

# Otis Redding Biography Mini-Unit



Volt Records (Billboard, page 7, 7 January 1967) [Public domain], via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

A Mini-Unit Study by [Look! We're Learning!](#)

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## Otis Redding Biography

Otis Redding was an American soul singer who became famous during the 1960s. He was born on September 9, 1941, outside the tiny town of Dawson, Georgia to his parents Otis Redding, Senior and Fannie Mae Redding.

Otis grew up in a large family. He was the fourth of six children. To make ends meet, he worked by picking cotton with his parents and his siblings. But even as a young child, Otis was different. He sang all the time, even on the way to and from the cotton fields.

When Otis was young, he and his family moved to the larger city of Macon, Georgia. Growing up there, Otis drew inspiration from other Georgia musicians who were beginning to become famous, including Little Richard and James Brown.

One of the local celebrities in Macon was a singer named Gladys Williams. Every week, she invited singers and musicians to participate in a live competition at a local nightclub. When Otis was 15, he entered the competition. Even though he was a good singer, he didn't know how to sing in time with the musicians playing the number, and Gladys stopped him in the middle of the song.

He was embarrassed by his performance, but he kept trying. The next time he went to the competition, he won first place. In fact, he won so many weeks in a row that the organizers stopped letting him compete!

A short time later, a Macon radio station began holding a music competition every week at the Douglass Theatre. At one of the shows, Otis met Johnny Jenkins, a talented guitarist, and the two became fast friends. Otis decided to join Johnny's group "Pat Teacake and the Panthers" to compete at one of the shows. The band easily won the competition prize with Otis singing the lead vocals and Johnny playing lead guitar.



Image: By Atco Records (Billboard, page 7, 19 April 1969) [Public domain], via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

In 1958, when Otis was just 17 years old, he married a local girl named Zelma and they had a baby boy named Dexter the next year. The couple added a daughter, Karla, to their family three years later. That same year, Johnny got the chance to record a demo track for a Memphis record company called Stax. Otis traveled with Johnny to the studio to record the song.

After the band played the song a few times, Otis got a chance to record his vocals along with the track. He was so excited to hear his own voice that he listened to the finished songs 12 times in a row! The record company executives were excited as well and, several months later, Otis heard his own song “These Arms of Mine” playing on his local radio station!

In 1963, Stax Records executives invited Otis to record another of his original songs. The song “Pain in My Heart” became a hit single. A year later, Otis got the chance to perform the song at the historic Apollo Theatre in Harlem, New York. The audience went wild!



Image By: Volt Records (Billboard, page 11, 17 September 1966)  
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Despite his hit songs, most of Otis’s income came from spending long trips on the road, touring the country. His music hadn’t become popular up North yet, so he usually toured other cities in the South. Most of their performances were for segregated audiences, where black people sat on

one side and white people sat on the other. Even though the audience members couldn’t sit together, they all loved to hear Otis’s music.

By 1965, Otis and Zelma had another boy named Otis III. To supplement his income from writing and performing, Otis had begun to branch out into music publishing. He started his own business, Walco Music Company, and began signing talented new performers. He also wrote music that was performed by other artists, including the hit song “R-E-S-P-E-C-T”, which was later recorded by Aretha Franklin.

Over time, Otis finally began to receive recognition for his music. He traveled to Europe and played performances in several countries, including England and Germany. Otis was worried that European audiences wouldn’t like his music, but people loved it!

