

Short Essay

**The role of music in the Civil Rights Movement,
the ways in which songs contributed to organizing and nonviolent transformation.**

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It is a deceptively simple song. It does not brim with antagonistic intent. Nor hostility. But it makes an audacious statement. An assurance, wrapped in a pledge: “We shall overcome someday. Deep in my heart, I do believe.” The song shines as an example of what Civil Rights Movement organizers valued about the movement’s purpose, its message, the shape of protest, and how they reached those on the front line and the fringes of the movement. Much has been written about the role of music in the Civil Rights Movement.¹ In this paper, I underline that the Black church—and its hymns—played a role in the movement’s organization and nonviolent transformation.

Beholden to non-violence—a principle espoused by Martin Luther King Jr.²—the movement had to communicate in an impactful way, a challenge since the social climate rendered individual Civil Rights movement members politically impotent. The goals, they reasoned, were unity and organized action, setting a course for nonviolent civil disobedience: demonstrations, sit-ins, freedom rides, and boycotts.³ They relied on music, specifically the freedom song, with its musical roots in slavery and religion to convey unity and communicate deep resolve.⁴ Singing would provide the movement with a mechanism inhabiting both secular and sacred worlds, assisting in the movement’s coalescing around a goal of nonviolent transformation.

Reminiscent of hymns, freedom songs expressed frustration, encouraged commitment, ameliorated fear, and fortified the weary. As one of the few spaces of “freedom” since the start of slavery, the church “offered an environment in which people learned a new self-respect, a deeper

¹ Kerran L. Sanger, *When the Spirit Says Sing! the Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement*. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

² Peter Seeger et al., *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009), 215.

³ Kerran L. Sanger, “The Rhetoric of the Freedom Songs in the American Civil Rights Movement.” (PhD. diss, Pennsylvania State University, 1991).

⁴ Candie Carawan and Guy Carawan, *Sing for Freedom the Story of the Civil Rights Movement through Its Songs* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2021), 5.

assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue.”⁵ The environment acted as bulwark against a social system denying African Americans those very things. “Once we finished that demonstration, we couldn't go back to the campus. And we went to a Black church, which is the only place in the community we had to go,” Bernice Johnson-Reagon of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee’s Freedom Singers recalls.⁶

As “moral agents,” Peter Paris writes, the church pressured members not to break laws since penalties for Black transgressions were steep, particularly for civil disobedience. Accordingly, most actions taken during the Civil Rights Movement fell within the letter of the law as a “shared Black social ethic,” in the shape of songs and their messages, was present during protests.⁷ Even so, as stated above, the church itself was not a politicized space. Paris also describes the Jim Crow era church as non-radical and even deferential in terms of political action in the community. Fredrick Harris feels that the church and its music challenged society while, in parallel, reinforcing attachment to societal structures such as the individual adherence to non-violence while promoting unity.⁸

Johnson-Reagon tells that, initially, she was singing "I Will Overcome." Her future husband, Cordell Reagon, convinced her to use “we,” something he learned at Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. “In the Black community, if you want to express the group, you have to say ‘I,’ because if you say ‘we,’ I have no idea who's gonna be there. And the church had always sung it this way.” Johnson-Reagon acquiesced for the sake of peaceful protest. Shifting pronoun

⁵ Sara M. Evans and Harry Chatten Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1992), 17.

⁶ Terry Gross, “Bernice Johnson Reagon on Leading Freedom Songs during the Civil Rights Movement,” NPR (NPR, June 19, 2020).

⁷ Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

⁸ Fredrick C. Harris, *Something within: Religion in African-American Political Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 135.

from 'I' to 'we,' recognized "the presence of Black and white people, fighting against injustice. And you have Black people accepting that need because they were also accepting that support and that help."⁹

With "Mississippi Goddam" in 1964, Nina Simone voiced a frustration many in the movement felt. In her study on protest music as theo-ethical tool, AnneMarie Mingo writes that women were desperate to be part of the movement yet denied opportunities to become community leaders. "Through song, they gave quiet strength to its organizing," Mingo explains. "Pastors had no idea women in their congregation were part of the Civil Rights Movement. One was arrested multiple times in Atlanta with Dr. King, and no one from church knew—their songs giving them calm resilience."¹⁰ The music of the movement acted as thread in the fabric of peaceful resistance.

Poet, Kalamu ya Salaam writes about music that, "our state of emancipation without liberation makes clear the struggle is around internal conflicts."¹¹ The music and songs of the Civil Rights Movement addressed the internal conflict felt by those active in civil disobedience, providing solace, fostering unity, and promoting non-violence. The shared memory of music and its religious provenance assisted the movement's goal of non-violent, dignified transformation. The church, per se, is not political. But when things got political, in spirit—peacefully—through music, the church was there.

⁹ Noah Adams, "The Inspiring Force of 'We Shall Overcome'," NPR (NPR, August 28, 2013).

¹⁰ AnneMarie Mingo, "Transgressive Leadership and Theo-ethical Texts of Black Protest Music," (Black Theology 17:2, 2019), 91-113.

¹¹ Kalamu ya Salaam, "It Didn't Jes Grew: The Social and Aesthetic Significance of African American Music." (African American Review 29, no. 2, 1995), 351-75.

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