

# We Shall Overcome

Perhaps no song is more closely associated with the Civil Rights Movement than the folk song, “We Shall Overcome.” It is often referred to as the anthem of the movement and was frequently sung at the end of Civil Rights marches and rallies. The progressive themes expressed in the lyrics of “We Shall Overcome” can be traced back to Spirituals, a type of religious song created by enslaved African Americans in the southern U.S that blended African musical elements and European church hymns.

The music and title of “We Shall Overcome” developed from the music of the Black Church. One of the songs that “We Shall Overcome” evolved from was the Gospel hymn, “I’ll Overcome Some Day,” written by Reverend Charles Albert Tindley around 1900. Tindley was a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church and the AME church was the first African American Christian denomination founded in the United States (1794).

During the labor movement of the 1940s, Black tobacco workers sang an early version of “We Shall Overcome” while marching on the picket line. Folk musicians learned about the song while participating in the labor movement and they helped popularize “We Shall Overcome” within the Civil Rights Movement and throughout American society beginning in the early 1960s. While “We Shall Overcome” may be the most well-known song from the movement, many other songs were sung by civil rights activists—collectively they became known as Freedom Songs.

## Lyrics (abbreviated version)

We shall overcome  
We shall overcome  
We shall overcome, some day  
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall overcome, some day

We are not afraid  
We are not afraid  
We are not afraid, today  
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall overcome, some day



## **A Change is Gonna Come**

“A Change is Gonna Come” is a Rhythm & Blues and Soul song written by singer-songwriter Sam Cooke. Sam Cooke (1931-1964) was originally a Gospel singer but became one of the pioneers of Soul music (a music genre developed by African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s with origins in Blues, Gospel, and R&B music). In October 1963, despite Cooke’s success and fame, he and members of his band were arrested when they tried to get a room at a whites-only motel in Shreveport, Louisiana. In response, Cooke wrote “A Change is Gonna Come” that December. Recorded and released in 1964, the song quickly became one of the most popular songs of the Civil Rights era.

### **Lyrics (abbreviated version)**

It’s been too hard living but I’m afraid to die  
Cause I don’t know what’s up there beyond the sky  
It’s been a long time coming  
But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will  
I go to the movie and I go downtown  
Somebody keep telling me don’t hang around  
It’s been a long time coming  
But I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will