U.S. Civil Rights Movement

Jacquelin C. Peters

In the early 1950s the continuing struggle of African Americans for basic human rights was directed toward winning crucial liberties long denied them — a good education and the vote. The NAACP sought to challenge the laws limiting educational opportunities by enlisting the legal strategies of African American attorneys such as the late Wiley Branton, who was to become Dean of the Howard University Law School, and Thurgood Marshall, currently a Chief Justice on the U.S. Supreme Court. The U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision rendered in 1954 cited the sociological and psychological findings of Dr. Kenneth Clark and others who maintained that the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* "separate but equal" doctrine instituted in 1896 was harmful to both Black and White students. The justices ordered in 1955 that all children be admitted to tax-supported public schools "on a racially non-discriminatory basis with all deliberate speed."

Close on the heels of the Brown decision came a series of events which jolted the Civil Rights Movement into the nation's consciousness. Mrs. Rosa Parks' arrest for violating the bus segregation ordinance in Montgomery, Alabama, sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott on December 5, 1955, four days after her detention. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., then 26 years old, was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization which organized the boycott. It took 386 days, but the city officials were finally convinced that integration of the buses was crucial to their economic health, and the bus boycott was discontinued. Three weeks later, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was founded with Dr. King as president, and the forces that would guide his destiny as a charismatic leader and a national hero gained momentum.

When four black college students staged the first sit-in on February 1, 1960 at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, a wave of similar student protests followed, sweeping the Deep South. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which provided many "foot soldiers" in the desegregation and voter registration efforts,was founded at Shaw University on April 15, 1960.

James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) led the Freedom Riders on a Greyhound bus from Washington, D.C. on a perilous journey through Alabama and Mississippi. On "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, the nation witnessed on television the assault of hundreds of peaceful demonstrators by

Spirits are high in this civil rights rally in an Alabama church. Freedom songs strengthened the resolve of non-violent demonstrators, who were prepared to encounter persecution and imprisonment. (Photo by Joe Alper, courtesy Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon)

Alabama state troopers. One week later, the Johnson administration presented a voting rights bill before Congress. On August 6, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act.

Song and eloquent oratory are integral to African American religious expression, and they were pervasive, spiritually sustaining elements of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. In emotionally tense or physically threatening situations, the standard of non-violence and a serene attitude were maintained through song, prayer, and words of encouragement. Massive church rallies, picketing demonstrations and even jail houses echoed with the sounds of resolve, declaring, "Just like a tree standing by the water,/ We shall not be moved."

Sacred African American music provided the basis for many freedom songs. One such spiritual, "I Will Be All Right," has evolved to become the universal anthem of protest, "We Shall Overcome." Techniques such as call and response, "worrying the line" (using melismatic vocal embellishments), or "lining out" a hymn (the song leader's singing or reciting the next line of verse before the end of the previous one)

are other retentions from traditional African American song.

Important contributions to the repertory of freedom songs were made by composers whose music sprang out of the Movement. The gifted Bertha Gober, one of the most prolific composers, sometimes received her inspirations while actively involved in demonstrations or while sitting in a jail cell; memories of those who were martyrs for the movement also provided histories for Ms. Gober and many others to put to music. Social contexts were established in song lyrics by naming the protagonists, antagonists, or locations where conflict was intense.

Grounded in the tradition of Black congregational song, choral quartets and ensembles transmitted the Movement's musical message to audiences far from the locale of the struggle. The Montgomery Gospel Trio, the American Baptist Theological Seminary Quartet — also known as the Nashville Quartet — and the CORE Singers proved to be solid songleading groups.

Nationwide support was garnered for SNCC through the works of four singers: Rutha Harris, Bernice Johnson, Charles Neblett, and Cordell Reagon, who organized the group known as the original SNCC Freedom Singers. Reagon delivered most of the interpretive information in performances which made the world sit up and take notice. Two other configurations of this group emerged: another group of Freedom Singers, followed by the Freedom Voices. This year's music stage features the original SNCC Freedom Singers with Ms. Bettie Mae Fikes standing in, as she has in the past, for Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon. Ms. Fikes, originally of Selma, Alabama, is known as one of the strongest song leaders of the Civil Rights Movement.

CITATIONS AND FURTHER READINGS

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SUGGESTED LISTENING

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Singing freedom songs, marchers led by Stevie Wonder braved the elements in Washington, D.C. every January 15th until Congress passed a bill making Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a legal holiday in 1983. (Photo by Sharon Farmer)