

**SPIRITUALS OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE:
BUILDING COMMUNITY AND ORGANIZING PROTEST**

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Introduction

Freedom songs played a critical role in the civil rights movements of the sixties. Less known is their importance to the African American struggle for freedom over the past two hundred and fifty years. Two factors account for the power of music in the struggle: the emotional effects of the music, and the songs' suitability for grassroots organizing.

Spirituals composed between 1750 and 1850, and their musical descendants, comprise the greater part of this body of music, although protestors also adapted secular folk songs, modified contemporaneous popular songs, and composed new songs. Spirituals proved more effective than secular songs as protest music, and their music and rhythm gave later freedom songs their power and influence.

Narratives of the African American struggles for freedom follow the work of formal organizations and their leaders. But grassroots culture and bottom-up leadership sustained the civil rights movement and the struggle against slavery that preceded it. Freedom songs brought disparate communities together, and sustained and energized the movement. They expressed shared commitment, strengthened perseverance, and sometimes healed the divisions that arose after arguments among activists. According to one authority, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was effective despite its apparently leaderless structure and egalitarian principles because

songleading fostered a kind of organic and tacit leadership necessary to conduct the day-to-day affairs of the movement. Songleading functioned as a de facto authority from which other responsibilities tended to flow.

It is not coincidental that some of the most prominent individuals in the

history of the civil rights movement, including Fannie Lou Hamer, James Farmer, Cordell Reagon, and Bernice Reagon, were songleaders.¹

The themes *exodus*, *freedom*, *perseverance*, and *community* infuse spirituals and their musical descendants, the protest songs or freedom songs. Each chapter in this thesis focuses on a spiritual that exemplifies one of these themes. The first chapter traces the history and influence of “Go Down, Moses.” This nineteenth-century spiritual of exodus links directly to the civil rights era freedom song, “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” Influential songleaders Harriet Tubman (associated with “Go Down, Moses”) and Fannie Lou Hamer (strongly identified with “Go Tell It on the Mountain”) led grassroots communities in the African American freedom struggle. Harriet Tubman led slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad, and was popularly known as Black Moses. Fannie Lou Hamer led protesters in the twentieth-century struggle against Jim Crow. Although people did not give Hamer the name “Moses,” she led communities in singing the exodus-themed spiritual “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” and like Moses of the biblical exodus, led people in the struggle against Jim Crow.

The somber nineteenth-century spiritual “No More Mourning” evolved into the joyous and celebratory “Oh Freedom.” This thesis postulates that the African American freedom struggle evolved analogously. Myles Horton of the Highlander Folk School learned “No More Mourning” from an organizer of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union in the late 1930s and brought it back to Highlander. Zilphia Horton, Highlander’s music director, wove it into the body of protest songs she taught for decades across the south during the labor movement, and it figured as one of the most prominent freedom songs of the sixties. “Oh Freedom” links songleaders and organizers John Handcox, Zilphia Horton, Joe Glazer, Guy Carawan, Bernice Reagon, and dozens more, all of whom used the freedom songs deliberately to organize resistance at the grassroots level.

¹ Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America*, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004) 31.

Despite its original sorrowful tune and lyrics, once transformed, “Oh Freedom” became a paradigmatic song of freedom, in addition to revealing links among protest movements and their grassroots leaders.

“We Shall Not Be Moved” and “We Shall Overcome,” two spirituals used as protest songs, helped protesters persevere and come together as a community. They became anthems: “We Shall Not Be Moved” in the labor movement and “We Shall Overcome” in the civil rights movements. They reveal significant connections among songleaders of different generations and locales. Both anthems bridge the labor movement and civil rights movement, linking the grassroots organizations Highlander Folk School and SNCC. They connect songleaders and singers, famously Zilphia Horton and Guy Carawan, but also traditional folk communities and communities of Northerners, whites, secular African American students, and others who heard freedom songs for the first time during the civil rights movement.

These four prominent, influential, and long-lasting spirituals, among the hundreds used in protests, crystallize themes that permeate struggles. For example, exuberance and victory, the themes of “Of Freedom,” underscore that spirituals’ themes ranged the spectrum of emotion, not limited to the wails heard in the sorrow songs analyzed by W.E.B Du Bois.

The intrinsic power of spirituals’ music explains their influence in protest movements. Yet without the organizing efforts of grassroots leaders, the spirituals could not have been as effective as history shows. These two factors—the power of the music, and their deliberate use by grassroots organizers—account for their success.

Chapter 1: Exodus—“Go Down, Moses” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain”

“Go Down, Moses” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain” show links among grassroots songleaders and organizers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These two songs taken together provide one example how folk spirituals emerged and gradually transformed into the freedom songs sung in civil rights protests in the sixties. The story begins organically among slaves on the plantation, on the Underground Railroad, and in the contraband camps of the Civil War.³ Slaves, escaping slaves, and freed slaves sang “Go Down, Moses” in camps and before British royalty. Members of the Union Army, northern politicians, and northern society at large heard “Go Down, Moses,” and the spiritual reached large white audiences in the United States and in Europe. Later, during the civil rights movement, the songleader and activist Fannie Lou Hamer picked up its theme (exodus) and main lyric (“Let my people go”), and transformed the Christmas hymn “Go Tell It on the Mountain” into a song of exodus. Singers in the sixties kept intact the melody, rhythm, and tempo of “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” but completely rewrote the narrative and lyrics, centered on the key phrase from “Go Down, Moses”—“Let my people go.”

“Go Down, Moses” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain” remain widely sung in black and white churches, but “Go Tell It on the Mountain” is remembered primarily as a civil rights protest song with the introduced exodus lyric, “Let my people go.”

³ Contraband refers to escaped slaves who came into contact with the Union Army. Officers declared them “contraband property,” and refused to return the men and women to the former slaveholders. After the Union Army accepted the first group of contrabands, more slaves escaped to join their ranks. By 1865, contrabands numbered at least 10,000. The Grand Contraband Camp in Virginia, the first self-contained African American community in the United States, offered education to African American men, women, and children, in defiance of Virginia law. Classes were often held outdoors under a large oak tree, known later as the Emancipation Oak, since African Americans gathered at the oak to hear the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation read aloud.

“Go Down, Moses”: Theme

Exodus resonated with African Americans during slavery, during Reconstruction, and during Jim Crow. While Christianization of slaves' native religions took place gradually, by the mid-eighteenth century, African Americans across the South knew the biblical version of exodus. Scores of exodus spirituals arose in the days of slavery. Moses, God's chosen people, Pharaoh, the Red Sea, wandering in the wilderness, and arriving at the promised land form the themes of dozens of spirituals. In addition to “Go Down, Moses,” the songs “Didn't Ole Pharaoh Get Lost in the Red Sea,” “The Ole Ship of Zion,” “When Moses Smote The Water,” “Brother Moses Gone,” “O Mary Don't You Weep, 'Cause Pharaoh's Army Got Drownded,” “Turn Back Pharaoh's Army,” “I Am Bound for the Promised Land,” “Way Down in Egypt Land,” and “O Walk Together Children” describe the biblical exodus specifically, and, using code, describe the African American exodus from slavery. These spirituals, among many others, established and spread the coded language used among enslaved peoples to express their conditions and to plan and carry out escape.

The theme of exodus ran like a subterranean river beneath all other themes, expressing the hope of slaves for a journey out of slavery (and later, sharecropping and Jim Crow). Enslaved peoples did not wait for white society to deliver them to freedom. Rather, their freedom resulted from journeying through the wilderness, overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles, following community leaders, and—as they described it—through grace and prayer reaching the promised land. All songs of resistance take shape around this central theme of exodus.

A large collection of specific themes and images derive from the general theme of exodus, the biblical story of the mass departure of Israelites from Egypt. Exodus signifies the literal journey from slavery into freedom, and identification with God's chosen people, and describes a powerful, charismatic leader chosen, blessed and commanded by God to bring His chosen people to freedom. It articulates resistance against oppressors: Pharaoh and Pharaoh's army in the biblical version, slaveholders and the Confederate Army in the mid-nineteenth

century. The strength of exodus as a rallying call relies on a shared belief in the sure and safe deliverance to the promised land: Canaan under Moses, and Canada or the North under Harriet Tubman. Like the Israelites in Exodus, community and perseverance brought African American slaves to the promised land, not the efforts of liberators associated with formal abolitionist movements, although freedom did not arrive without the added efforts of abolitionists.

Roots of Spirituals

Some historians and musicologists of the nineteenth century held that spirituals expressed slaves' resignation to their fate, and their hope for deliverance after death, not in life. Even scholars writing in the mid-twentieth century considered spirituals a religious balm only—pious traditions that helped slaves endure until their only form of salvation arrived, their own deaths. Scholars interpreted spirituals as prayers for deliverance by Jesus, and a yearning to unite with God in heaven to find peace and rest. This attitude dovetailed with the notion that slaves submitted to slavery, were not able to organize resistance, or found slavery not intolerable. Views that rationalized slavery led to a sociology where African Americans were considered childlike, simple, meek, willing to submit, without agency, and unable to demand freedom and act on that demand. Even sympathetic collectors of African American folk song, more aware than most of the history and conditions of slavery and its coded music, wrote disclaimers like the following:

In his songs, I find him, as I have found him elsewhere, a most naïve and unanalytical-minded person, with a sensuous joy in his religion; thoughtless, careless, unidealistic, rather fond of boasting, predominantly cheerful, but able to derive considerable pleasure from a grouch; occasionally suspicious, charitably inclined towards the white man, and

capable of a gorgeously humorous view of anything, particularly himself.⁴

The music and lyrics of the spirituals, and the history of peoples who sang them and used them in resistance, show otherwise. African American music pervades the centuries-long struggle for freedom. Spirituals supplied narratives of the journeys, and served as coded protest songs. More than metaphor or emotional release, African American music literally traces the journey to freedom, and the path of non-violent resistance practiced for centuries.

Scores of early spirituals explicitly invoke images of death, but slaves understood references to death as references to deliverance from earthly enslavement. Spirituals like the antebellum “From Every Graveyard” can be read literally, as the community of brothers uniting after the Christian resurrection:

Just behold that number
 From every graveyard
 Going to meet the brothers there
 That used to join in prayer
 Going up thro’ great tribulation
 From every graveyard.

Many spirituals paint an image of the singer joining the community that went before, and that now dwells in peace and joy in heaven. Death is postulated as the alternative to slavery: “Before I’ll be a slave/I’ll be buried in my grave.” However, the earthly, immediate alternative to the daily reality of slavery was freedom, not death. From their inception, spirituals communicated codes, as well as purely religious sentiments. Slaves endangered themselves, their families, and their

⁴ Newman I. White, *American Negro Folk-songs* (Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1965.) 30.

communities when singing openly of freedom. In this verse from an eighteenth-century secular song, a slave explains that his singing covers up his true feelings and intentions:

Got one mind for white folks to see,
 ‘Nother for what I know is me;
 He don’t know, he don’t know my mind,
 When he see me laughing
 Laughing just to keep from crying.⁵

Spirituals that on the surface refer to death as deliverance contain codes referring to freedom. Singing about joining those who went before, or about wishing to reach the promised land, did not represent turning away from this life, but a desire to join freedmen escaped from slavery.

Spirituals’ stories, themes, and images trace to African cultural norms and religious expression. African rhythms, polyrhythms, the distinctive call-and-response form, and other aspects of African music manifest in music of spirituals. When Northerners first learned spirituals in the post-Emancipation era, prominent music dictionaries described Negro spirituals as musically and lyrically derivative of the white church hymns that slaves heard in the early nineteenth century.⁶ Collectors and musicians who listened closely to spirituals strenuously objected, since the music and form of slave spirituals differed enormously from white church

⁵ Alan Dundes, ed., *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 489. He quotes the little-known collector, music transcriber, and author Lawrence Gellert, *Me and My Captain: Chain Gang Negro Songs of Protest* (New York: Hours Press, 1939). Songs recorded by Gellert were released in the 1930s, and re-released on Rounder Records in 1980. Born in Budapest in 1898, Gellert traveled through North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia from 1933-1937, collecting folk songs of African Americans.

⁶ Scholars variously wrote “Negro,” “Afro-American,” or “Black” in the same work, to conform to the convention of the period, or personal preference when not specifying a time period. That is, the word “Black” that an author used to refer to African Americans in 1965 replaced the word “Negro” used in 1930. This convention is followed in this thesis, although the word “black” is variously capitalized or not, depending on context. Quotations reproduce the spelling of the author of the quotation.

music. Nevertheless, this view was not put to rest until the mid-twentieth century. While white and black church music influenced the other, the enslaved African American community created new musical features not found in other American or African music. They introduced these elements into the broader strains of American music, enriching the latter, and creating wholly new genres of music: spirituals, gospel, ragtime, blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, rock, funk, hip hop, rap, and more. African American interpreters re-assembled some white spirituals from the early nineteenth century, but the result was new and unique, not an imitation.

Music translated everyday experiences and religious practices into living sound in West Africa during the time of the slave trade. John S. Mbiti wrote a comparative and interpretative study of African religion based on the beliefs, elements, and characteristics of more than three thousand African ethnic groups, each with its own religious system. Despite the diversity of religious beliefs that conform to local societies, and the wide range of linguistic groupings, fundamental concepts, ritual, and cultural expression are common across African religions. African religions practiced by slaves contained notions complementary to Christian descriptions of God, the role of God, and the relationship between God and man:

In all African societies, without a single exception, people have a notion of God—a minimal and fundamental idea about God. Like the Christian God, the African God is known as a High God, a Supreme God, a father, king, lord, master, judge, or ruler, depending on the society doing the naming (or, in some matriarchal societies, Mother, although the image of God as Father is not limited to patriarchal societies). God is a Creator and Provider who reigns in the sky or heaven and over heaven and earth, the two having originally been either close together or joined by a rope or bridge. Africans are expected to be humble before him, to respect and

honor him. This image of God is the only image known in traditional African societies.⁷

Native African religious beliefs readily incorporated Christian theology. Christianity explained God's role differently, and provided new rituals, but did not supplant traditional beliefs and rituals. Slave masters held conflicting and contradictory views of this syncretism, over time, and in different locales. Some slaveholders found slave religion threatening, and liable to incite insurrection or present slaves with dangerous notions of equality before God and man. They consequently forbade the practice of religion of any type. Others found the New Testament admonitions of Paul for slaves to be obedient to their masters a useful tool. Christianity became the dominant overt slave religion, firmly in place by the mid-eighteenth century. The practices of African diasporic religions, blended with Christian rituals, continue today. Christianity supplemented and enhanced religious expressions in early African American culture; it did not replace them. As in Europe, where Christianity absorbed indigenous religious rites, the practice of Christian religion among slaves absorbed prior practices of African religions. Significantly, music remained central to African American religion and daily life.

African American slaves' embrace of prophets and saints in spirituals and rituals also parallels traditional African religions. Daniel, Joshua, Moses, Peter, Paul, and dozens of Old and New Testament figures that appear in slave song are analogs of African "mythological figures of a spiritual nature."⁸ These lesser Gods, or intermediaries, acted as diviners of wisdom, divine hunters, or tricksters, who helped and interfered with daily life.

The presence of music in all spheres of daily life persisted as the most important aspect of African culture brought to America. African Americans under slavery, like their ancestors in Africa, drew no formal distinction between the sacred and profane, the spiritual and material.

⁷ Mbiti 29-52.

⁸ Mbiti 77.

Most linguistic groupings in African cultures contained no specific word for religion; religion infused all aspects of life. Rhythmic expressions predominated. Music and dance were synonymous with religious expression, and part of worship and daily work. Harvesting, hunting, education, politics, homemaking, and community life centered on music created and performed not by individuals, but communally. Likewise, music permeated all aspects of life in slave society. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century letters, essays, and histories documented the prevalence of music among slaves. Slaves across the South, and in all regions where slavery was practiced, wove rhythmical expressions (using the body or instruments), moans and chants, ring shouts, songs, and dances—practiced individually and communally—into work and communal activities, play, and love. Slaves enduring suffering, violence, forced family separation, and imprisonment relied on music to relate their stories, and gain strength to persevere. Slaves deliberately separated by linguistic groupings to prevent conspiracy to rebel employed music as a universal language, and formed inter-linguistic communities.

Spirituals share a traditional understanding of death and the dead with African religious traditions. The dead, in African cultures, inhabit the spiritual world along with God and the “lesser Gods,” or intermediaries; the dead migrate to the spiritual realm, but do not cease to exist. This parallels the Christian belief in life after death, except that in African traditions, the dead remain an active part of the community as long as they are remembered. Even after the memory of an ancestor fades completely, the person is not considered dead in the sense of not existing, but simply in the state of an ordinary spirit not known by name. The dead are literally the living dead, reincarnated in the spiritual realm. The Sengalese poet Birago Diop writes:

Those who are dead are never gone
 They are in the brightening shadow
 And in the thickening Gloom
 The dead are not beneath the Earth
 They are in the quivering Tree

They are in the groaning Wood

They are in the flowing Water

And in the still Water

They are in the Hut,

They are in the Crowd;

The Dead are not Dead.⁹

Unique syncopated and multi-meter rhythms, melodies in a pentatonic “blues scale” that created sorrowful and joyful tonalities, improvised lyrics, ring shouts, and ecstatic dance combined to form spirituals based either on universal religious themes or Old and New Testament stories. Lyrical and musical analyses of each spiritual discussed in this thesis describe characteristics of the spirituals’ rhythms, tonalities, and improvisations.

Go Down, Moses: Lyrical Analysis

Exodus 8:01 and subsequent verses of the chapter of Exodus in the Old Testament inspired “Go Down, Moses”:

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him, thus saith the Lord, Let my people go, that they may serve me.

“Go Down, Moses” traces the story of Exodus in thirty-six verses. This chorus follows each verse:

Chorus

Go Down, Moses

Way down in Egypt land

Tell ole’ Pharaoh

Let my people go.

⁹ Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 16. He quotes the poem from Francis Bebe, *African Music: A People’s Art* (Brooklyn, N.Y. : Lawrence Hill Books, 1975) 126.

