

# Transcript: Song & Music in the Movement

A Conversation with Candie Carawan, Charles Cobb, Bettie Mae Fikes, Worth Long, Charles Neblett, and Hollis Watkins, September 19 – 20, 2017.

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Charlie Cobb: [00:41] So the recorders are on and the levels are okay. Okay. This is a fairly simple process here and informal. What I want to get, as you all know, is conversation about music and the Movement. And what I'm going to do—I'm not giving elaborate introductions. I'm going to go around the table and name who's here for the record, for the recorded record. Beyond that, I will depend on each one of you in your first, in this first round of comments to introduce yourselves however you wish. To the extent that I feel it necessary, I will prod you if I feel you've left something out that I think is important, which is one of the prerogatives of the moderator. [Laughs] Other than that, it's pretty loose going around the table—and this will be the order in which we'll also speak—Chuck Neblett, Hollis Watkins, Worth Long, Candie Carawan, Bettie Mae Fikes. I could say things like, from Carbondale, Illinois and Mississippi and

Worth Long: Atlanta.

Cobb: Durham, North Carolina. Tennessee and Alabama, I'm not gonna do all of that. You all can give whatever geographical description of yourself within the context of discussing the music. What I do want in this first round is, since all of you are important voices in terms of music and culture in the Movement—to talk about how you made your way to the Freedom Singers and freedom singing. Although Worth was not "a freedom singer," there's nobody in SNCC that's a more definitive authority on the culture of the Movement, and in fact, Black culture than Worth Long. So Chuck, starting with you and I guess starting in Carbondale where you were a student—Carbondale, Illinois—get us from Carbondale, Illinois. You were involved with the Cairo Movement, Southwest Georgia, and in 1962, the formation of the Freedom Singers.

Chuck Neblett: That's right.

Cobb: Talk about those things.

Chuck Neblett: [3:16] My name's Charles Neblett, and I got started—well really, the thing that got me started in the Movement was Emmett Till. We were the same age, and when he got killed and it was devastating. I saw it as me. And I was just sick. And it so happened—it was like in September, but in December, I think, I saw Dr. King and Rosa Parks on tv, and I saw Black people standing up. And I got relaxed knowing that it won't be long before I get in it too. So we started in Carbondale, when I moved

to Carbondale, we started there, we got involved in the Movement in Cairo. John O'Neal and myself, we got started there. First time I'd ever gone to jail—

Cobb: What year was that?

Neblett: That was in '62. '61. I didn't know, I got in jail. My family heard about me being in jail. My mother, my sisters, they got a lot of their friends who would come and break me out of jail. [Laughter] I called them and told them, and said, "Okay." They were really upset.

Cobb: They were in Carbondale?

Neblett: They were in Carbondale. They were really upset, and so I got out of there. And I went to that jail so many times that they didn't search me anymore. They had searched me, and I decided I'd get me a Texas fifth of liquor, tie a string around it, put it down my back under my coat, take it to jail. So we took it to jail, and he just brushed me like this. And I held my elbows back, and he didn't search my back or nothing. It was just hanging down there. So I got in jail—me and a bunch of guys—we got drunk.

Cobb: In Cairo?

Neblett: In Cairo. We got drunk. [5:22] And we throwed the bottle out and broke it. And the guy came up and threatened us all. We said, "What? You sold it to us." [Laughter] Our story's going to be you sold it to us. So how the hell else we got it in here. "You sold it to us." And there he didn't know what to do.

Cobb: Now were you a student at Southern Illinois during all of this.

Neblett: Yes, yes, I was a student. Well anyway, we got out of that one. But it was—Cairo, Illinois was a vicious little place. It was a mean little town. People think Illinois, you think of Chicago. But you get down below Chicago, you got all white towns. One town called Anna, we asked them was there any Black people there? They said, "We don't have any Jews here!" And I said, "Well..." But it was just like the South. It was just like any other place in the South. And I left there, I went to southeast Missouri because they said, you better not come down here. That was right across the river, not too far from Cairo. They said, "You better not come over here." They come over and tell us we'd better not come over there. So Charles Dunlap and myself, we decided we'd go, and we started organizing there.

Cobb: As SNCC?

Neblett: No. That's before I got in SNCC. And there, in Charleston, Missouri, where James Forman, Ruby Doris Smith, came by and wanted me to join SNCC. But before then, Jim Forman and a lot of more people in SNCC had come to Cairo. I knew Cordell and all of them. We sang together and stuff like that. So anyway, 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.

Cobb: When was that?

Neblett: That was in '63?

Long: '3.

Cobb: What was "The Gospel for Freedom"?

Neblett: That was a fundraiser for SNCC. [7:46]

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. 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. [9:33] 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. [11:02] 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, see. I thought that was very interesting.

Cobb: Okay. I'll come back to you on a couple of points, but I'll get around to Hollis. Now you're in that little bitty place down there in Southwest Mississippi, named for an AME church no less.

Hollis Watkins: Yeah, I'm Hollis, and some people know me as Hollis Watkins. Others know me as Hollis Muhammed. And others know me as Brother Hollis. And I am the youngest of twelve children. My parents were sharecroppers. My family, in terms of the music, my family had a family quartet, which was more than a quartet because it was a whole bunch of us. Because right quickly, I can think about my daddy, my granddaddy, and three to four of my brothers, and a sister made up the quartet. So it was more than a quartet. [12:37] So growing up in the church, I was exposed to a lot of singing. And I noticed that if that if you could sing, the door was generally kind of open to you because they treated the singers different from those who could not sing. [Laughter] Well, see, coming from where I came from—sharecropper's son, and little community, and the church was named Chisolm. It was named Chisolm, and the church itself was built by my father, two of my cousins, who moved the church from a family who was headed at that time by Jerry Chisolm. Jerry Chisolm was in the caucasion. The church at one time was on his place, so my cousin and my daddy convinced the Chisolm to sell a little portion of their land. They bought that from it and put our little church, so naturally the thing that was right at the fingertips—the land is bought from the Chisolm's, you know. The church used to be on the Chisolm place, so to name the church from the Chisolm, so it became Chisolm AME Church. So we did a lot of sing, and I did along with my family as a part of that process. [14:36] I got involved with SNCC looking for Dr. Martin Luther King. Friend girl of mine said he's supposed to be out in McComb having big meeting and told me exactly where to go, to Burglund Town supermarket in McComb, in the Masonic Temple, just over the Burglund Town supermarket. So I got my three best friends, and we went looking for Dr. King because we were gonna see what this dude is about. Because we were the gangsters, I guess you could say, from the little community of Chisolm.[Laughter] So we went out, went to the place, and said, "Man, this place just don't look right." Going upstairs in this old building and whatever, we might be walking right into a trick. But we went up and opened the door and walked in. And there was this little old man standing there and doing something with some papers. So I asked him, I says, "Look, are you Dr. Martin Luther King?" He said, "No." [Laughter] So I was kind of startled at that point, and I didn't know how to come back. So finally, he said, "I'm Bob." And he explained, you know, I didn't hit him with the question of "Well, who is Bob?" Or "Who is you?" [Laughter] But he proceeded to answer my question in telling me that he was there working on voter registration and all that and wanted to know whether we'd be willing to work along with him. So I said, "Well what is it about? How do you do it?" And he explained, gave us one of the voter registration forms and asked us to fill it out. And when we filled it out, he says, "That's just how easy it is." Said, "You get people to go down to the courthouse and fill this

form out. And if it's filled out in a manner in which you just filled it out, than you would be qualified to register and vote." So we moved from that process, getting folks registered to vote. And about a week and a half or two weeks, another guy flew into town. [17:15] Going out to meetings, and he said, "I'm Marion Barry." Said, "I'm the chairperson of SNCC. I don't know whether you know it, but SNCC got two different programs. One is voter registration and the other is direct action." And my mind, "Direct action. Direct action. What is direct action?" So I asked him, "What do you mean by direct action?" And he explained how young people across the country was coming together, getting other young people involved in defining and identifying all the places that discriminated against Black. And they would have sit-ins and wade-ins and all those kinds of things to try to make that better. So he said, yeah. And he also said, "And they're forming their own organizations." So we said, "Yeah, that's it here." So we very quickly formed the Pike County Nonviolent Direct Action [Laughter]. No we were beyond Chisolm at that point. We were beyond Chisolm. Chisolm was too small. We're not even in the McComb or the Burglund and the Magnolia area—we Pike County! [Laughter] That's who we were. And lo and behold, going through the process and doing an investigation, we didn't do it well. [Laughter] [18:55] We didn't do it well because we decided that we were going to have our first demonstration at the public library because the public library wouldn't let Black students come to the public library. So we were going to have our demonstration there. We decided when it was going to be and where we were going to start out from, which was right there at the SNCC office. So we—there was twenty-two of us. We're twenty-two strong. We're ready for this things. So when we showed up on the morning where we were supposed to have the demonstration, "So let's see. Is everybody ready?" Say who's ready? Say what about you?" I started calling names. "No." "No." "No." [Laughter] Long story short, out of that entire group, there was only two of us that was prepared to go through with the demonstration. So we looked and said, "Yeah. We're going to jail today." How many of us are there? One or two. We're going to jail. So Curtis and I decided—

Cobb: That's Curtis Hayes.

Watkins: [20:04] Yeah, that's Curtis Hayes. Decided that we were gonna go on and have the demonstration. We proudly walked down the sidewalk to the library, and lo and behold, when we got to the library, the library was closed. [Laughter] That's why I said we didn't do a good job doing our research because had we done that, we would have found out that on Saturday morning, the library's not open. So being as young and gung-ho as we were, we said, "We're going to jail today. We ain't gonna let nobody turn us around and keep us from going." And that's what we did. We went to the Woolworth lunch counter. I often think about what would have happened if I had told my parents the full truth. I didn't tell them a lie. I just didn't tell them all of the truth. So they didn't have the full picture because when I left that morning, I just told them, I said, "Well, I won't be back tonight. I'm going to spend the night in McComb with some more of my friends." You know, I had finished high school and all that, had a decent young man. So they said, "Well, okay. That's fine. Just make sure you take care of yourself and be good." "Yes ma'am." [Laughter] I didn't tell them that I intended to spend the night with my friends in jail and not all that kind of stuff. So I don't know how that piece really would have come out. But in terms of putting my ability to sing a little bit together and having experience, privileges that gave to you that were not given to others, 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. [23:21] And we attempted to do it little bit. It worked so-so. But the other thing that I realized that somewhere in that period of time or shortly thereafter, I heard about a group called SNCC Freedom Singers. Said ok, this must be hooked into some of the same kind of things. This doing this. By me being one that could sing a little bit, after a period of time, there would be time when the SNCC Freedom Singers would be in the area where I'd be in. Sometimes I would sing a song with them, and at other times, instead of the full group going, maybe someone could not go, and they would call on me to help fill in for that group. So that's a little bit of some of the early pieces of my getting involved, being involved, and so I'm going to stop there. We can get further into the details later.

Cobb: [24:41] Okay. I'll come back with some things for you to. Worth, what I want you to do, in addition, to talking about your own entrance into the Movement—because of the wealth of your knowledge, I want you to provide a broader context for what both Hollis and Church have been saying. Both of them, I know, come from families that have a musical tradition. And there is a broad musical tradition in the Black community and specifically a broad musical tradition that is attached to the struggle for freedom, and I want you to kind of broaden what they said within that context.

Long: [25:30] Okay. I'm Worth Long. Let's talk about secular and sacred tradition because what I've heard here is secular. [Laughter] Someone talking about the song, and you'll notice that I'll mostly talk about song, not music. I know in Africa there wasn't a word for music. There was song. In my lexicon, I basically use the word song because it's something that even though it has melody, it makes statement. It tells a story. What we've just hold is two storytellers, right? Now they could sing the statements that they just made. They could sing the statements that they just made. And the song that I would make up from the story that he [Neblett] told would be about bringing the whiskey into the jail. [Laughter] Or I would find a song that complimented that. Who stole the whiskey from the well, right? And the story that I hear you [Watkins] say from another perspective, but the same perspective in a real sense, because we're talking about celebration in each. We're talking about involvement in each, and each person talked about how, from those perspectives, they moved forward to organize that in such a way that the aims of the Movement could be expressed, and the Movement could grow. People could hear what the music was about, and the Movement could grow. But the whole question of the Chisolm's—that's a song of organizing in a community where a family makes not just a general statement, but it makes a particular statement about itself and its commitment to its community. That's very important. [28:29] 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. [30:47] 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, that's a cold response. I found early on that women control the sermon with their feet. They were the metronome that controlled the pace of the service and therefore influenced the content. So at a certain point [pounding]], the pace, sometimes it was saying, "You need to hurry up, so we can go home." But at other times, it was saying [pounding faster], "You need to go on and bring down the spirit." [Laughter] So I came into the Movement having the experience of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church where my father was a presiding elder, basically of an African church. Of an Africanized church. My father, when he went to seminary in Salisbury, North Carolina, his tuition had been paid for by Episcopalians at St. Augustine, but when they heard him preach, they still put him through for a year, but they said that, "This man's a little too emotional for us. This an African preacher." [Laughter] [33:15] That is to say he's a country preacher. He's a country preacher, and my father was a country preacher, right. I'll talk about other things, but one of the things that I think I really want to deal with is when I say secular and when I say sacred, I'm making a distinction that may not really exist for many people who are in the spirit and who are in the community. That the music can move you no matter where it came from, whether it came from the whiskey in the well or from the drinking wine in fellowship at the table. That that same spirit [pounding] is a spirit of unity, and you can hear it through the songs that, if you just change one word, what was secular becomes sacred. Or what was sacred becomes real. Yeah.

Cobb: You want to say something?

Watkins: Can I just say that one that determines, what he just mentioned?

Cobb: Go ahead.

Watkins: I used to wonder how was it and what was going on because there was a Black guy that played in the juke joints on the weekends. And when you went to the church on Sunday, he was playing them same things. [Laughter] And folks jumped and shouted and went on from that, while he did it on Saturday night. I just thought—

Long: And then they refer to it as the Devil's music, right, in church. Right, the Devil's music.

Cobb: [35:37] Candie, you really start, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, you're involvement in the Movement begins as an exchange student at Fisk and you become involved with the Nashville Movement. Somewhere within that context you also meet Guy, which I assume introduces you to a range of music. And what particularly interests me, given your base at Highlander—and I hope you talk about it as you talk about yourself—is Highlander's important role in labor struggles in the South. Zilphia [Horton's] musical tradition really, which while not strictly speaking coming out of the Civil Rights Movement, is at least as much of a part of the spirit that infuses music in the Civil Rights Movement as anything else. And I hope you make that connection between the older tradition and—because I'm thinking about, I can remember us talking about labor union work and organizing in the South before we existed as SNCC. Or we existed as young student activists, and I never met Zilphia because she had passed by the time we met Myles, but obviously that musical tradition was important to him and to Highlander, so that's a part of your biography too, I think. That's a lot to ask, and you don't have to do it all at once.

Candie Carawan: Well, thank you.

Cobb: Take a bite at it, and then we can come back at pieces that need to be picked up later. We have two days, so not everything needs to be said in the first hour sitting around the table.

Carawan: [37:37] Okay. Well, I'm going to start by saying what a privilege it is to be sitting here at this table with you all. I have always felt like I, that there was some kind of luck in my life that got me to Nashville in 1960, and I'll start by saying that I grew up in a family in southern California. My parents were very involved in the community, just in the community sense, and they had a deep sense of fairness about things, and I grew up with that. And I didn't like anything that seemed really unfair. And when I was in high school, I did one paper on the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It looked really interesting to me. I did another study of what had gone on in India. I was sort of priming myself. And then to top it all off, a former student from my high school came back and gave an assembly program about the exchange program from Pomona College to Fisk University and how much she'd gotten out of that. I was sitting there, and I was thinking "I'm going to Pomona College, and I would be really interested in something that would take me to the South." So all of that lined up to help me get to Nashville in the spring of 1960, which of course was an absolute key time in the modern Civil Rights Movement. Jim Lawson had already been working their with students building the tradition of nonviolent resistance, not knowing exactly how it was going to play out but getting people ready to really confront what was really unfair in the South—the whole system of segregation and oppression. So I mean, I was just lucky. I will say in reference to the music, I always had loved music, and I had been singing in choirs in my high school and also at Pomona College. Getting to Nashville was the first time I'd experienced music in a huge community sense, and it was once the sit-ins began and the mass meetings were taking place, and the whole community was coming together and singing. [39:44] And these were not freedom songs yet. These were the forerunners to freedom songs, the traditions of the Black church, but those songs and the way the community expressed them, it just took me to a different place in my life musically than I'd ever been. And I always felt that was an important experience. Got involved in the sit-ins. Had a lot of questions about that being someone from the outside and someone—white person—and whether it



was helpful or not helpful to be involved. I just felt drawn to it, but because of this sense of fairness, I knew there was something really unfair, and here were some really brave young people standing up to that, and I just felt that I wanted to be a part of that if it's okay to do. So I got swept up in that. We all got to jail during that first semester, and you know, my life was really beginning to open up in a way that needed to happen. [40:50] I went with a group from Nashville to the gathering at Highlander. This would have been the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle at that time. And it was April 1st - 3rd, 1960. And it was really Septima Clark, who was on the Highlander staff, and Ella Baker were on the phone with each other, and they were saying, these sit-ins are going on across the South, and there are these young people, but there's no infrastructure to really support them, and we need to bring them together and think about that. So those two women were very strategic and really pushed Myles. I mean, Myles, there was always a college weekend once a year, but I don't think Myles took it too seriously. College students, you know, what are they going to do? Once 1960 came, Myles began to think a little differently about it, and I think Septima and Ella really pushed him to this. These are young people who are beginning to take responsibility in their community now, and this will be a different kind of college weekend. So anyway, those women identified which cities had been having sit-ins and invited groups of people from those cities to come together for that weekend. And I think about sixty, seventy young people got to Highlander April 1-3, and it was a very incredible weekend. It was, in the Highlander spirit, all about trading information about what people were experiencing and thinking about what are the next steps we need to take. And there was a lot of discussion about nonviolence. Is it a tactic? Or is it a commitment to a whole different way of life? We talked about that that weekend. Lot of discussion about older people in the community who have been working against segregation for years. Are we gonna be alienating them as we step ahead? Or is there a way that we can embrace what they've done and build on that? [42:51] What's the role of northern supporters who want to come down and help us? I mean all these things came up. It was a really important weekend, and the people who facilitated that weekend—Myles among them but also I think Herman Long had come up from Fisk, and some other people—their whole thing was to ask questions and get us to think about what we're doing and try to do some analysis and think about where we were going to take it when we left and went back home. [43:20] 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. [45:55] 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. I did not go, sadly. He went.

Long: And he introduced the song

Carawan: "We Shall Overcome" there.

Cobb: But I wish, to interrupt for a little bit—back up a little bit and talk about—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?

Carawan: [47:30] 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. [50:40]

Cobb: Okay. So we'll come back to some of that too because I think both in terms of music and in terms of the Movement itself, Highlander has played such an important role that we need more discussion of that around this particular table. And secondly, I am interested—I'm not going to put it to you now—in academic, the intersectionality of music of the labor and music of the Civil Rights Movement. I am interested in that and your particular commentary on that. You don't have to address that just now because we want to get to Bettie Mae. The girl from Selma, Alabama. [Laughter] There is a—let me just say because I curious as to whether this is true for you—there's a kind of, I'm thinking of Bernice too, this tradition where certain voices in the Black community are known, and within the context of the Movement, they're just called forward to "Come on up here, and sing us a song, Bettie Mae." Or "come on up here and sing us a song, Bernice." Is that some of your story?

Bettie Mae Fikes: [52:16] My name is Bettie Mae Fikes from Selma, Alabama, and I didn't join SNCC's—well I didn't get into the Movement. The Movement got into me rather. Lafayette came to Selma, Alabama when I was in the eleventh grade. And his car had broke down, Cle [Cleophus Hobbs] said. And they stopped, we were on our way from school, and they stopped to assist him. And while assisting him, he asked them if we knew that whether or not our parents had the right to vote. I wasn't concerned because I thought all adults had the right to do whatever they wanted to do. I had no clue about what was going on in the world other than things that was frightening on Sunday. I come from a very religious family, deacons, preachers, and good gospel singers. But on Sunday, after church, you know how Baptists, we get together, round dinner tables, and as usual, the men would also go out and talk among themselves. [53:36] And I heard them talking about boycotts, and "What's boycotts?" And it was frightening because the way they talked, sometime it would end up, "Man, it's gonna be another war." "It's gonna be like 1925 and we're gonna be in the soup line." And as a child, those things kind of scared me. So when I ran into Lafayette, and he wanted us to pass out leaflets, getting everybody to come to the church for a meeting. I asked my aunt, "Could I go?" Because my mother had died, and I had

ended—from Selma to Detroit, California, and back to Selma. And my aunt and great-grandmother who was living with them. So I went and asked could I go. Amazingly they said yes because normally I couldn't go nowhere other than church. So I wasn't concerned about the Movement. The thing I was concerned about was doing something—to go somewhere other than church. [Laughter] We'd go to church about seven days a week. When you're the preacher, Baptist in Selma, Alabama, uh-huh. It wasn't good for me. The singing was. I loved singing. I never looked at myself as a great singer, but I loved singing. That was only because my mother was a gospel singer, so at four, I was singing with her with the S.B. Gosepl singers. She would stand there and sing, "When the storms of life are raging, stand by me." And I'm looking up at her, and I would do the chorus. But she died when I was ten, and that stopped. And I went from the S.B. Gospel Singers to the [[Pier Room]] Four with my uncle. Now, I really didn't want to sing. I had to sing. I had no choice. And I think that they just said, "Bettie Mae, come on up here." They didn't know how terrified I was just to be in front of an audience, and my first ten minutes today is still pretty much the same. [56:20] But it wasn't so much being in church. It was the spirituality that got me. When I told people, what is it about that? When I see an old man sitting and crying, what is it about the music that would make you do that? So, as a child, that was my humble beginning. So when the music started, I had already—I was pretty much like Maya Angelou. I had been shattered. My mother's death. The greatest love I'd ever had. Going from family to family. You know, that broke me down. And I was taught, a woman is supposed to be seen and not heard. And when I got of school, everyday I had three houses to clean. So that's what I mean. I didn't need King to get me out of Selma. I knew I was leaving Selma. [Laughter] I'm sitting there one day, in the Movement, when I met this man here [Worth Long]. See people around this table were my contents of life. I knew I worried him to death, but if it wasn't for Guy and Worth, I would not be here sitting at this table today. I called them my two managers. I love Worth so because I didn't have anyone that I could really talk to. And when the Movement came I was already broken. When people see me today, they say, "Whew. When did that girl start talking like that?" I tell them I was like a broken bird with broken wings. And sometimes when I reach back on it today, I kind of understand and I don't. But when I met the men and women from the Movement, things that I had heard down in the basement of First Baptist Church, when they were teaching us how to protect ourselves from police brutality. And in my mind—I'm sitting listening—well who would want to get in the situation like that? Well, I didn't know anything was going on like that because the way it was, I thought that's the way it was. [59:09] My grandmother lived out in the country. Mr. Sewell, I call him, the master of the land, but I had no idea there was a difference because he stayed in our house just as much as we stayed in his house. The first place we boycotted, protested the Thirsty Boy, I had been going there as a kid for the longest, but I wasn't going there by myself. He would carry me in the summertime. Pick me up and put me on the high stools and order me a foot-long hot dog and tea with no sugar. Now I thought that's the way it was everywhere until these men came to Selma, and I heard things that we should have been taught in school, didn't know. I wouldn't even know if our teachers knew or if the curriculum was something different. 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

### **Song\_2017.09.19\_02TASCAM**

Bettie Mae Fikes: "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. I still have the album, never been opened because. [Laughter] But honestly, the thing about the Movement is something that we talk about the gospel and God. The Movement gave me life. [2:25] I don't know what my life would have been today if it had not been for the people and the Movement that transpired. I think it was more the people that brought me in than it was the conditions of the world because I wasn't so concerned about the world. I was always concerned about my mama died at ten, and I don't have nobody but me. I wasn't even looking at Jesus then because I was upset with him. He went and took my mama. I'm an only child, and I had to go through a hard life until the Movement came along. Then when the Movement came along, I had a family. All of a sudden, I could say anything to Worth, and I'd guess he say it like to my teacher, that girl, [sigh] Bettie Mae. But they saved me, and the Movement saved me. Worth started carrying me places. Guy carried me to Newport Folk Festival. As soon as I walked on the stage, graduation cap and got my diploma, I was on tour with Guy. Guy took care of me. Taught me. Then turned me back over to my brother here. He took care of me and always said, "You can do it." I never thought I could because I thought you had to be able to read music and do all these thing. And what key do you sing in? I don't know, just play, I'll catch up with you. There were no keys and things like that. Why? Because I took piano lessons under leadership of Reverend [[Galloway]], but I didn't even get a chance to go outdoors and play and mingle with my friends, so I would go in real quick and mark all the keys, so I could go right through the scales. That wasn't learning, and it didn't interest me. I'm the type that if I can't get in ten minutes, I don't need it. [Laughter] [4:45] So those are the things that covered me, and people really didn't understand. And I didn't really understand me. I said it and what came up, came out. But no one understood that where I came from, you must understand—as my

granny used to say—there's a root to that problem. You know you just don't look at the surface. It's a root up to that problem. So when I met these famous freedom singers and I went to Highlander when Guy invited us there. I believe that '86 was the last time I was there before the nineties. And I would just bless, well the people that God put in my life to get me to my next destination. I had never looked at it as singing. I liked the spirituality of a thing. I don't need a personality of a person. I need the spirit of a person, so when I sit down and talk about the Movement, still, it's just as fresh to me as it was back then. I'm just as teary-eyed about it today as I was then. [6:07] And from ten-years-old to high school, and walking around—my daddy loved the blues. And it was something about the blues that just turned me on. But after my mother died, my grandmother used to say, "Girl, don't be out there singing those reals." Those reals. Those were blues. They wanted me to be another Mahalia Jackson. Once again, I was being pushed, so when I started singing blues, I had to slip. I'd be at mass meetings, and then when mass meetings were over, I'd slip around to the shack. [Laughter] Mr. Walter my teacher. Mr. Walter, everybody was a friend of Mr. Walter. Everyone that was before us would always tell us and warn us about Mr. Walter before we got to him, and I had slipped out of the mass meetings at night, and went to the Shack. And Mr. Walter was there. And the next day in class, he sits at the desks like this very handsome man. "Ms. Fikes, I'd like to see you after class." My heart fell. So when everybody left, I was getting my little stuff together, trembling. And they walked out, and I went and stood in front of his desk. He finally, he's writing, not looking at me. Finally, "You did a beautiful job last night." [Laughter] So I became my supporter. When the Movement took place and I'm in high school, and they was telling us what to do, strategy meetings, and so we emptied out Hudson High. Mr. Walter, Ms. [[?]], all of them, they just went to the windows to look out. And only Mr. Flakes looked at the class and said, "Ms. Fikes is at the door. I'm going to the window. If anyone is left in this class when I turn around, I want you to know, you're getting an F." [Laughter]

Long: What was that punch line? What was that last line?

Fikes: He said, when he turned around from the window, if any student was left in his class, he wanted them to know, they were getting an F. [Laughter] So those were the things that brought me to this place. And then I had heard about Chuck before I had seen him myself. I seen, like I was telling him, I'd seen him and Ivanhoe, we were protesting Brown Chapel and the streets were full of people and police and white men. It was time that—Worth, I don't know if you remember it—I was standing there holding this sign, and the only thing in the world that I'm afraid of is a snake. And I don't know if that's because biblical days or what, but the streets was full. Police on both sides, and this little Jeep had parked at the wall where we paid the water bill. And these three white fellows got out with nothing on but jeans. And the closer they came, I don't know what took my attention to make me pay attention—Girl, this fellow was coming with this big snake wrapped all around his waist. And he had the head of it in his hand, and the police let him through. [10:31] And the closer he was getting to me, I'm holding this sign and I'm getting— [Laughter] And he was just going around pushing it in people's face. And the police allowed that. And when he got too close to me, I was about to pass out. I don't know whether it was you pushed him or somebody pushed him back. And when they pushed him back the police just took over and just stand the people, person, there with and just started beating them. And I stood there, crying. I don't whether—crying for two reasons. The beatings. I didn't look at myself as nonviolent. I really didn't, and

at that point, I knew we needed something more than nonviolent. I was 16-years-old at that time, and I said, "This is not for me." "This is NOT for Bettie Mae." I'm getting beaten enough by my own people. Now I gotta get beaten by the white folks too. This is not for me! But I didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't know which way my life was going to go. I mean, every night, I couldn't sleep. The closer it got to graduation, restless night, tossing and turning. I didn't want to go to college because if I went to college, that meant I would have stayed in Selma where I would be under control by this family. And I said, "My way out." This was my way out. [Laughter] That was my way out. And he's been my way out ever since. I'd tell you more about it but when I went to Newport Folk Festival with Guy, met the Freedom Singers, and all of them there. Sang with them, but the most thing that happened—I don't know where, who was responsible for it, but—but again, "Bettie, get up and sing. Get up and sing." So I got up and sang. I was singing with the Freedom Singers, and then they had me on stage, and it was just like we're here now talking. But they were talking about music and how music is developed. So they put me on the stage, and I don't know who this man was, and I didn't even know what this was about, and he says, "This young lady has, what we teach in school how to sing." Now nobody had taught me anything about a diaphragm, so he say, had me sing and say, "You see how she sings." Well I only sang like that because every summer, I would have to put books over my head and walk. That's how I spent my summer vacation—cleaning and being proper. [Laughter] I had to walk— [Laughter]

Cobb: Cleaning and being proper!

Fikes: With books on my head. So I've always—sometimes I'm sitting there and I stop— [Laughter]. So in that, he was saying that "She holds her diaphragm. You see how she hold her diaphragm there when she sings." I didn't even know what a diaphragm was. [Laughter] And then he says, "Sing about two-three lines of something." And it just so happened I did "This Little Light of Mine," and he said, "See, she can do five notes in one." What? But it was things that came naturally, I didn't understand. So my thing was, this man got me sitting up here in front of all these people and making me look like a guinea pig. I didn't think that was proper, so I was so self-conscious at the time, but I was just out of high school when I went to Newport Folk Festival, first time. I had just graduated from high school, as green as those leaves out there on that tree. Didn't know nothing! [15:24] But then, what I truly found out, what someone told me years later, that "Bettie, you have a gift. Not a talent." A gift not a talent. Your gift is from God. Thank you, and I sure hope you get to make some money. [Laughter] That hasn't come through, but then I ran into these boys. The male and the original. Chuck and I used to have to stand on the sideline and let Matthew and them do all the songs, and I'd Odinga Oginga. Oginga Odinga. I would stand there, and they would call me up, and I would sing "This Little Light of Mine." We'd go to houses and this and that and the other, so that became my introduction into the—my initiation into the Movement. Then I began to follow this man here that I knew by the end of my life. But I took a Trailways bus to Selma, Alabama, and I sat on the porch for the longest, sat there wondering, is this what you want to do? [Laughter] Are you going to go on the road with [[unsure]] money because I don't see life skills here for you. So but my thing is today, I was life skilled for so many others. [Laughter] So that was my participation, is still my participation in this thing we call the Movement.

Long: Alright.

Cobb: Alright. And that's the short version. [Laughter]

Fikes: See, I'm giving y'all my book. All my book. I don't think would ever get into print. I'd have told my story.

Cobb: [17:24] This is almost, for the formal record as much as my curiosity, thinking on this, but I'm curious as to what you think is the process by which you think a freedom song or freedom songs actually emerged? Are we talking spontaneous? I have no sense of to what degree they are composed deliberately. Would they just emerge is some kind of spontaneous kind of way? How do freedom songs come into existence?

Neblett: [18:11] 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.

Fikes: The guts.

Long: So it came out of the experience. Out of the Movement experience. You made something

Watkins: [20:07] I was about to say, I think in one way to define that process is you could say, they grew out of our culture. And we got a lot of mixed culture. You might see one. You might see two, or you might see the whole mix. A lot of times people ask me about my religion growing up. I told them, I say, "Well, I think when you look at that, you looking at AME with a Baptist influence inclined towards Holiness." [Laughter] So you might get either one of those or a combination of all of them. But I think it's those things that helped produce and shape whatever—one of the things I often think about as being good with the Freedom Singers is that they became universal teachers. They came and they taught that and then they'd go someplace else and found somebody hadn't been done, then they became a teacher of all of this. So that made it a lot easier. Then, we being jealous, said, if they can do that, let's see what we can change to make it more relevant to us and the things that we're doing here on a local level, on a state level. So it gave motivation and inspiration to us to put something in it that the people we were dealing with could relate to. See, if they couldn't relate to that, then it's going to be hard to get them to buy into it and go in that direction. [22:28]



Cobb: Go ahead. You wanted to say something, Worth,

Long: Yeah, in fact that helps me. A Pulitzer-prize-winning author had stated that song—and he didn't say music—he said song is the statement of a people. Want me to do that again?

Fikes: Yeah.

Long: Song, he said, is the statement of a people. And then he basically is saying that as he speaks about experience and culture—he went on to say that you can learn more about people from their songs than from anything else. Right? That's John Steinbeck. I'm writing something on, I'm trying to write something on that now. I found that I have to write because it's hard to talk. Hard for me to talk now.

Cobb: A part of the reason I was asking a part or a piece of that question has to do with the fact—and you can correct me if I'm wrong here— is that much of freedom songs come from church tradition, seems to me. You can correct me if I'm wrong here. And I'm curious because the other important strand of song in the South in particular, blues and other secular forms, if you don't hear that as clearly in freedom songs as you do the music or the songs of—. I remember asking Mrs. Hamer once, I asked her, I said, "Mrs. Hamer, did you ever sing the blues?"

Fikes: What'd she say?

