

HE'S GOT THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS

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Ages: 2-8

Themes: Spirituals, Music, African-American Culture

Running time: 6 minutes

SUMMARY

Based on one of the most well-known spirituals in America, *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands* is a visually rich depiction of the diversity and beauty of the world. Sung in rich voices, this movie brings to life a powerful song that has lifted the hearts and spirits of generations of people. Students and adults will want to sing along with the inspiring music and images.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn about the history and significance of spirituals.
- Students will create new lyrics and dramatic movements for the song, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands".
- Students will explore slavery in America through the spirituals.

BEFORE VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Play different versions of the song, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands". First, play a traditional version. Teach the words to the students. Practice singing together. Pair physical movements with different parts of the song to aid early language development. As children hear different renditions of the song, encourage them to dance, clap, and move to reflect the different tones of the songs.

Listen to other African American spirituals. There are some good collections available such as, *Wade in the Water, Vol. I* and *Afro-American Spirituals, Work Songs, and Ballads*. Again, encourage children to dance and move with the songs. After listening, discuss with students the tone and message of the various songs.

Guiding questions:

- What words can you use to describe how these songs make you feel? List the students' responses.
- What are these songs mostly about? What themes are common?
- Who do you think is singing these songs and why?

After eliciting the students' ideas, tell students that spirituals are a genre of music started by African slaves during the time that slavery existed in the U.S. Briefly discuss the concept of slavery with the students. Listen to the music again and pay close attention to the lyrics, particularly the refrains. Discuss with students the themes of

several songs. Most spirituals are either encouragements or disguised messages of escape routes to the North. Point this feature out to students and listen carefully for clues or messages contained in the songs.

Read aloud *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, by Jeannette Winter. This picture book tells the story of Peg Leg Joe, a conductor on the Underground Railroad who assists runaway slaves on their journeys north. The book is based on a spiritual by the same name that contains the directions to safe houses along the routes of the Underground Railroad. The music and lyrics to the spiritual are found at the end of the book. Learn the song with the students and discuss the reasons and ingenuity behind the song.

AFTER VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Organize a dress-up, play-house section in the classroom. Discuss with students how the lyrics to "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" aren't exactly the same in every version.

Guiding questions:

- To whom do you think the "He" refers in the song? (Explain that most people think of the "He" or another spiritual father figure.)
- What parts of the world does God or "He" hold in his hands in the movie?
- Based on other versions of this song that you've heard, what other parts of the world does God hold?
- Why do you think that the lyrics change between versions?
- What is important to you in the world?

Based on students' answers to the last question, invite students to make up their own line to the spiritual. Give them an example, such as, "He's got the forests and the rivers in his hands..." Write down students' ideas and sing the song again, inserting their lyrics. Each student should invent a physical movement to accompany their new lyric and teach it to the class.

Learn and practice a repertoire of African-American spirituals with the class. Give students instruments to play such as drums, clackers, and tambourines. For each spiritual, choreograph simple movements. Give a performance for parents and other students. As an extension, complete a shared writing project with the class where together you write a short paragraph about the history of African-American spirituals based on class reading and research. Elect several students to read or recite this history from memory as a part of the performance.

Discuss "the whole world".

Guiding questions:

- What are the parts of the world?
- What are different environments in the world?
- What different kinds of animals live in the world?
- What parts of the world are made by humans?

Have the students create a mural entitled, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Use butcher paper and finger paints. Each student should add an illustration to the mural, based upon the lyrics from the movie and the lyrics that the class wrote. Encourage students to go beyond the parts of the world that are beautiful to the parts that they experience, but may not necessarily be considered beautiful or uplifting, such as cities, airplanes, and factories.

As an extension to the "whole world" discussion, make papier-maché globes with the students. Use balloons to provide the basic shape. While the papier-maché is drying, students can work on coloring and labeling a map that they will glue onto the globe, including oceans and continents at a minimum, and getting as detailed as countries or environmental regions for older students. Provide students with a template that can be glued onto the globe so that the land and oceans come together correctly on a round shape (blackline masters can be found on the internet). Glaze the whole project with a clear lacquer to seal it. Hang the globes from the ceiling of the classroom.

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