Each verse contains an image taken from the biblical exodus, including “I’ll smite your first-born dead,” “Stretch out your rod and come across,” “The cloud shall cleave the way,” “Pharaoh and his host were lost,” and “Let us all to Canaan go.” Two call-and-response couplets comprise each verse:

Verse 1

When Israel was in Egypt’s land,	[Call]
Let my people go,	[Response]
Oppress’d so hard they could not stand,	[Call]
Let my people go.	[Response]

Chorus

Go Down, Moses,	
Way down in Egypt land,	
Tell ole’ Pharaoh,	
Let my people go.	[Resolution of Chorus ¹¹]

The third line, “Oppress’d so hard they could not stand,” continues the narrative begun with the first line, “When Israel was in Egypt’s land.” Each verse follows the same pattern: a call, followed by the response “Let my people go,” and a second call, followed by the same response. A congregation responded “Let my people go” seventy-two times over the course of singing all thirty-six verses. “Let my people go” also culminates the chorus that follows each verse, so that a congregation responded “Let my people go” over a hundred times when singing “Go Down, Moses.” “Let my people go” is the idea and image that rolls through the spiritual, binding verse to

¹¹ Resolution in western tonal music theory is the movement of a note or chord from dissonance (an unstable sound) to a consonance (a more final or stable sounding one).

verse, and culminating in each repetition of the chorus. The phrase “Let my people go” hangs in the air after the song is done. “Go Down, Moses” demands freedom, unyieldingly.

Calls arose from different people in a congregation, which then responded together “Let my people go.” A narrative built gradually, different people adding lines to the lengthening collection of verses. Over time, the congregation settled on standard verses, and participants sang mainly the known calls and responses—that is, sometimes people did not add many new verses, if any at all. But usually, during any one recitation, members of the congregation added new verses. Visitors who transcribed music and lyrics captured an incomplete set of verses, only the verses they happened to hear at a church or camp.

Several verses of “Go Down, Moses” introduced New Testament stories to the narrative, as well as aspects of nineteenth-century African American daily life. “O let us all from bondage flee/And let us all in Christ be free” incorporated Christ of the New Testament with the Exodus story. “I’ll tell you what I likes the best/It is the shouting Methodists” and “I do believe without a doubt/A Christian has a right to shout” cast light on how African American culture integrated with Christian church culture. “Shout” refers to a religious dance. People gathered in a small wooden church shuffled slowly in a ring, chanting and singing, pounding out rhythm with percussive instruments. Ankles never crossed, as happened in a “Devil’s dance.” The ring shout would not be understood or embraced by white churches, and African Americans felt more at home with “the shouting Methodists,” who agreed “a Christian has a right to shout.”

Some of the original verses of “Go Down, Moses” explicitly address conditions of slavery. The verses “We need not always weep and moan/And wear these slavery chains forlorn” and “The Devil thought he had me fast/But I thought I’d break his chains at last” connect the biblical exodus narrative with the reality of enslavement. These verses translated the story of exodus, made it relevant to slaves’ daily lives, and emphasized that “exodus” was not a metaphor, but a guide; not a meditation on persecution of Israelites in Egypt, but an evolving reality.

Three sets of lyrics contend for the status of original lyrics of “Go Down, Moses.” In 1862, the white hymnologist and publisher of evangelical hymnals (and famed builder of fine pianos) Horace Waters arranged and published “Go Down, Moses” in *Songs of the Contrabands*. Waters published a large number of contrabands’ songs, and considered “Go Down, Moses” the contrabands’ theme song. Harriet Beecher Stowe recorded in 1863 a second collection of verses when she heard contrabands singing “Go Down, Moses.” Stowe or another person transcribed it. In 1880, Fisk University published yet another version of “Go Down, Moses” in the hymnal *Songs of the Jubilee Singers*, one that transformed lyrics sung by former slaves to formal, arranged lyrics. The distinguished musician and composer arranged “Go Down, Moses” for the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their songbook, Theodore F. Seward. He based his verses on those sung by the first Fisk students, all former slaves.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers toured the United States and Europe to raise funds for Fisk University’s buildings and educational programs. The concerts brought spirituals transcribed in *Songs of the Jubilee Singers* to large audiences, who were hearing African American religious, folk, and coded protest music for the first time. Fisk University, founded in Nashville six months after the Civil War ended, needed the \$20,000 the choir hoped to raise to erect the first buildings on campus. Skeptics doubted the tour would reach its planned destinations, let alone raise \$20,000.

The original concert program included religious music from white churches, as well as spirituals from *Songs of the Jubilee Singers*. The polished, harmonious arrangements of spirituals sung by the former slaves followed European traditions. The music arranger emphasized precision and finish. He aspired to present art, not a shadow (or worse, a caricature) of “plantation song.” Seward created arrangements familiar to white audiences, conforming to their expectations of concert music. Contemporaneous music critics noted “[The Jubilee Singers] have become familiar with much of our best and sacred classical music, and this has modified their manner of

execution.”¹² The choir performed in tailored, formal dress, as expected by audiences. Fisk University did not have many funds, and the former slaves could not contribute financially to purchase a formal concert attire. This demonstrates the choir’s assumption that adhering as closely as possible to dominant culture norms was a necessity (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Fisk Jubilee Singers. Fisk University Archive, Special Collections; Nashville, Tennessee; circa 1870s; <<http://www.fisk.edu/academics/Library/SpecialCollections.aspx>>.

The spirituals from *Songs of the Jubilee Singers* were wildly popular, more than their counterparts from white church singing. The choir conductor adapted the concert program accordingly, and in the end it consisted mainly of slave spirituals, albeit performed in concert style. The tour proved a great success despite a slow start and initial disappointments. By 1878,

¹² Albert Christ-Janer, *American Hymns Old and New: Notes on the Hymns and Biographies of the Authors and Composers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 295.

the group had brought to Fisk University over \$150,000. The tour introduced dozens of African American spirituals to large (mostly white) audiences in the North and across Europe.

Lyrics performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers differ from the other two earlier sets of lyrics, the contraband lyrics transcribed by Horace Waters and the contraband lyrics transcribed by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The contraband lyrics recorded by Stowe closely represent “Go Down, Moses” as sung by slaves and fugitives. Horace Waters in *Songs of the Contrabands* and Theodore Seward in Fisk University’s *Songs of the Jubilee Singers* arranged “Go Down, Moses” for concerts and formal choirs. Waters’ version faithfully followed the literal narrative of the biblical exodus, whereas Seward transcribed lyrical improvisations and innovations as well. Seward’s version contains all but one of the lyrics of the contrabands recorded by Stowe. Since almost all singers in the Fisk Jubilee Singers had been slaves, the Fisk University songbook best reproduces the lyrics originally sung by slaves. No two live renditions of “Go Down, Moses” used the same set of lyrics, since calls arose organically and spontaneously from the congregation; no two versions of “Go Down, Moses” sung by groups of former slaves contained the same set of calls. Only one lyric in Horace Water’s contraband version does not appear Seward’s *Songs of the Jubilee Singers*: “He sits in the heaven and answers prayers.”

The version of “Go Down, Moses” published by Horace Waters in 1862 may have influenced the 1880 Fisk University transcription; the musicians at Fisk University knew Waters’ songbook. Waters’ transcription, while reflecting his own rhyming, choice of words, and grammatical constructs, accurately incorporated the slave spiritual’s phrases. Horace Waters’ version did not change the lyrics, other than to arrange them in “proper” English with conventional rhyming and grammar.

Trying to reconcile the three sets of lyrics for “Go Down, Moses” demonstrates the difficulty of discerning the original lyrics of spirituals or any folk song. Folk songs have no author, but arise from a community, and evolve with circumstances. They do not lend themselves to standard European musical notation and standard American English pronunciation, spelling,

idiom, or grammar. The sheer difficulty of indicating the notes, intervals, melody, and style of spirituals using classical European music notation stymied transcribers. The collector—whether white or black—imposed his or her memory, taste, and preferences on the transcription, limited by his or her strength, or weakness, in transcribing music.

Go Down, Moses: Musical Analysis

“Go Down, Moses” is a majestic, commanding song, sung slowly, almost ponderously. Its minor key and flattened intervals lend it a plaintive, haunting air. The embedded response “Let my people go” in each verse comes in at a low pitch, the same low pitch that begins each verse. But the response “Let my people go” does not climb the register, as does the call that precedes it. The pitch stays low and the music pounds out slowly and deliberately the words “Let my people go.” The call and response start on the same note, but the response resolves the two-line phrase, lending an air of finality to the command, “Let my people go.”

The chorus enters on a higher note than the verse it follows. This gives it a thrust of energy and urgency that matches the sentiment of the chorus: the command to Moses to free the captives. The final phrase of the chorus, another repetition of “Let my people go,” is musically identical with “Let my people go” as sung in a verse. The immobility of the music matches the implacable nature of God’s command. Each line of each verse ends with those three implacable notes, a rising C—D-flat—E-flat; the chorus’ ending again repeats the same three implacable notes. The overall effect is one of awe and power. The music itself commands.

Singers slowed and exaggerated the steady and regular rhythm that contained slight internal syncopation, to place even greater emphasis on “Let my people go.” That phrase resolves the two call-and-response couplets of each verse, each repetition of the chorus, and resolves “Go Down, Moses.” Theodore Seward stated that the melodies “spring from the white heat of religious fervor during some protracted meeting in a church or camp.” He remarks on the complicated and “sometimes strikingly original” rhythm, and the preference for using multiple

meters (ways to measure time, or beat out time). Former slaves accompanied rhythms and meters with “beating of the foot and the swaying of the body.” Seward documents the use of a musical scale with the fourth and seventh notes omitted, of the seven notes in a Western scale.^{13 14} He articulated for the first time these three prominent aspects of African American musical innovations regarded today as the great contributions of African American music: emphasis on rhythms, multiple meters, and the pentatonic scale known as the “jazz scale” or “blues scale” that omits the fourth and the seventh notes in the Western musical scale.

“Go Down, Moses”: Transmission

African Americans living under slavery created the spiritual “Go Down, Moses” during the period of the Underground Railroad. In the years preceding the Civil War, slaves escaped by following explicit pathways, traveling from staging house to staging house. Tradition holds that Harriet Tubman inspired “Go Down, Moses.” As a (singing) conductor on the Underground Railroad, Tubman led hundreds of slaves to freedom. Escaping slaves called her Black Moses, or simply Moses. “Go Down, Moses” acted both as metaphor and literal expression of the Underground Railroad: people traveling the Underground Railroad made a literal journey to freedom with the help of their Moses. Harriet Tubman, a powerful singer and storyteller (and a fierce, determined, brilliant and imposing figure) dramatized stories to bring them to life. Photographs attest to her powerful presence (see fig. 2, pg. 20). Tubman’s legend preceded her in life and even more so surrounds her since her death. One anecdote from Tubman’s life stories shows how she used the power of music to escape detection:

¹³ Christ-Janer 295.

¹⁴ Scales in traditional Western music generally consist of seven notes, and repeat at the octave (C, D, E, F, G, A, B and again the octave note, C). Notes in the commonly used scales are separated by whole and half step intervals of *tones* and *semitones*. When the five semitones of a Western scale are included (C-sharp/D-flat, D-sharp/E-flat, F-sharp, G-sharp/A-flat, and B-sharp), musicians say the Western scale contains twelve notes.

At another time she was being questioned by men on a train who were looking for her and she said: “Gentlemen, let me sing for you”—she had a great voice for song—then sang on for mile after mile till they came to the next station, then bade them good-bye and left the stage.¹⁵



Fig. 2. Harriet Tubman. Accessible Archives, <<http://accessiblearchives.com>>.

¹⁵ Jean McMahon Humez, *Harriet Tubman: Her Life and Life Stories* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003) 237. Her work contains extant biographies and folk stories of Harriet Tubman, along with a hypothetical autobiography, creating a nuanced history that takes into account the difficulty (and psychological richness) of exploring the history of a legend whose biographies must be analyzed from multiple perspectives. Humez’ book serves as a history of the Underground Railroad as well as of Harriet Tubman.

Spirituals signaled the presence of conductors or slaves on the Underground Railroad, acted as a beacon for a station, informed slaves of the near presence of Harriet Tubman, acted as communication among conductors and slaves and—the overriding use of spirituals—expressed and provided the storyline to follow (exodus), and provided succor to those making the journey. The spiritual expressed the thought of freedom ahead, urging singers and listeners to persevere individually and communally, and thus achieve victory.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, abolitionist and author of the controversial “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” collaborated with a group of tens of thousands of women in the United Kingdom, who signed a petition calling for their sisters in the United States to battle slavery. Stowe’s thirteen-page reply to their petition, printed in *The Atlantic* magazine in January 1863, included an account of contrabands singing traditional spirituals for President Lincoln and assembled politicians; their rendition of “Go Down, Moses” moved Stowe deeply. Stowe printed the contrabands’ lyrics to “Go Down, Moses” in full in her letter to the women of the United Kingdom. A fragment of the letter reads:

This very day the writer of this has been present at a solemn religious festival in the national capital, given at the home of a portion of those fugitive slaves who have fled to our lines for protection—who, under the shadow of our flag, find sympathy and succor. The national day of thanksgiving was there kept by over a thousand redeemed slaves, and for whom Christian charity had spread an ample repast.

Our Sisters, we wish you could have witnessed the scene. We wish you could have heard the prayer of a blind old negro, called among his fellows John the Baptist, when in touching broken English he poured forth his thanksgivings. We wish you could have heard the sound of that *strange rhythmical chant which is now forbidden to be sung on Southern plantations* – the psalm of this modern

Exodus—which combines the barbaric fire of the Marseillaise with the religious fervor of the old Hebrew prophet.

Oh, go down, Moses, Way down into Egypt's land!

Tell King Pharaoh to let my people go!

Stand away dere, Stand away dere,

And let my people go!

Oh Pharaoh said he would go 'cross!

Let my people go!

Oh, Pharaoh and his hosts were lost!

Let my people go!

You may hinder me here, but you can't up dere,

Let my people go!

Oh, Moses stretch your hand across!

Let my people go!

And don't get lost in de wilderness!

Let my people go!

He sits in de heavens and answers prayers.

Let my people go!

As we were leaving, an aged woman came and lifted up her hands in blessing.

“Bressed be de Lord dat brought me to see dis first happy day of my life! Bressed be de Lord!” [emphasis mine]

In all England is there no Amen?¹⁶

¹⁶ Stowe, Harriet Beecher, “A Reply to the Address of the Women of England,” *The Atlantic Monthly* January 1863: 120-134.

Harriet Beecher Stowe implored her sisters in England to champion for a second time the cause of emancipation, as significant numbers of people in the United Kingdom favored letting the *South* go—that is, grant the South secession and independence, and continue the practice of slavery. Stowe chose “Go Down, Moses” to amplify her appeal. She included a relatively long list of lyrics to bring to life for her readers in England the heartfelt appeal behind the emotional poetry that described the contemporaneous exodus. Stowe asked her sisters across the Atlantic to hear the prayer of the former slave—Blessed be the Lord that brought me to see this first happy day of my life! Blessed be the Lord!—and to add their amen. The music of “Go Down, Moses” transcended the camp and the woods and the plantation, and became part of political discourse among influential bodies of women on both sides of the Atlantic. The Queen of England may have known the spiritual “Go Down, Moses” due to this collaboration of abolitionist women in the United Kingdom and Harriet Beecher Stowe; the Queen specifically requested the Fisk University choir sing it for her in a special performance during their European tour in the early 1880s.

The man Harriet Beecher Stowe heard singing “Go Down, Moses” lived in the Grand Contraband Camp in Virginia. In 1862, the camp housed several thousand escaped slaves. The contrabands included men, women and children, clothed and housed by the Union army (see fig. 3, pg. 24). Sheet music and lyrics published in the North attest to the popularity of contraband music, much in fashion. On September 7, 1861, a visitor to the Contraband Camp reported:

I passed around the fortress chapel and adjacent yard where most of the “contraband” tents are spread. There were hundreds of men of all ages scattered around. In one tent they were singing in order, one man leading as extemporaneous chorister, while some ten or twelve others joined in

the chorus. The hymn was long and plaintive as usual and the air was one of the sweetest minors I ever listened to.¹⁷



Fig. 3. Exodus: “Contrabands,” fugitive slaves emancipated upon reaching Union-controlled territory, sit outside a house, possibly in Freedman’s Village in Arlington, Virginia, in the mid-1860s. Photo and caption: Aurora Mendelsohn, “From the Civil War to Our Seders, A Song of Redemption,” *The Jewish Daily Forward*, <<http://forward.com>>.

Another account comes from a New England minister, George H. Hepworth, who attended a church service in Louisiana. A large number of escaped refugees, not yet freed, had gathered “from a radius of forty miles, and formed themselves into colonies with from one to five hundred in each; and were living on three-quarters Government rations, and working in every which way in which they could.” He joined about one hundred gathered in a rough shack for a church service:

¹⁷ John Sullivan Dwight, “Musical Chit-Chat” *Dwight’s Journal of Music* September 7, 1861: 281.

For a few moments, perfect silence prevailed ... At length, however, a single voice, coming from a dark corner of the room, began a low, mournful chant, in which the whole assemblage joined by degrees. It was a strange song, with seemingly very little rhythm, and was what is termed in music a minor; it was not a psalm, nor a real song, as we understand these words; for there was nothing that approached the jubilant in it. It seemed more like a wail, a mournful, dirge-like expression of sorrow.

At first, I was inclined to laugh, it was so far from what I had been accustomed to call music; then I felt uncomfortable, as though I could not endure it, and half rose to leave the room; and at last, as the weird chorus rose a little above, and then fell a little below, the key-note, I was overcome by the real sadness and depression of soul which it seemed to symbolize ...

They sang for a full half-hour. – an old man knelt down to pray. His voice was at first low and indistinct ... He seemed to gain impulse as he went on, and pretty soon burst out with an “O good, dear Lord! We pray for de cullered people. Thou knows well ‘nuff what we’s been through: do, do, oh! do, gib us free!” when the whole audience swayed back and forward in their seats, and uttered in perfect harmony a sound like that caused by prolonging the letter “m” with the lips closed. One or two began this wild, mournful chorus; and in an instant all joined in, and the sound swelled upwards and downwards like waves of the sea.¹⁸

¹⁸ George H. Hepworth, *The Whip, Hoe and Sword* (Boston: Wise and Co., 1864) 163-165.

As a cultural force, the music of the contrabands wrought deeper and more personal connections among people of the North and former slaves. Other accounts of the contraband camps relate that music was ever present, particularly “plaintive hymns.” No visitor to the camps failed to remark in emotional detail the effect of the music. Michel Fabre, a Professor at the Research Center in African-American Studies at the University of Paris III, wrote, “The presence of the fugitives [contrabands] in the Union army provided a sort of transition towards human and cultural understanding of a people whose artistic productions had not been acknowledged by the South.” W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of the fugitives, who served in the Union army, that “perhaps for the first time, the north met the Negro slave face to face and heart to heart with no third witness.”¹⁹

When President Lincoln read aloud the Declaration of Emancipation on January 1, 1863, congregations of freedmen and slaves celebrated in song. “Black men assembled in ‘rejoicing meetings’ all over the land on the last night of December in 1862, waiting for the stroke of midnight to bring freedom to those slaves in the secessionist states.”²⁰ At the contraband camp in Virginia, people sang “Go Down, Moses” over and over. A “sister broke out in the following strain, which was heartily joined in by the vast assembly”:

Go Down, Abraham,

Away down in Dixie’s land;

Tell Jeff Davis

To let my people go.”²¹

¹⁹ W.E.B. DuBois, “Of the Sorrow Songs,” *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co) 251.

