

“WE SHALL OVERCOME”: FROM BLACK CHURCH MUSIC TO FREEDOM SONG

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Brandi Amanda Neal, M.A.

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The music sung by protesters in the American Civil Rights Movement was inseparable from the music in black Protestant churches. Despite the firm boundaries between the sacred and the secular in black Baptist and Methodist traditions, protesters adapted sacred hymns for secular protest use. Termed freedom songs, the music bound protesters together by shared spiritual associations with the music and by a communal performance experience.

This study explores the adaptation process of the freedom song using “We Shall Overcome” as a case study. An examination of the traditions of black American church institutions and the musical and textual attributes of the adapted song genres clarifies the methods by which protesters transformed sacred hymns and songs. Elements of black sacred music, simple and repetitive melodies and texts and universal themes, facilitated the adaptation of sacred hymns and songs. “We Shall Overcome” embodied all the adaptive musical characteristics inherent in freedom songs but at an elevated level. Moreover, additional functions of the black church, for example to serve as socioeconomic support to the oppressed black community in post-Civil War America, transformed social activism into a spiritual endeavor. It was inevitable that sacred traditions, namely music, aided social activism.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Honge kamyab, honge kamyab,
Hum honge kamyab ek din,
Ho-ho man mai hai vishwas
Pura hai vishwas, hum honge kamyab ek din.

These words were sung by Srilata Swaminathan to conclude her speech on rampant poverty and injustice in India at the Third Asia Pacific International Solidarity Conference of March 2005. In her roles as president of the All India Progressive Women's Association and a representative of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, she said: "Many of our cadre have been killed or imprisoned over the years. When comrades leave in the morning nobody knows if they will come home in the afternoon. The reason? Because CPI(ML) cadre put themselves on the line every day. Whether it is in defense of the basic human rights of peasants, against racism or sexism, for trade union rights or against imperialism....Their courage is breathtaking."¹

The song she sang was recognizable by those in attendance as an anthem for freedom, at once triggering painful memories and igniting determination. It has also been sung in the protest against apartheid in South Africa; its title was emblazoned on the t-shirts of student protestors in Beijing, China at Tiananmen Square in 1989; it is a favorite of Indonesian leftists and the Harlem

¹ Sue Bull. "India: Putting Their Lives on the Line for Socialism." *Green Left Weekly Online Edition*, May 4, 2005 (Accessed 4 November 2005), <<http://www.greenleft.org.au/back/2005/625/625p24.htm>>.

Boys Choir sang it at a memorial service following the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York City. Translated into English, Swaminathan's song is the enduring anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, "We Shall Overcome."

This study stems from personal encounters with the sacred/secular continuum in black churches in South Carolina during the late 1980's and early 1990's. My encounters with the unspoken rules of sacred conduct, what not to do or say in church and what not to sing or perform in church, influenced the direction of this study. Originally, the study sought to trace the transformation of religious music used in Southern black churches to freedom songs used in the Civil Rights Era. However, as I became familiar with the repertoire of music at protest events during the Civil Rights Movement, I was intrigued by the secularization of sacred music and how performers reconciled aspects of the sacred and the secular.

Music was integral to the Civil Rights Movement because it was a "source of courage, it was a means of responding to events and audaciously 'talking back' to the establishment."² Yet this "talking back" was not as sassy as it appears. Although the protest messages were powerful, they were tempered in musical transmission. These songs, known as freedom songs, were integral to the non-violent philosophy of the early Civil Rights Movement and were gentle dissention; the music promoted peace while simultaneously demanding rights for the oppressed.

This thesis examines the adaptation of sacred songs and hymns and their transformation into freedom songs, with an emphasis on "We Shall Overcome," from their musico-textual and ideological origins in the black church to the Civil Rights Movement. The adapted songs reflected the role of the black church as an institution exercising both spiritual and political

² Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Americans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 91.

functions, an agent through which black Americans could navigate socioeconomic restrictions. This thesis will examine this transformation of freedom songs using “We Shall Overcome” as a case study.

Though “We Shall Overcome” is most often considered a hymn from the Civil Rights Movement, its origins stem from labor protest movements in the American South. In 1945, black workers from the Food, Tobacco and Agricultural Workers Union of Charleston, South Carolina, organized a strike to protest their factory’s unfair conditions. They sang hymns on the picket lines and one of the protestors, Lucile Simmons, particularly liked to sing the hymn “We Will Overcome” in long meter style.³ This was the first documented use in a protest of the song that would become “We Shall Overcome.”

Sixty years after the 1945 strike, this song has achieved the status of a world-wide musical symbol of hope against oppression. This study aims to answer the question of how a song birthed in the sacred traditions of the post-Reconstruction American South spread so widely across countries, religions and political ideologies, with a change only in the language in which it is rendered.

This study has four components:

1. A description of the origins of “We Shall Overcome.”
2. The origins of the song and its relationship to the social action of the black church.
3. The musico-textual attributes of black sacred songs that facilitate their transformation into freedom songs.
4. An account of the adaptation attributes of the hymn.

