The 1932 founding of the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, is one of the most important moments in the history of the American Left. Myles Horton, a Christian activist and educator from Tennessee, previously discovered that the encroachment of industry into rural Appalachia robbed many local people of their livelihoods and culture. He devoted his work to reengaging the people with their culture by offering them opportunities to discuss their common experiences with other rural people. Horton found that the discussions flowed more freely if the meetings began with a communal song. Inspired by the radical Christian Marxist Reinhold Niebuhr, Horton founded Highlander with Don West, a Georgian Christian who shared the vision of establishing a folk school that would encourage people to challenge the South’s moral and political shortcomings and that would resist authoritarian dogma, whether it be religious or political. West and Horton did not want to use books to teach but instead wanted to use the culture, heritage, history, and social structure of Grundy County (where Highlander was located) and the wider South as teaching tools. Highlander’s ethos was not simply community development but, as Horton stressed, “people development,” upholding individual and group bonds with the working-class values and heritage that Highlander associated with Appalachia. It was based around the idea that the solutions to social problems would be found through the lessons of history and the pooling of individual experiences and knowledge.1

During the 1950s and 1960s, Highlander became the great meeting place for those in the civil rights movement. Many activists spent numerous hours discussing methods of protest with Highlander’s staff and volunteers before applying these techniques elsewhere. Through its workshops, Highlander helped to mold a new generation of activists who spread the Highlander
ethos throughout the South. Folk songs were fundamental to Highlander’s operation. Visitors were encouraged to join in singing, dancing, and making music. These activities, Highlander staff reasoned, would develop community bonds and create indigenous leaders in southern black communities, aiding the struggle for black civil rights.

Staff and students at Highlander swapped songs regularly. Staff sang new compositions at subsequent workshops to judge the response. If groups responded well, the songs would be kept and used again. Through this method, Highlander staff compiled a collection of songs that visitors identified with both musically and politically. By the late 1950s, Highlander’s repertoire had coalesced around an amalgam of African American spirituals, secular union songs, and original compositions that were an explicit attempt to portray the message of the African American freedom movement through song. The freedom songs remain as a powerful reminder of the civil rights movement and illustrate perfectly how the movement engaged with a tradition of cultural and political protest. To understand the legacy and meaning of these songs fully, it is necessary to examine the influence of Highlander’s two music directors: Zilphia Horton and her successor, Guy Carawan. Their experiences illustrate how Highlander staff fused white and black American protest culture and why they were so keen to utilize folk culture in the creation of protest movements. Furthermore, Carawan’s experience as a traveling singer in the early 1960s raises important questions about the black community’s relationship with its culture and heritage. While Carawan might have made mistakes in his assessment of this issue, his conclusions pose important questions about the role of the civil rights movement and of white people within it.

The influence of Highlander is also illustrated by the Citizenship Education Program (CEP), which created a network of over 900 informal citizenship schools in many areas of the rural South and led to the registration of hundreds of thousands of African American voters. The CEP played a critical role in ensuring the ongoing success of the civil rights movement. Although the primary goal of these schools was to increase black enfranchisement, underneath this exterior was a complex program designed to perpetuate black cultural traditions and instill a commitment to democratic protest in southern communities. The freedom songs played a central role in the curriculum. In fact, the CEP curriculum was explicitly designed to reflect the indigenous culture of the black South. In doing so, its designers ensured that the CEP did not become an alienating experience for students and helped to preserve many important cultural traditions. By 1960, the
CEP had been passed over to the direction of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Although the essence of the program remained, the SCLC attempted to make subtle changes in the program in order to fuse it with an overtly Christian message. These events illustrate how the SCLC engaged with black and white folk culture while it simultaneously emphasized the middle-class and respectable aura of black protest in the early 1960s.

**Cultural Policy at Highlander**

The attendance of movement activists such as Rosa Parks and John Lewis at Highlander and the profound impact it had on their lives are well documented. Less attention, however, has been given to the importance of cultural organizing to Highlander’s educational policy. Yet Highlander’s plans extended far beyond simple education. For Myles Horton, the simple process of literacy was no protection against corruption, since people could “learn to write for the purpose of forging a check.” He wanted Highlander to spread “the concept of what ought to be—human brotherhood, dignity and democracy.” Highlander’s relationship with local communities and local people became a leitmotif that characterized the work of those who trained at the school throughout the 1960s. This influence can easily be detected in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) grassroots organizing work and SNCC’s belief that local people should lead local organizations. The creation of this new political culture was based on the knowledge that most black southerners were not registered to vote and were not educated to a level at which they were aware of their potential political power. Highlander’s work revealed that this situation could be altered through encouraging these southerners to understand their political rights and responsibilities. Once they realized the power that they could wield, they would be able to make their own decisions about their lives and start to exercise their rights. The promise of Reconstruction could then be fulfilled, and black southerners would be able to participate fully in civic life.

