



THE MUSIC OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

How Songs define and carry a movement from the
Plantations to today

ABSTRACT

What were the songs of the Civil Rights Movement? Who were the voices and what were the stories behind songs like John Coltrane's "Alabama" or Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come." What were the songs sung on the streets and how are these times still relevant today? Jonathan David Faulkner explores these questions and more in the following pages.

Jonathan Faulkner

Prophets of the Civil Rights Movement

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The Musical Prophets: The Music of the Civil Rights Movement

If we set back and listened to the story of the Civil Rights Movement from those who were there we might hear a common chord, no pun intended, that being the opening chord of a song that would begin in the fields of the southern plantations and northern living quarters that continues today. This song, this mostly sad but beautiful song is the song of souls fighting for the right to be granted what they already should have had, dignity and personhood. It is a song that has so often gone unheard by the greater American public and even been intentionally drowned out by the American Church. It is a song that tells tales of lynching's and beatings and of the hope of a better future. Of overcoming the cruelty of having ones personhood stripped away and of resisting the continued attempts to continue to deny the personhood and dignity of an entire race. It is a song that sometimes takes the form of spirituals and sometimes takes the form of Jazz and sometimes, more so today, takes the form of Hip-Hop. A song that if we truly listened to we would not here mere melody and verse by the souls of Black men and women crying out for the one thing that all should recognize without hesitation, the dignity of being seen and treated as a human being. That is the music of the Civil Rights Movement before, during and beyond, the song of a struggle for to be viewed with worth and dignity.

Here we will look at some of the songs of the Civil Rights Movement as well as the artists who performed them. We will hear from The Freedom Singers, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Sam Cooke and many others. We will also take a brief look at how these themes have been picked up in Hip-Hop, specifically Christian Hip-Hop and look at the way music has changed to better reflect the pain that is reflected in the lyrics. While books sources have been

used, the purpose is to analyze the lyrics of the music itself. Book work will be used to bring out the background of the various songs and artists, such as the song “Berlin Wall” and how it reflects the events and was even sung during the Selma March. Because of the broad range of this topic and short page number given it is necessary to focus primarily on Black singers and groups and only even a few artists have been included but one must also recognize that there were many white musicians who wrote during the Civil Rights Movement and concerning Civil Rights Themes, the most notable being Nobel Peace Prize winner Bob Dylan. Sadly, this brief overview then barely does justice to such a beautiful and important part of the Civil Rights Movement or CRM as it will be referred to from here on out.

Styles & Characterization;

To begin a discussion on the topic of the music of the CRM one must first look at the styles and characterization of that music. By Characterization I mean how the music and lyrics work in tandem to give the full effect of the song. A longer paper would reveal a more nuanced conversation, but let us stick to the basics. The music began as the Negro Spirituals sung in the fields of the plantations and then in the Black Churches of the south. Pointing to such a great promise and freedom that we find in the Gospel. Songs like Bishop Walter Hawkins (1949-2010) “I’m going up a yonder” are close proximities to the sentiment and prayer you might have heard in the fields and reflects the desire so often expressed by the songwriters to be near to God. Though Hawkins writes after the Civil Rights Movement, recording albums from 1970-2009, he captures the desire for the freedom and the close communion and intimacy with God.¹

¹ Bishop Walter Hawkins, I’m Goin’ up a Yonder, arr by Martin Sirvatka, Hal Leonard, 1988, Libra music BMI

While the lyrics, which we will come to later, explored the pain and struggle of the Civil Rights Movement, the music often did not. Yes, there were some songs, such as John Coltrane's *Alabama* that catch almost perfectly the pain of the writer and capture the mood of an entire group of people. But there are also songs that, while expressing the urgency of the current cause, do so using a much blither key and very upbeat sound while using lyrics that purposely subvert the more upbeat music. This was because if you played the music the industry liked, music that was defined by the white power structure, you would be accepted to play gigs in places where the more subversive music was not accepted. Since people rarely actually listened to the words of the songs, as they do today, the messages often got lost in the music. An example of this was the very provocative "Mississippi Goddam" by Nina Simone. The fast paced, upbeat tempo is contrasted by lyrics that might incite white audiences to violence if they actually listened to the words.

