CHORDS OF DISCORD: SONGS OF DISSONANCE, VIOLENCE, AND
FAITH IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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Chords of Discord: Songs of Dissonance, Violence, and Faith in the Civil Rights
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To my wife Joyce, whose love and support gives me strength
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This study investigates three songs composed during the years of 1964 and 1965 that reflected the words and actions of activists in the Civil Rights Movement. The writers of “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready” created their songs to provoke Americans to participate in civil rights protest actions. These three songs were at the forefront of changing musical perspectives about the Movement. The three compositions moved beyond standard civil rights themes of transcendence to comment on racial violence, reveal the divisiveness among Movement organizations, and contemplate the role of faith in the campaign for civil rights.

This essay explores the messages of the three songs through analysis of four components: lyrics, music, vocals, and performance. Each of these components in the songs reveal evidence of how the songwriters and performers were able to connect to their audience and motivate those listeners to reflect and react to the events in the Movement and the actions of civil rights activists. Each song played a vital role in the Movement during the mid-1960s. All three compositions have established legacies that continue to inform and inspire listeners in the years since their recordings.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Joan Baez stood before the 250,000 people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. at mid-morning of August 28, 1963. The popular folk singer began to sing “We Shall Overcome,” the most recognized freedom song associated with the Civil Rights Movement. Many among the assembled mass joined in. The participants, many who had traveled long distances across the country, had descended upon the nation’s capital for the March on Washington to protest federal unwillingness to pass legislation providing blacks with job opportunities and equal rights. Although the crowd had listened patiently to activists’ speeches earlier in the day, it was music that inspired enthusiasm. Leaders of the Movement understood the power of music to reach people, and accordingly gave musical acts a prominent place in the day’s program.

As numerous other musical artists sang freedom songs to those assembled at the Mall, one musician played a song markedly different in tone from the others performed that day. Folk singer Bob Dylan sang “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” a song that decried the racist mindset permeating the South. In his composition, he suggested that such poisonous thinking provoked the killing of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers in Alabama two months earlier. “Only a Pawn in Their Game” confronted the growing racial disharmony in America. Dylan’s protest piece was followed in the ensuing months by other civil rights songs depicting racial dysfunction in America that also spoke to the discord between civil rights organizations. Songs like “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready” acknowledged the same concerns voiced in Dylan’s composition, but built upon its condemnation of racism with commentaries on dissonance in the Movement and the role of faith in the civil rights struggle. Anger at racial violence motivated musicians to press for political and social change to achieve equality and end the brutality.

Civil rights leaders considered music an essential component in the Movement. Music not only reflected Movement actions and goals, but it also emboldened activists to persevere and inspired ambivalent Americans to participate actively in social change. “Birmingham
Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready” are analyzed in this study because they are songs that reveal aspects that have yet to be investigated in depth, which are how discord in the Movement and the disconnection between blacks and whites became prominent themes in civil rights music. The violent relationship between Movement activists and white segregationists that Dylan commented on in his song would figure in later songs such as “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready.” The writers of those three songs, like Dylan, were motivated to respond to violent reactions taken against civil rights actions.

Historians have analyzed internal discord within the Movement, but the role of music in reflecting division between civil rights groups has not been fully probed. “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready” reflect a growing rift in the Movement that occurred at a critical period. These songs have previously been defined as compositions either supporting or condemning specific factions in the Movement. “People Get Ready,” released in 1965, was written by Curtis Mayfield and performed by his R & B group the Impressions. Scholars consider it a song of inspirational uplift. “Birmingham Sunday,” written by Richard Farina and recorded by folk singer Joan Baez, is perceived as a straightforward protest song that condemns racial violence. “Mississippi Goddam,” by nightclub singer Nina Simone, is regarded as a militant anthem that denounces the use of gradualism in civil rights. Scholars show that these definitions exist within the songs, but such characterizations do not reveal the full intent of the songwriters or the extent of the songs’ influence on audiences. This essay shows that discordance was prevalent in the Movement, and that the three songs revealed that lack of unity. The songs also responded to the pervasive violent attacks inflicted upon Movement participants.

This study shows is that Southern racial violence generated cultural creation in those three songs. Songwriters Farina, Simone, and Mayfield were deeply affected by the racial brutalities that they witnessed and felt compelled to share their views to their audience. Their responses to racial attacks declared that segregation and inequity between blacks and whites was intolerable and immoral. Each song, though different in musical style and lyrical structure, attempted to inspire activism from their audience. The songwriters advocated for change in the status quo in American society.
Once the music ended in Washington that day, civil rights leaders voiced disagreement over the value of the march. Some activists felt the event was a success. Bayard Rustin, chief organizer of the March on Washington, felt that the massive peaceful demonstration in Washington prodded President John F. Kennedy out of his previously cautious civil rights stance into a more assertive position. Rustin believed that the march proved to everyone “we were capable of being one people.” Andrew Young, a leader in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was convinced the march elevated civil rights from a Southern issue into a national one.¹ Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, felt that pressure for a federal civil rights bill steadily increased after the march.² These men were considered leaders in the nonviolent faction of the Movement, and their belief in the possibility of a racially united nation is reflected by Mayfield’s “People Get Ready.”

While songs of transcendence had the power to unite people in spirit and resolve, it could not inspire hope for all civil rights activists. Other groups did not have optimistic views about the march. Prior to the march, members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress on Racial Equality pushed for acts of civil disobedience in Washington. SNCC emerged out of student meetings in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1960. By 1963, it was deeply involved in sit-ins and marches. CORE, established in Chicago in 1941 on the principles of nonviolent protest, actively protested segregation and took a leading role in establishing the “freedom rides” as a protest action. As preparations for the march began, both groups began to push for increasingly aggressive protest actions. Ideas included blocking traffic on thoroughfares and conducting sit-ins in congressional offices of representatives from Southern states. SNCC and CORE members hoped to induce mass arrests with their tactics. March organizers rejected those ideas, causing consternation among participants in those two organizations.³ Malcolm X, spokesman for the Nation of Islam,

explicitly expressed his displeasure about the march. He mocked the event’s integrationist message as the “Farce on Washington.” Malcolm X could not understand why blacks would unite with their white oppressors. He and other militant leaders saw the Movement and the state of race relations in America very differently from the activists behind the March on Washington. The militants’ frustration with the slow pace of progress in civil rights mirrors Simone’s biting denunciation of gradualism in “Mississippi Goddam.”

Civil rights songs such as “Mississippi Goddam,” “Birmingham Sunday,” and “People Get Ready” lyrically expressed conflicted personal perspectives on the Movement post-march. “Mississippi Goddam” may have assaulted the ideal of gradualism, but it did not unequivocally reject nonviolent tactics. “Birmingham Sunday” questioned the effectiveness of nonviolent protest songs, but it also acknowledged the need for those civil rights protests to continue. “People Get Ready” pushed for Americans to take the higher moral ground offered by nonviolent actions, yet it also acknowledged that violence loomed over the Movement. John Lewis, leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, had mixed feelings about the march that very much revealed similar conflicted views about the state of the Movement after the march. He felt that the press presented it as some sort of revival prayer meeting. He complained that reporters focused more on the setting than on real issues. He stated that the march, ostensibly about “Jobs and Freedom,” did not achieve its stated goals. Though Lewis did not share the enthusiastic optimism of other nonviolence leaders about the march, neither did he join militants in dismissing it as irrelevant. Though he saw no immediate meaningful government action in response to the event, he did see value in showing the country and the world the size and strength of the Movement. Lewis’ intricate perspective about the March on Washington revealed his belief that the Movement could not be viewed through the narrow lens pointed at civil rights by the opposing nonviolent and militant factions. Lewis realized the Movement was a complicated, disjointed organism that reflected a wide variety of passionate voices determined to attain civil rights. His view echoed those expressed by Farina, Simone, and Mayfield in their songs.

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Although the march was filled with musical performances expressing the theme of transcendence, songs such as “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready” emerged in its aftermath to speak out against the violence that surrounded the Movement. Their messages were an extension of the themes articulated by leaders of the march. The activists’ oratories soberly reminded the audience of the violence that surrounded the Movement. They commented on the physical abuses blacks endured during demonstrations. Roy Wilkins assailed the government for its inaction in protecting black citizens, declaring “we are beaten and kicked and maltreated and shot and killed” by law enforcement officers. Martin Luther King, Jr. praised the men and women who came to Washington in search of freedom despite being “battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality.” John Lewis criticized the federal government for failing to protect children and the elderly from police dogs and fire hoses in the South. He further confronted the government, asking officials what they did while activists in campaigns in Albany, Georgia were being beaten, kicked, and assaulted. James Farmer, the national director of CORE, wrote a statement from his jail cell in Plaquemine, Louisiana where he was being held for charges stemming from a civil rights demonstration in that city. He proclaimed that “The tear gas and the electric cattle prod of Plaquemine . . . [are] giving to the world a tired and ugly message of terror and brutality and hate.” All these leaders had witnessed brutal acts of oppression. Their experiences provoked them to speak out louder and stronger in defiance of vicious attacks by racists intent on defeating the Movement. Violent events also provoked Mayfield, Farina, and Simone to question race relations and the state of the Movement in their songs.

Civil rights music from the years 1963 to 1965 exposed the discordant relationship between different Movement organizations and detailed rising racial tensions in the country.

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7 Lewis, Walking with the Wind, 219.

“Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready” offered unblinking views of the civil rights battle. They inspired activists to continue in the Movement and implored others to join the struggle. These songs reached wide audiences through live performances, record sales, and radio airplay. Musicians came to realize that they had to actively participate in order to enact meaningful change in society. Until the last two decades, the invaluable influence of music on civil rights in America has largely been dismissed by scholars as cultural history that carried little social and political value.

In 1990, African-American and Religious Studies scholar Vincent Harding lamented about the narrow approach of previous civil rights historical studies, which he proclaimed failed to make the connection between “liberating art and liberation politics.” Harding contends that historians sought to place the Civil Rights Movement into easily recognizable categories, such as political activity, while neglecting the impact music had on effecting social and political change in American society in the 1960s. In the two decades since Harding’s criticism, the academic community has begun to offer more thorough analyses of the influential role music played in the Movement.

Most studies of music from the civil rights era attempt to categorize songs into well-known themes. Songs that dealt with issues of race, segregation and social equality were declared “freedom songs.” Scholars declared many of those songs to be about transcendence and that their purpose was to promote religious faith as inspiration for people to push firmly but peacefully for civil rights. Songs that strongly condemned violence against blacks are primarily defined by historians as provocative militant anthems that demanded forceful physical responses to those attacks. Isolating songs into such narrow definitions fails to acknowledge that music from that era could not be so easily categorized. Though studies have shown the contentious relationships between groups in the Movement, there seems to be little indication by scholars that civil rights music reflected that state. Musicians during that period did capture the chaotic nature of civil rights through the lyrics, music, and vocals of

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their songs. They also documented how successes and tragedies within the Movement defined the emerging divergent courses of nonviolence and militancy.

