

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? Outright 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