

ONE

Singing Civil Rights
The Freedom Song Tradition

Then, too, there was the music. It would be hard to overestimate the significance of the music of the movement.

—Charles Payne, *"I've Got the Light of Freedom"*

The year is 1960. The place is the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. It is one of the few places in the South where black and white people gather together to talk about the emerging civil rights movement. Police regularly raid the school and challenge the activists. Those inside know their lives are in constant danger from the police and the Ku Klux Klan. On this evening some high school students are among those gathered. The police charge in and force the activists to sit in the dark while they harass them by searching through their things. Amid this terrifying scene, a girl begins to sing a song that was becoming the movement's anthem, "We Shall Overcome." Huddled in the dark, she spontaneously invents a new lyric. She sings, "We are not afraid, we are not afraid today." Of course, she *was* afraid in that moment. Anyone would be. But in singing the fear is both indirectly acknowledged and directly challenged. Singing away a bit of her fear, she asserts the rights she and countless others are prepared to fight and die for—the right to freedom and justice in their own land.¹

"We Shall Overcome" belongs now to the world, sung by Germans at the fall of the Berlin Wall and by Chinese dissidents in Tiananmen Square, but its home will always be at the center of the movement for black freedom and justice in the United States. In a sense, the African American

civil rights movement began when the first Africans were brought as slaves to the British colonies of the “new world” in 1619. Understanding some of that long history will be necessary to our story, but when most people use the term *civil rights movement* they are referring to a powerful force for change that emerged in the mid-1950s and had its greatest impact in the 1960s. That movement is at the heart of this book not only because of its intrinsic importance as a key moment in the long struggle for black Americans to achieve equality and justice, but also because it was the “borning struggle,” the movement that became the model for virtually all the progressive social movements that followed it in the latter half of the twentieth century. In terms of tactics, strategies, style, vision, ideology, and overall movement culture, the black civil rights struggle has had a profound impact on all subsequent social movements and on U.S. culture at large. It was also the first major movement covered fully by the new electronic medium of television, a medium whose power increasingly shaped the context of movements over the decades covered by this book.

The forms of culture most central to the civil rights movement were undoubtedly music and religion. The freedom songs whose story I tell in this chapter mobilized both. Music had long been a part of American movements including the antislavery movement in the nineteenth century and the labor movement in the twentieth century, among others, but the civil rights movement brought a new level of intensity of singing and left a legacy of “freedom songs” now sung all around the world. Songs were everywhere in the movement—in meetings, on the picket line, on marches, at the sit-ins, in jail, everywhere. Songs, especially as embedded in a rich church culture and later in black pop music, formed the communication network of the movement, and they also expressed the “soul” of the movement, linking its spirit to centuries of resistance to slavery and oppression.

The civil rights movement is undoubtedly the best known movement in recent American history. Unfortunately, much popular knowledge about the movement consists of half-truths and myths. Perhaps the most common and most misleading myth is the notion that the movement was started by and led by Martin Luther King Jr. The civil rights movement is often portrayed as virtually King’s singlehanded effort. But as a far less well-known but equally important figure in the movement, Ella Baker, put it, King did not make the movement, the movement made

King. As we will see, Reverend King was an important figure but he was only one among thousands of activists and hundreds of leaders. While he was a great orator and a great translator of the movement’s ideas to mainstream America, he was more often a follower of the movement’s actions than a leader of them. His high public visibility often obscured the extent to which the movement worked from a model of collective leadership and was driven by thousands of ordinary citizens struggling without media coverage or even public recognition.²

Related to the exaggerated importance given to King is a tendency to emphasize national leadership and centralized organizations. Central organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, founded in 1909) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC, founded in 1957) were important forces. The NAACP was the key, if not the only, black political organization in many communities. It served as a vital network of activists the movement drew upon in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But the efforts of local people working under the guise of the NAACP were often quite different from, more innovative and more radical than, those of the national office, which had long stressed slow progress through the courts. Similarly, while SCLC became the most visible civil rights organization under Dr. King’s leadership, the national office also often found itself trying to catch up with what bolder local pastors and parishioners were doing. This pattern was intensified when the most important civil rights organization of the 1960s, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, founded in 1961), emerged with its philosophy precisely based on the idea of cultivating local, group-centered leadership rather than building a central, hierarchical national organization.³

In a sense, there were dozens of civil rights movements in communities throughout the South (and the North), many of which were quite independent of national leaders like King. The backbone of the struggle consisted of hundreds of grassroots organizers, local people still mostly unsung, who sought not notoriety but justice, and who toiled, usually amid life-threatening danger, for many years before and after the most dramatic demonstrations, protests, marches, and speeches that are the best known manifestations of the movement. There were important local and regional variations in the movement that need also to be acknowledged, especially differences between urban and rural contexts. Indeed, in each of the hundreds of local communities where the movement

emerged, particular political, social, and cultural mixes shaped the struggle to unique contours.

Another myth has the movement suddenly and spontaneously emerging out of nowhere. But the large-scale, dramatic events that captured media attention did not arise spontaneously. They were made possible by countless hours, months, and years of work by local activists from all classes and segments of the black community. Moreover, black women did much of that local work. A focus on the (mostly male) national leaders obscures the extent to which women were the majority of movement workers and often the dominant force in many parts of the decentralized movement. Too narrow a definition of national leadership also distorts the role of women like Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and Fannie Lou Hamer, all women with deep respect for local traditions and shared leadership, who nonetheless played roles that were decidedly national in scope. It is unlikely that any figure in the movement logged more traveling miles around the nation in these years than Ella Baker, a woman key to the founding and functioning of both of the most important organizations of the movement, SCLC and SNCC.⁴ Similarly, homophobia has meant that the presence of gay men and women in the civil rights struggle has not been given its due. "Gay-baiting" (using someone's real or alleged homosexuality as a way to discredit or blackmail them) was sometimes used to stifle the movement, both locally and nationally. In the case of key movement strategist Bayard Rustin, both his homosexuality and charges that he was a communist (another common way of attacking folks, known as "red-baiting") were used in efforts to limit his effectiveness.⁵

Yet another key myth misrepresents the integrated nature of the movement, exaggerating the role of white people. There is certainly a partial truth in this, in terms of both the goals of the movement (which included an end to racial segregation) and the practice of the movement, in which white people sometimes played important roles and exhibited great courage in fighting for a cause that did not directly benefit them. But the civil rights movement was fundamentally a movement by black people themselves, many of whom remained highly skeptical about the possibilities of racial harmony even if the legal basis of segregation could be brought to an end. A focus on the role of white people is too often used to cover the continuing racism in U.S. society in the name of the fiction

that if we just stop talking about race, we will be suddenly transported into a colorblind utopia. In one of the strangest twists of political logic, blacks and other people of color are thereby blamed for racism, as if pointing to its ugly, ongoing existence were to create it, rather than a crucial part of the effort needed to eradicate it finally from the culture.

Popular understanding of the movement also sometimes exaggerates its visionary and spiritual dimension to the detriment of its more pragmatic side. Spirituality and the black church were important forces in the movement. But even the most famous visionary moment in the history of the movement, Reverend King's "I Have a Dream" speech, was delivered at a march (whose original planning stretched back long before King was even an adult) for "jobs and freedom," with jobs getting top billing. The movement often succeeded most fully when it brought direct economic and political pressure to bear on white business people and white politicians. Its moral appeals were important, but they were always backed by such nonviolent direct actions as sit-ins, boycotts, mass marches, and strikes, not to mention the threat of having to deal with still more radical blacks tomorrow if you didn't deal with civil rights activists today. Nonviolence in the movement was directed at and formed as *power*, a power as much political and economic as moral or spiritual.⁶ King himself became increasingly convinced, as the 1960s wore on, that freedom without fundamental economic change would be empty. His last major organizing campaign focused on a demand for economic justice for poor people of all races in the United States. King died believing that some form of democratic socialism would probably be needed to achieve racial justice in the United States.

So, if the civil rights movement was not quite what the mainstream media make it out to be, what was it? It was a fundamentally radical, grassroots, decentralized, mass-based, often women-led movement of thousands of black people (and some white allies) bent on forcing a deeply racist society to grant them freedom, dignity, and economic justice. The phrase "deeply racist" is meant to question another too easily presented myth of the movement—that its only real opposition was from ignorant, pot-bellied southern sheriffs, with ties to the Ku Klux Klan. In fact, racism was (and is) as deeply entrenched in the North as in the South, and racist assumptions shaped the responses of well-meaning white moderates and liberals as much as those of the more overt

kinds of bigot whom it is easy to parody. Moreover, the middle-class, genteel racism of the businessmen of the White Citizen's Council was as crucial as Klan terrorism in blocking black freedom, and the council frequently used the Klan to do its dirty work.

