

## WE SHALL OVERCOME: The Song



There is life and force in the music of the African American struggle for freedom. As people confronted racism in their communities, they sang. Some of the songs were new; many were older well-known songs transformed to reflect the commitment to stand against segregation and injustice. The evolution of "We Shall Overcome" is a powerful example of such cultural transformation.

At the turn of the century, "I Will Overcome" was sung in many African American Baptist and Methodist congregations. Its history as a freedom song began during a 1940s labor struggle by tobacco workers from Charleston, SC. At a Highlander Folk School workshop, members of the white local of the Charleston Food, Tobacco, and Agricultural Workers Union shared the song as one they had learned from members of their sister Black union local. Founded in 1932, Highlander was one of the few places in the South where Black and white workers struggling to organize unions could meet together. For safe traveling, white and Black members from the same town never attended the same workshop.

Zilphia Horton, the school's music director, learned the song from the tobacco workers and included it in all of her workshops. She taught it to Pete Seeger, who changed "will" to "shall" and, adding new verses, spread "We Shall Overcome" beyond the South. During the late 1950s, Zilphia

Horton's successor, Guy Carawan continued to use the song in Highlander workshops. During a 1960 spring weekend workshop he taught the song to Nashville student sit-in leaders. A few weeks later, "We Shall Overcome" was sung at the historic meeting of student sit-in leaders at Shaw University in Raleigh, NC. Organized by Ella Baker, then executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), this gathering led to the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). As Guy Carawan began to lead the song, all present in the room began to rise from their seats singing and reaching out to join hands, and the signature song of the Civil Rights Movement was born.

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### Highlander Research and Education Center

*Since 1932, bringing together workers, grassroots leaders, community organizers, educators and researchers to address the most pressing social problems facing the peoples of the South*

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# We Shall Overcome Fund

Supporting organizing  
in the South at the nexus of  
culture and social change

Administered since 1966 by  
Highlander Research and  
Education Center

**“We Shall Overcome”** served as the theme song of the Civil Rights Movement and is now a worldwide anthem for freedom and justice. Since 1966, the Highlander Research and Education Center has administered the **We Shall Overcome Fund**, which is generated by royalties from the commercial use of the song “We Shall Overcome.”

#### PURPOSE OF THE FUND

Created to nurture grassroots efforts within African American communities to use art and activism against injustice, the **We Shall Overcome Fund** supports organizing in the South that is at the nexus of culture and social change. Because of the song’s history and use in the primarily southern-based struggle against racism and injustice, African American communities must benefit from **Fund**-supported projects. We strongly encourage proposals from diverse racial and ethnic communities working in coalition to end racism, economic and environmental injustice, sexism and homophobia.

The **We Shall Overcome Fund** supports a wide range of projects including:

- ▲ Performance and visual arts projects linked to or directly serving efforts that seek to transform unjust social, economic, and political environments/conditions/imbalances;
- ▲ Workshops, conferences, and research projects that use arts and culture to build coalitions, share information, inspire, and mobilize people to take action;
- ▲ Preservation of Civil Rights Movement documents; multi-media research projects that document and share the history of the Movement.

**We Shall Overcome Fund** support has been vital to the success of cultural and social programs in rural and urban communities throughout the South. Our funding provides critical support to initiate and sustain innovative efforts at the nexus of culture and social change.



photographer: Danny Lyon, Bleakbeauty.com

#### WHO CAN APPLY

- ▼ Cultural Activists
- ▼ Educators
- ▼ Organizers
- ▼ Organizations

For projects that use arts, culture and community activism to organize for social, economic, and political justice to the benefit of African American communities.

Requests are accepted from the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

- ▲ Project funding not to exceed \$2000.00
- ▲ To apply you must complete an application form.
- ▲ Application Deadlines: January 15 & June 1

For more information about the **We Shall Overcome Fund** visit our website at [www.highlandercenter.org](http://www.highlandercenter.org) or call (865) 933-3443