SNCC 28th Anniversary Conference: “Oh Freedom” The Music of the Movement

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We Shall Not Be Moved: The Life and Times of SNCC 1960 - 1966 Conference
Date: April 15, 1988
Location: Trinity College - Hartford, CT

Host:
Jack Chatfield - Professor of American History, Trinity College

Speaker:
Bernice Reagon - SNCC Freedom Singers, 1962 - 1965; Director of the Black American Culture Department, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

Introduction By:
Naomi Amos - Musician; Wesleyan University and Trinity College

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***NOTE:** Recording begins while the session is already in progress.

Jack Chatfield: Naomi [Amos] is a professional musician, a classical pianist who has taught in Wesleyan and Trinity and a great admirer of the music of traditional folk music and the music of Bernice Reagon. So I'd like Naomi to make some brief introductory remarks.

Naomi Amos: I promise Bernice that I will be very, very short. Bernice Reagon was born in Albany, Georgia, and she was field secretary for SNCC. Yay, Albany, absolutely. And as many of you remember with great fondness, she was a very, very powerful voice in the Freedom Singers.

Today, she is director of the Black American Cultural Department at the Smithsonian and a member of Sweet Honey in the Rock, which is a wonderful group which speaks to us, the audience, in a tremendously powerful voice about tremendously important issues as we all know.

We've heard so much in the last two days about the music of the movement and how it generated the spirit of the movement. And I think as Bernice speaks to you, will also reflect on the fact that the spirit of the movement is so much infused in the music. So without any further ado—Bernice Reagon.

Bernice Reagon: [singing: “This May Be the Last Time”]

This may be the last time
This may be the last time, children
This may be the last time
May be the last time I don't know

Now, if this was a Black event, I would not have gotten through the first line. For an event to be a Black cultural event, you have to practice different aspects of Black American culture. This is a little low, this microphone.

And when they is singing, you don't have to see who is singing. You need to hear, and then before they get through the first line, join in so they don't feel stupid that they started this one. Now you are not born knowing how to practice Black American culture. You can be born Black and not be able to execute any Black American cultural expressions.

It is not in your blood. You have to learn it. And this country is culturally Black in terms of mainstream culture. I don't care who you are, if you grow up in this country, you spend a lot of your time and energy trying to be Black.

Most people learn about what is Black from the commercial industry, which does not want you to know what I want to talk about tonight, which is that Black American culture is participatory, and you don't go buy Black American culture. You have to create it.

[singing]

This may be the last time
This may be the last time, children
This may be the last time
May be the last time I don't know

That song is sung only with the understanding that you could be dead in the next moment. So it then does not remain a song. It names the quality of the gathering. Everything then becomes special, because you are actually voicing something you understand about your mortality—that this particular thing that we are doing in this moment might not ever happen again.

And then everything you do comes out of that awareness, and everything you do becomes precious, and everything you do becomes sacred. And when you sing that song out of that understanding, everything is just a little heavier, and you can feel it in the song. You can feel the weight of understanding that you are sitting in a very precious moment in your life. Any gathering with other human beings can be raised to that level just by declaring it so.

[singing]

I don't know Lord, I don't know
May be the last time, I don't know
Oh, I don't know Lord, I don't know
May be the last time, I don't know

The last time I saw Danny Lyon before this afternoon was 1979. He had just come from Central America. I think he made a film in Bolivia or someplace. Then he made a film about some bicycles or some bikers or something. And there he was this afternoon, talking about coming back from Haiti. And it was nice to find that the years had passed and he was talking about doing the same thing he had talked about when he took the picture of the Freedom Singers in 1961 and [19]62 in Chicago, Illinois.

[singing]

May be the last time we all sing together
May be the last time, I don't know…

Now, one of the things you have to do in order to learn about music in the movement, which is what I'm supposed to do for the next few minutes, is that most of the work has to take place inside of you. And you have to go places most people who are not Black and developed or practice Black American culture never speak to in their lives. That most people who don't have access to Black American culture die and never go to the place you have to go in order to do Black singing. You don't speak to—but you don't even know it's there.