²⁰ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company) 214.

²¹ William Wells Brown, *The Negro in the American Rebellion* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1967) 118-119.

Singers always improvised African American folk song and spirituals to add lyrics that described contemporaneous struggles, political leaders, grassroots leaders, and events. Freedmen celebrated Abraham Lincoln in the role of Moses and cast Jeff Davis, President of the Confederacy, as Pharoah, in this early example of new lyrics spontaneously added to an old spiritual.

“Go Down, Moses” in the Civil Rights Movement: “Go Tell It on the Mountain”

The phrase most associated with “Go Down, Moses”—“Let my people go”—entered the civil rights freedom song “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” The theme of exodus continued to resonate during Jim Crow. When Fannie Lou Hamer replaced the last line of the Christmas hymn “Go Tell It on the Mountain” with the phrase “Let my people go,” she transformed the upbeat, fast-tempo Christmas song into a song of exodus. The original lyrics

Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere,
Go tell it on the mountain,
That Jesus Christ is born.

became

Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere,
Go tell it on the mountain,
To let my people go. [emphasis mine]

John Wesley Work, Jr., Professor of Latin, Greek History and Music at Fisk University, first collected, adapted and published “Go Tell it on the Mountain” in his 1915 songbook, *Folk Song of the American Negro*.²² Work’s lyrics of the Christmas hymn include “While shepherds

²² The father of John Wesley Work, Jr. lived in the early nineteenth century. Possibly a freed slave, he directed a church choir in Nashville. Some of his choristers, former slaves, joined the first Fisk University choir. Work, Jr.’s son, John Wesley Work III (1901-1967), also studied, collected

kept their watching/O'er silent flocks by night/Behold throughout the heavens/There shone a holy light" and "Down in a lowly manger/The humble Christ was born/And God sent us salvation/That blessed Christmas morn." The freedom song lyrics bear no resemblance to the Christmas hymn.

"Go Tell It on the Mountain" is simpler than "Go Down, Moses," with short narratives or, in some instances, lacking a story line, with powerful verses that stand alone. It lent itself to lining out and congregational improvisation.²³ Members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party sang these lyrics at the 1964 Democratic Convention:

Verse

Who's that yonder dressed in red?	<i>[variation on the Christmas hymn's</i>
Let my people go.	<i>"Who's that dressed in white?"]</i>
Must be the children Bob Moses led	
Let my people go.	<i>[Bob Moses was a civil rights leader</i>
	<i>and SNCC Field Secretary.]</i>

Chorus

Go tell it on the mountain
 Over the hills and everywhere
 Go tell it on the mountain
 To let my people go.

and performed spirituals. This one African American family transmitted spirituals from father to son to grandson, from the early nineteenth century to the period of Emancipation to the 1960s. Other members of the Work family also studied and performed the music of the spirituals.

²³ Definition of lining out: "To line out a hymn, a song leader chanted one or two lines of text followed immediately by the congregation singing those lines to a tune, sometimes in a highly ornamented version. In this old way of singing, song leaders set the pitch and tempo and established the tune as they began singing the chosen hymn. Lining-out styles vary from one song leader to another. Some are quite direct and plain; others, more ornamented and wide ranging in pitch." Samuel S. Hill, Charles H. Lippy, Charles Reagan Wilson, *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press) 71.

Verse 2

Who's that yonder dressed in black ...

Must be Uncle Tom's turning back ...

Verse 3

Who's that yonder dressed in blue ...

Must be registrar's coming through ...

Improvisers rewrote entire verses of the Christmas hymn, such as

You know I would not be Governor Wallace

I'll tell you the reason why,

I'd be afraid my Lord might call me

And I would not be ready to die.²⁴

With the transformation of the last lyric from "Jesus Christ is born" to "Let my people go," "Go Tell It on the Mountain" became an exodus-themed freedom song, although it continued as a Christmas hymn in churches and religious gatherings.

The civil rights leader and voting rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer named "Go Tell It on the Mountain" one of her two favorite protest songs. Accounts of Hamer's life describe how strongly she identified with "Go Tell It on the Mountain." She loved and sang this song at almost every action, and often led with it. Fellow activists called "Go Tell It on the Mountain" her signature song, along with "This Little Light of Mine."

Hamer joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1962 after attending a meeting in Ruleville, Mississippi, where SNCC Field Secretary James Bevel taught the impoverished African American community how to register to vote. SNCC staff throughout

²⁴ Guy and Candie Carawan, *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement and Its Songs* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Sing Out Corporation, 1990) 52.

Mississippi—the state considered the “iceberg” of opposition to equal rights—taught people in workshops how to register, and how to teach others to register, in a climate of brutal violence. The disenfranchised sharecroppers lived in near-destitution under the harshest conditions of Jim Crow, often referring to the land they worked as the “plantation.” African Americans who registered to vote in Mississippi often lost their employment and housing. Incensed landowners turned sharecroppers off the land their families had worked for generations. The day Hamer registered to vote, she lost her home, and the right to farm the land her family had worked since the days of slavery. Ten days later, people who saw Hamer’s actions as a dangerous affront drove by the house where she slept, and pumped bullets into the house. Fortunately, no one was hurt. A year later, local police arrested Hamer and others, and forced two African American men also under arrest to beat her brutally with a blackjack; she suffered for the rest of her life from injuries sustained that day. (She described her beating, and the screams she heard from adjacent cells, during her televised testimony at the 1964 Democratic Convention, shocking the nation.) Rarely in United States history have citizens paid more dearly to exercise a civic duty. Fannie Lou Hamer said:

Everything [James Bevel] said [at the 1962 church meeting, where Hamer first heard SNCC workers address her local community], you know, made sense. And also, Jim Foreman was there. So when they stopped talking, well, they wanted to know, who would go down to register you see, on this particular Friday, and I held up my hand ...

The thirty-first of August in '62, the day I went into the courthouse to register, well, after I'd gotten back home, this man that I had worked for as a timekeeper and sharecropper for eighteen years [from ages 29-47], he said that I would just have to leave ... So I told him I wasn't trying to register for him, I was trying to register for myself ... I didn't

have no other choice because for one time I wanted things to be different.²⁵

Singing rewritten spirituals like “Go Tell It on the Mountain” and “This Little Light Of Mine” lit up the face and soul of Fannie Lou Hamer. Her determined enthusiasm emboldened all who were with her. Hamer refused to back down. When the historian Howard Zinn asked her if she would remain with the movement despite beatings and attacks on her life, she replied with the words to a spiritual: “I told them ‘if they ever miss me [from the movement] and couldn’t find me nowhere, come on over to the graveyard, and I’ll be buried there.’”²⁶ Like African Americans in the days of slavery, and Africans before them, Hamer chose song to express her deepest emotions. Zinn said, “when [Fannie Lou] sings she is crying out to the heavens.”

Like other songleaders in the movement, Hamer had known the spirituals since childhood:

Her mother had sung children’s songs to her when she was little. Her church taught her its hymns and its spirituals. Her life often gave her nothing but time in which to sing them—time in the fields, time at the ironing board, time fishing along the rivers and bayous. And later, time on marches, even time in jail. Her allies in the civil rights movement taught her their songs, and she became the unofficial song leader almost wherever she went. At training sessions, her robust voice and emphatic presence carried people with her in song, bringing together those who had been strangers, making them comfortable enough to talk easily.²⁷

²⁵ Howard Zinn, *The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965) 93.

²⁶ Zinn 96.

²⁷ Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Dutton, 1993) 39.

Hamer wove the music of the spirituals with her political leadership. Leaders in the Democratic Party were not ready to fight for African Americans' full participation in the political process, despite extending limited political, legal and law enforcement support to the movement. In Mississippi in 1964, the Democratic Party denied African Americans fair representation at the national convention to choose a presidential candidate. In reaction, Hamer and other activists



Fig. 4. Fannie Lou Hamer, center, singing at Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party boardwalk rally. From left: Emory Harris, Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) in hat, Sam Block, Eleanor Holmes, Ella Baker. Civil Rights Movement Veterans, <<http://crmvet.org>>.

organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and traveled by bus to participate in the convention. They demanded to be seated as representatives of the Democratic Party from Mississippi. The Credentials Committee fought back and a “compromise” was forced; the Democratic Party granted the MFDP a mere two seats. Hamer and the MFDP rejected the

compromise. Her stirring speech on national TV that detailed her own brutal beatings and what she endured in the struggle, and that included implacable, now-famous statement “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired” have entered national consciousness. Televised nationally leading a powerful rendition of “This Little Light of Mine,” Hamer reached millions of United States citizens with her song, as no reports of political infighting at the Democratic National Convention could. “When Mrs. Hamer finishes singing a few freedom songs one is aware that he has truly heard a fine political speech, stripped of the usual rhetoric and filled with the anger and determination of the civil rights movement ... on the other hand in her speeches there is the constant thunder and drive of the music,” a folk singer and fellow participant in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer observed.²⁸ Fannie Lou Hamer and other activists at the convention sang freedom songs daily outside the convention hall to draw attention to their presence and to express their demands (see fig. 4, pg. 32).

Although a sharecropper who worked in the fields since early childhood and one of eleven children in a desperately poor family, Fannie Lou Hamer spoke powerfully “with the constant thunder and drive of music” before audiences of thousands, with historically and politically astute analyses of American society. As vital and influential as charismatic preachers and songleaders in the black church, Hamer joined forces later with protestors in the anti-war movement. She carried her passion and song to other movements for social justice: the Freedom Farm Cooperative in Sunflower County and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Poor People’s Campaign.²⁹

The nineteenth-century spiritual “Go Down, Moses,” and the twentieth-century freedom song linked with it, “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” worked in their respective eras to encourage and energize African Americans seeking freedom and full rights. Both spirituals also acted as organizing tools, sung by powerful songleaders. Congregations continue to sing “Go Down,

²⁸ Thomas Vernon Reed, *The Art Of Protest: Culture And Activism From The Civil Rights Movement To The Streets Of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 37.

²⁹ Mills 211.

Moses” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain” in churches in diverse ethnic communities, including but not limited to African American and white churches. “Go Down, Moses” is the first song in many American Haggadahs, the text and music that are recited and sung at the Jewish celebration of the biblical exodus, the Passover. Songs demanding freedom helped African American protestors articulate demands, and helped communities work together to fight for freedom.

Chapter 2: Perseverance—“We Shall Not Be Moved”

The march was stopped about a block and a half from the campus by forty city, county and state policemen with tear gas grenades, billy sticks and a fire truck. When ordered to return to the campus or be beaten back, the students, confronted individually by the police, chose not to move and quietly began singing “We Shall Not Be Moved.”³⁰

Labor and civil rights activists sang “We Shall Not Be Moved,” a well-known spiritual turned protest song, to build community and to help people persevere and struggle together. It originated as an African American spiritual in the nineteenth century or earlier. Zilphia Horton, music director at an adult education center named Highlander Folk School, learned it from 1930s labor union singers, and incorporated it into the Highlander repertoire of protest music. As part of the Highlander repertoire, it moved to the civil rights movement when Guy Carawan, music director at Highlander Folk School in the late fifties and early sixties, taught it to student activists. People in the labor and civil rights movements sang it in protests, continually improvising the lyrics. Its melody did not change significantly over time, but tempo, rhythm, and lyrics did. Contemporaries considered it the anthem of the labor movement.

Other perseverance-themed spirituals later used as protest songs include “Come and Go With Me To That Land,” “We’ll Never Turn Back (We’ve Been ‘Buked and We’ve Been Scorned),” “Come By Here (Kumbaya),” “Sing till the Power of the Lord Come Down,” “Get On Board, Little Children,” “I Ain’t A-Scared of Your Jail,” “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” and “We Shall All Be Free.” Posterity does not record all songs active in the labor and civil rights movements. The historian John Greenway notes that a large class of protest songs “some of

³⁰ Bob Zellner describing a march by two hundred Talladega, Arkansas college students, in Guy and Candie Carawan, *We Shall Overcome* (New York: Oak Publications, 1968) 21.

which are unapproached for bitterness, anger, vehemence, and sincerity” are not included in his study as he considered them “unprintable” (presumably for profane or offensive lyrics).³¹

Standards of profanity loosened over the decades. While he does reprint the lyrics, “You low-life trifling bastard, You low-life thieving snitch; You selfish, greedy, bastardly thief, You God-damned son of a bitch,” he goes on to comment “that’s about as far as it can be carried.”

Folk songs that doubled as protest songs invariably originated as religious songs and slowly introduced secular elements that described the day-to-day earthly struggle for justice, in addition to a yearning for divine deliverance. The twelfth-century writer William of Malmesbury recounts “his ancient predecessor, Aldhelm” sang religious ditties until he gained listeners’ attention. He could then insert secular ideas into the songs and keep listeners’ attention; otherwise, people would have not stopped and heeded Aldhelm’s protest songs.³² Integrating protest music with struggle dates to time immemorial (especially religious music), but strained and polemical music predominated in the 1930s-1950s white labor movement.

“We Shall Not Be Moved”: Origins

Pete Seeger hypothesized “I Shall Not Be Moved,” the predecessor to “We Shall Not Be Moved,” was created before 1860. It appeared in print in 1908, copyrighted by the Rodeheaver Company. A musician and composer, Alfred H. Ackley (1887-1960), was interviewed by the magazine “Defenders of the Christian Faith” in 1941. He stated that he composed “I Shall Not Be Moved” in 1906 and created the central lyric “Like a tree planted by the water.” While this is possible, it is also possible he transcribed a common spiritual, adding his own stamp.

³¹ John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953) 17.

³² Greenway 13.

“We Shall Not Be Moved”: Lyrical and Musical Analysis

The Bible verse Jeremiah 17:7-8 supplies the central form and meaning of “We Shall Not Be Moved”:

Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord for he shall be as a tree
planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river ...

The standard first verse in traditional religious, labor, civil rights, and contemporary collections does not vary:

We shall not, we shall not be moved
We shall not, we shall not be moved
Just like a tree that's planted by the water
We shall not be moved.

The spiritual “We Shall Not Be Moved” expresses determination in the face of adversity. This message defiantly contradicts the assumption that African Americans passively accepted their status defined by the dominant culture. The spiritual embodies perseverance by individuals and communities. People singing the courageous lyric “Like a tree, I won’t be moved—We won’t be moved” confronted violence on the picket line in 1938, and in the South in the 1960s. They refused to be deterred. Singing the spiritual emphasized their group solidarity, and willingness to persevere together.

Subsequent verses elaborate motivations for their determination. “We are fighting for our freedom,” a verse common to the labor and civil rights movements, provides one reason why “we shall not be moved.”

We’re fighting for our freedom, we shall not be moved
We’re fighting for our freedom, we shall not be moved
Just like a tree that's planted by the water,
We shall not be moved.

Improvisation transformed the spiritual into a ballad describing a current dispute.

Members of the West Virginia Miners' Union sang "We Shall Not Be Moved" as a protest song in 1931 during a strike, an early documented usage.³³ The first verse began a song-ballad about the strike, and started by describing the union leader: "Frank Keeney is our captain, we shall not be moved."

Verse 1

Frank Keeney is our captain, we shall not be moved
 Frank Keeney is our captain, we shall not be moved
 Just like a tree that's planted by the water
 We shall not be moved.

Verse 2

Mr. Lucas has his scabs and thugs ...

Verse 3

Keeney got our houses bonded ...³⁴

Songleaders easily lined out a narrative due to the song's simple form, and the brevity of each verse. A songleader, or any member of a group, called out a first line; the group repeated it, and then sang the remaining three lines. The central lyric and central image—"just like a tree that's planted by the water"—did not change as the spiritual moved from church to picket line, but appeared as the third line in each verse. Protestors by their actions mirrored the image of "a tree that's planted by the water."

³³ Lee Hays, folk singer and activists, described another early use of "We Shall Not Be Moved" in his memoir. He relates that the "radical fiery Presbyterian preacher" Claude Williams sang the church hymn "We Shall Not Be Moved" during the 1930s labor movement. He wrote, "Sometimes at meetings way out in the back woods or in the heart of dismal cotton country, Claude [Williams] would sing a song like "We shall not be moved"—prepared to break into the old hymn words, if gun thugs should appear." See pg. 57 for details and context.

³⁴ Pete Seeger, *Carry It On!: The story of America's working people in song and picture*, (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Sing Out Corporation, 1991) 141.

The lyrics of “We Shall Not Be Moved” differ radically in the church, labor, and civil rights versions. Strikers at the Rockwood Tennessee hosiery plant in 1938 created the first five improvisations used in the labor movement that stand on their own (that is, do not form a narrative).³⁵ They refer plainly to work stoppages and violence on the picket line; they are not the abstract images of a religious hymn. The next lyrics introduced during the labor movement belong to a 1940 narrative version. Union members rallied behind the strong president of the C.I.O, John L. Lewis, and sang, “You can tell the henchmen, run and tell the superintendant” that John Lewis led and protected them. The declaration of determination remains the same, “We shall not be moved, like a tree planted by the water.”

Singers in the civil rights movement focused less on specific actions and leaders than during the labor movement. New improvisations emphasized the goal—freedom. Versions of “We Shall Not Be Moved” from the 1950s-1960s did incorporate one important lyric found in all transcriptions of the labor movement’s version, “We are fighting for our freedom.”

“We Shall Not Be Moved”: Transmission

“We Shall Not Be Moved” became so integral to the labor struggle that its roots as a spiritual came as a surprise to some, who assumed it was composed for the labor movement. Members of segregated labor unions, often bigoted and unwilling to march with their African American brothers and sisters, would have been shocked to learn they were shouting out African American songs. (The term “brothers and sisters” was used in the labor movement as well as during the civil rights movement, and in African American culture through today). Joe Glazer,

³⁵ Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger, *Hard-Hitting Songs For Hard-Hit People* (New York: Oak Publications, 1967) 348. Although published in 1967, the authors collaborated on this project for decades. It documents labor songs exclusively, and does not discuss music of the civil rights movement.

