

# SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

## Song & Music: Songs & Their Stories

Clip 1A (video) Hollis Watkins “You Had to Wake Up Every Morning with a Certain Mindset”

**Hollis Watkins:** In order to get the job done that needed to be done, we knew that you had to wake up every morning with a certain mindset. And that was determined based on how you could truly respond to the songs that we sang. Asked one another the question, “How did you wake up this morning?” If you didn’t come back with [singing]

*I woke up this morning with my mind, my mind it was  
Stayed on freedom  
Oh I woke up this morning with my mind, my mind it was  
Stayed on freedom  
I woke up this morning with my mind,  
Stayed on freedom  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah*

You went down through “I’m walking and talking.” I’m singing and shouting. I’m preaching and teaching. In regards to any and all of the things you were going to be doing, you knew that if your mind was not staying on freedom, something was going to be overlooked, not carried out.

Clip 1B (video) Bettie Mae Fikes: Woke Up This Morning

**Bettie Mae Fikes:** [Singing]

*I woke up this morning with my mind  
Stayed on freedom  
Lord, I woke up this morning with my mind, Lord  
Stayed on freedom  
I woke up this morning with my mind  
Stayed on freedom  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah*

*I’m walking and talking with my mind  
Stayed on freedom  
I’m walking and talking with my mind  
Stayed on freedom*

*I'm walking and talking with my mind  
Stayed on freedom,  
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah*

*Come on and walk, walk  
Come on and walk, walk  
Come on and walk, walk  
With your mind on freedom*

*Walk, walk, you gotta  
Walk, walk, you gotta  
Walk, walk, you gotta,  
Walk, walk, well now  
Ohhh, Ohhh, walk, walk*

*Talk, talk, you gotta  
Talk, talk, you gotta  
Talk, talk, you gotta  
Talk, talk with your mind on freedom*

*Talk, talk, you gotta  
Talk, talk, you gotta  
Talk, talk, you gotta  
Talk, talk, well now  
Ohhh, ohhh, talk, talk  
Talk, talk*

## Clip 2 (audio) Charlie Cobb & Candie Carawan: We Shall Overcome

**Charlie Cobb:** I remember talking with Guy about the origins of "We Shall Overcome" in so far as the Movement of the sixties was concerned. Its roots are with the older "I'll Overcome," and it was used in the, what was that, the tobacco workers strike in North Carolina. But one of the things that I remember Guy talking about, and I hope you will tell this story, is he introduced "We Shall Overcome" at that April meeting, I think. And that, I remember Guy saying, but Bernard and the guys in that quartet didn't much like the cadence of it. Or there was something wrong with the pace of the song, and they changed it to what, the way we hear "We Shall Overcome" today. Can you detail that?

**Candie Carawan:** I think that's a longer process. That is absolutely what happened, and of course, the song did evolve as it moved through time, but I don't think it necessarily happened—