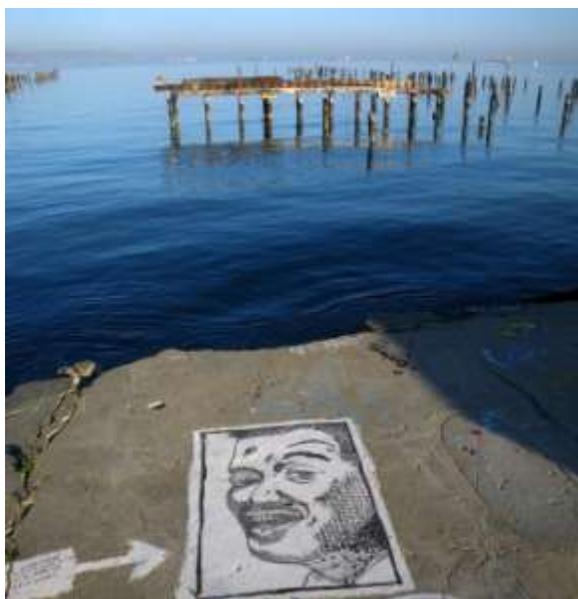


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He even played at music festivals where people listened to music other than soul. In the summer of 1967, he performed at the Monterey International Pop Festival in California to an enthusiastic crowd. While he was in San Francisco he

visited the bay and began writing the lyrics to the song that would finally make him a star: “Sittin’ On the Dock of the Bay”.

A few days after he recorded the song, Otis left to perform a show in Madison, Wisconsin. He boarded the plane with several other people, including members of the musical group The Mar-Keys. During the flight, the pilot lost control in bad weather, and the plane crashed into Lake Pomona just before reaching Madison. Otis and most of the other passengers died. When he died on December 10, 1967, Otis Redding was only 26 years old.

His funeral was held a week later and over 5,000 people attended the services. His final single “Sittin’ On the Dock of the Bay” was released shortly afterward, going gold in a couple of months. In 1969, the song received two Grammy Awards: one for Best R&B Song and another for Best R&B Performance. Twenty years later, Otis Redding was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in recognition of his contributions to American soul music.



Otis has also been honored in his hometown of Macon, Georgia. A bronze statue of him appears in the city’s Gateway Park. He was inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame in 1981.

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## Questions for Review:

1. Where did Otis Redding grow up?

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2. How many siblings did Otis have?

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3. How did Otis and his family earn money?

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4. Where did Otis meet Johnny Jenkins?

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5. What was Otis' first radio single?

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6. How old was Otis when he got married?

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7. Why did Otis travel to Harlem, New York?

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8. How did Otis start his own business?

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9. What were two of the countries that Otis toured in Europe?

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10. What famous musician recorded Otis's song "R-E-S-P-E-C-T"?

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11. Where was Otis when he wrote the lyrics for “Sittin’ On the Dock of the Bay”?

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12. How old was Otis when he died?

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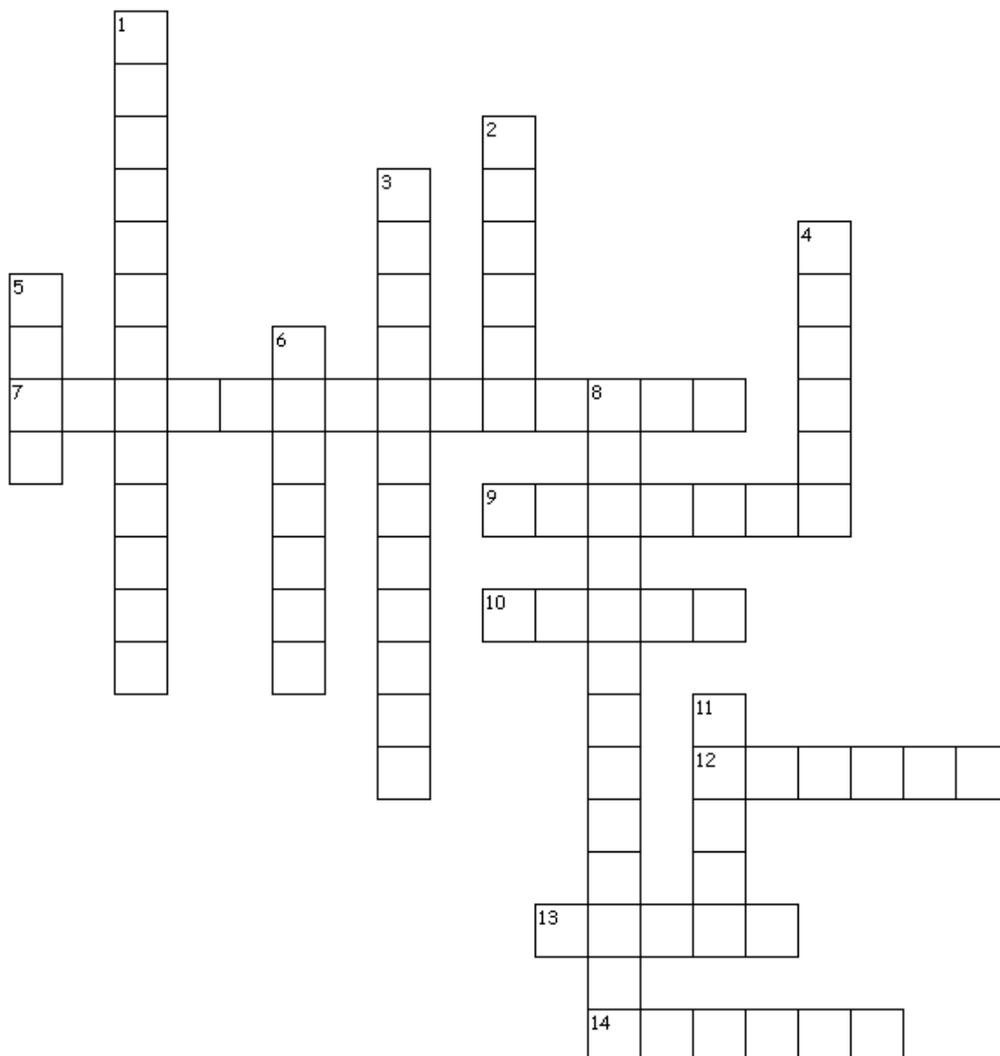
13. What honors and awards did Otis receive after his death?

