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Abstract

“We became visible.” This is how Bernice Johnson Reagon, a Civil Rights Movement worker, a member of the Freedom Singers, and the founder of Sweet Honey In The Rock explained how songs uplifted and inspired those blacks and whites who worked tirelessly for freedom throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s. Indeed, freedom songs in the movement gave participants the ability to stand up against their fears, express their hopes and desires, and unite the diverse range of people who participated in the movement. Reagon, now a history professor and music legend, grew up right outside of Albany, Georgia, where freedom songs first became an integral part of the Civil Rights Movement. Nestled in a land entrenched with racial segregation, the Albany campaign was notable because almost every single black member of the community became visible through his or her work. Whether it was by going to jail, marching, or attending a mass meeting, most citizens actively participated. Albany was and is still considered today to be one of the birthplaces of the mass movement for racial equality. Albany, therefore, came to symbolize for the larger struggle for black freedom not only the birthplace of a true grassroots campaign, but also the birthplace of freedom songs that would spread throughout the country and become a familiar and helpful tool for many freedom fighters.

Keywords

freedom songs, the Albany movement, Civil Rights Movement

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Albany, Georgia, is the seat of Dougherty County, and at the time of the movement, was home to roughly 56,000 individuals.² Located four hours south from Atlanta, the town was noted for its slave-holding plantations in antebellum days, and at the turn of the twentieth

¹ Kerran L. Sanger, *When the Spirit Says Sing! The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Garland, 1995), 10.

² Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950’s Through the 1980’s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 98.

century, the black population outnumbered the white population by a margin of five to one. However, after World War Two, the black population decreased significantly, and by 1960, blacks made up forty-two percent of the population.³ By 1960, most black residents were poor, worked on the cotton and peanut farms surrounding the town, and only went into the town itself to do shopping. However, despite the poverty of most Albany blacks, they kept their traditional culture alive. The town was always noted for its strong sense of community and African-American folkways flourished, especially in music, among its blacks. Singer Ray Charles was even a native of the town.⁴ Before 1961 there were few problems between blacks and whites, and the city was generally peaceful. Although Albany was extremely segregated, the whites in the town used to pride themselves on good race relations and were proud that their blacks did not appear to be unhappy in their positions.⁵

However, despite the seeming tranquility of the town and the assurances of the white community, the blacks became very receptive to ending segregation in 1961 when representatives of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, also known as SNCC, came to organize the community and register voters. Cordell Reagon and Charles Sherrod were the first to enter Albany, and together they set up an office. Although young, both had already been involved in sit-ins and Freedom Rides. Initially, the Albany blacks were afraid of Reagon and Sherrod and were reluctant to even speak to them. However, the two worked their way into the community and spoke at churches, restaurants, pool halls, and club meetings in order to get to know and organize the population. In preparation for the sit-ins and demonstrations that SNCC planned, they held meetings and workshops to instruct the citizens on how to remain non-violent even in the face of hostility.

³ Howard Zinn, *Albany, A Study in National Responsibility* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1962), 2.

⁴ Hampton and Fayer, 98.

⁵ Zinn, 3.

The first demonstration in Albany took place on November 1, 1961, when students from SNCC tested the Interstate Commerce Ruling that banned segregation in bus and train travel facilities. The students sat down in a white waiting room at a train station, but were ordered to leave by police.⁶ Since the town was obviously not complying with this federal ICC order, SNCC prepared for an extended campaign against desegregation. In order to unify various black organizations in the town, the Albany Movement, led by local activist William Anderson, was created in mid-November.⁷ This umbrella organization was composed of SNCC, the local NAACP, the Federation of Women's Clubs, and the Negro Voter League.⁸ On November 22, five students from Albany College, a black school in the town, were arrested for sitting in a white waiting room and ordering in the white dining room in the train station on their way home for Thanksgiving break. Albany's Chief of Police, Laurie Pritchett, argued that the arrests did not violate the ICC ruling because he arrested students on a local ordinance for causing a disruption in the station and obstructing the traffic of people.⁹ This event prompted the first mass meeting in Albany. It took place on November 25, 1961 at Mount Zion Baptist Church after activists walked in protest around City Hall. At the church, the citizens rallied, voiced their opinions, and while holding hands, sung "We Shall Overcome" together. The highlight of the evening was when some of the students who had been in jail from the sit-in spoke to the crowd.¹⁰

