



# Freedom Riders



## Study Guide

A Play with Music by Mad River Theater Works

Playwright: Jeff Hooper - Composer: Bob Lucas



## About the Show

*Freedom Riders* is the newest play from Mad River Theater Works. It explores valiant and courageous personalities behind one of the most critical chapters in the history of the civil rights movement. The play demonstrates the importance of working together to affect change and specifically how non-violent protest was used to combat the cruelties of segregation. Set in 1961, fifteen years after the United States Supreme Court had outlawed segregation, bus lines and cities throughout the south still enforced a rigid system of separating black and white citizens. Freedom Riders, both black and white and mostly young, decided to travel together on buses that crossed state lines purposefully disregarding the hateful segregation practices that were still commonplace in so many parts of the United States. The unforgettable heroes and the facts behind the events portrayed in *Freedom Riders* are essential to a full understanding of the civil rights era and American history.

Age Appropriateness: 3rd-8th grade

Duration: one act, approximately 55 minutes

Number of performers: 5

Music: contains live music

## Mad River Theater Works

Mad River Theater Works is an acclaimed touring ensemble that creates vibrant and evocative plays with music for families and young audiences based on American history and folklore. Founded in 1978, Mad River presents original productions that explore traditional stories and themes in a unique, innovative style. With over twenty-five years of touring experience, the company has earned an international reputation for authentic presentations that bring little-known characters and aspects of American culture to the stage. The artists of Mad River seek out subjects that reflect the rich diversity of our common heritage and make shows that combine the rhythms and folkways of everyday life with tales about extraordinary individuals. The resulting body of work is a vivid tapestry that weaves together live music, storytelling, and drama, exploring the grit and humanity of characters from the past.

Mad River has toured extensively throughout the United States and Canada, performing at theaters and museums such as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the California Center for the Arts, and the Raymond Kravis Center for the Performing Arts. Mad River has also presented multiple performances at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, as well as appearing in major cities including Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and San Francisco, and at international events such as the Vancouver Children's Festival.

The Mad River company members are a multi-talented group of writers, performers, and theater educators with experiences that span the worlds of theater and music, from regional theaters to the London Fringe, from folk festivals to Nashville. Producing Director and Composer Bob Lucas is an accomplished songwriter and performer who has achieved major success for his recordings as well as theater work. Two of his songs are included on the Grammy-winning album by Alison Krauss, *New Favorite*. Working as an ensemble, Mad River has created a unique theatrical style that appeals to audiences of all ages.

## Setting the Stage for the Freedom Riders

In the wake of the abolition of slavery in the United States, many southern states, which had previously been part of the confederacy, started to make laws to keep black citizens at a disadvantage. Many of those laws limited black citizens' right to vote in elections, and others, known commonly as Jim Crow Laws, mandated a policy called segregation. In education, segregation ensured that schools would either be black or white. That bathrooms and water fountains and playgrounds would be black or white. And on public busses, seats at the front would be reserved for white patrons while black customers were forced to sit in the back.

Debatably, the first freedom ride may have been the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation included 16 men- 8 white and 8 black, from the Congress of Racial Equality (C.O.R.E.). The men planned to ride public transportation in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. There were multiple arrests in almost every state they visited.

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1955, Civil Rights icon, Rosa Parks, famously refused to give up her seat to a white person on a segregated city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She was jailed. Parks was not the first person to fight back against these segregations, but her actions began the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a cornerstone of American Civil Rights history.

Five years later, in Greensboro, North Carolina, the first major student protest began when four black men from a local college staged a sit-in at a segregated lunch counter. Over time, the sit-in was reported in newspapers all across the southern states, leading students and activists from all over the country to start their own protests, resulting in the closure of many segregated lunch counters.

The next year, freedom rides began in response to the refusal of southern states to enforce two Supreme Court rulings (*Morgan v. Virginia* and *Boynton v. Virginia*) which demanded the desegregation of interstate bus travel. Ultimately, freedom rides became one of the largest student protests in American history. It all started with one bus and one group of protesters.

## Who Were the Freedom Riders?

With much of the United States still dealing with rampant racism and inequality, the first freedom ride of the civil rights era took place on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1961. Inspired by the actions of the Journey of Reconciliation, 13 riders set off to draw attention to the unfair policies of segregation on public and interstate transportation. The riders included 11 from C.O.R.E. and 2 from the rather new organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.). Everywhere that first bus went it encountered trouble. Sometimes there were minor attacks on the busses. Other times, riders were beaten and/or jailed. Things got even worse when the riders reached Montgomery, Alabama, where police commissioner, Bull Connor, organized violence against the riders in conjunction with the Ku Klux Klan. Many riders were beaten very badly, and some were turned away from local hospitals because of what they were trying to accomplish.



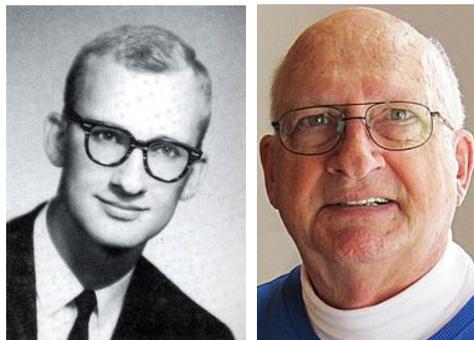
After the first ride, members of the Nashville Student Movement, as well as activists from across the country, organized their own rides into southern states. In total, there were over 60 rides. These protests, originally led by the youth of America- both black and white- spread across the country and lead the Federal Interstate Commerce Commission to issue an order of desegregation on public transportation. This was an important step along the road to banning segregation in so many areas and bringing America closer to a policy of equal rights for all.

