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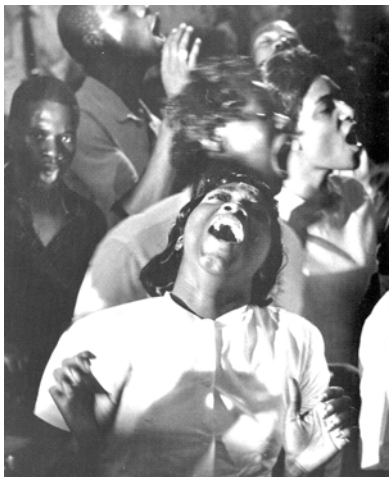


The Power of Freedom Songs

Bruce Hartford

Excerpted from the
Civil Rights Movement Veterans Website
www.crmvet.org

The Freedom Movement Was a Singing Movement — and Our Songs Were Freedom Songs

> *"The outpouring of freedom songs went to the core of the struggle and expressed, as nothing else was able, the hope, belief, desire, passion, dreams, and anguish of the conflict."* — Mary King, SNCC [1]

> *"We would sing about anything we felt. We would sing about why we sing. We would sing about the abuses we suffered, like not being allowed to vote. We would sing of sorrow and hope."* — Dorothy Cotton, SCLC [3]

Sometimes professional performers sang political songs for listening audiences — Nina Simone's *Mississippi Goddam*, Sam Cooke's *A Change Is Gonna Come*, Bob Dylan's *Blowing in the Wind* are examples — but when Movement veterans speak of "freedom songs" we mean the songs that we all sang together. Songs that we sang not as a performance or for entertaining others, not as something to be passively listened to, but as something we ourselves created anew each time we lifted our voices. And it was the act of singing, more than the beauty of the songs, that gave them meaning and power.

> In a sense the freedom songs are the soul of the movement. They are more than just incantations of clever phrases designed to invigorate a campaign; they are as old as the history of the Negro in America. They are adaptations of the songs the slaves sang — the sorrow songs, the shouts for joy, the battle hymns and the anthems of our movement. I have heard people talk of their beat and rhythm, but we in the movement are as inspired by their words. 'Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Freedom' is a sentence that needs no music to make its point. We sing the freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that 'We shall overcome, Black and white together, We shall overcome someday.' — Martin Luther King. [5]

For us, freedom songs were the psychic threads that bound the Movement into a tapestry of purpose, solidarity, hope, and courage.

The songs spread our message,
The songs bonded us together
The songs elevated our courage,
The songs shielded us from hate
The songs forged our discipline
The songs protected us from danger
And it was the songs that kept us sane.

The songs we sang together created for us a fortress of courage. In church-shaking mass meetings and tiny gatherings in sharecropper shacks, on voter-registration lines and foot-sore dusty roads, on marches, freedom-rides, and sit-ins, in night-running cars with the Klan on our tail, and in dank jailhouse cells, the songs uplifted and sustained us. As one Freedom Riders once put it, "*One song is worth two prayers*."


Prathia Hall, SNCC

I'd heard those songs before. I'd heard them in the piney woods setting of the churches of my mother's heritage in Nelson County, Virginia. ... Yet, in this place, Southwest Georgia, with hostile police ringing the exterior of the church, they were neither repetitious nor familiar; they were worship that contained within the reality of its expression a power affirming life and defying death.

That power with which those songs and prayers were infused transcended the objective reality of our situation, fashioned fear into faith, cringing into courage, suffering into survival, despair into defiance, and pain into protest. ...

It would be insanely dishonest to claim that we were unafraid. Fear was an intelligent response. Fear was a part of the survival kit. The challenge was to use fear as a signal to exercise caution while refusing to allow fear to paralyze you. One night when a gang of local "lawmen" entered the mass meeting and stood behind us with their hands on their guns, we sang our freedom songs with defiant and prayerful fervor. More than once Charles Sherrod challenged the sheriff ... All of us joined that prayer and we sang:

Ain't gonna let no sheriff
Turn me 'round,
Turn me 'round,
Turn me 'round,
I'm gonna keep on a-walking,
Keep on a-talking,
Marching up to Freedom Land.

