

IF YOU MISS ME FROM THE BACK OF THE BUS

Civil rights activism is serious business, but the Movement also inspired a myriad of artists and musicians. Songs filled the Movement; they bred inspiration, courage, and solidarity in the face of the ever-present threat of violence. What came to be known as “freedom songs” during this period in U.S. history grew out of the African-American tradition of singing in church. In fact, many of the songs of the Civil Rights Movement were based on the melodies of African-American religious songs. One of these songs, which chronicles the victories of the Civil Rights Movement, is “If You Miss Me from the Back of the Bus.” It was written by Charles Neblett of the Freedom Singers to the tune of “O Mary Don’t You Weep.”

If You Miss Me from the Back of the Bus

1. If you miss me from the back of the bus
And you can’t find me nowhere
Come on up to the front of the bus
I’ll be riding up there (3x)

2. If you miss me from Jackson State
And you can’t find me nowhere
Come on over to Ole Miss
I’ll be studying over there (3x)

3. If you miss me from the cotton fields
And you can’t find me nowhere
Come on down to the courthouse
I’ll be voting right there (3x)

4. If you miss me from the Thrifty Drug Store
And you can’t find me nowhere
Come on over to Woolworth’s
’Cause I’ll be sitting in there (3x)

5. If you miss me from the picket line
And you can’t find me nowhere
Come on down to the jailhouse
I’ll be rooming down there (3x)

6. If you miss me from the Mississippi River
And you can’t find me nowhere
Come on down to the municipal plunge
’Cause I’ll be swimming in there (3x)

7. If you miss me from the front of the bus
And you can’t find me nowhere
Come on up to the driver’s seat
I’ll be driving up there (3x)

Background Information

1. The mass participation in the year-long bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama showed the power of organized nonviolent resistance.
2. In 1962, James Meredith attempted to test desegregation by enrolling at the all-white University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), transferring from the historically black Jackson State College. The governor of Mississippi blocked Meredith's entrance to the university. Eventually Meredith succeeded in registering, and graduated from Ole Miss in 1963.
3. Although the 15th Amendment, passed in 1870, guaranteed African-American men the right to vote, southern states, in particular, placed many obstacles in the path of voters—poll taxes, literacy tests, bogus “purgings” of voter lists. In addition, the most brutal violence was reserved for African Americans who dared to register to vote, as well as for those who encouraged and assisted them. The trip to the courthouse was one of the most courageous things a southern African American could do. By 1964, half a million African Americans had registered to vote in the South. In 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act.
4. Restaurants were also segregated, and many lunch counters served “Whites Only.” On February 1, 1960, in the downtown Woolworth's of Greensboro, North Carolina, four African-American college students tried a new tactic. They sat down and ordered coffee. They were told that the lunch counter was for whites only, but they sat all day, waiting to be served. The next day, they returned with more students and continued to sit, enduring boredom, harassment, and humiliating violence. The “sit-ins” spread throughout the South.
5. Thousands of people were arrested and jailed for exercising their right to protest peacefully. Totally absurd charges were used to get protesters off the street and into jails—disturbing the peace, inciting to riot, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, distributing handbills without a license, etc. Protesters were also beaten, attacked by police dogs, sprayed with high-powered fire hoses, and sometimes fired upon.
6. In Cairo, Illinois, white residents swam in an outdoor municipal pool, which African Americans were not allowed to use; they had to swim in the Mississippi River. The 1962 campaign to desegregate swimming pools was the original inspiration for this song.
7. One of the demands of the bus boycott was for the employment of African-American drivers; but being in the driver's seat is also a metaphor for full rights and power.

Teaching Idea

This song has been sung with many different lyrics to match many kinds of situations. New verses have been made up on the spot to deal with current issues and struggles. Have students make up a new verse for this song based on a current or historical event.

Resource

Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960–1966. Smithsonian Folkways, 1997 (www.folkways.si.edu).

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