

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

Song & Music: Spreading the Word

Clip 1 (audio) Hollis Watkins “Not Going to Come to a Meeting About Voter Registration”

Hollis Watkins: I was in the Delta, and Bob and I—and Amzie told Bob, said "Bob, I got an idea. I think you are going about some things in the wrong direction, in the wrong way." Said, "Because you're not going to get a lot of folks that's going to come out to a meeting that's going to be about voter registration." He said, "I got me a little group up here." Them little girls and boys can sure enough sing. Said, "You should get your little group that can sing and book singing engagements for your little group." And said, "That way you'll always have a good many people that's coming." And he said, "What I do is I let them sing about two or three good, hot songs, right quick. And I say, 'I ain't gonna work my children to death.' I'm going to give them a break right now, and while they're on break and getting a little rest, I want to share some things with you." That's when Amzie said he would lay out this whole thing about voter registration.

Clip 2 (audio) Worth Long “Spreading the Word through Song”

Worth Long: In my own case, my father was a traveling singer before he was a preacher. He was a boy preacher, but he was known as a singer. At that time, they used to call—I may need some help, I've got my son here—they used to call people, they called him "the Songbird of the South." Every town had a songbird. But my father used to put out a billet, a little pamphlet. And it said, at the top of it, it said, "I am on the battlefield for my Lord," as sung by William Worth Long, a Songbird of the South." Yeah. When I saw that, I took it to him, and I said, "What's this about this bird? You was a bird?" He said, "It's about me traveling and spreading the word through song." Spreading the word through song, and I think the Freedom Singers in a real sense were about that, as you described. It's about moving among the people and spreading the word through song. And my father, when he preached, he would go way back into the Old Testament, but more important, he would deal with topical things, everyday things, things that were happening to him and to people around him. And from that he would always seem to get the right song, and how did you know that it was the right song? Based on the response. He was there preaching and called, right? But then, if nobody said, "Amen," then that wasn't, the response was not there. For instance, if I say, I'm preaching now, and I say—and Bettie Mae over in the corner say, "Help him now." [Laughter] That—I need to do something different. [Laughter] Right.

Clip 3 (audio) Charles Neblett: Forming the Freedom Singers

Charles Neblett: In Charleston, Missouri's where Jim Forman and them came through. They said, we—they were recruiting all young leaders, student leaders, and they wanted me to join SNCC and come to a thing they called "A Gospel for Freedom" in Chicago. I don't know if you remember that.

Charlie Cobb: When was that?

Neblett: That was in '63?

Worth Long: '3.

Cobb: What was "The Gospel for Freedom"?

Neblett: That was a fundraiser for SNCC.

Long: Gospel singing for freedom.

Neblett: Yeah. It was a fundraiser for SNCC. A guy named Paul Brooks was supposed to be heading it up. And that's when I first met a lot of SNCC people when I got there. And they were singing freedom songs, but all of them sang them different. Mississippi sang them different from Georgia, and Georgia sang them different—and all these people up here singing these songs. It was a mess! [Laughter] What we had to do was establish a baseline. The rhythm, and we got together some guys and myself, and we came back and we started it off together and people started singing it right. And I left there, and I went to Mississippi. And while I was in Mississippi, Pete Seeger and Jim Forman, Cordell, some more people, talking about forming a group called the Freedom Singers to act like the Jubilee Singers—to do the same thing that the Jubilee Singers did for Fisk University. And I didn't want to go. And Bob Moses told me it's just as important that you do that. That's an important thing to do in this Movement, and he thought I should. And we went and formed a group called the Freedom Singers. And we went and formed a group called the Freedom Singers. Bernice Reagon, myself—

Cobb: In Mississippi?

Neblett: No.

Cobb: In Southwest Georgia.

Neblett: No. We were in Atlanta.

Cobb: The details are important.

Neblett: We were in Atlanta where we got together. We rehearsed. It was Cordell, Bernice, myself, and Bertha Gober. And we rehearsed for about a week or so, and we got ready to hit the road as the Freedom Singers. And they needed a group named—they named us, we're the Freedom Singers. Put us together and put us on the road, and we traveled all over the place. All over the north. We went to let people know what was happening in the South, and we told them through song and commentary. And people got it—they got the spirit of that Movement through the music. We sang for nine months with that group, steady traveling, steady traveling, steady singing. High schools. Grade schools. Colleges. House parties. Anywhere we got, we'd go. And that the first time that I saw how powerful the music was. Other than, I'd taken it for granted because I was raised with music. My family was musicians and so forth, so I'd been singing and playing instruments all my life. But that was the first time I'd seen how important it was. That people really got the Movement. They got it when we were singing about it

because all the songs that we sang was about the Movement. See, I say, the song that we sang, they came out of the Movement. People sang about the Movement, but the music that we sang came out of the Movement.

Clip 4 (audio) Charles Neblett “Making an Individual Commitment”

Charles Neblett: I think there's a couple things. I've been thinking about a freedom song. There's a lot of songs that says "I." I, I, I, which is an individual commitment. Like I, I'm going to sit at the welcome table. I ain't gonna let nobody turn me around. You see, that person's getting up and saying what they're gonna do. And I think it's an expression. For freedom songs to work, you've got to have people in struggle. People feel struggle, just like the blues. That was freedom songs to a lot of people. The blues. People expressing themselves through the blues and the hard times they were going through. They sang the blues. When people got in the Movement, people started singing about the hard times that they were going through, and how they were going to deal with that, and how they were going to get out and be free. They saw freedom over all this prayer. All this crap. The shooting. Their mind was stayed on freedom. See, stayed on freedom. And that's what we had to do to make it a freedom song. You had to be stayed on freedom. Every guise or what else was happening at the time. You could be in hell. You could be in jail, but your mind stayed on freedom. And that's what gave people courage. That's what gave them the umph to go through all of this stuff because their mind was stayed on freedom. And when you had songs like that, that's what made a freedom song. People started singing freedom songs, and they talked about their own freedom. And it's like the "I" songs, I'm convinced that I want to make it. And people, Hollis, I—he's convinced he's gonna make it. You see. And everybody making a personal commitment that that's what they're going to do, which is a long ways from that reed. And we would be lost in that. We'd get lost in that.