The importance of “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready” lies in what the songs meant for both performers and listeners as reflections of a turbulent period in civil rights history. Each of the songs took the performers to a higher, more visible state of activism. All of the songs reflected the intrinsic role religion played in the Movement. These three songs were written and performed by the artists in order to influence their audiences to support civil rights. The artists attempted to make sense of the tumult and disunity in both the Movement and in America’s racial relations. These songs were emotional reactions to the violence that permeated the civil rights struggle. They also reflected the changing role of music and its growing influence on America.

The majority of analysis on civil rights music from the late 1950 to mid-1960s centers around freedom songs, many which were adapted from spirituals from the 19th century or from gospel standards from the early 20th century. This included songs such as “This Little Light of Mine,” “We Shall Not Be Moved,” and “We Shall Overcome.” Those songs were used extensively by participants in protests, and scholars have noted the religious undertones that girded the songs. The religious nature of the songs resonated with activists who were active in church, giving them a spiritual connection to the songs.

Transcendence is the key theme most identified in freedom songs. Sociologists Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison define freedom songs as the forum by which African-Americans expressed messages of hope and transcendence under oppressive conditions. In their view, songs about uplift helped to mobilize protest and create group solidarity within the Movement. Paul Harvey expresses similar ideas, surmising that black churchgoers used freedom songs to build cohesion between local people and the Movement at large. Kerran

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11 Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War Through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 172. Harvey, like Eyerman and Jamison, notes the historical link between the civil rights struggles for blacks in the 19th century and the Movement in the 1960s. He writes “freedom songs transmitted history across time.” Harvey highlights Andrew Young’s opinion that unity in the Movement was achieved when “[black people] faced with innumerable and insuperable obstacles, could transcend all those difficulties and forge a new determination, a new faith and strength, when fortified with song.”
L. Sanger concurs with Harvey, stating that activists who sang freedom songs associated their singing with a spirituality that motivated them to become “spirit of the movement.” All these scholars assert that the use of transcendence in song promoted unity in the black community and served to empower activists.

Thomas Reed indicates many freedom songs served as historical commentaries. Reed theorizes that “instant historicizing” was their major role, notating the accomplishments made by the Movement. Other scholars perceive roles beyond transcendence for freedom songs. Jon Michael Spencer feels that uplift existed in freedom songs, but also states that they played other roles. He identified the songwriter’s first role as a historian documenting personal experience or observations of the Movement. This role aligns with Reed’s theory of instant historicizing. Spencer defines the secondary role for songwriters as “participant historians” who empowered and motivated people through song.

Prior to the march, many musicians attempted to motivate people through songs of uplift. In the months following the march, artists like Farina, Simone, and Mayfield felt compelled to comment on the dissonance enveloping the Movement. Their songs focused attention on the disconnection in the Movement, which is an aspect that several scholars have analyzed. Thomas Turino declares that it was never unified, and that the different factions often disagreed about tactics and strategy. He also points out the friction between the national organizations such as SCLC and local movements. Turino notes that the burgeoning black militancy championed by Malcolm X and other leaders offered a radically different vision for blacks. That vision invoked a separatist nationalism very much at odds with the goal of ethnic assimilation championed by the nonviolent faction of the Movement. The defiant

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stance of militants is vividly represented by Simone’s confrontational lyrics and piercing vocalization in “Mississippi Goddam.”

Civil rights music began to reflect the philosophical differences between Movement factions after the March, and “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready” were songs at the forefront of that change in artistic perspective. Just as musicians indicated in their music, Thomas R. Brooks marks the march as the point when factions began to truly diverge. Although various organizations were physically coming together in Washington, D.C., he states that there was a philosophical split. Like Turino, Brooks saw a movement divided over strategy, tactics, and goals. He points out that there was a lot of sniping between groups as they battled to gain credit for victories in various civil rights campaigns. Groups were competing with each other for greater publicity and for funding. The division in philosophies between civil rights organizations was evident in music, with songs that strongly questioned Movement tactics and denounced violent actions competing for listeners with songs that promoted uplift and stoic perseverance. Musical artists, like Movement groups, felt compelled to express their differing visions of civil rights and the nation.

Dennis Chong also confirms the disunity between civil rights organizations that Farina, Simone, and Mayfield depict in their songs. He notes that groups like the NAACP pursued legal channels and lobbied politicians for social change, while groups such as SNCC, SCLC, and CORE used direct action instead. In Chong’s opinion, the Movement achieved unification at the March on Washington, only to lose its unity again after the passage of the second civil rights bill in 1965. In his estimation, this was a result of militant civil rights groups rising frustration with what they saw as paper victories and not real achievements, which further widened the schism in the Movement. The songs in this essay, as well as other evidence, contradict the notion of a real unity in the Movement during the march or in the immediate years that followed it.

“Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready” lyrically project the growing turmoil in the Movement during the early 1960s. Rhoda Lois Blumberg,

like Chong, notes the fissures that developed between factions loosely aligned in a coalition for the march. She offers that the more conservative organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League had to try to find common ground with the increasingly radicalized SNCC and CORE. She indicated that unity prevailed, at least on the surface. Yet, dissent among organizations was already beginning to appear during the Freedom Rides in Alabama and Mississippi in 1961. The Freedom Rides were a series of protest movements against segregated restaurants and waiting rooms at bus terminals in the South. Blumberg states that the NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and SCLC did assist each other during the rides, but it was not a completely united front. She proclaims that various factions often upstaged each other, and that a conflict in outlook would eventually sever any alliance. The fractures in the Movement would be an influential element behind the creation of “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready.”

Scholars have studied the relationship between music and violence, mostly about the use of songs during Movement activities. Thomas Reed states that activists used songs as the primary method to express the ideal of nonviolent protest to others. He notes that many civil rights songs juxtaposed the segregationists’ violence next to the actions of nonviolent protesters to reveal the stark contrast. Reed also spoke of the ability of music to diffuse a tense situation and calm agitated participants. What he and other scholars overlook is how violence motivated the creation of songs like “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready.” Those songs described violent attacks through religious language, using words that established a moral foundation that reached out to listeners.

There has been limited academic investigation into the role of violence as a motivating factor in the cultural creation of civil rights songs. There are studies of violence as it pertained to literature, especially on early twentieth century stories by black authors. Those essays grapple with the paradox facing blacks who struggled to reconcile their belief in a righteous and loving God with the violence and suffering they endured. In her essay addressing evil and its existence in twentieth-century black literature, Qiana J. Whitted references theodicy, which she defines as “a systematic affirmation of God’s goodness and

power in light of the reality of evil and suffering.” She states black writers explored doubts and frustration with the “Negro’s God” and raised questions the moral evils of oppression, injustice, and inequality. Whitted describes literature as a form of cultural expression that could readily challenge, assert or extend on philosophical speculations. Though Whitted only analyzed literature, these points are just as relevant to songs that grappled with the same paradoxical dilemma.

Theologian Anthony Pinn mentions the role of spirituals in confronting the issue of violence. He states that those songs centered on the notion of redemptive suffering, based on a belief that God manipulates moral evil to achieve good consequences. During this process, such suffering would provide strength to blacks. This ideal of redemptive suffering anchored King’s nonviolent strategy in the Movement. Pinn also theorizes that when blacks were faced with pain and suffering wrought by moral evil, faithful believers sought to resolve their dilemma in one of four ways: “(1) rethinking the nature of evil; (2) rethinking the power of God (humans become God’s coworkers); (3) questioning of God’s goodness/righteousness; (4) questioning/denial of God’s existence.” Pinn’s insightful analysis brings up the spiritual and moral questioning that exists in the three songs analyzed in this essay. The murder of Medgar Evers, as well as the killing of four young girls in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, offered violent examples of redemptive suffering. These tragedies and the many others like them moved songwriters to offer commentaries on the issue of racial violence.

Edward J. Blum notes how blacks have long used biblical symbolism in literature to comment on racial violence in America, and Mayfield uses that same theme with the biblical references and motifs he infuses into “People Get Ready.” Blum states that blacks’ experiences over the centuries have been shaped by “intense faith [and] intense brutality” and the need to reconcile those two aspects. Blum suggests that the way Southern whites


19 Pinn, Why Lord, 16.

20 Ibid., 111.
rationalized violent behavior was through the sanctification of racial segregation, which resulted from their merging of their belief in white supremacy with their Christian faith. He proclaims that W.E.B. Du Bois and other early twentieth century black authors sought to overturn those ideals in their works by offering visions of redemption for the violence and spiritual tumult in America. These narratives presaged commentaries that would emerge in the philosophies of civil rights leaders such as King, as well as in Movement-era songs like “Birmingham Sunday” and “People Get Ready.” Though speaking through a different medium, black and white musicians from the early to mid-1960s were seeking to solve the same conundrum that faced black writers earlier in the century.

Discord and violence in the Movement affected perceptions of religious morality, and the three songs in this essay provide essential sources to examine issues that were dramatically evolving in the years of 1963 to 1965. Great civil rights successes were blunted by violent responses against the Movement. These songs spoke about triumphs and tragedies that occurred in civil rights. Artists spoke to black audiences to offer support for the campaign while also pushing whites to become more involved in civil rights. Through their songs, musicians sought to compel listeners to push for equality for everyone.

This essay is a detailed analysis of “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready” that goes beyond the methodologies used by previous scholars on civil rights songs. A number of previous studies have offered analyses of lyrical intent and musical style, but this study expands on those essays by considering the songs’ total composition through analysis of interconnected aspects. This essay probes four separate song elements to uncover a more complete understanding of the songs’ meanings: lyrics, music, vocals, and performance.

Lyrical analysis of the three songs shows how discord and violence were projected through the songs’ words, and how aspects of religious faith and morality helped to shape their messages. Beyond direct lyrical intent, the structure of the songs’ verses served to define and strengthen their messages. Additionally, changing perspectives revealed through first, second, and third person narratives show that the songwriters sought to convey both a

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sense of individual responsibility and group participation to their audiences. These are critical components that empowered the songs to effectively influence listeners.

In conjunction with the lyrics, the musical scores of “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” and “People Get Ready” build emotional connections with their audiences. The instruments created rhythmic beats that established a powerful aural link to the listeners. The three songs encompass a variety of musical genres: folk, jazz, classical, pop, and R & B. Their musical styles defined what audiences the songwriters were attempting to reach. The music and lyrics required vocalization to present a fully formed commentary.

The vocals were crucial to establish the authenticity of the artists in their different musical genres. The differing singing styles and variable pitches used provided audiences with rhythmic foundations that drew in listeners and guided their interaction with the songs. The vocal interplay between singers and band members produced dialogue on civil rights issues. Specific vocal patterns provided the potent means to express lyrics in the most influential way possible.

As crucial as lyrics, music, and vocals were to the artists in expressing their messages, the final test for measuring the true influence of the songs was found in performances in concert and at benefits. Audience reactions to live performances provide evidence of the effectiveness of the songs’ messages of social equality. Live performances revealed that the three songs profoundly influenced their audiences to support civil rights.

