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Songs of Freedom, Songs of Protest
Part Three

Editor's Note: Due to technical problems, some Jefferson readers did not receive a legible copy of Dr. Andrew Roth's "Book Notes 73" last week featuring protest songs. Here is a new copy.

Top left: Josh White, top right: Lead Belly
Middle left: Pete Seeger, middle right: Sam Cooke
Bottom: Billie Holiday [*]

As we have been discovering these past two weeks, the trove of American protest music, music seeking the fruits of freedom, is vast, rich, and deep. And, quite varied; in fact, so various one wonders is the label "protest music" too limited, too reductionist, when what these songs really sing are songs of hope seeking social justice. Regardless of what we call them, as noted, the wealth of music is too vast, too rich, and too deep to be covered in any depth in two or three ***Book Notes***.

So, in this ***Note***, we'll narrow our focus and conclude our survey by linking 19th century African American spirituals and abolitionist music to their 20th-century descendants. We'll ask who were Lead Belly and Josh White, who were the Weavers, and what inspired Pete Seeger's "We Shall Overcome". Next week in Part Four we'll inquire into Bob Dylan's ambiguous role as a protest singer during the late-fifties and early-sixties folk revival and civil rights movement, but for today we'll ask who were the great black artists singing the era's great civil rights songs. Finally, we'll ask what song has most frequently been identified as the greatest protest song of all time.

If, as we saw last week, in the 1930s Sister Rosetta Tharpe brought gospel music into the commercial mainstream, then it is important to note that she was not alone. A number of other artists carried gospel, folk, and blues into, if not the commercial mainstream, then at least a dawning public awareness.

Two in particular merit our attention.

Josh White was an early 20th-century figure in Black protest music and later important in the mid-century folk revival. A close friend of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, White came to national notice in 1940 with his album ***Chain Gang*** which included his song *Trouble,* which opened "Well, I always been in trouble, 'cause I'm a black-skinned man". [1] After southern radio stations rebelled against the song, under the aegis of Eleanor Roosevelt, White performed a concert in Washington DC at the Library of Congress celebrating the 75th anniversary of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery. [2] His *Chain Gang* was followed by another album – *Southern Exposure* – which included anti-segregationist songs with liner notes written by the great African American novelist Richard Wright. In 1941, Josh White became the first African American artist to give a White House command performance. [3] His "St. James Infirmary" includes the famous quatrain:

from St. James Infirmary

I went down to that St. James Infirmary, and I saw some plasma there,
I ups and asks the doctor man, "Say was the donor dark or fair?"
The doctor laughed a great big laugh, and he puffed it right in my face,
He said, "A molecule is a molecule, son, and the damn thing has no race. [4]

A video of Josh White and His Carolinians singing the 1940 version of "Trouble" can be found here.

Born in Mooringsport, Louisiana in 1889, William Huddie Ledbetter, known more famously as Lead Belly, mastered the twelve-string guitar, which he called "Stella", and rode that mastery to a life of renown. [5] A folk and blues singer, as a musician he not only played the twelve-string guitar, he also mastered the accordion, the piano, mandolin, harmonica and violin. He introduced Americans to folk standards such as "In the Pines", "Goodnight Irene", "Midnight Special", "Cotton Fields" and "Boll Weevil". [6] Two of his songs are of particular importance in any review of the American protest music tradition – "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and "Goodnight Irene".

"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is an African American spiritual that originated in very early oral African American traditions. Its earliest roots are unknowable. Most commonly it is attributed to Alexander Reid, who wrote it down. Reid heard Wallace Willis, a Choctaw freedman in the Indian Territory that became Oklahoma, singing the song sometime around 1865. Others suggest Willis's wife Minerva composed the tune. And still others link it to a plantation in Tennessee. [7] Using the theme of death, the song reminds its audience of the glory awaiting them in Heaven. Traditionally performed as a call-and-response piece, it is meant to inspire its listeners to maintain hope in the face of oppression and to believe in their ultimate triumph.

Lead Belly's version is among the best. He sings:

from Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,

Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home. [8]

A recording of Lead Belly singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" can be found here.