On December 10, eight Freedom Riders were arrested in the Albany bus station. The following day, in protest, members of the Albany movement marched to the courthouse and

⁶ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 58.

⁷ Hampton and Fayer, 98.

⁸ Clayborne, 58.

⁹ Laurie Pritchett in Hampton and Fayer, 101

¹⁰ Clayborne, 59.

then had another mass meeting during which they decided that they wanted the famed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference or SCLC to come and help them. They felt that King would bring with him publicity that could be used to draw attention to the plight of blacks in the community.¹¹ The next day, on December 12, 267 students were arrested at the trial of one of the students from the train station sit-in for praying outside on the courthouse steps. By December 13, when the number of arrests grew to over 500 after continuing marches and demonstrations, 150 men from the National Guard were sent into Albany.¹² Amidst this chaos, on December 15, King and his associate, Ralph Abernathy, arrived in Albany.

According to Andrew Young of SCLC, King was only supposed to come to Albany to speak, but in a public meeting, Anderson asked him to march with Albany citizens.¹³ King would not back down once the request was made in front of others, and the next day, King led a march to City Hall where he and others were arrested.¹⁴ With over 700 demonstrators in jail, leaders of the Albany Movement tried desperately to negotiate with city officials, and a temporary truce was arranged on December 18.¹⁵ This verbal agreement was reached between C.B. King, the town's only black lawyer and a member of the movement, and city leaders to comply with the ICC ruling regarding train and bus facilities desegregation. The town also promised to release demonstrators and reduce the bail for the jailed Freedom Riders. Indeed, the city at first seemed to comply and immediately released the protestors, including King.¹⁶ Because the demands of the Movement appeared to have been met, King, satisfied with the

¹¹ William Anderson in Hampton and Fayer, 103.

¹² Clayborne, 60.

¹³ Andrew Young in Hampton and Fayer, 104.

¹⁴ Zinn, 17.

¹⁵ Vincent Harding and Staughton Lynd, "Albany, Georgia" in *We Shall Overcome*, vol. 1, ed. David J. Garrow (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 315.

¹⁶ Zinn, 18.

outcome, left Albany along with the press coverage. However, as soon as national attention was no longer focused on Albany, it became clear that in reality the city had no intention of desegregating at all and nothing changed.

In retaliation, in early 1962, a boycott began of white stores and of the bus line after a black woman refused to give up her seat on a bus. This continued through the winter and spring.¹⁷ However, while the boycott did cause the bus station to close, it was not very effective against white businesses simply because the blacks did not have much buying power.¹⁸ On July 10, 1962, King and Abernathy returned to Albany for sentencing from their December arrests. They were ordered to be jailed for forty-five days or to pay a \$178 fine. Both chose jail. King's imprisonment revitalized the Albany Movement, prompting a mass rally the following night, during which violence broke out between blacks and the police stationed outside of the church.¹⁹ However, on July 13, King and Abernathy were released from jail when Chief Pritchett arranged to have their bail paid so that media attention was directed away from Albany.²⁰ On July 20, Albany requested and received a court order prohibiting King from demonstrating,²¹ but this was lifted after King personally appealed to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.²² On July 27, King was again arrested for demonstrating in a pray-in, and that night, at a mass meeting when the crowd was asked who would go to jail with him, only fifteen volunteered. The movement had clearly lost its original spark. People

¹⁷ Hampton and Fayer, 108-9.

¹⁸ Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 318.

