

## "THIS IS WHAT THE UNION DONE"— ONE EXAMPLE OF USING MUSIC TO MAKE HISTORY MATTER

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Most history teachers have experienced something like this at least once in their careers: The lecture or assignment bombs, not because we are unprepared or we have pushed our students too far, but because the topics we explore are simply too removed from the daily experiences of our students to have any real meaning. The subjects of our explorations are, therefore, almost unbelievable to the students. They simply shut down, or they become apathetic or alienated.<sup>1</sup>

As a labor historian who has taught at both large universities and small colleges in the South during my brief career, I occasionally have experienced this phenomenon when I discuss the rise of the industrial union movement in the wake of the Great Depression. This period typically occupies a key point in the American and African American history surveys that I have taught over the years. Yet, because the labor movement that rose in the wake of the Great Depression has been in steep decline for decades, most of today's students have little knowledge or understanding of unions or their important role in American history. Often, when I ask students if they have relatives in unions, for example, less than a handful of the 35 or 40 students in the class will raise their hands. Sometimes students who have relatives, even parents who are members of unions, are unaware of the ways that the labor movement has touched their lives.

Music has become an important tool in my efforts to overcome these obstacles. First, music allows students to hear people describing the world around them in their own words. This helps students understand how people in the past made sense of the

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\*Note: The author is currently on leave from Miles College as a visiting assistant professor at Clark Atlanta University.

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of this phenomenon that is both amusing and enlightening, see Leon Fink, "Getting Lost—and Getting Home in History," *Perspectives* 39:8 (November 2001). I am indebted to many people for helping to inspire this essay. Most importantly, I must thank Dexter Blackman and Abou Bamba: We often discussed using music in survey classes at Georgia State University, while we were graduate students. I would like to thank the participants in the "Using Music to Teach World History" panel at the Twelfth International Conference of the World History Association held at Georgia State University in summer 2003. The panelists, Rebecca Wendelken, Jim Lane, Alex Zukas, and Monica Bond-Lamberty, inspired me to re-examine my teaching methodologies shortly before I began my job at Miles College in Birmingham. For an interesting overview of a high school teacher's efforts to use popular music in the classroom, see James Lane, "Keep on Rockin' in the Free World: The Advantages of Using Rock and Roll in Teaching Social Studies," *The Ohio Council for the Social Studies Review* 33:1 (Summer 1997): 13–19. Thanks are also in order to those who offered comments on an earlier draft of this essay at the Organization of American Historians' 2004 Southern Regional Conference at Georgia State, July 2004. Finally, I am grateful to Cliff Kuhn for first pointing me to the collection of songs discussed later in this essay.

times in which they lived. Second, music draws students into the subject in ways that typical lectures, and even other primary sources, cannot. It lessens the gulf between the students and the material and opens a window through which the students can gain a deeper historical understanding.

In the following essay I will describe how I use music in my discussions of the rise of the industrial union movement in Birmingham, Alabama. In this classroom exercise I play several songs written and performed by African American union activists in the Birmingham District from the 1930s to the 1950s. The discussions that arise from this presentation allow students to make important connections among the generation of African Americans who built the industrial union movement, the activists who later led the assault on Jim Crow during the civil rights movement, and themselves.

Though my discussion in this essay is focused on the labor movement in Birmingham and the classes I have taught in that city, the techniques I use in this exercise transcend geographic and topical constraints. Music, I believe, may be employed to help students understand other important eras and movements in American history. The discussion that follows suggests ways that teachers might adopt music to help students understand a wide range of topics and issues that are not limited to a particular historical context.

Since the fall of 2003, I have taught African American history surveys at Miles College, a small, historically black school located just outside Birmingham, in the industrial suburb of Fairfield. The formal titles of these classes are HI 308, African American History, and SS 101, the African American Experience. Mostly junior and senior political science majors make up the African American History class, while the African American Experience, a survey of black history in the United States, is typically filled with freshmen and sophomores. My discussion of the growth of the industrial union movement in the early 1930s focuses on Birmingham and the role that African Americans played in its dramatic success.

