

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

Song & Music: Facing Jail, Facing Fear

Clip 1 (video) Charlie Cobb “Song Helped Root Us in the Community”

Charlie Cobb: Aside from music, everybody here has a memory of jail. And attempts to terrorize us with jail. And song was vital. It was how Charlie Cobb knew Hollis Watkins was alive; or Chuck Neblett was alive; or Bettie Mae Fikes was whole; or Candie Carawan was whole. The song really helped us in a lot of ways keep our sanity. It also was what helped us root us in the community. I mean one of the qualities about SNCC was that it embedded itself in the Black community. It’s one of the things that made SNCC unique. Living with families and people in the Black community. And in that sense, whether song was coming from the church or coming from the juke joint, it was a way that helped root us in the community.

Clip 2 (audio) Hollis Watkins, Worth Long & Charlie Cobb “They Didn’t Want Us Singing In Jail”

Hollis Watkins: And I think that a lot of folks that was putting us in jail and all that kind of stuff back in the early sixties, late fifties etcetera, knew the importance of the communication piece, and that's why they didn't want us singing. They didn't want us to be singing songs, period. Cuz I know when they had us in Parchman, I did a testing thing. I just started singing a few, outright church songs. You better shut up or you going to the hole.

Worth Long: And the hole was the hole too.

Watkins: Right, the hole at Mississippi State Penitentiary was a six by six concrete cell. Only air you got was from underneath the front door. They had fourteen men.

Charlie Cobb: It always seemed to me that the whole point of jail, certainly in Mississippi and undoubtedly throughout the South, was to terrify you. And that involved more than just locking you up. Conveying the sense that you were completely alone and isolated and anything could happen to you.

Long: And under their control.

Cobb: Any minute by people who ruled these cages that you were in. And the whole point of it was to terrify you. And singing, song just undermined that. Any form of communication just undermined that particular effort. It’s interesting how things change—I had this argument on NPR many years ago because they were talking about the Kum Ba Yah experience. Just listening, I said, you can say it like that because you never been in jail. [Laughter] I mean for people that were in jail and you didn't know where so and so was, where so and so was. Maybe the only thing you had to assure—

Long: To communicate.

Cobb: you were alive was to hear Hollis Watkins sing Kum Ba Yah or something like that. I got pretty heated.

Candie Carawan: Good, good.

Cobb: by this particular point

Watkins: And see they knew, especially those of us from Mississippi and the surrounding areas, they knew that going to jail for Black men was almost like an automatic death sentence. And knowing that could happen, come at any time, so most of the things when they were doing something, they said, ain't going to tell you no more. Don't do it. And either you didn't do it no more or you stood the chance of being killed.

Clip 3 (audio) Candie Carawan: Singing in the Nashville Movement

Candie Carawan: Now the music. We, I know in Nashville, we'd had some singing. When we were in jail, it was very important. That was a thing that helped you feel—well the jail was segregated. We had like eighty or ninety of us were arrested. There were a big cell full of African American women. And there were a big cell full of African American men. And then there was a cell with two white girls, very afraid. [Laughter] And another cell with, you know, three white guys. I mean it was a segregated jail, which that was amazing to me. [Laughter] But anyway, it was very lonesome because you'd been in this massive group and you'd all been united and whoop, you're pulled off. So that music, and these were, we just pulled on whatever music people knew. Some of it was religious music. Some of it was rock 'n roll. Some of it was camp songs, and it gave us a strong united feeling. When we got up to Highlander, there, Guy Carawan—who would become my partner in all of this work for the next fifty years—was there with his guitar and teaching songs. And through that weekend, whenever people got bored or needed a break, there would be singing. And so he taught the group "I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table," and "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," and "We Shall Overcome." And these were calls for the sit-in students—we all just said, "Oh. These are wonderful songs. We need these songs." The group from Nashville included a quartet. There was a wonderful quartet—James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette, Joe Carter, and Sam Collier, I believe were the four guys. And they had these great songs. "You better leave segregation alone because they love segregation like a hound dogs loves a bone." [Laughter] "My dog loves your dog. Your dog loves my dog. So we can't we sit under the apple tree—" So there were these great, great songs, so those all came out that weekend. And whoever had songs from their different communities brought 'em out that weekend, and it was wonderful. And then I think, again on the lucky side, Highlander was only about a two hour drive from Nashville, and Guy was very struck by the quartet, and I think he liked all of the people in the group from Nashville, so he started coming down to Nashville then throughout the next few months. And then Ella Baker, who had been to Highlander many times, invited him when she pulled together at Shaw, April 15th, that weekend. She said, "Guy, I want you to come over and bring your guitar because I want you to introduce these songs when I bring all these young people together from across the South." So he then went on to the founding meeting of SNCC.

Clip 4 (audio) Hollis Watkins "Song Kept Us From Thinking about What We Were In"

Hollis Watkins: One of the things that the songs did—whether we realized it outright or not—was that the songs kept us from thinking about what we were in [murmurs of agreement] at the time. And some

folks would turn around and go back if they began to focus on going to jail. I don't know what my parents are going to say. I don't want to have to stay in—

Charlie Cobb: Or I know what my parents are going to say. [Laughter]

Watkins: Whichever one. You didn't want the participants to be focusing on the negative aspects. We always wanted to make sure we were singing. And sometime, we'd switch up, and you'd lead this time. And the next time, somebody else is leading it. But we rotated round and round of all of the different songs that we knew. Now when we were having our little meetings, we would teach one another songs, so that everybody was for the most part up on the songs. How to sing them.

