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Making Movement Sounds:

The Cultural Organizing Behind the Freedom Songs of the Civil Rights Movement

A dissertation presented by

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To

The Department of African and African American Studies

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Abstract

Making Movement Sounds recovers the people, places, and ideas that shaped the freedom songs of the civil rights movement and the strategies for their frontlines use. Rather than locate the movement's song repertoire within long histories of black cultural resistance, I uncover the cross-racial collaborations, influential strategizing centers, and core cultural concepts most responsible for its emergence and deployment as a political tool. I give particular attention to the workings of power and privilege by examining the oft-ignored prominence of the mid-century folk revival, the fields of folklore and folksong scholarship, and the disproportionate influence afforded the movement's white folk collaborators. Drawing on interviews with and reports and personal correspondence from leading cultural organizers as well as folksingers' commercially-produced frontlines field recordings and accompanying liner notes, I highlight the black and white collaborators, cultural concepts, and community debates that led to an array of musical strategies from the foregrounding of traditional black hymns to the surprising leveraging of the unlikely weapon of copyright law. I argue that the songs are best understood, not by tracing their "continuities and ruptures"[1] with black cultural tradition, but by tracing the collaborations and disputes of their key cultural actors and the socio-cultural context

[1] Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 30.

animating their encounters. Ultimately, *Making Movement Sounds* puts music history in conversation with anthropology, performance studies, and cultural studies to revise understandings of the people, politics, and practices shaping the mid-century sound of black resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

In July 1959 armed officials raided the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee during the final night of a leadership workshop for black and white participants of the burgeoning civil rights movement. They cut off the lights for nearly two hours, searched the building, assaulted some of those present, and carted others off to jail. Neither the workshop nor the raid was unusual. Since its founding during the Depression by Myles Horton, the son of a white sharecropping family, Highlander had been a training and strategizing hub for multiracial and intergenerational groups of Southern organizers and operated under constant threat from state authorities and the Ku Klux Klan. The fact that the state's intrusion was not unusual, however, did not make it any less frightening and while non-violence countered the tactics of the raid, song combatted the fear. One among those huddled in the dark began humming "We Shall Overcome," others joined in, and then Mary Ethel Dozier, a 15-year-old black high school student from Alabama, invented the now-familiar lines, "We are not afraid. We are not afraid. We are not afraid today." Dozier's improvised verse was taken up by the rest of the group and the song reclaimed space and galvanized spirits throughout and until the end of the raid.[1]

[1] Septima Poinsette Clark, *Ready from within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Navarro, CA: Wild Trees Press, 1986); John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 232; Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History" (doctoral dissertation, Howard University, 1975), 82; Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Let the Church Sing 'Freedom.'" *Black Music Research Journal* 7 (January 1, 1987): 117; Thomas Vernon Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture And Activism From The Civil Rights Movement To The Streets Of Seattle*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 1; Robert E.Smith, "'We Shall Overcome:' Where The Civil Rights Anthem Came From." *Southern Courier*, 2, no. 4 (1966).

On first glance, this story seems consistent with the narrative most commonly told of the songs of the civil rights movement—that in the face of racialized oppression and violent attack, traditional black song rose to the rescue. When told in cultural studies of the movement, the story bolsters broader claims rehearsed for centuries about the power of New World black culture to endure, comfort, and resist. But this simple narrative belies more complex ones about the multiple ways culture is remembered and remade and the diverse powers shaping the music of the mid-century fight for black freedom. Dozier, for example, was hardly an average schoolgirl, the song she sang was not simply a product of black tradition, and, as southern organizers along with historian John Glen have long asserted, Highlander was "no ordinary school."[2] The details of the use of "We Shall Overcome" that summer night in 1959 challenge frequent presumptions that traditional culture leapt into service during the civil rights struggle and index an alternative story of the era's organizers and their songs. That alternative story is less about the power of cultural memory and more about work of cultural organizing.

At the time of the 1959 raid, "We Shall Overcome" was still a year away from becoming the civil rights movement's anthem but had long been sung at Highlander. Since its labor-era beginnings and due to the leadership of white organizer, singer, and accordion player, Zilphia Horton, song had always been central to the school's approach to cultivating and asserting community power. She first visited Highlander in 1935 to gain new tools for her work with Arkansas miners but decided to stay after falling in love, not only with the school, but also with its founder and her future husband, Myles. Merging her experiences as a labor organizer and folk musician, she began folding an

[2] Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*.

extensive set of cultural initiatives featuring music, theater, creative writing, and dance into the leadership trainings Myles had already established. The school quickly became known, not only as the preeminent organizer's training hub in the South, but also as "the singing labor school."[3] In 1939, union leaders hailed Zilphia and Myles' combined efforts for having turned the nation's striking workers into a powerful "singing army."[4]

One of the most resonant songs of that "singing army" was an adaptation of a turn-of-the-century southern hymn called "I'll Overcome." The song had been brought from the pews to the picket lines in 1945 by Lucille Simmons and other black women of Charleston, South Carolina's integrated Food Tobacco and Agricultural Workers' Union of America (FTA-CIO) Local 15 for their five-month tobacco factory strike. Their picket line sound reflected the local's overwhelmingly black and female membership and resonated with other music emerging from the increasingly integrated unionism of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Emphasizing the song's sounding of fierce determination and its "prayer of relief,"[5] as picketer Lillie Mae Marsh Doster described it, the Charleston workers performed a slow-paced version from near-by Johns Island—one that stretched the refrain "I'll Overcome" into "I Will Overcome." They then changed the "I" to "We" to better reflect the collective voice of the integrated union and, with added verses such as "we will win our rights" and "we will organize," it quickly become the theme song of the strike.

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[3] Aimee I. Horton, "The Highlander Folk School: A History of the Development of its Major Programs Related to Social Movements in the South, 1932-1961," (doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1971), 148-144.

[4] John Lewis in *Labor Songs* compiled and edited by Zilphia Horton, Textile Workers of America, 1939, Highlander Education and Research Center Archive, Myles Horton Papers, 4.

[5] As quoted in Shana Redmon, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 141.

Two years later, "We Will Overcome" was brought to Highlander by workers from Charleston's Local 15 who shared it during one of Zilphia Horton's workshops. Horton was instantly taken by its power and began featuring it in her trainings and broadly disseminated picket line songbooks. After becoming part of Highlander's repertoire, the song underwent a series of revisions, mostly by white folk singers. As Myles Horton later reflected, "It probably developed independently where it came from, but it had its own life at Highlander."[6] Early on, Zilphia Horton gave it an Appalachian rhythmic style befitting her accompaniment on the accordion and she eventually taught it to one of her core collaborators, Pete Seeger. Seeger popularized it on stages around the country, gave it a more rigid rhythmic structure, and added the verses "the whole wide world around" and "we'll walk hand in hand."[7] In the early 1950s, Highlander shifted its focus from worker's rights to racial violence and Seeger's version, "We Shall Overcome," welcomed and inspired a new cadre of organizers. He sang it at Highlander's 25th anniversary gathering in 1957 where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—who attended with Rosa Parks—heard it for the first time. Days later King remarked, "There's something about that song that haunts you."[8]

"We Shall Overcome" was not catapulted to national and international prominence until the summer of 1960 and most of those at the 1959 raid had just learned it from Highlander's white music director, Guy Carawan, and black education director,

[6] As quoted in Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement," 76.

[7] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement," 76-78.

[8] Lynskey, Dorian, *33 Revolutions per Minute: A History of Protest Songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day*. 1st ed. (New York: Ecco, 2011), 1471.

Septima Clark.[9] Carawan was a northern folksinger recently arrived to continue Zilphia's labor-era work in the budding civil rights movement and Clark was a black South Carolina teacher who had been organizing in the South for decades and directing Highlander's training programs for five years. Carawan was a community organizing novice but a folk music expert. He arrived with graduate training in sociology and folklore, mentorship from Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger, a successful career on the country's most prominent folk stages, and a conviction that the "people's songs" had powerful political potential. Clark took Carawan under her wing as soon as he arrived and they began leading workshops together. They were the facilitators of the weeklong leadership workshop that was interrupted by the raid and, in keeping with Highlander's then 25-year-old practice, they had included group singing as well as training in the frontlines use of song. Thus, when the armed intrusion occurred, participants were well rehearsed in and ready to use Highlander's repertoire including the school's de facto theme song, "We Shall Overcome."

The young Mary Ethyl Dozier had participated in the workshop, not as a new movement recruit, but as somewhat of a seasoned veteran. Despite being 21 years Carawan's junior, Dozier had significantly more experience in combating southern segregation with song. She and her elementary school classmates Minnie Hendricks and Gladys Burnette had formed the Montgomery Gospel Trio five years prior and been the core song leaders for the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott and meetings of Martin Luther King's Montgomery Improvement Association throughout 1956. Carawan's background led him to focus on collecting, singing, and disseminating songs but Dozier

[9] Guy Carawan to Myles Horton and Conrad Browne, 1965, p 3, WISC-HREC, Box 37, Folder 11.

understood the importance of adapting them to meet the needs of particular movement moments. As she later recalled of her song leading during the bus boycott, "If somebody started beating us over the head with a billy club, we would start singing about the billy club[…]."[10] Despite her youth, Dozier's experience readied her to lead and support the group through the raid and, while Carawan had taught them melody and lyrics, it was Dozier who knew how to put "We Shall Overcome" to work.

The freedom songs of the civil rights movement are most often contextualized within long histories of black cultural resistance. They are described as descendant from the sorrow songs of the enslaved, the cries of captives aboard slavers, and social and political traditions centering music in parts of Africa. Dozier's impromptu transformation of fear into sung resistance is frequently mentioned in discussions of the movement's songs for its apparent evidencing of a black culture so powerful and deeply ingrained that it can be accessed by even the very young. Yet even a brief look at the details of that moment reveal the strategic cultural collaborations that, coupled with the leveraging of black tradition, were responsible for forging what would become one of the most impactful political uses of song U.S. history. The songs of the civil rights movement did, indeed, powerfully leverage traditions of black song but it is only by examining the work of the cultural actors who shaped their sound and use that we can begin to understand all it took to sing for freedom.

Making Movement Sounds recovers the people, places, and ideas that shaped the freedom songs of the civil rights movement and the strategies for their frontlines use. Rather than locate the movement's song repertoire within long histories of black cultural

[10] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement," 97.

resistance, I uncover the cross-racial collaborations, influential strategizing centers, and core cultural concepts most responsible for its emergence and deployment as a political tool. I give particular attention to the workings of power and privilege by examining the oft-ignored prominence of the mid-century folk revival, the fields of folklore and folksong scholarship, and the disproportionate influence afforded the movement's white folk collaborators. Drawing on interviews with and reports and personal correspondence from leading cultural organizers as well as folksingers' commercially-produced frontlines field recordings and accompanying liner notes, I highlight the black and white collaborators, cultural concepts, and community debates that led to an array of musical strategies from the foregrounding of traditional black hymns to the surprising leveraging of the unlikely weapon of copyright law. I argue that the songs are best understood, not by tracing their "continuities and ruptures"[11] with black cultural tradition, but by tracing the collaborations and disputes of their key cultural actors and the socio-cultural context animating their encounters. Ultimately, *Making Movement Sounds* puts music history in conversation with anthropology, performance studies, and cultural studies to revise understandings of the people, politics, and practices shaping the mid-century sound of black resistance.

In the pages that follow I review the existing scholarship on the freedom songs and my intervention into it, introduce the people, places, and ideas central to my investigation, and outline the theoretical frameworks guiding my study.

[11] Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 30.

Cultural Remembering and Remaking: Recovering Core People, Places, and Ideas

The literature on the freedom songs consistently situates them within black traditions of sung protest while regarding the cultural strategies of the movement's organizers and influence of its affiliated white folksingers as incidental to that story. While I am invested in the profound import and impact of legacies of black cultural resistance, I am wary of the ways their dominance can distort both the historical record and our understandings of the racial politics of cultural production and reception. As Karl Hagstrom Miller writes of "roots" narratives in discussions of folk music, "I do not doubt the veracity of such tales, but I think they have mistaken a part for the whole. [Such narratives] suggest that continuities within these traditions are more significant than transformations, the origins of a style more revelatory than the changing ways in which a variety of people have used it."[12] And yet, despite the growing understanding in music and cultural studies of music as a "social phenomenon more so than a natural one,"[13] essentialized notions of black song persist. By shifting the focus of study from songs to singers and from black cultural tradition to biracial cultural organizing, *Making Movement Sounds* privileges the work of cultural actors over the processes of cultural memory to bring a new cast of characters, organizing tactics, and central locales to the fore.

Black song has long been imagined as sounding the black soul and condition. Abolitionists leveraged the spirituals as their movement's primary cultural weapon

[12] Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.

[13] Ronald Michael Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 104.

precisely because of their presumed evidencing of the humanity and suffering of the enslaved. The songs were seen as naturally emerging and blacks heralded, as the abolitionist editors of the first collection of black American song described, as a "race of remarkable musical capacity."[14] Although descended from troubling tropes forged through performances on minstrel stages, auction blocks, and slave ships, a belief in the natural power of black song was held by black and white alike. In *My Bondage, My Freedom* Frederick Douglass recalls the songs of the enslaved as "[telling] a tale of grief and sorrow" so powerful that "every tone was a testimony against slavery."[15] Imagining an almost biological connection to the music, he likens the songs to tears, an involuntary and natural outpouring of despair, and portrays "a melancholy relief in singing."[16] W. E. B. Du Bois also posits an essential blackness at the core of such music in his use of "Negro folk songs" as a primary source in his landmark examination of *The Souls of Black Folk*.[17] Not unlike Douglass' description of the songs as a natural substance pouring forth like tears, Du Bois describes them as "sorrow songs…in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men" (204). This characterization of black music as sounding the black soul extends throughout the early century with jazz, blues, R&B, soul, and the civil rights movement's freedom songs being largely understood as quintessentially black. LeRoi Jones' seminal history of black American music, *Blues People: Negro Music in*

[14] Lucy McKim Garrison, Charles Pickard Ware, and William Francis Allen, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: A. Simpson & Co., 1867). Documenting the American South. DocSouth Books ed. Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Library, 11.

[15] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Penguin Classics. New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 44-45.

[16] Ibid., 46.

[17] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. 5th ed. (Chicago: ACMcClurg, 1904) http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.FIG:004563451,

White America, is the apex of such imaginings of a black American essence manifested in its music.[18] In his dubbing of blacks as "blues people," an entire race is collapsed into and becomes its sound. Ingrid Monson usefully notes that notions of an authentic black sound are often deployed—as was the case with Jones, for example—not thoughtlessly, but strategically to take discursive and cultural control in the face of economic or socio-political disempowerment.[19] The scholarship on the freedom songs, however, has generally been less alert to such strategic uses of notions of authenticity and naturalizes cultural tradition in ways that render cultural agency irrelevant.

Contemporary theoretical frameworks problematize notions of fixed and discrete cultures and trouble borders imagined around race yet scholarly analyses of the freedom songs largely adopt essentialist frameworks of the past. The literature offers nuanced readings of the impacts and effects of frontlines singing but consistently highlights the songs' placement within legacies of black cultural resistance while neglecting the socio-political encounters through which they were articulated. The foundational musical histories offered in Samuel Floyd, Jr.'s *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* and Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans: A History* set the stage for this scholarly investment in tracing musical traditions of social commentary and protest.[20] Their broad surveys take up both survivalist and syncretic cultural frameworks, understand movement songs as progenitors

[18] LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963).

[19] Ingrid Monson. "Response to Ronald Radano and William Ferris." Presentation at the American Historical Association Annual Conference, Washington, DC, January 2008.

[20] Samuel A. Floyd Jr, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: Norton, 1997).

of long cultural legacies, and guide subsequent studies. Kerran L Sanger's examination of "African-American song [as a] resilient tradition of protest"[21] in *When the Spirit Says Sing!: The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement*, for example, analyzes the freedom songs for their ability to assert empowering self-definitions and worldviews, sound movement goals, summon courage, and combat fear. Thomas Vernon Reed's *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* discusses the unifying power of collective singing and calls it the movement's "liberation musicology."[22] Bradford D. Martin's *The Theater is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America* highlights the significance of the freedom songs' power to claim space, particularly within a movement so focused on the ownership of and equal access to public schools and accommodations.[23] Yet, despite highlighting the powerful effects of frontlines singing and the black cultural histories on which it draws, these and other studies largely hide the diversity of actors and extent of work involved in making the movement's sounds.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, Shana L. Redmond, and Joe Street tell more nuanced stories of the freedom songs. Although black cultural tradition remains central, their studies also take note of cross-racial cultural organizing and *Making Movement Sounds* picks up where they left off. Reagon's perspective is unique because she is not only one of the movement's most significant scholars but was also a founding member of SNCC's

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[21] Kerran L. Sanger, *"When the Spirit Says Sing!: The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Garland, 1995), vii.

[22] Thomas Vernon Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture And Activism From The Civil Rights Movement To The Streets Of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 13.

[23] Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater Is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

Freedom Singers and key collaborator in Highlander's cultural work. Her foundational 1975 dissertation, *Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History,* offers invaluable documentation of the emergence of the movement's song repertoire and is based, not only on her own experiences, but on extensive interviews with her collaborators.[24] Her later scholarship and curatorial work at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History expand upon her dissertation by drawing out legacies of black cultural resistance and demonstrating the organizing strategies and transformational power inherent in the practice of black congregational singing.[25] Like Martin, she underscores the power of group singing to claim public space and describes her own experience of the ways "song extends the territory you can affect."[26] She also insists, after reflecting on the ways collaborative and improvisational singing practices push people into a particular practice of community, that group singing "is an organizing experience."[27] Although primarily focused on what she calls "culture history,"[28] her work

[24] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement."

[25] Bernice Johnson Reagon, "In Our Hands: Thoughts on Black Music." *Sing Out* 24, no. 6 (1976). Marvette Pérez, "Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon." *Radical History Review*, no. 68 (March 20, 1997): 4–24; Reagon, "African Diaspora Women: The Making of Cultural Workers." *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 1 (April 1, 1986): 77–90; Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century." West Coast Women's Music Festival, Yosemite National Forest, California, 1981; Reagon, *If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me: The African American Sacred Song Tradition*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); Reagon, "Let the Church Sing 'Freedom.'" *Black Music Research Journal* 7 (January 1, 1987): 105–118; Reagon, "My Black Mothers and Sisters or on Beginning a Cultural Autobiography." *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 1 (April 1, 1982): 81–96; Reagon, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See'; or, 'By and By I'm Gonna Lay Down My Heavy Load." *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (June 1, 1991): 111–119; Reagon, *We'll Understand It Better by and by: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

[26] In Bernice Johnson Reagon, Bill D. Moyers, and Gail Pellett, Public Affairs Television, Freedom Singers Films for the Humanities & Sciences, and Sweet Honey in the Rock (musical group). *The Songs Are Free with Bernice Johnson Reagon*. (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 2003).

[27] Bernice Johnson Reagon, "'Oh Freedom:' The Music of the Movement" in Cheryl Lynn Greenberg's *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 112.

[28] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement."

also gives significant attention to organizing histories and documents the protest context within which particular songs emerged. She offers limited discussion, however, of how the movement's cultural strategies were made and she frames white collaborators such as Carawan, Seeger, and the Hortons as "custodians" of the music rather than its co-architects.[29]

Shana L. Redmond's *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* textures understandings of the socio-political contexts through which twentieth century black anthems were articulated but continues the reliance on notions of a discrete black culture put to work for black freedom.[30] She analyzes black anthems for "their ability to cohere associations and communities by bringing into conversation a constellation of Black political activists, artists, and intellectuals" and frames black music as "a method of rebellion, revolution, and future visions."[31] Her chapter-length analysis of the labor movement's "We Will Overcome" recovers invaluable details of the 1945 Charleston strike and the role of black women organizers in particular, and frames the song as evidence of "the continuing importance of the spirituals in twentieth century music and protest scenarios."[32] She does not, however, analyze the social and political mechanisms at work in the song's creation or revise its origins story of emerging solely from the black church. Although Zilphia Horton makes an appearance, the primary actors in her "We Shall Overcome" story are the black women of

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[29] Ibid., 88.

[30] Redmond, *Anthem*.

[31] Ibid., 2 and 1.

[32] Redmond, *Anthem*, 8.

the Charleston, South Carolina's FTA-CIO Local 15 and her primary goal is not to reveal their strategizing around singing but to highlight their centrality in shaping the political landscape between the labor and civil rights movements.

Joe Street's *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement* provides the most nuanced reading of the freedom songs and offers the only book-length study of the era's cultural organizing.[33] Increasingly used by activists and scholars alike, the term "cultural organizing" describes efforts to place culture at the center of an organizing strategy with the recognition that cultural change is critical for social change.[34] As such, it is distinct from the inspiration or education provided by political and protest art and the promotion and agitation offered by activist entertainers. As Street defines it, cultural organizing is "an explicit attempt to use cultural forms or expressions as an integral, perhaps even dominant, part of the political struggle and…during this process, attention [is] drawn to the intrinsic political meaning of the cultural activity."[35] His chapter on the freedom songs gives thoughtful, albeit brief, attention to the collaborations of Highlander's white cultural workers and black activist song leaders. It goes beyond study of historical continuities, lyrical power, or the phenomenological experience of sound to offer an introduction to the collaborators involved in the era's leveraging the cultural in service of the political.

My focus on the development of a song-based strategy rather than instances when singing was most powerfully used brings a new set of people, places, and ideas to the

[33] Joe Street, *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

[34] For more on cultural organizing see Paul Kuttner, "A Collective Leap of Imagination: Youth Cultural Organizing," 2011 and The Arts and Democracy Project, http://artsanddemocracy.org.

[35] Street, *The Culture War*, 8.

center of analysis. Guy Carawan becomes a central figure for his work as Highlander's civil rights-era musical director. Zilphia Horton's influence emerges through Carawan's adoption of her labor-era strategies. Septima Clark and her mentee Esau Jenkins, known for their remarkable work for voter registration and community justice, emerge as foundational influences on the movement's musical strategies. Pete Seeger's role is expanded beyond his popularizing of "We Shall Overcome" on national and international stages to encompass his long history of collaborations with Highlander. Alan Lomax looms large for his mentorship of Carawan, collaboration with the movement's cultural leaders, and position on the board of the era's primary funding source for cultural work, The Newport Folk Foundation. And Bernice Johnson Reagon, long celebrated for her frontlines song leading, is revealed as one of the most powerful behind-the-scenes cultural organizers for black freedom both during and beyond the civil rights movement. In addition to these cultural workers, leftist music producers and publishers also become key collaborators as the recording and sale of the movement's songs and speeches extend the message of the movement and fund its continuation. While bringing these under-recognized cultural workers to the fore is one primary aim of my project, interrogating the unequal powers they each brought is another. *Making Movement Sounds* highlights, not simply the role of people like Carawan, Seeger, and Lomax, but also the disproportionate power they had to control the movement's sounds due to their multiple privileges.

These cultural workers were brought together, not through the activity in movement centers like Alabama or Mississippi, but in the organizing sites of Tennessee's Highlander Folk School. Still one of the South's most important strategizing hubs,

Highlander has received a great deal of attention in the fields of education and movement studies for its exemplary practices of popular education, critical pedagogy, and grassroots movement building[36] but remarkably little for its decades-long commitment to cultural organizing. The seven-page survey of the school's labor-era use of music and drama in Aimee Horton's 1971 dissertation remains the most extensive overview of the school's cultural initiatives to date.[37] The details of Highlander's involvement in the making of the civil rights movement's songs are most usefully (if minimally) documented by Reagon, Redmond, and Reed but in none of their texts does documentation give way to analysis of the cultural and racial politics of the repertoire's collaborative creation.[38] And yet, the folding of cultural work into organizing efforts has been a hallmark of the school since its inception eighty-five years ago. As Bernice Johnson Reagon recently said, "Highlander has always been a place where culture and organizing for social and political change were bonded in practice."[39] *Making Movement Sounds* highlights the centrality of Highlander to the history and practice of cultural organizing and restores its organizers to the story of the civil rights movement's songs.

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[36] See, for example, Frank Adams and Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: J. F. Blair, 1975); John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*; Myles Horton and Herbert R Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998); Aimee I. Horton, "The Highlander Folk School"; Myles Horton, Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Marshall Peters, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Michael W. Apple, and James A. Beane, *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007). Also see http://highlandercenter.org/.

[37] Aimee I. Horton, "The Highlander Folk School, 148-154.

[38] Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement" and "Let the Church Sing 'Freedom,'"; Redmon, *Anthem*; Reed, *The Art of Protest*.

[39] Bernice Johnson Reagon to Susan Williams, Candie Carawan, Guy Carawan, Wendi ONeal, Cartheda, Tufara Muhammad, February 10, 2005, Highlander Archives.

Singing For Freedom Through the Racialized Folkloric Encounter

A central aim of *Making Movement Sounds* is to animate the oft-ignored socio-cultural context for the era's cultural organizing—the early-century folklore boom, mid-century folk revival, and the politicization of the sounds of America's folk. The first half of the twentieth-century witnessed the birth and dramatic rise of America's folk fascination which, by mid-century, was a primary framework for understanding the link between politics and song. Karl Hagstrom Miller asserts that the twentieth century's "new folkloric paradigm changed music making and meaning throughout the South and the nation;"[40] I explore what impact this new paradigm had on the making and meaning of the civil rights movement's songs. Not only does this move shed new light on the freedom songs but it also intervenes in debates about the relationship between music and race.

At the turn of the twentieth-century, understandings of the culture concept as well as those for the folk and their songs were radically revised. In the social sciences, the previous era's evolutionism and Social Darwinism were replaced by a new understanding of culture as the collective lifeways emerging from particular historical circumstances. Inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois and articulated by Colombia University anthropologist Franz Boas and his students, this the new "historical method" for understanding diverse peoples replaced the comparative method that had been rewriting social hierarchy as natural difference for centuries.[41] Simultaneously, folksong scholars and collectors began

[40] Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound,* 9.

[41] Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution:*

championing the unique songs of America's folk for the first time. A sea change in a field previously focused solely on Europe, this new folkloric focus celebrated the unique national sounds to be heard in America's native songs.

In response to this new understanding of culture as relative rather than evolutionary and of American folksongs as sounding national identity, the early twentieth century exploded with a newly politicized and romanticized interest in America's "folk." Folklore was increasingly used as a tool for identifying and honoring heritage, shaping identity, and staking claims for equality by activist anthropologists, artists, and scholars of the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s,[42] radical folksingers during the economic turmoil of the 1930s and 40s,[43] and musicologists, record producers, singers, and fans of the folk revival up to and through the 1960s.[44] The influence of Third Period Communism on the American left during the Depression years significantly bolstered this growing politicization of folklore with its championing of folk music as the cultural weapon of the proletariat. "People's songs"—from black spirituals to Appalachian ballads—were uplifted as the sound of the American masses and wielded as a potent

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Essays in the History of Anthropology: With a New Preface (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Daphne Mary Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[42] Baker, *From Savage to Negro*; Ira E. Harrison and Faye Venetia Harrison, *African-American Pioneers in Anthropology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro*.

[43] Richard A. Reuss, and Archie Green. *Songs about Work: Essays in Occupational Culture for Richard A. Reuss*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. (London, UK: Verso, 1996); Richard A. Reuss and JoAnne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957*. American Folk Music and Musicians Series, no. 4. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000); Robbie Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

[44] Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*.

weapon in the early century's class struggles. As labor's troubadour Woody Guthrie wrote in 1947, "[T]he Communists everywhere are the only people I know of that know how to make the right use of our own American folk lore, folk culture, folk songs, and folk singers."[45] Yet, just as Robin D. G. Kelley demonstrates the extent to which a "Euro-American left wing tradition" was both "enveloped and transformed" by blacks of Alabama's Communist Party during the Depression,[46] I endeavor to show the ways the Euro-American folk tradition was both adopted and challenged by black cultural organizers of the civil rights movement.

Supporting this growing interest in and politicization of folklore were a string of new institutions. The American Folklore Society was founded in 1888, the Library of Congress established its Archive of Folk-Song in 1928, and the folklore initiative of the New Deal's Federal Writers Project in the late 1930's sent field recorders across rural America to collect a wide range of music for its files. In 1949, folklore's first doctoral program was established at Indiana University and producer Moses Asch launched what would become, and still remains, the country's most important folk label, Folkways Records. The popularity of folk music festivals throughout the 1950's led to the founding of the Newport Folk Festival and its Foundation in 1959 and ultimately inspired the Smithsonian Institution's inaugural Festival of American Folklife in 1968.

This folkloric moment was also felt throughout the Americas and Caribbean and black cultural forms in particular were increasingly highlighted as central to national

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[45] As quoted in Robbie Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), xiii.

[46] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*, 25th anniversary edition / with a new preface by the author. (Baltimore, MD: Project Muse, 2015), xi and 99.

character. In the U.S., black song was heralded as America's true native folk sound. It was celebrated by the singers and audiences of the internationally-renowned Fisk Jubilee Singers, extensively documented by folklorists, and showcased between 1917 and 1937 in the American Folklore Society's Journal of American Folklore's fourteen issues devoted entirely to "Negro folklore."[47] A similar process of "nationalizing blackness" occurred in Cuba and is discussed in Robin D. Moore's study of the 1923 founding of the *Sociedad de Folklore Cubano*, the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude-inspired *Afrocubanismo* movement of the 1930s, and the 1938 founding of the *Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos* with its inauguration of professional presentations of aesthetic practices of Afro-Cuban religious traditions still popular in the tourist industry today.[48] Kate Ramsey has similarly examined "the official cultural nationalist policy in Haiti during the late 1930s and early 1940s" when, not unlike in Cuba, the "government simultaneously constructed and promoted folklore performance as an official national sign" despite its criminalization of the ritual practices from which they emerge.[49] Although its manifestations and implications are distinct in each locale, the folkloric imaginary shaped the making, meaning, and politics of black culture throughout the early-century black Atlantic.

In the United States this rising popularity, politicization, and professionalization of folklore signaled a growing belief in cultural inclusion as democratic practice—Lomax

[47] Baker, *From Savage to Negro,* 144, and Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro*, 39.

[48] Robin Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940* (Pittsburgh, PA.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997).

[49] Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 177 and 16.

called folk music "a democratic American art"[50]—yet the politics of its collection and preservation revealed the lie of mistaking cultural inclusion for racial harmony or socio-political equity. Within the folkloric framework, a limiting essentialism surrounded the "folk" while the power to discover and preserve them uplifted their collectors. As James Clifford insightfully observes, the collector inadvertently becomes the subject of his or her own collection through a process implicitly designed "to make the world one's own, to gather things around oneself."[51] Robin D. G. Kelley's "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Folk'" illuminates the power dynamics implicit within such folk formulations.[52] He writes, "terms like 'folk,' 'authentic,' and 'traditional' are socially constructed categories [entwined with] the reproduction of race, class, and gender hierarchies and the policing of the boundaries of modernism."[53] Guthrie P. Ramsey further notes, "[a term] like *the folk* indexes a community supposedly trapped in a time warp… presumed to be preindustrial, agrarian, and untouched by the modern threat of mass-media culture."[54] However, Miller reminds us that "many who came to represent traditional culture, in fact, were not pre-modern but those who had experienced modernization at its most brutal: sharecroppers, factory workers, and prison laborers."[55] My project's examination of the making, rise, and resonance of the freedom songs of the civil rights movement takes these racial

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[50] As quoted in Neil V. Rosenberg, *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 13.

[51] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 218.

[52] Robin D. G. Kelley, "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Folk.'"