And so what you have to do, if you don't know what this is about, is to go and find it. Now, when you look for it, because you're used to looking for things outside of yourself, I see you cutting your eyes around like this. And it's like, you know, I'm asking you to come up with something, and so you're trying to find out where you gonna go get it. You don't have to look no place.

Sometimes if you avert your eyes and look down—not like some people can close their eyes—you don't have to close your eyes. But if you sort of look down, it shades external things enough so that you can quiet down. And sometimes that opens the door that has to be open if you gonna know what singing in the movement was about.

[singing]

This may be the last time
This may be the last time, children
This may be the last time
May be the last time I don't know

A lot of times, people talk about when we get together like this, they say, let's sing some freedom songs. And sometimes, when you think, if you get together and you sing some songs, you can get

back to that place that's itching that you need to scratch, which is why you said, let's sing some freedom songs in the first place. But the songs are only a vehicle to get to the singing.

And the singing cannot be understood as executing melody, rhythm, and harmony—although it helps if you can execute those things. But if all you do is hold the tune and get the rhythm and the harmony, you have not done what it is you say you want when you say, let's sing.

Black people use songs to get to singing. Singing is an organizing experience. Now I'm not saying you use singing to organize somebody. That's not what I'm saying it is. You cannot create a song within the Black American cultural experience if you're not an organizer. You cannot create a song if you're not willing to be organized. You have to hear. You have to be willing to lead. You have to be willing to follow. You have to be willing to experiment and move around the basic theme.

So every time a song is raised—and that's what you do, you don't sing Black songs, and it's all right if you said, “let's sing a song,” I'm not changing your language here—you don't sing Black songs. You raise them, which means they don't exist. And when I sing the first line of a song, I have not done anything but made an announcement about a possibility, which has nothing then to do with anything else I do. I raise the possibility, and it's up to somebody else whether or not it will fall flat and empty.

There are no soloists in the Black congregational song style. There are only song leaders. A song leader only leads a song. I'm not going to do a lecture on Black American song genres tonight, so don't repeat that too much until you hear the rest of the lecture. Go around saying, "Bernice Regon said there were no soloists in Black American singing." I didn't say that. A congregational style. There are only song leaders.

[singing: “I Was Standing By My Window (Can The Circle Be Unbroken)”]

I was standing at my window
One dark and stormy day,
When I saw the hearse come rolling
To carry my mother away.

What do you do if I'm starting a song and you don't know it? You pat your feet, you rock your body. You just help me out. Don't let me be a fool.

I was standing at my window
One dark and stormy day,
When I saw the hearse come rolling
To carry my mother away.

Will the circle be unbroken—

Now you know there's not enough harmony in here. You can tell, right? There's not enough harmony in here. There ought to be by now. You should be over there helping me out. You should be growing this deep.

Will the circle be unbroken
By and by, Lord, by and by.
There's a better home a-waiting,
In the sky, Lord, in the sky.

Will the circle be unbroken
By and by, Lord, by and by.
There's a better home a-waiting,
In the sky, Lord, in the sky.

[Bernice plays recordings of songs as audience follows along: “Oh Freedom,” “This Little Light of Mine,”]

Okay, you can tell the difference between the energy in this room and maybe the energy that's there [on the recording]. I'm still talking about the singing in the movement, I'm still talking about—and we had done some work before I put that on. And [“Can The] Circle Be Unbroken” had some power in it, didn't it?

Now, when I stopped singing, you did not—some of you weren't finished were you? What were you supposed to do?

Audience: Keep going.

Bernice Reagon: Right. Just because I'm up here does not mean I determine when a song ends. A song leader only does what?

Audience: Lead.

Bernice Reagon: I start and announce the potential. And then the piece continues based on the needs and the power, not of the song leader, but the people in the room. Now, it takes courage—for those of you who sort of hummed almost like the second line, it got stronger, right? It takes a lot of courage. That's why I talk about creating a song as an organizing experience—because you have to stick out. I promise you that if you cannot sing a congregational song at full power, you cannot fight in any struggle. Because at some point, you have to always be covered by somebody. And in a congregational song, you cannot cover.

It doesn't matter what your voice is like and what some kindergarten teacher told you when they gave you the hand clapper or the bell to ring. When the song is raised, there isn't anybody in that room who is not full power, which is why it had such intensity.