The movement, as it was simply known to its participants, had deep roots and continues to echo today, but its heyday was from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. The civil rights movement's most visible target was the system of racial apartheid in the South known as "segregation." Laws separating the races shaped every aspect of southern culture. Separate and much less well-funded and -maintained facilities for blacks—schools, restaurants, hospitals, public drinking fountains, even cemeteries—constantly conveyed a clear insult to a people deemed inferior by white segregationists. But this legally sanctioned system of racial separation backed by white terrorism was only the visible marker of a much deeper system of racial oppression that ensured blacks a politically and economically degraded status, in the North as well as in the South.

The core public strategy of the movement was based on nonviolent direct actions (civil disobedience, sit-ins, freedom rides, boycotts, building of alternative institutions, strikes, and other actions) aimed at ending the system of racial apartheid in the American South, securing the right to vote and other basic political rights for blacks, and bringing down the wider racist system of which these injustices were but a part. In regard to the first two goals, ending segregation and securing basic political rights, the movement proved a phenomenally successful, crucially important moment in a long, unfinished struggle.

The other, equally important part of the movement was its impact on black people themselves. The ultimate terror of racism lies in its ability to make the subjects of racism believe in their own inferiority. This process, often given the overly simple label "internalized racism," manifests itself in many differing ways, some blatant, others subtle. Whether successful or not at achieving particular goals set at any stage of the struggle, the movement was always successful in challenging this vicious force. Whether it was the act of signing a voter registration form for the first time, or of appearing as a witness against a white person in court, or even the bravery it sometimes took just to talk to an organizer, the movement was made up of thousands of small and grand actions that chipped away or sometimes dramatically swept away generations of oppression as it had shaped the self-image of black people. Historians

and social scientists have few tools for measuring such supposedly "subjective" changes, but they are at the core of the civil rights story.

Preconditions: Why the Civil Rights Movement Happened When It Did

Five main sets of large-scale changes provided preconditions that were seized by the black community to form the new movement: (1) population shifts and economic changes; (2) racial pride and resentment in the wake of World War II; (3) new federal policies, stemming partly from Cold War realities; (4) the example provided by anticolonial struggles in the Third World; and (5) new political strategies and tactics culled from the tradition of nonviolent civil disobedience.

First, a series of population shifts and economic changes repositioned the black community both geographically and occupationally. The Great Migration to the North that began after slavery continued well into the twentieth century, creating important centers of *relative* freedom in the North. These centers, such as New York's Harlem and Chicago's Southside, provided comparatively safe spaces in which models of black freedom were forged and from which campaigns into the segregated South could be launched to join an organizing tradition already at work there.

The declining importance and increasing mechanization of southern agriculture, paralleled by a rise in the number of industrial jobs available in the region, created larger urban black communities, which gave rise to a sense of collective power not felt as easily in rural isolation. Industrialization also brought a certain amount of unionization. While the South was and remains today a very inhospitable place for organizing labor unions, courageous and successful unions were created there, and blacks joined in significant numbers, mostly in segregated unions, occasionally in integrated ones. Labor unions became in effect training centers where future leaders of the civil rights movement picked up valuable organizing skills and learned social movement tactics and strategies. It is no coincidence that the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, which began in the 1930s with a focus mostly on labor organizing, became a key civil rights training center in the 1950s.⁷ Nor is it simply fortuitous that the most famous song of the civil rights movement, "We Shall Overcome," was first adapted as a labor song before it was transformed into the movement's anthem. Many connections existed between the labor movement and the civil rights movement.⁸

To these regional shifts in demographics and economics must be added a more national one. In its role as one of the two superpowers after World War II, the U.S. economy began the largest and most sustained period of growth in world history. Because the economic pie was widely and accurately perceived to be growing for all Americans, many white Americans became less resistant to modest gains by African Americans and other so-called racial "minorities." These economic conditions, of course, varied from state to state and county to county in the South (as well as in the North), and one can trace with some precision the degree of resistance to civil rights work based on the extent of economic stakes held by whites. It is no accident, for example, that some of the most difficult organizing took place in isolated rural counties where the new economy had not penetrated, and where whites felt they had the most to lose economically from black competitors.

A second set of precipitating factors revolves around the impact of World War II. Many African Americans fought courageously for freedom in that war. Most often they did so in racially segregated units. But under pressure from forces led by A. Philip Randolph, the great black union leader who later led the March on Washington, the federal government was forced to provide fairer labor practices for black women and men in the defense industries as the war began, and to desegregate the military during the war. These efforts provided a model for other desegregation efforts after the war, while at the same time pointing up the irony that blacks were fighting Nazi racism in the name of a freedom they did not possess at home. For many African Americans, particularly those from the South, the war provided the first glimpse of wider worlds where black oppression was not so absolute. Returning home from the war, often as decorated heroes, black soldiers expected and at times demanded respect from the white community, only to be met with renewed racist hostility. A postwar wave of lynchings of blacks in the South attests to the resistance such pride encountered from whites. Many of the key organizers of the 1940s and 1950s who built the foundation for the wider movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s were black veterans. The sentiments also found their way directly into a freedom song: "I'm an American fighting man / I'll defend this country as long as I can / And if I can defend it overseas / Why don't you set my people free!"⁹

A third set of factors involved some small but important shifts at the level of the federal government. The wartime desegregation efforts cul-

minated in the integration of the federal government itself, a controversial act in the borderline southern city of Washington, D.C. Following World War II, the Cold War against the Soviet Union brought new pressures to bear. How would national politicians in the leading nation of what they were calling "the free world" deal with the obvious unfreedom of African American citizens? Southern apartheid became an international embarrassment to the U.S. government, and incrementally pieces of civil rights legislation began to appear during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations.

This atmosphere also contributed to the far more significant action taken by the U.S. Supreme Court. After almost a half-century of court cases and organizing efforts spearheaded by the NAACP, in 1954, in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*, the nation's highest court declared certain types of school segregation illegal. While the ruling was limited and would only very slowly be enforced by the executive branch, it proved immensely psychologically important to black Americans generally and to an emerging core of civil rights activists in particular. It also provided a key legal precedent for local activists seeking to chip away at the myriad forms of segregation, not only of schools but also of public facilities and private businesses. As it turned out, the federal government had to be pulled kicking and screaming into support of the movement, even in the somewhat more liberal years of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, but *Brown v. Board of Education* initially held out great promise that the national government might aid in the battle against segregation and other systematic forms of racism enforced at the state and local levels. In the terminology of social movement scholars, this landmark Supreme Court case indicated a shift in the "political opportunity structure" available to activists. Its suggestion of "movement" in the federal structures further fueled "movements" at the grassroots level.¹⁰

Fourth, the rise of anticolonial struggles in the 1950s and early 1960s in the Third World, especially in Africa, provided inspiring examples for African Americans. The example of black people rising up to throw off white European colonial governments in African countries like Chad, the Congo, Dahomey, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Upper Volta, Zaire, and others, was a potent stimulus. The contrast between these newly liberated homelands and American apartheid was stark, and many African Americans began to conceptualize their

segregated communities as internal colonies within the United States. A particularly strong wave of successful independence struggles in a dozen African countries in 1960–61 coincided with and inspired the student-led sit-in movement at segregated lunch counters and other sites in those same years. Black novelist James Baldwin drew the direct connection in a single, colorful sentence: “All of Africa will be free before we can get a lousy cup of coffee.”¹¹

The fifth key factor was the development of a new set of political ideologies, strategies, and tactics. The anticolonial struggle in India, culminating in independence from Britain in 1948, not only provided inspiration, like the African struggles, but also, more concretely, gave the movement a successful contemporary model of nonviolent revolution. The movement adapted and adopted numerous philosophical, strategic, and tactical elements from the anticolonial movement led by Mahatma Gandhi, who himself had drawn upon a long American tradition of civil disobedience. Stretching from seventeenth-century Quakers to nineteenth-century abolitionists to early twentieth-century women’s right activists, and given philosophical form by Henry David Thoreau, this rich tradition provided a wealth of ideas and examples. Civil rights activists gradually merged these ideas and tactics with traditional forms of black activism and black Christianity. The key movement group that developed these nonviolent philosophies, strategies, and tactics was the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Founded in 1942, CORE was the offshoot of the radical pacifist Quaker organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation. In the 1940s and early 1950s, through boycotts and sit-ins in the slightly less daunting atmosphere of the North, CORE and like-minded groups honed the techniques that would become widespread a few years later in the South. Key activists in this tradition, such as James Lawson, Glenn Smiley, Bayard Rustin, and James Farmer, provided philosophical guidance and practical training in nonviolence to those already forging a new phase of struggle across the South. They are also the people largely responsible for educating Dr. King in the tradition he so effectively popularized.¹²

Roots of the Movement

All these factors played a role in creating ripe conditions for a new movement, but none of those opportunities would have been seized without people ready and schooled to act upon these openings. Part of the myth

of the civil rights movement is that it appeared suddenly, even miraculously, and spontaneously. Perhaps that is the way it looked to some white people who had the luxury of not paying much attention to black lives. But when the structural factors discussed above made the time right for change, the movement of the 1950s and 1960s formed itself around deeply rooted, longstanding cultural and political institutions based in many generations of black struggle. Across those many generations, the most important institution of the black community was the black church. The church had its origins in slavery where, as in the civil rights movement, it served politically ambiguous purposes. On the one hand, the church had been allowed to form in part because slave owners thought it might help pacify black slaves with a message of deliverance in the afterlife. Embraced on such terms, black Christianity could have a quite conservative effect. But preachers and parishioners also fashioned a very different kind of black Protestant Christianity, one in which messages of deliverance were read not as a heavenly promise but as an earthly goal. Nat Turner was only one of many black preachers who led slave revolts. Under slavery, black Christianity developed a kind of double coding in which Bible stories became liberation stories. For example, the captivity of the Israelites in Egypt became a metaphor of slavery, and the promised land of Canaan became a very literal promise of freedom in Canada. Black ministers and black choral singers developed sermons and songs that contained elaborate coded messages about this-worldly routes to freedom, such as the ones provided by the “underground railroad” of safe houses that led escaped slaves from the South to relative freedom in the North or in the still safer territory of Canada. Even when not used in this directly political effort to achieve freedom, the songs and sermons became a kind of liberation theology that kept alive alternative visions of the world that would, under movement conditions, be turned again to more earthly, political ends.

