

we *shall* overcome—but when?

Civil Rights Movement songs as historical documents building on a “Long 1960s” framework
while considering connections between music and the Black Awakening

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It occasionally acts as a fire retardant of sorts, soothing frayed nerves; at other times it emboldens protesters with its words of righteousness; and sometimes it even succeeds in placating seemingly implacable law enforcement, the songs of the Civil Rights Movement document the Long 1960s while capturing the spirit of the decade. For this section of the paper, I specifically consider “We Shall Overcome” as a historical document reflective of its journey and meaning as the “Marseillaise of the integration movement.”¹

Songs of the Civil Rights Movement as historical documents of the Long 1960s

Any mention of the Civil Rights Movement pauses at the Highlander Folk School, then located in Monteagle, Tennessee, a place committed to using “education to change society—not to reform the old one cosmetically, but to build a new and more humane society.”² Highlander’s founder, Myles Horton, writes that his “job as a gardener or educator is to know that the potential is there and that it will unfold. People have a potential for growth; it’s inside, it’s in the seed.”³

Highlander established a measured strategy for Southern school desegregation, that considered the citizen’s potential role, the power of the activist, and the song “as communication strategy.”⁴ Activists were armed with “freedom songs” adapted by music leader Guy Carawan from jail tunes, church hymns, and popular tunes of the day.⁵ Together with Zilphia Horton, wife of Myles and Highlander’s first music director, students were introduced to songs such as “We

¹ Margalit Fox, “Guy Carawan Dies at 87; Taught a Generation to Overcome, in Song,” *The New York Times*, May 8, 2015.

² Peter Seeger et al., *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009), 3.

³ Myles Horton, Judith Kohl, and Herbert R. Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 33.

⁴ Kerran L. Sanger, *When the Spirit Says Sing! the Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 15.

⁵ Peter Seeger et al., *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009), 39

Shall Not Be Moved,” “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” and “This Little Light of Mine.”⁶ At the center of Highlander’s melodious oeuvre of resistance is “We Shall Overcome.”

No tabula rasa, the song’s earliest antecedent is the Latin “O Sanctissima,” or “Sicilian Mariners’ Hymn,” featured in British publications of the day.⁷ The hymn is known to have been played by the 26th North Carolina Regimental Band during the Civil War.⁸ The song is next encountered as “No More Auction Block,” and was sung by freed slaves in Nova Scotia in 1833.⁹ Around 1900, the song shifts to “I’ll Overcome Some Day” by Revered Charles Tindley, himself descended from slaves. A version, “I’ll Be Like Him Someday,” was published in 1945 in Chicago by Faye E. Brown. In the same year, also in Chicago, another version, “I’ll Overcome Someday,” was published by Atron Twig and Kenneth Morris.¹⁰ Bernice Johnson Reagon, however, sees the church song “I’ll Be Alright,” an oral folk hymn *not* related to or descended from “O Sanctissima,” as the likely source of “We Shall Overcome.”¹¹

Zilphia Horton first encountered the song as “We *Will* Overcome,” as sung by members of a Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) Food and Tobacco Workers union in Charleston, South Carolina, in the mid-1940s. Horton, teaching it at Highlander, reduced the tempo. Frequent Highlander collaborator, Pete Seeger, unsure of the grammar of the alliteration, replaced the verb “shall” later recalling that “the meaning of the word ‘overcome’ is broadened still further... by never once explicitly stating who or what will be overcome. Thus it is left up to the singer or the

⁶ Maggie Lewis, “Guy and Candie Carawan: Song Leaders for Social Change,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 2, 1982, 3.

⁷ “Sicilian Mariners’ Hymn to the Virgin,” *The European Magazine and London Review Volume 22* (Great Britain: Philological Society, 1792), 385–386.

⁸ Irwin Silber, *Songs of the Civil War*, liner notes, LP 39983519 Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 1960.

⁹ John A. and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 450.

¹⁰ S.T. Kimbrough Jr, Carlton R. Young, ed., *Beams of Heaven: Hymns of Charles Albert Tindley* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 2006).

¹¹ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955–1965: A Study in Culture History” (PhD diss., Howard University, 1975), 65.

listener to let their minds speculate. This means that the song is ever living and ever growing.”¹²

Interestingly, in 2017, the song’s copyright was partially struck down, the judge declaring “the song’s adaptation from an older work—including changing “will” to “shall”—was not original enough to qualify for protection.”¹³

Seeger’s adjusted lyrics and views on the meaning of “overcome” epitomized the Highlander stance that the “people’s culture” remain flexible, adaptable, yet reactive within context. Carawan, in turn, learned the Seeger version in California from folk singer Frank Hamilton.¹⁴ Another verse, “we are not afraid,” was improvised at Highlander on July 31, 1959, by Mary Ethel Dozier, who recalls police searching Highlander for evidence that could assist them in closing the school down, her addition adding the steely resolve of resistance.¹⁵

A further shift shows up in the song when, at a December 1961 Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Albany, Georgia, protesters shifted the song into a new key and added call-and-response, an African American choral tradition. The song “became impregnated with additional slurs and improvised musical punctuations. ‘My Lords,’ ‘I know that’ and intricate ‘ohs’ appeared at the beginning of lines and at musical hesitations,” Bernice Johnson Reagon recalls.¹⁶ This version adds a progressive sense of motion to the music, with syncopation propelling the words, suggesting the surge and power of the Civil Rights Movement.

