

Google Arts & Culture Learn Together: Moments from Black Pop Culture



Using the lesson plan and Google Arts & Culture resources

This lesson plan is designed to support you as you explore Google Arts & Culture stories and exhibits related to the lesson topic. The images you will see here are just a sample of the media—texts, images, audio, and video—available to you on the Google Arts & Culture website. A parent or teacher might be guiding you through the lesson, or you might choose to complete it on your own.

All you need to access the lesson is an internet connection and a web browser. You may want to take notes, whether you do that digitally or with paper and pen.

The lesson plan has an **introduction**, which will describe the topic and provide some background information that will help you understand what you are seeing, hearing, and reading. Then the lesson will take you on a journey from one **Story** or **Exhibit** to another, fill in some details along the way, and pose **questions** that will help you focus on important ideas. Some lesson plans include a **project** related to the lesson topic. All end with a **quiz** and some **ideas for exploring the topic further**.

The lesson plan includes **questions** about the main stories and exhibits, and there is also a **quiz**. You will want to write answers to the questions in a notebook or on a piece of paper. Then you can check all your answers when you've finished the lesson.

Resources on the Google Arts & Culture website include Themes, Stories, Museum Views, items and images.

- ❖ **Themes** bring together stories, exhibits, collections, images, audio, and video files that relate to a topic.
- ❖ In a **Story**, clicking on the arrow on the right side of a slide will move you forward. The arrow on the left side takes you back. Sometimes, clicking on the right arrow will zoom you in on an image. Just keep clicking to keep moving forward. Audio and videos on slides will play automatically. Clicking on an image title will take you to a page with more information about it.
- ❖ In **Museum Views**, you move through a 3D space. Click to move forward. Click, hold, and move the cursor left or right to turn.
- ❖ An **item** will take you to an individual **image**, where you can zoom in and sometimes read more about the artefact.



In this lesson, you will learn about:

- ❖ the beginnings of modern Black pop culture in radio.
- ❖ how Black radio personalities engage the Black community.
- ❖ how civil rights leaders used radio to advocate for social justice and gender equality.

You will:

- ❖ view some stories and exhibits about the golden age of Black radio.
- ❖ answer some questions about what you have seen and read.

This lesson will take **30–45 minutes** to complete.

“TELLING IT LIKE IT WAS”

RADIO SMITHSONIAN PRESENTS

BLACK



RADIO

Learn Together: Black Pop Culture

Although Black people in the United States were considered free citizens after the end of the Civil War in 1865, in reality they were not provided the same rights and liberties as White people. Black voices were not given a say in government and faced oppression from most of society. Most of the songs and writings created during this time were in reaction and resistance to that oppression. They were also the first seeds of what would become Black popular culture.

Popular culture, or pop culture, consists of works of art, such as music, literature, fashion, or dance, transmitted via mass media. Pop culture usually reflects the values and beliefs of the people to whom the works of art are directed. The invention of radio broadcasting was pivotal in promoting pop culture, as it provided a way for songs and advertisements to immediately play in people's homes. Radio broadcasting was especially transformative for Black pop culture. At last, a group that had been so marginalized could make their voices heard.

As you view the exhibits and stories in this lesson, think about these questions:

- ❖ Why did radio resonate so successfully within Black communities?
- ❖ How does Black pop culture reflect the values and experiences of Black communities?
- ❖ How can pop culture act as an agent of change in addition to being a source of entertainment?

Golden Age of Black Radio – Part 1: The Early Years

Radio transmission was invented in the 1890s, but it was not prevalent in most people's lives until 1920. People appreciated a medium that delivered news more quickly than a newspaper or telegram. Radio also served as a new form of entertainment. Hearing the warmth of other people's voices allowed listeners to feel connected to one another. This was especially true for Black Americans, who often did not have a voice in society at the time. As larger networks began to allow programming for Black audiences, the beginnings of modern Black pop culture began to emerge.

Click [here](#) to learn about how radio created a sense of community for Black Americans.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. Why was the establishment of the radio station WDIA an important step for Black pop culture?
2. Why did radio stations begin featuring programming for Black audiences?
3. How did Black radio personalities use the medium to advance ideas of equality?