## Prominent Figures

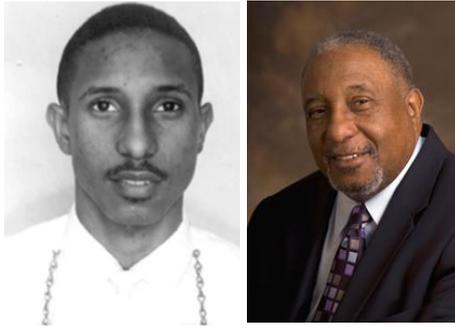
The characters in this play are fictional. However, the playwright drew heavily on the stories of three real-life freedom riders: James Zwerg, Diane Nash, and Bernard Lafayette.



**Diane Nash** was a co-founder and chief strategist of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She helped organize many successful protests in the American civil rights movement including notably the Nashville lunch counter sit-ins. During the rides, Nash took it both as a responsibility of SNCC and as a personal obligation to recruit as many young people as possible to ride into segregated states.



**Jim Zwerg** was the only white rider on the second bus of freedom riders. He was raised in Wisconsin, and in college he became a member of SNCC in Tennessee. He was badly beaten in an ambush in Montgomery Alabama. He recalled later "There was nothing particularly heroic in what I did. If you want to talk about heroism, consider the black man who probably saved my life. This man in coveralls, just off of work, happened to walk by as my beating was going on and said 'Stop beating that kid. If you want to beat someone, beat me.' And they did. He was still unconscious when I left the hospital. I don't know if he lived or died."



**Bernard Lafayette** was a student at the American Baptist Theological Seminary and a member of the Nashville student movement. He quickly got involved in the freedom rides after news reached him about attacks on the first wave of busses. On his first ride, Lafayette was beat in Montgomery, Alabama, and arrested in Jackson, Mississippi where he later went on to start the Jackson Nonviolent Movement.

## Important Terms & Names

*Boynton v. Virginia*  
*Brown v. Board of Education*  
Civil Rights  
Congress of Racial Equality  
Desegregation  
Integration  
Ku Klux Klan  
*Morgan v. Virginia*  
*Plessy v. Ferguson*

Protest  
Segregation  
Sit-in  
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee  
Supreme Court  
Racism  
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.  
Rosa Parks

## Timeline

### April 9th, 1947 – The Journey of Reconciliation

16 men from C.O.R.E. set out to test the desegregation of interstate travel by taking a bus to Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky.

### December 1st, 1955 – Montgomery Bus Boycott Begins

Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on the bus to a white rider and is jailed, beginning the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

### February 1st, 1960 – First Greensboro Lunch Counter Sit-In

Four students from Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University staged the first major student-led sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina.

### April 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>, 1960 – S.N.C.C. Founded

The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee is founded in Raleigh, North Carolina.

### May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1961 – First Freedom Riders Depart

Two busses, one Trailways and one Greyhound, left Washington D.C. headed for Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and finally Louisiana where they planned to hold a rally. Most of the riders were from C.O.R.E. and some were from S.N.C.C.

### May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1961 – First Bus of Freedom Riders Attacked

When the first bus reached Anniston, Alabama they were met by a mob of Klansmen. The mob stopped the bus's progress outside of town and set it ablaze. Many riders were hurt and hospitalized.

### May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1961 – Meeting at Montgomery First Baptist Church

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders meet in Montgomery to discuss the freedom rides. Several riders made an appearance disguised in choir robes.

### May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1961 – F.R.C.C. Formed

The Freedom Riders Coordinating Committee formed to organize more rides.

### May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1961 – Robert Kennedy petitions the Interstate Commerce Commission

Attorney General, Robert Kennedy petitions the Interstate Commerce Commission to comply with its desegregation policy.

### September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1961 – Final Freedom Ride Departs

## Pre-Show Discussion

1. Read parts of the study guide to the students or have the students read on their own. Discuss any questions they may have about that aspect of the topic they will see. This will help clear up any confusion they may have before the show.
2. What do the students know about the American civil rights movement? Can the students describe what a non-violent protest might look like?
3. Have the students draw or write predictions about what they think they will see based on what they read in the study guide, pictures, and history. After the show, look at the predictions and see who was correct.

## Post-Show Discussion

(Some of these are good to discuss with your students while you wait for your bus to arrive at the theatre after the show!)

1. Have each student come up with one or two of their favorite parts of the show. What was their least favorite part?
2. Compare the show they just saw with other theatre shows they've seen or with sporting events they've

been to. How are they different? How are they similar?

3. Do the students think they could write a play based on their lives? Have the students write a story that could be turned into a play. Perhaps include their favorite day, vacation they've taken, school or friend adventures. To expand on this activity, have the students write a scene of their play. Go to the library and look at the format of a play including stage directions, dialogue and scene description. Have the students perform their scene for the class. If they can't come up with something about their own lives, have them write something about an historical figure.
4. Write a journal entry about the play. Include favorite or least favorite parts. Are there particular scenes or times in the show that students related to in some way? Have they ever felt like any of the characters? Were there things they would do differently if they were in his/her shoes?
5. Pretend you are a reporter for a newspaper. Write a review of the play they have just seen.