Cobb: And she looked a little embarrassed, and I was young, so I wasn't gonna press her on the issue. It was just something that—I had been in some juke joint or something and the question occurred to me. And I was with her later on, and you know, she's so associated with music on some levels that it just seemed—the question just popped into my head. Where as you can think of, I guess, talking about Amzie, Hollis, traveling around plantations but with a gospel group but then pausing the gospel singing to make the pitch for voter registration. I don't see an equivalent of that with blues musician, or much interaction in that music. So that was part of what was underlying my question as to how, what the process is in which the music emerges, which is a question about culture? Blues is less legitimate in some ways.

Fikes: Mmmmmm.

Cobb: Than the choir. [Laughter]

Long: I see you over there. [Laughter]

Fikes: I will hold up. Slow your roll. Amen, amen.

Cobb: You understand where I'm trying to get at with this question?

Long: Kinda, kinda. But, when I grow up, I'll probably have to read a little more and talk and do more interviews with people who have actually made song, and that's what is important about us here. If say, you said that in the recording that they made of you, that the piano was what?

Fikes: Wrong key for me. It was the wrong key for me.

Long: But was it the right song?

Fikes: The right song but the wrong key.

Long: It was the right song in the wrong key. That's the song. I can make up a song about that, but it's very important to kind of figure out what kind of song are we talking about. Is it a topical song? Is it something that's in the news that you make a song up about? So if I'm, for instance, on the railroad and I'm doing railroad calls, then I can take any experience or any experience out here in the world, out here in the environment, and I can make it, I can mix it up, and make a statement with it. I can mix it up and make a statement with it. [27:55] Good example, topical from, you know where this is. Lindberg was a man through the ocean and the plane, New York to Paris, France. You know when that was, but then, "chuck, chuck, chuck" "chuck, chuck, chuck." These are railroad workers, gandy dancers working on the railroad. "I've been out east. I've been out west. I think I like out east the best." There's an ambiguity in that. "What do you do when you check your shoe? I go to Memphis to the office to talk-a-with the boss." So I'm talking about the variety of things that are possible as you—just in the calls that working people and Black people and especially, but oppressed people, especially, have developed through time. [29:07] And then some of it: "Annie had baby. Wasn't none of mine. Must be the captain's. He's there all the time. Annie had a baby."

Fikes: But they always told stories. I think, especially blues, I always associated blues with slavery time. Like they would tell stories when slaves were getting ready to leave the plantation headed for freedom. The freedom that they thought was freedom. And they would do it by song, singing in the field, when it was time to go. And so I tried to keep that in play today. I always do music, even when I'm singing with a band. Well, Bettie give us the first set. And I can't do that, but I don't know what to do. So I started giving song lists. But when I give the song lists they said—I don't know I'm going to do it, but you wanted a song list. [Laughter] But I like to do things like you said earlier. When you seeing that something is going on and the spirit is high and you don't know what the next minute is going to bring, you don't need a song list for that. It's something that automatically comes from your head and heart to sing, to fit that. When I pass that on, you think sometime that even with the gospel, I tell the young kids today. I was pretty much like you. I was tired of [singing], "Jesus, keep me near the cross." You know that sounds like a funeral, and I didn't like that. So that's what made me start rearranging song, so I've been so busy doing just things that come to my head. Last week, I was looking at a situation and the first thing came to my mind, "On the hill before the way stood an old rugged cross." And sitting there listening, and I'm in an Episcopal Church of all places, and then at the same time, blues crossed my mind, and I went back to thinking again, I called my brains are scattered. That my grandmother used to say, "You can't be straddling the fence. You either going to be a cow or you're going to be a pig. Do you understand that?"

My mama didn't give birth to no animal. And she was saying, "You going to sing the gospel or the blues." Pretty much like heard fellows say playing in the club on a Saturday night, playing at church Sunday, and doing the same thing. But we're singing on Saturday night, but on Sunday, we just kind of changed the place a little. So that made me go back into it, rather than writing something original. I wanted to create some of the things that had already been done. That had been passed over. And then some of the songs like, later on when I was grown, "Lord, don't move this mountain. Just give the strength to climb. Lord, don't you move this mountain!" [Laughter] Well you move this mountain, you told me if I pray and pray, and you would move this mountain. Now why would I sing, "Lord don't move this mountain." So it was things like that, that got me not confused but just like moving. What could I do about this? [33:27] So, I traveled doing the old spirituals. I called them the soul searchers. I liked doing "On the Hill for a Ways" "Steal Away." Somebody's calling my name, and then I can go into today, of things that I just sung for you and how I rearranged them for today.

Long: And you used them as freedom songs? Right, so that, so your question had to do with the whole question of—it seems to me—what is a freedom song, and how is it created? And I found it kind of difficult to answer that straight out. I think we've done some of that.

Cobb: [34:22] And part of that, I'm thinking, you may remember, Worth, years ago, I was writing on the blues. And I was with this old blues man in Mississippi, and we were really talking about sharecropping and the cycle of debt and how you get trapped by debt. And sometimes you wanted relief and you had to sneak off the plantation if you owed the plantation money. And he was trying to explain to me—and he told me this. He was really correcting a misinterpretation of mine about the blues because he was making the case that the blues were freedom songs. And he said, so—I remember exactly the conversation because he said—so when I say, I'm gonna leave you baby, I won't be back no more. I'm not talking about my wife. And yet, in my movement days, working with SNCC and Mississippi, I wholly associated freedom songs either with spirituals and the church tradition or composed songs as Matthew did or Bertha Gober did in Southwest Georgia and it never occurred to me to put into that that other musical tradition, which is the secular tradition of the blues. So that was part of my questioning. That was part of what was behind my question. I'm really interested in this question of how people think about freedom songs and what they consider freedom songs and how they emerge in people's minds as freedom songs.

Neblett: [36:17] There's one song that we sang that's called "Oh Freedom." Oh Freedom. I found out that the Black civil war soldiers, they didn't take prisoner. They'd kill them.

Long: So the Confederate soldiers did not take Black prisoners.

Neblett: Black prisoners. So, the Black soldiers kept on volunteering to come down. They knew this. Kept volunteering to fight, and it's one of the songs they sang. "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 to be free." But when I found out the history behind it, it became a whole new meaning. It was a whole new meaning. And when I sing that song, I feel differently about it.

Cobb: And another area, I'm interested in Candie, if you could talk about the linkage between the songs of labor struggle in the South in particular—textile workers in North Carolina or Charleston, South Carolina, and freedom songs as we understood them in the Movement.

Carawan: Well, I'll be glad to talk about it as I understand it sort of through the Highlander process.

Cobb: That's fine.

Carawan: I'm not the folklorist or the expert by any means. [38:00] 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—

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. In Guy's case, he had studied folklore in college, particularly at UCLA when he was getting his master's degree, and he had listened to a lot of Library of Congress recordings. So he came to the South with knowledge of southern music, both Black and white, and that really stood him in good stead when he began his work at Highlander. And then, he had been very much influenced by Pete Seeger and the People's Song Movement and had learned a lot of the labor repertoire. So he was gathering the ingredients he was gonna need to do his work at Highlander, and that was a very good thing. But I think Highlander had always used the knowledge that as people are struggling, and often people without a lot of formal education, one of the things that does make them feel strong is their cultural knowledge and history, so that was really built upon at Highlander and throughout time, and that's still true today that gets used. [40:50] Myles is the one, I believe, that pointed it out about "We Shall Overcome." We always thought because of how Zilphia had learned it, that the earliest use of the song in the labor movement was in Charleston in the 1940s with the tobacco workers. But later on, we learned that it had been used earlier in North Carolina, in Winston-Salem also as a labor song. So that tradition was there. Taking a well-known song, just like Bettie Mae, bringing it up to date in a contemporary situation. Bringing it to

Highlander. 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.

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. Oh, I guess I was going to say about Myles, Myles tells that that practice of holding hands and singing—he claims that came in the labor movement. Now I know we've always talked about it within the SNCC context, but there's a specific way that you stand and take—well, Myles claims, and I'm not sure it was the crossed arms, but at least the holding hands was very much a part of the labor struggles as well when that song was used in important labor struggles. That's kind of the nutshell version that I know.

Cobb: [43:10] That's fine. The one quick question, also, if you happen to know—I'm just curious and you may or may not know the answer—what about in terms of movements like the strikes say in Elaine, Arkansas, the tenant farmers? Or even the Southern Negro Youth Congress and the marches they had, were their songs associated with those Movements?

Carawan: Oh yes. Do you know John Hancocks? Do you know the name John Hancocks? He was a part of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, and he wrote songs. I'll use the word wrote. But I again, I think some of them had familiar melodies. Oh gosh. I need my little red song book here. [Laughter] Gosh, "Hogless, Hogless Are We." What's the one about the bosses? He had a whole repertoire of songs that he introduced into that particular movement, and some of those came to Highlander also when Zilphia was there. So they're part of the old Highlander mimeographed song books. So yes, I think there were traditions in other unions. And maybe some of it was inspired by the Wobblies way back, knowing that that was a singing movement. Worth, you probably know much more about this than I do.

Long: [44:31] Well, yeah. Too bad I can't write. Yeah, you mentioned Elaine, Arkansas. And Gould, Arkansas were two places where the Southern Tenant Farmers Union was—in fact, I had worked under the, with funding from the Tenant Farmers Union in Arkansas after SNCC. And also in another series, I had done blues research and then by doing the blues research, you get a sense of the social history of that area. We're talking about the Black Belt of Arkansas. But the Elaine area was a place where there was a major uprising that was put down by the National Guard of Arkansas at that time. I think Walter White writes about it, and there are several other accounts of that tragedy. The songs that came out of that. There are blues songs that arose out of that. Robert Junior Lockwood who is the stepson of Robert Johnson, for instance, was born in Marvel, which is in that basic area. And that's the area where I

organized in the 1970s, co-ops and credit unions and farmworkers and Black farmworkers. [46:40] But as to the particular songs

Wesley Hogan: I just Wikipedia-ed a couple, so I can toss some names to you. So there's "Raggedy Raggedy Are We."

Long: "Raggedy, Raggedy Are We." Good example.

Carawan: That's John Hancock's.

Long: That's Hancock's. "Which Side Are You On," from Reese was from a different. That's from the coal strike—

Carawan: Coal strike in Kentucky.

Long: —but that is sung in that area of Arkansas. That "Which Side Are You On" is one of the songs that I've collected in that area of Arkansas. But mostly the songs are revisions of church songs, so they follow what we're saying about the Civil Rights Movement songs. That they are songs revised. But then there are songs that are composed also, and then we'll talk about that, of course, at a later time, especially at the time of the folk song revival because songs are coming out a hundred miles an hour. We talked last night about

Carawan: Malvina Reynolds?

Long: Malvina Reynolds. Yeah. But Barbara Diane. Of course, Pete Seeger and others who were singing songs, many of them written by Woody Guthrie, but going back to the earlier songs, going back to many of America's early labor songs.

Cobb: [48:47] And Chuck, is there anything that can be called major musical influences on the Freedom Singers themselves? For instance, I always think for instance the music in Albany, Georgia was exceptionally powerful. Exceptionally powerful and distinctive. One, are there are distinctions that should be made like that? And two, is there anything that could be called major musical influences on the Freedom Singers specifically?

Neblett: Albany, when I first went to Albany, everybody sang. I mean, everybody sang. And I never heard as much singing and music in my life, when I went to Albany. And I think that with Bernice and Rutha [Mmmm hmmm] and the Freedom Singers, that had a great influence on the music that we—I think a lot of that tradition from Albany, Georgia, they brought with them. And today, they still sing in Albany. Rutha got her brother, Emory. He's a fantastic tenor, and all of that is from Albany, Georgia, and it's a big influence on the Freedom Singers, I think, on freedom songs that originated out of Albany. That's a town—there's something. I don't know what it is!

Cobb: Yeah, I was going to ask you, what do you think accounts for that about Albany? Very few people who go there and experience whether you're sitting in a church, not even necessarily—and you're struck by the music in that particular town.

Neblett: I don't know what it is.

Fikes: You can't put a name on it.

Neblett: I can't put a name on it! I mean those people are in sync with something. They're in sync.  
[Laughter] They're in sync with something that brings out that kind of music.

Long: But there's also the question of organization because I know singing unions play a part in some of, some development of musical tradition. But even before, things were organized in that way, just the acapella quartet singing. They had circuits throughout certain areas. In fact, Albany was one, Albany was what Andy Young called a "singing movement." He designates certain places as singing movements, and if you get a singing movement, than you had a spirited movement. Not just a spiritual movement but a spirited movement. So I think Ray Charles was born in Albany, Georgia. That should tell you something.  
[Laughter]

Neblett: He didn't sing nothing but gospel. [52:31] They got over about that. The sound. Ray Charles just had that gospel spirit kind of thing in him, although he sang the blues and all that. You can hear the gospel.

Long: And country music.

Neblett: That's right. You can hear it.

Fikes: It all goes back to spirituality. It's grounded and rooted in spirituality, and what they say is each individual does a different thing.

Neblett: And I think too for the freedom songs and how they—I think all of them came, people, the Movement come from a spiritual kind of thing. In the South, you know it's a spiritual movement. In the North, it was different. It was different. But in the South, people had been used to being church. They'd been church. And the biggest son in the world ain't gonna go against the church. [Laughter]

Fikes: I don't know, half of them up in there are sinners.

Neblett: Half of them are sinners. But anyway—and it was that gospel tradition. That spiritual tradition. And I don't know. It was just something. It was something to hear.

Fikes: Full force in energy. The sixties as far as music was concerned was to me kind of like I told you, biblical times, when Moses led the people out of Egypt. In the sixties when all these people gathered,

churches full, all outside, was full. And the voices, you could hear them from here—from Selma to Lowndes County, and it was so refreshing. And even though you were facing fear, those things, those songs—because when we were in jail, that's the only thing that comforted us was the songs. But it wasn't so much the song. It was the spirit of the song.

Long: The spirit of the song.

Fikes: And you know, anybody can sing. Lot of people got beautiful voices, but don't everybody sing with the spirit. And when you sing with the spirit, even though you singing and it's like something bouncing off the walls and hitting everybody in the congregation or whatever. Then you can sit and just hear someone doing a song, and they're sitting there and everybody's sitting there just looking, and when it's over, it's over. So those are two differences. It's the spirituality. And I tell everybody today that's mostly what's missing today in the Movement. They got all the songs, but they don't have the spirituality.

Neblett: [55:24] And in those churches in the South, especially in Albany, everybody sang. It wasn't a choir and you sat back and listened to the choir. No. The whole church would sing.

Cobb: I'll save the questioning until after lunch, but in response to your comment about that's what's missing. I mean if you hang out with the young activists in the Movement for Black Lives, while they don't have songs that come out of the church, they have chants that are—it seems to me in my interactions with them—that have as much "spirituality" as anything we might have heard. I mean if you've ever been, whether it's the Dream Defenders in Florida where I live because they're fresh in my mind because I was just attending their annual conference. I mean they have a range of chants reflecting what they want, what they're concerned with that remind, although they're not musical in the way that we're used to music that comes out of the church. I'm curious as to whether you've encountered that and what you think of that. Or even if you go to, Hollis, you remember the days when we were going to Marian Wright's Children Defense Fund training up there in Tennessee with all those kids. 1,500. There were chants for everything. I don't recall them singing. [Laughter] But they definitely had everything from chants to bring order to the group to sit down to political chants.

Neblett: They had so much energy.

Cobb: They certainly were high energy.

Fikes: And it was pretty much like we were.

Cobb: So that made be a difference of the times. But like I say, that's an involved conversation that we likely won't be able to finish leading up to lunch.

Watkins: I think one of the things that to look at, commonality, is groups of people were coming to participate in being a part of this. Right? When we look at what happened in Albany, it was that city, that church, those churches for the most part that came as a body. Part of the problem that we have



today, which is we don't have bodies of folks that's coming into this. You got two or three folks that are good at this, and they'll come in. People support in most cases the things, what these different individuals is doing and bringing, but they don't come as a collective body, which can wrap around these small groups. And that was, for example, one of the major differences why in Mississippi back during the civil rights period as they call it, it was a difference in Albany. And several of us in Mississippi, we were here and there and what have you. We were all over that could sing, but we was not a group. We attempted to produce group by telling folks, "Hey look. If you come to Mississippi, you need to be able to sing. If you can't sing, learn how to work your lips until you can." [Laughter] You know, we don't want you to appear to be an outsider when we know religion is a powerful thing in this state, and this is one of the powerful pieces that those of us who are deep into religion uses. [59:58] So you want to be a part of that, and that was one of the major differences because I can't remember, even with C.C. Bryant's church down in McComb, it wasn't a whole church piece that was coming and supporting that what we were doing. It was two or three strong folks out of that that could get the church group to do certain things that would be needed, and you had that same kind of situation lot of other areas throughout Mississippi.

Leah Wise: Can I ask a question? I don't know if you want to turn it off.

Cobb: No, no, everything is on the record.

Wise: Well I'm sitting through this, and there's a number of things that you raise. I want to ask a question about musical—it's about the music itself. I'm not sure I have the vocabulary, but to tell you where I came from. So I've been listening to a lot of Korean music recently and have been surprised at some of the traditions, of their traditional music, comes out of their experience as a nation of being conquered, constantly in struggle, and one of the commentators in one program I was listening to was saying that some of that pain was musically similar in their song to Black music, and that was why they thought there was a certain affinity there for some of the music from this country. And of course, there's popular stuff. But they were talking about the—here's where I'm in trouble about the language—but in the sound that's in the blues, the bending of the notes, that kind of when you're on that guitar and it makes your backbone split, that kind of [end of recording.]

#### **Song\_2017.09.19\_04TASCAM**

Cobb: [:37] Are we recording? Ok. Wesley, why don't you restate your question? That seems as good a starting point as any after lunch.

Wesley Hogan: Well I share our team's real excitement with the fact that you all are here. And this is the fourth session that we've done like this, and it never fails to really excite me. So I found that in the previous three sessions that I'll go back through them and have students look at them, and the students will ask me a good question about a story, and I won't have the answer because I didn't think enough to ask during the session. So when I heard Chuck say the question, the story about "Oh Freedom" and why it meant so much more to him, carried a whole new meaning when he sang the song—not just when he heard the song, but when he sang the song—when he knew the story of the freed Black soldiers that

came to fight in the Civil War knowing that Confederate soldiers didn't take prisoners, I wanted to immediately ask can he go into a little bit more detail and share what it meant and how he might use a story to tell people who weren't there, didn't know what circumstances you were in. Didn't understand what had happened in the Civil War either, might be able to understand what you were saying.

Long [1:57] Chuck, I would ask you to preface your statement with the first verse singing of the song. Or end it with that song. Would you, for me? [Laughter]

Cobb: It's on you now, Chuck.

Neblett: [2:18] 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. [5:07] 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." [6:14]

Cobb: I want to ask, in light of your comments and your song, what today in music, or even in the sixties, conveys that same kind of feeling that you just described and that understanding that you just described?

Long: The power of song, he said.

Neblett: Medgar Evers. The song about Medgar Evers. 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."

Cobb: Matthew Jones' song.

Neblett: Marshall

Cobb: Marshall's song.

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

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.

Fikes: [singing] [7:40] "In the Mississippi River, In the Mississippi River. [others join in] In the Mississippi River. 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 ...."

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. [9:42] 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.

Watkins: [10:00] 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. And on another note, I'd just like to say, in reference to before I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave. That had and meant a lot to me, but I looked at it from another piece. And I looked at it from the point of, our people, when they were brought over from Africa, many of them chose the route of taking a dive into those waters before they would be tied and brought to be working on those plantations. And I looked at how, in so many ways, i was a slave. Looked at how I, as a young Black man, was told and eventually showed through Emmett Till that we could be killed for looking in the eyes of a white woman. That I needed to be prepared to do somethings to keep me from being a slave, just as our foreparents had done whatever they felt they could do rather than being a slave. And I needed to define for myself some things that I knew that I could do and be on the job about doing those. So that's what hit me, going back to my foreparents, when they being brought from Africa.

Cobb: [13:09] It seems appropriate to ask, in terms of both Chuck's response to Wesley's question and the song we've heard, at least the short bits of songs we've heard, is to remind you of something, you said something earlier today that seems worthwhile to ask you to elaborate on. And that is you said that the music carried me to a very different place. So if you could elaborate some on that, Bettie Mae.

Fikes: When I'm singing, most people in the audience, they focus. They think I'm with them. But I don't see them because I'm wrapped up in the music. Not saying or feeling, am I going to do it well enough or anything like that, but that's what I mean. Going deep. I like to deal with substance. And substance carries you very, very deep. And when they said, what years ago, if music can calm the wildest beasts, what can it do for a man? So I reach out to others by, where my music carries me. And half of the time, you just can't not explain it. It's something that you. It's like a labor pain. Once it's over with, you [[soap out?]] it. [Laughter] You really can't explain.

Cobb: We'll take your word for it. [Laughter].

Fikes: In a couple of years, you'll be able to—we're headed there. But you really cannot, I cannot, explain it. I can't explain anything that I truly don't understand myself. [15:31] Since I've sitting here, trying to say stop, I can hear and feel something, and it goes through me. Now first when I started having that thought, I have a family member who had muscular problems, and I began to shake. That's going to happen to me. And I've been talking to people and all of a sudden, it's like, "Oooh, thank you Jesus." Now that's something I cannot explain, but it's something that goes deeper than words can ever say. When I do songs—I had to learn last Wednesday "Is It Well With My Soul." Well, learning it, first I had to get the lyrics. Then I had to get the melody, and after the melody, I had to get somebody to play it for me. So when I was singing it, I was so involved in learning this song that I couldn't put Bettie in the song.

Now I sung it Wednesday, and everybody was all the rage. Oh, you were just good, but it wasn't good for me. But when I went to bed that night to sleep, the lyrics started rolling just as easy, and when it got the first verse, when it got to the part that "Whatever my Lord, he has taught me to sing. It is well. It is well with my soul." And I go to shaking again. [Laughter]

Neblett: As Bettie said, the spirit talks through the music.

Fikes: So you don't understand, that's something other singers probably can do. But I have never been able to put it in words. How can you put feelings, how can you put a feeling in words? I just can't do it. I'd like to though.

Neblett: [17:46] You know, I've been to mass meetings, and they just sing just to sing. And the time they got through singing, their singing drove away fear. Their singing drove away fear. You had a heck of an engagement coming tomorrow. You gonna get out there. And everybody knew, but the singing drew away their fear and all the oppositions, and you could concentrate on what you gonna have to do, and how you gonna do it. How successful you gonna be through the singing. And after the singing was over, people didn't have too much more to say. But you get out and you do it. And it's been said that the spirit comes through the singing. The spirit flows through the singing, and I feel that's the reason why it was such a singing movement.

Fikes: It was.

Neblett: It was a singing movement because people wouldn't have moved without the singing. The spirit wasn't there without the singing. And that was it. The spirit. And we had a song we sang, "We're gonna do what the spirit say do."

Cobb: You were going to say something Hollis.

Watkins: Yeah, I was going to say, to me, it has to do with the pulse, the heartbeat, and all of that of us. I don't know what yours is and don't really know what mine is, but when I hear a beat or a word that corresponds with that in me, it automatically makes me move in a certain direction. And that's why I can't explain what the deal is, but when it reaches that point, I know it based on me feeling that at that point and based on my feeling it at that point, causes me to do that. [20:05] And that's why we can't really explain it like it is because a lot of times when we're up doing it, then as other people are doing things, it'll hit us. Because a lot of time, it don't hit us from the beginning. We've got to work it. [Yeah] Then we work up to it now. Hey, look. You feeling coming up at it. [Laughter]

Long: Must be love. [Laughter]

Watkins: Absolutely. [Laughter]

Long: That was call and response. [Laughter]

Watkins: But that's what happens is that everybody got that point, but we don't know even where our point is or theirs. But when those words or those drum beats or whatever hits it in accord, in sync with where I am, I can't do nothing else but get involved.

Fike: Thank you.

Neblett: Get into the groove. Finally get into the groove.

Long: [21:26] 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?

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

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.

Fikes: Singing your way out of fear, and feel like you've been liberated even though you're on your way to jail. [23:18]

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.

Watkins: That doesn't come just with age. There's a school teacher in Jackson. She stayed mad with me for the longest because she was at a program, and they wanted me to sing and lead the children in a couple of freedom songs. So these were kindergarten and first graders. I taught them the song of "Ain't Scared of Nobody," and she said, "Lord, ever since then, she's had more trouble out of the kids." Said, "They just want to take over something!" [Laughter] They said take it in lungs, the half of the class would be gone before she could get them—she said, the next day, they all started coming in the classroom singing, "Ain't scared of nobody cuz I want my freedom." [Laughter] And she said, it took a while—she stayed angry with me for a long time because the teachers knows, and they began to exercise that whole process.

Wise: [25:32] I just want to tell this story. Hollis taught this song to my granddaughter when she was two. And I remember him squatting by the stove in the kitchen, doing this, "Ain't scared of nobody" because she's kind of mouthing the words. We then taped after Hollis went back to Mississippi—I don't know, maybe two or three weeks after. She's in her crib, in her high chair, we're sitting there taping this song. "Ain't scared of nobody..." [Laughter] But it was in the song.

Long: The pied piper freedom. [Laughter]

Neblett: That's how powerful those songs were.

Fikes: I tell you.

Neblett: And nobody could get up there and talk about a [Laurie] Pritchett or anything. You put in in song, and the people automatically felt the spirit of it. And people moved off the spirit.

Cobb: [26:37] Do you think the kind of chant—to get back to an earlier question I raised—the kind of chant you hear among young activists today have the same impact or effect as the freedom songs that were sung in the 1960s? They clearly have impact among the young people who are engaged in the chant, but I'm talking about in a wider sense, in the way that the freedom songs had impact, not only among people who were singing them, but they had a wider impact in the community or among two-year-olds? Do you think—

Neblett: I experienced in a freedom schools. I seen almost two thousands young people with those chants.

Cobb: The freedom schools. You mean the training?

Neblett: Yes

Cobb: The Children's Defense Fund.

Neblett: The Children's Defense Fund. And those young people, their chants and it'd be so much energy there. Like the thing's gonna blow away. Just blow away. Those kids were into those chants. And then had a little girl hold her hand up like this, and when it comes down, you could hear—

Cobb: Everybody was really quiet.

Neblett: Everybody was really quiet. And that impressed me. And although, I'm not used to all that chanting, but it worked for them. And it worked for me too. It worked for me because I was—they identified with that. And it's real.

Fikes: That's their freedom music of today.

Neblett: That's their freedom music. And it's not ours, but we need to teach them ours. Because same way "Oh Freedom,"—they need to know these songs.

Carawan: [28:34] I liked it when Bernice would talk at Highlander when we'd have workshops for people who'd gotten funds from the We Shall Overcome Committee. She always started out by talking about how militant the freedom songs were. I think it sort of parallels the way we've talked—we, meaning this society—has taught the civil rights movement in the schools. It's never taught about how militant it was, which is why the perception—we were talking about this last night—the perception, people think of it as something weak or passive you know. I think the strength of the freedom songs, the militancy is how it made the police feel. Or the guy that came in with the gun. I think we need—that story needs to be understood better, and that's when younger people might want to learn these songs, if they think of them as really militant and going up what the real issues are, it carries more weight.

Neblett: And they know it, when they get into that situation, they'll sing it. They'll sing it.

Watkins: [29:39] To me, today there's a bigger, different, and greater struggle than we among ourselves collectively. Number one, there's some of us resent the fact that we did not get the glory, the popularity that we wanted and/or deserved. And since the folks that got it, for the most part, is all gone and out of the way, then I should be getting it now. And why are you coming trying to bring something different? You oughta be going with this because if you go with this, I'll get what I feel that I should be getting and deserve. And if you don't tie into that the way you should tie into it, I gotta a little built up resentment to you and against whatever it is that you are attempting to do, so I can't come in there and work with you in bringing that about. To me, a lot of the things is based on that kind of attitude, that kind of spirit. Back then, with most of the things that we did in terms of our singing, etcetera, had a "spiritual, religious" piece to it, and you could relate it. That didn't allow us to have that same kind of resentment that too many of us is feeling today. A lot of times, just because it does not, as we see it, include that



which we think it—we condemn it. And now, instead of the fight just between the young folks' enemy as they see it, also consciously and sometimes subconsciously, the fight is also between those that should be walking shoulder to shoulder with you in helping to bring things about. That's why, in so many instances when I'm talking to young folks, I say to them, "Hey, look. When it's time for you to take the lead in whatever, then you need to be ready and prepared to take it. But," I said, "don't run over me." Don't run over me. I said, when that time comes, if you can't figure out how to go around me, how to go over me, how to go under me, just pick my old rusty self up and set me on the side. And say, "Hollis, we going to miss you. You going to get plenty of food and you'll get enough. And we'll keep coming back to check on you." And go right ahead, and do it. But that's part of what I see happening today that make it appear—and that's one of things that..

Cobb: I'm not sure I understand what you're saying here, so can you be more specific about what you mean, in terms of either organization, names, events, or whatever.

Watkins: All of these things that you just named is, while I'll say can and in the most part, is taking place in all of the cities and the areas where we have young folks today attempting to do what they perceive folks like our age did and has done. They perceived, this is our day, and just like they did it then, these are things that need to be done now, and we're gonna do that. But we—and the way they see it, that's the only way they can go, but we who have been through that, see something different. I think they ought to be doing this instead of doing that way, and I think.

Fikes: Yeah. And so they're better together.

Watkins: Yeah.

Neblett: You see, we haven't taught them.

Cobb: Go ahead, Leah. Let Chuck go ahead and finish his sentence.

Wise: I mean, Hollis has worked a lot with young people, and so have I, and I think one of the challenges, because working with young people is also working with adults to be able to work with young people successfully. So part of it is part of understanding the context, and all of this means was when my daughter was nineteen, she said to me, "Mom, do you realize I've been in this setting nine times, when someone's been shot?" This is not somebody doing any political work or anything. This is just social activity. Many of those shots right on Central's campus. Well the insecurity that that puts on a teenager—you know, I've never experienced that at age nineteen. And so, I'm just saying, it made me step back and think about what's the different context. What kids know today is about their reality. Their reality is not the reality I knew. So I think this is a standard. [35:45] Part of the other thing Hollis is talking about is the issue of jealousy, wanting things. But there's also this other thing about what's the right way. What should be done? How you even convey some lessons that you hope people will know something about without trying to takeover.

Fikes: [36:07] The thing, you know, this is a very new day. Fifty years ago, we knew what we were fighting against and what we were fighting for. We were fighting for good education, good jobs, homes, be able to send our children to college. Today, it's a spiritual warfare. They're fighting against great institutions, and you know, it's all in the air now. It's a time when for the moans—those old folks used to say, "If you moan, the devil don't know what you're talking about." And we're really at a different place now. The younger generation, I'm not afraid of what's happening. I'm afraid of how dealing with it. You know look at the cost of living now. Look at schools and half of the younger generation are couch potatoes. Half of the young folk don't even know what's going on around them, nor do they care. That's just half of it. Now you got the majority that want to do something—that's why I said the spirituality is missing. And why is it missing because you can't be taught spirit. But if you haven't been around the spirit or you don't know how to connect with the spirit, you're just a spirit that's existing. So now, look at where we fought for just the right to vote. Everybody got a right to vote, but who's taking that privilege today. You know, when people died just for you to have the right to vote, put their lives on the line just for you to have the right to vote. I was fighting for the right to vote and I wasn't even old enough to vote. So those days, all of that foundation that was laid. I tell the young children, we laid the foundation, but it's left up to you to build now. [38:30] So if you tried to build with all of this chaos that's going on today, and your home life haven't taught you. Like you don't have a mama that knows something about the movement or about the spirituality, what's this child going to get? She can't get it in the classroom, the things that are supposed to enable you to live life and live life successfully, has been dropped. So people are just learning as they go. Our parents taught us, and we didn't only belong to our parents. We belonged—everybody belonged to everybody in the neighborhood, if you got out of line. You know, those days are gone!

Cobb: [39:17] I'd like to speak up for the younger generation today. Thinking back to say, when I saw twenty or nineteen, one of the things I find encouraging today is, to me, there's more activism and social consciousness among young people today than I remember back in the day. I think of the Howard campus where I enrolled. You know, there were many more people who were in the fraternities and were the sororities then were lining up to become a part of NAG, the Nonviolent Action Group, and going over to the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Or any of the Washington, D.C was surrounded by segregation. So I see a lot more activism. I see a lot more probably uncertainty about what the best way is to get—they see what's wrong. They have a sense, even if it's not completely clear as to what is wrong, what they don't like. What they'd like to change. They're less clear about how to get there. They're less clear about it, but they live in more complicated times as well. There's uncertainties that hover over young people today that didn't exist when I was a kid. And I say all of this to speak up, if you will, for the twenty-somethings. I'm influenced by, I've been hanging out with them for the last eight or nine months, so I just think that—as you were speaking, Hollis, I was thinking of how Julian said, once a long time ago, "What do you mean talking about passing the torch to us? Snatch it from us!" And I'm sort of sympathetic to that.

Watkins: [41:41] One of the things going along with that to show how we have escalated it, we have put out the whole thing of young folks ain't about nothing today. Young folks ain't going to be nothing. We've put that old kind of attitude and talk out there. And folks, a lot of times, come to me and tell me,

"Young folks, they just won't do nothing." So I asked them where have they been. Because when you look at us in Mississippi, if you take out the 1964 summer project, there never was more than about twenty-five, twenty-six of us at one time.

Cobb: I counted twenty-three.

Watkins: Okay. I want to be a little lenient—that was working in Mississippi. And I tell folks, I can take you to Tunica County right today, and I can show you that many right there in that county. So are you telling me that these folks are not doing anything, don't want to do anything. So that's part of that attitude. And to show you, we as SNCC being the most progressive as I would say of those, we didn't quite see it because through us freedom singers, you know, through us freedom singers, we came on with the one to show how for all we was, when we says, [singing] "Come here child. Sit on my knee. Let me tell how we got free." [Laughter]

Long: [43:31] That's parody.

