

“Race and Song: A Musical Conversation”

by Reggie Harris & Alastair Moock

A Study Guide

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

RACE AND SONG is an exploration of history and current events through the lens of race — and using the powerful tool of music. Veteran musicians and storytelling troubadours, Alastair Moock and Reggie Harris, rely on their years’ long friendship to discuss complicated issues of race, class, gender and history with intentionality and generosity of spirit. Together in musical conversation, they open up to each other and frame their lived experiences through music (which always helps the medicine go down!) and the use of historical and family photos.

Songs in the program include “Wade in the Water,” “Freight Train,” “It’s a Mighty Long Way,” “This Little Light of Mine,” and Moock’s own “Be a Pain.” These songs, and the stories behind them, amplify and give historical context for Moock and Harris’ life stories and perspectives.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Reggie Harris has traveled the world for over 40 years as a songwriter, storyteller and lecturer using music and the spoken word to make an impact in education, social and racial justice, the environment, faith and in human and civil rights. He is a teaching artist in the John F Kennedy Center’s CETA program, a Woodrow Wilson Scholar and the Director of Music Education for the UU Living Legacy Project, leading civil rights pilgrimages throughout the South. Learn more at ReggieHarrisMusic.com.

Alastair Moock began performing professionally 15 years after Reggie. He made a name for himself on the folk and Americana circuit before turning his attention to family and educational music after the birth of his twins in 2006. He has since garnered a 2013 Grammy nomination and three Parents’ Choice Gold Medals for his children’s albums, and has become a regular performer of assemblies and residencies for students on subjects ranging from social justice to language arts. Learn more at MoockMusic.com.

KEY PROGRAM GOALS

1. To teach students the history and legacy of slavery, the Great Migration, and the obstacles facing minority Americans, especially Black Americans, in accumulating and preserving wealth.
2. To explore the idea of personal struggle — whether through social obstruction (as in Reggie’s family’s case) or disability and illness (as in Alastair’s family’s case — his daughter was diagnosed with cancer at the age of five) — and what it means to “overcome.”
3. To explore what it means to be an ally.
4. To model for students, and educators, how to have productive and meaningful conversations around uncomfortable topics like race.

UNDERSTANDING MIGRATION

Our program discusses two periods in history when Black Americans “escaped” the South and travelled North. The first was the Underground Railroad, the second was the Great Migration.

The Underground Railroad was a network of ordinary Black and White folks who helped fugitive slaves (enslaved people) flee the South. Though organized locally and in secret, the effort effectively moved hundreds of people northward each year, increasingly so after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. (Read more [here](#)).

The Great Migration (or Black Migration) was a mass movement of about 5 million African Americans from rural Southern states to more urban Northern and Western states between about 1915 and 1960. (Read more [here](#)). In the program, Reggie discusses his own family’s migration north to the city of Philadelphia.

Topic for discussion: Why do people move?

It’s clear why people would want to escape slavery. What do you think it was that people were escaping during the years of the Great Migration? Do you think they found a better life in the new places they moved to? What did they bring with them and what did they leave behind? Did people in your family ever move from one place to another? Why did they move and how did it affect their lives?

Topic for Discussion: Tracing Your History

Alastair’s family was able to trace its history back through many generations on his father’s side (White, Christian, early American settlers from Northern Europe) and back a handful of generations on his mother’s side (White, Jewish, late American settlers from Eastern Europe). Reggie’s family hadn’t been able to trace its ancestry back very far at all until they were contacted by the distant White relatives mentioned in the program. Why do you think Reggie’s family was unable to trace the history of its Black ancestors? Has your family been able to trace its history? Would it be able to?

Art Connection: Comparing Visual Art

Compare Paul Collins’ painting, “Underground Railroad,” to Jacob Lawrence’s painting from “The Great Migration Series.” What do you see that’s similar? What’s different? Think about the stances of the people in the paintings. What do their body positions tell you about the way they travelled and the circumstances they were travelling under?

HISTORICAL FIGURES

The program mentions several important historical figures and groups, some of whom you may know well, some not so much: Dr. King, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Pete Seeger, John Lewis, The Freedom Singers, Elizabeth Cotten, Harvey Milk, Billie Jean King, March for Our Lives protestors, Black Lives Matter protestors, Global Climate Strike protestors, LGBTQ pride marchers.

Activity: Comparing Historical Figures

Choose three people or groups mentioned in our program — one you already know something about and two you don’t. Do some research on each. Why do you think they were all mentioned in the program? Write or discuss what you think they have in common and what they may not.

Topic for Discussion: Good Trouble

Civil Rights leader — and later Congressman — John Lewis famously, and regularly, told folks to go out and cause “good trouble.” What do you think he meant by that? What’s the difference between bad trouble and good trouble? Have you ever caused one or the other yourself?

STRUGGLE AND HOPE

Alastair and Reggie both believe that music has an ability to touch all of us in deep and unique ways that words alone cannot. They discuss in the program how songs are able to combine and reflect different emotions simultaneously.

Art Connection: Listening to Music

Listen to The Freedom Singers (Reggie has met and worked with several of them, and mentioned them in our program) singing “We Shall Overcome” at the 1963 March on Washington. What do you hear in their sound? Can you hear both struggle and hope? What might you guess is the history of this song? Where might it come from and how long do you think it may have been around? Watch the audience respond. They were all there that day to support the march and hear Dr. King’s keynote “I Have a Dream” speech. But they respond to the music and participate (or don’t) in different way. What can you observe about their reactions and connections to the song and sound?

BUILDING YOUR OWN STUFF

Reggie and Alastair played two original songs in program — one by Alastair (“Be a Pain”) and one by Reggie’s good friend, Greg Greenway (“It’s a Mighty Long Way”). They discussed why someone might want to write their own song rather than sing one that’s already been written. Alastair said he often asks himself, “What can you build yourself that can help make the world a little better?”

Topic for Discussion: What could you build yourself?

What are your very best skills? What do you love to do? Are you a musician, a writer, a drawer, an athlete, a mathematician, a dancer? Are you funny, a good talker, a good listener, an empath (good at putting yourself in other people’s shoes)? Can you think of a way you could use your best skills to “make the world a little better”? Who in history or around today has used similar skills to yours to make the world better (if you can’t think of any, look some up!)? And what do you think it means to make the world a little better? What would that look like to you?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For Younger Kids:

“We Shall Overcome: The Story of a Song” by Debbie Levy & Vanessa Brantley-Newton

“Harriet and the Promised Land” by Jacob Lawrence

“The Great Migration: An American Story” by Jacob Lawrence

“Henry’s Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad” by Ellen Levine

“Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag” by Rob Sanders & Steven Salerno

“Preaching to the Chickens: The Story of Young John Lewis” by Jabari Asim & E.B. Lewis

“The Golden Thread: A Song for Pete Seeger” by Colin Meloy & Nikki McClure

“Libba: The Magnificent Musical Life of Elizabeth Cotten” by Laura Veirs & Tatyana Fazlalizadeh

“I Am Billie Jean King (Ordinary People Change the World)” by Brad Meltzer & Christopher Eliopoulos

For Older Kids:

“March” (Trilogy) by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin & Nate Powell

“Day of Tears: A Novel in Dialogue” by Julius Lester

“Elijah of Buxton” by Christopher Paul Curtis

“Queer Heroes: Meet 53 LGBTQ Heroes from Past and Present!” by Aravelle Sicardi & Sarah Tanat-Jones

“The Great Migration: An American Story” by Jacob Lawrence

“Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents” by Isabel Wilkerson

“The Warmth of Other Suns” by Isabel Wilkerson