Clip 5 (video) Charles Neblett “The Only Way We Could Motivate Ourselves”

Charles Neblett: That song that you sing. Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around. We sang that to a lot of people. We sang when we came up against some insurmountable odds. Like people would be waiting for you. And the only way we could motivate ourselves to really face off, to face all these odds was singing Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around. And we'd get through singing that song, people had enough courage to face that danger, to confess that I ain't going to let nobody turn me around. And that's how powerful songs was. And we had other songs that we sung. We had a song that we sang to people who were, we called Uncle Toms. And Nervous Nellies. Some Black people just weren't going to act right. They weren't going to agree. They were just scared. And women, they get nervous. And we call them nervous Nellies. And we had a song that Matthew wrote, called “The Uncle Tom's Prayer” and it went like this. [Singing]

*I'm an Uncle Tom, Lord
That's what the people say
But I ain't no Uncle Tom, Lord
I'm just a little afraid
So help me, Lord, to stand up and be a man
And I'll fight segregation as long as I can*

*Oh, what about my house, Lord
What will I do?
You know I want my house, Lord
You know I really do
So help me, Lord, to stand up and be a man
I'll fight segregation as long as I can*

*Oh, what about my job, Lord
What can I do?*

*You know if I walk that line, Lord
You know that I am through
So help me, Lord, to stand up and be a man
And I'll fight segregation as long as I can*

Clip 6A (video) Bettie Mae Fikes “The Movement Captured Me”

Bettie Mae Fikes: So I didn't join the Movement. The Movement captured me. I finally found my place. I could do something. And it wasn't so much about singing. You know, when you're able to help someone else, you're really helping yourself more. So in the Movement, going out in the rural areas in the places where I'd grew up, I didn't know anything about it. Because I thought everything was alright in Selma. But when the Movement and the people came. We had, as the whites would say, “Those Freedom Riders.” They'd call everybody Freedom Riders. And when they came to the county of Selma, Dallas County, we didn't really have hotels, so they stayed in homes. We had Black hotels, but they were so overcrowded at the time. And then freedom people didn't have no money, so the community opened up doors for them to stay.

Clip 6B (video) Worth Long “Students Taking the Initiative Themselves”

Worth Long: I went to Selma, Alabama the day after four little girls were killed in Birmingham, Alabama. And what I found there—even though the organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had taught freedom songs and taught organizing methods to the students, the leaders from the SNCC were not there. But the students spontaneously had decided in response to what happened in Birmingham that they were going to march downtown themselves, not only in protest but also for the right to vote. And they had organized it themselves. And people like Bettie Mae Fikes, when I got to Selma had folk getting ready to march downtown in Selma, Alabama in one of the first major demonstrations to happen. And that was youth-led. What I did—I think I was with Julian Bond at that time—is I gave him my wallet, and I joined the line with these youth, knowing that I was going to have to go to jail. And I went to jail with them and followed their leadership. And one of the reason that Movement was a success and is a success and is remembered is because of students taking the initiative themselves, and then organizing, not just other students, but their families, their parents, their neighbors in such a way that we developed a major movement. This was in 1963. This is before a mass movement happened.

Clip 7 (audio) Worth Long, Charles Neblett & Bettie Mae Fikes “The Right Song at the Right Time”

Worth Long: Another important thing is the right song at the right time. What timeliness. Time. For instance, we getting ready to march out, and there are five hundred, four hundred policemen out there. And we're getting ready to go out. And I've said this before, but I may not want to sing, "This May Be the Last Time." [Laughter] It's a beautiful song. [Laughter] The song says "This may be the last time. This may

be the last time. This may be the last time. This may be the last time, I don't know." [Laughter] It may be the last time we ever sing together, right! You know, I call it appropriate and inappropriate calls. Timing. You want to sing, what?

Charles Neblett: Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around. [Laughter]

Hollis Watkins: Ain't scared of nobody 'cuz I want my freedom.

Long: Ain't scared of nobody 'cuz I want my freedom. What else?

Neblett: Woke up this morning, and I stayed on freedom.

Long: Stayed on freedom, right. [Laughter]

Neblett: I'm going to jail with my mind—

Long: Right.

Bettie Mae Fikes: Singing your way out of fear, and feel like you've been liberated even though you're on your way to jail.

Neblett: I've been in a mass meeting. We had a mass meeting at night, and the police came in with their guns and the dogs, and it put a chill on the whole church. And a youngster started singing. Said, [singing] "Ain't scared of your dog cuz I want my freedom. I want my freedom. I want my freedom." And everybody joined in. Another guy said, [singing] "I ain't scared of your gun cuz I want my freedom. I want my freedom." And then they got up and said, "I ain't scared of nobody cuz I want my freedom" The whole church started singing. They started singing, and you look at those cops, the fear left the people.

Fikes: Yeah, the people and got into the cops!

Neblett: That's right. Got into the cops. And they didn't know what to do. Because people were unified through song. Unified. Unified. And he was looking at a unified front against them, and they didn't know what to do.