SOUNDS AND SILENCES: MUSIC AND THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON

Brian Ward

Introduction: Dream Songs

“We must remember that music tames the wildest beast,” explained Carlton Reese, leader of the choir of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and composer-arranger of many popular freedom songs in the early 1960s. According to Reese, the importance of music in the movement lay in its power to unite people, both within the African American community and across racial lines. In particular, Reese noted how “We Shall Overcome” had emerged as “the theme song” of the movement, his analysis riffing, almost to the point of paraphrase, on the final section of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington: “One day we’re going to sit down and worship together and walk the streets together. Little white girls and little black boys will be able to pray together, sing together, and go to school together.” Echoing the visionary appeal for interracial harmony with which King ended his speech, Reese concluded that “We Shall Overcome” was “a national song — a song of peace, understanding, and hope that one day we will overcome things that keep us from being together.”

The soaring rhetoric of King’s “Dream” has become so ubiquitous in popular memory that it is hardly surprising that Reese would borrow its phrasing even as he echoed its sentiments. However, his comments also suggest deeper connections between the March on Washington and “We Shall Overcome” — a song of complex, biracial provenance whose title provided the optimistic tag line on the official program for the event and which the assembled masses sang several times during the day. As Reese appreciated, the song was emblematic of how music permeated the march and the broader movement, helping to define their spirit, goals, and meanings at literal and symbolic levels.

Most accounts of the March on Washington dutifully note that there was a lot of singing on August 28, 1963, much of it impromptu, led by the marchers themselves as they made their way to, along, and from the National Mall. Some accounts list the most prominent singers who appeared; several repeat the beguiling story that it

---


2 For “We Shall Overcome,” see Stuart Stotts, We Shall Overcome: A Song that Changed the World (New York, 2010); Allan M. Winkler, “To Everything There Is a Season”: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song (New York, 2011), 98-100.
was only at the urging of gospel singer Mahalia Jackson that King abandoned his scripted remarks to revisit the “Dream” that he had revealed in several earlier speeches. Nevertheless, accounts of the day’s music and music-makers tend to be brief and are riddled with errors about who sang what, where, and to what end. Few writers, for example, differentiate between morning performances from a stage located halfway along the mall, others from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the hour immediately before the official program began, and those performances that were part of the official program. In short, there has been little sustained attention to the role of music on the day or to the deeper significances of who appeared and who did not.

In seeking to address this oversight, the first section of this essay focuses primarily on the singers who did perform on the mall. Although Mahalia Jackson, soprano Marian Anderson, and the Eva Jessye Choir were the only artists listed on the official program, there was additional music at the morning and afternoon sessions, dominated by the sounds of folk artists such as Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul and Mary, Odetta, and the SNCC Freedom Singers. Explaining why folk music — especially as purveyed by white artists — was so prominent at the march is a key concern of this essay. So, too, is a desire to understand the critiques of the strong white folk presence at the march, not least from Bob Dylan, which form the main topic in the second section of the essay.

For historians, silences are often as revealing as sounds, and the final section of the essay considers the kinds of artists who were conspicuously absent from the day’s musical events. There was no place for jazz, blues, or rhythm and blues on the Mall. Technical considerations may have had a role to play here: getting the James Brown Revue onto the cramped podium in front of the Lincoln Memorial may have been one logistical challenge too many for hard-pressed organizers. Yet at various points during the day, technicians did manage to accommodate a piano, an organ, a smattering of brass, as well as acoustic guitars, so such problems were not insurmountable. Rather, these absences reveal the priorities of the mainstream civil rights movement as it courted middle-American white support through a politics of respectability, emphasizing the pursuit of core citizenship rights by a combination of legal challenges and nonviolent direct action protests that most Americans considered responsible and morally acceptable. The absences also illuminate the dance of
engagement and avoidance that took place between the movement and some of the most popular and revered black musicians of the day.

**Live on the Mall**

The politics of respectability were evident in the decision of the march’s main organizers, headed by Bayard Rustin, to include only classical and sacred music on the official program. One of the movement’s most important strategists, Rustin was instrumental in deciding which artists appeared and, of equal importance to the success of the event, secured a $20,000 grant from the Garment and Auto Workers unions to pay for the powerful sound system that carried the day’s speeches, prayers, and songs down the Mall. Celebrated soprano Marian Anderson was chosen to open formal proceedings at 2 p.m. with the national anthem. This publically proclaimed the patriotic intent of the demonstration and of the freedom struggle, which, in the midst of the Cold War, was often couched in terms of securing basic civil and voting rights for African Americans in order to close the credibility gap between America’s democratic ideals and its discriminatory practices.

Anderson’s presence also carried additional symbolic resonance. In 1939 she had sung from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial after the Daughters of the American Revolution barred her from performing in Constitution Hall. Two years later, when A. Phillip Randolph called for mass protest in Washington to demand equal opportunities in federal defense industries, he acknowledged the uplifting and cohesive power of music by proposing to conclude the event with a concert at the Lincoln Memorial, headlined by Anderson, fellow soprano Dorothy Maynor, and tenor Roland Hayes. Although that wartime march never took place, the mere threat helped to secure Executive Order 8802, which banned discrimination in federally funded war industries. Twenty-two years later, as Randolph and Rustin planned another effort to secure federal support for black rights and economic aspirations through mass mobilization in the capital, Anderson was an obvious choice to open the official program.

Unfortunately, however, Anderson got caught in the crowds and arrived on the Mall too late to sing the national anthem as planned. Later she performed an unscheduled version of “He’s Got the Whole World in his Hands” accompanied by her pianist. With Anderson delayed, Virginia-born soprano Camilla Williams stepped in and opened the formal program with the “Star-Spangled Banner.”

---

6 William Jones notes that, despite an ever-expanding Administrative Committee chaired by Cleveland Robinson that included representatives of many civil rights and labor organizations, Rustin always “retained primary control over planning and preparation of the protest.” Jones, *March on Washington*, 173. See also, John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago, 2003), 327–31, 335–57.