The centrality of Birmingham to the industrial union-building project during the New Deal era cannot be exaggerated. As the industrial center of the South, the city served as the union stronghold in the region. Beginning in the early 1930s, labor organizations identified with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) made inroads in the region's mines and mills. Because they were under the auspices of the CIO, these industrial unions were interracial organizations, welcoming both black and white workers into their fold. Typically, however, CIO unions followed a policy that left these unions in white control, regardless of their racial makeup.<sup>2</sup> Despite this fact, many of the unions—particularly in the coal and iron ore mining industries—had African-

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<sup>2</sup>See Ray Marshall, *Labor in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 151, and Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 64. This situation is also described in depth in my dissertation, “Race and Industrial Transformation in the Alabama Coalfields, 1933-2001” (Ph.D. diss., Georgia State University, 2003), 112–113.

American majorities. In Birmingham, historians have argued, black workers made up the backbone of the industrial labor movement.<sup>3</sup>

Largely as a result of the success of unionists in Birmingham, Alabama, became the union center of the Deep South. In 1956, almost a quarter of the state's nonagricultural workers belonged to unions—below the national average but impressive nonetheless.<sup>4</sup> Over time, and after bitter opposition from the state's economic and political establishment, unions became an accepted part of the social, economic, and political landscape in Alabama. Even among some opponents in the business community, the union movement grudgingly received credit for improving the quality of life by raising the standard of living in the state.<sup>5</sup> Then-Governor George Wallace reflected this status when he spoke to the state's coal miners in 1974. Wallace acknowledged the important contributions that the labor movement had made to the quality of life in the state and went on to claim that unions had "been a determining factor in the location of many new industries in our state."<sup>6</sup> At the time that Wallace spoke those words, almost eighty percent of Alabama's miners were unionized and more than twenty percent of the state's other workers belonged to labor organizations.<sup>7</sup>

By the early 1990s, however, the public attitude of state officials and business leaders toward unions had changed dramatically. In their efforts to lure a huge Mercedes automobile assembly plant to the state, for example, Alabama officials

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<sup>3</sup>See Woodrum, "Race and Industrial Transformation," 166–167, Horace R. Clayton and George S. Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), 323, and Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 142–3 and 144–5. See also, Peter Alexander, "Rising from the Ashes: Alabama Coal Miners, 1921-1941," in *It Is Union and Liberty: Alabama Coal Miners and the UMW*, Edwin W. Brown and Colin Davis, eds. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 62–83. It also should be noted that unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had a large presence in Birmingham.

<sup>4</sup>William Warren Rogers, Robert David Ward, Leah Rawls Atkins, and Wayne Flynt, *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 569.

<sup>5</sup>Wayne Flynt, *Poor but Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 348.

<sup>6</sup>Governor George C. Wallace to UMWA District 20 Convention, January 27, 1974, "Alabama Governors Speeches, Wallace, George C., January 18, 1971 to July 31, 1978," Microfilm Reel No. 5, SG 12678 Series, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.

<sup>7</sup>"Organizing: Where We Stand," *United Mine Workers Journal*, May 1, 1973. For state statistics, see Flynt, *Poor but Proud*, 348–49.

aggressively marketed the state as a bastion of low-wage, non-union labor.<sup>8</sup> And they worked hard to make sure the plant, located near Birmingham in the community of Vance, remained unorganized. Efforts by the United Auto Workers (UAW) to represent workers at the plant were met with ferocious opposition. “Some in Alabama’s business community are worried that a successful UAW drive at the Vance plant could tarnish the state’s anti-union reputation, which they believe helps economic recruitment efforts,” the state’s largest newspaper reported.<sup>9</sup> The shift reflected, at least in part, the weakening of the state’s labor movement. Deindustrialization and globalization decimated Alabama’s unions in the decades after the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the 1990s, the unionization rate in Alabama had dropped to about eleven percent.<sup>11</sup>

Miles College has not been immune from these changes. The college, in the words of one author, has always served students “from the black working class, from families involved in the ceaseless struggle to make ends meet.”<sup>12</sup> While historically black institutions such as Morehouse College and Howard University attracted many of the children of middle-class and prominent African American families in Birmingham, Miles drew most of its student body from children whose parents worked in the mines and mills around the city.<sup>13</sup> By the eve of the civil rights movement, the college had

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<sup>8</sup>For an account of this effort, see William Greider, *One World, Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 93–97.