³Pete Seeger and Peter Blood, eds., *Where Have All the Flowers Gone? A Singer's Stories, Songs, Seeds, Robberies* (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Publications, 1993), 33.

The analysis should reveal why “We Shall Overcome” has become the definitive protest song, crossing cultural boundaries worldwide.

2.0 ORIGINS

“We Shall Overcome” derives largely from an oral tradition, black hymnody, which complicates investigations into its origins. However, the infusion of outside elements such as European sacred hymns provides identifiable models in published sources dating back more than two centuries. The following section describes the black sacred and European sacred hymns that were possible predecessors for “We Shall Overcome.”

Figure 1. “We Shall Overcome”⁴

Voice

The image shows a musical score for the hymn "We Shall Overcome" in a voice part. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The melody is written in a simple, stepwise fashion. The lyrics are: "We shall ov - er - come, _____ we shall ov - er - come, _____ We shall ov - er -". The second staff continues the melody with lyrics: "come, some - day _____ oh _____ deep in my heart _____ I _____ do be - lieve, _____". The third staff concludes the phrase with lyrics: "we shall ov - er - come _____ some _____ day, _____". The music is written in a clear, legible font, and the lyrics are aligned with the notes.

We shall ov - er - come, _____ we shall ov - er - come, _____ We shall ov - er -
come, some - day _____ oh _____ deep in my heart _____ I _____ do be - lieve, _____
we shall ov - er - come _____ some _____ day, _____

⁴ Copyrighted version, Seeger and Blood, 34.

The words of “We Shall Overcome” are an adaptation of the gospel hymn “I’ll Overcome Someday” by C. Albert Tindley, first published in *New Songs of the Gospel* by C. Austin Miles and Maurice A. Clifton, December 22, 1900 by the Hall-Mack Company.⁵

“I’ll Overcome Someday”

I’ll overcome some day.
I’ll overcome some day,
I’ll overcome some day;
If in my heart I do not yield
I’ll overcome some day.

“We Shall Overcome”⁶

We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome, someday.
Deep in our hearts, we do believe,
We shall overcome, someday.

The melodic predecessors to the freedom song are not as easy to identify. Bibliographer James Fuld suggests the earliest potential origins of “We Shall Overcome” are in the hymn “O Sanctissima.” This hymn was first printed in the United States in May 1794 in R. Shaw’s *The Gentleman’s Amusement* under the title “Prayer of the Sicilian Mariners” and was published the next year in London with an English text.⁷ Fuld also suggests the first four measures (in 2/4) of the freedom anthem are identical to the melodic content in the Sicilian Mariner’s hymn accompanying the opening text “O Sanctissima.” A brief comparison of the two melodies in matching meters reveals closely related melodies (see Figure 2).

According to *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, the melody of “O Sanctissima” is shared by four benediction hymns with almost identical melodic content.⁸ One of these hymns, “Lord Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing” often appeared in print between 1773 and 1780. The *Dictionary* states:

⁵ The melodies of the two hymns are not related.

⁶ Seeger and Blood, 34.

⁷ James Fuld, *The Book of World Famous Music: Classical, Popular and Folk*, 5th ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2000), 624.

⁸ John Julian, ed., *A Dictionary of Hymnology: Setting Forth the Origin and History of Christian Hymns of All Ages and Nations*, 2 vols. (1907; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1957).

“The use of this Dismissal hymn has been and still is most extensive. Nearly every hymn-book of an Evangelical type published during the past hundred years has adopted it in a form more or less perfect.”⁹ Two modern Protestant hymnals attribute the tune as a “Sicilian Melody,” corroborating Fuld’s proposals.¹⁰

Figure 2. Comparison of "We Shall Overcome" and "O Sanctissima"

“We Shall Overcome”



“O Sanctissima”



A comparison of the first phrase of “We Shall Overcome” with “Lord Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing” is not conclusive. The first measures of the hymns are similar in melodic contour; the overall contour of the first phrase of “We Shall Overcome” is found twice as fast in the opening

⁹ Ibid., 686.

¹⁰ Lutheran Church of America, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 259. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 538.

two measures of the Dismissal hymn. Though evidence is strong for a relationship between the two hymns, it is merely coincidental. The 5-6-5-(4)-3 pitch progression is common.¹¹

Figure 3. Comparison of "We Shall Overcome" and "Lord Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing"

"We Shall Overcome"



"Lord Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing"



Philip Nel suggests the opening and closing melodic material of "We Shall Overcome" originates in an antebellum spiritual popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, "No More Auction Block for Me."¹² Though the specified melodic material is similar to the freedom song, this relationship is also coincidental. Both phrases have a related but common melodic contour: the opening scale degrees 5-6-5-(4)-3 and the closing degrees (4)-3-2-1.

¹¹ Scale degrees in parentheses indicate nonessential passing tones.

¹² Philip Nel, <http://www.ksu.edu/english/nelp/american.studies.s98/we.shall.overcome.html> (Accessed 20 April 2005). The two hymns do not share any text. This piece appears most often under the title "Many Thousands Gone."