Regardless, it was an artform, one that needed to be heard and respected. Though some like John Coltrane did not necessarily think of it as art the Jazz critic Amiri Baraka insisted that Black Art, including Music, was: "Crucially different from the Frank Stella-Roberts kind" that it was: "by definition, related to daily life, to culture, to public, self-definition and self-realization with regard to resisting racism."² Leonard L. Brown agrees with this assessment in his own book on Coltrane saying: "It often reflected adaptations and innovations resulting Black American life experiences."³ Writing at the height of the CRM it would seem that Baraka gives us a good definition to apply specifically to Black Music. And that is certainly true of a lot of the pieces we have and will look at throughout the discussion. Songs like "Mississippi Goddam" and The

² Ben Ratliff, *Coltrane: The Story of a Sound*, Picador, 2007, New York

³ Leonard L. Brown, *John Coltrane and the Black American Struggle for Freedom*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010

Freedom Singers “Berlin Wall” were about specific situations and stood up against the Racism and against the cultural norms like inequality and segregation that often seemed like a wall.

Simone even goes so far as to say: “You do not have to live next to me, just give me equality.”⁴

Sadly those words could still speak in many places around the country and in many churches today. For some Artists, the notion of Civil Rights and music were inseparable Miles Davis is said to have spoke as though: “Jazz and Civil Rights went hand in hand.” As his own legacy helped lead to the desegregation of various concert venues.⁵

This dynamic was not just part of the Jazz or Bebop scenes but found itself in regular soul music as well in the music of Sam Cooke. His song: “A Change is gonna Come” tells his story of going to a Whit hotel in Louisiana when all the Black hotels were full and though he asked for help, he was turned away because he was Black.⁶ The line comes out very clearly in verse 3: “*Then I go to my brother and say brother help me please, but he ends up knockin’ me back down on my knees.*”⁷ It is true that this kind of being turned away was part of the everyday lives of Black Men and Women in the South and in the North. During the Freedom Rides, for example, churches would place people, as guards, to keep the riders out of the churches⁸ and during the sit-ins Black Men and Women would be told to move. John Coltrane’s Alabama, as before mentioned; was written during the events unfolding in Birmingham, the mournful sax solo, not only showing the brilliance of Coltrane, but also the feeling of pain that backlit the song.⁹

⁴ Nina Simone, Mississippi Goddamn, Warner / Chappell Music Inc. BMI ASCAP,

⁵ Robert Marice Berman Jr. Miles Davis and the Civil Rights Movement in America, Kindle Books, Seattle WA 2015

⁶ Dr. Emmitt Price III, Lecture, Prophets of the Civil Rights Movement, 10/19/17, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

⁷ Sam Cooke, A Change is Gonna Come, Abko Music Inc.

⁸ Carolyn Renee Dupont, Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, New York University Press, New York, 2013, Mississippi goddamn, earlier mentioned, reflects the anger felt towards Mississippi as one of the most dangerous states for Civil Rights Workers and for Black men and women in general.

⁹ Ben Ratliff, Coltrane, 2007

Folk Songs & Their Contexts:

One of the greatest and at the same time most tragic aspects of the music of the CRM is that there is a lot that comes organically from the trials and events such as Billy Holiday's "Strange Fruit" or Coltrane's "Alabama". Most tragic because the fact that these songs about dehumanization and brutality had to be written at all tell us much about the sins of our tragic history. Some of it though grew out of the men and women fighting in the moment. The Nonviolent protestors who sat up night and day, in some cases, singing against the evils of Segregation. The Following section looks at some of those individual songs and examines their contexts, some of the history is devastating and some of it results in holding out for a victory. That is, however, the beauty of music and the greatest thing about being a musician. Songs writers become the witnesses to the major events and mourn over them or celebrate them depending on the event. Sometimes both are present, like in the case of John Walk & the Opened Eyes "River Song" which follows the story of a soldier's fiancé in World War II after he was killed dropping into Normandy.¹⁰ Or THRICE's song "Black Honey" which tells of the failed Middle Eastern Foreign Policy that has led to so much worldwide death and destruction.¹¹ As for Black American Folk Songs that were sung in the streets capture those struggles more exactly, not better, but more exactly, than some of the previously mentioned counterparts.

