

Shall We Overcome?: Songs of Protest in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968

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Introduction

Memphis: The Macrocosm For A Black Movement

The Civil Rights Movement found its epicenter early in 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. A brutal system perfected under the politics of plantation paternalism plagued the city with a firestorm of racial divisiveness hell-bent upon societal serfdom for the residential African-American populace.¹ The African-American community was a historically marginalized collective in the distribution hub of Jim Crow's mightiest product, King Cotton.

It was in this ethos of racial antediluvian understanding that black sanitation workers endured unnecessary squalor and hopelessly obtuse and dated moral and social devaluation. Forced to work for a pittance of their few-and-far between white counterparts, the African-American sanitation workers of Memphis sought to unionize in the name of moral justice and residual economic prosperity. This invalidated microcosm, representing some of the cities most marginalized African Americans, performed a necessary civil service, and in turn received the satisfaction of disparity, poverty, and social disenfranchisement.

A strike was looming at the dawn of 1968. With the providential support of national labor representatives, national civil rights figureheads and savants alike, the Civil Rights Movement buttressed a call for proper labor practice. The predominantly

¹ The marginalized in 1968 are for the purposes of this examination, those affected by the sanitation workers strike.

African-American sanitation collective ultimately, albeit indirectly, triggered a wellspring of necessitated civil action. No longer were the cries of the urban poor for the rights to succeed on a playing field of socioeconomic equality, but rather for the recognition of total parity and divinely ordained equality with the dominant white social hierarchy. Blacks and sympathetic whites alike saw the violation of human rights and sought to ensure their universal application in Memphis and the segregated South.

The Memphis movement was brutal. Months of striking left the cities poorest neighborhoods engulfed in the literal and metaphorical stench of indifference at the willing behest of City Hall. The fight in Memphis claimed the lives of demonstrators and modern messiah's alike, perhaps only to show the world the total and complete failure of the South's oldest and most myopically perverted institution, slavery and post-bellum Jim Crow.

Yet, it was Memphis, the stand-alone queen of the American Nile that provided an indigenous Promised Land for her African-American community. The Church in Memphis, carrying some of the oldest and most established traditionally African-American parishes, would fight a brave battle against the pariah state they had endured for far too long. The black church in Memphis served as an invaluable voice against the cacophonous tempest of Jim Crow.

Along with her churches, Memphis had a powerful and respected African-American clergy. This clergy was at its strongest in 1968. Many of her ministers had attained and exceeded the educational standards of their white societal and religious counterparts. The Memphis clergy provided the rallying cry to the overwhelmingly religious African-American populace. And somewhere in these churches a basic act of

non-violent direct action, collective healing, and emotional foundation craft emerged. This noble act was singing.

The African-American collective aligned their thought, their struggle, and their non-violent ideology upon their church, their community, and their musical tradition. Singing, as shall be demonstrated, was the best and brightest aggregate for a movement of the marginalized. This unification of the social periphery proved that Southern hegemony over social equality was incapable in defense of Jim Crow any longer.

To be changed by the audible is in itself a profound conclusion. Blacks were trapped in a cyclical societal netherworld, whereby they had no political representation, no rights, and no possibility of ascending the social ladder. The tripartite alliance of the African-American Church, clergy, and her musical tradition were vital in reaching settlement to the Memphis sanitation workers strike.

The African-American Church

The role of the African-American church in the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis in 1968, and in the daily lives of its parishioners, was unquestionably huge. The African-American church served as the catalyst in collectivization of the Memphis African-American community during the strike. Yet, the role of the church in African-American life had historically instilled the necessity for mutual recognition of marginalization, and the profound capability of community in ensuring the survival and foundational prosperity of the black community. Joan Beifuss will later depict Clayborn Temple as the center of the urban black community in Memphis, and when bolstered by historical record, this claim seems entirely valid.

To the Movement in Memphis the role of the African-American Church was gigantic. Historically, the African-American church fledgling or mighty in construct fulfilled a dominant social contract in the African-American community since the antebellum period. That social contract was based on the realization that much like the phoenix, the African-American collective, newly independent would have to rise from the ashes of slavery and face the subliminally, as well as the vociferous cries of Jim Crow. To respond to such institutionalized tyranny, the concordant evolution of the African-American church would help to fill a void left by Southern planters and agrarian juggernauts alike.

The role of the church is important for several reasons. For one, it provided a subliminal psychological release for a largely marginalized African-American congregation. In such places, one author writes, “Blacks could be philosophers, teachers, financiers, orators, and artists.”² The Church itself provided sanctuary, both literal and metaphorical. Whether attempting to escape the pangs of existence under white society, or the literal escape from violence or activity outside its walls, the African-American church was unquestionably important.

To elaborate, while the Church provided the social network of ministerial activity, pastoral care, and community formation, in Memphis these spiritually defined stairways to the Almighty, became the Marxian mass meeting halls of underground organizations, of transcendental talk, and progressive gab, they became the temples (in name and candor) to both God and social progressivism:

² Bernice Johnson Reagon, *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement 1955-1965: A Study in Culture History*, (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 1975), 68.

It was to the church that they came for physical protection and spiritual nurturing – the very structure developed by the Afro-American community for the survival of its people. The church provided the structure and guidance for calling the community together; it trained the singers to sing the old songs and gave them permission to create new ones; it sometimes produced real leaders, in its ministers, deacons, and church mothers, who met the challenges and worked to address issues of crisis and everyday survival as they arose.³

Again while exacting its contractual obligations with God and man, the edifice itself served duties common and compassionate in 1968. During the crazed and violent riots of March 28, 1968 Clayborn Temple served as a safe haven from police, tear gas, and unaligned disruptive African-American vagrants. The Rev. James Lawson depicted a scene where women and children were brought into Clayborn after a failed protest rally resulted in chaos outside its walls. The firsthand account below is telling of the power of the structure, and the power of religion in keeping people calm in the face of aggression:

Beifuss “How about inside Clayborn Temple? Were women and children panicky?”

Lawson “Oh, no. They were calm. There were speeches going on. There was singing. Various leaders were talking to the people.”

[In response the police fire tear gas into Clayborn Temple AME.]

Lawson “I do know that the place was filled with gas. And I was in the Minimum Salary Building when it happened.”⁴

And omnipresent through both polarizations was music and a musical tradition. It was singing that Lawson described as chaos rained down upon Clayborn, and it was also

³ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Let the Church Sing "Freedom" (in Papers of the "This Little Light of Mine" Project), Black Music Research Journal, Vol. 7. (1987). 108.

