“We Shall Overcome!”: The Call For Civil Rights In The 1960s

The 1960s was one of several eras thus far in American history in which Americans saw significant changes in the attitudes of societal affairs. One of the most notable things that changed was the overall attitude towards war. Until it was realized that the Vietnam Conflict may not be a winnable war as the Operation of Rolling Thunder of 1965 in Vietnam dragged on, Americans believed that we could win any war. In addition, because of Walter Cronkite's live reports from Vietnam and how they offered a different perspective than those given by political leaders, Americans began to question our country's dictation in foreign affairs. Together, Americans of all ages, primarily the Baby Boom generation--members of a massive generational cohort which began after World War II, protested the war by burning their draft cards, picketing, or defying their commander in combat. This was not the only thing in the 1960s that America transformed over. One other notable transformation was the issue of civil rights, which is the focus of this essay.

During the conservative and Communist-hysteria era of the 1950s, African Americans single-handedly achieved some civil rights victories. For instance, in 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States declared segregation in schools unconstitutional in the Brown v. Board of Education. In 1956, the Supreme Court of the United States declared segregation of buses in Montgomery, Alabama, unconstitutional, due to the boycott of the Montgomery Bus Company. Yet, the practices of Jim Crow remained after the rulings. In addition, people were reluctant to participate in a civil rights movement because of the power and influence of McCarthyism. However, after U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy's homeland communist inquisition was deemed
ridiculous towards the end of the 1950s, worries about being labeled a communist for advocating civil rights waned.

At this time, the civil rights movement was developing. Although many know that the movement was a difficult and long process, a general historical synopsis of the movement may not touch upon how activists remained motivated to continue on through all of the hardships they faced and what influences brought Whites and African-Americans together. Protest music—which consisted primarily of lyrically-revised traditional African-American church hymns and spirituals, and topical folk music, became an influential tool for the movement between the Freedom Rides of 1961 and the Selma March of 1965 that: encouraged activists to continue fighting against hard oppression; helped bring the African-American and White communities together; help redefine themselves in positive terms for their sake and to help explain to listeners the current injustices and oppressors of society; and compelled Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson to notice its wielding influence, pushing them to push forth civil rights legislation that put an end to Jim Crow laws in the south that had segregated society since 1876.

When the civil rights movement developed into an emerging massive movement with the lunch counter sit-ins throughout the south in 1960, the United States was in a Cold War with the Soviet Union over ideologies of economics, politics, etc. Because it was feared that Russia would spread communism to the United States because Eastern European countries fell into Russia's Soviet Union, a second red scare arose in the late-1940s. Soon, the scare was later dubbed “McCarthyism,” named after U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy who took control of the scare by leading a homeland search for communist people or activity. African Americans were rather scared to demand civil rights at the time because in the 1930s, the Communist Party was
an advocate for civil rights.¹ Mary L. Dudziak, a Professor of Law who is erudite on the relationship between the civil rights movement in the United States and United States law, points out in her book *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, that with McCarthyism, "...critics of American society often found themselves labeled as 'subversive.' Civil rights groups had to walk a fine line, making it clear that their reform efforts were meant to fill out the contours of American democracy, and not to challenge or undermine it."² However, after McCarthyism declined in the late-1950s as claims of who was communist became overwhelmingly irrational, civil rights advocates were less concerned about speaking out against the status quo. Yet anti-communist feelings were still strong in society, and there was uncertainty among civil rights activists as to how to construct a unified movement that wouldn't cause a stir, especially within the Black church.

In her article “Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement,” Dr. Allison Calhoun-Brown, an Associate Professor of Political Science at Georgia State University, argues that the Black church was one of few places where oppression was nonexistent. As the leading institution in the African American community, she argues that it was a place of stability and strength-building because they were interested in “securing and guaranteeing freedom of black people.”³ Yet, the church was hesitant to participate. Dr. Peter J. Paris, a Professor of Social Ethics at the Boston University School of Theology, is quoted in Calhoun-Brown's article, arguing that the church had a ‘loyalty’ to the laws and customs of the

nation.\textsuperscript{4} However, the church was more willing to support the movement when missionary and civil rights activist James Lawson preached about a familiar and effective method for civil rights legislation that would become the key method in the movement.