In the aftermath of slavery, the long struggle to give emancipation a substantive meaning continued to involve the church in a central way. Especially in those places where all or most political rights and spaces for political activity continued to be denied to blacks, the church served *de facto* as their political arena. One of the ironic effects of segregation was that it contributed to the formation of tightly knit black communities, and in those communities the churches became the heart of social and political as well as religious life. Black ministers were often the political

leaders of the community. Thus, when the new societal conditions opened up possibilities for a new kind of civil rights struggle, that movement often came wrapped in the language of black Christianity and was often represented publicly by ministers. Many preachers, but by no means all, became key figures in the freedom movement. Some *clergymen* (and they were almost exclusively men) avoided or opposed the movement, often because, as the most prestigious and sometimes also the most prosperous men in black communities, they felt they had the most to lose.

Any movement needs certain basic institutional infrastructures to function: an organizational foundation; a way to raise money; places to meet; a way to spread the word to new recruits. In many places, particularly in urban areas of the black South, the church provided all these resources. Church buildings became movement meeting places. Church social networks became movement networks. The church collection plate became the way to raise movement money. And moving from infrastructure to ideas, church sermons and church music became transformed into movement "sermons" and movement music that aided in the recruitment of thousands of participants. This process was not automatic or inevitable. Many conservative currents in black churches fought this transformation. But where it was done well, hundreds of black ministers and black congregations were rapidly transformed into components of a growing movement. The church also provided a degree of cover for movement activities. Black churches were bombed in terrorist attacks by the Klan and its sympathizers, and many black ministers died for the cause, but churches were relatively safe meeting places and ministers the most respectable ambassadors to the wider white world. In both the white world and the black community itself, church involvement often sanctified the movement, made it more legitimate and less frightening in the eyes of many people. While over time some limits to the church-based part of the movement became clear, church culture as it became transformed into movement culture was a key force for change, particularly for older segments of the community.¹³

Two other key sets of networks also proved crucial to the movement's ability to act upon new opportunities: the expanding group of black colleges and universities, and the large network of local NAACP chapters. Black colleges played a central role in the wave of sit-ins in 1960 and 1961 that eventually involved some seventy thousand students and supporters. The NAACP was crucially important not so much as a national

organization but rather as a network of local people who either on their own or nudged by people from outside the community seized the opportunity to go beyond the organization's own national agenda to create bolder movement actions.

Liberation Musicology

While many black cultural forms contributed to the civil rights movement, most participants and most analysts agree that music was the key force in shaping, spreading, and sustaining the movement's culture and through culture its politics. As the three key networks of churches, colleges, and NAACP chapters were galvanized into action, no cultural force played a greater role at all levels of struggle than what became known as the "freedom songs." Alongside and entwined with the "liberation theology" of black ministers stood the great "liberation musicology" contained in the tradition of African American song. Singing proved to have wide appeal across class, regional, generational, gender, and other lines of difference. It also crossed another line of distinction in the movement, voiced most succinctly by Ella Baker. Baker often spoke of the difference between "mobilizing" people and "organizing" them. Mobilizing focused on getting lots of bodies into the street for marches and large-scale demonstrations. Such actions had great dramatic value, and they were often a way to ensure media coverage of the movement. But they also tended to be fairly passive and transient events that did not necessarily bring the deepest changes. In contrast, the organizing tradition, as Baker defined it, focused on the slower but deeper task of bringing out the leadership potential in all people, and on building group-centered, as opposed to individual, leadership in communities that would do the ongoing work of changing people and institutions.¹⁴

The freedom songs were used by mobilizers like Reverend King, and by organizers like Baker, Septima Clark and Miles Horton.¹⁵ For the organizers, the value of freedom songs lay especially in their capacity to take the liberation messages latent in the black preaching tradition and make them available to ordinary people. The group-centered process of singing, with leaders emerging periodically out of the group to "line out" a new chorus, was at once an instance of and a metaphor for the general model of nonhierarchical leadership the organizers were seeking to instill. It was also the perfect tool for organizing communities that were for the most part deeply rooted in an oral cultural tradition. As the

great singer-activist-ethnomusicologist Bernice Johnson Reagon argues, freedom songs are one of the best records we have of the transformation of consciousness in the ordinary people, the masses, who took part in the movement.¹⁶

It is extremely difficult to invent a *movement culture* from scratch. It is far more effective to adapt existing cultural structures to support the new goals, ideas, and strategies set by the movement. No movement ever did this more effectively than the civil rights movement. One of the great tasks facing the movement as it took on new energy in the mid-1950s was how to bring the strengths of tradition to bear on new conditions. Almost by definition, traditions are conservative. Their job is to conserve the past. But traditions are made, not simply given, when people choose from myriad possible cultural forms those ones they will preserve or reanimate as traditions. The legacy of American racism and resistance to it meant that black culture included broad traditions of struggle. But how could you bring that tradition of struggle into the contemporary scene with its new opportunities and new tactics? The genius of the early movement was to bring the full weight of the liberation theology of black church music into the new struggle.

Following the “river of song” as it flows through the movement will allow us to see what forces were at play at various times, what ideas were central and how they evolved, as well as to capture some sense of what the movement felt like to those who enacted it. Music was the heart and soul of the movement, but it was always also a highly practical tool in the struggle.

Music as History

Like much else about the movement, the use of freedom songs that appears to be a natural or inevitable development was the result of much conscious, deliberate organizing over many years. Music did not enter the movement spontaneously, immediately, or automatically. An amorphous “freedom song” legacy had to be uncovered, reworked, made into a useable tradition. This involved planning, skills sharing, and active dissemination, not just natural evolution. Even when new songs, or new parts of songs, did arise spontaneously, this should be understood as a process something like the “spontaneous” improvisations of jazz in which “inspiration” is built on hours and hours of careful preparation.

In reaching older black people especially, church music functioned brilliantly as a way of pouring new content into old forms. The transition to the radically new ideas particular to the civil rights struggle was made far easier when attached emotionally and intellectually to the feelings and ideas found in the old spirituals and gospel songs. Some of the traditional hymns could be carried over into the movement intact, with no changes, because the change of context gave them new meaning: “I’m on my way to freedom land, I’m on my way”; “This little light, I’m gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.” The limits set by segregation may not have been as total as those set by slavery, but a deep desire for freedom arose out of both conditions. Other traditional freedom hymns were remade in the movement, sometimes with practiced spontaneity, other times through studied rewriting or rearranging. Lyrics were changed to incorporate the particular meanings of the new times. Eventually, whole new topical songs were created.

In two different but reinforcing ways music gave a sense of history to the movement. First, the “traditional” gospel songs and spirituals provided a feeling of continuity over long periods of time. This was important in letting those for whom the movement seemed disturbingly new feel that it was also something quite old and familiar. It also gave a sense of depth and patience. While the theme of having waited long enough was often and rightfully voiced on many occasions, the movement frequently depended upon a slow, evolving process. Organizing cannot be rushed. Whenever the immediate stakes seemed not worth the danger, pain, and frustration of the work, songs brought up from the days of slavery offered a gentle reminder of how ancestors had faced far worse circumstances. At the same time, they also fired hearts with indignation that a hundred years after supposed emancipation, blacks still were not free.

A second, different role played by music as history making we might call “instant historicizing.” This refers to the altering of old songs and the creation of new songs that told stories of the evolving movement. Where the old songs gave roots, the new songs celebrated the new accomplishments of the living generations. Writing new songs or new verses allowed each new community to claim its specific place in the long tradition of black struggle. This was especially the case when old spirituals were rewritten with lyrics about Nashville, or Hinds County, Jackson,

McComb, or wherever the latest struggle had emerged. Often the two kinds of historicizing—finding roots and naming the history being made in the present—were combined, as the songs would generally begin with the older verses for a basis, and then add the contemporary events into the narrative.¹⁷ More extended writings of movement sites, events, and people into history occurred in the form of new, topical songs like “The Ballad of the Sit-ins.” Perhaps not coincidentally, tracing the development of the role of music in the movement seems to follow closely the growth and development of the movement generally. Three clusters of events in particular are key to the rise of both the music and the movement: the Montgomery bus boycott, the student-led sit-ins, and the Albany, Georgia, movement.