Now, all of them people were not, what you call, great singers. All of those people were people who were risking their lives. And that's what it takes to raise a congregational song. You put yourself at total risk. You go all the way out. You, in fact, invite your voice to totally crack up. And even in the crack, there is freedom. The voice teachers will tell you—if your voice breaks clean and free, there's no problem. Anybody know what I'm talking about yet?

[singing: “Guide My Feet, While I Run This Race”]

Guide my feet while I run this race
guide my feet while I run this race
guide my feet while I run this race
for I don’t want to run this race in vain

Hold my hand while I run this race,
gold my hand while I run this race,
hold my hand while I run this race,
for I don't want to run this race in vain

Stand by me while I run this race,
stand by me while I run this race,
stand by me while I run this race,
for I don't want to run this race in vain

Guide my tongue while I run this race,
guide my tongue while I run this race,
guide my tongue while I run this race,
for I don't want to run this race in vain

Did you hear all the stuff that [indistinct] Did you hear it?

Audience: Yes.

Bernice Reagon: Well, you have to put some in—and you get this song out—some notes that's not gonna be in there, but if you don't put it in there, it's not a Black song.

Now, I still see people when they hear something coming, like, "Oh Lord, somebody else," you be trying to see who it is. And you see, in a room like this, where everybody's sitting down—if it's somebody in a row, you can't see who it is.

I know it comes from coming out also of another culture, which sees singing as performance that is to be observed. So that if you can't see where it's coming from, you actually are anxious, or it feels like—you feel like you're not quite getting it if you can't see who's doing it. So seeing the person who's doing it is crucial.

Well, if the leader is in the back of the room and you're in the front, you got to stand up and turn around. You could stop the whole song. The person who's gotten the courage to come up with that line just might not be able to face you standing up and yoking your neck around.

What you do when you hear something coming from some place and you can't see it is go deeper in yourself to give it strength and grounding—instead of trying to see it, hear it and expand it.

And what I'm talking about is something that has nothing specifically to do with the Civil Rights Movement. [It] has to do with the culture that evolved in this country by a very, very important group of people. And this stuff was there when we decided we were going to try to do something about our lives. And this was part of the way we did everything anyway.

Many of us who started had never even understood this culture as being a culture of struggle. If it's something you're born with—especially if your grandmama does it, she can't read—how is that supposed to have something to do with you fighting white people and racism, which sometimes is the same thing?

And it's not until you put yourself in a particular place and then you try to find your voice that you will select out of your repertoire those things that will allow you to stay in this new place.

I mean, theoretically, in Albany, Georgia, when I walked around City Hall for the first time, it was only the second time I'd ever been on Pine Street [Ave.] in my life. That was a new place. When we got finished with that twice—and I don't think Black people had ever in that number circled City Hall since the city was created.

When we finished that, Cordell Reagon and Charles Sherrod and Charlie Jones didn't know what in the world they were going to do. So we headed back toward the college, which we could not get to because we had left the college to start the march. And where do you go when you can't go no place in the Black community? Union Baptist Church.[1]

[1] Union Baptist Church served as a vital sanctuary during the Civil Rights Movement—a trusted refuge in the Black community when activists were blocked from public spaces, schools, or streets, symbolizing the central role of Black churches as organizing hubs, safe havens, and moral anchors in times of crisis.

A lot of radicals in this country are totally out of order when it comes to their dealing with Black people and our worship traditions. And you can feel them trying to understand it and piece it together and use it for the revolution, and they don't even know what they're talking about. But when you circle City Hall twice and you can't go back to Albany State College, the only place in Albany, Georgia you can go to that will hold that many people is Union Baptist Church, which, thank God, was on the corner just across the bridge.

We did not plan that that church should be there. But if that church had not been there, I am not sure where we would have gone. Because once you do something that is that new, you can't walk too far. You really have to stop walking real fast.

So this was a new time and a new day. I'd never done anything like this before in my life. So we get to this place, Charlie Jones looks at me and said, "Bernie, sing a song." And I go: *Over my head, I see trouble…*

See, now—now wait a minute. I have heard—first I go to an old song, right? You notice in this new position, I'm doing this new thing, ain't never done before, he says sing a song. I go to "Over My Head," and what is the line to "Over My Head?" But usually the first line you do is "Over my head, I see trouble in the air."