¹⁹ Clayborne, 61.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

²¹ Hampton and Fayer, 111.

²² Coretta Scott King in Hampton and Fayer, 111.

were tired, and many of the ardent activists were already in jail. King then left Albany on August 10 with a suspended sentence.²³ The Albany movement never regained momentum.

There were mixed reactions to the Albany movement. SNCC considered the campaign to be a success. It gave the formally scared black population of Albany hope that change could come and represented the first time since the Montgomery Bus Boycott that a whole community was involved in a civil rights effort.²⁴ However, other groups argued that Albany was a failure. Young argued that SNCC failed in Albany because nothing really changed as a result of SNCC not having a concrete strategy.²⁵ This lack of purpose plus the infighting among the various civil rights groups bred tense relations among leaders and hampered coordinated efforts. For example, although SNCC felt as though it was doing most of the work, the media only focused on Albany when King came to visit.²⁶ In addition, the local chapter of the NAACP felt slighted; when the movement was beginning in October of 1961, Sherrod and Reagon called a meeting without notifying the NAACP, and consequently the organization felt as if it was not being included.²⁷ And although SNCC continued to speak highly about Albany, Slater King, the Vice-President of the Movement, felt that the campaign failed because almost a quarter of black domestics lost their jobs as a result of participating, and because by the end of 1963 Chief Pritchett happily reported that Albany was “As segregated as ever.”²⁸

One person who prevented Albany from achieving its goals was that Chief Pritchett, a practitioner of non-violent arrests. Only violence in civil rights protests had served to enrage the nation and demand change. Pritchett himself admitted to studying King before he arrived to

²³ Tuck, 149.

²⁴ Anne Braden., “The Southern Freedom Movement in Perspective,” in Garrow, 100.

²⁵ Hampton and Fayer 112.

²⁶ Emily Stoper, *The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism In A Civil Rights Organization*, with a preface by David J. Garrow (New York: Carlson, 1989), 65.

²⁷ Tuck, 150.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 147

get a feeling for King's strategy. After he discovered that King worked by filling up the town jail, Pritchett contacted all jails within a fifteen-mile radius and received permission to fill them with Albany protestors.²⁹ But Charles Sherrod pointed out that although the country was not aware of violence, it did occur, thus making Albany not different than many other campaigns. For example, people were often beaten at the satellite jails and jam-packed into cells without any beds or blankets.³⁰ Yet, despite its problems, the movement did help to register many voters, and the movement caused blacks to respect themselves more. C.B. King even ended up running for Congress from Albany's district.³¹ Accordingly, even though awareness was raised in Albany, the movement was saddled with a great deal of problems that may have limited the scope of its success.

Regardless of whether the Albany movement is considered to be a success or a failure, one of the most important legacies of the campaign was the emergence of freedom songs from the town. Indeed, many famous songs that were sung throughout the 1960's were first used effectively in Albany and were subsequently introduced to freedom fighters around the country. As previously mentioned, Albany's black citizens were proud of their culture and considered singing to be a major part of their heritage. As explained by Bernice Johnson Reagon, freedom songs, broadly defined, were a mixture of traditional spirituals and popular music that were revised for each event during a civil rights campaign. Songs were an essential component in most black churches and homes, and blacks were raised to join in songs whenever one was

²⁹ Laurie Pritchett in Hampton and Fayer, 106.

³⁰ Charles Sherrod in Hampton and Fayer, 107.

³¹ Donald Harris in Stoper, 149.

started, whether it was in church or on the fields, even if one did not have a particularly attractive voice.³² Thus, it was only natural to bring song to this new struggle.