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## Otis Redding Crossword



### Clues:

#### Across

7. Singer who recorded Otis's song "Respect"
9. Park with Otis's statue
10. Name of Otis's wife
12. Famous Harlem Theatre
13. City where Otis grew up
14. City where Otis was born

#### Down

1. Otis's good friend
2. Crop Otis and his family harvested
3. City where Otis wrote his last song
4. Award Otis received after his death
5. Record company that signed Otis
6. Town Otis was flying to when he died
8. A singer Otis admired
11. Name of Otis's company

“Sittin’ On the Dock of the Bay” Copywork

*Sittin’ in the morning  
sun, I’ll be sittin’ when  
the evening comes*

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*Watching the ships roll  
in, Then I watch them  
roll away again, yeah*

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I'm sittin' on the dock of  
the bay, Watching the tide  
roll away, ooh

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I'm just sittin' on the  
dock of the bay, Wasting  
time

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### Questions for Review Answer Key:

1. Dawson, Georgia
2. Five
3. Picking cotton
4. The Douglass Theatre
5. These Arms of Mine
6. 17
7. To perform at the Apollo Theatre
8. By starting a music publishing business called Walco Music Company
9. England and Germany
10. Aretha Franklin
11. San Francisco, California
12. 26
13. Two Grammy Awards; Inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Georgia Music Hall of Fame; A statute of him appears in Macon's Gateway Park

## Crossword Puzzle Answer Key:

### Across –

7.ARETHAFRANKLIN

9. GATEWAY

10.ZELMA

12.APOLLO

13.MACON

14.DAWSON

### Down –

1.JOHNNYJENKINS

2.COTTON

3.SANFRANCISCO

4.GRAMMY

5.STAX

6.MADISON

8.LITTLERICHARD

11.WALCO

## Bibliography:

\*A note to parents – The following books and websites were used in the research for this mini-unit study. However, the books listed below are **NOT** children’s books and they feature themes about racism, language, and music that children may not be equipped to handle. Parents are advised to read the books themselves and then choose how to share the information with their children.\*

Freeman, Scott. Otis!: The Otis Redding Story ©2001 St. Martin’s Press

Schiesel, Jane. The Otis Redding Story ©1973 Doubleday & Company

Brown, Geoff. Otis Redding: Try a Little Tenderness ©2001 Mojo Books

Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otis\\_Redding](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otis_Redding)

Otis Redding.com: <http://www.otisredding.com/>