Figure 4. "No More Auction Block for Me"¹³

The image shows a musical score for the hymn "No More Auction Block for Me". It consists of two staves of music in 2/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first staff is labeled "Voice" and contains the lyrics: "No more auc-tion block for me, no more; no more No more auc-tion". The second staff continues the melody with the lyrics: "block for me, ma - ny thou - sands gone." The music is written in a simple, folk-like style with a mix of quarter and eighth notes.

Jon Michael Spencer proposes that “We Shall Overcome” is related to the gospel hymn “I’ll Be All Right.”¹⁴ As with most songs from oral traditions, an exact date for the origin of “I’ll Be All Right” is impossible to pinpoint. However through the oral testimonies of church members in Johns Island, South Carolina; Albany, Georgia; Pine Bluff, Arkansas; and Itta Bena, Mississippi, Bernice Reagon suggests that the song was used widely by the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁵ This position is corroborated in the documentary *We Shall Overcome* where Southern black church members performed and discussed the connection of “I’ll Be All Right” to the Civil Rights anthem.¹⁶ Moreover, Reagon, who has provided the most comprehensive narrative history of “We Shall Overcome” to date, suggests that “To examine the development of ‘We Shall Overcome’ as a theme song of the movement, it is necessary to go back to ‘I’ll Be All

¹³ Gustavus D. Pike, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (1873; reprint, Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1974), 186. I have changed the meter from 4/8 to 2/4.

¹⁴ Spencer, 84; and Bernice Reagon, “Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History” (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 1976), 69.

¹⁵ Reagon, 69.

¹⁶ *We Shall Overcome*, 58 min., California Newsreel, Los Angeles, 1989.

Right,' the root song that was standard repertoire in many traditional Black Baptist and Methodist churches in the United States."¹⁷

Textually, the two songs are very closely related:

“I’ll Be All Right”

I’ll be all right,
 I’ll be all right,
 I’ll be all right, someday.
 If in my heart, I do not yield,
 I will be all right, someday

“We Shall Overcome”

We shall overcome,
 We shall overcome,
 We shall overcome, someday.
 Deep in our hearts, we do believe,
 We shall overcome someday.

Melodically, the two songs are also closely related. Though not all melodic material in the two songs is identical, the two songs share identical rhythmic structures. Excluding its first two phrases, “I’ll Be All Right” is melodically identical to “We Shall Overcome.”

Figure 5. "I’ll Be All Right"¹⁸



James Fuld suggests that Roberta Martin, a popular gospel singer in the 1940’s, authored the melodic portion of the anthem integral to the Civil Rights Movement under the pseudonym Faye E. Brown.¹⁹ Fuld suggests that the final twelve measures of her 1945 song “I’ll Be Like Him

¹⁷ Reagon, 65.

¹⁸ Transcribed by this author from a performance on the documentary *We Shall Overcome*.

¹⁹ Fuld, 624.

Someday” is allegedly the source of the final bars of “We Shall Overcome” (see Figure 6).²⁰

The corresponding lines of text in Martin’s hymn are also closely related to the freedom anthem:

“I’ll Be Like Him”

I’ll be like Him someday
If in my heart I do not yield
I’ll be like Him someday.

“We Shall Overcome”

We shall overcome, someday
Deep our hearts, we do believe
We shall overcome, someday.

It is most likely that “I’ll Be All Right,” “I’ll Be Like Him,” and “We Shall Overcome” belong to the same “tune family,” a term defined by Samuel Bayard as “a group of melodies showing basic interrelation by means of constant melodic correspondences and presumably owing their mutual likeness to descent from a single air that has assumed multiple forms through processes of variation, imitation, and assimilation.”²¹ Though Bayard is describing a phenomenon from his research in British airs and ballads, this concept applies well to this study. As there is no evidence for an older source for the three songs, based on their respective ages it is most likely that “I’ll Be All Right” is the source for Martin’s hymn and the freedom anthem.

²⁰ Ibid., 625.

²¹ Ann Dhu McLucas, “Tune Family,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. Stanley Sadie (Accessed 6 November 2005), <<http://grovemusic.com>>.

Figure 6. Final measures of Martin's "I'll Be All Right"²²

The image shows two staves of musical notation in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first staff contains the lyrics: "Him some - day. _____ If in my heart _ I do not yield,". The second staff contains the lyrics: "I'll be like Him, some - day. _____". The melody consists of quarter and half notes, with a final measure featuring a half note and a whole note tied together.

²² Reduced by this author from Reagon, 79.

3.0 A SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION

The historical narrative of the American Civil Rights Movement is supported by a framework of activists and leaders. Prominent black leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and Joseph Lowery were connected not only by their civil-rights activism, but their roles as leaders of southern black churches. The three represent a correlation between the church and civil-rights; specifically that the church became the centerpiece for political activism in general, and the Civil Rights Movement in particular.

The black church long stood as an institution offering assistance to oppressed black Americans, and the centrality of the church sanctified the movement. By the mid-twentieth century, the black church retained elements of its founding mission, namely providing spiritual support and socioeconomic assistance to oppressed black Americans. The social action theme was strongly embedded in the music of black protestant denominations and allowed the use of sacred hymns to support social activism.

