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HUFF
POST POLITICS

The Little-Known Story of 'We Shall Overcome'

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"We Shall Overcome" serves as the background music for most of the past week's TV and radio programs documenting the history of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which occurred 50 years ago. But few Americans know the background of the song, which links together Black trade union activists, a radical training school for activists, college students who started the Southern sit-in movement, two folk singers, and a president of the United States. The story of that song, which has become an international anthem for human rights, reveals the civil rights movement's remarkable and complex tapestry and its lasting influence.

The song's origins go back to a refrain that slaves would sing to sustain themselves: "I'll be all right someday." Southern Black churches adopted the song and by 1901 a Methodist minister, Charles Tindley, published a version entitled, "I'll Overcome Someday."

In 1945, Black members of the Food, Tobacco, and Agricultural Workers Union from Charleston, South Carolina revised the song as part of their struggle and sang it on their picket lines. They sang: "We will overcome, and we will win our rights someday." Two years later, several of the union's activists brought the song to the Highlander Folk School, an inter-racial training center in rural Tennessee for labor and civil rights activists founded in 1932 by Myles Horton, an educator and minister who believed in the "social gospel." Zilphia Horton, Myles' wife and Highlander's music director, learned the song from the tobacco workers and included it in all of her workshops. In 1947, she taught it to folksinger Peter Seeger, who was a frequent visitor to Highlander. Seeger made a few changes to the tune, including turning "We Will Overcome" to "We Shall

Overcome." (Seeger also gives credit to civil rights leader and frequent Highlander participant Septima Clark for the word change).

Highlander was a hotbed of radical ideas and a frequent target of racist Southern politicians, who were outraged by its inter-racial meetings and its flagrant violation of segregation laws. It was one of the few places in the South where whites and blacks -- rank-and-file activists and left-wing radicals -- could meet together and participate as equals. For safe traveling, white and Black members from the same town never attended the same workshop. In the 1950s, Highlander's focus began shifting from union organizing to civil rights. Martin Luther King, Andrew Young, James Lawson, Fannie Lou Hamer, John Lewis, Stokely Carmichael and many other activists in the freedom movement attended Highlander's workshops.

After the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation in its *Brown v Board of Education* ruling in 1954, Highlander brought local civil rights activists together from throughout the South for a ten-day workshop to discuss how to get local school districts to carry out the court's decision. Rosa Parks, an NAACP leader from Montgomery, Alabama was one of the participants. She recalled:

"One of my greatest pleasures there was enjoying the smell of bacon frying and coffee brewing and knowing that white folks were doing the preparing instead of me. I was 42 years old, and it was one of the few times in my life up to that point when I did not feel any hostility from white people."

The Highlander experience strengthened Parks' resolve, showing her that it was possible for blacks and whites to live in "an atmosphere of complete equality" and without what she called "any artificial barriers of racial segregation." A few months after attending that workshop, she refused to move from the segregated section of a Montgomery bus. Her act sparked the bus boycott that galvanized the city's black residents and triggered a new phase of the civil rights movement.

Guy Carawan, an itinerant folksinger with a math degree from Occidental College and an master's degree in anthropology from UCLA, was attracted by Highlander's reputation for linking movements and music. Born in Los Angeles in 1927 to parents with Southern roots, Carawan started listening to folk music when he was 21 years old, inspired by artists such as Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Burl Ives. In 1959, while traveling around the country in a car with several other young folk singers, he visited Highlander in the Tennessee mountains. Myles Horton invited him to stay as Highlander's new music director to replace Zilphia, who had died three years earlier.

It was at Highlander that Carawan first heard Seeger's version of "We Shall Overcome." Carawan made his own changes to the song. He fastened the tempo and revised some words, making it easier to sing in large groups.

Late in the afternoon of February 1, 1960, four young black men -- Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil, all students at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro -- visited the local Woolworth's five-and-dime store. They purchased school supplies and toothpaste, and then they sat down at the store's lunch counter and ordered coffee. "I'm sorry," said the waitress. "We don't serve Negroes

here." The four students refused to give up their seats until the store closed. The local media soon arrived and reported the sit-in on television and in the newspapers.

The four students returned the next day with more students, and by February 5 about 300 students had joined the protest, generating more media attention. Their action inspired students at other colleges across the South to follow their example. By the end of March sit-ins had spread to fifty-five cities in thirteen states. Many students, mostly black but also white, were arrested for trespassing, disorderly conduct, or disturbing the peace.

Over Easter weekend -- April 16 to 18 - several hundred sit-in activists and their allies came to Shaw University, a black college in Raleigh, North Carolina, to discuss how to capitalize on the sit-ins' growing momentum and publicity. This gathering became the founding meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), designed to build on the youthful enthusiasm of the student activists, to expand the sit-in movement, and to adopt other strategies, such as the Freedom Rides and voter registration drives.

Carawan, whose own political outlook was transformed by the civil rights movement, attended the Raleigh meeting and taught "We Shall Overcome" to the assembled activists. They quickly adopted the song as their own, using it to sustain their morale during protest marches, on the Freedom Ride buses, and in jail cells. It quickly spread throughout the civil rights movement and became its unofficial anthem. Seeger, Joan Baez, the Freedom Singers (comprised of six SNCC activists), and others who helped catalyze the growing folk music craze performed the song at their concerts and at civil rights rallies.