<sup>9</sup>“Consultant Hired to Fight UAW Drive at Mercedes, Economic Recruiters Want Employees’ Voices Heard,” *The Birmingham News*, September 2, 1999.

<sup>10</sup>For an overview of the impact of deindustrialization on the iron and steel industries, see Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Racial divisions during the era of the civil rights movement also weakened Alabama’s labor movement. See Rogers, et al., *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State*, 569. For other accounts, see the work of Robert J. Norrell, especially “Caste in Steel: Jim Crow Careers in Birmingham, Alabama,” *Journal of American History* 57:2 (1991): 201–234, and “Labor Trouble: George Wallace and Union Politics in Alabama,” in *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South*, Robert Zieger, ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 250–72.

<sup>11</sup>“State Union Rolls rise to 201,000,” *The Birmingham News*, February 4, 2000.

<sup>12</sup>Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Back to Birmingham: Richard Arrington, Jr., and His Times* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 38. See also *Miles College Catalog: 2001-2003*, 17–19.

<sup>13</sup>Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 151.

“miraculously survived hard times” and it became a key institution in the struggle that enveloped Birmingham in the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>14</sup>

The college produced many of the early student leaders who, along with the dynamic minister Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), began the struggle against the racist caste system that defined the city and state. Aurtherine Lucy, the daughter of sharecroppers who was a graduate of Miles College, became the first African American admitted to the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa in the winter of 1956. Her tenure at Alabama proved brief. She was driven away by violent mobs of whites and expelled—ostensibly for “her protection”—by the university’s board of trustees a few days later.<sup>15</sup> Inspired by the sit-in movement of the winter of 1960, Miles students, led by student body president Jesse Walker, the son of laborers, initiated a “Prayer Vigil for Freedom” in a public park to protest racism and a planned filibuster of the 1960 Civil Rights Act. About a dozen students from Miles and a local two-year college were arrested for the protest, and one of the Miles students and some of his family members were later assaulted by whites for taking part in the demonstration. A month later, Miles students participated in a series of sit-ins at five segregated lunch counters in downtown Birmingham. Police arrested the students for violating the city’s “trespass after warning” law.<sup>16</sup>

As the movement in Birmingham gathered momentum in the early 1960s, Miles students continued to provide inspiration. Another student body president named Frank Dukes, a former autoworker and Korean war veteran, led more than 800 of the 900 students at Miles to sign a statement called “This We Believe” in December 1961. The statement proclaimed that students would “use every legal and nonviolent mean [sic] at our disposal to secure for ourselves and our unborn children these God-given rights guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States.” Dukes led the creation of the “Anti-Injustice Committee,” which began a high profile boycott in the spring of 1962 of businesses in downtown Birmingham that discriminated against African Americans. The boycott, supported by Shuttlesworth, ACMHR, and other organizations in the black community, spurred a decline of 85 to 90 percent of African American patronage of white stores downtown during the crucial Easter holiday sales period. The demands that organizers of the boycott articulated—hiring African American clerks and salesmen in downtown businesses, promoting blacks at downtown businesses, hiring black police officers, and desegregating rest rooms and drinking fountains—would make up many of

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<sup>14</sup>Franklin, *Back to Birmingham*, 37–38.

<sup>15</sup>McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 96–9, and Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 22. Lucy was admitted to the university’s library school.

<sup>16</sup>McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 151–57, and Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 148 and 150.

the core demands of the street protests and campaign led by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and ACMHR in the spring of 1963.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, in more recent years, Miles College has played an important role in the shift to black political power in Birmingham. Richard Arrington, the city’s first African American mayor, elected in 1979, was an alumnus and former professor and administrator at the college. U.W. Clemon, another Miles alumnus and former vice president of the Anti-Injustice Committee, became an important civil rights lawyer in the city. President Jimmy Carter later appointed him the first African American federal judge in Alabama in 1980.<sup>18</sup>

The massive economic changes that have swept Birmingham since the civil rights era have hit the city’s African American community particularly hard.<sup>19</sup> Miles College has continued its tradition of serving students often overlooked by other institutions. Today, the college’s historic mission is articulated in its “open-door” admissions statement, a policy that attracts many students from backgrounds that are both economically and educationally disadvantaged.<sup>20</sup> Reaching these students often requires professors to employ non-traditional methods designed to inspire students to cross the gulf that separates them from the study of history, a gulf created during their years in the Alabama public education system.<sup>21</sup> Music has become an important teaching tool in my goal of helping students connect with historical material that is often foreign to them.