Many histories place the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955–56 as the beginning point of the new phase of black struggle that came to be called the civil rights movement.¹⁸ Other boycotts aimed at segregated public transportation had occurred earlier in the decade in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Tallahassee, Florida, and elsewhere, but the Montgomery action was particularly well orchestrated and effectively publicized by movement activists. Myth has the boycott arising spontaneously when one tired woman refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white man. But it wasn’t quite as simple as that. Rosa Parks, the woman in question, had been a leading activist in her community for many years. Not long before her defiant act, she had been a guest at Highlander Folk School, that key movement center, where she learned a good many “freedom songs,” and a good deal about civil disobedience tactics. Her refusal to go along with segregation law by giving up her seat was indeed a spontaneous decision that day, but it came from a life prepared for struggle through many years in the NAACP, and the quick transformation of a seemingly isolated act into a full-fledged boycott was the result of careful planning by experienced activists.

The individual who first seized upon Rosa Parks’s heroic act was E. D. Nixon, a man with a long history of activism in the radical black union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and in the local chapter of the NAACP. Nixon had been waiting and preparing for just such an opening as that provided by Parks. He immediately called into play the key networks in the community, beginning with the ministers. Most of the local ministers threw themselves unhesitatingly into the action. One young minister, a newcomer to the community, was a bit more reluctant

but soon saw the light. His name was Martin Luther King Jr. Soon Nixon had King not only involved but filling a central role. Precisely because he was new to the community, King appeared to Nixon to be a good, neutral choice for leadership since he would not be caught up in any old personality conflicts or jealousies among the established ministers. And a fine choice it was, as King soon became a superb public relations person for the movement, and the finest orator of his generation.

While Nixon and the ministers played important roles, women were the real force behind the bus boycott. After Parks provided the impulse, Jo Ann Robinson and her Women’s Political Council did the grassroots organizing and developed the logistics that gave the boycott its bite. Robinson was an English teacher at nearby Alabama State College who had often felt the sting of segregation and racist insult, despite her relatively privileged occupation. She mobilized not only the council but also dozens of students and fellow teachers. Working furiously over the weekend after Parks’s arrest, the Women’s Political Council and its allies distributed thirty-five thousand leaflets and by Monday had organized an extraordinarily successful boycott. Only a handful of Montgomery’s thousands of black citizens rode the bus that first day, 5 December 1955, and few did in the weeks and months to come. Robinson’s women organized carpools and commandeered every vehicle that could move, including a few horse-drawn ones! Many, many people walked, sometimes as much as ten or twelve miles a day, rather than continue to face the insult of segregated buses. For a year they walked and walked, withholding their business and cutting deeply into the profits of the bus line.

Thus it is no accident that several of the freedom songs that emerged in Montgomery as symbols of their efforts had a whole lot of walking in them. When five thousand of Montgomery’s black citizens gathered inside and outside the Holt Street Baptist Church on the evening of the first day of the boycott, they led off the evening with an old hymn called “Onward Christian Soldiers” with the refrain “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war.” The song, written in 1864, set the movement in the context of Christianity and American history, and was one that all parishioners, whether new to civil rights struggle or veterans, would know. What would those gathered hear in the song and feel as they sang it? They would hear and feel that theirs was a righteous cause. They would hear and feel that they would need strength and fortitude, for it would be a protracted struggle. They would hear and feel that the war that

Rosa Parks had touched off would surely need as many foot soldiers as it could muster, would need an army. The song was an appropriate one to start with because the people assembled there were about to decide whether or not to continue the boycott that had initially been scheduled for just that one day. The song gave the key for a crowd that was readying to commit to a long battle, one that lasted more than a year. The song, however, was also one largely identified with the white Christian tradition, and as such it illustrates the rather conservative, middle-class constituency that initially set the tone in Montgomery. A certain version of "racial uplift" ideology in parts of the middle- and upper-class portions of the black community viewed the old black spiritual songs as something to leave behind, as works full of excessive emotionality, as "primitive" and "unsophisticated" reminders of darker times. The freedom song movement as it emerged had to fight against this view of things, and in so doing it helped bridge class divides in black communities.

Another old spiritual that became popular in Montgomery, "Walk Together Children," even more literally seemed to fit the scene and mood, and was more rooted in black tradition: "Walk together children, don't you get weary. / Walk together children, don't get weary. / There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land." These and similar songs were deeply familiar to the respectable church-going folks at the heart of the Montgomery movement. They needed no changing come movement time, but were given new life and urgency by the movement. Reverend King later recalled that people would sometimes come to meetings two hours before they were scheduled in order to get in some good singing sessions: "Usually the hymns preceding the meeting were unaccompanied lined hymns of low pitch and long meter. One could not help but be moved by these traditional songs, which brought to mind the long history of the Negro's suffering."¹⁹ At the outset of this new phase of struggle that some came to call the Second American Revolution, others the Second Reconstruction, the older hymns gave a sense of gravity, depth, and continuity to the movement. They made it clear that far more than comfort on a bus was at stake, that the boycotters were all part of a long, long story of suffering and triumph. That deep sense of history was carried more fully by song than by any other medium. At a time when few works of "black history" existed (most of what came to be so labeled emerged out of the movement), and when a major segment of the community had been kept illiterate, song played an immense educational role.

In the wake of the success of the boycott, Martin Luther King Jr. was thrown into national prominence, and along with others he worked to form an organization to further spread the movement gospel. The resulting group, founded in 1957, came to be called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As the name suggests, SCLC began as a conference of southern black ministers interested in furthering the freedom struggle, then evolved into a permanent organization to share information, resources, tactics, and strategies, especially via the network of Baptist, AME, and other black churches. While promising leadership, most often in the years between the Montgomery boycott and a mass upsurge after 1960, SCLC primarily filled a coordinating and informational function as most activity was generated and sustained at the level of local communities. Few of the local struggles received the dramatic attention accorded to Montgomery. One exception occurred in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, when federal troops had to be called in to protect black students whose efforts to integrate public schools in that city met with violent white resistance. That clash received national news coverage.

During the second half of the 1950s, most of the work was done by local people who patiently built networks, tested alliances, identified friends, measured foes, and learned organizing skills and the tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience. A significant part of that work was done at the Highlander Folk School (later Folk Center) where songs played a central role in building a network of activists. Song sessions, often led by the new music director there, Guy Carawan, proved an ideal way to build solidarity, friendship, and trust. Part of the training of organizers involved the use of music, as a repertoire of freedom songs evolved. Visitors from all parts of the South and North brought with them local songs or local variations on traditional ones. Misnamed the "fallow years" by observers looking only for dramatic action, the late 1950s were a crucial period of planting seeds that would lead to a spectacular harvest. Harvest season, as it turned out, was announced in 1960 by four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina.

The Sit-in Revolution: Students Take Up the Song

Four black college students, inspired in part by a comic book about the Montgomery bus boycott, and armed with rudimentary knowledge of the movement tactic known as the sit-in, walked nervously up to the

“whites only” food counter at the Woolworth’s store in Greensboro, North Carolina, on 1 February 1960, and asked politely to be served. Like Rosa Parks, these young men (Izell Blair, Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, and David Richmond) were in the right place at the right time to run smack into a “history-making day.” The tactic was not new, but at that moment the act struck a chord with a new generation of young people. Soon the young men were joined by other students from their college. And those students were soon joined by students in other cities. Utilizing the black college network, a wave of student protest swept across the South. Within two weeks of the Greensboro action, sit-ins had spread to fifteen cities. By the end of March more than twenty northern college campuses were also involved. Within eighteen months sit-ins had spread to over one hundred cities in twenty states and involved more than seventy thousand demonstrators, most college and high school students. There were more than thirty-five hundred arrests for civil disobedience. Much of the effort in this particular use of the sit-in tactic was directed at private businesses, rather than the public facilities that had often been the main focus earlier. Targeting national chains like Woolworth’s and Kress department stores, these sit-ins pointed up corporate complicity in state-sanctioned segregation, and also helped spread the movement to the North where these large chains were picketed and boycotted in solidarity with southern antisegregation efforts.²⁰

In the South itself, one of the strongest local centers of student protest was Nashville, Tennessee. From there came one of the key movement music groups, the Nashville Quartet (James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette, Joseph Carter, and Samuel Collier). Their specialty was the popular music of black youth, “rhythm and blues.” The sit-ins announced that a new generation was now the cutting edge of the movement, and, fittingly, that generation added its music to the fray. Unlike the traditional songs, which often had a strong liberation component already built in, the adaptation of popular student music required more radical alterations. For example, popular singer Little Willie John had a hit song at the time called “You Better Leave My Kitten Alone.” It was a typical song of lover’s jealousy, warning a rival away from the singer’s girlfriend. But in the Nashville Quartet’s version, the “kitten” became “segregation,” and the “you” became plural: “You better leave segregation alone / because they [white folks] love segregation like a hound dog loves a bone.” I don’t know if the “hound dog” line is a little slap at Elvis Presley whose “hound

dog” sound was widely understood as ripping off black musical style, but the main message is clear: black folks had better leave segregation alone because white folks’ dogged attachment to it was a sign of what they had to lose.