As Sarah Shin talks about in her book "Beyond Color Blind" Black Americans spent much of the last four centuries without power and their songs captured their fights against injustice and stories of pain that white-dominated history books and stories could not."¹² So,

¹⁰ Jonathan David Faulkner, "River Song" 10:31 Life Publishing" As performed by John Walk & the Opened Eyes, 2015.

¹¹¹¹ Thrice, Black Honey, 2017, Genius Media Group

¹² Sarah Shin, Beyond Colorblind: Redeeming the Ethnic Journey, Intersity Press, New York 2017 pg. 182

when you hear the music of the Civil Rights Movement the challenge becomes to hear the stories and see the people singing the song. If you calm your mind at times, listening to these songs, you can almost see Diane Nash sitting at the counter in a town in Kentucky or see the SNCC protestors sitting at the rope singing until the police take it down. You can almost see the Black Congregations all across the North and South singing “We Shall Overcome” a new wording of the spiritual “I’ll Overcome Someday.”¹³ Indeed, to hear the songs and not pay attention to the stories and the people telling them seems inconceivable, something likely done by only the most calloused who were present at Selma or Birmingham.

Berlin Wall: Let us look then at the stories that make up some of these songs and try to see the people singing them. For, like Martin Luther, alone in mighty castle, exiled and with limited contact, penned the words “A Might Fortress is Our God”¹⁴ we find the circumstances of the men and women of the CRM in their music. Take for example the Song “Berlin Wall” which one might think was about President Ronald Raegan’s demand to Gorbachave. Of course, that is the illusion that the SNCC protestors in Selma Alabama were going for as they sat behind a rope and a line of police officers awaiting the handing down of an injunction that would allow them to march from Selma to Montgomery.¹⁵ Facing down an army of Policemen, State Troopers and “Peace” men, who at one point went on a rampage through the protesters, beating and tear gassing them while they peacefully demonstrated through the night. The action led to a flooding of Selma by Black men and women and their allies, coming to support SNCC and the Southern Leadership Conference led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and as legal proceedings continued at a

¹³ Guy & Candie Carawan: Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through its songs, 1990, Sing Out Corporation, Bethlehem Pennsylvania

¹⁴ James M. Kittleson, Hans H. Wierma, Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career, Second Edition, Fortress Press, 2016Minneapolis MN

¹⁵ Robert F. Darben, The other Berlin Wall & what it can teach us today: Huffington Post, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-f-darden/the-other-berlin-walland-_b_6102746.html

snail's pace, one of Montgomery's Lawmen William Baker roped off the bridge that led from the predominately Black Selma and predominately white Brown's Church. The roped was instantly named the Berlin Wall,¹⁶ For hours and then days the protestors began and continue singing a song now called "Berlin Wall" at the rope, much to the chagrin of the police who guarded the rope. Changing the words depending upon who or what represented the wall. At one point the rope was removed and the Police Cars were put in place to form the wall and the cruisers themselves became the words of the song. The Lyrics went like this:

*We've got a rope that's a Berlin Wall, Berlin Wall, Berlin Wall,
We've got a rope that's a Berlin Wall, in Selma, Alabama.
We're gonna stand here till it falls, till it falls, till it falls,
We're gonna stand here till it falls, in Selma, Alabama.*

On and on until the Berlin Wall finally came down, 25 years before the real one, and the march was allowed to proceed.

You'd better Leave Segregation Alone: A song of the sit-ins, this song was a parody of the rock song "You'd better leave my little Kitten Alone"¹⁷ by Little Willie John and was popularized during the Nashville Sit-Ins. The Lyrics are franks and condemning of the hardcore segregationist who so adamantly apposed any form of desegregation, especially that of the lunch counter. ("*You'd better leave segregation alone, cause they love segregation, like an old dog loves a bone.*") A song that could have easily been sung about Mississippi Churches, it addresses the apparent need for there to be segregation felt by the white shoppers. Like the boys

¹⁶ Robert F. Darban - https://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-f-darden/the-other-berlin-walland-_b_6102746.html

¹⁷ Varawan: Sing for Freedom, pg 30.

interviewed in the “Eyes on the Prize” documentary on PBS who said “I do not want to eat next to a _____”¹⁸ As if, desegregating would have posed a threat to the privileges of the white man.