**Cobb:** In that April meeting.

**Carawan:**—immediately. It happened as it became a song used in many communities. And it was very much influenced in Albany, Georgia. You know, the way people do things there. I know Guy said at one point, he had been used to doing it on the guitar with certain chord structure, and at one meeting, he started to do that, and Bernice said to him—and Guy told this story a hundred times—she said, "Put that guitar down, my boy." [Laughter] And Guy loved to tell that story, and he, of course, recognized exactly, "This is the way I, from my tradition, can do the song and present it. But when it's really gonna be reflective of the communities, it's gonna have a different cadence and harmonies and the whole thing." That made me think of something else though. What was it? It'll come back to me. I got distracted. The story of "We Shall Overcome," it's a long story. And I know one thing Guy always said, was—he's credited with introducing the song, but he didn't feel that way. He felt that he was reintroducing this song into communities where it had once lived. I mean he was very well aware that it was a much older song and probably the grandparents of people in the SNCC founding meeting knew the song. He always felt that he was just reminding people or bringing back a song that had a living history. Is that enough for now? I know the whole question of how it was used in the labor movement, it's a beautiful story. And it had, it had come to Highlander from Charleston, South Carolina in 1947 when Zilphia was still alive. And it had been used on a picket line in the tobacco workers' strike there, and the women who brought it sang it at Highlander. And that was the tradition at Highlander. Zilphia built this tradition of always finding out from whoever was in the room what songs do you have? What are you bringing from your community? So these women from Charleston brought "I Will Overcome," and they'd been using it in their on their picket line. And Zilphia thought it was a beautiful song and loved it, and she adapted it to an accordion that she played, and she kept it alive at Highlander throughout the 1940s and used it at every workshop. So it began to sort of spread out from Highlander that way. But sadly, she did die in 1956. And when Guy called Myles and volunteered to come down and help out at Highlander, Myles said, "Well what can you do?" Well Guy said, "Well, I have a guitar and a banjo, and I do know some songs out of the labor movement." And Myles, very smart, said, "We need that. We haven't—we've been missing that without Zilphia, so come on down and volunteer." So that's how Guy got to Highlander.

### Clip 3 (audio) Charles Neblett: Oh Freedom

**Charles Neblett:** Well, talking about the Civil War, is that they finally, Lincoln finally let Black soldiers get involved. And after the Black soldiers got involved, as far as I'm concerned, they was the only ones that was committed to fighting that war to free themselves. I don't think anybody else had no idea that they were going to free Black people in that war. So I tell people that Black soldiers fought for their own freedom. They fought for their own freedom, and in the meantime, they knew or they found out very soon that the Confederate soldiers didn't take prisoners, Black prisoners. They either killed the ones that were alive or buried the wounded, buried them alive. And these soldiers knew that, therefore they had to fight to the death. They never stopped fighting. They fought to the death, and that's the reason why you see so much heroism from those Black soldiers. And those guys fought for their own freedom. They fought for their own freedom. They're the only soldiers, as far as I'm concerned, that fought in that war, fought for Black folk to be free, is those Black soldiers. And one of the songs that they sang was "Oh Freedom." "Oh Freedom over me, and before I be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my

Lord and be free." And I found out the meaning of that song. I found out how many soldiers died in that battle, knowing they weren't gonna be a prisoner. They gonna have to fight to the death, and it took on a whole new meaning for me when I sang that song. And that's the power in people knowing their history. Knowing their history. Knowing what their people did. So when I sing that song now, I can see those soldiers. I can see those soldiers. I can feel the spirit of those soldiers. I can feel it, and it took on a whole new meaning for me when I learned about that song. It's a song that I had been singing for a long time. Didn't know about it. You know, I'd been singing it for a long time and didn't realize the power of the song, and the commitment that was behind that song, you see. And when I learned the story about that song, it just gave me a lot of pride and how heroic those soldiers were. I mean they were slaves, ex-slaves, and really what kind of tenacity they had to fight for their freedom. And it went like this, [singing] "Oh, oh freedom. Oh freedom. Oh freedom over me, over me. And before [everyone joins in] I be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave. And go home to my Lord and be free. And be free."

#### Clip 4 (video) Candie Carawan: Keep Your Eyes on the Prize

**Candie Carawan:** I know one really wonderful story about Keep Your Eyes on the Prize, and it has to do again with my husband, Guy, who was working at Highlander. And he knew the song from the labor movement, and it was "Keep Your Hand on the Plow. Hold On." And he had this wonderful assignment from Highlander to go to the South Carolina Sea Islands off the coast of Charleston, and be the driver for Mrs. Septima Clark who was running the citizenship school program that Highlander helped get started in the Sea Islands. And Guy was a musician and loved music. And he loved taking Ms. Clark to the citizenship schools where they used music, but he also wanted to hear all the music he could hear because those islands are full of some of the oldest and richest Black music in this country. Beautiful traditions. So one day, he was singing—using that song in the citizenship schools, and a woman—one of the very first women down there to become a registered voter—Mrs. Alice Wine, came up to Guy and she said, "Oh we know a different echo. We sing "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize." So Guy liked that, and he began to teach that as he went around with groups in the Movement. And that's the version that became so popular. And later, it was recorded in some recordings, and Guy played the recording for Mrs. Wine, and she could not believe that she had anything to do with putting the prize in Keep Your Eyes on the Prize. It's a wonderful story. Do you want to sing a little bit of it?