“Labor’s Troubadour,” lifelong activist, songleader, union organizer and Education Director of the United Rubber Workers, AFL-CIO, wrote in his memoir:

Remember, these workers were from small mill towns and probably strict segregationists, followers of the likes of George Wallace and Jesse Helms. For them it was a union song, sung in a union hall. I was teaching [Negro spirituals] to white textile workers all over the South.³⁶

Glazer emphasized that not even activists in the labor movement realized that the power of “We Shall Not Be Moved” derived from the power of the spirituals. “We Shall Not Be Moved” was sung at almost all union conventions and on the picket line, sometimes for hours on end, as reported by Joe Glazer, who led songs at thousands of meetings, conventions and strikes:

Next to “Solidarity Forever,” “We Shall Not Be Moved” is the best known and most widely sung labor song in the United States and Canada. Whenever union songs are heard, it is a must.

At convention hotels in the wee hours of the morning, enthusiastic union delegations have been heard singing “We Shall Not Be Moved” with great gusto, and, despite the determination expressed in the song, they have on occasion found themselves definitely “moved”—by hotel police.

The song is a great favorite on picket lines because it is easy to add dozens of verses telling the story of any particular strike. At one strike

³⁶ Joe Glazer, *Labor’s Troubadour* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 34. His autobiography includes lyrics of seventy songs he used to unite and inspire workers, over his fifty years of work in the labor movement.

meeting in Biddeford, Maine, in 1945, several thousand textile workers roared it out, adding new verses continuously for a solid half hour.³⁷

Zilphia Horton led protesters in singing “We Shall Not Be Moved” during a 1945 strike in the rural South: a strike of the South Carolina CIO Food and Tobacco Workers Union in Daisy, Tennessee:

We were marching two-by-two with the children in the band. They marched past the mill and four hundred machine gun bullets were fired into the midst of the group. A woman on the right of me was shot in the leg, and one on the left was shot in the ankle ... Well, in about five minutes a few of us stood up at the mill gates and sang, “We shall not be moved, just like a tree planted by water ...” and in ten minutes the marchers began to come out again from behind barns and garages and little stores that were around through the small town. And they stood there and WERE NOT MOVED and sang. And that’s what won their organization.³⁸

Although the American labor movement incorporated song from its earliest days in the nineteenth century, and early songbooks like those of the Industrial Workers of the World were widely known and distributed, labor union meetings in the 1940s did not typically open and close with music, and music did not permeate meetings. Unionists sang infrequently, except in times of conflict. African Americans who attended early labor meetings remarked on this difference. They were surprised the union leader stood up, called the meeting to order, and commenced addressing

³⁷ Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer, ed., *Songs of Work and Freedom: 100 Favorite Songs of American Workers Complete with Music and Historical Notes* (Chicago: Roosevelt University, 1960) 39.

³⁸ H E Danfords, “The West Virginian,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, Volumes 5-6 September 1999: 61-81.

agenda items, rather than leading with a series of songs. Joe Glazer drew these conclusions in the early 1950s about the use of music in the labor movement:

1. 99% of American industrial workers do not sing labor protest songs except during strikes.
2. Rural workers are by far the most productive in the matter of union songs and songs of social and economic protest.
3. Most songs of this nature come from the rural South.
4. Labor protest songs, except the very simple and the very good ones, have no chance to become traditional.³⁹

While Glazer's statement that 99% of workers sang only during strikes is certainly a rhetorical flourish, and not based on statistical analysis, Glazer had a unique perspective on the reality of the labor union organizing. Glazer was the foremost songleader among union organizers and activists, expressly hired in 1940 to travel to union organizing events, conventions, and picket lines, to teach and lead protest songs.

Music was undeniably a significant force during strikes even if the labor protest songs were not often sung in other contexts. Additionally, labor movement historians document the use and purpose of protest music in the movement, from the nineteenth century through today. Union organizers understood that a protest movement needed to be colorful and attractive to recruit and keep members. In 1941, a commentator on workers' education wrote:

If labor is to stand up to fascism and throw its strength in a final conflict for, rather than against, democracy ... it has to be equally colorful, attractive, compelling in its mass appeal [as mass movements created by dictators]. Union bands, orchestras and choruses are helping to generate

³⁹ Fowke and Glazer 303.

this color and life. Yet labor music, in the sense of original music written by or for workers, is a rich field almost untouched ... Mrs. Horton at Highlander Folk School conducts classes in song-leading. The students' interest, she says, "seemed to be based on the growing realization of the need for group singing at meetings and consequently the need for [song]leaders."⁴⁰

Zilphia Horton described the power of music in the labor action: leading strikers in singing "We Shall Not Be Moved" brought people out of hiding, after being fired upon with machine guns, and gave them courage to stand their ground. She concludes that this action, enabled and empowered by the labor movement anthem, accounts for the strike's eventual success. Singing "We Shall Not Be Moved" strengthened community resolve and united protesters, and in the words of the songleader and political leader, Zilphia Horton, won the battle.

Tom Tippet in his 1931 history *When Southern Labor Stirs* eloquently states the necessity of involving cultural elements in union organizing. When peoples' need for social and cultural ties among themselves are not met by the union, they turn to organizations that provide those ties—including even the Ku Klux Klan.

There are educational, political and recreational movements through which all workers function, and if their union does not maintain these activities, the trade-unionists find them elsewhere, and they split their loyalties and interest in so doing. Many trade-unionists are more emotionally solidified to a lodge, the Ku Klux Klan, the American Legion or some other similar organization than they are to their trade

⁴⁰ Theodore Brameld, *Workers Education in the United States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941) 147. Zilphia Horton's role as songleader and activist is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

union. This is so, by and large, because those organizations give their members opportunity to take part in what they feel is an idealistic movement designed to improve the world. Everybody has an idealist spark; what he does with it depends on who fans it into flame.

The pity is that the [predominantly white] American trade unions have no program to marshal the native idealism of their membership into a social movement. *The lack of this program is particularly felt by southern mill workers, who are situated in such drab surroundings that they naturally crave a spiritual outlet. They are therefore extremely religious, and many of them belong to highly emotional sects.*

In Marion [North Carolina], as well as in all other strikes, there was an obvious similarity between their trade union activity and that of the church, and *when some speaker would discuss the union in terms of an all inclusive social movement their enthusiasm knew no bounds.* They caught the idea too, although it was new to them, and expressed it in terms of seeing light dawning over the mountain tops to make them free.⁴¹ [emphasis mine]

Union leaders came to understand this, and 1930s southern rural protests included cultural activities, especially music. This diminished in the 1940s.

Tippett summarized the conditions that led to the infamous fierce and bloody textile workers' strike in Marion, North Carolina in 1929. In the North Carolina Blue Ridge Mountains, workers endured difficult conditions: twelve-hour and longer shifts, extremely low wages, and night work. Mill operators illegally forced underage children to work, and required everyone to

⁴¹ Tom Tippett, *When Southern Labor Stirs* (New York: J. Cape & H. Smith, 1931) 281-282.

work past the end of their shifts with no overtime pay. The company store fleeced workers. Inadequate housing provided no running water or sewers, resulting in a great deal of sickness. No recreational facilities existed, although churches abounded that helped people materially and emotionally. Local police, state troopers, and the federal army brutally crushed the strike with tear gas and gunshots. Scores of people were wounded, twenty-five seriously, and at least six workers killed. Later, mills owners blacklisted the unionists. Local officials and the state governor, who called in state and federal troops, crushed a bloody decade of worker resistance. They “smothered the effective strike with the strikers’ own blood.”⁴² The effects of the famous Marion strike radiated throughout the labor movement, even though it failed to improve working conditions or wages.⁴³

Much of the music used during labor protests in the rural South in the 1930s derived from African American spirituals. White mill workers churched in the same fashion as their African American counterparts learned and chanted “re-written Negro spirituals” on picket lines and at meetings. White workers comprised roughly ninety percent of mill workers’ unions; most poor African Americans in the South worked as sharecroppers, and not in the new industries. Tippet observed:

...[at the] picket lines at night with their camp-fires burning, the women and men stationed there chanted re-written Negro spirituals across the darkness to inspire faith and courage; the mass meetings oftentimes in a downpour of rain, and the strikers singing. In those early weeks of the strike the Marion cotton mill [in 1929] workers caught a glimpse of something intangible, but something which they obviously and unanimously felt none the less. They would express it at their meetings

⁴² Tippet 283.

⁴³ Tippet 111-130.

thus: “We see a light over the hill-top. Something is coming that will make us free—us mill people free men and women.”⁴⁴

In 1929, in the early weeks of the Marion strike, Tippet heard religious emotions transferred into the struggle:

Hymns from [the mill workers’] churches were sung at the strike meetings, and were later transcribed into songs of the strike. Religious emotions too were transferred into the labor struggle. A striker would rise to speak, and in his zeal for the brotherhood of unionism he used the very terms of a church revival meeting. The crowd would encourage him with “amen.” Thus everybody would envisage a new kind of religion and a new kind of enemy. Many a prayer went up from the Marion strike lot that summer asking God Almighty to “help us drive the cotton mill devil out of this here village.”⁴⁵

Tippet introduced mining songs to students at Brookwood Labor College in an attempt to use the songs to agitate for workers’ rights.⁴⁶ The early labor movement and later the civil rights movement critically relied on the connection between peoples’ strong ties to their churches and their primary identities as members of a spiritual community.

The music and lyrics of “We Shall Not Be Moved” empowered strikers, and enabled them to express forcefully their determination. The importance of “We Shall Not Be Moved” in protest movements is shown by its predominance in musical history; “We Shall Not Be Moved” appears more than twice as often as “We Shall Overcome” in the thirty songbooks considered for

⁴⁴ Tippet 124-125.

⁴⁵ Tippet 120-121.

⁴⁶ Dick Weissman, *Which Side Are You On? An Inside Story of the Folk Music Revival in America* (New York : Continuum, 2005) 64.

this study. Although “I Shall Not Be Moved”/“We Shall Not Be Moved” remains part of Christian hymnals, and its prevalence in religious practice has not been diminished by its transformation in the labor and civil rights movements, its primary identity remains a protest song of determination and community perseverance. Songleaders—such as Joe Glazer in his formal role, and grassroots leaders on picket lines—used “We Shall Note Be Moved” to rally unionists. Both the force of its music and lyrics, and its suitability in organizing, explain its lasting influence.

Chapter 3: Freedom—“Oh Freedom”

The fear down here is tremendous. I didn't know if I'd be shot at, or stoned, or what. But when the singing started, I forgot all that. I felt good within myself.

We sang “Oh Freedom” and “We Shall Not Be Moved” and after that you just don't want to sit around any more. You want the world to hear you, to know what you're fighting for!⁴⁷

The spiritual “Oh Freedom,” first known as “No More Mourning,” became one of the leading protest songs of the twentieth century, and as such serves as an excellent prism on the use of music in struggles. It appears in almost every extant collection of songs used in the labor and civil rights movements. Irwin Silber, compiler of *Songs of the Civil War*, documents that folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax called it “the greatest of all the spirituals,” and that African Americans escaped from slavery, or still living under slavery, sang it often during the period of the Civil War.⁴⁸ Silber also states—albeit without presenting evidence—that people frequently sang it in the decades after the Civil War. It appears in major struggles for equal rights and fair treatment in the twentieth century: the early twentieth-century race riots, the early and late labor movement, and the civil rights movement.

Its use in the civil rights movement, in particular, highlights its significance. Joan Baez opened the assembly at the 1963 March on Washington by singing “Oh Freedom.” Odetta, introduced at the 1963 March on Washington by Martin Luther King as “the queen of folk music,” later the same day led hundreds of thousands singing “Oh Freedom.” In interviews,

⁴⁷ SNCC Field Secretary Phyllis Martin speaking to a journalist; Craig Hansen Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (New York: Plume, 1998) 12.

⁴⁸ Irwin Silber, *Songs of the Civil War*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960) 274.

veterans of the civil rights movement cite “Oh Freedom,” along with “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” as a representative song, or theme song, of the movement. Artists and activists, such as blues singer Betty Mae Fikes and SNCC organizer Len Chandler, chose it as an important song to lead the audience singing at civil rights movement reunions.⁴⁹ In 2001, the Smithsonian Institution created a traveling exhibition of documentary photographs of the 1964 Freedom Summer, and named it “Oh Freedom Over Me,” quoting a line from “Oh Freedom.” In each succeeding generation, in different contexts, and to varying ends, “Oh Freedom” spread quickly and became well known. The power of the spiritual to energize and unite people; its immediate and long-term adaptability; and its widespread, deliberate use by songleaders to organize reveal how freedom songs such as “Oh Freedom” critically aided the struggle.

Subtle changes in lyrics, melody, rhythm, meaning, and style of “Oh Freedom” exemplify the shift of a sorrow song to a freedom song, hinting at the potential of mining the evolution of freedom songs for insights into the African American freedom struggle. W.E.B Du Bois coined the term “sorrow song,” writing about spirituals in 1903:

They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—sorrow songs—for they were weary at heart. Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine. Then, in after years, when I came to Nashville, I saw the great temple builded of these songs towering over the pale city. To me, Jubilee Hall seemed ever made of the songs themselves, and its bricks were red with the blood and dust of toil. [...] Notwithstanding, [the Negro folk song] still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the

⁴⁹ Personal attendance at tributes to Guy Carawan at the Ash Grove 50th Anniversary: Legend and Legacy, UCLA, April 2008; and at a private residence, Pasadena, October 2010.

Negro people.⁵⁰

To Du Bois, spirituals evoked darkness and weariness, and as building blocks of a temple of music, “were red with the blood and dust of toil.” Semantic and emotional shifts in “No More Mourning,” the original name of the spiritual better known as “Oh Freedom,” explain how this spiritual, originally a sorrow song, came to be sung in protest as an exuberant, victorious freedom song.

“Oh Freedom”: Origins

The history of “Oh Freedom” is well documented and not controversial, save for the date of its first appearance: the 1830s, or several decades later. In the 1930s and 1940s, Alan Lomax researched the origins of thousands of folk songs, and concluded that former slaves sang “Oh Freedom” in Canada in the 1830s, implying slaves or former slaves created it decades before the Civil War in the United States.⁵¹ No early published versions exist to support this assertion. Lomax did not discover if the spiritual traveled from Canada to the United States, or if it originated in the United States. Alan Lomax found “... Negro soldiers in the Union Army quickly adopted songs like ‘Oh Freedom.’ ”⁵² Early collectors of spirituals claim that “Oh Freedom” originated later, during the Civil War, or in the period immediately around the time of Emancipation in 1863. Ample documentation attests that people sang “Oh Freedom” during the

⁵⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903) 177. See <http://way.net/SoulsOfBlackFolk/SoulsOfBlackFolk.html> for the full text of *Souls of Black Folk* annotated with lyrics and sheet music of all spirituals referenced by Du Bois.

⁵¹ Lower Canada abolished slavery in 1803, and the remainder of Canada in the 1830s. Free African Americans in Canada included people enslaved prior to 1830 in Canada, as well as escaped former slaves from the United States. “Oh Freedom” could have emigrated with African Americans from the South to Canada, or with freed men from Canada to the South, though the former seems more likely.

⁵² John Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Best Loved American Folk Songs* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1947) 341.

Civil War. Before Emancipation, slaves referred to captivity in code, and only when freedom was near dared to refer openly to slavery, as happens in the second line, “Before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave.” Slaves and escaping slaves who sang spirituals met with increasingly harsh reprisals. Slaveholders understood songs were coded communication, and rallying calls to organize escape or rebellion. For this reason, most collectors date “Oh Freedom” to the period of the Civil War, rather than earlier. Even in the 1860s, spirituals such as “Oh Freedom” were dangerous to sing. Thomas Higginson, a collector of spirituals during the Civil War, documented the hesitation of African Americans to refer openly to freedom if they suspected a slaveholder might hear. Higginson, an officer in the Union Army, published a fifteen-page account of his travels in the South during the Civil War. His article in the monthly periodical *The Atlantic Monthly* brought spirituals to the attention of Northerners. It contained over two dozen transcriptions of lyrics of secular and religious folk songs, along with colorful descriptions of overhearing the spirituals. He traveled among Civil War soldiers, including African American regiments, and among them he first heard and marveled at spirituals and other folk music. Higginson related a conversation with a young boy, a former slave who joined the Union Army, who explained the code contained in spirituals:

Some of the songs had played an historic part during the war. For singing the next, for instance, the Negroes had been put in jail in Georgetown, South Carolina, at the outbreak of the Rebellion. “We’ll soon be free” was too dangerous an assertion; and though the chant was an old one, it was no doubt sung with redoubled emphasis during the new events. “De Lord will call us home” was evidently thought to be a symbolical verse; for, as a little drummer-boy explained to me, showing all his white teeth

as he sat in the moonlight by the door of my tent, “Dey tink *de Lord*
mean for say *de Yankees*.”⁵³

The boy asserts “Lord” refers to “Yankees.” A spiritual that expressed looking to Northerners for help in obtaining freedom was still too dangerous to sing in the South. “Oh Freedom” contained the coded lyric “And go home to my Lord and be free,” meaning both salvation by Jesus and escape to the North. Along with the phrase “Before I’ll be a slave ...,” this line made “Oh Freedom” dangerous to sing.

“Oh Freedom”: Lyrical and Musical Analysis

The lyrics and image of “No More Mourning” derive from Revelations 20:3-4 in the New Testament:

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no
more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for
the former things have passed away.

The lyrical and melodic evolution of “Oh Freedom” demonstrate the change from sorrow song to freedom song. The early version of this spiritual, “No More Mourning,” expresses the belief that freedom is yet to come, but assured:

No more mourning, no more mourning, no more mourning after while
And before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave
Take my place with those that loved and fought before.

By contrast, “Oh Freedom,” a contemporaneous improvisation of “No More Mourning,” asserts and celebrates freedom attained:

⁵³ This fifteen-page article is reproduced in its entirety in many places on the internet, including <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/twh/higg.html>>.

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me

And before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave

And go home to my Lord and be free.

Although the overall form of the song, and the pivotal second line, are identical in the two versions, the lyrics and melody shifted significantly. Originally focused on mourning and death, the lyrics became upbeat, defiant, and triumphant. The melody moved towards a major key, creating a bright, lively sound, and a definite resolution. The original melody created a distant, plaintive mood, and did not resolve musically. The combined changes to the lyrics and melody changed the spiritual's meaning, from a yearning for freedom to a celebration of freedom attained. The changes in "Oh Freedom" expressed the journey from slavery to freedom in song. Musicological analysis of other spirituals may reveal similar sorrow songs transformed into freedom songs, and that mirrored milestones in the struggle for equal rights. Examining further the hypothesis that the transformation of "No More Mourning" to "Oh Freedom" mirrors the transition from slavery to emancipation requires analysis of other spirituals, to discover if any others also mirror major societal changes.