Indeed, Reagon was in the forefront of popularizing freedom songs during the Albany movement itself. At the outset of the movement, she was a student at Albany College and the secretary of the NAACP youth chapter.³³ She never had any professional training in singing, and learned to sing, like most other black Americans, at her local Baptist church which did not even have a piano.³⁴ She took part in one of the first demonstrations in Albany when she and other student activists walked along with Cordell Reagon and Charles Sherrod around City Hall before going to Mount Zion Baptist Church and attending the first mass meeting. None of the blacks had ever walked around the City Hall and they were thus afraid. To break the tension inside of the church, one of the SNCC workers asked Reagon to sing. She stood up to sing “Over My Head I See Trouble In the Air,” but when she began singing, the word “trouble” did not seem to suit the occasion, so she immediately changed “trouble” to “freedom,” thus expressing more hope. She felt that she had the authority at that moment to change the lyrics because she had already done something forbidden by simply walking around the City Hall.³⁵ Changing song lyrics to fit the unique circumstances of each city quickly became an accepted practice.

With singing used to quell the fear of the participants in one of the first demonstrations in Albany, this spiritual community continued to use songs throughout their struggle. Songs and signing played numerous functional roles in the movement. Songs gave blacks a positive

³² Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, ed, *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC*, (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1998), 110 & 114.

³³ Hampton and Fayer, 98.

³⁴ Bernice Johnson Reagon, *We Who Believe in Freedom: Sweet Honey In the Rock—Still on the Journey* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 14.

³⁵ Greenberg, 114-115.

view of themselves and uplifted their feelings. Blacks in the South had been long made to feel inferior and unworthy. But through singing, blacks felt as if they could create their own identities. Instead of being the stupid, lazy, and immoral people that whites portrayed them as, by singing powerful songs, they became courageous freedom fighters.³⁶ Songs, according to Reagon, also helped to unite all the black community members participating in the movement. It united the different classes and was often the only way to communicate to illiterate rural people.³⁷

Songs were also useful in jail, as they helped to pass time and to reduce fear. Reagon mentioned that in jail one could call out the names of white police officers in their songs, troubling the guards. This gave those in jail a small sense of victory.³⁸ Often, song leaders in jail or out on the streets were also looked to as leaders in the movement. For example, Reagon wrote that although she was younger than most of the people she was with in her jail cell, she was the one who was expected to communicate to the prison guards.³⁹ Being a song leader increased authority.

Although in Albany and in later campaigns freedom songs and singing became an integral part of the struggle and was a great sense of inspiration to the participants, initially, songs were not used in the Civil Rights Movement. At the first sit-ins, the students wanted to be quiet, stoic, and civil in order to gain respect from the public as they were arrested or harassed by angry whites. Therefore, singing was not deemed to be appropriate. Also, most early civil rights workers came from middle-class backgrounds where singing was not as

³⁶ Sanger, 3-4.

³⁷ Bradford Martin, "Politics as Art, Art as Politics: The Freedom Singers, The Living Theatre, and Public Performance," in *Long Time Gone: 60's America Then and Now*, ed. Alexander Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 165.

³⁸ Hampton and Fayer, 108.

³⁹ Martin, 166.

common or as familiar to them as to the poorer blacks, although after Albany and later, all blacks, regardless of class, began singing to unite the group and to get back in touch with their culture. In the Montgomery bus boycott movement, songs were usually not a part of demonstrations. In Nashville, however, one song was revised by civil rights workers to be used especially for the sit-ins. Taking a twist on the song “You’d Better Leave My Little Kitten Alone,” James Bevel and Bernard Lafayette gave new lyrics to the piece and renamed it “You’d Better Leave Segregation Alone”⁴⁰ revising the refrain to read: “You’d better leave segregation alone because they love segregation like a hound dog loves a bone, a bone.”⁴¹ The song recounted the hard times faced by the students at the sit-ins, and at the same time, degraded whites by comparing them to dogs. Just as Bernice Johnson Reagon changed lyrics to an old song, civil rights activists around the country soon began to reword songs to fit the occasion.

