

fannie lou hamer

songs my mother taught me



NATIONAL MUSEUM of
AFRICAN AMERICAN
HISTORY and CULTURE

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This recording is part of the *African American Legacy* series, co-produced with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Right: Fannie Lou Hamer, evicted from her home for applying to vote, demonstrates for voter registration. Hattiesburg, MS 1964.

Photo by Danny Lyon, courtesy of Magnum Photos

1. **Precious Lord** 6:22
(Thomas A. Dorsey / Warner-Tamerlane Publishing Corp., BMI)
2. **On Being a Sharecropper** 5:13
3. **Run, Mourner, Run** 1:23
4. **City Called Heaven** 3:31
5. **All the Pretty Little Horses** 1:34
6. **I'm Gonna Land on the Shore** 2:29
7. **Oh Lord, You Know Just How I Feel** 4:04
8. **I'm Going Down to the River of Jordan** 2:42
9. **Jesus Is My Only Friend** 3:03
10. **Pick a Bale of Cotton** :44
11. **Keep Your Lamps Trimm'd and Burning** 1:09
12. **Walk With Me** 1:41
13. **This Little Light of Mine** 3:08
14. **Mass Meeting Speech** 5:08
15. **Certainly Lord** 1:39
16. **Woke Up This Morning** 2:36
(Arr. by Robert Zellner (BMI) / Figs. D Music (BMI) obo itself and Sanga Music, Inc. (BMI) c/o The Bicycle Music Company)
17. **Amazing Grace** 1:27
(John Newton)



INTRODUCTION AND BIOGRAPHY

Fannie Lou Townsend was the 20th child of sharecroppers in Montgomery County, Mississippi. She was born on October 6, 1917, during the “Great Migration,” when thousands of blacks left the rural South seeking industrial and factory work in the urban areas of the Midwest, East, and West. Nevertheless, her parents James and Lou Ella Townsend did not join this exodus, and when Fannie Lou was two years old, the family moved west in Mississippi to E. W. Brandon’s plantation in Sunflower County. Fannie Lou began to work in the fields picking cotton at the age of six, a common practice among sharecropper children. Her first work experience as a child was when she picked 30 pounds in a week in return for an offer of candy and snacks from a plantation owner. In a 1965 interview, Mrs. Hamer stated, “By the time I was 13, I was picking two and three hundred pounds” (O’Dell 1965, 231–32). Despite the family’s tremendous productivity, however, they rarely came out ahead at the end of the year because of the rigged accounting practices of the sharecropping system.

Songs her mother often sang in the fields with her family expressed a longing for a better life. One of them is included in this compilation:

*I’m going to land on the shore (3x)
Where I’ll rest forever more.*

*The Preacher in the pulpit,
With the Bible in his hand—
He preaching to the sinners
But they don’t understand*

*I'm going to land on the shore (3x)
Where I'll rest for evermore.*

*I would not be a white man,
White as the dripping of snow
They ain't got God in their heart
To hell they sho' must go*

Living and economic conditions for Delta sharecroppers were barely adequate, as plantation owners generally sought the largest financial return for the least financial investment. The Townsends' house had no electricity, running water, or indoor plumbing. Schools were segregated, and schools for blacks, governed by the seasonal work of the cotton industry, closed when labor was needed. When Fannie Lou was growing up, black schools in the state were open just four months of the year, December through March, and provided a substandard education. Fannie Lou was only able to complete school through sixth grade before becoming part of her family's labor force. By all accounts, Fannie Lou liked school and was an enthusiastic student, continuing to develop her reading skills with Bible study. And through attending church with her mother, Fannie Lou learned the inspirational and communicative power of song.

The white ruling class in Mississippi engaged in ruthless practices to sustain racial segregation. The lynching of blacks was a constant threat from whites in positions of power, along with other forms of terrorism, brutality, and social intimidation that continued long after slavery was abolished. Blacks had little to no legal recourse against this oppression.

Fannie Lou's parents were models of determination and perseverance in their strug-

gles to provide for their family. Lou Ella often took her young children into the cotton fields after the harvest, walking for miles in the cold, shoeless, to gather enough cotton for a 500–600 pound bale she would sell to help the family get through the winter. They finally did save enough to purchase wagons and farm equipment, three mules, and two cows, and they planned to rent some land in an attempt to escape sharecropping. But strong resistance and resentment to racial change reared its head, and a white man poisoned their livestock. Stark lessons and cruelty unleashed on her family and other members of the African American community taught Fannie Lou about her region's deeply ingrained system of racial injustice.

