

Discovering *We Shall Overcome*

Almost a century after the American Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement emerged as a powerful force to change laws and attitudes in the United States in the ongoing fight for racial equality. Leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks led national boycotts and protests for social justice. ***We Shall Overcome*** became an important song and rallying cry because of its powerful message of hope in the face of adversity. The song became known around the world, and is still sung at marches and protests today.

Origins of a Protest Song



"I'll Overcome Some Day" was a gospel hymn by **Charles Albert Tindley** that was published in 1901. Tindley, hailed as "a founder of African American gospel," was a self-educated man who triumphed over enormous obstacles in his life to become an important community leader as a church minister.

The hymn was adapted and sung by workers during a 1945 cigar workers strike that lasted for over five months in Charleston, South Carolina, as **Lucille Simmons** led workers in a fight for higher wages and the right to organize.



In 1947 "We Will Overcome" was published in the *People's Songs Bulletin*. **Zilphia Horton** was listed as the song's contributor and gave an introduction to its history. She had learned the song from Lucille Simmons and went on to teach it to many others, including Pete Seeger, through her work as music director of the Highlander Folk School, an adult education school in Tennessee that trained union organizers.

Pete Seeger helped popularize *We Shall Overcome*, as did folk singer Joan Baez, who led a crowd of 300,000 in the song at the March on Washington in 1963 to advocate for civil and economic rights for African Americans. Since then, *We Shall Overcome* has been heard worldwide, including in the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement, the fight for independence of Bangladesh, and the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia.



We Shall Overcome

Charles Albert Tindley

The image shows a musical score for the hymn "We Shall Overcome" in 4/4 time. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff has the lyrics "We shall o - ver - come" and "We shall o - ver - come" with chords C, F, C and C, F, C. The second staff has the lyrics "We shall o - ver - come some - day" with chords C, F, Am, and G7, including a triplet. The third staff has the lyrics "Deep in my heart, I do be - lieve," with chords C, F, C, F, G7, and C. The fourth staff has the lyrics "we shall o - ver - come some - day." with chords C, F, C, G7, and C.

C F C C F C

We shall o - ver - come We shall o - ver - come

C F Am G7

We shall o - ver - come some - day

C F C F G7 C

Deep in my heart, I do be - lieve,

C F C G7 C

we shall o - ver - come some - day.

More Verses:

We are not afraid...

Truth shall make us free...

We'll walk hand in hand...

We are not afraid...

We are not alone...

Some more versions of "We Shall Overcome"...

- Pete Seeger (folk style)
- Gospel Version
- Joan Baez (March on Washington)
- Martin Luther King Jr. Speech

Now **YOU**

Create your own protest song or contribute a new verse to *We Shall Overcome*. What's a cause you care about in your community or the world? Write new lyrics for a verse, or original music, that expresses how you feel and what you'd like people to do about it. Record and send us your song or your lyrics. See page 5 and visit nyphil.org/yepschools for more information.

GLOSSARY

Melody — the main tune of music, the part that you would sing along to

Rhythm — the pattern of sounds that creates a beat

Dynamics — the volume of the music, i.e. loud (*forte*) or soft (*piano*)

Chorus — the refrain, or main part, of the song; the part that is repeated

Lyrics — the words to a melody

Hymn — a song whose purpose is religious

“The older generation isn’t taking enough action, so we must commit to doing it ourselves. We can say a lot with our songs.”

— Paloma Dineli Chesky, age 12, Very Young Composer

Attachments

12_We_Shall_Overcome_guitar_with_and_without_vox.mp3