

“People Get Ready”: Music and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s

by Brian Ward

Few sights or sounds conjure up the passion and purposefulness of the Southern Civil Rights Movement as powerfully as the freedom songs that provided a stirring musical accompaniment to the campaign for racial justice and equality in the region during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Whether sung at mass meetings, on marches and sit-ins, or en route to some of the Jim Crow South’s most forbidding jails, or whether performed on stage or record by one of the musical ensembles formed by civil rights activists, these songs conveyed the moral urgency of the freedom struggle, while expressing and helping to sustain the courage of the extraordinary ordinary people who were at the heart of it. This essay suggests just a few of the musical forms that might profitably be used by teachers and students to explore the history of the Southern Civil Rights Movement and the revolution in mass black consciousness upon which it was based (to hear some of these songs, visit our [online jukebox](#)).

Perhaps the most celebrated of all the freedom songs is “We Shall Overcome.” The complex process by which this song was adopted as a kind of unofficial anthem for the movement reveals much about the improvisational and hybrid nature not just of African American musical culture, but also of the movement itself. The movement was endlessly creative and adaptive. For all of its spiritual energy, moral and constitutional authority, and valiant attempts at coherent strategic planning, it was ultimately much less concerned with dogmatic notions of ideological or tactical correctness than with trying to get the job of destroying segregation and disenfranchisement done. Historically, black music displayed many of the same priorities. To be sure, African American music has always favored certain musical techniques and devices (a preference for syncopated and danceable rhythms, for example). Nevertheless, the most influential and popular black musicians have rarely been so preoccupied with dubious notions of musical authenticity or purity to overlook a good tune, an effective arrangement, or a telling lyric, no matter what their provenance. Much like the movement, black music was creative, adaptive, and eclectic: It pressed into service any number of techniques and devices that might help to generate a potent and moving piece of “black” music.

“We Shall Overcome” offers a good illustration of this kind of cultural hybridism. The story of the song appears to begin with a nineteenth-century hymn, “I’ll Overcome Someday.” In the interwar years, this hymn was recast as “We Shall Overcome” by Southern African American tobacco workers, who performed it for Zilphia Horton of the Highlander Folk School—an important biracial training ground for activists interested in labor organizing and progressive democratic reform in the South. Horton, in turn, introduced the song to white folk singer and political activist Pete Seeger, who added various lines (“black and white together”) to create the version that Highlander’s musical director, Guy Carawan, promoted as a universal call for social justice and human rights in the late 1950s.

Around this time, other individuals also put their stamp on the song. For example, when Tennessee state police tried to forcibly close down Highlander in the summer of 1959, black high school student Mary Ethel Dozier added the verse, “We are not afraid.” Her contribution was a classic example of how freedom songs were often created, or recreated, in the very teeth of the ongoing struggle.



Odetta performs at the Civil Rights March on Washington, DC, August 28, 1963 (National Archives and Records Administration)

Until this point, despite various palpable “black” influences on the song’s development, “We Shall Overcome” was generally performed in a manner close to the Southern white folk tradition, with remnants of hymnody. That all changed during the civil rights campaign in Albany, Georgia in 1961 and 1962. In Albany, young black activists, led by Bernice Johnson Reagon and associated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), took the basic structure of the song, syncopated the rhythms, and slowed the tempo down. This opened it up to spontaneous vocal punctuations from the singer-protestors, who gathered to sing it at mass meetings and at their demonstrations. In the process, Reagon and her colleagues redefined “We Shall Overcome” with call-and-response vocal patterns and improvisational possibilities derived from the black gospel-music tradition. It is this version of the song, endlessly refined to meet the demands of particular occasions in particular locales, that remains so evocative of the Civil Rights Movement’s early Southern efforts.

In terms of its stated goal of integrating public accommodations, the Albany campaign was something of a failure. Yet, in giving birth to the SNCC Freedom Singers, it could boast an important success. These singers, like their counterparts, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Freedom Singers, helped to spread the word of the movement far beyond the South through concert tours and recordings that included traditional black spirituals and folk songs as well as newly created freedom songs. We “called ourselves a singing newspaper,” Bernice Johnson Reagon recalled. SNCC’s communications director, Julian Bond, described the singers as the organization’s “public face.” In addition to raising useful cash for the perpetually impoverished SNCC, the Freedom Singers, according to Bond, reached out across racial and regional divides to show “an audience of our peers on white college campuses around the country who we are,” and therefore galvanize student support for the movement.