Lou Ella Townsend's strength of character and ingenuity set an example for Fannie Lou. Lou Ella was known to carry a pistol into the fields for self-defense against aggressive whites intent on doing harm to her children and others in her care. When a white man on horseback entered the field where the family labored and stated his intention to take Mrs. Townsend's "very young" niece back home with him after giving her "a good whipping first," Fannie Lou recalled, "my mother just stood there, popped her cork and said, 'You don't have no Black children, and you not goin' to beat no Black children. If you step down off of that horse, I'll go to Hell and back with you before you can scorch a feather'" (Lee 1999, 12). The courage Lou Ella demonstrated in dealing with such confrontations with whites gave Fannie Lou a sense of pride and moral fortitude that she drew on in her own struggles and activism later in life. In speaking about her mother's influence she said, "My mother was a great woman. She went through a lot of suffering to bring the 20 of us up, but she still taught us to be decent and to respect ourselves, and that is one of the things that has kept me going."

SEEKING VOTING RIGHTS AND BECOMING A LEADER

In 1944, when she was 27, Fannie Lou married Perry “Pap” Hamer, and they lived as sharecroppers on the Marlow plantation east of Ruleville. The Marlows had been plantation owners for generations and were well established in Sunflower County, possessing both political power and material wealth. As a housekeeper in the Marlow home Fannie Lou witnessed first-hand the great contrast between the living conditions of whites and African Americans; the Hamer house had cold running water only, a tub, and a non-working indoor toilet. In addition to her service as a domestic, she was a timekeeper on the plantation, and she was valued and respected by both the workers and the Marlow family.

Mrs. Hamer’s knowledge of the Bible, its messages of morality, and her experiences with the extreme injustice in Mississippi instilled in her a resolve that blacks should have the same civil rights and privileges as the whites in her state. She was aware of the activities of the racist Citizens’ Council and the role its members played in local and state politics. She knew, for example, that a sibling of J. W. Milam, who admitted to the lynching of Emmett Till, was a policeman in Ruleville. And like many blacks in the state, she understood that efforts to maintain whites’ supremacy involved acts of violent terror to create fear among members of the black community. The town of Ruleville and surrounding Sunflower County were known for being under intense racist pressure. She realized, then, that the road to equal rights could not be taken without serious risk.

Encouraged by her friend Mary Tucker, Mrs. Hamer attended an August 1962 mass meeting organized under the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) and held at the Williams Chapel Church in Ruleville. A number of civil rights organizers spoke—among them, the minister James Bevel of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and James Foreman and Bob Moses of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

(SNCC). Each speaker's message was intended to encourage the attendees to register to vote. When they asked for volunteers, Mrs. Hamer and 17 others raised their hands.

The group departed for the county seat of Indianola in a rented bus. When they arrived there, Mrs. Hamer led the way, entering the courthouse first. She recalled that a crowd of whites gathered, "... but they wasn't kidding down there they had on, you know, cowboy hats and they had guns; they had dogs." The clerk, Cecil Campbell, was extremely hostile, and Mrs. Hamer failed the rigged literacy test to interpret a section of the state constitution. On the way back to Ruleville the bus was detained and the driver arrested and fined for a fabricated violation. While the passengers waited for him, Mrs. Hamer led them in song, with "Down by the Riverside," "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around," and "This Little Light of Mine," bringing calm and unity to the nervous group.

The next blow came later that evening. Mrs. Hamer learned upon returning home that Mr. Marlow had given Pap Hamer an ultimatum: she either had to remove her name from the voter roles or leave the plantation and her job. When W. D. Marlow confronted Mrs. Hamer in person, her response was direct and clear: "Mr. Dee, I didn't go down there to register for you, I went down to register for myself" (Mills 1993, 38). Determined to go forward, Mrs. Hamer left the plantation that same night with her adopted daughters, finding a temporary place in the town before moving out of the county with her husband and family.