But the song is the sum of many parts. “We Shall Overcome” hints at early-1960s

¹² Guy and Candie Carawan, *Ain’t You Got A Right to the Tree of Life?* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, revised and expanded edition 1989) pp. 208-209

¹³ Christopher Mele, “‘We Shall Overcome’ Is Put in Public Domain in a Copyright Settlement,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, January 27, 2018). <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/business/media/we-shall-overcome-copyright.html>.

¹⁴ Peter Seeger et al., *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009), 8.

¹⁵ Howard Robinson, “Interview Excerpt of Ms. Mary Ethel Dozier Jones,” Levi Watkins Learning Centre. <https://cdm17283.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/Oralhis/id/24>.

¹⁶ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History.” (Diss. Howard University, 1975), 83.

cultural mixology where “white institutionalization was supposed to benefit Black culture, the song illustrating how Black and white culture interacted in the twentieth century.”¹⁷ In her John Lewis Fellows essay, Abibat Rahman-Davies asks, “How do you build coalitions to enact change when your ‘allies’ don’t truly understand what they are fighting against? They don’t truly understand the things that they are fighting against because they are repeating many of the same toxic actions they are supposed to be against, this is called toxic liberalism.”¹⁸

In their parallel suburban universe, white listeners in 1965 politely applaud BBC folk versions of “We Shall Overcome.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, on this side of the pond, Black protesters resisted—got injured—defying police intimidation, both to a tune treated as sacred in the African American church tradition.

From a contemporary Critical Race Theory perspective, white folk at Highlander *interpreting* Black culture for dissemination and use by that same culture, it having to settle for a negotiated, widely digestible version of their heritage, seems noteworthy.²⁰ But to most, the song represents a collaborative process—another aspect to the prompt that Civil Rights songs act as historical snapshots. Seeger calls it “a beautiful example of the interchange between black and white musicians creating American music.”²¹

Stokely Carmichael, however, feels, “you can’t divorce politics from culture.” He writes African Americans have to define themselves, “in our own terms, our real circumstances,

¹⁷ Joe Street, “Liberation Culture as Political Weapon in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.” (University of Sheffield, January 1, 1970). <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/15092/>.

¹⁸ Abibat Rahman-Davies, “We Shall Overcome,” *Humanity in Action*, accessed October 20, 2021. https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/we-shall-overcome-what/.

¹⁹ Joan Baez, “Shall Shall Overcome (BBC Television Theatre, London - June 5, 1965),” YouTube (YouTube, October 28, 2015). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nM39QUiAsoM>.

²⁰ Isaias Gamboa, *We Shall Overcome: Sacred Song on the Devil's Tongue* (Beverly Hills, CA: Amapola Publishers, 2012), 225.

²¹ Peter Seeger et al., *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009), 8.

possibilities, and interests relative to white America,” before stating African Americans had to liberate themselves from “demeaning definitions and limitations” forced upon them by “colonial conditioning,” concluding, “Cultural and psychological self-determination, that’s all.”²²

In hindsight, it is hard not to pause at the tinkering by the Hortons, the Carawans, and Seeger. It is hard not to consider Johnson Reagon’s comments on how future husband, Cordell Reagon, persuaded her to use “we,” something he learned at Highlander meant to facilitate greater inclusivity.²³ Or the song’s having to placate white police when they react—as they still do—with asymmetrical force against African Americans.²⁴

“We Shall Overcome” merges social activism and spiritual endeavor. It hints at the very things the next wave of activists would get impatient over in the hardened atmosphere after James Meredith’s June 1966 murder, when, even as Reverend King tries to unite the crowd, protesters fell silent on the words “Black and white together.”²⁵ The song, however, remains a powerful historical document based on tradition, steeped in church, but tweaked for inclusiveness and integration. It also emerges as a musical site, where, in the 1960s, whitewashing met whitesplaining leaving some to wonder, we *shall* overcome—but when?

²² Stokely Carmichael and Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 527.

²³ Noah Adams, “The Inspiring Force of ‘We Shall Overcome’,” NPR (NPR, August 28, 2013).