The most adapted singer’s repertoire was no doubt that of rhythm and blues soul singer Ray Charles. His songs, blending the traditionally opposed forms of gospel (God’s music) and the blues (Devil’s music), appealed to young people in emotional and political transition. The Nashville Quartet, for example, celebrated the successful citywide integration of Nashville lunch counters with a new rendition of Charles’s song, “Moving On.” Ray had sung of moving on from a love affair gone bad. In the movement version, the bad relationship was with that embodiment of segregation, Jim Crow: “Segregation’s been here from time to time / but we just ain’t gonna pay it no mind // It’s moving on—It’s moving on—It’s moving . . . // Old Jim Crow’s moving on down the track / He’s got his bags and he won’t be back.” The song brings news of a new day, and the notion of “moving” captured perfectly the feeling of motion the movement embodied (it also worked nicely as a marching song, in which the phrase “we’re moving on” became literal). For the skeptics, the line is added: “Well I thought they was jiving about Jim Crow’s gone / but I went down to his house and he sure wasn’t home / He’s moving on.” Important here is the sense of personal witness. The movement workers had truly seen Jim Crow on the run, and they were going to continue to run him and his friends out of town.²¹

The thousands of sit-in participants clearly needed to be organized, and in stepped the organizer’s organizer, Ella Baker, to help that process along, with a fair amount of musical help. Baker persuaded SCLC to fund a conference of student leaders, held on 17 April 1960. While SCLC had originally hoped to form a kind of youth auxiliary, Baker and others argued for an independent student organization. Out of that meeting came the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “snick,” founded in 1961), the movement group that became the center of struggle in the years to come. The number of student participants never regained the level reached early in 1960. Instead, SNCC became a core group, never with more than a couple of hundred members, who spread throughout the South, bringing with them the message that building local, group-centered leadership, rather than a centralized organization, was the key to success.

Many SNCC veterans point to the freedom song sessions held by Highlander music director Guy Carawan as a powerful force in harmonizing the diverse group of students at the founding conference into an organization. Carawan also offered the youth movement a further gift, his "Ballad of the Sit-ins": "The time was 1960, the place the USA / February 1st became a history making day / Greensboro across the land the news spread far and wide / When silently and bravely youth took a giant stride."

It is revealing of the independent spirit that drove SNCC that this song, written by the white southerner Carawan, was quickly adapted and changed by the four young black members of the Nashville Quartet. The Nashville students both shifted it musically from ballad form to a complicated rhythm and blues arrangement, and dropped a key lyric. Carawan had written the line, "We are soldiers in the army of Martin Luther King." While the students respected King, they also distanced themselves from him, especially from the patriarchal style of leadership he and SCLC embodied. Some referred to him as "De Lawd," and they refused to sing the line about being in his army. Thus, the song embodies the dynamic by which important white contributions to the movement were always contextualized within what was at base a black liberation struggle.

Albany: The Singing Movement Comes of Age

While the sit-ins and their follow-up, the freedom rides, were dramatic actions garnering national media coverage, they were not typical of the movement's development. More typical was the slow, long-term process of community organizing. An example of this kind of work, which was also a high point in the freedom song movement, occurred in Albany, Georgia, in 1961 and 1962. Bernice Reagon offers numerous examples of freedom songs that evolved not only lyrically but musically as they moved from site to site of struggle. The high mark of this process was no doubt the Albany campaign as well. From Reagon's perspective, as well as the testimony of many others, the community of civil rights workers in Albany took over, deepened, and expanded the role of freedom songs as none had before. "The mass meetings always started with freedom songs. Most of the meeting was singing. Songs were the bed of everything."²² Even allowing for a little local bias (Reagon is from Albany), she makes an excellent case. Albany was the place where all the components of the freedom song repertoire coalesced into a kind of musical united front.

The old spirituals had deep resonance with the older members of the community, and again played a key role in bringing people together across class lines. Of course, the students brought their pop adaptations into full play (it didn't hurt that one of their favorite pop singers to adapt, Ray Charles, was born in Albany). Another key source for the freedom song repertoire that also received important makeovers in Albany was old labor songs like "Which Side Are You On?" The adult community was the backbone of the Albany movement, and all the freedom songs went through a new baptism into a deeper spirit coming out of a rich local tradition of religious singing.

The musical alliance that was Albany culminated in the formation of the most aggressive force yet for disseminating the power of freedom songs, the Freedom Singers (originally Chuck Neblett, Ruth Harris, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Cordell Reagon, and Berth Gober). While other musical groups, such as the Montgomery Gospel Trio, the Nashville Quartet, and so forth, had played important local roles, the power of music in the Albany campaign convinced SNCC that a musical group could play an even larger movement role. The Freedom Singers eventually crossed the country many times, singing the movement story and raising funds through their concerts. They were particularly effective in bringing movement messages to the North and to young people on college campuses. The Freedom Singers also became associated with a burgeoning white folk song revival centered in Greenwich Village, New York. That connection proved a key link in recruiting northern white students to the civil rights cause. Freedom Summer of 1964, a massive SNCC campaign that brought more than a thousand northern students to Mississippi for three months of intensive movement activity, was greatly facilitated by links the Freedom Singers had made. Freedom Summer in turn proved to be of immense importance as a training ground for many of the activists who built the full range of student, antiwar, women's liberation, gay liberation, and other movements of the 1960s.²³ The Freedom Singers gave institutional form to something that had already become clear: music was a vital political force in the movement.

White Terrorism and Litanies against Fear

"When you get together at a mass meeting you sing the songs which symbolize transformation, which make that revolution of courage inside you," said Bernice Johnson Reagon.²⁴ And, as movement historian Charles

Payne writes, "The music operated as a kind of litany against fear."²⁵ Or, as put in song: "Oh freedom over me, Oh freedom / I'll be buried in my grave before I'll be a slave / No segregation over me, No segregation / I'll be buried in my grave before I'll be a slave."²⁶ The brutal murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, a Chicago native visiting relatives in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1955 was in many respects an ordinary act of southern white terrorism. Estimates suggest that between the end of the Civil War and the 1950s, more than four thousand lynchings of blacks by whites occurred in America (most, but not all, in the South). Well into the twentieth century, lynching was a "spectator sport" enjoyed by all classes in the white community; whole families would come out to watch. Postcards of favorite lynchings were made to send to friends and relatives.²⁷ Thus, while Till's case was nothing new, the context of new times brought new attention to it. Till's twin "crimes"—allegedly speaking "fresh" to a white woman and mentioning that he had a white girlfriend back home in the North—were typical of the slight pretexts used to justify these murders. Till was taken out of his home late at night, tortured, mutilated, shot, and dumped in the Tallahatchie River with a weight attached to his body. The weight was not enough to keep the crime from surfacing, and when it did, it led to a trial that received national attention. The act was common enough that one local white man could muse that he didn't see what all the fuss was about since "that river is full of niggers."²⁸ What was new was not the act, but the national and even international attention that it drew. The shift in attitudes suggested by the *Brown v. Board of Education* victory in 1954 was further evidenced by media attention and some protestations of outrage from parts of the white community. Still, it was not enough, and despite confessing to the murder, the two men responsible were acquitted and "southern justice" affirmed.

The Till case was one of many atrocities of whites against blacks that gained attention or, more often, remained in obscurity during the movement years. At least two other murders of blacks, both tied, unlike Till, directly to movement activity, occurred in Mississippi in 1955 alone. The new level of black resistance in the wake of the *Brown* decision was matched by renewed white terror and organization. The white Citizens' Council, for example, emerged at this time. Described as combining "the agenda of the Klan with the demeanor of the Rotary" club, it provided a seemingly more respectable face for white supremacy, but was ready to

use any means necessary to maintain white power.²⁹ But each new act of terror and each new level of renewed white support for segregation was met with greater resolve and redoubled efforts by the antiracist forces of the movement. Many of the young women and men who formed the cadre of activists in the peak movement years of the early 1960s recalled seeing images of Till's dead, damaged body in the pages of *Jet* magazine. Some vowed then and there to avenge his death.³⁰ Till's story was kept alive by movement song activists, and later folk-rock singer Bob Dylan further immortalized him lyrically in his "Ballad of Emmett Till."