This study, though it touches upon record sales figures and audience reception to the songs, does not probe deeply into the entertainment value of “Birmingham Sunday,” “Mississippi Goddam,” or “People Get Ready.” Such a value is important to understanding the popularity of the songs and their role in disseminating political and social commentary. This essay also does not address the conflicts between the artists and record label executives who were more concerned with sales figures than with the civil rights messages contained in the songs, and how that struggle might have influenced the creation of the songs. Investigation and analyses into these significant aspects should be broached in future studies.

Civil rights era music cannot be defined only as songs that inspired activists or as compositions that rejected of segregation and racism. The varying styles and intents of the songs, including the three analyzed in this study, reflect the cacophony of views that existed
in the Movement. Such dissonance could be lost in the overlay of sounds, yet somehow the
messages of the songs come through. Metaphorically, the utterly chaotic nature of the
Movement reflected in civil rights music calls to mind the ending section of the Beatles’ song
“A Day in the Life.”

Near the end of “A Day in the Life,” a twenty-four bar bridge is played by a forty-
piece orchestra. That bridge section begins with the lowest note for each instrument and ends
at the highest note. The orchestra members were not given specific notes to play during the
section. The musicians were instructed to play notes in ascending order in whatever fashion
they chose. The result is a swirling, noisy musical section that leads to a powerful crescendo.
Although chaotic and loud, the section leaves an unforgettable impression on the listener.
This embodies the orchestra of artists, which included Mayfield, Baez, Farina, and Simone,
who were challenged by the Movement to portray their views on how to achieve civil rights.
Their perspectives were as varied as the tactics and goals of the different civil rights
organizations. Simone articulated the true discordant nature of the Movement:

> We weren’t one unified group agreeing on everything and moving together
> (although to read the press anyone would think we were a single army marching
> behind Dr. King); we were a whole range of people thinking, discussing and
> arguing among ourselves. There were my friends at SNCC, who liked to organize
> from the ground up and who distrusted Dr. King’s SCLC with its leaders in
> Atlanta telling local communities what they should do; there was CORE, the
> Congress of Racial Equality, in Chicago, with its own structure, its own
> commanders, its own agenda; there was the NAACP, the old guard, looking at
> these newcomers with a sometimes cynical eye.  

Though groups had differing views and competing agendas about how to proceed in
the Movement, all participants desired the ultimate goal of equal rights for blacks in
America. Movement leaders suggested ways to achieve civil rights through their speeches
and writings, but they were only one part of the growing assembly of voices demanding
social justice. King pronounced 1963 as a critical year in civil rights, declaring it as the year
the “Negro Revolution” began. He noted the increasing number of protest voices, stating that
“Three hundred years of humiliation, abuse, and deprivation cannot be expected to find voice

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in a whisper.”23 He recognized that blacks would no longer accept violent subjugation by whites. An expanding chorus of activists demanded social and political change to bring about equality for all Americans. Civil rights songs would be essential members of that protest chorus.

“People Get Ready,” “Birmingham Sunday,” and “Mississippi Goddam,” each reveal the multi-layered and complicated nature of civil rights. The collision of different musical sounds, vocal tones and lyrical patterns offer varied and conflicting testimony about civil rights. These songs add immeasurably to the collage that reflects the Movement. Only through interpreting the music, lyrics, vocals, and performances of these songs can a deeper understanding be discovered of their importance in the Movement. These songs portray a Movement rife with disconnection, disillusionment, and disarray that exposed conflicting visions on how civil rights could be won. They also reveal the severe racial strain produced by social inequality in America, which often resulted in violent reactions to Movement actions. The songs warned of the heavy price that society would pay if that social imbalance was not corrected. These three songs perfectly capture the volatile state of civil rights in the United States during the years of 1963 to 1965.

CHAPTER 2

“AND THE CHOIRS KEPT SINGING OF FREEDOM”: TRAGEDY AND TRIBULATION IN “BIRMINGHAM SUNDAY”

Come round by my side and I'll sing you a song.
I'll sing it so softly, it'll do no one wrong.
On Birmingham Sunday the blood ran like wine,
And the choirs kept singing of Freedom.

That cold autumn morning no eyes saw the sun,
And Addie Mae Collins, her number was one.
At an old Baptist church there was no need to run.
And the choirs kept singing of Freedom.

The clouds they were dark and the autumn winds blew,
And Denise McNair brought the number to two.
The falcon of death was a creature they knew,
And the choirs kept singing of Freedom.

The church it was crowded, but no one could see
That Cynthia Wesley's dark number was three.
Her prayers and her feelings would shame you and me.
And the choirs kept singing of Freedom.

Young Carol Robertson entered the door
And the number her killers had given was four.
She asked for a blessing but asked for no more,
And the choirs kept singing of Freedom.

On Birmingham Sunday a noise shook the ground.
And people all over the earth turned around.
For no one recalled a more cowardly sound.
And the choirs kept singing of Freedom.

The men in the forest they once asked of me,
How many black berries grew in the Blue Sea.
And I asked them right with a tear in my eye.
How many dark ships in the forest?

The Sunday has come and the Sunday has gone.
And I can't do much more than to sing you a song.
I'll sing it so softly, it'll do no one wrong.
And the choir keeps singing of Freedom.

(lyrics by Richard Farina)
In the early morning of September 15, 1963, members of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, began arriving for Sunday worship services. The church had been a central institution in the community since the late 19th century. Adults and children made their way through the main and side entrances. None of the members who entered the sanctuary through the side noticed an unusual wrapped package underneath the stairs leading to the entry. Not a single member of the congregation saw the large bundle of dynamite that lay in wait under the church.

Addie Mae, Janie, and Sarah Collins were late that morning. They walked to church through the mostly black neighborhoods in the northwestern part of Birmingham, playfully tossing Janie’s purse back and forth like a football. The impromptu game sent the sisters into giggling fits, and delayed their arrival at church until just after 10:00 a.m. They were supposed to usher the adult service at 11:00, so Addie Mae and Sarah made their way down to the women’s lounge in the basement to freshen up.24

At 9:00 a.m., fourteen-year-old Carole Robertson was dropped off at the church by her father. Nearly a half hour later, her close friend Cynthia Wesley arrived. The same age, both girls attended the 9:30 Sunday school session to hear that morning’s lesson, “The Love That Forgives.” They were also scheduled to usher the adult worship service, which would be Cynthia’s first time. Around 10:10, the two friends went to the women’s lounge.

Eleven-year-old Denise McNair went to church that morning with her mother Maxine. Friendly and happy, Denise was also feisty and inquisitive. She had noticed how segregation treated blacks as inferior, and asked her parents why she did not have the same rights as white people in Birmingham. Denise had wanted to join the marches against segregation, but her mother told her she was too little. Denise retorted, “You’re not too little,” and asked why her mother did not march. Maxine had no answer. Around 10:10 a.m., Denise left her mother to go to the women’s lounge.25

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While Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins, and Sarah Collins were freshening up in the women’s lounge, a phone rang in the sanctuary. Cynthia’s close friend Carolyn McKinstry had just walked into the lobby, and went to answer the call. Carolyn picked up the phone, and heard a male voice give a time warning, “Three minutes.” Confused at the brevity of the message, Carolyn simply hung up the phone and left to prepare for the upcoming service.26

As the clock ticked closer to the half-hour, the five girls in the women’s lounge quietly straightened their dresses and checked their hair. Sarah began washing her hands and looked toward her sister Addie Mae, who was adjusting the sash on Denise’s white dress. Suddenly, a violent blast turned everything dark. Blinded by the explosion, Sarah cried out for her sister, screaming “ADDIE! ADDIE! ADDIE!” No response came from Addie, or from any of the other girls.27

The dynamite under the side entrance stairs had detonated. The force of the concussion was so powerful that it left a crater five feet across and two feet deep and a fifty square foot hole in the church’s eastern wall. Families in neighboring homes felt the tremendous blast, and people as far away as thirty blocks heard the explosion. The shaking shattered every stained glass window in the sanctuary, except one which sustained only minor damage. That window depicted Jesus standing at the entrance of a church, arms open in a welcoming gesture. In eerie symbolism, the face of Jesus had been completely blown away.28

Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders had thrust Birmingham into the national spotlight earlier that year, determined to integrate a town King declared “the most segregated city in America.” King came to Birmingham to confront the forced separation of races in that city, and to improve economic opportunities for its black citizens. King used nonviolent demonstrations to try to attain that goal. The first demonstration, a protest march

26 Ibid.
27 Sikora, Until Justice Rolls Down, 10-11.
on Good Friday, led to the imprisonment of King and other activists. During the “Children’s Crusade” summer demonstrations the city’s police force unleashed attack dogs and used fire hoses to disperse black youths. These protests sparked the wrath of segregationists, and the more hardened racists among them decided to dynamite the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

The bomb that exploded at 10:22 a.m. that morning profoundly changed how America and the world perceived Birmingham and the Movement. Newspapers and television covered the bombing, but it was musical artists who provided some of the strongest voices in spreading the message of the Movement, especially to the youth of the country. One song instrumental in provoking action from the country’s young whites was “Birmingham Sunday.” Recorded by Joan Baez in 1964, the song called attention to the evils of segregation and the tragedies born out of the violence it provoked in the South. “Birmingham Sunday” forced white audiences to acknowledge the brutal price paid in lives in the civil rights struggle. It also confronted the ambivalent stance many of them had towards the Movement.

In the aftermath, rescue crews found twenty-two injured victims, including a severely injured Sarah Collins. When rescue personnel lifted the heaviest debris, they discovered the mangled bodies of four young girls. Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson were mutilated almost beyond recognition. Four young girls, full of hopes and promise moments earlier, were dead. To the angry black crowd and stunned white city officials that gathered around the severely damaged church, it was quite obvious that the bombing was racially motivated. The girls’ tragic deaths triggered worldwide outrage and condemnation. Their killings and would prove to be a major turning point in the Movement, pressuring politicians to enact civil rights legislation, activists to demonstrate for equality, and artists to speak out in support of racial equality.

Earlier on that day, President John F. Kennedy had given a speech on civil rights at a conference in the town of Unity House, Pennsylvania. In prepared remarks he lauded progress against racial discrimination in America. He told the three hundred assembled leaders of labor, education, and government that together they would have “a far-reaching and significant impact on the nation’s civil rights program.”

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program was dwarfed by the impression left by the bombing in Birmingham. No longer could Americans, whether in the North or South, black or white, ignore the brutal actions of those who defended the causes of segregation and racism with violence.

