

# *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement*

**Black  
American  
Freedom  
Songs  
1960-1966**





# Voices of the Civil Rights Movement Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966

SF 40084 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings 1997; Originally issued by Smithsonian Institution Press (1980 R 023)

This double-CD reissue of *The Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs, 1960-1966* documents a central aspect of the cultural environment of the Civil Rights Movement, acknowledging songs as the language that focused people's energy. These 43 tracks are a series of musical images, of a people in conversation about their determination to be free. Many of the songs were recorded live in mass meetings held in churches, where people from different life experiences, predominantly Black, with a few White supporters, came together in a common struggle. These freedom songs draw from spirituals, gospel, rhythm and blues, football chants, blues, and calypso forms. The enclosed booklet written by Bernice Johnson Reagon provides rare historic photographs along with the powerful story of African American musical culture and its role in the Civil Rights Movement.

## Disc I MASS MEETINGS

1. **FREEDOM MEDLEY: FREEDOM CHANT; OH FREEDOM: THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE** (Freedom Singers) 1:56
2. **THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE** (Betty Mae Fikes) 4:16
3. **IF YOU MISS ME FROM THE BACK OF THE BUS** (Betty Mae Fikes) 3:02
4. **LORD, HOLD MY HAND WHILE I RUN THIS RACE** 2:47
5. **GET ON BOARD, CHILDREN** (Willie Peacock) 2:07
6. **CALYPSO FREEDOM** (Willie Peacock) 6:27
7. **FREEDOM NOW CHANT** 0:25
8. **OH FREEDOM** (Hollis Watkins) 3:06
9. **AIN' SCARED OF NOBODY** (Amanda B. Perdew & Virginia Davis) 1:47
10. **LEANING ON THE EVERLASTING ARMS** 1:13
11. **SERMON** (Rev. Lawrence Campbell) 6:35
12. **WE ARE SOLDIERS IN THE ARMY** 3:22
13. **GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN** (Fannie Lou Hamer) 3:00
14. **WADE IN THE WATER** (Fannie Lou Hamer) 2:30
15. **COME BAH YAH** (Willie Peacock) 5:22
16. **WALK WITH ME, LORD** (Fannie Lou Hamer) 1:34
17. **JESUS ON THE MAINLINE, TELL HIM WHAT YOU WANT** (Sam Block) 3:31
18. **FREEDOM TRAIN** (Sam Block) 4:33
19. **DON'T YOU THINK IT'S ABOUT TIME THAT WE ALL BE FREE** (Mabel Hillary) 3:29
20. **WE'RE MARCHING ON TO FREEDOM LAND** (Carlton Reese) 2:29
21. **WE SHALL OVERCOME** 3:03

## Disc II ENSEMBLES

1. **WE'LL NEVER TURN BACK** (SNCC Freedom Singers led by Emory Harris) 3:28
2. **WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED** (SNCC Freedom Singers led by Rutha Harris) 2:08
3. **CERTAINLY, LORD** (CORE Freedom Singers) 2:03
4. **GET YOUR RIGHTS, JACK** (CORE Freedom Singers) 3:47
5. **WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?** (SNCC Freedom Singers led by Cordell Reagon) 1:55
6. **WOKE UP THIS MORNING WITH MY MIND ON FREEDOM** (SNCC Freedom Singers led by Bernice Johnson) 2:27
7. **BEEN IN THE STORM SO LONG** (Bernice Johnson) 3:51
8. **DOG, DOG** (SNCC Freedom Singers led by Cordell Reagon) 2:30
9. **THE A & P SONG** (Integration Grooves) 2:25
10. **OH PRITCHETT, OH KELLY** (SNCC Freedom Singers led by Bertha Gober) 2:12
11. **I TOLD JESUS** (Bertha Gober) 3:16
12. **99½ WON'T DO** (Alabama Christian Movement Choir led by Carlton Reese) 2:26
13. **I'M ON MY WAY** (Alabama Christian Movement Choir led by Mamie Brown) 3:36
14. **CITY CALLED HEAVEN** (Cleo Kennedy) 9:13
15. **IN THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER** (SNCC Freedom Singers led by Marshall Jones) 3:36
16. **AIN' GONNA LET NOBODY TURN ME 'ROUND** (SNCC Freedom Singers led by Cordell Reagon) 2:12
17. **WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN** (Jimmy Collier and the Movement Singers led by Diane Smith) 3:06
18. **GOVERNOR WALLACE** (SNCC Freedom Singers led by Charles Neblett) 2:32
19. **BALLAD OF MEDGAR EVERS** (SNCC Freedom Singers led by Matthew Jones) 4:28
20. **UNCLE TOM'S PRAYER** (Cordell Reagon) 1:07
21. **OGINGA ODINGA** (SNCC Freedom Singers led by Matthew Jones) 2:45
22. **WE SHALL OVERCOME** (SNCC Freedom Singers) 3:20



Smithsonian Folkways







# Voices of the Civil Rights Movement

## Black American Freedom Songs

### 1960-1966

#### Disc I

#### Mass Meetings

1. **Freedom Medley: Freedom Chant; Oh Freedom; This Little Light of Mine** 1:56  
(Trad.-arranged Freedom Singers) Led by SNCC Freedom Singers with Rutha Harris. Recorded in Atlanta, GA, spring 1964. Courtesy Phonogram, Inc.
2. **This Little Light of Mine** 4:16  
(Trad.-arranged B. M. Fikes) Led by Betty Mae Fikes. Recorded in Selma, AL, October 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.
3. **If You Miss Me from the Back of the Bus** 3:02  
(Trad.-arranged B. M. Fikes) Led by Betty Mae Fikes. Recorded in Selma, AL, October 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.
4. **Lord, Hold My Hand While I Run This Race** 2:47  
(Trad.) Mass meeting participants. Recorded in Hattiesburg, MS, February 1964. Courtesy Moses Moon.

5. **Get On Board, Children** 2:07  
(Trad.-arr. W. Peacock) Led by Willie Peacock. Recorded in Jackson, MS, fall-winter 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.
6. **Calypso Freedom** 6:27  
(Trad.-arr. W. Peacock) Led by Willie Peacock. Recorded in Jackson, MS, fall-winter 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.
7. **Freedom Now Chant** 0:25  
Mass meeting participants. Recorded in Hattiesburg, MS, February 1964. Courtesy Moses Moon.
8. **Oh Freedom** 3:06  
(Trad.-arr. H. Watkins) Led by Hollis Watkins. Recorded in Jackson, MS, fall-winter 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.
9. **Ain' Scared of Nobody** 1:47  
(Trad.-arr. A. B. Perdew and V. Davis) Led by Amanda Bowens Perdew and Virginia Davis. Recorded in Atlanta, GA, May 1964. Courtesy Guy Carawan.
10. **Leaning on the Everlasting Arms** 1:13  
(Trad.) Mass meeting participants. Recorded in Danville, VA, 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.

11. **Sermon** 6:35  
Rev. Lawrence Campbell. Recorded in Danville, VA, 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.
12. **We Are Soldiers in the Army** 3:22  
(J. Cleveland) Mass meeting participants. Recorded in Danville, VA, 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.
13. **Go Tell It on the Mountain** 3:00  
(Trad.-arr. F. L. Hamer) Led by Fannie Lou Hamer. Recorded in Greenwood, MS, fall 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.
14. **Wade in the Water** 2:30  
(Trad.-arr. F. L. Hamer) Led by Fannie Lou Hamer. Recorded in Greenwood, MS, fall 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.
15. **Come Bah Yah** 5:22  
(Trad.-arr. W. Peacock) Led by Willie Peacock. Recorded in Greenwood, MS, fall 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.
16. **Walk with Me, Lord** 1:34  
(Trad.-arr. F. L. Hamer) Fannie Lou Hamer. Recorded in Hattiesburg, MS, February 1964. Courtesy Moses Moon.
17. **Jesus on the Mainline, Tell Him What You Want** 3:31  
(Trad.-arr. S. Block) Led by Sam Block. Recorded in Atlanta, GA, May 1964. Courtesy Guy Carawan.