8 For the Cold War context, see Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2000).

9 See Raymond Arsenault, *The Sound of Freedom: Marian Anderson, the Lincoln Memorial and the Concert That Awakened America* (New York, 2010).

10 “100,000 in March to Capital,” *Amsterdam News*, May 31, 1941.

By 4 p.m., many in the crowd were wilting. Some had traveled overnight to Washington; some had been marching or waiting on the Mall since the early morning; two hours into the official program, the fierce August heat was taking its toll. Then Mahalia Jackson appeared on the podium. According to many eyewitnesses King’s favorite singer revitalized the crowd with a rousing rendition of “I’ve Been ‘Buked and I’ve Been Scorned” which, in the words of Charles Euchner, “expressed the deepest suffering of the black race, reaching back to the slave ships and centuries of bondage and broken hopes and dreams — but also painting the brightest picture of the Exodus and a better world.” So enthusiastic was the crowd’s response that Jackson performed an encore, a blistering version of “How I Got Over” that powerfully evoked the dignity and resolve of the African American community.13

Also prominent on the official program was the Eva Jessye Choir, the New York-based brainchild of a pioneering African American educator-choral leader who had served as George Gershwin’s musical director for Porgy and Bess. The choir performed a medley of concertized spirituals culminating in “Freedom is Worth Shouting About” and, at the conclusion of the formal events, returned to the podium to lead one of the day’s many renditions of “We Shall Overcome.”14

Beyond the classical and gospel artists on the official program, a variety of other musical entertainment could be heard. The music coming from the side stage in the morning, like that heard during the informal program from the steps of the memorial in the early afternoon, was dominated by folk singers. Most of the songs celebrated the stoicism of the black community and the movement’s determination to destroy Jim Crow, while projecting a pervasive, if cautious,
optimism that racial justice would eventually prevail. For example, Josh White, a veteran folk and blues balladeer who had briefly sung with Bayard Rustin in the Carolinians vocal group in the early 1940s, sang “Marching Down Freedom’s Road.”

Joining the folkies in some of the ensemble singing in the morning was Lonnie Sattin, a modestly successful black balladeer who juggled pop and light soul styles with a predilection for bossa nova beats. Tellingly, Sattin was the closest the crowds on the mall came to hearing anyone within touching distance of jazz or rhythm and blues. From the same side stage, Odetta (known as “the Voice of the Civil Rights Movement”) played guitar and sang the purposeful “I’m On My Way” and “Oh Freedom” accompanied by versatile African American folk guitarist and sometime country fiddle player Bruce Langhorne. For an encore, Odetta offered an a cappella medley of “No More Auction Block” and “Child of God.”

In the afternoon, folk continued to dominate proceedings. Straight from the heart of the Southern struggle to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial came the SNCC Freedom Singers. Formed during the Albany protests in southwest Georgia in 1962, the group, featuring Bernice Johnson Reagon, Rutha Mae Harris, Charles Neblett, and Cordell Reagon, supplemented at the march by occasional member Bertha Gober, had become useful fundraisers for the movement through albums and personal appearances around the nation. The Freedom Singers also served, in Reagon’s phrase, as “a singing newspaper,” performing topical songs that informed sympathetic audiences about the struggle and becoming, as SNCC’s communications director Julian Bond recalled, SNCC’s “public face.” The singers usually ended their performances with “We Shall Not Be Moved,” a formula they repeated at the march, segueing into the defiant chant: “Ain’t Never Gonna Stop/ Because I Want My Freedom Now.”

The final song performed prior to the start of the official program was the old spiritual-turned-freedom song “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize, Hold On,” led and wittily updated by African American folk singer Len Chandler (“Your butcher, your baker, your clerk./we won’t buy where we can’t work”). In keeping with the integrationist ethos of the day, Chandler was joined at this rousing finale by the first couple of the folk revival, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan.

Among the other white acts present was the hugely successful Peter, Paul and Mary. Having already sung Pete Seeger’s “If I Had a
Hammer” from the side stage in the morning, the trio performed it again from the memorial in the early afternoon. Activist-actor Ossie Davis, who served as emcee for much of the day, introduced the group as “express[ing] in song what this great meeting is all about.” The trio also sang Dylan’s “Blowing in the Wind” from both locations. That summer they had enjoyed a major national pop hit with the song at a time when Dylan was still relatively unknown beyond the folk fraternity. “The song speaks of caring, of listening to one another,” explained Mary Travers, affirming the mood of harmony and mutual respect on the mall.

Shortly before the official afternoon program began, Joan Baez sang a poignant version of the spiritual “All Your Trials,” sandwiched between brief remarks by Ralph Abernathy and Ralph Bunche. During the morning she had harmonized with Dylan on “When the Ship Comes In” and led the crowd and many of her fellow performers in “We Shall Overcome.” The song was a familiar finale to folk concerts, serving as readily understood musical shorthand for the folk revival’s commitment to the freedom struggle — which helps to explain the pre-eminence of such artists at the march. A month earlier, the Newport Folk Festival had closed with an integrated lineup of the Freedom Singers, Peter, Paul and Mary, Baez, Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Theodore Bikel singing the same anthem. A July 1963 rally for SNCC workers and local activists in Greenwood, Mississippi, that featured the Freedom Singers, Dylan, Baez, Bikel, Seeger, and Chandler had ended the same way.

