

Name _____

Date _____

Emmett Till

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b'

Emmett Till was born in Chicago, Illinois on July 25, 1941. His mother, Mamie, had moved to Chicago from Mississippi at the age of two. Louis Till, Emmett's father, served in World War II and died overseas. Among the possessions sent back to Mamie was a ring with the initials L.T. engraved on it. Emmett Till was a happy child who helped his single mother around the house. Despite a battle with polio at age five that left him with a stutter, Till loved to crack jokes and make people laugh. In 1955, when Till was 14, his great uncle, Moses Wright, visited him and Mamie in Chicago. When it was time for Wright to leave, Till begged his mother to let him go back to Mississippi with him. Mamie reluctantly agreed and warned Emmett that the South was very different from Chicago. She explained that the South was segregated and that young Black boys had to be careful and on their best behavior. The day before Emmett left, Mamie gave him his father's ring. The next day at the train station was the last time Mamie saw her son alive.

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2. b'

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In Mississippi, Wright, a sharecropper, put Till to work picking cotton. Three days into his visit, Till and some other teenagers went to Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market for refreshments after a long day of work in the sun. The store was owned by Carolyn and Roy Bryant. Roy was away on a business trip with his half brother J.W. Milam, so Carolyn was working there alone. Till entered the store to buy gum. What happened next is uncertain. Some claim Till asked Bryant on a date; others say he said 'bye, baby' as he left. In court, Bryant claimed he grabbed her and whistled at her on his way out of the store. Whatever happened, Bryant stormed out. Emmett and his friends thought she was getting a pistol, so they left quickly. That night, Bryant and her sister-in-law agreed not to tell their husbands what happened. But when Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam returned, a kid who had been outside the store told the men Till had whistled at Carolyn Bryant.

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3. b'

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At 2:30am on August 28, 1955, Bryant and Milam went to Moses Wright's house to kidnap Till. Wright pleaded with them, saying Emmett was only a child, but Bryant and Milam forced Till into their pickup truck. The men brutally beat Till and took him to the edge of the Tallahatchie River. They shot Till in the head, fastened a metal cotton gin fan around his neck with barbed wire, and pushed him into the river. The next day, Bryant and Milam were arrested on kidnapping charges. Till's body wasn't found until three days later. His corpse was bloated and mutilated, making him completely unrecognizable. But Moses Wright was able to identify Till by one thing: his father's ring.

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4. b'

Mamie Till received her son's casket in Chicago shortly after Till's death. She collapsed in grief at the sight of it. She decided she would have an open casket funeral to show the world the horror of what of what Bryant and Milam did to her son. She told the funeral director, "Let the people see what I've seen." Thousands of people waited in line to see Till's brutally beaten body. Images from Till's funeral spread around the world in newspapers and magazines, a stark depiction of the dangerous racism Black people faced in the Jim Crow South. Mamie Till's decision to hold an open casket funeral turned out to be critical early turning point in the civil rights movement. Her refusal to let her son's name be forgotten helped spark the activism of the late 1950s and 1960s.

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5. b'

When the time came for Bryant and Milam's trial, they were promptly acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury. Even with Mamie Till in the audience and testimony from Moses Wright, the jury only deliberated for 67 minutes. Bryant and Milam lived in freedom for the rest of their lives. In 2007, more than 50 years after Till's death, Carolyn Bryant admitted she had lied in her testimony. Emmett Till never made physical or verbal advances on her in the store that day in 1955.

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