⁴ Rev James Lawson, interviewed by Joan Beifuss and David Yellin, Lawson Office Centenary Methodist Church, Memphis, Tennessee, 8 July 1970.

in communion that parishioners engaged in the behavior of singing. And while film footage corroborates singing at these locations, the historical prowess of singing in the African-American church cannot be ignored. Singing was in and of itself the most prideful elocution within the African-American church. From this tradition stemmed the potential for practical application. The wealth of the musical tradition, as shall be seen, was an impregnable armor in defense of black desire for equality. And while this musical tradition was truly valuable, the Church provided the creative impetus for both hymn construction, and the medium to allow for the movement in Memphis to blossom.

Clayborn Temple AME Church

Archival footage plays a crucial role in the assessment of the Movement in Memphis in early 1968. While one might assume the communal structure of protest marches, riots, and even sit-ins, these forms of planned and spontaneous demonstrations often emanated from the African-American church.

Joan Beifuss, author of *At The River I Stand*, paints the scene of Clayborn Temple's location and centrality within the period African-American social infrastructure:

Around Clayborn Temple was an area of rapid deterioration, broken gutters, decrepit houses with dirt yards and a few wilting trees, gas stations, liquor stores, little barbecue places serving the best barbecue in town. In back of Clayborn Temple was the large complex of St. Patrick's Church, once Irish, by 1968 practically empty. Up a block were the Memphis offices of the NAACP. Nearby were the Universal Life Insurance Company and the Tri-State Bank, intermeshed with the whole structure of black finance in the city.

This deteriorating area of Memphis black culture was within spitting distance of Beale Street, the former historical provincial capital of African-American artistic expression and independent black entrepreneurship.⁵ The street had hopelessly degraded into a vast and crime-ridden slum, plagued by vagrants, prostitutes, and cheap retailers.⁶ This area would later be stricken from the social fabric into a demilitarized no-man's land of urban renewal gone terribly wrong. Yet, Clayborn Temple survived and thrived during this period, perhaps indicative of the necessity of religion in times of trouble.⁷

Demonstrative of the racial shift in urban areas, the building was acquired by the AME church only twenty years prior to the strike itself.⁸ The church was designed by famous period architect Edward Culliett Jones and completed in 1891.⁹ Formerly Second Presbyterian Church, Clayborn Temple was as aforementioned, a white congregation, yet its application during 1968 was crucial to the success of the strike and the African-American community in Memphis. As Beifuss highlights, “The nerve center of the strike came to be an area on Hernando Street, just a block and a half south of Beale. Here next to the modern AME Salary Headquarters was big old stone Clayborn Temple...”¹⁰

As video footage, personal narratives, and secondary research demonstrate, the structure played a significant role during the sanitation strike. Early in the movement, prominent Memphis African-American minister James Lawson would call for nightly

⁵ Joan Turner Beifuss, *At The River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King*, (Memphis: B&W Books, 1985), 117.

⁶ Beale Street would serve as the provincial capital of blues music until its destruction in the 1970s.

⁷ Ibid. 116-117.

⁸ Ibid. 116.

⁹ Eugene J. Johnson and Robert D. Russell, Jr., *Memphis: An Architectural Guide*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 161.

¹⁰ Beifuss. 116.

mass meetings at Clayborn. He used the church as the cornerstone for spreading awareness of the plight of the sanitation worker, as well as the need for racial equality in Memphis. These nightly meetings were proposed following the first “riot-control” action taken by the Memphis Police Department in February 1968.¹¹

Clayborn served as the backdrop of the movement in Memphis. Showing up regularly in archival footage, the building served a myriad of functions, some unconventional. It was Clayborn that provided shelter, space for mediation, escape from tear gas and riot police, a house of God, and a centerpiece to the African-American push for social justice in Memphis, Tennessee. Most significantly the Sanitation Strike itself was officially ended in the sanctuary of Clayborn.

Mason Temple COGIC

As Clayborn Temple AME served a valuable function in allowing for protest organization and emanation, Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ) COGIC provided a more than capable arena for public speakers and in collectivization of the African-American community regardless of religious affiliation. Mason would appear frequently in archival footage. Its role as an innately specific oratorical microcosm is one of the most important in broadcasting both message and song. Film footage willingly exudes the importance of Mason Temple.

The Temple was opened in 1945 after its previous home had hopelessly deteriorated into architectural ruin. The building itself was massive, capable of housing upwards of 15,000 individuals, inspirationally large, and as a result, a key edifice in

¹¹ See Tape 2, Reel 9, 2:01. February 24, 1968.

Memphis in 1968.¹² The Temple was important for this reason, and others. As one of the oldest historically African-American parishes in the city, its founder, Bishop C.H. Mason chose Memphis as the national headquarters for the African-American COGIC in the late 1890s.¹³ The structures' size also made it an architectural marvel in its time, as well as an invaluable tool in organization. Even though the Temple serves as a place of worship, the structure is relatively secular in appearance. Its capability in holding an entire local community en masse is both literally and spiritually inspirational.¹⁴

The Temple's size would ultimately prove to be its biggest asset. As the wellspring for intellectual and creative thought during 1968, the structure served a different, albeit complimentary function to the Movement. Dr. Martin Luther King spoke at the Temple twice during 1968: the first pledging his support for sanitation workers on March 18, 1968,¹⁵ and the day before his death in his now eerily famous "Mountaintop Speech," on April 3, 1968.¹⁶ Both of these events highlight the significance of the Temple. The film record of these events allow the viewer to literally feel both the power of the building, and the power of Dr. King's delivery. His tone, and the structures size gave the Temple the capacity to supercede individuality and create a tremor of audible and soulful energy. Many examples of music are also present at The Temple, from the organ, to the spontaneous eruption of songs like "We Shall Not Be Moved," "We Shall

¹² Rev. James Lawson, interviewed by Bill Thomas and David Yellin, WMC-TV Studios Memphis, Tennessee, 1 July 1970.

¹³ V.E Miller and R.L. Williams, comps., *Facts About the Temple: Mason Temple – Memphis, Tennessee*, (Bogalusa: Bogalusa News Company, 1945), 47.

¹⁴ Ibid. 22.

¹⁵ See Tape 4, Reel 19.

¹⁶ See Tape 8, Reel 44. The "Mountaintop Speech" is eerily famous for Dr. King's reference to his failure to finish the Movement that he started; in an essence King alluded to his own death only hours before its actual occurrence.

Overcome,” and “This Little Light of Mine.” The inspirational message of both song and spoken word was an invaluable concoction in raising awareness and unifying the African-American population in Memphis.