In addition to dueting with Baez in the morning and participating in the ensemble singing that concluded the informal morning and afternoon sessions, Bob Dylan also sang “Only a Pawn in Their Game” from the steps of the memorial. While the vast majority of songs heard that day were uplifting expressions of, in Mike Marqusee’s phrase, “freedom and deliverance and unity,” Dylan’s performances struck a different chord. “When the Ship Comes In” moved from a vision of a divinely ordained egalitarianism (“the sun will respect/ every face on the deck”) that had much in common with King’s “Dream,” to prophecies of Old Testament-style retribution and bloody vengeance against the enemies of justice that were antithetical to King’s message of love and reconciliation. The main focus of “Only a Pawn” — a song about the murder of Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers that Dylan had unveiled in Greenwood earlier that summer — was not Evers nor his then unnamed murderer (in
1994 Byron de la Beckwith was finally convicted of the crime) but the socioeconomic-political system that made poor whites victims and tools of elites and allowed violence to flourish as an instrument of racial control.  

Although Marqusee underestimated the nascent radicalism of King’s speech before he began to dream, he was right to note that by “outlining a class-based analysis of the persistence of racism,” Dylan’s songs were closer in spirit to the speech of SNCC chairman John Lewis than almost any other music performed that day, with the partial exception of Chandler’s re-imagined “Eyes on the Prize.” Dylan’s celebration of retribution against those who obstructed justice in “When the Ship Comes In,” like his excoriation of state complicity in racial inequality and violence in “Only a Pawn,” hit radical notes unheard elsewhere in the music of the march, or in most popular black music, or in mainstream black protest politics during 1963.

Notwithstanding Dylan’s portentous contrariness, the prominence of folk artists, white and black, made sense in terms of the integrated agenda of the demonstration. Contemporaries and subsequent commentators have always accorded special significance to the multiracial composition of the crowds on the mall, reading it as a public affirmation of the kind of harmony, brotherhood, and respect invoked at the end of King’s speech. “It was an unbelievable feeling to see hundreds and thousands of people, black and white, sitting together, cheering,” recalled Lewis. The racially mixed folk line-up carried a prophetic, or at least an aspirational, dimension that helped to establish the symbolic politics of the march — accentuated by the fact that, beyond a small circle of cognoscenti who might admire Josh White and Odetta, or appreciate earlier folk-blues artists such as Leadbelly and Blind Lemon Jefferson, the folk revival was marked in the American imagination as predominantly white. Bruce Langhorne, who, with Len Chandler, was one of the few African Americans to become a fixture in East Coast clubs and coffeehouses central to the folk scene, called it a “very white scene.” The carefully integrated line-up at the march thus visually and audibly challenged prevailing notions of strictly segregated musical — and by extension social — worlds.

Equally important to the music’s symbolic resonance was the fact that most folk artists — including many who did not perform in Washington such as Pete Seeger, the Kingston Trio, Theodore Bikel, Judy Collins, Richard Farina, and Phil Ochs — were publically supportive of the freedom struggle, artistically and personally, to a degree

28 Marqusee, Wicked Messenger, 10.
30 Hadju, Positively 4th Street, 94.
rarely found in the early 1960s among black rhythm and blues, pop, or even jazz artists. Harry Belafonte recalled: “There was a significant array of white artists who were progressive politically...all of them came out of the folk movement.”31 The movement did not initially seek them out. Rather, they gravitated toward themes of racial justice in their music and sometimes offered practical help because of their own liberal politics and commitment to civil rights. “On the platform when these highly profiled, successful artists performed,” Belafonte explained, “it wasn’t just that they were sympathetic and very much involved in the ideals of the struggle, it was that that’s what they really were... [they had] a moral point of view.”32

Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary explained, “We’re here as everybody else is, to personally as individuals say that we feel that all human beings are equal, and in this case we’re saying something that we’ve said in our songs: that the colored man in America must have today...the same rights that we enjoy as white people.”33 Joan Baez felt much the same. The daughter of Quakers with a strong commitment to social justice, Baez moved in progressive political circles that intersected with the folk revival, where her crystalline voice quickly made her its most popular female vocalist. Haunted by memories of being taunted for her strange-sounding name and called “a dirty Mexican” while growing up in California, Baez admitted that when embarking on a first tour of the South in 1961, she was “barely aware of the civil rights movement.” Thereafter, she added “We Shall Overcome” and “Oh Freedom” to her regular repertoire and aligned herself closely with the struggle.34 Echoing Yarrow, Baez told reporters she was at the March because “all men are created equal. It’s as simple as that.”35

“My Friends Don’t Wear Suits”: White Artists in the Black Struggle

In August 1963, Bob Dylan could not yet match Baez’s commercial popularity, but he was widely touted as the most important new figure in folk. Dylan was also at the zenith of a complex and revealing engagement with the civil rights struggle that began in February 1962 when he performed at a fundraiser for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in New York at the instigation of his then-girlfriend, Suze Rotolo, who worked as a volunteer for the organization. She was “into this equality-freedom thing long before I was,” Dylan admitted.36 Dylan composed his first full-blown protest song for the occasion, taking as his subject the 1955 Mississippi lynching of 14-year-old


33 Peter Yarrow, interviewed by David Edwards, “President John F. Kennedy Speech on the Upcoming March.”

34 Joan Baez, And a Voice to Sing With: A Memoir (New York, 2009), 103. See also Hadju, Positively 4th Street, 16, 143-44.

35 Joan Baez, interviewed by Al Hulsen, “Interviews with Participants, Music from the Stage.”

36 Bob Dylan, quoted in Heylin, Revolution in the Air, 87.
Emmett Till. Other songs followed (“The Ballad of Donald White,” “Oxford Town,” “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” and “Only a Pawn”), all exploring connections among racism, power, violence, and oppression.

