

Faced with the violence—both legal and extra-legal—inherent in the Jim Crow system, civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s forged a culture of strength and resistance; and music played a crucial role in its development. “Songs fueled the Movement,” according to guitar virtuoso Chris Vallillo. “They bred inspiration, courage and solidarity in the face of the ever-present threat of violence. Freedom songs would be the glue that held the movement together.”

With his new CD, *Oh Freedom! Songs of the Civil Rights Movement* (available online at ginridge.com), Vallillo celebrates the Movement’s musical legacy with all the skillful slide guitar work, meticulous arranging and inspirational performances you’d expect from one of the hardest working roots musicians in the business.

Vallillo wears his influences proudly -- from country blues artists like Mississippi John Hurt and Mance Lipscomb, to bluegrass guitar wizard Doc Watson, to his Pops Staples-style tremolo slide on “We Shall Not Be Moved,” performed on a 1956 Gibson ES 225 (through a mid-50's Gibson amp for guitar geeks”)!

In Vallillo’s view, music connected the movement to the long history of African-American struggle while providing commentary on more timely issues. “Singing has always been a critical part of African American culture. Many of the songs that became known as “Freedom Songs” had their roots in the spirituals of the slavery era. For instance, the lyrics of *I Shall Not Be Moved* stretch back to the days of slavery. The song evolved through time from a gospel tune to a 1930s coal miners’ labor song, before becoming a civil rights song. The song *Oh Freedom!* is believed to have been written in response to the Emancipation Proclamation and was sung in public as a response to the news of freedom.”

Vallillo believes the songs remain timely given the resurgence of a civil rights movement like “Black Lives Matter” and the student activism at the University of Missouri and other campuses. “One of the main reasons I had for creating the project was to bring this music and these issues back into the forefront by highlighting the struggle that brought us this far. Very few artists are taking a stand on issues of social justice these days, but many of the issues that existed in the 60's are still with us. If anything, it seems as if we are moving backwards in terms of race relations given the particularly nasty nature of politics today. These modern day civil rights movements can—and do—draw an important lesson from the way music was used as a tool in movements of the 50's and 60's. “Recently, a segment on the national news showed students protesting recent gun violence on campus with a sit-in style candlelight memorial. They were singing *This Little Light of Mine.*”

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