— Prathia Hall, SNCC. [4]

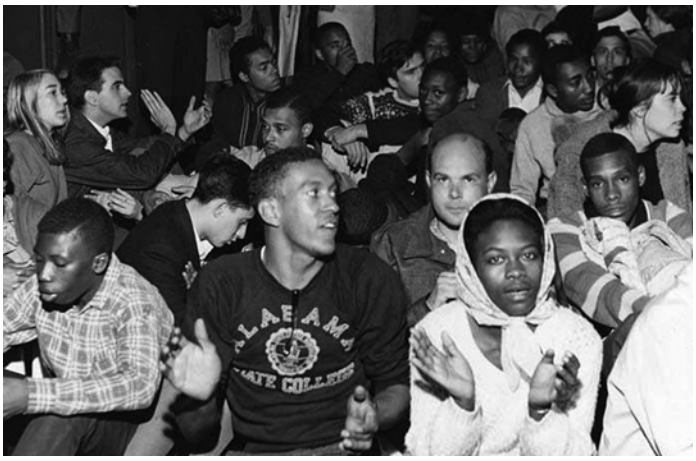
Freedom Songs and the Freedom Movement

Freedom songs suffused each singer with the summed power of the whole. They wove into a single Freedom Movement the adults who sang them in mass meetings, the young militants who carried them into jail, and the local activists who raised them in small circles of courage surrounded by danger. Freedom songs were the vows we took to stand together for justice and freedom, they were the pledges we made, each one to the other, to stand side by side through all that we might have to endure. As the furnace-fire turns iron ore into steel, singing our shared songs forged bonds of loyalty that for many of us have not withered with age in five decades.


Hollis Watkins & Arvenna Hall of SNCC, after being released from jail. Jackson, MS, 1963.

Through song and dance a people are able to share their burden, triumph, sadness and gladness of heart. People sing songs of heroism. They sing songs about the common oppressor or exploiter. The smallest and the greatest desires of a people are brought out in music. These songs can be used to draw people together and unite them in one common aim, goal and purpose." — Wazir Peacock. [2]

When reporters and TV audiences viewed the Freedom Movement from the outside — the fervent mass meetings in jam-packed churches, the indomitable endurance of voter-registration applicants lined up for hours at county courthouses, the marching columns of singing demonstrators — they rarely gave much thought to the painstaking work of educating, uniting, and mobilizing required to bring about those events. Freedom songs were a vital component of that organizing work.



Students sitting-in at the Alabama state capitol to demand voting rights for all, March 1965

Most social movements in America primarily use the written word to spread their ideas and advocate for their cause — books, manifestos, position papers, leaflets, newspaper and magazine articles, even comic books; and to a lesser extent, the spoken word in speeches, seminars, teach-ins, discussion groups, and so on.

Of course, the Freedom Movement also used the written word — *An Appeal for Human Rights* by the Atlanta students in 1960 being just one example. But more so than other movements, the Freedom Movement relied mainly on the human voice through sermon, oration, conversation, and above all song.

More than the pulpit, more even than the advocacy of organizers, it was the songs that carried the Movement's goals, ideals, and fervor into Black communities across the South — and into the North as well.

"The music actually was a group statement. If you look at the music and the words that came out of the Movement, you will find the analysis that the masses had about what they were doing." — Bernice Johnson Reagon, SNCC Freedom Singer. [8]

In many rural Black communities few people, if any, had ever participated in a political meeting before the Freedom Movement, but everyone was familiar with the character, traditions and rhythms of church service. So freedom meetings large and small were modeled on what folk knew and felt comfortable with. Since they were based on the music people knew — even if a few words were changed — freedom songs provided a touchstone of familiarity and reassurance to those choosing to risk their lives and livelihoods against great odds. And for some, they came for the singing and stayed for the struggle.

From Greenwood, MS, in 1962 SNCC field secretaries reported:

"I began to see the music itself as an important organizing tool to really bring people together — not only to bring them together but also as the organization glue to hold them together. I started to give people the responsibility of thinking about a song that they

would want to sing that night and of changing that song, you know, from a gospel song." — Sam Block, SNCC. [9]

"One night in February, we held a mass meeting. It was the largest one yet — we had to hold it in the First Christian Church. It was powerful. We couldn't stop singing freedom songs. Those songs had a real message that night: Freedom doesn't come as a gift. It comes through knowledge and power — political power. It comes from the vote. That night I went to bed at the office. That next morning people started knocking on the door first thing in the morning. They were ready to go down and attempt to register. They kept coming and coming — they knew they probably would not be allowed to register, but it was their right to try." — Wazir Peacock, SNCC. [3]

Protesting segregation in the streets of Farmville VA by singing *We Shall Overcome*.

Freedom singing was different from performance singing. Participation was far more important than the entertainment quality of the music. Everyone was a participant, everyone was expected to sing.