**Tyra Scott** (NCCU student): [Singing]

*Paul and Silas bound in jail  
Had no money for to go the bail  
Keep your eyes on the prize,  
Hold on, Hold on*

*Paul and Silas began to shout  
Jail popped open and they walked out  
Keep your eyes on the prize*

*Hold on, Hold on*

*Hold on, Hold on*

*Hold on, hold on*

*Keep your eyes on the prize*

*Hold on, hold on*

## Clip 5 (audio) Bettie Mae Fikes & Charles Neblett: In the Mississippi Rivers

**Charles Neblett:** And the song, like "Which Side Are You On?" And a lot of these songs, like "Which Side Are You On?" and "Medgar Evers, those are the songs—and "Mississippi River."

**Charlie Cobb:** Matthew Jones' song.

**Neblett:** Marshall

**Cobb:** Marshall's song.

**Neblett:** "Mississippi Rivers." Those are some powerful songs.

**Leah Wise:** Can you sing some of that Mississippi Rivers? Nothing's coming to mind. I just want to know what the song sounded like.

**Neblett:** Can you sing it? I'm hoarse.

**Bettie Mae Fikes:** [singing] "In the Mississippi Rivers, In the Mississippi Rivers. [others join in] In the Mississippi Rivers. Where you can count them one by one. It could be your son. Count them two by two. It could be me or you. Count them three by three. Do you want to see. Count them four by four. Well into the river they go. Well into the river they go. You can count them six by six. With their hands tied ...."

**Worth Long:** It's not an after dinner song.

**Wise:** A what?

**Long:** An after lunch song. [Laughter]

**Wise:** I'm just surprised that I've never heard it, but it's quite powerful.

**Cobb:** It's a very powerful song.

**Neblett:** After Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney were murdered. What they did was dragging the rivers, and they knew that they were buried on the other side of Mississippi, but they were dragging the rivers, seeing if they could find their bodies. But what they did, they started dragging up bodies. Some with their hands tied. Some with their heads cut off. In the rivers. There was a newspaper reporter there, he witnessed that. He said, "If all those people who'd been thrown into that river could get up and suddenly walk, they'd be coming out for six months. And these were people we really didn't know about. People that disappeared. Nobody knew anything about them. They were throwing them in that river. And Marshall wrote a song about it. He wrote a song about it.

**Hollis Watkins:** I just wanted to add another piece. When they started to drag the Mississippi River for the bodies of the three civil rights worker, we took that as a marker. Knowing that the bodies disappeared in the eastern part of the state, they went all the way to the western part of the state and started dragging the rivers, rather than dragging them over in the eastern part. So to us, they really was just making mockery of that whole process. And when the bodies began to come up in such numbers, and people are asking questions. Well, who are these? We didn't know about these. Then that forced them to say we better bring forth the real folks before we get ourselves deeper in trouble than we already are.

## Clip 6 (audio) Charlie Cobb, Worth Long & Charles Neblett: Oginga Odinga

**Worth Long:** We went to the Peachtree Manner with Oginga Odinga

**Charlie Cobb:** Oginga Odinga was—Kenya was not quite independent. Oginga Odinga was the vice president of this entity leading up to independence, and he was on a state department tour. Now it's important to understand that the government—and I guess Kennedy was still president—was embarrassed by the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides because they're in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and they're trying to persuade these newly emerging nations, most of which are Black and Brown, that America was the entity, the nation they had to commit to and not the Soviet Union. And the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, which were getting all this publicity, was disruptive. And so Atlanta was very important because they could showcase in Atlanta, because remember in Atlanta, its slogan was "The City Too Busy Too Hate." [Laughter] Right? So stopping—Johnson was president because the '64 public accommodations act, and they put Oginga Odinga in the Peachtree Manner because

**Long:** It was one of two integrated hotels.

**Cobb:** in downtown Atlanta, it was one of only two hotels—and we had never even known any downtown hotels ever had anybody. So here's this African—I remember, I was in the office. I was in Atlanta, in fact there might have been SNCC conference going on, and my attitude this Mau Mau was staying [laughter] in this hotel. Because you know, Kenya, that's all we knew about Kenya. That's where

the Mau Mau's had fought for independence, and this country was about to become—and it was Forman because remember Forman's background was in African Studies. So he was the one that knew that this African, Oginga Odinga, was coming through town and told us. And it was Forman. And everybody here knows Forman. You know how Forman, he's already made up his mind. He wants us to go downtown. So he's already manipulating us.

**Long:** He's getting books and pamphlets together.

**Cobb:** You know, he manipulated us to go down and see this guy.

**Hollis Watkins:** Wasn't Jomo the head man over there?

**Cobb:** Jomo Kenyatta was, but they hadn't become completely independent yet.

**Long:** But Odinga was to become home minister.

**Cobb:** Yeah, he was something like that. Home minister or vice president, but they were not completely independent yet. There was a schedule but

**Long:** They were leaning towards socialism.

**Cobb:** Yeah, and that was

**Long:** Very important. Leaning towards socialism.

**Cobb:** And that was because of Kenyatta, right. And Kenyatta had these connections with CLR James and George Padmore. These are major names in Pan-African history. And they were a little nervous about what Kenya was going to be because you had this huge white population in Kenya, and they already had this Mau Mau stuff going on. Trying to make a complicated story short. And we wound up going down there anyway. Because the Toddle House—Oginga Odinga welcomed us, and we spent about an hour or so with him, even singing freedom songs with Oginga Odinga.

**Long:** And his staff.

**Cobb:** And then coming—yeah, that whole delegation, I guess—then coming back down, there was a Toddle House coffee shop attached to the hotel.

**Long:** Cordell said, "Let's go in." They got a segregated counter over there! [Laughter]

**Cobb:** And we had just left the Mau Mau, you see. Oh yeah! Yeah, we just left him upstairs so

**Long:** It was in December. December 22. I had my ticket to go home to North Carolina to my wife and child. I went and sat in at Toddle House.

**Cobb:** There are pictures of it. I think Danny Lyon was around taking pictures.

**Long:** That was the second ring.

**Cobb:** Was it the second one?

**Long:** The second ring. First ring, they dragged out straight to the city jail, where the lights were on twenty-four hours a day. So there wasn't the darkness of a small cell. We had two cells. One where you slept and one resting areas. And I think Matthew was on the top, and I was on the bottom because I know something was coming, right. So in the morning at 5:30 in the morning, they had people move from the sleeping cell to the holding cell, except for Matthew and myself because we said, we have not broken any law, and we don't get up at this time. [Laughter] It's very important to be strategic about this here. Matthew was in the top bunk. I was on the lower bunk. [Laughter]

**Cobb:** So we got a song out of that experience. Matthew wrote a song.

**Long:** So when they drugged us out to solitary. They drug us from about what, two, as far as we went to come in this building. They drug us that far and through us in a cell. Matthew in a cell next to me. And it's my understanding that Matthew formulated part of that song, it was a little. So we're talking about a topical song. We're talking about a song that is written about a particular event in which he participated in. It was mostly ballads he wrote, but yeah, that Oginga Odinga. [...] Yeah. We stayed and sang in jail. We didn't sing Oginga Odinga. We hadn't written it. We sang songs, and the next group that came in, Ruby Doris was in that group. What did they say? When they checked them in they said, what's your name? Freedom. Everybody said the same thing. They said, what's your last name. Now. [Laughter] Freedom Now. They said, what's your name? My name's Freedom too.

