

## “People Get Ready”



### Excerpt from Lyrics By Curtis Mayfield

*People get ready, there's a train a comin'  
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board  
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'  
Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord*

### Excerpt from the Chapter Essay by Craig Werner

No song captures the feel of the early Movement better than Curtis Mayfield's gospel-inflected "People Get Ready," which culminates in an invitation to "get on board."

The center of a vibrant Chicago soul scene, which in terms of pure talent rivaled Detroit and Memphis, Mayfield embodied the relationship between civil rights, gospel, and soul.

Known as "the gentle genius," Mayfield grew up attending the Traveling Souls Spiritualist Church, a storefront church pastured by his grandmother on Chicago's poverty-stricken West Side. The experience shaped both his politics and his approach to music. "Gospel was your foundation," Mayfield said when asked about the inspiration for his songwriting. "All you had to do was just change

some few lyrics. 'Keep on Pushing' was intended, written as a gospel song. All I needed to do to lock it in with the Impressions was say 'I've got my strength' instead of "God gave me strength and it don't make sense.' Nothing else needed to be changed."

That quiet determination was part of what made Mayfield's music more than just background for the movement. When Martin Luther King Jr. launched an ultimately unsuccessful campaign targeting housing discrimination in Chicago, organizers tapped into the Impressions' local popularity even more directly. Mimeographed pamphlets distributed at African-American churches on the city's south and west sides adapted the lyrics of "People Get Ready" and "Meeting Over Yonder" to refer to upcoming rallies. As marchers wound their way through the streets of downtown Chicago to confront Mayor Richard Daley at City Hall, they sang "Keep on Pushing" alongside "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around."