

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Classroom: Grades 9-12

President and Public Pressure: "For a Redress of Grievances"

Activity - "Oh, Freedom"

Background

In *Let Nobody Turn Us Around*, Manning Marable and Leith Mullings note the significance of music in the civil rights movement:

Music, folklore, and poetry have always been important windows in understanding the political culture and history of African Americas. During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, "freedom songs" served many functions: they promoted solidarity, increased faith, expressed sorrow, and strengthened the wills of movement activities. Many of these songs were traditional songs of protest, whereas others were adaptations of spirituals or labor union songs.⁷

Sometimes wills needed strengthening because of danger. James Farmer, who in 1961 was the president of CORE, relates an incident when Freedom Riders were traveling a highway just outside of Jackson, Mississippi. Looking out the window, Farmer could see National Guardsmen flanking each side of the road, pointing their rifles into the forest in response to a warning of a possible ambush. When the ambush didn't come and the Freedom Riders found themselves inside the suburbs of Jackson, one of them broke into song:

I'm taking a ride on the Greyhound bus line,
I'm a-riding the front seat to Jackson this time.
Hallelujah, I'm a-travelin',
Hallelujah, ain't it fine?
Hallelujah, I'm a-travelin'
Down Freedom's main line.⁸

According to Farmer, all of the Freedom Riders picked up the chorus as they pulled into Jackson itself.

Taylor Branch describes the solidarity element so apparent at the March on Washington in *Parting the Waters*, a biography of Martin Luther King Jr.:

It was the first—and essentially the last—mass meeting ever to reach the national airwaves. . . . As a result, the term "mass meeting" meant very little when the pilgrims spilled out

singing freedom songs. A trainload that had boarded in Savannah singing "We Shall Not Be Moved" arrived at Washington's Union Station singing "We Shall Overcome." Andrew Young was there when hundreds of movement people from another city stepped through the train doors singing, "Woke up this morning with my mind set on freedom. Hallelu, hallelu, hallelujah!"⁹

Activity:

1. Go to a library, to a record or music store, or check the Internet to find songs of the civil rights movement. Using the same sources, look for information about the origins and meaning of freedom songs.
2. From your sources, choose a freedom song that is familiar to you or whose words seem inspiring. Analyze the meaning of the song: What is the song about? What is its mood? (joyful and triumphant? sad and full of longing? passionate? threatening?) Do you see the influence of the slave experience in either the theme or the subject of the song you chose? Do you notice biblical or spiritual references? Are there specific references to historic events? Was the song written during the civil rights movement or adapted from some other time? Would the words of the song be easy to learn? If adapted from another era, how does the song relate to black Americans' search for freedom? Why would this particular song be appealing in a freedom movement?

After completing the analysis, prepare a pre-performance report about the history of your selection. Make copies of the words of the song, so your classmates can follow along as you explain.

The next step is to sing the song to the class!

You say you can't sing? Here are two alternatives:

- A. Form a partnership with a fellow classmate who can! Consider that the task of the partnership is to educate your classmates about a selected freedom song. Since you don't wish to sing, you should conduct the research and present the pre-performance report. Your partner will be the performer.

OR

- B. Find a tape or CD of the song, and use that in the presentation.
3. If singing is your medium, though, consider asking your chorus teacher to help you learn the song and plan a performance date in your classroom.

As a more ambitious plan, work with five or six other students to organize a "freedom chorus." Enlist the support of as many class members as possible who are willing to learn the songs. The more "volunteers" the better, so the class can get a sense of how the combined voices add drama. Ask your teacher if you may take your group "on the hall." You could offer to perform for another class whose students are studying something similar, or in the cafeteria during lunch shifts.

Feeling even more ambitious? Inquire if your chorus teacher would incorporate freedom songs into a school concert. Prepare the program notes for the musical selections, and offer to narrate, explaining briefly to the audience the origin and spirit of the song.

4. Check your local library and video stores for the PBS Series, *Eyes on the Prize*. View several segments to catch the spirit of the freedom songs so often sung in the mass marches portrayed in the video. Write a short reaction paper explaining how these songs served as a vehicle for promoting solidarity, strengthening the will of the marchers, expressing sorrow, or celebrating victory. Share your findings with the class by showing them relevant clips from the videos.