During his missionary trip to India in 1952, Lawson studied Gandhi’s method of nonviolence and how he used it to gain India independence from Great Britain. Lawson argued in a \textit{New York Times} article on May 28, 1961, “Only through nonviolent demonstrations…can we accomplish our purpose. It is only when the hostility comes to the surface that the people see the character of our nation. The chances are that without people being hurt we cannot solve the problem.”\textsuperscript{5} After meeting Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., an early civil rights activist and a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1957, he was encouraged to make his case to college students at African-American colleges throughout the south to develop a unified movement using Gandhi's method.\textsuperscript{6} Lawson went to Nashville and became partners with Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, who was the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Nashville. While Smith aided in a drive for voter registration for local African-Americans, Lawson held workshops on nonviolence in the basement of the First Baptist Church, beginning in the fall of 1959. According to Tennessee4me, a website sponsored by the Tennessee State Museum, African-American college students who attended the workshops "would listen to a speaker talk about non-violence protests. Other times they would act out protest scenes. They

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learned to look straight ahead, not talking, not making eye contact...they were taught never to respond to violence with violence.\(^7\)

Martin Luther King Jr., too, traveled down south. King visited the Highlander Folk School in New Market, Tennessee, for their 25th Anniversary celebration, on Labor Day weekend in 1957. The school, which had been known around the area as the center of political activity since the 1940s, was focused on pushing for better adult literacy and voter registration for African Americans.\(^8\) At the celebration, King heard folk singer Pete Seeger do a folk rendition of the African American spiritual “We Will Overcome,” under the title of “We Shall Overcome,” in an effort to help blossom the recent efforts in civil rights.\(^9\) The chorus is as follows:

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\begin{align*}
\text{We shall all be free} \\
\text{We shall all be free} \\
\text{We shall all be free some day} \\
\text{Oh, deep in my heart} \\
\text{I do believe} \\
\text{We shall overcome} \\
\text{some day}^{10}
\end{align*}
\]

Music journalist Hardeep Phull notes in his book *Story Behind the Protest Song: A Reference Guide to the 50 Songs That Changed the 20th Century*, that the song may have struck a sense of familiarity among some in the crowd because "We Will Overcome" was an anthem at the school

\(^7\) “Non-Violence Training,” The Tennessee State Museum, accessed October 31, 2013, [http://www.tn4me.org/article.cfm/era_id/3/major_id/11/minor_id/31/a_id/113](http://www.tn4me.org/article.cfm/era_id/3/major_id/11/minor_id/31/a_id/113)


for the labor movement of the 1940s, and it served as a sense of religious comfort in the south in the 1900s, under the title "I'll Overcome Someday."\[^{11}\]

The church was more willing to support the civil rights movement when activist and folk musician Guy Carawan turned the civil rights movement into a singing movement. After becoming the music director of the school in 1959, Carawan was determined to find a way to blossom the movement through a personal and emotional connection. On Christmas Eve 1959, he had an awakening experience when he attended a service at the Moving Star Hall in Johns Island, South Carolina. Carawan was amazed at how the elements of the service, particularly the singing, brought an intense unity and energy:

> It really changed my life...this service was the most moving and democratic form of worship I had ever encountered. Every person in the hall took a turn praying, giving a testimony, or preaching a short sermon. Each segment was supported by vigorous 'bearing up' from the congregation and followed by an a cappella song--an old hymn, a spiritual, or a more modern gospel song--and would usually slowly build in pace, spirit, and volume until people were on their feet 'shouting.' I recognized that something very special was taking place in that hall and in that community. Here was the richness of an incredible African-American heritage and a courageous campaign to participate in the modern and changing world by gaining literacy skills and becoming registered voters.\[^{12}\]

Also, while in New York City in 1952, Carawan recounts Pete Seeger and the Jewish Young Folksingers “singing to express the feelings of people, seeing great numbers of people singing to express their feelings together and create a sense of cohesion.” In addition, music helped unite people at the school for the Labor Movement in the 1940s.\[^{13}\]

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\[^{11}\] Hardeep Phull, *Story Behind the Protest Song*, 1.
knowledge, he believed that there was opportunity for “a great singing movement in the Negro struggle.”

