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The Influence of Music during the Civil Rights Movement

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1. Introduction:

The main goal of this paper is to revisit music as a medium of the public voice. It was, and still is today, a big part of African American culture in the United States of America during the civil rights movement. It will go into detail where music got its role from, how it became a means of demonstration, how the media covered it, the freedom song which is considered the most well-known one and it is going to present the voices singing and performing the music.

Music has always been an important part of any culture. It expresses love, sadness, joy, pain, and many other emotions. Historically, music has been used to communicate ideas and influence people positively and negatively. In the 1950s and 1960s, music was vital to and helpful to the civil rights struggle. During this time, musicians, activists, and singers rearranged and recomposed music to incorporate ethnography in order to spread freedom songs in both large and small gatherings, to strengthen psychological fortitude in the face of brutality and harassment, to motivate activists during protracted marches, and to pass the time when things were slow or in waiting. Songs were essential for empowering, encouraging, and giving voice to the cause. In the United States, one of the historical times in which music played a pivotal role was in the civil rights movement in America during the 1950s and 1960s. This movement sought to change how African Americans were treated under the law and by society. The civil rights movement coincided when many African-American artists began to gain popularity, playing music that expressed their feelings about racial inequality. Music was used to inspire a sense of pride and hope in African Americans and spread awareness about the injustices that were taking place in America.

2. Music as a means of demonstration:

The significance of protest songs in the history of the United States may be traced back to the eighteenth century within groups of enslaved African people. These songs were also written as a reaction to the Revolutionary War. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, protest songs addressed various issues, including slavery, poverty, famine, war, government, other conflicts, and the day-to-day difficulties of living. The significance of protest songs in the history of the United States may be traced back to the eighteenth century within groups of enslaved African people. These songs were also written as a reaction to the Revolutionary War. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, protest songs addressed various issues, including slavery, poverty, famine, war, government, other conflicts, and the day-to-day difficulties of living. Early protest songs performed by enslaved African peoples were primarily based on the tones of hymns and folk cultures. These early protest songs frequently had religious connotations and dealt with topics such as supplication, liberation from distress, remembering happier days, and wishing for better times in the future. Despite the fact that enslaved populations were often coerced into attending Christian church services, they were allowed to freely express their disappointments and aspirations via the performance of spirituals without fear of intervention or reprisal from their masters. In performances of songs associated with the Civil Rights Movement, one may also see performance characteristics typical of hymns and early protest songs.

2.1 How music became a means of demonstration:

Seeing as African Americans were at the center of the Civil Rights Movement, integral to understanding the role of music in the movement is an understanding of the type of music that was common among African Americans at the time. The Civil Rights Movement sparked a new wave of African-American music that spoke to the issues relevant to the black

community at the time. This movement was called "soul" music, a mixture of gospel and blues music, with elements of jazz and rhythm & blues thrown in. Soul music reflected the feelings of many African Americans during this period; it gave listeners a sense of pride, hope, and love in their struggle against racial inequality. Some of the most significant protest songs of the Civil Rights Movement were built on the foundation of the gospel, black spirituals, and other folk traditions. Musicians throughout the Civil Rights Movement typically reworked and updated the words of these traditional hymns and spirituals to reflect the feelings and hardships of the twentieth century.

2.2 Examples of music being used to demonstrate:

The Civil Rights Movement occurred from about 1954 through 1968. Formal and informal campaigns and demonstrations were common throughout this period to modify legislation that formally enforced inequality in the United States, particularly for African Americans. Protest marches, sit-ins, boycotts, and public assemblies were commonplace in these movements. Music had a vital role as a uniting factor, a method of drawing attention to the cause, and a source of inspiration for the demonstrators. The influence of music was felt early on in the civil rights movement. At the outset of the movement, churches served as a unifying factor for demonstrators by providing vocal leadership via singing and choral music. Most civil rights gatherings and protests included religious group music. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. elaborates on how church leaders energized and encouraged demonstrators throughout community-based movements like the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and 1956 by leading them in Baptist and Methodist songs². According to Dr. King, hearing these

¹ Gridley, Mark. "Misconceptions in linking free jazz with the civil rights movement." *College Music*

Symposium. Vol. 47. (College Music Society, 2007) 140.

