

Bill Wolff
Protest Music, Spring 2026
Songs of the Civil Rights Movement

Names:

For this in-class small-group assignment, each group will complete this sheet together as a group.

On a separate piece of paper, compose 3 open-ended questions you have about the readings and/or the songs for today. Then give that paper to Bill.

On page 15, Sanger writes that “during all of these gatherings [sit-ins, demonstrations, freedom rides, jails—a fact Reagon supports on page 15, as well], whenever the activists met, they engaged in the behavior of singing, perhaps the most **powerful rhetorical behavior** of all in the civil rights movement.” What does she mean here as rhetorical behavior? I’d like you to identify 5 ways the civil rights organizers’ and singers’ behavior was either powerful, rhetorical, and/or powerful because of its rhetorical nature.

What was it about the music that had the ability to transform feelings of self-worth and empowerment? Think about the musical structure of call and response, the settings in which the songs were sung, and the role lyrics played in that transformation—specifically the lyrics on the sheet I handed out today.

On a page we didn’t read, Sanger writes, “During the civil rights movement, the activists often seemed to cast their adversaries in the role of non-persons. Their singing was not explicitly directed to [their adversaries] for [the songs] seldom addressed their adversaries or made demands of them. Yet the cooperation of these adversaries was sometimes needed, in a paradoxical way, in order for the activists to accomplish an important goal—to encourage neutral or uninformed observers to align their sympathies with the civil rights activists” (p. 49). How do you think their use of song in the spaces they were sung resulted in aligning sympathies and what does that say about the organizers understanding of media and strategic communication?