

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

Song & Music: Adapting Songs

Clip 1 (audio) Bettie Mae Fikes, “The Movement Got Into Me”

Bettie Mae Fikes: But sitting and listening, I said, "This is not going to be bad. I can do this!" Protesting and—I didn't think, I just thought we could do something for a week and then the next week, it would change. [Laughter] Mmmm hmmm. No, no, no, no. I found out that people were serious, and I think when we started protesting, and I started singing—didn't want to but I was supposed to spend some time at mass meetings. I'd go sing at mass meetings. Head straight to the shack so I could slip into the shack. I loved that secular music. I was drawn because Worth would tell us things, and I think you was the one who was mostly around the kids at that time. And I got educated. But the most important thing that impressed me so, it was the first time that I had seen so many Black, young men and Black young women that had dropped out of college—that had knew their parents would be upset—dropped out of college to come to Selma to work. Then I'm looking at all these bright-minded students that were so educated. I wanted to be like that! I wanted to be like that, so I hung around this man. I was just like the string on a Worth. [Laughter] And they would call me to sing and call me to sing. Finally, I don't even know how and when "This Little Light of Mine" came about. How I'd arranged it. I knew I'd arranged it because Walter Harris was my classmate. Great pianist. You know we used to call it whupping the keynotes. And we were singing "This Little Light of Mine" one day, and Caroline was singing it, and it just didn't sound right. Bettie Mae has always had a takeover spirit. [Laughter] Yeah. I'm sitting there listening to her and all of a sudden I say [singing], "Whoa," and I've been doing it that way ever since. But the music carried me to a very different place. When I seen all that I—well, when I seen that people were serious, when I started to see bloodshed. People beaten, especially when it was older women and older men, just for the right to vote. And we were going all out in rural areas, teaching people who did not how to read and write how to read the ballot, and so disappointed when they went to vote. So Guy came in—the first time I'd seen Guy was in Brown Chapel. Church packed, and all I could see was this—and the kids saying, "What's that man doing?" I got it later, after I'd heard the recording because you see, you could have came in the next night because the night you recorded that, Walter played it in the wrong key. [Laughter] That's the version that they have on Smithsonian.

Clip 2 (audio) Candie Carawan “Taking Something Known and Adapting It”

Candie Carawan: It's interesting that a lot of the songs that got used in the labor movement also came out of the South. They were songs that were commonly known in the South, so they're songs—. So the process of taking something familiar, melodically, and writing words to the present situation very much was strong in the labor movement. And I'll also mention the Wobblies, the International Workers of the World, way back. You know, they had a tremendous singing traditions, and some of those were composed songs and some of those have moved through time. Worth, you were asking me about the

song that I made up about the sit-ins, "They Go Wild Over Me." That was the Wobblies song. First it was a popular song in the 1920s. Then it was adapted as a labor song, and when I got in the sit-ins, I had a communist roommate in high school—in college—

Charlie Cobb: Oh, I thought you were going to say at Fisk. [Laughter]

Carawan: And she knew the song, and she taught it to me the year before I came to Nashville. So it was so easy to take that song with just a very few changes, it became a sit-in song. And that process, which you all have alluded to already, taking something known and adapting it. I think that was very much a living tradition at Highlander. And I give it to Highlander that they always recognized that song was really important, and one of the things that gives you strength when you're struggling. And Zilphia very much introduced that and got that going strongly at Highlander, and then Guy was able to build on that. [...] Another little piece of that in the Highlander story was on the night that the school was raided—this would be leading to the time that Highlander was taken away.

Worth Long: That was Monteagle.

Carawan: Monteagle. And people had to sit in the dark, and these deputized gun thugs went through their suitcases and all of that. There was a group there from Montgomery, and you all know Mary Ethel Dozier, who became Jamela Jones. She was a teenager in the group, like 13-years-old, and "We Shall Overcome" had been used in Montgomery, so she knew the song. So as they sat in the dark, I think people started humming "We Shall Overcome," and Mary Ethel was the one, that as they sat there in the dark, just made up the verse we are not afraid, and sang it to these deputized gun thugs that were rifling through people's suitcases. So it's like a classic moment that calls forth a verse, and then that became an official part of the song.

Clip 3 (audio) Hollis Watkins "To Make People Feel Good"

Hollis Watkins: One of the things that I would say is that be you starting out in the church or wherever, the singing for the most part was done to make people feel good. Coming up in the South, especially in Mississippi, there were all kind of things that constantly caused you not to be feeling good. And that was a reality hitting you in the face, so what you want to do is to introduce something that's gonna change that spirit? That's gonna change that attitude. Now you got folks feeling a little bit better, feeling good. Let's begin to put some direction to these things that's causing us to feel good, and while we're feeling good, we can talk about things that we need to be changed. Things that need to be changed in us, you know. That's why, when I'm feeling good, I can say, I ain't scared of no dog. You know, I want my freedom. I ain't going to let a dog keep me from getting my freedom, and go on and on, and that's how and why in a lot of instances, we sing the spirituals just like they were, but as time went on, we made something ourselves or changed the word of that that would give a different focus to what we want to be about. Now we're feeling good. Because see, if I ain't feeling good—anyway.

Clip 4 (audio) Charles Neblett “How Do Freedom Songs Come Into Existence?”

Charlie Cobb: How do freedom songs come into existence?

Charles Neblett: I think all, both ways. I think they come spontaneous. I think they come deliberate. I think it's all of those. I know some of the ways that freedom songs came about in the South is that, that's where you had familiar melodies, we changed some of the words. A lot of those were done on the spot with old Negro spirituals, gospels, that everybody knew. But we changed those things into freedom songs by changing some of the words that took on a whole different meaning. I think they came out all kinds of—you had people who wrote songs. You had Matthew who wrote a lot of songs. They didn't come all together spontaneous. He deliberately composed those songs. Like "Oginga Odinga" and so forth. I think it took all of that. And like I said before, is freedom songs as I see it, that we sang, they came from the Movement. They came from us. They came out of incidents and things in the Movement itself. Then you had a lot of songs that were composed about the music. A lot of songs about the Movement. But the things we did came out of us, came out of the Movement itself.

Bettie Mae Fikes: The guts.

Worth Long: So it came out of the experience. Out of the Movement experience.

Clip 5 (audio) Hollis Watkins “What Is A Freedom Song”

Hollis Watkins: To me, to me a freedom song, first of all is a song that frees the mind, spirit, first of all of the singer. Of the singer. And in freeing the mind and spirit of the singer, that freedom may not be to the same degree, but it's transmitted over to those who hear and reference. You could say transference over to participants, and one that is listening, whether he or she is singing or not, is participating in that. And if that participant continued to indulge in listening, their spirit will begin to move, and as it move, it creates a space, if it's not already there, for them to enter into that gives them the relaxation, the determination, and the motivation to move and take down the walls and barriers of whatever it is that they see in front of them. [20:42] So that's how, you know, I see freedom song. And here again, as it reaches out and takes down the barriers and builds up that spirit, attitude, faith, confidence in someone else. Then in that automatically creates a bond between the singer and the one that initially starts out listening.

Bettie Mae Fikes: Amen, brother! Thank you brother. You preach it now. [Laughter] Thank you. Thank you. Amen. Hallelujah.