Carawan began developing a singing movement by creating a music program in which workshops would be held at the school. At these workshops, student activist leaders from different colleges throughout the south worked with people from the school to lyrically rework African American hymns and spirituals into songs for civil rights, and teach it to their communities. Then, students would merge the knowledge and lessons they learned at the nonviolence workshops and the music workshops. As the movement progressed, this concept of using African American spirituals and hymns would become key in uniting the African-American community. In her article "Functions of Freedom Singing in the Civil Rights Movement: The Activists' Implicit Rhetorical Theory," Dr. Kerran L. Sanger, an Associate Professor of Communication at Buffalo State College, offers a rhetorical perspective on African American protest music. She argues that African American hymns and spirituals were used because it was "a medium that would reach out to and address Blacks from varied backgrounds." This would seem likely because, as previously stated: the church was one of few places African Americans weren't oppressed, the church was interested in advancing the rights of African Americans, and music was an integral part of services.

In April 1960 at the student civil rights group conference where groups talked about the current lunch counter sit-ins, exchanged ideas about protesting, and where to protest next, everyone connected personally and emotionally when “We Shall Overcome” was performed.

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Student activist Jane Stembridge recalls that it was ‘the most inspiring moment. It was just people releasing their common vision in that song.’ By the end of the conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was created.\(^\text{17}\) As an organization whose focus it was to educate African Americans about their basic freedoms, the SNCC decided to educate others about the movement by creating the Freedom Singers: Charles Neblett, Bernice Johnson, Cordell Reagon, and Rutha Mae Harris.\(^\text{18}\) Through concerts of the movement's protest song repertoire, the Freedom Singers not only sent an emotional and personal invitation for students at roughly 200 college campuses to join the movement, but donations from concerts provided the funding needed to make the movement happen.\(^\text{19}\) Dr. Sanger argues that these songs, which served as a form of communication, were “designed to encourage particular kinds of behaviors and actions…to invite and inspire through freedom rides, marches and imprisonment.”\(^\text{20}\) With this peaceful way of mobilizing the community, African-American churches throughout the south and north joined the civil rights cause; however, they were adamant in remaining within the bounds of the law.

Because the church was concerned about remaining within the law, activists were continually conscious about state and federal laws. In the then recent \textit{Boynton V. Virginia} court case, it was ruled in the December of 1960 that Virginia's Jim Crow laws on interstate buses, bus terminal rooms and restaurants, violated the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887.\(^\text{21}\) With this knowledge, on May 4, 1961, activists known as the "Freedom Riders," supported by the

\(^{20}\) Sanger, “Functions of Freedom Singing in the Civil Rights Movement,” 181.
Congress Of Racial Equality (CORE), traveled on Greyhound and Trailways buses in groups from cities in-between Washington D.C. and Jackson, Mississippi, to protest the Jim Crow laws that segregated bus and terminal services. The Freedom Riders designed the Freedom Rides campaign in such a way to grab attention. As word spread about the Freedom Riders, activists were met with angry, riotous White mobs. The media got word of the activity and were reporting on the Freedom Riders. In an article in the May 28, 1961, issue of *The New York Times*, the Freedom Riders arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, in a red and white Trailways bus, riding “smoothly along behind…forty-two…highway patrol cruisers…and sang with forced gaiety “Hallelujah, I’m a-Traveling.”22 When the first bus was forced to stop and the Freedom Riders were thrown into jail, reporters, policemen, and bystanders, heard them sing “Hallelujah, I’m a Traveling,” which the published edition was published by Harry McClintock and Harry Raymond. A verse and the chorus is as follows:

   **Verse:**
   
   *I'm paying my fare on the Greyhound Bus line*
   *I'm riding the front seat to Montgomery this time.*

   **Chorus:**
   
   *Hallelujah, I'm a-traveling*
   *Hallelujah, ain't it fine.
   *Hallelujah, I'm a-traveling down freedom's main-line.*23

   Such encouraging music motivated others to participate in the rides, even with the fact that another bomb could explode another bus. Surrounded by mobs, tough policemen, and swarms of reporters, activist James Farmer said that he and others muted out the tumultuous

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atmosphere by singing out loud “to silence our own fears and to rouse our courage.” In response to the widespread coverage of the Freedom Rides, on May 29, 1961, the ICC was instructed by the Kennedy Administration to desegregate all of their facilities; however, they did not make any immediate changes, and the freedom rides continued. The Freedom Rides ended on September 22, 1961 when Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy insisted that the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) revise the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), making it clear that racial discrimination on buses and terminal restaurants, waiting areas, and rest rooms, was against the rules. These rules went into effect on November 1, 1961. Guy Carawan argued that the event "gave the biggest boost there was to the spread of the freedom songs." To see if the rules would be respected, the movement moved onto Albany, Georgia.