18. **Freedom Train** 4:33  
(Trad.-arr. S. Block) Led by Sam Block. Recorded in Jackson, MS, fall-winter 1963. Courtesy Moses Moon.
19. **Don't You Think It's About Time That We All Be Free** 3:29  
(M. Hillary) Mabel Hillary. Recorded in Atlanta, GA, May 1964. Courtesy Guy Carawan.
20. **We're Marching On to Freedom Land** 2:29  
(C. Reese) Led by Carlton Reese. Recorded in Atlanta, GA, May 1964. Courtesy Guy Carawan.
21. **We Shall Overcome** 3:03  
(Trad.) Mass meeting participants. Recorded in Hattiesburg, MS, February 1964. Courtesy Moses Moon.



## Disc II

### Ensembles

1. **We'll Never Turn Back** 3:28  
(B. Gober-arr. Freedom Singers) SNCC Freedom Singers led by Emory Harris. Recorded in Atlanta, GA, spring 1964. Courtesy Phonogram, Inc.
2. **We Shall Not Be Moved** 2:08  
(Trad.-arr. Freedom Singers) SNCC Freedom Singers led by Rutha Harris. Recorded in Los Angeles, CA, August 1963. Courtesy Phonogram, Inc.
3. **Certainly, Lord** 2:03  
(Trad.-arr. J. McKissick) CORE Freedom Singers. Recorded in New York, summer 1963. Courtesy Joycelyn McKissick.
4. **Get Your Rights, Jack** 3:47  
(\_ . Mayfield-J. McKissick) CORE Freedom Singers. Recorded in New York, summer 1963. Courtesy Joycelyn McKissick.
5. **Which Side Are You On?** 1:55  
(F. Reese-J. Farmer) SNCC Freedom Singers led by Cordell Reagon. Recorded in Los Angeles, CA, August 1963. Courtesy Bernice Johnson Reagon.
6. **Woke Up This Morning with My Mind on Freedom** 2:27  
(Trad.-arr. Freedom Singers) SNCC Freedom Singers led by Bernice Johnson. Recorded in Chicago, IL, April 1963. Courtesy Bernice Johnson Reagon.
7. **Been in the Storm So Long** 3:51  
(Trad.-arr. B. Johnson) Bernice Johnson. Recorded in Atlanta, GA, May 1964. Courtesy Guy Carawan.
8. **Dog, Dog** 2:30  
(J. Bevel-B. LaFayette-arr. Freedom Singers) SNCC Freedom Singers led by Cordell Reagon. Recorded in Los Angeles, CA, August 1963. Courtesy Phonogram, Inc.\*
9. **The A&P Song** 2:25  
(B. Gibson) Integration Grooves. Recorded in Atlanta, GA, May 1960. Courtesy Howard Zinn.
10. **Oh Pritchett, Oh Kelly** 2:12  
(Trad.-arr. B. Gober-J. Culbreth) SNCC Freedom Singers led by Bertha Gober. Recorded in Los Angeles, CA, August 1963. Courtesy Bernice Johnson Reagon.
11. **I Told Jesus** 3:16  
(Trad.-arr. B. Gober) Bertha Gober. Recorded in Los Angeles, CA, August 1963. Courtesy Bernice Johnson Reagon.
12. **99 ½ Won't Do** 2:26  
(Trad.-arr. C. Reese) Alabama Christian Movement Choir led by Carlton Reese. Recorded in Birmingham, AL, 1963. Courtesy Guy Carawan.
13. **I'm On My Way** 3:36  
(Trad.-arr. C. Reese) Alabama Christian Movement Choir led by Mamie Brown. Recorded in Birmingham, AL, 1963. Courtesy Guy Carawan.
14. **City Called Heaven** 9:13  
(Trad.-arr. C. Kennedy) Cleo Kennedy. Recorded in Birmingham, AL, 1963. Courtesy Guy Carawan.
15. **In the Mississippi River** 3:36  
(M. Jones) SNCC Freedom Singers led by Marshall Jones. Recorded in Schenectady, NY, 1965. Courtesy Estate of Herbert Poller.
16. **Ain' Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round** 2:12  
(Trad.-arr. Freedom Singers) SNCC Freedom Singers led by Cordell Reagon. Recorded in Los Angeles, CA, August 1963. Courtesy Phonogram, Inc.
17. **Will the Circle Be Unbroken** 3:06  
(Trad.-arr. J. Collier) Jimmy Collier and the Movement Singers led by Diane Smith. Recorded in Chicago, IL, 1966. Courtesy Studs Terkel Radio Show.
18. **Governor Wallace** 2:32  
(J. Orange-arr. Freedom Singers) SNCC Freedom Singers led by Charles Neblett. Recorded in Schenectady, NY, 1965. Courtesy Estate of Herbert Poller.
19. **Ballad of Medgar Evers** 4:28  
(M. Jones) SNCC Freedom Singers led by Matthew Jones. Recorded in Atlanta, GA, spring 1964. Courtesy Phonogram, Inc.
20. **Uncle Tom's Prayer** 1:07  
(M. Jones) Cordell Reagon. Recorded in Atlanta, GA, May 1964. Courtesy Guy Carawan.
21. **Oginga Odinga** 2:45  
(M. Jones) SNCC Freedom Singers led by Matthew Jones. Recorded in Atlanta, GA, spring 1964. Courtesy Phonogram, Inc.
22. **We Shall Overcome** 3:20  
(Trad.-arr. Freedom Singers) SNCC Freedom Singers. Recorded in Chicago, IL, April 1963. Courtesy Phonogram, Inc.



## The Song Culture of the Civil Rights Movement

From 1955 to 1965 the equilibrium of American society was rocked by waves of social and political protest. Black people engaging in massive civil disobedience served notice to the nation and the world that they would no longer tolerate the abuses of American racism. The Civil Rights Movement heralded a new era in the Black American struggle for equality.

The Movement spread throughout the South. Among the initial organizers were Black college students who set aside their studies to work in segregated rural and urban communities. They received support from local leaders who listened to them, housed and fed them. Sharecroppers, ministers,

hairdressers, restaurant owners, independent business people, and in some special cases teachers: these were the first to try to register to vote, or apply for a job, or use a public facility previously reserved for Whites. The response was swift and brutal: economic reprisals, jailings, beatings, and killings.

The Movement grew, pulling in recruits from all segments of the Black community, joined by dedicated White supporters. The Civil Rights Movement forced change in legal, political, and social processes, but its essence lay in the

transformation of a people and the triggering of an era of change. The Civil Rights Movement was a burning struggle, breaking new ground and laying the foundation for ever-widening segments of the society to call for fundamental rights and human dignity.



View from the steps of the Danville, Virginia, courthouse, summer 1963.

Photo by Danny Lyon

The development of this anthology of Civil Rights Movement song was, for me, a way to pay homage to experiences which clarified my personal and professional direction. I grew up in Dougherty County, just outside of Albany, Georgia, in a community steeped in Black Southern cultural traditions. These traditions came alive for me as they shaped the cultural structures of the Civil Rights Movement. From the late 1950s through the mid-1960s, I celebrated and participated in the wedding of our traditional culture with our contemporary struggle for freedom. All the established academic categories in which I had been educated fell apart during this period, revealing culture to be not luxury, not leisure, not entertainment, but the lifeblood of a community.

As a singer and activist in the Albany Movement, I sang and heard the freedom songs, and saw them pull together sections of the Black community at times when other means of communication were ineffective. It was the first time that I knew the power of song to be an instrument for the articulation of our community concerns. In Dawson, Georgia, county seat of "Terrible Terrell," where Blacks were seventy-five percent of the population, I sat in

church and felt the chill that ran through a small gathering of Blacks when the sheriff and his deputies walked in. They stood at the door, making sure everyone knew they were there. Then a song began. And the song made sure that the sheriff and his deputies knew *we* were there. We became visible; our image was enlarged as the sounds of the freedom songs filled all the space in that church.

As I read the numerous studies on the Civil Rights Movement, I look for the people who made up the numbers; I look to see if they are a faceless mass or an eloquent and strongly focused community. The few successful studies acknowledge the songs as the language that focused the energy of the people who filled the streets and roads of the South during that period.

*The Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs, 1960-1966* documents a central aspect of the cultural environment of the Civil Rights Movement. It is a series of musical images, seen both distantly and at close range, of a people in conversation about their determination to be free.