Dylan was not alone in addressing racial matters; the folk repertoire of the early 1960s was full of such songs. Critic Robert Shelton noted how “new songs on this theme are not only weapons in the Civil Rights arsenal, but are also developing into valuable commodities in the music industry.” Phil Ochs’s “Ballad of Medgar Evers” and “Ballad of William Worthy,” Pete Seeger’s “Ballad of Old Monroe” (about Robert F. Williams), Richard Farina’s “Birmingham Sunday” (about the bombing of the 16th Street Avenue Baptist Church, recorded by his sister-in-law Joan Baez), Tom Paxton’s “Dogs of Alabama” (about Bull Connor’s violent policing of the 1963 Birmingham protests), and Paul Simon’s “He Was My Brother” (written in 1963, but revised after the murder of his college friend Andrew Goodman during Freedom Summer) were among the many songs that condemned discrimination and racial violence and expressed sympathy for the movement. As a consequence, folk music and folk singers had become inextricably linked in popular consciousness with support for the freedom struggle. Shelton even reported on a coffeehouse gig in Ogunquit, Maine, where he heard an impatient young girl demanding that the performer “Sing something about segregation!” This close identification with the movement virtually guaranteed that folk singers would loom large among the musicians chosen — and among those willing to be chosen — to play at the march.

Civil rights workers were generally very appreciative of the public and artistic stands made by white folkies. SNCC southern campus organizer Stanley Wise remembered seeing Bob Dylan when he was a freshman at Howard. “I remember him up there helping load trucks to take food to Mississippi. I mean, he was right there on the frontline. I don’t remember that from a lot of people.” Dylan’s trip to Mississippi in July 1963 made him acutely aware of the stark realities of Jim Crow and appreciative of the heroism of those who challenged it. Bikel, who paid for Dylan’s flight south and joined him, Chandler, Seeger and the Freedom Singers for the concert-rally in Greenwood, remembered Dylan’s distress at first seeing “whites only” signs at public facilities. Dylan developed a deep admiration for the SNCC organizers he encountered. He cemented firm friendships with James Forman and Bernice Johnson Reagon, whom he met in New York.

37 Hadju, Positively 4th Street, 107–108; Heylin, Revolution in the Air, 86–89.
38 Shelton, quoted in Cohen, Rainbow Quest, 204.
39 Shelton, No Direction Home, 124.
in 1962 and who even stayed in his apartment for a while. Reagon remembered, “We all thought, those of us in the movement and those of us in the Freedom Singers, that Dylan was fantastic as a songwriter and as a person.”

Although Reagon loyally maintained that “they really liked him down in the cotton country,” the appeal of Dylan and other folk artists was overwhelmingly to white, largely college educated, often Northern audiences. For example, when CORE’s Jimmy McDonald staged a 1963 fundraiser in upstate New York he had to concede “most Negroes do not know that much about ‘folk music’ so that Bobby Dylan does not have that much appeal in the Negro community.”

When Baez played movement-related events on Southern campuses including Miles College in Birmingham, Morehouse in Atlanta, and Tougaloo in Mississippi, her audience was 70 percent or more white. A black contingent sometimes had to be bused in because Baez’s contract insisted that African Americans had to be admitted to her shows. “We had to call up the local NAACP for volunteers to integrate an audience for someone they’d never heard of,” she recalled.

Not everyone, however, was sanguine about the preeminence of white folk artists at the march. Comedian-activist Dick Gregory bluntly asked “What was a white boy like Bob Dylan there for? Or — who else? Joan Baez?” To support the cause? Wonderful — support the cause. March. Stand behind us — but not in front of us.”

Bob Dylan sympathized. In November 1963, he wrote a column for Robert Shelton’s short-lived Hootenanny magazine, exposing the limits of the kind of racial liberalism that he and his music were often held to personify and which the strong white presence at the march was supposed to reflect. Dylan peeled away the veneer of respectability and interracial bonhomie to focus on the material deprivations and terror that confronted African Americans, particularly in the South, and to revisit the radicalism at the heart of the movement’s demands for freedom and equality. Remembering “Jim Foreman (sic) who I stood next to on a Mississippi sound truck an watched his face while he told people why they gotta go vote,” Dylan “started thinkin’ about John Lewis whose speech was cut down in Washington cause some people were afraid t speak on the same platform with somebody who could actually think t say ‘we shall march thru the South like Sherman’s Army.’”

A month later Dylan was awarded the Tom Paine Award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee (ECLC), an organization formed to protect freedom of speech in the face of Cold War repression.
Resentful of the pressure to write an endless stream of topical protest songs and increasingly wary of the "spokesman for a generation" acclaim beginning to come his way, Dylan got roaring drunk and gave an extraordinary acceptance speech that offended almost everybody present. He concluded by accepting the award on behalf of Forman and again questioned the value of the march's studied respectability and claims to biracial significance. "I was on the March on Washington up on the platform and I looked around at all the Negroes there and I didn’t see any Negroes that looked like none of my friends. My friends don’t wear suits. My friends don’t have to wear any kind of thing to prove they’re respectable Negroes."48

Shortly after, Dylan wrote to the ECLC trying, in a verse poem, to apologize but reiterating his skepticism about efforts to wrap in the garb of middle-American respectability a movement that, as he had implied in "Only a Pawn," demanded a much more radical revision of American values and socioeconomic structures. The ubiquitous suits and ties at the march, he repeated, militated against genuine acceptance of black humanity on its own terms: "black skin is black skin/It cant be covered by clothes and made t seem/acceptable, well liked an respectable...it is naked black skin an nothin else/ if a Negro has t wear a tie t be a Negro/ then I must cut off all ties with who he has t do it for."49

Following the march, his ECLC experience, and another trip south to support movement activities in February 1964, Dylan steadily withdrew from making overt political gestures and virtually abandoned the kind of topical songs that had made his reputation.50 "All I can say is that politics is not my thing at all," he explained after a set at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival heavily weighted towards his more personal songs drew the ire of some fans. "It ain’t gonna work. I’m just not gonna be part of it," he added pessimistically. While some of his peers, including Baez, became increasingly enmeshed with the New Left and endorsed its broad critique of American domestic values and foreign policy, Dylan argued that efforts to change the system were futile. "I’m not gonna make a dent or anything, so why be a part of it by even trying to criticize it?" he asked.51 Unlike many sympathetic white liberals, Dylan never pretended to fully understand, let alone articulate, the black experience. "What’s a Negro? I don’t know what a Negro is," an exasperated Dylan admitted to Shelton.52 Responsibility for expressing black identity and experience, the complexities of black culture, and the aspirations of the black community did not rest with white singers like himself, Dylan insisted.