Though many slaves had been converted to Christianity by missionaries during the Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century, they did not adopt the religion wholesale but often integrated it within slave culture to create hybridized methods of worship particular to their needs. Slaves found numerous themes in Christian salvation theology that resonated with hope for their circumstances. For example, the difficulties enslaved blacks faced echoed the story of the Israelites in Egypt and their hope of reaching the Promised Land. According to Christopher

Owen, black Christians believed “Christian ethics condemned the treatment they received as slaves and that the Bible promised them deliverance, in this world and the next.”²³

After Emancipation, the importance of the church did not wane; in fact, newly freed black Americans needed the strength of faith and the church more than ever. For although they had been rescued from the hell of institutionalized slavery, they were delivered into another: the restrictive Jim Crow Era. As a result, the church moved from being primarily a religious organization to one with a strong socio-political mission. According to Eileen Southern:

The black church stands tall in the center of the black experience in the United States. It was the first institution to be controlled solely by blacks, and it has remained their most powerful institution up to the present time.... [T]he church was more than a religious community: the church set up Infant Schools and Sunday Schools to care for its children and educate the ex-slaves; it sponsored benevolent and moral-reform societies.... In short, the church undertook the responsibility for providing black communities with all the opportunities and activities denied them....²⁴

The black church was not a passive institution for hope and survival in America, but became a tool for activism and social reform.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, black Americans controlled and almost exclusively populated seven independent Baptist and Methodist denominations.²⁵ Many of the denominations originated in antebellum America and were shaped by protest and activism against the inequalities in American society. Particularly, Baptist and Methodist churches were compelled to separate from their white counterparts and became increasingly self-reliant. For example, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) integrated socio-political philosophies, specifically social development and reform, directly into its doctrines. These tenets

²³ Christopher H. Owen, *The Sacred Flame of Love: Methodism and Society in Nineteenth Century Georgia* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1998), x.

²⁴ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 82.

²⁵ Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, eds., *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 61.

permitted black Methodist institutions to serve as a vehicle for socioeconomic assistance and to later offer a refuge and a spiritual shield against post-Reconstruction social conditions.

According to the AMEC, education was fundamental in the socioeconomic advancement of black Americans and created numerous opportunities for education. By 1890, the AMEC sponsored or supported 23 schools, colleges, and seminaries.²⁶ Influenced by the philosophies of church leaders such as its first bishop, Richard Allen, the AMEC's support of the community went beyond education and provided economic support. In a sermon Allen declared:

Whoever loves, desires the welfare and happiness of the beloved objects: but Thou, O dear Jesus, can'st receive no addition from imperfect services; what shall I do to express my affection towards Thee? I will relieve the necessities of my poor brethren, who are members of thy body; for he that loveth not his brother whom he has seen how can he love God whom he hath not seen?²⁷

Allen evoked a divine authority of socioeconomic support of the community and integrated this into the AMEC's doctrines. Allen's philosophy of sacred brotherly love is represented in the AMEC's motto: "God Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer, Man Our Brother." The motto equates man's relationship with each other to that of man to God and Christ.

The AMEC adopted Twenty-Five Articles of Faith, an altered form of the Wesleyan Methodist Twenty-Five Articles of Religion. The articles illustrate the sanctity in the concern for social welfare, and two articles particularly suggest a theological foundation for social acts.²⁸

²⁶ Lawrence S. Little, *Disciples of Liberty: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Age of Imperialism, 1884-1916* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 9.

²⁷ Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors* (1887. Bicentennial edition; reprint, New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 30-31.

²⁸ African Methodist Episcopal Church (Accessed 9 November 2005), <<http://www.ame-church.com>>.

Article Eleven. Of Works of Supererogation

Voluntary works, besides, over and above God's Commandments, which they call works of supererogation, cannot be taught without arrogancy and impiety. For by them men do declare that they do not only render unto God as much as they are bound to do, but that they do more for His sake than of bounden duty is required; whereas Christ said plainly, "When ye have done all that is commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants."

Article Twenty-Four. Of Christian Men's Goods

The riches and goods of Christians are not common as touching the right, title and possession of the same, as some do falsely boast. Notwithstanding, every man ought, of such things as he possesseth, liberally, to give alms to the poor, according to his ability.

The AMEC was committed to its objective of preparing black Americans for life after Emancipation. Clarence E. Walker suggests: "The church's mission to the freed bondsman was based on the belief that human nature was perfectible and that if the social order which the oppressed the black man were rearranged, he would become a productive citizen."²⁹ That is, once slavery was repealed, the black man could be guided to function successfully in society.

The Reconstruction Act of 1867 drastically altered conditions and allowed prominent members of the AMEC to stand for office. Aligning themselves with the Republican Party, AMEC pastors entered local politics and advocated for the improvement of social conditions for black Americans. The most notable black politician from this era and the first black senator in the history of the United States was an AMEC pastor from Mississippi, Hiram Revels.

