

Freedom Songs: Timeless Anthems for Equality and Change

Lauded as the “psychic threads that bound the Civil Rights movement into a tapestry of purpose, solidarity, hope, and courage” (Hartford 1), freedom songs served a number of seminal purposes. They offered psychological strength against persecution and brutality; catalyzed nonviolent protests; helped organize and mobilize mass demonstrations; created community and solidarity; and provided a cathartic means of communication that imparted power and ownership to those who refused to be silenced. They were so much more than just lyrics and music; they became the soul of one of the most widely recognized movement’s in American history. “In crafting responses through music, civil rights activists created a genre of songs for themselves...songs sung to enact Black freedom and work toward equal civil rights. Julius Lester explains the songs this way: freedom songs ‘should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. . .’” (Miller 53). While the melodies and lyrics may have evolved and been adapted to fit the differing struggles of differing eras, the conviction and message remains steadfast from one verse and chorus to the next. Whether they originated as negro spirituals, work songs, or hymnals, freedom songs continue to build upon a rich legacy not only by creating community, but also by memorializing the African American experience in new and relevant ways.

It is impossible to appreciate freedom songs’ history, complexities, purposes, messages, and sheer power if one doesn’t, first, have clear understanding of the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. Many dismiss the Movement simply as a push to abolish segregation and racial disenfranchisement in the South. While that was certainly one of the Movement’s primary objectives, “the uniqueness of the movement lay in its attempt to establish a new sense of

individual and collective self among southern black people through political mobilization and participation” (King 8). Consisting of social justice campaigns that took place primarily in the 1950s and 60s, the Civil Rights Movement was precipitated by a number of key historical developments, including, “the great migration of southern blacks to the North, the increasing prosperity enjoyed by the South after World War II, Jim Crow laws, and, most crucially, the [*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*] Supreme Court decision of 1954” (7) during which justices unanimously ruled that the racial segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. Their controversial decision helped undermine the Jim Crow laws of the Reconstruction Era, which had legalized segregation as part of the “separate but equal” doctrine.

While the *Brown v Board* ruling was met with defiance and, in some Southern states, an utter refusal to comply by desegregating schools, it ultimately catalyzed the country’s burgeoning Civil Right Movement. One year later, Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus, which, in turn, sparked the Montgomery bus boycott. What followed was nearly a decade of sit-ins, stand-ins, rallies, boycotts, and demonstrations—hard fought battles that eventually led to the abrogation of Jim Crow laws. That defining moment in history cleared the way for other landmark decisions, like the Civil Rights Act 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, all of which turned the tides for minorities in the United States.

At the heart of the Civil Rights Movement was a network of black churches, colleges, and pivotal, action-oriented organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In their own ways, they helped organize and mobilize freedom fighters to take part in different civil rights campaigns through a show of

nonviolent resistance. While demonstration leaders assembled protestors in various locations and numbers, they most commonly held mass meetings. These gatherings usually convened in churches and were typically led by ministers. “They were events and places where participants could express fear as well as resolution, anger as well as understanding, make plans and formulate strategies” (10). These gatherings gave participants an emotional outlet that enabled both expression and action. Freedom songs were the core of such expression. An amalgam of “traditional spirituals, church hymns, and secular music such as blues, rhythm and blues, and even calypso, freedom songs were a crucial semantic and syntactical element in the new language of public action” (11). Whereas much of the original music from which freedom songs evolved were decidedly religious, freedom songs themselves were explicitly political.

“Specifically, where the spirituals conveyed the slaves’ yearning for collective liberation and a sense of chosenness, the freedom songs added a more explicit message of collective resistance, of standing fast” (11). Hollis Watkins, who grew up on a small farm in rural Mississippi, became, at 19 years old, one of the SNCC’s first full-time workers. As a field secretary, he and other young activists like him organized sit-ins and voter registration rallies that on many occasions saw him arrested and jailed, where he was abused. Of freedom songs, he said:

You sing to throw off the weight, your burden. When you are weighed down and your spirit is low, your mental capacity is also low. But when you sing, and you let go of that weight, you rise up, you feel good about the decisions you’ve made or the ones you are about to make. You feel good about the jobs you are going to do, and you feel good to be part of the group that’s going to do them (Hsuing 23).