Keep Your Eyes on the Prize: Finally, it is only appropriate to mention the song that could be heard during almost every part of the CRM. It was written by Alice Wine who was one of the first graduates of the Septima Clarks Voter schools on John’s Island in 1956.¹⁹ As Guy and Candie Carawan would write about the song in their book of Civil Rights Songs entitled “Sing for Freedom:” “The song had meaning for the sit-in students who were the first to be bound in jail for long periods of time. It went with the Freedom Riders to Jackson and into Parchman, and on into Albany and all of the many other areas of struggle.” This was the first song considered when thinking about this topic and it is one many likely still remember hearing all over the South. The song itself follows the story of Paul and Silas found in Acts 16-16-40. (*Paul and Silas bound in jail, had no money for to go their bail, keep your eyes on the prize, hold on, hold on.*) from the time they are thrown in jail, til the miraculous opening of the doors by an Earthquake while they sang. The song then turns to the men and women who have been sitting in, riding busses and being jailed and speaks of the urgency that should have taken them from the beginning all while looking forward to the day when freedom would come. (*“We’ve met jail and violence too, God’s love has seen us through,”*). The song is jarring if you actually listen to the lyrics and offers such a beautiful hope in the midst of such heartache and pain. Thankfully though, the singers did keep their eyes on the prize and some still have their eyes on that same prize, even today.

¹⁸ Eyes on the Prize, America’s Civil Rights Years 1956-1969, Public Broadcasting Station

¹⁹ Corawan: Sing for Freedom pg 111

The Themes Carry On: The Civil Rights Music In Modern Christian Hio-Hop

While Secular Hip-Hop is something that is foreign to me as I write this, there are two artists within Christian Music, which I know very well because of past work in the industry, who I have found the continuation of the Themes of the songs of the Civil Rights Movement.²⁰ While Christian Music has slowly become more and more irrelevant, a sentiment shared by artists like Matt Bronlewee formerly of Jars of Clay and Charlie Peacock²¹ It is true that in Christian Music Markets, the music we would today consider “Woke” is often pushed to the backburner. For example; the For King & Country Song “O God Forgive us” climbed the top 20 up to No. 13 but because it was not “Positive and encouraging” certain stations refused to play it and it is now dropping back down the charts.

We have also seen a movement to greater relevancy by artists like Lecrae who, because they have spoken out and “Stepped outside the mold”²² set by the CMG’s, Labels and BMI/ASCAP has been ostracized as has seen his airtime on Christian Radio cut by 60% while some listeners were surprised to find that he had a new album out since most stations, including Christian Rap/Rock/Metal RadioU.²³ While Lecrae’s “Divorce” from Evangelicalism²⁴ has turned the Record Labels against him, it has not turned his fan base against him, hungry for truth and honesty this record has done better than any of its predecessors despite the lack of airplay.

²⁰ Please forgive me, I can only write what I know, and I know very little to nothing about secular Hip-Hop. I have however covered Lecrae for years and saw the beginning of KB’s rise to prominence. Formerly I was worked for Altrocklive.com Christian Music Group as a music Critic and stay as up to date as I can on the music news.

²¹ Charlie Peacock, *At the Cross Roads: An Insiders look at the past, present and future of Contemporary Christian Music*, 1999, Boardman and Holeman Publishers, Nashville TN

²² Jonathan David Faulkner, *godsheartforthose.com* October 17, 2017, Accessed on Nov. 28th 2017, <https://godsheartforthose.com/2017/10/19/lecræ-matt-toby-white-evangelicalism-and-quitting-church/>

²³ Based on 100+ hours of listening and comparing notes with my younger brother who listens to this station much, much more than I do and who, as I did, heard nothing of Lecrae’s new album, not even a song. RadioU has since switched to playing Christmas Music.

²⁴ Hugh Macintire: Lecrae talks new album and moving beyond Christian Music: Forbes, July 10th 2017, Accessed October 2017 - <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2017/07/10/lecræ-talks-his-new-album-and-moving-beyond-christian-music/#2d78b0ad4774>

Just as we discussed earlier, before his music fit the mold while the lyrics were subversive, now the lyrics and the music are unapologetically and blatantly “Woke” For Example verse two takes up certain Civil Rights Themes of not being treated as “Property” or fear of police or the tokenism that he was so often a victim of:

*Huh, once upon a time, God Opened up my mind
And showed me I don't have to be a product people buy
With this God given wisdom I can climb up out these holes
Stay up out the system cause the system never let go
Speak the Truth with no fear, it's gonna ruin my career
I've been a mascot for too long, I ain't come here for no fears
First of all, let me be clear one time Let me be real one time
If you want a religious puppet you're gonna have to hang this guy
I've been around the world, seen pretty girls caged up as sex slaves
Crooked cops done pulled me over treated me like I ain't made In the image of God and
that's so odd I'm at Sunday service with a snapback
And if ya hatin' on me go and hate, but if you gon' ride
You better tell me if you're with me.²⁵*

This song reminds us of songs like “Eyes on the Prize” or “Berlin Wall” and so many others of the CRM. The fact that these songs are still essential tells me we have not come as far as so many think we have.

The other artist making waves is the up and comer KB who makes a guest appearance on the aforementioned For King & Country song “O God Forgive Us” and who also appeared on Tenth Avenue North’s hit song “For Those who Can’t Speak.” He has been quickly and quietly carving out a name for himself in the Christian Rap Scene. But if stepping from the mold has caused industry leaders to turn on superstars such as Lecrae, how quickly will it devour a rising star like KB who’s music represents a generation of rappers who may never make it in Christian Music because they are dealing with relevant Matters. Rappers like Young Noah who was a

²⁵ Lecrae Moore, Come and Get me, Kobalt Music Publishing

friend of Michael Brown's and wrote a song about his death and BLM. While Lecrae cannot be accused of pulling any punches, KB brings the knockout on his new album "Today we Rebel." Not only is the entire album incredibly relevant it contains one of the most intense songs ever to be heard on a Christian Rap Album in the song "New Portrait."

*Look, was Christ really buried?
Is this whole story very fairy and I was just a man?
Did they really find His bones and they lied to keep the cold
Or did He walk out of His tomb to a throne?
Was He God? Was He not?
Did He buy us a spot in Heaven or is all of this a ruse?
Are we just delusional fools who refuse to believe in the truth or we fools?
Is all this the white man religion?
European invention to drive the weak to submission
How can an African like me get division
When these preachers owned slaves but taught that freedom was Christian
Christ to the culture
Christ to the vultures
Committed genocide with a cross and oldster
Christ of America
Christ of the system
That is not my Saviour, that's a politician*

*Christ that the Lord knows
Christ that was foretold
Christ that's shoulda come back in His war clothes
Which Christ do you believe?
You gotta know before you leave²⁶*

If Lecrae is merely subverting the system, KB is destroying it and voicing the reason so many Blacks, like John Coltrane, rejected the White Evangelicalism that dictated the humanity or inhumanity of entire races and groups of people based on what can only be called, as KB points out here, a false gospel. His question at the end of the chorus stings a little to the unwoke "What Christ do you believe? You gotta know before you leave." His indictment of preachers who

²⁶ KB, New Portrait, BMI ASCAP 2017

owned slaves but preached freedom takes us back to certain Civil Rights themes such as “Eyes on the Prize” and others. Again, the fact that we still need songs like this today tells me we are so far from where we need to be.

In Conclusion:

In Conclusion we have seen how from the cotton fields of southern plantations to the streets of Selma, to the world of Christian Music today how the music of the CRM has reflected the people and experiences as they have struggled to be seen as human and treated with equality and dignity, a right they should have had from the beginning. From Nina Simone to John Coltrane, to the Freedom Singers, to the students sitting at a segregated counter in Nashville to modern rappers, we have seen how the struggle has played out through songs. Songs that beg for us to listen and to hear the voices and see the people singing as they struggle for a better future and the fulfilment of a dream. As they truly keep their eyes on the prize and hold on tight.

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