Now, if I had understood what the trouble in the air meant, I would have sung it. But nobody had taught me. And I'll tell you that story in a minute, but right now: *Over my head, I see freedom…*

It was by the time I got to *trouble* that I didn't feel any trouble, and I knew I could not sing *trouble.* And also, I was given permission to mess with a sacred song. The permission came in because I walked around City Hall. And if you're bad enough to walk around City Hall, you can change the words to this old song.

And then people go around trying to think of new words to old songs. You have to live up new words to old songs. You have to take the stance, and then you can sing:

[singing]

Over my head, I see freedom in the air
Over my head, I see freedom in the air
Over my head, I see freedom in the air
There must be a God somewhere

Now let me talk about that trouble. I thought trouble was something you were supposed to stay out of. It's an interesting thing, but you can grow up in a Black family in these segregated communities, and they really drill in your head that you're supposed to stay out of trouble. So trouble was a negative word. I never knew you were supposed to go and get in trouble.

But the truth of the matter is, if you take a song like

[singing]

Wade in the water
Wade in the water, children
Wade in the water
God's gonna trouble the water

See, there's that trouble again, right? Well, you say, what does it mean? And then it's telling you to wade in the water and promising you that it's gonna be rough. And of course, you go there because you don't want to be where you are before you go into the water. You have to really be ready to never again see the you that you are standing before the struggle.

And really, the you that you are dies. You have to say goodbye to it. You have to really be ready—oh, you don't have to be ready. You—at least—you just have to push yourself, you know, make a deal with yourself. Sometimes you don't have to be ready. You can say, "I'll check you out later maybe."

But trouble is the only way you achieve change in your life. Trouble is the only way you achieve change in your life. And I was not taught that in my Black home. I was taught that you were supposed to stay away from it. So like—and they were saying things like, stay out of trouble, you know, stay away from the police. They didn't want me to get killed, because they knew that if you got into trouble, you were risking your life.

And that is true. This trouble that you're supposed to get into can kill you. But it does not always, as I stand before you tonight having gone through the trouble. But there are those of us who are not in this room tonight because they went into the trouble, and it did kill them. So you are at total risk, and you feel like you're at total risk. But if you want to kill the you that you are, you still have to go through it. And there is a promise that you will be different on the other side—guaranteed.

But it's like stepping off of a ridge when you can't see the bridge. And since you decided you don't want to be on the ridge anymore, you just step off. And you know, if you survive, you're going to be fighting all the way.

That's what the movement was like. And I am describing not reformation. I am really describing a revolution that takes place inside of you if you do. The transformation that takes place inside of you when you grow a song—it's many symbols of that revolution. But you really have to risk losing where you are to do it.

And I know some people, when they start to sing, or even when they listen to powerful singing, they get a little nervous, and they start holding on to chairs. And they do this, like, let me tie my

body down, because I have no idea what it's going to do if I let it go. And at least I know it now. And if I let it go, what in the world will it be?

And this whole thing of congregational singing is like a socialization process that just really works you up and down, in and out, through change. You cannot raise a song and not feel yourself change. You can feel it. The song starts and you get flushed—your body, your physical body gets flushed and it gets hot. That's when some people get ready to turn off all the circuits. But you're supposed to do what? Go right through it. Follow.

And what you have to do is turn up the burners. Turn up the burners by making a greater commitment to the song, and just be willing to follow it everywhere it goes. And what happens on the other side is—you never forget it. And you can't wait to get back to another one. Which is why you come to these meetings and say, let's sing some freedom songs, because you want it again. Because it's very sweet. There's something unforgettable about transformation.

And I'm talking about transformation that you can have some role in creating. But it is very, very risky business. And this singing stuff is very, very crucial to it. And you find people who are just weathered in it. They can go through more singing, gunning through song after song—everybody in church falling out. I told it, they still going. What to say—they've been doing that stuff all of their lives.