Accordingly, it is very possible that if one were to listen to the same song sung in five different Southern cities, there would be five different versions of the song. Often, names of prominent whites who supported segregation, such as mayors or governors or police chiefs, were used in songs. For example, Hollis Watkins, a SNCC activist, explained how the song “Which Side Are you On?” was often reworked. The traditional refrain read: “Which side are you on boy, which side are you on?” which was sung after each verse. For instance, in Mississippi one of the verses sung before the refrain was:

They tell me in Mississippi,
No neutral have we met,
You’ll either be a Freedom Fighter

⁴⁰ Ibid., 161-3.

⁴¹ Guy and Candie Carawan, eds, *Sing For Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through its Songs* (New York, Oak Publications, 1990), 30.

Or a Tom for Ross Barnett.⁴²
[Barnett was the segregationist governor of that state]

On the other hand, in Albany, one of the verses was:

They tell me in Albany
No neural have we met
You'll either be a Freedom Fighter
Or a Tom for Chief Pritchett⁴³

Also from Albany, the traditional spiritual “Oh Mary, Oh Martha” was reworked by students Bertha Gober and Janie Culbreath in jail to help keep morale high and was subsequently entitled “Oh Pritchett, Oh Kelly” (Ada Kelly was the mayor of Albany). This song contained lyrics such as “Oh Pritchett, Oh, Kelly, Oh Pritchett, I hear God’s children, you open them cells, open them cells.”⁴⁴ The spiritual “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round” was also revised. The refrain in the Albany movement would sometimes be sung as “Ain’t gonna let Chief Pritchett Turn me Round” or “Ain’t gonna let Mayor Kelly Turn me Rround.”⁴⁵ Bernice Johnson Reagon said that activists felt comfortable with using traditional, black Christian music because they felt particularly close to Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus was crucified to save others, they were being lynched fighting for their freedom and for the freedom as others.⁴⁶

One of the most important songs in Albany and throughout the rest of the Civil Rights Movement was “We Shall Overcome.” The song was originally entitled “I Shall Overcome” and although its origins cannot be completely traced, it is believed the song was commonly sung by slaves. It was first known to be used in a social movement when black female tobacco workers in Charleston sang it during a strike. It then became a popular song to be used by black and white labor forces, and was taught at workshops in Highlander by singer Guy

⁴² Greenberg, 124.

⁴³ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁴ Carawan, 64.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 62-3.

⁴⁶ Greenberg, 122.

Carawan. Highlander, located in Tennessee, taught labor unions how to effectively strike and was noted as being inclusive of all races. Carawan became involved in working for civil rights at Highlander and sung this song at the formation of SNCC at Shaw University. It was soon taught at workshops run by civil rights organizations. “We Shall Overcome” was extremely popular during the Albany campaign, and it was frequently sung at the mass meetings.⁴⁷ In fact, in Albany and later, often the lyrics were changed from “We shall overcome someday” to “We shall go to jail today” or “We are not afraid today.” Participants in Albany remember singing this song in jail and being pleased at how the guards were upset with the sense of community and unity the imprisoned civil rights workers showed.⁴⁸

Albany also influenced music in the movement because from Albany came the SNCC Freedom Singers, a musical group that toured the nation and brought the songs of struggling African-Americans with them. Bernice Johnson Reagon’s talent was quickly noted in Albany and Pete Seegar, a folk singer who released his own version of “We Shall Overcome” and was active in the Civil Rights Movement, told SNCC that Reagon and some other Albany students were excellent singers and should tour the country.⁴⁹ The SNCC Freedom Singers were thus born. The group contained four members, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Charles Neblett, Rutha Mae Harris, and Cordell Reagon. They became a fundraising group for SNCC and, more importantly, took the Southern struggle for freedom with them to the North and West. They explained the fight in the South by mixing their songs with spoken narratives, and listeners were often moved by the intensity of their voices which reflected the struggles that they had seen and taken part in.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *We Shall Overcome*, prod. And dir. Jim Brown and others, 58 min., California Newsreel, 1989, videocassette.

