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Voices of Civil Rights

Reason: A Borning Struggle COMMENTARY

¹⁴ The first Civil Rights Movement sit-in in Greensboro, N.C., 20 years ago, was marked this year by many events throughout the nation. One of the most moving of these events was "Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: A National Working Conference on Civil Rights Movement Culture," held at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of History and Technology in Washington, D.C., Jan. 30-Feb. 3. The conference was co-sponsored by the Smithsonian's Program in Black American Culture and by three divisions of Howard University: the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities and the Department of Music.

At the conference, many of those who had put their lives on the line during the '60s in the battle for civil rights came together to reflect on how and why they joined the Movement, to assess its significance and to rededicate themselves to its goals. There were tears. There was laughter. There was pride. There was nostalgia, a whole lot of nostalgia. But it was not a frivolous nostalgia. It was combined with a zeal to make sure that the many heroic deeds of the Movement not be forgotten, and a realization that the struggle for a more just society is an ongoing one.

There were songs — songs deeply rooted in the Black heritage — songs which served to reinforce the principles of the Movement, to communicate its message, to arm its participants with courage. Songs like "This Little Light of Mine," "Oh Freedom," "Go Tell It On the Mountain," "Which Side Are You On?" and, of course, "We Shall Overcome."

There was an exhibition of evocative photographs that were drawn from the work of 13 national photographers who documented civil rights activities in the '60s.

In the following commentary, Bernice Johnson Reagon, who heads the Smithsonian's Program in Black American Culture, talks about the lasting significance of the Civil Rights Movement and of the galvaniz-

A Borning Struggle

By Bernice J. Reagon

The Civil Rights Movement was a borning struggle, breaking new ground and laying the foundation for ever-widening segments of the society to call for fundamental rights and human dignity. Few forces have created as many ripples that crossed racial, class and social lines as did the Civil Rights Movement.

From 1955 to 1965, the equilibrium of American society was rocked as Black people engaged in massive civil disobedience to serve notice on the nation that they would no longer tolerate the abuses of American racism.

As the Movement spread throughout the South, initial organizers were Black college students who set aside their studies to work in segregated rural and urban communities. They received support from local Black leaders who listened to them, housed and fed them. Sharecroppers, ministers, hair-dressers, restaurant owners, independent business people, and teachers were the first to try to register to vote, apply for a job, or use a segregated public facility. The response was swift and brutal: economic reprisals, jailings, beatings, and killings. But the struggle continued.

While the Civil Rights Movement forced change in legal, political and social processes, its essence lay in the transformation of a people and the triggering of an era of change. People [of both races] who cared came to the South to march. And when they left, not only was the South changed, but they too were changed. People who were of Hispanic descent were white when they worked in the Civil Rights Movement, but, when they got back home, they were brown. Some who had worked with SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) began to do political organizing around issues concerning the Spanish-speaking community. Some of the leaders of the anti-war movement

were politicized by their work in the Civil Rights Movement. With the question of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, they found themselves in another mass struggle that cut across class and race lines.

For many organizers and supporters, then, leaving a specific project or struggle did not mean the end of political activity. These people came away from the Movement experience with a greater facility for seeing a wide range of questions. For many, there was no end or rest. The Movement was a beginning.

Indeed, the Movement did serve as a catalyst for the birth of numerous public causes and movements during the '60s and the '70s. Therefore, when one speaks of the history of movements during the last two decades, an accurate assessment would be hard to come by without giving a large share of the credit to the lessons learned from the Civil Rights Movement.

This brings us to the New Left. Personally, I have some reservations with the image that most people have of the New Left. It portrays this movement as being totally white, with Black people who have participated in struggle presented almost as an adjunct. The point is: the Civil Rights Movement borning not just the Black power and Black revolutionary movements but every progressive struggle that has occurred in this country — the struggles of students, anti-war activists, Native Americans, Chicanos, gay rights, the women's movement, the ecological and anti-nuclear movements, and many others.

To know the Movement's power for its own people, one must examine what this Movement offered for its creator community. Seen internally within the Black American context, the Civil Rights Movement was not a "borning" struggle but a continuation, a continuation of a struggle for freedom grown to a ripeness, so ripe as to burst forth, spilling over, affecting everything.

Historian Vincent Harding has set forth the theory that when Black people in Africa were captured during the slave trade, they then, in reaction, began to formalize a response to that loss of freedom. That response is the Black American experience in this country. Taken in this light, the Civil Rights Movement becomes a part of one of the longest and continuous struggles of a people for freedom in modern history.