Why Music?

The act of singing is in and of itself a profound action. When the soul of a movement finds its credence in this simple act, it is both unique and profound. With a rich musical tradition stemming back to Africa and sequentially, to slave times in America, the African-American response to white oppression was often the act of singing. The historical roots of song fit into the social fabric of African peoples.¹⁷

Historically, slaves thought to be rebellious and susceptible to revolt and derision from servitude developed a musical tradition that encompassed their African heritage, and their insatiable desire to speak out against the immense social quagmire in which they suffered. Specifically, under slavery, the colonial African had no voice in his chattel existence. The most prominent communication tactic endemic to the African-American tradition was the use and evolution of the spiritual and field holler as a tool of protest.¹⁸

This tradition produced the elemental audible tradition found later in the Civil Rights Movement. A link between the slave of yesteryear and the societal serfdom imposed upon the African-American workforce in Memphis was that in song, “you can say publicly...what you cannot say privately to a man’s face.”¹⁹ In fact as the movement

¹⁷ Kerran L. Sanger, “The Need for Redefinition of Self” in *“When the Spirit Says Sing!” The Roll of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 21.

¹⁸ Ibid. 22.

¹⁹ Ibid. 22.

progressed many participants welcomed the old song tradition into the present, as one author writes:

When activists talked about the singing of these songs, they redefined their ideas of what it meant to be black – to choose the old songs was to recognize their own heritage and express pride in it.”²⁰

Modern scholars seem to agree, that within any musical tradition lays the possibility for psychological as well as substantive change when singing is applied to a movement.

According to Leon Botstein, an English philosopher, “Among the truths affirmed by music is the sense of an implicit community; music renders human solidarity concrete.”²¹

This conclusion is necessary in the context of Memphis in 1968.

Music becomes a collectivization tool for a community of a historically similar experience. In Memphis and the American South, that common experience among African-Americans was slavery and the evolution of Jim Crow. The community formed was founded on a common musical tradition and upon an interrelated connection to domination under white society. Therefore an evaluation of musical centrality in a movement involving much more than mere unjust labor practice confronts the scholar.

Memphis left its own mark on music. As the original home of the Blues, and the birthplace of Rock ‘n’ Roll, Memphis historically provided a geographic and social landscape that rendered its location as the central place among rural satellites. That is, Memphis welcomed the rural poor and their music into a locale that insatiably craved new musical repertoire.

²⁰ Ibid. 27.

²¹ Leon Botstein, “Language, Music, and Politics” in *The State of the Language*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 367.

The Freedom Song

From the crucible of the rich African-American musical tradition came the “freedom song.” Often these songs were nothing more than traditional spirituals, with the most basic changes to their lyrical structure. The freedom song was:

based on the hymns sung weekly in southern churches. They, like the Psalms, were directed at believers. An examination of the lyrics of “freedom songs” indicated that unlike “The Eve of Destruction” and other popular songs, these tunes are directed to those within a movement or picket line rather than to a general audience. The lyrics are specific, repetitive, and simplistic.²²

Yet in Memphis, and throughout the American South, the freedom song metastasized into a mutation of the historical – albeit religious-based – African-American musical tradition, along with the revamping of lyrics to graft the old tradition with the applicable musical message.

The audible of the Civil Rights movement was the brainchild of its most basic participants, the songs themselves, and the activists who sang them. The application of the word “freedom” to traditional songs changed their original religious application to become the canon of the Movement. “Over My Head I See Freedom in the Air,” was “Over My Head I See Trouble in the Air,” the original never emphasized the power of “freedom” until its application during the movement.²³ Songs were subject to artistic *carte blanche*. Those who sang the songs in the streets, in prison, and churches, felt no allegiance to the original verses of the songs they utilized, in fact they often changed the

²² R. Serge Denisoff, “Protest Songs: Those on the Top Forty and Those of the Streets,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 4. (Winter, 1970), 819.

²³ Sanger, 72.

lyrics to fit their immediate situation. Bernice Reagon depicts a church in Mississippi singing “We Shall Not Be Moved,” while addressing their immediate focus, Governor Johnson:

*Governor Johnson, we shall not be moved,
Governor Johnson, we shall not be moved,
Governor Johnson, we shall not be moved,
Just like a pail of garbage in the alley,
He shall be removed!*²⁴

And while songs of the Civil Rights Movement often immersed themselves in predictable African-American religious song, the lyrical shift typecast of the movement also changed the lyrical styles of other immediately recognizable tunes. While Ray Charles was a founding partner in the evolution of gospel and soul, his musical clout and dispersion among a mainstream African-American audience made his songs willing contrafacta for Civil Rights demonstrators. Charles’ “Tell What I Say,” one of his earliest and most recognizable hits became under activists, “Sit-in Showdown – The A&P Song.”²⁵

The malaise of maltreatment under whites, and a cultural alignment to music allowed such activity, and in some instances, promoted it. Bernice Reagon points to this rather bluntly: “The author of such songs was relatively unimportant, ultimately the song would change and fluctuate based upon its individual usage and application.” This relative disregard for authorship and musical message craft occurred time and again. Little Willie John’s “You Better Leave My Kitten Alone,” was altered significantly when “kitten” was replaced by “segregation.” And while this simple alteration totally changed the message of the song, it was further altered. Verses were added to make the song a direct attack on status quo segregation:

²⁴Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Let the Church Sing “Freedom,” 110.

²⁵ Reagon, *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*, 106.

*Well I went down to the dime store to get myself a coke,
The waitress looked at me and said,
“What’s this a joke?”²⁶*

The ability for songs to change to address immediate social injustice or situation spanned the divide between the reservoir of old songs, and the creative capability of those on the frontlines of change in the movement. While many of these songs stemmed from the religious and historical location of African American’s in society, the sheer profundity with which the relative commoner created and modernized the gospel of a movement is both inspiring and foretelling of the power of both the activist and his historical grasp of a vibrant musical tradition.

Historical evidence already presented shows the direct correlation between the African-American classification as chattel in the antebellum period and the resultant wellspring of musical creation. African culture informed this musical development, as well as the African-American conception of cultural manifestation in the Bible:

It was the “African” side of black religion that helped African-Americans to see beyond the white distortions of the gospel and to discover its true meaning as God’s liberation of the oppressed from bondage.²⁷

The “freedom song” was the tool used by the Church, the demonstrator, and the preacher as a unilateral voice for collective identity craft. Blacks faced oppressive intolerance at the hands of white culture, but in turn sought salvation in both God, and their innately African musical tradition.