The spiritual contains the evocative images "slave" and "grave": "Before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave." Not abstract images, "slave" and "grave" bring forth powerful emotional responses. A person singing "Oh Freedom" identifies with the slave. "Grave" evokes death literally, and symbolically escape from slavery, virtual imprisonment under sharecropping, and later, under Jim Crow.

"No More Mourning" and "Oh Freedom" both read as first person narrative ("Before *I'll* be a slave, *I'll* be buried in *my* grave") but in the tradition of African American congregational singing, the "I" in "Before I'll be a slave" means both "I" and "We." Each person of a congregation singing "Before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave" joined with the community to declare "Before we'll be slaves, we'll be buried in our graves." Although on the surface an individualistic song, "Oh Freedom" operated as communal expression.

Singers improvised lyrics in both “No More Mourning” and “Oh Freedom,” but to a much greater extent in the latter. “No More Mourning” primarily served as a church spiritual, but “Oh Freedom” became a protest song. People sang it frequently during protest actions. They added hand clapping, swaying, and percussive instrumentation. The song’s simple and short form, and easily learned melody, opened it to continuous improvisation. Only the first of its three lines changed. Pete Seeger called “Oh Freedom” the most malleable of freedom songs. People improvised the lyrics of any freedom song to match the situation, but Seeger wrote of “Oh Freedom”: “The song is never sung twice the same. Every generation, every songleader adds verses.”⁵⁴ Variations on “no more mourning” predominate in the older version: no more crying, no more sighing, no more weeping. Most of the first lines of verses in “No More Mourning” survive in published versions of “Oh Freedom,” with the exception of the most literally religious (“Doubting Thomas,” “Weeping Mary”).

Even in private settings, people improvised “Oh Freedom” extensively. The spiritual remained in use as a cradlesong in the late nineteenth century, mothers crooning it to their infants. Thirty years after the Civil War, African American mothers and caregivers sang “Oh Freedom” with lyrics such as “No more sighing ... No more crying ... No more weeping ... No more slavery”⁵⁵

Lyrics added in the 1940s primarily related to the labor struggle, but some referred to civil rights struggles. Civil rights lyrics such as “No more Jim Crow,” published in Highlander Folk School’s labor union songbooks in the 1930s and 1940s, appear again in civil rights songbooks, although people marching and singing in the civil rights movement sometimes reproduced previously created first lines without knowing the Highlander versions. As with all spirituals and folk songs, the definite origin of lyrics in “Oh Freedom” cannot be ascertained.

⁵⁴ Seeger 43.

⁵⁵ Silber 274.

Protestors created lyrics during actions; later transcriptions recorded most improvisations, but not the date and place of first utterance. Nevertheless, songbooks record dozens of first lines for “Oh Freedom,” testament to its widespread use.

Sheet music demonstrates that the melody shifted from mournful to joyful; from a blues rendition to a lively and upbeat tune with a driving force. Church members sang “No More Mourning” more slowly, with less pronounced rhythm, and did not add emphasis to the rhythm with clapping or other percussive effects. Later singers sang “Oh Freedom” at a faster tempo, almost always accompanied with emphatic clapping and swaying. Subtle rhythmic differences underscored musical shifts; the newly added rhythm placed emphasis on certain words or phrases. Emphasis falls on “freedom” in “Oh Freedom,” but on phrases evocative of longing for future deliverance in “No More Mourning.”

Theodore Seward transcribed the upbeat melody and lyrics of “Oh Freedom” for the 1871 *Songs of the Jubilee Singers* songbook, suggesting the sorrowful and joyful versions existed side by side. However, the joyful “Oh Freedom” became most widely sung. Six major collections of folk songs from the early 1940s and the mid-1960s transcribed the upbeat version only. Hundreds of recordings and videos of “Oh Freedom” from the civil rights movement likewise show that the melody and lyrics of “No More Mourning” had been left behind.

Musical and lyrical differences between “No More Mourning” and “Oh Freedom” demonstrate the shift in emphasis from sorrow to victory. The upbeat, joyful version, “Oh Freedom,” played a significant role as a freedom song in the sixties, as shown by the large number of lyrical improvisations. “No More Mourning” did not.

“Oh Freedom”: Transmission

Musicologists have identified links among songleaders who led communities with “Oh Freedom” from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1960s. Theodore Seward transcribed the upbeat melody and lyrics of “Oh Freedom” for the 1871 *Songs of the Jubilee Singers* songbook. This songbook records the spirituals introduced to audiences across the United States and Europe by the Fisk University choir in the 1870s. “Oh Freedom” appeared in early twentieth-century protests, including the 1906 Atlanta race riots. Unsubstantiated newspaper reports that African Americans molested white women led to lynchings, followed by riots where “Oh Freedom” filled the air, according to the film documentary *Eyes on the Prize* and Irwin Silber’s *Songs of the Civil War*. However, like many histories of the African America freedom struggle that do not describe the role of music and songleaders, two major histories of the Atlanta race riot do not mention “Oh Freedom” or the role of singing during these protests.⁶⁰ In the 1930s, the white labor movement added “No More Mourning,” re-cast as “Oh Freedom,” to its repertoire of protest songs, via the work of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Along with dozens of other re-written spirituals, “Oh Freedom” entered the civil rights movement, again via Highlander Folk School, and became central in civil rights protests.

The role of protest music became central to Highlander Folk School’s educational program. This unorthodox institution served as an adult education center for the immediate local community in rural Tennessee, as well as for labor union organizers, activists working for social justice, and strikers on distant picket lines. Staff at Highlander learned spirituals and other folk songs, and composed labor songs from a myriad of sources, and incorporated them into curricula. Since Highlander staff conducted educational workshops locally at the Highlander complex in

⁶⁰ David Fort Godshalk, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and Rebecca Burns and June Dobbs Butts, *Rage in the Gate City: The Story of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

Tennessee, and at distant locations across the South, “Oh Freedom” demonstrates how spirituals moved from African American communities to the white labor movement. Participants in strikes and people gathered at union organizing meetings learned protest music at Highlander’s extension workshops, and labor movement songleaders, including “Labor’s Troubadour” Joe Glazer, learned them when visiting Highlander. Joe Glazer took songs he learned at Highlander to locations Highlander staff could not otherwise reach.⁶¹ In 1937, Myles Horton, co-founder and director of Highlander Folk School, traveled to the site of a Southern Tenant Farmers Union strike, where he met the union organizer and songleader John Handcox. Handcox taught “No More Mourning” to Horton, who brought the spiritual back to Highlander, where its music director incorporated it into Highlander’s body of protest music. Highlander songbooks from the 1940s published the old spiritual’s melody and lyrics, as sung by Handcox—the “sorrow song” version.



Fig. 5. John Handcox, left, and Joe Glazer at the 48th anniversary of the founding of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, Memphis, April, 1982. Photo: Evelyn Munro Smith, held by Joe Glazer. Labor Notes, <<http://labornotes.org>>.

⁶¹ See Chapter 2 for a description of Joe Glazer’s work.

Highlander's music director, Zilphia Horton (nee Zilphia Johnson), bridged the labor and civil rights movement as educator, songleader and organizer. She worked at Highlander Folk School from 1935 to 1956, and taught "No More Mourning"—and hundreds of other protest songs—at Highlander workshops. She transcribed, mimeographed and published songbooks that contained "No More Mourning." The Tennessee State Library and Archives contains three audio recordings of Zilphia Horton leading "No More Mourning," and thirteen songbooks or mimeographed sheets of music created and distributed at Highlander workshops from 1935 to 1956.

Zilphia Johnson seemed destined to join Highlander Folk School. She first came to Highlander in 1935 to attend a workshop, at Myles Horton's invitation; three months later, she and Myles Horton wed. Myles Horton had heard of Zilphia Johnson's union organizing in the Ozarks, where she worked with a "fiery radical Presbyterian preacher" and Christian Marxist named Claude Williams, despite her father's position as mill owner and wealthiest man in the small town. The conditions in the South in the fifth year of the Great Depression, 1934, are hard to imagine today: whippings, shooting, jailings, and lynchings by church-going people inflicted on labor organizers and striking workers. "It took brave men and women to work in labor organizing then," recalls Willard Uphaus, a religious educator.⁶² In this climate, Claude Williams moved to the Johnsons' hometown to organize mill workers and sharecroppers, black and white—extremely unusual in the South in the 1930s. Worshiped by those around him as "Jesus come alive," Williams was predictably denounced as a "dangerous and heretical communist." Zilphia Johnson aligned with Williams to help organize the union in her father's mill.

⁶² Doris Willens, *Lonesome Traveler: The Life of Lee Hays* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988) 25.

Before coming to Highlander Folk School, Zilphia Johnson studied music at a local college. Her father had issued an ultimatum: she must give up her association with the “Bolsheviks,” or be turned out and disowned. He did not intend to allow his musically talented daughter to continue to interact with “socialist revolutionaries” like Claude Williams. An accomplished pianist and winner of music awards, Johnson entered the nearby College of the Ozarks to study classical music. At first, she did not embrace folk music as worthy of study. Like many trained musicians, she considered it not part of serious musical education.

Zilphia Horton did not work in musical and political isolation after she joined the Highlander staff, despite its location in a small town in Tennessee. Before coming to Highlander, Zilphia Johnson studied at the radical New Theater League in New York City, where she learned the technique of encouraging workshop participants to write plays and music based on their own experiences, a technique and philosophy shared by Myles Horton and the Highlander Folk School. Johnson later employed this approach after she joined the staff at Highlander, in workshops that incorporated communally created and communally performed music, drama, and dance. Both Myles and Zilphia Horton cultivated connections with New York philosophers, theologians, educators, musicians, and activists. In addition to Zilphia Horton’s ties with the New Theater League, Myles Horton studied with Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary before co-founding Highlander Folk School, and the two remained close until Niebuhr’s death in 1971. But the connection transcended a personal bond between teacher and student: Horton’s education at the Union Theological Seminary greatly influenced the ideals and principles of Highlander Folk School. Later, in the 1940s and 1950s, Pete Seeger and other musicians linked east coast activists and Highlander Folk School. The folk music revival grew organically from social justice activism, with Pete Seeger as one of its most prominent songleaders and spokespersons. The alliances between Highlander staff and folk musicians on the east and west coasts came naturally. Their collaboration revolved around learning music from each other.

The New Theater League deeply influenced how Zilphia Horton fashioned the cultural and musical aspects of Highlander's educational workshops, shown in her friendship with Lee Hays. Lee Hays, longtime fellow traveler and singer with Pete Seeger in the musical group the Weavers, enrolled in the College of the Ozarks in 1932. Lee Hays had a structured background in church music; his father, a minister, moved the family from rural parish to rural parish in Arkansas and Georgia. As a child, he learned to sing sacred harp music in his father's church. Like Zilphia Horton, Hays learned radical politics from Claude Williams, and joined with him to organize workers. In the early 1930s, Hays learned from Zilphia Johnson the practical application of music to social protest.⁶⁴ It was a revelation for Hays to realize how the arts could serve to empower people for social actions. Hays wrote that "Claude [Williams] and Zilphia [Horton] did more to change and shape my life than any people I can recall."⁶⁵

Zilphia Horton also influenced Lee Hays' early artistic efforts. Hays and a friend made a documentary film about Southern sharecroppers and efforts at Highlander Folk School to organize the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, a racially integrated union.⁶⁶ In his documentary film, Hays vividly demonstrated the use of singing in building a movement: "The turning point in the film is when an image of clenched black and white hands is followed by one of biracial strikers marching and singing 'Black and white together / We shall not be moved.'"⁶⁷ Hays wrote:

It was in the plays that we first sang "No More Mourning" and "Roll

⁶⁴ Willens 35.

⁶⁵ Willens 29.

⁶⁶ A copy of their film, *America's Disinherited*, can be found in the film archives of the Museum of Modern Art.

⁶⁷ Robert Steven Koppelman, ed., *"Sing out, warning! Sing out, Love!": The Writings of Lee Hays* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003) 5.

the Union On” and “What is that I see yonder coming?” And always we sang songs like “Let the will of the Lord be done” and “When the struggle’s over we shall all be free, in the new society.”

Sometimes at meetings way out in the back woods or in the heart of dismal cotton country, Claude [Williams] would sing a song like “We shall not be moved”—prepared to break into the old hymn words, if gun thugs should appear.

Always Claude would find some local singer and job him into making new songs for the occasion, using familiar tunes of the people. One of these was John Handcox, and many songs are attributed to him which more properly should include Claude’s name in the credits.

As for my songs of that day [1930s], I have long since forgot how many of them Claude helped me to write. Sometimes the basic idea for a song is the most important part of collaboration.

Lee Hays and Zilphia Horton continued to collaborate musically. Hays later visited Highlander, where Zilphia Horton recruited him as a songleader: “When Zilphia got up and said, ‘Brother Lee Hays will now lead us in singing,’ I damn near dropped through the floor. There was no backing out; I had to take the plunge and I’ve been doing it ever since.” Hays wrote the play *Gumbo* about the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union that Highlander produced (sharecroppers referred to their soil as gumbo). Lee Hays wrote, “Concepts of what might be done with music, drama, and dance opened up windows on a whole new world.”⁶⁸ Hays familiarized audiences with songs of the 1930s labor movement, including “We Shall Not be Moved” and “No More Mourning.” He wrote or co-wrote “Wasn't That a Time?,” “If I Had a Hammer,” and “Kisses Sweeter than Wine,” all of which became Weavers’ staples. Starting with a friendship at music

⁶⁸ Koppelman 38.

school, Lee Hays and Zilphia Horton together worked as songleaders and organizers, consciously using music—including dozens of spirituals—as organizing tools.

Zilphia Horton crucially created and built the protest music repertoire at Highlander Folk School. Shortly after arriving at Highlander in 1935, she became its music director. She took responsibility for creating and leading the cultural aspects of Highlander workshops—writing and performing plays, as well as collecting, leading, and spreading songs of protest. A spirited, exuberant, and high-energy songleader, and creative force, Zilphia developed Highlander’s cultural programs through 1956, the time of her death at an early age. She was renowned as musician and singer, as well as teacher and transmitter. Pete Seeger said of Zilphia Horton, “She had a beautiful alto voice, an unpretentious rare voice, but not the show’off kind ... She brought out the talents of her audience and their enthusiastic participation. Her approach resembled more that of a Black singer and the Black church.”⁶⁹ Leadbelly (or Lead Belly, as Huddie Ledbetter spelled his nickname), famous and infamous blues singer of the period and frequent visitor to Highlander, said that Zilphia Horton was “the only white woman who could play black music that I ever saw.” Myles Horton remembers “Leadbelly’d get her to play with him anytime she was around. She’d get on the piano and play with him.”⁷⁰ Zilphia Horton encouraged Leadbelly to perform his as-yet unfinished “Bourgeois Blues” for the first time at a “respectable fund-raising party in New York,” sponsored by Eleanor Roosevelt and other highly-placed sympathizers of Highlander Folk School and its mission. Leadbelly may have composed “Bourgeois Blues” as a fundraiser for Highlander.

⁶⁹ Julia Schmidt Pirro and Karen M. McCurdy, “Employing Music in the Cause of Social Justice: Ruth Crawford Seeger and Zilphia Horton,” <<http://nyfolklore.org/pubs/voic31-12/socjust1.html>>.

⁷⁰ Myles Horton interviewed by Bill Moyers, *The Adventures of a Radical Hillbilly*. Videocassette, Public Broadcasting System, 1981.



Fig. 6. Zilphia Horton, left, singing at a dinner with Eleanor Roosevelt, center. Myles Horton is speaking with Mrs. Roosevelt. Wisconsin Historical Society, <<http://wisconsinhistory.org>>.

Zilphia Horton—and the staff of Highlander Folk School—worked with small unions, groups of workers, established unions, and the CIO’s educational programs, but above all with the immediate local community. Highlander’s approach, particularly integrating music with pedagogy, influenced the CIO greatly until the 1940s, when the CIO gradually severed ties with Highlander. Prominent labor organizations like the CIO hesitated to associate with an educational institution increasingly attacked as Communist.

Due to Zilphia Horton’s extensive use of music as part of the cultural aspect of Highlander education and outreach, “No More Mourning” and dozens of other folk songs used as protest songs spread throughout the labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s. The CIO’s educational arm published formally only one of the ten songbooks Zilphia Horton created; Highlander students mimeographed the rest. Highlander staff and students shared the songbooks

during workshops, union organizing meetings, and extension activities, such as workshops during distant strikes. The great majority of songs were not African American spirituals, but white folk songs and composed protest music of the early labor movement. “Re-written Negro spirituals” comprise only ten percent of the songs in Highlander’s published repertoire, although the number of times a song appears in a songbook, or the number of times protesters sang it during workshops or on picket lines, does not equate to its influence. Highlander staff successfully transmitted only the spirituals to later social protest movements, not the other ninety percent of labor protest songs in the Highlander repertoire, which are today little known. Due to Zilphia Horton’s work at Highlander, the spiritual “No More Mourning,” transformed into “Oh Freedom,” eventually spread from Tennessee in the 1930s throughout the entire United States in the 1960s.⁷¹

Zilphia Horton’s cultural work at Highlander Folk School influenced many. Over the decades, thousands of grassroots activists attended Highlander’s educational workshops, including dozens of well-known civil rights activists, including Rosa Parks, Pete Seeger, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ralph Abernathy, Woody Guthrie, Andrew Young, Julian Bond, Stokely Carmichael, Septima Clark and Esau Jenkins. Guy Carawan, a folk singer who succeeded Zilphia as Highlander Folk School’s music director in 1959, may have heard “Oh Freedom” (or “No More Mourning”) before joining Highlander, but he would have learned it at there as part of the Highlander repertoire

“Oh Freedom” demonstrates freedom songs’ importance to protesters, and how songleaders used freedom songs in grassroots organizing. Musical analysis of “Oh Freedom” unexpectedly suggested some sorrow songs may have metamorphosed to freedom songs. The

⁷¹ Zilphia Horton was also an early pioneer in forging women’s roles in the protest movements. That parallel, personal aspect of the struggle for equal rights is overlooked in accounts of her cultural work.

musical evolution of “Oh Freedom” may reflect cultural changes that mirror the progress of the African American freedom struggle. The spiritual energized and united protestors, shown by its use over centuries, and its frequent improvisation to match circumstances. Grassroots leaders, who doubled as songleaders, identified freedom songs, including “Oh Freedom,” as instrumental to their work. “Oh Freedom” emerged as one of the most important freedom songs, due to its simplicity and malleability, and due to its emphasis on freedom. “Oh Freedom” clearly highlights connections among grassroots organizers and songleaders of different eras: the time of slavery, the early twentieth-century race riots, the early and later labor movements, and the civil rights movement.

Chapter 4: Community — “We Shall Overcome”

The music was the soul of the movement.

—Andrew Young, “Let Freedom Sing” documentary

The history of the civil rights anthem “We Shall Overcome” reveals a unique link between generations and movements, and demonstrates the unexpected power of grassroots singing as part of deliberate organizing in the 1960s. It spread to diverse struggles for social justice worldwide, testifying to its emotional power, and ability to unite communities. “We Shall Overcome” translated to protests in Tibet, South Africa, Ireland, and Burma; today, people in the occupied West Bank sing it in marches. “We Shall Overcome” touched people individually and personally as well. Mrs. Viola Luizzo, a white civil rights worker murdered in Alabama in 1965, sang “We Shall Overcome” as she lay dying. The white anti-apartheid activist, John Harris, was hanged in 1965, and sang “We Shall Overcome” as he stood on the gallows waiting to be hanged. “We Shall Overcome” has been suppressed in South Africa ever since. “We Shall Overcome” appears less in contemporary protests in the United States. Known as the anthem of the civil rights movement, Black Power activists explicitly rejected “We Shall Overcome” and the nonviolent struggle. “We Shall Overcome” became a symbol of the splintering of the movement across ideological and strategic lines.

“We Shall Overcome”: Origins

The nineteenth-century spiritual “I’ll Be Alright” evolved into “We Shall Overcome.” People knew it also as “I Will Be Alright,” “I’ll Overcome” or “I Will Overcome.”⁷² African

⁷² Scholar, musician, songwriter during the civil rights movement and activist Bernice Johnson Reagon describes in detail the evolution of “I’ll Be Alright” to “We Shall Overcome,” and how activists used it in the civil rights movement, in *Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University, 1975) 64-80.

Americans on the remote Sea Islands off the coasts of Georgia, South Carolina and Florida sang “I Will Overcome” in the late nineteenth century. One source states “I Will Be Alright” originated outside Charleston on Johns Island, South Carolina, with the same melody as today’s “We Shall Overcome.”⁷³ Guy and Candie Carawan heard its story from the Gullah peoples of Johns Island in 1964, and transcribed and published the Gullah version in *Ain’t You Got a Right to the Tree of Life: The People of Johns Island*.

Histories list the gospel hymn “I’ll Overcome Some Day” among the antecedents of “We Shall Overcome.” Charles A. Tindley composed and published it in the 1903 hymnal *New Songs of the Gospel*. While some of Tindley’s lyrics appear in “We Shall Overcome,” including the central lyric “I’ll overcome some day,” his composition does not share the melody or form of the traditional spiritual, “I’ll Be Alright,” or its descendant, “We Shall Overcome.” Rather, Tindley wrote a narrative six-verse song ballad of temptation and salvation. The chorus after the first three verses includes the phrase “I’ll overcome some day,” but a different chorus followed the subsequent three verses. Tindley’s song ballad described a battlefield struggle against seen and unseen powers, culminating with “My Jesus says I need not fear/He’ll make it plain someday.” As with many gospel songs, Tindley’s hymn expressed a direct, personal connection and conversation between singer and God, not the communal spirit of “We Shall Overcome.”

By contrast, the text of “We Shall Overcome” does not form a song ballad. Each verse begins with a different line, repeated three times, and followed by the signature phrase “Deep in my heart, I do believe/We shall overcome someday.” Each improvised verse stands alone. The spiritual lends itself to spontaneous improvisation. Picketers in the 1940s, and civil rights activists in the 1960s, repeated this pattern. Many improvised verses described contemporaneous events. A

⁷³ GEECHEE (online magazine), February 20, 2012, <<http://geecheemag.com>>. “Geechee,” an alias for Gullah, designates a community near South Carolina, their language, and the region. The Gullah people descended from African American slaves, with less contact with nearby white populations and less inter-racial marrying over the past century than other communities descended from former slaves.

young girl hiding during a police raid on Highlander in 1959 sang out “We are not afraid,” creating a new verse. Pete Seeger added “We’ll walk hand in hand” and “The whole wide world around.” Zilphia Horton and people at the Highlander Folk School added several verses, including “We’ll walk hand in hand.” Unlike Tindley’s gospel song, “We Shall Overcome” is continually improvised, and new verses added to the dozens already well known.

The contention that “We Shall Overcome” derived from Tindley’s 1903 composition conflicts with the claim Gullah peoples sang “I’ll Be Alright” on the Sea Islands in the late nineteenth century. Supposing the dates can be reconciled, could a gospel song from New York have traveled to Johns Island, or was the Sea Islands spiritual not influenced by Tindley’s gospel hymn? If the latter, Tindley may have absorbed the chorus for his hymn—“I’ll overcome some day”—from a spiritual already sung in black communities.

Music per se provides the emotional power of a spiritual, not the lyrics, as evidenced by descriptions of emotional effects of singing the songs. Music energized the whole body, the whole person. Bernice Johnson Reagon explained to an audience at a freedom song workshop:

[When you] start to run song through your whole body, it won’t feel the way you had decided it was going to go through the day, and you’ll have to be pulling yourself together.

But what I am talking about is that you get together, and you sing to *do* this to your body.

That’s what black singing is. Songs are a way to get to singing. The singing is what you are aiming for. And the singing is running this sound through your body. You cannot sing a song and not change your condition. [...]

Now you have to do this, if you're going to do congregational singing.⁷⁴

Singing with the whole body effected changes in the singer's determination, and electrified the group. A song's longevity depended primarily on the melody, rhythm, and other musical features. Unionists forgot composed labor songs soon after labor actions, even those with wonderful poetic lyrics; the music did not stand on its own. Traditional spirituals placed lyrics secondary to music. Tindley's music has nothing in common with the music of "We Shall Overcome," undermining the argument that "We Shall Overcome" derived in part from his composition.

"We Shall Overcome": Thematic and Lyrical Analysis

"We Shall Overcome" intersperses lyrics of perseverance (often religious) with lyrics of community. Religious lyrics from the original spiritual, such as "I'll see His face" and "I'll be like Him," did not persist in the protest song version. From 1945 publications of "I'll Overcome" through the civil rights era "We Shall Overcome," the two themes of perseverance and community dominate.

Perseverance-themed lyrics:

We shall overcome ...

The Lord will see us through ...

Love will see us through ...

We shall be like Him ...

Community-themed lyrics:

We are not afraid ...

⁷⁴ Bernice Reagon in concert, and interviewed by Bill Moyers, on the videocassette *The Songs Are Free*, Public Affairs Television. 1991.

We are not alone ...
 We shall work together ...
 Black and White together ...
 We shall stand together ...
 We shall all be free ...
 The truth will make us free ...
 We'll walk hand in hand ...
 The whole wide world around ...
 We shall live in peace ...
 We're on to victory ...
 We shall end Jim Crow ... *[dates from 1950s]*
 We will win our rights ...
 We will organize ...
 The union will see us through ...

Despite the large number of community-themed first lines, the perseverance-themed lyric "We shall overcome" is the predominant lyric, repeated in each verse. The phrase "We shall overcome" musically acts as the statement and meaning of the song, as well as its resolution. Community is a central, inner theme of "We Shall Overcome," supporting the overall theme of the song: persevering together leads to overcoming. Every community-themed lyric contains within it the themes of victory, freedom or the beloved community prevailing: the end of segregation, the end of fear, or achieving an integrated society.

As with other spirituals, the "I" in "I'll be alright," and later "I will overcome," signified both the singer and the congregation. As the spiritual moved from the black church into the wider movement, people sang "we" more often. Bradford Martin explains the frequent transformation of "I" to "We" when analyzing "This Little Light of Mine":

“This Little Light of Mine” overtly reflected the concern with promoting feelings of self-worth. “This little light of mine/I’m gonna let it shine” began the song, affirming a resolution to express oneself as an individual. In the context of the civil rights movement, this amounted to a statement of personal commitment to the struggle for equality. Yet later in the song the subject changes from the first-person-singular “I” to the first-person-plural “we”: “We’ve got the light of freedom/We’re gonna let it shine.”

This shift reflects [...] significant developments. First, it emphasizes the collective nature of the civil rights struggle in which an affirmation of personal self-worth and commitment became a resolution of action on the part of a larger group of singers. Second, it also suggested the inverse, namely, that the heightened sense of personal identity generated a sense of group empowerment.⁷⁵

The “we” expressed black and white together, university students and rural sharecroppers, church and unchurched, Northerners and Southerners. Singing “we” instead of “I” did not imply less personal commitment, but shows how song helped build community. Abolitionist hymnody and social-gospel hymnody also incorporated dual meanings of “I.” The transformation of “I” to “we” (or, the two meanings of “I”) was not limited to civil rights freedom songs.⁷⁶

Pete Seeger changed “We *will* overcome” to “We *shall* overcome” in the 1950s, explaining “I changed it to ‘We shall ...’—I think I liked a more open sound. ‘We will’ has alliteration to it, but ‘We shall’ opens the mouth wider; the ‘i’ in ‘will’ is not an easy vowel to

⁷⁵ Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004) 27.

⁷⁶ Charles Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black church in African-American Experience* (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2003) 370.

sing well.” As with all shifts in lyrics, this history is uncertain, as Seeger also wrote “No one is certain who changed ‘will’ to ‘shall.’ It could have been me with my Harvard education. But Septima Clark, a Charleston schoolteacher [who was director of education at Highlander Folk School and a prominent organizer and leader of voter registration drives] always preferred ‘shall.’ It sings better.”⁷⁷

“We Shall Overcome”: Musical Analysis

Musical changes in “We Shall Overcome” concern tempo and rhythm; the melody did not change from the nineteenth-century “I’ll Be Alright” to the civil rights version of “We Shall Overcome.” The tempo quickened slightly, and the song became more rhythmic, with a marching song cadence. The music sped up, and became more insistent, as the movement intensified. Guy Carawan testified to the significance of the musical changes: “The song didn’t begin to spread until harmony and rhythm were added.”⁷⁸

Striking African American workers on the picket line in 1945 sang the song in a long, slow meter style,⁷⁹ and Zilphia Horton, music director at Highlander, sang “We Shall Overcome” “slower than anybody had heard it.”⁸⁰ Students in the civil rights movement quickened the tempo. One SNCC organizer recalled: “We put more soul in, a sort of rocking quality, to stir one’s inner

⁷⁷ Pete Seeger and Peter Blood, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?: A Singer’s Stories, Songs, Seeds, Robberies* (Bethlehem, PA : Sing Out Corporation, 1993) 99.

⁷⁸ An interview with Dorster ran in the “Roanoke Times,” Roanoke, Virginia, January 14, 2001.

⁷⁹ Seeger and Blood 101.

⁸⁰ David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing: The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981) 223.

feeling.” He continued, “When you got through singing it, you could walk over a bed of hot coals, and you wouldn’t notice.”⁸¹

Accounts of “We Shall Overcome” on the picket line in 1945 emphasize the importance of clapping and shouting, aspects of rhythm that lend energy, urgency, and drive. Lillie May Marsh Dorster, a picket captain from the 1945 strike, recalled:

It was a nasty strike, through five and a half months of a rough, rainy and cold winter ... To keep up morale, the pickets would ‘sing themselves away’ some days. We sang I’ll be all right, We will win our rights ... we will win this fight ... the Lord will see us through ... we will overcome. We sang it with a clap and a shout until sometimes the cops would quiet us down.⁸²

Seeger wrote: “During [1960], as [“We Shall Overcome”] moved into the deep South, it took on a more pronounced rhythm, dividing each of the slow beats into three short beats.”⁸³ Meaningfully, the song became associated with a particular way of singing—crossing arms to hold hands with people on either side, whether in a circle or in a line, and swaying to emphasize the rhythm. Carawan said “As [‘We Shall Overcome’] passed through different campaigns, it tended to take on the cultural flavor of each area. In Albany, Georgia, it took on a new beat and some additional decorations. In Birmingham it was given a gospel feeling. You ask about a ‘final version’ and I don’t actually think there is one.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Dunaway 275.

⁸² Guy and Candie Carawan, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* 138.

⁸³ Seeger and Blood 34.

⁸⁴ Lynskey 43.

“We Shall Overcome”: Transmission

The fiery preacher Claude Williams remembers singing “I Will Overcome” as a religious hymn and protest song in 1936 in Arkansas, and later in the 1940s with Zilphia Horton, John Handcox, and Lee Hays:

Claude Williams: We sang it first like this—

“I will overcome, I will overcome, I will overcome one day,
And with Jesus Christ as my leader [*or ‘And with the union as my leader’*]
I will overcome one day.”

That must have been about 1936 in the New Era School in Little Rock.

Lee Hays: I thought we knew it with the line “Down on my knees, I will sing and pray,” which I am sure we did not sing [in the marches] and I forgot how we did sing it in the play[s].⁸⁵

In 1945, members of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers union sang “We Shall Overcome” while striking the American Tobacco Company in Charleston. This was the first labor union strike in South Carolina history. Lucille Simmons, a member of the union, sang “I Will Overcome” as a choir member at the Jerusalem Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and added it to the repertoire of strikers, who sang spirituals on the picket line. In 2003, women who marched with Simmons remembered:

“She had a beautiful alto voice, and she would holler that song out,”
[Delphine] Brown said.

“She would take your soul,” [Joan] Cummings said.

“ ‘Down in our hearts I do believe we’ll overcome some day.’ You think about that, it’s almost like a prayer of relief,” [Lillie Mae Marsh]

⁸⁵ Willens 214-215.

Doster said. “We didn't make up the song. We just started singing it as a struggle song.”⁸⁶

After a five-month strike, workers settled for what management offered in the beginning, but “the cigar factory strike spurred a voter registration drive that made the workers the main source of new black voters in Charleston in the next few years.”⁸⁷ Two years later, in 1947, several women who sang “I Will Overcome” visited Highlander Folk to take part in an educational/training seminar, and there taught it to Zilphia Horton.

“We Shall Overcome” became a favorite of Zilphia Horton after she learned it in 1947. Virtually a theme song of Highlander Folk School, staff taught “We Shall Overcome” in seminars, and used it to end meetings and workshops. Horton published it in mimeographed songbooks distributed throughout the labor movement, and taught it to Joe Glazer who spread it in white labor unions and throughout the south. Tens of thousands of white workers led in song by Joe Glazer were not aware they sang a re-written Negro spiritual. Pete Seeger, a frequent visitor to Highlander Folk School since the mid 1940s, learned “We Shall Overcome” from Zilphia Horton in 1947, and sang it at Highlander Folk School’s Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Celebration in 1957. Martin Luther King, Jr., heard it for the first time at this gathering, and famously remarked the next day, “There’s something about that song that haunts you,” and later, during the sixties, said the song lent unity to the movement.⁸⁹ More than one hundred seventy-five labor union and civil rights activists and distinguished supporters of Highlander Folk School attended this celebration, including Ella Baker; Rosa Parks, who sparked the Montgomery Bus

⁸⁶ Bo Petersen, “We Shall Overcome: Civil Rights Anthem Rose to Prominence in Charleston Strike,” *The Post and Courier*, Charleston, South Carolina, September 21, 2003. He interviewed Brown, Cummings and Dorster.

⁸⁷ Peterson interview in *The Post and Courier*.

⁸⁹ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: W. Morrow, 1986) 98.

Boycott two years earlier; Rev. Ralph Abernathy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the civil rights organization formed during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, with the new leader Martin Luther King, Jr.; Septima Clark, who founded and ran Highlander Folk School's Citizenship Schools and extensive voter registration campaigns in the South; and Andrew Young of the SCLC, who later directed the voter registration programs that registered tens of thousands of African American voters by 1965.⁹⁰ Dozens of organizations sent representatives to the Highlander Folk School Anniversary Celebration.⁹² Thus Pete Seeger introduced "We Shall Overcome" to the vast majority of labor and civil rights organizations active in current or previous movements. King gave the closing remarks, expressing support for the labor union movement:

It must also be stressed that as industry grows in the South, organized labor will become more influential in this section. Organized labor has proved to be one of the most powerful forces in removing the blight of segregation and discrimination from our nation. Labor leaders wisely realize that the forces that are anti-Negro are usually anti-labor, and vice

⁹⁰ Passing references to Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and other participants, all lifelong activists with organizations including, but not limited to, Highlander Folk School, Citizenship Schools, SCLC, NAACP, SNCC and other grassroots organizations, and African Americans in diverse communities nationwide, do not reflect their critical importance in the movement. Women played a much greater role in the labor and civil rights movement than documented in most histories. See *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* by Barbara Ransby, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) and *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal accounts by Women in SNCC*, edited by Faith S. Holsaert et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010). Bernice Reagon commemorated Ella Baker in her song "We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest," quoting one of Baker's signature mottos, and singing about Baker before audiences that probably not familiar with her role, and contributions in the civil rights movement.

⁹² See the The Digital Library of Georgia, University of Georgia Libraries, for a partial listing of attendees and organizations represented: <<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/highlander/attendees.php>>

versa. And so organized labor is one of the Negro's strongest allies in the struggle for freedom.⁹³

In the 1950s, Septima Clark from Highlander Folk School organized and led the Citizenship Education Program, the first voter education and registration schools for rural, impoverished African Americans in the South. Clark brought music with her. An account of a teacher training workshop describes:

As the group [of participants in the teacher training workshop] gathered for "evening vespers," Dorothy Cotton lifted her lovely soprano voice and led them in song. "We shall overcome," she began as others joined in the familiar anthem of the movement. "We shall overcome, someday." [One of the singers explained:] "We have changed the words to "We shall overcome *today*.""⁹⁴

"We Shall Overcome" became the anthem of the nascent student protests literally overnight, when Guy Carawan introduced it to student protesters at conference in Raleigh held April 19-20, 1960. The first student sit-ins of the civil rights era in Greensboro, South Carolina in February 1960 inspired this conference. Ella Baker, the original organizer of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and its interim executive director until 1960, when Wyatt Tee Walker was appointed to that position, lauded the students' brave and (seemingly) spontaneous actions, and recognized the importance and power of the grassroots student movement. As with so many milestones of the civil rights movement, the first sit-ins followed careful, targeted,

⁹³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Look to the Future," Address at Highlander Folk School's Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Celebration, September, 2 1957, in Clayton Carson, Ed., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Vol. IV: Symbol of a Movement, January 1957-December 1958*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) 269-276. This collection of King's papers, speeches, and notes can be found online at <<http://www.kinginstitute.info>>

⁹⁴ Deanna M. Gillespie, *"They walk, talk, and act like new people": Black women and the Citizenship Education Program, 1957-1970* (Binghamton, New York: State University of New York, 2008) 193.

deliberate and thorough planning and preparation. They seemed spontaneous, but grew out of the nonviolent workshops led by Rev. James Lawson at universities near Nashville, Tennessee in February 1960. Students practiced nonviolent techniques: how to endure blows, verbal and physical; how to shield your body from beatings; how to persevere together.

