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**CELEBRITY SKIN....** The most powerful and important political song of the 20th Century made the *Billboard* chart for precisely one week in the fall of 1963, yet it was heard virtually every day for years on radio and television, and its chorus and melody were known to all.

The song, of course, is "We Shall Overcome." It was the pick to click among all those who marched for civil rights in that dreadful Birmingham summer of 1963, when the Alabama establishment unleashed fire hoses and dogs upon those trying to overturn Jim Crow. In September, when a bomb murdered four young girls in church, "We Shall Overcome" was the sound of the hour. During the week of November 9, a live version of the song that Joan Baez recorded at Miles College right in Birmingham managed to make the Hot 100 at No. 90. And that was it—even in the midst of a huge folk revival.

"We Shall Overcome" didn't really exist as an official artifact of popular culture. This seems weird today, when the world is one big jukebox and even political anthems—"We Are the World," "Born in the USA," "Don't Believe the Hype"—are commercial blockbusters, or at least resonate on the sales charts (Steve Earle's "Billy Austin," Jackson Browne's "Lives in the Balance," KRS-1's "Who Protects Us from You?").

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There are great songs among these, but none of them has become a symbol of a movement. For a lot of people, "We Are the World" was as much about bringing Bruce Springsteen, Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, Bob Dylan, and all the other stars together as it was about trying

to end famine in Ethiopia.

To understand the difference, it helps to know a little of the history of "We Shall Overcome." Pete Seeger, who had the greatest hand in fashioning the song, thinks it originated from the 19th century hymn, "I'll Be All Right," with an additional debt to Rev. Charles Tindley's 1903 "I'll Overcome Some Day." In 1946, at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, Zilphia Horton, one of the people who ran that storied institution for the study of radical strategies, heard an adaptation of Tindley's song by members of a tobacco work-

**RETURN TO SENDER....** The latest music marketing intrusion into our lives is the phone call. In the ultimate junk mail move, Michael Bolton called via tape to alert tens of thousands of unsuspecting Americans that he has a new album out. Dick Clark did the same to hype the January 11 American Music Awards show that he produced, telling the lucky call recipient what channel to watch. This tactic may or may not have produced higher TV ratings, but it did produce a torrent of complaints to stations airing the show.

We're now terrified to pick up the phone, because it might be National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences head Mike Greene, calling to bug us about the Grammys.

"Hi, this is Mike Greene, executive producer of the Grammys TV show. I'm the highest paid head of a non-profit organization in America and an administrator of MusicCares, a 'charity' that disburses less than 10% of its revenue to indigent musicians. Our TV show features censored performances and lame hosts with absolutely no connection to music. This year we'll have a special skit—just like Jay Leno—that will dramatize our proposal to seize the royalties of musicians who use drugs. Please watch."

ers union in Charleston, South Carolina. A worker named Lucille Simmons had changed the words to fit their struggle—most importantly, substituting “We” for “I.”

That difference is immense. By praying for everyone’s salvation, not just his or her own, each singer is drawn into something larger than themselves. After Horton and Seeger had changed the song some more, mainly adding verses, they taught it to folksinger Guy Carawan. Carawan sang “We Shall Overcome” at the founding convention of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960 in Raleigh, N.C. The song’s basic concept was so simple and its melody so seductive that it quickly spread first across the South, then the world. The civil rights movement had found its anthem.

Here’s the tricky part. There was celebrity involved here: Jon Landau, now Bruce Springsteen’s manager, remembers that in the radical enclaves of his Brooklyn youth, “Pete Seeger was Elvis.” But if the song had merely

come out of Seeger’s mouth over the radio, it wouldn’t have meant nearly as much. The same would have been true if Clyde McPhatter of the Drifters, then a huge rock’n’roll star, had learned the song on the Atlanta picket line he walked with Martin Luther King, Sr. in December 1960 and recorded it on his next album. If either of these had happened, it would have had a different meaning by the time it reached us. It might still move people—it might still be the song certain cancer patients I know sing in their dark hours—but its power would still be less than what it is now.

The problem’s not that stars somehow “taint” songs or slogans. It’s what has been lost in the years since the civil rights era ended: A real sense of a movement, the impact of a vast collection of people moving with a steady, singular purpose toward a goal for which they are willing to sacrifice everything. In 1946, the struggle to organize unions was such a struggle. In 1956, the struggle to gain citizenship rights for blacks be-

came the greatest such battle most of us have ever seen. In such situations, songs are powerful and necessary devices—but that’s all they are.

Today we ask so much more of our singers and our songs. We ask that they choose the battles we fight and that they do most of the publicity and fund-raising work. Instead of songs that symbolize what we’re doing, we all too often ask for songs that stand in for the doing itself. Since today there is no movement on the scale of the union drives of the 30s and 40s or the civil rights battles of the 50s and 60s, we often wait for musicians and their songs to begin the building process.