Similarly, black Baptists in post-Emancipation America offered socioeconomic support to the black community. Black Baptists built their own institutions to aid the community and Juan Williams and Quinton Dixie suggest that independent black Baptists emerged in order to give

²⁹ Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 46.

black Americans a “vital institution that would give blacks in the United States important social power....”³⁰

Black Baptists also produced prominent leaders who entered the public realm to offer assistance to the community. According to John DeJulio, “Reverend William J. Campbell led a delegation of ministers who met with General Sherman and advised the government on how to implement the Emancipation Proclamation. Four days after his dialogue with Pastor Campbell, General Sherman issued Field Order #15 which set aside forty acres of land for each black family (‘forty acres and a mule’), and provided federal troops to protect them.”³¹ Reconstruction allowed black leaders to navigate areas previously forbidden to them, namely the public sphere. Yet this freedom was not long-lived.

The Compromise of 1877 elected Rutherford B. Hayes the nineteenth President of the United States, withdrew federal troops from Southern states and signaled the end of Reconstruction. White Democrats regained control of Southern politics and used legislative and coercive methods to revert to a society hostile to black Americans. The Black Codes, enacted by Southern politicians, rendered the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment null and black Americans were abandoned by the Republican Party.³² As in antebellum American society, post-Reconstruction black Americans used religion as a means of survival and hope. Black

³⁰ Juan Williams and Quinton Dixie, *This Far by Faith: Stories from the African American Religious Experience* (New York: Amistad, 2003), 24-26.

³¹ Judith Crocker Burris and Andrew Billingsley, "The Black Church and the Community: Antebellum Times to the Present, Case Studies in Social Reform," *National Journal of Sociology* 8 (Summer/Winter 1994): 33 quoted in John J. DiIulio, Jr, “Living Faith: The Black Church Outreach Tradition,” *Jeremiah Project Report No. 3* (1998): <http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/jpr-98-3.htm>.

³² William T. Martin Riches, *The Civil Rights Movement: Struggle and Resistance* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 4-7 and Johnny E. Williams, *African American Religion and the Civil Rights Movement in Arkansas* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2003), 58.

Americans used the church as both a spiritual shield against the dangers in American society and a non-threatening platform from which to maneuver in these perilous times. As Black Americans began to protest the unbalanced social system in the twentieth century, inevitably sacred practices and traditions were used to aid their efforts.

4.0 BLACK SACRED MUSIC AND THE FREEDOM SONG

The role and power of the freedom song in black American civil-rights activism derives from the music's function in the religious rituals of black American worship. Hans Baer and Merrill Singer suggest that "...a great deal of what African American religion accomplishes in terms of personal uplift, spiritual fulfillment, and the experience of collectivity is achieved through the idiom of music...."³³ According to Baer and Singer, music can be considered the vehicle of spirituality, with the potential flexibility to work on both an individual and communal level.

Indeed, the delivery of the central message during a church service is often rendered in a melodic manner. Sermons are highly melodic and a preacher's skill at this musical delivery determines his success as a pastor.³⁴ Also, the interaction of black pastors with their congregations is very closely related to the call-and-response technique utilized in black sacred music. Louis Lomax describes a sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King utilizing the call-and-response interaction.³⁵

³³ Howard D. Gregg, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church: The Black Church in Action* (Nashville: Henry A. Belin, 1980), 245.

³⁴ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 346. For additional information on sermon performance see Gerald L. Davis, *I Got the Word in Me and I Can Sing it, You Know: A Study of the Performed African-American Sermon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

³⁵ Louis Lomax, *To Kill a Black Man* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1968), 113-118, quoted in Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 78.

Rev. King: I got my marching shoes!
Congregation: Yes Lord, me too.
Rev. King: I woke up this morning with my mind on freedom!
Congregation: Preach, doctor, preach.
Rev. King: I ain't going to let nobody turn me around!
Congregation: Let's march brother; we are with you...
Rev. King: The struggle is not between black and white!
Congregation: No, no.
Rev. King: But between good and evil!
Congregation: That's it; that's it
Rev. King: For God is not dead; I know because I can feel him....
Congregation: Deep in my soul!³⁶

The last congregational response completes Rev. King's phrase, and demonstrates both the call-and-response and the congregation's familiarity with the church musical repertoire that would become freedom songs. Rev. Osby of Aurora, Illinois altered the text of "I Woke Up This Morning with My Mind on Jesus" to "I woke up this morning with my mind on freedom" in a stint in the Hinds County Jail during the Freedom Rides.³⁷ "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round" was adapted by Rev. Ralph Abernathy in 1962 for use in the Albany Movement, a prominent protest group in Albany, Georgia. According to Guy and Candie Carawan:

[Rev. Abernathy] taught it one night to a mass meeting of the Negro community at Mount Zion Baptist Church. It immediately caught on and became widely used in the demonstrations. A nationally televised CBS documentary showed spirited students rhythmically clapping and singing "ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn me 'round" while the policemen picked them up, two to a student, and carried them into paddy wagons.

Finally, the words "I know because I can feel him deep in my soul" are similar to the text "Yes, God is real for I can feel him in my soul" in the spiritual "God Is Real." Though the latter spiritual is not a freedom song, its association with "I Woke up with My Mind on Freedom" and "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round" is indicative of the fluidity between the church and the movement.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Guy and Candie Carawan, eds., *Sing For Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs* (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Publications, 1990), 83.