²⁶ Ibid. 104-105.

²⁷ James H. Cone, “Black Theology in American Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 53, No. 4, 75th Anniversary Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. (Dec., 1985). 755.

And while this mechanization under music lumbered on to effect the social climate of the American South, “The musical structure, historical base, and function of this body of song had its roots in Black culture” and ultimately in its most basic musical tradition.²⁸ One author alludes that this marriage of old and new was almost to be expected, “The inner-directedness of the songs in great measure explains the use of hymns, since religion for the rural Black was a keystone of his culture and social structure.”²⁹

To simplify, songs of great social change and divine anthems of hope often found their taproots in the ancestry of the historical religious song tradition; “the songs of the slaves represented a body of data that remained present in the Black community to be used in future crisis situations.”³⁰ The leviathan of the movement, “We Shall Overcome,” came from humble roots, as did the rest of the songs of the Civil Rights Movement. Ultimately, this immense wealth of information, the historical position of the African-American community, and their deep reservoir of songs hinted that in Memphis in 1968, “freedom” itself would be won in the act of singing.

While this claim is inherently bold, scholars seem to agree that in singing the message of a traditional African-American spiritual truly held credence. “Keep you’ re eyes on the prize,” undoubtedly referenced the collective desire for societal and metaphorical freedom from the oppression of history, and the oppressor in City Hall.

Kerran Sanger alludes that this desire for “freedom” was both the outspoken and hidden message in all of the songs of the movement:

²⁸ Reagon, *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*, 25.

²⁹ R. Serge Denisoff, “The Religious Roots of the American Song of Persuasion,” *Western Folklore*, Vol. 29, No. 3. (Jul., 1970), 183.

³⁰ Reagon, *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*, 38.

The activists' primary goal was "freedom," the theme that dominated their singing. That the songs sung at every movement activity were commonly referred to by movement members as "freedom songs" provides the first bit of evidence that the activists saw freedom as their primary concern, but a great deal of additional evidence is available as well.³¹

Therefore a fundamental partnership between singing and the collective goal of freedom came to the forefront of practical strategy for change in 1968.

Topical songs³² buried in the netherworld of elite intellectualism were not going to carry credence to those being chased by dogs in Birmingham, spit on at lunch counters in Nashville, or maced in Memphis; "People involved in the Movement did not sing songs that articulated ideals that were not in harmony with their understanding and analysis of the situation."³³ The "freedom" song addressed a variety of issues, and consequently faced a variety of applications. Ultimately, these songs share in their roots, yet their independent creation and function in the movement is foretelling of the necessity for their independent analysis.

Footage

The primary focus of this research is to document the songs sung in protest, regardless of application, in Memphis in 1968. While the sanitation workers strike, and the African-American church in Memphis factored cardinally in the collectivization of

³¹ Sanger, 66.

³² John Michael Spencer, *Protest & Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). In his chapter "'We Shall Overcome': Freedom Songs of the Civil Rights Movement," Spencer differentiates between group participation and topical songs. Those classified as *topical* shall for the purposes of this examination be those in the style of Bob Dylan or Joan Baez.

³³ Reagon, *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*, 17

black and sympathetic white Memphians, the songs chosen and utilized in Memphis are the focus of this study. Over thirty-four hours of primary documentation, in the form of archival film footage has been catalogued from the period.³⁴ While this footage contains information about those who spoke, those who “shook” the fish tank of stagnation in racial progressivism, it contained little in the way of catalogued acts of singing. Those acts of singing, whether audible or silent, were indexed and catalogued by this writer, as were references to these songs. This archival footage was valuable in deciphering an all but forgotten segment of Memphis in 1968. Toward the present study, only those events caught on tape, or those taken as record immediately following 1968 shall be used in analysis of both song and application.

“We Shall Overcome”: The Battle Hymn of the African-American Public

When one thinks of the Civil Rights Movement, invariably, they think of three things: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and the song “We Shall Overcome.” To arrive at this conclusion, one need only engage in the most basic understanding of American history. Those of us who indeed “have a dream,” see the implicit poetical structure behind that repetitive message.³⁵ To repeat is often to reinforce, or to bolster. In the case of the action, to dream is to hope for the future, to see the fulfillment of prophecy, and to strive for the presently unattainable. The magnum opus of this

³⁴ Footage obtained from the University of Memphis Library Special Collections. Film has been cited in reference to its exact location within the film record on file. Items referenced in this paper pertaining to this collection are cited utilizing both their location on tape, reel, and exact occurrence.

³⁵ This statement is in reference to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famous “I Have A Dream Speech” given August 28, 1963 in Washington, D.C.

movement, is not the act of dreaming, nor is it the act of sitting-in. The act of overcoming is in itself, perhaps the most incredible affirmation of the Civil Rights Movement.

Regardless of geographic location, color, creed, or conception, the action of overcoming was most unilaterally recognizable in the act of singing. The song and the action are partners in analysis and function. The song itself gave unquestionable voice to those afraid to speak out against the tyranny of their tyrannous societal overseers, to overcome what those who sang saw fit.

Those of “implicit communities” formed by music, rallied around such songs, and while others were used, “We Shall Overcome” has permeated the fabric of time and history, and the unquestionably profound representation of the Civil Rights Movement. Authors like Bernice Reagon have corroborated this conclusion in labeling it as the “The theme song of the Civil Rights Movement.”³⁶

Yet, does the song beg for such a banal classification? Ultimately, such a classification makes the song archival in nature, the proverbial “break glass and remove in case of emergency.” “We Shall Overcome” is not only an excellent protest song, but its multilateral applicability to a myriad of social issues make it a highly effective protest tool.

“We Shall Overcome” undoubtedly lifted the hearts and minds of those suffering in 1968. The song appears more than any other observed in this research in Memphis in 1968.³⁷ It appears, and consequently addresses a myriad of functions.

³⁶ Ibid. 65.

³⁷ While somewhat abysmal, the footage corroborates at least four separate instances where the song was used in Memphis in 1968. Compared to others only occurring at most twice on film.