Bob Moses and SNCC members recognized the need for local leaders who were respected by the members of their community and also intimately aware of the intimidation and violence enacted by whites. So Bob Moses sought out Mrs. Hamer to work on growing and sustaining involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in Sunflower County. During the fall of 1962, Mrs. Hamer attended a SNCC rally in Nashville, Tennessee, and became a source of inspiration to SNCC members. She impressed the attendees as a



From left: **Guy Carawan, Fannie Lou Hamer, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and Len Chandler perform civil rights songs at the Newport Folk Festival, 1965.**

Photo by Diana Davies

speaker able to quote from the Bible and employ humor to shame and challenge those she felt were not doing enough to change the oppressive conditions in the South. By the end of 1962, Fannie Lou Hamer set up residence back in Ruleville and began working as a SNCC fieldworker. After her second voter registration attempt that winter, she learned in January 1963 she had passed the state's literacy test and was a legally registered voter. Her SNCC work registering local voters was public knowledge by this time. As a result, she was the target of constant intimidation, and she and Pap Hamer could not find regular work.

WINONA, MISSISSIPPI

Beginning in early 1963 Mrs. Hamer attended training courses on teaching adult literacy in local communities. These courses were modeled on programs developed by the Highlander Center in Tennessee and were held in other states in the South. With a group of fellow fieldworkers she traveled first to Dorchester, Georgia, and then to Charleston, South Carolina. In Charleston she met Guy Carawan of the Highlander Center, who taught the song "We Shall Overcome" to SNCC members. At these sessions most everyone noted Mrs. Hamer's singing and grassroots leadership qualities.

Returning by bus from South Carolina feeling inspired, the Mississippi contingent of fieldworkers sat at a whites-only counter at a stop in Columbus, Mississippi, to be served. The driver, taking offense at their actions, comments, and singing of freedom songs, called ahead to the Winona stop. There to meet the bus that Sunday, June 9, was an assembly of police officers. Four of the fieldworkers went into the bus station to get something to eat and sat down at the lunch counter. One waitress, showing disgust, tossed her dishrag in their direction, then two policemen tapped them with nightsticks and ordered them to leave. Standing outside, they noted down the license plate of one of the police cars. That

was enough for the police chief to arrest them. Mrs. Hamer left the bus, approached her fellow fieldworkers who were being arrested, and asked them whether the rest of the group should go ahead to Greenwood; the police chief had her arrested also. They were all taken to the Montgomery County jail.

The five women—June Johnson, a teenager, and Annell Ponder, a SCLC worker, both from Greenwood; Euvester Simpson, Rosemary Freeman, and Mrs. Hamer—and one man, James West, were denied phone calls. Johnson, Ponder, West, and Mrs. Hamer were severely beaten: Johnson and Ponder bloodied by the police with fists and blackjacks, and West and Hamer by two other inmates whom the police gave whiskey and ordered under threat to administer beatings with a blackjack. None of them received any medical treatment, which would have lifelong health consequences for Mrs. Hamer. Despite their wounds Mrs. Hamer and the group sang “When Paul and Silas Were Bound in Jail,” among other songs, to help unify and comfort themselves during their remaining time in jail.

SNCC staff, aware that the bus had arrived in Greenwood without Mrs. Hamer and the others, began to make calls to sheriffs and police stations in the region, because they knew that the police would not hesitate to kill the SNCC workers unless somebody was actively searching for them. Their calls succeeded in stopping the assault in the Winona jail. The SNCC workers also called press contacts. Ultimately it took the efforts of SNCC member Lawrence Guyot, who upon arriving to check on the jailed fieldworkers, was also arrested and beaten close to death in the Winona jail. He was followed by law student Eleanor Holmes Norton, James Bevel, Dorothy Cotton, and later, Andrew Young, all arriving in Winona to arrange for the workers’ release.

Law enforcement officers involved in the arrests and beatings included Winona police, the Montgomery County sheriff, and Mississippi state highway patrolmen. SNCC

workers in Mississippi and Atlanta notified the Justice Department and the FBI of the situation while the workers were being held. When an FBI agent arrived from Memphis to conduct interviews at the jail on June 11, Mrs. Hamer let him know she would not give a statement until she was released. She had good reason for her mistrust, since the FBI had a record of conducting shoddy investigations, botching evidence collection, and collaborating with state and local law officers.

Upon their release from the Winona jail on June 12, she and her fellow fieldworkers learned that Medgar Evers had been assassinated at his home in Jackson the previous night.