²⁴ Kerran L. Sanger, *“When the Spirit Says Sing!” the Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 53

²⁵ Peter Seeger et al., *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009), 215.

Building on the “Long 1960s” framework, what connections do we see between the music and the Black Awakening? How did they (or did they not) influence one another?

The music of the “Long 1960s” and Black Awakening are inextricably linked. But can a protest song confront white apathy? Or affect political outcomes, even decades later? Two songs inspired by an act of brutal violence suggest, yes. One held a mirror to white audiences, warning them about “critical shifts in Civil Rights from going limp to fighting back.”²⁶ The other, a reflective anthem, will echo all the way to 2008 when the United States will elect its first African American president, an implausibility to 1963 eyes. Both songs represent tonal shifts in the Civil Rights conversation, influenced by political events, reflecting the Black Awakening.

Mention of Nina Simone is understated during discussions around the Civil Rights Movement. “I was desperate to be accepted by the Civil Rights leaders,” Simone told *Q Magazine* in 1991, “and when I was, I gave them ten years of singing protest songs. In turn, it was the only time I’ve been truly inspired by anything other than...Mozart, Czerny, Liszt, and Rachmaninov”²⁷ But events in 1963 hardened her militancy.

When, on September 15, 1963, four Ku Klux Klan members set fire to the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls in the blast, the attack became Simone’s Damascus moment. She went to her garage to see if she could “make a home-made pistol. I had it in mind to kill someone, I didn’t know who, but someone I could identify as being in the way of my people getting some justice for the first time in three hundred years.” Her ex-policeman husband, Andy Stroud, said, “Nina, you don’t know anything about killing. The only thing you’ve got is music.” She reconsidered, and after an hour at her piano, she produced sheet

²⁶ A Loudermilk. *Nina Simone & the Civil Rights Movement: Protest at Her Piano, Audience at Her Feet. (Journal of International Women's Studies, 2013), 121-136.*

²⁷ Lloyd Bradley, “Here Comes Trouble,” (*Q Magazine*, December 1991), 82.

music for “Mississippi Goddam,” her first Civil Rights song, as she called it.²⁸ Simone the activist was ready to take Black Awakening to the concert hall and she would make her white audience sit up and take note of Black Power.

At a moment of national mourning, in the wake of a racially motivated church bombing that left Black America shell-shocked, Simone’s anthem is both call to action for African Americans and a statement of frustration at the invisibility of Black lives. Hearing mere outrage in “Mississippi Goddam” misunderstands what Simone attempts. She shrouds emotional architecture with satire while pointing at domestic life in American. Simone avoids diminishing the state of Civil Rights, yet her song resembles a musical shrug. Scholars observe that frequently “in the African American expressive culture, grief assumes a tragicomic mode, best known through blues. But this tragicomic mode also finds stunning expression in black humor.”²⁹

“Mississippi Goddam” juggles vaudeville orchestration, understated Jim Crow-era descriptions, with Civil Rights struggles. Simone’s mentioning the title elicits laughter from the predominantly white, liberal Carnegie Hall audience, and the humor lurking in the curse word lands an in-joke—but one of consequence and with urgency. To Simone, Mississippi is a synecdoche for more than “the South,” reflecting Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech that pointed out, “as long as you south of the Canadian border, you South.”³⁰

Simone assumes the role of “Black entertainment” shrewdly, the show-tune parody a searing less-than-entertaining rhetoric of raw emotion. A minor key change pivots the song into the tragic, but rhythms and chords remain constant, the modal shift taking the mood from

²⁸ Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *Nina: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (Ebury Press (Random Century Group, 1991), 90.

²⁹ Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11.

³⁰ Marcus Anthony Hunter and Zandria F. Robinson, *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 2.

elevated—droll—to melancholy, tense, and foreboding. Now, the lyrics are no longer misunderstood; they become a catalog of being damned in Mississippi. “Hound dogs on my trail/ School children sittin’ in jail/ Black cat cross my path/ I think everyday’s gonna be my last.” Her voice contributes to the desperation: “Lord have mercy on this land of mine!/ We’re all gonna get it in due time./ I don’t belong here, I don’t belong there/ I’ve even stopped believing in prayer.”³¹

The most daring part of the song—the element foreshadowing the mood and sentiments of the Black Power movement—occurs when she directly confronts her privileged audience. Simone speaks on behalf of her people to the white listener, particularly those satisfied with the up-to-then non-violent approach of the freedom struggle: “Don’t tell me, I’ll tell you!/ Me and my people just about through/ I’ve been there so I know/ keep on sayin’ go slow.”