The song stems from a rather long and nuanced history. Originally the song entitled “I’ll Be Alright,” had humble roots in application among African-Americans in coastal South Carolina. “We Shall Overcome” finds its roots as a traditionally African-American ballad, it is also an example of a “group-participation” song. These songs were adapted to be both recognizable and easily retainable to a mass audience.³⁸

The original tune, “I’ll Be Alright,” had two renditions, dependent entirely upon ones geographic proximity to the Atlantic Ocean. Among coastal populations the song began with a short rhythmic pulse and slowly increased in tempo to a shout. While inland³⁹ versions of this archetype for the theme song of the Civil Rights Movement would be sung with a steady upbeat rhythm, utilizing traditional folk practices of clapping and foot tapping.⁴⁰

The song was changed further when “I’ll Be Alright,” was adapted to “I’ll Overcome Someday,”⁴¹ in 1901 by C.A. Tindley.⁴² Then in 1945 the song saw its first application as a tool of protest mechanization during the Food, Tobacco and Agricultural Workers Union strike.⁴³ The song at this point was titled “I Will Overcome,” representative of the titles of both renditions, as well as what was previously thought to

³⁸ Reagon, *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*, 25.

³⁹ While not explicitly labeled as such, one can safely assume that the “inland” populations referenced by Reagon are those of the agrarian rural South.

⁴⁰ Reagon, *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*, 66.

⁴¹ Reagon, *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*, 69. On the evolution of “I’ll Overcome Someday”: In 1901, a similar song appeared. “I’ll Overcome Someday” was written by Charles Albert Tindley, a Black Methodist minister and hymn composer and was published in a collection released by the Paradise Publishing Company, a Tindley family enterprise. The book which contained this song was called *New Songs of Paradise*.

⁴² Spencer, 84.

⁴³ Reagon. *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*. 70-73.

be a representation of a specific social and economic struggle.⁴⁴ It was believed that the use of “I” instead of “we,” accomplished this singular collective goal.⁴⁵ The strike of mostly African-American farmers was a miserable failure. However, as a result of the application of song to that movement, in 1947, two picketers were invited to attend the recently formed Highlander Folk School in Mount Eagle, Tennessee.⁴⁶

The song was then taught to musical director Zilphia Horton. When Horton declared the song the “theme song” of Highlander, it had grown from its encumbering shell under the pronoun “I” into “We Will Overcome.” This alteration was fundamental to the song’s application in the Civil Rights Movement, and consequently in Memphis in 1968. The application of “we” reclassified the song entirely. What was once a song about singular and individual struggle became an adaptable and classifiable tool to be utilized in aligning a community. One author alludes that, “Singers substituted the use of “we” when they described actions, past, present, or future. The singers sang of what “we” have done or will do, and, by doing so, built unity in terms of the actual undertakings of the group.”⁴⁷

The song attained its final façade after Horton taught the song to folksinger Pete Seeger in 1947. Seeger performed the final permutation in replacing “We Will,” with “We Shall.” Seeger can also be credited with the creation of the influential verses “the whole wide world around” and “we’ll walk hand in hand.”⁴⁸ The song was debuted by Seeger at countless northern college campuses. In 1960, then Highlander director Guy

⁴⁴ Ibid. 73.

⁴⁵ Sanger. 75.

⁴⁶ Reagon. *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*. 76.

⁴⁷ Sanger. 75.

⁴⁸ Reagon, *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*, 77-78.

Carawan brought the song to the sit-in movement at the first Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee conference in Raleigh, North Carolina.⁴⁹

Lastly, much like other “freedom” songs, verses were often spontaneously created. The most powerful example of which was submitted by Mary Ethel Dozier, who was involuntarily locked in a closet at Highlander while her property was subjected to unlawful search and seizure. From that closet Dozier quietly sang at her captors “We are not afraid.”⁵⁰

Even though the song has a complex history of adaptation, the traditional oration of “We Shall Overcome” was used and adapted in Memphis. Of four documented examples, one of which is silent, the song occurs at both Clayborn Temple AME and The Mason Temple COGIC.

“We Shall Overcome” surfaced as protestors stemmed from Clayborn on March 28, 1968⁵¹ the song also appears at Mason in two instances. While the first is nearly impossible to discern, a snippet of the words “We Shall...” can be heard.⁵² This phrase could also be a part of another prominent Civil Rights era song, “We Shall Not Be Moved,” however, it is probably not. This conclusion is derived from the fact that the Mason Temple organ can be heard playing a similar ballad-like melody only minutes later in the choppy footage.⁵³ This is also buttressed by the fact that “We Shall Overcome” is a slow-paced ballad, at sixty-eight beats per minute, while “We Shall Not

⁴⁹ Candie and Guy Carawan, eds., *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs*, (Bethlehem: Sing Out Corporation, 1990), 238.

⁵⁰ Reagon. *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*. 82.

⁵¹ See Tape 6, Reel 23, 4:11.

⁵² See Tape 3, Reel 27, 5:27:28.

⁵³ See Tape 3, Reel 27, 5:34:46.

Be Moved” is much faster at ninety-two beats per minute.⁵⁴ This instance is under the direction of Roy Wilkins, a member of the NAACP. Wilkins has just offered a violent oration condemning the actions of the Memphis Police, in unnecessarily “macing”⁵⁵ peaceful protestors.” In his speech Wilkins clarifies the status of marchers: “Mace is to curb a riot of people running wild. Mace is not made to be used on orderly people marching down the street in an orderly fashion.”⁵⁶ The song also appears after Memphis clergymen H. Ralph Jackson delivers a speech at Mason Temple in which he and an improvised garbage can/collection plate deliver the message that “Garbage is not the problem, Loeb⁵⁷ is!”⁵⁸ The last example of “We Shall Overcome” is different in two distinct ways. It occurs on the one-year anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination in Memphis outside City Hall, as well as its application.⁵⁹

To decipher the data gathered from the footage; the song is used twice in a religious setting. The Temple, as has been discussed served as the place in which prominent voices of the greater Civil Rights Movement, including Dr. Martin Luther King, came to speak. In each of these applications the song served as both a rallying cry for the black community behind an official and as an affirmation of blackness in response to white atrocity. Both Jackson and Wilkins cunningly enamor their audiences with convincing statements of their validity in action and desire to participate. Both instances involve powerful orators that are both local members of either the Memphis clergy or

⁵⁴ Candie and Guy Carawan, 25.

⁵⁵ While “macing” is not a recognized term in the English language, its application as a verb is a part of lingua franca.

⁵⁶ See Above, Tape 3. March 14, 1968.

⁵⁷ Loeb refers to period Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb, who was unwilling to negotiate with sanitation workers in 1968.

⁵⁸ See Tape 4, Reel 18, 1:08.

⁵⁹ See Tape 14, Reel 84.