A song is to be Sung. If it remains on the page, it is the same as a new automobile that is bought, placed in the garage and kept there. A song is to be sung. One's musical abilities may be limited, but there are no limitations to one's spirit. A musical note is a guide, but it alone does not make a song. — Julius Lester, SNCC. [2]

Or as another Freedom Movement veteran put it: "*If you can't sing — sing louder.*"

All human communities are riven with divisions — social, political, religious, cultural, class, gender, age, personal. Building unity across these many divides is a hard row to hoe. Individuals may have longstanding feuds with other individuals, folk from one milieu might be uneasy attending a political meeting held in another, rich & poor, elite & "no account" do not mingle easily, a person from one race or culture may feel unwelcome or out of place in settings dominated by a different race or culture.

And in almost any established group of any kind there is a natural tendency for newcomers to feel like outsiders in cold distant orbit around the warmth of the "in-crowd." Successful social movements have to overcome and transcend these barriers. For the Freedom Movement of the 1960s, nothing was more effective in building solidarity across social fault lines, and breaking down individual isolation, than the group singing of shared freedom songs.

"See, it's not about words, it's about spirit. These people might not know each other. The kids probably made fun of their parents for going to church and singing this old stuff. But now the kids were caught in the grip of the movement, and without ever having done it before, the spirit caught them, and as natural as daylight it comes out of the spirit and their soul." — Cordell Reagon, SNCC.

The Freedom Movement taught us that there is a profound difference between holding an office and actually being a leader — that leadership is something that is demonstrated in work and action, not something conferred by a title or position. Singing, and leading freedom songs, became an important avenue by which new leaders could emerge without having to contend for some title or office.

"We had brought 17 or 18 people down from Ruleville [to try to register to vote at the courthouse in Indianola]. Amzie Moore had rented this bus that's used to carry day-workers to the cotton fields. ... [Afterwards] everybody gets back on the bus. Well, now it's getting late. And the driver starts to head back to Ruleville ... and he gets stopped by the deputy sheriff who arrests the driver for driving a bus of the "wrong color." And that's when Mrs. Hamer emerged, because she starts to sing. She's singing

these freedom songs: "This Little Light of Mine," "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." We hadn't really noticed Mrs. Hamer ever before. And really, I always thought her singing kind of shored up everybody — even us [SNCC staff]. I mean, 'cause, you know, you really don't want to be stuck on the road in Sunflower County [Mississippi] at sunset and identified with Civil Rights. It was pretty scary." — Charlie Cobb, SNCC [6]

Albert Turner, Bruce Hartford, Richard Boone, & Chuck Fager ending an SCLC meeting in the Selma freedom house, 1965.

From small gatherings huddled in a rural shotgun shacks to mass meetings in brick-a-day churches, people summoned their courage, stood up, and testified. They spoke of the oppressions and humiliations they had endured, their hopes and their dreams of a better future for their children, and their determination to challenge a system of oppression that was no longer bearable. Songs filled with words of freedom and defiance were a powerful form of group testimony and commitment, and for many, joining their voice in a freedom song was their first small step down freedom road.

Historian Taylor Branch describes SNCC organizers leading songs at one of the first big mass meetings in Albany, Georgia:

> ... that night they climbed into the Mount Zion pulpit to lead the singing. By prearrangement, no one played the piano or organ for either the freedom songs or the church hymns. The harmonies and intensities of naked voices became a trademark of the Albany Movement. All sounds, from the soaring gospel descants of the soprano soloists to the thunderous hand-clapping of the congregation, were created by human flesh. The songs harked back to the moods of the slavery spirituals. There were tragic, sweet songs like Oh, Freedom and rollicking ones like This Little Light of Mine.
>
> At first, the SNCC leaders accepted the songleader role because of their appreciation for movement singing, and the elders conceded them the role because music was of marginal importance to the normal church program. But the SNCC leaders soon developed a manipulative guile about the music. Their *a capella* singing took the service away from established control by either the preachers or the organist.
>
> The spirit of the songs could sweep up the crowd, and the young leaders realized that through song they could induce humble people to say and feel things that otherwise were beyond them. Into the defiant spiritual Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around, [Charles] Sherrod and [Cordell] Reagon called out verses of Ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn me around. It amazed them to see people who had inched tentatively into the church take up the verse in full voice, setting themselves against feared authority. [10]

The sit-ins and Freedom Rides were led by young people — college and high school students — and most of the demonstrators who filled the jails in the great mass protest movements were teenagers. But in the public meetings it was generally the older generation or the post-college staff organizers who gave the speeches and visibly assumed leadership roles. In many places, though, it was the high school and younger students who led the freedom singing, proudly standing forth at the front of the church before their parents, peers, and community as leaders of the next generation.

