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Hist 395
Kramer
3/17/16

Script: Connection through Music in the Civil Rights Movement

<“Freedom Medley: Freedom Chant / Oh Freedom / This Little Light of Mine” as performed by the Freedom Singers>

Topic: In this podcast, I will examine the music of the American civil rights movement particularly the music from the early to mid-1960’s while civil rights efforts were still largely focused on integration, rather than building Black power.

Throughout the podcast, you will hear music from Bernice Johnson Reagon’s compilation of civil rights music in the record “Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966,” which was produced by Smithsonian-Folkways Recordings in 1997. The tracks were drawn from a variety of sources. Significantly, many of the tracks were recorded live in mass meetings held in churches, where people from “different life experiences came together in a common struggle” (“Voices of the Civil Rights Movement”).

I originally came to the topic of civil rights music because I wanted to explore the dynamic in the folk scene between white, middle-class folk fans and black civil rights activists. In her book, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America*, historian Grace Elizabeth Hale argues that white folk musicians and fans were able to connect with Black civil rights activists within the context of the folk revival, despite having different motivations for participating in the folk revival. Tellingly, Hale describes participating in the folk revival for white fans and musicians as “joining with the folk,” indicating that folk

fans and musicians who were not part of the traditional profile of folk – that is, poor, rural, and marginalized – were still able to connect with the “folk” within the revival context (Hale, 86).

The means of connecting with the folk was the music: “It did not matter that the sources and the contours of the alienation that brought people to hear the [Black civil rights activists] concerts were different from those of the performers ... for a moment, in the singing, these differences did not matter.” (Hale, 115).

To further explore this dynamic, I delved into the topic of Freedom Songs, the music of civil rights activists. To my surprise, I discovered how dynamics between white folk fans and the “folk” – particularly a sense of connection through music despite different life experiences – were reflected in a way among the Black community too. The music brought together not just races, but also different socio-economic classes – really different life experiences – within the same race. So, in this podcast, I will explore how music, particularly the Freedom Songs, connected people divided by class, educational attainment level, location, etc., and how, throughout all of this, the “folk” elements of the music supported this connection.

<“Ain’t Scared of Nobody” as performed by Amanda Bowens Perdeu and Virginia Davis >

Historical Context of black action or in-action

Before launching into an explanation of how music during the civil rights movement connected Black Americans across social classes, I want to explain more why there was a need for connection in the first place. When activists like those from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (which from now on I’ll refer to as SNCC) went into southern Black communities to try to get Blacks to vote, why was there not immediate response by the community? Why did the civil rights activists have to establish connection with the Black

communities in which they worked?

In his book *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, the historian Charles M. Payne describes the conditions of racial power in Mississippi. He explains (helpfully voiced by a male actor):

“Everything that took place in Mississippi during the 1960s took place against that state’s long tradition of systematic racial terrorism. Without some minimal protection for the lives of potential activists, no real opposition to the system of white supremacy was possible. Lynching is only one form of racial terror and statistics on it virtually always underestimate the reality, but between the end of Reconstruction and the modern civil rights era, Mississippi lynched 539 Blacks ... Between 1930 and 1950 – during the two decades immediately preceding the modern phase of the civil rights movement – the state had a least 33 lynchings” (Payne, 7)

Whites’ threats of extreme violence served to caution southern Blacks from action that would upset the white hierarchical order – joining the civil rights movement would certainly qualify as seeking to disrupt, really overthrow, the white hierarchical order. Although Payne writes specifically about Mississippi, Blacks faced similar conditions across the South. Payne concludes:

“The point was that there did not have to be a point; Black life could be snuffed out on a whim, you could be killed because some ignorant white man didn’t like the color of your shirt, or the way you drove a wagon. Mississippi Blacks had to understand that viscerally. Those who wanted to work for change had to understand they were challenging a system that could and would take their lives casually” (Payne, 15)

Thus, taking action, particularly in such a direct attack on white power such as voting, was dangerous. So when a SNCC field worker – a college-educated, middle-class Black from out of town – went to a Southern Black community to ask for action, it’s no surprise that they were sometimes met with trepidation.