NAACP respectively. These instances demonstrate the song and its application as a tool of validation. “We Shall Overcome,” admitted both constant struggle, and reaffirmed a unilateral commitment to that struggle. Both of these songs occur relatively spontaneously, at least from what can be discerned from sometimes-ragged videotape. The song’s application in the religious setting, was not part of a church service, or under the direction of the orator, but rather within a community of believers not necessarily homogenized along lines of Christian identity. More importantly these “believers” in both God and movement recognized their necessity to change the status quo.

Although silent, on the film footage it appears that marchers are engaging in “We Shall Overcome” outside of Clayborn Temple as they prepare to march on March 14, 1968. This example is significant. If in fact protestors are singing “We Shall Overcome,” then this demonstrates three things: First the spontaneity of the protesting collective. Although the march is being led by James Lawson and others prominent black Memphians, they do not appear in this segment. Secondly, the song’s status as both a theme song and powerful anthem to those facing potential police brutality are demonstrative of the universal application of the song. But most importantly, the song is metaphorically perfect. Slaves had historically associated themselves with the Israelites in the Exodus narrative in the Bible. The Israelites much like the African-American community faced a well-armed, highly trained, over-society. The African-Americans of Memphis brought “We Shall Overcome,” and utilized it as non-violent weaponry in peaceful demonstration, that as Roy Wilkins demonstrated, was anything but peaceful.

This last example of “We Shall Overcome” is important in several ways. Primarily it confirms how a song can be used to rapidly collectivize a troubled

community. It also confirms the song's immortal status, as well as the song's power in the face of aggression.

April 4, 1969 was a beautiful day, as James Lawson and others attempted to pay homage to their fallen messiah, a teargas bomb exploded outside of City Hall, the device is triggered anonymously and quickly envelopes both the platform party and the crowd of sympathetic onlookers both white and black. As chaos begins to erupt, Lawson beckons the crowd to sit and sing "We Shall Overcome." As Lawson wipes his tear-filled eyes, thousands of onlookers sit on the pavement and sing. Chaos fades into the resounding tranquility in unification behind the song.

It would appear that this example usurps all other examples of the use of "We Shall Overcome." This example of "We Shall Overcome" clarifies several things about both the song and its application. It is first and foremost remarkable to see the power of such a song. To continue with biblical imagery already present in this section, "We Shall Overcome," had the power to part the Red Sea to allow for the safe passage of its followers. As thousands of people responded non-violently by sitting down in the face of blind aggression, they too invariably demonstrated the collective desire of both the Movement and its brainchild Dr. Martin Luther King. Author Sterling Stuckey draws this parallel nicely when he concludes that "Indeed, music backing nonviolent resistance was perhaps as powerful a means of fashioning a new day as guns have been in other places in our time."⁶⁰ The reductive reaction of the collective present was above all else to collectivize, to find immediate relation and a helping-hand from the person to ones left

⁶⁰ Sterling Stuckey, "The Great Singing Movements of the Sixties," in *Going Through the Storm: The Influence of African American Art in History*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1994), 266.

or right. Amazingly to find such people, one needed only to listen for what has as earlier been classified as the most noble act of the Civil Rights Movement. Those who overcame fear did so under the immense and providential power of “We Shall Overcome.”

What is remarkable and unremarkable at the same time, is the appearance of “We Shall Overcome” in Memphis. One of the reasons for utilizing video, was to prevent the effect of time on the erosion of the human psyche. This was done in an effort to prevent false recollections of the most commonplace song of the movement. Yet, in reality the fascinating conclusion is that even with time, “We Shall Overcome” was the iconoclastic champion of the entire body of songs found in 1968.

We Shall Not Be Moved: Rooted in the Waters?

The historical data for the remainder of the songs is significantly less voluminous than “We Shall Overcome,” this is in relation to the relative lack of data regarding the musical history of other songs. That aside, perhaps one of the most powerful songs found in Memphis in 1968, was the traditional spiritual “We Shall Not Be Moved.”

While not exactly historical, the song was a traditionally religious ballad. It was adapted to the Civil Rights Movement from its humble religious roots. Originally the tune carried strong religious imagery while the original first verse managed to maintain applicability during the Movement:

*I shall not, I shall not be moved,
I shall not, I shall not be moved,
Just like a tree planted by the water,
I shall not be moved.*

On my way to heaven, I shall not be moved...

Fightin’ sinnin’ Satan...

*Jesus is my captain...*⁶¹

This was the traditional spiritual rendition. The Civil Rights adaptation of the song was considerably different. Again, as the song retained its original first verse, subsequent verses were adapted to fit the social movement to which the song was applied. Even though the song retained its historical first verse, the shift from “I” to “we” is fundamentally important. Just like “We Shall Overcome,” the shift from the singular to the communal was pivotal in its application to a movement of the marginalized. These new verses included:

*We are fighting for our freedom...
We are black and white together...
We will stand and fight together...
Our parks are integrating...
We're sunning on the beaches...*⁶²

This adaptation of “We Shall Not Be Moved” from a spiritual to Civil Rights ballad was interesting, but as aforementioned, it was not uncommon. The song also represents one of the most popular and adapted songs used in social movements. Texts regarding labor songs consider “We Shall Not Be Moved” the theme song for striking workers.⁶³ The song was progressive and pertinent. Those instances of the song being used by striking workers unwilling to literally “move” from their picket lines occurred, but the song is ultimately about instilling pride in the righteousness of the collective identity. “We Shall Not Be Moved” implicitly defines the collective and delineates the importance of their unwillingness to back down.

⁶¹ Sanger, 71.

⁶² Candie and Guy Carawan, 25.

⁶³ Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer, *Songs of Work and Protest*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications), 38-39.

Even though “We Shall Not Be Moved” was classified as a song to be used by struggling laborers, its roots in the African-American church explain its applicability elsewhere. The song appears only once in film footage available.⁶⁴ The song was observed at Mason Temple during a speech by H. Ralph Jackson already mentioned in this presentation. And while “We Shall Overcome” seemingly trumps “We Shall Not Be Moved,” its application seems inherently valid in the context of Jackson’s message. As Jackson resoundingly condemns the actions of Mayor Henry Loeb, the congregation spontaneously erupts into the song.

If “We Shall Overcome” validates the desire to end segregation, the broad-based classification for the Civil Rights Movement, then “We Shall Not Be Moved” topically addresses the immediate concern of the collective at Mason Temple: the resolution of the strike.