When people started attending the mass meetings, young people provided the music. So we formed a young people's freedom choir, a children's freedom choir, and we put songs together. We began with our regular gospel songs, but then I started changing the music, the tempo, and the lyrics. One of my classmates, Walter Harris, was a piano player, and together we would improvise right off the top of our heads in mass meetings. That's how the Selma version of "This Little Light of Mine" came about. Our version was more upbeat and contemporary sounding than the traditional gospel version. — Bettie Mae Fikes. [4]

Selma AL high school students leading freedom songs, 1963

They say that actions speak louder than words, and in many senses that is certainly true, but in some circumstances words *are* actions. The visible tip of social struggles are protests, rallies, oratory and dramatic confrontations, but political movements are built on a foundation of meetings. Meetings were the bones and sinews of the freedom struggle, but inevitably there were disputes and disagreements.

They say that talk is cheap, and of course that is very often the case. But talk can also be agonizing, wrenching and divisive. When our meetings were filled with bitter contention, when jealousy, frustration and rage poisoned the air, we sang our freedom songs together and somehow eased our anger and reknit our tattered unity even when the underlying conflicts remained unresolved. And we discovered that beginning a meeting with song started it from a place of unity, and ending every meeting the same way helped keep us together.

Ending a meeting at the Atlanta SNCC office. From left, Mike Sayer, McArthur Cotton, James Forman, Marion Barry, Lester MacKinney, Mike Thelwell, Lawrence Guyot, Judy Richardson, John Lewis, Jean Wheeler, and Julian Bond far right.

"There was music in everything we did. If you had a staff meeting, or if we were just around the office, somebody would just come out with a song. Or if there were bad feeling, a painful discussion, tension, anybody, not a singer or anything, just anybody at the meeting or in the office, would open up with a line of a song, and somebody else would take it over, and somebody else would add a verse, and by the end, everybody would be hugging each other and loving each other. You can't have a movement without that." — Cordell Reagon, SNCC. [3]

One aspect of the early 1960s now often forgotten is the "Red Scare," the post-war anti-communist hysteria and demagoguery that vilified all dissent as foreign-sponsored treason and any challenge to the status-quo as "un-American."

Billboards falsely labeling Dr. King a "communist" were erected across the South and Dixiecrat politicians denounced "Reds" and "Socialists" from every radio and newspaper headline. Because Freedom songs were deeply rooted in familiar church hymns, they helped counter this smear-campaign, and even the most politically servile journalists found it difficult to see a menace from Moscow in students singing *This Little Light of Mine* (though, of course, much of the southern press somehow managed to do so).

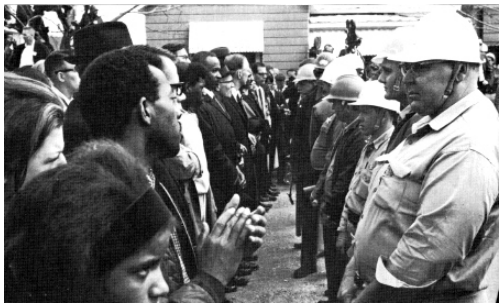
Selma AL students defying police by singing freedom songs on the steps of Brown Chapel

Freedom Songs and Nonviolent Direct Action

From the midst of the Movement in 1963, Guy and Candie Carawan of the Highlander Center wrote:

> Freedom songs today are sung in many kinds of situations: at mass meetings, prayer vigils, demonstrations, before freedom rides and sit-ins, in paddy wagons and jails, at conferences, workshops, and informal gatherings. They are sung to bolster spirits, to gain new courage and to increase the sense of unity. [2]

Freedom songs were an essential element of the nonviolent direct action tactics employed by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In its simplest and most obvious aspect, the beat of the songs set the rhythm of our feet on picket lines and marches. Throughout history, everyone from porters toting their loads, to armies on the march, to migrations crossing the face of the land used song to set the pace and ease weary miles. As did we in the Freedom Movement.



Using song to hold the line in Selma, 1965

But the role and importance of freedom songs in protests went far deeper than that. The power of nonviolent direct action lies in the group. To be effective, unity and discipline are required — unity of purpose and tactics to present a clear message, discipline in the face of threat. It was the songs we sang together, each protester part of the whole, that embraced and sustained us as a cohesive body. Yes, of course, we discussed the necessities of unity and discipline in our meetings, and our leaders preached solidarity before we marched out, but it was the songs that emotionally bound us together and forged us into one.

"[In Birmingham] they started singing a new song that summer. It went to the tune of "The Old Gray Mare." There wasn't only a song; there was a dance that went with it — sort of a hesitation step with a twist and a step forward and then backward. The singers would use it like this: Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth would be lecturing everyone in the church, explaining all about nonresistance. "It's to be a silent demonstration," he would say. "No songs, no slogans, no replies to obscenities." Everyone would nod. "However," the reverend would add, "when you're arrested, sing your hearts out." So, all the young people would file out of church, solemn as deacons, quiet as mice. Then a cop would come along and shout, "You're all under arrest!" That was the cue. Suddenly there were five hundred bodies moving at

once, their voice shouting out:
Ain't a-scared of your jail 'cause I want my freedom,
Want my freedom,
Want my freedom,
Ain't a-scared of your jail, 'cause I want my freedom,
I want my freedom now!"
— Len Holt. [3]

We're taught to assume that politics are primarily about the intellectual content of ideas, but social and political struggle — particularly popular mass movements — are as much, or more, about emotion as they are about ideology. While the tactics of direct action attempt to present ideas in dramatic, persuasive, and forceful ways, those tactics rely on, are profoundly influenced by, and are designed to affect, human emotion and psychology — the emotion and psychology of the participants, the targets, the bystanders, the cops, and those who hear about the demonstration through the grapevine or from the media.

In addition to their power to inspire, encourage, and educate, freedom songs were used by the direct action campaigns of the 1960s as practical tools for focusing and guiding the psychic contours of an event — be it meeting, protest or jail cell. Different songs, different verses of the same song, and differences in the tone and style of the singing itself, all evoked different responses. Like an artist using color to alter the mood of an image, skilled song leaders sensitive to the moment used freedom songs to shape and direct the emotions experienced by ourselves and those within the sound of our voices.

Many freedom songs could easily be adapted to local circumstances. The song, *If You Miss Me From the Back of the Bus* written by SNCC Freedom Singer Charles Neblett to the tune of *Oh Mary Don't You Weep*, lent itself to verses like: *If you miss me from* [name of segregated Black school], *just come on over to* [name of white school], *and I'll be studying there*. When hate-filled mobs mocked and jeered us or screamed racist epithets and insults, we replied with *Ain't gonna let* [person, organization, law, etc] *turn me 'round*, when they tried to drown us out with honking car horns, we invented verses ridiculing "honkies."

On occasion, protests became dialogs between us and our adversaries, their words might be shouted through bullhorns, ours might be addressed to them by name, *Oh, Pritchett, oh, Kelly, open them cells*. And by singing our responses collectively, we reinforced and maintained our cohesion and discipline in a way that shouting back as individuals could not have done.


Under arrest for the crime of defying segregation in Tuscaloosa, AL. 1964.

Then when we got to the lyrics, I changed them, too. I was thinking about Selma's sheriff, Jim Clark, and so I sang, "Tell Jim Clark, I'm going to let it shine"' next I used the head of the State Troopers, Al Lingo, and put him in the next verse. — Bettie Mae Fikes. [4]

Singing our response in harmony as a cohesive body was also our way of effectively reacting to immediate events. By choosing a different song, or inventing a new verse on the spot, or inserting into a verse the name of an official, or police chief, or business, or institution, the picket captain or song leader voiced our collective response to whatever was occurring:

If ordered to disperse, our reply might be, *We shall not, we shall not be moved...*
When placed under arrest, we answered with, *Paul and Silas, bound in jail...*
When they brought out the dogs, we countered with verses like, *Ain't scared of your dogs 'cause we want our freedom...*

When we were really scared, we sang, *Before I'll be a slave I'll be buried in my grave...*
And when our hearts were heavy with grief, we eased our pain with, *We'll never turn back, no we'll never turn back...*

Today, protesters mostly chant slogans rather than sing. But in terms of political and moral effectiveness, political chanting is to group singing as a mouse is to an elephant. Any song provides far more information and content than any shouted slogan. And there are many *more* songs. Songs uplift the spirit in a way that chants do not, and songs express a greater range of emotion. As a practical matter, most people can sing much longer than they can chant — on a typical demonstration today, chanted slogans die out after a few minutes because untrained voices simply can't sustain that kind of shouted repetition for long — but songs are easier on the voice, they can be carried for far longer. And songs create a stronger emotional bond and sense of unity, which is why church services emphasize singing.

Most people fear violence — potential or actual. The fallacy of terrorism is that fear can be used to coerce behavior and even belief. More often, fear generates hatred and opposition, not compliance. Many bystanders — and for that matter some members of the media — respond to organized demonstrations, even explicitly nonviolent ones, with apprehension that they are on the edge of mob fury. This can set them against both the protest and the cause which motivates it. By its nature, chanting comes across as angry and unruly, and even silence can be perceived as sullen hostility, but singing marchers appear far less threatening to apprehensive onlookers (and reporters). Even the police might, once in a while, find themselves politically less able to justify arrest or assault against nonviolent singers than a crowd of unruly-sounding chanters.