Neblett: It's another thing. We lost our, we've been losing our institutions. You take the school for instance, we've lost it. And Black schools really made a difference, made a difference. We have lost that as an institution. And we've had the churches been going in so many different directions. We had those two institutions that had complete control over the people and our young people. And we don't have it anymore. And in fact, even our churches are migrating towards the white church. The schools—we don't have school teachers anymore. You go to any school in the biggest ghetto in this country, and you find there are majority white teachers.

Fikes: The kids aren't being taught because the teachers are scared. The teacher says, now in St. Paul, I was there last year—and the last day for me before I went to the airport that evening, they'd asked me to stop by this school. And I thought I was going to talk to students, and when I get there, it's an auditorium of teachers, white teachers, wanting to know what they're doing and how they can teach our Blak students. And my thing was, you're calling me cuz I'm Black? You know.

Watkins: You the expert. You can tell them. You can teach us.

Fikes:[45:25] Yeah. That's when I realized how most of the teachers today, especially the white teachers are afraid. And that lets you know how times have changed. You know when we were in school and we got out of line, you prayed that it didn't get home to your mama. But it's different today. It's so different now that the child will curse you out and ready to fight, and tell mama, then mama's coming to give you a working over. So all these things and concepts are going on. And it has—we're seeing a whole lot of improvement, but we've become so fashionable today. Like I tell people, the good book says, be in the world but not of the world. So we got, as they said years ago, we've got babies having babies. Now the babies been filled. What you can't pass on to the baby. My great grandmother had to teach all of us, in olden days when the mama go to work and the grandmama's in the home, and the grandmother is the caretaker. But all of us had to know our ABC's and be able to count to a hundred before we went to

preschool. Now we got some intelligent young kids today, but the discipline has been taken out. And discipline is not so much about whupping and abusing—it's different than a whupping and abuse. But the thing is, they haven't been taught respect, authority. They don't respect authority today. Somebody see you in the street—if we were acting up in the street, Ms. Nichols would come, "Bettie Mae." "Yes ma'am." Today that cannot happen if the child has been taught by the mother and father or grandmother, yes it still can happen. But we have so much of that today that is not happening. And who suffers? The child.

Neblett: I gotta say. We've got to have institutions. We've got to have functioning institutions. We have a functioning school. Ain't nobody gonna teach your kids like you.

Fikes: Well, do you think it was a good thing for the school to have been segregated?

Neblett: [48:06] I'm saying, that it's wrong to turn over our children to people who don't like them and are afraid of them and don't have a vision on where those kids can go.

Cobb: I'd like to suggest that it doesn't come down to a question of schools. I mean, the Black community, certainly the one I grew up in, was a much more integrated community than it is now, in the sense of various classes of people within that community—it was a community in a way that it's not. So I went Rosenwald Training School for a couple of years in Kentucky. My father was teaching at Kentucky State, and we had to learn—and I was what second grade, third grade—we had to learn "Lift Every Voice and Sing." That was like, we had to stand up and sing the Negro national anthem, and it was just a part of the dynamic of the community. And the music was integrated, music, a lot of it was, in fact, related to the idea of freedom. And it was noticeable to me because I went from elementary school to an integrated school because my father went back to school, and I wound up going to school in Boston because my father was working for a higher degree, and the difference in the schools. We were no longer singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" for sure, nor were we singing anything related to the idea of freedom in so far as the Black community was concerned. That may be a continuing kind of problem, this lack of what a friend of my calls the disintegration of the Black community maybe a kind of problem.

Wise: [50:24] I just want to say, you can't project on all Black communities whether the community might be in Mississippi or the Delta or whatever because when I came up here to North Carolina, it was rather a cultural shock you could say because a lot of the things in terms of community and action that we thought about, or at least I learned in the Deep South, just wasn't here. The class divisions here were pretty stark. And where it really—two places it kind of hit me in the face—one was when my daughter was in public school here, we had a Black superintendent, Black principal in her school, half the teachers in her school were Black. This was at Durham High at the time, which was initially the white school here, not Hillside. And there was one Black image in the entire school, which was of a hijacker. And when we raised issues in the PTA meetings about not only image, but what was being taught in terms of curriculum, the principal—the Black principal tells us—now the majority, the school itself is 95 percent Black students, ok. He tells us, "Your job is not to educate the children. That's our job. What you need to do is raise money for band uniforms." And he said, "I'm the image. You don't need these other images.

I'm the image." Now the thing about it is, the school board, which was majority Black, the bulk of the folk on there were not revolutionaries. They did not come out of the Movement. When we were organizing down east, it was preachers paid off by companies that we were up against as much as we were. You know, I'm just saying it's a complicated picture. It wasn't for some of the middle class kids, Black schools worked well because their mamas, the teachers paid attention to. But the working class kids, that wasn't the truth. So I'm just saying, let's be honest if we're going to talk about what institutions we're trying to build, and we did go through a timeframe in the seventies, we were trying to build institutions. That's what the King Center was about with history. You know, the Malcolm X Liberation University. The Center for Black Education. We went through a conscious self-institution building process, what happened to that? That's another story. But I'm just saying, I don't think that means institution building is not important. It is. But let's speak to the reality is on the ground.

Cobb: [53:20] It's interesting in this vein, when I enrolled at Howard, ninety-some-odd percent of Blacks going to college were going to HBCUs. Today, that figure is 10 percent of Blacks going to college are attending HBCUs. There's been a dramatic shift. Not that Howard was any kind of paradise of consciousness. I'm talking about students. Go to Fisk and take a look at Fisk and any number of schools, the school where Cleve is president, Voorhees.

Wise: But still the graduate schools take the kids from Black schools first.

Cobb: Anyway, that's a little deviation from, except in the sense that music and song if you will flows out of the culture, and if the culture is shifting so dramatically, then that is part of the explanation for the diminishment of song, maybe. I don't know. There are lots of questions related to music and song. I don't know if we can answer them around this table or not. I mean, how important for instance is the demographic shift from the south to the north in terms of song. Or rural to urban in terms of song and song tradition. Does it mean that older traditions begin to shrink? The kinds of things that were common when we were kids or certainly when I was a kid—my father started out as a minister in the A.M.E. church. And music there, I mean I don't know to what extent that is all diminished. I mean things that were just routine.

Fikes: [55:47] Well they haven't completely diminished, as a matter of fact. When we used to go to church, singing was devotion. There was the deacons in the front of the church. You had the singing, [singing] "Shine on me. Shine on me." And then there was prayer. And after prayer, scripture. And after scripture, another song. It was devotion hour. Now you have praise. Completely different from fifty years ago. "Shine" You don't hear moans no more when the spirit is high. Preachers preaching. "Oh mama, Lord have mercy." You don't hear that anymore. Matter of fact, Smithsonian, Bernice [Johnson Reagon] for a long time was traveling south to different churches just to find churches that did the old moan. You still can find sisters shouting and stuff, but all those traditions of things that inspired us so much back then, has nearly about disappeared.

Watkins: [57:14] And see in our church, you know, the good A.M.E. we took away the excuses in terms of that whole devotional piece because we started out with the devotion that said, [singing] "Guide me,

oh thou great Jehovah. Pilgrim through this barren land. I been weak..." [ Laughter] I mean so, I am weak but thou are strong.

Neblett: That's a thing to raise the spirit. They bring that out to get the spirit in the service.

Fikes: Charged to keep by having God to glorify.

Neblett: That's right, and when everybody started singing that stuff together, it was like the roof was going to come off that church. I mean, the kind of harmony, everything, you had everything there. You had every note in the book there. And when everybody sang what they felt. And when it came through it was something, and it looked like the roof was going to come off that church when they all got together and started singing that. And when the spirit was high, that's when the preacher got it.

Fikes: And spoiled it.

Watkins: One thing I want to say that further to me, bears witness in terms of the beat being the thing is because I remember in our church when we were getting folks ready for the choir, we used to sing what we called, we would do the notes. Do-re-me-fa-so

Long: Shape notes.

Watkins: And folks, in regular programs, my daddy and them would do them note things, and folks get just as upbeat and spiritual flowing in doing the notes before we get to the words.

Fikes: That's the choir room.

Watkins: That has to do with that beat.

Long: Long meter.

Neblett: I mean they just put it out there and let it flow. They just let it flow with the spirit. Just let it flow, and everybody would get in there. Everybody had their own little bit and everything was in there. Everything. And it worked. And the spirit got into that thing, that whole process.

Cobb: And you can still hear that today in Albany in that church across the street from the museum. Go there, I forget, they have a little small civil rights museum in Albany, church. You still hear that.

Long: You still hear that in Durham County but you have to go out to the county. You see, you can't get that in Durham.

Neblett: What used to amaze me was hearing those sopranos coming in and do their thing. You got the altos. I mean you heard everything in there, and it was a—I used to sit back and just listen because

hadn't heard it where I was raised up. I knew about it. My father could do it, but we was in a place where they didn't do that. And when I got into the church where they were doing it, and the whole church would come together. And I said, "Wow."

Watkins: The piece that got me was the bass. My bass was the king bass.

Neblett: I love the bass.

Cobb: And there's another piece of this discussion I want to bring in and consciously, and that centers on Appalachia. An area that's poor, oppressed in many ways, and I'm just wondering, is there a tradition that's similar to this in Appalachia and particularly in the areas where there was agitation for change, areas that say Myles was working in back in the thirties and forties and what not. What's comparable if anything? And what's not? Can we talk about freedom songs in that sense too?

Carawan: [1:02:02] Well, I'll talk just a little bit from a personal perspective because we had the interesting experience

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Carawan: my experience being at Highlander 1960 to 1965, and then hearing the challenge from the Civil Rights Movement. Alright you institutions that are based more in white communities, you need to be doing your work in white communities. You need to be building allies for the freedom movement, and you need to be working where racism lives. And Myles in particular, as the director of Highlander, felt that that was a very appropriate call, and that it was a good time for Highlander to shift it's focus. And so Highlander did shift its focus between 1965 and the rest of the sixties. And a lot, there was a big changeover in the staff at Highlander, but Guy and I, partly because Guy had a lot of background in other musics than just in the Black South, were kept on to go up into the mountains to see what we could learn. To see what were the parallels with the freedom movement. And it was very challenging. First we had to go and see what people, when you said that people know what the problems are but aren't sure what to do about it. We needed to go up and listen and hear what are people identifying as the problems, and then begin to look at how is any kind of cultural resource sustaining some of that work. And it was a great, great learning experience. [1:33] I mean I was talking with at lunch with Leah and Rose about the parallels in term of the music. It's a different musical tradition in Appalachia. It's a lot of individual voices telling the stories of the struggles. And a lot of guitar accompaniment and all that to those stories, but the churches had the long meter church music in the old regular Baptist Church and you know. But the difference was in the churches in the Deep South where you had the tradition, the music, you also had the tradition of the struggle, and a lot of the word about what needed to be done was brought forth in the churches. I'm thinking about Johns Island now and Essau Jenkins. You had all the good music but then you had Essau Jenkins talking about how important it was to register to vote and all that. The old regular Baptist churches in the mountains were very conservative and were not reaching out around any of the issues, whatever social justice work was going on was not being carried through the churches. And a lot of the churches were pretty much under thumb, I would say, of the coal industry, which had everything else under its thumb too. But I mean, so there's a whole history that I

could talk about in terms of Highlander's work doing comparable workshops that brought together both the people who were working on the issues along with the cultural resources to try to let people, first of all understand there's a history of music and other forms of culture that sustain struggle, and then also, what are the contemporary forms that are supporting that now. [3:21] But I just wanted to jump ahead—because I thought about this when you were talking Charlie—about the young people because there's a big movement of young people in Appalachia now. A lot of it is around trying to look at economies that are going to replace coal because coal is finished, you know. So there are a lot of young people who culturally and identity-wise want to stay in Appalachia, and they're very committed to staying there. But they're looking at how can we do that? What are the economies? And parallel to that is a huge cultural piece. So it's very encouraging to me. Right at the time of the Trump campaign, we were hearing about Appalachia and how they're all going to support Trump and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah—these young people are coming in. They're saying, we're so lucky that we live in this region. First of all, we have all this energy around working on the social justice issues. And then we have all these people who really care about their culture, and that means the older culture but also contemporary things. To me, it's a great story. [4:35] I just, I feel like it's very different culturally than the freedom movement, but so much of what we've talked about today. The fighting for your rights, and the culture that makes you feel powerful while you're doing that. All of that is there.

Cobb. Can it be heard in contemporary music from Appalachia?

Carawan: There's that other thing. Let's talk about the commercialization of music, and the question of what's available to people. I mean, of course it can be heard if you're looking for it and you're going to the right places, or you know who on YouTube has it. You know I feel like our whole culture has been so commodified in terms of what's available in the mainstream and also how you take that through your earbuds or whatever, it's not a participatory. I mean, I think that has a huge effect, so that would be true in Appalachia. But I'm saying there are a lot of places in Appalachia where people do get together to do the music. There are institutions in Appalachia, not only Highlander, but Appalshop, places that really support that and makes films about it, recordings about it.

Neblett: [5:48] See, we did a tour, freedom singers, of eastern Kentucky, and we didn't know how we were going to do it.

Cobb: When was this?

Neblett: 1993. We did a tour of eastern Kentucky.

Carawan: This is the Freedom Singers you're talking about.

Neblett: We did concerts at these colleges, and those kids there were stunned. They were just like stunned. And they asked questions, a lot of question. And I told them that eastern Kentucky reminded me of South Africa. You got more resources than any other place in Kentucky right up here, but you got the poorest people. I say, they taking that—they got beautiful roads that they use to take out this coal.



Take it out of your community, to take it out. And your schools, they're poor. They're in bad shape. We went around to high schools. We went to junior high schools to sing, and all of them were in bad shape. And we told them this, and yet teachers from that college, they followed us around everywhere we went. They went to every concert that we did. They followed us from school to school. And we went to Appalshop, everywhere. Harlan County. Those counties, a lot of those counties Blacks didn't go into them. I mean they had Black policeman, state troopers who they would assign up there. They'd try to discourage them from state troopers. But those people had an hear. They heard. They saw how they identified with Black people and the plight of Black people in that area.

Rose Carden: Did you work—at that time, did you travel to any of the Black communities and churches in Appalachia?

Neblett: Yeah, every town we went to we tried to find a Black church in there where we'd do a concert because they weren't necessarily at those events. So we found on Sundays, those Black churches, we would go and sing.

Wise: [8:23] What I want to say about our experience when I was working with the network and we were bringing all over the South—so for me, the similar things culturally, the folk in Appalachia have first of all, a serious song tradition. A lot of people sing in their homes. Neighbors come. I mean, it's not so much the mass church experience, but people are singing all the time, together, as a form of entertainment. And a lot of it has to do with commenting on what's going on. But also, they are also very anchored in land, so that was a real similar cultural notion as Black folk in the Deep South. But it's also been with Native Americans, so just sort of building on what the traditions are that people have had. And then the other thing I was going to say is what I've found in being here in North Carolina, there's a lot of Scotch-Irish folks up in the mountains from here, and they're relatively isolated. But there's this tradition of revolutionary Irish songs that some people would know. So it's like, depending on what they can reach back to, there are threads definitely there.

Cobb: [9:46] Where do we want to go from here? Bobby Womack.

Carawan: Let's see. Let's see.

Cobb: Yeah, ok. I'm going to get my royalty check. Anyway, I want to get back to this question I sort of half asked earlier about both the impact of the freedom song—or not the impact, the convergence if you will, of freedom songs in the sixties and the Movement we were involved in in the Deep South and the chants we're hearing with the Movement for Black Lives in this period of the 21st century. The piece—I think I asked this but I didn't quite hear an answer—yes, you can spot the enthusiasm among those who are chanting as in the Freedom Schools, at Haley Farm, or at the Dream Defenders' conference I was attending last month. But the part I didn't quite get an answer to, your opinion about, has to do with once you get beyond those participants, does it have the same kind of impact in the community or in a congregation that the freedom songs had? Do they act to mobilize a community, if you will, in the way freedom songs acted? At least sometimes, I've seen it happen certainly in parts of

the South. The singing and then people are ready to take on or challenge anything, and it had an impact beyond the Freedom Singers if you will. You see what I, I don't know if I phrased that question in a way that could be clearly understood.

Neblett: [12:04] I think the difference was that the South, the songs and the Movement was Christian based, it was church-based. And in the North, it wasn't so. It was a question. The South kind of accepted to a certain extent, the concept of nonviolence, but the kids in the North said, "Hell no." They weren't part of it, and that was more of spiritual movement. Something that people were used to. Something they could digest and be a part of. And I think it's a whole different thing with older and younger people and chants now. I don't know. Although, I enjoy it. And I've enjoyed being in the midst of all that energy. I enjoyed being in the midst of all that energy.

Cobb: My question is whether or not that energy gets beyond the room, outside the room. Whether it's that big tent that people were gathering in at the Haley Farm.

Carawan: I can't really see the grandmothers joining in the chants. Well maybe some of them.

Wise: Well, Charlie, there's also in general, culturally or musically, this whole field of rap which was not our moment. There's no choir singing. There's no choral harmony in rap music. It's much more individual stuff, but there's a lot of rap tradition that is political. It's not all junk. It's not all personal, so I think that as a mass activity, it's really different. But what even looking at—I was just thinking it wasn't just so much today, just going from the work in the Deep South and SNCC, and you think about the Black Panthers, I don't ever remember hearing them sing a song.

Long: Oh no, no, no.

Wise: There were? In my experience, I never heard a song.

Long: Power to the People. Black Power to the People.

Wise: That was chants though. Those were not—I'm not saying they didn't have anything. They didn't have

Cobb: They did a whole album of Black Panther songs. Elaine Brown made a whole album of Black Panther songs in the, I forget now, the late sixties or early seventies. You know, she started out as a singer before she became—she eventually becomes chairman or chairperson of the Panther Party. But she has an album, I assume. I don't know that it's still in existence, but it was actually an album of Black Panther songs.

Watkins: One of the major differences as I see it is back then, there was a place, institution, etc. that legitimized, at least for the Black community and for some of the white community, the Civil Rights Movement. See, I don't see the same as it relates now to young folks in the Movement. I don't see an

institution, etc., that gives the folks, to any of those people who were scared as all get out, to be a part of SNCC and what have you. They justify—if they got cornered—they justify them doing what they did because our church is a part of that, and our church asked us to do thus and so. And that gave them a way out to overcome, to present something that would help them with their fear. But today, I don't see that, that institution or those institutions out there, that is legitimizing people being a part of the whole movement the young folks are really trying to get going.

Neblett: [16:46] That's a dialogue I think needs to be held with young people because we don't know in depth. We need to have that dialogue.

Fikes: You were asking if the chants had any, would spread through the community.

Cobb: Through the community like our songs.

Neblett: Use it as a teaching tool. We had a dialogue with it.

Cobb: I wrote down. Here's a chant from—they wrote it while I was there, so I wrote it down. "We don't need no cop rolling down our block. We'll make the violence stop. Drop it like it's hot." You know, they went around chanting that, and I could see people in the neighborhood relating to such a chant, but I don't see it in the same way that people will respond to "we ain't gonna let nobody turn me around" or something like that.

Watkins: There's one part, Charlie, for example that makes it hard for our older folks now to accept that. Just the phrase of "drop it like it's hot." [Laughter]

Fikes: That's the same way with rap. Look at how long rap has been around. That's their culture, just like

Cobb: And the other thing I know that goes along with the chants, which I don't think so much went along with freedom—there's a physical part of it. Drop it like it's hot and then they drop themselves. They drop. They bend their knees.

Watkins: What are you talking about?

Cobb: And I don't see.

Wise: That's where the spirit would come for sure.

Cobb: I'm very interested in—it's one of the questions I'm raising in my writing, to what extent do the ideas and behaviors of the young activists, how effective can they, or are they in the communities that need to be organized. There's lots of questions like that. You can sing, but can you chant. Can you do the physical motions that sometimes go along with that? I'm interested in that.

Carawan: [19:21] Well picking up on what Hollis said, what would there be that would be comparable to the mass meeting, for instance? Wouldn't there be great, with the Movement for Black Lives now, that was comparable to the mass meeting? I mean it wouldn't be a mass meeting, but something that brings a larger community together. I can see the chant that you just described—

Long: This is comparable to the mass meeting. No.

Carawan: I gotcha. I gotcha. That's like when I heard the Irish Ceilis, you could watch on your cell phone. That's different than filling the room with people to hear the music.

Long: Yeah, right. Well this is networking.

Carawan: Now I'm thinking of it as a strategy now for the Movement for Black Lives. Where would there be a gathering place for—I got your point.

Long: Oh, thank you.

Carawan: I'm still talking about a physical place where, for instance, that chanting with the dropping your knees, I mean I could see an older generation really appreciating that in a space, not wanting to do it, but I mean if it's important—[Laughter]

Cobb: I don't know if I could do it.

Carawan: I mean there are exceptions. I mean think it's a really good question how you do build a more community based movement.

Cobb: I don't think they're church centered the way, but they do have gatherings you know. I've been to outdoor gatherings.

Fikes: Well we were criticized as being children out there in the Movement, and you know, I remember quite a few times on protest, older Black women on the job that were protesting would say, "Y'all need to be in school somewhere. Out here embarrassing out." It's different today. We're going from rap now to Ferguson and all of this. We see where whoever rapped at us, and when you go to a rap concert, it's packed, but that's mostly for the younger generation. Now when rap first came out, now that generation are full blown adults now, so you got another generation that has come on out of rap. But what they've acquired, so now we got the chanting. And with the Black Lives Matter, now how is this really going to focus on the matter of—you know, you got words, you got the dance, but do you have the do. So these are the things, now for the younger generation, you know like I always tell them, I've been to a lot of the Black Lives Matter and all the cops and it's always controversy.

Neblett: Well rap, when it started off, it was very revolutionary.

Fikes: When it first started off.

Neblett: Everybody would listen to it.

Fikes: If I didn't run from the Ku Klux Klan, why would I run from a white man?

Neblett: Yeah. It was very revolutionary.

Fikes: But that was just one or two that was the first.

Neblett: But what happened is that rap artists who ran rap got bought off. You got people like Disney. I mean, Disney, those big corporations bought it off. And we saw rap change. It got pornographic, you see.

Fikes: It was all about money and power then.

Neblett: You see, pornographic. They bought it off, and now, who runs rap are these white institutions.

Watkins: [23:17] You know, one of the other things I think we have to look at, that thing that Worth just held up, what that's doing and has done to a lot of us. And that has caused us to want an instant, quick fix about any, all that we're doing. I had a couple of sessions with some young folks, and the issue that we had to deal with is to analyze what two different songs meant and how we saw them. One of the songs was, [singing] "I left my home in Georgia. Heading for the 'Frisco Bay. I got nothing to live for. Nothin's gonna come my way, so I'm sitting on the dock of the bay. Wasting time." So that was one. The other was [singing] "I was born by the river in a little tent. Just like the river, I've been running ever since. It's been a long time, a long time coming, but I know a change gonna come, oh yes it is." To talk about those, what do you get from them. What do you think is being projected as a part of that? And as a result of doing that, a lot of things came out, and they began to look at things, and "This dude sings like he's just going to give up on life." Well, you might as well go on out of here, if that's how he's feeling. But the other guys obvious in that he's had some hard times, but he ain't giving up on himself. He isn't giving up on his people. You know he knows that being persistent and keeping on keeping on, he going to bring it about. It's too often, but if I got that thing that Worth just showed him, I want some instant stuff. Hey look. You talking about next week. Can I get it later this evening?

Long: Yesterday.

Watkins: And why wasn't you here yesterday?

Long: Why wasn't you here yesterday.

Cobb: But in terms of—let me put this to you—in terms of what you sang, the Sam Cooke you just sang part of, or in part of any numbers of popular singers I can think of, would you agree that there was more

of a connection between the freedom struggle and the entertainment establishment, at least the Black entertainment establishment in the 1960s and seventies than there is now

Long: No.

Wise: Can I just, can I just add one thing before we get off rap? I just want to say that yes, the mainstream rap got bought off, but the other aspect of it, the technology allowed everybody to be able to do their own thing, so it's also an underground, constant replenishing. Folks putting their stuff out there. What that stuff is varies. But what I wanted to say, there has been in some of the community organizing, especially with kids who have been incarcerated and with kids in Africa for example who have been child soldiers, they've used rap and writing rap as a healing aspect of people both claiming their space and telling their story, but trying to get beyond it. So it's a different. It's still a cultural force. It may not look exactly like what we were involved with in the 1960s, but what I think the technology causes, which is a challenge, is that people don't come together physically to look each other in the eye, to share any kind of analysis. You can't do that in compartmentalizing with this. Texting, you know. So I feel like that's a big challenge for right now, in terms of you think about growth. And politically, socially, culturally, spiritually, you can't engage life, what does that mean? I feel that that's a big challenge for—

Cobb: [28:29] In terms of what you just said, about Africa in particular, if you follow African issues, you can't help but now that when it comes to civil society, organizations, which generally are challenging government establishment—Angola comes immediately to mind for instance. So does Kenya. Rap musicians play an important role in articulating challenges to these governments demanding. I mean that's the form that public expression has taken on young people, and precisely because it's just easier to do technologically. I mean you can produce and there are whole undergrounds in places like Nairobi and Zimbabwe. Rwanda. Angola and what not. Rap music—

Carden: Is it primarily male?

Cobb: There are female rap artists, but I could quantify it for you. But you said, you didn't think there was more of tie in the 1960s between the entertainment establishment—here I'm thinking of—and the Movement than there is today. When I say entertainment establishment, I mean groups like the Temptations. Some of the stuff that came out of Motown. Curtis Mayfield, and all that.

Fikes: All of them were talking about issues.

Cobb: I don't know.

Fikes: They do it their way today, but the sixties, they were doing keep on pushing.

Wise: Beyonce's stuff.

Fikes: Yeah. Beyonce is today. Temptations. Curtis Mayfield. The blues back then. But I don't know what the music is today.

Unidentified audience members: I think that talent used to push the industry, while now the industry pushes the talent. And so if they want to inject corporate interests or whatever into it, the artist is ok with that because they're not actually talented themselves, so it's really just marketing now. So where back in the day, you had somebody who was truly talented and once they got their platform, they could use it for however they wanted. Now it's like, we're giving you this platform, so you're really under our control. That's how I see it.

Fikes: True. That's how it is today.

Wise: Atlantic Record was very unhappy with Otis Reddings with how much he was giving and got direction and support to younger artists about how to survive in the industry. So it wasn't always a pretty picture. I mean, they had their constraints back then too.

Unidentified audience member: But it's like now, even if you look at entertainment in general, like LeBron James is the best basketball player in the world, so now here has a platform where he can talk about people writing Negro on his gate before the playoffs. But you're an artist and you were basically prepackaged and marketed in a certain way, then you're controlled by whoever created you, and you can't go outside of that. So once you have talent, you can use that to create your platform. You control your platform moreso. Now I'm saying, these people who don't have talent who are basically there because of whoever created them, they're slaves to that person. And that's a lot of what comes to us now because of the commercialization of music.

Cobb: But hasn't that always been true.

Neblett: That's what east-west violence was like.

Cobb: The what?

Neblett: The east west violence. That's rap. It's controlled.

Long: Right.

Deal: I was wondering if we could maybe go back to the sixties for a bit, and this is kind of based off of a comment that you made last, Mr. Neblett, in that when Stokely made the call for Black Power, it was kind of shift in terms of how the Freedom Singers saw their role. So I was wondering if you all could maybe elaborate on the evolution of freedom songs over the course of the sixties, both in terms of content and also fitting into the larger movement. And also, playing off of your comment and your experience with the Panthers and their not being a lot of song incorporated into those meetings, but how was that shift, over time?

Neblett: [33:12] Well, when Stokely came around with Black Power, and he called. SNCC, they put down the whole thing of nonviolence. Everything dried up. We didn't have no songs. We didn't have a song ready for that period. And we just kind of stopped. We just kind of stopped for a while. And we started back in the late seventies and the early eighties, we started singing again. We had done special things during that time, but we didn't get back in full, in any kind of thing until the seventies. The late seventies and early eighties we started singing again and people were ready for those songs.

Wise: Did you ever make a song up about Lowndes County or the MFDP?

Neblett: I don't think so.

Long: See there are two things happening here, I think. One is that the original Freedom Singers disbanded, and a new group of all male Freedom Singers emerged. And it was in that same historical period. So when did the Freedom Singers that consisted of Matthew and his brother and yourself and others began? What year?

Neblett: We began '64, '63, '64.

Long: Ok. That's earlier then. It's actually '64.

Neblett: Now that group, it went on for a while. That was the last group. But after that, there was no group. And then when the group, when the third group—

Long: So we're saying '64 to sixty-what? So when did the second group disband?

Neblett: '65.

Long: So just two years?

Neblett: Right. Then we put together another group, which was the first—got Rutha [Harris], Bettie Mae, myself, and Cordell. And Cordell. And that's when we started singing again.

Long: In the seventies?

Neblett: In the seventies.

Long: And from seventy-what until when? Until now? Ok. So that would be an important consideration. That's why I was trying to do that, to let you know you're talking, when you're saying, the Freedom Singers, we're talking about different configurations of singers with different types of songs, right.



Neblett: When the second group got, that was the group where Matthew was writing in, Marshall was writing in. Other people were writing songs, and it changed the whole context of the Freedom Singers.

Cobb: [36:40] Also, I mean it's a natural follow-up question to what you raised, Worth. How big of difference does it make when SNCC ceases to exist? And the Freedom Singers continue, but SNCC no longer continues. Does that affect either the music that you sing? The songs that you sing? Or anything about—

Neblett: Well, we sang new songs, but we did it in the context of the Movement in the South. You know, whether SNCC existed or not. The Movement in the South, and we sang those songs. And people were ready for them and embraced them. Like we still sing "This Little Light of Mine," and "Megar Evers" and those songs that still resonated with people.

Watkins: You know, one of the things that always been interesting for me is people constantly coming through Mississippi and asking about the work in Mississippi. And what did I do or what did I think about SNCC leaving? Going out of existence. So for me, it's well define what you're talking about because I thought I was just as much a part of SNCC as anybody else, and I know I have not left Mississippi, and I have discontinued. So I don't think I can answer the question that you asked me because I'm still here. MacArthur Cotton is still here. Charles McLaurin is still here. So here we are!

Neblett: We're still the SNCC Freedom Singers.

Watkins: So that was one of the—

Wise: I'm curious. Did you ever do songs about the war? I was just thinking about the time you were talking about Matthew writing songs about the current struggles, right. So I know the war was a huge divisive thing, but there was activity going on across the South and in the rest of the country about the war. But what happened to that in terms of song?

Neblett: I don't know.

Long: "I'm a demonstrating G.I. from Fort Bragg. The way they treat my people makes me mad." That's Matthew.

Neblett: My home is in Danville. [39:27] See, I didn't go to that war either. They called me up, and they called me and I didn't know how to stay out. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew I wasn't going to war. I wasn't going. So they got me in California in the club. I knew there were cops. You know by the way they walked, they looked. I knew it was the police, and half time, they came back and told me I was up for three counts of draft evasion. Three counts. And I was going to have to go back to my draft board that Wednesday because that was a Saturday. That Wednesday the next week, I'd go to jail. And I was wondering how come they didn't put me in jail already. You must want me to go to that war. He wanted to get me killed. So I went the next—my draft board was in East St. Louis, Illinois, but I went

down to Atlanta and told them I couldn't make it. I'm here, I couldn't make it. I'm here to be drafted. And sorry, we'll draft your Black ass right down here. I thought alright. So I came back the next day, but I wouldn't take off my clothes. Did my written test, but I wouldn't take off my clothes, and the big sergeant there—I was smoking a cigarette too. They said no smoking. This big old raw-boned guy, he slapped that cigarette halfway across the room. But anyway, I wouldn't take off my clothes, and they sent me to the psychiatrist.

Cobb: That's exactly where I wound up.

Neblett: [41:15] They sent me to a psychiatrist. They made me mad. I wasn't scared. I was angry. And I told them, I'm not answering any more of your questions. I'm ready to fight. I'm ready to kill my enemy. I'm ready to kill my enemy, and I want my gun right now. And he looked at me. I kicked his desk. Rrooom. I told you I'm ready to kill my enemy right now. Give me my gun. And he got up and went out of there and got some more people and came back. Man, I really kicked his desk. Said, I told you to bring me my—where's my gun. I wanted my gun. And he looked at me. Nobody said a word. And he went back in there, and the guy said, "Get out of here." And the longest walk I ever made was down those long federal steps. I said, they are going to shoot me in the back. I had to walk down those steps deliberately, like I owned the steps. And I finally got down those steps, got in the car, drove back to the office, and they wrote out a ticket. I said, get me out of here now. And they wrote me out a plane ticket. I went to the airport, got on the plane, and after I got about five hundred miles away from there, I could breath. I could breath. And I still don't know how I got away.

Cobb: [42:39] You were classified undoubtedly as the same classification I had, which was 1-Y. Not to be used in cases of extreme national emergency, and then to be used with caution. The 1-Y classification.

Watkins: My 1-Y—

Neblett: They classified me 1-Y and 4-F.

Cobb: I had that classification. Ivanhoe had that classification.

Watkins: Whatever mine was do it for physically unfit.

Cobb: 1-Y

Wise: They put all the other brothers, Michael [Simmons] and—

Cobb: Michael went to jail!

Wise: In Atlanta

Long: I think we've gotten to war stories. But one of the things—

Cobb: And by the way, Matthew's song was not so much about Vietnam as it was about a G.I. who was protesting in Danville, Virginia.

Long: [43:39] But one of the things that I'd like to see, is it possible for us at some point to kind of define what a freedom song is?

Cobb: Yeah, we can do that tomorrow.

Long: And also to look at it from the standpoint of, because one of the things I would talk about is the commonality between freedom songs and the other songs that made that song possible. And it's antecedents. Now because I think I'm gonna probably come up with the possibility of—no, just that for right now.

Cobb: We have all night to think about it.

