



Book Review

We Shall Overcome

A Song that Changed the World

by Stuart Stotts

Clarion Books, Hardcover, 80pp, \$18 list price

I was walking along in Vancouver in 1970 with my long hair and walrus mustache. Passing by an obvious "establishment" bloke, in a taunting and pejorative way he began singing, "We shall overcome, we shall overcome..." It was interesting to me that to him, this song represented the politics and philosophies of all us folks left of center. Gosh, I thought, the song must GET to him! Which made me respect it all the more.

30 years later, I wrote about **We Shall Overcome** (June 2001 WZ), inspired by meeting the great labor songslinger Joe Glazer, who had helped spread the song when he was young. He was in Madison promoting his autobiography which explained his relationship to the song.

Now, 40 years later (and 45 years since I first heard Pete Seeger sing the song in Appleton WI), a grand book arrives all about the song by Wisconsin's acoustic music guru, storyteller, songwriter, educator and author, Stuart Stotts.

We Shall Overcome: A Song That Changed The World, is written, according to the publisher Clarion Books, for children from eight to twelve years old. I'm not a parent, so I'm out of touch with what sort of input is usual for kids these days regarding complex and sometimes violent truths of social history. It must be tricky to decide how much information to impart without being either too condescending or too complicated. How much can be retold about the horrors of various social movements to get the idea across without becoming so upsetting as to freak a kid out? My cluelessness in this area notwithstanding, my gut feeling is that Stuart zeroed in on the ideal blend for most youngsters of the targeted age range.

Physically, the book is a delight, with two-color (red and black) printing

throughout. The illustrations by Terrance Cummings are in stark black and white and are reminiscent of old labor posters. The pages are of nice thick paper and the many historic photographs are captioned in detail. Included in the package is a CD of the song sung by Pete Seeger in 1964, who also has written a fitting Foreword for the book.

The main body is divided into eight chapters. The first begins with bus desegregation conflicts in Montgomery in 1961, and gives an example of how **We Shall Overcome** was sung to give a feeling of hope in what seemed a hopeless situation. As in the rest of the book, Stuart here quotes captivating eyewitness accounts by such people as Barnard LaFayette Jr, a courageous leader in the civil rights movement through the 60s.

Chapter two discusses songs in general, then probes the origins of **We Shall Overcome**. In the third chapter, Stuart very convincingly explains the mechanics of the oral tradition.

The fourth chapter has the song working its way into the labor movement via folks like Joe Glazer and the Highlander Folk School's Zilphia Horton, and Pete Seeger. Again, quotes and photos add important impact to the text.

Chapter five continues this thrust and brings it along into the growing student involvement with civil rights. Tennessee's Highlander Folk School, begun in the early 30s to promote labor rights, shifted its focus to civil rights in the 50s. Guy Carawan, its music director, used **We Shall Overcome** extensively in his work. Martin Luther King Jr was the featured speaker at the Highlander School's 25th anniversary in 1957.

On Easter weekend of 1960, Guy was asked to lead a singing of the song at the formative meeting of the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee in Raleigh, NC. Everyone stood up, crossed their arms in front of themselves, and joined hands as they sang. Guy Carawan: "They just heard that song and knew it was theirs..."

Chapter six follows the song into the repertoire of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. Baez sang the song with a chorus of 250,000 at the famous March on Wash-

ington. The chapter culminates in Lyndon Johnson signing the Voting Rights Act and ending his accompanying speech with the pronouncement, "We shall overcome."

Chapter seven talks of the song's use in the Vietnam War protests, and chapter eight shows it continuing to spread around the world. Pete Seeger, in his 1964 world tour, was surprised to learn how many people already knew the song. Dr. King was given the Nobel Peace Prize in the same year and also used the phrase "We shall overcome" in his acceptance speech. The song was used in South Africa to protest apartheid and in Bangladesh during their War of Independence. On the terrible day of September 11, 2001, NBC played Bruce Springsteen's version of it every hour to give people a sense of hope. It was used in the campaign for Obama, and continues to be sung anywhere there is a need for courage, hope, and a sense of community.

Stuart then adds a personal "Author's Note" about his and his late father's involvements with the song. The book is dedicated to his father Jack Stotts, who was a professor at McCormick Presbyterian Seminary in Chicago and a life-long civil rights worker. This is a very welcome section, as this wonderful and moving book is otherwise written in the third person, which is fine, but the Author's Note helps to explain why Stuart felt enough passion about the song to tackle this amazing project.

The book ends with sheet music for the song followed by Stuart's source notes, which reveal that many of the quotes in the book are taken from interviews Stuart conducted himself. An extensive Bibliography follows, and an index.

The work involved in putting a book like this together boggles the mind. Somehow Stuart Stotts managed to accumulate all this information and immerse himself in it without losing the consistently upbeat mood of its presentation. I would strongly recommend this book, and wish I had read it when I was a kid. My hat's off to Stuart Stotts, a true treasure of Wisconsin and beyond.

<http://louandpeter.com/wzold/wzjun01.html>
Labor's Troubadour by Joe Glazer, U of IL