A few weeks later, civil rights leader Rev. C.T. Vivian invited Carawan to "bring your guitar" to a demonstration protesting the bombing of the home of prominent black Nashville lawyer, Z. Alexander Looby. Four thousand demonstrators marched to Nashville's City Hall. Carawan led the singing of "We Shall Overcome," adding the verse, "We are not alone."

Music played an important role in the 1963 March on Washington. Its organizers asked the 22-year old Baez to lead the immense crowd in "We Shall Overcome" as well as "Oh Freedom." Bob Dylan, still a fresh face on the folk scene, sang "When the Ship Comes In" (with Baez) and, solo, "Only A Pawn In Their Game," an angry recounting of the murder of civil rights leader Medgar Evers earlier that year. Peter, Paul and Mary roused the crowd with their renditions of Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and Seeger's "If I Had a Hammer." Odetta sang "I'm On My Way (to Freedom Land)," one of many Negro spirituals that activists transformed into civil rights protest songs. Len Chandler joined Dylan and Baez in "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize (Hold On)." The Freedom Singers performed "We Shall Not Be Moved." Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson performed "How I Got Over" and "I've Been 'Buked and I've Been Scorned." Opera star Marian Anderson got to the event too late to sing the National Anthem as originally planned but she arrived in time to perform "He's Got The Whole World In His Hands" after King's speech.

The March on Washington helped turn the civil rights movement from a Southern crusade to a national phenomenon. After President John Kennedy was assassinated three months after the march, Lyndon Johnson helped steer JFK's Civil Rights Act through Congress. As the movement grew, Johnson was transformed from a reluctant ally into a fervent supporter. He worked in tandem with civil rights leaders to push for another key

legislative measure that was one of the march's demands -- the Voting Rights Act. On March 15, 1965, LBJ announced his support for the bill in a speech before Congress, with 70 million Americans watching on television.

"It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life," Johnson said. "Their cause must be our cause too, because it is not just Negroes but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome."

By uttering those words, Johnson, who grew up in segregated Texas, had not only embraced the civil rights movement but drawn on its most cherished phrase to demonstrate his solidarity, a move guaranteed to alienate many Southern Democrats in Congress. It took five more months of protests by civil rights activists and arm-twisting by Johnson to get the House and Senate to pass the bill. On August 6, Johnson signed the Act into law with Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and other civil rights leaders in attendance.

Guy Carawan was not on the Lincoln Memorial steps on August 28, 1963, and he is much less famous than the artists invited to perform at the march, but he nevertheless had a profound influence on the civil rights movement and subsequent crusades for justice around the world. Over the past half century, human rights activists in South Africa, China, and elsewhere have adopted "We Shall Overcome" as their own.

Believing that singing and music could be a unifying force, he not only taught the SNCC activists "We Shall Overcome," but also many other the Southern gospel and religious songs, changing a word here and there to adapt it to their cause. These include "Follow the Drinking Gourd," "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize (Hold On)," and "I'm Going to Sit at the Welcome Table."

Now 86, Carawan still lives at Highlander, where he has worked since 1959, pursuing a career as a folklorist, a teacher, and a performer at nightclubs, college campuses, and public rallies for social change. Carawan plays guitar, banjo and hammer dulcimer. He and his wife Candie, whom he met during their involvement with the civil rights movement and who frequently sang with him at concerts and workshops, have been avid collectors of freedom songs and prolific producers of books and recordings documenting the music of both the civil rights movement and of Appalachian culture. His records include "Tree of Life," "Sing for Freedom," "The Nashville Sit-in Story," "We Shall Overcome: Southern Freedom Songs," "Freedom in the Air: Albany, Georgia," "The Story of Greenwood, Mississippi," "Birmingham, Alabama, Mass Meeting," "Been in the Storm So Long," "Moving Star Hall Singers: Folk Festival on Johns Island," "Come All You Coal Miners," and "They'll Never Keep Us Down." He has also recorded a children's album, "My Rhinoceros & Other Friends."

The Carawans' books on the civil rights movement include *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs*, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, and *We Shall Overcome: Songs of the Southern Freedom Movement*.

Their study of the culture and music of the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina was documented in a book, *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina -- Their Faces*,

Their Words and Their Songs, and an album of field recordings, "Been In the Storm So Long: A Collection of Spirituals, Folk Tales and Children's Games from John's Island, South Carolina."

In addition to his own recordings and folkloric collections, Carawan and his, Evan, who plays hammered dulcimer, recorded a duo album, "Appalachian Irish Tunes on Hammer Dulcimer," in 1988 and, joined by Candie, a Carawan family album, "Home Brew", in 1991. He has also produced albums for other performers (including the Stanley Brothers), written songs recorded by other performers (including Peter, Paul and Mary), and played guitar on albums for other performers and producers (such as Alan Lomax).

Carawan's role in the civil rights movement and in the folk music revival of the 1960s is documented in many books, such as Ronald Cohen's *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* and William Roy's *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*. He is mentioned in Stuart Stott's children's book, *We Shall Overcome: A Song That Changed The World*. A documentary film by the Carawans' daughter, Heather, "The Telling Takes Me Home," recounts her growing up at Highlander in a family and community of activists. In 2003, Occidental College presented Carawan with an honorary degree, but rather than accept the award at a graduation ceremony, Carawan performed a concert on campus and received the degree in between his two sets.

Highlander (now called the Highlander Research and Education Center) remains a vibrant force in the world of social activism. In recent years its workshops have focused on environmental justice and immigrant rights. But its mission is still animated by the spirit of the song that Carawan helped spread across the South, the nation, and the world: "Deep in my heart. I do believe. We shall overcome someday."

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