The two primary types of black religious music in America were spirituals and gospel hymns. A brief examination of their styles and functions will clarify the religious foundations for freedom songs.

4.1 SPIRITUALS

The spiritual, the largest body of black folk song to survive from the period of the early black church to the present, is a black American sacred song whose subject matter carries symbolism and refers directly or by metaphor to American suffering.³⁸ Many early-twentieth-century black Americans disassociated themselves with the spiritual because of its painful association to slavery, but the genre's social significance and musical suitability made it easily adaptable for use in the Civil Rights Movement.

Slavery shaped the spiritual; many of the hymns expressed the hope for emancipation. The spiritual's role and purpose in slave life is examined in John Lovell's *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*.³⁹ Wyatt Tee Walker summarizes and itemizes Lovell's findings in his monograph *Somebody's Calling My Name: Black Sacred Music and Social Change*. His list of the functions

³⁸ Paul Oliver, "African-American Spiritual," *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (accessed 18 October 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

³⁹ John R. Lovell, *Black Song: the Forge and the Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual was Hammered Out* (New York: Paragon House, 1972).

of the spiritual in slave life holds remarkably viable for the Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁰

1. To give the community a true, valid and useful song
2. To keep the community invigorated
3. To inspire the uninspired individual
4. To enable the group to face its problems
5. To comment on the slave situation
6. To stir each member to personal solutions and to a sense of belonging in the midst of a confusing and terrifying world.

The first element concerns the validity and usefulness of spirituals for a protest. With the exception of number five, the remaining elements of the list are integral to the morale of a protest group. Spirituals carried a shared history that could provide strength for a protest group. The spirituals' associations with slave ancestors and their perseverance provided strength in the face of adversity. As the movement broadened and attracted non-black members, Walker's function number six was especially useful in unifying individuals from diverse backgrounds. Element four refers to the black church's encouragement of political activism.

In another article, Walker describes the religious and musical characteristics of the spiritual and its relevance to the Civil Rights Movement.⁴¹ Walker identifies three musical aspects of spirituals that made them suitable for adaptation from the church to protest events. First, "The spirituals possess a *Simple and Repetitive Musical Idiom*. Generally speaking, the lyrics and music of the Negro spiritual have a basic theme, which is varied only slightly to differentiate between the refrain and stanza..."⁴² This is the most important characteristic in the adaptation process. The "simple and repetitive" nature facilitates the learning of a song by those within and

⁴⁰ Wyatt Tee Walker, *Somebody's Calling My Name: Black Sacred Music and Social Change* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), 47. The seventh element, "To provide a code language for emergency use" does not apply to the Civil Rights Movement.

⁴¹ Wyatt T. Walker, "The Soulful Journey of the Negro Spiritual: Freedom Song," *Negro Digest* 12 (July 1963): 84-95.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 90.

outside a culture. This was most important during the stages of the Civil Rights Movement when many non-black Americans joined the Movement and songs could both unite and strengthen a protest group.

Walker's remaining aspects concern performance:

The spirituals are *Given to Improvisation* and are best rendered *non-accompanied* by musical instruments. The proper rendition of the religious folk songs of the Negro makes the voices of the accompaniment and the instruments. Much of the musical literature of the Negro spiritual is designed to be sung antiphonally, and coupled with its repetitive character it is understandable that a great group of voices could be handled as an organ, expressive of many nuances of the Negro's song-filled faith.⁴³

Walker's aspects are key to understanding the transfer from sacred hymn to protest song. First, he addresses the change in the music's structure. This is integral in the absorption of the song by protesters. Walker notes that Negro spirituals are designed to be "antiphonal," a process commonly referred to as call-and-response. The leader could spontaneously change the texts and melodies of spirituals to adapt to the present situation, and the spiritual's structure allowed the group to assimilate variations quickly.

4.2 GOSPEL HYMNS

The *New Grove Dictionary* defines gospel as "a large body of American religious song with texts that reflect aspects of the personal religious experience of Protestant evangelical groups, both white and black. Such songs first appeared in religious revivals during the 1850s but they are more closely associated with the urban revivalism that arose in the last third of the 19th

⁴³ Ibid., 92.

century.”⁴⁴ The black gospel era reached its height during the Great Depression and hymns are closely bound to the socioeconomic struggles and the action-oriented objectives of the black church. Gospel hymns show many of the same musical characteristics of spirituals and the influence of white hymnody. Like the spiritual, most gospel hymns are transmitted orally, and have simple and repetitive music and texts that are given to improvisation. The development of gospel music displaced spirituals which were moved to non-formal times of worship during this modernization. Spirituals were performed only during pre-service devotions, prayer meetings, and revivals.⁴⁵

The social messages in gospel songs differ from those in spirituals:

If the message of spirituals is endurance of the trials of this life with the reward of life after death, that of gospel songs is more immediate. Though the themes are often similar, and many gospel songs are little more than spirituals with a modern beat, their spirit is infinitely more optimistic. Gospel songs bring a message of ‘good news’ and are so called, according to some preachers, because they state the gospel truth.’ The promise of a better life hereafter still pervades them but their joyousness and extrovert character suggest happiness achieved in this life in preparation for the next.⁴⁶