That’s asking the impossible. If the Birmingham movement had had only its celebrity support of Martin Luther King, Jr., Clyde McPhatter, James Baldwin and Harry Belafonte, but not the thousands of brave high school and even grade school students, the civil rights movement wouldn’t have come to much.

Musicians can’t be the center of a social movement because that’s not what they do. (And it’s worth noting that, in a world where the polarization of wealth and poverty shapes every issue, some of the musicians who’ve helped the most aren’t even close to being poor themselves.) Yet we are constantly approached by people who believe that if only the right one or two or three celebrities can be marshaled, the battles can be won. It just doesn’t work that way.

This sounds defeatist but it isn’t. Our songs remain powerful tools, even in a time of disorganization and frustration like the present. They are vehicles we can use to share our opinions, attitudes, hopes and fears. Most of all, they are the vehicles by which we transmit our shared dreams of what is possible.

**FLAVA IN YA EYE....** The MTV special *Aaliyah’s Favorites*, which counted down thirty videos on January 16th, her twentieth birthday, was a rare glimpse at the influences that combined to create this voice of the moment. Aaliyah’s choices reflected the fact that she was four years old when “Thriller” (her all-time favorite video) came out, but that choice also brought home the enormous influence Michael Jackson’s videos have had on the choreography employed by everyone from Brandy to the Junior Mafia family.

The thirty videos Aaliyah played comprised the best three hours of video programming I’ve caught on MTV in months, including rarely shown classics like Bobby Brown’s “Every Little Step,” Nas and Lauryn Hill’s “If I Ruled the World,” and 2Pac’s “How Do You Want It?.” She also had the guts to show three of her own videos.

Aaliyah’s choices were also notable for her willingness to, as she put it, “switch it up,” showing Nine Inch Nails’ “Closer” after drawing connections between Trent Reznor’s and Timbaland’s use of beats. She also played Shania Twain’s “From This Moment,” Aerosmith’s “Pink,” and Soundgarden’s “Black Hole Sun.” I might watch MTV a lot more often if Aaliyah were a regular veejay—D.A.

Yes, we need to build a movement whose goal is to feed every living human being, to shelter and educate and heal them. Musicians should be a part of that, a glorious part. But the way to such a movement lies in understanding our various roles. When such a movement begins to build itself (it may seem to spring up overnight, although there will have been many who spent years preparing for that occasion), there will be plenty of work for all to do. With guitars and without them.

And with the help of one another, on that day, we shall overcome.—D.M. [*Originally appeared in W.H.Y., the magazine of World Hunger Year (505 8th Ave., NYC 10018), in a special issue on musicians against hunger and poverty*].

**BLOWIN' IN THE WIND....** In 1993, two black men in Charleston, South Carolina, Sherman Evans and Angel Quintero, came up with a radical new design for a local rap group's album cover. They took the Confederate flag and recast it in the traditional colors of African liberation: red, black, and green.

The record went nowhere but Evans and Quintero have since launched a clothing company.

Carvell Holloway writes: **Miles Smiles, Nefertiti, Miles in the Sky Sorcerer, E.S.P., Miles Davis** (Columbia Legacy)—It's 1963 and you've built and recorded one of the greatest jazz quintets to date. Now all those guys have moved on and, since the baddest musicians are looking for you too, you easily put together another generation of genius (Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Ron Carter, Tony Williams). But these new, younger players are getting bored with "All Blues" and "My Funny Valentine," so what do you do? First, let every night feel its way by allowing tempos, key changes, and time to become feelings of the moment, instead of cast-in-stone, black bow tie performances. Next, in the studio, jump with both feet into electronic instruments and jazz/fusion as you let the young guys run wild and experiment with all the things you're feeling. History will absolve you. [Carvell Holloway is a professional jazz trumpeter in Los Angeles].

Stars and Bars flying there be replaced with the NuSouth flag (this at about the same time that an integrated South Carolina band, Hootie and the Blowfish, were also asking that the Confederate flag be taken down).

"If you don't get it, you're either still a slave or a slaveowner," says Evans. Hmmm. Well, NuSouth wants a dialogue, so let's talk.

Given America's blood-drenched history, there's no way to remove an aura of slavery and white supremacy from the Confederate flag. But the understandable association between flag and history has also fueled the misconception that anyone who

The current version of Lynyrd Skynyrd has, according to Evans, bought a crate of NuSouth shirts, perhaps seeing in NuSouth's symbol a reflection of "We Ain't That Different," the anthem in support of North/South unity that leads off *Twenty*, their most recent studio album.

On the other hand, speaking of "dialogue," blues singer Chamika Copeland, opening a Lynyrd Skynyrd show in Denver last fall, refused to go on until the Confederate flag stage backdrop was removed.

What's ultimately at issue here isn't the flag, but the nature of the