Voices around the world reacted quickly and forcefully to the tragedy, including government leaders, the media, and musical artists. Two months after the bombing, jazz musician John Coltrane recorded “Alabama,” an elegy for the girls featuring Coltrane’s plaintive saxophone supported by a subdued piano, bass, and drums. Club singer Nina Simone recorded “Mississippi Goddam,” a scathing verbal assault on the gradualist approach to civil rights, a path favored by many whites. Through their works the two black artists expressed emotional responses to the church bombing. The words and music of these artists reminded the black population to continue the struggle for civil rights. They also relayed a message to white Americans that the only acceptable outcome of the Movement was equality and freedom for all. This same intent existed in the folk song “Birmingham Sunday,” written by Richard Farina and recorded by Joan Baez in 1964.

Folk music played a vital communicative role in highlighting social issues to the public. Folk artists encouraged active participation from their listeners. Within the early 1960s folk movement, Joan Baez moved her audiences through song to take action. Musicologist Arnold Perris suggests Baez and other folk artists performed songs with the expectation that audiences would respond sympathetically to the social messages in them. Baez’s attractive but untrained singing style made her seem “authentic” to listeners, who trusted her words and actions. Perris notes that the implicit trust listeners gave Baez empowered her to become an articulate national spokeswoman. He claims Baez lead a group of followers as large as any political or religious leader, and she emerged as a powerful figure in civil rights. Other scholars have pointed to traits of authenticity and purity as factors in explaining Baez’s powerful influence on audiences. Those aspects exist in “Birmingham Sunday,” and allowed Baez to connect emotionally with listeners.


Baez’s built her early career on classic ballads, but by 1963 her repertoire had shifted towards social commentaries. *Joan Baez* was her first album that contained more than just traditional folk tunes. It showcased a mixture of folk standards alongside songs imbued with social messages by contemporary songwriters such as Richard Farina and Bob Dylan. “Birmingham Sunday” was the standout track, and it showed the growing activism of both Farina and Baez.

According to cultural historian Craig Werner, Baez had her greatest influence among white students who had not previously connected emotionally with King and civil rights leaders in Birmingham. Although networks displayed video of fire hoses and police dogs deployed against black schoolchildren, the news was impersonal. Werner asserts that folk singers like Baez, not the evening newscast, were providing insight that students craved. Charles J. Fuss notes that Baez was among the first major musician to speak out in support of civil rights, bringing the issue to her mostly white audience. “Birmingham Sunday” was one of the first original songs Baez used in her activist role, expanding her music beyond standard folk ballads.

Scholarship on the historical role of “Birmingham Sunday” is not extensive, but does touch on the song’s purpose and meaning in the context of race relations of the time. Journalist David Hajdu interprets “Birmingham Sunday” as a “gently, poetic evocation” of the bombing tragedy. Daniel J. Gonczy states that “Birmingham Sunday” accurately describes the church bombing through simple melody and straightforward lyrics, but offers a white perspective of an exclusively black experience. He views the song as an indication of the chasm that existed between predominantly white protest folk music and the predominately black Civil Rights Movement, in which white and black experiences could not

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32 Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, 47.


really be connected. The views of Hajdu and Gonczy portray “Birmingham Sunday” as an understated protest song that merely documented a tragic event. This correlates to other scholarly analyses of the song.

The song holds a deeper purpose that existing scholarship does not address. “Birmingham Sunday” uses both direct and subtle references to religious themes, which became the foundation for the message of the song. Farina referenced civil rights within a religiously-influenced framework that established a moral context accessible to audiences. He set his message against the background of racial division and violence. The religious aspects of the song link it to the tradition of freedom songs. Although “Birmingham Sunday” is a song that differs stylistically from spirituals, the song’s intent was the same as gospel-style pieces. “Birmingham Sunday” is more than just a protest song about a tragedy. It was created and performed to move people to react, with a particular emphasis toward provoking activism among white youths.

African-American Studies scholar Ingrid Monson states that as the Movement grew, white musicians were expected to make a stand against racial bigotry alongside their black counterparts. “Birmingham Sunday” powerfully expressed a protest message aimed against racial hatred, reaching a large audience through record sales, radio airplay, and live performances. Baez achieved popular success in the early 1960s, selling millions of copies of her first two albums. Joan Baez/5 was commercially successful as well, reaching number 12 on the Billboard album charts. “Birmingham Sunday” occupied a significant role in the Movement due to Baez’s popularity, which allowed Farina to communicate his social message to young white Americans through her performances.

By 1963, the media had taken note of Baez’s popularity and influence. In 1962, Time magazine dedicated a cover story on Baez and the rapidly rising popularity of folk music. “Folk Singing: Sibyl with Guitar,” depicted Baez as the leader of an esoteric cult of folk music.


The article claimed she appealed to America’s youth with songs about basic values. The “sibyl” reference implies that Baez was a prophetess imparting wisdom to her followers. This was a role Baez inhabited when she performed “Birmingham Sunday.”

Farina and Baez were not only folk artists, but also social activists who promoted their views through song. On the surface, “Birmingham Sunday” comments on the tragic killing of four girls. On a deeper level, the song tried to reach out to whites and evoke a more profound understanding from them of the obstacles blacks faced in the civil rights fight. It was also meant to provoke whites to actively support social equality for all races. The song was part of a powerful folk music movement that promoted social change. Politicians and the media found it difficult to ignore a musical movement that sold millions of records in the early 1960s. Folk albums were dominating the charts in the early 1960s.

“Birmingham Sunday” is a protest song that uses tragedy to speak out against racial violence. Farina and Baez passionately promoted civil rights and knew that music was a vital forum they could use to show their support for the Movement. For them, the song expressed a message of equality beyond the black audience and out to whites. Farina’s own experiences made him familiar with the intersection of civil rights and religion. Son of an Irish mother and Cuban father, Farina made several trips to Ireland by the age of eighteen, including two instances in which he fought for the Irish Republican Army and was arrested. His experiences there as a young man primed him to fight for those he perceived as disadvantaged in society.

By late 1963 Farina emerged as an important folk musician and literary talent who offered critical perspective on relevant social subjects. Richie Unterberger states that in “Birmingham Sunday” Farina presented something that belonged in the topical-protest tradition of folk music. Unterberger notes that within that tradition, Farina created songs that broke the constraints of popular song through the use of allegorical language, mixing the

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39 Ibid.
personal with the political. This allegorical language is used liberally in “Birmingham Sunday.” Farina used metaphors to draw audiences into his song.

In the opening stanza of “Birmingham Sunday,” Farina sets forth his intention, weaving together aspects of freedom songs, religion, and the Movement in the first four lines. The first five words reveal that Farina’s intended audience was the white public. By starting off the song with “Come round by my side,” Farina not only beckoned listeners to physically come closer and listen to the song’s message, but he also alluded to the “side” that he, Baez, and other activists occupied in supporting civil rights. This line issued an invitation to whites uninvolved in civil rights while inferring that there was racial divide. Farina understood that many Americans remained detached from the aims of the Movement, and the song was his attempt to connect to that ambivalent group. Most of the black population was already on the side Farina championed, and he would have been aware that his role as folksinger would have had a limited effect on blacks more attuned to freedom songs infused with spirituality.

“Birmingham Sunday” addresses religious faith, as well as the tragedy resulting from acts of retribution by segregationists. Line three in the first stanza reads “On Birmingham Sunday the blood ran like wine.” By associating the deaths of the four girls in terms of a blood sacrifice, Farina alludes to Christ’s blood being shed as a sacrifice for man’s sin as shown in the Bible in Romans 3:25. In the New Testament, in Luke 22:19 and in Hebrews 10:10, the sacrifice is now symbolized through wine, which is used as remembrance of the blood sacrifice of Jesus for all. Farina clearly portrayed the girls as martyrs, positioning them as innocent victims who sacrificed their lives in the battle for civil rights. In doing so, he affirmed the statement made by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his eulogy for Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, and Cynthia Wesley. At their service, King stated “The blood of these girls must serve as a revitalizing force to bring light to this dark city.”

41 Richie Unterberger, Turn! Turn! Turn!: The ‘60s Folk-Rock Revolution (Milwaukee: Publishers Group West, 2002), 118.


By projecting the girls as blood sacrifices, Farina appealed to the Christian ethos of a white public familiar with the Eucharist ceremony. His familiarity with blood sacrifice symbolism came from his Catholic upbringing.\(^{44}\) The blood/wine sacrifice imagery was not meant as a direct reference to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Instead, it was meant to frame the deaths through a religious practice vitally important and very familiar to God-fearing white southerners. He also wanted to appeal to the conscience of his audience, to get them to emotionally invest in the same outrage blacks felt over the killings. The song's emphasis on the taking of innocent young lives would strike a nerve with Farina’s audience.

Use of blood imagery by Farina alludes to additional biblical passages, beyond those mentioning sacrifice. Blood is a metaphor for murder in biblical chapters of second Samuel and first Kings. The Bible refers to the shedding of blood through murder and killing in chapters of Matthew, Luke, Acts, Romans, and Revelation.\(^{45}\) The numerous biblical references linking blood to murder further serve to underscore the religious background of the blood/wine motif in “Birmingham Sunday.” It also serves to highlight the heinous nature of the crime and the sinfulness the act represented.

In the first two lines of the song, Farina uses the common literary and poetic device of alliteration to hook the attention of his audience:

\begin{quote}
Come round by my side and I’ll sing you a song  
I’ll sing it so softly, it’ll do no one wrong
\end{quote}

The repetitious sound of the consonant \(s\) is used in the first syllables of five words in the opening lines. This established a poetic form of meter that works to hypnotic effect to pull in listeners.\(^{46}\) By stating that lyrics would be sung so softly, Farina adroitly alerts his audience to listen intently to his message. Farina follows the alliterative phrasing with “it’ll do no one wrong,” offering a commentary that mimicked a common refrain among whites in the early 1960s, a group in which many desired the maintenance of status quo in society. A rebuttal to that statement is found in the implied message offered in the words from stanzas

\[^{44}\text{William T. Lawlor,} \text{ Beat Culture: Lifestyles, Icons, and Impact (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 103.}\]

\[^{45}\text{Stephen Renn, ed.,} \text{ Expository Dictionary of Bible Words: Word Studies for Key English Bible Words Based on the Hebrew and Greek Texts (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2005), 123.}\]

\[^{46}\text{The analysis of alliteration in “Birmingham Sunday” was inspired by Ronald C. White’s analysis of alliterative phrasing in Lincoln’s Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural.}\]
two through six, which are a declaration by Farina to “do someone wrong.” In that passage, he spotlights the immoral and deadly results of violent actions by segregationists.

The last line of the first stanza, “And the choir keeps singing of Freedom,” forms a connective chorus that runs throughout the song. The simple, direct chorus lines link religion to protest songs, centering on the theme of “freedom” emphasized by activists. “Freedom” was the buzz-word at the center of the Movement in 1963. “Freedom Now” and “Freedom in ‘63” were principal slogans of organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality. King touched on the theme in his March on Washington speech imploring America to “let freedom ring” and for the nation’s blacks to be “free at last.”47 Farina returns to the chorus phrase throughout the song to emphasize the Movement's ultimate goal and to reinforce religion’s role in achieving that aim.

