



Finding Your Voice

Dr. John McGuire
Christopher Newport University
Assistant Professor of Voice & Director of CNU Opera
john.mcguire@cnu.edu

When people join their voices together, whether it be in song, spoken word or chant it is both a powerful and empowering experience. It can bring one a sense of belonging, community and help communicate a message.

This is witnessed from singing in church (and sometimes in bars) to chanting at a sporting event, rally or picket line to reciting vows or oaths, religious and otherwise.

We will explore when people have used their actual voices in songs and chant to fight for their rights. Focusing on two songs and one chant that influenced monumental change in the United States (and Britain) during the 20th Century.

All three of these pieces became an anthem or virtual Battle Cry for their respective movements.

The first song *The March of Women* is from the Women's Rights Movement, specifically Women's Suffrage. Composed in 1911 by Ethel Smythe, a composer and major figure in the Women's Suffrage movement in Britain and the United States. There were close ties between the movements in the USA and Britain for the right of women to vote. Ethel made frequent trips to the USA in order to further the cause in both countries.

Ethel Smythe was truly a larger than life character and feminist. Along with being a composer, she was an avid hunter, mountain climber, open lesbian and published author. She challenged the "status quo" and broke boundaries all the while championing for women's rights. Her autobiography *Impressions That Remained – Memoirs Of Ethel Smythe* details only a portion of her colorful life. She had twenty-five years of more escapades and controversy after its publication in 1919 until her death in 1944.



Dame Smythe, the first woman to receive dame-hood for music, studied at Leipzig Conservatory. There she met many heralded composers such as Grieg, Brahms, Dvořák, and Clara Schumann. Ethel composed in many genres, including opera. An interesting note is that her opera *Der Wald* had been the only opera composed by a woman to be performed at the Metropolitan Opera until Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de loin*, presented during the 2016-2017 season.

The March of Women quickly became an anthem for the Suffrage Movement. Its status was solidified after the controversial trampling death of suffragette Emily Davison by King George V's horse Anmer at the Epsom Derby on June 4th, 1913.

Suffragettes from both Britain and the United States took to the streets singing Smythe's battle song in her honor.

Shout, shout, up with your song!
Cry with the wind, for the dawn is breaking;
March, march, swing you along,
Wide blows our banner, and hope is waking.
Song with its story, dreams with their glory
Lo! they call, and glad is their word!
Loud and louder it swells,
Thunder of freedom, the voice of the Lord!

Long, long—we in the past
Cowered in dread from the light of heaven,
Strong, strong—stand we at last,
Fearless in faith and with sight new given.
Strength with its beauty, Life with its duty,
(Hear the voice, oh hear and obey!)
These, these—beckon us on!
Open your eyes to the blaze of day.



Comrades—ye who have dared
First in the battle to strive and sorrow!
Scorned, spurned—nought have ye cared,
Raising your eyes to a wider morrow,
Ways that are weary, days that are dreary,
Toil and pain by faith ye have borne;
Hail, hail—victors ye stand,
Wearing the wreath that the brave have worn!

Life, strife—those two are one,
Naught can ye win but by faith and daring.
On, on—that ye have done
But for the work of today preparing.
Firm in reliance, laugh a defiance,
(Laugh in hope, for sure is the end)
March, march—many as one,
Shoulder to shoulder and friend to friend.

The song was continually sung at meetings, rallies and marches until the 19th amendment to the Constitution was finally ratified by the United States Congress on August 26, 1920. Thus giving American women the right to vote. In Britain, women (over the age of 30 with qualifying factors) were given the right to vote with the Representation of the People Act in 1918. Ten years later in 1928 the British government passed the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act granting all women over the age of 21 the right to vote.¹

Several orchestras and choruses in the United States and Britain still perform and record Ethel Smythe's anthem *The March of Women*.

¹ Sophia A. van Wingerden, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866-1928*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 176-178.



We Shall Overcome the second song we will explore is the most recognizable song of the Civil Rights Movement.

Although all citizens were able to vote with the passage of the 19th amendment there were still deep-rooted problems of racism in American society. The Civil Rights Movement worked alongside the Women's Movement, however the two were very separate, often divided by race.

Particularly in the southern states of the USA. African Americans were often made to pass "literacy tests" and pay "poll taxes" before they were allowed to vote. Ending this discriminatory practice was among several platforms that the Civil Rights Movement championed in order to fight racism, segregation and unfair treatment of African Americans and all minorities.

Not surprisingly, the southern region of the United States was the epicenter of the movement. The Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee is where Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King first heard Pete Seeger's version of *We Shall Overcome* on September 2, 1957.

They were celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Highlander Center. King gave the keynote address at the seminar titled "The South Thinking Ahead."

In his speech, King talked about bringing together communities to work past differences in religion, race and economic class. Among those in the audience was Rosa Parks, whose refusal to move to the back of a bus in 1955 galvanized the civil rights movement in Montgomery, Alabama. (King mentioned her in his speech: "You would not have had a Montgomery story without Rosa Parks.")²

The song immediately became the Civil Rights movement's anthem.

² "We Shall Overcome by Pete Seeger," www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=9390 (May 1, 2017).



The well-known melody had many incarnations before Seeger's version. It was originally a hymn with words set by the minister Charles Albert Tinley in 1901. He named it *I'll Overcome Someday*.