Long: But I'm gonna come up with a concept of a freedom song as a—I think at one time spirituals were called message music—as a message, as a message song. As a song that communicates something and then we can see if some of that—

Cobb: Well you could make the argument of course that song from the point of which the first Blacks were offloaded and sold into slavery and began to sing marks the beginning of freedom songs. Taking from the 16th century all the way through Public Enemy.

Long: If you were romantic.

Cobb: There's nothing wrong with being romantic in the freedom movement. Perfectly legitimate. Seems to me. And that, when you say antecedents that we're exploring here. DuBois called it sorrow songs. I never much liked that characterization because I thought they were about more than sorrow. When you listen to them or thought about what they were saying.

Watkins: I think we have already mentioned a few. For example, the whole as we saying in the churches, the whole song of "Steal Away." Steal away to Jesus when talking about the slave ships, the slave ship named Jesus. Couple others that we already mentioned.

Cobb: I think that Bernice's closing remarks at SNCC's 50th were brilliant in respect to that very point. And when she characterized the whole tradition of Black song at the end of the 50th conference.

Long: You just basically paraphrased Mark Miles Fisher who was the minister at White Rock Baptist Church, who did his dissertation at the University of Chicago in which he was basically saying—he was talking about the double entendre of people saying you can have your thing, but give me Jesus. But he's saying that is a ship. He's talking about people trying to return to Africa, and it was brilliant for his time.

Neblett: [48:00] The other thing about those, I don't know what you call it, sorrow songs. But when Africans were on that ship speaking different languages, whether they just started moaning in the spirit, or they came together in the spirit. The only way they could really communicate was through the spirit. And they sang through the spirit, not words, you see. And they called them sorrow songs. But the fact is, they sang together. They got together through singing. Through music, and that's the only way they had to communicate.

Long: But the moan, the moan was universal.

Neblett: That was universal.

Watkins: That's what we would say in our church. You get the spirit going. You start moaning, and you'd say, the devil can't hear or understand what we're talking about. [Laughter]

Wise: There's also—primary was rhythms because the different cultures that people were coming from, they didn't have the same singing traditions. But they definitely had rhythm, and that was the first thing that was taken away was the drum. That people would play with spoons or whatever. They tried to take away the ability to beat a rhythm.

Long: But you can't take it away.

Wise: But I'm just saying what white folk went after was—

Neblett: The brothers would use the canes. They had that rhythm. You could hear it in the churches. They'd use their feet. Their canes, and their hands, and you had the same rhythm going.

Watkins: Now there was a brother that used to come to Highlander for a little while that was from up in—

Carawan: Was from where?

Watkins: From up in the mountains. He did the spoon, the spoon thing. Ed Cabet.

Carawan: Ed Cabell

Long: Cabell, Cabell, Cabell. It's really actually North Carolina. He was in North Carolina at one time. Asheville.

Carawan: He lives outside of Rome, Georgia now. But he still comes over to Boone once a year where they honor him. He's still singing. He's had a stroke, but he's still singing.

Neblett: My father could beat. They called him bones. Bones. And he set that thing, he played them things with all them rhythms to do it. He'd have two of 'em in each hand, and we just sat and watched him. I tried—well Chico got a little of that, he could beat a little of it. But he never could do it like my father.

Long: [51:10] But there was a call that went with it too. Oh cah dad, dum dum. Chant that went with the bone. I took with the Smithsonian in what sixty—seventy in Mississippi from Yazoo City who did bones, but who did a series of chants—

Watkins: Chants to go along with them.

Carawan: Maybe these young people who are chanting, they need to get the bones out.

Neblett: I used to be fascinated by them, you know.

Cobb: There are chants, there are a lot of stomping that goes along with the chanting that they do. A lot of rhythmic stomping. Like I said, there's a lot of physical exertion in their freedom song.

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.

Long: And the hole was the hole too.

Watkins: Right, the hole was 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.

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.

Carawan: Good, good.

Cobb: by this particular point

Watkins: [54:40] 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.

Hogan: Charlie, this might be something more appropriate for tomorrow, but I've got a keen eye on the clock and I know

Cobb: Oh yeah. We're coming near the end of our time.

Long: Right, I could tell.

Hogan: Maybe tomorrow you might talk a little bit too about some of the freedom singers that aren't here around the table, just to get a little more of a portrait of the early folks that were involved in that. I would love to find out more too about what the reception was. You know, Chuck talked a little bit about how people got lifted when they were in the room with the Freedom Singers, but it would be so helpful to get some specifics if people have them about how that was an organizing tool, or how people responded.

Cobb: Where is Bertha Gober? Does anybody know?

Fikes; Every time we get together.

Cobb: I know.

Watkins: And nobody knows. Say is she still in—I haven't seen her. Has anybody?

Fikes: I haven't seen her since she moved—

Long: No, she was in Atlanta, Georgia in the early seventies.

Watkins: That's my understanding. She was somewhere. The somewhere was in Atlanta. The same thing happened in terms of when we use to ask about Annell Ponder. It was the same kind of thing.

Cobb: And Annie Moody of CORE?

Fikes: Did you find her?

Cobb: Annie Moody has passed away.

Watkins: They gave

Long: Annell passed away.

Watkins: They gave, I think they did a street or something in honor of Anne Moody.

Cobb: Where? In Mississippi?

Watkins: Yeah. Where she's from.

Cobb: Wilkinson County. Somewhere down there. Your neighborhood.

Watkins: Centreville. I think that's where I'm talking about. Centreville. That was supposed to be happening yesterday. Or the day before?

Long: What is the song we're going to end with? What is the most appropriate song right now? He's hoarse. That was manipulating. I'm sorry. Old SNCC. Let's go.

Watkins: There's one that we used to sing as a warner to those that were working in the civil rights movement, [singing] "You better leave segregation alone. You better leave segregation alone. Because they love segregation like a hound loves his bone. His bone." [Laughter]

Wise: [58:57] Do you know where that song emerged from?

Cobb: That was Jim Bevel I think.

Long: And Bernard Lafayette.

Neblett: That quartet.

Carawan: The Nashville quartet.

Watkins: [59:13] [singing] "Well, I went down to the dime store to-" Or get something to eat. [singing] "Well I went down to the dime store to get me something to eat. The next thing I knew I was knocked off my feet. You better leave segregation alone. Because they love segregation like hound dog loves a bone. A bone." [Laughter]

Long: The right song for the right time.

Carawan: Charlie, do you want to say anything about the panel, what we should?

Cobb: The panel is just going to be a short version of this conversation. I'll go over the same questions, but it's just for a public audience. That's all. It'll just maybe start here with you all discussing your own entrance into the Movement and entrance into song, lack for a better phrase.

Wise: Can I encourage you all to do more singing.

Cobb: But you can sing or you can—

### **2017.09.19 Music and the Movement panel, North Carolina Central University**

John Gartrell: Good evening, everyone. Good evening. Good evening. Good evening. This is tremendous to have this turnout this evening. I want to first introduce myself. My name is John Gartrell. I'm the director of the John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture in the Rubenstein Library at Duke University. I've been given the charge this evening to give an overview and a brief introduction of the program we're going to be having this evening. First and foremost, I just want to say thank you to the folks here at North Carolina Central, particularly Dr. Jarvis Hall and his cohorts. We are so appreciative of you opening your doors for us to have this event here this evening. I would say, maybe a little over a year ago, we started having events here at Central as a part of the partnership we've been having at Duke between ourselves, the SNCC Legacy Project, the Duke University Libraries, and the Center for Documentary Studies. And it's just been wonderful to have a chance to come over to Central to share with you all remembrances of the Movement with veterans who participated themselves. So thank you for opening your doors, and thank you for coming out this evening.

So just to give folks an overview of the project and why we we're all gathered here tonight. A little over three years ago, partners from the SNCC Legacy Project, the Duke University Libraries, and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke sat around the table, and we got to talking about ways that we could contribute to a project that would preserve and tell history. Not solely from the perspective of history, but also in pushing it forward in how that history can and has influenced activism today. And that conversation has manifested itself in what we call a documentary website—the SNCC Digital Gateway. And you can find it at [snccdigital.org](http://snccdigital.org). On that website, you can find many of the stories of folks on the panel this evening, along with many other members of SNCC, mentors, local people that worked alongside that really pushed the Movement in a direction that it needed to go. All driven by young



people, and it's great to see so many 19-20-21-year-old folks because y'all was them. And them is y'all, and I get that from y'all. And hopefully you will see yourselves in some of the stories that are shared here this evening. So for the occasion we are here to talk about music in the Movement. Our esteemed panel which will be introduced in just a moment, will share with you some reflections of their time in the Movement, and how music, really SNCC above any of the civil rights organizations really placed an emphasis on the Black aesthetic. You think about, voting rights, you think about grassroots organizing, but you can't talk about SNCC without talking about music, art, literature, poetry. It was such an important thread to their activism, so hopefully we'll have a chance to learn more about that. That project has been going on for the last two-and-a-half years in May 2018, but the website will live on for as long as Duke has said that it will live on. And I encourage you all to go to [snccdigital.org](http://snccdigital.org) to learn more about these stories. So for the course of this evening, after I put the microphone down, I will turn it over to Charlie Cobb who will be the moderator for this evening. He will introduce our panelists. Following that, we will have a selection by the North Carolina Central Vocal Jazz and Gospel Ensemble and Choir, and then we will go right into our panel discussion. And before I close, I want to say there are some materials at the back table for sale this evening. A book by Brother Hollis Watkins, and we have two Freedom Singers songs and CDs available for sale once the event has concluded. So thank you again, and I'll turn it over to Charlie.

Charlie Cobb: [5:14] Good evening. First, before introducing the panel, a few thoughts. Not long because I'm a writer and better at the keyboard than at the microphone. But an important thing to understand about this panel is that 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. Now thinking about freedom songs, which is really what we here to talk about, it reminds me—and I want to say this before introducing the panel—that the core of American music, American song, and the core of Black music—which I think is what defines American music—is the idea of freedom. And whether you're looking at Black life in the 15<sup>th</sup> century or Black life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the idea of freedom has always been very much integrated in song. Whether it's the chants of groups like Black Lives Matter or BYP100 or whether it's the music of SNCC in the 1960s. I want you to think about that or think of that about the people I'm now going to introduce starting on my left here.

[8:16] Chuck Neblett comes off the campus of the University of Illinois in Carbondale, Illinois. Made his way into the Movement through campus protests, into community protests, and eventually to involvement in SNCC, and was one of the founding members of the SNCC Freedom Singers. And I should say before going any further, I'll ask each one of the panelists to elaborate in their own presentations to the extent that they wish on their movement backgrounds and biographies and as well as their comments and reflections on the music. Hollis Watkins, whose book is in the back and you should read

it. Brother Hollis: Sankofa of a Movement Man. Hollis was the first of the young Mississippians to commit full-time to the Movement in Mississippi, specifically who worked with SNCC. And has continued to work with an organization he founded and is very important in Mississippi today, Southern Echo. And Hollis is also one of the well-known voices in the Movement. Bettie Mae Fikes was just—how old were you? 16? Bettie Mae Fikes from Selma, Alabama was just 16-years-old as she made her way into the Movement with varying levels of support from family. And Bettie Mae, I would argue is one of the most powerful voices of song that you will hear. In some ways, she redefined—and maybe she'll talk about this—she redefined what movement singing was. Candie Carawan was an exchange student from California at Fisk University when the sit-ins broke out, and became a part of that sit-in movement. But also became a singing voice, along with her husband, Guy Carawan, who also played a major role in the way the song “We Shall Overcome” made it into the Movement in the 1960s. Also—and maybe Candie will talk about this—brings a great depth of understanding about the broader influences, such as John Z[[unsure 11:09]] of South Carolina and how that affected and shaped the singing of freedom songs. Because remember there was Movement before there was SNCC. And those movements had song, and they influenced SNCC. Candie has commented, I hope she will elaborate on about that. And Worth Long who was one of SNCC's leader, and a native of this city. He lived not too far from this campus is perhaps—speaking personally—the most knowledgeable person I know when it comes to Black song and Black culture. If you want to get at the depth of Black song and Black culture, Worth Long here is the go to guy. And I won't even presume to make a suggestion about how and what he should present to this audience. So I'm going to start over here with Chuck. I will say, if you all remember what we did this morning. Start a little biographically, but expand it some in terms of how you make you way your song. And first the ensemble is. [12:54]

#### North Carolina Central Vocal Jazz and Gospel Ensemble and Choir

Director NCCU ensemble: As they are coming up, I just want to welcome you. We are honored to have you here and excited to be here. We are from North Carolina Central University, and it's a combined group of the University Choir and the NCCU Vocal Jazz Ensemble. We'll be joined by instrumentalist, Trey Billy Thomas, on drums. We're gonna sing, “Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around.”

[14:03] Singing Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around.

Worth Long: [18:29] Now what would happen—just a minute—what would happen if they came back and just did one verse of that and we all participated? Could we do that? [Applause] I wonder what would happen. [Ensemble returns]. That was wonderful.

Audience and ensemble sings one more verse of “Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around.”

Charlie Cobb: [20:40] And before Chuck speaks, I'd like to thank these young people here for what they gave us. [Applause]

Chuck Neblett: Yeah, you started something. Getting us ready to go and hit the street. My name is Charles Neblett, and I got into the Movement from Cairo, Illinois. From Carbondale really. I was in school there at SIU [Southern Illinois University]. I like to say that my family was always involved in the Movement in some way. My father was born in 1887, and he died 93 at 106 years old. So he had a lot of stories to tell. And my mother was a singer. She was a great singer. She was a soprano. And my father was a guitarist. He had a great guitar. He played jazz. He played gospel, blues. Only reason he stopped—he was very religious, and he said every time he picked up that guitar and played, the blues was on him. And he stopped playing. He stopped playing in clubs. He stopped playing all together. He played for us around the house. When I was in school at SIU, they had quite a few Blacks on campus. And I organized a lot of Black people to protest on that campus because they were segregating their housing and so forth. But when it came down to it, the kids started crying, saying they couldn't do it, because it was the first time that anyone in their families had gone to college. And if they messed up and got kicked out of college, it wasn't going to work. There was four of us—we just wrote a scandal sheet about what the president was doing. What the Dean of Men was doing. It was true what he was doing. Hanging out in the Black community, going with the Black ladies and so forth. We had it all on a scandal sheet. We scattered it all over campus one morning at about four o'clock. [23:09] And we got back to campus the next day, they was waiting for us. They knew who it was. Somebody had squealed on us. Somebody had talked. And they knew exactly who it was, and he brought us in his office, the president. And he asked us who was doing all this writing. And it cracked me up. One of the guys with us, he was doing all of this—he was flunking English. He had no papers—he didn't have no time to write the papers. But I told him that we weren't interested in who wrote the paper. We were interested in the problems that we were having on that campus because he was discriminating. We talked about the housing. So that was we was concerned about. We weren't concerned about nobody writing papers. That was what we were concerned about. And he got to listening, and he said, "If I take care of this next semester, will you guys behave yourselves?" And I was shocked. He said, "I said, if I stop this mess, next semester, I will take care of it." I said, "Yeah." He said, "Do we have a deal?" I said, "Yeah, we have a deal." And he did it.

[24:23] So we moved from there down to Cairo—John O'Neal, myself, and a couple of other guys—went down to Cairo, Illinois and started a movement down there. And let me tell you, that was the meanest place—this was Illinois—that was one of the meanest places I've ever been at. That's the first time I went to jail, in Cairo, Illinois. And I went about five times because every time we went out and did a demonstration, they'd pick on us. We're going back to jail. But anyway, from Cairo, Illinois—in fact, we demonstrated at the swimming pool. How bad it was. Kids would die, drowning in the Mississippi River because there were currents in it. All kinds of currents in it. Currents. And our kids would drown because they didn't know how to swim. Two or three people a year would die. And we demonstrated trying to open up the swimming pool—the public pool—for Black kids to swim in. They wouldn't do it. We climbed the fence. Chico—my brother—he put a hat on his head. Pulled it down, he looked like a white boy. He looked in, and as soon as he got in, they realized he was a Black kid. And he went and jumped right in that pool. And they went after him. Right in that pool. And I was going over the fence. I was going over that fence because they had my brother over there, and they were going to get him. And I looked back, I looked up from the ground and that whole fence had turned Black. All those kids were coming over that fence. We jumped into the pool. We jumped in the pool, clothes and all. And the

police—the white kids got out. They got out of that pool. And the police is trying to get us out. And we said, “You come in here and get us. We ain’t coming out.” And the police decided that they were going to come in that water after us. But anyway, before they, before they’d desegregate that pool, they filled it up with concrete. They filled it up with concrete. And it’s that way today.

[26:31] And after that, we demonstrated, and we had a Movement going in Cairo. They told us we better not come to Missouri. That was a threat. I mean they come out and told us, “You come over this bridge, over into Missouri, you going to have it.” So Charles Dunlap and myself decided we’d go to Missouri. So we went across and went to Missouri. And as it happened, we ran into a sheriff there, and he was rich. He didn’t have nothing else to do but be the sheriff. And he told, “I don’t see why you haven’t demonstrated long ago.” Said it’s good people here. All the good people in my jail. He says, “You know, I’m with you. But they told me to keep you in my jail. That’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to keep you in my jail.” I went to St. Louis with him. They carried prisoners. He came back and made them people serve me. I was never. Made ‘em serve me. I wouldn’t order nothing that I couldn’t see. I was nervous. And the only thing I could see was coffee. And then they asked me, “How do you like your coffee?” really mean. And I said, “I like it Black and sweet, like I like my women.” [Laughter] And they laughed at that, and they even laughed. And they brought me my coffee. Another time the sheriff would take me to weigh cotton for him. He had a big plantation. If I wanted to get out of jail, because they only way they told me I’d get out of that jail was if I’d leave town, and I wasn’t going to leave town. And I was weighing cotton for him, an old lady come up there with fifty pounds, I’d put a hundred pounds. I had them Black people scared to bring me their cotton because they didn’t know what was gonna happen. And when I did, I inflated everything. And when I did, the sheriff came back, looked at his books, and said, “You got me, didn’t you?” And I said, “You’re right. These people are breaking their backs, picking your cotton, and you ain’t paying them more than this. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.” He said, “I might be ashamed of myself, but you ain’t weighing no more cotton for me.” So that’s the only thing that broke open that Movement down there. When people went back to their cotton field and told the public what I’d done. And they said they thought they knew it was serious, and that Movement started. I finally got out of jail.

[29:05] Then I ran across SNCC people. I ran across Cordell [Reagon] and a lot of people in Cairo, Illinois. But they came to Missouri. It was Jim Forman, Paul Brooks, and some more. Ruby Doris Smith. And they asked me to join—be a field secretary for SNCC—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And to come to Chicago and help them out in a thing they were putting out called the Gospel for Freedom. And that’s when I went to Chicago and met all of these—the Hollis Watkinses from Mississippi, Peacocks, and so forth—and I helped put it together. We sang up there and brought them down to Mississippi. Going down there, the guys were teasing me, telling me I was too middle class, and I wasn’t going to make it. And I was looking at them, “If you can make it down there, I’m sure I can.” But sure enough, when I got there and saw the house we were staying in with those double barrel buckshots in the doors and the walls, and I said, “Whoa! What did I get in to.” But anyway, that’s when I started working in Mississippi. But while I was there, Jim Forman called and asked me if I would sing with a group called the Freedom Singers. That they wanted to put together a group of people to sing the songs that we all always sang as freedom songs. And really, they wanted to put together—we wanted it to be

a motivator. Not singers, not entertainers, but be organizers. We wanted to organize through song, to raise money and recruit people. So that's what we did. We rode down there to organize, and we took us to the Newport Folk Festival, to the Carnegie Hall. We went everywhere. To Cobo Hall in Detroit. And we sang everywhere. We sang at house parties. Everywhere we'd get a venue, we sang and carried the message of the Movement through song. And the thing about the music—you could get the spirit of that Movement through the music. You'd get the spirit of it. That song you were singing—Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around—you'd get the spirit of it. It's got a spirit to it. And not only did it give us courage as we were singing in the South—Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around—it gave people up here to do something—in the North—to do something. And it was a great motivator and organizing tool. That's how we used the music. And we took that music everywhere. And that was the point, the high point of our involvement was getting everybody involved in the singing. And from there, from the music, that was it. And another thing. That song that you sang—Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around—we sang that for 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.

[33:12] 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*

[34:49] [Applause]

Hollis Watkins: [35:00] First, give an honor to the Almighty. It is such a pleasure and privilege for me to be here with you. And the light glows even brighter for me tonight because I got somebody in the house I know got my back, if nobody else other has my back. I'm not talking about my wife because she's here. And I know all of that because she's got that. But I have Hollis here tonight. Not this Hollis—I've got myself but I got a son, Hollis, Jr., his wife, his two children, and his mother-in-law. So I want you to see my son and his family. Gotcha that time. Gotcha! [Laughs] He's run all over this area. Running with the Durham Striders. He's still here. And he ran track in high school. What was the name of his high school? Hillside. Hillside. There was a lot of interest here, so I'm thankful that they are with us here tonight.

[36:47] I am the youngest of twelve children. My parents were sharecroppers when I was born. I was one of those who was not supposed to have made it. Not make anything of myself. I was one of those who was given that diagnostic because of the money that my family made. See, when I first enrolled in Tougaloo College in Mississippi, my parents made less than \$700 per year. But thank God. I made it. And as others of us out here who may be given negative thoughts, but you can make it. The whole thing about being poor never runned across my mind or my family's mind because every week, we fed the poor by delivering baskets and boxes of food for people to have to eat. Now I got involved with the Civil Rights Movement at the age of 17 with the NAACP youth chapter. And then at the age of 19 is when I got involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, better known as SNCC. When I looked at what was happening in my community, I realized the church was the most important and largest institution in the community. So I paid notice to what the church was doing. One of the things I saw in the church down there was that a lot of singing took place. It seemed to have motivated people to do things that needed to be done. My family—most everybody in my family could sing—so it was expected that I sing. I remember when I was about 3-years-old, my daddy used to point me out, like I pointed my son out, and say, "That's my baby right there. I'm going to ask him to come on up and be with the rest of us. And if he feels like singing, I want him to sing." That's where I got my start in terms of singing.

[39:27] We used music as an instrument to bring people together, to motivate people to do things that would improve the community. Yes, there were a lot of the well-known people we know in reference to the Movement that I met, worked with. Some of them I still work with now. A few, they're still around. But I just want to say that there's a lot of things that I could say and talk about, but I don't want to do that because you may have something that's more important to talk about or want to hear from me, than that which I'm about to give you. So I'm not going to do a lot of talking because if you've got some questions in reference to whatever about the Civil Rights Movement, I want to be able to try to answer those, and we can move further along. However, since you stirred the pot and got the spirit moving, I'm going to ask you to join in with me, and we sing a couple verse of a freedom song. Some of us refer to this song as "Freedom Come and It Won't Be Long." Others refer to it as "Calypso Freedom." So, how many of you know that song?

Worth Long: The banana boat song.

Hollis Watkins: The banana boat song. We say that because the person we got the song from, he sang the banana boat song. In his song, he said [singing]:

*Dayo, Dayo  
He sing daylight come  
And he wanna go home*

But we said [singing]:

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

And then I'm going to put one or two verses. Can we do that? Alright. [41:45]

*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*

[43:45] For those that don't know about Parchman Jail, it is the Mississippi State Penitentiary. It is the place where I spent 55 days in the maximum security unit on death row for attempting to get our people registered to vote. Thanks for being here tonight. Just keep on keeping on.

Bettie Mae Fikes: [44:07] Good evening. Now I don't want you guys to sit here quietly. Once upon a time, I was like you. Young, and they used to say full of fluid and ready to do it. [Laughter] And to get ourselves ready to go to jail—have you ever prepared yourself to go to jail? We even prepared ourselves to die for all mankind. And to get hyped up in the basement of First Baptist Church, they were hollering—I'm sure you've heard many, many times—what you want?! You haven't heard it. Freedom. We used to scream, 15-16-17-18-19-year-old students from R.B. Hudson High School. And we'd scream out, "Watchu want?!" [Freedom] Thank you. They don't know yet. [Laughter] You still looking for freedom. Watchu want?! [Freedom!] Watchu want?! [Freedom] And when you want it?! [Now!] [Singing]

*Whoa, this little light of mine*

*Well, I'm gonna let it shine*

*Well, this little light of mine [Come on!]*

*Well, I'm gonna let it shine*

*Well, this little light of mine, my lord*

*I'm gonna let it shine*

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine*

*Everywhere I'm go, Lord*

*I'm gonna let it shine*

*Everywhere I go*

*I'm gonna let it shine*

*Everywhere I go,*

*I'm gonna let it shine*

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine*

[46:30] The difference between now and then, even if we didn't know the song, our spirit was so high, we were ready to go to jail. We were fighting for freedom. We were fighting for the right to vote. We weren't even old enough to vote. We were laying the foundations for you. And you are here to build off that foundation. And today, when I say "Watchu want?" and I don't hear no reply back, I say, "Something is wrong here." 15-year-old Bettie Mae Fikes, I bring you greetings from Selma, Alabama by way of Los Angeles, California. I've been fighting for freedom a long time, and I ain't got tired yet. Our



songs were mostly from the church. I come from a line of good gospel singers, preachers. My mother was a gospel singer. So I'm involved in gospel and blues. And the book always say, my mother was a gospel singer. She gave me the gospel. My daddy was a gigolo, and he gave me the blues. [Laughter] Well, when I tell this story, I'm a little girl. A little Black girl all the way from Selma, Alabama. My mother died at the age of ten. Only child. So I was like Maya Angelou. I became withdrawn because I figured that my mother was the only one that loved me. [48:16] I turned against God and everybody else. How can God love me when he has taken away the only person that ever loved me? My mother had moved to Detroit, and from Detroit, she died. From Detroit, I moved to Los Angeles, California with my mother's brother. And from California back to Selma, Alabama where I got involved in the civil rights struggle. Now I had closed up until the Movement opened me up. 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. In our home, they turned electric lights off. Bill was paid, but we were entertaining freedom folks. And that amazed me. I really got involved in the Movement because I wanted to go somewhere else other than church all the time. [Laughter] That was my initiation for the Movement. I don't have to go to church seven days a week. And then end up singing all day Sunday. Sunday, you were there all day. And sometimes in the state now it's still the same.

[50:49] Martin Luther King, they were talking about Martin Luther King. And I had made up my mind—I didn't need Martin Luther King to free me from Selma. I knew I was leaving Selma. But what kept me was when I saw the brutality. First it was to have a release and not to go to church. But when you look around and you see older women that you've known all your life being slapped around and kicked down by white supremacists. Police looking but not doing anything. Here we're looking, but we're nonviolent. What would you do? Would you stand there? All these things were taking place. That's what carried me back to the old songs. The things I said I wouldn't do when I got grown were the things I'm doing now. Those *old* songs. I used to hear my Grandma, [singing] *Jesus, keep me near the cross*. I did not like that. I was like. I wanted rhythm. I wanted rhythm. Freedom gave me that rhythm, the rhythm to sing. I never looked at myself as a great singer, but today, when I come and give you our history, and people sit up and look at me like I'm crazy, I have a problem. Because here we are, 51 years in our history. We've been fighting brutality since slavery times and look where we are now. We fought for education. We fought for the right to have good jobs. We fought for the right for y'all to be in these beautiful buildings tonight. Now where and what are you gonna do now? The ball's in your court. I'm not giving mine up. Not yet, but I'm going to continue doing what I'm doing as long as I can. But the thing is, I want to pass on the history. And when I talk, I always say, "I want to touch you." Do you know what I'm talking about? The spirit of being me and the spirit of being you have been used up. We're not using that spirit to fire anymore. We were 15 and 16-years-old. We would have a group of children, ten or fifteen of us.

And you could hear us all the way to Montgomery, Alabama. But when you don't know, and you have not been taught, and number one, y'all don't have to go through what we went through.

[54:11] I came from a place where [singing] *Nobody knows... old slavery songs....the trouble I've seen. Nobody knows.* Now we ask the question: do you know? And if you know, how do you know? And what do you know? So I'm gonna keep it open. Not talk too much. I like to talk. Chuck started me on that. By them being with the Freedom Singers, he said, "Bettie, when you sing songs, you've got to give people the history of the song." I said, "That's your job." Now they tell me that Bettie talks too much. So I'm going to close it, and I'm going to close it with: [Singing 55:06]

*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*

Thank you. [Applause]

Candie Carawan: [57:16] Oh why would I have to follow Bettie Mae. [Laughter] Good evening everyone. It's wonderful to see you all here, and I can't tell you how lucky I feel to be here. My life has been full of luck. I was that lucky person who got myself from southern California to Nashville, Tennessee in the spring of 1960, just in time for the sit-ins. And I have to tell you, it changed my life. Came on an exchange program from a college in California. Nashville had already been having two years of nonviolent training workshops with Rev. James Lawson. And that town was preparing to really take on the injustice there. And very shortly after I got to Fisk, the sit-ins began. Two weeks or very shortly after the first sit-in in Greensboro. When you learn your history, and you learn about Nashville, the most extraordinary group of freedom fighters came out of there. And a lot of it had to do with that training they went through. But these were people who would change this country and move on through all the rest of the years of the Civil Rights Movement with great courage and great leadership. We had Diane Nash there. John Lewis. James Bevel. Bernard Lafayette. Angeline Butler. Just many, many people who would not let terror turn them around. And when everybody else was ready to stop, they were ready to keep going. So it's a really important body of people. I just feel by the grace of God I ended up there to learn about this country with people like that. Very shortly—well in Nashville, we had the sit-ins. We all went to jail. We, as Charlie said, the music kept us alive while we were in jail, kept us in touch with each other. Came out of jail. There was an economic boycott that was organized, a very, very strong one that went all through the spring. And by the end of May, the downtown lunch counters and restaurants had integrated. And it was really this powerful force of the Movement that got started there in Nashville that brought that about. It was only the beginning, but it was an example of what you can do calling attention to the problem, and then with this economic boycott, putting a lot of resistance where it hurt into the community and brought about a great change.

[1:00:10] What I really want to tell you about is after that—in May, April, the first part of April—there was a workshop that brought together people from all around the South. People, just your age, these were the college students and some high schools students who were stepping out. There was a workshop at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. A really important gathering place in those days. It was one of the few places that Black and white people could come together and really strategize about the changes that needed to come in the South and that were beginning to come. And this workshop—April 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup>—brought together about sixty or seventy people from around the South, people who had been involved in sit-ins. And the whole idea of the weekend was to tell each other what was going on, from community to community. This was way before the internet, and to talk to each other and share experiences. And the staff at Highlander, their job was to ask us what we'd been

experiencing and challenge us to think about what we were going to do next. So it was a very, very crucial and important weekend. And the role of music at that work shop was really, really important. Prior to that, we really didn't have what I would call freedom songs. Unless, we're gonna go where Worth is gonna take us tomorrow. The freedom songs were really living in the Black South ever since Black people were in the South. The spirituals, and so many of the songs already spoke to freedom. But we didn't have what we now think of as the freedom repertoire, and at that workshop, there was a volunteer on the staff at Highlander who had been active in the labor movement and knew a lot of songs. And whenever we got tired of talking, he began to teach us songs that were going to become very useful to us when we went back to our communities. [1:02:14] He taught us, "I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table," and "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," and "We Shall Overcome." That was Guy Carawan. That was the person who later on would become my life partner, and we would move on through time continue spreading songs, but also record the songs, and get them around. And document the songs. And hold little workshops, mostly sponsored by Highlander that would bring together the song leaders from all of the different communities, so we could learn each other's songs. So it was a really important time in history, and I think that happened over those next few years really brought a lot of change to this country. And as everyone here has said, there are many more changes to come, but I think, reflecting on how very young people began to shake this country up and sing while they did it, is something worth thinking about. And taking it where it can go now. Ok. That's it. I'm not going to end with a song. [Laughter]

Worth Long: [1:03:40] Yeah, thank you Candie and other panelists. I'm in select company here. Almost everybody, as Charlie has said, has championed freedom, but they have championed in jail. And I said to you, I'm thinking about some of those experiences, and as you see me shiver, it's not from the jail experience in fact. I used jail as a place to rest. If you work with these people in organizations, sometimes you were happy to go to jail because they had you working morning and night. Morning, noon, and night, I suppose. Let me do this though. Who can tell me where is Formosa Avenue? [Woman gestures] Someone else please. I know you know. Is there someone who knows where Formosa Avenue is? Ok, where is it? [Unintelligible answer from audience.] Ok, thank you. I was born there. So I wanted to share with you the fact that I was born damn near on campus. [Laughter] What was called North Carolina College for Negroes, North Carolina College of Durham, North Carolina College, North Carolina Central University has been my home since early years. This is a special place to me, so this campus is special. And you are special because you're here today. It makes me really feel good to be at home. I want to thank you for that. I want to thank you for being here to welcome all of these fine people who were involved in a Movement that is part of a long and continuous struggle. Not just a recent struggle. Not just the modern Civil Rights Movement, but we're talking about a Movement that goes back through the years and the struggles of people for liberty and for freedom. [1:06:31]

One thing I remember from 407 Formosa, where I was born, is that I was among all these people that were a little bit different from me. My father was a farmer, and he drove a jeep. We had some land out where Hillside High School is now. And he would drive his jeep out and work on the farm all day. And he was a land owner. He was not a poor man. That's what he did. The only thing we would need in our house other than what we provided ourselves was coffee and sugar. Coffee and sugar. We had

everything. We didn't need a doctor. My mother would go out back, and she had an herb garden. The whole idea of self-sufficiency was something that I just took for granted in members of my family and my community. But then, there were some people who had not just what they needed, they had more than what they needed. And at an early age, I knew the distinction between someone who had what they had to have to survive and—when my daddy talked about subsistence farming, which is what the agriculture department talked about, he said, "You mean survival. You mean survival farming." He said, "I've been doing that all my life. And I've been teaching people how to do that well. How to come together, how to pool their money together, their labor together, and get land. And control their community. And be self-sufficient. [1:08:53] At that time, what they called the Freedom Movement, had to do with—I think they characterized it as uplift. As uplift. One of the poems or songs I remember that illustrated that was James Weldon Johnson's, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which at one time was considered the Negro anthem. It was called the Negro anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." It was very important to me. It was the song that was sung at the beginning of the program. Actually, it was sung at the beginning of organizing attempts in Selma, Alabama. We didn't initiate that. The local people initiated that. People from your community, Bettie. And I guess I should say something about my organizing attempts and experience because I ended up—not because of my concept of self-sufficiency, but the concept of freedom I learned, both in the schools and in the communities and in the rural areas of North Carolina where my father worked and preached—I learned that there was a freedom dynamic that happened within places where he traveled. And he was a presiding elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. That meant that he needed to have quarterly conferences. He had these ten churches that he would attend to. And sometimes he would do the same sermon at each of the churches. So I memorized some of his sermons. But I noticed that he would keep the sermon the same, but he would change the songs. And that would confuse me. And I asked him, I'd say, "Well Daddy, why did you use this song today? Why did you sing this song today?" He said, "Because that was the song to sing." He said, "That's the song they wanted me to sing." So he was singing what was appropriate to an audience. Not was appropriate to his repertoire. I learned that also from him.