Jack Gibson and Herb Gershaw at WERD Lunch Call Show 1950
Archives of African American Music and Culture

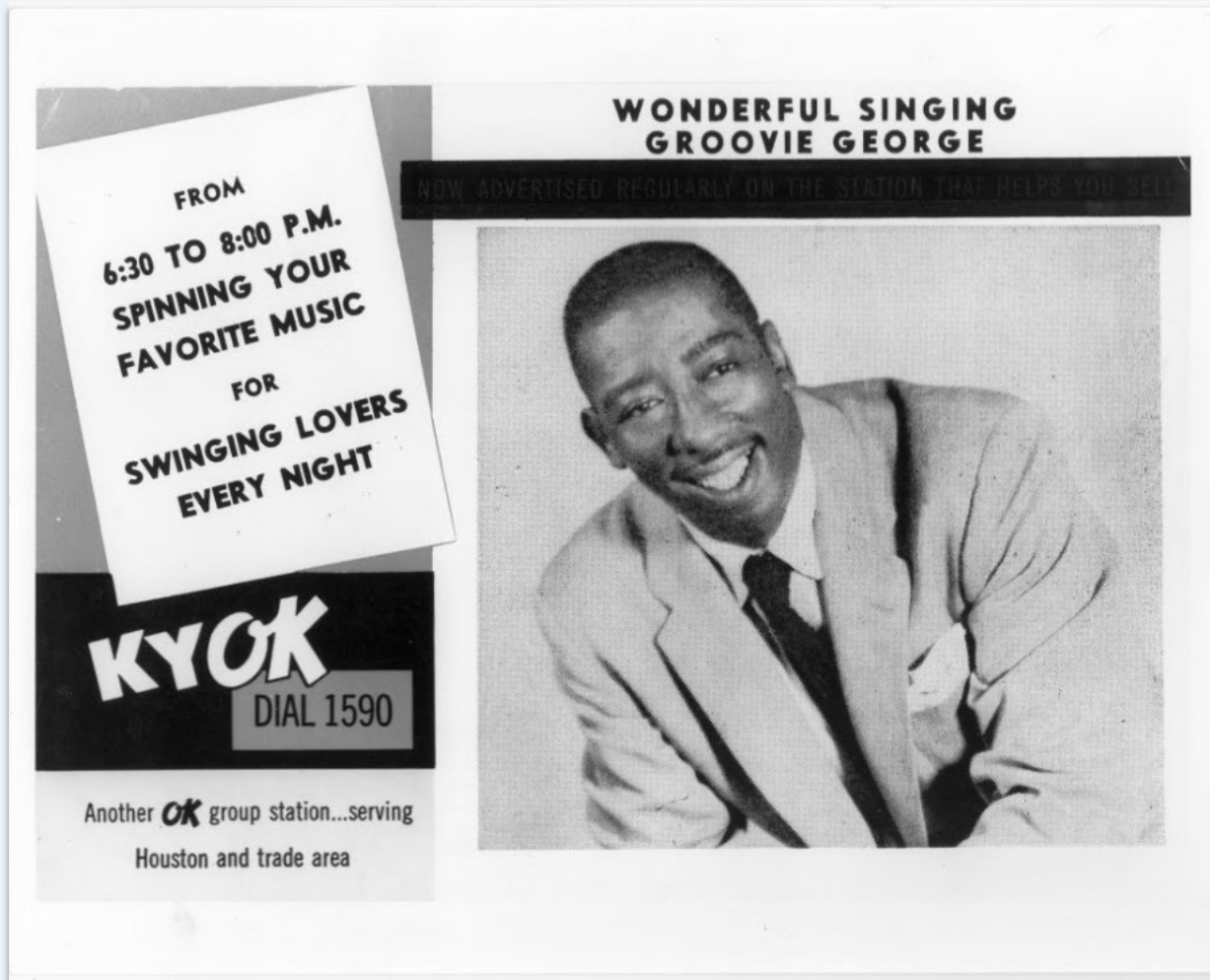
Golden Age of Black Radio – Part 2: Deejays

A “deejay” is an informal abbreviation for “disc jockey,” or someone who introduces and plays music or some sort of program on a radio station. Deejays do not simply press play – they conduct interviews, discuss current events, tell jokes, and engage with the audience. In the early days of radio, deejays, especially in the Black community, turned radio into the immersive form of entertainment that people grew to love.

Click [here](#) to learn about the important role of deejays in Black radio broadcasting.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. What does “personality radio” mean?
2. Why did deejays use different names for their radio personalities?
3. Why were deejays so influential in the Black community?