An additional effect of these schools proved to be a huge change in self-awareness among southern blacks, notably around their own self-image. The Highlander program emphasized that their heritage was valid and that their culture was viable and legitimate.

Highlander’s early programs explored the problems experienced by local workers in their relationships with employers and unions. With the arrival of Zilphia Johnson in early 1935, cultural activities became more prominent.
A Spanish-Indian native of Arkansas, Johnson was inspired to embrace leftist politics by radical Presbyterian minister Claude Williams, who urged her to visit Highlander. Within three months of her arrival, she had married Myles Horton and become Highlander’s music director. She brought song to the center of Highlander’s ethos, believing that music should be at the heart of all things: “of situations, beliefs, of struggle, of ideas, of life itself.” She argued that people’s lives could be enriched through song, especially through songs of other cultures. For her, songs that spoke of people’s everyday lives, and particularly folk songs from rural areas, were a vital conduit for the development of personal dignity and pride in cultural heritage. Zilphia Horton collected well over 1,000 songs from the unions, from other leftist groups, and from black and white folk traditions. These she disseminated to the thousands of people who passed through Highlander or participated in picket lines at which she sang. Horton was adept at transforming the message of folk songs into something that related directly to the experience of her audience. She overhauled “Old MacDonald’s Farm” into a song celebrating the leader of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO): “John L. Lewis Had a Plan” (C-I-, C-I-O). The stoical Pentecostal hymn “I Shall Not Be Moved” was developed into the more inclusive “We Shall Not Be Moved.” Previously an expression of the individual’s relationship with God, the song was transformed into a declaration of group solidarity. The original presents the individual being assailed by the tempest; faith renders the individual as firmly rooted as a tree. The second version transforms this solidity into the conviction that the group will not be swayed from attaining its goal, a message that was taken to heart by the unions and later the civil rights movement.

Group singing, for Zilphia Horton, was important in the development of group solidarity and in ensuring that the masses and their leaders did not become alienated from each other. She believed that leaders had to emerge organically from the people and needed to retain a close bond with those being led. Song played a central role in preserving this organic relationship. This understanding of the role and duties of leadership was central to the Highlander ethos. Horton interpreted folk song as an international language of brotherhood and sisterhood. Well aware of the slave and sharecropper tradition of singing while working, Horton detected similarities with the union movement. For her, these twin traditions of song cut across racial lines. She was not alone in considering song a fundamental weapon against oppression: her husband considered music and singing to be part
of the school's original concept. Song lyrics could inspire people to become activists, tell stories that illiterate people might not otherwise read, and, importantly, involve the whole community. Through its activism and example, Highlander reconnected vast numbers of southerners, black and white, with their common heritage and insisted that their culture was a valid expression of their lives and their politics.7

Highlander’s work focused on weeklong residential workshops at which groups of people from a variety of southern communities would be encouraged to discuss their community problems and how to solve them. This pooling of intellectual resources often led visitors to recognize the common obstacles that they faced and the common bonds that united them, leading them to conclude that group political action was a viable means through which they could challenge oppression. Highlander’s staff limited themselves to supervisory roles, facilitating rather than leading the discussions, acting as an additional resource should the workshop request it. Visitors were encouraged to speak freely throughout their stay at Highlander, with discussions often lasting through mealtimes and long into the night. Zilphia Horton integrated Highlander’s cultural program with the more formal curriculum, thus designating music and folk dancing as a mixture of education and entertainment. Groups would be encouraged to sing together during the day. These activities instilled solidarity, cultural pride, inspiration, and hope in communities and contributed to the development of leadership. Furthermore, if people could come together as an impromptu choir, then why not as a political organization? Highlander’s official policy asserted that democracy meant more than simply freedom of thought and religion, and more than equal rights to a livelihood, education, and health; it also meant an equal opportunity “to participate in the cultural life of the community.” For Highlander’s staff, the cultural programs, especially those involving group singing and collective improvisation, exemplified the spirit of the community that the school hoped to create. These activities helped to forge bonds between individuals in a group by breaking down personal barriers and opening up channels of communication. Once people had sung songs together, they became less reticent to speak in front of the group. These groups bonded with each other over their shared heritage and learned of the different traditions within the larger shared history of the South. More than simply a means to create bonds of friendship, the democratic practice of communal singing was also a device for transmitting ideological and pedagogical messages. For the staff of Highlander, cultural programs had a dual
purpose: they helped to develop group cohesion, and they highlighted how culture and politics existed in symbiosis. Thus the cultural work fed into and informed the political work, as well as making a political point itself.  