Now, as I describe this phenomenon, I am not saying that the people who can create congregational songs are radicals within the society. I'm not saying Miss Nana, who was the most powerful song leader I ever heard in my life, participated in the Albany Movement. Because you get the lesson, and you get the training. Application is a whole 'nother thing. So that it is not enough to know these old Black songs.

[singing: "I'll Be Somewhere, Listening"]

When he calls me I will answer,
When he calls me I will answer,
When he calls me I will answer;
I'll be somewhere listening for my name.

Now, you can sing that until the church come over, and the revolution will not come. So I don't want you to get confused.

In addition to this stuff that was in the South, there is something else that has to happen before you get the freedom song. And there has to be some decision that you will break with the status quo—whatever it is.

Someone was talking about Carolyn Daniels, who was doing hair in Dawson [County], Georgia today. And you have to—you have to visualize that. I mean, maybe you're a single parent or something, but it's like, you know. And the good hairdresser charged a dollar and a quarter a head, and they did hair for 12 hours a day. And you just fried the hair. This is straightening the hair. And you curling it and frying and curling and frying.

And what makes you decide that it's all right for you to let these crazy people stay in your house—which is gonna get your house shot up. You're gonna lose most of your business, because who's gonna come to get their hair done if people are shooting in your house?

And it means you have to visualize the house you live in, the check you get, the car you have—everything—the education you're getting—everything that you have goes right on the block with the risk, because you found something more important to reach for.

And when you get that, and when you begin to walk in that way—which may be very different from going to Mount Early Baptist Church on First Sunday and singing these same songs. Mount Early Baptist Church may not even let you in to have a mass meeting. You have to have a mass meeting in Mount Zion Baptist Church, which is the high Baptist church, which wouldn't be caught dead singing "Guide My Feet."

I mean, they really would not ever sing "Guide My Feet" in Mount Zion Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia, because that was the high church. It was the church the teachers were the members of, and they sang Randall Thompson, hallelujah, hallelujah.

But some of those country churches wouldn't let you there—some of those churches who did the style I've been talking about—wouldn't let you in. Mount Zion let you in—what you do? You go into Mount Zion and do you sing Hallelujah? No. You sing the thing that symbolizes transformation, and you jerk that material out of its holding place.

And so you have prayers in Mount Zion that's like: "Lord, here come me, your meek and undone even body, bow to the mother dust of the earth." You get the old prayers and the old tones in Mount Zion Baptist Church.

I am now talking about class too, within the Black community. And it's in Mount Zion Baptist Church—which would never sing like this—that you hear "We Shall Overcome" delivered back into the full range of expression of the Black choral tradition the first time.

And it's not Mount Zion, and it's not the cultural atmosphere of that membership. It is that that church is now hosting a Movement, which is peopled by people who then speak their language. And these songs are the voices. These songs are the statements that they make.

And therefore things like “We Shall Overcome,” “We Shall Not Be Moved,” “This Little Light of Mine,” “Guide My Feet”—and those songs, some of them with the changed words, and the songs with the non-changed words—sit right next to “A Charge to Keep I Have,” “A God to Glorify,” which Charles Sherrod sang this morning.

In Montgomery, Alabama, they sang Onward Christian Soldiers until they couldn't sing it anymore. I sung that song in school. I hated that song. I never heard the song until I heard it in the context of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

And everybody who is anybody who cares remembered when that boycott started—especially if you didn't live in Montgomery—if you were Black, you were convinced through some system which said Black people can't keep nothing together. There was no way those people gonna stay off them buses.

First, some people in Northern cities don't understand because everybody use public transportation. Northern cities. In the South, only the poorest people in the community use public transportation. If you are little less than the poorest poor, you got a car. You wouldn’t be caught dead on a bus.

So Montgomery Bus Boycott was poor people. The people preaching had cars. Joanne Robinson had a car. The people who were supposed to stay off the bus didn't even speak to the people who were preaching under normal circumstances. Somehow those people were supposed to somehow get together and stay off the buses. And we knew it wasn't gonna happen.

So every day, you went home scared, to turn on the radio, to pick up your paper, to look at the TV to see if they were still walking. Damn if they didn't walk for a year.