Following the successful sit-ins, student leaders and participants—with crucial help from Ella Baker—gathered in Raleigh on April 19. In addition to SCLC financial and logistical support secured by Baker, Highlander Folk School supported the gathering and sent its music director, Guy Carawan. The students' seemingly spontaneous decision to create the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC) came after only a few days spent debating their next coordinated actions, and the direction of the new student movement. The creation of SNCC benefited from prior planning, although the preparation included allowing students to self-organize. Neither Baker nor Highlander staff presented the students with an organizational structure to adopt. Like Highlander Folk School, Ella Baker espoused bottom-up leadership:

Ella Baker is a behind-the-scenes activist; one of the great organizers of the past fifty years. When the Reverend Martin Luther King founded a new civil rights organization in 1957 with other ministers, he called on Ella Baker to set up the organization's national office and organize its mass meetings. She remembers: "I set up the office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1958, but you didn't see me on television, you didn't see news stories about me. *The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization might come. My theory is, strong people don't need strong leaders.* [emphasis mine]⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Ellen Cantarow, *Moving the Mountain: Women Working for Social Change* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1980) 52.

The cautious leadership of SCLC in 1960, by stark contrast, thought the students should join a young persons' branch or "Junior Branch" of the SCLC, or perhaps the NAACP. Baker understood students needed to find their own means to self-organize, and create continuing tactics and strategies for protests independently conceived. She embraced radical positions; that is, she tried to understand the root causes of societal problems, and without interfering, allow organic growth of radical actions.

From its first day, SNCC was associated with music—spirituals and other folk music transformed into protest songs. In a real sense, SNCC was born in song. Hundreds of students, sit-in leaders, participants and supporters from a diverse group of colleges and universities, grassroots and formal civil rights organizations, Southerners and Northerners, white and black, attended three seminal conferences convened in the spring and summer of 1960. The first workshop, the Seventh Annual Highlander Folk School College Workshop, took place at the Highlander Folk School, April 1-3, 1960. Students at the workshop had been jailed in Nashville, Atlanta, and cities in South Carolina, and were ready to discuss nonviolence, and how to work with local white communities. Participants at this workshop did learn "We Shall Overcome," but its breakthrough moment came at the second gathering, held April 19-20, 1960, in Raleigh, North Carolina. Carawan said: "The Raleigh Conference had two hundred students there from all over the South involved in the sit-ins singing "We Shall Overcome" for three days. Who was there? John Lewis, Marion Barry, James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette."⁹⁶

Myles Horton and Septima Clark at Highlander Folk School directed the third student gathering, in August 1960—the first of many subsequent "Sing for Freedom" workshops facilitated by Highlander over the next five years, conducted in different cities in the South. These freedom song workshops followed Highlander's traditional method of working with

⁹⁶ Josh Duncan, *Freedom in the Air: Song Movements of the 60's* (New York: International Publishers, 1965) 40.

emerging social justice groups. Grassroots leaders, songleaders, folk singers, and student protesters attended and participated. The songleaders and singers who attended Highlander's freedom song workshops greatly affected the nature and dissemination of freedom songs. Carawan led this third conference. Four girls from Montgomery attended and brought their versions of freedom songs, derived from gospel hymns they sang during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Two important leaders in the SCLC, Rev. C.T. Vivian and Frederick Shuttlesworth, set the tone and keynoted the meeting.⁹⁷ Several publications resulted from the August 1960 workshop, including a mimeographed songbook. It included southern traditional tunes, and tunes written by Northerners:

TRADITIONAL

We Shall Overcome

Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning

Sowin' on the Mountain

I'm Comin' Home on the Mournin' Train

We Are Soldiers

Moving on to Victory

Oh Freedom

John Brown's Body

Plenty Good Room

NORTHERN-WRITTEN

The Beatitudes

The Burning Cross

Picket, Picket

Jim Crow Has Got to Go

Integrate the Schools

For Just a Little Drink

We Have Gathered

The Ink is Black

I'm Gonna Walk and Talk for My Freedom

The Whole Wide World Around

Man of the Whole Wide World

⁹⁷ Duncan 40.

Little published documentation exists for these three seminal 1960 workshops/conferences, so important for the explosion of freedom songs in the movement. Primary sources survive in the archives of Highlander Folk School, SCLC, SNCC, and southern university libraries, and some participants from the three workshops held in 1960 are available for interviews.

National media broadcast “We Shall Overcome” in 1960, when groups of student protesters sang freedom songs during subsequent sit-ins and protest marches. People of every ethnicity and economic class throughout the South heard for the first time “We Shall Overcome” transformed from church spiritual to freedom song. The three workshops from April to August 1960, facilitated by Highlander Folk School and Myles Horton, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Ella Baker, led by Guy Carawan, and attended by hundreds of future leaders and songleaders in the student movement, marked a turning point in the development of freedom songs in the civil rights movement.

Adoption of freedom songs in the civil rights movement

African American students (and white students) did not at first gravitate towards singing “re-written Negro spirituals.” Generational barriers, self-consciousness about the “old church music,” and a waning understanding of the meaning and importance of traditional African American spirituals interfered. Movement leader Rev. C. T. Vivian described his initial introduction to Guy Carawan’s repertoire from Highlander Folk School:

At the beginning of the movement, we really didn’t have any music that we could call “movement music.” We had church music, but remember that it was largely a young movement; it was a movement of change. It needed something to fit. We also didn’t realize how important a dynamic music would be to a movement. That was the beginning of a

movement and we didn't know what was necessary and what wasn't. We weren't thinking about it in terms of "what is going to inspire us?"

When we did start seeking songs to use at mass meetings, the only thing we had among us that had any sense of life to it was church music. And some of the church music didn't fit at all. For instance, I was giving a movement speech once, and the choir followed with "I'll Fly Away." Now that didn't fit at all. In fact it was a direct contradiction to what I was saying. How much different it could have been if they had followed with a movement song that was also religious.

I don't think we had ever thought of spirituals as movement material. When the movement came up, we couldn't apply them. The concept has to be there. It wasn't just to have the music but to take the music out of our past and apply it to the new situation, to change it so it really fit ...

The first time I remember any change in our songs was when Guy came down from Highlander. Here he was with this guitar and tall thin frame, leaning forward and patting that foot. I remember James Bevel and I looked across at each other and smiled. Guy had taken this song, "Follow the Drinking Gourd"—I didn't know the song, but he gave some background on it and boom—that began to make sense. And, little by little, spiritual after spiritual began to appear with new words and changes: "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize, Hold On," or "I'm Going to Sit at the Welcome Table." Once we had seen it done, we could begin to do it.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Guy and Candie Carawan, *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs* 3-4.

A participant at the 1960 Raleigh conference remarked:

“We Shall Overcome” was sung—and led—by Guy Carawan. The “leading” here was more important than his singing; while some few amongst the students ... had no doubt heard an earlier incarnation of the song—I’ll Overcome Someday”—most had never heard the version that is now sung around the world in an incredible variety of protests ...

When I saw Guy take the stage at the Raleigh conference, my first thought was “surfer!” With longish blond hair and a fringed jacket, he looked like someone off a California beach. But he and his singing were as far removed from the Beach Boys as he could be—when he sang, you could tell he lived the songs, he felt the songs, in a way the “June” and “Moon” platitudes of sixties’ popular music artists never could.⁹⁹

Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, assistant to Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and author of historical and cultural studies of African American music, said

⁹⁹ The Beach Boys’ breakout first hit was a blues tune, modified only slightly from its origin in the Chicago blues scene.



Fig. 7. Guy Carawan, left, singing with SNCC activists Bernard Lafayette, center, and James Bevel in 1960. Photo by Candie Carawan. Knoxville News Sentinel, Knoxville, Tennessee, <<http://knoxnews.com>>.

of Guy Carawan's work, "It is an oddity that the introduction of the Negro spiritual (with new freedom lyrics) into the movement as a means of clear group expression of common goals and unified efforts was through a young white folksinger, Guy Carawan."¹⁰⁰ Although many activists did immediately embrace traditional church songs, and had living experience singing these songs in church and in earlier protest actions, others associated the songs with slavery, and argued the songs should be left behind as remnants of a demeaning time. Carawan and others argued that appropriating the songs for struggle represented a vital connection with a past steeped in resistance—not a past that did not include resistance—and a recognition of African American heritage, culture, and music of which protesters should be proud. Some SNCC activists understood the old songs strengthened a sense of identity, and did not diminish African American

¹⁰⁰ Guy and Candie Carawan, *We Shall Overcome* 42.

identity under siege in Jim Crow in the South and throughout the country. Carawan described others' resistance:

For some Negro college students, as well as for some adults, this revival of spiritual singing has meant a turning back to a part of their cultural heritage—an embracing of something which for years they have scorned or rejected.¹⁰¹

Carawan understood that African Americans were taught inferiority in school, and could not avoid absorbing the psychological cruelty of Jim Crow. He wrote that young people had been “brainwashed by the public school system to accept the myth of their own inferiority,” but later recalled that for the students, realizing what the old songs meant came as an “exhilarating revelation.”

To the extent that African American university students knew the spirituals, most knew only the concertized versions dating from the period shortly after the Civil War. Guy Carawan described students' singing prior to the 1960 Nashville sit-ins as “stilted and formal and showing a basic lack of pride in their own music.”¹⁰² He added, “I found the singing that went on in the civil rights movement gatherings [in 1959] stiff and formal. It seemed most of the leaders running the meetings were those educated type of Negroes who have gotten rid of all traces of folk speech, humor and old Baptist style in their behavior and are afraid to sing a spiritual or gospel song that might cause a foot to tap, hands to clap or bodies to sway. Instead it would be an attempt to sing the octave range in the best bel canto style.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Guy and Candie Carawan, *We Shall Overcome* 8.

¹⁰² Guy and Candie Carawan, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* 71.

¹⁰³ Dunson 39.

Len Chandler, an activist in the student movement, became a songleader as well as composer of new songs. He continues today to travel across the United States to sing freedom songs for new audiences. But at first, he was one with doubts:

I went through this scene, man. I was ashamed of my Grandmother's music. I went to school to get the degree, in Akron, and things were all put up in a nice little box, a package of the Western World's music. But there was nothing in that box about my music. Why even the spirituals were fitted out for a white audience, made to sound nice and polite ...

It wasn't until this white professor [Carawan] took me to his house to listen to some tapes that I started to know what my music is about. It took a white man to teach me—about my own music! Why this music ... is great.¹⁰⁴

Bernice Johnson Reagon, activist, songleader and one of four voices in the original Freedom Singers a cappella group formed in Atlanta in 1961, has since the 1960s sustained the tradition of African American music, in her varied roles as scholar and historian, musician and performer, curator and researcher at the Smithsonian Institution, and (self-described) Elder. A recipient of the MacArthur Genius Award in 1989, she continues to travel the country singing old and new freedom songs, expanding the repertoire to include recently articulated struggles. Reagon's influence reached far beyond politics and performance. Her presence electrifies a room, and like Zilphia Horton before her, she encourages everybody to sing, and she succeeds. She understood the brainwashing Carawan referred to:

¹⁰⁴ Dunson 1-2.

As a general rule, [southern black colleges] attempted to free students from cultural traditions and ties that were distinctly rural. Black and old-fashioned.¹⁰⁵

Reagon grew up in a deeply religious household, her father a minister; she has said she was not aware of any distinction between (church) music and daily life.

I felt like that there was no air I breathed that these songs didn't exist in.

... I didn't even think of them as songs, I didn't think of them as things I needed to learn. They just came with the territory.¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, the explosion of freedom songs explicitly tied with nonviolent protest sparked a transformation for her. As a young woman in her early twenties, she transferred her powerful singing from the church to the civil rights struggle. She stated, "Somehow this music ... released a kind of power and required a level of concentrated energy I did not know I had. I liked the feeling."¹⁰⁷

The early songleaders understood the power of music to change and empower the grassroots movement, help people persevere and unite, and have faith in eventual success. SNCC activist Cordell Reagon explained:

The music doesn't change governments. Some bureaucrat or some politician isn't going to be changed by some music he hears. But we can

¹⁰⁵ Reagon, *Songs of the Civil Rights Movement* 110-112

¹⁰⁶ Bernice Reagon with Bill Moyers, Performance and Interview, *The Songs Are Free*. PBS Broadcast, 1980.

¹⁰⁷ Bernice Reagon, "Black Music In Our Hands," Caroline Shrodes, Harry Finestone, Michael Shugrue, Marc Di Paolo and Christian J. Matuschek, ed., *The Conscious Reader* (White Plains, New York: Pearson/Longman, 2003) 1-2.

change people—individual people. The people can change governments.¹⁰⁸

Music also emboldened protesters facing brutal beatings and jail. Georgia activist Vernon Jordan said “The people were cold with fear until music did what prayers and speeches could not do in breaking the ice.”¹⁰⁹ Black and white Freedom Riders arrested for traveling together on buses in the deep South, and imprisoned in a notorious Mississippi prison, sang continuously, months on end, learning songs from each other.

Activists in the latter part of the sixties, frustrated by partial successes and the continuing economic deprivation of African Americans despite the passage of the civil rights bills of 1964 and 1965, misunderstood the purpose of adopting traditional African American spirituals. Early workers in the civil rights movement articulated ideas later called Black Consciousness and Black Power, but phrased them in terms of traditional culture. Bernice Reagon expressed how the movement relied on African American culture with “this voice just resonating about our specialness in the universe”:

Bernice Reagon: You might not have money, you might not have blah-blah-blah, but you got this culture that empowers you as a unit in the universe, and places you, and makes you know you are a child of the universe.

Bill Moyer: Even though you’re not free.

Bernice Reagon: When the culture is this strong and has this consistency where black people can grow up in these places, with this voice just resonating about our specialness in the universe ... and I

¹⁰⁸ Seeger and Reiser *Everybody Says Freedom* 85.

¹⁰⁹ Lynskey 44.

always say you're in trouble if you get too far away from that core that grounds you.

Since the earliest days of Highlander Folk School workshops (and African American struggles during slavery and Reconstruction), activists focused on helping people discover and take pride in their identity and cultural heritage. Not only African American communities, but poor rural white communities in Tennessee in the 1930s learned at Highlander Folk School to appreciate and value their indigenous music and culture. They created strategies for improving their condition by consciously modeling existing cultural norms for living and working together. From that, they organized specific actions. Spirituals and their descendants, the freedom songs, strengthened identities and achieved the goal of raising consciousness and pride. SNCC and the other civil rights groups worked to build protesters' confidence, and believe in their ability to create the change they sought. Merely embracing spirituals in protest expressed black consciousness and pride. The Black Power movement discovered the same ongoing need for African American communities to identify with their own cultures. Their ideology phrased this as raising consciousness of African and African American culture, teaching African Americans to take pride in their heritage, and to rely on themselves—not outsiders—to effect change. Following turmoil in the civil rights movement, Black Power groups rejected music that grew out of the trials of slavery, and held that the time for the old songs had passed. Malcolm X did not mince words, and advocated physical response (although the question of how deeply he embraced violence as the solution is a question beyond the scope of this thesis). In his speech "The Ballot or the Bullet," delivered in 1964 when African American votes were critical to the outcome of the presidential election, Malcolm X said:

The government has failed us; you can't deny that. Anytime you live in the twentieth century, 1964, and you walkin' around here singing "We Shall Overcome," the government has failed us. This is

part of what's wrong with you—you do too much singing. Today it's time to stop singing and start swinging. You can't sing up on freedom, but you can swing up on some freedom. Cassius Clay can sing, but singing didn't help him to become the heavy-weight champion of the world—swinging helped him become the heavy-weight champion.¹¹⁰

Use of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement Before SNCC

The three student organizing conferences held in 1960 chronicle how Carawan organized deliberately with the help of rewritten spirituals. But integration of church music with the movement did not start with SNCC or its songleaders. Prior to the spring of 1960, when Carawan's role as songleader in the civil rights movement began, grassroots participants sang protest music during two seminal actions: the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and the 1960 lunch counter sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina.¹¹²

Over the span of the year-long Montgomery boycott, thousands of African Americans walked and walked, sometimes ten or twelve miles to reach destinations. Walking and marching predominate in protest music of this period. Walking protesters sang the 1864 spiritual “Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching as to War,” and this song opened organizing meetings (although it appeared more often in white churches than in African American hymnals). This hymn led the first mass meeting of the Montgomery Bus Boycott at the Holt Street Baptist Church. Martin

¹¹⁰ Catherine Ellis, Stephen Drury Smith, *Say It Loud: Great Speeches on Civil Rights and African American Identity* (New York: New Press, 2010) 8.

¹¹² Although recognized as the “first sit-ins,” the Greensboro sit-ins in February, 1960, succeeded those in 1939 at an Alexandria, Virginia library; Chicago in 1942, sponsored by the Committee on Racial Equality (later the Congress of Racial Equality, or CORE, a significant civil rights movement organization); in the neighborhood of Howard University in 1943 (motivated by CORE's actions); St. Louis in 1949; Baltimore in 1952; and others. Chronicles of the civil rights movement do not document the extent of music as protest in these earlier sit-ins.

Luther King, Jr. wrote, “When that massive audience stood to sing, the voice outside swelling the chorus in the church, there was a mighty ring like the glad echo of Heaven itself.”¹¹³ Bernice Reagon stated that before “We Shall Overcome” became the movement’s anthem, “Onward Christian Soldiers” was the movement’s marching song, with lyrics that expressed the will to fight, and with music whose martial cadence helped forge a collective sense of unity.¹¹⁴

People walking in the Montgomery Bus Boycott sang a nineteenth century camp meeting spiritual, “Walk Together, Children” (“Great Camp Meeting in the Promised Land”). It drew upon the familiar theme of exodus, and like “We Shall Overcome,” emphasized the need for perseverance and community:

Walk together, children, don’t you get weary

Walk together, don’t get weary

There’s a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.¹¹⁵

The Montgomery Gospel Trio, an early freedom song choir, led the Montgomery boycotters in group song. One of its members, Mary Ethel Dozier, remembered “This Little Light of Mine” and “We Are Soldiers in the Army” as spirituals sung during the boycott. Although Guy Carawan played a significant role in re-introducing spirituals to the struggle, especially to university student protesters who identified less and less with the music of the church, music bathed the movement anywhere that protest manifested.