50 Marqusee, Wicked Messenger, 96-99; 115-20.
52 Bob Dylan, quoted in Hajdu, Positively 4th Street, 201.
**Conspicuous Silences: Jazz and Rhythm and Blues**

In the world of jazz, there were many black musicians who might have filled that role at the march. Yet, as saxophonist John Handy complained at the time, “Of the large number of ‘cream of the crop’ Negro and white artists and entertainers present, there was not one jazz artist on the program.” Handy, who had played with Charles Mingus on the seminal album *Better Git It in Your Soul*, was a longtime activist who had been imprisoned for his involvement in a New York sit-in at Woolworths. Following a move to the West Coast, he joined the San Francisco CORE chapter and picketed the Bank of America to protest discriminatory hiring practices. Handy found the absence of jazz from the program unfathomable “because jazz, along with the spirituals, has played a major role in the Negro’s struggle for freedom...After all, jazz has been the Negro’s artistic means of self-expression and has opened many minds and hearts to the Negro.” Frustrated by the absence of jazz at the march, Handy formed his own integrated Freedom Band, which took to the road as the “musical troubleshooter for the Movement.” Handy adopted “the uniform worn in the South by SNCC workers — i.e. work shirts, dark pants, denim jackets, etc.” There were to be no suits and ties in the Freedom Band.

Unknown to Handy, however, Washington native Duke Ellington actually had been asked to participate in the march. According to his sometime lyricist Don George, Ellington declined, moaning, “I’ve got sore feet. I can’t walk that far.”

But as Harvey Cohen has shown, the truth was more complex and symptomatic of the dilemmas faced by black musicians when it came to aligning themselves publically with the new, more militant, direct-action phase of the freedom struggle. For years, Ellington had been brilliantly expressing black consciousness in his art, not least in the “My People” show in the summer of 1963, when he premiered “King Fit the Battle of Alabam’” — one of his most overtly political works, dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr. and the Birmingham campaign. A life member of the NAACP who played dozens of benefits for the organization, Ellington had even joined a Baltimore sit-in in February 1960. A year later he had a non-segregation clause inserted into his contract for performances. The provision was, however, unevenly applied, and Ellington drew regular criticism from activists for playing segregated shows. He was also perpetually trying to live down widely circulated comments he had made in 1951, claiming that the black community was not yet ready to mount a campaign for full citizenship due to its lack of economic power. By the time of the march, Ellington had not changed his

---


55 For Ellington’s relationship with the movement in the 1950s and 1960s, see Harvey G. Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America* (Chicago, 2010), 298-307, 379-407.

56 Ibid., 301-307.
opinion. He admired King but doubted the efficacy of direct-action tactics. He dismissed the march as a futile public relations exercise that would do nothing to raise the capital necessary to empower the black community. “The only people who did good out of the goddam parade was the people who owned businesses in Washington, the hotels and all that,” he complained.57

If Ellington’s refusal to participate rested partially on principled reservations about the value of the march and of direct-action protest more generally, his decision also reflected the fact that around 95 percent of his audience was white.58 While this cross-racial appeal opened up potential for educating whites and persuading them to support the burgeoning movement, there was no guarantee that this would happen. Indeed, there was widespread fear that forthright civil rights advocacy might alienate white fans who had come to think of Ellington as a national treasure but rarely as a political figure. He was a man who, as Alistair Cooke once observed, often appeared “strangely apart from the troubles and recent turmoil of his race.”59

Ellington was hardly unique among jazz musicians in his cautious approach to the movement. In 1961, white jazz critic and civil rights advocate Nat Hentoff ridiculed suggestions that jazz artists were regularly involved in civil rights activities or committed to supporting it financially. He doubted that as many as “one in five hundred even belonged to the NAACP.”60 Nevertheless, in terms of both aesthetics and thematic preoccupations, many jazz players, particularly younger musicians associated with gospel-blues soaked Hard Bop and more experimental free form New Jazz, expressed support for the struggle in their music. This was reflected most overtly in works such as Charles Mingus’s “Fables of Faubus,” which mocked the Arkansas governor in the wake of the 1957 Central High School crisis in Little Rock; songwriter-jazz vocalist Oscar Brown Jr.’s 1960 album Sin & Soul, which captured the historic black experience in “Bid ‘em in” and “Work Song”; “Alabama,” John Coltrane’s elegy to the four girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing of September 1963; Sonny Rollins’s Freedom Suite; and Max Roach’s We Insist! Freedom Now Suite, which Roach insisted Candid Records offer to civil rights organizations at a discount so they could resell it to raise funds.61

Beyond such explicit invocations of the movement, within many forms of postwar jazz there was a quest for individual expressivity within a supportive group setting and for structural freedom (particularly harmonic and rhythmic freedom), which many heard as

58 Ibid., 385.
a soundtrack to the black struggle for justice, freedom, and escape from the tyranny of white values. As Atlanta-based SNCC worker Fay Bellamy heard black pride and sympathy for the movement expressed “in how the rhythms changed in jazz,” perceptively adding, “I think the mind-set a jazz person might have versus the mind-set a rhythm and blues person might have, might have been somewhat different in that period of time.” As Bellamy appreciated, young jazz artists tended to emerge from and work within a self-conscious cultural vanguard, where music was expected to mix with politics. There was an expectation that any credible jazz musician would be conspicuously committed to the freedom struggle: both they and their protean art were expected to challenge existing social, economic, political, and racial, as well as musical, conventions.