The Justice Department eventually filed civil and criminal charges in response to the incident in Winona. The civil complaint charged Winona mayor Martin C. Billingsley, police chief Thomas Herrod, and sheriff Earle W. Partridge with violating the Interstate Commerce Commission regulation forbidding racial discrimination in station facilities serving passengers. This was followed by criminal charges against the highway patrolman, sheriff, police chief, and two others for the beatings and for violations of constitutional rights. The criminal trial was held in Oxford, Mississippi, on December 2, 1963. Most of the country was still in shock from the November 22 assassination of President Kennedy, and the trial didn't make national headlines. All the officers were acquitted by a white jury.

FREEDOM SUMMER AND THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY (MFDP)

The black population and their allies in state continued making concerted efforts to have an effect on electoral politics. A mock election was conducted statewide in the fall of 1963 to demonstrate that, if allowed to register, black people would vote. The results were encouraging, with 80,000 people voting, including whites—clear evidence that a



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NEGROES RUN IN MISS.

FOUR RUN ON FREEDOM SLATE

JACKSON, MISS., — Missions of the state's voters — more than 100,000 — are expected to vote in the June 23 primary election.

The four — Mrs. Victoria Gray, James M. Houston, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rev. John Cannon — are the only Negroes running in the primary.

Gray is a member of the state's House of Representatives. Houston is a member of the state's House of Representatives. Hamer is a member of the state's House of Representatives. Cannon is a member of the state's House of Representatives.

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Beating Marks Freedom Day

CANTON, MISS., — A Negro parade celebrating Freedom Day in the city today was held at a time when the city police were arrested without adequate participation in the annual annual celebration.



Mrs. Victoria Gray, Senate candidate, speaks at an outdoor rally in Canton.

COURT NIXES PEACE BOND REQUIREMENTS

SEALMA, ALA., — The Alabama Court of Appeals has ruled that the state's requirement that a person arrested for a crime must post a peace bond is unconstitutional.

The court's decision is a victory for the state's civil rights leaders, who have been fighting the requirement for years. The court's decision is a victory for the state's civil rights leaders, who have been fighting the requirement for years.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

SNCC Student Voice newsletter vol. 5 no. 13 feature about Mrs. Hamer and three other African American candidates who ran in the 1964 Mississippi State primary election.

Zeman Freedom Summer Collection, courtesy of McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

statewide voter registration campaign was worth pursuing. By this time, some white student activists had begun working with SNCC, a development that generated some debate within the organization. Mrs. Hamer's position was full of wisdom: "If we're trying to break down this barrier of segregation, we can't segregate ourselves" (Mills 1993, 82). Ultimately, however, strains and stresses within

SNCC caused it to fragment and no longer welcome the participation of white students. In November 1963, after the historic August 28 March on Washington and JFK's assassination, Mrs. Hamer attended the SNCC leadership conference at Howard University in preparation for organizing during the following summer. She spoke to the attendees about the brutality she had been subjected to in Winona and led them in singing "This Little Light of Mine." She arrived home in Ruleville inspired by the group's plans and organizing to register more blacks to vote in Mississippi and other southern states.

Beginning in 1963, Mrs. Hamer's home served as a local resource and distribution point for donated food and clothing in Ruleville and the surrounding area. In retaliation against the increased voter registration efforts, local and state politicians who controlled the federal food aid subsidy cut off access for the state's sharecroppers and families, who were in dire need of basic food subsistence for their families, especially during the winter months. Additionally, in an attempt to intimidate Mrs. Hamer, the state's Sovereignty Commission—closely allied with the Citizens' Council—sent investigators to her home to “examine” her aid activities under the pretense that she was receiving aid from sources beyond the states' control.

Mrs. Hamer decided to run for Congress in 1964, even though her prospects of election were slim. Her campaign was both an act of protest and a means of motivating blacks in the 2nd District to take action by registering and voting, despite the widespread violence and intimidation. Her campaign was supported by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), which included SNCC, SCLC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the NAACP. Death threats and hate mail against Mrs. Hamer increased. But she continued in her struggle, stating, “Sometimes it seems like to tell the truth today is to run the risk of being killed. But if I fall, I'll fall five-feet four-inches forward in the fight for freedom” (ibid., 91). Local police stepped up the surveillance and harassment of her and members of the community associated with voting registration efforts, often detaining and fining people on trumped-up charges.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was founded in April 1964 to challenge the state's all-white Democratic Party. Mrs. Hamer, along with Victoria Gray, who was running for the U.S. Senate seat held by John C. Stennis, and two other MFDP black candidates—James M. Houston, a candidate for the 3rd Congressional District, and Reverend John E. Cameron, a candidate for the 5th District—campaigning in the

state's Democratic primary election. Mrs. Gray announced, "We feel the time is ripe to begin to let people know that we're serious about this whole thing of becoming first-class citizens." All the black candidates were defeated, as many expected, since so few blacks were registered to vote. But the primary was the first step in a larger challenge to the state's Democrats.