Sometimes a song *not* written as a protest becomes "thought of" as a protest song because of its association with a cause. The classic example is Lead Belly's version of "Goodnight Irene" which came to be understood as a protest against Jim Crow laws causing black anguish. Lead Belly never claimed that he wrote the song, but he adapted it while in prison in Texas. [9] A social outcast, Lead Belly sings he could only see Irene in his dreams:

from Goodnight, Irene

At Saturday night I got married
Me and my wife settled down
But me and my wife have parted
I'm gonna take another stroll downtown
Irene goodnight (goodnight Irene)
Irene goodnight
Goodnight Irene, goodnight Irene
I'll get you in my dream [10]

After Lead Belly died in 1949 from ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease), the Weavers recorded a version of "Goodnight, Irene" and several months later Pete Seeger recorded a solo version. [11] The Weavers and Pete Seeger are major figures – arguably ***the*** major figures – in the folk revival of the late-1940s and 1950s leading to the folk music resurgence of the early-1960s and the protest music of the civil rights movement. Coming out of the union movement music of the 1930s and the pacifist anti-war movement of the early 1940s, The Weavers grew out of an earlier group Pete Seeger and Lee Hays sang with – The Almanac Singers. The Almanac Singers had a brief spot of popularity in the early '40s "doing topical songs in a folk idiom." [12] In 1948, Seeger and Hays joined with Fred Hellerman and Ronnie Gilbert to found the Weavers. Taking their name from a 19th-century German play, "Die Weber", about a weaver uprising in 1844, they sang songs of workers' rights and social solidarity. [13]

Struggling to survive, sometimes playing gigs for as little as $15 a performance, the Weavers worked the Greenwich Village folk scene. After signing a contract with Decca records the group found unexpected success in late 1949 when two of their songs started to get jukebox play – "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena" and their version of Lead Belly's "Goodnight, Irene". Folk purists objected to the addition of strings and a brass band to accompany the group, but their version of "Goodnight, Irene" sold over a million copies and went to #1 on the pop charts. Their leftist sympathies snarled them in the anti-Red fervor of the early 1950s and by late 1952 the group disbanded. Pete Seeger, who thought working in a group limited his repertory and was uncomfortable with the group's commercial success and "pop" approach, went out on his own. [14]

A recording of the Weavers singing “Goodnight, Irene” can be found here.

Proving F. Scott Fitzgerald wrong, who once famously said something to the effect that there are no second acts in American life, the Weavers regrouped in late 1955 to play a sold-out concert at Carnegie Hall. Vanguard Records issued an album entitled “The Weavers at Carnegie Hall” and the folk revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s was born. Their “greatest hits” included such folk “classics” as “If I Had a Hammer”, “Kisses Sweeter Than Wine”, “Midnight Special”, “Wimoweh”, later made famous by the Tokens in 1962 as “The Lion Sleeps Tonight”, “When the Saints Go Marching In”, “On Top of Old Smoky” among many others, including, of course, “Goodnight, Irene”. [15] They inspired a Rolodex of the era’s folkies, such as the Kingston Trio, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Bob Dylan, the Rooftop Singers and Joan Baez. It was the Kingston Trio’s “Tom Dooley” that broke the cliched dam and folk became, for a time, pop. [16]

Pete Seeger broke away from the group a second time and became the godfather, maybe more accurately, the grandfather of the folk movement mentoring Bob Dylan, Don McLean and later Bruce Springsteen among others. It was Seeger who allegedly cut the cord on Dylan’s electric guitar at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. In a late-life interview, Seeger asserted what he did was say “If I had an axe, I’d cut the cable right now”. Seeger later said he wasn’t angry at Dylan for going electric, he was just upset at the poor sound quality. [17] Sounds to me like a delayed rewrite for a softer ending – cleaning up loose ends, so to speak.

Seeger had been singing songs of protest since the late-1930s heavily slanted towards pro-union and workers’ rights, civil rights and anti-war themes, first against American entry into World War II but most famously the war in Vietnam. Two of his songs, however, became movement anthems – one an anti-war and one civil rights. The anti-war anthem was “Where Have All the Flowers Gone”. Seeger wrote it in 1955 while enroute to a concert at Oberlin College. Based in part on a Cossack folk song “Koloda-Duda” and an Irish lumberjack melody, [18] the song asks:

Where Have All the Flowers Gone

Where have all the flowers gone?
Long time passing.
Where have all the flowers gone?
Long time ago.
Where have all the flowers gone?
The girls have picked them every one.
Oh, When will you ever learn?
Oh, When will you ever learn?

Young girls
They've taken husbands every one.

Young men
They're all in uniform.

Soldiers
They've gone to graveyards every one.

Graveyards

They're covered with flowers every one.

Flowers
Young girls have picked them every one. [19]

A recording of Pete Seeger singing “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” can be found here.