The unmistakable intended meaning of the Till murder and others like it is put succinctly by Charles Payne: "Black life could be snuffed out on whim, you could be killed because some ignorant white man didn't like the color of your shirt or the way you drove your wagon. . . . Those who wanted to work for change had to understand that they were challenging a system that could and would take their lives casually."³¹ Most of the imagined acts that allegedly precipitated lynching were as flimsy as the accusation used in the Till case. If one could be killed for an innocent remark, or in another contemporaneous case, for not getting out of the way of a white man driving his car, then how much more dangerous must it have been to openly challenge the racial hierarchy that random terror was meant to uphold. Imagine what danger faced a civil rights worker under such conditions. Virtually everyone who took up the civil rights cause in the South, black or white, was essentially put under threat of death. They could expect to lose their jobs, be beaten many times, have their homes fire-bombed or fired on in drive-by shootings, have threats made against the lives of their children and other relatives. If these acts of intimidation did not work, and for most they did not, then the next level was assassination. The list of those who died for the civil rights cause is a long one.

While song was not the only means by which fear was overcome, it appears again and again in accounts of that process. The "litanies against fear" that freedom songs became were an indispensable part of a deep-seated process of personal political transformation. As Bruce Hartford remembers it, "We were singing. . . . Somehow, I can't explain it, through the singing and the sense of solidarity we made a kind of psychological barrier between us and the mob. Somehow we made such a wall of strength that they couldn't physically push through it to hit us with their sticks. It wasn't visual, but you could almost see our singing and

our unity pushing them back.”³² Cordell Reagon’s choice of words is likewise revealing in this regard: “You know you are . . . going to get . . . beaten, you know you might even get killed, but the sound, the power of the community, was watching over you and keeping you safe.”³³ Note that it is “sound” that contains the power of community, the sound of the freedom songs.

The direct practical power of this singing as empowerment is illustrated by an occurrence during one of the dramatic follow-ups to the sit-in wave, the “freedom rides.” The freedom riders were black and white activists attempting to ride interstate buses across the South, stopping at and integrating bus stations along the way. The rides met with brutal resistance at virtually every stop. There were so many casualties among the CORE volunteers who started the rides that SNCC had to step in to replenish the ranks. After the bombing of buses in two cities, after brutal beatings in other cities, the freedom riders crossed the border into the most vicious state in all the South, Mississippi. One of the ride organizers, CORE’s James Farmer, recalls that crossing: “Our hearts jumped into our mouths. The Mississippi National Guard flanked the highway, their guns pointed toward the forest on both sides of the road. One of the riders broke out singing, and we all picked it up. I remember the words: ‘I’m taking a ride on the Greyhound bus line / I’m riding the front seat to Jackson this time / Hallelujah I’m a traveling / Hallelujah ain’t it fine / Hallelujah I’m a traveling / Down freedom’s main line.’”³⁴ This spontaneous generation of new verses helped calm the fear by reminding the freedom riders that they had been there before, and they had survived. At the same time, it incorporated the new foe into the familiar terrain of the foe already met and faced down, and thereby cut the enemy down to size.

Another kind of song used against white terrorism was the parody. These songs seem aimed at demystifying whites, showing their hypocrisy and the relative poverty of their motives in the struggle. This song, for example, was sung to the tune “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know”: “Jesus loves me cause I’m white / Lynch me a nigger every night. / Hate the Jews and I hate the Pope / Jes’ me and my rope. / Jesus loves me, the Citizens’ Council told me so.” And here is a rather different verse sung to “We Shall Overcome”: “Deep in my heart, I do believe / We shall keep the niggers down / They will never be free-eee-eee / They will never be registered, / We shall keep the niggers down.”³⁵ As Charles Payne notes,

much of the humor in these songs was “an attack on fear.” The Klan and the Citizens’ Councils that held people in thrall were made less threatening. The courage to take on the life-threatening task of organizing could be gently instilled.

The Western tradition as embodied in the English language makes a series of reductive oppositional concepts that make little sense in the context of the civil rights movement. Practical/idealistic, transcendent/immanent, sacred/secular, spiritual/political, these oppositions make little sense in a movement where transcendence, idealism, and spirituality generated great, immanent, practical, earthly power. “Over my head I see freedom in the air.” There is a transcendence of self here that is also an immanent sense of personal power. It is not transcendence based necessarily in faith in a reward somewhere else. Traditional religion could offer that. It was very much a sense of power and satisfaction and personal reward felt in the moment, in the movement. Freedom songs deepened the sense of religious devotion in those whose connection to the movement was rooted in Christianity, but it also worked on the spirit of those with more secular orientations. Transcendence was immanent in the fight. Freedom was in the air freedom fighters breathed, not up in heaven. One verse that might otherwise seem strange makes perfect sense in this context: “we’ll never turn back until we’ve all been free.” Note that it is not until all “are free” but all have “been free.” The movement didn’t just talk about freedom, it gave it. Being free was part of the experience of the movement. But “freedom is a constant struggle,” not a state achieved once and for all. At the deepest level, that sense of freedom came from overcoming the fear of death. While transcending the fear of death is often discussed as a metaphysical issue, in the movement it was very much a practical political issue. Fear, including the ultimate fear of death, had long been and was still a tool of white oppression. Without the ability to overcome that fear, there would have been no civil rights movement, no matter what political opportunities or economic structures came into place.

Music as Strategy and Tactic

The movement did not happen because black people just “woke up one morning with their minds set on freedom.” “Freedom is a constant struggle.” “You have to keep your eyes on the prize,” not “let anybody turn you round.” You have to know “which side you’re on,” “never turn back

until we've all been free and we have equality." "We shall not be moved." "Ninety-nine and half percent" of commitment won't do. "You better leave segregation alone."

These are lines quoted or paraphrased from freedom songs, rearranged a bit and with a few prepositional phrases to provide continuity. I mean to suggest in this way that a good many ideas about movement needs, values, tactics, and ideology were conveyed and reiterated through song. In addition to the key role of fighting off paralyzing fear, songs played other strategic and tactical roles. As Charles Payne notes, "The changing fortunes of the movement and the morale of its participants could have been gauged by the intensity of the singing at the meetings. Music had always been a central part of the black religious experience. Ministers knew that a good choir was a good recruiting device. In the same fashion, many who came to meetings came just to hear the singing."³⁶

This is music that bypasses the commercial interests of the music industry, and it also downplays the importance of singing expertise. Singing in the black tradition is very much a participatory event. Thus, going to a meeting, even just to listen, could quickly lead to deeper levels of involvement. Get their voices, one might say, and their politics will follow. Music becomes more deeply ingrained in memory than mere talk, and this quality made it a powerful organizing tool. It is one thing to hear a political speech and remember an idea or two. It is quite another to sing a song and have its politically charged verses become emblazoned on your memory. In singing you take on a deeper level of commitment to an idea than if you only hear it spoken of. The movement was all about "commitment," and singing was often a halfway house to commitment.

Music could be used to deepen specific kinds of engagement as well. Mississippi organizer Sam Block, for example, recalls using songs strategically to ease people into greater degrees of leadership. He recalls that freedom songs were important as "an organizing tool to bring people together—not only to bring them together but also the organizational glue to hold them together. I started to give people the responsibility of thinking about a song they would want to sing that night and of changing that song, you know, from a gospel song [to a freedom one]."³⁷ This deepening of commitment through song had much to do with the body as well. Civil rights workers spoke often of "putting your body on the line" for the cause. Bodies were literally the weapon of the movement,

and "on the line" often meant in the line of fire, for fists, firehoses, spit, and sometimes bullets. The act of singing, as Bernice Reagon describes so well, is also a deeply physical thing. To let your voice go, to put it "out there," was also in meetings a kind of rehearsal for, and in demonstrations an act of, putting your body on the line. The sense of personal power felt in the act of singing in full resonance among a mass of fellows was translated into movement power on the front lines. Reagon recalls a voter registration meeting in 1962 in which "the Negroes began to sing. The voices that were weak at first gained strength as they moved up the scale with the old familiar words 'We are climbing Jacob's ladder.'" When the local sheriff came to disrupt the meeting, the singing grew stronger, culminating in a rousing chorus of "We Shall Overcome" as the sheriff retreated.

Beyond helping recruitment and deepening commitment, music served to convey the key values and tactics of the movement. Kerran Sanger notes that often the order of verses in a song enacted a move from abstractions (freedom, equality) to concrete acts to secure that value (sitting in, going to jail, breaking an injunction).³⁸ Various kinds of mass demonstrations, from marches to civil disobedience actions, were central to the movement. Initially, most demonstrations were silent, since any sign of "rowdiness" would be used as a pretext for assault. Songs were first used only in rallies and in workshops teaching nonviolence. But eventually it became clear that they could become key elements in demonstrations and civil disobedience actions. Any time large numbers of black people gathered in the South, they were viewed as a threat, as a potential mob. Singing (along with prayer) became a perfect way both to keep a mass from becoming a mob, and to convey to opponents that one was witnessing an organized event, not a mob action. Songs conveyed messages of quiet defiance, not rage, and clarified the values, stakes, and issues of the action. Singing could be both a rehearsal for collective activity and a direct part of the action. Singers are not generally imagined as threatening figures. By their very posture and activity, the singing activists conveyed their nonviolent intentions.