Willie Peacock, also a key figure in the SNCC, echoed Watkins’ sentiments about freedom songs’ ability to fortify, bolster, connect, and unify protestors whose nonviolent

resistance was met with unfettered hatred and violence. Peacock was raised on a Mississippi plantation to a sharecrop family, an experience that taught him what slavery looked and felt like. As a college student, he went door to door, from church to church, educating Blacks on the importance of voter registration. Like Watkins, Peacock faced an uphill battle fraught with resistance not only from the conservative Whites in his community, but also from Blacks who were fearful of upsetting the status quo and the consequences such defiance could bring. More than one attempt was made on Peacock's life, including a targeted attack by a local policeman that left 27 bullet holes in a car in which Peacock was riding with friends. A staple at many of the mass meetings, where demonstrations were organized and new recruits were educated on what to expect and how to comport themselves, Peacock was well versed in the importance of freedom songs in galvanizing those on the front lines as well as the importance that unity played in endowing protestors with the mettle and confidence required to face the probable threats of arrests, beatings, and even death. Of the psychological function of freedom songs and their ability to "channel fear and anger into effective collective action" (10), he said:

When you sing, you can reach deep into yourself and communicated some of what you've got to other people, and you get them to reach inside of themselves. You release your soul force, and they release theirs, until you can all feel like you are part of one great soul...When you have that kind of unity and that kind of communication, there is nothing the police can do to stop you" (23).

Freedom songs are not limited to the internal function of encouraging and unifying freedom fighters, they also proved quite instrumental as external negotiation tools that deescalated difficult and contentious encounters between freedom fighters and those resistant to change. One concrete example of freedom songs at play was Freedom Summer 1964, during

which the residents of Hattiesburg, Mississippi—one of the most conservative states in the South—found themselves embroiled in a dramatic voter registration drive. In Hattiesburg, “music became a critical ingredient” (Goertzen 60).

First and foremost, singing helped unite SNCC activists and local organizers. Many African American organizers hailed from the North. They had the dubious task of trying to convince local Black townspeople to try to register to vote. But in Hattiesburg, where white citizens outnumbered Black citizens, and most demonstrations were met with swift and decisive gunfire, local Blacks had much to lose. Organizers went door to door in hopes of recruiting registration aspirants. If they were successful, they, then, had to hold a meeting somewhere in town. More often than not, that location was a local church, which placed the pastor, his parishioners, and the physical building at great risk. Eventually, however, pastors in and around Hattiesburg began opening their churches to host mass meetings in support of the Voter Registration Movement as well as for Freedom Schools. According to activist Sam Block, “That is when it became clear that singing freedom songs could be an important tool in persuading black Mississippians to attend mass meetings. ... The day after our first gathering... as I walked the streets, I met a lot of people, and the thing that they remembered most about the meeting was the songs that we were singing. And they asked me when we were going to have another meeting and sing those songs” (68). Thus, freedom songs didn’t just help recruit supporters for the cause; it helped keep them united.

Second, singing played a role in deescalating contentious confrontations, sometimes even circumventing violence. It’s important to note that nonviolence was a key theme throughout the Civil Rights Movement. “The concept of nonviolent action encouraged movement participants to love those who oppressed them and discouraged hateful violence as a means of resistance”

(Blommestein 61). Though nonviolent action may seem like a simple form of protest or the path of least resistance, it was actually a calculated strategy, often preceded by tactical organizing and training due, in large part, to the fact that activists, no matter how peaceful and nonthreatening, were almost, without exception, met with unmitigated hatred and lethal aggression. Len Holt, a CORE field secretary recalled:

[In Birmingham] Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth would be lecturing everyone in the church, explaining all about nonresistance. “It’s to be a silent demonstration,” he would say. “No songs, no slogans, no replies to obscenities.” Everyone would nod. “However,” the reverend would add, “when you’re arrested, sing your hearts out.” So, all the young people would file out of church, solemn as deacons, quiet as mice. Then a cop would come along and shout, “You’re all under arrest!” That was the cue. Suddenly there were five hundred bodies moving at once, their voice shouting out:

Ain't a-scared of your jail 'cause I want my freedom,
 Want my freedom,
 Want my freedom,
 Ain't a-scared of your jail, 'cause I want my freedom,
 I want my freedom now! (8)

Segregationists, particularly in the South, responded to peaceful protestors with beatings, tear gas, fire hoses, attack dogs, bombings, lynchings, and outright murder. William Bell, a former mayor of Birmingham, Alabama recalls, “During that period of time you had people who were being murdered, homes being numbed, churches being bombed and there was a sense that evil would prevail” (Simkins 3). However, protestors continued to meet violence with nonviolence. They understood that responding with guerilla warfare would hinder the Movement

rather than help it. “The violence was being perpetrated by the oppressors, not the oppressed and that was an incredibly powerful message and an incredibly important tool during the movement” (7). Thus, Movement leaders continued to call “for calm against a backdrop of outrage” (6).