Hentoff’s barbs notwithstanding, it is also clear that some jazz artists, veterans as well as the militant new young guns, who did speak out boldly for black pride and against racism, aligned themselves more conspicuously with the struggle. The Little Rock school crisis prompted Louis Armstrong, jazz’s most revered elder statesman, to denounce Orval Faubus as an “uneducated plowboy,” berate “no guts” President Eisenhower for his handling of the affair, and pull out of a State Department-sponsored goodwill tour of the Soviet Union because of “the way they are treating my people in the South.” Armstrong’s stance drew enormous appreciation from the black public who knew the risk it posed to his career. “Armstrong knew what he was doing,” explained George Perkins of Norfolk, Virginia, proudly, “and is ready to accept whatever the consequences.” Jazz artists also gave benefit concerts for the movement in the early 1960s, such as the SNCC “Salute to Southern Students” show at Carnegie Hall in February 1963, which spawned a lucrative double-album featuring Julian “Cannonball” Adderley, Charles Mingus, and Thelonious Monk alongside Nina Simone, one of the most heavily involved artists of the period, whose style straddled jazz, folk, blues, pop, and rhythm and blues.

Ironically, however, while some promoted the New Jazz, in particular, as the sound of black pride and insurgency, the black masses in the early 1960s tended to prefer rhythm and blues, whose performers usually distanced themselves from formal identification with the struggle, either in their music or in personal terms, until later in the decade. Again, before trying to explain the absence of rhythm and blues artists from the March and their relatively low profile in
the early movement, it is important to acknowledge that there were exceptions to this generalization and to reaffirm that the politics and significance of African American popular music were never reducible to socially engaged lyrics or to the public activism of artists. The sound of rising black consciousness was encoded in the sounds and performance practices of rhythm and blues and in the success of some of its artists as much as in the literal meanings of its songs. As noted by Imamu Amiri Baraka, the author-activist whose liner notes, poetry, and advocacy did much to forge links between the New Jazz and the freedom struggle, even lyrically apolitical songs “provided a core of legitimate social feeling, although mainly metaphorical and allegorical for black people,” which both aligned with and intensified a new black pride.67

Moreover, in the late 1950s and early 1960s there were some popular rhythm and blues songs that did engage with the freedom struggle and the socioeconomic realities of the black experience long before the profusion of such fare later in the decade. Like many earlier blues songs, the Silhouettes’ “Got a Job” and Jerry Butler’s “I’m a Telling You” addressed black economic disadvantage. Chuck Berry’s “Promised Land” worked as an allegory of the 1961 Freedom Rides, while his earlier hits “Johnny B. Goode” and “Brown-Eyed Handsome Man” foreshadowed the ubiquitous “black is beautiful” songs of the late 1960s and 1970s. Nina Simone frequently touched on the intersection of racial and gender oppression and addressed the battle against Jim Crow explicitly with “Mississippi Goddam” in late 1963.68

However, while one could undoubtedly extend this list, at the time of the march such songs were exceptional, not typical. While many folk singers and some jazz artists dealt openly with race relations in their music, such moves were much rarer among the stars of rhythm and blues who dominated black-oriented radio, black jukeboxes, black theaters, and black turntables.

Similarly, by 1963 only a few leading rhythm and blues artists had taken a bold personal and public stand in support of the movement. In 1960, Clyde McPhatter and fellow NAACP life member, organist Bill Doggett, had played a series of integrated youth rallies where McPhatter praised “the young white students who... have stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Afro-American youth in this irresistible crusade.”66 McPhatter also participated in an Atlanta sit-in, appeared on picket lines, and performed benefits for the NAACP and SNCC. Yet the relatively unusual nature of such conspicuous commitment


68 For a discussion of lyrical engagement with the movement in the rhythm and blues of the late 1950s and early 1960s, see Ward, Just My Soul Responding, 203-18.

69 Clyde McPhatter, quoted in Amsterdam News, July 9, 1960.
was hinted at when in April 1963 McPhatter was still being hailed in the black press as “one of the first to take an active part in a public demonstration of anger and disgust with the status quo.” Other rhythm and blues artists involved in early protest activities included the young Gladys Knight in Atlanta, Bunny Sigler in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Jackie Wilson, who worked hard for the Philadelphia NAACP and had for some time refused to play segregated shows. So, too, had Little Willie John, who, like black balladeer Roy Hamilton, attended the march as a private citizen and who, again like Hamilton, regularly performed at benefit concerts.

Plans for the March on Washington had actually prompted a modest surge of public engagement from the world of rhythm and blues. Ray Charles and the Shirelles appeared alongside more regular movement supporters Johnny Mathis, Nina Simone, and Dick Gregory at a Miles College fundraiser that raised about $9,000 for the Council for United Civil Rights Leadership (CUCRL), which handled the financial arrangements for joint civil rights projects. On August 23, 1963, even the perennially cautious Motown, a black-owned record label with a growing biracial audience that seemed to embody the predominantly integrationist agenda of the mainstream movement, allowed Stevie Wonder to appear at a benefit show at the Apollo Theater in Harlem to raise money for the forthcoming march. Significantly, the show, which generated about $30,000 with its $100 ticket price, featured well-established black and white jazz artists (Art Blakey, Carmen McCrae, Thelonius Monk, and Tony Bennett) alongside sympathetic white Hollywood celebrities such as Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward. For Motown’s founder Berry Gordy, keeping this sort of company did no harm to the label’s reputation as an emerging force in the wider American entertainment industry at a moment of growing optimism about the prospects for meaningful African American economic progress.

Nevertheless, such public commitment was rare, and the biggest rhythm and blues artists of the day were seldom seen on the frontlines, or heard making forthright statements on behalf of the movement, or headlining benefit concerts. This reticence frustrated both activists and more militant artists. Bernice Johnson Reagon “really thought these people should be sending money. They should be doing benefits…. We thought all of them should be there. But, you know… Sometimes, I think, they couldn’t quite see an interest.” In 1960, Harry Belafonte had condemned the timidity of many of his fellow
black artists, complaining “I see fear all around me and I have no respect for it.” Years later he recalled how he had found it “extremely difficult” to get some of the most popular black musicians of the day involved: “When it came time for show and tell, nobody showed, they had nothing to tell.” He said of James Brown, Sam Cooke, Motown, “all of those people distanced themselves from the Movement; not only once removed from it, but sometimes twenty times removed from it.”