The next phase of voting and civil rights efforts began directly. Freedom Summer organizers worked to reverse longstanding black disenfranchisement through increasing black voter registration, civil rights activism, and Freedom Schools—a literacy component aimed at both youth and adults. The low level of literacy and education among the poor, both black and white, had long been used to the advantage of the state's politicians to maintain racial segregation and white political and economic supremacy. With the participation of white students and volunteers recruited from the North, SNCC commenced their largest voting registration effort. Mrs. Hamer attended the June 1964 Freedom Summer orientation meeting in Washington, D.C., and also the student orientation in Oxford, Ohio, later that summer. She did not mince words when speaking about the challenges ahead, including the very real dangers. At the sessions she moved the volunteers with her determination, plain-spoken wisdom, courageous leadership, and, as always, songs.

That summer, the entire country learned of the brutality and lawlessness perpetrated against black citizens and the voter registration workers. Traveling together by car to investigate a church burning near Philadelphia, Mississippi, Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Mickey Schwerner, members of CORE, were arrested on a false charge. After they were released, they disappeared; they had been pursued and murdered. Chaney was black, Goodman and Schwerner were white. The case drew national headlines. It took six weeks of investigation and searches by federal agents to locate their bodies.

Throughout the summer Mrs. Hamer was in constant motion, working in her community and traveling around the state and country speaking, singing, and leading others in song. Freedom Schools were established in Ruleville and surrounding towns. Mrs. Hamer served as a combination surrogate mother/grassroots leader to local volunteers in the face of violence close to home; the Williams Chapel Church around the corner from the Hamers' house was firebombed.

1964 DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION

The MFDP's goal was to challenge the all-white Democratic Party delegation and unseat them at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Mrs. Hamer played a critical role in this effort by organizing, speaking, and, of course, singing. MFDP members organized precinct meetings followed by county conventions, which selected 283 delegates to attend the state convention. Ella Baker, a member of the SCLC and longtime supporter of the voting rights effort, established a Washington, D.C., office for the MFDP, and their state convention selected 68 delegates and alternates. Mrs. Hamer was selected as the MFDP 2nd District executive committee representative from Mississippi. The theme of her speech at her district's convention was, "We are sick and tired of being sick and tired!" She then led the delegates in singing the national anthem and "We Shall Overcome."

Included in the MFDP delegation to the Democratic National Convention were Aaron Henry as chairman; Lawrence Guyot and Charles McLaurin; Victoria Gray as National Committeewoman; Annie Devine as secretary; Unita Blackwell; and four white delegates including Reverend Ed King, the party's National Committeeman. Mrs. Hamer was named vice chair. Joseph Rauh, an attorney and Democratic insider with

ties to Hubert H. Humphrey and Walter Reuther of the UAW, served as the MFDP counsel. To get the MFDP challenge to the convention floor, Mr. Rauh strategized, the MFDP needed eleven votes from the credentials committee, and then eight states would need to respond in support to force a roll call vote. MFDP members held vigils on the Atlantic City boardwalk before and all during the convention. Mrs. Hamer sang “Let My People Go,” “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” and more songs, accompanied by Annie Devine, Victoria Gray, and Bernice Johnson Reagon. Their efforts succeeded in garnering support from other state delegations.

President Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act over the summer, aware that he needed to show action and moral conviction in the face of mounting civil rights demonstrations and their repression by state and local governments. But to mollify southern Democrats, he put the MFDP and their allies under FBI surveillance, and he pressured Mr. Rauh to



Fannie Lou Hamer and Chuck Neblett (a SNCC Freedom Singer), leading freedom songs at an orientation of Freedom Summer SNCC volunteers in Oxford, Ohio, 1964.