Singing proved instrumental in reaffirming participants’ belief in nonviolent action. Some freedom songs, such as the ever-popular “This Little Light of Mine,” encouraged activists to love not only one another, but those against whom they were resisting. Other freedom songs, such as “Ballad of the Student Sit-Ins,” expressly discouraged hateful violence as a means of resistance. Still, other freedom songs, though they did not overtly address violence, presented “images of walking or traveling, an act symbolic in that it signifies movement toward a goal or an end to oppression, but also symbolic for its nonviolent nature. Within [them], to travel is to strive for something without violence, even if met with violence” (61). SCLC member and Civil Rights veteran Bruce Hartford recalled:

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

were most intensely trying to break into our line of march. But they couldn't do it, we would hold them off, protect ourselves from their attacks, by the moral, psychological force of our singing. They couldn't break through our barrier of song. (12-13)

A third function of freedom songs was their ability to help individuals from diverse backgrounds, both racially and economically, find common ground. Often, Civil Rights campaigns called for Blacks and their White sympathizers to work together toward a common cause. However, working toward the same goal did not mean that their efforts were without strife. Freedom songs often “attenuated unsurprising but counterproductive friction between individuals of different races, different classes, and—through specific details of performance practice—different opinions about to best express black culture through music” (60). In the case of Freedom Summer, for example, Black Civil Rights leaders made the controversial decision to recruit seventy volunteers—mostly affluent White students from Yale and Stanford—to help advance their push to register Black voters in Mississippi. “...plans for involving high-profile northern students as an integral part of Freedom Summer” (75) was met with mixed emotion. Some Blacks believed that well-connected white volunteers would shine a light on “the illegal segregationist policies of the South” (75) and, in turn, attract the media and government attention needed to illicit change. Other Blacks, however, felt strongly that jeopardizing Whites by placing the “on the front lined was using racism to fight racism” (75). There was also a general concern that inviting Whites to join the campaign would open the door for them to usurp the operation while at the same time undermine local Blacks’ growth and morale. And, indeed, both positions proved correct. More than 800 liberal youths, many of them White, joined the 1964 Movement in Mississippi, which saw strides that would not have been possible but for the publicity that accompanied White children of privilege. Likewise, the White volunteers “had enormous hearts

but were apt to have egos and senses of entitlement nearly as large. Many were dangerously naïve, and some were outright patronizing, even if without knowing it” (75). Doug McAdam, a sociologist and Civil Rights veteran, summarized their collective character as such:

[The volunteers] were independent both by temperament and by virtue of their class advantages and relative freedom from adult responsibilities.... Academically, they numbered among “the best and the brightest” of their generation, both in the levels of education they had obtained and the prestige of the colleges and universities they were attending.... They shared a sense of efficacy about their own actions. The arrogance of youth and the privileges of class combined with the mood of the era to give the volunteers an inflated sense of their own specialness and generational potency. (75-76)

Freedom songs helped bridge the gap between local Blacks and young White liberals.

Not only was singing an essential part of the training process, it offered focus, comfort, and unity during especially difficult times. For instance, during the Mississippi Summer Project, three workers—two White volunteers from New York and a local Black activist—were reported missing. “It would be some time before the bodies were found, but the worst was feared immediately, and first reactions included singing” (77). Black and White activists alike gathered, and the first song they sang was “Kumbaya.” Participants clearly recall song leaders improvising one verse after another. “‘People are missing, Lord, Kumbaya.’ ‘We all need you, Lord, Kumbaya.’” (78).

Singing freedom songs also “sidetracked or minimized friction [between activists and volunteers] by hammering home the essential message of the movement” (75). Though the White volunteers’ Black counterparts were, in fact, their hosts and bosses, the former tended to exhibit a rampant sense of superiority. Freedom songs helped abate that pervasive mindset and attitude

by underscoring their musical and oratory skills. For instance, volunteers who taught at the Freedom Schools in Hattiesburg and throughout Mississippi were surprised by their pupils' singing and speaking capabilities. The White volunteer teachers' lectures "were peppered with 'uh' and 'er,' which were not nearly as common in the school students' speech" (78). Likewise, their singing, perhaps as a result of many years performing regularly in church, exceeded not only their White counterparts' expectations, but also their talents. Thus, the relationship between Whites and Blacks proved mutually beneficial, even if unexpectedly so. White teachers offered factual knowledge, while Blacks students provided insights on performance practice and elocution. In the end, singing proved a humbling experience for Whites. "That was a very good thing for intra-movement diplomacy, given the tendency of some of the volunteers to patronize their hosts. Thus, not very paradoxically, a culturally based disparity in relevant musical skills, helped the singing of freedom songs function as a unifying element within the Movement" (80).