Now, by the time they did that, day after day, something happened to you. Because suddenly, you were being taught something nobody had told you. And that is, Black people can get together and stay together—even though they don't like each other. Because you know them people in Montgomery were fighting each other. Because you got all of them people mixed up.

I mean, how them educated people, like all the ministers with them degrees, gonna keep them people off the buses, and all them don't like each other. So, you know, it's a mess. And somebody told you when there was a mess, you weren't supposed to execute nothing in a mess. So the first lesson you learn is: Aha, I can have a movement, and it can be a mess.

So whenever all the people come and ask me about what friction between the organizations destroyed the movement—I have no orientation of how to respond. Which friction? There was

never not no friction. I have never lived in a Black community and not heard Black folks talking about each other.

I think there looked like there was no friction. I mean, by the time you hear, see all these Black people and all of us—and we are singing together, right? It looked like we had erased all the friction. That is a façade. That is not what the singing does. The singing suspends the confusion and points to a higher order—sometimes long enough for you to execute the next step.

Therefore, singing will not set you free, but don't try to get free without it—if you're in the United States of America. Because this is culturally a Black country. This is culturally a Black country.

So the idea that there could be a movement and that Black people could walk for a year totally destroyed lots of things we had been taught within our path to our own people about what was possible. And once you understood that you didn't have to get it right to start—all you had to do was start—it was over.

And all of the songs were not church songs. And because all of the people in the Movement were not church people. So the songs came right off the radio. And the most popular person who delivered songs to the Movement was a man named Ray Charles. I don't think he knew he was delivering songs to the Movement. But Ray Charles represents a synthesis of what was happening in the Black community. It was an important thing to happen.

My mother heard Ray Charles for the first time singing “Drown in My Own Tears.” She was upset. She was as upset about Ray Charles as she was about Rosetta Tharpe. Every time Rosetta Tharpe was crossed back into the church, my mother would be upset. She loved Rosetta Tharpe.

But Rosetta Tharpe would sound so bluesy, you couldn't tell whether she was singing a church song or a reel—and you were supposed to be able to separate the two.[2] Musically. From the introduction of the instrument, you were supposed to know whether it was church or blues.

Ray Charles started “Drown in My Own Tears.” It sounded like gospel. Well, what is he doing? Is he singing blues or he's singing reel?

Well, here you get—we done walked around this place, this building in Albany, Georgia, two times. Where do we go? We go to the church. Come right out of the street into the church. I think Charles Sherrod talks about this better than anybody I know about how the church had to go to jail.

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[2] Rosetta Tharpe blurred the line between the sacred and the secular with her gospel-infused guitar and vocal style so rooted in the blues that listeners couldn’t always distinguish whether she was singing a spiritual or a dance tune, challenging rigid boundaries in Black musical culture and redefining expressions of faith and artistry.

Now they told us about going to jail in the Bible. You get all these Bible stories of:
[singing: "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize"]

Paul and Silas, bound in jail,
Had no money for to go their bail
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

You ought to read the Bible sometimes by Paul and Silas organizing in Southern Europe. That's where they were. They got put in jail. They sound like SNCC workers. And this woman, Lydia, was the person who would let them stay in her house. After they got out of jail, they had to have some place to go. There's Lydia. She lets them in her house. She's the first woman converted.

There's Carolyn Daniels, or Mama Dolly [Raines], or somebody in these places that let these SNCC workers in. But you know, in the Black church, even as we were being passed these song structures that had these transformation lessons, nobody told us we had to go through trouble. And nobody said that going to jail would be a good thing.

And I said, well, they would preach about it, but they would preach about it like Paul and Silas was so special, so unique, incredible. There they are in jail, and they sang until they walked out.

Now, once you go through the Civil Rights Movement and you in these cells, rocking these cells with these songs, and the jail has let you go because they can't stand it no more—Paul and Silas ain't got nothing on you.

And all of a sudden you understand Paul and Silas. Nobody told you in church that Jesus on the cross had nothing on Black folks because we've been lynched—that we had a real, immediate relationship to the cross all the time. How come they were talking about Jesus like that was so bad?

I guess it was the part about him getting up three days later that made it different. But they should have related Jesus in the Black church to lynchings. The preacher should have said something about that. And then you really could sort of understand what Jesus was doing.