Photograph by Herbert Randall, courtesy of McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

compromise on the cause of the MFPD. President Johnson worked hard to suppress any distractions to his nomination at the convention. His most direct action was to preempt the live telecast of Fannie Lou Hamer's impassioned, heartfelt, and graphic testimony before the credentials committee for his own impromptu press conference. His maneuver more or less backfired, however, because television networks decided to broadcast her full testimony the following evening. The MFDP delegates' testimony was followed by a series of proposals and meetings to devise a solution to their challenge, and at one meeting, Mrs. Hamer addressed Senator Humphrey, the party's vice presidential nominee. A final compromise was worked out between Walter Reuther, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, Bob Moses, and MFDP delegates Aaron Henry and Ed King to assure Johnson's and Humphrey's nomination by the party leadership without consulting the full MFDP delegation. Two at-large seats were given to MFDP members Aaron Henry and Ed King. This compromise resulted in dissension and divisions among MFDP delegation.

STAYING THE COURSE

Through their efforts the MFDP members demonstrated that grassroots organizing, ordinary citizens, and community leaders in their state could make a difference in national politics. And their efforts eventually led to black participation in the state's Democratic Party.

The struggles, frustrations, and disappointments at the national convention gave rise to accusations and short tempers among the delegates and voting rights workers. Seeing their need for a respite, Harry Belafonte invited Mrs. Hamer and other SNCC leaders to Guinea as guests of President Sékou Touré. This was Mrs. Hamer's first travel outside of the country, and being hosted by the country's president made it an especially moving experience.

After returning to Mississippi from Guinea, Mrs. Hamer, Victoria Gray, and Annie Devine, resumed their efforts with the MFDP to run against three state congressmen. Mrs. Hamer began traveling on fundraising trips to support their campaign. During a trip to New York City, she appeared at two rallies with Malcolm X. One was for the MFDP; the other, for the Organization of Afro-American Unity, was held at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, where Malcolm X would be assassinated a few months later. The Freedom Singers performed with Mrs. Hamer at fundraising events.

Next, Mrs. Hamer, Mrs. Devine, and Mrs. Gray decided to challenge the congressmen from Mississippi on January 4, 1965, the day they were to be seated. With the legal counsel of Arthur Kinoy and William Kunstler, the challenge was based on the documented systematic disfranchisement and intimidation of black voters in Mississippi and the exclusion of MFDP candidates from the state's general election ballot. The challenge by the three women was not supported by NAACP, and Lyndon Johnson was against it as well. The Voting Rights Act signed by President Johnson on August 6, 1965, had the added effect of overshadowing the MFDP challenge to the Mississippi congressmen. Despite lobbying efforts and procedural maneuverings, their challenge was dismissed.



Singer and Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival.

Photo by Diana Davies

Back home in Mississippi, Mrs. Hamer worked to save the state's Head Start program. As a result of MFDP organizing and Mrs. Hamer's support, Robert Clark was elected in 1967 as the first black in the state legislature since Reconstruction. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, sent a shock through the Civil Rights Movement, the country, and the world. His killing caused many in the movement to question the country's claim to be a democracy based on human rights. Still others questioned the adherence to nonviolent protests, and in response to his assassination riots broke out in cities throughout the country including Washington, D.C. However, the SCLC's planned multi-racial Poor People's Campaign occurred after King's death, and demonstrators set up a tent city in Washington, D.C. to demand economic and human rights for the poor. Although SNCC offered limited support to the Poor People's Campaign, Mrs. Hamer addressed the mule train headed from Mississippi to D.C. in May of 1968. Later that year Mrs. Hamer was seated as a state delegate at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where she spoke out against racial injustice and the Vietnam War, and four years later she served as a delegate to the national convention in 1972.

During all this extraordinarily active time, Mrs. Hamer suffered physically from health problems resulting from her severe beating in Winona—an ordeal she often spoke about as a reminder of the injustices in Mississippi. She continued with efforts to change the corrupt segregationist system in the state. She established the pig bank in 1968 to supply meat to poor families in the Delta through sharing animal husbandry. In 1969, she established the Freedom Farm Cooperative to raise food crops and cotton, with the goal of empowering both the black and white rural poor. (Despite her fundraising, networking, and organizing efforts to sustain it, the Freedom Farm did not survive.) She drew on support for these endeavors from the National Council of Negro Women, headed by

Dorothy Height, and organizations throughout the country. She was invited to speak at universities from Harvard and Duke to Mississippi Valley State College.