This application is valid, however not necessarily true to form of its historical application. If “We Shall Not Be Moved,” is applicable to a myriad of social situations, research and first hand accounts point to its primary application at the street level. Bob Zellner, depicts the songs application when 200 Talladega College students were met with teargas and dogs by the local police.⁶⁵ SNCC field secretary Phyllis Martin also depicted the songs capability at usurping fear in the face of aggression.⁶⁶

Ultimately, it is up to the practitioner to decide if in fact “We Shall Not Be Moved” is rooted in the waters of the African-American spiritual or its progressive

⁶⁴ See Tape 4, Reel 18, 1:07.

⁶⁵ Candie and Guy Carawan, 25.

⁶⁶ Spencer, 90-91.

application in social movements. It is however, apparent that the song played a viable role in Memphis in 1968.

Amen, Amen: The Preachers Lament

“Amen, Amen” is a traditional religious melody. Its use in Memphis in 1968 is interesting. While the song is innately religious in nature, it also sheds light on both musical technique and unaltered religious musical application to a modern movement.

Call and response is a simple technique. One group provides a lead line, and the other provides a uniform response. “Amen, Amen” is a perfect example of this technique. Call and response is also a common practice in the African-American church. The technique has several benefits. Fundamentally, while the preacher is seen as an authority figure within the church, call and response allows the parishioner and commoner alike to actually “preach back.”⁶⁷ And although not necessarily as inclusive or as powerful as the immediate construction of a communal identity under the word “we,” the responsive behavior of call and response is at its heart a partnership. Even as the priest holds authority in ministerial duty, both parties, common and ordained, have a shared responsibility to fundamentally answer the call of their musical counterpart.

Bernice Reagon writes of the significance of “Amen, Amen,” in classifying the song upon its melodic simplicity. The song was in its essence a one-word lament of praise based upon the audience it was directed to. Again, call and response factors significantly into such a conclusion. While the commoner was often tasked with the traditional repetition of the basic song structure, the preacher or song leader would offer

⁶⁷ Ibid. 234.

the direction of that message. So, while this melodious reverberation emanated from the congregation, the pastor would interject with the location of the blessing, whether that be to the church, priest, deacons, or even sanitation workers, the priest served as the compass rose for the songs direction. The power of the song ultimately came from “the richness of Black harmonic techniques and improvisation in choral singing.”⁶⁸

“Amen, Amen” appears twice in archival footage. Coincidentally, these appearances occurred within minutes of one another. The first occurrence is after Ralph Abernathy⁶⁹ proclaims himself the new leader of the Civil Rights Movement on April 8, 1968 in a memorial service held for Dr. King at City Hall in Memphis.⁷⁰ The second occurrence takes place after James Lawson calls for the removal of National Guard troops from black neighborhoods. He subliminally hints at their misapplication in reminding onlookers, “We’re not killing anyone.”⁷¹ The crowd then spontaneously erupts into “Amen, Amen.”⁷²

While “Amen, Amen” is used twice in as many minutes, its application during both instances is unique. In the first, Abernathy proclaims his leadership of both the SCLC and the movement itself. The crowd affirms Abernathy’s conclusion by singing. They welcome their new leader enthusiastically, and engage in singing to emphasize this. Although the song is an example of call and response it seems to work here as collective sigh of relief for the African-American community in Memphis.

When applied to James Lawson’s message, “Amen, Amen” works differently.

⁶⁸ Reagon, *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*, 102.

⁶⁹ Minister Ralph David Abernathy was considered to be Dr. Martin Luther King’s right hand man during the Civil Rights Movement.

⁷⁰ See Tape 13, Reel 67, 1:41:40.

⁷¹ See Tape 13, Reel 68, 54:30.

⁷² See Tape 13, Reel 68, 58:20.

Where the first occurrence welcomed a new leader, the second buttresses the necessity for social change. Lawson is not proclaiming his personal and public status, but rather the status of policy and the black community in Memphis. Even as both instances can be seen as affirmations, their applicability to different messages is truly fascinating. Also important to recognize is the songs geographic and social utilization. Both appearances of the song highlight its application among a mass audience of protestors. Even though the event served as a memorial for King, the song is capable again of rapid collectivization. A leader with a bullhorn could easily hear his supporters unify as he directed their sonorous cries. It is fascinating that a song with such a historically religious message was not observed in a church, but rather at the street level among thousands of protestors. “Amen, Amen” becomes a tool of both religious structuring and collectivization in Memphis in 1968.

Leaning on the Everlasting Arms: The First Attempt at Defiance

While historical data is limited on the application of “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” the song has not, as far as can be found, undergone any significant revision since its first publishing in 1887 by Elisha Albright Hoffman. Hoffman was coincidentally the author of nearly 2,000 Baptist hymns and was also white. Hoffman published nearly 50 songbooks prior to his death in Chicago in 1929.⁷³ And while penned by a white songwriter the song saw considerable usage within the African-American Church. It was also a popular hit for mainstream gospel recording artists, The Harmonizers. The song is

⁷³ “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms. <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/l/o/lotearms.html> (2 August 2006).

classified as an “old standard” within the musical and religious tradition, perhaps hinting at the longevity of the original unaltered song.⁷⁴

The song appears once in archival footage. During a failed sit-in at a Memphis City Council meeting, police chief Henry Lux asks demonstrators to leave the proceedings.⁷⁵ “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” would serve as the earliest example of audible singing found in the collection. Occurring on March 5, 1968, the song places a timestamp on the movement in Memphis. Its occurrence predates the riots of late March, as well as the first attempted marches and meetings proposed by James Lawson during the No New Clothes for Easter campaign.

The song is representative of the close ties between black Memphians and religion. “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” is chock full of religious imagery, the least of which compares the singer to a pilgrim. While this may seem relatively minute, the classification alongside a religious message made practitioners both righteous in their attempts to end segregation, and also in their “ordination” from God to do so. The song’s application is also telling of the collective goal of demonstrators to leave nonviolently while still leaving their mark on City Hall. The marchers are humble, peaceful, and calm, they leave with the echo of their musical desire for change filling the annals of City Hall. Even though unwilling to mitigate with demonstrators, the song’s providential power stems from its capability to again form an “implicit community” relatively quickly, as well as leave those who disagreed with the demonstrators in religious check between their moral consciousness and seats as elected officials.

⁷⁴ Kip Lornell, review of *Close Harmony*, by James R. Goff, Jr., *American Music*, Vol. 21, No. 4. (Winter, 2003), 518.

⁷⁵ See Tape 3, Reel 12, 1:02:40.