Bernice Johnson Reagon



## Freedom Songs: Language of Black Struggle

Music has always been integral to the Black American struggle for freedom. The music culture of the Civil Rights Movement was shaped by its central participants: Black, Southern, and steeped in oral tradition. The freedom songs – though recorded, transcribed, committed to the written page, and read – truly came to life, were developed and used, within the context of Black tradition. The power of the songs, so apparent in these recordings, manifested itself through the process of linking oral expression with everyday Movement experiences. This integration was noted by Charles Sherrod, field secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who described how music bonded community support during the



Songleaders at the Newport Folk Festival, 1964: (left to right) Brenda Darden, Rutha Mae Harris, Cordell Reagon, Cleo Kennedy, and Betty Mae Fikes. Photo by Joe Alper

first mass meeting held in Albany, Georgia, in November 1961:

*The church was packed before eight o'clock. People were everywhere, in the aisles, sitting and standing in the choir stands, hanging over the railing of the balcony, sitting in trees outside the window.... When the last speaker among the students, Bertha Gober, had finished, there was nothing left to say. Tears filled the eyes of hard, grown men who had seen with their own eyes merciless atrocities committed.... And when we rose to sing "We Shall Overcome," nobody could imagine what kept the church on four corners.... I threw my head back and sang with my whole body.<sup>1</sup>*

As Civil Rights workers traveled – and as their image and word traveled still further via

<sup>1</sup> Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, pp. 128-9.

the electronic news media – they gave the Movement's music wide and effective dissemination. Robert Shelton, then music critic for the *New York Times*, described this process:

*"We Shall Overcome" has been called "The Marseillaise" of the integration movement. It has passed by word of mouth with great speed despite the fact that no single disk of the song has been issued and no sheet music will be available in the stores until next month.<sup>2</sup>*

Mainstream music was directly affected by the Movement's musical outpouring. Many songs of social commentary written or recorded during the folk and topical song revivals reached the top of the popular charts.

At the height of the Movement, *Newsweek* magazine wrote that Civil Rights Movement music gave people "new courage and a new sense of unity":

*History has never known a protest movement so rich in song as the Civil Rights Movement. Nor a movement in which songs are as important. Martin Luther King called them "vital." ... At nightly get-*

<sup>2</sup> Robert Shelton, "Rights Songs Have Own History of Integration." *New York Times*, July 23, 1963, p. L22.

<sup>3</sup> "Without These Songs." *Newsweek*, August 31, 1964, p. 74.

*out-to-vote meetings singing always came first, the singers gilded with sweat starting off with "We've been 'buked and we've been scorned...but we'll never turn back...."<sup>3</sup>*

## Roots: Notes on Black American Choral Song Style\*

Most Civil Rights Movement singing was congregational: songs sung unrehearsed in the tradition of Black American choral style. This style has its own set of aesthetics and principles that govern the birthing and execution of a song, its own parameters defining the range and use of the vocal instrument, and its own rules setting out roles for all singers within the group.

Traditionally, Black American congregational-style singing is initiated by a songleader. The qualities of a good songleader are both musical and organizational. Community gatherings are usually opened with song and prayer; the songleader is the galvanizer, the

\* I am indebted to Dr. Doris Evans McGinty, Chairman of the Department of Music, Howard University, for her collaboration in developing the musical analysis used in this and the following section.



maker of the group. A good songleader must manifest strength, energy, and enthusiasm that make a group want to sing. The vocal qualities of the Black American traditional singer are distinct and, in some instances, run counter to Euro-American music traditions. There is a strong appreciation for the use of the vibrato, producing an expansive and warm tone; vocal textures and colorings must cover a wide range, from smooth and clear tones to those with a gravel-like feel. The strong Black American songleader must be able to sing on the edge of the voice with tones uncovered, often intentionally producing a break in the voice to heighten the tension. Aspirations for the covered, carefully modulated tone have little place in the Black American traditional music setting. The agility of the singer, the ability to "worry the line" (sing several notes on one syllable), to scoop and glide, to issue strategically sustained and textured calls, are some of the qualities which establish musical grades within the Black American community.

In Black American congregational-style singing, the song begins with one voice, that of the songleader. The beginning note is in fact not the beginning note and must always be

approached from above or below as a kind of grace note which takes no additional time in the measure and is rarely noticed by the untrained ear. This method of attack is opposite from Euro-American tradition, which requires a clear tone and precision of attack on the first note. The effect of the Black American attack is to soften the beginning, to gentle and caress the first note by blending it with another. Once the songleader establishes the song, other singers fall in – "growing" the song, moving it in a gradual process to fuller potential. The success of the singing rests to a large extent in the ability of the songleader to select the right song for the right moment and to infuse the group with the spirit to sing.

The specific musical role of the songleader varies from one song to another. One of the strongest characteristics of the African and Black American song tradition is the call-and-response pattern. The songleader usually issues the call, and the group responds in alternating sequence, as in the spiritual "Certainly, Lord" (Ensembles, track 3).

*Call: Have you been to the river?*

*Response: Certainly, Lord.*

*Call: Have you been to the river?*

*Response: Certainly, Lord.*

*Call: Have you been to the river?*

*Response: Certainly, Lord.*

*All: Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord.*

When the primary function of the songleader is to initiate the first line of each stanza or chorus and thus to identify the new lyrics for the congregation, the relationship between songleader and chorus differs. In such instances, once the new lyric line is set, the song is kept moving by extemporaneous calls; these calls are placed within and between lines by the songleader as well as by other solo voices in the group. "This Little Light of Mine" (Mass Meetings, tracks 1 and 2) is performed in such a manner:

*Songleader A: This little light of mine,*

*All B: I'm gonna let it shine*

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine*

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine*

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

Although line A is divided so as to suggest call-and-response alternation within the line, this does not take place. The songleader sings the phrase "This little light of mine," after which the entire group sings to the end of the

stanza. At this point, the songleader raises, or lines out, the lyrics for the next stanza. Other songs in which this pattern of alternation between songleader and congregation may be heard are "We Shall Not Be Moved" (Ensembles, track 2) and "I'm On My Way" (Ensembles, track 13).

When a songleader begins a song, the spirit of the song sparks other potential songleaders. As the song gathers momentum, a second songleader can take over, and the song may go on indefinitely, passing from one songleader to another. The signal for a lead change is usually a call (sustained tone) from the new leader, begun during the last line of the chorus and moving into lead position for the new chorus or verse. The new leads may be more intense and/or have a different twist, infusing the musical experience with new energy. Thus the song moves to higher levels, and each performance becomes a new song.

The Black American traditional chorus is essential to the making of a song. The call of the songleader requires the response of the group; the raising of a new line needs the group for completion. Black American group singing builds gradually, each singer creating a musical path for each performance. The song



may be known by all, but with each singing there is the potential for a new line, a different variant on the melody, new slides, and improvised calls. The traditional chorus feels its way harmonically into the chord, with patterns becoming strongest at the cadences. The song does not begin in neat, four-part harmony; the melody is always strongest. It may be sung by all voices in unison, or some voices may sing the first or even the second octave above or below. Deviations occur, however, as each singer strives to state the melody individually. Variety in the melodic line is also created by the wide range of vocal textures and phrasings. The phrasings can set up counter-melodies and rhythms. This is demonstrated in the singing of the hymn "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" (Mass Meetings, track 10). The songleader initiates the song with a verse, singing the phrase "What a fellowship." By the time she gets to the second line, "What a peace is mine," a few members of the congregation have joined in. When they reach the refrain, "Leaning on the everlasting arms," the whole group is in and, from that point, together builds the song to its end. Unison singing, with occasional deviation from the melody, predominates, although the

chorus includes a counter-melody in the inner voices:

*Chorus 1:*

*Leaning \_\_\_\_\_ Leaning \_\_\_\_\_*

*Counter-melody:*

*Leaning on Jesus, Leaning on Jesus*

*All: Leaning on the everlasting arms.*

Although it follows the original melodic direction of the composer, the singing of this hymn is brought into the realm of Black American singing tradition by the vocal textures, variant melodies, spontaneous interjections by solo voices, and the songleader-chorus relationship.

When harmonies occur in Black American congregational song style, they are often first indicated by one or more voices feeling for a bass line, which is usually established by the end of the first or second line of the song. Vertical intervals of thirds, fourths, and fifths (the fifth being most common) are heard as the harmonies are gradually formed. Dissonances occur, often more than one at a time. The tension of the dissonance is muted to some degree by the number of variant intervals being sung, thus creating a blanket of sound. This blanket serves as a backdrop against which the

stronger, more defined melodies and harmonies unfold. One hears melodies, perhaps harmonies, and more, giving the feeling of full musical sound with no empty spaces. This characteristic distinguishes traditional group singing from other styles.