During this movement in Albany, there was an effort to overrule all Jim Crow laws. The local chapters of the SNCC and the NAACP collaborated and sent a group of five Freedom Riders from Atlanta to Albany. However, Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett had been studying the civil rights movement and their method of nonviolence, and had figured out a strategic and legitimate plan that he believed would avoid the media's attention and bring the Albany Movement to an end. With the support of Albany mayor Asa Kelly, Laurie Pritchett instructed officers to arrest protestors to protect public order. To avoid the attention of the press,

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26 “Highway History," U.S. Department of Transportation.
nearby jails in neighboring towns were arranged for protestors. When the Freedom Riders were arrested upon arrival, the focus quickly shifted to complete desegregation in the city.

Frustrated, activists turned to music yet again. During each night throughout the movement, activists gathered at the Mount Zion Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia, for prayer meetings, which heavily involved congregational singing. One song that was sung at the meetings and Seeger and Reiser argue was "the theme song of the Albany movement" was "Ain't Gonna Let Chief Pritchett Turn Me 'Round." Originally titled "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around," activists added the following verse:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn me 'round,} \\
\text{turn me 'round, turn me 'round, turn me 'round.} \\
\text{Ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn me 'round.} \\
\text{I'm gonna keep on a-walkin', keep on a-talkin',} \\
\text{marching up to freedom land.}
\end{align*}
\]

In the commentary section about the song in their book *Sing For Freedom: the Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs*, Guy Carawan and his wife Candie note that in a nationally broadcasted CBS documentary that covers the Albany movement, there is footage of activists singing the song while policemen threw them into police cars. Freedom Singer and SNCC founder Cordell Reagon argues that while dealing with Pritchett’s surprise counteraction and continuous violence from segregationists, “music kept us together. It's like an angel watching

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30 Ibid, 76.
32 Guy and Candie Carawan, *Sing For Freedom*, 62. I was unable to find which documentary they were referring to.
over you. You know you are probably going to jail...you might even get killed, but the sound, the power of the community was watching over you and keeping you safe.”

Pritchett's plan didn't go quite as planned as music took over the activists’ bodies, guiding them out of the church and out onto the streets singing in front of cameras to picket downtown segregated businesses. *The New York Times* recognized the influence that songs wielded in an article entitled: “Songs A Weapon in Rights Battle: Vital New Ballads Buoy Negro Spirits Across the South.” In the article, activist Charles Jones argued that “we could not have communicated with the masses of people without music. They could have not communicated with us without music.” The same article notes “A survey of Albany, GA, Durham, NC, and other tension points throughout the south indicated that spirituals, hymns, and gospel songs help bolster the morale of integrationists.”

Although activists were successful during the Albany movement in gaining widespread recognition, no legal wins had been made by the end of the Albany movement in August of 1962. Yet, the movement shifted towards Birmingham in the following year to Birmingham, Alabama, where segregationist Eugene "Bull" Connor declared his intention to run for mayor.

Activists were worried about Connor because as the town Commissioner of Public Safety, he was behind the attacks on Freedom Riders. Reverend Fred Shuttleworth, co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), ignited the Birmingham Campaign of the movement. In the Birmingham Campaign, activists worked to desegregate public facilities and downtown stores through marches and boycotts.

teenagers, and children, left the church to go march, policemen and reporters heard them singing. Under the consent of Governor George Wallace who was most known for his infamous cry during his Inaugural speech just months before for “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever,” Eugene Connor ordered policemen and firemen to attack activists with fire houses and police dogs and throw them into jail; however, the brutal retaliation did not discourage the activists any.\textsuperscript{36} Carawan argues that music is what kept the movement going: “from outside the jail window I could hear hundreds and hundreds of voices singing freedom songs. People had marched over from the mass meetings to the jailhouse, just to let all those in jail know that everyone was thinking of them.”\textsuperscript{37}

At the same time, members of the SNCC and CORE were on the Freedom March from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. They had with them a letter to Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, calling for desegregation. While marchers were met with jeering counter-protestors with Confederate flags and policemen at the Alabama/Mississippi border, they carried on by singing “Ain’t Gonna Let Governor Wallace Turn Me ‘Round.” A verse is as follows:

\begin{quote}
Ain't gonna let George Wallace turn me 'round,  
turn me 'round, turn me 'round, turn me 'round.  
Ain't gonna let George Wallace turn me 'round.  
I'm gonna keep on a-walkin', keep on a-talkin',  
marching up to freedom land.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{36} George Wallace to crowd, 14 January 1963, box SG030847, folder Q20276-Q20290, Administrative Files, 1958-1968. The quote was in Wallace's Inauguration speech. The original physical copy is found in the Alabama Department of Archives and History, who also provided a digital copy on their digital collections page.  