To help students understand why the industrial union movement prospered in Birmingham, I have drawn on a collection of songs issued in 1999 by the Sloss Furnace

<sup>17</sup>Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 194–201; and McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 265–73.

<sup>18</sup>On Arrington, see, generally, Franklin, *Back to Birmingham*, and J. Mills Thornton III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 513–31. On Clemon, see McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 286–87, especially the footnote on 287. Also, “‘Foot Soldiers’ Remember King Legacy: Martyr Saluted in March, Love Feast,” *Birmingham News*, January 21, 1997. Current Birmingham Mayor Bernard Kincaid is also a Miles College graduate. See “Candidate Profiles,” *Birmingham News* (October 12, 2003).

<sup>19</sup>See, generally, Robin D.G. Kelley, “Birmingham’s Untouchables: The Black Poor in the Age of Civil Rights,” in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 77–100.

<sup>20</sup>*Miles College Catalog: 2001-2003*, 48.

<sup>21</sup>For an overview of the problems facing the Alabama educational system, see Rogers, et al., *Alabama*, 609–10. The history faculty at Miles College in recent years has demonstrated a great deal of creativity in meeting these challenges, including adopting changes to the curriculum that emphasized World History. See Robert Cassanello and Daniel S. Murphree, “Implementing *The La Pietra Report*: Globalizing U.S. History Instruction in Birmingham, Alabama,” *OAH Newsletter*, 29:4 (November 2001).

Association called *Spirit of Steel: Music of the Mines, Railroads and Mills of the Birmingham District*. Many of the 21 songs in the collection were written and performed by workers and union activists during the “golden years” of the industrial union movement, from the early 1930s through the mid-1950s. This collection has helped me go beyond merely describing the protections that unions enjoyed under President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs or in the new organizing tactics used by CIO activists. It allows the workers and activists themselves to describe why they cast their lot with unions and how they viewed the world around them.

This music was central to the union-building efforts of Birmingham District activists. In the words of historian Robin Kelley, CIO unions in the region fostered a “unique social and cultural environment—a milieu that blacks themselves helped to create.”<sup>22</sup> Black churches and gospel musicians who performed throughout the industrial regions of Alabama proved central to the organizing efforts of union activists. Gospel quartets were of particular importance because Birmingham was a center for this type of religious music. The quartets, which typically performed a capella, wrote songs that reflected the twin concerns of work and religion.<sup>23</sup>

As CIO unions established a presence in the mines and mills of the Birmingham area, the line between union and religion often blurred.<sup>24</sup> Folklorist Brenda McCallum, who pioneered the study of black gospel quartets in Birmingham, called this convergence between the labor movement and Protestant Christianity in the African-American community the “gospel of black unionism.” Black workers, she argued, saw the industrial union movement as a “secular church,” and they easily blended aspects of evangelical Christianity with labor unionism.<sup>25</sup> African-American workers in Birmingham often found justification for their involvement with the union movement in Biblical scripture. Unionism was a “holy cause” that offered “deliverance and emancipation” from the “wage slavery” and exploitation that black workers knew in the mines, mills, and company towns of Alabama.<sup>26</sup> In their efforts to support organizing drives at their mines and plants, black workers composed songs that “commemorated

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<sup>22</sup>Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 148.

<sup>23</sup>Brenda McCallum, “The Gospel of Black Unionism,” in *Songs about Work: Essays in Occupational Culture for Richard A. Reuss*, Archie Green, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 113, and Ray Funk, “Birmingham Quartets Celebrate the Union Movement,” in *Spirit of Steel: Music of the Mines, Railroads and Mills of the Birmingham District* (Birmingham: Sloss Furnace Association, 1999), 11.