In the next section of the song, Farina devotes a stanza to each girl. Farina purposefully gives each victim a name and number. In doing so, he personalized the tragedy to his audience, forcing them to confront the sacrifice made by each girl. The numbering of the victims symbolically marked them for an inevitable violent death and calls to mind a listing of casualties of war. It also subliminally provides a tally of deaths by racial violence, adding the girls’ names to a growing list of people killed in the battle against desegregation. Farina’s intentional references to the girls’ names ensured that the audience would not just consign them to anonymity, but would instead recognize their individuality and develop personal emotional connections to the girls.

In stanza five, the lyrical focus moves away from the victims toward the explosion itself and to reactions to the attack. The time and place of the bombing is established in line one via the reference to the song’s title. The line ends with “a noise shook the ground,” a statement on the sheer power of the blast. Lines two and three reveal how deeply the blast affected worldwide opinion, which was revealed through the almost universal condemnation of the event:

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\text{And people all over the earth turned around.}  \\
\text{For no one recalled a more cowardly sound.}
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47 Eric J. Sundquist, *King’s Dream* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 94-95. Sundquist lists the two slogans as the most commonly used in Movement events, and notes the prominent use of “freedom” in King’s speech.
As Farina indicates in his lyrics, reactions to the attack were swift and pointed. Birmingham mayor Albert Boutwell, his voice breaking and tears streaming down his cheeks, commented on how sickened he was about the atrocity. President Kennedy strongly rebuked the segregationist policies and actions of Alabama Governor George Wallace, suggesting that the governor’s acts had encouraged the violence which fell upon the innocent. Kennedy also released a statement calling for significant change in implementing civil rights. In his statement he declared “If these cruel and tragic events can only awaken that city and state—if they can only awaken the entire nation—to a realization of the folly of racial injustice and hatred and violence, then it is not too late for all concerned to unite in steps toward peaceful progress before more lives are lost.” Thousands protested the bombings in rallies in New York, Boston, and Washington D.C. Memorial services were held to mourn the victims in New York and Houston.

When Farina described the bombing as a “cowardly sound,” he expressed the sentiments of many people around the country. In an editorial written two days after the tragedy, the New York Times vociferously condemned the bombers, as well as political leaders in Alabama. The editorial declared it an act of madness, and blamed on Governor Wallace and his political associates for policies to “incite and encourage and direct” individuals to commit heinous crimes. The editorial berated public officials in Birmingham and Alabama who had “by words and actions as well as by silence, created a receptive atmosphere for the irrational and horrible crimes that naturally ensued.” The editorial concluded with a call for the United States Congress to enact a civil rights bill that would guarantee equal rights for blacks. The church bombing moved the Times’ editorial board to offer their strongest support for a civil rights bill to date. The somber but accusatory tone that permeates the editorial also exists in “Birmingham Sunday.”

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The explosion provoked worldwide outrage, as Farina suggested in the line “people all around the Earth turned around.” The day after the tragedy, the official Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* issued a statement condemning the “real massacre of innocents,” provoked by racial hatred of fanatical segregationists.52 Hundreds of Ugandans protested the bombing during a rally in the city of Kampala and issued a petition to the United States Embassy that condemned the killings as an “abominable ghastly murder.”53 Farina’s lyrics not only describe how the world took great notice of the tragedy, but it also left unsaid yet understood that the world was also watching America to see how it would rectify the volatile situation. The international community was observing America to see if it could live up to the ideal of equality that the nation was first founded on. Americans were fully aware of negative international perceptions of the United States. A Harris survey from 1963 showed that seventy-eight percent of white Americans felt racial problems were hurting the standing of the nation abroad.54

The bombing was a deliberately violent response by segregationists to the actions of activists in Birmingham. The church was a central factor in protests in the city, playing a pivotal role in marches and in the “Children’s Crusade.” Andrew Young states that the demonstrations were within four blocks of the church, and that it served as headquarters for protest leaders such as King and Fred Shuttlesworth. According to Taylor Branch, the church was an integral part of Movement events because of logistics. He notes that the church was across from Kelly Ingram Park, a common gathering area for demonstrators a few blocks from downtown.55 For segregationists, bombing a vital Movement site brutally announced their anger over the presence of activists and demonstrations in city. In “Birmingham Sunday,” Farina continuously refers to the church and its choir members not only to emphasize its importance in civil rights actions, but also to highlight the moral differences between activists and segregationists.

55 Lee, *4 Little Girls*. 
Segregationists in Birmingham had fought against integration for years. The church attack was only one of many violent acts taken against blacks in the city. Racially motivated bombings in Birmingham had occurred over twenty times since 1956, earning the city the infamous moniker “Bombingham.” By the time of the church bombing, none of the previous bombings in the city had been solved. No perpetrators were arrested for committing those crimes. Since no loss of life occurred during those attacks, the country took little notice of those them. The murder of four little girls jolted Americans out of their state of indifference. “Birmingham Sunday” was a reminder to listeners that innocent lives paid the price for apathy toward civil rights.

Americans in the early 1960s were aware of the rampant racism infecting Birmingham and the South. An editorial from the New York Times from April of 1960 condemned Birmingham as a “community of fear” that destroyed any rational middle ground between whites and blacks due to the “emotional dynamite of racism, reinforced by the whip, the razor, the gun, the bomb, the torch, the club, the knife, the mob, the police.” Yet, even media acknowledgement of social inequity between races did not provoke strong reactions from the white population. Fred Shuttlesworth realized the church bombing made a statement more powerful than any other bombing that came before it. To him, that tragic event finally convinced white America why there needed to be a Birmingham confrontation and why the race issue needed a leader such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Likewise, Farina and Baez used “Birmingham Sunday” as a reminder to whites why their participation was essential in changing the poisoned racial culture in the country.

Walter Cronkite, the well-respected and trusted CBS news anchor during the 1960s, commented on the profound impact the church bombing had on the American public:

I don’t think the white community really understood the depths of the problem and the depths of the hate of the Klan and its friends in the South, until that incredibly mean perverted, terrible crime of blowing up kids in a Sunday school basement. At the moment the bomb went off, and those four little girls were blasted and buried in the debris of the church, America understood the real nature

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56 Bush, “Bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church,” 61, 269.
58 Lee, 4 Little Girls.
of the hate that was preventing integration, particularly in the South but throughout America. This was the awakening.\textsuperscript{59}

Cronkite, from his unique perspective as the nation’s most influential newscaster of that era, recognized that the attack forever changed how white America viewed the struggle for civil rights. Whites could no longer ignore the virulent racism in Birmingham and in the South, or the violence that segregation fomented. Yet, Farina expresses the fear that no real change might come of such tragedy, lamenting that "The Sunday has come and the Sunday has gone," but nothing had been done to stop the violence.

The second stanza of "Birmingham Sunday" refers to the location of the tragedy: "In an old Baptist Church there was no need to run." The lyrics move beyond the symbolism of sacrifice referenced in the first stanza. Farina projects that blacks and whites in America desired spiritual protection from their churches. The line does not reflect any form of physical protection offered by sanctuaries. There were no safe havens for blacks subjected to numerous attacks on churches throughout the South. Reverend John C. Cross, presiding minister at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, recalls that bomb threats to the church were an "everyday occurrence."\textsuperscript{60} Blacks who lived in the South faced the ever-present threat of being violently attacked. They would have not blindly believed that their church was somehow unassailable.

For Farina, that line was not meant to reflect reality. It serves instead as a declaration to the audience that everyone deserved to feel safe within the walls of their house of worship. Farina could have simply described the bombed sanctuary as a church, but he specifically identified it as a Baptist church. This is significant, because the reference to a Baptist church would have carried great weight with young whites, especially southern youths. Nearly half of white southerners belonged to a Baptist church.\textsuperscript{61} The lyrics establish a direct connection between the Baptist traditions of both blacks and whites in the South. The linking emphasized similarities in religious foundation and morality. This highlighted a shared

\textsuperscript{59} Monson, \textit{Freedom Sounds}, 211; Lee, \textit{4 Little Girls}. Monson feels the bombing inflamed the nation’s fears of an impending race war.


moral ground between races, one that could allow blacks and whites to understand the moral necessity of civil rights.

The third stanza references the violent reality that blacks faced in the fight for civil rights, manifested in attacks against activists and communities. “The Falcon of Death was a creature they knew,” alludes to the omnipresent specter of death that constantly hovered over the lives of southern blacks. In Christian symbology, the wild falcon represents evil thought or action.62 Blacks in Birmingham and throughout the South were acutely aware of the region’s long history of racial killings. Farina used the falcon as a metaphor for such deadly actions. The “Falcon of Death” was a symbol that the white audience would relate back to their religious background. That image informed whites that blacks faced the constant threat of violence due to their involvement with civil rights.

In stanza four, Farina’s lyrics declare that with Cynthia Wesley “her prayers and her feelings would shame you and me.” Farina uses religious connotations for a dual purpose in that line. First, the phrase highlighted the strong religious faith exhibited by Cynthia, which supports the song’s intent to promote her as martyr. Secondly, Farina uses allusions to Cynthia’s strong religious faith and moral purity to admonish whites who lacked the moral conviction to support civil rights. Farina appealed to his audience’s religious and moral standards. He hoped to spur them to engage in social change that would bring about equality.

Stanza five of “Birmingham Sunday” portrays Carole Robertson in a light similar to Cynthia Wesley. In line three, Farina writes “She asked for a blessing but asked for no more.” Robertson’s request for a blessing establishes a sense of spiritual humility. Farina accentuates attributes of selflessness and sacrifice through his description of Robertson. The idea of a blessing is an invocation of special favor by God on a person held in high esteem.63 The song imparts the faith that Carole Robertson possessed, which Farina intimates mirrors that of Cynthia Wesley. Again, he used religious references easily understood by the white public. They would identify with a plea for God’s blessing in their lives. That Carole Robertson did not receive her blessing injects the lyrics with a somber message of sacrifice.


63 Renn, Expository Dictionary of Bible Words, 118. This is the definition provided by Renn, a noted biblical scholar.
that reinforced an image of martyrdom. Farina used the song’s lyrics to shape Cynthia, Carole, Denise, and Addie Mae into paragons of purity and spiritual righteousness, which starkly contrasted the amoral actions of segregationists. This imagery reinforces the innocence of the victims that both Kennedy and the Vatican newspaper mentioned in their statements reacting to the tragedy.

In the final stanza, Farina expresses his frustration over the limitations of both religious faith and protest songs. In that last stanza, Farina writes:

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\begin{align*}
\text{The Sunday has come and the Sunday has gone} \\
\text{And I can’t do much more than to sing you a song} \\
\text{I’ll sing it so softly, it’ll do no one wrong} \\
\text{And the choirs keep singing of freedom}
\end{align*}
\]

Farina marks the passage of time while reminding the audience that the singer can only accomplish so much through the singing of a song. The last chorus contains a subtle change that differentiates it from previous stanzas. Whereas previous stanzas ended with “And the choir kept singing of Freedom,” the last line of the song is “And the choirs keep singing of Freedom.” Farina acknowledges that faith, often expressed through freedom songs, buoyed the resolve of those in the Movement. That faith in the Movement would continue to remain strong despite devastating tragedy.

