



Music and the Civil Rights Struggle

One of the original members of the SNCC Freedom Singers, Cordell Reagon, put it even more directly: "Without these songs, you know we wouldn't be anywhere. We'd still be down on Mister Charley's plantation, chopping cotton for 30 cents a day." Bernice Johnson Reagon, then a member of the SNCC Freedom Singers, now presiding spirit of the ... group Sweet Honey in the Rock, recalls Ella Baker's influence on her sense of the connection between music and politics: "She urged us as organizers to understand how to create structures that allowed others in our group to also be leaders as well as followers. Her power was in her wanting to increase others' sense of their own power and their access to power." Reagon describes the courage the songs gave to the Freedom Riders jailed in Hinds County, Mississippi; the students participating in SNCC's voter education project in McComb, Mississippi; the marchers in Pine Bluff, Baton Rouge, Selma, Birmingham: "They sang as they were dragged into the streets. They sang in the paddy wagons and in the jails. And they sang when they returned to the Black community's churches for strategy rallies." One of those rallies took place in Dawson, Georgia, where, Reagon remembered, "I sat in a church and felt the chill that ran through a small gathering of Blacks when the sheriff and 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 the deputies knew we were there. We became visible, our image was enlarged, when the sound of the freedom songs filled all the space in that church.*

-- Excerpt from Craig Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America*, 1999

* The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was one of the most important groups of the Civil Rights movement, leading sit-ins throughout the segregated South and helping organize the 1963 March on Washington at which the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.