In order to tell the story of music's capacity for connection, I am going to tell you the story of a SNCC field worker named Sam Block who went to Greenwood, Mississippi in an effort to encourage Black voting. I found this story in a collection of interviews conducted by Joseph A. Sinsheimer, a history student at Duke University in 1987 who recorded oral histories from participants in the Mississippi civil rights movement.

Block – as was typical of SNCC field workers – was a Black middle-class, college student who was active in the civil rights movement. Like many SNCC field workers, his background did not match the backgrounds of many of the people whom he wanted to mobilize into the civil rights movement – often, people working on plantations. As a stranger with a different life experience, especially one who was trying to encourage dangerous action for Blacks in the South, Block experienced initial difficulty connecting with the Black community of Greenwood. Reflecting on his entrance into the town, Block remembers the fear that his activism inspired in Greenwood's Black population. Block remembers, “As a matter of fact students and other people, I mean the younger people, when they saw me coming would automatically get on the other side of the street. I would go into pool halls and I was no longer welcome in the pool hall. As a matter of fact they just completely separated themselves, divorced themselves from me period” (Block, Sam interviewed, 15) < Cassette 1, 41:32 – 41:42> Underlying Black Greenwood's initial chilly reception of Block was the idea that he, along with other civil rights activists, was going to enter a community, trouble the racial order, and then leave the local people to suffer the consequences of upsetting that order. Block says, “People would just get afraid of me... They said, ‘He's a freedom rider’ ...I was just there to stir up trouble” (Payne, 146). When an outsider is pushing a dangerous agenda, it can be difficult for him or her to establish a connection.

<"Get on Board Children", as performed by Willie Peacock">

Music as connection in Block's narrative

Here is where music enters the story. At the first mass meeting Block organized in Greenwood, Block taught Freedom Songs. The next day, Black Greenwood treated Block differently, approaching him, instead of avoiding him, and significantly asking when there would be another meeting and chance to learn more Freedom Songs. Block recounts:

"The next day as I walked the streets I met a lot of people. And the thing that they remembered the most about that meeting that we had that night were the songs that we were singing. And asked when we were going to have another meeting and sing those songs. And I began to then see the music itself as being a real important organizing tool to really begin to bring people together. And not only just as an organizing tool to bring them together, but also as an organizing tool to serve sort of as an organizational glue of holding them together." (Block, Sam interviewed, 18). <Cassette 1, part 2: 1:57 – 2:51>

The key details to draw out of Block's recollection are, first, that previously unreceptive Greenwood residents began to ask about new meetings, particularly in relation to a meeting with Freedom Songs, and second, Block's own identification of the songs as "glue," a perfect symbol of connection if I've ever heard one. Block echoes this later: "It always seemed to have been the music that really served as a drawing card and the organizational glue that always seemed to make people want to come back and be a part of whatever we were doing" (Block, Sam interviewed, 24) <Cassette 1, part 2: 23:02 – 23:22> I want to draw your attention to his explicit observation on the power of music; it was the music that made "people want to come back and be a part of whatever [SNCC] were doing." Suddenly, with this glue, this connection between Black Greenwood and SNCC as represented by Block, people wanted to join, to participate. In Greenwood, Freedom Songs catalyzed connection.

Other civil rights activists who worked to share Freedom Songs picked up on the way the music supported connection. SNCC field worker Bernice Johnson Reagon recalled that after communal music-making, “the differences among us would not be so great. Somehow, making a song required an expression of that which is common to us all” (Martin, 29). In his book *The Theater Is in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America*, historian Bradford Martin identified the crucial impact music had on forging connection in the trend of SNCC dispatching field workers who were good songleaders, since music, in the context of participants from diverse backgrounds, provided “a means by which educated, often middle-class black student activists could effectively communicate with poor rural black Southerners” (Martin, 29). Martin crucially identified that connection required a means of communication, which music provided. Civil rights activist Julius Lester speaks to the cross-class communication Martin identified, when Lester said that Freedom Songs “crumbled the class barriers within the Negro community... The professor and the plumber, the society matron and the cleaning woman, the young college student and the unlettered old man stand beside each other, united by a song and a dream” (Martin, 29).