The bass is generally a rolling bass, leaping out before the beginning of each line and tailing after the end; it may also add punctuating phrases at any gap in the song to serve as intensifiers, points of pressure, pushing the song to greater heights. This responsibility is also carried by strong, higher voices which are not leading but are accenting the choral response. The overall effect is of a great mass of vocal sound surging forward in unity, alive with voices moving on their own time without altering – in fact, enriching – the direction of the song.

Black American choral song style is the union of songleader and congregation: the commitment of singers, masters of their tradition, to speak both individually and in one voice. It is an outstanding example of the unity of group statements existing in total communion with the sanctity of individual expression.

### From the Tradition: A Contemporary Statement

The core of Civil Rights Movement songs was formed from the reservoir of the Black American traditional song repertoire and older styles of singing. This music base was expanded to include most of the popular Black American music forms and singing techniques of the period. From this storehouse, activist songleaders made a new music for a changed time.



SNCC field secretaries/songleaders in Danville, June 1963: (from left) Cordell Reagon, Tennessee; Dottie Miller, New York; Bernice Johnson, Georgia; Avon Rollins, Tennessee; Bob Zellner, Alabama. Photo by Danny Lyon



Lyrics were transformed, traditional melodies were adapted, and procedures associated with old forms were blended with new forms to create freedom songs capable of expressing the force and intent of the Movement.

The first recognized and named body of Civil Rights Movement freedom songs came from the student sit-in organizers in North and South Carolina and Nashville, Tennessee. Their repertoire, which included arranged spirituals and football cheers, Top Forty rhythm and blues hits and gospel, shaped the first songs of action.

The song "Oh Pritchett, Oh Kelly" (Ensembles, track 10) corresponds closely to the spiritual "Rockin' Jerusalem" arranged by John W. Work. While the form and voicings remained consistent, new lyrics by Bertha Gober and Janie Lee Culbreth addressed the local Albany, Georgia, struggle of November and December 1961. This performance of "Oh Pritchett, Oh Kelly" provides an excellent demonstration of the evolution and use of Black American forms.

The song has several sections with two or more functions carried out in each. In the opening section, the call of the soloist, "Oh Pritchett" (chief of police, Laurie Pritchett), is answered by the chorus with "Oh Kelly"

(Mayor Asa Kelly), setting up the traditional call-and-response pattern:

*Call: Oh Pritchett*

*Response: Oh Kelly*

*Call: Oh Pritchett*

*All: Open them cells.*

The soloist moves the song into the next section with a refrain sung in a style reminiscent of Black American traditional preaching oratory. The chorus supports it with a chant of one word – "freedom" – setting up a counter-rhythm to the solo line:

*Solo: I hear God's children*

*Crying for mercy,*

*Chorus: Freedom, Freedom, Freedom*

*Solo: Lord, I hear God's children*

*Praying in jail,*

*Chorus: Freedom, Freedom, Freedom.*

The solo is highly syncopated, while the chorus's chant defines and steadies the beat. The two sections together form a chorus that is repeated after each verse. In the verse, the call-and-response pattern is heard again:

*Call: Bail getting higher*

*Response: Praying in jail*

*Call: Bail getting higher*

*Response: Praying in jail.*

Some of the most arranged songs were sung by the ensembles which traveled the country, drawing attention to and support for the Movement. One such composition, "In the Mississippi River" (Ensembles, track 15), was written by Marshall Jones after three Civil Rights workers were reported missing in Mississippi at the beginning of the summer of 1964. A massive troop-led search dragged Mississippi's rivers and found several Black bodies, long dead. The song served to articulate the feelings of Jones and the Freedom Singers as they watched the tragedy unfold.

*Solo: In the Mississippi River [2x]*

*Solo: Lord, Lord, Lord, Lord*

*Group: In the Mississippi River*

*Group: Well, you can count them one by one*

*Solo: It could be your son*

*Group: Well, you can count them two by two*

*Solo: It could be me or you*

*Group: Well, you can count them three by three*

*Solo: Do you wanna see?*

*Group: Well, you can count-a them four by four*

*Group: Oh, well-a into the river they go [2x]*

*Group: Well, you can count them five by five*

*Solo: With their hands tied*

*Group: And they don't come out alive*

*Solo: And their feet tied*

*Group: And you can count them six by six*

*Solo: Holes throughout the body*

*Group: In Mississippi, they got it fixed*

*Solo: Like Goodman*

*Group: And you can count them seven by seven*

*Solo: Like Schwerner*

*Group: The Mississippi River sure ain't heaven*

*Solo: And Chaney....*

The opening line is a call in the style of a field holler:

*In the Mississippi River....*

The end of the call is crossed by another solo wail:

*Lord, Lord, Lord....*

When the field holler line is repeated, it is joined by an additional voice in tight harmony at a minor third interval. After the third call is sounded, forming a trio, the song slips into a



chant with the three voices in deep, soft, rolling chords:

*You can count them one by one.*

*You can count them two by two.*

These lines set up a chanting rhythm which is then countered by a solo voice, "It could be your son, it could be me or you." The sequence advances until another layer is added by a second lone voice over the chorus and main lead. The second solo voice uses a field holler style, ringing out the names of Mississippi's rivers.

The next shift comes with a change in lyrics. The chorus moves from counting bodies "one by one" to "We got to stop them/From going in the river." Moving from observation to action infuses new energy into the song. The level is further raised by the increase in bass presence and movement: the bass line begins to lope, setting up a counter-rhythm to the rest of the chorus. This blend of field holler, preaching, and chanting, with rhythm and blues harmonies in a tightly orchestrated arrangement, is an excellent example of the musical options open to songleaders operating in a period of change.

Rhythm and blues song structures, character-

ized by a strong lead, clean, tight 1-3-5 harmony backup, and a rolling answer-bass, were another source for the new songs. "Dog, Dog" (Ensembles, track 8), written by James Bevel and Bernard LaFayette during the Nashville sit-in of 1960, utilized all the components of a



Fannie Lou Hamer, accompanied on guitar by singer/collector Guy Carawan. Photo by Joe Alper

fine rhythm and blues song. The song opens with the soloist's extemporaneous chant line:

*Solo: Dog, dog, dog, I'm talking 'bout a black dog. I'm talking 'bout a white dog....*

The background sets up another level of rhythm with a harmonized chant:

*Chorus: My dog a-love-a your dog....*

At a signal from the lead – "a-then-a why can't we" – the song expands into a barbershop choral structure utilized by Black gospel quartets. At the end of this section there is a clean stop, and the chorus renews the chant, with the lead doing a series of calls. Syncopation is paramount in the lead and chorus lines; lyrics sung in multiple rhythmic phrases set up a percussion system as well as carrying out melodic and harmonic functions. The exaggerated bass gives an added punch to the chanted chorus; its sweeping, out-of-formation tail in the coda creates a dramatic effect suggestive of Black barbershop bass style.

As Movement activity took root in a community, local songleaders joined in the action. They learned the songs of the organizers and added to them, sifting through the local, traditional repertoire to make use of older songs

which captured the feelings of the current struggle. In rural counties of Southwest Georgia, mass meetings used as their basic repertoire the lining-out hymns and call-and-response songs of that area. Sometimes these older songs were sung without change; sometimes one word was changed to identify and document a specific experience or event. A good example of this practice can be found in "I'm On My Way" (Ensembles, track 13).

The music of a good mass meeting would blend traditional material (unchanged in song form or lyrics) with material updated by Movement events and with the standard freedom song repertoire. Songleaders themselves often functioned in a variety of styles. In Greenwood, Mississippi, traditional songleader and organizer Fannie Lou Hamer could lead a congregation in a renewed version of "Go Tell It on the Mountain" (Mass Meetings, track 13) as well as in the traditional "Walk with Me" (Mass Meetings, track 16). In Selma, Alabama, a Youth Freedom choir functioned as the songleading unit (Mass Meetings, tracks 2 & 3). Although they developed a few gospel selections for performance, the choir's primary role was to lead mass meeting congregations in





The Selma Youth Freedom Choir, 1963-64.