[53] Ibid., 1402.

[54] Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 39-40.

[55] Miller, *Segregating Sound*, p. 21.

politics seriously by interrogating the power dynamics within the movement's cross-racial cultural collaborations. I do this in two ways. First, I examine the ways the racialized folkloric encounter gave white folksingers and folklorists privileged powers to control and define the movement's sounds. And second, I heed the calls of J. Lorand Matory and Lee D. Baker[56] to tend to the ways academic scholarship engages with, affects, and shapes knowledge production, cultural practice, and politics on the ground. Although the workings of privilege and power are of central concern, I also reveal the ways black organizers devised and enacted strategies to regain and maintain control.

Theoretical Frameworks

My interest in the diverse encounters of Highlander's cultural workers and influence from the early- and mid-century folk fascinations is guided by Afro-Americanist anthropology and music and performance studies. I situate my work within the growing literature from these fields replacing outmoded understandings of culture as involuntarily inherited with frameworks revealing it to be actively and continually contested. My interest in cross-racial collaborations and disputes is particularly guided by debates surrounding music scholar Ronald Radano's critique of the concept of black music and anthropologist J. Lorand Matory's invitation to diversify the people and powers considered in studies of black culture.[57] Additionally, my examination of the

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[56] J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Baker, *From Savage to Negro*.

[57] Ronald Michael Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*; Matory, "Islands Are Not Isolated, 232–43; and in Kevin A. Yelvington, *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora*. (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press; Oxford, UK: James Currey, 2006), 151-192.

differing approaches to musical documentation and dissemination used by the era's black and white cultural workers contributes to discussions in performances studies about the relationship between the archive and the repertoire. In each case, my core concern is to texture understandings about processes of cultural remembering and remaking by recognizing the strategic work of and power dynamics among cultural organizers. Thus, rather than offer broad histories of black cultural resistance, I tell on-the-ground stories.

In *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music*, Ronald Radano eschews investments in documenting lineages of black musical tradition to write a history of the socio-politics defining the contours of the very category of black music.[58] He writes, "We need to move beyond these modern fantasies of autonomous form that have overtaken black musical studies, not to deny artistic value but in order to situate the making of art forms within the broader dimensions of culture."[59] Radano's "emphasis on social and cultural production"[60] over the preservation and continuation of black forms is controversial for its effort to explode any notion of an authentic black sound. Although his rigorous research uncovers invaluable details of black cultural history and its fraught politics, it also eclipses the powerful ways black music has political weight. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., for example, has characterized Radano's account of black music as a discursive category rather than a socio-cultural one as "impressive but grossly misleading" and as a "*completely* agent-less… fiction."[61] Ingrid Monson has also

[58] Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music*.

[59] Ibid., 2.

[60] Samuel A. Floyd Jr. and Ronald Radano, "Interpreting the African-American Musical Past: A Dialogue." *Black Music Research Journal* 29, no. 1 (April 1, 2009), 3.

[61] Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. "Black Music and Writing Black Music History: American Music and Narrative Strategies." *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (2008), 114.

challenged Radano for ignoring the ways notions of an authentic black sound have been politically deployed to great effect. As she writes,

> [I]t seems that [the discourse of racial authenticity] has been one of the few discursive weapons available to African Americans to protest the inequalities of the economic outcome and advocate for self-determination. Moreover, the invocation of racial authenticity… has most typically occurred in response to either unreflective white liberal behavior or overtly racist behavior.[62]

My work offers a new perspective on this debate about race, authenticity, and politics. My analysis of the strategic deployment of the supposedly authentic black sound of the freedom songs looks both at its troubling racial politics and its powerful political impacts. I take up Radano's call to consider the cross-racial social construction of musical categories and sounds but also demonstrate, following Monson, the multiple ways the songs served, and continue to serve, black freedom through their unabashed assertions of and commitments to blackness.

I am also guided by the interventions made by Paul Gilroy and J. Lorand Matory into nearly a century of analytic frameworks for understanding the defining powers and processes at work within black cultural practice. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy replaces the decades-old scholarly focus on the "African Diaspora" with its homelands and host-lands with investigations of the "Black Atlantic" with its flows of influence and exchange.[63] His text intervenes in a scholarly conversation invested in the impact of an African past on the American present through such articulations as calls for pan-African unity, debate over the regenerative power of African

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[62] Ingrid Monson, "Response to Ronald Radano and William Ferris." Presented at the American Historical Association Annual Conference, Washington, DC, January 2008.

[63] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

"survivals"[64] versus the devastating violence of American racism,[65] recognition of significant difference despite shared origins, and focus on the developmental processes of such differences through the linguistic frameworks of "syncretism" or "creolization."[66] In opposition to this landscape of analytics invested in origins, Gilroy offered a seascape of travel and exchange. Matory expands upon Gilroy's framework in *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* by offering "Afro-Atlantic dialogue," an alternative analytic metaphor that recognizes the reciprocal relationships among a diversity of actors, locales, and times within the black Atlantic framework.[67] He rewrites the popular narrative of Candomblé as a resistant African cultural survival by exposing the formative role played by African, Brazilian, and "Euro-American elites [scholars, nationalists, and slaveholders] with the power to 'invent tradition' in black Brazil."[68] Similarly, his later studies of the Gullah/Geechee of the South Carolina Sea Islands conclude that it is *proximity to* rather than *isolation from* difference that has been responsible for what is often regarded as their distinctively African cultural retentions.[69] He asserts that interaction via travel and tourism rather than the presumed isolation of island life has "precipitated an unprecedented degree of cultural

[64] Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*. 1st ed. (New York and London: Harper & Bros, 1941). Harvard Anthropology Preservation Microfilm Project ; 00221.

[65] Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

[66] Sidney Wilfred Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

[67] Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*.

[68] Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, p. 14.

[69] Matory, J. Lorand. "The Illusion of Isolation: The Gullah/Geechees and the Political Economy of African Culture in the Americas." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 04 (2008): 949–980 and Matory, "Islands Are Not Isolated, 232–243.

self-awareness, canonization of tradition, and pride, as well as profit, in Gullah/Geechee speech, foodways, handicrafts and history."[70] He goes on to claim that the strategic representation of an authentically remembered "'Gullah/Geechee culture' has become a potent weapon in the struggle to maintain landownership and access to resources."[71]

Although my study does not look across the Atlantic, Gilroy and Matory's broader insistence on troubling "roots" narratives, looking beyond bounded categories, and accounting for cross-group interaction guides its core commitment: to attribute agency and autonomy to the subjectivity of cultural actors rather than the power of culture itself. Or, as Vincent Brown writes, to recognize that "practices of meaning are better seen as tools to be used than as possessions to be lost."[72] In my story of the freedom songs, black culture does not simply emerge and survive but is created, as Matory argues, through the "strategic assertion[s]" of diverse cultural actors and is "shaped by dialogue among numerous other… interlocutors of unequal power and unequal access to the means of communication."[73] The result, as Kevin A. Yelvington summarizes of Matory's approach, is a "holistic view [where] black cultures [are] conceived of as dynamic and interactive, and blacks conceived of as knowing subjects who are active agents in the construction of their own cultural worlds…. They are not, in other words, to be conceived of as passive receptacles of 'culture.'"[74] For this reason I

[70] Matory, "The Illusion of Isolation," p. 950.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Vincent Brown, "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery." *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009), 1245.

[73] Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 17 and 188.

[74] Yelvington, *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues,* 8.

resist the popular term "culture bearer" and use, instead, "cultural worker" or "cultural organizer."

One locus of cross-racial dialogue and debate in the making of the freedom songs was the differing modes of musical documentation and dissemination brought by black and white organizers. My interest in this aspect of the era's strategizing not only emerges from an attention to the dialogues shaping cultural production, but also contributes to debates about cultural memory and making within performance studies. In her landmark book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Diana Taylor urges those investigating the past to release investments in "the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials" and embrace information to be found in "the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge."[75] The archive, she argues, "sustains power" by privileging those with access to its halls and walls while the repertoire "provide[s] the anti-hegemonic challenge" of those whose histories are more often preserved through performance.[76] It is thanks, in part, to Taylor that the song repertoire of the civil rights movement is, in and of itself, a legitimate site of historical analysis. However, Robin Bernstein and others have expanded upon Taylor to explore how the relationship between archive and repertoire might be more dynamic than static and more fluid than binary. Bernstein's analytic of the "scriptive thing," for example, reveals the interanimation between archive and repertoire by reading archival objects, not for the tangible information they preserve, but for the behaviors they were likely to have

[75] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

[76] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19 and 22.

invited.[77] A book, she explains, is not simply a collection of words but is also an invitation to pick it up, open it, and move one's eyes along its pages.[78] More pointedly, a black antebellum doll is not just a relic of racialized design but an invitation to racialized play.[79] Exploding the binary of archive and repertoire, Bernstein explains, "To read things as scripts is to coax the archive into divulging the repertoire."[80]

The cultural archive of the civil rights era is littered with strategic efforts to script the movement's future repertoire, both musical and tactical. Primary among the strategies brought by its folk figures was musical documentation, not only for the archives of the Library of Congress, but also through song sheets, songbooks, recordings, and, ultimately, intellectual property law. These archiving processes were considered organizing tools. The adoption of the labor era's Popular Front-inspired use of song sheets and songbooks as well as the production of radio documentaries and albums of movement songs endeavored both to facilitate participation on the ground in the South and invite engagement from supporters in the North. Later, intellectual property law was used to control access to and script future uses of the movement's songs. Additionally, Carawan's approach to cultural organizing was guided by the archives created by nearly a century of writing from abolitionists, folklorists, and cultural scholars on leveraging black songs for black freedom. However, even though this dynamic interplay of oral tradition, archival documentation, and cultural production intended to serve the

[77] Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," *Social Text* 27, no. 4, 2009, 67–94 and Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

[78] Ibid., 74.

[79] Ibid., 69.

[80] Ibid., 12-13.

movement, its reliance on written rather than embodied modes of preserving and passing on coupled with its privileging of official archives bolstered the power of the era's white folk collaborators to control the sound and use of the movement's songs. I, however, endeavor to show the ways black cultural organizers struggled for and regained control through musical performances on the frontlines and a surprising upending of intellectual property law.

My final theoretical stance is a writerly one. While this chapter has endeavored to lay bare broad scholarly frameworks and interventions, the chapters that follow endeavor tell a story. The new perspectives offered by my focus on the movement's cultural actors are best viewed, not from a distance, but up close. I have, therefore, written a social history of the movement's cultural organizers that profiles key figures, unearths the extent and nuances of their work, and reveals their central influences and challenges, along with their guiding principles and practices.

I begin by animating the histories, icons, politics, and ideas of the early-century American folk field through the story of Highlander's civil rights-era musical director, Guy Carawan. Carawan grew up alongside America's developing folk fascination and was raised in song by radical folksingers and folklorists who had adopted the cultural politics of "Third Period" Communism. Although frequently portrayed simply as the folklorist-hero who facilitated the amplification of traditional black music on the movement's frontlines, I reveal Carawan to be an organizing novice trained by folklorists and folk singers of the white North and situated within the field's fraught racial politics. Through the story of his formative years, from his birth in 1927 to his move to Highlander in 1959, Chapter One introduces the concepts and characters from the

American folk field later shown to have significant power in the creation and reception of the civil rights movement's songs.

Shifting from the white North to the black South, I then examine the cross-racial collaborations through which the freedom song repertoire was made. Chapter Two tells the story of the sometimes contentious strategizing between the folkniks, community leaders, and singers affiliated with Highlander. It recovers the cultural influence of black organizers like Septima Clark, Esau Jenkins, Bernice Robinson, and the student-activists of the sit-in movement as well as that of white collaborators from the folk field like Carawan and his mentor, Alan Lomax.

My third and fourth chapters move from the creation of the songs to the shaping of their legacy. After the movement's anthem, "We Shall Overcome," rose to international prominence, the unlikely weapon of intellectual property law was leveraged in an effort to control its meaning and use. Chapter Three analyzes Pete Seeger's role in spearheading this effort and situates it within his labor-era use of copyrights as an organizing tool and his decades-long engagement in the folk field's debates about the ethics of cultural ownership. While Chapter Three describes the copyright itself as a strategic move emerging from concerns of the folk field, Chapter Four reveals its subsequent control by organizers of the black South. Uncovering new aspects of the dedicated career of SNCC Freedom Singer and cultural scholar Bernice Johnson Reagon, this final chapter reveals her decades of behind-the-scenes leadership in overseeing the copyright of "We Shall Overcome" and ensuring its continued service to the struggle for black freedom.

Ultimately, with its focus on the encounter between the privileges brought by white folk figures and strategies brought by black organizers, *Making Movement Sounds* tells a history of the freedom songs that is less about music and more about power—about the power to remember and revise tradition, to shape and direct a movement, and to make and memorialize its sound.

Guy Carawan and the Discovery of America's Folk

Guy Carawan was the most influential white folk singer of the civil rights movement. He played a key role in codifying and spreading its repertoire of songs, introduced many to its anthem, "We Shall Overcome," and is frequently credited for having transformed the desegregation fight into a "singing movement."[1] When he moved south to join the struggle he brought expertise culled from his career as a folksinger, studies of folk song scholarship, immersion in the nation's growing folk archive, and mentorship from radical folkniks in merging politics and song. However, despite this folk field expertise, he had no experience with community organizing or movement building, knew relatively little about the civil rights struggles in the black South, and had a minimal and largely secondhand knowledge of traditional black song. The perspectives and practices he brought were culled almost entirely from the white northern folk scene and its Popular Front cultural politics would be both adopted and challenged by the southern black leaders with whom he came to support and work. Yet, due to his privileged access and the power afforded the folkloric frameworks he brought, he and they would have an indelible impact on the movement's sound.

This chapter revises the story frequently told of Carawan by focusing on his formative years rather than his civil rights era work. Carawan grew up alongside

[1] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965 and "Let the Church Sing 'Freedom.'"; Street, *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement*; Howard Zinn. *SNCC, the New Abolitionists* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002); Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Ronald D. Cohen and Stephen Petrus. *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 204.

American folklore and the story of his early years is also the story of the folk field's formative histories, icons, and frameworks. Largely through him, the field would come to have great influence on the movement's music and cultural strategies. Beginning with his childhood in California and moving through his decision to join the southern movement, I chronicle his mentorship from the likes of Pete Seeger and Alan Lomax, academic training in folklore, immersion in the folk archives of the Library of Congress, and career on folk stages across the country. In doing so, I complicate the folklorist-hero narrative frequently used to discuss his role in the movement and illuminate the cultural and racial politics of the folkloric context in which he was steeped.

Folksongs and Folk Heroes

Guy Carawan was born on July 28th, 1927, to southerners living in Los Angeles. Both of his parents were politically conservative and he later recalled, "I grew up in a family life which had opposite values and interests to what I ended up doing."[2] His father was a war veteran from a North Carolina farming family who had hopped a freight train west during the Depression to begin what would ultimately be lethal work as an asbestos contractor. His mother was from an elite Charleston family and, after finishing college, landed a job as a secretary at Los Angeles' oldest newspaper, *The Herald Express*. The two met in a boarding house where they eventually married and raised three sons but the stark differences in their backgrounds remained a constant source of tension. His mother longed to live in more elite neighborhoods, insisted on sending the children to schools in

[2] Guy Carawan, Interview by Sue Thrasher, January 28, 1982, Highlander Center, transcript, Highlander archives, 1.

wealthier districts, and frequently called his father "poor white trash."[3] Guy remembers his father, on the other hand, "always under houses crawling around" and teaching him and his brothers the value of a hard day's work.[4]

Music was central to his mother's efforts to give her sons a leg up and connect them with noble national traditions. She diligently arranged lessons and put them in the band of the Sons of the American Legion.[5] When Guy Sr. chased after the boys to do their chores she would yell, "Oh, leave those boys alone. Let them practice clarinet."[6] Yet despite his father's dismissals of music during the day, at night he would lean into the sounds of home via a local radio show hosted by Southern musicians living in California. Carawan recalls, "[L]ate at night around midnight when everybody had gone to sleep, I might hear my father sitting there smoking a cigar, singing old hymns and ballads that he learned from his mother growing up in rural North Carolina."[7] Although not focused on it at the time, Carawan would later describe his father as "a true bearer of the oral tradition of Eastern North Carolina."[8] While his mother ensured his formal musical training, it was Carawan's father who inadvertently instilled in him a deep curiosity about the songs of America's folk.

Although this inheritance from his father was clear to Carawan later in life, when he was a child the very notion of America even having its own distinctive folk was

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 6.

[5] Guy Carawan interviewed by Kathy Bennett, January 17, 2003, Civil Rights Oral History Project of the Nashville Public Library, 9.

[6] Guy Carawan, Thrasher interview, 8.

[7] Ibid., 25

[8] Guy Carawan, Liner notes to "Songs with Guy Carawan," Folkways Records, 1958.

relatively new. For more than a century, the "folk" had been understood as being solely in or of Europe and it was not until the 1900s that America discovered its own. Coined in the 18th century by German philosopher Johnann Gottfried von Herder, the term *volk*, or "folk," described those whose isolation from the corrupting influence of civilization had preserved their authentic connection to the land and, thus, to the nation. Herder believed it was in the *volkslieder*, or "folksong," of this distinct group that the sound of national identity could be heard.[9] Herder's extensive influence led generations of song collectors on both sides of the Atlantic to identify the folk, wherever they may be found, as those with cultural memories of an old Europe. The American field of folk song scholarship was therefore born through and anchored by Harvard professor Francis James Child's seminal and Herder-inspired 1882 text, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*[10]—an exhaustive ten-volume work detailing the European folk song cannon. Child's work sent decades of American song collectors and scholars looking, not for new musical traditions emerging from their own young nation, but for those preserved by rural white communities from America's revered European past.

In the new century, however, America found its own folk in two strikingly opposite groups—the formerly enslaved and the frontier cowboys. In the years straddling the turn-of-the-century, the Negro spirituals, amplified by abolitionists and popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, were increasingly heralded as America's original folksongs for their emergence from a people both isolated from and distinctly shaped by the nation. In 1893, world-renowned Czech classical composer Antonín Dvořák echoed this claim

[9] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Volkslieder*. 2 vols. (Leipzig: Weygand, 1778-19; Hildesheim ; New York: Golms, 1981).

[10] Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1882).

and famously bolstered its validity, declaring, "These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are American…. These are the folk songs of America."[11] In 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* celebrated these "sorrow songs" as "the sole American music"[12] and by 1916 marketing materials for the immensely popular Fisk Singers had shifted from marveling at their "slave songs" to heralding their "American folksongs."[13]

While the Fisk Singers made folksongs of the Negro spirituals of the south, a budding folklorist from Mississippi named John Lomax found "the Anglo-Saxon ballad spirit" in America's "big and still unpeopled west."[14] Lomax was raised on a Texas farm on the Chisholm Trail and had long been enamored of the songs he grew up hearing from men driving cattle to Kansas.[15] He began writing the songs down as a child and, even when he went to college at the age of twenty, refused to leave them behind. Recalling his arrival at school, he wrote, "I carried in my trunk, along with my pistol and other implements of personal warfare, a little manuscript roll of cowboy songs."[16] His college professors, still guided by Herder's investment in Europe, told him the songs "had no value"[17] but 23 years later, after graduate work at Harvard under Francis Child's protégé,

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[11] "American Music. Dr. Antonin Dvorak Expresses Some Radical Opinions." *The Boston Herald*. May 28, 1893.

[12] W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 5th ed. (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903), 251.

[13] As quoted in Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919*. Music in American Life (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 203.

[14] John A. Lomax, *Cowboy Songs: And Other Frontier Ballads* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1910).

[15] John A. Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), xi.

[16] Ibid.

[17] John A. Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, xi.

George Kittredge, Lomax's "little manuscript roll" grew to become his first book. *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*[18] was published in 1910 and rewrote the parameters of the field; the book adopted Child's methods but eschewed his European focus by looking entirely at "that unique and romantic figure in modern civilization, the American cowboy."[19] Thus, in the early twentieth-century the Negro spirituals and the cowboy songs forever shifted America's folkloric focus towards its own.

Carawan was born just as this new interest in "native American"[20] song traditions was taking root. In the 1920s the Archive of American Folk-Song was founded at the Library of Congress and formalized the field; the recording industry capitalized on and popularized America's unique black and white sounds with the mass production of "race" and "hillbilly" records, and artists and thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance embraced and upheld the newly recognized centrality of black culture to national identity to bolster the respectability of their New Negro. The decisive shift away from the European song canon was perhaps most clearly announced in 1927, the year of Carawan's birth, by Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag*—an extensive collection of 280 American songs whose academic and popular prominence eclipsed that of the European ballads emphasized by Child. Decidedly disinterested in songs of European descent, Sandburg heralded his volume as "an All-American affair marshaling the genius of thousands of original singing Americans."[21] The book was immensely popular, remained in print for more than seventy

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[18] John A. Lomax, *Cowboy Songs*.

[19] Ibid., xi.

[20] Ibid., xv; Lawrence Gellert, *Negro Songs of Protest* (New York: American Music League, 1936).

[21] Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), vii.

years,[22] and was a prized possession of a young Carawan who received it as a gift from his mother.[23]

After inheriting the century's growing romance with the nation's folksongs from his parents, Carawan would learn new ways of hearing America's sounds from the radical songsters he encountered in college. For those committed to progressive politics, the songs of America's folk, whether southern blues or mountain ballads, sounded not simply the spirit of the nation, but the struggles of its underclass—the resistance of blacks in the Jim Crow south, the laments of whites of the Dust Bowl, the rallying cries of organized labor, the collective struggles during the Depression, and the resistance to rising conservatism during the war. This politicization of vernacular songs was facilitated by two Depression-era trends: the American Communist Party's (CPUSA) increasing embrace of the people's songs as the true sound of the people's struggles and the New Deal's celebration, through federally funded art and folklore projects, of the common man. Folk music's authenticity was held up in contrast to capitalism's corrupting commercialism and singing was championed, not only as a way to communicate political messages, but as a political act in and of itself.

Carawan was introduced to this perspective on politics and song in 1946 through Pete Seeger's musical collective, People's Songs. Seeger, who was then a recent war veteran and member of the CPUSA, had gathered his musical partner Lee Hayes, friend Alan Lomax, and an interracial group of more than thirty giants of the post-war political music scene in his Greenwich Village basement earlier that year to discuss ways to unite

[22] Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 11.

[23] Carawan interviewed by Kathy Bennett, 9.

and amplify the singing left. During that meeting People's Songs was founded and its stated mission was "to create, promote, and distribute songs of labor and the American people."[24] The organization worked closely with the unions and the folk community, hosted workshops on the political uses of song, produced concerts and hootenannies, and published records, songbooks, and a quarterly bulletin.[25] It quickly attracted more than 3,000 members and opened offices in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Carawan encountered People's Songs while a student at Occidental College. He was dating California-native Noel Oliver whose father, Bill, was a member of both People's Songs and the CPUSA. As Carawan later described it, the Oliver home was "the center of politics, artistic doings, [and] the people's song movement."[26] It was there that Carawan met Seeger and Hayes as well as "Dust Bowl troubadour" Woody Guthrie, black South Carolina guitarist Josh White, and others committed to the radical politics they heard in America's non-commercial music. He later wrote, "I was introduced to a whole circle of city people who were singing folk songs [and] I got the bug and was at it myself in a very short time."[27]

This new community of radical songsters sparked a political awakening in Carawan. "[I]deas began to hit me," he recalled. [W]hat is this society we live in like? Is

[24] "People's Songs: A Bulletin of People's Songs Inc." 1946.

[25] The People's Songs was an ambitious endeavor and lasted only four years. As Seeger wrote in a letter to Highlander's Zilphia Horton two months after its founding, "Fact is, we got started here in something that suddenly turned out to be bigger than we thought, and we've been busy trying to fill the job that is cut out for us" (Seeger to Horton, Februrary 12, 1946, WISC-HREC, Box 25, Folder 20). The organization went bankrupt after spending all its resources on the Henry Wallace campaign but its quarterly bulletin was revived in 1950 as the still-extant "Sing Out!" magazine.

[26] Guy Carawan to Sue Thrasher, January 28, 1982, Highlander Archives, 15.

[27] Guy Carawan, liner notes to "Songs with Guy Carawan," Folkways Records, 1958.

there such a thing as a working class that gets messed over? Are there people who make most of the money, or control, or what is racism?... [I]t got my mind into a ferment."[28] This ferment led him away from his conservative family and toward the study of Marxism and Socialism in conjunction with folklore and anthropology. He also began pouring over the vast archive of field recordings from the Library of Congress and performing regularly with his musical partner Frank Hamilton. After college he got a master's degree in sociology with a focus in folklore at UCLA. He studied under Wayland Hand, the founder and head of the university's folklore department, one-time head of the *Journal of American Folklore*, and president of the American Folklore Society. Hand was well versed in the history of American folk culture, had undergraduate and graduate degrees in German, and had written his dissertation on German folksongs.[29] In addition to understanding the debt the American field owed Herder, he also knew the ways Herder's linking of culture and nation had been adopted by the Nazis and used to facilitate their use and abuse of German folksongs. Troubled by this precedent, Hand discouraged Carawan from engaging People's Songs, repeatedly urging him to leave politics alone and "let a folk song be what it is."[30] Carawan was not persuaded. By then he was fully rooted in the community the Olivers had introduced him to and, rather than adopt the academic remove encouraged by his UCLA advisor, upon completion of his degree in 1952 he followed Seeger and Hays to New York.

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[28] Ibid., 16.

[29] Frances Cattermole-Tally, "Obituary: Wayland Debs Hand (1907-1986)." *The Journal of American Folklore* 102, no. 404 (1989): 183–185.

[30] As quoted by Carawan in the Bennett interview, 4.

Carawan then spent what he would later call "a pretty formative"[31] year living and working as a music teacher at the Ottlie Orphan Home in Long Island and performing and protesting with the radical songsters of Greenwich Village. New York had long been the center of the music industry and had recently become the center of the radical folk scene as well. It was home to giants of the field including Seeger, Guthrie, and Hudie "Leadbelly" Leadbetter, and also to the array of powerful publishers, producers, agents, folklorists, and collectors helping to shape the field. Carawan's political education came from rallies in the streets but his training in merging music and protest came at the weekly folk music gatherings in Washington Square Park and from People's Songsters Hays and Seeger. Carawan frequented Hays' Brooklyn home where they talked about Hays' time with The Weavers—the post-war manifestation of the political folk singing group he and Seeger had founded a decade earlier—and experience with the House Un-American Activities Committee after Seeger's name appeared in *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*. Hays also talked about his work leveraging folksongs within labor organizing and alongside such seminal figures as Presbyterian minister and activist, Claude Williams, and the founder of The Highlander Folk School's cultural initiatives, Zilphia Horton.

While Hays was Carawan's primary teacher, Pete Seeger became his role model. Later described as "a preacher with a banjo in place of a psalm book,"[32] Seeger's unwavering humility and commitment to anti-militarism and economic and racial justice made him one of the most beloved and most boycotted singers in the country. Born in

[31] Carawan, interviewed by Thrasher, 34.

[32] David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing? The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: Random House, 2009), location 132.

New York to a progressive musical family, Seeger began playing the ukulele in grade school, later switched to the banjo and, by the time he was a teenager, had committed to a career in politics and song. His mother, Constance de Clyver, was a classical violinist and his step-mother, Ruth Seeger, was a renowned composer whose arrangements had been featured in Sandburg's *American Sandbag*. However it was his father, Charles Seeger, who had the greatest influence on him. Seeger was a pioneering musicologist who, by the 1930's, ardently believed "that music must serve"[33] and by mid-decade believed folk music to be the nation's most powerful. He was a leading figure within the communist-affiliated Composers Collective of New York and deployed folk singers to help build community among displaced migrant and farm workers through the New Deal Resettlement Administration.[34]

Pete briefly attended Harvard University, following in his father's footsteps, but dropped out in 1938 due to an increasing interest in politics and protest. He moved to New York where his friend Alan Lomax, the son of his father's colleague John, introduced him to the city's political music community including Leadbetter and Kentucky miner and union balladeer Aunt Molly Jackson. Lomax, then the director of the Archive of American Folk-Song at the Library of Congress, soon hired Seeger to help him listen to and identify the best of the more than 3,000 race and hillbilly albums for a discography he was building of recorded folksongs.[35] For Seeger, four years younger than Lomax and significantly less experienced, it was a transformative immersion into the

[33] Charles Seeger as quoted in *Singing Out: An Oral History of America's Folk Music Revivals* by Dunaway, David King, and Molly Beer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 47.

[34] Cohen, *Depression Folk*, 71-72.

[35] John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 144.

nation's sounds and the beginning of a life-long partnership with Lomax. Although he had been a musician since childhood, Seeger later described his experiences in the 1930s—watching his father's work merging music and politics, meeting radical folk singers in New York, and hearing the sounds of the nation with Lomax at the Library of Congress—as the time when he discovered the power of "folk songs with teeth."[36]

By the time Carawan got to New York in 1952, Seeger was the leading figure of its political music scene. Much in demand, Seeger was constantly on the road singing with and for activists and their supporters while collecting and transcribing songs and their histories for the magazine of his People's Songs, *Sing Out!* He had largely learned this approach to musical organizing from Zilphia Horton at Highlander with whom he had been in constant communication since the founding of People's Songs.[37] Carawan interacted with Seeger at the monthly People's Songs hootenannies in New York and as a singer under his direction with The Jewish Young Folk Singers (JYFS). The JYFS had choirs throughout New York's boroughs and pushed Carawan's knowledge of folksongs beyond the US with its repertoire of progressive and traditional songs from the cultural backgrounds of its black American and Jewish and Russian immigrant members. A young Harry Belafonte was one of the group's soloists, Paul Robeson was a frequent collaborator, and Seeger and Hays were co-directors along with Bob Decormier and Earl Robinson. Struck by Carawan's musical talent, intellectual curiosity, and political passion, Seeger suggested he travel south to hear southern folk music first hand, visit the Highlander Folk School, and meet one of his mentors, Zilphia Horton.

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[36] As quoted in Cohen, *Depression Folk*, 61.

[37] Letters between Seeger and Horton, 1946-1966, WISC, Box 25, Folder 20.

In the summer of 1953 Carawan wrote his singing partner Frank Hamilton, who was in California working with Woody Guthrie and Odetta, to say, "Let's go south."[38] Hamilton jumped at the idea: "I packed my toothbrush, underwear, and socks in my guitar case and hit the road."[39] While plotting their adventure in a Harlem nightclub they met Rambling Jack Elliot, the rebellious son of a Brooklyn doctor and protégé of Guthrie's. Like Carawan and Hamilton, Elliot had never been to the South but was enamored of its music and upon hearing their plans he insisted on coming along. The duo became a trio and dubbed themselves The Dusty Road Boys.

Song hunting in the South had long been a romantic rite of passage for folk song collectors and singers alike and a significant part of this trip's allure was its mirroring of the legendary southern road trip of John and Alan Lomax. The father and son team had famously set out across the South in the summer of 1933 with a 316-pound recording machine, a gift from Thomas Edison's widow,[40] in their trunk and retuned with a treasure trove of recordings that would form the foundation of the newly established Archive of American Folk-Lore. The following year they each published an academic article detailing the adventures and discoveries of their trip[41] and together they published *American Ballads and Folksongs*,[42] the most extensive and popular collection of American songs since Sandburg's *American Songbag*. By 1950 the Lomaxes were the

[38] Carawan, interviewed by Thrasher, 40.

[39] As quoted in Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 3.