Zilphia Horton insisted that the word content of the song was vital to its resonance, ensuring that the audience received both information and inspiration. The responsibility of the leader of the group was to make certain that the songs sung at a meeting related to the group’s interests and goals. Zilphia Horton had seen this theory work in practice on numerous occasions. In 1948, for example, she and Myles conducted an educational meeting for rural blacks in a barn in western Tennessee. They began by singing songs with a small group of interested people, which soon grew into a large gathering as others heard the music and became drawn to this seemingly impromptu revival meeting. The group sang old spirituals and songs familiar to the local people. The Hortons encouraged them to add new words about the Cooperative Union that the locals had recently established, thus linking their political present with their cultural heritage. The first round of songs was augmented by a long political discussion of the role of the co-op before the group returned to song after two local people fetched a fiddle and banjo. The hootenanny–cum–political meeting eventually exhausted itself late in the night. For Zilphia Horton, music had provided a means to bring the community together. It was now the job of the community leader to direct the community in a creative direction. By using the folk culture of the group, the leader could enliven political meetings and prevent them from becoming dull and unappealing to the local populace. Not only could song bring people together, it could provoke thought and even transmit ideology. For the Hortons and Highlander, it was an invaluable tool.

Highlander successfully used these methods within the union movement during the early 1940s, but Zilphia Horton, who viewed song as a multiracial working-class organizing tool, became particularly frustrated at the pace of racial change within the unions. By the late 1940s, Highlander had become critical of the CIO’s attitude toward race and was concerned about the lack of progress being made in educating workers about the value of a biracial approach to organizing. The school had developed a large dependence on the funds accruing from the workshops that it conducted for a number of southern CIO-affiliated unions. Despite the fact that several of these unions bristled at Highlander’s rejection of segregation and occasionally refused to integrate, Highlander was instrumental in devising the curriculum for the CIO’s worker education programs. Aware that some CIO unions were establishing their own education programs, Highlander decided to broaden
its program outside the CIO, with the obvious benefit that Highlander no longer had to squabble with the less progressive unions over the race issue and was less reliant on their money. Horton was also dismayed at the failure of the CIO’s southern organizing drive, Operation Dixie, to transcend racial antagonism in the South between 1946 and 1948. In an atmosphere that was increasingly tainted with anti-Communism, the CIO abandoned its commitment to racial solidarity and grew ever more wary of offending the sensibilities of white workers. Highlander’s refusal to engage in Red-baiting exacerbated the divisions between it and the CIO. By 1947, the CIO’s new direction included the withdrawal of funds for Highlander. This was a galling slight for the Highlander staff who drew great pride from their challenge to the CIO’s attitudes to race and segregation and who placed particular emphasis on the role of the working class in forming the vanguard of the struggles against racial discrimination.10

Throughout her working life at Highlander, Zilphia Horton insisted that folk culture was fundamental to enacting change in the southern working-class community. This culture not only spread democratic ideology through the lyrics of folk song, but it also spread democratic practice through uniting leaders and the masses in a common vocality. Moreover, her ideas, even her personality, were central to Highlander’s work in the South.

Guy Carawan and the Freedom Songs

Following Zilphia Horton’s tragic accidental death from uremic poisoning in 1956, the Highlander music program entered a fallow period that lasted until the appointment of Guy Carawan in 1959. Arriving at Highlander on the recommendation of Pete Seeger, Carawan soon revived the school’s musical traditions, contributing a fundamental component of the growing freedom movement among African American students in the South. That he was able to do so in such a short time underscores the importance of the cultural program to Highlander.11

Born in Los Angeles to southern parents, Carawan learned guitar at college from records and visits by folksingers such as Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly (Huddie Ledbetter), and Seeger. Carawan first visited the South in 1953 after earning a master’s degree in sociology, visiting Highlander, and finding solace and inspiration in the school’s amalgamation of Popular Front radicalism and folk song. From the very beginning of his work at Highlander, Carawan emphasized the role of folk culture in the burgeoning black freedom movement. He thought that the potential for a singing movement to