[1:11:57] I'm not doing that right now with you, but earlier, we did do something that's reflective of what my father did. And that was when this wonderful singing group came up. And thank you. I want to thank the director of that group. I want to thank the group and its leadership. What happened was that we were with that group. We knew that was a fantastic group, but we were not participating with that group. And what I was trying to do was, what? What was I trying to do when I stood up and said—I took over your group. I asked them to come back and ask them to come back and do another verse. And what happened? They came back. And what happened to you? You got involved, right. Now that, formulaically, that seems very simple, doesn't it. Or does it seem complex? Either way. That works. That works. When we are involved in something, it just seems better than when we are listening to it. When we are not just an audience, but when we are a congregation—let's use that word. Give me another word. When we are part of a participatory group, right. SNCC in its singing and in its organization stressed participation. Being involved, but also being connected in such a way that you were connected, not just to some people who were sitting before you speaking—my son is here, between two fine looking ladies. Would you ask him to stand? [Applause] Right, attorney William Worth Long from Atlanta, Georgia, and I would have my daughter stand, but she could not come to her alma mater at

North Carolina Central University. This is her home. And I'm gonna end here. But that one thing—if you don't, if I don't say anything more, and if you don't hear any more from me, the whole idea of participatory practice. At the Smithsonian—I didn't say anything I did in the Movement, but I did a lot of it by default. After the Movement, I had no skills other than taking people to jail, right. [Laughter] So I decided, I said, what am I going to do? And I said, Well, I looked at what I liked to do. And one of my hobbies was collecting music. I started it when I was fifteen-years-old over in Chatham County in North Carolina. I started recording people singing blues and acapella quartets and congregational singing. And I said, well let me see if I can do some of that. Find a way to do that and also eat. Eat three times a day. [1:16:46] So I started working with Smithsonian Institution as a researcher. I did ethnographic research at the Smithsonian. I started in 1970, and I still do some there. I found that the filmmaking, and we have some of that going on now, that was being done, wasn't from the inside out. It was from the outside in in most cases. And the stories I wanted to tell was the story of the people from the inside out. So I got their stories first, and then helped them help me to make a story. And I helped make film with Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, which is a blues film. With Chris [[Choi]] of New York University, a film on Chinese in the Mississippi Delta. *Mississippi Triangle*, and then in between that, I decided I'd do records. So I did a record on Robert Johnson with the director of Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife. I followed that with a record of the songs of struggle, world songs of struggle. *We Shall Overcome*, which featured, among others, the Freedom Singers. Chuck and Bettie Mae Fikes and others. And then I did something else, but my time has run out, right. And I want to thank you.

Charlie Cobb: [1:19:14] And I want to thank the panel for their contributions and sound. Time—the clock is ticking. I want to give you the opportunity to ask questions of people on the panel. There's a mic there. You probably need to step up to it and pose your questions to either individuals on the panel or to the panel in general. Surely there are questions, or things you would like elaborated on from members of this panel. I'm sorry my glasses aren't work. Walking up to the mic now.

Aaron Watkins: [1:20:22] My name is Aaron Watkins. My question is: who inspired you? Who inspired you? All the panelists.

Hollis Watkins: Very briefly, I'd like to say my father inspired me. My father said to me, "Son, you must always stand up for what is right, even if you are the only one standing." And I looked at that and said, "Daddy said I must stand up against all of that which is wrong." So it was those few words that motivated and inspired me that go down the road that I have gone down and still going down. Trying to make things better over these past 56 years.

Charlie Cobb: Anybody else on the panel want to...

Chuck Neblett: Well, my father and my mother, they always told us to stand up for what we believed in. Hold your head up. You're just as good as anyone else, and don't let me see you acting otherwise. Otherwise you'll have trouble out of me. But the one who inspired me—the situation that inspired me to get into the Movement was Emmett Till's murder. When they just mutilated that kid and put that wire and that metal wheel around his neck and threw him in the river. And when I saw that I was sick

because I knew it was me. We were the same age. That was me, and nobody was gonna do anything about it. And that's what inspired me to do something. To do something. To do something.

Charlie Cobb: Anyone else want to say something. Use the mic, Worth.

Worth Long: [1:22:30] 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. That inspired then, and it inspires me now.

Charlie Cobb: There's an important point to be made in terms of your question, and I'd like to make my one contribution to this conversation. And that is what's often missed about the Movement—and I was a SNCC field secretary in Mississippi from 1962 until 1967. And an important point to make about the Movement in regard to your question—as much as the Movement challenged white supremacy and racism and segregation, just as important is the fact that what you saw looking at the Movement was Black people challenging themselves within the Black community. Because that's what you saw when you looked at the sit-ins, you saw people like yourself challenging. And they were raising, well what are you gonna do when you're faced with segregation? I tell people I was kidnapped by the Mississippians because I had no intention of being in Mississippi. I paused in the state to introduce myself to the sit-ins students. And one of these students, Lawrence Guyot who would become chairman of the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party—I told them I was on the way to Texas for a workshop on civil rights. I'm from Washington, D.C. And Guyot, who's a big guy, got out of his seat—and those of you who know Guyot know his whole style. And he hovered over me with complete disdain. And he said to me, and I never will forget the words, "You're going to Texas for a workshop on civil rights? What's the point of doing that when you're standing right here in Mississippi?" Guyot was getting ready to go up into the Delta, and I got the message. If you're serious, you'll stay and work with us. If you're not serious, you'll go off in Texas and chatter about civil rights. And I decided to hang with them for a while, not realizing that once I started, I wouldn't get out of the state for another five years. [Laughter] But the lesson is—and this is what inspires me—people like Hollis Watkins, native Mississippian, Fannie Lou Hamer, all these people my age who are challenging me to do something that got me to do something. And I think that's the story of every single person sitting on this panel. And I'm done for the rest of the evening. Thank you. [1:27:15]

Tyra Scott: Hi. I'm Tyra Scott. I think a couple years ago I was asked by one of the professors over at the arts and humanities in a play called "Home Girls" about nine people at Fisk University who started doing sit-ins in response to what happened over at A&T at Woolworth's. So they had me learn "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" to sing by myself, acapella, and it really spoke to me. So I was wondering if there's more of a story behind the creation of that song, and also what song in particular speaks to you the most to this day?

Candie Carawan: [1:28:14] Thank you. Maybe you'll sing it before you sit down. 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: [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*



[Applause]

Lawrence Warren: [1:31:13] Good evening. My name is Lawrence Warren, and my question for you is being that you are SNCC and y'all lived through that Movement. I was born in '96, so I learned about the apartheid in South Africa, but I know that music was a huge part of that revolution as well. So I was wondering if you could talk about the similarities and differences in I guess, our struggle or their implementation of music in the Movement.

Chuck Neblett: [1:31:53] Music was the motivating force, the lifeblood of that Movement. It's often been said that if it wasn't for the music, there wouldn't be a Movement. And I can't say enough about the music in response—in the music, it went hand in hand. We got courage from that music. Like you said before, which side are you on? That was a song we'd sing that'd give us courage. A lot of those songs, we'd sing in a dire situation. We'd sing those songs, and we'd get courage. And to move on doing what you doing. And keep your eyes on the prize, hold on, hold on. So if weren't for that music, I doubt that we'd have had the courage and the stamina to do the things we did.

Charlie Cobb: [1:33:03] I lived in Tanzania, East Africa in the early 1970s, and I had a lot of interaction with what was then called the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, who were young people like yourselves. Most of the older leadership was either in jail or in exile. And one of the things—they knew a number of the songs from the Movement here. And I had lots of discussions with them. They paid attention, particularly when Stokely shouted out Black Power, they paid attention to the Movement here in the United States, and they embraced a number of the songs. Not just “We Shall Overcome,” but “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize” and other songs because it's a little told story, the kind of interaction that was taking place in the 1970s between the young activists in South Africa in particular, and southern African in general, and Black activists here in the United States during this particular time period. And music was a piece of that interaction.

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, 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.

Bettie Mae Fikes: [1:35:40] A struggle is a struggle wherever you are. That’s why the music of struggle—the same music sung in different languages is all about the struggle. It might be a different struggle, but it’s the same struggle. Because a struggle is a struggle whether you’re in Africa, whether you’re in London. Wherever you are, like I said earlier today, that’s why “We Shall Overcome” is internationally known. I woke up this morning. So whatever state, whatever country you come from—and the only reason why the spirit is not high here tonight is because you have not experienced anything yet. But you getting ready to. [Laughter]

Grace Nichols: [1:36:39] Blessings. Good evening. Thank you for your time. It’s an honor to hear from y’all. I’m Grace Nichols. I’m currently the cultural organizing fellow for an organization called Southerners on New Ground, also known as SONG. And I, I’m gonna be at Highlander next weekend for the 85<sup>th</sup> homecoming, so I’m gonna be co-facilitating a workshop on the national movement to end money bail as interventions to dismantle the prison industrial complex. I really appreciated the comment particularly about the Freedom Singers being more than entertainers. Being motivators and being organizers. So I’m curious, what did the conversations look like regarding the strategy? The political education that came along with the singing. What I love so much about what I do is the multi-facetedness of creating. The healing elements. The community building elements. But when y’all were going to sing somewhere, what were the actions surrounding that? Was it like, ok, a lot of time we’ll have somebody hand out flyers. Or a specific kind of program. I’m curious what that looked like for y’all.

Chuck Neblett: [1:38:03] Well, when we did a concert, like I said before, we used our music as an organizing tool. And we didn’t get back off of that. We’d say that. And what we would do was tell people what we needed. What needed to be done. Whether it was raise money. Whether it was raise money in their own communities. Whether to come down South, but they had to get involved in some kind of way. And that’s what we did. We got people involved in the Movement, and we used the same. We used songs as a motivator, as an organizing tool in order to get ‘em in there. They could hear a song, they would get the spirit of that Movement. The spirit. And through that spirit, we got people to move. To do something in their own communities. Come down South and so forth. And that’s one of the reasons we said we used our music as an organizing tool, as a motivator, as an organizing tool to get people to move.

Hollis Watkins: I just want to say thank you for continuing to be doing work through your work. The organization that I started, Southern Echo, has in the past done workshops and training with SONG, and it’s good to know that you’re still pushing on. [Applause]

Audience member: [1:40:04] Hi. Thursday is the first day of early voting for the primary locally. And NCCU has a very low turnout usually. And I hope you can encourage students to vote. There’s a student,

an NCCU here, a grad student over in Public Administration, is running for city council, and a former professor here Pierce Freelon, and he's still teaching African American Studies over at UNC, but he's running for mayor here. And people need to know about it. I've been out today on campus, and people don't even know where to vote. How to vote. Just go down to the Law School. You can register and vote all at once. It'll only take five minutes. Five minutes and vote. It's quick and easy. And you should do it. People died to give you that chance to vote.

Maya Quentin: [1:41:15] Hi. My name is Maya Quentin, and I guess you all have kind of hinted on this, but do you feel like activism today is in need of more music?

Bettie Mae Fikes: Oh yes! The thing today—

Charlie Cobb: Wait a second, Bettie. [Hands her microphone.]

Bettie Mae Fikes: We got quite a few—we can't say that things are not being done today. We can't say that the children, or the younger generation, are not doing anything. But what is so lacking today is the music. We fall for education. And like I was saying the reason that y'all aren't on fire tonight is because you have not witnessed any hardship. You have not been to the point when you wake up in the morning, you don't know whether it's going to be your last day or not. You don't know anything about that. And that's too much weight to carry at 15 and 16-years-old. Not only that, is the weight of seeing a loved one beaten and there's nothing you can do about it. But the only thing we'd done back then is to pray and to sing. And the music is not here anymore. You know the spirit of music. Everybody's singing. We weren't performers! We were singing from the heart. The spirituality. And I've been in a lot of marches, and I've witnessed a lot of people marching, but it's as dead as a doorknob. It's really, and it's frustrating. When you go out—I have never looked at myself as a great singer, but it's something about the sound of music that can just open up the inside of the person and draw everyone outside in. And up until we get to that, before you can free anyone else, you've got to free yourself. And we have not got there yet. Now we're copycats. Like ewe, we're—don't go there Bettie. [Laughter] We have not got there yet, but that's the thing we need. Spirituality, music, and prayer, that saved us fifty years ago is the only thing that's going to save us today. And Jesus Christ, y'all don't know what's on the way. You better get a song in your hearts. I'm telling you, you better get a song in your heart. All these institutions, all these teachers that are teaching you aren't going to save you. We going to a place where the only thing that's going to save you is [breaks into humming]. Thank you.

Charlie Cobb: [1:44:23] While you're still there, I want to ask you a question because we had some of this discussion earlier today, those of us around the table. I'm curious to put this to you. I've been spending over the past year some time with both the BYP100 folk and the Dream Defenders in Florida where I live. And what I've noticed in their gatherings—they have a lot of very political chants and spoken word rhythms. And one of the questions we were wrestling with earlier today is to what extent is that the equivalent of freedom songs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Does it evoke the same kind of feelings of spirituality and emotion? And does it get beyond the group the way that freedom songs did in sense that the music—the freedom music—of the sixties reached the community. More than just SNCC or

more than just CORE. I'm curious as to whether you—what you think about the chants that also define a lot of young Black expert today.

Maya Quentin: I wouldn't be an expert on chants. I wouldn't say I'm an expert on spoken word. I've delved into spoken word a little bit but—I'd say for me, certain spoken word pieces I've felt touched me and evoked strong feelings. And I feel like those pieces, if they were presented in outwardly it would be similar to the effect of music but not the same feel. Because as you were saying earlier, it lacks participation

Hollis Watkins: [1:46:35] I just want to leave this—and I'm hoping and praying that we all will take heed of it—there are too many of us that have bought into the whole notion and saying of a few people: that are young people ain't about nothing and ain't gonna do nothing. Too many people are saying, "Let's go back and think about the sixties." But I have you to know, one by one, there's a lot more activism from young people today than there was back in the sixties. Take the whole state of Mississippi. If you extract the 1964 Summer Project out of the scenario, there never was a time when there was more than 23 to 25. I'm putting forth the number 25, but Charlie here has counted the folks up and down, and he has only found there to be 23. That's how many of us dealt with the whole state of Mississippi. I can today take you into counties in Mississippi where we can find 23 active young people in that one county. So don't fall for as we say the okey-doke, and know who we are and prove it through our actions. And once you begin to work with young people or people in general, you can add up the numbers and say, "Hey, look what they did in this county back then. We are twice that number right now." I just wanted to put that out there, so some of us who get discouraged real early can back up off of that and say, "I got it. I'm going to get more than what I got. I'm going to bring some of y'all, so y'all can get it!"

Audience member: [1:49:01] I'm sorry to be the last one. I didn't stand 'cuz of my knee. But I have a quick question for y'all. The previous events in Durham, including the statue and other monuments that people have come now to have attention to and want to act. How do you feel about Durham community coming out and doing that with those activities?

Charlie Cobb: The confederate statue?

Audience member: Yes, sir.

Charlie Cobb: Well I have a view about how the argument should be made. I've noticed that the argument is usually made around slavery because all of those guys were slavers. But I would like to see pushed forward more prominently, the fact that these statues are statues that people who rebelled against the United States government, and not only that, launched a war in which more than 600,000 people were killed, so question is why would you want to put up a statue to people like that? I wish that was included in the argument. I think you'd get further in some ways with that argument. Otherwise you get the kind of stupid stuff that Trump says. Well, George Washington had slaves, which is totally irrelevant. But the fact that these people were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people is a persuasive argument I would say

Audience member: [1:50:54] So a few of Durham community members took upon themselves. They went and they had a movement. Like they all came together and went and did something about how they felt. And they wanted to take down the statue because they didn't agree with what the state meant. Because what they realized what that meant to them, they didn't want that around their community. So they went and took down the statue, basically is what happened. They went to jail, yes. [Applause]

Hollis Watkins: All I got to say and that is [singing]: *Keep on pushing. Ain't stop now.* [Laughter]

Wendell Taft: I'm [[Wendell Taft]], theater director at Hillside High School. I wanted to first thank y'all for being here. I actually have one voice here—this is my acting troupe from Hillside that actually write a play each year on the Civil Rights Movement. We're researching a lot—that's why they're here to study, to listen to you, take back and put information in that they can continue to carry. The problem that we have a lot of times, even here in Durham, that we put on a show every year of the history and the struggle, but we have to work extremely hard to get people to come and listen to it. And these are 15-16-17-year-olds who are doing it. So what advice would you give them to continue and don't get discouraged, but to keep that fight going.

Bettie Mae Fikes: [1:52:50] You can't give up. Today—we're not interested in things that will carry us forward today. We don't have the participation of the community. And we don't know how to rally around the community. What, fifty years ago we were around through the communities pretty much like they do when you're voting for the president. Going through the communities making them aware of what we're doing. But the thing is today that's so different from when it was fifty years ago or fifty-one years ago. So the only thing you can do, I tell everybody, is just keep your eyes on the prize, hold on. I'm a blues singer and a gospel singer. But when I go to see a blues artist today, there's about ten or fifteen Blacks, and the place is crowded with every other nationality. We as Blacks got to know that our heritage, conflict is based on our spiritual, gospel, and blues. [[That's more like a talk music]] that's what Charlie's doing. The thing is if we give up, it's like giving up a dream. We don't know what tomorrow is gonna—the old folks used to say we don't know what tomorrow's going to bring. We don't know the next minute is going to bring now. So if you don't live life to its fullest starting now, we is afraid to speak because we've been taught to live on the system that society say we're supposed to be. As a young woman, if you have not married by the age of twenty, you know you graduated from high school and probably into college—but at a certain age, you become an old maid. And people begin to wear these things that are pushed on them. That's not necessarily our life. So my thing is to all, every school I go to—I had a little young fellow ten years, after I did a lecture, ten-years-old, and I was telling him about the bus rides. And after I had finished, he came up to me and said, "Ms. Fikes, I promise you I won't repeat the past." So that's what we got to do is not repeat the past but build on the past. Don't give up now. If you see something wrong, or see something that you can do, than start doing that. And if people see you doing that, some people will criticize and some will go with you. But if that's what you feel is right for you, that's what you've got to do. And my brother, you doing the right thing. I thank you. And I thank y'all.

Leah Wise: [1:56:15] I'm sorry but I'm Leah Wise, and I'm a retired organizer. But I want to say, Chuck was talking about how you use a performance opportunity, an organizing opportunity. So if you think about your performance opportunities, how do you organize in the community to have people present? So one way to think about it, at least what we used to do, is try to involve children that sing. Inviting little churches and their dance groups. When you bring kids to be a part of their performance, you bring their parents and their families and you have an audience. And so, it's just as a strategy, you think about who you want to most reach and think about what is in those neighborhoods to come, but when you do that, you have a presence there.

Chuck Neblett: [1:57:16] Yes, I was going to say you take your program to where people are. If you have to go to a school, you take it there. Or if it's a community group, you take it there. Anywhere that you can get an audience that will listen to you. And that's how you go to build up on your participation. The more people know about you and what you're doing, the more people will support you.

Hollis Watkins: I just want to say, we should not shy away from the hard questions. A lot of us are afraid that we'll get these hard questions, and we won't be able to deal with them. But, if you go after preparing yourself, you'll be successful. Out of all of my 56 or -7 years of working in the Movement, the hardest question that I've ever had proposed to me was a one word question. And that question came from this guy here, who just dropped his head, with the blue shirt [Watkins's son]. I said to him, I wanted him to do something. That hard question that he proposed something was, "Why?" And I tried to deal with why, and it just became a why—why to everything that I said. And I guess the spirit began to communicate between the two of us when I got to the fifteenth or sixteenth why. I mentally said, if this boy asks me why one more time, it's gonna be *the end* of him. And when I gave the answer of why, he said, "Ok." Went on about what he was about. So don't be afraid to answer and deal with the tough questions because whatever is needed is within us.

Ajamu Dillahunt-Holloway: [2:00:10] So can we get a round of applause for the SNCC veterans. And to the North Carolina Central University Department of Political Science. And the SNCC Digital Gateway Project. Center for Documentary Studies. The people, yourself. Tomorrow at 10 a.m. for North Carolina Central students in room 146, there will be a separate conversation with SNCC veterans. A more informal conversation. So if you're an undergraduate student and you interested in talking more directly with these wonderful people on the panel, room 146 is where we'll be meeting. And also, please don't forget, we have an incredible book here and please go and see how you can read up and contribute [...]

[Wednesday, September 20, 2017](#)

**Song\_2017.09.20\_01TASCAM**

**Morning conversation at North Carolina Central University**

[Singing] "If you don't go, don't hinder me. If you don't go, don't hinder me. If you don't go, don't hinder me. I'm on my way, I'm on my way.

Long: What happened along this song?

Fikes: They're not on their way.

Long: No, these beautiful people. They look like me. Wait, let's—can we get through as well. If you can't sing, don't worry about it. I can't sing. Let's try it again. Do you know the words?

Fikes: Repeat everything I say, you repeat. I'm on my way. I'm on my way. To freedom land. To freedom land. I'm on my way. I'm on my way. To freedom land. To freedom land. Freedom land, I'm on my way. It's just repeat everything I say.

Long: Call and respond. She calls. You respond.

Neblett: We all do.

Fikes: [Singing] If you don't go. If you don't go. Let your children go. Let your children go. If you don't go. If you don't go. Let your children go. Let your children go. If you don't go. If you don't go. Let your children go. Let your children go. I'm on my way. Praise, God, I'm on my way.

Long: Let's stand up and do that.

Cobb: Okay. We've got to stand.

Long: This is a good group. Do you realize what we got here?

Watkins: I sure did.

Carawan: We didn't hear them very loud.

Long: We are just going to do this one more time. So this is your last chance. Look over at somebody and say, this is your last chance. Just give them a light. Somebody tell him what we are doing because his voice is needed. We need your voice.

Watkins: And I want to add one additional thing. If the spirit hits you and you feel good about it, then put a little hand motion into it. There's nothing wrong with that.

Fikes: [singing] I'm on my way. I'm on way. To freedom land. To freedom land. I'm on my way. I'm on my way. To freedom land. To Freedom land. I'm on my way. I'm on my way. To freedom land. To freedom land. I'm on my way, praise God, I'm on my way. I'm on my way. I'm on my way. To freedom land. To

freedom land. I'm on my way. I'm on my way. To freedom land. To freedom land. I'm on my way. I'm on my way. To freedom land. To freedom land. I'm on my way, praise God, I'm on my way."

Watkins: [4:10] And since we know they are on their way, we can surely know that freedom is a coming.

Fikes: It won't be long.

Cobb: So how do you want to do this Jarvis?

Jarvis Hall: Do an introduction and what we want to talk about. We want to talk about the role of music in the Civil Rights Movement. And I'd ask Charlie also, Charlie Cobb, Mr. Cobb, to talk about.

Long: You can call us by our first names. Just Charlie.

Cobb: Yeah, I'm fine with Charlie.

Hall: For those of you who don't know me, a lot of you are my students, but I'm Jarvis Hall and I teach in the political science department here. So I want to welcome you first of all, and we want to thank our visitors from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And we especially want to thank our partners from Duke University, the SNCC Digital Gateway Project, and Kaley Deal is very much responsible for pulling this together and having this event. And I also want to recognize Ajamu Dillahunt, who is an intern over with the project and has been working very hard. And in fact, it's because of him that we have this partnership. And it's such an important partnership. I just hope our students appreciate who these people are. I mean these are the people who helped pave the way. Who helped clear the road for you, so we owe them a debt of gratitude. And we are certainly happy that they are here to share their wisdom with us. They don't want to just talk to us. They want to hear from you too about the role that music can play as a tool, as a weapon in the struggle for human and civil rights, both historically, as well as it is happening right now. Spoken word and hip hop and those kinds of things. Can we just introduce the panel and have some brief comments and then open it up for questions?

Cobb: [6:30] Exactly. My name is Charlie Cobb. I was a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi for a few years, organizing mainly around voter registration. Everybody sitting at this table comes out of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In fact, to have a discussion about music in the Movement, you have to have a discussion about the Movement. So as important as the people seated at this table are in terms of song or the music of the Movement, just as important, or perhaps more importantly, these are people who both shaped and were shaped by the Movement. And the important thing for you to understand about them is their movement life, their movement experience. What they tried to do. What they accomplished, and what remains to be accomplished. I want most of this to be your questions and comments to this group of people. I will introduce everybody very, very briefly. Chuck Neblett here immediately to my right worked with SNCC in Mississippi, Southwest Georgia, and was one of the founding members of the SNCC Freedom Singers.



Hollis Watkins here from Mississippi was the first of the young Mississippians to commit [pause to let students come in from a class change]

[10:12] Let me start over. My name is Charlie Cobb. I was a field secretary for SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, in Mississippi from 1962 to 1967, mainly organizing around voter registration. Big struggle then, though not only about voter registration. And everybody at this table was involved with SNCC's work. I was saying earlier, as important as these people are to song in the Movement, you really can't talk about freedom songs without talking about the Movement. So it's important to understand the movement tradition that they are a part of. Indeed, the movement tradition that they helped fashion. That's as important as their comments on the music, or their comments on song, and each one of them will—I'm not going to start over. [Laughter] As important as what they have to say about song and music in the Movement, it's important for you to understand the movement tradition that they're important and they helped fashion. You can't understand freedom song without understanding the freedom movement. And they will talk about that as much as they talk about music. I'm going to give you a very brief introduction to these folk, and they can elaborate on this introduction to the extent that they wish. Chuck Neblett, here, from Carbondale, Illinois, which is really as much a part of the South as Mississippi was, was involved with SNCC both in Mississippi and Southwest Georgia and is one of the founding members of the SNCC Freedom Singers, and he can talk about that founding. Hollis Watkins here from Mississippi was the first, or I should say one of the first two given Curtis Hayes, one of the first two of the young Mississippians to commit full-time to the Movement in Mississippi as a SNCC field secretary. Candie Carawan here, an exchange student from California, she was attending Fisk University as an exchange students when the sit-ins broke out. Candie Carawan. When the sit-ins broke out, and became involved with them, and has since played along with her husband, who unfortunately has passed, Guy Carawan, a very important role in terms of the infusion of particularly an older music tradition related to labor and the like into the music of the Movement. Bettie Mae Fikes next to Candie was a teenager when the Movement reached her hometown of Selma, Alabama. In addition to all of the work she did with SNCC, has been one of the—and you heard that just a few minutes ago—one of the most powerful voices in the freedom movement. And you'll be interested to hear her discussion as to how she becomes involved in the Movement. And Worth Long who's from this city, not in the strictest sense a freedom singer, speaking personally, probably one of the most important analysts of the whole Black cultural tradition in the South, which again out of which the music flows and it involves more than music. [14:47] If you want to understand any number of aspects of Black southern culture, Worth Long here is the go to person for that. That being said, let me say one more thing. It's a special pleasure to be here at North Carolina Central because this is my father's school, and I even ran into last night a couple of faces I hadn't seen in, trust me, many years. Rev. Charles Cobb, Sr. [laughter] who lived not very far from Worth's family because he's a native of Durham, North Carolina as well. That being said we really want this session mostly to be your questions, comments, thoughts, directed at the people at this table. Chuck, why don't you start, and we'll just quickly go around the table here.

Neblett: [16:01] Music has always been a part of the Movement. If it wasn't for the music, they said, there wouldn't be a movement. But we were in a time where they were televising a lot of the things that

were going on in Mississippi, Alabama. It was just, doing what people didn't know. And we decided, they decided to create a group of freedom singers to take the message of this movement throughout the North and to organize, organize groups, support groups. And we put that group together—field secretaries, they pulled field secretaries together who sang, song leaders, and put a group together a group called the Freedom Singers to take the word of the Movement throughout the North. And we could do it in song better than we could speak it because through the music, people got the spirit of the Movement. And people could understand it better and could understand the people. And we sang everywhere. Carnegie Hall, the Jazz Festival, the folk festivals, and just everywhere. And we sang so much one time we just got sick. We didn't understand that you could make yourself sick and you really couldn't sing. So we did that throughout the North, and we used music as a motivator and as an organizing tool. So we looked upon ourselves as organizers and not entertainers, you know but organizers.

Watkins: [17:48] So, as he said, I'm Hollis. I'm the youngest of twelve children. My parents were sharecroppers. I am from Mississippi. Still today, I am from Mississippi where I first got involved in the Civil Rights Movement at the age of seventeen and then hooked. You know, it's kind of like you go fishing, some of the ones you hook with your hook don't get away. Stay there. So I'm one of those that was caught. [Laughter] So for the last fifty-some years, I've been trying to do what I could to make things better. In Mississippi, when we look back there, there were no Black elected officials with the exception of one little town in Mississippi. It's in the Delta called Mound Bayou, only place you'd find at that time. There were all kind of stipulations that prevented Black folks from having equal rights. You couldn't just go in a place and order you something to eat. You had to go to the back window and tap on the window, place your order, give them your money. And once they got through serving all of the white people on the inside, then you perhaps would get what you ordered, even though they had your money. Coming from Mississippi, Mississippi being in the Deep South, religion was a big thing, and where there was religion, there was spirit. And where there was spirit, there was a lot of singing going on. So I got my first start in terms of singing in the churches. And that was something that people in Mississippi could relate to. Since they could relate to it in the churches, then we as a part of the Civil Rights Movement decided that we would start out singing some of those songs with people as a part of our mass meeting. And gradually introduced them to new songs and/or changed the wording in some of the songs that they sang in the churches every day. So that's a little bit about my start. And I say start because it goes all the way from being able to look at a white person in the face without being kicked, beaten, or look a white woman in the face for being killed for eyeball rape. So we had a weight on us, and many of us took that vision to many of the city jails, the county jails, and even the Mississippi State Penitentiary. So I'm going to stop right there, and I'll be ready to answer y'all's questions once my colleague here finishes.

Carawan: [20:57] My life was changed when I came as a teenager to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and I've ended up living in the South and working in the South ever since. And really, it was the beginning of my education to get to the South, and especially to be involved with young people who were so determined to change this country and were so courageous in doing it. And of course, we didn't know how much change would come about, but we were dreamers. And we hope that you are as well. We felt like the country could be changed. We felt like we could build a different kind of society, and to

be swept up in a group of young people supported by a larger community who believed they could do that was a life changing—I ended up at a really important institution called the Highlander Folk School. It was one of the few places in those days where Black and white people could come together and dream about what was possible and talk about ways to get there. And that place is still going on. It's called the Highlander Research and Education Center. Eighty-five years old. I met my partner there, Guy Carawan, who was a wonderful musician and a lot of the role that we played, not only singing with people like these wonderful people here, but also documenting a lot of the songs, trying to help people understand what was going on through the stories that people could tell and the songs they were singing. And then also developing workshops for song leaders from different communities who'd come together and share with each other the songs, and then take them back to their own communities. So it was a fabulous way to live a life. I just was so thankful that I was lucky enough to get to the South when I did. And I came here this morning to learn from you all. We have a lot of hopes in young people today. It's often been young people who have led the way in our country, and you need to believe that. And you need to be bold and brave about how you go about that, so I'm really hoping to hear from you all today. What are your questions, but also, what are you thinking about and what are you worried about and what are you hoping for?

Fikes: [23:17] My name is Bettie Fikes. I'm originally from Selma, Alabama, and when I look at the audience this morning, I think so much of myself is fifteen, sixteen years-old, sitting, staring at the person on the panel talking to us about freedom. I didn't know anything, and pretty much like you, Not many of you have heard about this thing that we've been talking about, freedom. Raise your hand. See. How many of you know or understand that there was blood shed and someone had to die for everything you take for granted today? How many of you know that? Public transportation, schools, restaurants, everything that you take for granted today, someone had to die or bloodshed for you to have that right today. I was a part of that, and when I sit today and look at young people like I used to be, it grabbed hold of me, and it's still holding on to me. And I hope that something that I say, sing, or do today will inspire you to be a part of this because what you do not know, and what you do not understand, something is coming your way. And it's not on the name of freedom, but if you're not prepared, you will not be able to stand. So we're here to help you, to push you in a direction to do something for your community and your country. For your neighbors, all the communities, and most of all, to go deep within self and understand what we're talking about today. Well I always say, Get on the bus. How many want to get on the bus? You heard about the Freedom Riders. You can ride the bus today and not sit in the back. Someone had to die for that. Do you understand that? No, but we'll talk about it. Thank you.

Long: [25:40] Thank you, Bettie. I'm glad that when I came to Selma, Alabama that you were there to teach me all of what I needed to know to be an organizer. The thing I learned that you need to know to be an organizer is that you need to be able to listen well and you need to be able to see well. I don't see well right now. I guess all of that in order to be able to solve the problems and to bring solutions to whatever it is that needs to be solved. Now what if we said the main problem was that we had to face when we were fighting in the Civil Rights Movement? Give me at least things. Give me at least two main things that you can think of. It doesn't matter what you say, but can I get someone to say it. What were

some of the main things that these old people who are here now were fighting for? What was the meaning of struggle for our period?