[40] Alan Lomax, "Saga of a Folksong Hunter," *HiFi/Stereo Review*, 4, no. 5, May 1960, 30-31 in Alan Lomax, *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 173-186.

[41] Alan Lomax, "'Sinful' Songs of the Southern Negro: Experiences Collecting Secular Folk-Music." *Southwest Review* 19, no. 2 (1934): 105–131; John A. Lomax, "'Sinful Songs' of the Southern Negro." *The Musical Quarterly* XX, no. 2 (January 4, 1934): 177–187. doi:10.1093/mq/XX.2.177.

[42] John A. Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).

towering figures in the field and their 1933 road trip was legendary for having solidified John's legacy and catapulted Alan's career. Meeting exactly two decades later, The Dusty Road Boys were eager to follow in the Lomaxes' footsteps. They piled their two guitars, one banjo, and bulky recording equipment into Carawan's car and set out, as Hamilton would later describe it, "in search of American folk music."[43]

Finding the Folk on the Road

The next ten weeks took The Dusty Road Boys through Virginia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee and were as exhilarating as they were exhausting. They paid for food and gas by performing in bars and folk festivals and on street corners and radio shows while sleeping where they could—sometimes in people's homes, sometimes outside, and often, as Carawan wrote to his then-fiancé Noel Oliver, among the "scramble of blankets, clothes, food, utensils, guitars and the hundred and one other things that fill[ed] the back seat of the car."[44] They were sometimes "very low on money and very low in spirits"[45] but mostly had the time of their lives. They met and played with "top hillbilly singers"[46] such as Earl Scruggs, Grandpa Jones, String Bean, A. P. Carter, May Justus, and Roy Acuff, and attended the legendary Grand Ol' Oprey and Ashville Folk Festival.

For Carawan, however, the trip was as sobering as it was thrilling as it brought him face to face for the first time with the politics and powers of the Jim Crow South.

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[43] As quoted in Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 3.

[44] Guy Carawan to Noel Oliver, Summer 1953, Candie and Guy Carawan Collection, McClung Collection's Tennessee Archive of Moving Image and Sound, 4.

[45] Ibid., 18.

[46] Ibid., 23.

Soon after leaving New York and on Seeger's recommendation, the trio visited the black menhaden fishermen of Merry Point, Virginia, who were part of a union organizing campaign and strike that stretched down the coast to Florida. They played in the Merry Point rallies and stayed with Bill Levner, the area's lead organizer, but were quickly chased out by the sheriff and the Klan. In Nashville they visited a black bluesman who could "make [the guitar] whine, cry, and throb the blues like no one in person you'd ever seen" but, again, they found themselves on the run when the sheriff pulled up shouting, "Get your butts out of here! You're not supposed to be out here!"[47] In Mesic, North Carolina, they spent two weeks on Carawan's family farm learning the songs Guy had grown up hearing from his father. When the trio asked where they might record black songs, Carawan's Uncle Claude and Aunt Nancy warned, "[Y]ou better not go mixing with negroes. The people here won't stand for it."[48] Racism was certainly a fixture in the north as well as the south and, with the 1954 decision in *Brown v Board of Education* less than a year away, desegregation was a frequent focus of the New York folk scene. Carawan, however, had never experienced the bald-faced racism of the American South, and wrote to Noel that he found the juxtaposition of America's music and racial violence "hard to reconcile."[49] Years later he described the trip as the crucial period when, at the age of 26, he "began to learn about racism."[50]

Carawan was also deeply affected by his encounters with anti-communist sentiment, particularly in Tennessee at the home of the legendary singer and folklorist

[47] Carawan, interviewed by Thrasher, 54

[48] Carawan to Oliver, 3.

[49] Carawan to Oliver, 1-2.

[50] Carawan, interviewed by Thrasher, 53.

Bascom Lamar Lunsford. Carawan had long admired Lunsford for his Ashville Folk Festival and his extensive recordings of American music. Lunsford was also legendary for having hosted the music festival where a teenaged Pete Seeger first heard and fell in love with the five-string banjo.[51] When Carawan and his crew arrived at Lunsford's home, however, Lunsford had already heard that they were friends of the radical Seeger and Guthrie and shouted with disgust, "Are you Communists?!"[52] Hamilton later recalled, "Guy was crestfallen."[53] Describing Lunsford's interpretation of the radical songsters Carawan had come to so admire, he wrote to Noel, "[Lunsford] turned out to be just the opposite of the kind of person I'd expected. He sings like an old mountain reprobate, full of glee and friendliness. He turned out to be a reactionary aristocrat."[54] In a letter written later when the three returned to attend Lunsford's folk festival, Guy still found him to be "suspicious and unfriendly" and his opinion had solidified: "He's a shit—and how."[55]

Guy's wrestling with anti-Communist sentiment came to a head during the group's visit to Tennessee's Black Mountain College, an experimental arts-based school whose multidisciplinary faculty included some of the nation's leading artists. The traveling trio was invited to perform and, while there, attended a screening of "Man on a Tightrope," an anti-Communist film by the controversial Elia Kazan who had testified the

[51] "Performers Notes," in "Newport Folk Festival Program," 1963, Festival Files Collection (#300007), Southern Folklife Collection, Manuscripts Department, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[52] Carawan, interviewed by Thrasher, 55.

[53] As quoted in Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 5.

[54] Carawan to Oliver, 7.

[55] Ibid., 32.

previous year before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Carawan wrote of his experience watching the film, "I got a sick feeling in the bottom of my stomach and it didn't go away for a long time that evening. No one seemed bothered by what to me was real filth and lies."[56] After their performance he got into a heated debate with poetry professor, Charles Olson, who believed political involvement corrupted artistic practice and that political folk singers in particular "were killing their art."[57] Carawan passionately disagreed but the argument deepened his commitment to the progressive folksong movement just as his anger with Kazan's film left him "thinking seriously about a trip to the Soviet Union."[58]

When the three finally arrived at the Highlander Folk School Carawan found it a great comfort in the midst of a Southern tour whose musical exhilaration had been repeatedly complicated by political confrontation. Since its founding in 1932, Highlander had been a training and strategizing hub for multigenerational and interracial groups of southern organizers and had also always prided itself on the refreshing refuge offered by its mountain locale. Carawan wrote to Noel,

> For the first time since we left the menhaden organizer, Bill Levner, I felt back among some politically akin people. It's very encouraging to find a place like this in the South carrying on its program and being well liked by the community…. There is a whole gang of wonderful people here.[59]

The leader of that wonderful gang was Highlander's founder, Myles Horton, whom Carawan had met briefly in New York but became enamored of that summer.

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[56] Ibid., 30.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., 29-30.

[59] Carawan to Oliver, 19-20.

"He's a combination of so many good kinds of things," he wrote to Noel. "An organizer with a great sense of humor, a hell-raiser and mixer with all kinds of people, a great knowledge of folk culture and community life, also very politically astute."[60]

Horton had grown up in a southern Christian family equally committed to education and community service. He had spent his life looking for ways to merge the two and in the summer of 1927, at the age of 22, he decided to establish an adult school in the south committed to cultivating local leadership for social change using a radically democratic pedagogy. In preparation for this endeavor, he studied ethics, socialism, and progressive education with Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary in New York and sociology and politics with Robert Park at the University of Chicago. He complimented this formal education with experiences in the field by visiting labor schools, supporting striking workers, and traveling to Denmark to learn from teachers and students of the Danish Folk Schools. These Danish schools were widely credited with facilitating the political participation of the rural poor through a residential education program focused on civic engagement, cultural heritage, and community cooperation and became the primary model for Horton's own endeavor. Horton began fundraising in 1932 and within a year had teamed up organizer and poet Don West and southern minister Jim Dombrowski to open The Highlander Folk School in Grundy County, Tennessee.

In the school's inaugural years, Horton developed the residential program structure that would become its hallmark. Students came for weeks or months at a time and participated in workshops such as "Union Problems," "Labor History," and "The

[60] Ibid., 20.

Worker Sings a Folk Song" along with a daily schedule of chores and recreation.[61] Eschewing traditional approaches to both education and community organizing, Horton described Highlander as less of a school and "more of a center where people with common or overlapping interests gather for discussions of problems and dreams."[62] By 1938 the school's mission read as follows:

> The Highlander Folk School is a southern school for members of trade unions, farmers' organizations, and cooperatives. Its purpose is to assist in the development of the labor movement, both in the immediate necessity of organizing industrial workers and farmers, and in the final attainment and protection of their fullest rights. Our residence courses are based on the experience and problems of the class of people who work with their hands and brains.[63]

Within a year of opening its doors, Horton's center for "problems and dreams" was well on its way to becoming the region's preeminent organizing hub. Evidencing the growing support for the school among radical educators and organizers, in 1933 John Dewey wrote Horton a handwritten note of congratulations: "I am much impressed with the intelligence and certainty and direction of the plan and those who are engaged in carrying it out. It is one of the most hopeful social-educational plans I know of."[64]

In addition to meeting Myles Horton, The Dusty Road Boys also followed Seeger's advice and spent time with Horton's wife, Zilphia. An Arkansas-born, classically trained musician who played the piano and accordion, Zilphia had been disowned by her father in 1935 after becoming a follower of the radical preacher Claude Williams and trying to organize the workers in her father's mine. She then attended a

[61] "Highlander Folk School Review,"1938, Highlander Archives, Serie II, Box 1, Folder 1, 2.

[62] Myles Horton to Louis Adamic, November 7, 1937, WISC-Myles Horton Collection, Box 6, Folder 3.

[63] "Highlander Folk School Review,"1938, Highlander Archives, Serie II, Box 1, Folder 1, 3.

[64] John Dewey to Myles Horton, September 27, 1933, WISC-Myles Horton Collection, Box 6, Folder 2.

two-month labor education workshop at Highlander where she and Myles met and fell in love. They were married two months later and led Highlander together, with Myles guiding its organizing strategy and Zilphia ensuring the inclusion of culture. Early member of Highlander's teaching staff, Aleine Austin recalled, "Myles was for the mind… but Zilphia was for the soul."[65]

Zilphia had established an extensive set of cultural programs in support of Highlander's work in the labor movement including the publication of personal narratives, production of original theater, and collection of traditional music. While the plays and personal narratives documented union members' experiences, the song collections endeavored to capture their cultural traditions. She hosted evenings of community singing where hymns, mountain ballads, and strike songs were shared and led workshops that emphasized song-leading skills and strategies for revising songs to best suit specific movement contexts. She also worked regularly in black communities and with black singers such as Hudie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, Josh White, Paul Robeson, and Southern Tenant Farmers Union organizer and singer John L. Handcox. Countering tendencies to romanticize or exoticize black song, she would often quote Langston Hughes's introduction to folklorist Lawrence Gellert's 1936 collection, *Negro Songs of Protest*:

> These songs collected from plantations, chain gangs, lumber camps, show that not all Negroes are shouting Spirituals, dancing to the blues or mouthing inter-racial oratory—supposedly unruffled by the economic stress of these days. Some of them are tired of being poor and picturesque and hungry. Terribly and bitterly tired.[66]

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[65] Aleine Austin, interviewed by Sue Thrasher, 1982, Highlander Research and Education Center Archives, 3-8.

[66] Zilphia Horton, "Why do you sing the songs you sing," n.d., Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Tennessee State Archives, Box 5, Folder 4.

Through Zilphia's leadership, Highlander's cultural efforts were so effectively integrated into its labor organizing that in 1939 it was nationally recognized by the unions as the "singing labor school."[67] Highlander staff member Laney Melamed recalled of Zilphia's song leading, "It never bombed. There was a magic when she picked up the accordion."[68]

Zilphia's interest was not simply in leading singing but also in training song leaders. She offered technical advice ("Be sure the pitch is low enough," "Indicate clearly the tempo of the song by singing a few words," "Clap or tap the phrases which are not sung correctly [to] get people to relax and 'feel' the rhythm"[69]) and also defined core principles and practices such as having "a selfless interest in the music" and "look[ing] the entire audience in the eye."[70] She also spoke regularly and passionately about the deeper meaning of music and its role in society. Rejecting the idea that music was "an art form for leisure time, performed and enjoyed by and for the chosen few,"[71] she insisted it was "the heart of things—of beliefs, situations, of struggle, of ideas, of life itself."[72] To illustrate its emergence from the histories, struggles, and joys of those creating it, she frequently compared cultural expression to a water lily whose beauty depended on "the

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[67] Aimee I. Horton, "The Highlander Folk School: A History of the Development of its Major Programs Related to Social Movements in the South, 1932-1961" (doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1971), 148-144.

[68] Laney Melamed, interviewed by Sue Thrasher, 1982, Highlander Research and Education Center Archives, 3-8.

[69] Zilphia Horton, "Suggestions for Song Leaders," n.d., Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Tennessee State Archive, Zilphia Horton Collection, Box 5, Folder 4.

[70] Zilphia Horton, "Song Leaders," n.d., Tennessee State Archive, Zilphia Horton Collection, Box 5, Folder 3.

[71] As quoted in Adams and Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, 76.

[72] Zilphia Horton, "Suggestions for Song Leaders," Box 5, Folder 4.

rich mud at the bottom of that pond."[73] She insisted, "There has to be some central core that holds people together before anything worthwhile comes out in the way of culture."[74] At Highlander, that central core was political commitment and the songs that emerged served their movement building.

In addition to singing and training song leaders, Horton tirelessly typed and mimeographed song sheets for Highlander's archive and labor union songbooks—a constant practice of documentation, publication, and dissemination that would shape approaches to organizing with song for decades to come. Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) president John Lewis recognized the power of her work and heralded the unions' embrace of it in his introduction to her 1939 songbook for the Textile Workers of America, *Labor Songs*, in which he wrote, "A singing army is a winning army, and a singing labor movement cannot be defeated."[75] Creating labor songbooks was no easy feat and required a huge commitment of energy and time. Horton was in constant correspondence with union leaders, publishers of the *People's Songs Bulletin* Seeger and Hays, and individual singers to discover, learn the histories of, obtain permissions, and pay royalties for old and emerging songs. This overwhelming effort was complicated by her frequent travels but Horton found the endeavor entirely thrilling. As she wrote to the CIO Education Director, George Guernsey, "I'm beginning to feel like a

[73] Zilphia Horton, workshop outline, n.d., Tennessee State Archives, Zilphia Horton Collection, Box 5, Folder 4.

[74] As quoted by Guy and Candie Carawan in "I'm Gonna Let it Shine: Singing in Highlander," *Social Policy*, 1991, 21, Issue 3.

[75] *Labor Songs*, Zilphia Horton, Textile Workers of America, 1939, Highlander Education and Research Center Archive, Myles Horton Papers, 4.

detective."[76] Zilphia was the embodiment of everything Carawan admired and his time with her would come to shape much of his later work. While Black Mountain served to clarify his stance through its embodiment of things he opposed, Highlander felt to be a kind of homecoming.

After a final stop in New Orleans—where Carawan peeled off briefly to meet Noel in Mexico and Hamilton and Eliot met up with banjo player Billy Faier—The Dusty Road Boys returned to New York with their recording equipment broken and their views of southern music and politics revised. Carawan felt their adventure had been an invaluable education and would later write, "That trip taught us a lot. New landscapes, different lingos, songs, people, communities—and discrimination."[77] Despite his studies at UCLA and immersion in the recordings at the Library of Congress, he wrote, "I learned more about southern… life and music that summer than I have from all the books I've read or records I've listened to."[78]

Carawan returned from their southern tour eager to deepen his learning and jump-start his career. After briefly returning to California where he married Noel Oliver and gave concerts with Frank Hamilton recreating their trip in song, he spent the rest of the summer working with Lorraine Hansberry and other black cultural luminaries at her Camp Unity. Unity was an interracial family resort that merged outdoor recreation with political education with a focus on arts and culture. He worked closely with Hansberry and a visiting faculty that included W. E. B. Du Bois, his wife the playwright, composer,

[76] Zilphia Horton to George Guernsey, November 27, 1946, Tennessee State Archives, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 1, Folder 11.

[77] Guy Carawan to Friends of Highlander, August 1959, p1, WISC-HREC, Box 37, Folder 11, 1.

[78] Guy Carawan, liner notes to "Songs with Guy Carawan," Folkways Records, 1958.

and activist Shirley Graham Du Bois, and anthropologist, writer, actor, and wife of Paul Robeson, Dr. Eslanda Goode Robeson. At summer's end, motivated and inspired by the work he had seen during his southern tour and at Camp Unity, Carawan asked Pete Seeger's father Charles the best place to study the history of America's folk culture and role in its politics and social change. Seeger told him there was no formal program that would meet his particular needs and suggested he pursue independent study. Carawan returned to California and spent the next two years sitting in on classes and reading all he could in UCLA's library while teaching guitar and building his solo career with extended engagements in such roots music hubs as Chicago and Detroit and repeated pavement pounding in New York.

In 1957 singer and folklorist Bess Hawes convinced Carawan and Oliver to attend the Sixth World Youth Festival in Moscow and to stop in London on their way to meet her brother, Alan Lomax. Carawan had committed to visiting the Soviet Union at Black Mountain College and had long been enamored of Lomax so he and Oliver quickly agreed. They joined the delegation of forty Americans who gathered with young people from 131 countries at the Moscow festival and then spent six weeks touring China in defiance of a State Department travel ban—a trip that Carawan would later learn had cost him his passport. He also spent a month performing and recording in Russia with Pete Seeger's sister, Peggy, and another two months traveling in Poland and Italy. Committed to seeing the world since his confrontations with Lunsford and Olson and introduced to international music through Seeger's Young Jewish Folksingers, Carawan was profoundly moved by the trip. He would later write:

> It was a remarkable experience—to see there in one city 36,000 youth from the four corners of the earth, wearing their native clothes and doing their native songs

> and dances. Through the discussions and friendships we had there and later on in my travels to China, Russia and Europe I came to believe in an emotional and personal way that I had always thought on a rational level, that "all men are brothers." Human beauty and dignity took on direct meaning for me; the world became peopled with real people; China is not remote.[79]

The part of the trip that would have the greatest impact on Carawan's life, however, were the two months he spent in London recording and living with Lomax. Pete Seeger had been Carawan's musical model but in London Lomax became his mentor—a life-long relationship that he would later describe as having influenced him "in the most major and dramatic way."[80] Carawan had read Lomax's work and listened to the recordings he and his father had made for the Library of Congress. He also took great inspiration from Lomax's belief in the politics inherent, not only in folksongs themselves, but in their documentation and preservation. Lomax felt it was his calling to bring the "unheard majority onto the center of the stage"[81] and had ushered Ledbetter to stardom, worked closely with Zora Neale Hurston to record in the deep South, studied and recorded folk music all over the U.S., Caribbean, and Europe, and written extensively about the power and politics of folk culture. Lomax was guided by the conviction that folksongs "reflect our democratic and equalitarian political beliefs" and "can provide ten thousand bridges across which men of all nations may stride to say, 'You are my brother.'"[82] However, despite his assertions to the contrary, he had inherited some of his conservative father's troubling beliefs about race and culture—beliefs that emerged most

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[79] Guy Carawan, liner notes to "Songs with Guy Carawan," Folkways Records, 1958.

[80] Guy Carawan to Alan Lomax, 1994, Letter prepared for the Folk Alliance Meeting, http://www.culturalequity.org/alanlomax/ce_alanlomax_profile_carawan.php.

[81] Lomax as quoted in John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 37.

[82] By Alan Lomax. "America Sings the Saga of America." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*. 1947.

pointedly in the questionable relationships he had with the singers he recorded and presented.

Following a growing desire to document global folk cultures, Lomax moved to London in 1950 where he spent eight years conducting fieldwork throughout Europe while also writing and performing. Arriving in London seven years into Lomax's eight, Carawan found him to be both icon and inspiration. Awed during that trip and thankful for the rest of his life, Carawan wrote to Lomax decades later,

> Long before I met you in person you were having an influence on me. Your books and the field recordings you and your father had put at the Library of Congress were much of the inspiration that got me into the study of folk song and folklore at UCLA with Wayland Hand. Your writings and recordings made the material come alive in a way that was absolutely irresistible. [Bess] put me in touch with you when I traveled through London [and y]our personal generosity kicked in then. You let me stay in your London apartment learning about what you were doing and soaking up ideas about the power and richness of folk cultures; the link they can have to people's social and political goals.[83]

Despite debates among some in the field about Lomax's interpersonal politics, he had yet to come under serious scrutiny and Carawan, for better or worse, embraced him as a role model.

Carawan returned to the New York folk scene with broadened expertise and deepened confidence after his six transformative months abroad. He began a college tour singing and talking about his travels and, after signing with Moe Asch of the legendary Folkways Records, recorded his debut albums, "Songs with Guy Carawan" and "Guy Carawan Sings Something Old, New, Borrowed and Blue."[84] His repertoire reflected the musical education he had amassed during the previous ten years; He sang the American,

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[83] Guy Carawan. "Guy Carawan to Alan Lomax," 1994. Letter prepared for Folk Alliance Meeting.

[84] Guy Carawan, *Songs with Guy Carawan*. Folkways Records, 1958; Guy Carawan, *Guy Carawan Sings Something Old, New, Borrowed and Blue*. Folkways Records, 1959.

Jewish, Russian, and Chinese folk songs he had learned from People's Songsters, the Jewish Young Folksingers, rural southerners, foreign folksingers, and the archives at UCLA and the Library of Congress. Alan Lomax, who had notoriously critiqued "so-called city-billies or folkniks [who] believed that they had learned everything that there was to know and had become 'folk singers,'"[85] wrote the liner notes to Carawan's second album and praised him as a "natural talent."[86] He wrote that Carawan's "seriousness and sensitivity" had facilitated rigorous scholarly and musical study while also enabling him to grasp the nuances of style and emotion—a combination he felt most "city singer[s] of folk songs" lacked. Not only did Lomax depict Carawan as a dedicated student and interpreter of folksongs, he also positioned him as a natural heir to folk culture:

> Singing style seems to be passed on in families, as part of the basic emotional and aesthetic inheritance of children. I feel sure that Guy learned a lot from his father, perhaps without even knowing it, for his attack, particularly on the southern mountain songs, is so "right."[87]

Carawan thus arrived on the professional folk stage in 1959 seasoned by his national and global travels, legitimized as a folksinger by Lomax, and naturalized as one of the folk by his father.

Following the "Singing Spirit"

While Carawan was launching his musical career in the north, the desegregation movement had its dramatic beginnings in the south. Three years before the release of his

[85] Alan Lomax, "The Folkniks - and the Songs They Sing." *Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine* 9, no. 1 (1959): 30–31.

[86] Alan Lomax, "Introduction and Notes on the Songs," liner notes to Guy Carawan's *Guy Carawan Sings Something Old, New, Borrowed and Blue*, Folkways Records, 1959.

[87] Ibid.

first album and while he was buried in UCLA's archives and performing in folk music capitols, Emmitt Till was brutally killed, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, and 40,000 blacks boycotted Montgomery's city buses for an entire year. None of this pulled Carawan from his path. It was not until 1959 when he saw Martin Luther King, Jr. speak at a black church in Boston that he felt compelled by the swelling movement he heard King compellingly describe. No longer attached to California as he and Noel had separated, and drawn by "the singing spirit of Highlander"[88] where King and other movement leaders were increasingly spending their time, Carawan called Myles Horton to see if he might get involved by living on Highlander's campus.

Zilphia Horton had died in a terrible accident two years earlier and Highlander's music programs had stopped. Her death was a devastating blow. Myles Horton wept for days as letters of condolence came pouring in from across the country from those who had known and loved her including Rosa Parks and Saul Alinsky.[89] A memorial concert was held three months later with the following report in a Highlander bulletin attesting to all she had meant and done:

> [S]he was one of the most genuine, natural, unspoiled, affirmative persons any of us has ever known, and for twenty-one years she helped make Highlander human and joyful and songful and gay, and thus helped all the countless people Highlander touched to make the dark and dreary places throughout the south more human, more joyful, more songful and more gay…. Highlander has always been committed to the struggle for justice and to the extension of democracy and education for all people. But from the first it has also been keenly interested in the cultural values…. Throughout the south and in many places beyond the south, unions and workers' groups have been set to singing again about the most

[88] Guy Carawan to Friends of Highlander, August 1959, p1, WISC-HREC, Box 37, Folder 11.

[89] Condolence Letters, Tennessee State Archive, Zilphia Horton Collection, Box 1, Folder 16.

> important things in life (their work, their loves, their jokes, their faith) by Zilphia, who took them new songs and old songs and gave them the courage to sing.[90]

Horton had been unable to pass her work on to anyone else and had written friends about "the difficulty of moving forward without Zilphia"[91] but when Carawan called he felt both the timing and the person were right. Horton and Carawan spent a week discussing possible arrangements and finally agreed that, in exchange for room and board, Carawan would oversee the rejuvenation of the Highlander's engagement with music. Although thrilled and grateful for the opportunity to continue the work Zilphia had so powerfully begun, Carawan knew hers would be tremendous shoes to fill.

As Carawan packed and prepared he sought guidance and counsel from Lomax. By then Lomax had returned from London and was also living in New York where Carawan visited him repeatedly to brainstorm plans for leveraging folk music in the southern fight for racial justice.[92] They talked about the methods forged by People's Songsters and Zilphia Horton, about lessons learned from Guy's travels, and about Lomax's experiences recording and working with black American song. Lomax's folkloric paternalism led him to believe the integration movement needed a trained outside eye and ear able to shape black traditional songs into a nationally resonant sound of resistance. Carawan, he felt, was perfect for the job. Carawan, however, knew that his background was primarily with white American and European roots music and that

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[90] In "Highlander Reports," July 1956, Tennessee State Archives, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 1, Folder 5.

[91] Myles Horton to Connie Burden, August 14, 1957, Highlander Center Archives, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 52.

[92] John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World*, 322.

collecting and disseminating songs for a black movement would require him to learn as much as, if not more than, teach.

He had gathered a host of powerful perspectives and practices over the previous decade: a conviction that traditional black songs were among those that most powerfully sounded the nation; a communist-inspired cultural politics that upheld traditional, non-commercial songs as powerful political tools and championed their documentation and dissemination as an organizing method; an investment in and romance of song collecting in the field; contacts with leftist producers in and promoters of the New York folk scene; and inspiration from the movement's charismatic leader, Dr. King. He did not, however have deep knowledge of the nation's racial politics, had only had his first encounter with southern racism six years prior on his trip with the Dusty Road Boys, and his experience with black song was minimal and largely second hand. Although a celebrated folksinger shaped by his significant studies of folk song scholarship and mentorship from preeminent political songsters, when it came to race in America—and despite his 32 years—he was, admittedly, very much a child. As Carawan, himself, would later recall of his arrival at Highlander in 1959 and entrance into the civil rights movement, "I was still a babe in the woods."[93]

[93] Carawan, interviewed by Thrasher, 69.

Making Movement Sounds:

The Encounters That Shaped the Repertoire

In the summer of 1955 on South Carolina's Wadmalaw Island, a 57-year-old school teacher stood before a church of black Islanders to transform the pain of racial violence into powerful community action.[1] The teacher was life-long black South Carolina educator and organizer Septima Clark and the occasion was a Sunday service in which the community grappled with the recent death of a black woman hit by the speeding car of a white Marine. Racism was nothing new in South Carolina but neither was organized resistance. Clark had been a community leader for close to forty years and encouraged those gathered, as she had with many before, to deepen their engagement by joining voter registration drives and supporting the NAACP. Her pitch that morning, however, diverged from those she had long used. In addition to pushing Islanders to get involved at home, she also encouraged them to broaden their tools and supports by traveling nearly 500 miles away. After summoning commitments to "the worth and dignity of man and the right of each individual to the good life," she urged those gathered, "[S]how the people around you that you have a registration certificate, that you will come out to the polls and vote when an election is on your island, that you have a

[1] Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 231.

membership card from the NAACP, and that you will send a man to represent you at the workshop at Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee!"[2]

As the desegregation movement took off, The Highlander Folk School became its primary organizing hub. By the time Guy Carawan decided to move to the school, black educators and organizers had already been streaming in for the better part of the decade and the school's work and demographics had changed. Unlike when he had visited with the Dusty Road Boys in 1952 and in sharp contrast to the community in which he had worked and learned up until that point, the Highlander Carawan joined in 1959 was predominantly black.[3] Reflecting this new Highlander and the ways in which he was unprepared to engage it, Carawan would later recall of his arrival, "For the first time in my life I was surrounded by black people."[4]

Carawan arrived with perspectives and practices shaped by the folk field of the North but was met by organizers and singers from and of the black South. As he traveled to learn and lead songs, his privileging of traditional songs was met with an interest in those more popular and new; his investment in lessons learned from the archives was met by the lived realities and practices of the black folk; and his efforts to define, capture, and contain a repertoire through recordings and song sheets were challenged by black singers continually making revisions on the frontlines. Although Carawan was influenced by the black cultural workers with whom he worked and they, in turn, were influenced by him, Carawan's platform at Highlander, contacts in the folk world, and reputation as a folk

[2] Ibid.

[3] John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 159.

[4] Carawan to Thrasher, 121.

singer ultimately gave him disproportionate access and control. The movement's repertoire was, thus, the product of influence and exchange but was also shaped by the workings of privilege and power.

This chapter tells a new story of the freedom songs of the civil rights movement. Moving beyond the usual tracing of black cultural histories from which the music emerged or honoring the black and white singers most responsible for its amplification, I recover the organizing histories, cultural frameworks, core collaborations, and power dynamics that shaped the repertoire and the strategies for its dissemination and use. My story's main characters are black organizers and white folk figures; its action focuses on the Highlander Folk School's facilitation of their encounters; and its goal is to reveal the nuances of their sometimes-contentious collaborations. Moving up to and through the dawn of civil rights and into the rise of Black Power, this chapter uncovers the dialogues and debates, powers and privileges, that made the movement's sounds.

From Citizenship Schools to Singing Schools: A Strategy Forged on the Sea Islands

The Highlander Folk School became home to the civil rights movement in the 1950s but had been integrated since opening its doors in 1932; Black scholars and organizers had always visited and taught there; training in countering discrimination had been offered for union leaders since the 1930s; and in 1944 the South's first inter-racial labor education program was held on its campus with 40 black and white members of the United Automobile Workers.[5] In response to the Supreme Court's initial consideration of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and believing the case to be confirmation, no

[5] "Community Reaction to Negroes at Highlander," 1945, WISC-Myles Horton Papers, Box 15, Folder 2, 4; Charron, *Freedom's Teacher,* 220; Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*, 88, 129-130.

matter its outcome, that the South's most pressing issue had shifted from poverty to prejudice, Highlander's board voted in 1953 to make school desegregation its primary focus.[6] They quickly inaugurated a series of workshops to gather potential leaders, grow the budding movement, and forge a cohesive South-wide strategy. These workshops ran throughout the mid and late 1950s and brought a wave of black organizers, educators, and students to Highlander's campus.

One among them was South Carolina native Septima Clark. Born in 1898, Clark had a master's degree from Hampton and had been teaching in Charleston, Columbia, and Johns Island schools since the age of 18. For her, the push for civil rights had begun in 1945 when black veterans returned from fighting abroad newly committed to taking up their own fight at home. She later wrote, "[T]hat is when the civil rights movement really got going, both for me personally and for people all over the South."[7] The frontlines of her work were in the classroom and in Charleston's civic organizations. She taught fourth through seventh grade and held leadership positions in the Young Women's Christian Association and NAACP of Charleston where she facilitated voter registration, challenged the law barring blacks from voting in primary elections, and worked with Thurgood Marshall.

