

# Sam Cooke - A Change is Gonna Come Comprehension

## Background:

This 1964 R&B hit written and performed by black singer Sam Cooke and is among the most recognisable pop songs associated with the African American Civil Rights Movement.

## A brief history of the Civil Rights Movement:

1863 – President Lincoln freed slaves in Confederate states.

1868 – All African American people were guaranteed the rights of full citizens.

1870 – Rights to vote were granted for all male citizens regardless of race. These rights were not fulfilled in southern states.

1890s – Jim Crow laws were common in southern states, segregating black people from white people in places such as schools, public buildings and buses.

(Jim Crow was not a person, but a caricature of a black slave played by an actor. ‘Jim Crow’ became a derogatory term for black people.)

1955 – The Montgomery Bus Boycott began after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat for a white man. The boycott by black people lasted a year.

1957 – Schools were desegregated. There were still some people who did not agree with this.

1963 – Over 200,000 people marched on Washington to protest for their civil rights. Martin Luther King Jr. made his famous ‘I Have a Dream’ speech.

1965 – Marchers in Selma, Alabama were met with police brutality and tear gas as they marched peacefully for their right to vote.

1965 - It became illegal to prevent any citizen from voting, regardless of their race.

Here is a link to a Youtube video that explains the Civil Rights Movement for children:



## Lyrics

I was born by the river in a little tent  
Oh and just like the river I've been running ev'r since  
It's been a long time, a long time coming  
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will

It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die  
'Cause I don't know what's up there, beyond the sky  
It's been a long, a long time coming  
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will

I go to the movie and I go downtown  
Somebody keep tellin' me don't hang around  
It's been a long, a long time coming  
But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will

Then I go to my brother  
And I say brother help me please  
But he winds up knockin' me  
Back down on my knees, oh

There have been times that I thought I couldn't last for long  
But now I think I'm able to carry on  
It's been a long, a long time coming  
But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will

Here is a link to the video of the song:



**Questions to consider:**

**In the title, what do you think the 'change' is?** *Racial equality.*

**He said he was born by the river, does anyone know a famous river in America?**

*Mississippi*

*This is where Sam Cooke was born.*

**Where in America is Mississippi?** *South*

**What do we know about the South in relation to racial equality?** *It was slow to change and bring in the laws (as seen in the timeline.)*

**Do you think Sam Cooke came from a rich or poor family?** *Poor*

**Why?** *He said he was born in a tent.*

**Why do you feel like he's been running ever since?** *As a black man growing up in America he doesn't feel safe. He feels like he is always running away from danger because of the racism he has faced. Sam Cooke's family moved from Mississippi to Chicago when he was young.*

**Why does the singer repeat the phrase 'long time'?** *He is emphasising how long black people have faced institutional racism.*

**Why has it been too hard living for Sam?** *Racial segregation and discrimination toward blacks is still omnipresent over 100 years after 1863, when black people were freed from slavery. Sam will have experienced verbal, possibly even physical abuse purely because of the colour of his skin.*

**What is Sam referring to when he sings 'beyond the sky'?** *Heaven*

**Why would he be afraid of dying?** *Because of all the racism the singer has experienced, he may now question his faith and whether there even is an after life. And if there is an afterlife, it will be filled with racial discrimination and segregation.*

**What does Sam mean by going downtown?** *Downtown usually refers to the commercial, cultural and often the historical, political and geographic heart of a city.*

**Who do you think is telling him to not hang around?** *Jim Crow laws which dictated the public lives of blacks in the south. In this case, Cooke is saying that there are certain places he cannot hang around because whites will force him to leave.*

**What does he mean by hang around?** *Hang around is an informal term used to pass time idly or in relaxing or socialising. Depending on the age of your class, you could also talk about this having a double meaning to recognise lynching. For a huge chunk of American history, whites gathered in town squares and other public spaces to murder black people under the auspices of punishing them for crimes they often had not committed. Sometimes, these vigilantes didn't even bother with the pretence of alleged wrongdoing and simply hanged people to terrorise African Americans in their communities, asserting their dominance in the aftermath of slavery.*

**Who do you think 'brother' refers to?** *White people*

**Why might he refer to white people as brothers?** *There are so many more similarities than differences between people of different race. Also the use of brothers means he sees them as equal.*

**What 'times' is Sam referring to?** *The experiences of racism he has experienced in his life.*

**Why do you think he is able to now carry on?** *He is commenting on all the protests including the marches on Selma and the speeches from people like Martin Luther King which fills him with hope for a brighter future.*

**What does the word optimism mean?** *Being hopeful and confident about the future.*

**What is the opposite of optimism?** *Pessimism*

**Do you think this song is optimistic or pessimistic?** *Optimistic*

**Why?** *Despite the fact that he has faced hardships and challenges he still has hope that change will come. He envisions a future world without any racism and segregation.*

**Do you think the change Sam speaks about has happened? Why?** *Open for discussion.*

**On a scale of 1-5, how relevant is this song today as it was then?** *Open for discussion.*