To acknowledge her commitment and service to demanding civil and voting rights a Fannie Lou Hamer Day and Banquet was held at the Ruleville Central High School in March of 1970; even Mayor C. M. Dorrough, long an adversary, sent a letter of commendation. In 1971 she participated in the National Women's Political Caucus, where she spoke candidly about the special issues, experiences, and challenges of African American women. In recognition of her lifelong work, she received honorary degrees from Tougaloo College, Shaw University, Howard University, Morehouse College, and Columbia College of Chicago. The Congressional Black Caucus honored Mrs. Hamer in 1976 with the George W. Collins Award for Community Service. Later in the year, Fannie Lou Hamer Day was established in Ruleville to honor and recognize her life of courageous work.

Her health continued to deteriorate. In 1974, Mrs. Hamer was hospitalized for exhaustion. In 1976, she had surgery to treat breast cancer. During the following year, hypertension and diabetes contributed to her decline. She passed away on March 14, 1977, not quite 60 years old, due to heart failure. Her funeral was attended by hundreds of people, with many more unable to fit into the church. The people speaking to honor her included Ella Baker, Andrew Young, Stokely Carmichael, Dorothy Height, and other leaders in the movement. There is now a Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden in Ruleville, an official state historic marker, and local post office named for her. Mrs. Hamer's keen sense of righteous indignation, morality, and civic engagement compelled her to struggle against the state's political system at both the local and national level. It is due to the grass-roots leadership of Mrs. Hamer and others that change in attitudes became possible.



ABOUT THIS RECORDING

This recording is based on a limited-edition cassette recording, *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, compiled and conceptualized by folklorist, culture worker, and activist **Worth Long** for the Smithsonian Institution's Voices of the Civil Rights Movement symposium held in 1983. Worth Long is highly accomplished and respected for his five decades of work documenting a wide range of traditional cultures. He has received many honors, including a Grammy nomination, a Peabody Award, Smithsonian Lifetime Achievement Award, and National Black Arts Festival's Living Legends Award.

Fannie Lou Hamer and her husband, Perry "Pap" Hamer in 1971.

Photo by Louis H. Draper.

Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon is a renowned singer, song leader, scholar, and civil rights activist. She produced the limited-edition cassette *Songs My Mother Taught Me* for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History Program in Black American Culture, where she served as a program director and curator from 1974 to 1993. Dr. Reagon organized the 1983 Voices of the Civil Rights Movement symposium, and she produced the Smithsonian Folkways recording *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960–1966* (SF 40084). Dr. Reagon is a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Freedom Singers. She later founded the Harambee Singers (1968–1970) and Sweet Honey in the Rock (1970–2004). Dr. Reagon is a Peabody Award recip-

ient for the NPR series *Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions*, a MacArthur Fellow, and the recipient of many other honors and awards.

Julius Lester is a writer and scholar with over 43 published works. He has two albums on the Vanguard label and is also an accomplished photographer. He served as a distinguished professor at the University of Massachusetts before retiring in 2003. With support from the Newport Foundation, he interviewed Mrs. Hamer at her home in Ruleville, Mississippi, in 1965.

Moses Moon (Alan Riback) was a folk music impresario who operated the Gate of Horn folk music club in Chicago during the 1950s and 1960s. He traveled with Pete Seeger to Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1963, where he heard the songs and singing of the Civil Rights Movement. Recognizing the importance of songs to the Civil Rights Movement effort, he began recording mass meetings and other civil rights events from 1963 to 1964. His recordings of Fannie Lou Hamer are from 1963 field recordings. A select compilation of his recordings can be heard on the Smithsonian Folkways recording *Lest We Forget, Vol. 1: Movement Soul, Sounds of the Civil Rights Movement, 1963–64* (FW 05486).

TRACK NOTES

1. Precious Lord

A rendition of the gospel hymn composed by Thomas Dorsey. Mrs. Hamer speaks first about the day she was released from the Winona, Mississippi, jail and learned of the assassination of Medgar Evers. She addresses Charlie Evers, Medgar's brother, about life's ups and downs.

2. On Being a Sharecropper

Mrs. Hamer is interviewed by Julius Lester in 1965 at her home in Ruleville, Mississippi. She speaks about being a sharecropper and the struggle for a better life, recounting how her mother would make ends meet over the winter months.

3. Run, Mourner, Run

A solo version of the spiritual "Run, Mourner Run" (also known as "Bright Angels Above"). Mrs. Hamer sings both the lead (call) and response parts at a nice tempo.

4. City Called Heaven

As Mrs. Hamer sings the spiritual "City Called Heaven," the vibrato in her voice is clear. Her rendition communicates the desire to leave the mortal world in hopes of a better world in heaven.