Clark first visited Highlander in 1954, 56 years old and a seasoned organizer. She had heard it was the only place in the South where blacks and whites could strategize together and, believing cross-racial collaboration to be a prerequisite for substantial change, decided to go. While the Supreme Court was deciding *Brown v. Board*, she was

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[6] Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*. 155.

[7] Clark, Septima Poinsette. *Ready From Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement*. (Navarro, CA.: Wild Trees Press, 1986), 23.

participating in her first Highlander workshop on school desegregation and helped create two brochures for community distribution—"A Guide to Action for Public School Desegregation" and "What is a Workshop."[8] When she returned home she merged tools gained at Highlander with those she had long been using to host a day-long workshop for the Charleston PTA. Highlander's leaders Myles and Zilphia Horton drove down to support her and she led parents and teachers in discussions of school desegregation focused on "home and family life, health, religion and music."[9] She returned to Highlander twice that summer, each time with a car full of Johns Islanders, and by summer's end she had joined the staff as the school's Director of Education and ran what would be her first of many workshops for potential leaders of the growing movement. Evidencing the impact of her work, one attendee in her first workshop was a shy Alabama seamstress who, two months later, would use her training from Highlander and mentorship from Clark to bring national attention to concerns of the black South by refusing to give up her seat on a public Montgomery bus.[10]

While Rosa Parks became one of her most famous students, a lesser known Johns Island farmer named Esau Jenkins was her most impactful. Jenkins was born on Johns Island in 1910 and at the age of fourteen asked Clark, then a well-known Island educator, to teach him to read.[11] Despite having only a fourth grade education and what Zilphia

[8] Clark, *Ready From Within*, 31; Septima Poinsette Clark, *Echo in My Soul,* 1st ed. (New York: Dutton, 1962), 120.

[9] Clark, *Echo in My Soul,* 121.

[10] Clark, *Ready from Within*, (Navarro, CA.: Wild Trees Press, 1986), 31.

[11] Ibid., 42.

Horton later described as a deceptively "sphinx-like expression,"[12] Jenkins went on to single-handedly lead much of the island's mobilizing for change. He was the founder the Progressive Club which secured legal aid for black Islanders, president of the PTA, assistant pastor and director of Sunday school at his church, and president of the 200 member strong Citizen's Club which facilitated voter registration.[13] His most extraordinary effort, however, was the adult literacy and citizenship education program he had begun with his wife, Janie. The Jenkinses ran a bus service bringing Islanders to and from Charleston-area jobs and schools, and, knowing them to be community leaders, one regular commuter asked for their help passing the literacy test required for voter registration. The request inspired them to teach passages from the Constitution and offer political education for all passengers throughout the daily commute and their classroom on wheels became a remarkable success. Clark and Jenkins decided to expand the program and, taking advantage of the "laying by" season when famers were out of the fields, began offering literacy and citizenship education Island-wide each winter.[14]

Their Citizenship Schools would ultimately spread from Johns Island to the neighboring Edisto, Wadmalaw, and James Islands and make teachers of literate community members of all ages, quadruple the number of registered black voters, and facilitate nearly 100 percent voter turnout. The program was quickly replicated across the Deep South and in 1961 the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) became its institutional home. Septima Clark and her cousin Bernice Robinson, who had been the

[12] Zilphia Horton, Report, November 1954, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 1.

[13] Zilphia Horton, Report, November 1954, Tennessee State Library and Archives, p. 1; Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 223-224.

[14] Clark, *Ready From Within*, 50.

first citizenship teacher, later joined SCLC's staff to continue oversight of the program. Over the next fourteen years, the schools would yield hundreds of community teachers, nearly 100,000 newly literate southern blacks, 42,100 voters, and spread a new model for community-led organizing and action. It was an astonishing endeavor that would change the Sea Islands and, ultimately, the South.[15]

Knowing Jenkins had much to offer and believing Highlander had much to offer him, Clark brought Jenkins to his first Highlander workshop in the summer of 1954. The Hortons were immediately taken aback by his extensive Island work. Recalling the moment she realized the breadth of Jenkins' leadership, Zilphia Horton later wrote, "In a class discussing how best to enlist the support of the community for a given project, one of the suggestions was to call informal meetings of the community leaders to discuss the project. It became evident that in his community, Mr. Jenkins was all these leaders and would have to call a meeting with himself."[16]

As soon as he returned to Johns Island from his first Highlander trip, Jenkins tested the strategies he had learned there for supporting desegregation. He reported to Myles that he had successfully organized "three weeks of youth fellowship" at his church with "white young men and women from Charleston singing, studying, playing and sitting together with colored young men and women."[17] Eager to deepen his relationship

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[15] Glen, *Highlander*, 167-172; David P. Levine, "The Birth of the Citizenship Schools: Entwining the Struggles for Literacy and Freedom," *History of Education Quarterly*, 44, No. 3 (2004); Peter Ling, "Local Leadership in the Early Civil Rights Movement: The South Carolina Citizenship Education Program of the Highlander Folk School," *Journal of American Studies*, 29, No. 3 (1995): 399-422; Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*; Edmund L. Drago, *Charleston's Avery Center: From Education and Civil Rights to Preserving the African American Experience* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2006), 249-251.

[16] Zilphia Horton, Report, November 1954, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 1.

[17] Esau Jenkins to Mr. Myles [Horton], September 20, 1954, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

with the Hortons, Jenkins invited Myles and Zilphia to attend a dinner he was organizing in honor of Judge Walter Warring and his wife Elizabeth Warring. The Warrings were friends of Highlander's and greatly respected on the island for their commitment to civil rights. Judge Warring had ruled to open South Carolina's Democratic primaries to black voters and his dissent in South Carolina's *Briggs v Elliot* declared the inherent inequality of segregation and had helped pave the way for *Brown*. Horton promptly responded to the letter, told Jenkins he and his work were "an inspiration,"[18] and, although Myles was unable to join her, two months later Zilphia was back on Johns Island.

Zilphia was eager to celebrate the Warrings but was particularly excited by the "added incentive" of getting more time with Jenkins.[19] She stayed with him and his family and, in addition to attending the Warrings' dinner, witnessed the adult literacy program Clark and Jenkins had recently begun. Awed by what she saw, Zilphia committed to supporting it and arranged for Highlander to buy an old school building to house the program and provide ongoing financial support.[20] The Citizenship Schools became a central part of Highlander's new focus on desegregation; Jenkins was one of the growing movement's most powerful local leaders; and Clark would ultimately be hailed by Martin Luther King, Jr. and known to many as "the mother of the movement." Honoring the likes of Jenkins and Clark and the school's role in supporting them, King said to the nearly 200 people gathered for Highlander's 25th anniversary celebration in 1957, "I have long admired the noble purpose and creative work of this institution. For 25

[18] Myles Horton to Mr. [Esau] Jenkins, September 23, 1954, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

[19] Zilphia Horton, Report, November 1954, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 2.

[20] Zilphia Horton to Esau [Jenkins], November 18, 1954, Tennessee State Library and Archives; Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 227; Clark, *Echo in My Soul*, 139.

years you have given the South some of its most responsible leaders in this great period of transition."[21]

Two years later, Guy Carawan joined Highlander's staff. He had last been to the school in 1952 when it was still focused on supporting farmers and laborers but by the time of his return Zilphia had died, Clark, Jenkins, and Bernice Robinson were all on staff, the Citizenship Schools were a hallmark program, and the school's attention had decidedly turned to civil rights. For Carawan, the Highlander he joined, the people with whom it worked, and the movement it was supporting were all dizzyingly new.

Despite his disorientation, Carawan hit the ground running. Immediately after arriving, he began splitting his time between leading and teaching songs for Clark's "Citizenship and Integration"[22] workshops and traveling to regional gatherings of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s SCLC. He was struck partly by the openness of black people to the involvement of a northern white folksinger but mostly by the power of black culture:

> I had listened to it on records and heard singers—it attracted me—but to be right in the midst of black people talking and singing about and praying about and preaching… was just so really moving.... I can remember having grown up in my life hardly ever having tears come to my eyes about anything…. But I can remember that year, just almost every week something hitting me so deeply that tears were pouring out of my eyes.[23]

Carawan told Myles and Highlander's then director, C. Conrad Browne, that he felt "the potential for a great singing movement as part of the freedom struggle—one which could far surpass the singing in the labor movement."[24] Believing there was already powerful

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[21] As quoted in Highlander Brochure, 1963, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC.

[22] Glen, *No Ordinary School*, 144.

[23] Carawan to Thrasher, 121-122.

[24] Guy Carawan to Myles Horton and Conrad Browne, 1965, 3.

singing but no established body of songs to unite organizers across locales, he began the work of "looking for a repertoire."[25]

Balancing the humility born of his emotional immersion into this new terrain with the confidence cultivated by his decade of study and taking advantage of the broad reach offered by his new platform, Carawan wrote a letter to Highlander's national network soon after arriving to introduce himself, his background, and his plans.[26] He recounted his California upbringing by Southern parents, education while busking with his buddies "all the way from Charleston to New Orleans," studies at UCLA, and inspiration from Zilphia Horton while repeatedly insisting that he was "still learning" about "music, songs and life." He ended the letter with six ambitious proposals for cultivating a shared repertoire and addressing the need for "new singers and leaders who can carry on in [Zilphia's] spirit…. and spread it all over the South to help in the fight for integration":

- [T]hat Highlander put out a book of songs for integration;
- [T]hat Highlander hold some workshops to train song leaders who will go back and function in their own communities and organizations;
- [T]hat Highlander put out some records of songs for integration to go with the book and to help new song leaders (and the public in general) to learn these songs.

Some other ideas being discussed, also involving music and integration, are:

- [A] festival bringing together different kinds of Negro and white music, song and dance, both old and new, that could and would be well attended and well integrated;
- [W]orkshops for music educators and workers in schools and churches;
- [W]orkshops for folklorists.[27]

Carawan's proposals emphasized written and recorded modes of documentation and dissemination and the need to train both organizers and folklorists in using music to

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[25] Guy Carawan to Sue Thrasher, p. 129.

[26] Guy Carawan to "Friends of Highlander, 1959, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

[27] Ibid.

support of their cause. They synthesized practices he had learned from Pete Seeger and his People's Songsters, from Alan Lomax and folk song scholarship, and from his own experiences coming into the political world of song through both the music and its archive. They also drew from the songs, songbooks, and training strategies left by his predecessor, Zilphia Horton. After circulating his ideas he quickly received invitations from a host of southern leaders.[28]

In addition to applying the tools he had brought from the folk world and inherited from Zilphia Horton, Carawan also seized the opportunity to gain new ones through his work with Septima Clark. He was awed by her leadership skills while supporting her "Integration and Citizenship" workshops but longed to join her during her winters on Johns Island. He knew little of her citizenship program but knew a great deal about traditional Johns Island music. In the literature he had read and archives he had scoured, the Sea Islands loomed large for what was described as their uniquely preserved African culture.[29] Until bridges had been built shortly after the war, travel across the 15 swampy miles between the islands and the mainland could take as many as nine hours[30] and it was believed the island's isolation had kept its African-descendant culture largely intact. The folk song archives in which Carawan had been steeped were filled with texts by white collectors and scholars fascinated by black Sea Island culture—texts that dated all the way back to the mid-nineteenth century. One influential text he had read was *Slave Songs*

[28] Guy Carawan, Summary of Work, 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 37, Folder 11, 3.

[29] Guy Carawan, "Spiritual Singing in the South Carolina Sea Islands," 1960, WISC-HREC, Box 67.

[30] Zilphia Horton, Report, November 1954, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 1; Clark, *Ready From Within*. 42.

of the United States, the first book-length collection of black American songs.[31] The collection was published in 1867 by white abolitionists Lucy Garrison, William Allen, and Charles Ware, featured songs they had heard during extended time on the islands, and inaugurated what would be centuries of fascination with Sea Island culture and investments from outsiders in its protection. They describe their collection's "wild and strangely fascinating" songs as precious "relics" of the African and enslaved past of their singers and insist the songs "be preserved while it is still possible."[32] Carawan had also read anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits' field-defining 1941 book, *Myth of the Negro Past.*[33] Herskovits' *Myth* countered presumptions common at the time that the devastating violence of enslavement had erased any memory of a cohesive or usable black past. Instead, Herskovits argued, black American culture was rich with African "survivals." In a chart rating different North American black populations, Herskovits famously heralded Sea Islanders as "very African" in the categories of magic, folklore, and music.

Guided by these and other texts, Carawan believed black Sea Island music to be the nation's most authentic and felt confident that time there would help his new charge of identifying and spreading songs for civil rights. During his initial collaborations with Clark at Highlander, he learned, not only of the extraordinary organizing she had undertaken to create the Citizenship Schools, but also of the "the prayer meetings,

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[31] Lucy McKim Garrison, Charles Pickard Ware, and William Francis Allen. *Slave Songs of the United States*. (New York: A. Simpson & Co., 1867). Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Library. http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/allen/allen.html.

[32] Garrison, Ware, and Allen, *Slave Songs of the United States*, 11 and 9.

[33] Guy Carawan, "Spiritual Singing in the South Carolina Sea Islands," 1960, WISC-HREC, Box 67, Folder 7; Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*. 1st ed. Harvard Anthropology Preservation Microfilm Project ; 00221. (New York, London: Harper & Bros, 1941).

watches and wakes, the ring shouts, Gullah dialect, folk beliefs and superstitions"[34] she had seen on the Islands. Eager to deepen his training and see the black folk culture he had read so much about, Carawan offered to spend the winter on Johns Island working as Clark's driver, learning Island songs, and developing a musical component for her citizenship curriculum.

Although Islanders were "puzzled" by the sight of a white man working as a black woman's driver,[35] Carawan received an extraordinary introduction to the civil rights movement, its people, and its strategies while working with the Citizenship Schools. Describing his experience as unlike any he had had, he would later write,

> It is a touching sight to see some of these old people, with hands roughened and calloused from a lifetime of plowing and swinging axes and picks, struggling to hold a pencil steady and slowly laboring to write their a-b-c's. And then to see their joy and pride once they have learned to read and write well enough to become a registered voter…. [T]hese new votes have been responsible for many improvements on the islands—new schools and buses, justice in the courts, [and] better community spirit….[36]

In addition to being his first direct experience with community organizing, his work on the Islands also expanded his understanding of how culture could be used to build community power. The founding pedagogical approach of the Citizenship Schools placed Islanders, themselves, at the core of the curriculum and understood political and cultural inclusion as central to black citizenship.[37] This approach was inspired partly by Highlander's own modeling after the Danish Folk Schools, whose residential adult

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[34] Guy Carawan, "Spiritual Singing in the South Carolina Sea Islands," 1960, WISC-HREC, Box 67, Folder 7, 2.

[35] Ibid., 5-6.

[36] Guy Carawan, "The Living Heritage of the Sea Islands." *Sing Out* 14, no. 2 (1964): 30.

[37] For more on the centrality of culture in the Citizenship Schools see Joe Street, *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007), 27-39.

education centered the lives and ways of the Danish "folk," but largely followed the decades-old tradition of radical education forged by South Carolina's black teachers—a tradition of which Clark had long been a part. Bernice Robinson was the primary innovator of this student-centered curriculum on the Islands. Chosen by Clark and Jenkins for what they knew would be her respectful approach to teaching adult learners and lack of a "high falutin'" attitude,[38] Robinson set the workbooks donated by elementary school teachers aside and, instead, began her classes by asking students what they wanted to learn. This led her to teach literacy via the practical skills of filling out money orders, tracking hours worked, or calculating owed pay and, after transcribing experiences shared from daily life, she would help the group read their own stories. Speaking to the task at hand but also to the core value of their citizenship education, Robinson would say, "This is your story. We're going to learn to read your story."[39] It was community organizing that built community power, not just through understanding and seizing legal rights to political inclusion, but also through the centering of one's own experiences and history—a practice that would later become central to Carawan's work with songs.

The organizing mentorship Carawan received from Clark, Jenkins, and Robinson that winter was invaluable but his introduction to the practice and inherent politics of black congregational singing was transformative. As he would later write, "That experience really changed my life."[40] Carawan had come to Johns Island, not only to

[38] Clark, *Ready From Within*, 49.

[39] Peter Ling, "Local Leadership in the Early Civil Rights Movement, 417.

[40] Guy and Candie Carawan, "Singing and Shouting in Moving Star Hall," *Black Music Research Journal*, 15, No. 1, (spring, 1995): 17.

learn from Clark, but also to "search for older ways of singing"[41] and on his very first night he found them with Esau Jenkins. Carawan arrived on the island on Christmas Eve and at midnight Jenkins took him to an all-night gathering at the island's praise house, Moving Star Hall. The hall had been built in 1919 to host continued worship and singing after church services had concluded and was used predominantly by older Islanders accustomed to and invested in older ways of worshipping.[42] Thrilled to finally be on the Islands he had read and heard so much about and in a building that had long held many of its songs, Carawan reported to Highlander, "I sat there in the dark next to Esau taking it all in and feeling like I was in heaven. When the singing started I knew I was."[43] A mix of different kinds of songs were sung but all, he later wrote, "had been stylistically reshaped into a powerful old-time African-American form—sung in unison with vocal improvisation and complex hand-clapping and foot-patting rhythms."[44] Echoing statements from nearly a century of collectors and scholars before him, Carawan described what he had heard as being "as old as any Negro religious singing in America today."[45]

It was not just the music that amazed him but also the community principles it enacted. Carawan was familiar with the hierarchical format of more traditional church services but the gathering he witnessed at the praise house was community-led with each

[41] Guy Carawan, "Spiritual Singing in the South Carolina Sea Islands," 1960, WISC-HREC, Box 67, Folder 7, 4.

[42] Guy and Candie Carawan. "Singing and Shouting in Moving Star Hall, 19.

[43] Carawan, "Spiritual Singing in the South Carolina Sea Islands," 1960, WISC-HREC, Box 67, Folder 7, 4.

[44] Guy and Candie Carawan, "Singing and Shouting in Moving Star Hall," 23.

[45] Carawan, "Spiritual Singing," 4.

person having the opportunity to lead prayer, offer testimony, preach, or lead a song. Carawan was awed by the "true spirit of community ownership" in Moving Star Hall and later described it as "the most moving and democratic form of worship I'd ever encountered."[46] More than just a worship service with extraordinary music, the hall embodied the values of democratic leadership cultivated by Horton and Clark and enacted by leaders like Jenkins and Robinson—values that countered reliance on the hierarchy of charismatic leadership from above by investing in democratic, community leadership from below. That first night with Jenkins, Carawan realized he had joined, not simply a powerful organizing campaign, but one whose leaders understood, more deeply than he, the important role of and lessons inherent in culture:

> 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. Esau Jenkins was the rare kind of grassroots community leader who understood both the value and beauty of the older folk culture and the necessity to fight for progress and change.[47]

Moving Star Hall helped him understand the music as more than simply an organizing tactic but the embodiment of organizing principles. Despite his extensive studies and travels of the country and the world, Carawan's Johns Island experience stood out and he wrote during that winter trip, "I've never heard singing mean so much to people as it does to them."[48]

Yet despite its vibrancy, the traditional songs sung by the elders of Moving Star Hall was not the only, and was hardly the most popular, music on Johns Island.

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[46] Guy and Candie Carawan, "Singing and Shouting in Moving Star Hall," 23, 17.

[47] Ibid., 18.

[48] Guy Carawan, "Spiritual Singing," 4.

Carawan's folk training led him to seek out and celebrate traditional songs sung and passed on by older generations but the island's young people were more interested in contemporary songs learned in churches and schools and via radio and television. For them, it was not traditional spirituals but contemporary gospel and rhythm and blues that held sway. Carawan read the younger generation's preference for the new as the result of generations of white missionary educators consistently devaluing traditional black culture in the name of progress and assimilation. He reported with concern,

> This highly developed folk form of worship, body of songs and style of singing are in danger of complete extinction in another generation or so. Most of the younger generation in this area have lost them to a great extent already. The combined forces of the schools, the organized churches, and the mass commercial culture with its control of radio, records, T.V. etc., have been too much for the young people to resist. The finer aspects of their parents' folk culture get practically no recognition from these institutions that play such a large part in their education. Local schools and churches here usually take no responsibility for helping keep them alive. The young people are losing a valuable part of their heritage.[49]

Not only was he coming to view traditional songs as best for sounding the movement, he also increasingly felt their safeguarding to be consistent with the movement's goals of combatting white supremacy.

Islanders were engaged in this cultural debate as well. Many elders criticized the choices of young people who sought schooling and jobs on the mainland and viewed progress as the ability to leave their Island past behind but leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church supported such moves and condemned traditional black music as being an impediment to black progress.[50] Carawan sided with the elders of

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[49] Ibid., 4.

[50] Peter J. Ling, "Developing Freedom Songs: Guy Carawan and the African-American Traditions of the South Carolina Sea Islands." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 44 (October 1, 1997): 202.

Moving Star Hall and felt confident that young people were being lured away from their traditions while elders were pressured to regard them with shame. Merging cultural beliefs born of his folk training with those he had learned from the Citizenship Schools and feeling an urgency to save what he perceived to be an endangered Island culture, Carawan decided—despite disagreement with some blacks with whom he engaged—that his contribution to building black power would be to center black culture and celebrate the old over the new.

Carawan was supported and guided in this prioritization of traditional over emerging music, not only from Island elders and the folkloric frameworks he had brought, but also from the archives he continually engaged. In addition to relying on the foundations laid in texts he had already read, Carawan also began drawing on new knowledge gained during regular trips to the Charleston library.[51] While living on Johns Island Carawan read, among other things, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson's 1869 wistful description of the songs sung by his South Carolina regimen in his *Army Life in a Black Regimen*, song collector Lydia Parrish's celebratory 1942 *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*, and black linguist Lorenzo Turner's landmark 1949 *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*.[52] Each of these authors, whose texts stretch across 80 years, reports an experience similar to Carawan's of discovering African survivals, perceiving them to be endangered, and feeling compelled and proud to save them. Each of them also, like

[51] Carawan, "Spiritual Singing".

[52] Carawan, "Spiritual Singing," 1960, WISC-HREC, Box 67, Folder 7; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, 1896; Lydia Parish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Islands*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992); Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

Carawan, perceives the Islanders and their culture as "untouched"[53] despite more than a century of white contact through enslavement, Jim Crow, and cultural adventurers such as themselves documenting and defining black songs. The long history of white investments in older black songs became a primary force in Carawan's approach to folding music into organizing on the Island—an approach his position at Highlander would later empower him to spread throughout the South.

Adopting and furthering this investment in "pure," rather than emergent, black music, as well as the Citizenship Schools' centering of Islanders' own history, Carawan began running "Singing Schools"[54] after the citizenship classes where he focused on the preservation and strategic revision of traditional black spirituals. He reported to Highlander that one of "the main purposes of the new singing program at the adult schools [was] to help stimulate the continuance and development of this old spiritual singing traditions in the Sea Islands by giving it some recognition and a regular place in the program."[55] In addition to leading songs, he also regularly read aloud from scholarship on black music, hoping Islanders would be influenced by the field just as he had been. One text by which his Singing School attendees were "genuinely moved"[56] was Alan Lomax's profile of two black folk singers, *The Rainbow Sign: A Southern*

[53] "Singing Schools." *Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine* 9, no. 4 (March 1960): 42.

[54] Myles Horton to Friends of Highlander, July 1959, WISC, Box 37, Folder 11; "Report of Guy Carawan's Work With the Adult School Program, South Carolina Sea Islands 1960-1961," n.d., WISC Box 8, Folder 9.

[55] "Spiritual Singing in the South Carolina Sea Islands," Guy Carawan to Myles Horton (?), 1960, WISC, Box 67, Folder 7, 5.

[56] Ibid.

Documentary.[57] In it Lomax hails black music as containing "the most distinctive American folk songs"[58] and describes black church music in particular as containing "the noblest and most beautiful songs of the West."[59] Despite the ironies of imposing a white perspective on black pride and power, Carawan wrote that his strategy of singing old spirituals while sharing texts from renowned scholars who had celebrated them endeavored to "bolster the Sea Island people's own feelings about their songs and make them more aware and proud of their unique history and beauty."[60]

Although largely successful, he did encounter some resistance. Younger generations generally did not participate and, in addition to the shame or apathy reportedly felt by some on the island in relation to traditional music, some elders also found the suggestion to rewrite songs of worship to more directly address integration to be entirely sacrilegious. Carawan reported, "[I]t goes against the reflexes of the older people at first to hear new words and new meanings put to their old church songs."[61] Yet despite these challenges, the Singing Schools were ultimately "enthusiastically received"[62] and, after being written about in *Sing Out!*, were also celebrated by the folk world beyond.[63] Praise for the schools ultimately muted critiques and the culminating

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Lomax, Alan. *The Rainbow Sign, a Southern Documentary.* 1st ed. (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1959), 4.

[59] Ibid., 15.

[60] Carawan, "Spiritual Singing," 5.

[61] Guy Carawan, "Summary of Work," 2.

[62] "Spiritual Singing in the South Carolina Sea Islands," Guy Carawan to Myles Horton (?), 1960, WISC, Box 67, Folder 7, 5-6.

[63] "Singing Schools." *Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine* 9, no. 4 (March 1960): 42.

celebration for that term's Citizenship Schools was a community sing attended by more than 100 of Carawan's students and their families.[64] The following fall Clark wrote Carawan to say, "The adult school teachers met on Monday, October 3rd and asked to have singing next term. They would like to do a variety of songs and want you to help them."[65]

Shaping a Repertoire

On February 1, 1960, the movement took a significant turn. Four black freshmen from Greensboro's North Carolina Agriculture and Technical College took their seats at the segregated lunch counter at the Woolworth's in the center of town and insisted on being served. Their actions were met with violence, received national attention, and ignited a surge of campus-based activism. Just two months earlier, the integration movement had been largely focused on public education and led by those who had been moved to action by the Montgomery bus boycott. But once the sit-ins began, focus shifted to lunch counters and the frontlines filled with students.

When Carawan returned to Highlander after two months on Johns Island and having successfully launched the singing schools, he found the movement and its songs dramatically changed. The music he had heard when he first moved to Highlander had been that popularized during the bus boycott and reflected its predominantly older, church-going, and working-class participants. It included such traditional songs as "Onward Christian Soldier," "This Little Light of Mine," "Amen," and "Nobody Knows

[64] Caraway, "Spiritual Singing," 5-6.

[65] Septima Clark to Guy Carawan, October 3, 1960, WISC-HREC, Box 8, Folder 9.

the Trouble I've Seen."[66] The rise of the sit-ins, however, had brought an emerging cadre of young leaders who, not unlike the youth of Johns Island, were less interested in culling traditional songs from the church than in revamping those from the jukebox. Among the new movement's most powerful singers were the four dynamic students from Nashville's American Baptist Theological Seminary known as the Nashville Quartet—Joseph Carter, Bernard Lafayette, James Bevel, and Samuel Collier.[67] These young preachers brought their background in the church to their passion for rhythm and blues and crafted a unique movement sound from traditional songs as well as those popular on college campuses. In addition to the hymns of the Montgomery bus boycott, they also popularized adaptations of hits like Little Willie John's "You Better Leave My Kitten Alone" which became "You Better Leave Segregation Alone," or Ray Charles' "What I Say" which became "Segregation Ain't No Good."[68] Julian Bond, then a student at Morehouse, poignantly described the music he and his peers found most compelling in a poem first published in *Pegasus*, the Morehouse literary journal he had helped to found, and later reprinted in the inaugural issue of SNCC's newsletter, *The Student Voice*. The poem spoke back to descriptions of America by Langston Hughes and Walt Whitman, and wrote young blacks into the genealogy of poetic reflections on the nation by describing his generation's most motivating music.

> I too, hear America singing
> But from where I stand
> I can only hear Little Richard
> And Fats Domino.

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[66] Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History." (doctoral dissertation, Howard University, 1975), 91-97.

[67] Guy Carawan as quoted in Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement, 112.

[68] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement," 105-106.

But sometimes,
I hear Ray Charles
Drowning in his own tears
or Bird
Relaxing at Camarillo
or Horace Silver doodling,
Then I don't mind standing
a little longer.[69]

The student leaders, with their passion for the new, first met Carawan and his investment in the old at a Highlander workshop for student leaders in April, 1960. This annual weekend workshop had been launched the summer after *Brown* and was advertised as being for "college students, recent graduates and post-graduates, young instructors, and any others who would be interested in the dynamics of campus leadership for integration."[70] Carawan, then thirty-three years old, was appreciated by the young leaders and appreciative of their sound but his approach was often out of step with theirs. His teaching focused on spirituals culled on Johns Island and emphasized the import and impact of traditional sounds but the students brought their more contemporary repertoire and expansive approach to songs. "They adapt everything," Carawan wrote with amazement. "Blues, rock-and-roll songs, pop ballads, hillbilly songs, gospels and spirituals were all used freely and adapted."[71] Revealing the complexities of their interaction and exchange, Carawan's original composition for the students, "The Ballad of the Student Sit-Ins," was both embraced and revised. Although quickly adopted and regularly sung, the students gave the song two significant changes; Carawan's straight-ahead ballad was given an arrangement more akin to the rhythmic structures of R&B and

[69] Julian Bond, "I, Too, Hear America Singing." *The Student Voice* 1, no. 1 (June 1960): 4.

[70] "College Weekend Workshop Flyer," 1959, WISC-HREC, Box 78, Folder 8.

[71] Irwin Silber, "He Sings for Integration." *Sing Out* 10, no. 2 (1960): 5.

gospel and his line "We are soldiers in the army of Martin Luther King" was dropped to affirm their commitment to a youth-led and decentralized organizing structure as opposed to the top-down leadership of SCLC.[72]

Despite their differing perspectives, the dynamics that weekend between Carawan and the students were more collaborative than contentious and the subsequent sound of the sit-in reflected influences from them both. The students taught Carawan about their politics and musical preferences and, respecting his skill as a song leader and position at Highlander, they invited him to spend two months in Nashville supporting their movement and recording its songs.[73] Later that year Carawan got Moe Asch of Folkways Records to produce his recordings from Nashville, both to preserve the movement's sounds and to encourage support from listeners. Reflecting the mix of musical styles that came from the encounter between Carawan and the students, the album, "The Nashville Sit-In Story: Songs and Scenes of Nashville Lunch Counter Desegregation," featured three adaptations, or "parod[ies]," of popular, rock and roll, and hillbilly songs, two original songs by the Nashville Quartet merging gospel and doo-wop, and three "old spirituals."[74]

Although an array of songs was heard in Nashville, over the next four months Carawan's teaching at two catalytic events codified the repertoire of traditional songs that

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[72] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement, 113-114; Thomas Vernon Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism From the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 22.

[73] Carawan, "How This Record Came About," liner notes to Carawan, Guy. *Nashville Sit-in Story Songs & Scenes of Nashville Lunch Counter Desegregation*. New York City: Folkways, 1960; Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement, 112.