All of which begs a crucial question: why, given their obvious interest in seeing the struggle for black civil and voting rights and expanded economic opportunity succeed, were so few rhythm and blues artists visible in movement activities, including the march? The most important factor was that the most successful or ambitious rhythm and blues artists were anxious to avoid potentially controversial gestures that might alienate a new, highly lucrative, young white audience from their music at a time when equal access to the economic opportunities and rewards of American consumer-capitalism was widely accepted as one of the movement’s principal goals. As Belafonte put it, “I think most of them were in great danger of losing their platform ... they dreaded losing their newly found moments of opportunity.”

In this context it is highly significant that 1963 was an extraordinarily integrated moment for popular music, especially among American youth. The emergence of rock and roll in the mid-1950s had sparked an unprecedented crossover of black music into what had once been almost exclusively white popular music record and radio markets. By the end of 1956, one in five *Billboard* pop chart singles was by black artists. While racially specific musical preferences persisted, between roughly 1956 and 1964 it became increasingly difficult to separate black and white youth tastes. In 1958, more than 90 percent of the records on the rhythm and blues singles charts also made the pop charts, while forty-five of the eighty-six Top Ten rhythm and blues hits were actually by white artists. Between 1956 and November 1963, there were 175 Top Ten black chart hits by white artists. Just three months after the March on Washington, *Billboard* suspended its separate black charts, believing that such a racially segregated index of consumer preferences was an anachronism. Although the magazine had to revive a separate black chart just fourteen months later, when white and black musical preferences began to diverge once again, the crucial point is that the march took place at a moment of striking interracial fluidity in the world of popular music.
In 1963, then, there seemed to be unprecedented opportunities for black rhythm and blues artists to make the leap to mainstream success. If only a gifted and lucky few ever made that jump, fewer still were willing to jeopardize a shot at the big time, or to put their lives at risk, by appearing too militant. “The reason more artists weren’t involved,” according to SNCC organizer and Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party chair Lawrence Guyot, “was because a large segment of the black population wasn’t involved — for the same reason, Terror.” This was especially true for Southern-born acts or for those who relied on playing the region for their livelihoods. “Mostly the southern entertainers were a little reluctant to get involved because they still had to live pretty much in that region and they were a little — I don’t want to say frightened — reluctant.” Guyot explained.78

While personal ambitions and fear had a role to play in this caution, another factor was that many musicians had only limited control over where they played or what they did. Fay Bellamy had some sympathy: “They were stars to the masses, but what was really going on in their lives? Did they own their music, or were they working for Berry Gordy or some other company?”79 As Bellamy appreciated, the basic configuration of economic and managerial power within the recording, touring, and broadcasting industries meant that rhythm and blues was an unlikely source of much forthright comment on American race relations or public support for black insurgency. The whites and a handful of African Americans in positions of real power in the industry focused on market penetration, not political mobilization. “Marvin Gaye had attempted for a number of years to just do something with us ... And I know Stevie Wonder was just trying really hard,” remembered Stanley Wise. Before the later 1960s, however, public support from Motown acts tended to be, at best, covert and fleeting: “They just weren’t sure how the population would accept that [activism]. Because they were trying to get to their main market and they didn’t want to be viewed as militants or belligerents, or that sort of thing.”80 This contrasted with the younger generation of New Jazz players and folksingers, whose credibility and popularity might actually have been imperiled if they had not appeared sufficiently politicized.

One final context helps to explain the low visibility of rhythm and blues artists around early movement activities and at the march. This involves the movement’s own confusions about whether or how to use the most popular performers of the day effectively. The civil
right movement was characterized by a genius for improvisation, and there was no grand strategy and little expertise when it came to harnessing the financial, inspirational, or propaganda potential of artists and celebrities. This was especially true when those performers came from what was considered the seamier side of black entertainment, which is how rhythm and blues was sometimes viewed. Even Mahalia Jackson, who unlike many gospel singers of her generation never flirted with secular music, was deemed far too earthy for veteran educator-writer-activist Anna Arnold Hedgeman. The only woman on the march’s organizing committee, Hedgeman objected to Jackson’s place on the official program, considering her too crude and ill-educated, her music too raw and emotional, for this relentlessly respectable affair.\footnote{Euchner, Nobody Turn Me Around, 155.} Although she was outvoted on Jackson, Hedgeman’s concern for propriety reflected the mainstream movement’s powerful middle-class orientation with educators, students, and clergy to the fore. This could create a forbidding environment for singers of humble origins and little education whose repertoire often turned around ribald themes of lust and longing, passion and pleasure that did not accord with the decorous image the movement wished to project.

This tension, coupled with widespread inexperience in dealing with artists and celebrities, was evident at CORE, whose fundraising activities in the early 1960s were largely the responsibility of Val Coleman and Marvin Rich, two middle-aged white men whose fingers were not exactly on the pulse of the latest trends in American popular music, black or white. In theory, CORE volunteer lawyer George Schiffer, who acted as a copyright consultant to Gordy, provided some access to Motown. Yet CORE still managed to send letters asking the label to allow Stevie Wonder and the Marvelettes to play a fundraiser to the wrong management agency and later wrote to one “Berry Gardy of the Motonen Record Company.”\footnote{ Marvin Rich, letter to Barry Gardy (sic), May 4, 1964, V:179, Congress of Racial Equality Papers, 1941-1967, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.} 82