Seeger, a Harvard dropout, went to New York City in 1940 where he met Lead Belly, who introduced him to the blues, and Woody Guthrie, with whom he “shared his love of vernacular music and agitprop ambitions”. [20] Working first with the Almanac Singers and then the Weavers, Seeger became the central figure in the folk revival. In the late 1950s at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, Seeger reworked an old tune transforming it into “We Shall Overcome”. Martin Luther King, Jr. heard Seeger sing it, remarking that “There’s something about that song that haunts you”. [21]

“We Shall Overcome” has a long history. With hints of two European songs from the 18th century, “Prayer of the Sicilian Mariners” and “O Sanctissima” and echoes of songs sung by Black slaves such as “I’ll Be All Right” and “No More Auction Block For Me”, the song also borrows lyrics from the Reverend Dr. Charles Tindley’s “I’ll Overcome Someday”. In 1945, the lyrics and melody were combined by gospel arrangers Atron Twigg and Kenneth Morris. Its first appearance as a protest song was in Charleston, South Carolina during a strike against the American Tobacco Company. Lucille Simmons, one of the strikers, gave the song its powerful sense of solidarity by changing the “I” to “We”. It was Simmons who brought the song to the Highlander School where Pete Seeger learned it. Seeger change the lyrics from “We will” to “We shall”.
[22]

Easy to learn, the song began to be sung at civil rights protests throughout the South and the nation. “’It’s the genius of simplicity’, Seeger said about the song in a later interview. ‘Any fool can get complicated’”. [23] Rather quickly, it became the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, finding a rebirth in 2020 at the demonstrations protesting the murder of George Floyd and proclaiming that Black Lives Matter. Its lyrics sing of solidarity and hope:

from We Shall Overcome

We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome, some day.

Oh, deep in my heart,
I do believe
We shall overcome, some day.

We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand, some day. [24]

Oh, deep in my heart,

We shall live in peace,

We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace, some day. [24]

Recorded by literally dozens of singers, including most memorably Joan Baez, a video of Pete Seeger singing "We Shall Overcome" can be found here. Joan Baez singing "We Shall Overcome" live at Woodstock can be found here.

Coming out of the late-fifties and early-sixties folk revival, Bob Dylan, Tom Lehrer, Dave von Ronk, Ian and Sylvia and Leonard Cohen and others wrote and sang some of the most memorable songs advocating civil rights for African Americans. Phil Ochs' "Going Down to Mississippi" and Dylan's "Blowin' In the Wind", "Oxford Town", "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" and, of course, "The Times They Are a-Changin" are among the most famous. Next week we'll look into Dylan's ambiguous attitude towards his renown as a protest singer, which he memorably rejected in "Maggie's Farm" on which he wasn't "going to work no more", but for now who were the great African American protest singers and what were the songs they sang?

There are a number of contenders for 'anthem of the civil rights movement'. "We Shall Overcome" the most obvious, but Fannie Lou Hamer's "Go Tell It on the Mountain" needs to be near the top of any list. Fannie Lou Hamer not only sang about freedom's struggle, she lived it. As her biography at the National Women's History Museum opens, "Fannie Lou Townsend Hamer rose from humble beginnings in the Mississippi Delta to become one of the most important, passionate, and powerful voices of the civil and voting rights movements and a leader in the efforts for greater economic opportunities for African Americans". [25]

A sharecropper's daughter and a sharecropper's wife, Hamer toiled on a Mississippi plantation where, since she "was the only worker who could read and write, she also served as timekeeper". [26] In 1961, while having surgery to remove a uterine tumor, she was involuntarily sterilized by a white doctor; as her biography notes, "such forced sterilization of Black women. . .was so widespread it was dubbed a 'Mississippi appendectomy". [27] Hamer became a leading figure in the drive for voting rights. She led movements in Mississippi in 1962, South Carolina in 1963 and most notably in Mississippi in 1964 – the Mississippi Freedom Summer. She led the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's challenge of the local Democratic party at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, which motivated President Lyndon Johnson to press for the 1965's Voting Rights Act. She became one of the first Black women to stand in the U.S. Congress protesting the 1964's Mississippi House election. In 1971, she founded the National Women's Political Caucus. In later years, frustrated at political progress's slow pace, she turned to economics and established the Freedom Farm Cooperative. At its peak in the mid-1970s the Co-Op was one of her county's largest employers. Sadly, in 1977 at 59, Fannie Lou Hamer died of breast cancer. [28]

In a widely circulating internet meme, Fannie Lou Hamer is quoted as saying she became a civil rights worker because she was "Sick and tired of being sick and tired". Some people only 'talk the talk'; Fannie Lou Hamer not only walked the "talk", she sang it in memorable fashion. Creating both a prophetic and pastoral style, she recorded versions of "This Little Light of Mine", "Woke Up This Morning", "Wade In the Water" and others. [29] Her "Go Tell It on the Mountain" adds the verse "Let my people go" from the spiritual "Go Down Moses" about Moses leading his people out of Egypt and "transforms the traditional message, creating a song heralding the oncoming Civil Rights struggle". [30] It sings:

from Fannie Lou Hamer's version of 'Go Tell It on the Mountain'

Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills, and everywhere.
Go tell it on the mountain
To let my people go.