While the act of singing played an integral role in the Civil Rights Movement, it was the actual freedom songs activists sang—their lyrics and the history and emotion behind them—that gave their meetings, trainings, and campaigns real teeth. The tradition of singing in African American culture "began with the arrival of the first Africans brought to this country as slaves" (Sanger 183). Songs were central in "the work the slaves did, in their limited leisure time, and in their planning for a better life after slavery, whether that life was a spiritual afterlife or a temporal life after escape from slavery" (183). This rhetorical tradition, established by slaves, continued into and through Blacks' emancipation. The songs they sang not only offered insight into their everyday lives, they also helped Blacks define themselves "as people capable of overcoming the limitations placed on them by White people" (183). Eventually, song evolved to into a medium that enabled Blacks to address each other,

regardless of their varied backgrounds, ultimately making freedom songs “central to the rhetoric that fueled the Movement” (183). In fact, many activists have gone so far as to assert that Movement protests would not have been possible without singing and freedom songs.

Bernice Johnson Reagan for example, an active song leader and original member of the Freedom Singers group said, “By the end of the freedom Rides, the songs...were considered essential for organizing. No mass meeting could be successfully carried off without songs” (184). Singing accomplished what speech alone could not, in part because it provided activists with an outlet through which to express their emotions and in part because the song lyrics themselves were so far reaching.

“We Shall Overcome” is perhaps the most recognized freedom song in the African American struggle for equality. However, like many of the tunes appropriated and adapted for the Civil Rights Movement, the song’s roots date back to the antebellum period. A negro spiritual, originally titled “No More Auction Block for Me,” the song was sung by slaves. In part, the lyrics read: “No more driver’s lash for me. No more, no more. No more driver’s lash for me. Many thousands gone” (Place 1). Simple and direct, the lyrics outlined the everyday injustices experienced by slaves, such as auctionings, lashings, and whippings. The verses not only acknowledge the thousands of Blacks who suffered and died as a direct result of such brutality, but also vow to no longer idly sit by and quietly accept the same treatment or fate.

By the late nineteenth century, Black churchgoers had modified “No More Auction Block for Me” into “I’ll Be Alright,” a song with “an almost identical rhythm and melody” (Kytte and Roberts 1) as “We Shall Overcome.” Then, in 1900, Charles Albert Tindley, a Methodist minister “published a hymn titled ‘I’ll Overcome Some Day,’ which included the line, ‘If in my heart, I do not yield, I’ll overcome some day’” (3). On its road to becoming the

anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, the song was also used among coal mine and tobacco labor activists fighting for better working conditions and higher pay. It helped boost morale and “along the way, strikers crafted new verses—‘we will win our rights,’ ‘We will win this fight,’ ‘we will overcome’—that gave the song even greater collective and political meaning” (4). Eventually, Guy Carawan, a White folklore singer, introduced “We Shall Overcome” to members of SNCC, where it was widely disseminated and often sung as part of different Civil Rights protests and demonstrations, like sit-ins, freedom rides, and marches. Overtime, “We Shall Overcome” became something of an unofficial anthem for the Movement. Of the song’s enduring appropriateness and power, human rights activist Bernard LaFayette postures:

The song has different meanings at different times. Sometimes you’re singing about the problems all over the world—“We shall overcome”; sometimes you’re singing about problems in the local community—“We shall overcome.” But in the bus station it was a prayer—a song of hope that we would survive and that even if we in that group didn’t survive, then we as a people would overcome” (186).

Perhaps more so than any other freedom song, “We Shall Overcome” created a much-needed sense of community. Many freedom fighters, in retrospect, testified that the songs they sang were not for performance or entertainment purposes. The words of the songs coupled with the active participation of singing them, rather than the beauty of the songs themselves, are what gave them power and meaning. Aside from expressing the Movement’s goals, ideals, and fervor, freedom songs “suffused each singer with the summed power of the whole” (1). One freedom fighter explained: “Freedom songs were the vows we took to stand together for justice and freedom, they were the pledges we made, each one to the other, to stand side by side through all that we might have to endure. As the furnace-fire turns iron ore into steel,

singing out shared forged bonds of loyalty” (2). In essence, freedom songs like “We Shall Overcome” galvanized not only the African American community, but also its White sympathizers. In a fight where jailings, beatings, rapes, and murders precipitated by visceral and implacable hatred and oppression were met with nonviolent protest, freedom songs were their own brand of weapon. They unified and empowered those who wielded them and, in doing so, gained ground against those on their receiving end.

