

As Long as there is a Dream in the Heart: MLK, the Movement, and Music

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As delivered.

“As long as there is a dream in the heart, you cannot lose the significance of living.”

This paraphrase of a quote from the renowned African-American theologian and mentor to Dr. King, Dr. Howard Thurman, best represents the tenacity of the music-memory or consciousness of African slaves. It also provides the foundation for the remarks I will share with you today on the enduring power of music, and the role it has played in creating beloved communities of peace, justice and equality.

Until the end of the twentieth century, most scholars believed that the institution of slavery destroyed almost all of the fundamental aspects of African culture amongst the slaves in the Americas. It was assumed that, because the slaves came from various parts of Africa and had no common language or set of traditions, their memories of Africa would have been lost.

But this misconception failed to recognize the value that music played in the lives of slaves who had been plucked from seemingly disparate cultures in which music accompanied almost every activity in every community. As a result, the “dream in the heart” of African slaves would not only persist in the New World, but thrive.

That music played an integral role in the expression and activities of African slaves has been well documented. With respect to musical style and practice, the slaves who were transported to the U.S. and other Western nations continued to utilize song in much the same manner as their African ancestors. The earliest utterances of the slaves—the calls, cries and hollers—were wordless. Based on tonal aspects of West and Central African languages, these musical phrases had no particular structure or form. They were used as a form of communication or individual expression (*Example: calls*)

Eventually the calls and cries developed beyond a single line or phrase and evolved into worksongs, play songs, and spirituals. (*Examples: “Hey Rufus”*); #1 (*“Troubles so hard” by Vera Hall, which many of you will recognize as “Natural Blues” by the electronica musician, Moby*); and (*“Come on Up”*).

Slave owners originally attempted to quell the music-making of the enslaved artisans (particularly drumming), but nothing the owners did could eradicate the slaves’ music memory. Eventually the owners realized that it was to their advantage to encourage music-making as a means of maintaining structure and order; they also soon found that they preferred to dance to music performed by slave musicians, who took the rather staid British dance tunes and “jigged” them (added syncopated rhythms and “jazzed it up.”)

As a result of these adaptations, most of the music provided for dances and balls on southern plantations was performed by slave musicians. Many of you may recall the 2013 period drama, “12 Years a Slave,” adapted from the 1853 slave narrative memoir of the same name by Solomon Northrup, a New York State-born free African-American man who was kidnapped in Washington, D.C., in 1841 and sold into slavery. Northrup—a gifted violinist—worked on plantations in the state of Louisiana for 12 years before his release. The accuracy of the film has been praised by academics and film critics alike, and Northrup’s ability to earn income as a musician and gain some advantages in both his free and enslaved lives as a result of his musical talents are likely truthful depictions.

As in Africa, African-American music was also closely tied to dance. It is this aspect of African culture that, arguably, carried over into the Americas more than any other characteristic. Bodily movement, foot-stomping and hand-clapping accompanied almost all African-American music. Conversion to Christianity posed a dilemma for slaves—particularly in the South—where the Methodist missionaries condemned dancing (or any bodily movement during worship) as sinful. The shout spiritual or ring shout represents an attempt by slaves to combine bodily movement with music and devotion as an aspect of their religious expression. (*Example: demonstrate what a shout spiritual looks like*). (*Then play first (#2) “There’s Not a Friend Like the Lowly Jesus” in hymn version—followed by (#3) “Jesus Knows All About My Troubles” sung by residents of St. John’s Island, SC—one of the oldest African American communities in the Western hemisphere*).

There should be no surprise that music played such a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960’s, because music was a significant part of the social folkways of African-Americans. The Freedom Singers, formed in 1962 in Albany, Georgia, intentionally used music to educate communities about civil rights issues. Music was also used to energize and bolster the morale of foot soldiers in the movement. Indeed, Bernice Reagon Johnson, founder of the Freedom Singers and later of Sweet Honey in the Rock, suggested that the differences between people vanished when their voices were joined in song. In speaking about the role of music in bringing people of different backgrounds together, Reagon stated: “After the song, the differences between us would not be so great.” (Reagon “*In Our Hands*”) (#4) (Play “*Ella’s Song*” sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock). (#5) “*Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round;*” (#6) “*We Shall Overcome*”.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood the role of music in sustaining morale during the movement. Like most African-American Baptist ministers at the time, music played an important role in his sermons. As a child, I was privileged to have heard Dr. King preach on several occasions at Zion Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. Dr. King and my minister, Dr. L. Venchael Booth, were friends and colleagues.

Zion Baptist Church in the fifties and throughout the sixties was arguably at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. The guest ministers whom Rev. Booth invited to the church reflected that sentiment. They included, in addition to Dr. King, Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, Rev. Wyatt T. Walker—whose papers have recently been given to the University’s Boatwright Library—Rev. Gardner C. Taylor, Dr. Samuel Procter, Dr.