[74] Carawan, "How This Record Came About," in liner notes to *The Nashville Sit-In Story*, New York City: Folkways, 1960, 1.

became the dominant sound of the movement. After the college workshop, Ella Baker invited Carawan to lead songs at the national gathering of student leaders she was hosting two weeks later at her alma mater, Shaw University. The meeting brought hundreds of student activists together and birthed SNCC, the movement's most impactful organization. Carawan taught the young leaders gathered by Baker such traditional songs as "I'm Going to Sit at the Welcome Table" and "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" and closed the weekend's first day by introducing a revision to a traditional Sea Islands song few of the students knew called "We Shall Overcome."[75] Carawan had first heard the song from his singing partner Frank Hamilton who had learned it from Pete Seeger, but he had learned it anew during his time on the islands with Clark and Jenkins. Julian Bond later recalled of learning the movement's soon-to-be anthem, "Guy led the audience in singing it, and at the conference's end, several hundred young people had both learned and adopted 'We Shall Overcome' as their song."[76] Carawan's repertoire was further codified and spread that August at the "Sing for Freedom" hosted by him and Septima Clark. The "Sing" was advertised as Highlander's "first musical workshop" and attracted more than 70 participants from 11 states.[77] Carawan, again, taught traditional songs, led workshops in adapting them, and offered trainings in front lines song-leading.[78]

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[75] Carawan to Thrasher, 126; Candie Carawan to author.

[76] Julian Bond, "Foreword" to Guy Carawan, Candie Carawan, Julian Bond, and Florence Reece. *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through Its Songs*. (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2007), x.

[77] Anne Lockwood, "August Music Workshop Evaluation," September 30, 1960, WISC-HREC, Box 64, Folder 16; "Sing for Freedom: In the Community and on the Campus," 1960, WISC-HREC, Box 64, Folder 16.

[78] Ibid.

By the end of the summer of 1960—through Highlander's student workshop, SNCC's founding meeting, and Carawan and Clark's "Sing for Freedom"—Carawan, from his national platform at Highlander, had taught his repertoire of traditional songs to hundreds of the swelling movement's rising leaders. By the fall of 1960 he had published the first mimeographed songbook of the civil rights era and codified what he later called the movement's "basic repertoire:"

> We Shall Overcome
> We Are Soldiers
> I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table
> Everybody Sing Freedom
> We Shall Not Be Moved
> This Little Light of Mine
> Which Side Are You On
> Freedom's Comin' and it Won't Be Long
> If You Miss Me at the Back of the Bus
> Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round
> Come and Go With Me to That Land
> Oh Freedom
> Over My Head
> Woke Up This Morning With My Mind on Freedom
> The Hammer Song
> We'll Never Turn Back
> Keep Your Eyes on the Prize.[79]

In the subsequent months, this repertoire was heard around the globe. Student activists merged it with their own and brought it to their work in the South, folk singers popularized it on stages across the north, and televised protests and concerts brought it to living rooms nation and worldwide. Carawan was known, both to local activists and to the movement's most prominent leaders, as the long-haired, California folk singer leading songs for integration with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s signature scrawled,

[79] Guy Carawan, "Sing For Freedom," May 1964, WISC-HREC, Box 64, Folder 17, 2.

endorsement-like, on his banjo.[80] *Sing Out!* declared, "Guy Carawan is a phenomenon in this curious, cynical world of 1960"[81] and SNCC's newsletter, *The Student Voice*, reported, "Guy Carawan, artist of folk music, introduced 'We Shall Overcome' to the students. This great ballad has become the theme song and Guy, the music man."[82]

Although his work was undeniably influential, the celebration of Carawan—both then and now—ignores, not only the impact of his time on the Sea Islands, but also the black singers on the frontlines who transformed his repertoire as it passed through different movement centers. Carawan may have printed the song sheets but black singers were not bound by the page. During the 1961 Freedom Rides, new verses and songs were developed on buses and in jails and the most significant changes occurred later that year in Albany, Georgia. The songs of the Albany movement were largely led by SNCC's Freedom Singers, Rutha Mae Harris, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Cordell Reagon, and Charles Neblett. As Bernice Johnson Reagon remembers, Albany is where the music was "delivered back into the full range of expression of the Black choral tradition for the first time."[83] Black song leaders in Albany reinserted black congregational song styles such as rhythmic accentuations and melodic improvisations that had been flattened by Carawan's strumming style on the guitar and background as a folksinger.[84] Recognizing the birth of a new sound and rushing to capture it, sheet music for this revitalized repertoire was

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[80] Irwin Silber, "He Sings for Integration." *Sing Out* 10, no. 2 (1960): 4–7, 5.

[81] Ibid., 4–7, 6.

[82] "The Student Voice," 1, no. 3 (October 1960): 5.

[83] Reagon, "Oh Freedom," 118.

[84] Brandi Amanda Neal, "'We Shall Overcome': From Black Church Music to Freedom Song." Doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, June 27, 2006 ; Reagon, *Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*; Reed, *The Art Of Protest*; Street, *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement*.

published by Oak Publications in 1963, a company founded in 1960 by People's Songster Irwin Silber and Folkways' founder Moe Asch to continue the work of the then-defunct *People's Songs Bulletin*. The collection contained the repertoire that had been culled by Carawan and refashioned on the frontlines. It was called *We Shall Overcome! Songs of the Southern Freedom Movement*, was compiled and annotated by Guy Carawan and his new wife Candie, a white exchange student at Fisk, and heralded by Silber as "one of the most significant books we have ever issued."[85]

Back in New York, Alan Lomax watched the curation and rise of the civil rights movement's songs in amazement. He had not seen Carawan since he had come asking for advice in preparation for his move to Highlander the previous year. After watching him apply all they had discussed, Lomax wrote Carawan a letter of awe, praise, and encouragement:

> While I was squirreling round in the past, you were busy with the present, and how I envy you. It must be wonderful to be with those kids who are so courageously changing the South forever. I hope they feel proud of the cultural heritage of their forbears. It was a heritage of protest against oppression, of assertion against hopelessness, of joy in life against death. Tell them that they can search the world over, all the libraries, all the manuscripts, and they will never find a cultural heritage more vital, more noble, more flexible, more sophisticated, more wise, more full of love, more human or more beautiful. Tell them that if they can walk into their free future with the great arts, the great laughter, the wit and the perceptiveness of life that their oppressed but always proud and life-ennobled ancestors possessed—and add to this their own sophistication, that the culture of the American Negro can become the wonder of the civilized world. Tell them that if they lose what is so close at hand, offered them by their fathers and mothers and grandmothers, that their children will have to turn back to it. If they can accept the folk of the South on their own terms, they will build not only an invincible political movement but a bridge of beauty that all mankind will long to walk across.[86]

[85] Irwin Silber, "Just Published by Oak," Oak Publications, 1963, WISC, Box 64, Folder 13.

[86] Quoted in Guy Carawan, "Summary of Work," 1.

To Lomax, the towering figure of American folklore and influential thinker among northern radical songsters, Carawan had done what he himself had only dreamed of: leveraged the black cultural past as a powerful weapon in the fight for racial justice. In keeping with the folk field's romance of and reverence for collectors, he did not credit the black organizers and singers who had been instrumental in shaping and amplifying the movement's sounds. Nor did he name any of the Freedom Singers or members of the Nashville Quartet or acknowledge Septima Clark, Esau Jenkins, or the Islanders with whom they worked. It was Carawan alone, Lomax felt, who had brought these songs to their rightful place at the fore of a movement to change the country. And to his mind, it could not have happened any other way.

Black Culture, Black Power

In the succeeding years, declarations of "Black Power" overtook the civil rights era's demands for "Freedom Now" and white involvement was increasingly critiqued. White organizers were urged to organize their own and Carawan began doubting his role in the movement. In 1961, during his second winter on Johns Island and as the songs he had led and taught were being revised by black song-leaders on the frontlines, Carawan reflected on differences between his musical style and those of the black Islanders with whom he was working. He felt able to teach songs but when it came to leading songs or training song leaders he described himself as a "failure"[87] and felt his reliance on the banjo or guitar becoming an impediment in groups accustomed to singing a cappella. He decided a local singer with a better understanding of the nuances of Islanders' musical

[87] Carawan, "Report on Guy Carawan's Work," 1961, WISC-HREC, Box 8, Folder 9, 2.

style would be a better teacher and began shifting the focus of his Singing Schools from teaching songs to identifying and training song leaders. This developing realization was later crystallized in Albany, Georgia, when Bernice Johnson Reagon said during a rendition of "We Shall Overcome," "Lay that guitar down, boy!" before changing Carawan's even pulse and chord progression to a triplet rhythm and style more consistent with that of the black church.[88]

Humbled by these challenges, Carawan began relinquishing his role as song leader and taking on that of documenter.[89] Between 1960 and 1967 he significantly expanded the folk archive with his eight albums of field recordings from the movement's frontlines, all of which were produced by Asch at Folkways and two of which were made in collaboration with Lomax.[90] In 1963 he and Candie moved to Johns Island with their young son Evan where they committed to recording black Island culture.[91] In 1965, however, and in response to Black Power, they moved back to New York, realizing, as Guy would later put it, "[W]e didn't really belong in the Sea Islands."[92] They then

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[88] Guy Carawan, interviewed by K. G. Bennett, Nashville Public Library, January 17th, 2003, transcript, Nashville Public Library, 11.

[89] For more on Carawan's shift from song leading to documenting see Joe Street, *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement*.

[90] *Nashville Sit-In Story.* Folkways Records, FH#5590, 1960. Recorded by Guy Carawan, assisted by Mel Kaiser at Cue Studio; *Hamper McBee, Cumberland Moonshiner.* Prestige Records, 1965. Recorded by Guy Carawan in Knoxville, TN, April 6, 1962; *Freedom in the Air: Albany Georgia, 1961–62.* SNCC #101. Produced by Vanguard Records for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Recorded by Guy Carawan. Produced by Guy Carawan & Alan Lomax; *We Shall Overcome, Songs of Freedom Riders and the Sit-Ins.* Folkways Records, FH#5591, 1963. Includes Nashville Quartet and Montgomery Trio. Recorded in New York City; *Birmingham, Alabama, 1963. Mass Meeting.* Folkways Records, FD#5487; *The Story of Greenwood, Mississippi.* Folkways Records, FD#5593, 1965; *Sea Island Folk Festival: Moving Star Hall Singers.* Folkways Records, FS#3841, 1966; *Been in the Storm So Long: Spirituals, Shouts, Folk Tales and Children's Songs of Johns Island, South Carolina.* Folkways Records, FS#3842, 1967; *Earl Gilmore: From the Depths of My Soul.* Appal Recordings, JA0022, 1967.

[91] Carawan and Carawan, *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life*?

[92] Guy Carawan to Sue Thrasher, 187.

produced two albums of Island music from materials they had collected and in 1967, after moving to Kentucky to begin what would be decades of cultural work in Appalachia, they finally published the book they had been working on for years, *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs*.[93] The Carawans' recordings and publications remain the primary record of the movement's music and thus, even as they relinquished some of their leadership on the ground, their work continued—and continues—to exert control.

The Carawans' dive into the work of cultural preservation deepened their conviction that traditional black culture was endangered and needed saving but black SNCC workers embracing Black Power were wary of having old songs at the center of their new movement. While the resolve of the spirituals had bolstered the non-violence of the civil rights era, the defiant outrage of songs like Nina Simone's 1964 "Mississippi Goddamn" was increasingly thought to better reflect the era's new politics. At the 1964 "Sing for Freedom," which Carawan organized from his new Johns Island home, tensions over conflicting musical strategies flared. The four-day event, "where few slept and all sang,"[94] was held at the Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta and hosted singers from Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Its goal was to share songs from across the South, invite Northern songwriters to meet and learn from Southern activists, and, as Carawan wrote in the brochure, "provide some understanding for the young singers (and some of the older people too) of how present day freedom singing is related to the

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[93] Carawan and Carawan. *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life?*

[94] Josh Dunson, "Slave Songs at the 'Sing for Freedom,'" in Broadside, #46, May 30, 1964, WISC-HREC, Box 64, Folder 17, 1.

past."[95] Carawan expressed concern that "young people [had] come to take this music lightly, to laugh and snicker at it" and wanted the gathering to provide an opportunity to "raise questions about how much the Negro has been brainwashed about his own folk culture and whether or not the old music is relevant to today's issues."[96]

Journalist Josh Dunson reported that "the meeting of the young and the old was strained" as each generation criticized the music of the other.[97] Debate focused on whether songs of slavery were appropriate for a black freedom movement and exploded during a performance by the Sea Island Singers, whom Carawan had brought to represent the old. SNCC field secretary, Charles Sherrod asked, "Why? Why sing those songs here?" Sea Islands singer Bessie Jones responded by describing the songs as containers for histories of black resistance but others felt defeated by even the reference to enslavement. Black songwriter Len Chandler shared his journey from being "ashamed of Grandmother's music" to coming to critique the erasure of blackness from the Western canon:

> Why even the spirituals were fitted out for a white audience, made to sound nice and polite. You know the bit: Marion Anderson, Paul Robeson…. It wasn't until this white professor took me to his house to listen to some tapes that I started to know what my music is about. It took a white man to teach me about my own music! Why this music is great, and the boys on the radios and the tvs have stopped you from hearing it.[98]

Andy Young, a SNCC field secretary from Georgia, shared the ways he had experienced traditional black music as central to successful organizing:

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[95] Guy Carawan, "Sing For Freedom Festival and Workshop DRAFT" 1964, WISC-HREC, Box 64, Folder 17.

[96] Ibid., 2.

[97] Dunson, "Slave Songs," 1.

[98] Dunson, "Slave Songs," 2.

> We all know you can't trust a Negro on a negotiating committee who doesn't like his people's music. We found that out in Birmingham. CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] tried to organize Plaquemine, Louisiana, but they did not do too well. Their people were mostly from the North, and really did not know how to sing. When we came into Plaquemine we had hundreds in the streets in a few days. That's because we learned how to sing in the old church way.[99]

Although not all were convinced, many were and the Sea Island Singers got the weekend's only standing ovation at their final performance. Dunson concluded his article about the Sing by describing the freedom songs as "a wedge with which the treasure chest of Afro-American culture is being opened."[100]

Soon after this gathering, the idea of the treasure chest of tradition upon which black power could be built took root and, ironically, Carawan became somewhat of a go-to person for help devising a cultural strategy for Black Power. SNCC's Freedom Singers visited Carawan on Johns Island—a trip Bernice Reagon would later tell Carawan had changed her life[101]—and SNCC's co-founder and the architect of Freedom Summer, Bob Moses, also traveled to the island to discuss ways Carawan's cultural work might be brought to SNCC's summer programs in Alabama, Arkansas, Southwest Georgia, and Mississippi.[102] Moses hoped Carawan might help him use music to "convince the Negroes in these areas that they have validity as people and have something very special to offer culturally as well as politically."[103] As a result, the 1965 "Sing for Freedom" was held at the Edwards, Mississippi, Mt. Beulah Community Center and funded by the

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[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Candie Carawan to author.

[102] Guy Carawan to Connie [Brown] and Myles [Horton], January 4, 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 8, Folder 7.

[103] Guy Carawan, forward to "Statement by Alan Lomax," 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 65, Folder 1; For Bob Moses' trip also see Guy Carawan to Connie and Myles, January 4, 1965, Box 8, Folder 9, WISC-HREC.

Newport Foundation due to the support of Carawan's mentor and the Foundation's prominent board member Alan Lomax.[104]

After the 1965 Sing and in response to the agreement reached there that, as Lomax summarized in a report to Highlander, "continual cultural development should go hand in hand with political and educational development,"[105] Carawan, Lester, Lomax, and Reagon organized a three-day "Conference for Southern Community Cultural Revival." Their goal was to combat black resistance to African-descendant music and ensure its continued development in black communities by putting "a folk music revival program into action [on] a Southwide basis."[106] Cultural leaders were invited from Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and the Sea Islands with framing and guidance provided by Lomax and black folklorist Willis James. Those in attendance resolved that the conference would be

> a springboard for a cultural revival in the South at the community or grassroots level; that we will deal first with Negro culture and music, since this seems to be in the greatest immediate danger of being lost to posterity, and to have the greatest immediate advantage, that of enriching the newly aware and modern Negro with a sense of identity in his own and American culture.[107]

Unlike the hugely popular Newport Folk Festival, which catered to national audiences and gathered the folk community in Rhode Island, participants of the conference planned community festivals where local roots music would be performed for local people. As

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[104] Guy Carawan to Connie [Brown] and Myles [Horton], January 4, 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 8, Folder 7; Guy Carawan, forward to "Statement by Alan Lomax," 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 65, Folder 1; For Bob Moses' trip also see Guy Carawan to Connie and Myles, January 4, 1965, Box 8, Folder 9, WISC-HREC.

[105] Alan Lomax, "Statement by Alan Lomax," 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 65, Folder p. 1.

[106] Alan Lomax, Bernice Reagon, Charles Sherrod, Eleanor Walden, "Report on the Conference for Southern Community Cultural Revival," 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 65, Folder 2, 1.

[107] Ibid.

organizers wrote, "Heretofore, talented musicians have been 'discovered' and taken out of their communities to become performing stars on the commercial stage…. The producing communities have benefited little."[108] Thus, launched by the Cultural Revival Conference and guided by Carawan and Lomax, this first organized cultural initiative of Black Power focused on cultivating community pride and rewards through the celebration of traditional black culture.

In the succeeding years, commitments to Black Power rose and the involvement of white folk figures was no longer welcome. For the Carawans, this exclusion was experienced most poignantly with their friend Julius Lester. Lester had met the Carawans in Nashville while a student a Fisk, later became a writer for *Sing Out!,* and spent time working at Highlander and with Carawan on Johns Island. He moved to Mississippi in 1964 to become SNCC's director of photography where his mission was to "document what the South and the people look like on the edge of change," and in 1965 he joined the staff of the Newport Foundation where his primary duties were to attend and report on Southern music festivals.[109] When the Newport Foundation sent him to one of Carawan's Johns Island festivals, Lester described it as "musically exciting" but politically "disturbing" because the audience was largely comprised of whites from Charleston.[110] Still focused on integration and cross-racial learning, Carawan had reported this fact to Highlander with pride[111] but Lester found the prioritizing of white exposure to black culture profoundly troubling. Describing Carawan as more of a hindrance than a help,

[108] Ibid.

[109] Julius Lester in conversation with the author, November 23, 2015.

[110] Julius Lester, "To the Board of Directors," 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 71, Folder 13, 2.

[111] Guy Carawan to Connie [Brown] and Myles [Horton], January 4, 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 8, Folder 9.

Lester reported that this problematic approach was "part of Guy's legacy" and something "the Foundation is going to have to deal with to get a real community cultural revival going on Johns Island."[112] His reports over the following year indicate his growing skepticism and hostility. "The cardinal rule," he writes, "is that the local people have to be totally involved in planning and producing these festivals. Little will have been accomplished if outside organizers have to return year after year to produce festivals."[113]

The final blow came in 1967 when Lester gave the Carawans' Sea Islands book a scathing review in *Sing Out!*[114] He critiqued the musical transcriptions, described the photographic aesthetics as "flat" and their content as "typical of what white[s] see in the black South—old people and children,"[115] and said the inclusion of intergenerational differences would have more accurately depicted a community's efforts to understand and redefine black identity, power, and progress. Ultimately, he said the book reflected "the limitations of what whites can do when they venture into a black community." Candie later recalled her and Guy's exclusion from the movement as "one of the most painful things I can remember"[116] yet Lester describes it less as a personal attack than part of a broader move from civil rights to black power: "Guy took black power personally. It wasn't personal."[117]

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[112] Julius Lester, "To the Board of Directors," 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 71, Folder 13, 2.

[113] Julius Lester, "To the Board of Directors," February 1966, WISC-HREC, Box 71, Folder 13.

[114] Julius Lester, "*Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life? The People of Johns Island, South Carolina: Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs*—Review," in Sing Out! 17, no. 3 (1967): 37-41.

[115] Ibid., 41.

[116] Candie Carawan to Kristen Turner, June 28, 2010.

[117] Julius Lester in conversation with the author, November 2015.

"All Rights Reserved:"

Copyrighting a Freedom Song

> I myself usually figure even a song that I compose is like a child: mine to control only as long as it sticks around the house…. So sing, change. Add to. Subtract. But beware of multiplying. If you record and start making hundreds of copies, watch out. Write a letter first. Get permission.
>
> -Pete Seeger, 1993[1]

In 1960 and at the height of the song's popularity, Guy Carawan suggested to Pete Seeger that they copyright "We Shall Overcome."[2] Having helped facilitate the song's growth from labor song to civil rights anthem and witnessed its extraordinary national resonance, Carawan was concerned about protecting its meaning and preserving its legacy. He worried the song's overwhelming popularity coupled unlimited access to its use might dilute its power and he hoped legal control would sustain its political use. He and Seeger agreed it was a good idea and they and two other white folksingers registered the copyrights to the song. In the most controversial cultural effort of the era and the most striking instance of white control, the unlikely weapon of intellectual property law was leveraged in an attempt to turn the anthem of the civil rights movement into its most lasting cultural organizing tool.

The creation of the "We Shall Overcome" copyright emerged from decades of debate among folk music scholars, collectors, and musicians about the cultural and racial politics of intellectual property law. Originally crafted to protect literature, intellectual

[1] Pete Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone: A Singer's Stories, Songs, Seeds, Robberies*. (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out, 1993), 16.

[2] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement," 85.

property law in the United States only recognizes the original creations of individual authors or groups of individual authors and, until the 1976 Copyright Act, required a written deposit of any works being protected.[3] Rooted in Enlightenment notions of the individual, Lockean theories of property, and a privileging of the written word, it is a law fundamentally flawed when it comes to protecting communally authored and owned, improvisatory, and oral musical traditions. Despite these tensions and because of the particular power the law constructs, by the time of the "We Shall Overcome" copyright in 1960, predominantly white folklorists and folksingers had been claiming ownership of and collecting royalties on folk material—from black southerners, white Appalachians, and native Americans—for decades. In fact, the copyright history of traditional American music is one comprised almost entirely of musicians, collectors, and scholars with privileged access—to recording equipment, to travel, to funding, to the music industry, and to the law—claiming recognition and reward for music created by America's poor. Given the particular popularity of black music in American history—from minstrel songs to race records to jazz and blues—black artists and communities have been disproportionately affected by this bias within the law. As legal scholar, K. J. Greene pointedly writes, intellectual property law "has been central to racial subordination from both an economic and cultural standpoint" and has a "long history of piracy of the works of African-American artists."[4] With its intentions of protecting the song from cooptation

[3] The 1976 Copyright Act did not actually go into effect until January 1, 1978. Songs registered before 1978 remained subject to earlier regulations.

[4] K. J. Greene, "Copynorms, Black Cultural Production, and the Debate over African-American Reparations," *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal* 25 (2008): 1179; Greene, "Intellectual Property at the Intersection of Race and Gender: Lady Sings the Blues." *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy, and the Law* 16, no. 3 (2008): 366.

rather than maximizing its market value, the "We Shall Overcome" copyright endeavors to intervene in this history.

And yet, the copyright troublingly writes the white ownership of the black freedom movement's anthem into both the law and the historical record. The decision to copyright the song came solely from the movement's white cultural leaders, emerged from issues of concern within the predominantly white fields of folklore and folk song scholarship, and facilitated opportunities for continued white control of the song's meaning while removing it from processes of evolution, ownership, and control inherent to the black congregational tradition. Most pointedly, the white names on the copyright threaten to erase the black people and communities that made and shaped the song. Despite its stated intentions, the "We Shall Overcome" copyright remains deeply fraught terrain.

Histories of the civil rights era are often told through legal constraints, challenges, and victories. The more traditional histories treat laws as edicts with easily identifiable intentions and effects and bookend the era with the resistance sparked by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the victory of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Increasingly, however, historians and legal scholars alike understand the law to be less about the rules it dictates than the struggles it responds to and shapes, and see the black freedom struggle in particular as stretching well beyond *Brown v. Board* on one side and voting rights on the other. Speaking specifically to the ways civil rights era law was seized, reinterpreted, and stretched by activists, legal historian Kenneth Mack asserts that "[t]he messiness of social movement politics often escapes easy conclusions about the effects of formal law" and encourages viewing the law as something that "opens new debates rather than closing

old ones."[5] This chapter adds the seizing of intellectual property law through the "We Shall Overcome" copyright to the legal and cultural history of the civil rights era and, rather than simply celebrate its successes, reveals the ways it complicates as much as it resolves.

The "We Shall Overcome" story told here unearths the debates about race and cultural ownership that led to the song's copyrighting. It traces the labor movement's influence on artists' thinking about the protections afforded by law, the ethical challenges confronted by folk musicians, collectors, and scholars during the mid-century folk revival, the looming threat of cooptation and commercialization that led Carawan and Seeger to copyright the integration era's anthem, and the tensions inherent in legally tethering the song to their interpretation of its civil rights era meaning and use. Ultimately, it is a story of the debates about race, rights, and rewards opened by U.S. copyright law, the strategies devised by cultural workers in response, and an effort to shape the public memory of the world's most famous freedom song.

Leveraging Copyright for Labor

The core principles of U.S. copyright law directly counter those of traditional music. Whereas the law invests in originality, individual authors and owners, fixed compositions, and written documentation, traditional music relies on familiarity, communal authorship and ownership, evolution over time, and embodied modes of remembering and dissemination. Describing the principles of black congregational singing, for example, Bernice Johnson Reagon emphasizes its prioritizing of the

[5] Kenneth W. Mack. "A Short Biography of the Civil Rights Act of 1964"." *SMU Law Review* 67 (2014): 232.

experience of group improvisation over the compositional particulars of a given song.[6] Rather than focus on simply "executing melody, rhythm, and harmony," she writes, "Black people use songs to get to singing."[7] Further illuminating conflicts inherent in the law's requirement of a written deposit and underlying presumption that a song can be captured on paper, Reagon insists black songs "don't *exist* before they are sung."[8] Preeminent folklorist Charles Seeger also defined traditional music in ways that counter the requirements for legal protection. Describing the importance of communal ownership in folk music he asserted that an "authentic" folk song must evolve over generations such that "the sharp traits of personal composition are worn to the rounded commonality of oral transmission."[9] U.S. copyright law, however, transforms this communal musical process into a product to be owned and sold.[10] As Seeger summarizes the resulting conflict for those looking to square traditional music's allegiance to the community with the law's commitment to the market, "[W]e are left with legal practices that are unethical and with ethical beliefs for which there is no legal support."[11]

Guided by labor movement politics and in response to the destitution of the Depression, legal protection for artistic work became a core cultural organizing concern in the 1930s and 1940s. The labor movement's musical resistance relied on an extensive

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[6] Bernice Johnson Reagon in Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

[7] Ibid., 112.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Charles Seeger, "Who Owns Folk Music: A Rejoinder." *Western Folklore* 21, no. 2 (April 1962): 95.

[10] For more on musical copyrights turning process into property see David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 168.

[11] Charles Seeger, "Who Owns Folk Music," 93.

set of publishing efforts largely led by Pete Seeger in the North and Zilphia Horton in the South. A significant portion of their work involved transcribing, mimeographing, and distributing protest and strike songs but both Horton and Seeger also took great pains to identify authors and support them in registering copyrights. Guided by the politics of the movement in which they were immersed, they each focused on protecting creative labor despite the inherent conflicts between copyright law and traditional music.

Seeger's labor era organizing was done through his organization, People's Songs, and his focus on securing copyrights emerged from his oversight of its publishing efforts. In attendance at the founding meeting of People's Songs were education directors from the CIO who helped the group strategize on how best to serve and support the labor movement.[12] The dissemination of song sheets became their central strategy and *The People's Songs Bulletin* their primary medium. The *Bulletin* featured song-sheets for new and traditional union songs, anti-war songs, children's songs, blues, gospel, and international folksongs. Just below the masthead, the inaugural issue declared, "The people are on the march and must have songs to sing… It is clear that there must be an organization to make and send songs of labor and the American people through the land."[13] Within a year of its founding, People's Songs had more than 1,000 members and offices in 32 states and six countries and the *People's Songs Bulletin* had nearly 3,000 subscribers.[14] Irwin Silber, the founding editor of the *Bulletin* and prominent voice of the folk world, later wrote of this unprecedented coming together of left-wing songsters and

[12] Richard A. Reuss and JoAnne C. Reuss. *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957*. American Folk Music and Musicians Series, no. 4. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 188-189.

[13] "People's Songs," February, 1945, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1.

[14] Roger Deitz, "'If I Had A Song...': A Thumbnail History of Sing Out! 1950-2000... Sharing Songs for 50 Years!," 2000. http://www.singout.org/sohistry.html.

folk song supporters, "We believed that the world was worth saving and that we could do it with songs."[15]

Broadened dissemination of movement songs was one major goal of People's Songs but honoring the creative labor of their authors by helping them secure copyrights was another. Although an almost entirely ignored aspect of their work, this copyrighting effort pushed People's Songs beyond simply supporting the labor movement to becoming an organizing hub to serve its artists. The front page of the inaugural issue of the *People's Songs Bulletin* encouraged songwriters to submit their music for publication and added, "You are assured of complete copyright and royalty protection."[16] An additional section was entitled "How to Copyright a Song" and readers and potential contributors were told all songs published would "remain […] the possession of the composer."[17] This statement responded to the concerns of many when People's Songs first launched that they would claim copyrights to the songs they published just as folklorists and folk song collectors had done for decades. Educational Director of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union of NYC, Mark Starr, wrote to Zilphia Horton soon after the group's founding,

> As you know, there has been a great deal of appropriation without acknowledgement in labor songs. Now that the People's Songs has come to the front to organize the business, we shall have to be more careful than before because they may decide to copyright songs which they did not make and then charge us for using them. We find songs from the old ILGWU songbook used without acknowledgement and sometimes made over with questionable additions. There was the case of a Brookwood student who took several of the songs which the students had composed there and then later copyrighted them in his name.[18]

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[15] Irwin Silber, "Introduction" in Irwin Silber, ed. *Reprints from the People's Songs Bulletin: 1946-1949*. (New York: Oak Publications, 1961), 4.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Pete Seeger, "How to Copyright a Song." *People's Songs* 1, no. 1, (February 1946): 2.

[18] Mark Starr to Zilphia Horton, October 16th, 1946, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Tennessee State Archive, Box 1, Folder 7.

People's Songs did, in fact, end up copyrighting some songs; Zilphia Horton's notes for one of her songbooks lists "songs copyrighted by P.S." with the final accounting note, "8 songs, $5, $40."[19] These monies did not, however, line any individual's pockets but supported the organization's ongoing work and often successful efforts to identify authors and support them in registering copyrights. As Silber wrote of their lack of interest in personal profit and foreshadowing the intentions of the "We Shall Overcome" copyright, "Our goal was world peace, not a piece of the world."[20]

While Seeger helped singers secure copyrights at People's Songs, Zilphia Horton did similar work with southern labor organizers at Highlander. Although primarily remembered for her accordion playing, rich contralto singing voice, song leading, and songbooks, Horton also spent an extraordinary amount of time writing to musicians, union leaders, labor magazines, and People's Songs to acquire publication rights for songs. As she explained to the Assistant Educational Director of the National CIO, George Guernsey, in a letter about her progress on a CIO songbook, "Some time has been spent on actually writing down accompaniments and getting music ready for the copyists but the most part has been spent in correspondence."[21] She added that she was "having fun" and later wrote in amazement, "I had no idea the correspondence which would result in digging up authors, composers, and information."[22] Sometimes her requests were

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[19] Zilphia Horton, "Songs Copyrighted by P.S.," 1948, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Tennessee State Archive, Box 1, Folder 13.

[20] Silber, "Introduction," in Silber, ed. *Reprints from the People's Songs Bulletin*, 4.

[21] Zilphia Horton to George Guernsey, October 28, 1946, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Tennessee State Archive, Box 1, Folder 10.