Jamila Jones, a woman who grew up in Alabama and sang professionally as a teenager with the Montgomery Gospel Trio and the Harambee Singers. In 1958, the school she attended, Highlander Folk School, was raided by the police. They shut off all the lights in the building. In the darkness, the students began to sing. “We sang, ‘We are not afraid’ to the song, ‘We Shall Overcome,’” Jones recalled. “And we got louder and louder with singing that verse, until one of the policeman came and he said to me, ‘If you have to sing,’ and he was actually shaking, ‘do you have to sing so loud?’ And I couldn’t believe it!” she said. “Here these people had all the guns, the billy clubs, the power, we thought. And he was asking me, with a shake, if I would not sing so loud. And it was that time that I really understood the power of our music” (Stewart 1).

Hymns, spirituals, and gospel songs were also mainstays within the Civil Rights Movement. “Many of the songs that expressed the aspirations of the struggle were rooted in ... songs of the church” (Woodward 7). In fact, mass meetings, which were often held in church buildings also resembled church services. In addition to songs, they featured prayer, Bible readings, and sermons. Take for example the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which is often cited as “the first of its great experiments in nonviolent resistance” (7). It lasted for 381 days and involved an array of different tactics, including marches, demonstrations, boycotts, and

sit-ins. The launch of the boycott at Holt Street Baptist Church was attended by nearly 15,000 participants, led by Martin Luther King, Jr., and employed a great deal of singing. In King's own words: "The opening hymn was the old familiar 'Onward Christian soldier,' and when that mammoth audience stood to sing, the voices outside swelling the chorus in the church, there was a mighty ring like the glad echo of heaven itself" (7). While some reporters thought the hymn contradicted King's message of peaceful resistance, "Onward Christian Soldier" became the Montgomery Bus Boycott's most used marching and fighting song. It, along with other traditional, Christian hymns, such as "Amazing Grace," "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," were "adapted to respond to the needs of the moment" (7), resulting more than one hundred freedom songs.

In addition to fostering community, courage, and perseverance, freedom songs also memorialized the Black American experience. In this sense, they are a form of oral history. Like singing, storytelling as a way of passing a legacy from one generation to the next dates back to the transatlantic slave trade. It was an especially critical tool for African American slaves as they were forbidden to learn how to read or write in a systematic push to keep them uneducated and illiterate. But music became a way both to teach and to remember.

"Birmingham Sunday," for instance, tells the story of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963 by The Ku Klux Klan. The song reads like a story and each verse eulogizes each of the four young girls killed in the attack: "And Addie Mae Collins, her number was one. At an old Baptist Church there was no need to run" (Carawan 111); "And Denise McNair brought the number to two. The falcon of death was a creature they knew" (111); "That Cynthia Wesley's dark number was three. Her prayers and her feelings would shame you and me" (111); Young Carole Robertson entered the door, and the number her killer had given

was four” (111). Each verse ends with the same refrain: “And the choirs kept singing for freedom” (111). The lyrics are a reminder of the pain, loss, and sacrifice that preceded progress as well as the dogged tenacity of those who refused to settle for anything less than absolute equality.

Similarly, “End the Slums” offers insight into the specifics of the African American struggle. In part, the lyrics of one stanza reads: “I really wanted a decent job, I really needed some scratch. I heard people talking about a dream, now, a dream that I couldn’t catch. I really wanted to be somebody and all I had was a match. Couldn’t get oil from Rockefeller’s wells. Couldn’t get diamonds from a mine. If I can’t enjoy the American dream, won’t be water but fire next time” (235). The song also touches on the black citizen’s desire for better education; the black man as a casualty of a judicial system designed to cripple him; and the black man’s shame, anger, and violence as a direct result of his hopeless situation in the ghetto. All are issues that remain alive and well within present-day Black communities. And all are byproducts of the systemic racism that necessitated and birthed the Civil Rights Movement in the first place.

Freedom songs were powerful conduits for positive change in America. In a time when people could not hear one another speak across existing racial divides, song became a universal language of peace, love, and tolerance. Both the act of communal act of singing and the lyrics sung helped people express their emotions, while affording them the strength and courage to face unfathomable hatred and brutality. From helping leaders organize and mobilize mass demonstrations to something Blacks and Whites united toward a common end to abating violence and subduing segregations bent on squashing campaigns and keeping Blacks and their supporters in their place, freedom songs led the charge for justice and

equality. When viewed as individual pieces of a larger puzzle, they also provide a revelatory timeline of the African American experience. Like the people who sang and continue to sing them, they have morphed throughout the centuries, adapting to fit the ever-evolving struggles of Blacks in America. If anything, their link to the past fortifies their message of strength, determination, and hope and serves as proof that together, we truly have, can, and shall continue to overcome.

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