On stage and on record, Cordell Reagon—another of the original SNCC Freedom Singers—would often act as a narrator, explaining how particular songs were created in the midst of particular local struggles. And it is precisely because the freedom songs were frequently improvised to reflect very specific issues, personalities, and events, as well as to convey the broader spirit, motivations, and goals of the movement, that they offer such fascinating, frontline insights into the lived history of the freedom struggle. For example, an outstanding song leader like Betty Mae Fikes reworked existing freedom songs to capture local details of the struggle in Selma, Alabama. In her version of “This Little Light of Mine,” Fikes defiantly told archetypal racist Southern law officers Jim Clark and Al Lingo—the antiheroes of Bloody Sunday in March 1965, when nonviolent marchers were brutally beaten and teargassed by state troopers on Selma’s Edmund Pettus Bridge—that she and her colleagues intended to keep the light of freedom burning despite the brutality they faced in pursuit of voting rights. In her rendition of “If You Miss Me at the Back of the Bus,” Fikes inserted the name of her own Hudson High School into a list of segregated facilities in need of integration. This kind of customization gave a concrete local context to songs that were staples among activists, young and old, throughout the entire South.

While many classic freedom songs like “Keep Your Eyes on The Prize,” “Oh Freedom,” and “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around” were drenched in black sacred musical traditions, it is worth reiterating that

many songs, like “We Shall Overcome,” were forged in dialogue with, not in isolation from, white hymnal and folk-music influences. At a time when integration and biracial cooperation were touchstones for the movement, this musical miscegenation -- also apparent in early rock-and-roll music, which boasted black and white artists and black and white fans, and which drew on both black rhythm-and-blues and white country influences -- symbolically reproduced the best hopes of many activists. Moreover, as befitted songs created largely by young African Americans who spent much of what little leisure time they had listening and dancing to the latest jazz, R&B, and soul hits, many freedom songs bore the imprint of the most popular black commercial music of the day. “Get Your Rights, Jack,” for example, cheerfully ripped off Ray Charles’s “Hit the Road, Jack,” while “Sit-In Showdown: The A&P Song,” created by Spellman University student Brenda Gibson, recreated the sounds of Charles’s “What D’I Say?” to commemorate the sit-in protests against the A&P store in Atlanta. Thanks to Cordell Reagon, Little Willie John’s “You Better Leave My Kitten Alone” could be heard throughout the southern Civil Rights Movement as “You Better Leave My Desegregation Alone.”

The freedom songs sung by activists on the frontlines of the civil rights struggle rightly hold an iconic place in any musical history of the Southern movement. Nevertheless, the other forms of popular music with which the freedom songs often intersected—blues, gospel, folk, jazz, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and soul—also offer useful insights into the entwined histories of the freedom struggle, black racial consciousness, and race relations. Indeed, it is important to recognize that African Americans were not the only ones singing about the movement in the 1950s and early 1960s. Any comprehensive soundtrack to the era’s racial protests might also include songs by white folk artists like Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Janis Ian, and Phil Ochs, all of whom sang of the indignities of segregation and the shame of the racism that mocked America’s best democratic ideals, while saluting efforts to redress racial inequalities. Bob Dylan’s “Oxford Town,” for example, was a searing indictment of the state-sanctioned bigotry and indifference that produced the murderous rioting at the University of Mississippi when James Meredith desegregated the institution under armed guard in 1962. Folkies like Dylan produced earnest and often inspirational songs that helped to create a groundswell of public support for civil rights protests and reform, especially among young white college students.

Folk songs and freedom songs tended to be fairly open in their commitment to the Civil Rights Movement. In considering what music was most intimately connected to, or evocative of, the civil rights era, it is tempting to focus purely on the lyrics of particular songs. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the changing sounds of black music during this period embodied the revitalized sense of black pride and raised racial consciousness upon which any organized struggle for racial justice built. For example, the soul music pioneered by artists such as Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and the Impressions in the late 1950s, and refined by the stars of Motown in Detroit and Stax in Memphis, among many others, in the 1960s, fused rhythm and blues, pop, and in the case of Southern soul, country music with the protean gospel influences that marked the style—irrespective of its lyrical content—as unmistakably and proudly African American. Put another way, James Brown’s funky poly-rhythms and uninhibited vocals in apparently apolitical dance songs like “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” sang volumes about black pride, cultural creativity, and heritage long before he recorded the more lyrically explicit anthem “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” in 1968.