<“This Little Light of Mine” as performed by Betty Fikes >
Freedom Songs as folk songs

Across Black communities, like what we saw in Greenwood and other civil rights activists’ experiences with civil rights music, Freedom Songs served to support connections between different groups of Black Americans separated by divisions such as socio-economic class. But why? I argue that part of what produced this connective capacity in Freedom Songs were qualities that made them inherently part of the folk music universe – which is admittedly amorphous and flexible. Since civil rights activists who sang Freedom Songs used three things – vernacular music, the folk process, and communal performance – they democratized

relationships in the same ways folk musicians do through folk music. In other words, these characteristics made music – and the movement as a whole – more accessible to Black Americans across different backgrounds, which allowed the activists to forge connections with the communities where they worked.

I want to first start with the classification of Freedom Songs as “vernacular music.” According to historian Benjamin Filene, vernacular songs are “songs employing a music language that is current, familiar, and manipulable by ordinary people. In contrast to fine art or classical music, vernacular music demands only minimal formal training and material resources to produce it” (Filene, 4). The significance of this is the easily transmutable quality of Freedom Songs; without necessary prior knowledge or experience, people could share and learn the music despite different knowledge or experience. SNCC field worker, Hollis Watkins pointed out the concrete implications of this in Freedom Songs’ simplicity, claiming that anyone could “pick them up” and learn to sing them quickly (Martin, 39). Complementing their simplicity was their familiarity. According to SNCC member Bernice Johnson Reagon, the

“core of Civil Rights Movement songs was formed from the reservoir of the Black American traditional song repertoire and older styles of singing. This music base was expanded to include most of the popular Black American music forms and singing techniques of the period. From this storehouse, activist song leaders made a new music for a changed time” (“Voices of Struggle,” 1).

Let me pause and ask why did activists draw Freedom Songs from these types of music? Reagon has said that Southern Black colleges, from where SNCC members were often sourced, ‘as a general rule, attempted to free students from the cultural traditions and ties that were distinctly rural, Black, and old-fashioned’ (Martin, 22). Guy Carawan, a folk musician who aided in the production and dissemination of Freedom Songs, reinforces this point when he said “Black

college students had generally rejected their rural musical backgrounds and preferred formal hymns at their meetings,” and suggested that students were embarrassed of the style of Freedom Songs “that were sung with hand clapping and in a rural free-swinging style” (Cohen, 183). Martin – the historian I mentioned before – elaborates:

“these students [who became the base of efforts like SNCC] were upwardly mobile, and some of them linked spirituals with slavery and social backwardness. Rather than the music of the traditional church, black college choirs substituted meticulously arranged ‘Negro’ spirituals,’ which used typical European harmonies and musical structures” (Martin, 22).

Thus, the use of what were considered traditionally Black musical sources was a conscious decision by civil rights activists who were seeking to create connection; with college-educated civil rights activists, the switch was forced, and not natural. Martin explains: “the traditional spirituals supplied a body of songs with which middle-class students and rural sharecroppers were both familiar, and which could be easily altered or ‘updated’ to address the most timely and pressing issues. (Martin, 22). Therefore, not only did the simplicity of the songs – what I am referring to as their vernacular quality – support easy dissemination of Freedom Songs, but so too did the familiar structure of the songs.