Those same lyrics also exhibit a sense of helplessness. Despite all the demonstrations and songs about freedom, people were still dying in the name of civil rights and equality had yet to be achieved in America. Segregation and racism were still rampant in the South. The final stanza expresses Farina’s frustration at the limitations of song and faith. His lyrics insinuated that it would take direct action to gain civil rights, and it would need to come from all Americans.

Throughout “Birmingham Sunday,” Farina linked together aspects of darkness, the victims, and religious faith. He established the connection through the strategic placement of the conjunction “and.” Twelve of the thirty-two lines in “Birmingham Sunday” begin with “and,” which demonstrates Farina’s desire for continuity between themes. Lines describing darkness or death were linked by “and” to three of the girls. This highlights the well-defined clash between the omnipresent dark evil surrounding the church and the purity of the girls. The use of “and” in the chorus line infers that choirs will keep singing, just like the civil rights campaigns would continue until true freedom was reached.
In “Birmingham Sunday,” the theme of darkness is stressed both explicitly and implicitly in the lyrics. Note how the references are made:

That cold autumn morning, no eyes saw the sun (2nd stanza)
The clouds they were dark and the autumn wind blew (3rd stanza)
The church it was crowded, and no one could see
That Cynthia Wesley’s dark number was three (4th stanza)
How many dark ships in the forest? (7th stanza)

In “Birmingham Sunday,” allusions to darkness serve two purposes. They convey a sense of foreboding, lending solemnity to the lyrics. This was clearly the intent of Farina, because he embellished facts surrounding the bombing in order to suit his artistic purposes. Weather reports for that day indicated it was cloudy in Birmingham, but the sun did shine through.\(^64\) Yet, Farina’s lyrics state “no eyes saw the sun.” Farina took dramatic license to heighten the mood of enveloping darkness and growing unease. While an aura of impeding tragedy inhabits the lyrics, a second and equally powerful meaning emerges from the allusions to darkness. Scholarly readings of the lyrics often overlook the religious connotations in references to the dark, which connect back to biblical passages.

In the English Standard version of the Bible, Proverbs 4:19 states “The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.”\(^65\) The lyrics of “Birmingham Sunday” build the feeling of wickedness, first establishing it with the lack of sunlight and the presence of dark clouds. In biblical terms, darkness equals chaos and confusion.\(^65\) In Job 10:22, darkness symbolizes moral chaos, which mimics its use in the lyrics of “Birmingham Sunday.”\(^66\) When Cynthia Wesley is assigned a “dark number,” evil is now attached to a person, to a victim. This personalizes the effects of the evil act that killed the little girl. Finally, when the song questions how many “dark ships in the forest” exist, it asks the audience to think about how prevalent evil was in Birmingham, in the South, and throughout the rest of the United States. How many segregationists were hiding in the metaphorical forest, waiting to emerge and commit violence? The song’s emphasis on

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\(^64\) Sikora, *Until Justice Rolls Down*, 4.

\(^65\) Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 104. This is the definition provided by McGrath, a leading theologian.

\(^66\) Renn, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, 238.
The seventh stanza of “Birmingham Sunday” is adapted from an old Celtic folk song called “I Once Loved a Lass.” Farina derived both the lyrical structure and the music for “Birmingham Sunday” from the Celtic standard. Farina’s inclusion of the adapted stanza did not simply paying homage to a classic folk ballad. The questioning nature of that particular stanza in “I Once Loved a Lass” suited the purposes of Farina for “Birmingham Sunday,” providing a way for the song to engage in dialogue with its audience. The changes Farina made in the lyrics may seem subtle, but speak volumes about his intended message:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I Once Loved a Lass</th>
<th>Birmingham Sunday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The men in yon forest they are asking me</td>
<td>The men in the forest they once asked of me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many wild strawberries grow in the salt-sea</td>
<td>How many black berries grow in the Blue Sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And I answer them back with a tear in my eye</td>
<td>And I asked them right with a tear in my eye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many ships sail in the forest.</td>
<td>How many dark ships in the forest?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Farina changed the fruit reference in the stanza from strawberries to black berries. This was an important symbolic change since it is the only appearance of the word “black” in the song. “Birmingham Sunday” describes a violent attack on a black church, but nowhere in the song is that made explicit. The attack was widely covered by the media, and people in the United States and throughout the world were very aware of the circumstances surrounding the tragedy. In that line, Farina reminds the audience of the racial aspect of the attack.

Another significant change in wording is seen in the third line. In “I Once Loved a Lass,” the singer answers the question of the men in the forest, alluding only to ships. Yet, in “Birmingham Sunday,” the singer instead “asked them right back” about the “dark ships in the forest.” The use of “ask” is a much more active verb than “answer,” and implies that an answer is expected in return. Farina ends the stanza with a query for his audience, asking them to ponder how many dark forces and how much evil intent still existed in American society. Through this passage, Farina confronted listeners with the brutal reality of the crime. The insertion of the word “dark” in the stanza was to continue the theme of a lurking evil,

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67 Herbers, “Funeral.”
one that looms throughout “Birmingham Sunday.” This theme discomforts the audience, and does not allow them to turn away from the horror of the tragedy.

“Birmingham Sunday” also borrows its melody structure from “I Once Loved a Lass.” The ballad recounts the story of a man who witnesses the woman he loves marrying another man. The song is sung through a first-person perspective, and expresses the grief and longing that the man feels at losing the love of his life. The musical score of “I Once Loved a Lass” accompanies lyrics that express the man’s state of hopelessness and sadness. The singer bemoans losing the woman he loved, and tells of a pain so deep that he cannot find the strength to go on. The mournful music assists in accentuating to listeners the feeling of loss. This was an emotional musical style Farina transferred into “Birmingham Sunday,” albeit in a much darker form.

In adapting the music of “I Once Loved a Lass” for use in his song, Farina tapped into the element of loss that pervades the traditional folk classic. “Birmingham Sunday” portrays somber sentiments of loss in recounting the killing of the girls. Although “Birmingham Sunday” is about the unimaginable loss of young lives while “I Once Loved a Lass” comments on the loss of true love, both songs are about intense loss. The difference is that in “Birmingham Sunday,” the devastating loss is felt by the American public and not just one individual.

Farina’s use of the melody from “I Once Loved a Lass” as the musical foundation for “Birmingham Sunday,” followed a common practice of folk singers and songwriters during the 1960s. Folk artists routinely borrowed melodies from traditional folk songs to build their original lyrics upon. This practice was done even by the most influential folk singers, including Bob Dylan. In 1964 Dylan used the melody from “I Once Love a Lass” for his song “Ballad in Plain D.”68 Throughout his career, Farina freely lifted melodies from traditional folk standards; therefore, his use of a borrowed melody for “Birmingham Sunday” was not out of the ordinary. The use of a common melody cloaked the song with an aura of familiarity for the audience, and fans of folk music would have readily embraced songs with original lyrics that were attached to traditional melodies.

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A guitar is the only musical accompaniment in “Birmingham Sunday,” which was in keeping with the folk traditions of the 1960s. This performance style also connected closely with how its melodic sire “I Once Loved a Lass” was performed in Ireland and England in the 18th century. During that time, “I Once Loved a Lass” was performed sans musical instruments, with notes in different parts of the song held either for a long note or a short note, in an unexpected rhythm. Farina kept the use of long notes in “Birmingham Sunday,” but adhered to a specific rhythm. As structured by Farina, long notes were emphasized repeatedly in a fixed pattern throughout the stanzas. In each of the eight stanzas, the first three rhyming lines all end with words extending out to two notes. The fourth and final line of each stanza ended in a word that was extended to three notes. This created uniform musical phrasing, punctuated by extended notes that emphasized the refrain in each stanza. That emphasis assured that the imagery of the choir singing for freedom would be the lasting impression left with the audience.

In the recorded version of “Birmingham Sunday,” the use of only a single guitar in the performance gives primacy to her singing. This allows her voice to become the dominant instrument, evoking emotional responses from the audience. Baez touched her audience in what Vanguard Records founder Maynard Solomon states was “a sense of controlled passion, a reaching of depth of feeling without giving away to overstatement, and projecting the depth of that feeling through the most subtle vocal techniques.” Baez’s compelling evocative singing style, on display in “Birmingham Sunday,” was described by Time as a “pure, purling soprano voice” that had an innate ability to get into the “emotional heart of a song.” The use of a lone guitar to accompany her voice accentuated Baez’s ability to form powerful connections to her audience in “Birmingham Sunday.” Her siren-like voice drew listeners to her performance and deep into the soul of the song.

Baez begins singing “Birmingham Sunday” in a quiet tone, but her voice becomes increasingly louder as she sings about the murdered girls in stanzas two through five. The

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70 Hadju, Positively 4th Street, 58-59.

song reaches its vocal climax when Baez sings of the bombing itself, but the vocals draw back dramatically in the last two reflective stanzas. Baez’s singing performance demands the audience’s attention, compelling them to confront the tragedy. The restrained vocals at the end of the song bring about a reflective mood. The subdued ending leaves listeners to grapple with questions about the limitations of faith and song and to reflect on their role in the Movement.

Baez’s passionate vocal performance on “Birmingham Sunday” was influenced by her understanding of the role of religion in the Movement and its effect on shaping morality. Her religious understanding came to Baez in her youth, revealed in schoolgirl essays written at the age of fourteen. She wrote “There is a supreme power that makes us do the good we do, that makes our conscience tick.” She wrote another essay that mused upon God’s interaction with His people. Her second essay offered feelings that conflicted with her first essay. Her second essay stated “I think God is going to leave everything up to us. He is going to see what we do to ourselves.” As a young girl Baez was unsure of the precise direction of God’s influence in human actions, but she was quite confident that God was somehow a part of people’s lives. For Baez, religion was a necessary factor for overcoming injustice because it provided faith and spurred activism. She commented on the intersection of those two aspects, stating that when she heard King speak at the March on Washington she felt “the breath of God thunder through him, and up over my head I saw freedom.” Religion was the common tent-pole most blacks and whites centered their lives around, and Baez’s emotional vocals expressed that influence in a meaningful way the touched audiences.

Baez realized the importance of her active support of civil rights, which gave an example for her listeners to follow. Baez first met King at a conference in 1956, and this meeting shaped her participation in the Movement. King’s ideology gave inspiration to Baez’s beliefs about injustice and suffering. As a young teen, Baez wrote an essay that deplored segregation and discrimination, calling them the “stupidest things in our world.”

