

We Want The Funk!

A Classroom Guide for Teaching with the Film

from the [Michigan Learning Channel](#)



Overview

This guide helps educators integrate *We Want The Funk!* into learning experiences across subjects for grades 4–10. It blends the film’s cultural and historical depth with concrete teaching strategies, mini-lessons, prompts, and student-led projects. We have also added Michigan-specific content and learning suggestions throughout to help students connect funk music to the history, communities, and creativity of their home state.

About The Film

We Want The Funk! chronicles the history of funk music, spotlighting icons like James Brown, George Clinton, and Labelle. The film examines funk's role in identity, joy, resistance, and pop culture. In the classroom, students can explore how funk became a soundtrack for self-expression and social change, setting the stage for the role of music as a movement accelerator.

Find the full film (available through July 7, 2025) at pbs.org/independentlens/documentaries/we-want-the-funk/.

Access supplemental materials and multimedia content from Detroit PBS, including a panel discussion featuring local experts, a modern playlist curated by Detroit PBS staff, and local journalism about the history and significance of funk in southeast Michigan at detroitpbs.org/we-want-the-funk.

Classroom Themes & Planning Ideas

Theme: Funk Foundations

Mini-Lesson Topics:

- Compare Motown vs. Funk: sound, purpose, and audience
- Define "the One" beat and how it shapes funk rhythm
- Funk's musical ancestors: gospel, jazz, soul, R&B

Prompts/Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean to have a "sound of your own"?
- How does rhythm communicate emotion?
- Why did funk emerge when it did?

Resources:

- [Carnegie Hall History of Funk](#)
- [Smithsonian on James Brown](#)
- [Motown Museum \(Detroit\)](#)

Michigan Connections:

- Compare Detroit's Motown sound to Ohio and Illinois funk scenes
- Listen to early Funkadelic recordings made in Detroit
- Research Michigan-born funk and soul artists (e.g., Bettye LaVette, Dennis Coffey)

Student Project Ideas:

- Create a Michigan music map showing regional styles and cities
- Interview a local musician or DJ about the legacy of funk in Michigan
- Listening journals: respond to funk and Motown tracks from Michigan

Theme: Funk as Cultural Resistance

Mini-Lesson Topics:

- Respectability politics vs. cultural pride in the 1960s-70s
- Language and imagery in Black Power messaging
- Afrofuturism in music and performance (e.g., Parliament costumes)

Prompts/Discussion Questions:

- What does "unapologetically Black" mean to you?
- How do artists use style as a statement?
- Can music change minds or movements?

Resources:

- [Black Power Quotes for Students](#)
- [Afrofuturism Collection at NMAAHC](#)

Michigan Connections:

- Explore the Black Arts Movement in Detroit and its influence on music and poetry
- Study the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and their cultural impact
- Research how Detroit techno emerged from funk and Afrofuturism

Student Project Ideas:

- Create protest posters using Detroit-based quotes and slogans
- Map the rise of Black creative expression through Detroit arts collectives
- Host a classroom discussion or gallery walk on resistance through music and art

Theme: Women in Funk

Mini-Lesson Topics:

- Contributions of Labelle, Parlet, Brides of Funkenstein
- Gender dynamics in funk vs. Motown
- Style, agency, and second-wave feminism

Prompts/Discussion Questions:

- How did women push boundaries in funk?
- How does performance empower?
- Who are some modern-day successors to Labelle?

Resources:

- [List of Women in Funk](#)
- [History of Labelle](#)

Michigan Connections:

- Highlight Michigan-based female performers (e.g., Martha Reeves, Aretha Franklin's Detroit years)
- Explore how Michigan artists used music to speak on gender and race
- Investigate the role of women behind the scenes in Michigan's funk and soul scenes

Student Project Ideas:

- "Funk Herstory" zine featuring Michigan artists and trailblazers
 - Write a profile or podcast episode on a woman in Michigan funk
 - Plan an all-women music festival featuring and inspired by Michigan musicians
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Theme: Music Education & Social Change

Mini-Lesson Topics:

- Public school music programs in the 1970s vs. now
- Access, equity, and the roots of creativity
- Funk and hip-hop: cause and effect

Prompts/Discussion Questions:

- What happens when kids lose access to the arts?
- Why was music education important for funk's birth?
- How are young people creating music today?

Resources:

- [NEA Report on Arts Education](#)
- [Nelson George on defunding music](#)

Michigan Connections:

- Research the history of music education in your local district
- Connect with Michigan arts education advocacy groups (e.g., Michigan Arts Education Instruction & Assessment)
- Explore youth-led music programs like the Detroit Institute of Music Education (DIME)

Student Projects:

- Survey music/arts education opportunities in your school
 - Propose ideas for improving music education in your district
 - Interview a local music educator about their career and community impact
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Student-Led Extension Projects

Project Type	Description
Digital Storytelling	Make short explainer videos tracing funk's influence on modern music or dance, including Michigan-specific performers or movements.
Virtual Museum Exhibit	Curate a digital showcase about the history of funk in Michigan or across broader contexts with photos, bios, music clips, and fashion.
Funk Dance Revival	Plan a Soul Train-style dance party or host a dance tutorial for younger students.
The Funk Archives Podcast	Produce student-led segments on funk artists, songs, and history, collecting an archive of historic content that connects to local stories
Afrofuturism Festival	Plan and host a cross-curricular showcase with music, art, and science fiction that explores the themes of Afrofuturism

More Teaching Resources

- [The Funk Chronicles Podcast](#)
- [Rickey Vincent's *History of Funk* Radio](#)
- [Museum of African American Music](#)
- [Motown Museum \(Detroit\)](#)
- [Soul Train YouTube Channel](#)
- [Detroit Historical Society: Music and Culture](#)
- [Afrofuturist Costumes: Labelle + Clinton](#)