It was later called *I Will Overcome* and was a favorite hymn sung throughout the south in African American churches.

Pete Seeger first heard the song at The Highlander Center in 1947 when sung by Zilphia Horton, the cultural director of the Highlander Center. He added two verses, a banjo part and published the song in 1948 with a title change to *We Shall Overcome*.

The song wasn't copyrighted until October 7, 1963. Listed as "New material arranged for voice and piano with guitar chords and some new words," the copyright was granted to Seeger, Guy Carawan, Zilphia Horton and Frank Hamilton. Horton had died in 1956, so her husband Myles represented her estate in the claim. Guy Carawan was the music director and Myles Horton was co-founder of the Highlander Folk School; Frank Hamilton was a folk singer who worked with Seeger and often performed the song.

All four of the copyright holders (the composer credit is listed as Guy Carawan/Frank Hamilton/Zilphia Horton/Pete Seeger) advanced the song in some fashion, but none profited from the songwriting royalties, which are donated to the We Shall Overcome Fund. Administered by the Highlander Research and Education Center, the fund supports cultural and educational endeavors in African American communities in the South.



"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

The Lord will see us through, the Lord will see us through

The lord will see us through some day

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe

The Lord will see us some day

We're on to victory, we're on to victory

We're on to victory some day

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe

We're on to victory some day

We'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand

We'll walk hand in hand some day

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe

We'll walk hand in hand some day

We are not afraid, we are not afraid

We are not afraid today

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe

We are not afraid today

The truth shall make us free, the truth shall make us free

The truth shall make us free some day

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe

The truth shall make us free some day

We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace

We shall live in peace some day

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe

We shall live in peace some day



The most well known version was sung by Joan Baez at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963 before Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed by President Johnson on July 2, 1964 ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin, is considered one of the crowning legislative achievements of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965, also signed by President John on August 6, 1965 another landmark piece of federal legislation in the United States that prohibits racial discrimination in voting, was another success of the Civil Rights Movement during this turbulent time.

The Civil Rights Movement continues the struggle to end racism. While strides have been made there is still work to be done. At recent rallies to fight racist groups protesters united in singing *We Shall Overcome*, highlighting the importance and long lasting legacy of this significant song.

The third anthem explored is a chant:

“We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it!”

From the 1960’s to the present day social “norms” are constantly being challenged. Sexual orientation and identity has always been a contentious issue. Just as progress toward acceptance of sexual orientation was being made, the AIDS crisis brought those advancements to a screeching halt.



Admittedly, somewhat jarring and obviously markedly different from the first two songs. This is a definite more “in your face” protest strategy and use of the voice. Instead of boisterous singing like *The March of Women* or the lucid tones of *We Shall Overcome*, this chant is more like a shout used to provoke a fight. And fighting they were.

This chant was born from the particularly violent gay bashings that were taking place in New York City and throughout the United States in the late 1980’s to early 1990’s.

Several members from both the HIV/AIDS activist group ACT UP and the Human Rights Campaign formed the organization Queer Nation. It began in New York City and chapters quickly spread across the country, including Atlanta, Denver, Houston, Portland, and San Francisco. Their mission throughout their history has been to eliminate homophobia and increase Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) visibility.

Queer Nation took some of the radical energy, internal diversity and tactics of ACT UP into attempts to empower bisexuals, transgendered people, and others who had been excluded from, marginalized by, or toned down by the mainstreaming of aspects of the lesbian and gay movement, Queer Nation’s signature actions, often aimed at “queering” public places, included kiss-ins in shopping malls and straight bars, same-sex marriages on the steps of the Catholic cathedrals, and “pink panther” patrols bashing back against antigay violence.³

Their protests were often as seen as abrasive as their slogan. They would also picket and target neighborhoods and hangouts of suspected gay bashers and pass out flyers saying “your neighbors are bigots” with the photos of the accused attackers.

Of course their chant “We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it!” (and variations thereof) were loudly heard at every rally, protest and even sometimes outside of elected officials homes. Including the Long Island march and protest at the home of New York State Senator Ralph Marino. The Senate Majority Leader was responsible for the defeat of

³ Thomas Vernon Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 212.



New York’s “Hate Crimes” bill. The bill subsequently passed.

A renowned demonstration took place in Houston after the murder of Paul Broussard on July 4th, 1991. There was an outcry from the gay community after the vicious attack and lackluster response from the law enforcement officials. Queer Nation Houston helped organize large public protests, some of which took place in front of the mayor's house, with Broussard’s mother participating. The resulting media attention led to one of the assailants' girlfriends calling the police. Ultimately 10 youths were charged and convicted of the murder.

The tactics used by Queer Nation did ultimately pay off as laws and protective measures were passed in many cities and states to help alleviate discrimination against the LGBTQ community.

The Human Rights Campaign, the biggest advocate for the LGBTQ community has had even more success with being the major force behind the fight for the Same Sex Marriage Law, which was fully granted in all 50 States in the US on June 26, 2015.

The two songs and chant explored show when people use their voices, figuratively and literally, they can advance their message. Hopefully igniting change and advancement in the process.

There is still a lot of work that needs to be done with Global Inequality and Human Rights. Finding and using your voice, especially with others fighting for and demanding common rights, we can hopefully see even more progress towards a peaceful and accepting global community.



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