[22] Ibid., Folder 11.

quickly met with approval (from singer Cis Cunningham: "You are welcome to use that song"[23]) and other times they were denied (From publishing company Leo Feist Inc.: "[W]e regret exceedingly that we cannot grant permission to you to include our song.... It is strictly against our policy to permit our songs to be used in this form by any outside agencies"[24]). Most often, however, the process dragged on for months as her requests were frequently met with uncertainty (From Mark Starr, Educational Director of International Ladies' Garment Workers Union NYC: "I hardly know what to advise. That song… is undoubtedly like many other songs of mixed paternity and would be extremely difficult to find out who was the owner").[25] Although working in different parts of the country, Horton and Seeger were in regular communication and felt themselves partners in distributing songs of labor, protest, and peace while honoring authors and singers by supporting their copyright claims. Evidencing their mutual respect and support, Seeger made it a practice of sharing his own songs with Horton free of charge.[26]

Despite their good intentions, however, Horton and Seeger's roles as gatekeepers of their own publications and of the copyright processes they encouraged planted complex racial dynamics at the heart of this inaugural effort to leverage copyright law within broader social justice aims. Horton was a college-educated and classically-trained

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[23] Sis Cunningham to Zilphia Horton, 1938, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Tennessee State Archive, Box 1, Folder 2.

[24] Leo Feist Inc. to Zilphia Horton, 1946, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Tennessee State Archive, Box 1, Folder 6.

[25] Mark Starr to Zilphia Horton, 1946, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Tennessee State Archive, Box 1, Folder 7.

[26] Lee Hays to Zilphia Horton, 1946, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Tennessee State Archive, Box 1, Folder 3 and Pete Seeger to Zilphia Horton, February 1946, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Tennessee State Archive, Box 1, Folder 7.

pianist from Arkansas whose entry into cultural organizing was facilitated by an immersion in folklore and Seeger was the son of a preeminent Harvard musicologist. Even as they led efforts to bring music to the movement's frontlines, their work was undoubtedly shaped by their elite backgrounds and formative influences from the academic fields of folklore and folk song scholarship. Their reliance on the publication and dissemination of song sheets, for example, emerged more from academia and musical strategies of Popular Front communism than from traditional processes of preserving and passing down music. In addition to shaping the sound of the movement through their song sheets, they also controlled the selection and editing processes of their publications. In a 1946 letter to a song leader who had submitted four picket line songs, Zilphia Horton explains the songs will be included in her labor songbook provided agreement on some "minor changes" to melodies, lyrics, and titles.[27] She suggests revisions to stanzas she finds "awkward to sing," chord progressions she feels are "artificial," and titles that are "too dramatic," and insists that if changes are not made the songs "will have to be cut." The tone of the letter is cordial but also exerts control over whether and how the songs will be published: "I like the songs very much," she writes. "It's just that I think it would make them a little better to make these few changes." Even as Horton and Seeger facilitated the use and spread of folk songs for labor, their methods activated a complex racial politics that are inherited by the next decades' efforts at organizing with song.

[27] Zilphia Horton to Jessie, October 29th, 1946, Tennessee State Archives, Zilphia Horton Folk Music Collection, Box 1, Folder 10.

Folk Songs on the Hit Parade

Folk songs were hardly a lucrative business in the 1940s and Horton and Seeger's copyright concerns were more a matter of principle than profit. With the dawning of the next decade, however, that changed dramatically and issues of race and rights became increasingly fraught. In 1950 Seeger and his new singing group The Weavers recorded the traditional song "Goodnight, Irene" which had been popularized by black Louisiana folk and blues singer Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter who had died six months earlier. Leadbetter had been "discovered" in 1933 by an eighteen-year-old Alan Lomax and his 65-year-old father John in a Louisiana state prison during the pair's famous song-collecting tour of the South. Coaxing songs from black prisoners, whom the elder Lomax described as their "black convict friends,"[28] was central to their musical expeditions. The Lomaxes believed the isolation of segregated penitentiaries helped preserve a pure black song tradition and many prison officials encouraged singing among the incarcerated and especially for white visitors. John Lomax wrote soon after their trip,

> Before returning to our home in Texas, we had traveled in a Ford car more than 15,000 miles and had visited and interrogated nearly 10,000 Negro convicts in four Southern states…. [A] long-time Negro convict spends many years with practically no chance of hearing a white man speak or sing. Such men slough off the white idiom they may once have employed in their speech and revert more and more to the idiom of the Negro common people. In my judgment, the songs and ballads we found and recorded this summer, under the conditions indicated, are practically pure Negro creations, both in words and music. [In the penitentiary] the old songs are kept alive and growing.[29]

Rather than highlight the racial violence and oppression shaping black criminalization and incarceration, the Lomaxes' recording and celebration of this music led generations

[28] John A Lomax, "'Sinful Songs' of the Southern Negro." *The Musical Quarterly* XX, no. 2 (April 1, 1934): 181.

[29] Ibid., 181-182.

of fascinated folk song collectors to "follow the folksong trail" to black prisons in the South.[30]

When the Lomaxes encountered Leadbetter, they were awed by his powerful singing and virtuosic guitar playing. Despite his belief that it was "nearly impossible to transport Negro folk-singers from the South and keep them untainted by white musical conventions,"[31] John Lomax brought Leadbetter to New York immediately after his release in 1935 and promptly produced his Library of Congress recordings, commercial albums, and national tours. Leadbetter quickly became a folk sensation and, just as quickly, he and Lomax were fighting—in the streets and in the courts—over financial arrangements including Lomax's credit in and cut from copyrights.[32]

Both Seeger and Zilphia Horton knew Leadbetter well. Once settled in New York, he frequently hosted them and other radical songsters in his lower east side apartment and regularly performed for progressive causes including a Highlander fundraiser in 1940 during which he sang a duet with Horton.[33] The success of The Weavers' version of "Goodnight Irene," which was recorded in his honor soon after his death, led Seeger to be directly, although posthumously, involved with Leadbetter's copyright conflicts. In a move revealing his divided allegiances among the music industry, folk artists, folk collectors, and himself, Seeger helped negotiate an agreement between his group's

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[30] Harry Oster, "Angola, 1959," in "Newport Folk Festival Program," 1960. Festival Files Collection (#300007), Southern Folklife Collection, Manuscripts Department, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, 9.

[31] John A Lomax, "'Sinful Songs' of the Southern Negro," 182.

[32] Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 62.

[33] Pete Seeger, "I Knew Leadbelly." *Sing Magazine* 4, no. 3 (September 1957); Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*, 65.

managers and Martha Leadbetter and Alan Lomax, who represented Huddie and John's estates respectively. The agreement assigned the song's rights to World Wide Music and credited it as being "written and arranged by Huddie Leadbetter and John A. Lomax."[34] While Leadbetter's version of "Irene" had been a favorite on folk stages, The Weavers' version shot to the top of the pop charts, sold more than two million copies, and, as Seeger later described it, made "Hit Parade history."[35] The song was so popular, as were its numerous covers, that Seeger later recalled, "The summer of 1950, no American could escape that song unless you plugged up your ears and went out into the wilderness."[36] Ledbetter's widow Martha and John Lomax's son Alan shared in the sizeable royalties along with The Weavers and folk music officially became big business.

The impact of having a folk song on the pop charts was, as Irwin Silber reflected in 1960, "as startling as it was instantaneous [and] everyone began to climb on the folk song band-wagon."[37] Music industry executives and recording artists alike wanted to capitalize on the new folk craze and searched for would-be hits in anthologies published by folklorists. Music publishers and artists began leaning on the section of copyright law allowing new recordings of public domain songs to be copyrighted as "adaptations"[38] but

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[34] Ellen Harold and Don Flemming, "Lead Belly and the Lomaxes." Accessed April 12, 2017. http://www.culturalequity.org/currents/ce_currents_leadbelly_faqs.php.

[35] Pete Seeger, "I Knew Leadbelly," *Sing Magazine* 4, no. 3 (September 1957).

[36] As quoted in Ronald D. Cohen and Stephen Petrus. *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 77.

[37] Irwin Silber, "Folksongs and Copyrights." *Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine*, March 1960, 32.

[38] "That compilations or abridgments, adaptations, arrangements, dramatizations, translations, or other versions of works in the public domain… shall be regarded as new works subject to copyright under the provisions of this Act." 1909 Copyright Act, Section 6. Also see William F. Patry, *Copyright Law and Practice*. Washington, D.C: Bureau of National Affairs, 1994, 3, 1502, and Silber, "Folksongs and Copyrights," for an overview of evolving copyright practices among folk music performers, collectors, and publishers through the 1950s.

by the end of the 1950's desires to own the spotlight led many to follow the precedent set by The Weavers' "Irene" by registering copyrights to traditional songs as authors, not adaptors. This move erased the names of traditional artists by only celebrating those with enough access and appeal to popularize their music. Debates about legal and cultural ethics began dominating the folk field and even the Newport Folk Festivals—hailed by Bernice Reagon as "the closest thing the folk song revival had to a 'National Convention'"[39]—were abuzz with questions of copyright. At the inaugural festival in 1958, Alan Lomax's copyright practices became the focus of a panel titled "What is American Folk Music?"[40] and in 1963 the Newport Foundation tried to quell the growing storm of concerns with a workshop on "Folk Music and the Copyright Law" given by their long time General Counsel Elliot Hoffman."[41] By the time "We Shall Overcome" was copyrighted there was such a swirling debate among singers, publishers, folklorists, song collectors, and fans that Silber wrote in a strident article on the subject, "[T]he folksong world is in a ferment over the problem of copyrights."[42]

In the early 1960s, the copyright ferment spilled onto the pages of popular and academic journals. Condemning what he called "the dollar-madness of the year all of America's folksongs were copyrighted," Silber initiated an ongoing copyrights debate in *Sing Out!*, the journal he had launched in 1950 with Pete Seeger and Alan Lomax after

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[39] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement," 141.

[40] Israel Young, "Newport Folk Festival," in *Caravan*, No. 18, 1959, 25-27, in Scott Barretta, ed., *The Conscience of the Folk Revival: The Writings of Israel "Izzy" Young*. American Folk Music and Musicians Series, no. 18. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 13.

[41] Newport Folk Festival Program, July 1963, North Carolina Collection, Rare Book Collection; Southern Historical Collection, Southern Folklife Collection University of North Carolina Archives.

[42] Irwin Silber, "Folksongs and Copyrights," 36.

People's Songs and its *Bulletin* folded.[43] Prompted by a new collection of folk songs containing "an extraordinary number of phony claims to copyrights and authorship," Silber took to the journal's pages to decry this growing trend.[44] He reviewed the previous decade's surge in folk copyrights, chastised those taking advantage of legal loopholes to steal and profit from the public domain, and said the list of those wrongfully profiting from folk songs included Alan Lomax and "could be extended almost interminably."[45] His article prompted a heated discussion among *Sing Out!*'s columnists and readers for the next five years.[46]

The academy's wrestling with the issue came to a head in 1962. On the pages of the *Journal of Western Folklore*, Gershon Legman offered a scathing critique of song collectors' copyright claims and Charles Seeger printed his retort three months later.[47] Legman's article lamented that "folk song, and much of the parallel folklore, has passed from the mouths of the folk into the pants pockets of folklore promoters, and even a few folklorists," lambasts the "quasi-legal basis" of such moves, and quotes artists' stories of "never receiv[ing] one cent."[48] Seeger agreed that copyrighting practices had spun out of

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[43] Irwin Silber, "Correspondence." *Sing Out* 10, no. 2 (1960): 42.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Silber, "Folksongs and Copyrights," X .

[46] Cynthia Gooding, "Concerning Copyright." *Sing Out* 11, no. 1 (1962): 24-25.; Pete Seeger, "The Copyright Hassle." *Sing Out* 13, no. 5 (1964): 41-42; A. L. Lloyd, "Who Owns What in Folk Song?" *Sing Out* 12, no. 1 (1963): 41–; "Concerning Hootenannies, Copyrights, and Loyalty Oaths (Editorial)." *Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine*, December 1964; Silber, "Folksongs and Copyrights"; "Tenth Anniversary Issue: Copyrights and Collectors." *Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine*, November 1960; "Correspondence." *Sing Out* 10, no. 2 (1960): 42-44.

[47] Gershon Legman, "Who Owns Folklore?" *Western Folklore* 21, no. 1 (January 1962): 1-12 and Charles Seeger, "Who Owns Folk Music, 93-101.

[48] Legman, "Who Owns Folklore?", 7 and 4.

control and highlighted the ways copyright law was fundamentally ill-suited to protect traditional music but, nonetheless, rigorously defended collectors' rights to royalties.

Alan Lomax was a central figure in the era's copyright debates for the money he had received from "Goodnight, Irene" in the 1950s, the copyrights claimed in his published folk music collections since the 1930s and his insistence that folklorists and collectors deserved royalties. In previous decades, few if any folklorists understood or gave much thought to copyright law and it had long been standard practice—across socio-political beliefs and by the likes of Zora Neale Hurston, Carl Sandburg, Cecil Sharp, and Lawrence Gellert—to copyright material collected in the field once published or recorded.[49] Lomax felt strongly that such earnings were justified and insisted all royalties he received only furthered his own his folk song research. [50] Furthermore, he insisted, it was not collectors but "the young pirates of the folknik school" raiding folklore's collected treasures in search of the next hit single who should be chastised.[51] Prominent folk revival commentator and owner of the Greenwich Village Folklore Center Israel "Izzy" Young was one of many holding Lomax's feet to the fire and exposing the lie of his purported commitment to the bearers, rather than just the collectors, of the nation's folk heritage. As he wrote in a snide review of a Lomax volume in 1960, "The only sour note occurs when we are warned that our heritage, so movingly described, is entirely copyrighted."[52] According to Lomax, however, and revealing his myopic view, it

[49] John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World*. (New York: Penguin, 2010), 295-296.

[50] Alan Lomax to Gershon Legman, September 23, 1960, Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 2004/004, folder 040223), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. For more on Lomax and copyrights see Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World*, 292-296.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Barretta, ed. *The Conscience of the Folk Revival: The Writings of Israel "Izzy" Young*, 215.

was collectors such as himself who were the real victims of the newly commercial folk craze because, since folk music appeared to be alive and well on the hit parade, there was "less and less money available for field work."[53]

Although Lomax did make notable efforts to protect those recorded in the field—singlehandedly pushing the Library of Congress to establish a policy of paying those recorded for their collections and being among the first to use written contracts with his own field informants—such efforts were inevitably eclipsed by his troubling professional practices and interpersonal politics. Lomax was so often contacted by artists about money owed that he kept a document in his files titled, "Form Letter to Field Singers Wanting to Know Where Royalties Are."[54] The letter tells artists that their compensation will come, not in dollars, but through association with Lomax himself. "In other words," he writes, the recordings should be considered their own reward because, he tells the artist, "they served to put you on the map." The letter concludes by encouraging the artists to record their own albums and, in a warped gesture of generosity revealing of his own problematic ownership claims, grants them permission to use any of their own songs shared with Lomax "without any restriction at all." Charles Seeger, who had known him most of his life, frequently challenged the young Lomax on his approach to copyrights. Describing one "big argument" they had had and the ways Lomax responded, he recalled,

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[53] Alan Lomax to Legman, September 23, 1960, Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 2004/004, folder 040223), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 2. For more on the dwindling support for folk song collection in the late 1950s throughout the Americas and Europe see Pete Seeger, "The Copyright Hassle," 41-42, and Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World*, 295.

[54] Alan Lomax, "Form Letter to Field Singers Wanting to Know Where Royalties Are," Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 2004/004, folder 040223), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

> [H]e said, "but Charlie, how can I live?" "Oh," I said, "but Alan, that's just what the bank robber says. How can he live if he doesn't shoot up the bank." He didn't see the point.[55]

Lomax was of central concern to cultural workers of the civil rights movement, not only for the usefulness of his decades of work as a folklorist of the black South but also because of the threat he posed given his troubling copyrighting practices. Lomax's investment in the radical politics of folksong, particular interest in traditional black music, and undeniable power as the nation's leading folklorist led him to be deeply involved in the work of supporting, disseminating, and documenting the movement's music. He had an ongoing mentoring relationship with Guy Carawan, recorded and produced albums of freedom songs, co-organized Highlander's conferences and workshops on the importance of black culture, and was also a board member of the Newport Foundation, the primary funder of the movement's cultural efforts. For many, however, his stated commitment to the radical left in general and black communities in particular was belied by his troubling interpersonal politics and questionable copyright claims. In his work with Leadbetter, for example, in addition to swindling him out of royalties and other payments, he consistently framed his talent as emerging, not from musical brilliance or sophistication, but from innate savagery. Treating him more as a curiosity he had captured than a talent he supported and managed, Lomax made Leadbetter clean his home and work as his driver while insisting, in sensationalist marketing intended to authenticate his folk performance, he was "a nigger to the core of

[55] Charles Seeger as quoted in David King Dunaway and Molly Beer. *Singing Out: An Oral History of America's Folk Music Revivals*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23.

his being."[56] In addition to being aware of his controversial reputation, Lomax's regular presence in civil rights circles exposed organizers to what Candie Carawan describes as his constant lecturing of black people about their culture and his "blustery personality."[57] Julius Lester, who was on the board of the Newport Foundation with him, similarly recalls Lomax as abrasive and arrogant and describes him as "brilliant" but "paternalistic:"[58] "He treated black people like children. Everybody hated him."[59] Particularly concerning were Lomax's notions about cultural ownership. As Lester pointedly recalls, "Alan was about exploiting people and about copyrighting their music in his name."[60] Lomax's proximity to the movement, constant recording of its songs, and nearly unrestricted access given the power he wielded as a national figure and gatekeeper of Newport's funds, led many to worry how he might coopt the movement's music for his own financial gain. Speaking of the relief he and others later felt when "We Shall Overcome" was copyrighted, Lester says, "Alan would have done it. Alan would have copyrighted the song in a heartbeat. Alan was brilliant and made brilliant contributions but he was an awful human being."[61]

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[56] Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 59-60.

[57] Candie Carawan in conversation with the author, 2014.

[58] Julius Lester in conversation with the author, November 23, 2015.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

Copyrighting and Controlling a Freedom Song

It was against this backdrop of the folk world's "ferment over copyrights" that "We Shall Overcome" gained international resonance and Guy Carawan approached Pete Seeger about copyrighting the song. Carawan felt Seeger was the best person to consult. Not only had he been instrumental in popularizing the song outside of the movement, he had also had decades of experience with the music industry, copyrights, and squaring the two with his progressive politics. Carawan and Seeger later described their decision to pursue copyright protection as a defensive one intended to protect the song from cooptation and commodification. Seeger recalled consulting his publishers who said, "If you don't copyright this song, some Hollywood types will have a version out next year like, 'Come on Baby, we shall overcome tonight.'"[62] Bernice Reagon later recalled Seeger wanting the copyright to reflect the song's authorship "by American Negro people"[63] but copyright law requires attribution to specific individuals—an importation from European laws designed to protect classical music's singular composers and written scores rather than oral tradition's alternative notions of authorship and ownership. They did not want to credit themselves as writers and the names of Lucille Simmons and others of the Charleston strike were not yet known to them.[64] It was decided the copyright would name Pete Seeger for the two verses he had added and for changing "will overcome" to "shall overcome,"[65] Carawan's California singing partner Frank Hamilton

[62] Pete Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, 34.

[63] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement, 85.

[64] Pete Seeger, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, 34; Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement, 85.

[65] Seeger later attributed this change to Septima Clark. Noah Adams, "The Inspiring Force of 'We Shall Overcome.'" *All Things Considered*, August 28, 2013. http://www.npr.org/2013/08/28/216482943/the-inspiring-force-of-we-shall-overcome.

for the verse he added while performing on folk stages and for teaching it to Carawan, Guy Carawan for the guitar rhythm he had added and for initiating its spread by teaching it to the students of the sit-ins and SNCC, and posthumously to Zilphia Horton who had learned it from black women of the labor movement and transformed it into Highlander's signature song.[66] Crediting these four and accounting for those they could not name, the original copyright text read:

> Musical and lyrical adaptation by Zilphia Horton, Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan, & Pete Seeger. Inspired by African American Gospel Singing, members of the Food & Tobacco Workers Union, Charleston, SC & the Southern civil rights movement.[67]

Myles Horton, who held the copyrights in Zilphia's name, suggested finding a way to disseminate royalties to the community, insisting that if any one of them made a profit from the song "Zilphia would come back to haunt me."[68] It was at this point that the group brought in two black collaborators—Bernice Johnson Reagon and Vincent Harding, a theologian and colleague of Dr. King's. Together, they decided all royalties would be put into a "Freedom Fund" earmarked for the black freedom movement. Although a pioneering effort, the copyright did not entirely resolve the previous decade's debates about the ethics and racial politics of copyright claims. It is troubling that four white names were chosen when the four black Freedom Singers, for example, could have just as easily been a justifiable choice, and it is striking that black collaborators were not consulted or involved until after the decision to copyright had already been made. And

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[66] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement, 85.

[67] In 1997, Seeger approached Bernice Reagon and Guy Carawan about adding Lucille Simmons' name to the copyright as an arranger. Joseph Taubman to Pete Seeger, December 10, 1997, WISC-HREC, Box 9, folder 4.

[68] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement, 86.

yet, the "We Shall Overcome" copyright was powerfully unique in its intention to protect the legacy, not of a particular artist or arrangement, but of the song itself.

Toshi Seeger, Pete's wife, set up the copyright with Pete's publisher, The Richmond Organization (TRO), and its founding partner Al Brackman agreed to handle all requests for the song. It was a powerful partnership; TRO was the largest publishing company in the industry and Brackman was one of its leaders. A native of Brooklyn, New York, Brackman had been in the music business since 1933 and worked extensively with popular white folk singers like Seeger as well as prominent black artists such as Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington.[69] In addition to his broad experience and industry respect, he also had extensive knowledge of the particular challenges of publishing and protecting traditional music. Brackman personally oversaw what *Variety* described as TRO's "voluminous catalogue of folk material [including] the Leadbetter estate," a responsibility that brought him into "several legal hassles over tunes' rewriting and similar copyright squabbles."[70] After decades of work across the musical color line and in legal battles about rights to traditional music, Brackman took it as an honor to be among those charged with protecting the anthem of the integration movement. He committed to protecting the song's legacy rather than maximizing its profits by denying all requests for its use in commercials or other circumstances thought to compromise its integrity. Brackman also arranged to have TRO cover any legal fees accrued in the event of a lawsuit brought to challenge the copyright's validity.[71]

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[69] Desmond Stone, *Alec Wilder in Spite of Himself: A Life of the Composer*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 158.

[70] "Leadbelly's 'Cottonfields' Hits Charts and Cues Unique Copyright Angles." *Variety* (Archive: 1905-2000) 226, no. 9 (1962): 51.

[71] "'We Shall Overcome' Advisory Committee Meeting," September 2, 2005, Highlander Archives, 3.

Carawan, Hamilton, Horton, and Seeger signed a standard "Popular Songwriters Contract" stating TRO's ownership of the song and their agreement to divide royalties equally among themselves and TRO.[72] The song's earnings were minimal as only commercial uses were regulated and permission was rarely granted. Royalties distributed over two quarters in 1964, for example, were for uses by American and Canadian television stations and totaled a modest $414.92.[73] Given her expertise in black traditional song, it was decided Bernice Reagon would be Brackman's primary consultant whenever he felt unsure about a request[74]—a practice continued to this day between Brackman's successor and his partner's son, Larry Richmond, and Reagon's daughter, Toshi Reagon. Guidance on distributing royalties was always sought from her and Vincent Harding.[75] Although the contractual agreement Brackman drafted was a standard one, the arrangements for managing the copyright and distributing its royalties were unprecedented. Its minimal returns notwithstanding, royalties were placed in a trust as the copyrighters had agreed and distributed to cultural workers in the South.

While Brackman and Reagon controlled the song's use, Seeger took on controlling its meaning and protecting the copyright itself. As the anthem's international resonance grew, Seeger worried about the ways it would be differently interpreted in diverse contexts, particularly when it came to translations. In 1967 he sent Brackman a

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[72] "Popular Songwriters Contract" between Ludlow Music and Zilphia Horton, Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan and Pete Seeger, 1963, WISC-HREC, Box 69, folder 6, 1.

[73] Royalties Statement for Guy H Carawan, BMI, March 31, 1964, and December 31, 1964, WISC-HREC, Box 8, Folder 9.

[74] "'We Shall Overcome' Advisory and Ad Hoc Committee Meeting," August 30, 2003, Highlander Archives, 1-2.

[75] Wendi O'Neal, personal communication with author, April 19, 2016.

two-page document titled "Note to Translators of the Song 'WE SHALL OVERCOME' From English into Some Other Language."[76] He asserted that it was "wrong to translate 'We Shall Overcome' as 'We Shall Triumph' or 'We Shall Be Victorious'" and celebrated "the charm and poetic ambiguity" of the word "overcome."[77] He wrote,

> [T[he meaning of the word is broadened still further in the song by never once explicitly stating what will be overcome. Thus it is left up to the singer or the listener to let their minds speculate. This means that the song is ever living and ever growing. I was once asked when I sang for four thousand young Lutherans in California, 'Mr. Seeger, exactly who do you want to overcome when you sing that song?' I answered, "A song is not a speech. And this song means many different things to many different people.[78]

Additionally, in an effort to stock up defenses against any future legal attack against the copyright itself, Seeger sent Brackman a 25-minute audio letter in 1963 detailing his understanding of the song's history and justifications for their copyright claim.[79] With his wife Toshi's help, Seeger tells the story of how a turn-of-the-century hymn became the anthem of the civil rights era. He recognizes the then-unknown names of the black singers who first used it as a protest song during the labor movement as the "biggest single missing link in the chain," gives significant attention to Zilphia Horton for adapting, amplifying, and supporting it among union members, and celebrates the black singers and song leaders who indelibly shaped it. He then details the musical changes he made to better facilitate group singing and address the integrationist cause. Reflecting on its history, power, and impact as well as the structure of the copyright, he says, "It is

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[76] Pete Seeger, "Note to Translators of the Song "WE SHALL OVERCOME" From English into Some other Language," 1967, WISC Box 69, Folder 6.

[77] Ibid.; Peter Seeger to Al Brackman, June 10, 1967, WISC Box 69, Folder 6.

[78] Pete Seeger, "Note to Translators of the Song "WE SHALL OVERCOME"; Peter Seeger to Al Brackman, June 10, 1967, 2.

[79] Pete Seeger to Al Brackman, audio recording, 1963, TRO archives.

really and truly one of the world's great songs… In all my life I may never be any prouder of [anything] I ever did."

Despite his insistence that the song's meaning remain open, the control he exerts in these two instances is striking. First, it reveals the ways his preexisting relationship with the publishers and extensive experience in the music industry gave him privileged access to control the song's future meaning and use. Second, it reveals his tethering of the meaning of the song to his own interpretations through private communications that precluded comment or correction from others. Although his stated intentions were to protect the song and preserve its ability to serve black freedom movements, the letter and tape reveal the ways the copyright not only threatened to eclipse black interlocutors from the song's documented history but facilitated their exclusion in the crafting of its ongoing legacy as well.

Although actively engaged in the behind-the-scenes processes of setting up the copyright, Seeger was curiously silent about it during the concurrent public debates about folk music and copyrights. This fact is particularly noticeable given his leadership within the very communities most affected and involved. In the years following the copyright, Seeger was among many—including some he knew well such as his father Charles Seeger, Irwin Silber, and Alan Lomax—publicly wrestling with the ethics of copyrighting folk music and sketching proposals for redistributing royalties earned from public domain songs. Silber, for example, concluded a 1960 article by proposing royalties from traditional songs go into a "Folk Song Foundation" which would collect

> royalties on traditional song and [use] the monies for grants in folksong scholarship, for publication (in book and record form) of the folksong treasures stored in the Library of Congress, and for some payment to the original singers

> and collectors who have helped to keep alive this important part of our national heritage.[80]

That same year, Alan Lomax wrote about a foundation he had been trying to launch for five years that would support "folk lore research" with money from folk song copyrights.[81] In 1962 Charles Seeger urged folklorists and collectors to devise a structure with "50 per cent going to the individual anthropologist or publisher of collectanea [and] 50 percent to a fund for the protection of the public domain," adding that a panel of folklorists and musicologists should evaluate songs.[82] Folksinger Cynthia Gooding went further to suggest a group of artists, collectors, and scholars write a charter and elect a board to oversee distributions:

> Funds could be paid to rural informants and to professional singers in need. It could be used to give fellowships, to develop new collecting methods, training methods. Perhaps a school could be established. A reference library of books, tapes and records could be made available from the Fund. The Fund might help preserve the equanimity as well as the honesty of the art and the profession [and would be] philanthropic and non-profit."[83]

Seeger's own contribution to this discussion came in 1963, three years after "We Shall Overcome" was copyrighted and amidst ongoing strategizing about controlling the song's meaning and royalties. His article, appearing in *Sing Out!* and titled "The Copyright Hassle," wrestles with the various positions articulated on the subject in the previous years, discusses the exchange between his father and Gershon Legman, and even proposes a "PD [Public Domain] Fund" to collect a percentage of royalties on

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[80] Irwin Silber, "Folksongs and Copyrights," 36.

[81] Alan Lomax to Legman, September 23, 1960, Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 2004/004, folder 040223), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 2.

[82] Charles Seeger, "Who Owns Folk Music, 97.

[83] Cynthia Gooding, "Concerning Copyright," 25. Notably, ideas sketched in Gooding's proposal are strikingly similar to those later adopted for the "We Shall Overcome" Fund.

traditional songs and support recordings for the Library of Congress.[84] At no point, however, does he mention his own copyright experiment with what is arguably the most famous folk song of all time.

This silence continues to surround the copyright today and an effort that might have been more publicly celebrated given its response to folk debates of the time and ongoing protections offered the song has, instead—and seemingly by design—remained relatively unknown. This silence suggests an awareness of the fraught terrain on which the copyright stands. Although it has controlled the meaning and use of the song, black cultural workers, of both the civil rights era and today, have privately critiqued the copyright for its removal of the song from communal processes of evolution and growth, initiation by whites and their belated effort to include blacks, and erasure of the song's black history through the listing of white singers as its author.[85] And yet, it is entirely due to the copyright and its rigorous control that the numerous and ongoing requests to use the song in commercials or other contexts that might lessen its power have been consistently denied and the song has retained its sole association with the civil rights movement.

For the nearly 60 years of its existence, the copyright has activated and engaged with heated debates about culture, race, and rights and remains rife with contradictions. It confronts the biases inherent to the law while simultaneously perpetuating white control over black culture; it supports black southern organizing at the cost of writing white authorship into the historical archive, and it assigns ownership over something inherently

[84] Pete Seeger, "The Copyright Hassle," 43-45.

[85] A number of black cultural workers close to Highlander and the copyright offered their critiques during interviews on condition of anonymity.

defined by its freedom. Revising common understandings of the song as an assertion of unified resistance, the story of the "We Shall Overcome" copyright reveals its ongoing sounding of struggle, reaching towards resolve, and reflection of America's relationship with race.