The concept of the borning struggle and the continuing struggle poses a kind of analysis that refuses to be static and 1

raises the question: what next? On the one hand, what other group will now decide that it too needs to organize and become visible and demand space according to its concept of its needs? What is next in the struggle for liberation for people who must shift strategically to meet new challenges in a society which continues to spew up blatant and overt statements denying their rights to humanness?

What does this have to do with culture?

If Black people in this country have been moving fairly steadily in many complex ways toward places of liberation and against the major forces and structure of the society whose existence and prosperity is directly related to keeping them oppressed, then we are looking at 400 years or more of struggle. What the people do in naming themselves and setting their values and forming their communities must be seen within this context. When one looks at Black American culture, one is looking at a culture of struggle. Black Americans have not only given America this recent era of struggle but have also been the major innovators in forming the American culture. Indeed, it is into the traditional reservoirs of the creative expressions of Black people that the culture makers and marketers have dipped for the wares that they would sell to the national and international audience.

In studying the Black American experience, it is important to recognize that there is a difference between the impact we have on the society and the impact we have on ourselves.

When I think about the songs of the Civil Rights Movement, for instance, I think of what the Movement gave me. It gave me the audacity to pick up a song I'd sung all my life — "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" — and then go to the Bible and find there were things in the song that weren't in the Bible story and I think that was probably because that song was not for Daniel in a lion's den but for my people in a lion's den of another sort. It was as if such songs that had been passed on to me seemed to be receptacles waiting to be filled with what I had to say about this time.

Personal View: Songs of Struggle

I grew up in Dougherty County, just outside of Albany, Ga., in a community steeped in Black southern cultural traditions. These traditions came alive for me as they shaped the cultural structures of the Civil Rights Movement. From the late '50s through the mid-1960s, in Howard County, Georgia,

the wedding of our traditional culture with our contemporary struggle for freedom. All the established academic categories in which I had been educated fell apart during this period, revealing culture to be not luxury, not leisure, not entertainment, but the lifeblood of a community.

As a singer and activist in the Albany Movement, I sang and heard the freedom songs, and saw them pull together sections of the Black community at times when other means of communication were ineffective. It was the first time that I knew the power of a song to be an instrument for the articulation of our community concerns.

In Dawson (Ga.) county seat of "Terrible Terrell," where Blacks were 75 percent of the population, I sat in a church and felt the chill that ran through a small gathering of Black people when the sheriff and his deputies walked in. They stood at the door, making sure everyone knew they were there. Then a song began. And the song made sure that the sheriff and his deputies knew we were there. We became visible, our image was enlarged, when the sounds of the freedom songs filled all the space in that church.

From December 1955 to December 1956, Blacks in Montgomery, Ala., chose to walk rather than ride on segregated city buses. To sustain and unify the community during the boycott, mass meetings were held. There were speakers and there was singing.

In 1960, when Black students sat in and were beaten at segregated lunch counters across the South, they sang. They sang as they were dragged into the streets. They sang in paddy wagons and in the jails. And they sang when they returned to the Black community's churches for rallies.

When the buses carrying the Freedom Riders were stopped and burned, when the riders were pushed to the ground and beaten, they sang. When the Freedom Riders were jailed in Mississippi's Hinds County Jail and Parchman Penitentiary, they sang again. During the summer of

1961, when students in McComb, Miss., were suspended from school for participating in SNCC's first testing of the Interstate Commerce Commission's ruling that interstate travel be integrated, songs thundered from the massive community-based movement that was born. In Selma and Birmingham, in Greenwood and Hattiesburg, in Danville and Pine Bluff and Baton Rouge and Cambridge, in segregated cities across the nation, communities of activists came together. Central to their gatherings — mass meetings, rallies, marches, pray-ins, jail-ins — were their freedom songs.

As I read the numerous studies on the Civil Rights Movement, I look for the people who made up the numbers; I look to see if they are a faceless mass or an eloquent and strongly focused community. The few successful studies acknowledge the songs as the language that focused the energy of the people who filled the streets and roads of the South during that period, people who heralded in a new era in the Black American struggle for equality, people who laid the foundation for ever-widening segments of the society to call for fundamental rights and human dignity. □

Bernice Reagon, Ph.D., is a cultural historian, singer and songwriter.