And then you put some pressure on the preachers, you see, because then you could be like Jesus if you wanted to, because then you have to threaten getting put in jail and get lynched, which is the position people in the Movement took.

And what the songs do is wrap themselves around all of this dancing and all of this activity. So there is no place you go where there is not a song. There was a song that went:

[singing]

I know, I know we'll meet again
I know, I know we'll meet again
If you and I will never say goodbye
When we leave again.

It takes that kind of love song, and it's a song that comes out of the hearts of penitentiary, but these people had been in jail and were [indistinct]. It's that kind of love song that makes you understand something about love songs—makes the little love songs you hear on the radio sorta light.

Little Willie John had a song that was called:

[singing: "Leave My Kitten Alone"]

You better leave my kitten alone

Guess who the kitten was? A woman, right? My kitten alone, right—ownership, possession, all that.

When the Movement took the song—and this usually happened with all the secular songs—they would take the song, and the church song, they would maintain the same structure, so you would lift trouble out, put freedom in. *I'm on my way to Canaan land*—lift *Canaan,* put *freedom* in. Nothing else has changed.

Secular songs—positions had to change in order for the song to deliver the message. And I'm still working on trying to understand why that was.

But this Little Willie John song, talking about leaving something alone. When the Freedom people got the song, they said:

[singing]

You better leave segregation alone
Because they love segregation like a hound dog loves a bone

An interesting thing, because although they're trying to say, leave this thing that's mine alone—this song is saying, leave that alone. And the song is talking to Black people. You can't have segregation unless we participate.

And one of the hardest jobs for the organizers was addressing Black people. And a lot of times, people think the organizers spent their time confronting white people in the communities. You did not have to go directly up against white people.

You would be talking to Black people—Black people who were terrified. And just that act of trying to get Black people to find it within themselves, to consider whether they wanted to separate themselves from that system, was a confrontation of all the white people in the power structure.

And so all the time, you have these songs that do that. It's torsion. And organizing is aggressive. And it's hard. And you harass people. You make it so that everybody in that community believes that if they're going to live, they have to go to jail—that going to jail is the hippest thing going. And if they arrested people today, and you went and took your test, you just thought you would die if the arrests stopped before you got there, because you would have to walk around and you didn't get put in jail. That is what happened with the Movement.

So it's not like organizing and being nice. People are coming to you and saying, "Do you want your freedom? What you doing sitting around here?"

This woman talks about her son who harassed her daily about why wasn't she going with him to jail. And she says the cobwebs started to move from around her brain.

So when you organize, you bother people. You bother people so they don't even sleep. You knock on their doors to get them to register and vote, till they decide, well, if I don't go, this person is just going to be here the rest of my life. So let me go so he will leave me alone, so she will leave me alone.

And there is an element in the organizer that is slightly harassment, and they don't talk about that a lot. So those of you who are trying to organize on your campuses or trying to find this proper way of doing it so that the people you are addressing don't feel anxiety.

You create great anxiety in the people who need to be free. And that in itself will create anxiety in the people you need to move against. But you must stir up the people.

This song is called "Lord, We Shall Overcome"—many times. It went several times a night. I think it went several times a night because it was very important to understand that you don't get a group if you don't get some individuals. And I always worry about that word "we." I don't know what "we" mean. When somebody tells me "we," I want to know what "we" you gonna be.

"We" is a way to avoid testifying your personal stance. Now, if I say where I'm gonna be, you say where you gonna be—then the "we" is understood, and we will all know what's gonna happen.

That's why I'm glad they changed—white people did this—they changed "I'll Overcome" to We "Shall Overcome," to correct it grammatically also, because "I'll Overcome" means you're stating an individualistic statement. They changed "I Shall Not Be Moved" to "We Shall Not Be Moved" for the same reason. Because, you know, in the white culture, you must name the state.

But I'm glad they didn't do it with this song. Because this song says, if you wake up in the morning and you are alive, you ought to position yourself so somebody else who walks past you that day feel the intensity of your heat.

[singing: "This Little Light of Mine"]

This little light of mine, 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.

Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine
Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine
Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.