Paul and Silas bound in jail.
Let my people go.
Had nobody for to go their bail.
Let my people go.

Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills, and everywhere.
Go tell it on the mountain
To let my people go. [31]

A video of Fannie Lou Hamer's 1963 version of "Go Tell It on the Mountain" can be found here.

Martin Luther King, Jr. thought the civil rights movement's unofficial anthem was the Impressions' song "People Get Ready". [32] By the time they disbanded and retired in 2018, the Impressions, who began as the Roosters in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1958, had become pop icons. With a changing mix of members and a repertoire that included doo-wop, gospel, soul and rhythm and blues, they were inducted into three Halls of Fame: the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Vocal Group Hall of Fame and the Grammy Hall of Fame. Although at one time Jerry Butler was a member of the group, their greatest fame occurred during the 1960s when, with Curtis Mayfield singing lead, they had a series of hits "that served as inspirational anthems for the Civil Rights Movement", including "Keep on Pushing", "We're a Winner", and "People Get Ready". [33]

Although not as explicitly a protest song as some others, Martin Luther King, Jr. thought Mayfield's "People Get Ready's" "message of deliverance with its promise of a train a-comin'" motivated his followers, for "listeners found it easy to imagine their oppressors in the verse that starts, 'There ain't no room for the hopeless sinner who would hurt all mankind just to save his own". [34] The complete verse sings:

from People Get Ready

There ain't no room for the hopeless sinner
Whom would hurt all mankind, just to save his own, believe me now
Have pity on those whose chances grow thinner
For there is no hiding place, against the kingdom's throne [35]

A video of The Impressions and Curtis Mayfield singing "People Get Ready" can be found here.

As with last week's ***Book Notes*** review of anti-war songs, there are too many civil rights songs of quality to do them justice in a relatively short ***Notes.*** From John Legend's "Glory" in 2014's film *Selma* to James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black

and I'm Proud" to the Staple Singers' "I'll Take You There" to Lauryn Hill's "Black Rage" to Public Enemy's "Harder Than You Think" to Nina Simone's "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" and "Mississippi Goddam" to Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues" and "What's Going On" the list is long. However, before turning to the song most frequently noted as the greatest protest song of all time, I want you to note Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come".

Although he died young in 1964 when he was murdered under circumstances still debated today, as MyBlackHistory.net remarks, Sam Cooke is considered "the most important soul singer in history." [36] The son of a Baptist minister, Cook first learned to sing in his father's church's choir. After moving from gospel to soul and rhythm and blues, Cook became one of the most popular singers of his time, popular in both black and white communities. A list of his *"Hits"* includes "You Send Me", "A Change is Gonna Come", "Cupid", "Wonderful World", "Chain Gang", "Bring It On Home to Me" and "Good Times".

Cooke wrote "A Change Is Gonna Come" in October, 1963 after he was arrested in Shreveport, Louisiana when he refused to be turned away from a 'whites only' hotel that had originally accepted his reservation. Cooke first performed it on Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show* in February, 1964. [37] The song does not directly confront discrimination, although it does say "I go to the movie and I go downtown/Somebody keeps telling me 'don't hang around", but as Ed Masely says "it couldn't be more obvious what kind of change he's after when he hits you with that gospel-flavored chorus of 'It's been a long time comin' but I know a change gonna come/Oh yes it will'". [38] Cooke didn't live to see it become a civil rights anthem, but the song has been performed by hundreds of singers, most notably Aretha Franklin, who considered Cooke one of the greatest male singers of all time. [39]

A video of Sam Cooke singing "A Change Is Gonna Come" can be found here.

Well, for three weeks I've been teasing you with the question "What is the greatest protest song of all time"?

Obviously, one can disagree about this and arrive at no definitive answer. You'd also be right to point out that a "Greatest Hits", "Top Hits", "Top Forty" approach to the music of women's rights, black rights, abolitionism, civil rights and anti-war protests, not to mention borrowing from sports talk show gibberish the acronym GOAT (Greatest of All Time) to describe a song of deep cultural significance, smacks of the trivial if not sacrilege. But, and I agree, a case can be made that Billie Holiday's 1939 "Strange Fruit" is, indeed, the greatest protest song of all time.