Photo by Danny Lyon

song. By contrast, the Alabama Christian Movement Choir sang the basic freedom song repertoire, but primarily functioned as a choir. They performed new and complexly arranged gospel-style freedom songs. For example, the

traditional spiritual "99 ½ Won't Do" (Ensembles, track 12) was set, with some changes in lyrics, in a gospel style. Songwriter Carlton Reese uses the powerful and flexible Hammond organ in a percussive style to set

the driving pace. He opens the call-and-response chorus with his gravel-voiced shout:

*Call: Oh Lord, I'm running....*

*Response: Lord I'm running, trying to make a hundred....*

In the middle section of the song, the roles are switched as the choir sets up the call and Reese responds:

*Choir: 35 – 40 45 – 50....*

*Solo response: Won't do Won't do*

Reese then turns the pattern around again and takes on the call by shouting:

*Solo call: Let me tell you, 91... 92....*

*Choir response: Won't do Won't do*

The choir then takes over the chanting of "Won't do" in full harmony.

In local centers of Movement activity these songs, singers, and songleaders found their places. Rhythm and blues-based songs were generally sung on street corners, in offices of Movement organizations, in jail, and in secular social gatherings; songs with a religious base found voice in mass meetings, marches, and all Movement activities. Wherever and however they were sung, the songs of the Civil Rights Movement reflected their roots in Black American cultural traditions.





*Mass meeting in a Selma church. Photo by Joe Alper*

## Mass Meetings

From December 1955 to December 1956, Blacks in Montgomery, Alabama, chose to walk rather than ride on segregated city buses. To sustain and unify the community during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, mass meetings were held. There were speakers and there was singing. In boycott-organized car pools that took people to work, there was singing.

In 1960, when Black students sat in and were beaten at segregated lunch counters across the South, they sang. They sang as they were dragged into the streets. They sang in the paddy wagons and in the jails. And they sang when they returned to the Black community's churches for strategy rallies.

When the buses carrying the Freedom Riders were stopped and burned, when the riders were pushed to the ground and beaten, they sang. When the Freedom Riders were jailed in Mississippi's Hinds County Jail and Parchman Penitentiary, they sang again. During the summer of 1961 when students in McComb, Mississippi, were suspended from school for participating in SNCC's first voter education project, they sang. In Albany, Georgia, in 1962,

when mass arrests followed the first testing of the Interstate Commerce Commission's ruling that interstate travel be integrated, songs thundered from the massive community-based movement that was born. In Selma and Birmingham, in Greenwood and Hattiesburg, in Danville and Pine Bluff and Baton Rouge and Cambridge, in segregated cities across the nation, communities of activists came together. Central to their gatherings – mass meetings, rallies, marches, pray-ins, jail-ins – were their freedom songs.

The songs on this CD were recorded in mass meetings, most held in churches. As you listen, imagine a mass of people, predominantly Black with a few White supporters, of different backgrounds and life experiences drawn together by a central struggle. Listen for the range of song forms, from the traditional "Lord, Hold My Hand While I Run This Race" to the Freedom Ride song "Calypso Freedom." Listen for the grey sound areas, the interweaving harmony, and dissonant lines characteristic of Black congregational singing. Try to feel and develop an appreciation for song structures that call all present, regardless of musical ability, to lift their voices in song, granting to



every voice, without fear of clashing with others, the forum of musical expression.

### 1. Freedom Medley

This medley consists of a "Freedom Chant," "Oh Freedom," and "This Little Light of Mine." The core group of songleaders is the second group of SNCC Freedom Singers, participating in one of SNCC's periodic conferences.

The "Freedom Chant" moves into the singing of "Oh Freedom" led by the core group of songleaders. According to oral tradition, "Oh Freedom," a song from slavery, was used as a marching song by Blacks protesting the Atlanta race riots of 1906. With changes in lyrics, it was used in the 1930s by organizers of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. By the time of the Civil Rights Movement, "Oh Freedom" was not generally found in the repertoire of Black church congregations. It was occasionally performed by school choral groups and remained part of the spiritual tradition. Movement activists familiar with this tradition and the song culture of the labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s brought the song to the sit-ins and Freedom Rides and into the

mass meeting song repertoire.

The medley moves through the chorus of "Oh Freedom" and shifts into "This Little Light of Mine." This song is led by Emory Harris with his sister, Rutha Mae Harris, a member of the original SNCC Freedom Singers, taking her turn at lead from her position on a harmony line. The transition is smooth and indicative of songleader flexibility within Black group singing. Chuck Neblett, also of the Freedom Singers, leads the final chant of "Oh Freedom." Medleys of this sort were the rule and not the exception; during mass meetings, song after song, usually more extended than this edited version, would come without a break.

### 2. This Little Light of Mine

This rendition is led by Betty Mae Fikes with the Selma Youth Freedom Choir and is accompanied by piano. The song maintains enough of its traditional structure to allow for full participation by the congregation. The gospel influence is evident in Fikes's statement of the initiating line. One of the strongest songleaders to come out of the Movement, Fikes uses her unique and signature call to ini-

tiate each new verse halfway through the last line of the old verse. The gospel change in melody is picked up and maintained by the full congregation. For comparison, listen to the traditional-style version of "This Little Light of Mine" as led in the Freedom Medley (Mass Meetings, track 1) by Emory and Rutha Harris.

Songleaders often localized songs by adding lyrics peculiar to their immediate situation. Many of the songs from Selma, Alabama, used names of local personalities. For example, Fikes sings "Tell Jim Clark" (sheriff of Selma) and "Tell Al Lingo" (head of the Alabama State Troopers), calling their names as symbols of what the Selma Movement was fighting. Movement leaders were also named in the new lyrics. Spontaneous cheers and clapping greet Fikes's lines, recognition of her skill as a songleader and on-the-spot chronicler of the mood of the congregation.

### 3. If You Miss Me from the Back of the Bus

This song also picked up new words and phrases in each local struggle. Here Betty Mae Fikes inserts the name of her school, Hudson High, after the opening line. Parrish High, the name of the White high school over which an

integration battle was being fought, was placed after the phrase "Come on over to...." Another verse says, "If you miss [Sheriff] Jim Clark, can't find him nowhere/Come on over to the graveyard, he'll be laying over there"; a third, "If you miss Governor Wallace, can't find him nowhere/Come on over to the crazy house, he'll be resting over there."

In Selma, even songs used in church had a contemporary ring and were secularized. In other communities, it was rare to hear lyrics that wished someone dead. Throughout the South, however, mass meeting orators would often reiterate that God would "take care" of those who were blocking the progress of the Black community.

### 4. Lord, Hold My Hand While I Run This Race

This song is basic to the repertoire of rural Black Baptist congregations. Unchanged, the traditional lyrics gave voice to feelings aroused by the contemporary situation:

*Lord, hold my hand  
Lord, guide my feet  
Lord, answer prayer  
While I run this race*



*'Cause I don't want to run this race in vain.*

"Lord, Hold My Hand" is an excellent example of the flow and development of a song in the context of congregational singing. In this mass meeting, the singing of the song came at the end of a prayer. The leader states the first phrase and is joined by the congregation on "While I run this race." A male voice stronger than the songleader's introduces each new chorus with a call, generating energy in the singing of the song. This is not unusual: within the Black congregational song tradition, anyone moved by the spirit can start a song; in this performance, the songleader changes three times. The song is given body by the wide range of vocal textures in the lead and response, with most of the chorus singing a variation of the melody – octaves apart.

### 5. Get On Board, Children

This song, drawn from the repertoire of arranged spirituals sung by Black high school and college choirs, is led here by Willie Peacock, a native of Columbus, Mississippi. Peacock was forced to leave his hometown when he became active in the Civil Rights Move-

ment. Peacock's lead on this song, and on "Calypso Freedom," which follows, has a raspy vocal tone. The range of his singing style can be heard by contrasting vocal texture here with his singing of "Come Bah Yah" (Mass Meetings, track 15).

Jackson, Mississippi, rallies and mass meetings did not follow the structure of the traditional religious service. This mass meeting, called as a vigil to await the returns from Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party elections, included speakers and freedom songs led by local songleaders and by members of the SNCC Freedom Singers.

### 6. Calypso Freedom

The song is based on a traditional Caribbean melody popularized during the 1950s by Harry Belafonte as "The Banana Boat Song." The Movement lyrics chronicled the experiences of the Nashville Freedom Riders. "Calypso Freedom" was usually performed by organized ensembles. Here Willie Peacock and the core group of songleaders are joined by the drummer of the Blue Gardenia, a local rock and roll band, who spontaneously added a rhythm section to the end of the song.

### 7. Freedom Now Chant

This chant begins with shouts of "Freedom!" and evolves into a call-and-response chant with part of the congregation shouting "Freedom!" and the rest answering "Now!" Sung immediately after "Freedom Train," the chant increases in pace until it sounds like a moving train.