Similarly, jazz saxophonist John Coltrane’s instrumental “Alabama,” inspired by the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four black girls in Birmingham in September 1963, expressed a depth of grief and rage that no lyric could possibly intensify. The whole of the avant-garde or free jazz movement that claimed Coltrane, along with other prodigiously gifted musicians such as Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Ornette Coleman, and Pharoah Sanders, as major influences was predicated on a self-conscious rejection of Western—interpreted as white—notions of musical correctness. Many of these musicians hoped to escape what they saw as the tyranny of white cultural expectations and standards by substituting a black aesthetic, which would give precedence to a different, uniquely African American standard of musical excellence. As such, their musical experimentation represented a more radical expression of the kind of discontent with the racial status quo that inspired the civil rights struggle, coupled with a determination to secure respect for distinctively African American values that would become a hallmark of the Black Power era in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The accomplishments of these musicians help to illustrate the important point that

the political and social significance of all black music, be it jazz, soul, or the freedom songs, was often encoded in its rhythms, timbres, harmonies, and melodies.

Yet another way in which black music evoked civil rights themes was through lyrics that, in comparison to lyrics in freedom songs and to some folk music, were less explicit about the struggle itself. In fact, lyrics about the civil rights struggle were relatively rare in commercially successful rhythm-and-blues and soul music until the second half of the 1960s. Before that, there was a good deal of innuendo.

One example of this kind of veiled commentary was Chuck Berry's "The Promised Land." In this song, Berry offered a partial allegory of the 1961 freedom rides organized by CORE and continued by SNCC to protest the continued segregation of interstate transportation in the South. In "The Promised Land"—which is chock-full of souped-up, quasi-biblical imagery relating to the Exodus story, that most potent of all tales of escape to a better place—Berry's hero follows much the same route through the South as the freedom riders, though he sensibly bypasses Rock Hill in South Carolina, which is where the riders first encountered militant white resistance to their integrated bus journey. In one verse, Berry invokes the worst violence experienced by the actual freedom riders, which occurred in Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery, describing a journey that "had most trouble, / it turned into a struggle, / half-way across Alabam'."

While Berry chooses to nod in the direction of the movement through allegory and allusion, many of Curtis Mayfield's hit songs for his group, the Impressions, explicitly praise the black community's dogged determination to "Keep On Pushing" for their rights. In the exquisite soul-spiritual, "People Get Ready" (another of the many rhythm-and-blues and soul songs that celebrated the freedom to travel or chronicled escape from some kind of oppressive situation), Mayfield urged his listeners to "get on board" the righteous struggle for racial justice. In "A Change is Gonna Come"—a self-penned song initially recorded for a benefit album to raise funds for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—Sam Cooke used his remarkably supple voice and gospel sensibilities to protest racism and encourage faith in the possibilities for a more egalitarian world.

Nina Simone, a versatile musical genius who defied easy stylistic categorization by straddling jazz, blues, pop, classical, and gospel styles, recorded a succession of songs—perhaps most famously, the rollicking, darkly humorous "Mississippi Goddamn"—that excoriated the Jim-Crow South and celebrated the strength of the black community as it struggled against discrimination. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, literally dozens upon dozens of rhythm-and-blues and soul songs like these spoke to the growth of black pride, the distinctiveness of the African American experience, and the beauties of black culture, as well as to the specifics of the civil rights struggle. Together, they provided a witty, poignant, joyous, hummable, and eminently danceable musical soundtrack to an era when the spirit of the movement and the possibilities for a more equalitarian society captured the imagination of most black and many white Americans, even beyond those who were active participants in any formal movement activities.

While the undeniable and hard-won successes of the Civil Rights Movement in ridding the South of statutory segregation and disenfranchisement did not create a society free of racism or racial discrimination in which genuine equality of opportunity could flourish, the movement nevertheless did go hand in hand with the rejuvenated sense of black pride and empowerment encapsulated in a freedom song like "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round." It was certainly no coincidence that one of the most popular songs of the late 1960s was Aretha Franklin's recording of Otis Redding's "Respect." In her version of the song, the "Queen of Soul" transformed what might have been a less sweeping plea for personal domestic respect into a universal demand for respect for black rights, achievements, and aspirations. Such sentiments had always animated the Civil Rights Movement. They would become even more prominent in the Black Power period, when songs like the Staples Singers' "Respect Yourself" and Johnny Taylor's "I Am Somebody" would capture the spirit of a new era in the struggle for racial justice.

Brian Ward is a professor in American Studies at Northumbria University, UK. His major publications include *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (1998), *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (2004), and *The 1960s: A Documentary Reader* (2009). He is currently working on a book about the relationships between the American South and the world of British popular music.

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<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-rights-movement/essays/%E2%80%9Cpeople-get-ready%E2%80%9D-music-and-civil-rights-movement-1950s>