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73 Baez, And a Voice to Sing with, 103.
75 Baez, And a Voice to Sing with, 38.
Baez’s beliefs aligned with King’s, and their common social perspective would drive her actions in civil rights. Baez proclaimed “Martin Luther King, Jr., more than any other public figure, helped to solidify my ideas and inspired me to act upon them.” Baez became active in the Movement in the early 1960s, and by 1963 accompanied King to civil rights events. King recognized Baez’s ability to relate effectively to white youths. Her communicative power greatly influenced King’s decision to invite Baez to perform at the March on Washington, where she led a crowd of 250,000 people in singing “We Shall Overcome.” In an interview from early 1963, Baez expressed her hope that “something that I sing in these songs gets across.” Her plea for social change came across to those who witnessed her performance at the nation’s capitol. The message of “Birmingham Sunday” would come across to audiences in like manner.

In July of 1964, Baez performed at the Newport Folk Festival in Rhode Island. She, along with Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul, and Mary, was one of the biggest draws of the festival that attracted 70,000 attendees. In her headlining performance before a predominately white crowd, Baez sang several traditional folk songs. Baez, though, specifically saved “Birmingham Sunday” as the last song in her set. Her closing performance illustrated the importance she attached to the song and its message. She wanted the song to be the audience’s last impression of her performance. She was determined to remind them of the brutal cost of civil rights, which all too frequently came in the form of lives.

Scholarly analysis tends to focus on Baez’s version of “Birmingham Sunday,” neglecting other performances. Richard Farina and his wife Mimi performed the song in several concerts during 1964 and 1965. At Big Sur, California in June of 1964, they performed “Birmingham Sunday” as their finale, joined by Baez. The crowd was moved by their performance and clamored for an encore. The Farinas could not oblige their fans because they had no songs left to perform. The Farinas’ compelling set impressed a

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76 Ibid., 12.


78 Hajdu, Positively 4th Street, 210.
representative of Elektra, who offered the duo a recording contract. Like the festival audience, he recognized the power of their rendition of “Birmingham Sunday.”

At the 1965 Newport Festival, the Farinas again gave the song a position of prominence. This time “Birmingham Sunday” led off their set. Dennis played the dulcimer during the performance, which gave the song an element of harmonic accompaniment missing from Baez’s subdued version. Although the Farinas were lesser known in folk music than Baez, reviewers noted the impact their performance had on the audience. Sing Out! declared the Farinas one of the most interesting and successful acts at the festival, stating that their performance instigated “sparks of excitement.” A second review in the same issue stated that the Farinas had a better connection to the audience than more established acts.

The Los Angeles Times confirmed the Farinas’ powerful bond with the audience. It credited the Farinas with stealing the show at that year’s festival. The audience connected to the song’s message through the impassioned performance by the Farinas. They were affected in much the same manner that the previous year’s audience was moved by Baez’s performance.

A month after the March on Washington, the Saturday Review critiqued Baez’s performance. Reviewer Robert Sherman noted that folk songs offered constant reminders that freedom was not truly available to all Americans. He stated that freedom songs, along with media coverage, dramatized the urgent problem of segregation in a manner that was overcoming national apathy. This same intent drove Baez’s performance of socially conscious songs like “We Shall Overcome”, and informed her performances of “Birmingham Sunday.” The divide between races needed to be bridged before white support could grow for civil rights legislation. Her activism, through performances and protests, indicated her awareness that racial disconnection needed to be addressed.

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79 Ibid., 206-7.

80 Ibid., 257.


In an article, Farina wrote about Baez’s sway over American youth, especially in speaking out on social issues and motivating others into action. Farina stated that Baez felt the “intolerability of bigoted opposition to Civil Rights” and was confident that most of her listeners were like-minded. Baez, along with Dylan, performed many college concerts in the early 1960s, expressing support for civil rights. Farina felt students were seeking a more profound language like the one found in folk music. He viewed Baez and Dylan as the spokespersons for those youths. By having Baez sing his song, Farina tapped into one of the most powerful voices in music to deliver his civil rights message. In some ways Farina may have “preached to the choir” in “Birmingham Sunday,” but he wanted young whites to commit to the Movement in action as well as in thought. He pushed them to take a stand to end all the suffering and inequality that affected blacks.

Other articles also noted Baez’s promotion of social issues and her ability to make a deep impression on her audience. Musical America extolled Baez’s traditional folk style stating that during performances Baez was “reaching directly into the heart of her own generation.” This connection was important, for the article states that folk music was not simply about poignant melodies; it also expresses stark social truths through commentary while taking an ethical stance on society’s troubles. “Birmingham Sunday” exposed the dangers of racial discord, and pushed Americans to understand how it reflected upon their own morality. The violent actions taken against the Movement drove Farina to write poignant lyrics and Baez to sing with a purposeful passion.

The tragedy highlighted in “Birmingham Sunday” drove the American public to increase pressure on the government to end segregation, providing the impetus that eventually led to the passage of the Civil Rights Bill in July of 1964. “Birmingham Sunday” did not have that type of influence, but it revealed the reasons why civil rights legislation was critically needed in America. The song’s moving message showed white audiences that civil rights legislation was not just something that should be done, but was something that must be done to ensure equality for all Americans. If such legislation did not come to pass, then the

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cycle of tragedy would repeat itself and the “choirs” of activists would keep somberly singing of freedom they had yet to achieve. Farina and Baez understood this reality, and used their song to expose the racial dissonance in the country, a divide that needed fixing in order for the Movement to succeed. The movement for equality and racial harmony that Farina and Baez advocated for in “Birmingham Sunday,” set against a backdrop of violent segregation, is poignantly captured in Charles McNair’s most treasured memento of his slain daughter. In the black and white photo, Denise is seen in her nightdress, blissfully clutching her favorite toy next to her face. The innocent black girl is tightly hugging a white doll.
CHAPTER 3

“THIS IS A SHOW TUNE”: DEFIANCE AND DISCONTENT IN “MISSISSIPPI GODDAM”

Alabama's gotten me so upset / Tennessee made me lose my rest
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

Alabama's gotten me so upset / Tennessee made me lose my rest
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

Can't you see it / Can't you feel it
It's all in the air
I can't stand the pressure much longer / Somebody say a prayer

Alabama's gotten me so upset / Tennessee made me lose my rest
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

This is a show tune / But the show hasn't been written for it, yet

Hound dogs on my trail / School children sitting in jail
Black cat cross my path / I think every day's gonna be my last

Lord have mercy on this land of mine / We all gonna get it in due time
I don't belong here / I don't belong there
I've even stopped believing in prayer

Don't tell me / I tell you
Me and my people just about due
I've been there so I know / They keep on saying "Go slow!"

But that's just the trouble / "do it slow"
Washing the windows / "do it slow"
Picking the cotton / "do it slow"
You're just plain rotten / "do it slow"
You're too damn lazy / "do it slow"
The thinking's crazy / "do it slow"
Where am I going / What am I doing
I don't know
I don't know

Just try to do your very best / Stand up be counted with all the rest
For everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

I made you thought I was kiddin' didn't we
Picket lines / School boycotts
They try to say it's a communist plot
All I want is equality / for my sister my brother my people and me

Yes you lied to me all these years / You told me to wash and clean my ears
And talk real fine just like a lady / And you'd stop calling me Sister Sadie

Oh but this whole country is full of lies / You're all gonna die and die like flies
I don't trust you any more
You keep on saying "Go slow!"
"Go slow!"

But that's just the trouble / "do it slow"
Desegregation / "do it slow"
Mass participation / "do it slow"
Reunification / "do it slow"
Do things gradually / "do it slow"
But bring more tragedy / "do it slow"
Why don't you see it / Why don't you feel it
I don't know
I don't know

You don't have to live next to me / Just give me my equality
Everybody knows about Mississippi
Everybody knows about Alabama
Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

(lyrics by Nina Simone)

“The name of this tune is Mississippi Goddam, and I mean every word of it.”

Nina Simone’s introduction drew laughter from the mostly white audience at Carnegie Hall in New York on May 21, 1964. The songstress was renowned for her theatrical showmanship, so the crowd expected to hear an up-tempo show tune. She was a classically trained pianist whose music mixed jazz, folk, pop, and classical styles. Not one to disappoint her audience, Simone gave the crowd a show tune they would never forget. Much to the surprise of the audience, her lively musical tune accompanied bold lyrics seething with anger and frustration over racial inequality in America. Those lyrics also revealed Simone’s distrust of white authorities who persistently counseled black citizens to wait patiently for gradual implementation of civil rights.

The lyrics of “Mississippi Goddam” reveal Simone’s ire over violence against blacks, as well as her mounting frustration with the slow progress in civil rights. By the end of her performance, the crowd had absorbed the blunt words and realized that what they heard was
anything but a simple show tune. This rendition of “Mississippi Goddam” was recorded onto a live album, and that recording would affect listeners across the country in the same manner. Simone’s civil rights anthem not only assailed the audience at Carnegie Hall, but also challenged them to confront the volatile state of race relations in the United States.

After its release in late 1964, “Mississippi Goddam” quickly became popular among activists and the black community, mainly because it powerfully represented the feelings of anger, frustration, and disillusionment of many involved in the civil rights struggle. It established Simone as a leading activist musician in the Movement. The song’s powerful influence provoked a lot of scholarly analyses. Studies of “Mississippi Goddam” mainly focus on framing it as a statement rejecting nonviolent tactics. Those essays also define Simone as a militant activist. This study will show that Simone, through words and actions, rejected such strict interpretations of her song or her role in the Movement. Simone and “Mississippi Goddam” reflected multi-layered influences and offered multiple viewpoints that defied any simple definitions.

Scholars who interpret “Mississippi Goddam” as a renunciation of nonviolent civil rights protests likely do so because of Simone’s harshly provocative lyrics. Ruth Feldstein states that the “lyrically and politically ferocious” tone of “Mississippi Goddam” strongly questioned non-violence as a strategic tool. According to Feldstein, Simone challenged the feasibility of a “beloved” mixed community of blacks and whites. This notion of brotherhood, strongly voiced by King in his speech at the March on Washington, offered a vision of peaceful racial coexistence that “Mississippi Goddam” seemingly rejected.

Peniel E. Joseph defines “Mississippi Goddam” as a protest song that denounced America’s smug self satisfaction in the aftermath of the March on Washington. Daphne Brooks interprets the song as a rebuke of nonviolent action. She places Simone in direct opposition to non-violent activists who pursued coalition building between blacks and whites. Two recent dissertations view the song similarly. Rasheedah Jenkins argues that

the song placed Simone solidly within the black liberation struggle and offered “a bold
indictment against American apartheid” that reflected the anger and restlessness of freedom
fighters.\textsuperscript{89} Reva Marin declares that “Mississippi Goddam” represents Simone’s rejection of
the consoling nature of religion. Marin feels that Simone rebuked the faith-based nonviolence
philosophy articulated by King and other civil rights leaders.\textsuperscript{90}

Several scholars insinuate that activists who supported nonviolent protests inevitably
accepted gradualism in civil rights. Joseph interprets Simone’s lyrics as criticism of civil
rights liberals who advocated for patience.\textsuperscript{91} Brooks connects nonviolent protest to
gradualism, stating that Simone called attention to nonviolent tactics that resulted in
excruciatingly slow racial reform in America.\textsuperscript{92} Marin likewise notes that Simone’s
strongest criticism is directed at the gradualism, a strategy that Marin suggests dominated the
early years of the Movement.