² King, LaGarrett J. "Black history is not American history: Toward a framework of Black historical consciousness." *Social Education* 84.6 (2020) 335.

traditional songs was a powerful experience because it reminded listeners of the long history of the Negroes' suffering².

2.3 Recent exploration of the people involved:

During the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, popular music mainly consisted of choral pieces and spiritual hymns. The influence of this music on the people involved in the movement was recently explored in The New York Times. This newfound strength and solidarity is a direct result of the music. In particular, they sustain faith, a brilliant optimism in the future, even in our darkest hours. This early repertoire of hymns and songs was the driving force in organizing people and keeping them strong during the most trying times of the civil rights movement. Protesters in the south who were confronting violence and hatred found solace in the gospel and spiritual music. This song was played at gatherings, prayer processions, Freedom Rides, in prisons, and other events during the Civil Rights Movement. For example, sit-in and protest songs are reported separately³. This text demonstrates the multifaceted nature of music's significance in the Civil Rights Movement, as the gospel could be used to inspire bravery. In contrast, Negro Spirituals could be used to express the pain felt by African-Americans at the time.

3. Media coverage of the civil rights movement

Many famous musicians became engaged with the Civil Rights Movement because of media coverage of it. Mahalia Jackson, Harry Belafonte, Joan Baez, and many others in music and entertainment played crucial roles in guiding the movement. They would inspire others to join the Civil Rights struggle with solidarity songs. Many different kinds of musicians contributed to the Civil Rights Movement, not only black ones. Remember that

³ Rose, Leslie Paige. "The freedom singers of the civil rights movement: Music functioning for freedom." *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 25.2 (2007) 60.

the Civil Rights Movement was not one organized effort led by a single person but a conglomeration of separate but complementary efforts working toward the same goal. This resulted in a wider variety of musical styles and musicians from different parts of the world. For example, southern activists like Pete Seeger reworked a spiritual originally titled "I'll Be Alright Someday" as "We Shall Overcome" to rally the masses. Eventually, many other singers would cover this song, making it the unofficial anthem of the Southern Civil Rights Movement. Similarly, the morning before Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a Dream" speech in Washington, DC, singers like Joan Baez would perform an ancient slave song called "Oh Freedom"⁴. Baez's song performance and the participation of many other musicians and organizations played a significant role in garnering media attention and gaining white support for the civil rights movement.

3.1 The Ed Sullivan Program:

Media platforms like the Ed Sullivan program bolstered the Civil Rights Movement by allowing black artists to break into mainstream American culture and including well-known singers and bands who helped draw more attention to the cause. The proliferation of mass media was a significant factor in the success of the Civil Rights Movement. As more and more people in the United States acquired televisions, news of the civil rights movement spread like wildfire, allowing ordinary citizens to see the fight for equality up close and personal for the first time. Since television reaches a far wider audience than radio, musical performances would significantly boost its presence throughout the civil rights movement. The likes of Diana Ross, Nat King Cole, the Supremes, and many more would first become familiar to American audiences thanks to various programs like "The Ed Sullivan Show"⁵.

⁴ King, LaGarrett J. "Black history is not American history: Toward a framework of Black historical consciousness." *Social Education* 84.6 (2020) 340.

⁵ Rose, Leslie Paige. "The freedom singers of the civil rights movement: Music functioning for freedom." *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 25.2 (2007) 65.

3.2 Exposing middle America:

Broadcasts like Ed Sullivan's would expose middle America to the sounds of the Civil Rights Movement. As a result, more African Americans would be exposed to mainstream culture, strengthening the cause. The culture of white America was already being influenced by music. Even before the widespread popularity of rock & roll in the 1960s, musicians like Chuck Berry were bridging cultural divides in the 1950s. Berry, known as the "Father of Rock and Roll," significantly influenced many Civil Rights-era musicians. This includes Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and many more. In the early 1950s, black music and slang began to enter the mainstream. Black music and other parts of black culture may be transmitted with more significant regularity with the spread of media, which, from an anthropological perspective, would enable music to play an even more central role in civil rights. An effective means of disseminating musical messages on civil rights would be via television.