Fikes: Say it.

Audience: Expression.

Long: Freedom of expression.

Audience: Access to basic human rights, needs.

Long: Human rights, ok. This is getting good. It's going to help me.

Audience: Unity?

Long: Unity. Aah ha. These are things we're struggling for.

Audience: Access to schools.

Long: Access to education and schools. Aah ha. Somebody else.

Audience: To pave the way for the next generation.

Long: Good. Ok. Now what were some of the things we were fighting against? Can you say it so everybody can hear it?

Audience: Fear and lack of knowledge.

Long: Fear and lack of knowledge, ok. Someone else.

Audience: Hatred. Yeah

Long: I don't have much time up here. My time is running out. Help me. I'm counting on you.

Audience: Abuse of power.

Long: Abuse of power. Ok, right. I think I understand that.

Audience: Racism and violence.

Long: Racism and violence.

Audience: Something I talk in my class about is acquiescence, accepting a subordinate position within the racial order. So you're fighting against, changing consciousness.

Long: Ok. Not understanding where you are. Ok. And give me two more. Two or three more. Just anything. Whatever comes to you is what I'm trying to do.

Audience [29:38] I would definitely have to say one of the things that you guys fought for was the ability for us to be heard.

Long: Right, aah ha. Alright, we talked for and against. What are we fighting against?

Audience: White supremacy.

Long: Aah ha. And again. Just say it.

Audience: In my class I talk about two things. The fight against fear, ignorance, and greed coming from one perspective. And in American history that's been predominantly white.

Long: Fear, ignorance, and greed. Thank you. Now I didn't mean to start this way. I was going to say something about myself. [30:33] I'm basically an organizers, but I organize from learning from people. So I want to thank you for giving me that information. It will help me as I grow older. [Laughter] And I think what you said is really very important, and in this workshop, you should feel like everything you say—you're not being graded for it, are you? Right. [Laughter] No, you should feel free to say what you want to, at least to this panel. Ok, I want to thank you. Now the things that I did in my life. I couldn't sing, so I had to record people singing. I loved to do it. So I ended up producing, making records of people who sang, and I ended up making film of people who sang. And but more importantly, I worked with students and others so that we could sing together to lock to our community, and we could march together with our community, and that we could answer some of the questions that you just raised.

Cobb: So it's now open to your comments and questions and responses if you will to what the people at this table have been saying to you. Who's going to start? Yes.

Audience: Do you feel like the progress that we've made so far, do you feel like it's going back to what it was? Like back to when you were in SNCC and stuff?

Cobb: I'll leave it to any of the five people up here to respond. Did everybody hear her?

Audience: My question was do you think that the progress that we've made, that we've backslided, like we've gone back to where we once were back in the day where you were fighting for your rights?

Neblett: [33:02] Well, freedom ain't free, and you still have to do maintenance. You still have to be vigilant, and you still have to pay attention because if you don't watch, the progress that you've made will fade away, and we'll have to do it all over again.

Watkins: I don't think we're going back, while at the same time I don't think we're utilizing that which we have. One of the reasons I feel that we're not going back because there's a lot more activism on the part of young people today than it was back then in the early sixties. One clear example is at one period of time, if you take out as it relates to Mississippi, if you take out the 1964 Summer Project, there never was a time when there was more than 23 or 25 young people working in Mississippi. Today, I can show you that many that's just working in one county.

Carawan: What I learned in my life is if you really want to see things move forward, is you have to insist and to insist, you have to be organized. You can't just ask. And you can't just point out the problems. And you can't wait for some government body to make the changes. You have to insist on what you want, and the reason I don't think we're going back is I count on you all to insist on the world that you want. But I really will stress to do it, you've got to be organized. You've got to come together with other people who are insisting on the same thing and you know, push.

Fikes: [34:50] I don't think we're going backwards. I think we're a little bent. [Laughter] You must understand. Look at you today. I asked the question, how many know in order to grow, you've got to know where you come from. If you don't know where you come from, you don't know where you're going. So as much and as important as the Movement was fifty years ago, you have a movement going today, just as important. Black Lives Matter. But there's a thing you call organization, and there's a thing you call order. You cannot comprehend without those two working together, and the most important is spirituality. I hear that there's chanting going on today for Black Lives Matter. Well chants came from Africa years ago. Today, we not only need chanting, but we need all of our ancestors that have gone on before us. When I sing, I sing of old Harriet Tubman. When I talk about Harriet Tubman, I become the spirit of Harriet Tubman, but if you have not experienced these things, you do not know these things. So that's why I say, we're not going backwards. I'm not going backwards, but we are a little bent.

Audience member: So I have a question. In your experience and your travels since the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, as you have looked at higher education, the universities and colleges around the country and around the world—higher education, we claim that we are trying to create students who are civically engaged, who are change agents. As you have looked at higher education around the world, what's your assessment of the role of higher education and should higher education play a better role in informing about history? In talking about the role that culture and music has played as change agents? What's your assessment of it?

Fikes: Well, my assessment of it, when I look at it today, we fought for education. Died for education, but as my great grandmother who raised me—died at the age of 117 years old—was not an educated woman, but she could read everything in the Bible. I never could understand that. The thing is, when I look back today at education, my grandmother used to say, "The worst thing in the world is an educated

fool." We have so many educated people that's doing things on their left-handed side, that's making others suffer for that. You can look around the world today and see that. We're in the position today because of educated people. Today we need to use our education universal, whatever you give to the universe, the universe gives back to you. It's spirituality. We're not using our education it should be for every man, every boy and every girl. If we done these things, and we were still doing these things, it would kind of mill out the order that we're in today. If we hadn't done those things, you would not be sitting here in the lack of knowledge that we're in today. We had an excuse not to know. Today, it's no excuse, but you've got to want it bad enough, and if you don't want it, you gonna go another way. You're going to do what society say you're supposed to do. That's not necessarily so. So you got to go within yourself and educate yourself to be the person that you're supposed to be and what God required you to be.

Cobb: [39:23] My concern about education doesn't center on higher education. It just doesn't center on higher education. It starts much earlier. My concerns with education start much earlier, and it's linked to political process too. So we see right now an assault being made on public education, and we know particularly in inner cities or communities of Black, poor, and minority people, they're not being educated in public schools. I mean Washington, D.C., the average high school graduate graduates being able to read, write, and count at an 8th grade level. In Mississippi, if you're able to read, write, and count at an 8th grade education, they officially declare you educated at a twelfth grade level. So that's where my concern is. My concern is the kind of school boards we have, the way textbooks are produced to ignore so very very much, and that's a huge struggle that needs to be engaged. Because we didn't really tackle a lot of that when we were working in the 1960s. By the time—I have simple concerns, you know. I think anybody that goes to college should be able to go to college without having to take remedial courses. That's where my concerns center.

Watkins: [41:15] I was going to say part of our problem is we are so—and it's my position that you should never, never assume because any time you assume you open the door for negative consequences, and we see too many of those. We assume that if this person has this kind of education or this level of education, they will know how to use it and will conduct themselves in this manner. The door opens for negative consequences to come in there because that is not the case. It's just like me giving you a Caterpillar. Alright, you got what you need. You go ahead and use it. I don't even know how to crank the thing up, so how am I going to use it? So it's too often that we look at education from that perspective. It's too often that we go and don't discuss and talk about what does this mean to you? Now you have what quote unquote is supposed to be an education. What does that mean for you? How will you use it? Will it be for you or will it be for others? Or will it be for a combination? So that's part of our problem is that we don't take the next step that's needed for us to reap full benefits or for us to do things that's not gonna be confined to benefiting myself as an individual. And one of our biggest problems is that we have not overcome fear. [43:22] We have to overcome fear. And when I say overcome fear, I'm not saying don't have some fear. That's a natural piece to have some fear, but don't allow the fear you have to keep you from saying what needs to be said, doing what need to be done with whom, to whom it need to be done. And at the time it need to be done. I want to stop there.

Cobb: Ajamu, you had your hand up.

Ajamu Dillahunt: I wanted to add a comment to things that you all were fighting against. One term that didn't come up that's kind of linked to the terms that were mentioned was capitalism. I think that was really a force which you all were fighting against and we continue to fighting against today. But I have a question about Black elected officials in Mississippi. In the time that you were doing organizing work, there was only one in the county that you mentioned. How was the election of Chokwe Lumumba in Jackson, the capital, and his son this year, how was that important to how we look at Black political power today?

Watkins: [44:39] Well not just there, we know having Black people elected is not the cure. And the reason for that is most of our Black elected officials and those of us that elect them know it. Know that they are scared. They have a lot of fear, and that fear keeps them from being accountable to the Black people in the community. I think we have made a good step in electing Antone, Chokwe's son, because as long as I've known him, he's been attempting to do things that's gonna uplift and better, especially the Black community. And I've been knowing him ever since his father was seventeen. So we're making progress, but part of the problem in electing so many no-good Black elected officials is the fact that, oh this is my buddy, knowing she's gonna white folk. Knowing she's gonna—that doesn't make sense. You've got to help her grow, and say, hey look, I know you alright with me. But you know yourself, you got those folks and you ain't going to stand up—you've got to overcome that fear. We've got to begin to lay out and be honest with each other. I had one elected officials, sure well was trying to be that way, he said to us, he was one of the Black state legislators, he said, "Don't leave me up there with them white folks." [Laughter] "You help put me up there. You stay with me while I'm up there." He said, "Because they're going to come." And I said, "What are you talking about?" He said—one little example to show you how they'll get you—he said, "For the last three months, everywhere I have gone to eat, when I got ready to pay my bill, they tell me, 'So and so has already taken care of that.' 'So and so has already taken care of that.' Said ok." He said, "For the weak ones, we get back to the state legislature, and they say, 'Now Chuck, you know I've taken care of quite a few meals for you, and you know that. That's undisputable, so I need a little help from you. You know, I need you to help me get this package through.'" And we fall victim right there. [47:44] But there are some kinds of progress and growth because, for example, we had a situation where we needed to get something built in Jackson that the legislature was holding up, wouldn't approve it. But they had something that they wanted tremendously up in northeast Mississippi, and it just so happened that this brother was chairperson of the committee. And they asked him, well when are you going to bring this bill up? He said, when I looked at my record, I saw the bill about this thing in Jackson ahead of it, so I figure, we have to solve that one first. He said, it's first in order, so he beginning to grow, but a lot of us, we said, 'Oh yeah. We would've pushed it on through.' So a lot of growing has to take place among us. We're on the way, but we got a long way to go, and part of that has to do with us admitting to ourselves—I tell people I work for, give you an example of what I'm talking about—in the county where my sister lives, she's trying to be involved in politics. I talk with her, and she'd be all up in something, and I tell folks, I say, don't elect my sister to be in a position to do anything that white folks is going to be asking her to do the opposite. Said, you going to



come up missing. Said I thought that was my sister? Yeah, she is my sister, but I don't want my sister to be the bulldog that's standing there smiling but ready to bite you every time you come through.

Hall: [49:47] So I know students have classes, so if you need to go, we're going to go until 11:30a, but if you need to go, I'd rather you all go now as opposed to—but if you can stay, stay.

Lenore [NCCU vocal instructor] [51:27] So great to be here. I have a question about music. So the music that's been so much a part of your being able to keep encouraged, to solidify your courage, to inspire you, and just opposed to what's being used today in chants, right. So some of that, there are a lot of layers why the music that you use and the Freedom Singers had access to was in the culture. It was in the Black community. It was in the church. All of that foundational music. And a lot of different layers happened for that in the integration where now you have young people who, spirituals is a category that they study in a music department because it's required. They may listen to gospel music. They may listen to rap music. Jazz music. Some of the things that come from blues and spirituals, so how do you—what is your suggestions for way students can make, to migrate how they center themselves in their music choices and choose music, and think about—what did you think about when you were choosing music, and what do you suggest for them, since it was such a different time for them?

Neblett: [53:11] It wasn't a matter, I don't remember making a choice. I was a jazz musician before I became a Freedom Singer. Played jazz. My father played the blues and gospel. I'm mean it was all a part of us. It was all a part. When we started singing freedom songs, we started singing things like "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." That was part of the spiritual, gospel. But anyway, we sang songs that were familiar with us, and the gospel songs related to the church. You gotta understand the South is different from the North. People down there are churched. More people are churched, and they believed that you could sell nonviolence. You couldn't sell it in the North. You couldn't sell things like nonviolence in the North, and people sang spirituals and gospel, blues. So the freedom songs really came from blues and gospel. I had to do some jazz in some music, but you have to get 'em exposed. You've gotta expose kids to things sometime. We were exposed to gospel and jazz. Kids now, they have to be exposed to that music, and they have to have their own, you see. If they understand what they're doing, understand their mission, understand in order for that music to be a part of them, they have to have their own.

Watkins: [55:01] 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.

Neblett: [57:10] We found out a lot of songs, already gospel songs, they were freedom songs.

Cobb: I think Chuck is right. Exposure is key, and I don't know what the solution is. You know in the South, you found, even if you were like being chased, sanctuary in homes and churches in the community. And the music is all in that culture, and it pulls you right in. What I notice to the extent that I've hung out with some of the young activists today, is the places where they are doesn't give them exposure to the music and that kind of culture. So there's no logical reason why freedom songs in the sense that we used them in sixties would be a part of their dynamic. I've also noticed that when they have been exposed to freedom songs, they get enthusiastically caught up with them, but I don't know what the solution is if you're talking about the kind of activists that form BPP or Black Lives Matter or Dream Defenders or any of these groups. I don't really know what the solution is in terms of exposure to that, the kind of cultural dynamic that led us to embrace and use freedom songs.

Carawan: [59:00] I wanted to ask the question back to you and maybe the rest of you could comment too. It feels to me like in the Movement, what was important was material that made you feel powerful. So for you all, something is going to make you feel powerful when you express yourself, and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that. What does make you feel powerful?

Cobb: Ajamu, you had your hand up.

Fikes: Wait just a moment. See, to your question, I always say, you know, music chose me. I started at age four with my mother. But if you have a spirituality about you is one thing, and if you're not spiritually inclined, then you're not educating, riding off what someone says and teaching you. When you're going through a problem, music always plays a part. That's whether there's a problem, whether you're excited, whether you're happy. For instance, if you're going through something and who all feels sometimes whatever you're going through, a song come in mind and take place? That ever happen. For instance, if I'm going through something, a song would come to mind. The old people would moan. Mmm hmmm hmmm hmmm hmmm mmmm. They're going through something. Bettie today is, if I'm going through something tragically, [singing] "I don't know why I have to cry sometime." If I'm in a blues mood, I'd be singing [singing] "I've been downhearted baby, ever since the first day that we met." It's a difference but it's whatever you feel. We work a lot off emotions, and emotions sometimes carry us to the next place, whether it's light or darkness.

Long: [1:01:01] Let me do just a quick thing. And I heard yesterday that someone said, they were talking about the commercialization of culture. About the commercialization of music. Who chooses what you hear? And I think that's one of the relevant things that if in fact, I want to be, I want a quality of life where I can be healthy and my food choices are limited to what someone else who is commercially oriented decides they want to sell me through advertising or whatever means, then I'm in a predicament. It seems to me that we have to present an alternative to the commercial media but also to

commercialization in general, where we at the grassroots have a cultural movement and a cultural product. I'm going to do a cultural product that is not only equal but better than what is being heard in other areas. What we know we can't do is we cannot compete with the advertising, the selling of that product, but we can compete by, say in the curriculum, being sure that if we're doing music, then we're not just talking about limited aspects of song. We're talking about a comparative aspect of song from the universal or global aspect on down to—actually I should say from the grassroots, the community aspect on up to the universal aspect. So that we understand the relationship. The relationship doesn't come from the top down. It should come from the bottom up. And that was one of the major instances, significances in the Movement. The organizing so that culture and politics and power comes from the bottom up and not from the top down, right. Now that was a commitment to that conversation of culture. That's the best I can do, but that was the best I can do.

Watkins: This fellow right here's been trying to get in for a long time.

Dillahunt: [1:04:15] That's just fine. But I was going to say that a lot of the chants that kind of emerge, especially from Dream Defenders—there's one that kind of goes, [chanting] "Ella Baker was a freedom fighter, and she taught us how to fight. And we gonna fight all day and night until we get it right. What side are you on, my people? What side are you on?" And it keeps on like the freedom song. So there's so many songs, chants that kind of emerge and a lot of spin that's been put to it is with hip hop. So B.Y.P., even in different, other movement spaces, you'll have Kendrick Lamar songs, "We Gon Be Alright." And that's played often at rallies, meetings, before meetings. And then B.Y.P., we have a chant, we say [chanting] "Unapologetically, Black. Unapologetically, Black. Black. Black. Black. Black. Black. Black." And that call just rallies a whole bunch of people before meetings, before rally, we use that to kind of gather the people. So it may be a little different in terms of the jar of music that the freedom singers sung, but that's kind of the basis, in terms of our generation, the music that kind of emerged in our generation. So and then with B.W.F.J., you have the Fruit of Labor Singing Ensemble, where they go around the country singing freedom songs that they've created. And they have another portion they call Hip Hop For Justice, and they have open mics and different performances. I mean it's a wide range of different types of music that incorporated hip hop. So there's just a lot of chants and chants/songs that are used to bring the people in. And they even have gospel origins.

Fikes: If you're gonna be from an African origin, you been chanting for a long time.

Long: [1:06:09] I remember in Selma, Alabama, we had a group from Durham that I called up to the stage to do that, the chant, the Ella Baker chant. That's not relevant to the time, but it seemed to be a women's group.

Fikes: And it's a new day. A new world order. 51 years ago. You can't get by what we did back then. And that's why I said we laid the foundation for you to chant. And it's left up to you to build today. It's your day now. And we're here to say to you younger generation, we've got your back.

Long: That was a good comment. I think that was your attempt to have people feel like this is no longer a panel. We're in a conversation together, and we can exchange ideas, right, that may work.

Audience member: I have a problem with the use of the word, chant. I'm a member of the faculty of the Department of Music, and when you say chant, a number of connotations and images come to mind. The freedom songs, which were connected to both early gospel as well as the song, the body of song we now call Negro spirituals that used to be slave songs or code songs for the underground railroad. Certainly the time has changed and their use changes, but I think one thing that is really a concern, a deep concern for me, and I think about, I certainly would love for you to respond to this idea—that as singers of the freedom songs you were producing, you were making the music. Whereas the present generation, we are now less makers of the music, but we're now consumers. And we're on the other end of this market chain, and where there's a corporate entity telling you this is what you want. This is what revolutionary. Whereas freedom songs, you were saying, these songs that we're singing, this is not only our vision for a better America, but this is what we're doing. This is what's coming out of us. And the sense of that internal expression being worked out is a lot different than today.

Long: [1:09:17] A lot of people don't realize that the chant we're talking about, we don't know where it comes from. We know where it is now in terms of the freedom struggle, but where did it come from. For instance, they forget about the work song. The fact that many of the chants came from the work songs and from working people. Good example would be railroad workers who work on the line, track liners, or gandy dancers sang. "What do you do when check is short? Go to Memphis to the office have a talk with the boss." A chant. Even to the plants, when you get plants in Detroit, people did chant. "Finally got the news. Finally got the news. Finally got the news how my dues are being used." Right, this is in the 1970s, right. This is before our time. But then the African chant is what we have not talked about, and that would take a long time because of the people are not sure—we don't have the history. We don't have a recorded history of some of that.

Audience member: You hit real close to home when you talk about Selma, Alabama and Detroit. Detroit's my home town and my paternal grandfather came from Selma, Alabama.

Long: But he came from Alabama or Mississippi.

Cobb: Alabama.

Long: Right, migrated.

Audience member: I just wanted to know how effective do you feel social workers are in society?

Fikes: You had good and bad on both sides. What I feel a lot of times that you can't even rationalize, saying what's good and what's bad because news, for instance. News is only rated by raters. But they normally put all bad on the news. Showing social workers [[unknown] when something bad happens in families, especially in California. For instance, they haven't check on this child, and they'd go back a

couple of times and not document it. Something bad happens to the child and that goes on to the department, but then there's this discredit the ones that are working eighteen and nineteen hours trying to do the right thing. So there's no way to balance that out. To the ones that go into the field to be the best that you can be, do the best that you can. But either way you go, there's always going to be an advantage and a disadvantage. It's always going to be someone that ends up suffering and holding them back from the bad that someone else did.

Long: Now your question on higher education and your question about social work can be joined. Do you intend to go into social work.

Audience member: Yes.

Long: So now I know where the question is coming from, so if you answer that question, just from that standpoint, I'm intending to go into social work, what's your real question? Say it one more time for me.

Audience member: I guess what role do you think they play in society? Like how effective how they in situations—

Long: Like are you trying to make a choice, is what I'm asking?

Audience member: With what?

Long: Are you trying to bring meaning to your choice? Is that what?

Audience member: Yes.

Neblett: [1:13:54] I think it has to do with mission minded-ness, and if your mission is to help people, you work with that institution, and you more than likely will come at odds with that institution when you try to do the right thing for the people. So I think you have to have a mission mind. You have to have a mind to do that. It's revolutionary. Wherever you do it, it's revolutionary. And you have to have a revolutionary mind inside of those institutions, in order to help people.

Cobb: There's an inherent tension between the social worker and the system within which the social worker has to work. And the tension is that the system—social workers probably is working with the most disadvantaged in any particular society. A city, a county, or whatever, a state. And the system that the social worker finds him or herself in actually has no interest in providing assistance to the most disadvantaged. In fact the system operates in exactly the opposite kind of way. Here I'm talking about political systems here. State governments, city governments, county governments. The bureaucracy that attaches, that's a part of that system. So there's a tension between the social worker who wants to do right, and it depends on the social worker in the final analysis. How much can he or she tolerate? I know social workers who in the final, who in the end have just thrown up their hands in despair. And they've

told me, 'I've tried to do good, Charlie. I can't deal with it anymore.' I mean I know people like that, and that tension is—

Watkins: I was gonna say, this is a situation and a position I would say that you need to use the four steps of community organizing. Investigate, educate, negotiate, and demonstrate. See you need to find out where are the good ones and who are the good ones that you can network with, and you have them separated in a group from the bad ones that we know that's out there. And see you and the good ones can begin to communicate, know exactly where each other's coming from and how each other sees that, and that's that commonality in there. And you create a method or process in which y'all stay tight and can work to build and convert all of those who are bad into becoming a part of your group. Or to get some others that's not in the field to come into it, like you are. So it's not a overnight thing that's going to change all the folk that got their guns cocked and pointed, hoping and praying and hoping and wondering when we going to die.

Fikes: Be willing to serve.

Long: [1:18:04] You see, social work, Annell Ponder was a social worker. Dr. W.E.B. DuBois was a sociologist, basically, but taught social work. He was an organizer. He organized, both inside and outside the system. Inside the system he was teaching people how to do service to people who needed it as social workers. Outside, he was saying that you need to understand the power dynamic that exists in any field, whether it's education, social work, whatever it is, and you need to understand the structure. You need to understand how it's structured. And when I say structured, I mean if it's a bureaucracy, what kind of bureaucracy is it? Is it something that can actually be used to do the job that it says it's set up for? And we count on you, you've already made a decision—see if there's an alternative way, a way that you can build an alternative structure that's something that either is like that system or different from that system or even opposed to that system if it doesn't work. A little different from your four principles. If it doesn't work, some people would say it needs to go. A dead tree needs to fall. And you need to look at that too, but of course, that you're talking about a different situation there. But a dead tree, except for firewood, needs to fall, right. And then when that happens in the Movement, we had some problems. [Laughter]

Neblett: Another man done gone.

Audience member: I have another question if you'll bear with me. It's related to chant. Melody. Is there a spirit in melody of freedom songs that you don't quite get in the same degree in chants?

Fikes: [1:21:23] Yes. Yes. The question that the young lady asked, the student asked leaving, who we opened with "I'm on My Way," and she came up and asked a question that, "Do God come through you when you sing?" And that was a good question because I talk so much on spirituality. For instance, I had to learn some songs last week, and before I get to the lyrics, I have to have the melody. When I get the melody, then I go to the lyrics. So the lyrics were sent to me first without the melody. It took me, I think, another three or four days before I got the melody. Then once I got the melody, I got the feel of the

song. And then after I got the feel of the song, I was able to go to a pianist and play it for me. So it's still for Bettie Mae, I always go back to the spirituality and the melody of the song. Words take meaning to songs. Well for me, melody take meaning. I like harmony and those things. So today, you don't get that in chanting. You get the energy in chanting. That's what chanting brings on. And it's pretty much like melody because melody fills you up, so when the sisters, when we had the old mothers of the church that get the spirit so high it felt like you could run away. In the sixties, it got you so high it would just make you want to go to jail. Then you bypass going to jail—this is worth me dying for. But chanting gives you energy. That energy gives you something worth fighting for, so if I compare it, it's completely different. That's for me.

Long: [1:23:48] We got some music people in here. A constant element in African American expression, let's deal with that. They said they took away the drums, ok. [Drumming] Hand bone. They took the drums.

Fikes: What did you say?

Audience member: There was a 1693 law in Virginia Colony saying that it was illegal to have or play the drum. But they did not wall, they could not wall body percussion.

Long: You can't take—

Neblett: Walking stick on the floor.

Long: So what is the opposite argument to that? I just gave one. Handbone. I did a thing called, homemade music makers at Smithsonian. Homemade music makers. Anything you got around you that you can use to make music. Most of it percussion. Most of it percussion. So what we're talking about basically is element of percussion. Even with piano music during certain periods, it became for blues players a percussion instrument.

Audience member: Eighty-eight well-tuned drums. And ragtime.

Long: And ragtime. Is there another example? Is there another example?

Audience: The rhythms of our feet.

Long: Yeah, the rhythms of our feet. And the rhythms of our minds. Memory. The rhythms of our mind. Rhythm. Right about ideation, she just discussed it another way, I think. But these things are important. The rhythms of our thoughts. The rhythms in our minds, right. I forgot my baby, and I'm rocking from sadness. I forgot my baby. I'm singing a spiritual. I'm going from side to side. I'm singing a jubilee and I'm going up and down. So it's—there's a lot that we could talk about on that. But that's, did you want to add something? Sorry, you with the choir.

Audience member: I'm in school listening, grateful. But I agree. The first thing I do in teaching singers is teach them how to breath. She said how to feel the music in their breath, walking around the room, feeling their body, feeling the rhythm, and feeling the tone in their body. Just singing one long tone and hearing that sound. Because that [singing] "Mmmmmmm."

Long: Do that again please? [Laughter]

Audience members: [singing] "Mmmmmmmmm" because for me a lot of times, young people, you just have to direct them to what to listen to and think about. How to think about themselves in the middle of the music.

Fikes: [1:27:30] You teaching them how to be in tune with themselves.

Audience member: Because a tone, a tone can change a mood. It can bring information. And then all the rhythms, the voices of the first instrument—I've gravitated towards jazz since age fifteen, and my parents always had—I grew up on the south side of Chicago—my parents always had all kinds of music playing. My father had african drums. So for me, that's how I understood music to be, and so I teach that to the young people and try to answer their questions about what now? What for me? How do I immerse myself in it? So when we were preparing them for the song yesterday, we first went to see video examples of the song and give them a foundation about the SNCC Freedom Singers and listen to all of that. And then they were like, what's SNCC? Answering those questions so they came—they were so excited that after the first time they went through the song. They started having ideas. Well we can do this. And I want to lead one of the line. So we had students who were normally on their phones, like were like this on the edge of their seats, watching and listening to everything y'all said. So we're grateful that you're hear.

Long: [1:29:02] Yesterday, one of the things I was amazed by and please by was there was more than one lead singer. There was a collective lead singer. There was a rounding of lead singers, so there was not just one voice. One special voice, right.

Audience member: Thank you for requesting the encore of their song because what that gave the audience or the congregation if you will, permission ironically to do was to join in. And the one thing that I have learned in my experience as an African American concert musician is that when there is a participatory element in the performance, that humanizes it even further. The tradition that comes over from Europe, which I think is really connected to religions, the organized religion division, where you have a priest that says, "The Lord be with you." Right. "And also with you." [Laughter] You respond. While in the African American church, it's oh, you can kick something off. It might be the pastor. It might be someone in the back of the room. it could be a moan from one of the mothers of the church that has no lyric.

Long: So that everybody can sing.



Audience member: There is a call and response for whoever it is who makes the call. That's open season.

Long: Right. The call could happen anywhere. That was part of the beauty. [1:31:00] I'm so sorry. We want to know what you think about what's happening here. [Laughter] I'm picking on you because you've got the glasses like mine.

Audience member: I'm just taking it all in.

Long: Give something out. Breath out. Give me something. How you feeling?

Audience member: I'm feeling pretty right.

Long: Do you sing?

Audience member: No, sir.

Long: Have you ever sung?

Audience member: Not

Long: No street corner singing, no shouting.

Audience member: Nah, not really.

Long: Does music move you?

Audience member: Of course!

Long: Aahhhh. Now—tell us about it.

Audience member: Well, I grew up listening to all different kinds of music. I used to fall asleep listening to [?], the r&b station when I was a kid and listen to a bunch of different things. My father, he's Nigerian, so I grew up listening to—going to Nigerian parties and listening to actual Nigerian music where they do a lot of the things y'all talk about. Where they use the inflection in their voice to become the actual instrument. It's actually pretty nice, and I like to hear it.

Long: Thank you.

Dillahunt: Have you all read Robin Kelley's book, "Africa Speaks, America Answers," about the development of modern day jazz. That's a good one. It just speaks to a lot of the African influence on jazz music and music in general.

Long: By the way, James H. Cone wrote a book on spirituals and blues and some other stuff also. Some other ones. One of the upperclassmen at Philander Smith College when I was there. Very important person. [1:33:39] I'm sorry, Mr. Cobb.

Cobb: No, I'm not moderating. [Laughter] I didn't even come here with the intention of moderating. I was drafted into it.

Long: The lady in the back. Who's next? Go ahead.

Audience member: Are you talking to me? I just walked in about ten minutes ago.

Long: Yes. I realize that.

Audience member A: But I was in the audience last night and I appreciate the conversation y'all had. I'm faculty of the Department of History, and so last night, I was really interested in the question and answer portion of the program. And there was a conversation that started about young people and acknowledgement a lack in the continuation of this tradition of music as activists. And I was thinking about several hip hop artists who I think are certainly continuing that tradition in infusing activism in their music, and when someone mentioned the freedom song, "Which Side Are You On?" there was a hip hop song playing in my head that that is the chorus of, "Which side are you on." Several stanzas that are about the contemporary struggles that Black folk are facing with the rise of the prison industrial complex, with police brutality. So I think there is a tradition that perhaps older people might not be aware of that is being continued in this hip hop music. And I have my students, in fact yesterday, listening to rap artists who are continuing this tradition as a way to connect them to what the presentation that y'all gave last night is about.

Audience member: Can you give some examples?

Audience member A: So I'm thinking about if you heard Indie 5000 album, the first song on the compilation album. "Which Side Are You On" Talib Kweli. The sister right here from North Carolina, Rapsody. There are several artists on that particular song. Amazing track. I'm also thinking about Lauryn Hill's Black Rage. I'm thinking about, yes. You've got a list—it is amazing. I'm thinking about Mos Def. He's got a song "Black on Both Sides" where he's talking about, he's singing, "I woke up this morning with my mind." And he's talking about his grandmother who was born into slavery. I mean there are artists who are continuing this tradition, and it's speaking to a new generation. You're in a different mode, but I think it's still the same message.

Long: And you're teaching history?

Audience member A: Yes.

Long: Cultural history?

Audience member A: I teach Black women's history. I teach African diaspora history. Black folks.

Long: Teach on. Alright, I'm not going to pick on anybody else. [Laughter]

Audience member D: I'm just enjoying myself. I have a great appreciation for—

Long: Good. I love you

[...]

Will Long [1:38:16] Did you all feel like freedom songs were a part of what we'd call popular culture in the sixties. Because I think one of the things that some of the artists that she mentioned, they're not what I would consider to be pop artists. But I think there has been kind of a movement, even with popular artists like Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, some of the others who are incorporating kind of more ideas and concepts about freedom. But I was just curious. Did you consider the freedom songs to be part of popular culture in the sixties?

Neblett: [1:38:48] There are two things. I always say that the freedom songs that we sang came out of the Movement. It came out of it. Some more songs that people wrote about the Movement. And the songs we sang, I didn't think about it being in popular culture or anything, but it was just a useful tool that we had. It's a very useful tool that we had to sustain ourselves in it.

Long: I think. "They went wild over me." Tell us about that. Just for a little bit, and then we—

Carawan: Well, I'm not sure how it fits, but the whole thing about adapting songs. When I was in the sit-ins, there was a song—it had been a popular song in popular culture way back in the 1920s. They go wild over me. It was like a love song. Then the I.W.W.—International Workers of the World—the Wobblies had done a labor version of that, and someone had taught that to me shortly before I went to Fisk. And it was so easy to take that song and tweak two or three of the versus. It became a sit-in song.

Long: And what did it say? They went—

Carawan: They go wild, simply wild over me. The waitress goes wild. The jailer goes wild. The bed bugs and the fleas go wild while you're in jail.

Long: And that was after your first time.

Carawan: I guess it was. Yeah it was.

Fikes: First time.

Audience member: Your story about spending time in Parchman, Mississippi. That touched a chord in my gathering member of what I learned about American history and the fact that at one time that was a plantation that was made into a penitentiary, and that in the 1960s, in the midst of the Freedom Rides that that place was used to incarcerate Freedom Riders.

Long: In a book called, "Brother Hollis"

Cobb: Hollis's book. Hollis's book.

Long: What is it called?

Watkins: Brother Hollis: the Sankofa of a Movement Man.

Long: You talk about, not that I've read the book, but you talk about being in the hole, I'm told.  
[Laughter]

Watkins: Well, that's correct. And the hole was a name given to a cell that was considered to be their solitary confinement. The whole was a six by six concrete cell. The only place you could get air was a small crack underneath the door. And fourteen of us had to tolerate that for a short period of time.