Spirituals used imagery and metaphors that left deliverance from physical bondage in God’s hands whereas gospel music promoted action against the stringent social conditions. The spiritual “Dis is de Trouble of de World” laments the exclusion from religion: “I ax Fader Georgy for religion, Fader Gorgy wouldn’t give me religion.” Here, the slave tries to attain a type of freedom while still enslaved and uses God as a means for coping with the situation. In contrast, God’s role is more supportive in the gospel hymn “Walk with me, Jesus.” The singer

⁴⁴ H.C. Boyer, “Black Gospel Music,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. Stanley Sadie (Accessed 3 November 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Walker, *Somebody’s Calling My Name*, 199.

takes on the control of his own fate and asks only for Jesus' support. This ideological shift in gospel hymns supported protests and added theological support to the protester's aims.

4.3 ATTRIBUTES FOR ADAPTATION

Freedom songs used in the final decades of the American Civil Rights Movement (1955-1969) were usually adapted almost unchanged from pre-existing musical material. Bernice Reagon divides freedom songs into two categories, though this study is only concerned with the first: (1) group participation songs, extemporaneously adapted from existing material by a group involved in civil rights activities, and (2) professionally composed topical songs which comment on protest events and allow for textual improvisation.⁴⁷ This adaptation was facilitated through four shared attributes: (1) group contribution and performance, (2) simple and repetitive musical forms, (3) given to spontaneous change, and (4) universal values.⁴⁸

The song must be presented in a form that transfers directly to group performance and the call-and-response form was ideal. With spirituals, the leader presented melodies and texts and demonstrated changes, and participants could easily repeat the presented material. Gospel hymn forms are more varied and do not often demonstrate this attribute. For example, the hymn "His Eye is on the Sparrow" does not suit the group performance as it is a solo song that demonstrates the performer's skill. The song encourages embellishments that cannot be accomplished in the spontaneous protest setting. Also, protest singers had license to alter texts and melodies to fit the

⁴⁷ Reagon, 25.

⁴⁸ These attributes are my modified version of Walker's adaptive characteristics of spirituals.

moment. They turned the hymn “Marching to Zion” to the protest song “Marching to Freedom.” Melodic alterations are extemporized by the leader.

Both melody and text should be simple and repeated to facilitate learning a song during a protest event and to reinforce memory. A simple form also allows for a more diverse group to participate. A song’s text must be applicable to a broad range of circumstances without regard to the individuals’ specific culture.

5.0 ATTRIBUTES OF ADAPTATION IN “WE SHALL OVERCOME”

“We Shall Overcome” can be categorized as the first type in Bernice Reagon’s freedom song categorization. Group participation and simple melodies were the leading appropriative characteristic for most freedom songs but other factors increased the potential adaptability of “We Shall Overcome.”

Though “We Shall Overcome” was not strictly rendered in the call-and-response technique, the performance tradition clearly divided the ensemble into leader and group roles. In most freedom songs in the call-and-response technique the leader indicated modifications in text and melody; in “We Shall Overcome” there were no changes in melody but changes in text. At the end of each chorus, the leader quickly spoke the new text that fit the conditions. In the copyrighted version of “We Shall Overcome” reprinted in *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, there is the direction “Songleader gives words for next verse” in parentheses underneath the text.

The absence of any major variation in melodic and textual material made “We Shall Overcome” ripe for adaptation. The musical material in each verse and refrain did not change and the texts in each verse were unusually similar. The anthem’s melody is simple and adheres strictly to Western functional harmony; it is conjunct and diatonic. Melodic leaps are small and simple; the largest leap is a perfect fifth and occurs once. Rhythmically, “We Shall Overcome”

is also simple; the song progress mostly by quarter-note values and the quarter-note motion in each verse is replaced by notes with longer durations.

Other than the common practice in freedom songs of changing pronouns to suit the sex, number, and actions of protesters, all text was the same in each verse. Moreover, the pronoun “we” eliminated any cultural specificity and encourages group morale. According to Spencer, “The collective language of the freedom song, a trait of abolitionist and Social Gospel hymnody...fostered the needed sense of community.”⁴⁹

Also, the text in “We Shall Overcome” exhibited an extraordinary ability for adaptation by any movement of oppressed peoples. For example, the song used actions such as “walk hand in hand,” “will all be free,” and “are not afraid” to promote peaceful unity.⁵⁰ The fourth verse, “the whole wide world around,” is especially relevant for the Civil Rights Movement as it focused on the elimination of racism and the equality of all people. This reading was also viable within the other contemporary movements in the 1960’s Counterculture. The “whole wide world” could be interpreted to address the hotly debated Vietnam War issue.

⁴⁹ Spencer, 85.

⁵⁰ All verses refer to the copyrighted version, Seeger and Blood, 34.