### 8. Oh Freedom

In this version, Hollis Watkins, a SNCC field secretary from McComb, Mississippi, uses the tradition of lining-out lyrics during the singing of hymns to give the new words of each verse to the congregation. In traditional Black religious services, the lining-out of hymns is often chanted. Here, with the spirited, upbeat freedom songs, Watkins's "lining-out" of the new line becomes a shout.

### 9. Ain' Scared of Nobody

This song came out of Birmingham during the summer of 1963, when Sheriff Bull Connor responded to increasingly militant demonstrations with dogs and firehoses. Here it is led by Amanda Bowens Perdew and Virginia Davis, two members of a trio from Americus,

Georgia. The trio's members, including Sammy Mahone, functioned as songleaders for the Americus voter registration and school desegregation movements.

### 10. Leaning on the Everlasting Arms

Hymns were used throughout the Movement from the time of the Montgomery mass meetings. Here, a very popular late 19th-century hymn (lyrics by Elisha Hoffman and tune by Anthony J. Showalter, 1887) is sung by mass meeting participants in Danville, Virginia.

### 11. Sermon

This segment of a sermon by Rev. Lawrence Campbell, a leader of the 1963 Danville, Virginia, Movement, illustrates the song-sermons that were an essential part of the cultural structure of mass meetings. Campbell is a master storyteller, able to blend references to the specific realities of the everyday Danville struggle with biblical and Christian concepts.

### 12. We Are Soldiers in the Army

This song, composed by James Cleveland and popularized by the Gospel Harmonettes of Birmingham, Alabama, was a part of the stan-



dard repertoire of Black gospel choirs. It was first used in Civil Rights Movement mass meetings by the Montgomery Trio, who adapted it to the unaccompanied congregational style. Like most of the music sung in Danville, Virginia, this interpretation is marked by a driving lead and the dominance of unison singing in the chorus. The baritone leader uses the traditional call-and-response song style with elements of the gospel arrangement. The practice of blending arranged gospel songs with congregational singing and having the congregation participate fully in the blend is a product of Civil Rights Movement freedom singing.

### 13. Go Tell It on the Mountain

### 14. Wade in the Water

### 15. Come Bah Yah

These songs were sung successively in a Greenwood, Mississippi, mass meeting, with the songleading function carried out by a core of singers led by Fannie Lou Hamer. Hamer, a traditional songleader with no formal Western vocal training, leads a congregation that includes young members with experience in both Black traditional and Western song and vocal styles. The differences between them can

be heard in the leading of the three songs.

Together, the songs illustrate a range of influences that fed into mass meeting music. While they all come from the spiritual tradition, they demonstrate different aspects of freedom song evolution. A traditional Christmas song heralding the birth of the Christ child, "Go Tell It on the Mountain" was usually sung as an arranged spiritual by Black high school and college choirs. The verses come from the traditional repertoire and are also found in the spirituals "Go Down Moses" and "Wade in the Water." The phrase "Let my people go" is associated with the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Hamer's singing of the song takes it out of that frame of reference and moves it back into a congregational song style; in so doing, she transforms the traditional message, creating a song heralding the oncoming Civil Rights struggle.

"Wade in the Water" is found in traditional congregational singing and in the arranged spiritual repertoire. In Black oral tradition, the song is associated with stories of Harriet Tubman, conductor on the Underground Railroad during slavery. Again, Hamer functions as

leader and soloist. The lyrics of the traditional chorus remain unchanged. Hamer sifts through the traditional stock verses to find those that speak symbolically to the goals of the struggle at hand. She begins with a verse that addresses the unity of the human experience. A second verse talks about overcoming hindrances.

"Come Bah Yah," led by Willie Peacock, blends several stages of the song's evolution. During slavery, "Come By Here" was sung as

*Organizer, orator, song-leader: Fannie Lou Hamer was one of three Civil Rights Movement activists who led the challenge to the Mississippi delegation at the Democratic National Convention. Photo by Diana Davies*



a spiritual. It was taken to Liberia, West Africa, where the pronunciation of words already shaped by Blacks in the United States was further altered by the tonal linguistic culture. The Africanized version was re-imported and popularized as "Cum Bah Yah." Here Peacock blends the various pronunciations into "Come Bah Yah." Although sung in the same mass meeting as "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and "Wade in the Water" and by the same group of singers, the shift in lead from Hamer to Peacock results in a shift in harmonization and vocal placement. While maintaining elements of Black traditional vocal textures, the core group of songleaders moves into a smoother, more Western, "classical" choral statement with the tight harmony found in arranged spirituals.

### 16. Walk with Me, Lord

This spiritual is in the same tradition as "Lord, Hold My Hand" (Mass Meetings, track 4) and was used frequently in mass meetings. Here it is sung by Fannie Lou Hamer, songleader, organizer, and orator from Ruleville, Mississippi. When she tried to register to vote, Hamer was jailed, beaten, and



forced to leave her home and job as a plantation sharecropper. Her voice was heard in mass meetings and on marches in the state of Mississippi, and later throughout the South and across the nation. Until her death in 1977, Hamer was an activist and leader in movements for social justice.

### **17. Jesus on the Mainline, Tell Him What You Want**

This song was led by Sam Block at the 1964 Atlanta Sing for Freedom songleaders' conference. In this version, traditional lyrics and performance style remain intact. The traditional verses are: "If you're sick and can't get well, tell him what you want/He will come in a hurry, tell him what you want." These were supplemented with "If you want your freedom" and "If you're bound in jail."

### **18. Freedom Train**

This song was led by Sam Block at the 1964 Jackson, Mississippi, vigil for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party elections. It is based on the hymn "Old Ship of Zion," which can be found in the repertoire of traditional unaccompanied congregations and Black

gospel quartets. It was used during union organizing drives of the 1930s and 1940s as "Union Train."

Block, one of the first native Mississippians to commit himself to full-time Civil Rights Movement organizing in his home state, was a major force in shaping and transforming freedom songs. Although of the younger generation of songleaders, Block had a strong, traditional song style. Using preaching techniques inserted between verses, he would make extemporaneous statements analyzing Movement activities. Here the song is performed with the congregation carrying out a rolling key word chant ("freedom," "coming," "thousands," etc.) under each new chorus.

### **19. Don't You Think It's About Time That We All Be Free**

This song was composed by Mabel Hillary and recorded by her at the 1964 Atlanta Sing for Freedom songleaders' conference. Hillary, who died in 1976, came from St. Simon's Island, Georgia. A member of the Georgia Sea Island Singers, she was a songwriter and singer of traditional, sacred, children's, and blues songs. Here is an excellent example of

the way an audience, familiar with the traditional song form chosen by the songleader, learns a song at the first singing.

### **20. We're Marching On to Freedom Land**

This song is one of several powerful gospel compositions written by Carlton Reese and based on the Birmingham experience. Here

Reese performed and taught the song to Movement songleaders at the 1964 Atlanta Sing for Freedom songleaders' conference.

### **21. We Shall Overcome (Mass Meeting version)**

Led by Fannie Lou Hamer, the theme song of the Movement closed a mass meeting in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in 1964.





*CORE Freedom Singers listening to playback in the studio, with James Farmer, then National Director of CORE (fourth from right).*

*Photo by Bob Adelman; from the collection of Joycelyn McKissick-Myers (Makeda)*

## Ensembles

Early in the development of each local Civil Rights Movement campaign, strong songleaders emerged spontaneously and came together to form core songleading units. In Montgomery, Alabama, it was the Montgomery Gospel Trio. In the Nashville, Tennessee, sit-ins, it was the American Baptist Theological Seminary Quartet, known also as the Nashville Quartet. Out of the Freedom Rides and other activities sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality came the CORE Singers. From the Albany, Georgia, Movement came the original SNCC Freedom Singers, followed by a second group of Freedom Singers and, briefly, the Freedom Voices. From Birmingham, Alabama, came the Alabama Christian Movement Choir. Activities in Selma and Chicago brought together Jimmy Collier and the Movement Singers. During the 1968 Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)-sponsored Poor People's Campaign, Collier teamed up with Rev. Frederick Douglas Kirkpatrick to form a powerful songwriting and performing duet.

Rooted in the traditions of Black congrega-

tional song style, these ensembles evolved into performing units capable of presenting Movement songs to local audiences throughout the country. By blending older, more traditional forms with the modern sounds of gospel, rhythm and blues, and arranged spirituals, and by singing together consistently, these groups achieved a clean sound with a practiced placement of voices, harmonies, rhythms, and leads.

