



# Rivers of Rhythm: We Shall Overcome

**Audience Level:** 6th —12th Grades

**Genre/Content Overview:** Geography, U.S. History Language Arts, Listening and Speaking

## Learning Objectives:

- Students will describe the role of *We Shall Overcome* in the Civil Rights Movements.
- Students will investigate the relationship between African American artists and activists in the authoring of *We Shall Overcome*.

## Summary Description:

The story of a song hardly ever travels a straight path. It winds through time until it hopefully takes a place rooted firmly in the heart of humanity. *We Shall Overcome* is no exception. It first appeared as a protest song during a 1945–1946 labor strike of African American women workers against American Tobacco in Charleston, South Carolina. As picketers sang *I Will Overcome*, by composer Charles Albert Tindley, one of the strikers, Lucille Simmons transformed the “I” to “We” and the journey began. Subsequently carrying Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, TN Simmons introduced it to other labor activists. Zilphia Horton, head of the school’s cultural program would then share it with Pete Seeger, who, ten years later, would pluck it out on his banjo in front of a young Baptist minister named Martin King in September of 1957. The Civil Rights Movement now had it’s anthem.

Since that time the song has traversed the planet and become the property of our planet. From migrant farmworkers and anti apartheid activists to a group of Australian students on a Freedom Ride for the Aboriginal people, when people worked for equal rights peace and justice, the song became part of their struggle. The lyric even dawned the t-shirts of Chinese students when they faced government tanks in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square and it’s melody filled the air as the Berlin Wall came tumblin’ down. To this day this song stands as a definitive artistic, revolutionary expression of the oneness of mankind.

## Key Questions:

1. What is the role of music in the struggle for civil rights?
2. Who sang *We Shall Overcome* and how was the song written?

## Key Concepts:

Freedom Songs	Thematic Song Writing
Segregation	Common Melody
Civil Rights	Spirituals
Justice	Hymn
Folk Music	

### Set of Tasks:

- Familiarize students with the song.
- Listen to at least two different renditions and discuss similarities and differences between them. And discuss what a Freedom Song is and its connection to the Civil Rights Movement. (10 min.)
- Using [riversofrhythm.org](http://riversofrhythm.org) have students search “Pete Seeger” and read about him or listen to his music. You can also use images of Pete Seeger to explore him as an influential folk and children’s singer and his commitments to a more equitable society. (10 min.)
- Describe the relationship between Pete Seeger, *We Shall Overcome*, and those who taught Seeger the song: Have students search some or all of the following contributors to the authoring of *We Shall Overcome*: Charles Albert Tindley, Lucille Simmons, Zilphia Horton, Guy Carawan, and the Freedom Singers to answer these two questions about each artist/activist. (10 min.)
  - i. Who am I?
  - ii. What did I do for “We Shall Overcome?”

*Notes: This part can be jigsawed or you might choose to select only 2 or 3 artists/activists to explore at great depth. Some will be in [riversofrhythm.org](http://riversofrhythm.org) if they are not available at Rivers of Rhythm you can search <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/music-in-the-civil-rights-movement/>*

### Resources and Materials for the Lesson and for Extension Activities:

[riversofrhythm.org](http://riversofrhythm.org)  
We Shall Overcome speech by LBJ  
Freedom Rides for Aborigines in Australia 1965

### Artists:

Charles Albert Tindley  
Lucille Simmons  
Zilphia Horton, Director of Highlander Folk School, Highlander Research and Education Center  
Guy Carawan, Pete Seeger,  
Dr. Martin Luther King  
Freedom Singers

### Possible Extension Activities:

- a. Turn what they have learned into a mapping activity. Have students locate pieces of the stories they read on a world map.