



“rhythm and blues,” and the gospel style of the old shape-note publishing houses became a polished and dynamic urban gospel. American youth were increasingly receptive to musical alternatives of which their parents had been unaware, or to which they were opposed.

Elvis Presley was a major beneficiary of these transformations. His dynamic and sensual style combined elements from virtually every form of popular music available in the postwar years. He and other rockabilly musicians such as Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and the Everly Brothers unleashed the most important musical revolution that America had experienced since the blossoming of jazz earlier in the century. Together with rhythm and blues performers such as Fats Domino, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry, they carried the musical sounds of the Southern working class deep into American popular culture.

Country music has become America’s favorite. Its styles and themes seem to appeal to much of the nation’s adult White population. This trend may reflect a “southernization of the North,” but it also suggests the musics and the cultures that created them are becoming part of the national mainstream. But country musicians are still overwhelmingly from the South, and their lyrics often self-consciously reflect Southern preoccupations and longings.

Southerners export musical treasures to the world and absorb much in return. Their styles may no longer be as regionally distinctive as many would like, but how could it be otherwise when the folk cultures that produced these traditions are undergoing a similar transformation? Happily, many of the older traditions — such as old-time fiddling and string band music, clog dancing, and Sacred Harp singing — are preserved and revitalized by

increasing numbers of young people. New Orleans has seen a revitalization of the brass band as young musicians rediscover it, and scores of Cajun youth have taken up the accordion and the Louisiana French music of their ancestors.

Many performers preserve the older traditions of Southern rural music: singers like Austin-based Don Walser, who yodels and sings in the old-time honky-tonk style; Ralph Stanley, the banjo player and tenor singer from McClure, Virginia, who preserves the haunting, pinch-throat style of Appalachian singing; and Doc Watson, the North Carolina wizard of the flat-top guitar. And, thank God, Bill Monroe, the Kentucky musician whose sky-high tenor singing and powerful mandolin style defined the art of bluegrass music performance, still lives and entertains.

Music & the U.S. Civil Rights Movement

Jacquelin C. Peters

Song and eloquent oratory are integral to African-American religious expression, and they were pervasive, spiritually sustaining elements of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. In emotionally tense or physically threatening situations, the standard of nonviolence and a serene attitude were maintained through song, prayer, and words of encouragement. Massive church rallies, picketing demonstrations, and even jail houses echoed with the sounds of resolve, declaring, “Just like a tree standing by the water / We shall not be moved.”

Sacred African-American music provided the basis for many freedom songs. One such spiritual, “I Will Be All Right,” has evolved to become the universal anthem of protest, “We Shall Overcome.”

*We shall overcome
We shall overcome
We shall overcome someday.
Deep in my heart, I do believe
We shall overcome someday.*

Techniques such as call and response, “worrying the line” (using melismatic vocal embellishments), or “lining out” (the song leader’s singing or reciting the next line of verse before the end of the previous one) are other retentions from traditional African-American song.

Grounded in the tradition of Black congregational song, choral quartets and ensembles transmitted the Movement’s musical message to audiences far from the locale of the struggle. The Montgomery Gospel Trio, the American Baptist Theological Seminary Quartet (also known as the Nashville Quartet), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Singers, and the SNCC Freedom Singers gave performances that encouraged the world to sit up and take notice.

Suggested Listening

Been in the Storm So Long.

Smithsonian Folkways SF 40031.

Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through its Songs.

Smithsonian Folkways SF 40032.

Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs, 1960–1965. Smithsonian Collection of Recordings R023.

Wade in the Water, Vols. 1–4.

Smithsonian Folkways SF 40072/75.

Jacquelin Celeste Peters is a consultant scholar for the D.C. Community Humanities Council. She compiled the premier edition of the Directory of African American Folklorists for the Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies.