HOW TO THINK OF FREEDOM SONGS (EXCERPT #1)

One of the first things that's important when you think about freedom songs and the Civil Rights Movement is to not actually think of freedom songs as if they were created strategically by the Movement. Like the collective breath of the Movement, they were a natural outpouring, evidencing the life force of the fight for freedom.

Think about the dominant numbers of participants who decided they would put their everyday existence at risk to fight racism in their local community. These people belonged to a culture that had a very high place for music that they themselves created as a part of their daily lives. Most of the participants from these local communities would be able to list to you music in several genres that they liked not only to listen to but also to sing. So we're not talking about a group of people who just practiced one kind of music.

What is interesting about the songs that end up as freedom songs is the fact that they function in the Movement as 'congregational' songs. Congregational songs are started by a songleader — a songleader is different from a soloist. A soloist is someone who can execute the entire song. A songleader is someone who starts the song, and if that performance is successful, it is successful not only because of the prowess of the leader but because people who are located within the sound of that voice join in to raise the song into life.

If you listen to recordings of mass meetings, you will find, many times, people singing — and you need to imagine that everybody in the church is singing. That is congregational singing. It is the kind of singing I grew up with in the Black church, in school, on the playground.... I can remember secular activities — rallies — where the congregational style was used, and you had a songleader, and everybody was doing the singing.

SOURCES AND MEANINGS OF FREEDOM SONGS (EXCERPT #2)

The other thing that's important to understand is that the songs that were sung the most were adapted from the repertoire that people already knew. One of the songs that was sung over and over again in almost every mass meeting was "This Little Light of Mine": "This little light of mine/I'm going to let it shine." This song was sung more than the theme song of the Movement, "We Shall Overcome." It's an "I" song. It gives you a chance to pour into the sound of your singing voice your individual personal commitment to be in the freedom struggle.

If you went to a specific local community, you could find things out through the songs used in that community. In Montgomery, Alabama — and this is early in the mass mobilization with the bus boycott — people would sing several hymns a lot. One is "Onward Christian Soldiers" — that song you would have heard mostly as a Sunday school song. To understand freedom songs and freedom singing, you would have to imagine 400 or 500 people in Montgomery, Alabama, singing that song with their voices raised for 15 minutes. If you wonder why that song could capture the power of what they were doing, look at the text:

> Onward, Christian soldiers
> Marching as to war
> With the cross of Jesus
> Going on before...

It is a battle song. It tells us something about nonviolence in the Civil Rights Movement. Many times when people talk about nonviolence, they think of a sort of passivity, a peacefulness. If you are talking about the Civil Rights Movement and our practice of nonviolence, you have to think of aggressive, confrontational activity, edgy activity; action designed to paralyze things as they are, nonviolent actions to force change.

We talked about being in the 'freedom fight' and 'freedom struggle.' Words that say, "I am in this battle for the duration." When you look at a song like "Onward Christian Soldiers," you understand why that song carried people in the struggle.

MASSES OF PEOPLE SPEAKING THROUGH SONG (EXCERPT #3)

Some of the songs are a structure into which there are lyric changes that document where that singing took place. It's very easy, if you're not aware, to miss the value of that documentation. Freedom songs are documents created by a collective voice. Often when we think of masses of people we actually think of inarticulate people and we look for a speaker to let us know what is going on. During this Movement, the masses came singing and the songs they sang are essential documents. If you don't pay attention to the specificity of the songs they chose at a particular time, around a specific situation, you miss an opportunity to hear masses of people speak. It is not just enough to hear the voices of the speakers who speak at the mass meeting. It is also very important to know what was created as an articulate voice by those hundreds of people who gathered as a part of that struggle.

These songs are very important in capturing the culture. News reports covering the Movement always used the singing as a way of trying to tell the story of the power of what was going on. So when you talk about the culture of the Movement, it is important that you draw from the rich music database. If you draw indiscriminately, you miss the opportunity to tell a much more detailed, articulate story that comes from the collective voice of the people whose participation created and sustained the mass mobilization campaigns.

THE IMPACT OF FREEDOM SINGING (EXCERPT #4)

When I sing, at full voice, you can hear me a block away. If you're walking toward me, you're walking inside the sound of my voice. There are stories about protesters being in jail, and the jailers saying, "shut up that singing." There is a story of the Freedom Rides, where Bernard LaFayette talks about singing in Parchman Penitentiary in Mississippi, which is where they put the Freedom Riders, when they arrived in Jackson, Mississippi.

The singing I talked about before was all church songs, but the minute you get younger people involved, you get at least three additional genres of music: first, fewer hymns and more gospel music; second, concert spirituals; and third, songs from the top 40 rhythm and blues charts and new songs written to tell the story about specific events.

There is a great example of songs being changed to speak to the moment during the Freedom Rides. When the riders finally got to Mississippi, they were arrested and ended up in Parchman Prison. They sang non-stop, pulling songs from all those genres, and refashioning the lyrics. After the first organized loads of bus riders were jailed, people in other parts of the country began to pair up racially, get on the bus and decide they are going to sit differently. They started to do it in small groups, rather than being directed by a larger organization. When the freedom riders locked up in Parchman got the news that more riders were on the buses coming south, they started singing, "Buses are a'comin, oh Yeah," In one situation, Bernard LaFayette recalled that the prison guards tried to stop the singing. They said to the singing freedom riders, "if you don't shut up, we'll take your mattress," the protesters would sing, "You can take my mattress, you can take my mattress, oh yeah, you can take my mattress you can take my mattress, I'll keep my freedom, oh yeah..." That song is a concert spiritual, and we learned it as an arranged concert spiritual, "Chariots a'coming, Oh Yeah."

There is a story of a policeman beating a demonstrator on the ground and the man being assaulted began to sing, "We Shall Overcome," and this particular policeman could not continue the beating. This did not happen in every case, however. People who were against the Movement had strong reactions when faced with powerful, solid freedom singing. And the singing was essential to those of us involved in the action, it was galvanizing, it pulled us together, it helped us to handle fear and anger.

I am talking about full and rich singing, when people are singing at full power. When the song started you usually had at least three-part harmony and the sound filled the air -- it was powerful music, the freedom songs.

SINGING IN THE FACE OF DANGER (EXCEPRT #5)

I was in a mass meeting in 1963 in Mississippi, and the sheriff walked in. And Fannie Lou Hamer was up speaking, and she called out that sheriff, just flat footed: "I know you, I know your name." There were white and black people present. That sheriff and Fannie Lou Hamer lived in that community. In those environments you understood the tension and the danger of what local people did who were active in the Movement. Songs raised in those moments served to hold everybody, helping to manage the tension that came when the sheriff and deputies came to see who from the community was in that mass meeting.

There was a very strong "stay away" feeling about the law. The law was not there to protect you. The law was a danger to you. Just their physical presence would create a chill. And the singing helped you to navigate that energy inside of your body. I'm talking about sound moving through your body and helping you to breathe through that tension. It's very important not to suggest that singing made fear disappear. Because you really knew the danger, and that did not go anywhere. But singing could help you to stay and hold your stance.

FREEDOM SONGS AND POPULAR MUSIC (EXCERPT #6)

Young people pulled songs from the hit parade and used them as freedom songs. Ray Charles more than any other recording artist had songs that became freedom songs, because of his voice, the way he used his piano, and a very strong blend of churchy, bluesy energy. We came up with a new word to describe the new genre. We called it "soul."

Ray Charles' music was familiar and new. It was accessible. Sometimes he would take a specific church tune and put love song lyrics to it. But even when he didn't do that, there was a synthesis in his voice that crossed the musical lines between what we would call the secular and the sacred. The movement itself then was primarily hosted by the church — in a community, you had to somehow find a space where larger groups could come together, and churches hosted the movement in many, many communities. Churches were also the places we left, to go out into the street and go to jail. The whole idea of the church moving into the street, the church moving into jail, is captured in this kind of music.

Take the song, "You Better Leave My Kitten Alone," by Little Willie John; during the Nashville Sit-in Movement, it became "You Better Leave Segregation Alone." Ray Charles's "Lonely Avenue" was turned into "Fighting For My Rights":

> My cell had no windows
> And the air couldn't come through
> And I felt so hot and stuffy
> That I didn't know what to do
> That's why I'm fighting for my rights...

NATIONAL PERFORMRES AND THE MOVEMENT (EXCERPT #7)

There were always performing artists who found ways to support the Movement's activities. One of the strongest was Harry Belafonte. His "Banana Boat" song in Parchman Penitentiary became a song about the Freedom Rides, "Calypso Freedom." The Staple Singers toured and traveled with Martin Luther King. Mahalia Jackson sang with and organized fundraisers for Dr. King. The Freedom Singers, who I sang with, performed at Carnegie Hall in 1963, and Tony Bennett closed the show. Later that year at a joint SCLC and SNCC benefit, we did a concert with Mahalia Jackson. There was a benefit for SNCC McCormick Place in Chicago, that featured gospel groups with a chorus of freedom singers from across the south.

The Civil Rights Movement challenged racism, and the dominant areas of organizing took place within southern segregated communities. However, the Movement happened to the entire nation. There was no place one could be where there was not someone responding in some way to what was happening. The Freedom Singers were invited to perform at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival, and for several successive festivals there were groups of songleaders who were on the program to sing the songs that came out of their local campaigns. The dominant popular commercial music genres were folk and topical songs. The freedom songs and the Civil Rights Movement that birthed the songs and singing charged the national music culture. Popular music followed the concerns that were raised about justice, about getting along with each other, about challenging injustice. Black and White musicians of the day explored those issues in their music.

The second part of Eyes on the Prize moves into the 1970s and dealing with some of the things that happen when these energies move into urban Black communities outside of the south. The struggles and language of organizing changed. There was a strident, impatient and often angry tone. Many were concerned that it was not as focused and organized and controlled as the southern based campaigns. There were urban rebellions, there were national and regional conferences, there were poets who spoke and sang their lines and new songs from Black musicians. The music and the word was about the redefinition and repositioning of Black America, about Vietnam, about surviving in a racist nation by recentering one's cultural core. Africa and beauty and Blackness were redefined and it was all there in the music, in the poetry, in the

hair, in the dress, in the food — Black power, Black pride, Black consciousness, Black studies. Black people reshaping their cultural ground.