Montgomery resident Hannah Johnston told Pete Seeger of many other spirituals involved with the Montgomery Bus Boycott: “Steal Away,” “Old Time Religion,” “Shine on Me,” “Swing Low,” “I Got Home in that Rock,” “Poor Man Dives,” “Leaning on the Everlasting

¹¹³ William Roy, *Red, Whites and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music and Race in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) 184.

¹¹⁴ Roy, *Red, Whites and Blues* 184.

¹¹⁵ Reed 18.

Arms,” “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” “Pass Me Not,” and “O Gentle Savior.” The Montgomery Gospel Trio later carried their music—and lyrical improvisations that matched the protests—to voter registration drives in Alabama.¹¹⁶

Grassroots training that included protest music influenced the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott. Rosa Parks and other participants in the boycott attended Highlander Folk School workshops between 1953 and 1955 that concentrated on strategies for reacting to the upcoming Supreme Court decision on *Brown vs. Board of Education*. These Highlander workshops opened and closed with music, and taught the use of music in protest. Participants discussed possible outcomes for either eventuality of the Supreme Court Decision—segregation upheld or dismantled—and strategies for follow-on actions. Several months before she refused to give up her seat on the bus, Rosa Parks attended a 1955 Highlander seminar specifically focused on how to achieve desegregation in the wake of the 1954 *Brown* decision. The Highlander workshop no more caused Rosa Parks’ action than any other social justice actions carried out by people associated with Highlander, but Rosa Parks’ resolve and understanding of the upcoming struggle deepened at the Highlander workshop.

Regional protests had their own particular theme song. In the 1960s Nashville sit-ins, that song was “Amen.” The single word “freedom” replaced “amen.” Repeated five times, accompanied with clapping, the word “freedom” drastically changed the meaning of the chant; amen means “so be it.” John Lewis described it: “This song represented a kind of coming together, you really felt it—it was like you were part of a crusade, a holy crusade. You felt uplifted and involved in a great battle and a great struggle. We had hundreds and thousands of students from colleges and universities around Nashville gathering downtown in a Black Baptist

¹¹⁶ James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism* (London: Routledge, 1997) 76.

Church.”¹¹⁷ The power of the “Amen” song did not come from the lyrics, which only repeated one word five times—“freedom.” The song’s power derived from a harmonic richness that lent itself to congregational-style participation, and a straightforward yet powerful rhythm that invited group clapping and movement.¹¹⁸

In Raleigh in 1963, students sang their theme song “We Are Soldiers” during marches, rallies, picketing, sit-ins, and jail-ins. Their protest focused on a single demand: that every person be granted access to all places of public accommodation in that city. The Raleigh movement was primarily a marching movement, hence the popularity and applicability of a song like “We Are Soldiers.”¹¹⁹ These regional theme songs strengthened local communities’ identities and brought people together in grassroots movements.

Other groups of freedom song singers such as the Selma Freedom Choir and Carlton Reese’s Gospel Freedom Choir of the Alabama Christian Movement for Civil Rights (known as the “Birmingham Choir”) performed mainly on African American college campuses, and participated directly and indirectly in the greater freedom song movement catching fire throughout the south. Each group had its own repertoire and style; for example, the Birmingham Choir and Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth “harnessed a radical interpretation of Christianity to power the movement’s militancy.”¹²⁰ Indeed, myriad singing groups, informal and formal, gathered together, sang and led songs and improvised songs. Singing protest music, much of it grounded in traditional spirituals, had become such an integral part of protest that most particulars were not documented for posterity, although anecdotes of a specific spiritual representing a turning point a

¹¹⁷ Bernice Reagon, *Songs of the Civil Rights Movement* 102.

¹¹⁸ Roy, *Red, Whites and Blues* 185.

¹¹⁹ Clyde R. Appleton, “Singing in the Streets of Raleigh, 1963: Some Recollections,” *The Black Perspective in Music* Autumn, 1975: 243-252.

¹²⁰ Phil Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus: The Civil Rights Revolution in a Southern Town* (Montgomery, Alabama: NewSouth Books, 2003) 28.

specific action abound in histories of the sixties. The singers and protesters pointed out that documenting the songleaders and events was not important. The groundswell of community participation in the struggle strengthened and intensified with the music. Music created grassroots action accompanied with grassroots communal expression of perseverance and belief in future victory.

Deliberate Use of Freedom Songs to Organize

Guy Carawan realized three months after joining Highlander Folk School in 1959 that “there was something special that I could offer ... I had seen from my couple of years in New York, watching Pete Seeger use singing to express the feelings of people for a cause, being in the Jewish Young Folksingers with Bob DeCormier, and seeing great numbers of people singing to express their feelings together and create a sense of cohesion, that singing could be a powerful force. After being in the South for this short time, it was apparent to me that there was the potential for a great singing movement in the Negro struggle”¹²¹

In 1963, Charles Sherrod, SNCC Field Secretary and veteran activist, wrote “teaching freedom songs” as the first item on the list of activities needed for effective community organizing techniques. SNCC leaders emphasized teaching and leading songs since they recognized music erased differences between black and white participants, between desperately poor and middle class, between Southerners and Northerners, and even between the leadership of organizations like SCLC and NAACP and grassroots organizations like SNCC. Bernice Reagon remarked “After the song, the differences among us would not be so great. Somehow, making a song required an expression of that which was common to us all.”¹²² Julius Lester, another songleader, SNCC leader and veteran activist, amplified this when he said:

¹²¹ Dunson 39.

¹²² Bernice Reagon, “In Our Hands” 1-2.

[The freedom songs] crumble the class barriers within the Negro community. ... The professor and the plumber, the society matron and the cleaning woman, the young college student and the unlettered old man stand beside each other, united by a song and a dream. They marched together and are jailed together.¹²³

By the summer of 1960, Guy Carawan believed that the young African American singers sang, and led, better than he, and that his instruments got in the way of their energized a cappella style. He stepped back from the role of songleader; he collected, recorded, published, publicized and taught songs, but no longer led groups in singing. He did not join any of the formal musical groups formed after 1960, such as the Freedom Singers, formed in 1961 in Atlanta.

When Guy Carawan first came to Highlander in 1959, new in his role as music director, Myles Horton sent a letter to many communities where Highlander had established Citizenship Schools, announcing that Carawan's folk singing skills were available. Carawan wrote the body of the letter and outlined his personal history, as well as his plans for a musical program. The items he listed all came to fruition in the following years:

- That Highlander put out a book of songs for integration
- That Highlander hold some workshops to train song leaders who would go back and function in their own communities and organizations
- That Highlander put out some records of songs for integration to go with the book and to help new song leaders (and the public in general) to learn these songs

¹²³ Julius Lester, "Freedom Songs in the South," *Broadside*: February 7, 1964.

- A festival, bringing together different kinds of Negro and white music, song and dance, both old and new, that could and would be well attended and well integrated
- Workshops for music educators and workers in schools and churches
- Workshops for folklorists.¹²⁴

In retrospect, this describes well the sequence of events from 1959-1960 and thereafter.

The parallels between Zilphia Horton and Guy Carawan—two (white) people who created a direct link between protest songs of the labor and civil rights movement despite the fact they never met—are uncanny. Both played a significant role in bringing African American spirituals into the protest song repertoire of their day. Each was a musician and folklorist, university-educated (music in Horton's case, sociology in Carawan's case), and already interested and experienced in the practical art of using music in protest before coming to Highlander Folk School. Horton studied at a radical New York theater, and learned techniques of incorporating music and drama into adult education, organizing and protests. Carawan traveled with folk singers involved in social movements, including Pete Seeger, and sang in this capacity in California, New York, London, Moscow, and across the U.S. Both were personally committed to the struggle for justice, and gravitated towards working with the same institution, Highlander Folk School. In their roles as successive music directors at Highlander, each actively promoted using folk songs in protest. Both Horton and Carawan traveled and learned new songs, and incorporated them into existing repertoires. Horton expanded a repertoire born from folk songs, and songs from the labor movement. Carawan expanded the Highlander repertoire built by Zilphia Horton, with northern folk songs, popular secular songs, and newly composed songs, but especially additional traditional African American spirituals. Horton and Carawan collected songs

¹²⁴ Dunson 38.

and worked as songleaders for small groups of people in the movement, and performed in grassroots settings and concert settings. Critically, they learned, taught, popularized, transcribed, recorded, and published the music.

Their roles as musicians dovetailed with their leadership roles in grassroots movements. Zilphia Horton and Guy Carawan assumed the role of songleaders and educator-participants, rather than overt organizers who planned specific actions. Both worked with grassroots organizations, primarily as members of those organizations, and in some settings, as consensus-based leaders. Horton worked with Highlander Folk School, with the explicit goal to nurture grassroots communal action. As Highlander educational principles advocated, indigenous leaders emerged from local community organizers and workshop participants. Guy Carawan worked first with Highlander Folk School, and later with SNCC, the student-created grassroots engine of the civil rights movement. Zilphia Horton and Guy Carawan, Highlander and SNCC, worked with formal, leader-centric organizations such as the CIO in the labor movement, and the NAACP and the SCLC in the civil rights movement. Initially cautious to embrace the students' more aggressive actions, such as the Freedom Rides of 1961, leaders in the civil rights movement aligned themselves with the grassroots, embraced and endorsed their actions, and joined in song.

Zilphia Horton and Guy Carawan drew deeply from African American spirituals at critical moments in American history, acting as musical bridges among social protest movements. Carawan learned from, and carried on, Horton's work. However, acting as catalysts and sparks, they facilitated rather than caused protest actions. Catalysts take on meaning when a pre-existing organic substrate undergoes a transformation. The substrate was the music of the people; Zilphia Horton and Guy Carawan recognized the power and possibility of the music, and worked with all their capacities to advance its effectiveness in the movement. Interviewed in his eighties, Guy

Carawan said, “ ‘We Shall Overcome’ is definitely not my song—it is a movement song. My main role is being in the right place at the right time.”¹²⁵

“We Shall Overcome,” the canonical link between Zilphia Horton and Guy Carawan, Highlander Folk School and SNCC, the labor movement and the civil rights movement, transcended the singing movement as no other. The phrase “We shall overcome” became a slogan in speeches of leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1965, in a speech introducing the Voting Rights Act, President Johnson’s unexpected declaration, “We shall overcome,” was met with stunned silence, followed by thunderous applause and tears. Johnson affirmed “We *shall* overcome” in a somber voice, delivering each word distinctly and slowly, emphasizing *shall*, and looking directly into the camera. Johnson used the phrase “We shall overcome” not as a rhetorical flourish, but in the tradition of spirituals, as a coded message that he gave the civil rights movement his full support. (Today, this speech is popularly known as Johnson’s “We Shall Overcome” speech.) Johnson affirmed solidarity with the struggle in the most public way possible. This speech and affirmation enraged opponents of the civil rights bills. At the same time, his embrace of the slogan “We shall overcome” encouraged those in the civil rights movement.

The spiritual “We Shall Overcome” wove together three themes—perseverance, community and freedom. The explosion of freedom songs throughout all parts of the movement shows the importance of grassroots identity and community building for the movement’s eventual successes. Persevering as a community, and holding on to the faith that change will come, dismantled Jim Crow. “We Shall Overcome” expressed that communally shared struggle in word and song. Songleaders figuratively linked arms across generations and movements in singing the message that led the exodus to freedom.

¹²⁵ Lynskey 43.

Conclusion

After 1965, the role of freedom songs changed and diverged. The Black Power movement explicitly rejected nonviolent resistance, and the music that was its soul and unifying principle. A great many popular songs of the sixties continued the tradition of freedom songs, and addressed Black Pride directly. James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," belonged to the new secular freedom songs, as did dozens of popular songs written and performed by African American artists in the mid to late sixties.

Bernice Johnson Reagon carried the flame to the women's movement, founding the musical group Harambees, and later, Sweet Honey in the Rock. As a scholar and historian, she has written histories and analyses of African American music and concomitant freedom struggle, and curated Smithsonian exhibits. She has continually composed and performed music since her time with the Freedom Singers in 1961-1962, and as a songleader through the sixties. As a contemporary songleader, she travels extensively, presenting music workshops and performances.

The spirit of freedom songs has not disappeared from African American music. In his 2010 book *Decoded*, the contemporary artist Jay Z describes hip hop and rap as the newspaper of the streets, much as freedom songs served as the newspaper of the movement. Links with the tradition are forming, as hip hop artists consciously align themselves with the music and spirit of freedom songs.

Every month, media reports the use of music in different protests around the world, invariably in the context of grassroots groups and street demonstrations—not political parties. In February 2012 in Senegal, protesters composed rap songs—an African American musical genre, albeit one with much in common with African musical traditions—that served as rallying cries, expressions of frustration and anger, and demands for change. Police detained the rap artists. The rappers and the other protesters said they will not be moved, and will not stop singing in protest

until they achieve their political goals. As in other nonviolent resistance movements, the Senegalese youth vow to remain peaceful in opposition. NPR reported on February 19, 2012:

Senegal's capital of Dakar remains jittery, with youth and police locked in running street battles. Riot police are firing tear gas on rock-throwing protesters who oppose President Abdoulaye Wade's bid for a third term in office.

Some of the protests have been led by rap artists. They have been mobilizing the youth and putting pressure on Senegal's leader to step down. They even have a name for their movement: Y'en a Marre. It means "We're Fed Up. Enough is Enough." "The Y'en a Marre thing, everybody was Y'en a Marre inside their chest," says Djily Baghdad, a rapper and founding member of the movement. "Everybody had that Y'en a Marre feeling. Everybody was fed up. So, as rap artists, we write songs to protest about how people are crying."

The rappers have composed what's become an opposition anthem, a song titled "Abdoulaye Faux! Pas Force," or "Abdoulaye, don't force it, give up!" It was written by Kilifeu and Simon, two rappers that were detained by police on Thursday.

You hear their song at Y'en a Marre's outdoor gatherings, which attract hundreds of Senegalese youth. [...] But Baghdad says rappers are just trying to wake people up and convince the Senegalese that only the people can bring change.

"We have this slogan called NTS: New Type of Senegalese," he says. "That's what Y'en a Marre is trying to build, but [to] do it in the most peaceful way."

The rappers, the opposition and other demonstrators vow they'll

continue to protest and make Senegal ungovernable unless Wade withdraws his candidacy ahead of the upcoming vote.¹²⁶

Closer to home, protesters in support of union organizing rights in Wisconsin in 2011 sang popular music in meetings, occupations of the state capitol building, and marches.¹²⁸ The rock bands “Rage Against the Machine” and “Street Dogs” joined a ragtag band of musicians who had come to sing labor songs for the tens of thousands of workers rallying in the frigid weather outside the capitol. Street Dog’s lead singer, Mike McColgan, is a Boston firefighter and proud member of International Association of Fire Fighters Local 718. He forged an aggressively pro-labor punk rock band that literally shouted, “Not Without a Purpose, Not Without a Fight!” For years, they integrated epic songs like “There Is Power in a Union” and new ones like “Unions and the Law” into concert repertoires. During street protests in Madison, “Wisconsinites, from toddlers to septuagenarians, jumped to the most rhythmic version anyone had ever heard of Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land”—or, perhaps, just jumped in hopes of staying warm.”¹²⁹

Inside the occupied capitol building, to the eventual consternation of people sleeping in the building as part of the occupation, Native American drummers, music students and many others in the center of the rotunda chanted and drummed continuously. (They eventually moved their drumming and chanting so others would not be disturbed.)

The Street Dogs issued an open invitation to a free concert in the city’s convention center. A few hours later, thousands of students and young workers overflowed the convention

¹²⁶ Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, “ ‘Enough Is Enough,’ Say Senegalese Rappers,” *NPR Radio Broadcast Transcript* February 19, 2012, <<http://www.npr.org/2012/02/19/147113419/enough-is-enough-say-sengalese-rappers>>.

¹²⁸ John Nichols, *Uprising: How Wisconsin Renewed the Politics of Protest, from Madison to Wall Street* (New York: Nation Books, 2012) 5-8.

¹²⁹ Nichols 9.

center, and the line of people stretched out the door into a cold snowy night, winds whipping off the city's lakes. During the concert, McColgan shouted "Madison, Wisconsin, let's get rowdy! I want to hear you! Sing it with me!" Lyrics in one of his songs condemn "dedication to corporate greed," assert "the pay up top is way too high, while those in the middle barely get by," and pledge to use the power of united labor. John Nichols, author of a recently published book about the Wisconsin protests, reports "[The lyric] 'Let's go and start it again'—did not sound idealistic, let alone unrealistic. It sounded right and good and necessary. And when the guitars and the drums went silent and McColgan shouted 'Do it!' the fists were still held high and teenagers and college students shouted back, 'Yes! Do it!' "

As the weeks-long protests that involved tens of thousands of people from the local communities—teachers, fire fighters, police, city and state workers, sympathetic farmers who relied on communal bargaining rights to sell their products, students and non-unionized workers—dragged on, planned activities educated the crowds, including labor films shown each night on the wall of the capitol. Nichols writes:

Civil rights leaders led the crowd of occupiers in chants of "We Shall Overcome," and nationally prominent singers appeared to give free concerts from balconies, where just a few days earlier, lobbyists had plied their dark arts. On the floor of the rotunda, Miles Kristan and dozens of other young people maintained an open microphone where workers, students, and musicians had their say through each day. There were surrounded by drum circles that maintained a steady rhythm through the day and into the evening, going silent only as this great mass of humanity settled in to sleep on marble floors, steps, and benches in a

scene that was at once peaceful and anarchical, serious and good

humored, unprecedented and yet strangely reminiscent of a past ...¹³⁰

If the “occupy” movements begun in 2011 evolve like the labor and civil rights movements, twenty-first-century leaders—possibly doubling as songleaders—will emerge from local, self-organized, grassroots, consensus-based groups—not from political parties. As in the civil rights movement, real community among disparate members of the protest must be forged before they achieve political victories as a group.

Spirituals—and other genres of music—as protest songs represented the journey (exodus) to freedom, articulating centuries-long nonviolent resistance. In the words of the old African American song from the eighteenth century,

O I’m gonna sing, gonna sing

Gonna sing all ‘long the way

O I’m gonna sing, gonna sing,

Gonna sing all ‘long the way.

The four spirituals analyzed in these pages stand individually as powerful songs, but took on greater influence as protest songs, and contributed to the slow progression of change. Songleaders led grassroots communities with songs; the communities gradually united to become formal and effective political organizations. Songleaders working as organizers, and the power of spirituals’ music, brought communities together to persevere, until they “reached the promised land,” and achieved victory and freedom.

¹³⁰ Nichols 128.

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