SNCC’s membership was generally younger and hipper, so it might have been expected to be better at courting black musicians. But as late as 1965, Betty Garman admitted that SNCC’s use of popular artists was still a “kind of hit and miss operation,” while experience persuaded Julian Bond “that you can’t appeal to this class of entertainers… If you are going to get help it’s going to be the Belafontes, the Dick Gregories, the folk people.”\footnote{Betty Garman, letter to Dick Perez, July 14, 1965, A-IV-70, SNCC Papers. Bond interview.} As Stanley Wise put it, “there was never any real effort on our part unless the artists themselves pushed it. In other words, artists had to do something for us despite
our hesitancy.”84 This attitude created a stultifying cycle of inactivity. Few black artists were likely to step forward without encouragement from the movement. And even when such encouragement was forthcoming, there was often a sense that musicians were not really respected, consulted properly, or treated as a significant part of the movement beyond a crude fundraising or publicity function. “Those niggers don’t ever bother with me until they want something,” Mahalia Jackson once fumed to Coretta Scott King about her treatment by the SCLC.85

Here, the perspective of Junius Griffin, who worked as director of public relations at the SCLC before joining Motown’s publicity department, is revealing. Griffin could recall “no concerted efforts to court soul artists during [my] years with SCLC.” Moreover, he agreed that those artists who did appear at rallies or fundraisers thanks to ad hoc arrangements or personal connections were often treated insensitively and left disillusioned. Berry Gordy’s sister and Motown executive Esther Gordy once explained to Griffin that “Motown was reluctant to allow its artists to participate in Movement events and activities because they were used as mere addendums to programs and never as an integral part of activities.” Invited to swell attendances and income at benefits and rallies, these artists often performed in the aftermath of endless speeches, usually using inferior sound systems that failed to showcase their music effectively. And, recalled Griffin, “when they were ready to leave the next morning, no one was present to say goodbye. Artists and management were highly offended by this practice.”86

In the final analysis what civil rights organizations wanted most from artists and celebrities was revenue and publicity, and there were always richer, more reliable pickings available in other areas of entertainment than in rhythm and blues. Artists of the stature of Ray Charles or James Brown were attractive propositions, not least because their endorsements might have done much to raise black morale and maybe even some cash. But such artists were usually deemed less effective than jazz musicians, folksingers, or Hollywood stars for reaching the middle-class whites whose consciences and wallets the movement most needed to pry open. These pragmatic and fiscal priorities meant that civil rights organizations were hardly precious about who they approached. SNCC was equally happy courting James Brown and the Beatles, whom Constancia “Dinky” Romilly initially tried to contact through Bobby Dillon (sic) and Joan

84 Wise interview.
85 Coretta Scott King, telephone conversation with Stanley Levison, May 24, 1969, Martin Luther King, Jr. FBI File, Part II: The King-Levison File, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
86 Junius Griffin, interview with Brian Ward, July 22, 1996.
Baez. Romilly made no distinction between soul brother number one and the fab four in terms of their fundraising and publicity potential, which was how their usefulness to the movement was primarily conceived.  

Not that income from most benefit concerts was particularly impressive. SNCC reckoned benefits “seldom net more than 10% to the beneficiary” and listed them among the more “unwise or questionable” methods of fundraising at its disposal.

Conclusion

The music made and shared in Washington on August 28, 1963, generally spoke to the ideas of individual and collective freedom, and to the desire for more harmonious and respectful race relations that permeated the early movement. Of course, the emotional and motivational qualities of music are difficult to capture, even in the most lyrical prose; its political significances and influences are harder still to quantify. Yet, while the emphasis on white folk and the absence of some forms of black music irked some, we know that the music played, sung, and heard at the march profoundly moved many participants and observers. Music somehow captured the essence of the moment, articulating and enhancing the feelings of solidarity and purposefulness, determination and guarded optimism that most marchers felt that day. “When I began to really feel good was when Joan Baez sang ‘We Shall Overcome’,” recalled Berl Bernhard, white staff director of the Civil Rights Commission. “You just felt ‘this is it, this is OK...You could just feel everybody going ‘Yes!’”.  

Julian Bond, a self-professed Bob Dylan fan, arrived on the mall eager to hear him and Baez sing, and still managed to sound giddy with excitement half a century later when recalling Mahalia Jackson’s performance: “That was a big, big treat,” he purred. Equally memorable, however, was a moment late in the afternoon, after the official events had concluded and the professional singers had departed, when Bond joined hands with his SNCC colleagues to sway and sing along in a final rendition of “We Shall Overcome.” This reminds us, not just of the significance of that particular song in the movement and at the march, but also of how those who sang as they made their way to, along, and away from the mall helped to create the soundtrack to the event and thereby shape its meanings.

Brian Ward is Professor in American Studies at Northumbria University. His major publications on the US South, the African American experience, and popular music include Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and

87 “SNCC Guide to Fundraising,” n.d., C-I-151, Dinky Romilly, letters to Joan Baez and Bobby Dillon (sic), July 9, 1965, B-I-52, both SNCC.

88 “Unwise or Questionable Fund Raising Methods,” n.d., A-IV-13, SNCC. A Westbury, NY, “freedom concert” for SNCC in June 1964 generated $2,800, but by the time headliner Nina Simone, the supporting acts, and the venue were paid for, the net profit was under $600. That same summer, when Joan Baez and Pete Seeger waived their fees for another SNCC benefit in New York, the organization netted over $1,300 profit. “New York Friends of SNCC: Balance Sheet (May 1 — Sept. 30, 1964),” A-VI-6, SNCC.

89 Andrew B. Stroud, letter to Jim McDonald, August 16, 1965, E-II-44, CORE-Addendum.

89 Berl Bernhard, interviewed in Martin Luther King and the March on Washington, dir. John Akomfrah (Smoking Dog Films, 2013).

Race Relations (1998); Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South (2004); The American South and the Atlantic World, Creating Citizenship in the Nineteenth-Century South (both 2013), and Creating and Consuming the American South (2015). He is currently working on two projects: the first about A&R (Artists and Repertoire) workers in the early US recording industry; the second on the Beatles’ experiences in the US South.