Freedom Singers: The Movement of Music

JAMES DEKLE

It was during the early 1960's when four young adults were called upon to raise funds and share the Civil Rights Movement through song. Charles Neblett, Cordell Reagon, Bernice Johnson, and Rutha Mae Harris would become the original group of Freedom Singers. The group was assembled through the efforts of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This committee was formed in 1960, and was designed to be an educational tool for the black community. They were committed to educating the black community of their civil rights, including their right to vote. Consequently, in 1962, the four students gathered for two days to rehearse music and train as SNCC representatives.

At the completion of their training, the Freedom Singers embarked on a tour beginning in December 1962 and ending in August 1963. The group’s tour destinations were primarily northern states in locations including churches, colleges, high schools, house parties, demonstrations, marches, protest, and jails. During the summer of 1963, the Freedom Singers performed for large audiences with performances with Mahalia Jackson, the Newport Folk Festival with Bob Dylan, Carnegie Hall, and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. As a result of those performances, Mercury Records signed the Freedom Singers to a recording contract, which led the group to record a studio album in October 1963.

The repertoire of the group consisted of hymns, spirituals, and original compositions by members of the group. The text of many of the selections was altered to civil rights themes, but the tunes of the songs were often common or familiar to the general audiences. This is the case in many of the iconic songs that were birthed out of the movement. “We Shall Overcome,” perhaps the unofficial anthem of the movement, was adapted from Charles Tindley’s hymn “I Will Overcome Someday.” Also, selections like “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round” would substitute other phrases in place of the word ‘nobody’ including ‘racism,’ police dogs, and other barriers that were obstacles during the movement. The intention was to create an atmosphere where audiences would join in singing the message and themes of the movement to inspire hope, entertain, and yet, protest the injustice. The music of the freedom singers became a powerful voice of education and awareness, and revealed the civil injustice in the lives of many African Americans. The results of the efforts of the Freedom Singers have led some historians to refer to the civil rights era as the movement of song.

The Original Freedom Singers disbanded at the end of 1963. Nevertheless, the songs of the movement continue to resonate in our lives today. Since 1963, the group has taken on new membership at different times, and has performed at selected events commemorating their efforts during the early 1960s. In 2010, three of the original singers, Bernice Johnson, Charles Neblett, and Rutha Harris, performed at the White House for President Barack Obama. The performance also included Smoky Robinson and Bob Dylan.

REFERENCES