Complementing activists’ sourcing from Black traditional music was how Freedom Songs fit into what is called the “folk process,” which democratized the music in a different way. Again, let me use the historian Benjamin Filene to provide clarity; he defines the folk process as “the way in which ordinary people create new songs and alter old ones to fit their personalities and their individual and community needs” (Filene, 194). By virtue of being based in traditionally popular Black music, and since freedom singers often drew upon these sources and adapted them “to fit new situations of social contestation in the civil rights movement,” Freedom Songs can be

understood to have been subjected to the folk process (Martin, 14). The significance of the folk process was the inclusive quality of it – anyone could take old music and reshape it, especially when using music that was familiar to them. SNCC field worker Hollis Watkins, speaking about Freedom Songs, said that, anyone could invent a verse and then “they’d hear the verses coming back to them” (Martin, 39). Martin argues, “Watkins’s comments suggest that the process of inventing verses created an equality of musical opportunity, which facilitated greater feelings of equality between the often urban middle-class students in SNCC and the poor rural blacks in the communities where SNCC did fieldwork” (Martin, 39). In Block’s narrative, he details the democratization process Martin describes when he recalls including Greenwood residents in the music-making. Listen to him speak about talking to Greenwood residents about music for the meetings:

“And I would give people responsibilities, you know, of thinking about a song that they think they would want to sing that night and changing that song, you know, from a gospel song. And think about freedom, interjecting your own feelings and your own words into that. And through that – out of that at least grew a lot of good Freedom Songs that we would sing in that meeting and across Mississippi later on” (Block, Sam Interviewed, 18) <Cassette 1, part 2: 2:51 – 3:30>

Right there, you hear the democratization of the relationships between the music-makers. Block initiates a diffusion of responsibility for the songs, a diffusion of control and power, and so, instead of forcing the music and his agenda upon them, he is able to connect with Greenwood’s Blacks as an ally, a member.

Lastly, I want to touch on another facet of the democratizing power of music; that is, the communal aspects of folk music that are very much present in Freedom Songs, and drew on Black Southern cultural tradition. As in the case of folksinger Pete Seeger’s famous sing-a-

alongs, folk music was a shared experience; rather than a listener deferring to a performer, folk music, and Freedom Songs, were something for you to join in yourself. This communal quality of folk further democratized the relationships of the singers. Fortunately for civil rights activists, singing was already established as a communal activity among Southern Blacks. In an interview, Reagon said ““Growing up in Albany, I learned that if you bring Black people together, you bring them together with a song. To this day, I don't understand how people think they can bring anybody together without a song”” (Eye on the Prize Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon). Watkins applies Reagon’s insight to SNCC’s outreach, reporting that singing was ““something that people in the South did ...if you sang with people, then you could talk about voter registration”” (Bradford, 39). The music was not just about democratization, but also shared experience, which served to create connections between people from different backgrounds. In an interview, Reagon, reminiscing on a time she spent in jail, recalled how the communal singing helped to bring jailed civil rights participants together:

“So songs were used to pull people to a common place... in my jail cell there were women from high school all the way to like 70 years old. And there were church women and street women, and there were like women with degrees, and college women. ... these Black people were not together from a together place in terms of what their culture was, or what their class was, but there was a together experience that all of us had” (Reagon).

<“We Shall Not Be Moved” as performed by The Freedom Singers >

Conclusion

Entering into dangerous territory with a dangerous proposition, civil rights activists like those working for SNCC who were attempting to catalyze voting in Southern Black communities, were at a disadvantage. Not only were they trying to get people to perform a very risky action, they were doing so as an outsider. Activists were likely not from the area and also had different life experiences from those whom they wanted to move to action. Activists’ use of Freedom Songs

helped them as the music forged connection between activists and the communities they worked by democratizing the relationships of the singers. By giving activists and communities a shared space on equal footing, connection was possible.

<“We Shall Overcome,” N/A>

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Specific tracks featured (in order of play):

1. "Freedom Medley: Freedom Chant / Oh Freedom / This Little Light of Mine" as performed by The Freedom Singers
2. "Ain't Scared of Nobody" as performed by Amanda Bowens Perdue and Virginia Davis
3. "Get on Board Children" as performed by Willie Peacock
4. "This Little Light of Mine" as performed by Betty Fikes
5. "We Shall Not Be Moved" as performed by The Freedom Singers
6. "We Shall Overcome", n/a

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