



THE BEATLES

Handout 1 - Segregation in the American South

The members of The Beatles were great champions of the African-American Rock and Roll and Rhythm and Blues music of the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the years before their international success, The Beatles performed long shows nearly every night of the week, and their repertoire was peppered with “covers” of songs associated with African-American musicians. Many of those African-American musicians were from the American South, which at the time employed “Jim Crow” laws to segregate white citizens from all people of color.

Jim Crow separated public spaces into “white” and “colored” and enforced social subservience for people of color. When The Beatles first came to the United States in February 1964, the South was still struggling to adapt to the *Brown v. Board of Education* case of 1954 in which the Supreme Court ruled public school segregation unconstitutional. Segregation of other public spaces was still legal, but was struck down several months later by The Civil Rights Act of 1964.

A few examples of Jim Crow laws:

- **Alabama:** It shall be unlawful for a negro and white person to play together or in company with each other at any game of pool or billiards.
- **Mississippi:** Any person guilty of printing, publishing or circulating matter urging or presenting arguments in favor of social equality or of intermarriage between whites and negroes, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.
- **Virginia:** Any public hall, theatre, opera house, motion picture show or place of public entertainment which is attended by both white and colored persons shall separate the white race and the colored race.
- **Maryland:** All marriages between a white person and a negro, or between a white person and a person of negro descent, to the third generation, inclusive...are *forever* prohibited, and shall be void.

Examples of Jim Crow social regulations:

- A negro male can not shake hands with a white female because it implies being socially equal. (If an African-American male offered his hand to a white woman he risked accusations of rape).
- Under no circumstance will a negro male light the cigarette of a white female.
- Negroes are not to show public affection toward one another, especially kissing.
- Whites do not use courtesy titles when referring to negroes. Negroes are called by their first names. Negroes must use courtesy titles when referring to whites, and must not call them by their first names.

Segregationist Reaction to African-American music:

In the late 1950s the “White Citizens Council,” a well-funded network of pro-segregation associations throughout the South, adopted a stance against musician Little Richard. Calling Richard’s songs, “the heavy-beat music of Negroes [that] appeals to the base in man, [and] brings out animalism and vulgarity,” the WCC urged a boycott of African-American Rock and Roll and warned that the music was part of a plot to “mongrelize America” waged by desegregationists.