⁴⁸ Harding and Lynd, 317.

⁴⁹ *We Shall Overcome*.

⁵⁰ Martin, 170.

Some of the songs in their repertoire included “Dog, Dog,” which spoke of a dog belonging to a black family that played with a dog belonging to a white family while their owners could not get along, and “We’ll Never Turn Back,” which encouraged blacks to keep fighting through even through the most difficult circumstances. They sang favorites such as “We Shall Overcome and “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Roud,” and introduced the public to “Governor Wallace,” about Alabama’s Dixiecrat Governor and “Woke Up this Morning With My Mind On Freedom.”⁵¹ They performed in the Mississippi Delta during the difficult days of SNCC’s voter registration campaign to raise spirits, sung at music festivals, and taught workshops in the North to interested college students. In fact, James Schwerner and Michael Goodman, two white civil rights workers who were murdered in Mississippi first became interested in the movement through a Freedom Singers workshop.⁵² In June of 1963, over 2,000 people came to Carnegie Hall in New York for a show entitled “A Salute to Southern Freedom” featuring the Freedom Singers and Mahalia Jackson, a famous gospel singer. But, as suggested at the time by the *New York Times*, the Freedom Singers stole the show. The Freedom Singers’ message appealed to both black and white inside and out of the South for the words of freedom and hope that they spread.⁵³

As seen, freedom songs first became a main tactic used in Albany, and thanks to the talent from this city, these songs became a staple in the Civil Rights Movement. Due to his experience in Albany, Charles Sherrod considered singing so important that he actually listed teaching freedom songs as the first item on his agenda for a SNCC conference in the spring of

⁵¹ *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966*, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Collection, 1980), LP.

⁵² *We Shall Overcome*.

⁵³ Martin, 159.

1963.⁵⁴ One civil rights agitator, Goldie Jackson, reflected on the power of singing and said “Two things held us together: prayer or something good to come and song that tells from the depth of the heart how we feel about our fellow man.”⁵⁵ Freedom songs that originated in Albany and became popularized by the Freedom Singers quickly caught on. “We Shall Overcome” soon became the unofficial anthem of the movement and was sung during the famed March on Washington in 1963. Additionally when referring to his voting rights legislation, President Johnson promised the blacks of his country that “We shall overcome” in an attempt to show his solidarity with the black community.⁵⁶ Freedom songs gave hope to those participating in the movement and helped communicate their fight to the rest of the nation.

Accordingly, the Albany struggle had many lasting impacts on the broader battle for civil rights and on American society as a whole. Albany workers fought for over seven months to register voters and to help desegregate the city, and after fights, arrests, and injunctions, little had tangibly changed. Yet, the people of Albany were no longer afraid to speak out, and it was the first true grassroots campaign of the movement. In addition, the activists of Albany helped to shape the freedom struggle by turning to its rich black culture to utilize freedom songs as an effective tool. These songs gave courage to the blacks, unified them, and gave them a sense of power. Because of the prominent use of song in Albany and the subsequent spread of the songs by Albany’s own Freedom Singers, soon almost every civil rights protest included some type of freedom song. Indeed, perhaps the greatest achievement of the Albany campaign was that freedom became, to borrow from Bernice Johnson Reagon, visible. The struggle of the entire Albany community—not just a portion, showed the world that all blacks wanted their rights.

⁵⁴ Clayborne, 64.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁶ *We Shall Overcome*.

The massive amounts of people in jail made clear that African-Americans were willing to suffer to receive justice. The songs that grew out from Albany's strong sense of black spiritual community displayed the courage they had to withstand the backlash of reactionary officials and police. The Freedom Singers and the traditional and revised songs that they took with them demonstrated to the rest of the nation the conflict that was taking place and allowed other freedom workers to find and use the power of song in their own struggles. And the visibility that came from Albany helped to light the way for future civil rights campaigns that highlighted the plight of blacks to the nation and forever altered race relations in the country.