Audience member: How short?

Watkins: Just a few days.

Long: But I was in Kilby Prison where the Scottsboro Boys were for two weeks. The march from Selma to Montgomery. I was there. I was in Kilby Prison, but it was nothing like what you described, so I have added respect for Brother Hollis.

Watkins: And when I say a few days, I mean the total group of us, but there were many times, if you wanted to go to the hole, you just start singing. Freedom songs, that was your ticket. Not round trip ticket to the hole, but it was your ticket to your hole. And that was one of the things—but I must say, understanding the logistics of the hole and music, we took that weapon away from them. Because what we discovered is that there was very little difference being in the hole and being in the regular cell where you either slept on steel bunks or concrete floor, no kind of covering. It was basically the same. So we discovered and created a system by which not more than two of us would get in there, and we'd start asking permission to go. And then they stopped using it ultimately because it didn't have the effect that they wanted. We took that—I think I do talk about that in my book.

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[Opening conversation about Charlie's book, This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed]

Long: [1:32] This brother whose book I read last night. He was up there in Holmes County.

Cobb: Well Hollis was running the Holmes County project. [Laughter] Although I think Bob wanted to replace you. Didn't he want to replace you or something?

Watkins: Well, see there was—what happened was that they decided that somebody else was going to be the project director for Holmes County. I had already been working in Holmes County before the summer project. Hartman Turnbow, Ozell Mitchell, and Mr. Mitchell's sister had come to Greenwood to invite us to come down there. So when they were talking about—I said, "Well look, it got to be somebody from Mississippi." Here's a county that Black folks are 75 percent of the population. Black folk own 73 percent of the land in this county, and I will not have some downtown whoever come and going to mess up this county. Hell no! Hell to the no. And we discussed it all of us in Greenwood, we discussed it. And they were still locked on it. I said, "Look. I'm outta here. I'm gone." I say, "Nobody better not come to Holmes County talking about they're the project director. If they do, they're going to have to deal with me, and I'm not talking about philosophically." [Laughter] "I will kick somebody's—"

Long: Y'all were over on the west side of Highway 55. Because Pickens, y'all weren't doing much in Pickens.

Watkins: Well we had, we had to get out to Pickens. You see we started off the folks that came and invited us there was from [[unknown]]. Neither were we doing a lot at that time over in Goodman. Pickens and Goodman. Pickens is on the east side.

Long: That's where I found some Black people when y'all finally got over there. And I found the best singers in the world. Lonnie Pitchford

Fikes: Oh lord. Lonnie Pitchford. Three strings.

Long: And Boyd Rivers too.

Fike: Boyd was from there too!

Long: Boyd Rivers was from Pickens.

Cobb: Are we recording? Before we get started, I want to ask Wesley, you should move for at least for a few minutes closer to the mic because I want you to repeat—it's pertinent to the discussion we were having at Central this morning. So I wanted you to repeat the story that I guess Judy told you about how the music can be used.

Hogan: [4:49] So I was on the phone with Judy this morning, and she said to say hello to everybody. And she's working on setting up a summer institute next summer here at Duke to teach thirty K-12 teachers about how to use the SNCC site, so they can bring it into their classroom. She said, "How's the music session going?" And I said, "It's great. It's so enhancing!" And she said, "Well that's good." Because there was something that was really bad that happened a little while ago where New York City students that Judy and Ladner sisters and others were working with, and they were teaching them freedom songs. And then they traveled to D.C. for something, and while they were there, they were surrounded by guys with red hats who said Make American Great Again, and they got really uncomfortable. And they just learned this song, and so they started singing, "Ain't gonna let nobody—" [Laughter] And then they would pick it up and take it. I apologized to Mr. Watkins. I used his story in response to Judy because I was so fired up that this happened. This happened when Hollis taught this to a bunch of first graders. You know the teacher came back to him and said that they were unmanageable. You couldn't get them back in the classroom. But that's what happens when you teach this to young people, and they start feeling their sense of belonging and power. So anyway, that's a little story.

Watkins: [6:18] One slight correction, it was a combination of kindergarten and first graders. They were all together. And they were in the Jackson mall. And they were the Jackson mega mall. They were having a big event there, and people came out and talked. And it just dawned on me that I should say a few words and teach the little kids this song. So they got fired up, and they was just singing, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around. Turn me around. Turn me around. Ain't gonna—" And you could see them putting the gestures in there. And one of the teachers later on was very angry with me because she said that that was one of the worst things that I could've done. It messed up her teaching there because after the kids learned that song, they was so hard to get to stop singing. She said, on the way back to the school and even after they get there, they're coming off the bus. "Ain't scared of nobody cuz I want my freedom. I want my freedom." And it just went on and on, she said. It took several weeks before the kids could—

Fikes: But they will remember that—

Watkins: Yeah. Absolutely. See what would happen, what she said, is that today one or two of them might start, and the next thing you know, two or three others will start it. And it may be tomorrow or the next day, another one or two, rather than the first that is, so they just had it going on. You know what to do.

Neblett: [8:14] You'd be surprised that these small kids have their own struggles. They have their own struggles. And they can relate to a lot of it. I'm tellin' you.

Fikes: Going through the same thing. Might be different way, but the feeling is the same.

Watkins: That was a beautiful site for me.

Cobb: Which makes me feel compelled to ask the question that's on my list, that I want you all to talk to, which is a simple one on the one hand and complex on the other. What is a freedom song?

Fikes: I just say what I want to say.

Cobb: Say what you want to say.

Fikes: Why you looking at me when you say that? [Laughter]

Cobb: Because you're better to look at than Chuck. [Laughter]

Long: You're better to look at right now.

Fikes: [9:12] A freedom song, to me, is the freedom of expression. I can't—I think the only time I'm ever really free is when I'm singing. Now, where I've been for two and a half months has been freedom, even though it's in the open. All this beauty of nature that God has created, so when I sing, I'm looking up at these trees and all this beauty that surrounds me, and it feels like I can float. That's freedom to me. Before I go back into the real world. But that's what freedom is and that's what freedom means to me. When you free enough and you expressing yourself and that expression reaches into, touches someone else, then you become liberated. But then what you say, you're only liberated or free for a moment while you doing that. But there are not too many people in life today have that type of freedom. I would love to have big money but will big money make me as comfortable as I am in doing what I do. So I have the freedom of doing and speaking and singing with expression and to me, you know, I tell everybody, freedom does not mean you got a good job. Freedom does not mean you're living on the house on the hill. Freedom does not mean that you have acquired all the qualities of this life that we call the American Dream, that we used to call. Freedom is the expression that when you wake up in the morning and feel good knowing that you may not have nothing, not knowing how you're gonna make it through the day. That's freedom for Bettie Mae. All that sounds, I keep my eyes on the prize.

Cobb: I want to hear from everybody on this question of what is a freedom song here.

Carawan: [11:29] Ok. I'll go next. I guess I'll put it in a little bit smaller box. Because I've been thinking while we've been here, and you sort of posed the question earlier, I think what I would in my mind—it's gonna start back with the really early days when Black people were in this country and songs emerged, and they had hidden means, but they were definitely survival songs and struggle songs. And to me that's a continuum that we could spend years studying and should, but it gets us to the point where when the modern freedom movement that we think about took place, the songs that Guy and I put in our book began to emerge that said just outright, I want my freedom and began to specify. Those songs became the modern freedom songs, but they were coming off this long continuum, which I think needs to be recognized. Which is also very, very powerful, and which served a huge purpose to get people to the fact where they could begin to speak about their oppression and address it.

Cobb: Now if I can move to this side of the table.

Long: [13:04] There's a thing called a fight song. This is all of them right. The people'll be playing ball, and every campus got what they call, a what? A fight song. And that song is a song that gives spirit to the multitude. Right? [Laughter] So whatever is articulated as the aim of that group, you hear it pretty much capsuled into the fight song. I had a fight song for North Carolina Central that my daughter had prepared for me, but we didn't get it recorded before we left. But let's think of a fight song that are a fight, an expression. Because to me, a freedom song is communication. It has to do with communication. It has to do with making a statement about your concrete condition in this world. But also about what, where you want to be, right? And it's sometimes about how you will get there, right? So did I do three things? What? Where, where you want to be, and how you going to get there. Right. Now most of those fight songs talk more about the assurance that they will be there, that they will win. They talk about that third thing or beyond. In the church, they talk about that third thing, or beyond. But a freedom song that says, that uses the word fight—let me think. "I'm fighting for my rights." Ok. Give another one. Fight. Help me now. What is this thing that you're saying? [Humming] Fighting for my rights.

Cobb: Fighting for my rights. It's a Ray Charles song.

Long: What is that tune?

Wise: [singing] "I'm fighting for my rights."

Long: No what words does it say.

Neblett: My cell doesn't have no windows.

Long: My cell doesn't have no windows.

Neblett: So the air couldn't come through.

Long: So the air couldn't come through.

Neblett: I feel so hot and stuffy.

Long: I feel so hot and stuffy.

Neblett: And I didn't know what to do.

Long: And I didn't know what to do.

Neblett: Still I was fighting for my rights.



Long: But I was fighting for my rights. Ok. [16:25] That speaks even to another thing. You talking about steadfastness in this particular case. You're talking about someone who is assured that no matter what they face. They're going to still struggle. Do you hear that kind of in what you're saying?

Cobb: Can I just, before we pick up with Hollis and Chuck, but in terms of what you said, the thought occurs to me in terms of what you said Worth, that I can't really think of a freedom song that says we cannot do something. It's all affirmative. It's always about what we're gonna do. What we want. I cannot and anybody here can correct me if I'm wrong here, but I cannot think of a freedom song that says we can't do something. And it's one of the striking qualities of these songs is that they're all affirmative about what we intend to do. And we don't even have to bring up what we cannot do.

Long: [17:43] But then the aims of the—in terms of the real freedom songs—the aims of a Movement very often are encoded into what that songs says. The aims of the Movement. I could say even the meaning, the purpose, and the aims of that Movement are encapsulated in that song. And I use the word encapsulated because it's like the minimus thing. It's like it's been reduced to lowest terms. You can say it in a few phrases, but a few fiery phrases. That's what I have to say right now.

Cobb: Hollis?

Watkins: [18:38] 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, than that automatically creates a bond between the singer and the one that initially starts out listening.

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

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.

Long: [24:01] Ms. Hamer, she said—I don't know if I can do it—freedom, freedom somewhere. Who know that? Very few of us know that. It's on the album, Fannie Lou. Help me. Freedom somewhere. [singing] "Freedom, freedom somewhere. Freedom, freedom somewhere. I'm going to keep on searching 'til I find it. Freedom, freedom somewhere." That's all she said.

Cobb: I'm not familiar with that one either. That's a new one.

Fikes: Never heard that.

Neblett: But when you speak of freedom, when you speak of freedom, it's the way you want to be. It's the way you gonna go. And you've got to feel freedom now. You've got to be free. You free yourselves. First of all, you free yourselves in that, during the—you free yourself. And all of them talking about, every song is talking about freeing yourself. And it's individual. And if you are there, and you want to free yourself, you identify with that.

Watkins: [25:23] See if you don't have a proper state of mind, I mean, I'm going to know you ain't got that, and you ain't going to get me to the point where I can have it. So with you, you get that state of mind, and then you come out there. See that's the thing the deal with my sister here—see, when she does her thing right from the beginning and juggling with them notes like she do, ain't no question. She is not joking. She is not joking. She feels it, and by her feeling it, she makes me feel it. See, that's what happened with them little children that I sang. They saw how I was singing that song, and they bought into it. They begin to feel this way, and they started hitting with their fists. They started stomping with their feet and all of that. And no, they weren't scared of nobody. They wanted their freedom.

Neblett: Now, you say, those kids were feeling out of an individual situation. Every one of those kids, they felt it. They felt it within themselves. And when they got together, it was a mess, but you've got to feel it for yourself. And anybody who's yearning for freedom or change, and you bring in the freedom songs, they can grasp it really well. They grasp it. They feel it. They can feel it.

Cobb: You wanted to say something, Leah.

Wise: [27:08] Well, I kind of wanted to say something and sort of asking a question at the same time. I was just reflecting on the things I've heard you all speak to, and so, one of the things—yesterday, there was some distinction made about songs of struggle and songs that describe struggle and songs that are taking folks through. So that was one thing. The other is I think yesterday we talked a lot about the cultural roots that anchor these songs in people's own experience and culture, and when they asked last night about South Africa, it made me think about that because I was thinking about when those kids marched. "Humm. Harr hummmm. Harr hummm." And it's from the Zulu chants, and it's quite grounded. So what I was thinking about was what takes the song from the individual commitment to the mass, and are some of the—is that a particular thing about the freedom songs that we are describing that become movement songs. I'm not sure. I'm just wondering, are they automatically the same thing, or is what becomes actually a song sung in collectivity, something that takes it up to another notch. So that's what I've just been thinking about as I heard you all talking.

Neblett: [28:35] You got a lot of freedom songs—I think the ones that work, it depends on what the situation is. They work in different situations. I know a lot of songs—let me see if I can think of one—that I wouldn't sing at a rally. I wouldn't sing at a rally. Some songs that, if I'm on a picket line, I'm not gonna sing no slow songs. But I think it depends on the situation. That all of them will work, but it depends on the situation.

Long: So if you running, you're going to sing a fast, upbeat song. Right.

Watkins: See one of the, like on the little cd that I made, I didn't say freedom songs. I said songs of struggle because to me, it gets to be a struggle, and by you struggling with it, depending on who you are and where you are and how you deal with it, determines whether it becomes a freedom song. One that transitions from a song of struggle into being one that sets free. And I think that's how you look at it. And that communication, it takes getting back to the heart and the soul where you can feel it, and you know it's for real. Because your issue may not be mine, but mine is affecting me the same yours is affecting you, and therefore, I can relate to you brother. I can relate to you sister because I understand.

Cobb: Let me—I'd like to drill a little bit deeper here in this discussion. And partly, it will address some of what Leah raised, as well as some of the conversation that has gone on for the last fifteen or twenty minutes. And I'd like to go around the table with this again. Could you all talk very specifically about situations from your own experience in which you've used freedom songs? How you used them? What the effects of using it or them has been? Yes, I'm looking at you Bettie Mae. It seems to me we want to be fairly specific at some level. I mean there's nobody sitting around this table who hasn't either collectively with the group of people or just individually because you're being chased by somebody maybe, used a freedom song. And there's a variety of ways they've been used, and I'd like to hear how you've used those songs.

Fikes: [32:09] Over my head. I see freedom in the air.

Cobb: I believe you.

Fikes: You know, I always ask children, "What is freedom to you?" But the songs—freedom to me—that I use quite frequently, keep your eyes on the prize and hold on. And when I'm thinking of that, if I'm writing a letter, I always say, end the letter with "Your sister in the struggle." Another one that we used to sing and we had with the Freedom Singers, Rutha and Cordell. "Just a Closer Walk With Thee." Now I have to tell children this doesn't mean I am so religious because I'm not religious. I try to follow the footsteps of Jesus but people, with my music, I go wherever they call. But with the singing of the songs and passing on the songs, what is good for me, I have so many that strengthens me. Eyes on the Prize. Over My Head, I See Freedom in the Air. Those are the two major ones that I walk with daily. Still making up verses as I go, depending on what my struggle is for that day. But those are the songs, if I tell people, you've got to have a song in your heart. I had changed the lyrics, like we've done so many times from church, I've been running for Jesus a mighty long time, and I ain't got tired yet. So I changed it to I've been running for freedom a long. Ain't got tired yet. So those are songs that I like to sing. Paul and—and when I do that, I'm not only helping myself. I told—that is like the moans to me. And those are the things that I hold on to.

Cobb: [34:23] Well I had in mind in asking the questions, kind of like Hollis was talking about this morning at Central about being in Parchman in the hole and how the use of song could result in being put in the hole. Except eventually they began to learn that that wasn't really working.

Long: He wants you to do that again.

Cobb: Well, it doesn't have to be the exact. You don't have to do that again, but I just want to say that as an illustration. Or Bernice Reagon talks about, for instance, how she changed the lyrics of Over My Head, I See Trouble in the Air to Over My Head, I See Freedom in the Air, and she's at the mass meeting in Albany, and somebody who says, "Bernice, come on up here and sing us a song." And Bernice says she was thinking about over my head, I see trouble in the air, and she said to herself—and this is the way Bernice tells the story—I was thinking about the song Over My Head, I See Trouble in the Air and then she said, we got enough trouble. I don't need to sing about trouble, and she decided to change the word to Over My Head, I See Freedom in the Air. When I say drill down in the experience of how you use freedom songs, that's what I'm kind of looking for.

Fikes: Come by here, Lord. Come by—you know you're going through something and no way humanly possible that you can see anyone around you that can help. And you say, "Come by here, Lord. Oh come by here." All those songs of freedom brings freedom. So you have so many collective songs that fit the situation, but like you said, the only ones that fit you personally. When I look around and say, "I've been—I've changed, I've been in the storm so long." That's my signature song now. When I do that, that's going deep. So I have many that I've chosen to be a part of me, but I have few that carry me to my next destination.

Cobb: Ok. Candie, how do you, what do you have?

Carawan: Ok. I guess I'm going to say two things. Well, the first thing is I feel like I come at this from a really different place than all of you. And I feel very humbled in the situation really. I mean, I'm not a freedom singer really. I'm somebody who lucked into this world.

Long: But writes freedom songs.

Carawan: [37:20] So I just want to say two things. One is sort of an institutional thing that I've seen happen over and over again, and the second one is very personal. How songs make a difference. You know, I'm thinking of being at Highlander, and I'm thinking about the role of music at Highlander, and I'm thinking about the many times we've tried to bridge distance between people. And that could be age or urban/rural, north/south, but I'll go to the Appalachia/Deep South because there was a period where after Highlander had worked in Appalachia, they collectively, the board and staff, felt that it's a time to try to bridge these Deep South freedom struggles and people's struggles in Appalachia. And so the gatherings at Highlander would bring those two groups of people. And it was so often the music, and it would be the freedom songs or the deeper in tradition songs out of Black communities and the comparable music from Appalachia, which would be very, very different in spirit, but would speak to people's very concrete experiences. Or it might be a poem. Lois Short had a poem about what it was like to grow up in Kentucky. And I can remember very specifically one time—we used to always start on the Friday before we got to the nitty gritty about issues on Saturday morning, we would usually start with a cultural piece on Friday night. So Lois gives her poem about growing up in Kentucky, and Sophia Gracie Harris from Montgomery is there. And the next morning, I can still remember her saying, I didn't know I could come into this room and we could build trust and talk to each other about what we're really struggling with, but when I heard that poem last night, you know. So it's the role of the freedom songs that I have seen very directly work that way, and how appreciative I am of that. The personal thing, just because it popped in my head as we were talking, as Guy got toward the end of his life, the song that he sang every time—I mean, he remembered songs, and this is important for memory—you know, songs really stayed with Guy. But the one that no matter what else he sang, he always did "You Got a Right to the Tree of Life." And it's the song that came from Johns Island in the form more of a chant, but Guy had adapted it years before to his own guitar. And I mean, he probably sang that song the day before he died. You know, so it was of all the songs that he had carried through his life and done in a performance situation or done in a situation where he's drawing it out of other people, that one just stayed right there until the very end.

Long: [40:10] It says what, ain't I

Cobb: Ain't you got a right

Carawan: But that is so interesting because even on Johns Island, there are two versions. One is "ain't you got a right to the tree of life," and the other one is, "Run, Mary, Run. You've got a right to the—. Isn't that interesting. So Guy had adapted the Ain't You Gotta Right, but years later, somebody on the island said, I want you to hear this version. You got a right. But it wasn't the "I". It was in both cases, it

was the you. But we also thought of it collectively, the big you. But it's just a real interesting point that you're making. And Bernice used to make that too. The I versus the we.

Long: What is an utterance? I talk about what is spoken. What is moaned. Can we, can we put that under utterance?

Cobb: Yeah, I don't see why not.

Long: Is what is growled an utterance? I don't know. I'm using a pick up stick thing in my mind, and I'm trying to say, well no, communication—freedom songs sound like an utterance of something that does something somewhere for some reason.

Fikes: To somebody.

Long: To somebody.

Cobb: So why don't you talk some about the utterances? [laughter] What it did to somebody? [Laughter]

Fikes: Alright, come Holy Spirit. [Laughter]

Long: We would need a blackboard. We ain't in Selma, Bettie. How many things was that? Was that five things? We going to put the somebody up closer to the top. Right? So what do we got? We got utterance that

Hogan: [42:47] You said something that does something somewhere for some reason to somebody.

Long: That does something to somebody. To somebody, right. Try it again.

Hogan: Something that does something, somewhere for some reason to somebody.

Long: Yeah. I'm trying not to say that an utterance speaks, so I said does. It does something.

Cobb: She's just repeating what you said.

Long: I know, I know. I'm still trying.

Wise: I'm struggling to understand what you're trying to use with the distinction with utterance. Where are you trying to go?

Long: I'm trying to broaden it. To make it more ambiguous in order to make it work [laughter]. You asked me. I'm telling you.

Wise: Are you looking for an umbrella term?

Long: I'm looking not so much for an umbrella. I want to put the umbrella here, but under the umbrella I want it to flow. I want the rain to come in. So I want some holes in there. I want to punch some holes in the umbrella.

Wise: So the rain—

Long: So the rain can come in. [Laughter]

Cobb: Worth, all I meant in asking my question [laughter], all I was trying to get in asking my question was a story or two.

Long: My story would probably would have to do with using song as an organizing tool. I remember in Arkansas [44:48], most of the leadership was preaching. And it was kind of like this morning. It's structured. The speakers are up here, and the audience is out there. Even though they're maybe divided into two rows, there's no amen corner. That's when you're talking about—and structure's important. So what I was trying to was because structure tells you that you are free to speak. It tells you, you are free to be. Or it tells you that you are in jail, as in the case of the structure of the box that Hollis was in that only had one hole. That had no

Cobb: Significant flow of air.

Long: No bathroom facilities, right. No bathroom facilities. So sometimes that box can be transformed to other cultural areas, and we're still boxed in. A circle is not a box. So I remember in Little Rock, Arkansas, deciding what we would do, we would meet in small groups, so that we could form circles. And even if we didn't have enough room to do it in a gym—we'd have enough chairs, we would still have circles. If somebody came in late, they could crouch. They could get on their knees. But that, the structural thing was not enough. Somebody threw their head back and started singing a traditional song. And everybody joined in as if it were a thing natural to do. What then, what I then introduced was a freedom song. [47:18] If you hear me hesitating because I can't remember what the song was, but I introduced a freedom song that was immediately picked up by everybody in the same way that congregational song had been picked up earlier. And it changed the whole course of that organizing meeting. And I remembered that whenever I went and wherever I went. The other thing I remember is the song not only moved the audience, the people assembled, but it moved me. That I felt good about it. I felt more powerful, empowered. And I could do my job better, more sensitive. I could almost feel in the room what people were feeling and thinking. You know what I mean? More connected. So that song cleansed me, cleansed my mind to the extent that I could utter, that I could talk better. And I'm having problems now because of a medical condition. I can't, can't operate and organize like I used to because I can't follow, I can't put those sticks down the way I used to. I used to throw them down and just spread them and—

Fikes: Without touching.

Long: Right. [49:12] And then I put the cap on them. The umbrella. Sometimes I'd put the umbrella and then throw the sticks. Right, but there was a method to the madness. I hope that.

Cobb: That helps. That helps. [Laughter] One question by way of following up on what you said before moving onto Hollis—was it, in terms of that liberating feeling, which is what you're describing in part—was that because of how you rearranged the organization or structure in the room? Is that what the roots of that?

Long: I think that the success—my perception of the success of that Movement gave me the strength to be renewed. It energized me, but I noticed that it energized every little circle in the room. That was the most important thing.

Cobb: And that was something that you carried with you, just to be clear, on your future organizing work in other places?

Long: Yes.

Wise: That's how we set up for the same reason. Because when you're in a circle, you see, you connect eye to eye to everybody. And it's much more empowering.

Long: And you hear in a different way. You speak in a different way when you're eye to eye.

Wise: And the voices are equal.

Cobb: You know, as you speak I'm thinking of that, I think it's famous or semi-famous principle for lack of a better word of Martin Luther King, who when he became the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and he wrote out this list of his expectations as the new pastor of Dexter Avenue. Number one on his list was authority flows from the pulpit to the pew, not the other way around. And I couldn't help but think of that as—well it also helps you understand SCLC a little bit, right, a little bit better. It just flashed into my head as you were talking about how you had arranged this meeting.

Long: So finally people stood up in the circles and sang. And held hands in a circle and sang. It was a new.

Cobb: And it was not something you were expecting?

Long: [52:00] It was not something I planned. Right, but it was something that I desired to see. Or results that I desired to see.

Cobb: We undoubtedly will come back to this, but Hollis—



Watkins: Well, I'll go and bring it in now. But I just want to say, we talk about songs of struggle, freedom songs, and all of that, they don't as I see it, they don't reach the level of being considered a freedom song unless it frees the attitude, the spirit, and all of that of the people. And all of us have, we have a certain attitude. We have a certain spirit. We have certain talents and abilities that we don't realize that we have. We stumble up on them. But if we don't fight it, it turns out to be something good. See because from my understanding, if we are in the right spirit and right attitude and has enough righteousness that's in us, we can communicate with people up to a thousand miles from us. And when you are, when you go in a meeting, you look out over the audience, in most cases, when you do that, you identify all the folks that you can relate to that's somewhere near the same wavelength that you are on. And when you talk or whatever it is that you are doing, these will be the few people that you will frequent most of the time to see if we're together on this. And based on the expressions on their face and all of that, determines whether you keep going down that road. The further down the road you get, and the more reciprocal that you get from these few people, the stronger become because you know you're not out there by yourself. You got these folks with you. [55:29] And as you grow, they grow as a part of that process. I a lot of times and a lot of folks will get you to come by a program and sing a song. I don't like that. I might come but I don't want to sing if I got to sing a song. You tell me how much time I've got. [Laughter] If I got five minutes, three minutes, whatever, and I determine what I put in that timeframe. Communicate makes things better as a part of that. And see, here again, based on what you have gotten from the eyes of all of these folks that you've been glancing at, tells you what is the appropriate song for you to sing at this particular time. And you move on as a part of that process. But otherwise, you're left. I know a lot of times I've gone to meetings, etc. and gone to different churches, and based on the spirit and attitude of the people determine which spirituals that I sing and how much of it I sing. And all of that comes into play because it's freeing me, and if my becoming free can't impact somebody else coming to be free, than I need to take a look at mine, I think. I got the wrong tag on it, and move from that. That's to me how I see the whole freedom thing. Because some of the folks, I mean, they get so free, they be ready to shout after a couple verses or something. So nothing wrong with freeing people, but that's how I look at it because I want to be free. And I know if I want to be free, there's somebody else that want it too. And there are some other folks out there that don't mind going down the same road with me with both of us to get our freedom. [58:15]

Cobb: Let me ask you this, and I'll push it and nudge it a little bit toward your own experiences. I think I've got the movie right, Phil Aldon Robinson's Freedom Song, set in McComb. I don't think you're enthusiastic about the movie but there's a scene in which the students are protesting at the Pike County, not the Pike County courthouse, but downtown McComb. As I recall the scene, there's a march scene in that the students are singing as they're marching into downtown McComb. There are two questions. One is that accurate, and two, what was to the best of your recollection as somebody who was there, was the effect of that singing on those high school students?

Watkins: The effect of the singing was great on the students. We started singing when we left the office.

Cobb: Above the Burglund Supermarket?

Watkins: Burglund supermarket, and we kept on singing. So we were motivated when the, through the singing. A lot of students' spirit was dampened when they saw that arrests was in the process. Because see, we initially said we were going to march to the county courthouse, not realizing at that time that the county courthouse was not in McComb, it was Magnolia, six or seven miles on down the road. And when we realized that we said well let's go to city hall and went there. But the attitude and spirit was extremely high with all of the singing, prior to the arrests and even in the arrests for a short period of time. So that—

Hogan: Do you remember what you were singing?

Watkins: Remember what I was singing?

Hogan: Do you remember what you were singing?

Watkins: There were several songs that we sang. I was not quote unquote the leader of singing all the songs, but we sang, "Freedom, Freedom Now." We sang "This Little Light of Mine. I'm Gonna Let It Shine." "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." Basically all of the freedom songs that we could think of doing. For a period of time, we went through those songs.

Cobb: By the time of that march, the Pike County Nonviolent Action Movement—am I right here—had been formed.

Watkins: Yeah.

Cobb: Had the students learned those songs at workshops that Marion and all of them were conducting as a part of that specific organization? Or where did the knowledge of those songs come from?

Watkins: The knowledge originally came from myself, Marion Barry. You know, he brought the knowledge of song down with him. And it's kind of like each one, teach one. So that's [tape ends]

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Watkins: That's where the knowledge of that. And the other thing is that all of the songs were the kinds of songs that you doing almost like a call and response, right. And we were used to the call and response in all of the churches, and most of us were church-goers as a part of that process. That's where the knowledge of it came. So those that, who didn't know and hadn't been a part of it, you know, five, ten minutes you done caught on.

Cobb: [:34] I was asking you those questions because I think the use of song in that specific protest gives us insight into the role of song—particularly because these protesters were essentially high school students.

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—

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.

Long: It reminded me. I have a copy of an advanced copy of Freedom Song. Of the script.

Cobb: Of the script.

Long: I have a copy of the script.

Watkins: Now Freedom Song was very hard in many ways for folks to understand because I knew, for example, I knew who C.C. Bryant was and what he was doing. I knew his relationship to E.W. Steptoe down in Amite County, so when I see, looking at the movie, C.C. Bryant turned into Steptoe [laughter]. C.C. Bryant turning into E.W. Steptoe.

Long: You know it's an illusion.

Watkins: So I became very, very frustrated as a part of that when—and I'm thinking—you when we first talked about was having the movie be as real as possible, but because they couldn't get the millions of dollars that they wanted, they Hollywood-rized it. So that's what we were dealing with. Because just like in me and Curtis's—I don't know how far in the movie we had gone before I recognized who I was. [Laughter] It must be me! And somebody said the little guy that was singing the song. I said, well he was— And I said, let's start from the beginning then.

Fikes: Start all over.

Watkins: And then got a little mindblown because the beginning part, we go down to the public library. And they get to the library, I see all these chains on the gates and all of this kinds of stuff and locks, and I'm saying, Hell, there ain't no fence around the library! [Laughter] It really kind of messed with me. It's a whole lot of jive. Well said, you know, they had to put the Hollywood touch. We're supposed to giving the folks somewhere the folks can see and understand what was there.

Fikes: Yeah. The real. The real.

Watkins: And I said, golly. Then coming back singing the song. That's you. Yeah, leading the songs because that's what you do most of the time. So that was you.

Long: Did the songs sound right thought?

Watkins: Some of them came pretty good. Some of them didn't, but here again, you couldn't listen with a real intensive eye and ear when you see Hollis coming down here and Worth [Laughter] Because you said, I did that! Hollis wasn't no where around when I did that. [Laughter] It was mess up.

Fikes: Well I was just saying about the movie Selma, I haven't been able to go to see it because when it was released, I got so many phone calls. After the madness, I said, well I'm not going to see it because I don't want to get in trouble. And the movement people, boy oh boy, it was another call—and how can you do—they should have just named it King. Why did they have to put it Selma, and give incorrect history? And they were just like you with Ms. Annie, you remember, Annie that hit Jim Clark.

Cobb: Annie Cooper.

Long: Annie Cooper.

Fikes: She knocked the devil out of Jim Clark. [Laughter] She's a tough lady, but we feel the same way. You don't mess with history that's already half of—that's why I'm thankful for, today what you guys are doing because we've got in books, so much incorrect history. And I just tell people, you know, history is just another man's story.

Cobb: Well I come with Hollywood stuff, very low expectations.

Long: But what if you do a very good movie with beautiful songs, but nobody goes because it doesn't fit the expectation.

Wise: But now there's YouTube, so anyone can put something up.

Cobb: So we can do a film on Hollis and don't even tell him. [Laughter]

Watkins: [7:44] There was some movie that had me in it. It was, I think it was another movie. Yeah.

Long: Which one was shot in North Carolina, in Wilmington, in the city of Wilmington?

Wise: The Wilmington 10?

Cobb: No, I don't think there ever was a movie on them. I don't know. But anyway, I want to get to Chuck here. I didn't mean to go on and on, a film review on Freedom Song and all of that.

Long: Good history.

Cobb: Hollis is here, so I did want to bring up the question of singing in that movie. But Chuck, the basic question I asked the group was still on the table. Which is, ground us in your one or some of your experiences using song, you know, that state out in your mind.

Neblett: [8:54] The first one that stands out in my mind is in jail in Charleston, Missouri. And they had told me that in order for me to get out of jail, I had to leave town. And I didn't make, I wasn't going to cooperate. My thing was you don't cooperate with evil. You don't cooperate with nothing that is wrong.

Cobb: Where is Charleston, Missouri? Is that part of the southern part like Cairo?

Neblett: It's down below Cairo, below the bridge from Cairo into Missouri, and it was the town about five, ten miles after you pass the bridge. And they once told us, you come through Cairo and [[?]] you better not come down here. You better not come to Missouri. And so we thought about that for a while, Charles Dunlap and myself—

Cobb: I'm sure you did.

Neblett:—said, let's go to Missouri.

Fikes: You should've had a song before you went there. [Laughter]

Neblett: Let's go to Missouri. So we got to Missouri, and we was there for two days and they had us in jail. And we got out of jail, and we went back again. About three more days we were back in jail.

Cobb: Were you still in school at Southern Illinois?

Neblett: That's when I hadn't dropped out. And we got back into jail. So then, he took us out of jail. He asked us if we wanted to get out. We said, yeah. The guy put us on a plantation, weighing cotton. We weren't picking. He had us weighing the cotton, special privilege.

