

What is interesting about the songs that end up as freedom songs is the fact that they function in the Movement as 'congregational' songs.

Congregational songs are started by a songleader -- a songleader is different from a soloist. A soloist is someone who can execute the entire song. A songleader is someone who starts the song, and if that performance is successful, it is successful not only because of the prowess of the leader but because people who are located within the sound of that voice join in to raise the song into life.

### **Masses of People Speaking Through Song**

Some of the songs are a structure into which there are lyric changes that document where that singing took place. It's very easy, if you're not aware, to miss the value of that documentation. Freedom songs are documents created by a collective voice (MEANING: MANY PEOPLE CREATED THE LYRICS NOT JUST ONE PERSON). Often when we think of masses of people we actually think of inarticulate people and we look for a speaker to let us know what is going on. During this Movement, the masses came singing and the songs they sang are essential documents. If you don't pay attention to the specificity of the songs they chose at a particular time, around a specific situation, you miss an opportunity to hear masses of people speak (MEANING: SONG LYRICS CAME FROM HOW PEOPLE WERE REACTING TO THINGS HAPPENING AROUND THEM AT THAT INSTANT). It is not just enough to hear the voices of the speakers who speak at the mass meeting. It is also very important to know what was created as an articulate voice by those hundreds of people who gathered as a part of that struggle (MEANING PEOPLE WEREN'T JUST STANDING WAITING FOR PEOPLE TO TELL THEM WHAT TO DO, THEY WERE ACTING AND WERE SMART, THEY WEREN'T SHEEP BLINDLY FOLLOWING A LEADER).

## **The Impact of Freedom Singing**

When I sing, at full voice, you can hear me a block away. If you're walking toward me, you're walking inside the sound of my voice. There are stories about protesters being in jail, and the jailers saying, "shut up that singing." There is a story of the [Freedom Rides](#), where Bernard LaFayette talks about singing in Parchman Penitentiary in Mississippi, which is where they put the Freedom Riders, when they arrived in Jackson, Mississippi.

There is a great example of songs being changed to speak to the moment during the Freedom Rides. When the riders finally got to Mississippi, they were arrested and ended up in Parchman Prison. They sang non-stop, pulling songs from [church music, gospels, spirituals, and pop songs of the day], and refashioning the lyrics. After the first organized loads of bus riders were jailed, people in other parts of the country began to pair up racially, get on the bus and decide they are going to sit differently. They started to do it in small groups, rather than being directed by a larger organization. When the freedom riders locked up in Parchman got the news that more riders were on the buses coming south, they started singing, "Buses are a'comin, oh Yeah," In one situation, Bernard LaFayette recalled that the prison guards tried to stop the singing. They said to the singing freedom riders, "if you don't shut up, we'll take your mattress," the protesters would sing, "You can take my mattress, you can take my mattress, oh yeah, you can take my mattress you can take my mattress, I'll keep my freedom, oh yeah..." That song is a concert spiritual, and we learned it as an arranged concert spiritual, "Chariots a'coming, Oh Yeah."

## **STORIES OF LAW AND FREEDOM SONGS TO HELP**

There was a very strong "stay away" feeling about the law. The law was not there to protect you. The law was a danger to you. Just their physical presence would create a chill. And the singing helped you to navigate that energy inside of your body. I'm talking about sound moving through your body and helping you to breathe through that tension. It's very important not to suggest that singing made fear disappear. Because you really knew the danger, and that did not go anywhere. But singing could help you to stay and hold your stance

There is a story of a policeman beating a demonstrator on the ground and the man being assaulted began to sing, "[We Shall Overcome](#)," and this particular policeman could not continue the beating. This did not happen in every case, however. People who were against the Movement had strong reactions when faced with powerful, solid freedom singing. And the singing was essential to those of us involved in the action, it was galvanizing, it pulled us together, it helped us to handle fear and anger. I am talking about full and rich singing, when people are singing at full power. When the song started you usually had at least three-part harmony and the sound filled the air -- it was powerful music, the freedom songs.