4. We Shall Overcome: The most well-known liberation song:

The song "We Shall Overcome" is often considered the most well-known of all the liberation songs. Not only does the intricate mechanism through which this piece was embraced as a type of unofficial anthem for the revolution tell a lot about the spontaneous and hybrid character of African American musical tradition, but it also exposes a lot about the character of the campaign itself. The movement exhibited unbounded inventiveness and versatility throughout its existence. In the end, despite all of the movement's spirituality, ethical and jurisprudential authority, and courageous efforts at the comprehensible tactical organization, the movement was overall far less focused on dogmatic conceptions of philosophical or strategic appropriateness as it was with attempting to get the job done of demolishing separation and disempowerment. Throughout its long and illustrious history,

black music has always shown many of the same objectives. It is a well-known fact that African American music has always preferred a select group of musical methods and instruments. However, the most prominent and well-known black performers have seldom been so consumed with questionable conceptions of musical authenticity or purity that they have overlooked a catchy melody, an excellent arrangement, or telling lyrics, regardless of where they came from⁶. Like the movement, black music was inventive, adaptable, and varied. It used any number of approaches and tactics that would serve to make a powerful and moving piece of "black" music. The song "We Shall Overcome" is an excellent example of this ethnic hybridism. The lyrics of "I'll Overcome Someday," a hymn written in the eighteenth century, seem to be where the song's tale begins. This hymn was rewritten as "We Shall Overcome" by Southern African American tobacco laborers during the interwar period. They performed it for Zilphia Horton of the Highlander Folk School, a significant biracial learning foundation for activists interested in workforce organizing and gradual electoral reform in the south⁷. Pete Seeger, a white folk musician and political activist, was introduced to the song by Horton, who presented it to Seeger. Seeger introduced different lines to the song, including "black and white together," to generate the variant that Guy Carawan, the music supervisor of Highlander, promulgated as a unified invitation for human rights and social justice in the late 1950s..

4.1 Changes to the song by other people:

During this same time, the song was also influenced by the contributions of a few other people. For instance, during the summer of 1959, the Tennessee State Police attempted to shut down Highlander forcefully. A black high school girl named Mary Ethel Dozier wrote

⁶ Morant, Kesha M. "Language in action: funk music as the critical voice of a post-civil rights movement counterculture." *Journal of Black Studies* 42.1 (2011) 72.

⁷ Eyerman, Ron. "Music in movement: Cultural politics and old and new social movements." *Qualitative Sociology* 25.3 (2002) 450.

the stanza "We are not afraid" in response to this attempt. Her contribution was a paradigmatic illustration of how freedom songs were often conceived of for the first time or reimagined when the fight for liberation was still raging.

4.2 How the song was performed:

Until now, "We Shall Overcome" has often been sung in a style akin to the Southern white folklore, with remains of hymnody, despite several discernible "black" influences on its creation. The Albany, Georgia, civil rights movement of 1961 and 1962 altered that. Young black activists in Albany reduced the speed and added syncopated rhythms to the song's fundamental framework. This allowed for impromptu vocal interjection from the singer-protestors who congregated to sing it at public gatherings and throughout their protests. Reagon and her other musicians reimagined the song "We Shall Overcome" by incorporating a call-and-response vocal structure and improvisational opportunities from black gospel music. This rendition of the song, constantly updated to fit the needs of certain events in specific locations, has made the song so emblematic of the original Southern endeavors of the Civil Rights Movement.

5. The people performing liberation songs:

The music created would not have had such an important role during the civil rights movement, if it there would have been no fitting singers performing them. It required both skill in the vocal areas as well as deep dedication for the movement for the music to be this moving and empowering.

5.1 The Freedom Singers:

The Albany initiative, which took place from 1961 to 1962, was unsuccessful in its attempt to integrate public spaces. And yet, it can point to a significant achievement in the form of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Freedom Singers. Live concerts and releases using classic black spirituals and traditional music, as well as newly composed liberation songs, served to disseminate the news of the cause far beyond the south,

as did a similar group, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Freedom Singers. Julian Bond, SNCC's head of public communications and relations, has called the group's musicians and singers "the public face" of the movement. Bond claims that the Freedom Singers, in addition to generating money for the always-broke SNCC, also went out across racial and geographical barriers to demonstrate to our contemporaries in white college colleges throughout the nation who they are, therefore galvanizing student support for the struggle.

5.2 The freedom anthems:

A musical history of the Southern campaign would be incomplete without including the freedom anthems performed by activists at the front lines of the civil rights battle. However, soul, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, jazz, folk, gospel, and the blues, all of which the liberation songs often interacted with, also give significant insights into the intertwined histories of the independence fight, black racial awareness, and racial relations. Not only did African Americans write and perform songs about the movement in the '50s and '60s, but so did other artists. White folk musicians sang songs about the humiliation of segregation and the disgrace of racism that insulted America's most important democratic principles. They also lauded the fight to end racial inequality. For instance, "Oxford Town" by Bob Dylan was a scathing critique of the state-sanctioned racism and apathy that led to the violent riots that claimed the lives of four students and a professor in 1962 when James Meredith desegregated the University of Mississippi under army watch. Many people, particularly young white university students, were moved to support civil rights rallies and change by the sincere and often inspiring music created by folkies like Dylan.

5.3 Supporting the movement:

Those who sang folk or liberation songs were often not shy about supporting the Civil Rights Movement. It's tempting to look just at the words of songs when trying to determine

which pieces of music best capture the spirit of the civil rights movement. Even yet, it's necessary to acknowledge that the evolving black musical styles of the time encapsulated the renewed black pride and heightened racial awareness that formed the foundation for any organized battle for social equality. Soul music, created by artists like the Impressions, Sam Cooke, and Ray Charles in the late '50s and perfected by the stars of Motown and Stax in Detroit and Memphis and numerous others in the '60s, combined pop, rhythm, and blues, and in the case of Southern soul, country music with the pervasive gospel impacts that characterized the style as undeniably and boldly African American regardless of the song lyrics⁸. In other words, long before James Brown released the more lyrically overt anthem "Say It Loud, I'm Black, and I'm Proud" in 1968, his groovy poly-rhythms and unrestricted vocals in seemingly nonpartisan songs such as "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" sang loads concerning black dignity, contextual inventiveness, and legacy.

6. Conclusion:

Music's effectiveness and contribution to the civil rights movement can be attested to by activists like Martin Luther King Jr. and others. Later, Martin Luther King would say that the liberation songs are an important and powerful part of our movement. They instill new courage and a sense of community among the populace. They maintain hope and faith in the future, especially in our darkest hours. Black people sang them under civil oppression, and King's Institute at the time served similar reasons. We were both "in bondage," and the songs offer hope to our conviction that We shall conquer, Black and white together, we shall overcome someday. The civil rights songs encouraged the downtrodden to work toward the day when they would finally experience equality.

⁸ Rodriguez, Noreen Naseem, and Amanda Vickery. "Much bigger than a hamburger: Disrupting problematic picturebook depictions of the Civil Rights Movement." *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 22.2 (2020) 109.

It's impossible to overstate music's profound influence on the Civil Rights Movement and its lasting effects on American culture. These shifts are readily apparent in the regular music usage in demonstrations and concerts staged to raise awareness about social concerns. By the 1980s, black cultural music icons like rap and soul had become as popular as rock and roll or country, replacing the earlier civil rights music. Through rap, issues like poverty, ghettos, violence, and inner-city gangs would be brought into the spotlight (History). The songs would change people's positive and unfavorable opinions about African Americans. Rappers of the era often criticized white America in songs that addressed such issues as police brutality, governmental power, and racism. The fact that people of other races and cultures have embraced African American culture and music shows how influential the music of the civil rights movement was. That's perhaps the most significant musical development of the Civil Rights Movement.

7. Works cited

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