

# Music of the Civil Rights Era, 1954-1968

The old spiritual, *We Shall Overcome*, became the theme song of the Civil Rights Movement.

(Words)

We shall overcome\_\_\_

We shall overcome\_\_\_

We shall overcome some day\_\_\_

For I know in my heart\_\_\_\_\_

It will come true\_\_\_\_\_

We shall overcome some day\_\_\_\_\_

"On the morning when 10,000 started out from Selma, the people sang about 'that great getting up morning.' There were songfests at night when they camped along the roadside; there were songfests in Washington while the crowds waited for speeches to begin. They sang *Oh, Freedom, Blowing in the Wind*, and other folksongs, but again and again they came back to *We Shall Overcome*, making up hundreds of verses to fit the simple melody."

"As the black masses began to realize that nonviolence was powerless against the entrenched racism in the United States, the singing stopped. Instead, there were angry slogans and riots. Only for one day was there singing again, on April 9, 1968, the day of the martyred Martin Luther King. The crowds marched through the streets of Atlanta, Georgia, behind the mule-drawn funeral caisson, blacks and whites holding hands and singing *We Shall Overcome*. It was almost as if they thought King's death would set things right."<sup>1</sup>

"*We Shall Overcome*, an old song that had done service in the labor movement and elsewhere, became the particular anthem of the civil rights movement-and of successful movements around the world. It became a ritual to close movement gatherings with a rendition of *We Shall Overcome* sung with arms crossed, hands linked, bodies rocking from side to side. Time and again, the brave words and steady rhythm of the song fostered courage, unity, and hope."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Southern, Eileen. *Music of Black Americans, A History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971, p. 491.

<sup>2</sup>Kasher, Steven. Forwarded by Myrlie Evers-Williams. *The Civil Rights Movement, A Photographic History, 1954-68*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1996, p. 72.