<sup>24</sup>Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 149, and McCallum, “The Gospel of Black Unionism,” 108.

<sup>25</sup>McCallum, “The Gospel of Black Unionism,” 108 and 117.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 118–19.

and canonized labor leaders, sanctified labor organizations, and praised the gospel of black unionism," McCallum wrote.<sup>27</sup> This impulse comes through clearly in two songs from the *Spirit of Steel* collection that I play for students when I discuss the emergence of the industrial union movement in Alabama in the years following the Great Depression.

The first song that I play for students is "This What the Union Done" by "Uncle" George Jones, an elderly miner recorded by folklorist George Korson in Trafford, Alabama, in 1940. Jones set the lyrics to "Honey in the Rock," an old spiritual. It describes the challenges that black miners faced in the early years of the Great Depression and the efforts of union leaders to resurrect the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). It also illustrates McCallum's concept of the "gospel of black unionism."<sup>28</sup> Jones was born in rural Greene County a few years after the Civil War. He migrated to Birmingham, where he eventually found work in the region's coal mines. He participated in the early organizing drives of the UMWA, and he was shot during one of these efforts in 1902. By the time he was recorded by Korson, he was blind, had difficulty walking, and no longer worked in the mines.<sup>29</sup> The fact that Jones was too old to enjoy the high wages or benefits that union contracts brought to the Alabama coalfields did not dampen his enthusiasm for the UMWA cause. During the recording, Jones's voice seems to crack with emotion as he sings the chorus, an effect that is not lost on students who hear his song today.

Among the more important topics that Jones explores in the song are the rebirth of the UMWA in Alabama in the early 1930s and the way that New Deal legislation emboldened miners. Many miners believed that UMWA leader John L. Lewis and President Franklin Roosevelt enjoyed a close relationship and that the president and the federal government were committed to protecting industrial unions.<sup>30</sup> Early in the song, Jones sings that, when Roosevelt took office in 1933, he told Lewis,

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>28</sup>Jones, "This What the Union Done," in *Spirit of Steel*, 69, and McCallum, "The Gospel of Black Unionism," 119. See also Funk, "Birmingham Quartets Celebrate the Union Movement," 16.

<sup>29</sup>Jones, "This What the Union Done," 69. The UMWA had a long history in the Alabama coalfields before it established a permanent presence in 1933. For accounts of these early organizing efforts and strikes, see Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), and Brian Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908-1921* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

<sup>30</sup>Of course, Lewis later broke with the Roosevelt administration. For an overview of the complex relationship between the UMWA leader and the President, see Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1977).



In union we must be.  
Come, let us work together,  
Ask God to lead the plan.  
By this time another year,  
We'll have the union back again.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, by invoking "God," Jones demonstrates how miners and other workers saw the industrial movement as divinely inspired. As such, labor unions enjoyed protection that was both secular and other-worldly.

Later in the song, Jones shows how workers viewed the measures passed under the New Deal, including the National Industrial Recovery Act and the National Labor Relations Act (the Wagner Act). These measures, he sings,

Gave all the men the right to organize  
Join the union of their choice  
When the President had passed the law,  
We all did shout with joy  
When they said no operator, sheriff, or boss  
Shouldn't bother the union boys.<sup>32</sup>

Jones also describes the difficulties that miners knew during the early years of the Great Depression, when they had to travel "from place to place" looking for work because the mining industry had virtually shut down in Alabama. It was a time when wages were so low that miners "could scarcely live in the summer time—almost starved in the fall."<sup>33</sup> Jones's memories of the old days contrast sharply with the new reality after miners brought the union back:

Now when our union men walked out,  
Got the good clothes on their backs,  
Crepe de Chine and fine silk shirts,  
And brand new Miller block hats;  
Fine silk socks and Florsheim shoes,  
They're glittering against the sun,

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<sup>31</sup>Jones, "This What the Union Done," 69–70.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

Got dollars in their pockets, smoking good cigars—  
Boys, this what the union done.<sup>34</sup>

