



The Freedom Riders and Song

The Freedom Riders were a group of African-American and white men and women who traveled on buses to the Deep South in 1961 to fight racial segregation. Many of them were beaten and arrested when they arrived in the South. The following is an excerpt of an account of their time in the state prison in Parchman, Mississippi.

As the local jails filled up, many of the Freedom Riders were transferred to the newly built maximum-security facility at Parchman Farm located 140 miles outside of Jackson.

At Parchman the conditions worsened. Men and women prisoners were segregated from each other by race and sex. The female population was housed in the death row wing of the prison and never allowed to go outside and mingle with the general population. Women in particular were subject to humiliating body searches and allowed no time for exercise.

The Freedom Riders responded to their harsh treatment by singing freedom songs from their cells. (One Freedom Rider was actually a bass singer with the San Francisco Opera.) When the guards demanded they stop their singing, the Freedom Riders refused. As punishment for their insolence, the guards took away their blankets. "Nights were cold," recalls one Freedom Rider as they were forced to sleep "on the cold, hard steel floor." Scattered hunger strikes further weakened many of the Freedom Riders physically but did not dampen their moral resolve.

Source: The Freedom Riders' 40th Reunion Website, <http://www.freedomridersfoundation.org/id16.html>

This is how one former Freedom Rider described the role of music to the movement:

"Music was just as important as learning about nonviolence," said Ernest "Rip" Patton, one of the original Freedom Riders. "Music brought us together -- we can't all talk at the same time, but we can all sing at the same time. It gives you that spiritual feeling. It was like our glue."

Source: Trymaine Lee, "Take it to Church: The Music of the Movement," 5/30/11, Huffington Post