The three SNCC ensembles developed to the highest degree the use of music to carry the Movement's message to audiences far removed from the struggle. Through nationwide tours, these groups catalyzed support for SNCC Movement activities at a time when public attention was focused primarily on media-recognized leaders and large direct-action events rather than on the more dangerous and lonely grassroots organizing activities.

### 1. We'll Never Turn Back

Composed by Bertha Gober, one of the most important Movement songwriters, "We'll Never Turn Back" became the theme of the Movement's efforts in Mississippi. The song was written in memory of Rev. Herbert Lee, the first person killed in Mississippi for his





*Original SNCC Freedom Singers Charles Neblett, Bernice Johnson, Cordell Reagon, and Rutha Mae Harris, 1963. Photo by Joe Alper*

SNCC Freedom Singers in this performance. This group was formed in 1964 with Charles Neblett, Cordell Reagon, James Peacock, Matthew Jones, and Marshall Jones. When Reagon and Peacock left to form the Freedom Voices, they added Bill Harris of Albany, Georgia, as the third voice; Emory Harris joined the Freedom Singers; Betty Mae Fikes also sang briefly with that group. This second group of Freedom Singers made a more contemporary musical statement; their repertoire supplemented the standard body of freedom songs with material from the folk revival or topical song movement. Matthew Jones, songwriter and jazz musician, also wrote many new songs for the group. They used guitar accompaniment – first Rafael Bentham and then Bill Perlman, the only White member of the organized singing groups – on most of their selections.

## **2. We Shall Not Be Moved**

This song, a part of the Black sacred song repertoire, was one of several used throughout the union drives to organize Black laborers during the 1930s and 1940s. Here the original SNCC Freedom Singers are led by Rutha Harris, who used the darkest and heaviest qualities



*The second group of SNCC Freedom Singers: (from left) Marshall Jones, Chuck Neblett, Emory Harris, and Matthew Jones, in Harlem, 1965. Photo by Diana Davies*

of her voice when singing lead or chorus in traditional songs.

The original SNCC Freedom Singers grew out of the Albany, Georgia, Movement. They were organized by tenor Cordell Hull Reagon from Nashville, then serving as SNCC field secretary in Albany. The singers were soprano Rutha Harris and contralto-alto Bernice John-

son, both of Albany; baritone-bass Charles Neblett from Carbondale, Illinois; and Reagon. At various times, baritone Chico Neblett and soprano Bertha Gober augmented the basic quartet. All members functioned as soloists and songleaders, with Reagon carrying the bulk of the commentary in performances. The group developed a tight quartet sound and a repertoire based on the full range of freedom song: songs from mass meetings as well as those created from popular, secular melodies.

## **3. Certainly, Lord**

During the Civil Rights Movement, “Certainly, Lord” was sung as an arranged spiritual by Black choral ensembles and as a congregational song in the traditional Black church. This version, performed by the CORE Singers in a gospel-like style with piano and organ accompaniment, maintains the traditional call-and-response structure. In order to record the album on which this song originally appeared, it was necessary to obtain the release from jail of the CORE Freedom Riders.

support of Civil Rights Movement organizing efforts. Because he could not read or write, Lee, a farmer and a minister, was not eligible to vote. He housed SNCC voter registration organizers working in McComb and was killed by E.H. Hurst, then a member of the Mississippi State Legislature.

Emory Harris leads the second group of



#### 4. Get Your Rights, Jack

This song, based on "Hit the Road, Jack" by Ray Charles, is accompanied by a piano line in counterpoint to the vocal. In the freedom lyrics, the chorus urges Jack, a Black man, to get his rights and be a Tom no more. Jack speaks in verses, pleading with CORE and Mississippi's Governor Barnett to give him relief. The lyrics of the verses are structured as questions and answers, treated in call-and-response style, with the male voice asking the questions and the female voice answering. The song takes on a theatrical quality by conversational interplay between the singers.

#### 5. Which Side Are You On?

Imprisoned in the Hinds County, Mississippi, jail during the Freedom Rides, CORE leader James Farmer wrote new words to this union song. The original version was composed in the 1930s by Florence Reese during a Harlan County, Kentucky, coal miners' strike; Farmer's revision addressed the Black trustees used by prison officials to guard the Freedom Riders. Here it is led by Cordell Reagon, organizer of the original SNCC Freedom Singers.

#### 6. Woke Up This Morning with My Mind on Freedom

This song is based on a gospel quartet, "Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Jesus." Like "We Are Soldiers in the Army," it is performed in a congregational song style while maintaining aspects of the arranged gospel version. While in the Hinds County, Mississippi, jail during the Freedom Rides, Rev. Osby of Aurora, Illinois, re-worked the traditional version. The song was brought to Albany, Georgia, by SNCC field secretaries Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon. Here it is performed by the SNCC Freedom Singers led by Bernice Johnson.

#### 7. Been in the Storm So Long

This spiritual is sung by Bernice Johnson of Albany, Georgia. Johnson functioned as a local songleader in the Albany Movement. She was a student member of the Executive Board of the Albany Movement before joining the original Freedom Singers in 1962.

#### 8. Dog, Dog

This satirical song, written by Movement activists James Bevel and Bernard LaFayette,

was spread throughout the South by Movement organizers – especially Reagon, who here leads the original SNCC Freedom Singers. The song became a mainstay in the repertoire of both the first and second groups of freedom singers. Using rhythm and blues motifs, the song tells a parable of two boys who lived next door to each other but could not play together because of the color of their skin. Their homes were separated by a fence, but the dogs could slip under the fence to play. The song asks: If dogs can get together, why can't we?

#### 9. The A & P Song

Written by Brenda Gibson, this song was based on popular rhythm and blues tunes. Although the quality of the recording is poor, it is one of the early examples of new freedom songs created from the R & B charts.

*I went to A & P  
Down on Edgewood Street  
When I looked around  
There was a bulldog hound  
He said listen my friends  
You can't trade here*

*I'm the chief right here my friends  
I'm the chief right here. [2x]*

*I want to tell you 'bout segregation  
It ain' no good [2x]  
And I won't stop tryin'  
'Til integration is mine....*

The song was performed at Spelman College in Atlanta during the "Sit-in-Show-Down," a presentation of music, poetry, and prose created by Julian Bond to dramatize the position of students who organized the Atlanta sit-ins. This recording presents the Integration Grooves, here consisting of Brenda Gibson, Emily Winston (piano), Robbie Tate, Sonya Mixon, Ernestine Palmer, Pat Mathas, and others.

#### 10. Oh Pritchett, Oh Kelly

Retaining much of the format of the arranged spiritual "Rockin Jerusalem," Bertha Gober and Janie Lee Culbreth created this song while in jail in Albany, Georgia. Gober had sung the solo of "Rockin Jerusalem" as a member of her high school choir. The verses refer to Albany's Chief of Police Laurie Pritchett and Mayor Asa Kelly.



### 11. I Told Jesus

This spiritual, arranged and sung by Bertha Gober, who became involved in the Civil Rights Movement as a college student in Albany, Georgia, demonstrates her delicate lyrical solo style. Gober, a native of Atlanta, had a musical background as a jazz and gospel soloist.

### 12 99 ½ Won't Do

### 13. I'm On My Way

### 14. City Called Heaven

These songs are performed by the Alabama Christian Movement Choir, organized and conducted by Carlton Reese, which performed nightly during the intense activities of the summer of 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. In this urban and industrial coal mining and steel city, freedom songs were performed in the gospel style accompanied with organ and piano.

"99 ½ Won't Do" is based on the gospel tune popularized by Mother Katie Bell Nubin, mother of Rosetta Tharpe, famed gospel singer of the 1940s and 1950s. Reese, who leads the singing, rearranged the song and inserted new Movement phrases. "I'm On My Way" is a traditional spiritual, here led by Mamie Brown.

In the freedom song version, only one word is changed: "Canaan" becomes "Freedom."

Cleo Kennedy, gospel soprano from Birmingham, is accompanied here by Carlton Reese during a mass meeting in Birmingham. In Kennedy's superb gospel-style treatment of the spiritual "City Called Heaven," her soprano voice is slender, almost nasal, and lyrical. Her worrying-the-line – tremors, slides, and slurs – heightens this powerful experience in gospel music. The intensity of her performance is reflected in the strong congregational response.

### 15. In the Mississippi River

Marshall Jones wrote this song in the aftermath of the disappearance of three Civil Rights workers in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. As local rivers were dragged in search of the men, several other bodies were found. The body of the song is in a quartet chant form. The solo voice cuts the chants with extemporaneous phrases. This performance, led by Jones, is an excellent example of the sophistication of songwriting and arrangement achieved by the second group of SNCC Freedom Singers.

### 16. Ain' Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round

During the Civil Rights Movement, this traditional song was first used during the summer of 1962 in Albany, Georgia. Fifth Circuit Federal Court Judge Tuttle issued an injunction banning demonstrations. The reading of the injunction during a mass meeting sparked the musical response, "Ain't gonna let no injunction turn me 'round." In this performance, the song is sung by the original Freedom Singers, led by Cordell Reagon.

### 17. Will the Circle Be Unbroken

This song is part of the Southern Baptist music tradition. It was used throughout the Movement in its original form and was often sung at moments of internal organizational crisis. Diane Smith, of Jimmy Collier and the Movement Singers, leads off during an interview with the trio on the Studs Terkel Radio Show. Collier, a native of Arkansas, worked as an organizer and performer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He and James Orange came together as a performing unit on the 1965 Selma march; Diane

Smith joined the group during SCLC's 1966 Chicago campaign.

### 18. Governor Wallace

Written by James Orange in rhythm and blues style, this song was directed at George Wallace, who used the full powers of the governor's office to obstruct the efforts of the Alabama civil rights struggle. The song became popular on the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery March. Here it is sung by the second group of SNCC Freedom Singers, led by baritone-bass Charles Neblett.

### 19. Ballad of Medgar Evers

Matthew Jones composed this song after the murder of Medgar Evers during the summer of 1963. Like many of Jones's compositions, the song records and analyzes Movement events and issues. Most of his songs were arranged to be performed by an ensemble or by him as a solo singer; "The Ballad of Medgar Evers" was structured so that the chorus was open to congregational singing. Here it was led by Jones at the 1965 Atlanta SNCC conference.





Left: Movement Singers leader Jimmy Collier on the 1965 Selma March. Photo by Matt Herron, Black Star

Right: The Poor People's March led by songleaders Jimmy Collier (with banjo) and Rev. Douglas Kirkpatrick (guitar), spring 1968. Photo by Diana Davies



## 20. Uncle Tom's Prayer

Another Matthew Jones composition, here sung by Cordell Reagon, this song's lyrics address, with a humorous twist, Blacks who had not yet found the strength to stand in support of Movement activities.

## 21. Oginga Odinga

During a 1964 state department sponsored tour of the United States, Oginga Odinga, an official of the newly independent nation of Kenya, traveled to Atlanta and was housed in one of the city's two integrated hotels, where he received a delegation from SNCC. They exchanged songs and stories of their respective struggles, for *Uhuru!* ("Freedom Now!" in Swahili, the official language of Kenya). The SNCC activists then went next door to sit in at the Toddle House, a still-segregated restaurant chain, and were subsequently arrested. Here the song is led by Matthew Jones, who wrote it while in jail as a result of the sit-in.

## 22. We Shall Overcome

The theme song of the Movement is here sung by the original Freedom Singers during a Chicago, Illinois, recording session. In the studio performance, overdubbing is used to give the four voices a fuller sound. This version's use of cross-punctuating calls from all voices reflects the congregational music tradition of Albany, Georgia. In Albany's mass meetings, the song was slowed down, providing more space for improvised, spontaneous vocal elisions, leads, and cross-statements of lines.



## RECORDINGS FROM THE FOLLOWING COLLECTIONS:

Guy Carawan Collection, Highlander Folk Center, New Market, TN  
 Joycelyn McKissick Collection, Soul City, NC  
 Moses Moon Collection, Occidental, CA  
 Phonogram, Inc., Chicago, IL  
 Herbert and Rebecca Poller Collection, Schenectady, NY  
 Bernice Johnson Reagon Collection, Washington, DC  
 Studs Terkel Radio Show Archives, Chicago, IL  
 Howard Zinn Collection, Boston, MA

## DISCOGRAPHY

*Everybody's Got a Right to Live: Jimmy Collier & Rev. Frederick Douglas Kirkpatrick* Broadside BR 308  
*Freedom Songs: Selma, Alabama* Folkways FH 5594  
*The Nashville Sit-In Story* Folkways FH 5590  
*The Sit-In Story: The Story of the Lunchroom Sit-Ins* Folkways FH 5502  
*The Story of Greenwood, Mississippi* Folkways FD 5593  
*We Shall Overcome: Documentary of the March on Washington* Folkways FH 5592  
*We Shall Overcome: Songs of the Freedom-Riders & the Sit-Ins* Folkways FH 5591  
*WNEW's Story of Selma* Folkways FH 5595

## CREDITS

Original production coordination: Bill Bennett  
 Transfers and preparation of master tapes: Jack Towers and Bernice Johnson Reagon  
 Cover art: Lois Mailou Jones  
 Graphic design: Bill Meadows  
 Archival and field research: Phyllis May  
 Program compiler, booklet essay, and annotations: Bernice Johnson Reagon  
 Musical analysis collaboration: Dr. Doris Evans McGinty  
 Editorial assistance: Linn Shapiro  
 Photographic research: Philip Harris  
 Special thanks to Phonogram, Inc., for use of the Mercury recordings, and to Guy Carawan and Moses Moon, whose foresight and perseverance as collectors during the 1960s made possible the presentation and dissemination of this treasury of Black American song history.  
 Smithsonian Folkways reissue executive producer: Amy Horowitz  
 Producer: Bernice Johnson Reagon  
 Remastering: Dave Glasser at Air Show in Springfield, VA  
 Audio supervision: Pete Reiniger

Production coordination: Mary Monseur and Michael Maloney  
 Editorial assistance: Carla Borden, Bernice Johnson Reagon  
 CD packaging and design: Reynald Searles  
 Special thanks to Rachelle Brown, Assistant General Counsel, and Niani Kilkenney, Program in African American Culture

## ADDITIONAL PHOTO CAPTIONS

Booklet, pg. 38: *Released from jail after participating in Civil Rights activities, CORE Freedom Singers perform at a recording session in New York City, 1963. Photo by Bob Andelman; from the collection of Jocelyn McKissick-Meyers (Makeda)*  
 Booklet Back Cover: *The Freedom Day Festival, Greenwood, Mississippi, with songleader Willie Peacock (left front), June 1963. Photo by Danny Lyon*  
 Front Card: *The Selma March, 1965. Photo by Ivan Massar, Black Star.*  
 Rear Card: *At the SNCC office in Atlanta, November 1963: singing in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination. Photo by Danny Lyon*



## ABOUT SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Moses Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are available on high-quality audio cassettes, each packed in a special box along with the original LP liner notes.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings was formed to continue the Folkways tradition of releasing significant recordings with high-quality documentation. It produces new titles, reissues of historic recordings from Folkways and other record labels, and in collaboration with other companies also produces instructional videotapes and recordings to accompany published books, and a variety of other educational projects.

The Smithsonian Folkways, Folkways, Cook, and Paredon record labels are administered by the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies. They are one of the

means through which the Center supports the work of traditional artists and expresses its commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding.

You can find Smithsonian Folkways Recordings at your local record store. Smithsonian Folkways, Folkways, Cook, Dyer-Bennet, and Paredon recordings are all available through:

Smithsonian Folkways Mail Order  
414 Hungerford Drive, Suite 444  
Rockville, MD 20850  
phone (301) 443-2314  
fax (301) 443-1819  
orders only 1 (800) 410-9815  
(*Discover, MasterCard, and Visa accepted*)

For further information about all the labels distributed through the Center, please consult our Internet site (<http://www.si.edu/folkways>), which includes information about recent releases and a database of the approximately 35,000 tracks from the more than 2,300 available recordings (click on Data Base Search).

Or request a printed catalogue by writing to: Catalogue, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 955 L'Enfant Plaza, SW, Suite 2600, Smithsonian Institution MRC 914, Washington, DC 20560, USA. Or use our catalogue request phone: (202) 287-3262, or e-mail [folkways@aol.com](mailto:folkways@aol.com)







Smithsonian  
Folkways



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings | Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies  
955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600 | Smithsonian Institution | Washington, DC 20560  
© 1997 Smithsonian Folkways Records