6.0 CONCLUSION

When the workers in Charleston picketed to protest the segregation of the American Tobacco Company, they would sing songs like “We Will Overcome” and “We Shall Not Be Moved.”⁵¹ In an interview with Bernice Reagon, Marie Hodges reveals that the hymn came to the Charleston strike from a sister organization at Reynolds Tobacco Company in Winston-Salem, NC.⁵²

In 1947, members of the Local 15 participated in a workshop at the Highlander Folk Center in Monteagle, Tennessee, and Robert Sheldon disclosed the identity of two individuals “remembered only by their first names, Anna Lee and Evelyn.”⁵³ Zilphia Horton, wife of the Highlander Center’s leader Miles Horton, asked the members of the Local 15 if they knew any labor songs and the Local 15 performed the 1945 Charleston version of “We Shall Overcome.” The Highlander Center adapted the song and it gave it new life.⁵⁴

Folk singer Pete Seeger visited the Highlander Center in 1947 and became an essential player in the dissemination of the freedom song. Seeger spearheaded the American folk revival during the 1960’s and was relentless in his pursuit of civil rights and universal employment. He provided additional information about modifications to the freedom anthem, particularly the

⁵¹ Stephen P. Graham, interview by Reagon, in Reagon, 74.

⁵² Marie Hodges, interview by Reagon, *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵³ Robert Sheldon, “Rights Song Has Own History of Integration,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1981.

⁵⁴ Miles Horton, interview by Reagon, in Reagon, 76.

change to the pronoun “we” that adds the sense of universality and communality to the freedom song. Seeger credited Lucille Simmons with both the pronoun change and the move from a fast gospel tempo, akin to the traditional rendering of “I’ll Be All Right,” to a solemn spiritual-like performance tempo of “We Shall Overcome.”⁵⁵ Seeger also played a direct role in altering the song, experimenting with rhythm and changing the word “will” in “We Will Overcome” to “shall.” Along with Zilphia Horton and Guy Carawan, Seeger used his popularity to disseminate the anthem and spread the song to audiences as he traveled.⁵⁶

According to Miles Horton, “We Shall Overcome” remained integral to labor movements and spread far enough across the United States to be used as a theme song for a labor radio program in Johnson City, Tennessee.⁵⁷ It is impossible to pinpoint the exact moment of adaptation moment by the Civil Rights Movement but by 1965 the freedom song had gained national familiarity.

In 1960, Pete Seeger, Guy Carawan and Zilphia Horton registered the legal copyright for “We Shall Overcome,” stipulating that the proceeds go to charity. Seeger explains that he took out a defensive copyright on “We Shall Overcome” before others could profit from less reputable variations.

In the early ‘60’s our publishers said to us, “If you don’t copyright this now, some Hollywood types will have a version out next year like ‘Come on Baby, “We Shall Overcome” tonight.’ So Guy, Frank [Hamilton] and I signed a “songwriter’s contract...” All royalties and income from the song go to a non-profit fund, the “We Shall Overcome” Fund, which annually gives grants to further African-American music in the South.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Seeger and Blood, 33.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Miles Horton, interview by Reagon in Reagon., 76.

⁵⁸ Seeger and Blood, 34.

From the mid-1960s the development of “We Shall Overcome” is well-known. It was accepted as the musical symbol of the movement and used prevalently in protest activities across the United States. As numerous groups picked up the song, it was catapulted to the forefront of the movement and public exposure increased accordingly. The nomadic Guy Carawan and Pete Seeger continued to add to the proliferation of the song and Dr. Martin Luther King, the most prominent figure of the Civil Rights Movement, made a concerted effort to make the anthem “a component of civil rights activism.”⁵⁹

The song’s highest endorsement came from President Johnson who recognized it in a nationally televised address.⁶⁰ During a speech for voting rights on March 15, 1965, President Johnson remarked: “It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause, too, because it's not just Negroes, but really, it's all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.”⁶¹ In this move he legitimized the freedom song and highlighted the struggle it represented.

This study aims to understand the process of transforming sacred hymns to the secular protest songs of the Civil Rights Movement. The line between the sacred and the secular is usually well defined within the black church; for example, the outrage within the black community at Ray Charles’s blending of gospel music and blues in his 1954 song “I Got a Woman” is legendary.

⁵⁹ Spencer, 84.

⁶⁰ Fuld, 624.

⁶¹ President Lyndon B. Johnson, Speech on Voting Rights March 15, 1965, quoted in National Public Radio program *All Things Considered* January 15, 1999.

Yet not long after this period, an entire genre of songs was adapted from the sacred tradition and used in the Civil Rights Movement.

Freedom songs are essentially an anomaly, as they bent rules that were firmly entrenched within black culture. As the quintessential freedom song, what does “We Shall Overcome” reveal about the corpus of freedom songs? It is the model freedom song but also the ultimate freedom song. It embodies all the attributes of adaptation: simple text and melodies for easy transmission, but at an elevated level. Yet it was not purely the ease of transmission that made the song the symbol of the Civil Rights Movement and so easily adapted. It was the filter of the song through the labor movement and the Highlander school. Specifically, it was the *intention* of key figures such as Horton, Seeger and Carawan to spread the song across the nation. This intent to disseminate, the song’s position as the Movement’s musical symbol and the increasing visibility of American protests in the 1960’s set “We Shall Overcome” apart from others in the genre. It appears that “We Shall Overcome” is an anomaly within an anomaly.

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