Simone takes the audience to church. The band responds to her calls that desegregation, mass participation, and unification are all “too slow.” It is a critique of non-violence: “But that’s just the trouble ([Chorus:] too slow!)/ Washin’ the windows (too slow!)/ Pickin’ the cotton (too slow!)/ You’re just plain rotten (too slow!)/ Too damn lazy (too slow!)/ You’re thinkin’s crazy.” Miss Simone is not kidding when she confronts the audience, “I bet you thought I was kidding, didn’t you?” provoking low mumbling. No more laughter. Change is overdue.³²

But events in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 15, 1963, affected another artist to write a song that would envision a change about to come. A change that would reverberate over the next five decades until, on November 5, 2008, an African American man, Barack Obama, was elected 44th President of the United States. In his victory speech to his home crowd gathered

³¹ Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddam,” YouTube, February 26, 2013. <https://youtu.be/LJ25-U3jNWM>.

³² Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You the Autobiography* (New York: Hachette Books, 2020), 67.

at Chicago's Grant Park, Obama declared, "change has come to America." He campaigned on change, the slogan, "change we can believe in," and the website change.gov, all alluding to a song by another Chicago South Sider, Sam Cooke, and his 1963 civil rights anthem, "A Change Is Gonna Come." And for a minute there, Obama's election fulfilled Cooke's prophesy.

Acting as both composer and lyricist—and inspired by Bob Dylan's 1962 "Blowin' in the Wind"—Cooke was moved to write "A Change Is Gonna Come" when, on Good Friday 1963, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested in Birmingham after violating an anti-protest injunction and kept in solitary confinement where he penned "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." When, in May 1963, police in Birmingham, Alabama, responded to 4,000 protesting African American youth with police dogs and fire hoses to break up the crowd, footage of the event shocked the United States and the world. Then, after events at 16th Street Baptist Church, in the fall of 1963, Cooke and his musicians were turned away from the Shreveport, Louisiana, Holiday Inn. "He just went off," Guralnick mentions in an NPR interview.³³ It was the last straw.

The resulting song, recorded in Hollywood on January 30, 1964, conveys hope to the African American listener, yet Cooke's voice betrays a tinge of desperation, introducing a new sound in protest music. The song's structure differs from previous protests songs, not following the verse and chorus tradition, Cooke instead employing a short bridge bringing him back from despair before he appeals again, in vain: "Then I go to my brother / And say "brother help me please" / But he winds up knocking me / Back down on my knees."³⁴ But, in spirit, Cooke echoes the old spiritual, "Oh Freedom," and what Seeger calls "acceptance of death."³⁵

Cooke's song basks in the afterglow of "I Have a Dream," delivered by Dr. Martin

³³ Terry Gross, "The Measure of Sam Cooke's 'Triumph'," NPR (NPR, October 31, 2005). <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4982687>.

³⁴ <https://www.discogs.com/master/462054-Sam-Cooke-Aint-That-Good-News>

³⁵ Peter Seeger et al., *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009), 152.

Luther King Jr, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. Until this point, protest songs were preoccupied with messages of progression and destinations: marching, riding, buses that are “A-Comin’ Oh Yes,” climbing Jacob’s ladder, rowing boats ashore, and even “Hallelujah I’m a-travelling.” Cooke, by contrast, describes a process, a “change.” He waits. What exactly is not explicitly stated, but he reflects the state of knowing that King’s speech inhabits. “A Change Is Gonna Come” is hardly the stuff of an unbridled optimistic “We are Moving on to Victory,” or a righteous “We Shall Overcome.” Instead, Cooke talks about quiet resolve in much the way “Guide My Feet While I Run This Race” makes it clear that “on the road to social justice, we can “never turn back.”³⁶

The change Cooke sang about, and King foresaw, came in the shape of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed by U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson. Change itself—the process of it—was decades away, and even in 2021, change still eludes as we still take stock of senseless killings at the hands of militarized police, and Black Lives still don’t seem to Matter, to some at least³⁷. At its core, “A Change Is Gonna Come” is about protest and social progress.

If the 1960s form a framework for Black Awakening, Obama’s November 2008 victory speech is steeped in its legacy, his words echoing the songs of the Civil Rights Movement: “The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year, or even one term, but America—I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you: We as a people will get there.”³⁸ We are not there yet, however. And many are still voting, marching, protesting—and dying—for a change may not be coming, after all.

³⁶ Peter Seeger et al., *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009), xviii.

³⁷ Frank Edwards, Hedwig Lee, and Michael Esposito, “Risk of Being Killed by Police Use of Force in the United States by Age, Race–Ethnicity, and Sex,” *PNAS* (National Academy of Sciences, August 20, 2019). <https://www.pnas.org/content/116/34/16793>.

³⁸ Barack Obama, “Transcript of Barack Obama’s Victory Speech,” NPR (NPR, November 5, 2008). <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96624326>.

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