

pete seeger

# We Shall Overcome

Words and music by Zilphia Horton, Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan, and Pete Seeger



This anthem of the civil rights era has a complex history. Seeger originally learned it from music teacher Zilphia Horton, who in the 1940s had heard striking tobacco workers sing it in “long meter” style—a slowed-down rendition that allows ample room for harmonizing. According to Seeger, Frank Hamilton and Guy Carawan gave the song a steady 12/8 pulse, and Seeger himself did the guitar arrangement (and, perhaps, changed “will” to “shall” in the title phrase). All these contributors wound up copyrighting “We Shall Overcome” to keep it from becoming an “insipid pop song,” says Seeger. It was his late manager, Harold Leventhal, Seeger explains, who told him, “Pete, you know if

you don’t copyright this, some character out in Hollywood will copyright it, and next thing you know they’ll have a version where it says ‘Come on, baby, you and me will overcome tonight.’” Seeger and the others stipulated that all royalties go to the We Shall Overcome Fund, chaired by Bernice Johnson Reagon of Sweet Honey in the Rock, which supports black music in the South.

This version is transcribed from *If I Had a Hammer: Songs of Hope and Struggle* (Smithsonian Folkways). Seeger plays 12-string in his customary low version of dropped-D (down two frets in the bass), using a 12/8 strum similar to what he plays in “Jacob’s Ladder.” This triple rhythm (1-2-3 4-5-6 7-8-9 10-11-12) is often heard in slow blues.

—JEFFREY PEPPER RODGER

Dropped-D Tuning: D A D G B E

Verse

♩. = 80

**D** 000132    **G6** 3x0000    **D** 000132    **D** 000132    **G6** 3x0000

1. We shall o - ver -  
2-5. See additional lyrics.

**D** 000132    **G6** 3x0000    **D** 000132    **G6** 3x0000

4 come we shall o - ver - come We shall o - ver -

**Bm** x13421    **E7** 230100    **A7** x02030    **D** 000132    **G6** 3x0000    **D** 000132

8 come some day Oh deep in my heart

**G6** 3x0000    **A7** x02030    **Bm** x13421    **D** 000132    **G6** 3x0000    **D** 000132    **A7** x02030    **D** 000132

13 I do be - lieve We shall o - ver - come some day

D G6 D G6 D  
1. We shall overcome, we shall overcome

G6 Bm E7 A7  
We shall overcome some day

D G6 D G6 A7 Bm  
Oh deep in my heart I do believe

D G6 D A7 D  
We shall overcome some day

D G6 D G6 D  
2. We'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand

G6 Bm E7 A7  
We'll walk hand in hand some day

D G6 D G6 A7 Bm  
Oh deep in my heart I do believe

D G6 D A7 D  
We shall overcome some day

D G6 D G6 D6  
3. We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace

G6 Bm E7 A7  
We shall live in peace some day

D G6 D G6 A7 Bm  
Oh deep in my heart I do believe

D G6 D A7 D  
We shall overcome some day

D G6 D G6 D  
4. We shall all be free, we shall all be free

G6 Bm E7 A7  
We shall all be free some day

D G6 D G6 A7 Bm  
Oh deep in my heart I do believe

D G6 D A7 D  
We shall overcome some day

D G6 D G6 D  
5. We are not afraid, we are not afraid

G6 Bm E7 A7  
We are not afraid today

D G6 D G6 A7 Bm  
Oh deep in my heart I do believe

D G6 D A7 D  
We shall overcome some day

*Repeat Verse 1*

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