



MIKEWILEY

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PRODUCTIONS

# THE PARCHMAN HOUR DISCUSSION GUIDE



## THE PARCHMAN HOUR



### Mike Wiley – The Playwright, Actor and Director

Mike Wiley has spent the last decade fulfilling his mission to bring educational theatre to young audiences. In the early days of his career, Wiley found few theatrical resources to shine light on key events and figures in black history. To bring these often ignored stories to life, Wiley started his own production company. Through his work, he has introduced countless students to the stories and legacies of Emmett Till, Henry “Box” Brown and more. He has also brought Timothy B. Tyson’s acclaimed book “Blood Done Sign My Name” to the stage. Mike Wiley has a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and was the 2010 Lehman Brady Visiting Joint Chair Professor in Documentary Studies and American Studies at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to his numerous school and community performances, he has also appeared in the films *Wolf Call* and *Empty Spaces* and been featured in *Our State* magazine and on PBS’ *North Carolina Now* and WUNC’s *The State of Things*.

### Synopsis

Mike Wiley Productions’ newest work commemorates the bravery and contributions of the Freedom Rides. In 1961, 13 riders boarded a bus in Washington, DC bound for New Orleans via Mississippi and Alabama. They barely made it out of Alabama alive. Over the course of the next three months, approximately 300 other riders took up the mantle and followed the path of those first brave few. Mobs brutally assaulted many. Others were arrested and, instead of posting bail, chose to serve sentences in one of the most brutal prisons in the South, Parchman Farm, proving the Freedom Riders and the movement to desegregate interstate travel would not be deterred.

Presented in the style of the variety shows of yesteryear, this moving production explores three of the tensest months of 1961. *The Parchman Hour* brings to the stage powerful oral histories and conversations from the Freedom Rides’ most iconic protagonists and antagonists.

*The Parchman Hour* was originally produced by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and The Department of Dramatic Art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The play was also the culminating event at the National 50th Anniversary Freedom Ride Celebration in May 2011. This work is a celebration of bravery and a call to action through remembrance, leaving the audience asking, “Who stood up for me? Moreover, for whom can I stand up for today? Who needs my words, my song, my voice?”



## The Setting

Mississippi State Penitentiary (also known as Parchman Farm), 1961

## Themes

Racism, hope, determination, nonviolence, student activism

## Key Characters

John Lewis – Student, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader, Freedom Rider

Stokely Carmichael – Student, SNCC leader, Freedom Rider

James Farmer – Director, Congress On Racial Equality (CORE)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – Civil Rights activist and president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

Robert Kennedy – U.S. Attorney General (1961-1964)

Diane Nash – Student, SNCC leader

Jim Zwerg – Student, Freedom Rider

Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor – Commissioner of Public Safety, Birmingham, AL (1957-1963)

Governor John Patterson – Governor of Mississippi (1959-1963)

## Vocabulary

Jim Crow

Racism

Plessy v. Ferguson

Boynton v. Virginia

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

## Discussion Topics

- Explain James Farmer’s description of the Freedom Rides as “an ordeal of conscience.”
- Why was it critical that the philosophy of non-violent protest be adhered to during the Freedom Rides?
- Discuss the importance of the media in the success of the Freedom Riders movement. What are some current examples of causes the media has helped or hindered?
- The Freedom Riders were a very diverse group (in terms of gender, race, religion and state of origin). Why was this critical to the success of the movement?
- Do you think the Riders were aware of the true dangers they faced when they stepped on the bus?
- Discuss the reticence of the Kennedy Administration and Martin Luther King, Jr. to become involved in the tense situation that arose in Mississippi.
- Discuss the ideological differences between the major civil rights groups of the time (NAACP, CORE, SNCC and SCLC). How did these differences result in disagreements about the best way to approach desegregation in the South?
- As they waited in jail, discuss how The Parchman Hour radio show helped steel the resolve of the riders.
- As you heard the individual stories of the Freedom Riders, to whom did you most relate? Why?
- Is there a cause you feel passionately about? What are some ways you could shine a light on that cause?

## Recommended Reading & Viewing

### Grades 5-8 Reading

- *Freedom Riders: John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the Front Lines of the Civil Rights Movement* by Ann Baucom
- *Freedom Rules: Journey for Justice* by James Haskins

### High School Reading

- *Breach of Peace: Portraits of the 1961 Mississippi Freedom Riders* by Eric Etheridge
- *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* by John Lewis

### High School Viewing

- *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years*
- *American Experience: Freedom Riders*

### Other Resources

- [http://biology.clc.uc.edu/fankhauser/Society/freedom\\_rides/Freedom\\_Ride\\_DBF.htm](http://biology.clc.uc.edu/fankhauser/Society/freedom_rides/Freedom_Ride_DBF.htm)
- [http://www.outreach.olemiss.edu/Freedom\\_Riders/Resources/](http://www.outreach.olemiss.edu/Freedom_Riders/Resources/)

