
Odetta, “Oh Freedom”



Perhaps no single artist was more closely associated with the Civil Rights movement than Folk singer Odetta Holmes, better known simply as Odetta. Born in Birmingham, Alabama, Odetta had an operatic voice that she put to use singing Folk, 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 have 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 are some of the parallels between the two 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”?