And on one occasion, singing proved to be effective camouflage that hid Freedom Riders from arrest. After the Klan mob brutally assaulted the riders at the Montgomery bus station, a local judge cited the riders for contempt of court for violating an injunction against interracial groups travelling together in Alabama. Court officials and police sought to serve the riders with the injunction and arrest them for violating it. Some of the Black riders managed to escape into the Black community before the cops could bust them. One later recalled:

> *"That night the police were waiting for us at the First Baptist Church. They were all through the church, with our pictures and warrants in their hands. As soon as they saw us, they were going to arrest us. We came in through the back of the church. We saw these choir robes. We put them on, kept our faces covered, and walked on up to the choir stand. We had been singing together for a long time, since Nashville, so we sounded good. We had harmony, we knew the words. We sang away. John Lewis had a patch on his head — we put him in the back, so they couldn't recognize him. We could see plain-clothes men out there in the congregation, looking up at the balcony, looking around the room. They never recognized any of us."* — Bernard LaFayette, SNCC. [3]

To a degree, freedom songs shielded us from mental and physical harm. In the face of visceral, implacable hatred, vicious cruelty against those least able to defend themselves, official brutality and persecution, gut-wrenching tension, jailings, beatings, rapes, murders, betrayal by self-proclaimed "friends," and obscene hypocrisy from our political "leaders" in Washington, it was the songs that kept us sane.

And on occasion the songs even protected us from imminent violence. In Grenada, MS, in 1966, for example:

"Every night, we had these marches of two or three hundred people circling the square. On several occasions there were periods of three or four nights in a row when violence against the Movement would peak, and surrounding us would be mobs of 500 or more Klansmen. These weren't your typical spur-of-the-moment pick-up mobs, they had been mobilized by the KKK from all over the state to come to Grenada to do business. Some of the time — not always — we could literally hold them off by the quality of our singing. We could create a psychic wall that most of the time they could not breach, even though they wanted to. ... I remember — vividly — where the Klan leaders were on some of those marches. They formed a wedge of hatred that sort of pushed out into our psychic space. And as we marched around the square singing with every ounce of energy and passion we could muster, we would have to circle again and again past this one spot where they were most intensely trying to break into our line of march. But they couldn't do it, we would hold them off, protect ourselves from their attacks, by the moral, psychological force of our singing. They couldn't break through our barrier of song." — Bruce Hartford, SCLC. [7]

Freedom Songs of the Freedom Movement

Freedom songs evolved out of our collective memory and creativity. Almost all of them were based on, or adapted from, existing songs. In some cases a few words were changed to turn them into freedom songs, in others entirely new lyrics were set to previous melodies.

The major source of freedom songs was music of the Black church, a musical tradition rooted in, and still echoing, the freedom struggle against slavery. Popular "Top-40" music, particularly Rhythm & Blues, was another source from which freedom songs were adapted. And some freedom songs came out of the Labor Movement, particularly the union songs sung by Appalachian miners and southern agricultural workers. The Highlander Center in Tennessee, long active in labor and civil rights struggles, became a central point for the exchange and development of freedom songs from all sources.

"Highlander was one of the gathering places during the early days of the movement. Weekend after weekend in the early 1960s, community leaders and activists from across the South came to share information, to strategize and to plan, to bolster each others' spirits as they returned home to confront segregation. We were based at Highlander for those years and could build on what had been learned there during the Labor Movement — that singing could be a strong unifying force in struggle, and that commonly known songs, particularly southern gospel and religious songs with repetitive stanzas adapted to the situation, were most effective." — Guy and Candie Carawan [2]

The Carawans of Highlander Center, 1960

Listed below are some of the most-often sung freedom songs.

Note how often the word "freedom" appears over and over in song titles, but the term "civil rights" appears not at all, a pattern that also holds true for the lyrics. Those who sat-in, marched, and registered to vote viewed the struggle as a fundamental fight for freedom, which is why many Movement veterans prefer the term "Freedom Movement" over "Civil Rights Movement." For us it was a broad, mass social movement to overthrow an intolerable system of oppression, exploitation and dehumanization that called into question fundamental elements of American society, and as such it was much broader than a narrow dispute over application of certain legal rights — as some would have it today.

No one knows the number of freedom songs, some were sung in only one locale or one struggle and sometimes an ordinary song could for a moment become a freedom song simply because of the

circumstances in which it was sung. But there was a core of 50 or more songs sung widely throughout the Movement, and some of them were sung almost everywhere on almost all occasions.