**Neblett:** There was this little boy. He was about ten. And going by saying, Freedom, and he was getting ticked off. They wouldn't give no other name. Just freedom, and they came to this little boy. What's your name? My name's Freedom. What's your mama's name? Her name's Ms. Freedom? [Laughter]

**Long:** Ruby Doris was none hold barred, so she told everybody who came through there that we don't give no names. So your name is freedom, right? So they take you up on an elevator. Take you up on an elevator. The lights go off halfway up, and by the time you get to the top floor, you feeling it. That's in Atlanta. The city. They too busy whooping your ass.



## Clip 7 (audio) Candie Carawan: They Go Wild Over Me

**Candie Carawan:** I'm in Washington, D.C. and I'm rooming with somebody. And later she told me her parents in Indianapolis were members of the communist party. So we used to share songs and stuff. So she taught me, "They Go Wild Over Me," the Wobbly version. And I don't know if she told me or later, probably through Guy, I understood it had been a popular song in the 1920s, kind of a love song. But it ended up in the I.W.W. songbook. So I mean it's so early in my experience in the Movement and so early in the time of Guy starting to collect freedom songs and all of that, so I don't really know where I got the idea. But I got arrested. We got involved in the sit-ins. I know we were in a situation when we were arrested, which would have been in late February 1960, and even though we connected through music in the jail—that was how we kept track of each and kept our spirits up—there weren't freedom songs. It was one song that we used, which was a version of [singing] "Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen." We changed it to [singing] "Civil Rights. Civil Rights" That was the one thing that sort of was like a freedom song, but otherwise, it was basically religious songs, popular songs, kind of rock 'n roll, camp songs. The wide bunch of stuff, and I think probably shortly after coming out of that I just put together the new words to "They Go Wild Over Me." "Just as mild mannered girl as can be. And I've never done no harm that I can see. Yet on me they put a ban, they would throw me in the can. They go wild, simply wild, over me." The very first documentary album that Guy did was the Nashville Sit-In Story, which is—I don't know if you all remember—but it's very corny in a way. It has this written script. I don't remember, but it starts with Bevel saying "I am an American." But anyway, there are a number of songs on there, and "They Go Out Over Me" got included in that. . It's kind of a—through time, people at Highlander always try to get me to sing it and all that. But I mean, my favorite thing about it in a contemporary way is, I think most of you know Ash-Lee Henderson, who's the new co-director at Highlander, and she's got this little daughter who I guess is about 4-5-maybe a little bit older now. She loves, "They Go Wild Over Me" [laughs] and it was sung at Guy's memorial, my song sang it and told the story about being kept by a babysitter when we were in jail in Birmingham—I don't know what it was—but Ash's daughter just got off that song, and she had to have it on her mix in the car. So she can apparently sing the whole song with Ash-Lee.

## Clip 8 (video) Hollis Watkins: Freedom Come and It Won't Be Long

**Hollis Watkins:** [singing]

*Freedom*

*Give us freedom, hey*

*Freedom come, and it won't be long*

*Well, I took a little trip on the Greyhound bus, hey*

*Freedom come, and it won't be long*

*Just to fight discrimination and this [[we must]], hey*

*Freedom come, and it won't be long*

*Freedom,*

*Freedom, hey  
Freedom come, and it won't be long*

*Well, some says Peter and some says Paul  
Freedom come and it won't be long  
Well, it's only one God that made us all, hey  
Freedom come and it won't be long*

*Freedom,  
Freedom,  
Freedom come, and it won't be long*

*Well, if you don't believe that I've been to hell  
Freedom come, and it won't be long  
Just a follow me down to that Parchman Jail  
Freedom come, and it won't be long*

*Freedom,  
Freedom, hey  
Freedom come, and it won't be long*