Songs were often the primary means to convey this difficult idea of nonviolent struggle. Nonviolence was a core value of the movement, but like much else it was interpreted differently by different civil rights workers. For some it was a deeply held, often religious principle. For others, its value was primarily tactical. In some situations, particularly

in rural areas, activists were sometimes forced to carry guns in self-defense, even as they remained committed to nonviolence in their movement actions. Especially in a situation where the opponent had a near monopoly on the tools of violence, and where the use of that violence was often legitimated by public opinion, nonviolence is a powerful weapon. Many songs juxtapose acts of violence on the part of the segregationists to the nonviolence of the protesters: "We've met jail and violence too / But God's love has seen us through," or "We're gonna board that big Greyhound / Carrying love from town to town." These verses, both from "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," refer to the movement's adaptation of Christian love for one's enemies, as interpreted through the long tradition of pacifism. Love was almost as great a theme as freedom in the movement, used effectively to contrast with the hate unleashed by white supremacy in the form of police dog attacks, beatings, and myriad other forms of violence.

When situations did threaten to get out of control of the organizers, music could also serve more proactively as a tactic to change the mood and thereby the action of the participants. Music could calm a tense situation. Or music could ignite a tired mass. Sometimes the same song could do either, depending on the tempo and spirit with which it was sung. There is no such thing as a definitive version of a freedom song, because they were constantly adapted to the needs of particular situations, conditions, and locales.

"We Shall Not Be Moved": Communicating outside the Movement

That the freedom songs played many and varied roles internally in the movement is abundantly clear. But what about songs as a means of communicating to the worlds outside the movement? Did the music have the power to transform people not involved in the movement? Out-right racist defenders of white supremacy were largely immune to that power, though a few stories of such extreme conversions can be found. But among those undecided, those unsure of how to think about the movement, the effect could be quite significant. Many, many accounts exist of bystanders being deeply moved by the dignity and power of the protesters in song. As one activist put it, "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 change people—individual people.

The people can change governments."³⁹ In particular, the movement's singing power had an impact on the press, whose surprising degree of sympathy for the civil rights activists is neither typical nor predictable, given the norms of the profession. Compared to political rhetoric, with which most white reporters had the familiarity that breeds contempt, movement music was something else, a different register of ideas and feelings against which the press had fewer built-in defenses. One white southern journalist recalls that the "songs, the mass meetings, not only made common place rituals of the society I lived in, the white society, seem pale by contrast, but spoke a condemnation that made them too, unpalatable."⁴⁰ Stories are also told of jailers and police sometimes moved by the songs to lessen their brutality. Southern wardens often seemed to enjoy the singing as a change from the dull routines of prison life, little suspecting that they were witnessing not "darkies" singing but activists communicating.

The nature of the audience of movement songs is a complicated question. On the one hand, lyrical phrases like "We shall not be moved" seem like statements directed at outsiders. But more often they seem to me to be directed internally as a reminder not to "be moved." Similarly, we hear the phrase "We are not afraid," and this seems at once wishful thinking and a truth. Or, more properly, it is wishful thinking becoming truth as the act of singing itself gives the courage not initially felt. Movement songs seldom seem directly aimed at outsiders, because to do so would be to lessen the activists' sense of their own power. It was more as if they were willing to be overheard making their musical declarations.

The more important outside audience for freedom songs was no doubt the fence-sitters, sympathetic perhaps but confused, frightened, or just not yet knowledgeable enough concerning what the movement was all about. James Farmer, in jail during the freedom rides, rewrote the 1930s labor song, "Which Side Are You On?" as a freedom song with just this kind of work in mind: "I rewrote the old labor song . . . on the spur of the moment in the Hinds County jail. After the Freedom Riders who were imprisoned [with me] had been discussing and speculating about the attitude of local Negroes regarding the Freedom Rides." With this in mind, his rewrite directly challenges the fence-sitters: "They say in Hinds County, no neutrals have we met / You're either for the Freedom Ride or you 'tom' for [segregationist governor] Ross Barnett // Oh people can you stand it, tell me how you can / Will you be an Uncle Tom or will

you be a man?" Challenging white-subservient "Uncle Toms" was the most aggressive form of address to those not yet in the movement. More common were songs of invitation, or songs that acknowledged levels of commitment. A good example occurs in the song "I'm on My Way to Freedom Land": "I'll ask my brother to come with me / I'm on my way, Great God, I'm on my way // If he can't come, I'm gonna go anyhow... // If you can't go, don't hinder me // ... If you can't go, let your children go, / I'm on my way, Great God, I'm on my way to freedom land."⁴¹ This lyric allows three levels of commitment: "come with me," or at least "don't hinder me" (perhaps by being an informer); and if you can't help, at least "let your children go." This last line is especially important because as the movement became youth-driven in many places after 1960, generational conflict became a vital issue. The best young organizers were those who built upon the knowledge and organizational base of the World War II generation of activists in order to help bridge this gap. A brilliant practitioner of this was young black organizer Bob Moses, who after leaving graduate school at Harvard to join SNCC, worked closely and respectfully with the older Mississippi veteran activist Amzie Moore. As Charles Payne characterizes it, "Older activists [had] created... cooptable networks, and a younger generation found new uses for them."⁴² In this process as in so many others, music proved a useful bridging tool to bring older people in or at least to let their "children go" to movement land.

Music, Collectivity, and Identity

Beyond particular strategic needs, music strengthened and transformed personal and collective identity for movement workers. One of the main dynamics in any social movement is the relationship between individual and collective identity. People enter movements as individuals, and must continue to feel a sense of individual commitment, but at the same time they must gain a sense of collective identity as part of the group effort that is the defining feature of movements. The civil rights movement handled this delicate balance of individualism and collectivity better than most movements, and once again, music played a significant role. Listen, for example, to this line from the most famous song in movement repertoire, "We Shall Overcome": "Deep in my heart I do believe, we shall overcome some day." Note how the line starts with an individualized statement of commitment "I do believe," then shifts to

the collective with "we shall overcome." The song actually began its life as a black spiritual, "I'll Be Alright," and was adapted in 1945 by the mostly black, mostly female members of a tobacco union in Charlotte, North Carolina. It was they who turned the "I'll" to "We" to support their collective union struggle. The song received further refinement and adaptation to the civil rights struggle by Zilphia Horton, the first music director at Highlander. She taught it to folksinger Pete Seeger who in turn taught it in 1950 to the man who became Highlander's second music director, Guy Carawan. But it was not until 1960, when Carawan held a South-wide song workshop, that the song started to gain a central role in the movement. Three weeks after that, it was a featured song at the founding SNCC convention. In making it their own, the students further changed it musically and lyrically. Thus, the song most identified with the collective identity of the movement evolved through many *individuals* contributing to its creation.

Music, of course, was not the only force in shaping movement identities, but it clearly was among the most powerful. Bernice Reagon beautifully illustrates, for example, how a moment of musical improvisation can be a direct outgrowth of, and contributor to, collective action, even as it also brings personal transformation. In the midst of a tense moment during the struggle in Albany, Reagon recalls: "Charlie Jones looked at me and said, 'Bernice, sing a song.' And I started 'Over My Head I See Trouble in the Air.' By the time I got to where 'trouble' was supposed to be, I didn't see any trouble, so I put 'freedom' in there."⁴³ I suggest that in the moment, Reagon is not simply expressing a change of feeling, but enacting it as the music changes her. As she describes it: "The voice I have now I got the first time I sang in a movement meeting, after I got out of jail. I did the song, 'Over My Head I See Freedom in the Air,' but I had never heard that voice before. I had never been that me before. And once I became that me, I have never let that me go."⁴⁴ The notion of being born again in the spirit is deep in certain Christian traditions. As Reagon suggests, the movement bred such feelings too. The sense of a freedom deeper than freedom pervades the stories told by movement folks. The word *transcendence* is usually used to describe something above and beyond mere politics. But in the movement, transcendence of self was also a discovery of self. Gaining a sense of "somebodiness" that was so crucially a part of the movement's work often came paradoxically when the self was given up to a larger whole, a collective spirit.

The claiming of a positive sense of blackness is often credited to the black power phase of the African American freedom struggle in the latter part of the 1960s, but the civil rights years laid down some important elements of that identity reclamation project. And music was a key part of that project. For many southern blacks, particularly those from the middle classes, the great spirituals and gospel songs reworked by the movement were part of a heritage they sought to deny in favor of cultural forms with more cachet in the white world. For many movement participants, reclaiming freedom songs was part of claiming an identity as self-defined black people proud of their ancestry, rather than as white-defined "Negroes." The urban black power identity, discussed in the next chapter, owes more of a debt to the civil rights phase of the movement than is generally acknowledged.

Charles Payne summarizes this evolutionary process as embodied in the music and other rituals of local mass meetings: "Mixtures of the sacred and the profane, the mass meetings could be a very powerful social ritual. They attracted people and then helped them develop a sense of involvement and solidarity. By acting out new definitions of their individual and collective selves, people helped make those selves become real. Informed and challenged by the speakers, pumped up by the singing and the laughing and the sense of community, many of those who only meant to go once out of curiosity left that first meeting thinking they might come once more, just to see."⁴⁵ And that "once more" often became many more, and that performed self-singing became the real self acting for change.