- ***We Shall Overcome***. Sometimes referred to as the anthem of the Freedom Movement, for the general public this song is certainly the best known and most iconic of all the freedom songs. *We Shall Overcome* was, in effect, an oath of commitment and solidarity with each other and an avowal of steadfast determination in the face of oppression. For some, it was the song they instinctively turned to when in great danger or enduring physical attack, and for most everyone it was the ceremonial song of ritual that closed gatherings and sent us out into action.

We were in this auditorium, and they tell us: "T*hree people are missing*." And the next day we all got on the bus to Mississippi. — Hardy Frye. Freedom Summer, 1964

No song better illustrates the evolution of freedom songs than *We Shall Overcome*. It originated as work song, *I'll be Alright, Someday*, sung by slaves in southern plantation fields. In 1901, it was published by Rev Charles Albert Tindley as the hymn *I'll Overcome Someday*. In 1945, Black members of the Food and Tobacco Union in South Carolina, on strike for union recognition and fair wages against the American Tobacco Company, kept the melody but adapted the words and title into *We Will Overcome*, including the verse *We will win our rights, someday*. Zilphia Horton of the Highlander Center heard it, and then sung it often at the center where it became a staple of their repertoire.

SCLC Citizenship School teacher Septima Clark changed "will" to "shall," and began singing it as *We Shall Overcome*. Folk singer Pete Seeger and others took it, added new verses such as *Black and white together*, and sang it in union halls and picket lines across the country. From him it passed to Guy Carawan who in 1960 brought it to SNCC's founding conference in Raleigh NC. From there it traveled down to Albany Georgia where young singers of the Albany Movement slowed the tempo, syncopated the rhythm, and added the call-and-response versification which then became the Freedom Movement standard.

Since the 1960s it continues to evolve and change as it travels around the world — from Belfast to Tiananman Square, from South Africa to South America — as both a song and a symbol of freedom and resistance to oppression in many nations and many languages.

> *"One cannot describe the vitality and emotion this one song evokes across the Southland. I have heard it sung in great mass meetings with a thousand voices singing as one; I've heard a half-dozen sing it softly behind the bars of the Hinds County prison in Mississippi; I've heard old women singing it on the way to work in Albany Georgia; I've heard the students singing it as they were*

being dragged away to jail. It generates power that is indescribable" — Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, SCLC. [2]

- ***This Little Light of Mine***. Taken directly from church, *This Little Light* was perhaps the song most often sung in mass meetings and protests. It is a joyous, uplifting song filled with life, energy and enthusiasm. It was one of the songs we could sing on and on and on with many participants contributing verses as the spirit moved them:


Fannie Lou Hamer

We've got the light of freedom, we're going to let it shine
Tell [Chief Pritchett, Sheriff Clark, Bull Connor, etc], we're going to ...
Down in [Selma, Albany, Mississippi, etc.] we're going to ...
Everywhere I go, I'm going to ...

When you see photographs of people with their heads thrown back and song pouring from their voices, like the image on our home page, odds are they're singing *This Little Light of Mine*.

- ***Oh, Freedom***. Dating back to slavery times, *Oh, Freedom* was our song of courage and commitment. It too was a song that lent itself to creating and adapting verses on the spot.

No more weepin'...
No more shootin'...
No more tear gas ...
No more jail house ...
No Bull Connor ...

Traditionally, each verse ended with *Before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave, And go home to my Lord and be free*, but by the middle '60s some activists changed the last phrase and were singing it *As I fight for my right to be free*.

- ***Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round***. Another song adapted directly from church. We sang *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round* as a spirited song of defiance. After the first verse which was always "nobody," subsequent verses would identify anyone or any thing that was trying to halt the Freedom Movement: racism, violence, cops, tear gas, jailhouse, Klansmen, Governor Wallace, Al Lingo, down to the names of the individual cops blocking a march or dragging us off to jail.


Protesters returning to church after confronting the Klan in St. Augustine, FL. 1964

- ***Keep Your Eyes on the Prize***, also known as *Paul & Silas* or *Hold On*. A variation of the classic *Gospel Plow* (sometimes known as *Keep Your Hand on the Plow*), it was adapted into a freedom song by Citizenship School teacher-student Alice Wine in 1956. A vibrant song of determination, its rhyme scheme of a couplet followed by *Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on, hold on*, made it easy to create and adapt new verses, many with biblical or topical references:

Paul and Silas bound in jail — *Only chain that a man can stand*
Had no money for to go their bail — *Is that chain of hand on hand*

Paul and Silas began to shout
Jail doors opened and they walked out

Freedom's name is mighty sweet
One of these days we're gonna meet

Only thing that we did wrong
Stayed in the wilderness a day too long

First thing that we did right
Was the day we began to fight

- ***Woke Up This Morning With My Mind Stayed on Freedom***. Adapted from *Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus*, by Freedom Rider Rev. Osby in the Hinds County jail, this spirited song of joy and determination encouraged singers to invent and contribute verse after verse, often in multi-part harmony:

Ain't no harm to keep your mind...
Walkin' and talkin' with my mind...
Marchin' and singin' with my mind...
Going to jail with my mind...
I'm gonna walk, walk, I'm gonna talk talk, with my mind on...