Lord Hold My Hand While I Run This Race, Lord Guide My Feet While I Run This

Race: Mourning Song

Even though little historical data exists surrounding the song, its application in Memphis is both unusual and profound. The song appears once in archival footage at Dr. King's Memphis memorial on April 8, 1968.⁷⁶ The song's application is one of the most profound of the movement. While the title of the song suggests the desire for God's guidance, the collective present at the event were in mourning. Perhaps this song is also illustrative of the desire for guidance in the face of martyrdom. It is inconceivable to think about the emotions present during its application. Perhaps onlookers were angry, saddened, and even confused; conceivably they were all of these and more. The song was unquestionably powerful in addressing these emotions, along with God's guidance:

As a humble plea these lyrics would be a request for God's guidance. However if viewed as an invocation in the African religious prototype, this song would be an instrument to bring forth the guidance of God in a day's or life's journey; thus the practitioner had the power to call up the Gods.⁷⁷

The song represents the single best performances of all the footage. The Reverend Billy Kyles a local Memphis pastor leads the crowd in "Lord Hold My Hand..." with an amazing attention to tonality and vocal prowess. Kyles is powerful and also conscious in his rendition. He is in essence trying to repair those broken by the recent assassination. "Lord Hold My Hand..." is decisively the best application of the singular use of "my" throughout the footage. The utilization of "my" when applied to the circumstances of the

⁷⁶ See Tape 12, Reel 64, 4:02.

⁷⁷ Reagon, *The Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*, 36.

struggle is fundamental to its successful application. This is also important from the standpoint that the crowd is gripped by the full spectrum of emotions. The message of the song is illustrative of individual reconciliation under God, as well as divine guidance in handling emotional response. While the group was already a collective, the individual attention the song is capable of is a perfect adaptation to its appearance on film.

This Little Light of Mine: From God to Freedom and Back Again

“This Little Light of Mine” is today commonly associated with Christian Sunday School. Many can remember singing the song at an early age, utilizing their index finger as an improvised “light of Christ.” Even as this practice is done in an effort to identify the relationship between children and Jesus, the song saw practical application during the Civil Rights Movement. “This Little Light of Mine” appears in both its traditional religious rendition, and its adaptation to “This Little Light of Freedom.” Regardless of title classification, the song utilized spontaneously spawned verses from both the leader and commoner alike. To buttress this claim, Julius Lester once said “A song is to be sung. If it remains on the page, it is the same as a new automobile that is bought, placed in the garage and kept there.”⁷⁸

When considering “This Little Light of Mine,” one can certainly see the song’s capability to be easily retained by the singer. It is perhaps the easiest of all songs, with the possible exception of “Amen, Amen” to learn in the collection. When “This Little Light of Mine” was applied to the Civil Rights movement, the “light” abandoned its traditional religious message and came to represent “freedom.”

⁷⁸ Candie and Guy Carawan, 27.

The song is peculiar in its application of both “I” and “we.”⁷⁹ While both applications of the songs retain the traditional first verse completely unaltered, subsequent verses pertaining to Civil Rights interestingly intermingle the individual from the collective. Civil Rights era verses include:

We’ve got the light of freedom, we’re gonna let it shine...

Deep down in the South, we’re gonna let it shine...

Down in Birmingham (Mississippi, Alabama, etc.), we’re gonna let it shine...

Everywhere I go, I’m gonna let it shine...

All in the jail house, I’m gonna let it shine...⁸⁰

As can be seen, the collective goals are represented by the use of “we,” while personal commitments and struggles are represented by the use of “I.” Again, many would easily refute the importance of such a realization. Yet, “This Little Light of Mine,” addresses the both the necessity of the collective and the commitment of the individual. Consequently, “This Little Light of Mine” serves as a hybrid of other songs examined in this research.

The song in its Civil Rights adaptation appears in Memphis one time. During Bayard Rustin’s visit to the Mason Temple, the song appears rather spontaneously.⁸¹ As a member of the A. Philip Randolph Institute and position as an established northern African-American, the viewer wonders if Rustin will be well received. Initially, his progress is slow, but his conclusion that “Where there is justice, order will prevail; where

⁷⁹ Sanger, 83.

⁸⁰ Candie and Guy Carawan, 28.

⁸¹ See Tape 3, Reel 16, 4:34.

there is injustice, disorder is inevitable” and that that is the only riot report one needs causes the spontaneous eruption of the song.

Although silent on film, “This Little Light of Mine” is one of two occurrences decipherable in the collection. This is made possible by a close-up of Rustin’s face while singing. The song is somewhat commonplace in application. One can easily imagine singing such a song in a religious setting, especially after receiving the support of a nationally recognized Civil Rights leader. The application of the song is commonplace, however the dynamic of the change in lyrics is unique in its concern for both the individual, and the greater collective.

Conclusion

Folk hero Pete Seeger once said, “No song I can sing will make Governor Wallace change his mind.”⁸² Even though Seeger may have been referencing the ostentatious racism exhibited by Alabama Governor George Wallace, this paper seeks not to evaluate singing and its affects upon the over society, but rather its affects upon its participants. The music found in archival footage provides several conclusions. First, that among African-Americans and other socially marginalized groups, the power of song was incredible. To make this conclusion, I need only reference the application of “We Shall Overcome,” at City Hall in Memphis. Singing inherently formed the most basic and lasting implicit communities. It was not the concern of demonstrators whether or not they were singing the right song at the right time, but rather that they listened to their hearts and capably chose the songs that meshed with the fabric of their experience.

⁸² Pete Seeger, “False From True,” *Broadside*, LXXXVIII (Jan. 1968), 1.

While the effects of hindsight are intrinsically in focus, it is important to remember that the participants in Memphis saw their situation as their greatest lifelong challenge. It is impossible for the modern scholar to relive the events of 1968. More importantly it is impossible to experience the emotional heartbreak and happiness of that troubled year to Memphians and the worldwide community. What is possible is to praise those who came before, who regardless of mace, teargas, riot police, political intolerance, and dogs continued to sing in the streets, churches, and jail cells. The power of singing as has been demonstrated is not in the capability to change the hearts and minds of embittered figureheads, but rather to include and rapidly collectivize those who willing participated in the most basic action of a profound social movement. While messiahs came to Memphis to be the disciples of those they cared most about, in mourning, in hope, and in martyrdom, the sanitation workers strike of 1968 was profoundly aided by the act of singing.⁸³

⁸³ The author would like to thank Dr. Tim Huebner, Jenna C. Hurt, Ed Frank, Bill Short, Dr. Russell Wigginton, Mary Beth Kovacik and Bob Hoyler, Reverend James Lawson, David Crosby, Bob Dylan, and above all else, those people both living and dead, who chose and continue to sing out against the pangs of segregation and social injustice.