Cobb: He was college educated. [Laughter]

Neblett: This sheriff owned a plantation. This sheriff, he had a boot, he had a lot of money and a lot of land. A lot of people working for him. He just wanted to be sheriff. That's all he wanted. They didn't buy his cars or nothing. He bought his own and had them decorated the way he wanted it. He let us weigh cotton. I weighed cotton. What I did, old sister came up having picked fifty pound of cotton, I'd go there was a hundred pounds. I inflated all of the stuff, and when he came back, the people were scared. They

didn't want to bring me the cotton. They didn't want to bring it to me. I'd go grab it. And we came back, he looked at his books and said, "You've gotten me, didn't you?" Said, man, you ought to be ashamed for yourself, paying them people that little money and breaking their backs all day. I said, you to be ashamed of yourself. And the people were far off. They were around. They was listening. And he was, I might be ashamed of myself, but you ain't weighing no more cotton for me. And that's when people went out and told. They went out in the community and told them we were serious. That these guys came back and they're serious. And that had them break open the movement in Charleston, but in there, I get put back in jail. And I told them I wasn't going to leave. I had to leave. You going to come back here, you going to be in my jail. Or you get out of here and go. And that's when I, it was going through my mind—fighting for my rights, that's when I wrote that song. Wrote it in jail. "My cell had no windows and the air couldn't come through. I felt so hot and stuffy" You know "My mama, she done told me, on her dying bed, my son don't get his freedom, I'd rather see him dead."

Fikes: Mmmm hmmm.

Neblett. [12:50] And I stayed in there for about a week, and some old people from the community came and got me out, got me out of that jail. And there's another time, we back in jail again, and people were really down. And we start singing a song, "Paul and Silas bound in jail. Had no money for to go their bail. Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on." You know, hold on. And we started singing that song and people started picking up, and everybody started singing that song. And our spirits got up, and everybody was feeling pretty good. And we were talking about hang on to their. You can't get these crackers, let them beat us. They're not going to beat us down, you see. And I thought that was practical. We used songs at that time to motivate us. To make us see things that weren't there. We could see the end of the light. We could walk through muddy water but we can see dry land. And that's how I saw the songs, you know. You look through this muddy water but you can see dry land. I thought about all the songs, "Wade in the Water," "Troubling the Water."

Long: God going to trouble the water.

Neblett: Going to trouble the water. But on the side is dry land. And that's—so we would sing that all over the place. I mean, I remember with the Freedom Singers, we'd be out singing those songs. And a lot of those songs, we'd been connected to some kind of way however. And I think that's why we, a lot of people moved, were moved by that singing because we could feel it ourselves.

Long: Right, and had experienced it. [15:02] Oginga Odinga is a good example. Oginga Odinga. Because it'll take—can we do that in two-and-a-half minutes? You start out. Not the song. We're not going to do the song. No. What we'll do is the experience of it. Can you begin to tell that story? We're going to do it quick, and then I'll help you because I end up going to jail with Matthew and going to solitary with Matthew. So can we do that?

Neblett: [15:41] He came to Atlanta, and Atlanta wanted to showcase Atlanta. It was a liberal city, how liberal it was. So I think it was someone from the office, the SNCC office, we went down there and sit-in at the restaurant—I think it was Toddle House

Cobb: It was the Toddle House. What it was

Long: We went to the Peachtree Manner with Oginga Odinga

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.

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Cobb: [17:31] 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.

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. [18:56]

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: [21:56] 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.

Cobb: Yeah. I gave a copy of the song to the Kenyan newspaper. The Kenyan Standard. I was interviewing, in fact, Oginga Odinga's son as a reporter, and I told him this story and recited it for him. He wanted to know if I had a copy, and I wrote down what I remembered from memory of the song, and the newspaper in Nairobi published it. Did a little story about it.

Long: 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.

Watkins: In Jackson they didn't have but one floor to go up. [Laughter]

Neblett: That ain't no joke.

Cobb: And that sit-in got no support from the Black establishment.

Long: That's right.

Cobb: Nobody in that whole establishment supported SNCC on this.

Fikes: How long were you guys in jail?

Long: A week and a half, I guess it was. Some people got out later, and then we sent in Wilson Brown—actually they got married later.

Cobb: Oh right, he just passed. Helen O'Neal.

Long: No, not Helen. Owns a drugstore. She married Tom Dent.

Neblett: Bobbi Yancy?

Long: Bobbi Yancy Jones.

Neblett: She died?

Cobb: No, I had the names mixed up.

Long: But what I'm saying is that Jones bought stock in Dobbs House, of which Toddle House was a subsidiary, and they got some for Wilson Brown too. And I think Wilson Brown probably still owns some stock in Toddle House. So what they did was they went in with their stock in their hand and got arrested? They said, we own this place. [Laughter] We own this mother. [26:37] I'm serious. Drag them on off to jail.

Neblett: You going to the jailhouse now.

Long: They were to have a meeting, Dobbs were to have a meeting—see research is very important. But they were having a meeting, a stockholders meeting in Birmingham the next month, and we were planning to send our delegation with their stock. They arrested part on us.

Fikes: History, history, history.

Long: I'd love to hear about your song, and don't

Cobb: But before you do that, I don't know that Chuck had finished.

Long: Oh, I'm sorry.

Neblett: The other thing about freedom songs is that people have feeling. [27:37] They have to feel it, and it's no promise their singing the freedom song's gonna work. If it don't work, it ain't going to work. It ain't going to work. If people don't sing it, it don't work, you know. So it's got to come from the inside—it's got to come from inside of you. It's gotta be an individual commitment. You got to to be committed to that. You got to feel that song yourself, and then other people will sing your song. That's it.

Long: Yeah. Bertha rearranged We'll Never Turn Back a little bit based on that. She tried it out in the community, did a little variation, became the theme song of the Movement.

Neblett: You gotta have it right.

Cobb: And speaking of Bertha, the question occurs, not just about Bertha but who are the freedom singers who are not here that we should know about? Who are the freedom singers that shaped the music, here I mean specifically that movement music that we generally call freedom songs that we were singing in the 1960s. Who were the people that people should know that either we don't know or are not around? And as soon as you said Bertha, that's the question that sort of popped up in my mind?

Long: Peacock.

Neblett: It was the first group. Cordell, Bertha, myself, and Rutha.

Cobb: For the record, Cordell Reagon, Bertha Gober, Chuck Neblett, and Rutha Harris.

Fikes: Now you said not around?

Cobb: Not around.

Neblett: Not around? The only one who's not around in that first group is Cordell.

Fikes: Rafael.

Neblett: No. He's in the second one. Cordell. He's deceased. In the second group, the people who are not around from there is Peacock, James Peacock. Rafael Benthams. He was a guitarist, before Bill Perlman.

Watkins: Wasn't Willie part of something?

Neblett: Willie never did sing with us. And he didn't make that third group. Well, it was Matthew. He's gone.

Cobb: Matthew Jones.

Neblett: And that guy named Rafael. He died too, also, and he's gone. And I think that's about it.

Long: Ok. Who's the guy from Cuba?

Neblett: That was Rafael Benthams.

Long: He had a Batista relative. [30:39] Also, who managed—we've never talked about Mildred Forman who was very important in making the tours work.

Cobb: Well why don't you talk about that and how that

Long: I was in Selma. I was staff coordinator, but I was in Selma.

Neblett: [30:58] Mildred was good. I don't see how she—

Cobb: put up with y'all? [Laughter]

Neblett: And then, to make it worse, to make matters worse, we did a tour with Dick Gregory. Ok, it was Dick Gregory. The Freedom Singers, and Mildred's in there the den mom. She called herself a den mom. [31:26] And I'd never been around a person that could talk all the time.

Long: That's right.

Neblett: I mean 24/7. Nonstop. He could talk. [Laughter] I never had such a hilarious time in all of my life was with Dick Gregory. And Mildred. He hit on Mildred 24/7. All Mildred could do was sit there and just listen. [Laughter] He was having a ball. I could tell you a lot of stories if I want. [Laughter]

Long: No, no. Dick Gregory. He tried—he couldn't sing. He was worse than I was.

Neblett: Yeah, we tried it.

Long: But he was fantastic at the right, a person you could count on.

Cobb: Gregory was amazing. I remember in Greenwood, I don't know if you were there. We brought a group—Gregory had just gotten there—of people to the county courthouse in Leflore County, and all these possemen were all around the courthouse. And they were muttering, nigger this, and that. And Gregory walks up to one of them, stare him in the face, and says, "Who you calling nigger? You ain't nothing but a nigger yourself." And he pointed, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." And I'm standing there, and I said, "Oh hell! We're gonna have to write this man's wife and tell her he got killed." [Laughter] And how he got killed. I remember Gregory doing that.

Neblett: He was something else. Lord, Jesus, he was. That was really something. That was really something. [Laughter]

Carawan: [33:30] Well I wanted to ask about Toshi Seeger because you mentioned that Pete had helped form the original group. But I had understood from Bernice that it was really Toshi.

Neblett: Toshi, she organized our first tour.

Cobb: Your first?

Neblett: Toshi.

Cobb: Oh, Toshi Seeger.

Carawan: Pete's wife.

Cobb: Yeah, I was losing the last name.

Carawan: The organized person behind Pete.

Long: And she was organized too.

Neblett: And she did that first tour, and we were so busy. We were so busy that everybody—they'd come to our concerts, and everybody would want us at their schools and everywhere. And we were silly enough to do all of that. Do three or four concerts a day. To do that. It was really a success that we did that. We made ourselves sick. I couldn't sing.

Cobb: Can we just back up? Will you talk some about how she made her way to the Freedom Singers? Is that via Highlander or is that because of interest in the Movement or what?

Carawan: Pete and Toshi is a pair.

Neblett: You see, Pete Seeger saw—

Cobb: Because we want it all down for the record.

Neblett: They saw the music in the Movement. Everybody was singing. And he wanted—he asked them that why don't we have a group to do for SNCC like the Fisk Jubilee Singers did for Fisk? And they talked about that, and Cordell happened to be in Georgia at the time.

Cobb: Who talked about it? They meaning—

Neblett: Forman. Pete. Cordell, and some more people. And what they did, they talked about it and tried to figure out who was going to be in it, who would be in that. And since Cordell was in Albany, he got Bernice and Rutha. Ok. I was in Mississippi at the time, but I'd been working with Cordell up in Illinois and so forth. I'd sing with them at the Gospel for Freedom in Chicago. And they said, hey, we need that guy, and they called Mississippi, and they got me. And we rehearsed for a week, then we hit the road. Now Toshi came on, I guess because of Pete and because Pete talked to them about putting a group together. And Pete came, and she came down and organized that first tour.

Cobb: Which was to where?

Neblett: [36:17] Oh man.

Wise: Did she accompany you when you?

Neblett: No.

Long: You started out—can you name four stops from New York to where?

Neblett: We did New York. Chicago. We did the midwest and went back to Carnegie Hall. And we did a folk festival and jazz festival. We were just everywhere.

Long: So that was before the station wagon. Y'all are flying.

Neblett: No, we weren't flying. No, we weren't flying.

Fikes: You were flying over the highway. [Laughter]

Neblett: We had a small Buick station wagon.

Marvinia Neblett: Was Ivanhoe [Donaldson] the first driver?

Neblett: Ivanhoe was the first one out. He got us all the way to Chicago. Ivanhoe, he wanted to drive. [Laughter]

Long: That's Ivanhoe. Ivanhoe drove a truck from Michigan to Tennessee.

Cobb: Clarksdale.

Wise: I want to ask you about an event if you remember it. I was reading it in Ms. Hamer's book. She was talking about when you all met with Malcolm in New York and went to sing for his folks. Do you remember that and anything about that audience, how that was?

Neblett: Yes. We were at the Methodist Church [37:41] right after the convention.

Cobb: The '64 convention.

Neblett: The '64 convention, and we went to New York. We sang, and Ms. Hamer went to sing at the Methodist Church, the Methodist Church, remember. And Malcolm was there and he asked us if we would come and sing at the Audubon. And we said, sure. So we got there kind of early, and Malcolm was hot. Mrs. Hamer had told about how she'd gotten beaten and all that kind of thing. He was hot! He said, you don't let your women be beaten and treated like that. He said, you run around here praying and laying in, want somebody to give you something. He said, everything that white man go, he took it. And

he think he's gonna give you something. That's what he said. He talked about us pretty bad, and we started talking about him. We said, hey, we've been up here in New York. You guys ain't doing nothing up here. Out of 58,000 teachers, you only got a few teachers. In Harlem you ain't got but four or five Black policeman. I said, ok. Why don't you come on down to Mississippi? Come on down to Alabama where we are? And he said he'd do it. And we got up and we sang. In his book, he wrote his mind was really changed when we sang. He said we sang about Oginga Odinga, and he didn't know, and he didn't know we was as hip as we were to national affairs. And he changed his mind about these young people. But we had a heck of a time. It wa ball though. We enjoyed it. Because Malcolm wasn't playing.

Fikes: [39:38] He said put your Bible in one hand and your pistol in the other.

Neblett: He said, if you begging and crying, he said, that white man ain't going to give you nothing. He said, nobody gave him nothing. He took it. He said what it's got to be is the ballot or the bullet. That's the only thing you got, he said, is the ballot or the bullet. That's the only thing he understands.

Carawan: What about the audience in the Audubon?

Neblett: Yeah, they warmed up to us singing. They did. They warmed up. And it was really nice. It was a beautiful concert.

Carawan: Does that mean that they were a little bit skeptical—

Wise: Harlem [[?]] Georgia, South Carolina. The folks from Harlem are from Georgia and South Carolina.

Cobb: North Carolina.

[Side conversation between Long and Carawan]

Neblett: He got a whole new idea about what SNCC was and we were all about.

Marvinia Neblett: Did you tape that concert with Malcolm?

Neblett: No.

[Overlapping conversations between Long and Wesley Hogan and Cobb]

Cobb: That was one of the good things about Malcolm was, unlike a number of people in the Nation [of Islam], he was fairly, pretty open to being challenged. I didn't know it at the time but he would come by our house for discussion with my father because what had happened, you know, Malcolm founded the newspaper, Muhammad Speaks, and was the editor. And he did a very smart thing once he founded the newspaper and Muslims were selling it. They decided they would sell the paper on Sundays in front of Black churches as they let out. And it was a logical thing to do. I mean, you're trying to sell a Black paper

to Black people, then stand in front of Black churches on a Sunday around noon, and you'll be in contact—. Well the ministers were in an uproar about this. And my father publicly defended Malcolm's right to do that. And he would come by the house, and they would have these arguments. The Christian preacher and the Muslim preacher, and I was in high school, but I wasn't conscious enough to know. I knew some kind of Muslim was coming by the house, but I didn't know enough to know anything about Malcolm X much. I was what, tenth grade, I think.

Neblett: [42:35] And Malcolm did come to Selma.

Cobb: But the point is he was more flexible in terms of engaging the people in the Black community and then a number of these other Muslims of nationalists were. He never backed away from engaging. [Side conversation with Wise]

Wise: And he was so excited about the young people in Selma doing all that work.

Fikes: They just sent me the video of him speaking in

Wise: In Browns Chapel? There's a video of it.

Long: Yeah.

Wise: But I was going to say the other thing about Malcolm though is that Stanley [Wise] talked about how he used to come down to D.C. all the time and Howard. And like Mahoney had this apartment.

Long: Bill Mahoney.

Wise: Bill Mahoney. And they used to have like clusters—

Cobb: Well there was a very famous debate at Howard that, there was a group on campus. I was a freshman. It was called Project Awareness. Mike Thelwell, Stokely, Courtland, Stanley Wise, I mean there was a whole group, and they had something called Project Awareness, which sponsored a series of debates on campus. And the first one was between Malcolm X and Bayard Rustin. [Laughter] And was packed, and Malcolm won the debate emotionally, and Bayard won it intellectually in the audience. I'm sitting in the audience, and the auditorium was brand new. Crampton Auditorium.

Long: Was there freedom singing?

Cobb: No. No. This is in 1961.

Wise: NAG is just beginning.



Cobb: This was in '61, and then they had a number of debates. They had Norman Thomas and Herman Kahn, who was an advocate of mutually assured destruction, which was a term that doesn't exist now, but then it meant that if both sides had enough bombs, so that if you used them, both sides would be destroyed, nobody would use them. So Herman Kahn who was at Stanford University, was a big time advocate of this. And he debated Norman Thomas, the socialist on campus. They had a whole string of debates all year long on Howard's campus. But Malcolm and Bayard was the first one. And you know, I've never checked. I don't know if that debate was ever recorded or not. I never have thought to check to see if it was recorded at the time. And that was my first substantive introduction to Malcolm X, where I had to think about what he was thinking about.

Wise: [45:33] Well what I was curious about, who was Mahoney's roommate? Do you know? Because in Stokely's book he talks about Malcolm coming to his apartment, but Stanley told me that they used to meet at Bill Mahoney's.

Cobb: It could be. It might have been Jan Triggs, who would eventually become a Muslim. Jan and I don't get along because he was with a faction that some of you remember when Marion got shot by Hanafi Muslims and also the person killed at that was my student intern because I was a reporter at WHUR. They had an intern from School of Communications, and I just, and Jan was the leader of the Hanafi Muslims in D.C., so when this kid, my intern, was killed as well as Marion, I stormed up to Jan's house and just—I won't go into all of that. But Bill was the first person from the Movement I ever met, and Jan Triggs was with him. And they weren't—they were protesting but not civil rights. They were protesting ROTC on campus, and they squatted in front of the administration building with a sign that said, in ROTC—and I was walking into the building to pay some kind of bill, and I stopped, and I asked Bill, because I didn't know—I said, what's ROTC? [Laughter] And he explained it to me and that led into a conversation about the Movement. And he wanted to know if I knew about NAG, the Nonviolent Action Group and all of that. And I think Jan Triggs was his roommate, is what I'm saying.

Long: [47:33] Point of order. We're not talking about song.

Cobb: I know, I know. I just got kind of distracted. You're right.

Long: It might be something, insensitivity.

Wise: I just want to say one reason I was asking about the experience before the ballroom in Harlem, because my understanding was that the Nation didn't do singing.

Cobb: I don't know because I don't have the—

Wise: Is that right? That's why I was curious about the response.

Cobb: i don't know what the rules are in the Nation about music, anything like that. Anyway, because the clock is ticking. We're supposed to wrap up at about 4:00p.m. It may be appropriate here to have some discussion about the freedom song—

Marvinia Neblett: I just wanted to add something. I was hoping Chuck would be in here. But one of my proud moment was when the SNCC Freedom Singers had already done the appreciation for Stokely in D.C., and it was later, a year or two later, at least a year before you all, before he went to Guinea, Africa. The Freedom Singers went to see him in his house. New York? Was it New York? I believe.

Cobb: Yeah, he was staying in a house in the Bronx.

M Neblett: They sang three or four hours just to Stokely. All the different freedom songs, and whatever he requested, that's what they sung.

Cobb: I didn't know that.

M Neblett: So he got a personal concert with the SNCC Freedom Singers.

Cobb: Worth?

Long: [49:18] This may do it. When Cordell died in California, finally there was a memorial in Washington, D.C., and I bring it up because Bernice Reagon, Johnson Reagon, who arranged the order of service and everything. But one of the things she did with people who were to do testimony, was she asked them before they came up to say anything that as they came down the aisle, that they should break out into song, and that was the only requirement that prefaced your—so when Julian Bond went down—

Cobb: I was going to say I remember—

Long: Julian Bond came down. Julian sang "My Buddy." And then everybody was crying.

Cobb: I remember that. Julian said he had never sung publicly ever. That's what he said. I've never sung publicly ever, and then he sang this song, "My Buddy."

Long: When the cameras came down, I saw it as an opportunity, so I came down singing, and what I sang was, [[Dietrich's]] "Oh Happy Day," but the old version. The old version of Old Happy Day, just me, my saviour, and my God. Ok, at that time, it was the lyric. It was in Dirksen's Sacred Songs, but there was no tune. So the tune that was put to it was an old drinking song, and the drinking song was "How Dry I Am." [Laughter] So I came down singing, "How Dry I Am" [Laughing]. No, no, no. I sang "Oh Happy Day," but that's—and what I talked about when I [laughter] got down to do my testimony, I talked about how that song had grown from being just a lyric and lyrics and sacred songs by [[Dietrich's]] to being a song that was, that had a tune, to be the song by Edwin Hawkins, to being the song by Edwin Hawkins, "Oh Happy

Day." And how Edwin Hawkins Africanized that song, so it was no long "How Dry I Am." [Laughter] The song was done in African cadence, right. [Laughter] And it was done in call and response. It was done in call and response, right. [Laughter] No, no, "Oh Happy Day." He revolutionized that song just a little bit of it. Oh Happy Day. What'd he do.

Fikes: [singing] "Oh happy day. Oh happy day. Oh happy day. Oh happy day. When Jesus washed. When Jesus washed."

Long: Now do that in comparison to—

Fikes: [singing] "How dry I am. How dry I am. How dry I am. How dry I am."

Long: No, no, that was terrible.

Fikes: That's for real. Don't sing at my memorial! Don't you come! [Laughter]

Neblett: Don't let him sing at a funeral.

Long: That's what I did.

Neblett: Don't let him sing at my funeral!

Fikes: And somebody that know me, sitting next to him for mine—don't you say nothing! [Laughter]

Cobb: That would be perfectly appropriate for Cordell's memorial.

Fikes: Yeah it was. Very appropriate. Very appropriate.

Long: Well people had been crying from what Julian did, so they wanted to flow.

Fikes: [54:43] It's time to put together Oh Happy Day and How Dry.

Cobb: I can sort of hear it in my head.

Fikes: [singing] "Oh happy day. How dry I am. Oh happy day. How dry I am."

Long: No, no, no, it's not the tune. There are two different tunes.

Fikes: But I'm talking about even the lyrics.

Long: But it doesn't matter. If it's just "Oh Happy Day" repeated over and over again. It becomes Africanized. Because of short phrasing and call and response.

Fikes: The call and response. The call and response.

Neblett: That's enough

Cobb: Ok. Speaking of—

Marvinia Neblett: Being married to Charles, I really appreciate the SNCC, the songs that came out of the Movement. And becoming active in Russellville, Kentucky. Logan County. When you get to a chance to look up the history, the songs have really strengthened me and helped me get through things with the community, as well as my children being raised in Russellville, Kentucky, which is a long story. And I sing Woke Up This Morning With My Mind on Freedom, and I Woke Up This Morning With My Mind on Jesus, and it really strengthens me when I get up in the morning. I use that song a lot. And one of the things that I want to say is I have to write down the facts of the history of the SNCC Freedom Singers and how they were founded and what they've all done. I don't want to go into it unless you say you want me to go into it, but I would like to submit what Charles has given me as far as the founding information, the ones who were in the first group and the second group and the group that's going forward. And he has to really repeat it to me because I understand how Bill Perlman got involved in the group. Rafael was on the guitar, so Bill Perlman replaced him, so a lot of people don't remember him, but him explaining that to me helped me to remember exactly how he got involved in the group, and how his mother was very active in the group. And how, I believe it was Jim Forman that was recommending him to be in that group, and Charles can explain that.

Cobb: Well why don't you?

Long: Well Chico was in that picture.

M Neblett: Chico was in this picture. He was in and out.

Neblett: He was in and out. Chico was in and out. He'd go in to sing for a while, and he'd get a burr in his saddle, and he'd be somewhere else. But Rafael, he left, and we didn't have a guitarist, so Bill Perlman—Forman knew his mother because she worked in the SNCC office in New York, and the woman had a lot of money. And found out his son could play guitar—

Cobb: I could see Forman— [Laughter]

Neblett: So Bill Perlman joined the group. But it's a funny thing about that story. His mother decided that Bill would not go anywhere without her, them. That they sent him off to camp. They'd have to stay there because they left him there, he'd leave and come on back home. Said that was the only time, when he joined the Freedom Singers, that he left and stayed gone. And the first time—I drove him down to, I think it was Georgia. And we stopped at a place to get some food, and the guy put it in a bag. And I said, no, he's not gonna put it in a bag. I'm not going to—and I said I'm not going to pay for it. And he

said, yes you are going to pay for it. Kiss my ass. I ain't paying for it. And man, he got irate. And he was mad. He said, get out of here, and take that little white son a bitch with you. Bill had never been down south before. [Laughter] So then got in the car—had one of those small, four lane highways through there, and a guy got in his car right behind me. So what I did, I pulled over, I pulled into the other lane and got him front of me. I stopped, and he got in front of me, and I got behind him. I got behind him, and I was bumping him. I was bumping him all the way. And he hit that car and I never seen him no more. And Bill was petrified. [Laughter] [1:00:00] I mean he was petrified. And then we stopped in D.C. someplace for a freedom house or something, and he stayed awake all night wondering— We finally got down there, and but he got with the Freedom Singers, and he stayed. He could really play. That's one thing he could really play the guitar. And he didn't want to go home. The movement intrigued him so bad. It really intrigued him. The Rabinowitz's. He was staying with the Rabinowitz's, and they were there. And he made it. And they told me, his mother told me, she was about a hundred years old—that was the one thing that he stuck with. And right now, I go and see him. We did some concerts up in where he lives, up in upstate Massachusetts, and up there. He did, he put on something and got us singing. We sang up there. A festival. We cut a little album up there for Bill, and he's still at it. Living on a farm.

Fikes: Get upset when he's not included.

M Neblett: And this information is in the 2010 50th Anniversary SNCC Reunion. So it's a lot of information.

Neblett: That's all the guys except Peacock, I think.

Long: That why I knew. I can't see but I can remember.

Hogan: So Kaley, I don't know if we can get that photograph before everybody leaves tomorrow, but that would be fantastic. Even if it's a duplicate of stuff we have.

Neblett: Yeah, Peacock would be.

Long: I'd still like for you to get on the record with your Wild Over Me story. It's very important to have that.

### **Song\_2017.09.20\_04TASCAM**

Long: What is it? It's topical. What does that story do that combines elements that we have talked about and have not talked about? What elements are in it that we haven't talked about?

Carawan: Well, I'm not totally sure what is you really want me to

Long: I'm not even, right.

Carawan: Well then I'll just tell the simple story. This is long before I had my chance to go to Fisk, or the year before. 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." [2:25] 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. So that touches my heart. Did that kind of go where you wanted to go?

Long: It can. But if you analyze it, what you did not from this perspective—well, what does that do? Say it wasn't your song, and you're analyzing. What does it do?

Carawan: I guess that it encapsulates something that was going on in 1960 in the sit-ins, from somebody's experience. What else?

Long: It takes a pocket or tune, a folk tune, from the I.W.W. period, from an early organizing labor period and it adapts it to a new situation or struggle. There's gotta be another thing. I don't know what it is but

Cobb: Maybe there doesn't have to be another thing.

Neblett: Exactly.

Long: There is, there is.

Carawan: I don't if this is exactly what you're thinking, but one other thing is that element of kind of humor and sarcasm.

Long: That's right. Irony.

Carawan: Irony, which is one reason why I think people in Nashville enjoyed it, and the other sit-in students because it had that. Now mind you, there was already a lot of humor in the quartet—Bevel and Bernard sung to.

Neblett: Yeah, they did Dogs. Did they do "I Know"?

Carawan: I don't know, but I love that song.

Cobb: Yes, they did.

Long: I know we'll meet again.

Cobb: Wasn't that Bevel and Bernard?

Long: It's good then to conference with our, to pull all of us.

Neblett: [singing] "I know..."

Long: And you and I will never say goodbye.

Cobb: 'Til we meet again.

[Neblett starts singing and group joins in] I know we'll meet again, and then you and I will never say goodbye when we meet again. Oh you came from Atlanta, Georgia, and I from Nashville, Tennessee. But we both met with our Mississippi drill because we wanted to be free. Ohhhhh. I know, I know, I know we'll meet again. I know, I know, I know, I know we'll meet again. And then, you and I will never say goodbye 'til we meet again." [7:02]

Cobb: Well it seems an appropriate note [laughter] to end the conversation on, as any.

Carawan: I brought everybody a picture of Chuck.

Background talk. [Audio topping out]

[7:50] Wesley Hogan: Charlie, as you think through the last two days, since we have everybody here now together, is there anything else you think we need to know in order to be able to share with young people? Is there a song that we need on tape? Or should we use these beautiful recordings that we have?

Cobb: I don't think there's a song we need at this point. I mean there's always more discussion. The only item on my list of things that I hoped to get some sort of discussion about was more on what might be called the antecedents of the freedom song. You know, the roots part of it. There's a whole discussion about roots, that's some of what Bernice did in her closing remarks at the SNCC 50th, and I appreciate Bernice's remarks but I was interested in Bettie Mae and Candie and Chuck and Worth and Hollis' discussion on that. Because in some respects, given the diversity of this particular group, how you would come at the roots of freedom songs or the antecedents of freedom songs would be slightly different from person to person. And it would be an interesting discussion, but I don't know how you do it in three minutes. [Laughter]

Kaley Deal: I told him around 5:45p but I can tell the shuttle to come later, depending on how you all are feeling. It's been a long day.

Cobb: It's been a long two days.

Long: It would be a coda to the song that just happened.

Cobb: I think the song ending is sufficient for our purposes.

Carawan: You can have us back and we can talk about it. [Laughter]

Long: Let's do something though. I enjoyed our dialogue. Is it a dialectical? [Laughter]

Cobb: These are five syllable words, at this time of the day, are too much for me.

Long: [10:32] We're not trying to redefine what a freedom song is. We're trying to find out where it came from and what existed before that. Is that kind of what we're?

Cobb: Well that's one way to go at it. Yeah.

Long: Well, where would you start and where would we end in terms of the freedom song. We start at struggle. At the contradictions between one thing and another. Between the rich and poor.

Cobb: See, that's why it's such a big discussion, even narrowing it down, is a big discussion.

Long: Right, that's why I thought I'd show it to you. [Laughter] Well what are some of the other questions though. Because what I was going to try to do was to see...



Cobb: Just take the question of where do you want to start. I mean, one level, you could start with the decades of the fifties and the sixties—the modern civil rights era, so to speak. Or you could say, see that's what I'm saying.

Long: Well, do you start with consciousness or sound?

Leah Wise: Well, I don't know. I'm curious because I remember talking to Ella Baker about the things that she did during the Southern Negro Youth Congress. She talked about how they would take flatbed trucks out to the plantations and do these kind of, do voter registration and education kind of stuff. I never asked about the song part, but I don't because she was such a singer, I imagine it was there.

Cobb: That's what I'm saying. See there are so many potential starting points. Because you take the position, well we should start with the post World War II era. Or you could say we want to start with the Southern Negro Youth Congress and then that puts us in 1934.

Long: Or the National Sharecroppers' Fund. Or the Southern Tenant Farmers.

Cobb: Do you want to start with the spirituals that were part of the resistance in the slave era? That's what I'm saying. It's such a big discussion about where to start, and all of the starting points are legitimate.

Neblett: That's right.

Cobb: And they're all legitimate. What you just said is perfectly legitimate.

Long: What would be a starting point in Africa would be the question. Where does it begin.

Neblett: Start on the ship.

Long: Yeah, but did people sing before the ship.

Cobb: [13:06] I don't know. I raised that with a scholar friend of mine. I said, one of the big unknowns when you talk about Africa and enslavement is what's going on in Africa in way of conversation on the continent—what are people thinking when they see their people loaded on ships and going off where. I just don't know.

Long: What did they think about the presence of war was in play?

Cobb: I don't know. I can talk a little bit about Africa during the era in which you have African Liberation Movements, but that's our same era, though. Post World War II or the sixties and fifties, but before that, I just don't know.

Long: So we've come to the point where we're saying it's so broad and wide that it's hard really.

Cobb: Until we decide on the starting point.

Long: It's tortuous. Let me use that word. It's such a tortuous journey.

Cobb: Until you decide—and maybe that's a worthwhile discussion. Simply the discussion about how do we start.

Long: Do you start at the modern Civil Rights Movement or its antecedent? And what is that? What do you think? What is that? Or do you start with

Cobb: I defer to Bernice on this.

Wise: Why would you want to start—it sounds like to me, the same issue around what has Black peoples' Movement been for liberation? And in this country, it didn't start in the fifties. So why would we want to start there? So I would think you'd want to see what the connections and the foundations were and the new expressions that happened because it's the same historical question.

Cobb: Except that these discussions, remember, are more focused because they're about SNCC and movement music. This is not a big broad discussion about Black struggle in general in the United States. This, these discussions are focused on SNCC.

Long: Then we would focus on student movements. On the student movement.

Cobb: And that might be how you want to incorporate into that discussion the Southern Negro Youth Congress.

Wise: But to me, where the discussion would be relevant, when you talk about the question well what was the roots of this Movement. And various people have spoken about that in different ways, so there's an awareness of some of that. Not necessarily that becomes the focus of the discussion.

Cobb: I don't know. It's a bigger discussion about how do you approach history

Long: What were the students—you get down to students—what were the students' models for struggle? France resistance in Algeria. Does struggle against the resistance against racism and imperialism.

Cobb: Given time, I'm open to all of that. I'm open to another three days [laughter], in which we could just incorporate all of this into a new agenda because it's all legitimate. A Black struggle clearly begins whenever the first Blacks were offloaded and sold into slavery, enslavement here in this country.

Long: And Black singing began

Cobb: Probably the same time.

Neblett: These songs, gave utterance because they couldn't speak each other's language.

Wise: The Black struggle goes back to the African continent. Now come on y'all.

Neblett: Everybody bore witness to their condition. They would moan. They couldn't speak each other's languages or anything, so they mixed them up, so they came up moans and groans and utterances.

Long: You came up with insurrections onboard!

Neblett: That's right.

Cobb: And that's almost from the start.

Long: That's something to sing about.

Cobb: Just getting across that Atlantic.

Hogan: So let me just say thank you so much. [Laughter]

Neblett: That's my girl [Laughter].

Hogan: I got taught well by many people among you. [Laughter] Thank you so much for a lot of different things .....