Its back story might surprise you and will certainly dismay you. Singing it in nightclubs and cafes, Holiday always sang it as the last song in her set. She requested that the lights be dimmed except for a spotlight on her face and that waiters stop serving. When she finished singing, the spotlight off and the house lights back on, the stage was empty. She did no encores. She sang her iconic version of the song for the first time on April 20, 1939. As her biography at Biography.com notes, "This was how Holiday performed "Strange Fruit", which she would determinedly sing for the next 20 years until her untimely death at the

age of 44". [40]

Named by **Time** magazine in 1999 as the song of the century, [41] and referred to by Ahmet Ertegun, co-founder of Atlantic Records, "as the beginning of the civil rights movement", Holiday's legendary song was written in 1937 by Russian Jewish immigrant Abel Meeropol. [42] A school teacher, Meeropol, who never witnessed an actual lynching, wrote the song as a poem under the pseudonym, Lewis Allen, after seeing Lawrence Beitler's photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Indiana. In 1971, Meeropol said, "I wrote 'Strange Fruit' because I hate lynching, and I hate injustice, and I hate the people who perpetuate it". [43] Meeropol published the song in a teachers union publication, had it set to music. A nightclub owner who heard it, introduced it to Holiday, who upon hearing it for the first time said it reminded her of her father who died at 39 when he was refused care at a hospital because he was a Black man. [44]

Café Society, where Holiday first sang the song, was the first racially integrated nightclub in New York City. Aida Amoaka says "What happened on the first night Holiday performed "Strange Fruit". . . foreshadowed the response it would get as a record." She quotes Holiday, who said "The first time I sang it I thought it was a mistake. . . there wasn't even a patter of applause. . . then a lone person began to clap nervously. Then suddenly everyone was clapping". [45] Later Meeropol would write, "She gave a startling, most dramatic and effective interpretation, which could jolt an audience out of its complacency anywhere." [46]

Not everyone approved. Holiday would be hounded for the rest of her life, in particular by Federal Bureau of Narcotics commissioner Harry Anslinger. As Holiday's biography at Biography.com says, "Anslinger, a known racist, believed that drugs caused Black people to overstep their boundaries in American society and that Black jazz singers – who smoked marijuana – created the devil's music." [47] Knowing Holiday used drugs, he had some of his agents frame her. Holiday spent a year and a half in prison. When released, she was refused a cabaret singer's license. Barred from nightclub singing, she performed at concerts. Not able to escape, as Pak says, "her demons" she began to use drugs again. Hospitalized, in 1959, she was tormented by Anslinger's agents and died a short time later. [48]

Well, I hope Anslinger lived long enough to learn and as our contemporary culture cancellers of the right and left will also learn, the truth ultimately can't be silenced. Holiday's song bringing to life Meeropol's poem excoriating the evil of racism still resonates. Searing as its lyrics were in 1939, in 2021 they still resound:

Strange Fruit

Southern trees bearing a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

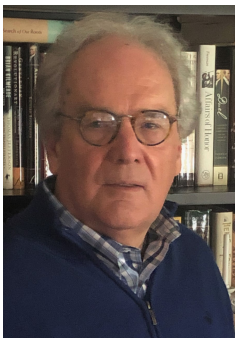
Here is a fruit for the crow to pluck

For the rain to wither, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop. [49]

A video of Billie Holiday in 1939 singing "Strange Fruit" can be found here.

Protest music – the sound of freedom, the sound of those masses Emma Lazarus said were 'yearning to be free' – is, ironically, one of America's great contributions to world culture. Double-irony, maybe such music could only exist in a free society, even if that society's freedom is unequally distributed and often fractured and abused. Next week, an American child of the upper Midwest who said he only wanted to be Buddy Holly but became the icon of cultural change and then renounced his countercultural hero status saying he never wanted to be a protest singer. What to make of Bob Dylan, who said he wasn't 'working on Maggies' Farm no more'?

Rather than just reading the names of songs, for a more complete experience of these songs listen to Episodes #13 and #14: *"Songs of Protest Seeking Freedom"* of my ***The American Tapestry Project*** on WQLN/NPR which can be found on WQLN's website here, and on NPR One here.



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1. "Josh White". Photo: Full-length portrait, standing, facing right, holding guitar/photo by Albert A. Freeman, **Library of Congress** available at https://www.loc.gov/item/98505456/ accessed August 19, 2021;
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End Notes

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