5. All the Pretty Little Horses

A traditional folk song and children's lullaby. Mrs. Hamer recounts that the song was passed down from her grandmother to her mother to her. The song includes a verse that conveys the sentiments of a slave caregiver.

While caring for her master's child, she longs for time with her own child, who is in need of the mother's care and attention.

6. I'm Gonna Land on the Shore

A song that Mrs. Hamer recalls being sung in the cotton fields by her mother when Mrs. Hamer was picking cotton with her as a small child. Singing would serve as a salve so they could continue the difficult work. The song expresses a desire for something better in life and the belief that racial injustice is a sinful practice.

7. Oh Lord, You Know Just How I Feel

A lament and an appeal articulating the singer's faith that God knows the plight and suffering they are experiencing. It also conveys the sorrow of losing a family member. Mrs. Hamer speaks about the long days of picking cotton and her mother singing this spiritual as evening commenced.

8. I'm Going Down to the River of Jordan

A traditional spiritual that both Mrs. Hamer's mother and father sang. It tells of a person standing alone in judgment before God.

9. Jesus Is My Only Friend

A lament expressing the feeling of having nothing to comfort or care for a person other than one's faith in God.

10. Pick a Bale of Cotton

A playful tune belying the hard labor of picking a bale of cotton. Mrs. Hamer recounts that as a child, when she and her siblings would compete at picking the most cotton, her mother would sing this traditional song.

11. Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning

A song Mrs. Hamer recalls hearing in her youth. This song offers encouragement to keep going on even through the darkness of evening as the day's labor is almost done.

12. Walk With Me

A spiritual also known as “Walk With Me, Lord.” On this recording Mrs. Hamer leads the singing with congregational response during a mass meeting. The song expresses the moral right and spiritual courage to register to vote and struggle for civil rights, and not to hate those who oppose the civil rights struggle.

13. This Little Light of Mine

A song that Mrs. Hamer sang at mass meetings and many other events during her life in the Civil Rights Movement. It gave those with her a sense of strength and courage in the face of seemingly insurmountable opposition from white supremacists. The song is part of the civil rights song canon.

14. Mass Meeting Speech

A passage from the Gospel according to St. Luke that Mrs. Hamer reads during a mass meeting. She relates this verse and other Bible verses to the struggle for civil rights and mentions the righteousness of speaking out against the system of racial segregation. She tells of her house being shot at 16 times in an attempt to intimidate her to cease organizing for civil and voting rights in her county.

15. Certainly Lord

A good example of a call-and-response spiritual song sung at mass meetings in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. Hamer's leading part asks the congregation to confirm their collective desire for an end to segregation along with full civil and voting rights.

16. Woke Up This Morning

An adaptation of the gospel song "Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Jesus" into a civil rights song. This rendition expresses encouragement to continue to struggle for civil rights. Mrs. Hamer leads the singing of this song with the congregation at a mass meeting.

17. Amazing Grace

A well-known Protestant hymn that was adopted as a spiritual by African Americans. It was sung on recordings by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Mahalia Jackson, and gospel quartets. Mrs. Hamer leads the singing at a mass meeting. The Civil Rights Movement took up the song, as it expressed the moral righteousness of the struggle against racial segregation in the United States. It was originally composed by the Englishman John Newton, an 18th-century seafarer and slaver trader who became a minister and composer of hymns.

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Various artists. 1965. *The Story of Greenwood, Mississippi*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings FW05593.

SELECT ONLINE RESOURCES

An excerpt of Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony at the 1964 Democratic Convention
http://www.metacafe.com/watch/hl-14442207/a_celebration_of_womens_history_fannie_lou_hamers_testimony_at_the_1964_democratic_convention/

Freedom Summer the PBS documentary:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/freedomssummer/>

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Fannie Lou Hamer and Chuck Neblett, lead freedom songs at an orientation of Freedom Summer SNCC volunteers at the Western College for Women, Oxford, Ohio 1964.

Photograph by Herbert Randall, courtesy of McCain Library and Archives, [University of Southern Mississippi](#).



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7. Oh Lord, You Know Just How I Feel
8. I'm Going Down to the River of Jordan
9. Jesus Is My Only Friend
10. Pick a Bale of Cotton
11. Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning
12. Walk With Me
13. This Little Light of Mine
14. Mass Meeting Speech
15. Certainly Lord
16. Woke Up This Morning
17. Amazing Grace



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