Another song that I use to discuss the growth of the industrial union movement in Alabama is “Satisfied,” recorded by a gospel quartet called the CIO Singers in 1952.<sup>35</sup> The group often performed at union meetings and was a key fixture on a local CIO-sponsored radio show. Most of the singers were members of the United Steel Workers of America (USWA), a union that established a strong presence in the steel and iron mills in the Birmingham area. The group’s promoter, Perry L. “Tiger” Thompson, was a political and union activist in the black community.<sup>36</sup> In “Satisfied,” the CIO Singers associate the origins of Birmingham area unionism with Biblical scripture:

Christ’s last Passover  
He had his communion.  
He told his disciples  
Stay in union.  
Together you stand  
Divided you fall.  
Stay in union  
I’ll save you all.<sup>37</sup>

Like Jones, the CIO Singers describe the emergence of the industrial union movement as a divinely inspired force for liberation from the exploitation and poverty that workers had known before they belonged to unions:

Well, you read in the Bible to understand  
God must have meant this mighty plan.  
Men working hard, day by day  
Working overtime and getting little pay.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid. See also, Alexander, “Rising from the Ashes,” 83. The lyrics he uses, taken from another source, are slightly different.

<sup>35</sup>CIO Singers, “Satisfied,” in *Spirit of Steel*, 73.

<sup>36</sup>Funk, “Birmingham Quartets Celebrate the Union Movement,” 12–13. See also McCallum, “The Gospel of Black Unionism,” 123–24.

<sup>37</sup>CIO Singers, “Satisfied,” in *Spirit of Steel*, 73.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 74.

Union leaders in "Satisfied" take on the role of divinely inspired reformers sent to liberate workers from the ravages of the Great Depression and exploitation. Philip Murray, a former miner who headed both the CIO and USWA, was sent by God to "take care of the CIO."<sup>39</sup> Murray died in 1952, and his death was seen as divinely inspired as well:

But one Sunday morning about one-thirty  
 He had a cerebral hemorrhage, the world was worried.  
 Well he called him loud, he called him low  
 Said, We decided you must go  
 To Canaan land where you'll be safe. ...<sup>40</sup>

Lest Murray hesitate about making the trip, God tells the ailing union leader:

I prepared a man to take your place.  
 Now tell the working men they need not fear,  
 "Walter Reuther is going to be their engineer."<sup>41</sup>

As the songs by Jones and the CIO Singers demonstrate, the industrial union movement that emerged in Birmingham after the Great Depression sunk deep roots in Birmingham's black community. The songs show how CIO unions were, in Robin Kelley's words, "broad-based social movements, enriched with southern cultural traditions."<sup>42</sup> Playing these songs to today's students, I believe, helps them understand how African-American activists viewed the world around them and why so many flocked to the union fold. The music also illustrates an important point about why unions under the CIO umbrella were so successful in Birmingham—they were shaped by the communities in which they existed.

In this respect, the music helps students comprehend how a movement that has become disconnected from their community was at one time deeply rooted in it. The students at Miles, most of them aware of the college's central role in the black community in Birmingham, can explore the history that their grandparents and great-grandparents made. Students can understand the important connections among the generation of African American activists who established the industrial union movement,

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 151.

the later generation who transformed the city with the civil rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s, and their own generation. In this sense, the music helps Miles College students recover their own history.

Such revelations, of course, are not limited to Miles College and Birmingham. Music can prove a valuable teaching tool for instructors at small colleges and large research universities located in both small towns and urban areas (and everywhere in between). Music could prove a valuable asset in helping students explore other social and political movements in American history as well. For one example, Gregory Freeland recently described how music allows his students to understand the ideology and the "psychological and emotional elements" that inspired civil rights protestors in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>43</sup> Music from the civil rights movement, like the labor songs that I use, inspires Freeland's students to connect more directly and emotionally with the historical material in ways that are not possible through more traditional lectures and document analysis.<sup>44</sup> Teachers who want to try different ways to connect to their students can use music to open windows to many times and topics. If they look around, they will see many opportunities to bring history into their classrooms.

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<sup>43</sup>Gregory Freeland, "Music and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968: A Classroom Approach," in *Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement: Freedom's Bittersweet Song*, Julie Buckner Armstrong, Susan Hult Edwards, Houston Bryan Roberson, and Rhonda Y. Williams, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 125.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 126-27.