- ***We Shall Not be Moved***. Another traditional song adopted by the Labor Movement and then going on to become a staple of the Freedom Movement (and every other progressive social movement of the 20th Century). In one of its earliest labor uses, *We Shall Not be Moved* became a powerful song of the "Uprising," the 1909 general strike of garment workers led by teenage girls on New York's Lower East Side. It's a lively and spirited song of determination and defiance, easily adaptable with only a single line change from verse to verse:

We're fighting for our freedom...
Black and white together...
The Movement is behind us...
Segregation is our enemy (it shall be removed)

- ***Which Side Are You On***. Written in 1931 by Florence Reece of the United Mine Workers in Harlan County, KY, its melody comes from the traditional ballad Jack Monroe and the hymn *Lay the Lily Low*. This song quickly became a staple of union, and then civil rights struggles. It's a spirited challenge song favored by young rebels. The Freedom Movement directly adapted many verses from those of the Labor Movement:

My daddy was miner, and I'm a miner's son
I'll stick right with the union 'till every battle's won.

Oh workers can you stand it? Oh tell me how you can
Will you be a lousy scab, or will you be a man?

Don't scab for the bosses, don't listen to their lies
us poor folks haven't got a chance until we organize.

They say in Harlan County, there are no neutrals there
You'll either be a union man or a thug for J.H. Blair

My daddy fought for freedom, and I'm his faithful son
I'll stick right with the struggle 'till every battle's won.

Oh people can you stand it, oh tell me how you can,
Will you be an Uncle Tom or will you be a man?

Don't Tom for Mister Charlie, don't listen to his lies
'Cause Black folks haven't got a chance until we organize

They say in say in Mississippi, no neutrals have we met
you're either for the Freedom Ride or tom for Ross Barnett

Other verses emerged out of our experiences, such as:

Come all you northern liberals, with all your excess fat
A few days on the picket line will soon get rid of that.

Come all you learned students, who finally made the grade
Don't forget your parents, for they're the ones who paid.

- ***If You Miss Me from the Back of the Bus***. Written by SNCC Freedom Singer Charles Neblett to the tune of the traditional *Oh Mary Don't You Weep, Don't You Mourn*. A mainstay of the Freedom Movement, the song's rhyme scheme was highly adaptable to struggles all over the South.

  If you miss me from the back of the bus...
  Come on up to the front of the bus, I'll be riding up there.

  If you miss me from the back of the bus...
  Come on up to the driver's seat, I'll be driving up there.

  If you miss me from [name of Black school]...
  Come over to [name of white school], I'll be studying there.

  If you miss me from the cotton fields...
  Come on over to the court house, I'll be voting right there.

  If you miss me from the Mississippi river...
  Come on over to the city pool, I'll be swimming in there.

Other freedom songs that were widely sung across the South include:

Ain't Scared of Your Jail
Certainly Lord
Come and Go With Me to That Land
Come By Here
Do What the Spirit Say Do
Everybody Sing Freedom
Freedom (adapted from Amen)
Freedom Is A Constant Struggle
Freedom's Comin' and It Won't Be long
Get Your Rights Jack
Go Tell It On The Mountain
I Know We'll Meet Again
I Love Everybody
I Want My Freedom
I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table
I'm On My Way to the Freedom Land
I'm So Glad Ninety-Nine and a Half Won't Do
Oginga Odinga
*Oh, Wallace (*also known as *You Never Can Jail Us all)*
Oh Pritchett, Oh Kelly
This May Be the Last Time
Wade in the Water
We Are Soldiers


St. Augustine, FL. 1964

Quotation Sources:

1. *Freedom Song*, Mary King.
2. *Sing for Freedom: the Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through its Songs*, Guy and Candy Caraway.
3. *Everybody Says Freedom*, Pete Seeger & Bob Reiser.
4. *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*
5. *Why We Can't Wait*, Martin Luther King.
6. Charles Cobb Interview.
7. Bruce Hartford Interview.
8. *They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee*, Dick Cluster. South End Press, 1979.
9. *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, Charles Payne.
10. *Parting the Waters, America in the King Years 1954-1963*, Taylor Branch.