However, they were immediately assaulted by police and thrown into jail. Yet again, the confidence of protestors did not shatter.

Although the movement ended a few days later on May 10 when many businesses agreed to abandon segregationist policies and even hire African-Americans, this angered segregationists, especially the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Soon, Birmingham was soon dubbed “Bombingham” as the KKK detonated over twenty bombs, including the bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church that killed four young girls and shocked the nation and world. Because of the national and international attention drawn to the south, President John F. Kennedy sent in federal troops to Alabama to establish order. On July 18, President Kennedy warned members of Congress: “The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or State or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them,” and argued that constitutional changes needed to be made to guarantee the protection of public services to African Americans; however, Congress didn’t feel it was urgent to pass such legislation at the time.

By the summer of 1963, folk music, a genre that includes songs that discusses the woes of the oppressed, had begun to reemerge as a mainstream genre, thanks to Baby Boomers. Folk group Peter Paul and Mary helped bring folk music into the mainstream that summer with “Blowin’ in the Wind,” a socially-conscious song that discusses the fight for civil rights. The chorus is as follows:

Yes, how many years can some people exist
Before they’re allowed to be free?
Yes, how many times can a man turn his head
Pretending he just doesn’t see?
The answer my friend is blowin’ in the wind


The answer is blowin’ in the wind

As Baby Boomers moved away from home and entered into college in the early 1960s, many developed new outlooks and perspectives about American society. In his book *A Generation in Motion: Popular Music and Culture in the Sixties*, David Pichaske, a scholar of history who became of age in the 1960s, argues that boomers grew to learn that not every race receive equal amounts of equality and justice. This realization brought them to take “injustice, irritation, and idiocy head on,” for they “felt personally guilty and individually responsible for the gap between reality and possibility.” In his civil rights address to congress on July 18, President Kennedy acknowledged their realizations. He argued: “One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet the heirs, their grandson, are not fully free. They are not yet free from the bonds of injustice…from social and economic oppression. And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.”

However, many boomers began to mute-out the mainstream paradoxical arguments regarding racial equality and searched for a different voice, which they found through folk music.

In his book *Turn! Turn! Turn!: the 60’s folk-rock revolution*, music journalist Richie Unterberger believes that when McCarthyism died in the late-1950s, folk music was allowed to reemerge because folk was used for communist causes in the United States during the 1930s. It also provided musicians with a growing social consciousness to gain immediate recognition. However, with anti-communism still strong, folk musicians first performed at coffeehouses because of the open-minded atmosphere. Thus the rediscovery and revival of folk music by

43 “President Kennedy Address” *NBC News*, [https://highered.nblearn.com/portal/site/HigherEd/browse/?cuecard=1679](https://highered.nblearn.com/portal/site/HigherEd/browse/?cuecard=1679)
44 Richie Unterberger, *Turn! Turn! Turn!: the ’60s folk-rock revolution* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2002), 32, 34
college students was allowed to occur. Folk musician Judy Collins believes that the reason why college kids resonated with folk music “may be the world situation. You can’t ignore the world—everything in it is so complex, everyone must ask questions and ponder what is going on.” For college students this rang true because they realized that what was preached by society and what was, was polar opposite. Folk music would provide a refreshing perspective to the paradoxical issues of racial issues.

Pichaske argues that college students turned to folk because it “functioned as a kind of newspaper, bringing to their audiences not only the latest atrocities but important editorial commentary as well.” One of the most notable folk musicians was Bob Dylan, who played a significant role in folk music and civil rights. In his book Talkin’ ’bout a Revolution: Music and Social Change in America, folk singer Dick Weissman argues that Dylan was “the first popular singer to find or create an audience for songs of social issues.” Dylan was a strong voice for college students because the lyrics to his songs provided an initial commentary about the civil rights movement and the Vietnam Conflict, which was another issue that the boomers were battling with. Dylan says when writing music, “I don’t think…I just react and put it down on paper…what comes out in my music is a call to action.” His song “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” a more popular Dylan song, provided listeners a reflection of the whole civil rights movement. A powerful and relevant verse is as follows:

A South politician preaches to the poor white man
"You got more than blacks, don't complain you're better than them,

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45 Judy Collins, quoted in Richie Unterberger, Turn! Turn! Turn!: the '60s folk-rock revolution (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2002), 170.
46 Pichaske, A Generation in Motion, 60.
48 Bob Dylan, quoted in Dick Weissman, Talkin’ ’bout A Revolution: Music and Social change in America, 73.
you been born with white skin” they explain
And the Negro’s name
Is used it is plain
For the politician’s gain
As he rises to fame
And the poor white remains
On the caboose of the train
But it ain’t him to blame
He’s only a pawn in their game⁴⁹

With folk music emerging and the amount of prevalence and significance that African-American protest music had in the civil rights movement, King decided to include singers of both genres at the Lincoln Memorial program for the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. A reason may be that King invited folk artists to the program is because the purpose or intention of music of both genres were nearly identical. Pichaske argues that folk singers in the 1960s "were grounding themselves musically and sociologically in the past: Gandhi, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Guthrie..." and, through music, sought to "confront injustice directly, but be nonviolent and be the victim."⁵⁰ Musicians present at the program included activists and folk musicians Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, the Freedom Singers and gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. The August 29, 1963, issue of The New York Times, acknowledged that during the program, “there was no violence to mar the demonstration. In fact, at times there was an air of hootenanny about it as groups of school children clapped hands and swung into the familiar freedom songs.”⁵¹ In an article published fifty years after the event in the August 26, 2013, issue of Time magazine, Joan Baez remembers “the ocean of people. I’d never seen anything like that. I remember the electricity in the air...you knew that whatever it was you were going to say or do was going to be recorded as part of

⁵⁰ David Pischaske, A Generation in Motion, 54-55.
history.”52 In the same article, activist and folk singer Harry Belafonte recounts that when he saw the audience linked arm-in-arm while singing “We Shall Overcome,” "You went through that crowd and you couldn’t find any type missing, any gender, any race, any religion. It was America at its most transformative moment."53 Soon, however, it seemed that societal transformation was at a halt when President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963. Yet, as activists did the in past with difficult situations, they looked towards the future--to Mississippi the following summer.

In the summer of 1964, SNCC activist Robert Moses brought the movement to focus on Mississippi because of the threats, poll taxes and literacy tests that were imposed upon African Americans at the voting booth. Three years prior, SNCC activist Robert Moses began a drive to register African Americans to vote and two years later led a successful mock election known as the "Freedom Vote," thanks to local White activists. In 1964, Moses gathered White activists from the north to Mississippi for a "Freedom Summer" to do statewide voting registration drives and work to eliminate the voting blockades.54 The drives were important because the next U.S. Presidential election would be held that November. During the drives, however, activists were faced with more danger when two White and one African-American activists were found dead in a river. Music again seemed to encourage and bring together activists. At a concert in Meridian, Mississippi, Pete Seeger said “We must sing ‘We Shall Overcome’ now. The three boys would not have wanted us to weep now, but to sing and understand this song.”55 However, out of nearly

51 Harry Belafonte, quoted in Kate Pickert, “One March,” Time Magazine, August 26/September 2, 2013: 76.
17,000 African-Americans who registered, only 1,600 of the completed applications were able to vote. These efforts, the news coverage, and the assassination of President Kennedy compelled President Johnson and Congress to swiftly pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, on July 2, 1964. This law was a significant win in the long struggle for racial equality, especially in the south because it helped put an end to many of the Jim Crow laws of the south. According to ourdocuments.gov, a website supported by such organizations as the National Archives & Records Administration and the U.S. News & World Report, the act banned "discrimination in public places, provided for the integration of schools and other public facilities, and made employment discrimination illegal." However, the description of Title I of the act on the Dirksen Congressional Center's webpage provides that although unfair requirements for voting are banned, it does not specify that literacy tests were abolished. The voting registration drive continued on the following year in Selma, Alabama, organized by the SNCC.

The movement focused in on Selma because although there were slightly more African Americans than Whites in Selma, the voting turnout was 99% White and 1% African American. Activists were met with resistance once again, and Americans watched as activists were assaulted and tossed into police cars as they marched from Selma to Montgomery. The song “Do What The Spirit Say Do” became an unofficial anthem of the movement. The chorus is as follows:

You gotta vote when the spirit say vote.
You gotta vote when the spirit say vote.