Benjamin Mays, and many, many more. Zion's embrace of the Civil Rights Movement was in direct conflict with the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (NBCUSA), which maintained a policy of official detachment from the Civil Rights Movement. A desire to be as actively engaged in the Movement as possible by Zion and several other black Baptist churches eventually led to tension between the NBCUSA and its more progressive congregations.

At the root of this tension was a power struggle over the leadership and future direction of the church. Would the church be at the forefront of important social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, or would it concern itself solely with ecclesiastical concerns? This tension came to a head when Dr. King's nomination of Rev. Gardner C. Taylor for president of the NBCUSA was defeated in 1961. Rev. Booth, who had supported Rev. Taylor, sent letters to a number of churches inviting them to send delegates to a two-day meeting on November 13-14, 1961 at Zion intended to discuss concerns about the direction of the NBCUSA. Thirty-three delegates from 14 states convened for two days, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention was formed.

As an active member of the congregation, my father served in a number of capacities to support the visitors at the church, and I assisted him. We set up chairs in the social hall and also served meals to our guests. In addition, my father and his fellow members of the Men's Chorus, led the singing during the deliberations. There was much excitement surrounding this gathering, as Zion had moved from its historic Ninth Street location in the West End to a resplendent new facility in Avondale. At one end of the long new building was the sanctuary, which was large enough to seat more than one thousand people; a small, intimate chapel was situated at the far end of the building. I was allowed to sit in on the deliberations. I especially enjoyed sitting in the back of the room listening to the discussions making the case for tying the new conventions' ideals to issues of freedom, civil and human rights, and to progressive ideas. And I remember the voices raised in song—strong, powerful, and hopeful.

As a young man, I recall that almost every time Dr. King preached at Zion, he was alone. However, on one occasion he brought his wife Mrs. Coretta Scott King. He had come to Cincinnati not only to preach at Zion, but also to preach at a revival for Dr. Otis Moss at Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Dr. King preached at the morning service, and in the afternoon Mrs. King performed a vocal recital. Mrs. King had met Dr. King while she was studying voice at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. She completed her master's degree at the Conservatory after the two were married.

Although she retired from singing professionally after her children were born, she did find a way to use her musical talent for the movement. She organized and performed in a series of Freedom Concerts, which were critically acclaimed. Her concerts combined music with poetry and narration to tell the story of the Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. King organized Freedom Concerts in many major American cities in order to raise money for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, founded by Dr. King.

Her “Freedom Concert” at Zion had a tremendous impact on me, as a young fledging cello player. I was really moved by her voice; in fact, I had goose bumps just listening and watching her sing. It was after speaking with her following her recital that I began for the first time to contemplate seriously the possibility of becoming a professional musician. When I told her that I played the cello, she told me to keep it up; she also mentioned that a black violinist had recently been appointed to the New York Philharmonic (Sanford Allen was appointed as the first black musician in the Philharmonic in 1961).

Many years later in 1994, I was asked to make remarks and present a gift to Mrs. King at the King Center from my Leadership Cleveland Class, which had flown to Atlanta for the day. Margot Copeland, then the Executive Director of Leadership Cleveland, had wanted our class of 64 predominantly white Cleveland leaders to experience a predominantly black city in action. As we were walking around the grounds of the Carter Center that morning, Margot asked if I would deliver remarks and present a token of our appreciation to Mrs. King at the end of our day in Atlanta. During my remarks—with some trepidation, because I was uncertain about how she might respond—I mentioned the impact her recital had had on me in my formative years as a cellist. To my delight, Mrs. King responded quite positively and was visibly moved.

These stories, and the enduring connections all of us create through meaningful interactions with each other, reflect the “Beloved Community” that Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement intended to create, and what we strive to create at the University of Richmond. As early as 1956, Dr. King spoke of the Beloved Community as the end goal of nonviolent boycotts. In a speech at a victory rally following the U.S Supreme Court decision to desegregate busses in Montgomery, Dr. King stated, “the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community,” Dr. King’s “dream in the heart.” And the ultimate goal of the Beloved Community is integration, which is genuine inter-group and inter-personal living.

At Richmond, we share common values and experiences. We interact in our classrooms and research labs, in living-learning communities, through community engagement and Study Abroad, and in the arts, athletics, and student activities. Our shared consciousness or music-memory, like the songs that once connected African slaves, is this University and the people who live and learn here. We have a lot that unites us, and much to celebrate. But on this day especially, let us commit to creating a Beloved Community at the University of Richmond, grounded in mutual understanding, mutual respect, and empathy. Let us seek friendships with those we don’t know, and understanding of opinions that differ from our own. Let us use grace, humor, and intelligence to confront injustice where and when we see it. For only then will we have created a community that is truly and enduringly intercultural, with genuine inter-group and inter-personal living—a community in which everyone thrives.

Thank you. And now let’s sing.

(Divide into two groups and practice with each group, then sing together):

1. "Glory, glory hallelujah, since I laid my burdens down."

2. "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, Oh this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine"