Music has long been used by movements seeking social change. In the fifties and sixties, this was particularly true, as successful black and white musicians openly addressed the issues of the day. During the sixties, popular white singers such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez lent both their names and their musical talents to the civil rights movement. In fact, music long assisted those working to win civil rights for African Americans. Freedom songs, often adapted from the music of the black church, played an essential role bolstering courage, inspiring participation, and fostering a sense of community. Andrew Young, former executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, remembered how music helped build bridges between civil rights workers and members of the communities they hoped to organize:

They often brought in singing groups to movement friendly churches as a first step in their efforts. They knew how little chance they stood of gaining people’s trust if they presented themselves as straight out organizers: people were too afraid to respond to that approach. So they organized gospel groups and hit the road.

The Staple Singers belonged to that tradition. Beginning as a gospel group, they became soul superstars at the height of the civil rights movement. As Rob Bowman notes in Soulsville, U.S.A., “They attempted to broaden their audience by augmenting their religious repertoire with ‘message’ songs.”
Musically and politically, The Staple Singers fit right in at Stax Records, that model of racial harmony in a time of societal upheaval. Co-owner Jim Stewart argued, “If we’ve done nothing more, we’ve shown the world that people of different colors, origins, and convictions can be as one, working together towards the same goal. Because we’ve learned how to live and work together at Stax Records, we’ve reaped many material benefits. But, most of all, we’ve acquired peace of mind. When hate and resentment break out all over the nation, we pull our blinds and display a sign that reads ‘Look What We’ve Done—TOGETHER.’”

Co-owner Al Bell went further: “Dr. King was preaching what we were about inside Stax, where you judge a person by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. And looking forward to the day when, as he said, his little black child and the little white child could walk down the streets together, hand in hand. Well, we were living that inside of Stax Records.”

The “‘protest’ material against a ‘folk rock’–oriented beat” that The Staples Singers performed also owed much to King.

According to lead singer Mavis Staples,

The songwriters knew we were doing protest songs. We had made a transition back there in the sixties with Dr. King. We visited Dr. King’s church in Montgomery before the movement actually got started. When we heard Dr. King preach, we went back to the motel and had a meeting. Pops [Mavis’s father, who played guitar and shared lead vocal duties with his youngest daughter] said, “Now if he can preach it, we can sing it. That could be our way of helping towards this movement.” We put a beat behind the song. We were mainly focusing on the young adults to hear what we were doing. You know if they hear a beat, that would make them listen to the words. So we started singing protest songs. All those guys were writing what we actually wanted them to write. Pops would tell them to just read the headlines and whatever they saw in the morning paper that needed to be heard or known about, [they would] write us a song from that.

Inspired by “Pops” Staples, songwriters Raymond Jackson, Carl Hampton, and Homer Banks penned “If You’re Ready (Come Go with Me)” in 1973. Similar in sound to the group’s 1972 hit “I’ll Take You There,” the song lists specific obstacles to justice. Recorded after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., both songs build on the “dream” King articulated throughout his career.

Seven years after the Watts Riots, Stax executives outlined a grand concert that would bridge music and activism.

[The Initial plan] was to feature three acts performing in Will Rogers Park at the Watts Summer Festival site. Over time, this developed into an all-day concert to be staged at the Los Angeles Coliseum on the final day of the Watts Summer Festival featuring virtually every current Stax artist. The artists would give their performances free of
charge, Schlitz beer would sponsor the event and thereby offset some of the production costs, and Stax would pick up all other incurred costs. Admission was held to a one-dollar, tax-deductible contribution per person so that virtually anyone in the community could afford to buy a ticket. Even so, several thousand tickets were distributed absolutely free of charge.

Some scholars suggest that Wattstax reflected the newfound emphasis on black empowerment, moving beyond legal recognition of equality to a focus on self-determination. A company press release outlines the goals of the festival:

Any strong record label could do something like this to support their community. We hope that WATTSTAX '72 will be a model for other companies to put forth similar events. This sort of all-star benefit is not so humanitarian as to be entirely without profit. And, it’s a rare opportunity that lets you do something corporately valuable without being guilty of exploitation.

Sure, Stax could have just given the Watts Festival $100,000. But, this way we have a prototype for something that can be done by many other record companies in many other cities, and it involves the community rather than being a handout. A successful all-star concert like this also focuses pride in a community image.

The Staple Singers were just one of many Stax artists that participated. Singer Carla Thomas remembered being in Los Angeles during the Watts Riots and said she was “happy to be back and be a part of the rebuilding, instead of tearing something down.” Saxophonist Floyd Newman noted that what started as just “another gig” for Stax musicians became a “worldwide thing.”

One writer declared, “The event marked the first all Black entertainment event of its size and scope ever to be completely Black controlled!”

In the end more than 112,000 people attended, making it the second largest gathering of African-Americans in the United States at the time, second only to the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Equality.

On the national stage, Stax and its founders were recognized by California senator Alan Cranston in a commendation read in the Senate chamber on Friday, October 13, 1972:

Mr. President, a major American business has made a notable contribution to the people supporting it, a contribution worthy of recognition.

The Stax Organization, a leading black business in America, and the dedication of its leaders to the basic principles of American citizenship deserve our commendation.

Primarily involved in the production and distribution of musical records, for which they have been known as the “Memphis Sound,” the Stax Organization, headed by a dynamic man named Al Bell, recognizes that its success depends upon the public.
this in mind, Al Bell and his associates recently began a program of giving back to the people some of the benefits the company has received from them.

A most significant example of this kind of corporate responsibility was displayed on August 20, 1972, in Los Angeles when Stax, a Memphis-based company, organized “Wattstax ‘72,” a massive 6-hour musical spectacular that brought some 100,000 black citizens together at the Los Angeles Coliseum. The entire event was a gift from Stax to the community.

The entire proceeds from the event have been distributed to the Watts summer festival, to enable them to carry out a yearlong program of community support, the sickle cell anemia program, the Martin Luther King Hospital, and the Watts Labor Community Action Committee.

I commend the Stax Organization and those associated with them in this project. They are, indeed, inspirational examples of good citizenship to all Americans of every race, creed, and national origin.

**Connection Questions**

These text-dependent questions are based on the Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading and Literacy in Social Studies:

1. What does the word “augmenting” mean in the context of the second paragraph?

2. Jim Stewart is quoted in the second paragraph. Which of his statements best expresses the idea that at Stax Records people of different races worked fruitfully together?

3. In the fourth paragraph singer Mavis Staples remembers that her father said, “Now if he can preach it, we can sing it. That could be our way of helping towards this movement.” Who is the “he” to whom “Pops” Staples refers? What “movement” is he talking about helping?

4. What did Wattstax commemorate? Why was Wattstax so culturally significant?

5. Based on this reading, how did music help civil rights activists gain the trust of people who were reluctant to follow community organizers?