And when the spirit say vote, I'm gonna vote
And when the spirit say vote, I'm gonna vote.\textsuperscript{60}

The environment grew riotous and violent in March following the deaths of activists Jim Reeb, a northern White Unitarian minister who was beaten to death outside a diner, and Viola Luizzo, a northern White woman who was shot by the Ku Klux Klan while transporting African-American activists back from a protest. In response to these traumatic events, folk music Len Chandler wrote “Murder on the Road in Alabama.” This was a rather difficult time for President Lyndon B. Johnson, who had the rising issues of the Vietnam Conflict to deal with. Since the beginning of the year, Johnson also had been working on a program known as the Great Society program, which sought to solve the issues within the country such as the amount of aid to education, undeveloped and depressed areas, and roadblocks to voting.\textsuperscript{61} Before he could focus more on Vietnam, President Johnson sought to end the drive in Alabama with Voting Rights Act of 1965. In his speech to Congress on March 15, 1965, President Johnson said:

I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy. I urge members of both parties--Americans of all religions and colors--from every section--to join me in that cause. At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. It is not just Negroes, but all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome. There are the enemies--poverty and ignorance--and not our fellow man. And these two shall be overcome.\textsuperscript{62}

However, by the time the Voting Rights Act was passed, activists were witnessing a divide within the movement. A year after the Voting Rights Act passed, the phrase "Black

\textsuperscript{62} President Lyndon Johnson's speech to Congress on voting rights: The American Promise, March 15, 1965; Judiciary Committee, Accompanying papers, S. 1564 (SEN 89A-E12); 89th Congress, Records of the U.S. Senate, Record Group 46. The National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. has the original copy and published a digitized copy. http://www.archives.gov/legislative/resources/education/voting-rights/johnson.html
"Power" becoming a slogan for African-American activists who grew tired of the continual abuse, method of nonviolence, and slow progress. They wanted to take over the movement. At the same time, the Black Panthers, a militant group of civil rights activists who wanted to take the movement down a provocative route, rose to prominence. In the March Against Fear, a march to end racism in Mississippi, in 1966, one activist argued in regards to "We Shall Overcome": "We don't sing those words anymore. In fact, the whole song should be discarded. Not 'We Shall Overcome,' but 'We Shall Overrun.'"\(^\text{63}\) As the movement grew more violent during the Freedom Summer and in Selma, and as the Vietnam Conflict received more attention from the media than civil rights, many folksingers moved further left on the political spectrum and talked about starting violent protesting.\(^\text{64}\) However, King, who was the face and advocate of the nonviolence method, continued on with his determination for a racially united and peaceful movement, until his assassination on April 4, 1968.

As a history major and music minor, I believe it is important to understand and make known the importance and influence that protest music had in the civil rights movement fifty years ago today. Throughout the civil rights movement during the first half of the 1960s, it was the music that helped advance significant civil rights legislation. Through music, African-Americans were able to connect and unite with each other because it was the music of the church, which had served as a place of support and refuge for African-Americans years prior to the movement. African-Americans were reminded of that support when faced with bomb threats, violent policemen and bystanders, and oppressors. Through music, they had the encouragement to express to news cameras, news watchers, and people at the scene, what they were fighting for and who was in their way. With how much influence the music had on African-Americans and


\(^{64}\) Pichaske, *A Generation in Motion*, 62.
the development of the civil rights movement and legislation, folk musicians were compelled to write about the movement and their initial reaction to it. For boomers, folk music provided them with clear messages and perspectives about the civil rights movement, which was opposite from the demagoguery. "We Shall Overcome," which served as a connection among folk audiences and African-Americans, it also served as an anthem for the whole movement. Because of its significance and lyrical content, President Johnson took notice of it. In his speech to Congress on March 15, 1965, Johnson argues that as a nation, "We Shall Overcome" the barriers not between the African-Americans and Whites, but the barriers between all races. The era between 1961 and 1965 has not only helped make the United States a more equal society, but it is another example in American history in which the interests of the common good overcomes the interests of the privileged few. The Civil Rights Movement would help inspire women fight for equality between the sexes in the Second Wave of the Feminist Movement between the mid-1960s and early-1980s; help the LGBT since The Stonewall Riots of 1969 to seek equality in the eyes of society and law with the Gay Rights Movement; and help Native Americans regain respect for their people and culture with the American Indian Movement in the 1970s.

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