Forging a Legacy:

The Creation of the "We Shall Overcome" Fund

> This music was like an instrument, like holding a tool in your hand.
>
> —Bernice Johnson Reagon, 1976[1]

> As a song, "We Shall Overcome" does not really exist with a rendering of the melody and the lyrics. The song does not exist unless you channel your commitment to social transformation.
>
> —Bernice Johnson Reagon, 2005[2]

No longer content to steadily and patiently march towards a "someday" victory, by 1966 many activists were embracing a new politics that was quick-paced, urgent, and defiant. In the previous year the final blows had been delivered to the movement's nonviolent army with Malcolm X's assassination, the brutal assaults on protesters during the march from Selma to Montgomery, Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) worker Sammy Younge's murder after using a gas station bathroom, and the shooting of James Meredith during his March Against Fear. Expressing the growing sentiment among many, SNCC leader James Forman said he had reached "the final end of any patience with nonviolence—even as a tactic" and Stokely Carmichael defined the moment, saying, "This is 1966 and it seems to me that it's 'time out' for nice words…. [W]e are going to use the term Black Power."[3]

As the vision for the black freedom movement shifted so did its soundtrack. Malcolm X proclaimed, "We want freedom now, but we're not going to get it singing

[1] Bernice Johnson Reagon. "In Our Hands: Thoughts on Black Music." *Sing Out* 24, no. 6 (1976), 1.

[2] "Cultural Workshop Notes, September 2-4, 2005," Highlander Archives, 6.

[3] Peniel E. Joseph, *Stokely: A Life*. (New York: Civitas Books, 2014); Stokely Carmichael, "Black Power," July 28, 1966.

'We Shall Overcome'" and the multi-racial hand-holding of freedom songs soon gave way to the fist-pumping of James Brown's "Say It Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud."[4] Stokely Carmichael even stormed the office of Harold Leventhal, agent and promoter to Pete Seeger and other folk figures, to confront him about the white cooptation of black resistance music, an incident signaling the shift away from folk collaborators.[5] As Julius Lester wrote, "Now it is over. The days of singing freedom songs and the days of combatting bullets and billy clubs with Love. We Shall Overcome (and we have overcome our blindness) sounds old, out-dated."[6]

Against this backdrop of the shifting politics and changing sound of 1966, royalties from the "We Shall Overcome" copyright were transferred from Carawan, Hamilton, Horton, and Seeger to Highlander where debates about managing its royalties were reopened. Three years prior, Myles Horton had been named trustee for the writers in an effort to streamline administration of the monies and their distribution. Royalties then began being housed at Highlander and the school began absorbing all tax burdens.[7] On Seeger's suggestion, management of the copyright was formally signed over to Highlander in 1966[8] and The "We Shall Overcome" Fund (WSOF), described as a "living

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[4] Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*. (New York: Grove Press, 1965), xx; Stokely Carmichael, "What We Want," *The New York Review of Books*, September 22, 1966; James Brown, "Say It Loud--I'm Black and I'm Proud," 1968.

[5] Peter David Goldsmith, *Making People's Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 384; Ronald D. Cohen and Stephen Petrus, *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 234.

[6] Julius Lester, "The Angry Children of Malcolm X." *Sing Out!* 16, no. 5 (1966): 21.

[7] Al Brackman to Myles Horton, Frank Hamilton, and Guy Carawan, August 26, 1963, WISC Box 69, Folder 6.

[8] "Excerpt from Highlander Board Meeting," May 14, 1966, WISC-HREC, Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20, p. 6; Myles Horton, Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan and Frank Hamilton to Highlander Research and Education Center, June 14, 1965, WISC Box 69, Folder 6.

memorial"[9] to the song, was officially established as a repository for royalties and resource for activists working at the intersection of "culture and struggle." There was no public announcement of the Fund or celebration of its founding. The only public notice of its inauguration came modestly, with the addition of the following sentence to the copyright text printed on all published versions of the song: "Royalties derived from this song are being contributed to The Freedom Movement under the trusteeship of the Writers."[10]

With Black Power bursting onto the national stage, it was an apt time to ensure financial rewards from black culture went into black communities but a complex time to place the anthem of the black freedom movement under the stewardship of an integrated and white-led institution. The mission of the WSOF—to distribute the song's royalties to black cultural organizers in the South—aligned with Black Power's calls for self-determination and economic independence; As Carmichael had insisted, "When we urge that black money go into black pockets, we mean the communal pocket."[11] Its operation from Highlander, however, activated core questions of the time about the role of whites in black struggles and the opportunities and challenges of institutionalizing efforts born from and meant to serve a grassroots movement. The black and white members of Highlander's leadership team and their cultural collaborators brought differing perspectives to these questions and their collective struggles in the decade between 1966,

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[9] C. Conrad Browne to Guy Carawan, Frank Hamilton, Pete Seeger and Myles Horton, May 26, 1966, WISC Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20.

[10] "Popular Songwriters Contract," Ludlow Music, Inc., 1963, Supplementary Paragraph 10, WISC-HREC, Box 69, Folder 6.

[11] Carmichael, "What We Want."

when the WSOF formally began, and 1977, when its practices were finally codified, and the granting parameters and administrative processes of the Fund were defined. All of this occurred amidst the new cultural politics being articulated by the Black Arts Movement, the rage of Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddamn," the demand from Aretha Franklin for "Respect," and the budding voice of Audre Lorde. Although "We Shall Overcome" was born from the integration movement, its legacy would be defined by the cultural politics and concerns of Black Power.

Throughout this formative decade for the Fund, Bernice Johnson Reagon was its leading force. Although "We Shall Overcome" had waned in popularity by the time of the Fund's founding, Reagon refused to make a museum piece of the song or forge a funding structure that simply honored the past. To the contrary, she led efforts to actively shape the song's legacy as one of continued relevance to and tangible support for the black community. A leading cultural organizer from the movement and committed scholar of black culture, Reagon insisted the Fund only center black people and communities despite its association with the biracial integration movement, ensured its support for projects emerging from within black communities rather than descending from without, and shaped administrative policies and practices to best ensure its longevity. She was not alone in these efforts but worked alongside an almost entirely black team of cultural leaders committed to overseeing the Fund. Yet despite the invaluable support of these collaborators, the precision of Reagon's vision and rigor of her commitment were singular. Her leadership also set a precedent as she was quickly joined and ultimately succeeded in steering the direction of the Fund by other black women—a trend that has become formal policy to ensure that the song's ongoing

protectors reflect the identities of its original creators. Although the "We Shall Overcome" story written into the copyright archive is one of four white folksingers leveraging their privilege to protect the anthem of the civil rights movement, the story revealed by the administration of its Fund is one of black women seizing control of the song's legacy through the ongoing work done in its name.

This chapter chronicles the shaping of that legacy through debates in boardrooms, correspondence, and the press, and highlights its strategic forging by black women. Although an inherently fraught site due to the complexities of its copyright and compromises of its institutional oversight, the Fund's control in the nearly six decades of its existence has ensured its adherence to its founding mission of supporting the black south. The "We Shall Overcome" copyright created by Carawan, Hamilton, Horton, and Seeger endeavored to counter the anti-black bias within intellectual property law but it was the committed work of those overseeing the Fund that facilitated the actual inclusion, protection, and reward the copyright purportedly assured.[12] Pushing past the story of the "We Shall Overcome" copyright by white folksingers, this chapter recovers the history of sustained work led by black women to actualize its promise.

Institutional Supports and Community Compromises

Six years after "We Shall Overcome" was copyrighted it was given an institutional home. Carawan, Hamilton, Seeger, and Horton were each committed to protecting the song and ensuring its continued work but were also committed to their respective careers. Carawan was beginning to transfer the skills he had honed leveraging

[12] For more on the distinction between countering bias and facilitating inclusion through the law see Kenneth W. Mack, "Legal History Dialogue: Bringing the Law Back into the History of the Civil Rights Movement," *Law and History Review* 27 (2009): 665.

music in the civil rights movement to struggles among the Appalachian poor; Hamilton was increasingly invested in developing approaches to musical education, Seeger was a national figure in the radical folk scene and Horton was still a leader at Highlander.[13] The work of managing the copyright—maintaining regular correspondence with the song's publishers, determining how to distribute royalties, and tracking income, distributions, and taxes—proved overwhelming and they agreed the broader supports offered by an institution would best serve the song and its Fund. Given its decades of work incorporating music into organizing in general and role in shepherding "We Shall Overcome" in particular, Highlander seemed the obvious choice. When the song's publisher Al Brackman wrote Carawan, Hamilton, and Horton in 1965 that Seeger was considering gifting his share of the royalties to Highlander, they each quickly agreed and followed suit.[14]

With the additional supports of institutional ownership, however, came the added complications of institutional concerns. In 1966 Highlander was in a particularly vulnerable place. The school had withstood segregationist and red-baiting smear campaigns from federal and state authorities since its 1932 founding but in the late 1950's a new wave of attacks focused less on Highlander's supposed moral threats to the southern way of life and more on possible legal violations within its operation. This tactical shift quickly yielded success for the school's opponents; In 1961, one year after

[13] Unlike Carawan, Horton, and Seeger, Frank Hamilton was never actively involved in the copyright or administration of its Fund. He continued to have a robust performing career, often collaborating with Carawan and replacing Seeger in The Weavers in 1962. Always particularly committed to teaching, he co-founded the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago in 1957 and the Frank Hamilton School in Atlanta in 2015.

[14] Al Brackman to Guy [Carawan], Myles [Horton], and Frank [Hamilton, May 27th, 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 12, Folder 20.

"We Shall Overcome" was copyrighted, Highlander's charter was revoked and its land seized as a result of trumped up charges—charges claiming the school had been selling alcohol without a license, its founder had used the nonprofit for personal financial gain, and that its practices violated state segregation statues whose focus on private institutions, it was argued, were unimpeded by *Brown v. Board's* sole focus on the public.[15] Sensing dwindling chances of success throughout the high-profile court case, Horton secretly secured new land and a new charter. Thus, the day after the Highlander Folk School was forced to close in Monteagle, The Highlander Research and Education Center opened in Knoxville. Even after the move, however, assaults continued from Knoxville's press, city council, and Klan, and despite the swift recovery from a significant defeat in the courts, Highlander was hardly on stable ground.[16] It was in this moment of settling into a new home and managing anxieties about its protection that Highlander was gifted royalties from "We Shall Overcome." While the musicians involved had focused on copyright debates swirling in the folk field, Highlander's board would soon be debating how to square the Fund's accountability to the black community with the dictates of their charter.

At a meeting in May 1966, after a number of procedural motions approving meeting minutes and managing board membership, Myles Horton informed his board that Highlander had been gifted the "We Shall Overcome" royalties.[17] He explained that,

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[15] Glen, *Highlander*, 243.

[16] Glen, *Highlander,* 257.

[17] "Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors," May 14, 1966, Highlander Research and Education Center Archive, 1-2.

although they had informally held the monies "as a service"[18] since he had become the song's trustee three years prior, new procedures had to be put in place now that the funds were legally theirs. In particular—and speaking to the core compromise of institutional ownership—Carawan, Hamilton, Horton and Seeger could no longer have direct control but would have to become advisors to the board regarding expenditures from the Fund. Horton then shared a proposal from Carawan, himself a board member but not present for this meeting, who saw the creation of a core group of advisors for the Fund as an opportunity to more equitably define and structure the song's ownership. He proposed that the group of advisors be expanded beyond the original copyrighters to include representatives from SNCC and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He hoped this expansion of the copyright's overseers would ensure accountability to the black organizers at the heart of the movement rather than just the white folksingers who had supported its songs.

What seemed to him a reasonable proposal for the black freedom movement proved a controversial one to Highlander's board. Brailsford Brazeal, dean of Morehouse College and chairman of Highlander's Executive Council, disapproved and quickly responded, "I think that we ought to keep full control of that money."[19] Brazeal expressed concern about bringing in people from other organizations, particularly ones with which Highlander often competed for funds, and felt it important that all those with power over the Fund's distributions be committed to protecting Highlander and have a thorough understanding of its by-laws. Brazeal was intimately familiar with the risks of

[18] Excerpt from Highlander Board Meeting," May 14, 1966, WISC-HREC, Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20, 1-2.

[19] Ibid., 3.

mismanaging Highlander business as he had been involved in the lawsuits of the previous years and formed a Legal Education Committee to appeal the revocation of Highlander's charter. Fresh from the frontlines of these defeats, he insisted throughout the meeting that Highlander "hold administrative control" of the Fund and even proposed that Highlander's Executive Committee replace Carawan, Horton and Seeger as Fund overseers.

The composition of Highlander's board reflected the diversity of communities it had engaged and while the black college dean Brazeal prioritized institutional concerns, Johns Island organizer Esau Jenkins emphasized accountability to the black community. By the time of this 1966 meeting Jenkins was collaborating with Carawan and Reagon to develop a folk revival in the black South—the project they had inaugurated with Julius Lester and Alan Lomax and one that continued Jenkins' long-commitment to cultivating black cultural pride as part of building a black political movement.[20] His history with Carawan and investment in black cultural ownership led him to support the involvement of SNCC and SCLC in managing the money from "We Shall Overcome." He emphasized the "very important part" they had played in the movement and urged the board to honor the wishes and wisdom of Carawan who, he reminded them, had "done a lot to make this thing possible."[21]

Yet the politics of institutional ownership continued to complicate the ethics emphasized by Jenkins. Brazeal, still prioritizing Highlander's safety and control, dismissively retorted, "Guy could just abide by the decision of the board. He has been our

[20] Alan Lomax, Bernice Reagon, Charles Sherrod and Eleanor Walden, "Report on the Conference for Southern Community Cultural Revival" 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 65, Folder 2, 1.

[21] "Excerpt from Highlander Board Meeting," May 14, 1966, WISC-HREC, Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20, 3.

representative in these matters all along." Horton sought resolution and pointed out that both organizations were represented on Highlander's board in Septima Clark of SCLC and Bob Moses of SNCC—neither of whom were present at this meeting—and thus Carawan's concern was already addressed. The issue was ultimately, however, rendered moot—likely to the relief of some and dismay of others—when Horton later clarified that, whatever the make-up of the Fund's committee, it could only serve in an advisory capacity. "In other words," said black economist Lewis Sinclair, "we would have veto power," to which Horton responded, "Sure."[22] By the end of the meeting it was clear to all that along with the protective benefits of institutional ownership came the unavoidable compromises of institutional control.

Twelve days later Highlander's director C. Conrad Browne wrote the four original holders of the "We Shall Overcome" copyright to thank them for gifting the royalties to Highlander and communicate the board's final decision: Highlander would appoint, in consultation with Carawan, four to six people to serve as "Fund Trustees [and] act as an advisory board to the Highlander Executive Committee."[23] Carawan and Horton later agreed on a list of thirteen potential committee members including organizers from SNCC and singers and scholars affiliated with the movement. Before the selection process could begin, however, each potential committee member had to attest to their understanding that the work of overseeing the Fund would require, not just a commitment to black culture and community organizing, but an attention to the institutional concerns of Highlander as well. Each was sent a "statement of policy" detailing Highlander's

[22] Ibid., 5.

[23] C. Conrad Browne to Guy [Carawan], Pete [Seeger], Frank [Hamilton], and Myles [Horton], May 26, 1966, WISC Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20.

spending guidelines under the Internal Revenue Service and was required to sign and return a card saying they had read and understood its impact on the administration of the Fund.[24] By the end of the year, Highlander's "We Shall Overcome" Fund was launched with $5,468.66 on hand.[25] Guy Carawan, Vincent Harding, Bernice Reagon, and, in a move honoring community accountability over institutional concerns, Faye Bellamy of SNCC and Dorothy Cotton of SCLC became its founding "advisory board of directors."[26]

Making and Maintaining Meaning

Once the Fund's relationship to Highlander and the composition of its advisory committee had been established, new debates quickly emerged about its changing meaning in changing times. In the Fund's first years, it supported efforts affiliated with Highlander and largely led by Reagon to cultivate cultural pride in the black South.[27] However, despite the Fund's continued focus on southern blacks, Highlander was shifting its attention to mountain whites. By the time of the Fund's founding in 1966, the strength of SNCC, SCLC, and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) coupled with Highlander's commitment to support and make way for black leadership had led Horton and his colleagues turn their attention away from southern civil rights and towards poverty in their home region of Appalachia. In 1964, Highlander hosted a handful of SNCC's white members for a three-day workshop about the challenges facing

[24] Memo to Julius Lester from C. Conrad Browne, August 16, 1966, WISC Box 8, Folder 9.

[25] Memo from Highlander's Executive Committee Meeting, February 10, 1977, WISC-HREC Part 6, Box 32, Folder 50.

[26] We Shall Overcome Fund Memo, 1966, WISC Box 69, Folder 6.

[27] Alan Lomax, Bernice Reagon, Charles Sherrod, and Eleanor Walden, "Report on the Conference for Southern Community Cultural Revival" 1965, WISC-HREC, Box 65, Folder 2.

Appalachia's mountain poor in which they decided an education program akin to the Citizenship Schools would best help those struggling in the region to understand, critique, and demand more accountability from federal antipoverty programs. Highlander-supported organizers developed this work over the remainder of the decade while Guy and Candie Carawan organized cultural festivals and offered workshops on using mountain music in this growing movement.[28]

Highlander's shift towards Appalachia was resonant with broader shifts in the national landscape. President Lyndon Johnson had declared his War on Poverty in 1964 and by 1967 Martin Luther King had shifted his focus from racial violence to the injustices suffered by the poor, declaring, "I think it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights."[29] By the end of the decade many were focused on the national and multiracial Poor People's Campaign King had called for just before his assassination. Signaling this shift and the questions it raised, in 1968 the "We Shall Overcome" Fund supported white folk singer Anne Lockwood Romasco to lead a contingent of Highlander organizers and cultural workers to set up camp and offer cultural workshops in Resurrection City, the Poor People's Campaign's tent city on Washington D.C.'s mall.[30] While it had initially been clear that grants from the "We Shall Overcome" Fund would go exclusively to black-led projects supporting black southern communities, by the late 1960's Fund administrators were confronting

[28] Glen, *Highlander*, 251-271.

[29] King, Jr., Martin Luther. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 138.

[30] "Freedom Fund Report to the Board," April, 1970, WISC-HREC, Box 12, Folder 22; Glen, *Highlander*, 215.

questions about how to honor the civil rights movement's anthem once the civil rights-era had past.

Rather than continue to accommodate this shifting focus from racial violence to the struggles of the poor, the first official act of the inaugural WSOF Advisory Committee defended against it by rigidly defining its funding parameters along racial lines. In doing so they made it their mission to not just manage the song's money but to control its legacy by actively shaping the work the Fund would do in its name. The song would not be used, as it might have been had the committee formed at the height of the integration movement, to support projects working across the color line or serve communities deemed most in need by the nation's changing politics. Drawing on the Black Power politics of the time, the Advisory Committee wrote a memo to Highlander's board and Executive Committee outlining guidelines that centered black culture and communities, prioritized grassroots community leadership, honored cultural organizing, and ensured the Fund's longevity.[31] The committee first insisted the Fund only be used for projects related to southern "Afro-American Folk Culture (with an emphasis on music)." Second, they refused to support leadership from above or outside the communities being engaged by stipulating that the Fund would not cover entire budgets but only support projects that had "gain[ed] community support in the sharing of financial responsibility." Third, they invested in supporting, honoring, and raising public awareness about cultural organizing by requiring grantees to submit project evaluations and recorded documentation for a public archive of "We Shall Overcome" projects.[32]

[31] Memo from the We Shall Overcome Advisory Board of Directors, undated, WISC, Box 69, Folder 6.

[32] Although the sharing and celebration of the work of WSOF grantees occurs in other ways, this public archive was never established.

And lastly, they tended to the health and longevity of the Fund by stipulating that grants would only be awarded at or below five hundred dollars unless royalties significantly increased.

Despite the clarity of these guidelines outlined and adopted in 1966, the changing politics of the 1970s continued to threaten the Fund's stated commitment. In 1972 Highlander's new director Frank Adams submitted a WSOF proposal, writing, "A social movement seems to be stirring in the Appalachian Mountains…. Of course, this is what we have been working for [and] we'd like to see music more consciously used as a means of awakening this spirit."[33] Addressed to the four original copyrighters rather than the WSOF Advisory Committee, his proposal requested use of the entirety of the Fund's holdings, then totaling $12,334.85, to support Guy Carawan and black mountain musician Earl Gilmore in a year of cultural work in Appalachia. The proposal was made during a time of significant transition for Highlander. They were still developing their new Appalachian focus, had just relocated to a bigger plot of land in New Market, Tennessee, and were in the midst of a string of leadership changes as Horton, although still active, had retired, Adams had succeeded Conrad Brown as director, and Mike Clark was preparing to succeed Adams. Additionally, during the move to New Market a number of documents had been lost including the funding regulations outlined in 1966 by the WSOF Advisory Committee.[34] Emerging amidst excitement about the swelling Appalachian movement and disorientation from the upheaval at Highlander, Adams'

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[33] Frank Adams to Myles Horton, Pete Seeger, Frank Hamilton and Guy Carawan, May 25, 1972, WISC Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20.

[34] Mike Clark to Freedom Fund Committee, October 13, 1972, WISC-HREC Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20 and Guy Carawan to Bernice [Reagon], October 5, 1972, WISC-HREC Part 6, Box 12, folder 20.

proposal broke with agreements made just a few years before about how much the committee was willing to grant and who was entitled to the song's royalties.

Bernice Reagon had already been a strong presence on the WSOF Advisory Committee and guided the process of devising its funding guidelines but the Appalachia proposal catapulted her into becoming more strident in her defense and control of the Fund. Each member of the Advisory Committee was committed to movement building and cultural organizing but Reagon had made the preservation, protection, and celebration of black culture her life's work. By 1972 she was writing her doctoral dissertation about the songs of the civil rights movement at Howard University, working as a historian and program curator in the areas of black culture at the Smithsonian, and preparing to launch her all-black and female singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock to merge culture and politics as she had done with the civil rights-era's Freedom Singers.[35] While some felt the Appalachia proposal was resonant with the history of "We Shall Overcome," to Reagon it was an affront. Upon hearing about it she wrote a scathing letter to incoming director Mike Clark with the hand-written request that her words be forwarded to all on the Fund's Advisory Committee.[36] Her letter insists, in keeping with the guidelines she had helped to establish six years earlier, that grants be limited to $500, only support black southern music, and be decided upon by the cultural workers of the Advisory Committee, not the white folksingers on its copyright. Rearticulating the intentions of the Fund and critiquing the names on the copyright itself, she writes,

[35] Marvette Pérez, "Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon." *Radical History Review* 1997, no. 68 (March 20, 1997): 4–24. doi:10.1215/01636545-1997-68-4.

[36] Bernice Reagon to Mike Clark, September 26, 1972, WISC Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20.

> I am aware of the fact that Guy Carawan is to a large extent responsible for the introduction of the song to the Nashville Student group in a protest context. He is also one of the erroneous copyrighters of the song (four-all white). It is through his grace and the grace of the other living copywriters, that the fund was set up and the decision made that the people who "made" the song should have access to any profits forthcoming.

Assuming Carawan was behind the proposal and angered by its disregard of the funding guidelines she had helped to draft, she continues, "I suggest that you search your records, find [the guidelines, and] send copies to the entire committee, especially Guy."

Carawan quickly wrote Reagon to assure her the proposal had been Highlander's and not his, communicate his approval of her suggestions, and try to make amends.[37] Within a month the proposal was withdrawn and the maximum award of $500 was granted to Earl Gilmore to support his music and only $51.25 granted to Carawan for "travel expenses."[38]

The Appalachia proposal spurred Reagon to adopt two additional strategies for protecting the Fund. First, she began what would be a three-year effort to get Highlander to support the creation and strategic distribution of a WSOF brochure. Although a seemingly simple gesture, the document would do powerful work. She emphasized the importance of circulating a brochure "so that Blacks in the South struggling in the area of Black Music can be aware of [the Fund's] presence and make wider use of it"[39] and hoped it would address her growing concern—one only amplified by the Appalachia proposal—that those closest to the Fund were not from the communities it purported to

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[37] Guy [Carawan] to Bernice [Reagon], October 5, 1972, WISC-HREC Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20.

[38] Mike Clark to Freedom Fund Committee, October 13, 1972, WISC-HREC Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20; We Shall Overcome Disbursements Schedule, 1967-1977, WISC Part 6, Box 32, Folder 50; "Freedom Fund Report," January 17, 1973, WISC Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20.

[39] Bernice Reagon to Mike Clark, September 26, 1972, WISC Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20.

serve. Second, she initiated conversations with Mike Clark, Toshi Seeger, and the Carawans about establishing a separate fund for white artists. Together they devised a plan for an "Appalachian Community Fund." The Appalachia Fund would use royalties from *Voices From the Mountains*,[40] a book the Carawans were set to publish about Appalachia and its songs, as well as those from the works of other white artists.[41]

Tensions between Reagon and Highlander erupted again three years later when the *Washington Post'*s music reporter Hollie West published a two-page profile of Reagon that revealed her concerns about the Fund.[42] The spread included two articles, one focused on Reagon and the other on her doctoral research about and organizing work with "We Shall Overcome." The latter article made public some of the debates that had previously only been discussed internally at Highlander. It revealed her critique of the white names on the copyright, concerns about protecting the intended purpose of the Fund, frustrations with the reluctance of whites to center race and racism, and response to the controversial Appalachia proposal. Questioning Highlander's commitment to protecting the Fund's service to the black South, she is quoted as saying, "There are no real strong safeguards against redefinition of the fund…. I don't know what's going to become of it." Speaking generally to the frustrations of working in interracial coalitions but clearly alluding to Highlander's attempt to shift the Fund's focus to Appalachia, she goes on to reflect, "[M]any white singers [don't] want to address with any level of

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[40] Guy Carawan, *Voices from the Mountains,* 1st ed., (New York: Knopf, 1975).

[41] This project was discussed over the course of a year but never materialized. Mike Clark to Toshi Seeger, November 13, 1973, WISC-HREC, Box 12, Folder 20.

[42] Hollie I. West, "A Black Theme Song: Tracing a Black Theme Song" and "Bernice Reagon: Singing Songs of Struggle and Life," *The Washington Post,* June 8, 1975, L1.

consistency the racism in this country. They focus… on their own problems, like coal mining."

When Clark confronted Reagon about the article she responded with a mix of apology and anger.[43] She pointedly recounted moments when West's questioning left her feeling "very uncomfortable" because it hit on troubling aspects of the copyright and its history such as the white singers credited as authors, the facts of the Appalachia proposal, and whether there were any legal protections against the Fund being compromised over time. The problem, she insinuated, was the fraught nature of the Fund, not her willingness to discuss it, and the solution lay more in her committed work to control its distributions than Highlander's desire to silence controversy. At times she strikes a conciliatory tone—apologizing for losing "control over what happened to the fund in [the] story" and saying her words had been "twisted"—but her frustration with Highlander is clear. Standing on more than ten years of leadership within and beyond the organization, she closes her letter defiantly by responding to Clark's claim that she had attacked Highlander, "I am not even going to waste paper answering that." Although Highlander's Executive Committee technically retained oversight over the Fund, by the mid-1970s Reagon was very much in control.

While the Appalachia proposal and *Washington Post* profile sparked the most volatile and public debates over the Fund, grant applications provided continuous platforms for smaller ones. In these smaller arenas, Reagon's attention was no less rigorous and her work no less impactful regarding the work done in the song's name. In the 1970's, proposals were reviewed remotely with committee members receiving

[43] Bernice Reagon to Mike Clark, July 28, 1975, WISC Part 6, Box 12, Folder 10.

application materials in the mail along with a reply card to be returned to Highlander after checking the box indicating either "I approve" or "I do not approve." Each proposal required evaluation of how well a project matched the Fund's intentions or fit within the history it intended to honor. As such, each was an opportunity to reaffirm or reinterpret the meaning and goals of the Fund. While the committee was quite thorough in its application reviews—frequently asking follow-up questions of applicants and requesting additional materials—Reagon's rigor in centering black artists and culture and tending to the long-term strength of the Fund stands out. In a particularly striking example, in 1973 the committee received a proposal from the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project, a collaborative project Reagon had co-founded in 1966 with white performer Anne Romaine to showcase the biracial cultural history of the South. In keeping with broader trends in the movement exemplified by SNCC's ousting of its white members and Black Power's urging of whites to organize their own, Reagon had left the project in 1968 to focus on cultural work in and from black communities. Romaine then turned her focus towards preserving and presenting white culture.

Romaine's 1973 WSOF proposal included both black and white musicians and, although running counter to guidelines agreed to for the Fund, was clearly aligned with the history of "We Shall Overcome." The project emerged directly from the integration movement, was originally founded by a biracial cultural organizing team, and ultimately accommodated Black Power's demands of white allies by focusing on working among whites. The proposal was unanimously approved by the WSOF committee but Reagon's approval was conditional. Wanting the Fund to do more than simply honor projects aligned or allied with black freedom movements, she made sure it maintained its

founding commitments to black artists. Specifying how the money could be used and requiring evidence to which Romaine adhered, next to the checked box for "I approve" on her reply card for her former collaborator's proposal, Reagon wrote in large print, "For Black performers—Request a report of expenditures."[44] Soon after this proposal, she pushed the WSOF to require final reports from all grantees that documented work done and monies spent.

Reagon's protections of the Fund were not solely about race. She also ensured its service to artists themselves rather than just the organizations that supported them and to building its legitimacy by tracking and measuring impacts. In 1975 the committee received a proposal from the John Henry Memorial Foundation, a black-led organization supporting black artists and culture in Appalachia. The application was submitted by the foundation's director, Edward J. Cabbell, and described the organization as the "Black voice in the mountains as far as the arts and humanities are concerned."[45] Fitting squarely within the WSOF's goals, the committee had supported the organization in the past, would continue to support it for a number of years in the future, and in 1977 Cabbell himself was nominated to and accepted a position on the Fund's advisory committee.[46] Reagon, however, rejected his 1975 proposal, writing on her reply card, "This appears to

[44] Reply Cards for Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project application, summer 1973, WISC-HREC, Box 12, Folder 20.

[45] Edward J. Cabbell, to Friends (of the WSOF), undated, WISC-HREC, Box 12, Folder 21.

[46] "We Shall Overcome Fund Brochure Draft," 1977, Highlander Library, Highlander Collection, Series 2, Box 4, Folder 59.

be general funding for the organization. I prefer supporting specific programs where we can more clearly see the input and results."[47]

Reagon was soon joined in her de facto leadership by Dorothy Cotton, a founding WSOF committee member, SCLC education director, and collaborator of Esau Jenkins and Septima Clark. While Reagon focused on controlling access to the Fund and shaping its meaning, Cotton urged deeper engagement from both the WSOF Advisory Committee and Highlander's leadership team about its mission and policies. In 1977 Cotton attended a meeting of Highlander's Executive Committee to push them to more deeply engage debates about the Fund's administration and call for a special meeting of the WSOF Advisory Committee to devise an "overall strategy for future use of the Fund [and its] purposes."[48] In both the Executive Committee meeting and the WSOF meeting three months later, she pushed for the resolution of a host of pressing concerns: Should the Fund continue to focus on black communities or, as Candie Carawan suggested in the meeting, should guidelines change as "the focus of struggle" changed?[49] Should new music be supported or is the Fund committed solely to traditional forms? How should a proposed project's engagement with political struggle be assessed? Should other oppressed groups be considered for support? How will new Advisory Committee members be appointed? Can WSOF money be used for administrative costs related to the Fund? How should communication between the WSOF committee and Highlander's

[47] Bernice Reagon, Reply card for application from the John Henry Memorial Foundation, March 22, 2976, WISC-HREC, Box 12, Folder 21.

[48] "Minutes, Highlander Research and Education Center, Meeting of the Executive Committee," March, 1977, WISC Part 6, Box 32, Folder 50, 1.

[49] "Minutes, Highlander Research and Education Center, Meeting of the Executive Committee," March, 1977, WISC Part 6, Box 32, Folder 50.

