

Music Played Key Role in US Civil Rights Movement

By Richard Paul

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Aretha Franklin performs at Radio City Music Hall in New York, Mar. 21, 2008.

For all its unity of purpose, there were many divisions in the civil rights movement. One of the most stark divisions played out in the music that urged the movement forward.

[Richard Paul's report on Civil Rights Music](#)



When we think about the civil rights struggle in the United States, a tune called “Freedom Song” comes to mind. It was the type of music you could expect to hear at the civil rights movement’s mass meetings and protest rallies.

“It was usually based musically in the spiritual tradition,” said Suzanne Smith, author of *Dancing In The Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*. “But the lyrics often reflected the exact situation that the activists were confronting at that moment. If they were arrested at a rally, they

would often sing the songs in jail to keep their spirits up.”

A song called "Oh Pritchett, Oh Kelly" that was written in the Albany, Georgia, jail refers to police chief Pritchett and Mayor Kelly.

“Singing together in a group helps to, I think remind people that they are not alone,” Smith said.

Most of the original fighters in the civil rights movement were based in the church, so their songs were a lot like church hymns.

The tunes were often hymn tunes and the style of singing conformed to the style of praying in the mainline African-American churches, often relying on call and response.

“The act of call and response creates the sense of community that is quite different than even just singing a song together as one,” said Smith. “They would maybe be feeling defeated, or feeling afraid, and that call and response -- and that sense that they were in a room full of people all singing together -- gave them strength.”

But these iconic freedom songs did not remain the sole anthems of the civil rights movement. Even as people prepared for the March On Washington, the ground was shifting. There were new voices that, instead of praying for equality, were demanding respect.

Aretha Franklin’s “Respect”, a pop song with a deeper meaning, became very important in the civil rights movement.

“Activists would write about this. They would say, ‘Rhythm and blues is a weapon. Listen to ‘Heat Wave,’ listen to ‘Nowhere to Run.’ This music is our tool against oppression,” Smith said.

These new songs, many from the Detroit-based record company Motown, were different from the older freedom songs, both in content and the way they were listened to, according to Smith.

“The freedom songs were songs that were experienced as a collective, group experience,” she said. “Motown songs were something that you might enjoy with other people, but were often on the radio or at a party and it was a more receptive experience rather than a participatory experience.”

The difference in musical style reflected a difference in approach by the old-line and newer civil rights activists.

“The black militants were more wanting to move away from that black church tradition to a degree and move toward a more international view of militancy and revolution,” Smith said. “And they saw popular music speaking to that.”

The music of the civil rights era changed as the dissidents themselves changed.

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