
Odetta, “Oh Freedom”



Perhaps no single artist was more closely associated with the Civil Rights movement than Folksinger Odetta Holmes, better known simply as Odetta. Born in Birmingham, Alabama, Odetta had an operatic voice that she put to use singing Folk songs, the Blues, and old Negro Spirituals. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., referred to her as “the queen of American Folk music.” Numerous artists from Bob Dylan to Janis Joplin cited Odetta as a powerful influence on their music.

At the 1963 March on Washington, Odetta performed “Oh, Freedom” – a song originally sung by newly freed slaves after the Civil War.

Excerpt from Lyrics

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free

No more moaning, no more moaning, no more moaning over me
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free

Questions for Discussion

1. How does Odetta use her voice to create a specific mood? What mood does she create?
2. Why do you think a song associated with the period immediately after the Civil War resonated so deeply during the Civil Rights Movement? What were some of the parallels between the two historical periods?
3. How do the lyrics of “Oh Freedom” represent the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement? What are the similarities between this song and “We Shall Overcome”?