KYOK Publicity Poster featuring George Nelson 1961/1962
Archives of African American Music and Culture

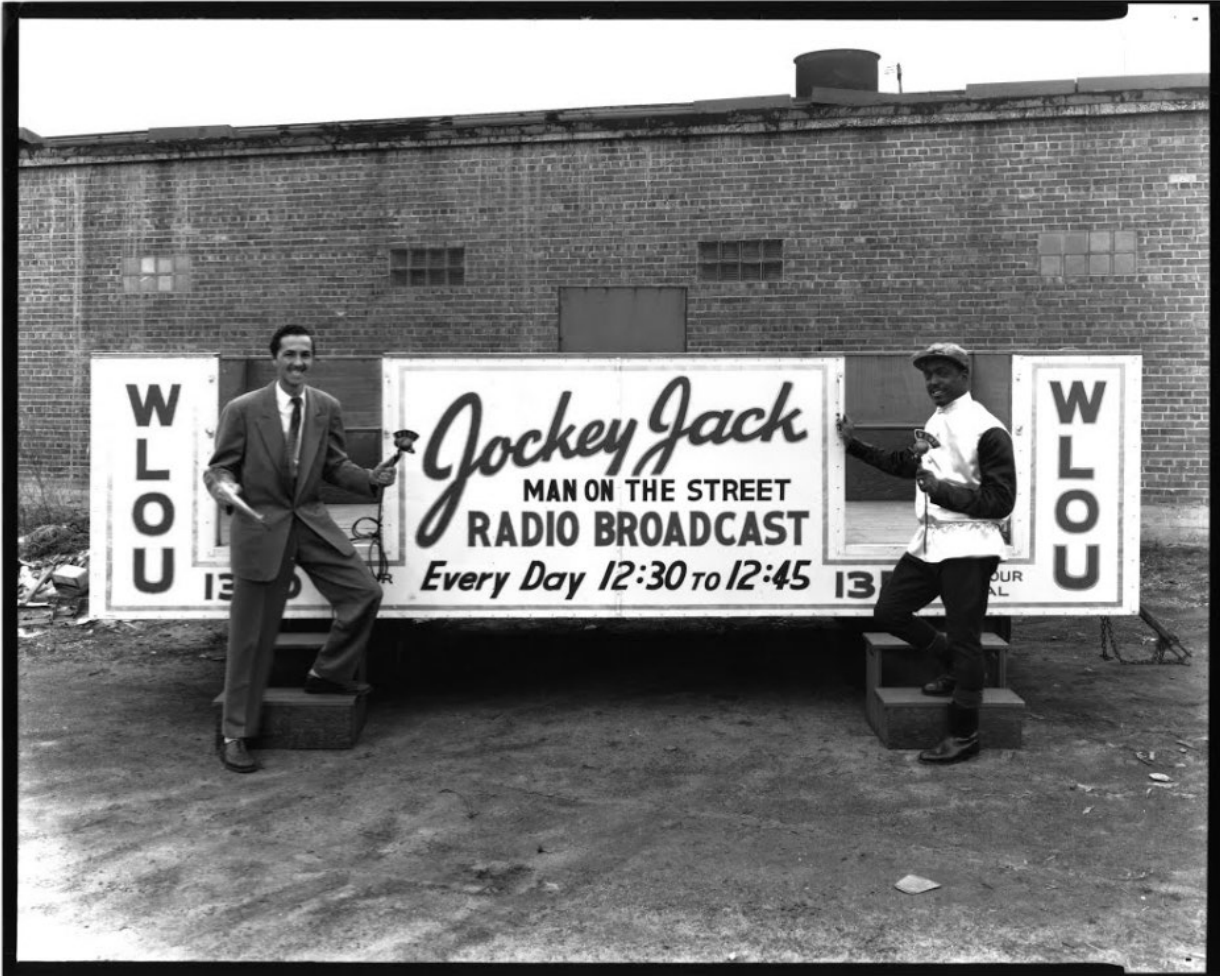
Golden Age of Black Radio – Part 3: Community Engagement

Radio has never just been a form of entertainment, but also an important source for both local and national news, and a way to stay engaged in one's community. Deejays can use their platform to inform the public not only about issues in the community, but also about practical ways to help solve those issues.

Click [here](#) to learn about how Black deejays and radio stations strengthened Black communities.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. How did the WDIA help disabled children in Memphis?
2. Why was the WDIA so successful in becoming a community radio station?
3. How did community engagement help Black radio stations become more profitable?



Jockey Jack: man on the street 1940/1949
Archives of African American Music and Culture

Golden Age of Black Radio – Part 4: Gender Equality and Civil Rights

The golden age of Black radio coincided with the civil rights movement and the second wave of feminism. Radio was an essential medium at the time for the Black community, as that was the fastest way to hear breaking news. Black deejays also used their platforms to advance the cause of civil rights, and Black women deejays advocated for gender equality.

Click [here](#) to learn about how radio personalities promoted social justice and gender equality.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. How did the portrayal of Black women in radio change from the 1930s to the 1960s?
2. How did Black deejays use the radio to promote social justice?
3. Why was radio an integral part of the Civil Rights Movement?



KYOK van in front of civil rights marchers 1967
Archives of African American Music and Culture

Quiz

Read the questions and write your answer in your notebook or on a piece of paper.

1. Why was “The All-Negro Hour” pivotal for Black pop culture?
2. Why did Al Benson become such a popular radio personality?
3. How did Black deejays help the record business?
4. How were personality deejays part of the entertainment in radio?
5. How did radio stations use the idea of community engagement to get sponsorships?
6. What is an example of how deejays used music to engage the Black community?
7. In what ways did Black women deejays experience sexism?
8. How did Black deejays encourage activism through radio?

Explore Further

This lesson has given you some vocabulary to talk about Black pop culture in the United States. It has also introduced you to some basic ideas that are relevant to this topic. To learn more about Black pop culture in the United States, click [here](#).



It's Your Turn!

In this lesson, you learned about the rise of Black pop culture during the golden age of Black radio. Now it's your turn to do something. Here are some ideas for projects that you can do at home or in the classroom.

- ❖ Listen to a recent radio program or a podcast that is made by and directed to Black people. Write a few paragraphs about how the programming today is different from and similar to radio programming during the golden age of Black radio.
- ❖ Do some research about the invention of radio broadcasting, the rise of Black programming, and the Civil Rights Movement. Make a timeline showing how these events were related.
- ❖ The advent of television followed radio. Do some research about the rise of television and shows that were directed to Black audiences. How did television shows portray pop culture of the Black communities at the time? Prepare a brief presentation that shares what you learned.

Hank Ballard and the Midnighters 1954
Archives of African American Music and Culture

Answers

Golden Age of Black Radio – Part 1: The Early Years

1. WDIA was the first all-Black radio station, which gave recognition to the Black community of Memphis as they had the opportunity to play music by Black artists that was ignored by other stations and talk about issues in their communities.
2. White owners of radio stations realized how many people tuned into the programs directed to Black people and saw Black programming as very profitable for them.
3. Black radio personalities would feature stories about people that fought for equality, such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, to highlight the importance of equality.

Golden Age of Black Radio – Part 2: Deejays

1. Personality radio refers to how Black deejays were as much a part of the entertainment of radio as the music they played. By speaking with a certain rhythm and rhyme and with an animated delivery, they used their assumed personalities to connect with the listeners.
2. Deejays used different names for their radio personalities to create more of a character that people would listen to. Most names would rhyme or have something to do with the style of music they played.
3. Deejays were influential in the Black community because they gave people someone to look up to and trust. They were celebrities, but they also talked in a way that made people relate to them.

Golden Age of Black Radio – Part 3: Community Engagement

1. Deejays at WDIA announced fundraising opportunities to pay for buses that would bring Black disabled children to hospitals and schools.
2. WDIA was the only radio station in the area run by Black people and for a Black audience. Because there was no competition, everyone listened to the same radio station, which made it easier for everyone to hear about the same events and news.
3. As deejays organized more events in the Black community, more people began listening to the radio station, and therefore more sponsors wanted to advertise on programming directed to Black people.

Golden Age of Black Radio – Part 4: Gender Equality and Civil Rights

1. Black women went from being portrayed as stereotypes in the 1930s and 1940s to being respected deejays by the 1950s and 1960s.
2. Black deejays used their radio programs to announce marches and protests, as well as allow leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., to share their messages over the radio. Deejays would also warn people of places where there was unrest or violence.
3. Many people, including Dr. King, believed that the Civil Rights Movement never would have happened if not for the prominence of Black deejays. Because Black people had voices they could trust, they were more likely to participate in Civil Rights protests and marches. Black deejays also helped organize events like the March on Washington.

Answers

Quiz

1. It was the first comedy show featuring Black entertainers.
2. Al Benson had a sound that was different from most other deejays and he appealed to Black people who had roots in the South. He also played music that was different from anyone else, so people wanted to hear what he played.
3. Black musicians would try to get deejays to be the first to play their records, and so the deejays would play and promote the records, boosting sales from both White and Black listeners.
4. Personality deejays talked in a specific style that was similar to music, and they often acted in character instead of simply an announcer, which made the deejays as much a part of the entertainment on radio as the musicians.
5. People in the Black community knew that Black people were interested in what was going on in the world, and they bought newspapers to read about it. Once radio stations began broadcasting news, they knew more people would tune in, and were able to get sponsorships based on the greater number of listeners.
6. In Detroit, Martha Steinberg would play the blues as a “blue collar” salute to the blue collar workers she saw working. People would tune in to hear the salute and know that many people in their community were listening at the same time.
7. Men would often refuse to give women deejays credit for their ideas or accomplishments.
8. During their programs, many Black deejays would announce if there was a meeting or protest and encourage their listeners to participate.