

The Role of Freedom Songs

By [SNCC Digital Gateway](#)



Meredith March through Mississippi, June 1966. © Matt Herron/TakeStock

One cannot understand the history of the Civil Rights Movement absent the role of freedom songs. Here is a [description of their importance from the SNCC Digital Gateway](#), followed by the song “[If You Miss Me from the Back of the Bus](#).”

Freedom singing was a vital part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) community organizing tradition. When [Sam Block](#) went to [Greenwood, Mississippi](#), to start [SNCC’s first voter registration project in the Mississippi Delta](#), one of the first things he did was teach local people freedom songs. The songs, often borrowed from traditional church songs, helped thaw some of the fear that locals had towards the Movement. “I began to see the music itself as an important organizing tool,” Block reported, “not only to bring [people] together but also as an organizational glue to hold them together.”

The music culture of the Movement encouraged people to participate. Freedom singing, unlike performance-based singing, was congregational, as in church. People clapped and sang along with songs that expressed freedom in the face of oppression and courage in the face of danger. And people were carried away with the emotion and power that the singing generated. [Willie Peacock](#) witnessed this power shortly after joining Block in Greenwood in the fall of 1962. “We couldn’t stop singing freedom songs. Those songs had a real message that night: Freedom. . . comes through knowledge and power — political power.”

Freedom singing also gave those who weren’t a part of the established civil rights leadership a chance to have their voices heard in the Movement. [Bettie Mae Fikes](#) was a high school student when SNCC activists began organizing a [voter registration drive in Selma, Alabama](#). And while

voter registration was geared towards adults who were eligible to vote, she helped form a young people's freedom choir. Instead of singing the regular gospel songs at mass meetings, Fikes and her friends "started changing the music, the tempo, and the lyrics." "We would improvise right off the top of our heads," Fikes recalled, "I was thinking about Selma's sheriff, Jim Clark, and so I sang, 'Tell Jim Clark, I'm going to let it shine,' next I used the head of the state troopers, Al Lingo, and put him in the next verse." Fikes became the voice of the Selma Movement.

More than anything, freedom music was a tool for liberation—"an instrument," [Bernice Johnson](#) explained, "that was powerful enough to take people away from their conscious selves to a place where the physical and intellectual being worked in harmony with the spirit." Johnson was a student at Albany State College (now University) in 1961, when [SNCC came to the small Southwest Georgia city](#). She quickly emerged as a leader of the [Albany Movement](#), using her powerful singing voice to spur the Movement forward. "Singing was the 'bed' and the 'air' to everything," she later reflected, "and I never heard or felt singing do that on that level of power."

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The Power of the Whole

Bruce Hartford from [Civil Rights Movement Archive](#) adds,

Freedom songs suffused each singer with the summed power of the whole. They wove into a single Freedom Movement the adults who sang them in mass meetings, the young militants who carried them into jail, and the local activists who raised them in small circles of courage surrounded by danger.

Freedom songs were the vows we took to stand together for justice and freedom, they were the pledges we made, each one to the other, to stand side by side through all that we might have to endure.

As the furnace-fire turns iron ore into steel, singing our shared songs forged bonds of loyalty that for many of us have not withered with age in five decades.

If You Miss Me from the Back of the Bus

One of these freedom songs, which chronicles the victories of the Civil Rights Movement, is "If You Miss Me From the Back of the Bus."

The original title was "If you miss me in the Mississippi River and you can't find me nowhere, come on down to the swimming pool and I'll be swimming down there." The song was written by Carver Neblett, to the tune of "O Mary Don't You Weep," during a trial surrounding a protest at the public swimming pool in Cairo, Illinois. The brother of one of the defendants drowned in the river because the public pool did not admit people of African descent. As the song spread throughout the South, people changed the title to, "If You Miss Me From the Back of the Bus".

1. If you miss me from the back of the bus
And you can't find me nowhere
Come on up to the front of the bus
I'll be riding up there (3x)

2. If you miss me from Jackson State
And you can't find me nowhere
Come on over to Ole Miss
I'll be studying over there (3x)

3. If you miss me from the cotton fields
And you can't find me nowhere
Come on down to the courthouse
I'll be voting right there (3x)

4. If you miss me from the Thrifty Drug Store
And you can't find me nowhere
Come on over to Woolworth's
'Cause I'll be sitting in there (3x)

5. If you miss me from the picket line
And you can't find me nowhere
Come on down to the jailhouse
I'll be rooming down there (3x)

6. If you miss me from the Mississippi River
And you can't find me nowhere
Come on down to the municipal plunge
'Cause I'll be swimming in there (3x)

7. If you miss me from the front of the bus
And you can't find me nowhere
Come on up to the driver's seat
I'll be driving up there (3x)

Song lyrics to "If You Miss Me From the Back of the Bus" © 1963 Carver Neblett. Reprinted with permission from Sanga Music Inc.

Background Information

Here is information about historical references in the verses of the song.

1. The mass participation in the yearlong bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama showed the power of organized nonviolent resistance.
2. In 1962, James Meredith attempted to test desegregation by enrolling at the all-white University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), transferring from the historically Black Jackson State

College. The governor of Mississippi blocked Meredith's entrance to the university. Eventually Meredith succeeded in registering, and graduated from the University of Mississippi in 1963.

3. Although the 15th Amendment, passed in 1870, guaranteed African American men the right to vote, Southern states, in particular, placed many obstacles in the path of voters — poll taxes, literacy tests, bogus “purgings” of voter lists. In addition, the most brutal violence was reserved for African Americans who dared to register to vote, as well as for those who encouraged and assisted them. The trip to the courthouse was one of the most courageous things a Southern African American could do. By 1964, half a million African Americans had registered to vote in the South. In 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act.

4. Restaurants were also segregated, and many lunch counters served “Whites Only.” On February 1, 1960, in the downtown Woolworth's of Greensboro, North Carolina, four African American college students sat down and ordered coffee. They were told that the lunch counter was for whites only, but they sat all day, waiting to be served. The next day, they returned with more students and continued to sit, enduring boredom, harassment, and humiliating violence. The “sit-ins” spread throughout the South.

5. Thousands of people were arrested and jailed for exercising their right to protest peacefully. Totally absurd charges were used to get protesters off the street and into jails — disturbing the peace, inciting to riot, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, distributing handbills without a license, etc. Protesters were also beaten, attacked by police dogs, sprayed with high-powered fire hoses, and sometimes fired upon.

6. In [Cairo, Illinois](#), white residents swam in an outdoor municipal pool, which African Americans were not allowed to use; they had to swim in the Mississippi River. The 1962 campaign to desegregate swimming pools was the original inspiration for this song.

7. One of the demands of the bus boycott was for the employment of African American drivers; but being in the driver's seat is also a metaphor for full rights and power.

Teaching Idea

This song has been sung with many different lyrics to match many kinds of situations. New verses have been made up on the spot to deal with current issues and struggles. Have students make up a new verse for this song based on a current or historical event.

Resource

“If You Miss Me From the Back of the Bus” is included in this collection, sung by Bettie Mae Fikes. *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960–1966*. Smithsonian Folkways, 1997.