Music as Captivity Narrative

Why *freedom* songs? Why not justice songs, or equality songs, or some other term? *Freedom* was the touchstone word of the movement. The songs and the movement had an elective affinity: freedom was from the beginning a major theme of the movement, but the songs played a role in making that concept even more central to movement ideology. Why was that word so important? It had both breadth and depth. First, there was the historical depth, the resonance with the major fact of black history, slavery, as we have already discussed. In addition, the term points to an open-ended present and future; it could mean many things in the imaginations of many different participants and potential partici-

pants. *Freedom* was also one of the few political words almost universally embraced by Americans, at least in theory. *Equality*, probably the only competitor for the label, is by comparison, a far more controversial concept. Perhaps most important, in the South the concept of freedom had great resonance because all black people in the region had felt deeply a sense of unfreedom, had felt fettered by having to restrain and contain themselves in order to play the roles demanded by a segregated society. While equality might have suggested a desire to be like white people, freedom suggested an open horizon to explore the many realms that had been declared out of bounds to black people. Freedom worked on many levels, from the most intimate to the most broadly public.

There is another, more specific way in which freedom resonated especially well in the movement. One of the most important sites for both the composition and singing of freedom songs was jail. Much of the movement was based on the tactic of nonviolent civil disobedience, the purposeful breaking of a law judged to be unjust. Since the whole system of segregation was unjust to blacks, occasions for going to jail were many. Beyond that, the entire civil rights movement was essentially declared illegal by the white southern power structure that harassed activists constantly, arresting them for petty or made-up offenses above and beyond acts of civil disobedience. Going to jail, therefore, was a major fact of life for movement participants, and it could be the most grueling and dangerous part of the work. It could be particularly frightening for those raised with conservative religious views. Thus, several songs have God endorsing and even demanding the experience: "Well, have you been to jail? certainly Lord, / Certainly, certainly, certainly Lord."⁴⁶

Freedom songs also became a favorite way to pass time, maintain solidarity, keep spirits high, and communicate while in jail. Incarceration also provided long hours of time to write, rewrite, and otherwise develop the freedom song tradition. "We were in the Hinds County jail, and we were fasting and singing all the time. We were in separate cells, but we could sing to each other so it wasn't bad."⁴⁷ Another account shows how music kept solidarity alive even in solitary confinement. Bob Zellner, a white southern movement activist, was placed in solitary after being threatened with castration by other white prisoners. His movement mate Chuck McDew was placed in solitary at the same time. They were in five-by-seven-foot cells with only a five-inch-square ventilation opening

and a small grate in the ceiling. Zellner heard a familiar whisper coming from the ceiling, and realized McDew was in the cell directly above him: "Then we sang. As the police pounded on the door threatening to whip us we sang 'Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Set on Freedom.' Even after they turned the heaters on and blasted us with unbearable heat for seven days, we continued to sing—'We'll walk hand in hand.'"⁴⁸

Freedom songs did some of their best work in jail where they made all the more palpable the feeling that freedom was in the air, air that could move freely, like the mind and the spirit, out of the confines of a prison cell or the prison house of a racist society.

Musical Pleasures

In stressing the important, even instrumental role music played in the movement, one should remember that singing could be a plain old source of pleasure and recreation. Movement work was often unimaginably arduous. In such a context, but in any movement context really, there needs to be time for pleasure and relaxation. And there too music was often the key. In addition to songs drawn into the movement for specific practical uses, there was music around just for fun. SNCC activist and later U.S. congressional representative John Lewis recalls that in addition to the freedom songs, and sometimes as a respite from them, he spent many a long drive down country roads listening to the latest pop songs on local radio stations, especially with the emergence of "soul" music in the 1960s.

"Soul" music later became, according to former Black Panther leader Elaine Brown, the "soundtrack" to the black power movement and may have, to a far lesser degree, played a political role in that phase of the black freedom struggle. But in the context of the civil rights struggle, it was more often the soundtrack used to forget the movement for a while. Some pop songs, like Ray Charles's "Hit the Road, Jack," which became "Get Your Rights, Jack," or Harry Belafonte's "Banana Boat Song," which found a freedom rider version, did become part of the freedom song repertoire. But Lewis's point is that the hard, patient, dangerous work of organizing was grueling, and any movement that does not leave room for just plain fun is likely to burn out its participants. Given the constant threat they faced, this need was particularly strong in those freedom fighters in the rural deep South, but everywhere music was in the air,

sometimes even in the form of freedom from freedom songs with their powerfully disturbing reminders of the struggle.⁴⁹

Singing as and against Ideology

"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. And on the other hand in her speeches there is the constant thunder of and drive of music."⁵⁰ Fannie Lou Hamer was not alone in being able to turn a series of songs into political speech. Many organizers learned to do something like this. The movement's best organizers understood that success required an unusual degree of openness in terms of movement ideology and strategy. Situations varied so much from state to state, county to county, and between rural and urban black communities, not to mention the varied class, gender, sexual, and educational backgrounds that further complicated organizing. A single approach to ideology and struggle would most certainly have failed to create the solidarity necessary to succeed. Given this situation, songs were uniquely suited as organizing tools. As we saw, sometimes people would just come for the music, and then find themselves drawn into the fray before they knew it. Movement ideas could be conveyed to the illiterate and to the literate who were deeply rooted in an oral tradition.

The larger point here is that music, as the center but hardly the whole of the movement culture, functioned as an overarching site. It served not only as an active tactical force and strategic unifier but also, more fundamentally, as a baseline context in which differences could coexist. Movement cultures function best when they both express and move beyond ideology. Ideologies—elaborated key ideas and values—are crucially important to any movement. But they are also often the points of contention that pull movements apart. The very vagueness (or more positively, open-endedness) of "cultural" forms, which has kept many social scientists from examining them seriously as a movement force, is precisely one of their virtues. Sometimes open-ended expressions can do work that more precise forms cannot. The "freedom" in freedom songs was never very precisely defined. As we have seen, it could be made very concrete in particular situations, such as the freedom to be served respectfully at a lunch counter. But it could also mean many things to

many different people. Freedom songs formed the core of an extraordinarily rich movement culture that harmonized diverse constituencies, values, strategies, tactics, and goals, and in doing so they became a central force in moving this nation further down that long, unfinished journey to a place beyond racism.

From Freedom Songs to Power Plays

The accomplishments of the civil rights movement between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s are quite astonishing. Two major federal civil rights acts in 1964 and 1965 greatly extended rights for all Americans, especially for people of color. By the late 1960s the vicious system of legal segregation in the South had been almost totally dismantled, and with it much of the systematic white terrorism that stood behind it. The Citizenship Schools and Freedom Schools that grew up during the movement had also by mid-decade laid the groundwork for the radical reworking of black history that was a key stage in the evolution of what we now call "multiculturalism." Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the effect of the civil rights movement in transforming American culture. Yet its limitations must also be confronted. For many participants who could not see the long-term impact of their actions, the movement seemed as much a failure as a success by the mid-1960s. More recently, the movement has borne the burden of mainstream acceptance, becoming hallowed as an American success story by the very forces of complacency that stood in the 1960s and stand now in the way of further progress toward racial justice. The movement has become a museum piece, its radical power stuck in amber, its meanings reduced to Martin Luther King Day platitudes. This process of denying or forgetting the radical dimensions of the movement began already in the late 1960s when new, allegedly more radical forces arose in challenge.

On the Meredith march, one of the last great events of the civil rights phase, SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael scripted a performance that would signal a shift to new sites and styles of black struggle. Carmichael planned his speech for the rally that night as a direct counter to and challenge of Martin Luther King's leadership of the march. Carmichael's chosen method of combat was a battle of key words. In such rallies, it was common for a speaker to shout, in call and response style, "What do we want?" to which the traditional civil rights response was "Freedom now!" But on this night Carmichael had asked his comrade Willie

Ricks to seed the audience with people armed with a different script. Timed to Carmichael's call, Ricks and others shouted back not "Freedom now!" but rather "Black power! Black power!" The phrase quickly drew media attention, and was read as signaling a split in the movement. As open-ended as the term *freedom*, the phrase *black power* came to have a dizzying array of meanings, but at that moment it did indeed signal a sea change in the movement.⁵¹

The civil rights movement had always been about power. It wielded its power quite successfully in all the ways discussed here, and more important, it empowered thousands of ordinary African Americans. But especially for those on the front lines of SNCC and others among the hardcore organizers, the accomplishments seemed thin compared to the sacrifice, and the emotional and physical scars ran deep. In relation to the abiding poverty and continuing racism in the South and the North, they did not feel very powerful. These people understood better than most the work still undone. They particularly understood it when they looked to the northern ghettos where a long period of freedom from legal segregation had not removed other deep economic, political, and cultural forces of racial injustice. Drawing strength from the southern struggle even as it strongly critiqued it, the black power phase of black struggle took center stage.