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Guy Carawan, who died at age 87 on 2 May 2015, in his longtime home at the Highlander Center in East Tennessee, was never famous, but he is probably best known as the man who introduced “We Shall Overcome,” which was to become the civil rights movement’s anthem, to the first mass gathering of southern student leaders who formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April of 1960. In fact, Carawan was a rare breed of cultural activist whose work as a singer, song leader, and preservationist proved essential not just in popularizing “We Shall Overcome” but also in close to half a century of steadfast effort to deepen the use of music in southern social change efforts from lunch-counter sit-ins to the South Carolina sea islands to Appalachian Kentucky and beyond.

Precious few whites joined the young African Americans who led the first wave of sit-ins that burst forth in the South in early 1960 to challenge and ultimately break down Jim Crow segregation. In Nashville—site of one of the earliest and most militant local movements—any white protester stood out. One stood out more because he always carried with him a guitar. That was Guy Carawan, a tall, lanky, blond troubadour who that spring began introducing songs like “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” “This Little Light of Mine,” and many other adaptations of spirituals and folk songs to a demonstration of 4,000 in downtown Nashville.

As the Rev. C. T. Vivian, a leader of the Nashville movement, recalled later,

At the beginning of the movement, we didn’t have any music that we could call “movement music.” We also didn’t realize how important a dynamic music would be to a movement . . . and some of the church music didn’t fit at all. . . . [T]he first time I remember any change in our songs was when Guy came down from Highlander[A]nd little by little, spiritual after spiritual began to appear with new words and changes. . . . [O]nce we had seen it, we could begin to do it.¹

A native of Los Angeles with a master’s degree in sociology from UCLA and an interest in folklore, Carawan was a folksinger who found his life’s passion in 1953 when, at the suggestion of his friend Pete Seeger, he first visited what was then the Highlander Folk School, a southern social justice educational center established during the Great Depression. Guy had always been drawn to his southern roots, with a parent from each of the Carolinas, as he liked to recall—his mother a “Charleston blue-blood” and his father a “country bumpkin.”

Ten to 15 years older than the SNCC students, Carawan (born in 1927) possessed, as they did, a fierce commitment to racial justice that he had absorbed in part during

his own college years from the left-wing, socially committed People's Song movement in the early 1950s. As a young adult in Los Angeles's Topanga Canyon and later the Washington Square folk scene in New York City, Carawan met and played music with the likes of Seeger, Burl Ives, Brownie McGee, and Lee Hays. Seeger and Hays also inspired him with stories of little-known left-wing cultural currents in the South as at Highlander, which by the 1950s had trained scores of trade unionists and civil rights organizers and routinely incorporated music and cultural activities in educational programs.

Visiting Highlander during his first trip south in 1953 to explore southern music as part of the "Dusty Road Boys" busking trio with fellow folk singers Frank Hamilton and (Ramblin') Jack Elliott, Carawan returned there in 1959 to become musical director of the school in exchange for room and board. His timing was serendipitous, as he arrived only months before the sit-ins swept the region.

Throughout 1960, Carawan organized music workshops at Highlander that encouraged movement participants to adapt traditional music for new purposes even as he became a kind of roving movement song leader. He compiled makeshift songbooks to give the movement's emerging music wider distribution. On picket lines and in gatherings and at festivals across the region, he introduced to the young student leaders verses that we know today as part of what became through those collective efforts an evolving and increasingly popular canon of "southern freedom songs." In doing so, he became a sort of bridge between the new generation of black-led activism that ignited the South after 1960 and the socially committed, left-wing cultural activism of the older, largely white People's Songs movement, which by then had been largely suppressed by Cold-War anti-communism.

Carawan was a talented singer-songwriter who continued to perform in concert venues all through the '60s and '70s as a way of making money and publicizing politically relevant folk music on college campuses. In that way he represented a vibrant point of southern connection amid the rise of the new folk revival, whose hub was New York. Working with Alan Lomax and many other supporters of the revival, Carawan frequently became a conduit for freedom singers and traditional southern African-American music-makers to perform at folk festivals such as Newport. Yet he found his real calling in lifting up music for social change in more direct forms in the South.

As the blossoming African-American freedom movement became more and more thoroughly a singing movement by 1961, Carawan's role shifted more to that of documenting the emerging civil rights music canon and preserving older and little-known southern musical and folk traditions that the movement had adapted and reinvigorated. He routinely recorded songs as they were sung at civil rights rallies, and many former SNCC organizers still fondly recall his hauling around and setting up in churches and at rallies an old black recorder nearly as tall as he was. Working with the Folkways label, in late 1960 Carawan produced *The Nashville Sit-in Story*, the first record album to feature live music, speeches, and interviews from the front lines of protest.

In 1961, Guy also married one of the students he had met through his early work in Nashville. Candie Anderson, an exchange student from Pomona College in California, to historically black Fisk University, was another of the handful of whites who marched in downtown pickets and took seriously the power of music to spark change. The couple marched down the aisle to the tune of “We Shall Overcome.” Theirs was a working union of shared social commitments: the Carawans became partners in musical activism that persisted for more than four decades and across the various social movements that spun off the black freedom struggle.

The pair spent parts of the 1960s in Johns Island, South Carolina, which Guy had first visited on behalf of Highlander’s black voter registration efforts. There the couple organized festivals and concert tours to promote the importance of traditional music and cultural practices. From a chant he first heard at one of the island’s religious “praise house” events, Carawan wrote new lyrics and gave a new beat to a song he popularized as “Ain’t You Got a Right (to the Tree of Life)?” The Carawans also expanded their collecting efforts to include oral history interviews, producing a book of that same name (1967) as well as two documentary record albums that remain among the few collections of authentic Gullah speech and song in an era of rapid change for that region.

A similar residency in Appalachia later in the decade brought them into the movement against strip mining, where their cultural organizing (often in the form of jamborees) again lifted up the value of traditional music in empowerment efforts that drew them to mountain musicians such as Florence Reece, Si Kahn, and Jean Ritchie.

In the early ’70s, Guy and Candie Carawan—by now the parents of two children—returned to live in a log cabin in the woods of the new Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee, where they continued to make music and host cultural organizing workshops in service of successive social change issues related to peace and social justice through the end of the 20th century. Over the years they produced three books and more than two dozen record albums featuring their own, but more often others’, music and stories.

Guy Carawan suffered late in life from a form of Alzheimer’s, but even then he would readily pick up the five-string banjo he kept at hand and sing a few bars of “Ain’t You Got a Right?” He passed away peacefully in his sleep, his longtime partner at his side.

Note

- [1] From C.T. Vivian interview with Guy and Candie Carawan, quoted in Guy and Candie Carawan, *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2007), xviii–xix.