Executive Committee be regulated?[50] Although many of these questions had been debated within the WSOF Advisory Committee, Cotton forced the organization as a whole to grapple with them, thus creating deeper institutional investment in the Fund. Although she feared their inability to quickly resolve these questions threatened the integrity of the Fund and she considered resigning,[51] Cotton's push for deeper institutional engagement ultimately left the Fund on significantly more solid ground.

The questions raised by the discussions Cotton initiated clarified the Fund's core concerns and led to some significant steps. Feeling the need to bring others into the conversation and following Guy Carawan's suggestion, Highlander agreed to host a three-day gathering of cultural workers close to the Fund and its mission.[52] The announcement released two months later described the weekend gathering as a "Music and Culture Workshop with special emphasis on Black Culture and developments since the Civil Rights Movement."[53] Highlander invited people who had actively been leveraging culture in service of social justice and hoped the gathering would provide an opportunity to share and cultivate skills while facilitating larger conversations about the ethics and aesthetics of cultural organizing. The event was attended by an array of cultural workers and scholars including the co-founder of SNCC's Free Southern Theater John O'Neal, Duke University's historian of the U.S. South Peter Wood, WSOF grantees

[50] Ibid.; "Minutes: 'We Shall Overcome' Advisory Committee Meeting, June 26, 1977, WISC, Part 9, Box 7, Folder 48; "We Shall Overcome Fund: Some unresolved questions," 1977, WISC-HREC, Part 9, Box 7, Folder 48.

[51] "Minutes, We Shall Overcome Advisory Committee Meeting," June 26, 1977, WISC Part 9, Box 7, Folder 48.

[52] "Minutes, Highlander Research and Education Center, Meeting of the Executive Committee," March, 1977, WISC Part 6, Box 32, Folder 50, 3.

[53] Cultural Workshop Invitation, May 20, 1977, WISC-HREC, Part 9, Box 7, Folder 48.

and future Advisory Committee members Ed Cabbell of the John Henry Folk Festival and Jane Sapp of Miles College, as well as the entire WSOF Committee. The weekend's support of local cultural workers and facilitation of further discussion of issues of central concern to the WSOF were so successful that Highlander hosted it again the following year.[54]

As a result of the discussions during the weekend workshop and the broader institutional investment Cotton had facilitated, the brochure Reagon and Cotton had both been advocating for five years was finally drafted by the WSOF Committee in the summer of 1977.[55] It outlines the history of the song, the composition of the Fund's Advisory Committee, and procedures for interested applicants. In addition to documenting the Fund's history, facilitating its accessibility, and formalizing its operation, the brochure draft also endeavors to resolve the 17 years of struggle to define its work through the articulation of the first WSOF mission statement:

> The We Shall Overcome Fund supports efforts to preserve and develop Black culture, especially Black music, in the southern U.S.A. Begun in 1966, the Fund provides small grants to projects which reflect a blend of culture and struggle, a blend embodied in the song "We Shall Overcome."

The 1977 brochure draft culminated the formative struggles of the Fund's first decade. Although continually updated, it remains a core document used at Highlander and within the WSOF. Evidencing its reach, when asked about her understanding of the song and its Fund in 2016, Highlander's then director Pam McMichael said, "I have stuck close to the brochure because Bernice Johnson Reagon and others were involved in the

[54] "We Shall Overcome Workshop on Music & Culture, June 24-26, 1977," June, 1977, WISC-HREC Part 9, Box 7, Folder 48.

[55] "We Shall Overcome Fund Brochure Draft," 1977, Highlander Library, Highlander Collection, Series 2, Box 4, Folder 59.

writing of it."[56] Although WSOF administrators would continue to debate the meaning and legacy of the song and parameters for the work done in its name, by 1977 Reagon and Cotton had successfully launched the Fund, defined its core commitments, and introduced it to the region's community of cultural workers.

Ongoing Work, Continuing Struggles

The WSOF has continued to serve the black South while consistently expanding its resources and reach. Royalties have come from commercial uses in film, television, and radio both domestically and abroad in such countries as Israel, Greece, Germany, the Czech Republic, South Africa, Italy, Croatia, and Lithuania[57] and have consistently increased over time; Initially averaging approximately $1,000 per year in the 1960s and about $7,000 in the 1970s, royalties have grown to an annual average of about $22,000 in the 2000s.[58] To protect the Fund from depletion and ensure its continued growth, in the late 1970s a portion of its holdings were invested and from then on future grants were drawn only from half of all royalties and interest earned with the rest going back into the principal.[59] Due both to this formula and to increasing royalties over time, by 2004 annual distributions ranged from $13,000 to $25,000; the investment account and granting account combined totaled $357,965.00[60]; and the three to five grants of no more

[56] Pam McMichael in conversation with the author, June 9, 2016.

[57] "38th Accounting," Broadcast Music, Inc., 1977, WISC-HREC, Box 12, Folder 20; "Royalty Statement," BMI, April 8, 2005, Highlander Archives.

[58] Royalties reports from Highlander, BMI, and TRO, 1960-2009, WISC-HREC and Highlander Archives.

[59] "We Shall Overcome' Advisory and Ad Hoc Committees Meeting," August 30, 2003, 3.

[60] "'We Shall Overcome' Meeting," April 9, 1995, WISC-HREC, Box 9, Folder 4; "'We Shall Overcome' Fund Grants Report, Fiscal Year 2003-2004," September 2, 2004, Highlander Archives; WSOC Income/Expense Report FYE 2002, 2003, 2004," Highlander Archives.

than $500 awarded annually in the Fund's initial decades has expanded to more than a dozen annual grants of up to $2,000 each.[61] The kinds of projects being funded have also expanded, extending beyond music to include an array of cultural work—from museum curating to quilting—done in tandem with broader organizing efforts.[62]

Evolving concerns about ensuring its longevity, protecting its founding commitments, and maintaining clarity about the issues, regions, and demographics it supports continue to define the Fund and in 2004 four significant changes were made. First, the committee agreed to expand its focus beyond race to encompass multiple oppressed groups. The revised brochure states,

> The "We Shall Overcome" Fund supports efforts to preserve and develop African-American culture, especially music, in the Southern United States, [and] groups and organizations… that confront racism, unemployment, hunger, discrimination, and other forms of oppression.[63]

Multiracial projects are only eligible, however, if they include black collaborators or stakeholders. As Reagon later explained and evidencing her continued centering of blackness even within her shifting framework,

> Historically, we have seen that… when people say multi-racial, diverse, it could be two or three different groups with no African Americans. [W]e focus on making sure that African Americans are at the table and involved.[64]

Second, the Fund's regional commitments were sharpened by the committee's designation of fourteen southern states as its sole funding region.[65] Explaining the ways

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[61] "Freedom Fund Report to Highlander Board," April, 1970, WISC-HREC, Box 12, Folder 22; Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Applicants Breakdown," August 24, 2005, Highlander Archives.

[62] "'We Shall Overcome Fund, Disbursement Schedule, 1967-1976," 1976, WISC Part 9, Box 7, Folder 48; "'We Shall Overcome' Fund Grant Reports," September 2004, Highlander Archives.

[63] "'We Shall Overcome'—The Fund," 2004, Highlander Archives.

[64] "WSOC Cultural Workshop—September 1-3," 2006, Highlander Archives, 6.

this geographic focus served contemporary freedom struggles in addition to highlighting the landscape of civil rights-era struggles, Reagon told a gathering of WSOF grantees, "[T]he nature of the oppression in the South runs this country."[66]

Also in 2004, the WSOF reinstated the annual cultural workshop inaugurated in 1977. The reinvigorated workshop hosts southern cultural workers, most of whom are WSOF grantees, and is part of the reunion activities of Highlander's annual Labor Day weekend Homecoming celebration. In addition to supporting emerging cultural organizers, the weekend workshop is also intended to address concerns about the Fund growing obsolete due to the generation gap between its civil rights-era founders and the contemporary artist-organizers it seeks to engage. Explaining the way she hoped the weekend workshop would address these concerns, Reagon described it as both "an exchange" and "an introduction" where emerging and veteran cultural workers could share practices while also learning about the histories and concerns grounding each generation's work.[67] Part of Reagon's contribution to this "exchange and introduction" is her telling of the story of "We Shall Overcome" and the creation of its Fund.[68] Now a highly anticipated tradition of the annual gathering, her welcome address has become the final platform on which she shapes and shares the narrative of the song's history and legacy.

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[65] The fourteen states are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. "Region for the 'We Shall Overcome' Fund," 2004, Highlander Archives.

[66] "'We Shall Overcome' Cultural Workshop, September 3-5," 2004, Highlander Archives, 2.

[67] "'We Shall Overcome' Cultural Workshop, September 3-5," 2004, Highlander Archives, 1.

[68] Carlton Turner in communication with the author, June 14, 2016.

The fourth and final change in 2004 was the addition of Tufara Waller Muhammad as Highlander's first full time cultural worker since Guy Carawan. A black organizer and singer from Little Rock, Arkansas, Muhammad's charge was to participate in and orchestrate cultural initiatives throughout the region and conduct outreach for the Fund. In her thirteen years on staff, and under the mentorship of Reagon, Muhammad revitalized Highlander's cultural work, pushed the organization to confront the new racial politics of the new century, and connected contemporary cultural organizers to the work of the "We Shall Overcome" Fund.

While the work of the WSOF has been continually strengthened, the Fund's very existence has been threatened as tensions surrounding the copyright itself have grown. In 2012, Isaías Gamboa, the founding director of the California service organization The We Shall Overcome Foundation (WSOF), challenged the copyright's validity in his self-published book, *We Shall Overcome: Sacred Song on the Devil's Tongue*.[69] He argues that Pete Seeger and his "folk mafia" copyrighted the song after stealing it from a woman Gamboa believes is its true author, black composer and Cincinnati sharecropper Louise Shropshire. Despite unconvincing evidence and research later described as contradicting "over six decades of scholarship, analysis and reporting,"[70] after publishing his book Gamboa convinced the Cincinnati City Council, Ohio House of Representatives, and Ohio Legislative Black Caucus to pass resolutions recognizing Shropshire as the "long-

[69] Isaias Gamboa, *We Shall Overcome: Sacred Song on the Devil's Tongue.* Edited by JoAnne Henry Ph.D. 2nd ed. (Beverly Hills, CA: Gamboa Music Group Publications, 2012).

[70] As quoted by Kyle Jahner in "Seeger Made 'We Shall Overcome' An Anthem, Owners Say," *Law360.com*, August 4, 2017. https://www.law360.com/articles/951432/seeger-made-we-shall-overcome-an-anthem-owners-say.

lost author of the iconic freedom song" and newly discovered "source of pride for the city of Cincinnati."[71]

In 2015 Gamboa sought permission from The Richmond Organization and its offshoot, Ludlow Music, to use the song in a documentary about its history and copyright entitled "Grand Theft Gospel." His request was denied and in response, he filed a class action lawsuit challenging anthem's ownership and demanding all licensing fees received over the 56 years of its copyright be returned.[72] Just two months earlier, a tentative and much-publicized $14 million settlement had been reached in a three-year battle against the publishers of another hugely popular song generally assumed to be in the public domain, "Happy Birthday to You."[73] Like Gamboa, the plaintiffs were filmmakers who had been denied use of the song and their class action suit also challenged the copyright's validity and demanded "millions of dollars of wrongful licensing fees" be returned.[74] Gamboa quickly retained the same legal team and filed a similar suit.[75]

Soon after hiring these powerful lawyers, Gamboa was joined by a powerful partner. Upon hearing of the suit, well-known television director and producer Lee Daniels—who had been honored by Gamboa's foundation in 2013 at a Cincinnati event celebrating Louise Shropshire—claimed he, too, had been denied full usage of the song

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[71] Resolution No. 79, Cincinnati City Council, September 11, 2013; Alicia Reece, State Representative-33rd District, Special Recognition for "We Shall Overcome – An Evening of Hope: The Life and Legacy of Louise Shropshire," September 27, 2013; Reece, 1.

[72] *We Shall Overcome Foundation v. The Richmond Organization Inc. and Ludlow Music Inc*. Southern District of New York. Filed April 12, 2016. Print.

[73] *Good Morning to You Productions Corp., On Behalf of Itself and All Others Similarly situated v. Warner/Chappell Music, Inc*. Southern District of New York, June 13, 2013.

[74] Ibid., 1.

[75] *We Shall Overcome Foundation v. The Richmond Organization Inc. and Ludlow Music Inc*.

for his award-winning film "The Butler" and charged $100,000 for extremely limited excerpts.[76] Gamboa and Daniels filed an amended joint complaint portraying TRO and Ludlow as ruthless corporate thieves who have "wrongfully and unlawfully" claimed ownership of "We Shall Overcome" while either "silencing" or "extract[ing] licensing fees" from those requesting its use over the 56 years of its copyright.[77] "The song about freedom," Gamboa told the press weeks before filing his suit, "is being held for ransom."[78]

Gamboa and Daniels' suit, which makes no mention of the WSOF, brought the largely unknown fact of the song's copyright to public attention and played on the seeming contradiction inherent in owning a freedom song. Within 24 hours the suit had been reported in dozens of news outlets ranging from small local papers to national and international press and was framed, almost without exception, as a noble effort to "liberate" the song from corrupting corporate control.[79] The press frequently linked this battle with those of the black freedom movement from which the song emerged. The legal team was described as endeavoring to "unshackle [the song] from copyright protections"[80] while headlines declared "'We Shall Overcome' Should Belong to Us"[81] and "'We Shall Overcome' Copyright May Be Overcome Someday."[82]

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[76] *We Shall Overcome Foundation and Butler Films, LLC v. The Richmond Organization, Inc. (TRO INC.) and Ludlow Music, Inc*. Accessed October 12, 2016, 9.

[77] Ibid., 3.

[78] Joel M. Beall, "'We Shall Overcome' Belongs to Cincinnati." *Cincinati.com*. February 1, 2015.

[79] Ken Paulson, "'We Shall Overcome' Should Belong to Us," *USA Today*, May 11, 2016.

[80] "'We Shall Overcome' Should Be Free, Lawsuit Contends," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2016.

[81] Ibid.

The lawsuit is ongoing and, despite its extensive press coverage and the threat it poses to the future control over the song and the organizing work done in its name, those closest to the copyright and its Fund have remained, as Seeger was in the 1960's, curiously silent. There has been no public statement from Highlander, TRO, or any of the cultural organizers currently administering the Fund. This silence is likely a deliberate one intended to mask tensions and disagreements that have surrounded the copyright since its inception. In one of the only public discussions of it, Bernice Johnson Reagon's 1975 dissertation critiques the "severe shortsightedness" of the copyright as the white names it writes into the archive threaten to erase from history the black communities from which the song emerged.[83] She writes,

> [I]t was Blacks who had interpreted this song in a socio-political context in Charleston and Winston-Salem before it came to Zilphia Horton at Highlander. It was Blacks again in the sixties who utilized the song functionally and musically in such a way and with such power that its value as a commercial product would warrant copyright considerations.[84]

She also, in correspondence about the 1972 Appalachia proposal, calls Carawan, Hamilton, Horton, and Seeger the song's "erroneous copyrighters."[85] In other instances, however, she praises the copyright. In her dissertation she calls the four copyrighters important "catalysts"[86] for the song's resonance and continued work and at a meeting of

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[82] Ben Sisario, "'We Shall Overcome' Copyright May Be Overcome Someday," *New York Times*, April 12, 2016.

[83] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement, 87.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Bernice Reagon to Mike Clark, September 26, 1972, WISC Part 6, Box 12, Folder 20.

[86] Reagon, "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement, 87.

Highlander's board and the "WSOF Advisory Committee in 2005 she hailed it as "one of the most amazing copyright structures" in our nation's history.[87]

Contemporary WSOF overseers have conflicting views. Wendi O'Neal, a New Orleans-based singer, organizer, and mentee of Reagon's who served on the WSOF advisory committee from 2004 to 2015, appreciates the organizing work the copyright has facilitated but is clear about her belief that the copyright itself is wrong. She critiques its relocation of the song from communal to institutional ownership and, although she has been an integral part of the continued work it has facilitated, she says, "The music industry is an industry of gangsters [and] I don't think any of those people should be holding the copyright to that song…. I think it should be in public domain."[88] On the other hand, current advisory committee member, theater artist, and activist from Mississippi, Carlton Turner feels the Fund is an important an unprecedented effort to maintain black control over black culture:

> [The money from the copyright] sustains our work and comes from our culture. We're benefitting from the practice of a song deeply embedded in our roots. We all wish we could do more without art in terms of fueling activism but it just doesn't happen like this. I've never been a part of anything like this.[89]

Speaking to the challenges of being a steward for the copyright's ongoing work while also holding its contradictions—a challenge that likely motivates the silence surrounding it—O'Neal says, "I feel a deep obligation… but it's very loaded. I'm not really sure how to be responsible to it."[90]

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[87] "'We Shall Overcome' Fund Combined Meeting," September, 2005, Highlander Archives, 6.

[88] Wendi O'Neal, personal communication with author, April 19, 2016.

[89] Carlton Turner, personal communication with author, June 14, 2016.

[90] Wendi O'Neal, personal communication with author, April 19, 2016.

Despite these tensions surrounding the copyright itself and although it remains relatively unknown, the WSOF has supported black-led cultural organizing in the South for nearly 60 years. Its struggles, strategies, and work may not be as dramatic as those on the frontlines but they have, nonetheless, had significant impact. The Fund has scaffolded community work since the dawn of Black Power and has recently supported such contemporary movements as North Carolina's Moral Mondays, South Carolina's Truthful Tuesdays, and Black Lives Matter.[91] It has also consistently supported musical traditions of black Johns Island, the very region and tradition from which the song originally emerged. Its work has been led by the remarkable behind-the-scenes commitments of a host of unsung heroes. Founding WSOF Committee members Faye Bellamy, Guy Carawan, Dr. Dorothy Cotton, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, and Dr. Vincent Harding indelibly shaped the song's ongoing political use through their oversight of the Fund and decades of continued work. Carawan, Cotton, Bellamy, and Reagon remained on the committee well into the 2000's with Carawan and Bellamy serving until their deaths and Cotton and Reagon until their recent retirements. In keeping with the lineage of singers who birthed the song and the legacy inaugurated by Reagon and Cotton, the cultural workers who have served on the WSOF Committee have always been from the South and, with the exception of Guy Carawan and his wife Candie, have also always been black and largely been female. The Fund's new generation of guardians includes Tufara Muhammad, who served as the Fund's outreach worker and Highlander's cultural organizer from 2004 to 2015, and Omari Fox, Ebony Golden, Wendi O'Neal, and Carlton

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[91] Anonymous communication with author.

Turner who currently lead the Advisory Committee. Despite its ultimate and still contested control by Highlander, the WSOF remains one of the institution's most respected programs and its Executive Committee has always honored and upheld the Advisory Committee's decisions.

Histories of the civil rights movement frequently suffer from distorting oversimplifications. Investment in bracketed timeframes erases histories of sustained struggle. Focus on charismatic leaders eclipses the work of grassroots organizers. Celebration of white allies prematurely curtails understanding of black organizing. And reliance on the written record ignores those without privileged access to the archive. The WSOF Fund and its oversight is one story that has largely been overlooked. Although the work of each WSOF Committee member has been remarkable, Dr. Reagon's commitment stands out. She served on the committee for an astonishing 56 years, mentored many of its grantees, and led the initial charge to shape the Fund's vision and ensure its longevity. As the song continues to be leveraged in movements for change—most recently in the wake of the Orlando massacre,[92] in protest of rejected gun control measures on the House floor,[93] and in response to the continued deaths of black people at the hands of the police[94]—Dr. Reagon's legacy of work administering the "We Shall

[92] Kimberly Yam, "At Orlando Vigils Nationwide, Mourners Sing 'We Shall Overcome' In Solidarity | HuffPost." Accessed August 6, 2017. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/orlando-shooting-we-shall-overcome_us_575ec00fe4b00f97fba8d5f5.

[93] This action was led by Georgia congressman and civil rights icon, John Lewis. Joshua Berlinger, "Rep. John Lewis Sit-in: His History with Nonviolent Protest" - CNNPolitics, June 23, 2016. http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/23/politics/john-lewis-sit-ins/index.html.

[94] David Vergel. *Protesters in Washington D.C. Sing "We Shall Overcome,"* 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmKDms3n46Y. Importantly, however, Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists have generally rejected "We Shall Overcome" and songs like Kendrik Lamar's "We Gon Be Alright" are more frequently used. As St. Lewis rapper and organizer Tef Poe famously said of BLM during a 2015 rally, "This ain't your grandparents' civil rights movement." Barbara Reynolds, "I Was a

Overcome" Fund and the work of those who followed her profoundly deepen and expand understandings of what it takes to sing for freedom.

Civil Rights Activist in the 1960s. But It's Hard for Me to Get behind Black Lives Matter," *Washington Post*, August 24, 2015.

> And when there is a promise of a storm, if you want change in your life walk into it. If you get on the other side you will be different. And if you want change in your life and you're avoiding the trouble you can forget it. So as Harriet would say, wade on in the water. It's gonna really be troubled water.
>
> -Bernice Johnson Reagon, 1998[1]

Every summer the Brooklyn-based dance company, The Urban Bush Women (UBW), hosts a ten-day training in cultural organizing for more than 100 artists, educators, and community leaders from across the country and around the world. The company is known, not only for its internationally acclaimed performance repertoire, but also for its leadership in the field of arts and activism. The purpose of the Summer Leadership Institute (SLI), as the company's founder Jawole Willa Jo Zollar describes it, is to "expand and strengthen the network of front line social justice workers."[2] A predominantly black and female company, UBW commits to centering practices and stories of the black Atlantic and its SLI draws inspiration from histories of both performance and organizing; Participants explore a range of movement traditions—from the ring shout of the enslaved and the cyphers of hip hop—as well as the sociopolitical contexts from which they emerge and community aesthetics and ethics they articulate. These movement traditions are explored in conjunction with organizing traditions forged by the likes of Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer and, by putting the two together, participants gain new understandings of the politics of culture and the art of organizing.

[1] Sweet Honey in the Rock. *Sweet Honey in the Rock Live at Carnegie Hall.* Chicago, Ill.: Flying Fish Records, 1988.

[2] As quoted by Lizzy Cooper Davis in "The Summer Leadership Institute: Strengthening Core Muscles for Organizing, Art-Making and Community Building," *The Urban Bush Women Choreographic Center Blog*, Spring 2016, http://www.urbanbushwomencenter.org/voicesfromthebush/.

Ultimately, through its immersive, residential experience, the SLI is one where, not unlike Myles Horton's school for "problems and dreams,"[3] core principles are defined, community challenges are identified, and solutions are imagined.

Although a professional dance company, UBW invests in mining cultural practices more broadly and—whether working on stage, in the studio, or in the community—they regularly explore the embodied lessons and political power of song. On the first day of the 2010 SLI, founding director Jawole Willa Jo Zollar invited those gathered to share and join their voices in "This Little Light of Mine," the song made anthem by Hamer and others of the civil rights movement. The group had yet to introduce themselves or learn each other's names but already they were asked to sing. Hearing the day-one shyness in their voices, Zollar held up her hands to stop them almost as soon as they began: "Wait, wait, hold on. Now, it sounds like some folks aren't sure about whether they *want* their light to shine." Through smiles and laughter the group conceded this hesitation to fully sound themselves into the space and Zollar explained that their volume should reflect, not a confidence in singing ability, but a commitment to participate. Or, as Septima Clark, Guy Carawan, and others at Highlander wrote in the introduction to their 1961 songbook, "One's musical abilities may be limited, but there are no limitations to one's spirit."[4] Reminding the group of songs sung during mass meetings, sit-ins, arrests, and incarcerations, Zollar explained that movement songs were not intended to simply pass or ease the time but were powerful tools purposefully used. Whether sung to sound and strengthen support, embody and amplify collective power,

[3] Myles Horton to Louis Adamic, November 7th, 1937, WISC-Myles Horton Collection, Box 6, Folder 3.

[4] In "Songs for Freedom," 1961, Highlander Archives, p. 1. Also quoted in Septima Clark's autobiography, *Echo in My Soul,* (New York: Dutton, 1962), 240.

celebrate accomplishment, or refute and resist defeat, collective singing was used, she said, "to draw up energy to do dangerous work and tend to the group."

The SLI participants began again and, rather than showcase talent or admire expertise, they sang to run sound through the body of their new community, weave it together with expressions of intent, and discover what their collective voice might be. As the song teaches, the strength of a group depends on the commitment of each individual. Unlike other black freedom and resistance songs such as "We Shall Not Be Moved" or "We Shall Overcome," "This Little Light of Mine" is what Bernice Johnson Reagon calls an "I-Song."[5] You cannot sing it without making a personal commitment because the "I" in its lyric does not allow you to hide, defer, or disappear into a "we." Reagon asserts that "We-Songs," with their grammatically correct expression of first person plural, indicate the presence of white collaborators whereas "I-Songs" continue a black cultural understanding of how to most powerfully sound a group. When the SLI's participants sang again, their voices began to reflect this commitment—a commitment to be present, a commitment to listen and share, a commitment to lend their energy to the group, and a commitment to find the harmonies of collective sound rather than the dissonance of individuals battling to be heard. In this first SLI moment, art was not offered as adornment, spectacle, or the property of an accomplished few but was framed as an integral part of building and practicing community. Lifted by the musical lessons and legacies of the civil rights movement, this song and the group's sounding of it became their invitation, invocation, and initiation into a tradition of artful movement-making reliant on the sophisticated utility of cultural tools.

[5] Bernice Johnson Reagon, Bill D. Moyers, Public Affairs Television, and Mystic Fire Video. *The Songs Are Free*. (New York: Mystic Fire Video, 1991).

I have been working with UBW for seven years and the 2010 SLI was my first as a member of their faculty. The company's approach to leveraging the cultural in service of the political and that of their core partners—the organizational successor of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee's Free Southern Theater, Junebug Productions, and the collective of anti-racist organizing trainers, The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond—have invaluably deepened my own. Whether supporting leadership development with artists, activists, and educators, organizing with community partners, or exploring cultural history and politics with young dancers-in-training, we operate from the same core principles. We commit to centering black culture within movements for black freedom. We adopt Ella Baker's investment in hearing, supporting, and following young people by respecting youth culture and honoring the insights articulated and embodied therein. We honor elders and ancestors by leaning into the wisdom of practices used for generations. And, above all, we take culture seriously—as a container of history and a language through which we are often our most articulate—because, as Bernice Johnson Reagon teaches, for people of the black Atlantic "culture was often the only territory we could affect."[6]

We are not alone in this investment in and recognition of cultural practice as community care and resistance. Historian Sterling Stuckey, for example, called the ring shout "a central organizing principle of slave culture."[7] Musicologist Ned Sublette reported from the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, "Music was the first

[6] Bernice Johnson Reagon in "The Songs Are Free."

[7] Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1988), xii.

responder."[8] And describing the power of cultural traditions in the days and weeks after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans cultural worker and director of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, Carole Bebelle recalls, "[W]e had art as a healing force…. Art became the oxygen."[9] We also work alongside and take inspiration from a powerful network of dedicated cultural organizers that includes: artist-activists like Faviana Rodriguez, Ricardo Levins Morales, and those of the southern collective, Alternate Roots; training and research hubs like Arts and Democracy, Animating Democracy, Imagining America, the department of Art and Public Policy at New York University, and the theater and community program forged by Robbie McCauley at Emerson College; and the continued leadership of The Highlander Folk School, particularly through its Zilphia Horton Cultural Organizing Institute.

Despite my troubling of the notion in my introduction, much of my work is rooted in the belief that culture does, indeed, leap into service when the state fails us. I do not, however, believe it rises up unencumbered or unaffected by the very structures of power it endeavors to resist. Nor does it emerge effortlessly or on its own. Taking culture seriously means more than just honoring its power; it means interrogating its processes and politics as well. How have the traditions we claim as our own been named and defined? What powers have shaped their memory and use? How can our efforts to cultivate leadership or support community power focus both on cultural traditions and on the struggles and strategies of cultural actors? And how can these questions strengthen our continued work in community? The field of arts and organizing is rife with talk of the

[8] Ned Sublette, email to author, January 16th, 2010.

[9] Carole Bebelle in Arlene Goldbard, *Art Became the Oxygen: An Artistic Response Guide*, U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, August 2017, 4, http://usdac.us/artisticresponse.

importance of honoring cultural heritage, particularly in the face of Eurocentric aesthetic models. While this may be true, it is not enough. We need lessons that are more activating, historical models that are more challenging, and stories of our predecessors in cultural organizing that highlight, rather than hide, their work.

As I have learned both with UBW and in my research, highlighting and honoring the work also means confronting and embracing the challenges. I opened with the story of the 1959 raid at Highlander and the use by those present of "We Shall Overcome," a song most had just learned from Guy Carawan and Septima Clark. Carawan and Clark, however, both missed that night's singing as they had been among the first to be arrested and were already on their way to jail. This experience threw their differently racialized relationships to power into stark relief. As the arresting officer took roundabout routes along dark roads and switched cars to avoid being followed, Carawan demanded to know their rights but Clark, fearing for her life, desperately urged him to keep quiet.[10] While the interracial group they had left behind asserted unity in song, Carawan and Clark found themselves very much at odds.

This is not an uncommon civil rights-era story. Along with the power of integrating the frontlines came the challenges of navigating radically different experiences of and impulses around danger, safety, and power. Anger and fear were constants among movement organizers and, despite the sung assertion that "we'll walk hand in hand," collaborating in integrated coalitions—around cultural efforts or political strategies—was difficult and dangerous work. These challenges, however, were understood as necessary and commitments did not waver. The 1959 workshop interrupted by the raid was one of Carawan and Clark's first collaborations and, despite high tensions

[10] Clark, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement,* 57-59.

and even higher stakes, it would not be their last. Within a few short months they were heading to Johns Island to begin work that would ultimately change the movement and its signature sound.

My focus on conflicts, struggles, and the workings of power and privilege is not intended to undermine the movement's cultural work, demonize particular actors, or suggest that cross-racial collaborations are doomed. To the contrary, I believe such collaborations are essential and we ignore their challenges to our detriment. As Bernice Johnson Reagon says, "[Coalition work] is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort. [C]oalition building is not necessarily nurturing. It is coalition building. And if you feel the strain, you may be doing some good work."[11] If we do not examine the strains, we are left with a sanitized picture of success arriving with the ease of the inevitable rather than through the herculean effort required to challenge and change the status quo. The collaborations I have explored were far from comfortable and their work far from perfect but it is my hope that, by illuminating some of the conflicts these cultural workers were brave enough to take on, wrestle with, and sing through, we can begin to get a more realistic picture of what effective organizing—with all its messiness and missteps—requires.

The story of the freedom songs of the civil rights movement is the cultural organizer's Rosa Parks story. The popular narrative of Parks tells simply of a tired old woman who happened to launch a movement. Her catalytic protest is rewritten as accidental and her preceding years of training and strategizing—much of which occurred

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[11] Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century." West Coast Women's Music Festival, Yosemite National Forest, California, 1981, 3-4.

at Highlander—are erased. Similarly, the songs of the civil rights movement are most often understood as simply emerging from centuries-old black traditions of sung resistance. What is eclipsed, again, is the work and as cultural resistance is naturalized, cultural organizing is erased. In both cases, we are left with models that hinder rather than help contemporary efforts to learn from the past to build movements for the future. In addition to engaging the scholarly debates discussed in my introduction, my project is also guided by my work with UBW and inspired by our broader community of cultural organizers. Ultimately, it is my hope that *Making Movement Sounds* reorients the study of black cultural resistance to offer practitioners on the ground new histories on which to draw and build.

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