Numerous studies have posited “Mississippi Goddam” as an endorsement of black
militancy. Feldstein declares that Simone challenged liberal views about race relation,
influencing fans to associate her with the black power movement.\textsuperscript{93} Joseph offers an
interpretation similar to Feldstein. He states that “Mississippi Goddam” revealed the “stark
political anger and critical consciousness” associated with the Movement’s outer fringe, and
that the dire warnings in the song called to mind the message of militants such as Malcolm
X.\textsuperscript{94} Phyl Garland also alludes to militancy, declaring that “Mississippi Goddam” gave voice

\begin{itemize}
\item Brooks states that “Mississippi Goddam” comments on the failure by Movement leaders to face the violent time
bomb ticking in the guise of white supremacist groups, and how the song exposes the myth of any hope of an
American collectivity.
\item Rasheedah Jenkins, “The Songs of Black (Women) Folk: Music, Politics, and Everyday Living,” (PhD
diss., Louisiana State University, 2008), 46.
\item Reva Marin, “Protest Notes: Abbey Lincoln, Nina Simone, and the Civil Rights Movement,” (PhD diss.,
York University, 2007), 46-47.
\item Joseph, \textit{Dark Days, Bright Nights}, 25.
\item Brooks, “Nina Simone’s Triple Play,” 187.
\item Feldstein “I Don’t Trust You Anymore,” 1366.
\item Joseph, \textit{Dark Days, Bright Nights}, 24-25.
\end{itemize}
to the submerged anger of blacks, while simultaneously establishing Simone as the foremost popular singer of black protest.95

This study does not seek to dismiss arguments that project “Mississippi Goddam” as a condemnation of gradualism. Nor does it attempt to deny that the song offers support for militancy in the Movement. Those elements in the lyrics and have been analyzed by others in depth. What this study will disprove is the overriding scholarly opinion that Simone, in song and in action, firmly rejected nonviolent tactics in the Movement at the time she wrote “Mississippi Goddam.” This essay dismisses as erroneous the assumption that the renunciation of gradualism was a rejection of non-violence.

“Mississippi Goddam” contains conflicting statements, varied lyrical patterns, and a changing musical tone. The song’s multiple, layered viewpoints cannot easily be categorized and must be viewed within the context of her actions. Curiously, numerous essays on Simone and “Mississippi Goddam” describe how she and her songs defied categorization into a single defined musical genre, yet many of those same essays attempt to place her and her song into one school of thought regarding civil rights. Simone actively participated in nonviolent events before and after the creation of “Mississippi Goddam,” which contradicts scholarly interpretations of Simone as a staunch opponent of nonviolence.

Analysis of the lyrics, music, and vocals in “Mississippi Goddam” will provide additional insight into Simone’s message and her place in the Movement. Simone’s successful combining of all those elements touched the conscience of the American public during a turbulent time. “Mississippi Goddam” is not simply a song that preached for militant action. It is a song that demanded civil rights for all through whatever means available.

Simone’s emergence as an activist was rooted in her childhood and her pre-Movement musical career. Born Eunice Waymon, at the age of six her musical gifts were on display in her role as pianist for her family’s church. Over the next several years, through monetary contributions of black and white citizens in her hometown of Tryon, North

95 Phyl Garland, The Sound of Soul (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1969), 176; Reebee Garofalo, Rockin’ the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 235; Marin, “Protest Notes,” 50-51. Other scholars look at the song in terms of militancy. Garofalo comments on Simone’s farsighted and insightful lyrics. He asserts that Simone captures the pulse of the era, and that the song’s content and tone previewed the militant movement about to erupt in America in the mid-1960s. “Mississippi Goddam,” according to Marin, is evidence of Simone’s shift toward a militant stance in civil rights.
Carolina, Waymon received professional tutelage for the piano.\textsuperscript{96} By 1954, at the age of twenty-one, the classically trained Waymon adopted the stage name Nina Simone, and began performing in as a singer and pianist in dinner clubs around Philadelphia.

Simone’s performances drew steady crowds, and she signed a record deal that distributed her music to the American public. Simone’s growing popularity brought her to New York by the late 1950s, where she interacted with an artistic and intellectual crowd in Greenwich Village that included writers, poets, and other musicians. One person in that group provided the foundation for Simone’s transformation from entertainer to activist. Lorraine Hansberry, whose play \textit{Raisin in the Sun} was the first play on Broadway by a black writer, pointed out the racial realities of America to Simone. According to Simone, “[Hansberry] told me over and over that like it or not I was involved in the struggle by the fact of being black—it made no difference whether I admitted it or not.”\textsuperscript{97}

By the early 1960s, Simone had developed a loyal following in Philadelphia and New York. Up to that point, although Simone enjoyed performing in front of live audiences, her main reason for performing was to provide for herself and her family. The events of the Movement, as well as pressure from her friend Hansberry, pushed her closer toward activism. Simone recollected hearing about King’s arrest and imprisonment in Birmingham in 1963, noting that “Dr. King was writing his famous Letter from Birmingham Jail while I was on stage.” Hansberry confronted Simone about her hesitancy in joining the battle for civil rights. Simone recalled “Lorraine called to point out the comparison and talked what I was doing for the movement while its leaders were stuck in jail.”\textsuperscript{98}

Even before writing “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone supported civil rights through her concerts. Simone sponsored and performed at concerts benefitting SNCC, CORE, NAACP, and other civil rights organizations. Most notable was Simone’s performance in Birmingham at the “Salute to Freedom” concert. Her performance at the benefit in the

\textsuperscript{96} Simone and Cleary, \textit{I Put a Spell On You}, 12, 21-23.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 87.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 88.
By 1963, Simone was closely following the events surrounding the civil rights movement, but had not yet given voice to her beliefs. Two tragic events from that year spurred the young songwriter to become an activist. On June 11, she heard about the murder of Medgar Evers, a field secretary for the NAACP in Jackson, Mississippi. Shaken by the news, a distraught Simone felt her conscience shifting. Although Ever’s murder did not fully provoke Simone into action, the killing was “the match that lit the fuse.” The bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in September of 1963 provided the final push that propelled Simone into her new role as activist.

News of the tragic deaths of four little girls flooded Simone with emotions. She could no longer rationalize staying silent about race relations in America. Simone describes her epiphany, stating:

The bombing of the little girls in Alabama and the murder of Medgar Evers were like the final pieces of a jigsaw that made no sense until you had fitted the whole thing together. I suddenly realized what it was to be black in America in 1963, but it wasn’t an intellectual connection of the type Lorraine had been repeating to me over and over—it came as a rush of fury, hatred and determination.

Simone’s fury drove her to attempt to build a zip-gun to try to shoot anyone that she felt held responsibility for the murders. Her husband calmed her down and reminded her that while she knew nothing about killing she did know a lot about music. Simone channeled her emotions into a song. An hour after sitting down at the piano, Simone stood up with the lyrics and music for “Mississippi Goddam.” As Simone put it, “It was my first civil rights song and it erupted out of me quicker than I could write it down.” Simone remembers that this was the moment when she realized there was no turning back for her. That was the point where she committed to the cause of civil rights and her life as an activist began in earnest.

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100 Simone and Cleary, I Put a Spell On You, 88-89.
101 Ibid., 89.
102 Ibid., 89-90.
The horrific deaths of the four girls shocked many artists, both black and white. Richard Farina’s “Birmingham Sunday” used metaphors and religious imagery to express sadness and frustration about the attack. Sung in melancholy fashion by Joan Baez, it expressed a white perspective of the immorality of racial violence and the disharmony it created in society. Jazz musician John Coltrane recorded “Alabama,” a plaintive instrumental elegy for the slain girls. Poet Langston Hughes wrote his poem titled “Birmingham Sunday (September 15, 1963)” in response to the attack. Written only two weeks after the tragedy, the poem vividly portrays the violence of the bombing with its graphic descriptions. Much like Hughes’ poem, Simone’s song used a confrontational style to get the message across. The blunt language of “Mississippi Goddam” contrasts with the subdued lyrics in “Birmingham Sunday.” Yet, both songs spotlight the messages of Movement disconnect, violence, and racial divisiveness.

Analyses of “Mississippi Goddam” primarily focus on its pointed language of condemnation of gradualism, and historians interpret the lyrics as a declaration of Simone’s preference for militancy over nonviolence in the Movement. Such focus slights the significance of other messages that exist in the song. The lyrics reveal Simone’s frustration with the results of nonviolent protests, but the song does not unequivocally reject of that form of protest. Simone endorsed the advancement of civil rights by any means possible, whether nonviolently or through militance. Simone explained her position by saying “There was more than one way to skin a cat and whatever means worked to get what you wanted was the right one to use.”

Simone was not alone in questioning the use of nonviolence. Even staunch opponents of violent protests such as James Meredith and Medgar Evers questioned the effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns. Meredith states he had doubts about such tactics, and that his conversations with Evers indicated that his fellow activist had similar misgivings. Meredith states that in the end, Evers supported the actions because he was “dedicated to the cause of human freedom.” Though they had doubts about nonviolent protests like Simone, Meredith and Evers ultimately supported those actions because they furthered the cause.

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103 Ibid., 94-95.
The searing renunciation of gradualism is shown in the penultimate stanza, which reads like a laundry list of Movement actions and goals:

- Desegregation / “do it slow”
- Mass participation / “do it slow”
- Reunification / “do it slow”
- Do things gradually / “do it slow”
- But bring more tragedy / “do it slow”

Scholars interpret these lyrics as a rejection of nonviolence. What these words reveal is the intense frustration Simone and others felt about the slow progress of nonviolent protest. Simone quite clearly denounces gradualism through the use of the mocking chorus line “do it slow,” yet gradualism and nonviolent protest were not necessarily linked. Mass protests were effecting change, and concessions won by King in Birmingham were acknowledged by Simone. She said, “I thought an important victory had been won, and when a little while later President Kennedy announced he was going to present a new Civil Rights Bill to Congress it seemed like another was on the way.”

The killing of Evers and the church tragedy blunted Simone’s enthusiasm for earlier civil rights successes. Despite the goals achieved, the effect was to “bring more tragedy.” The girls’ tragic deaths spurred her to speak out. Simone’s anger reflected what activists felt each time someone was killed in the campaign. Roy Wilkins, a leader who firmly believed that blacks and whites could coexist together equally and peacefully, was himself pushed to the emotional edge. He recalls his initial reaction upon learning of Evers’ murder was hatred toward whites. In the immediate days after Evers was killed, his widow Myrlie also felt the same rage. The fact that their loathing of whites passed does not diminish the powerful statements revealed from their emotional responses. Like Simone, they were incensed at the sacrifice in lives and the seemingly glacial pace of progress in civil rights.

Simone’s vented her frustration throughout “Mississippi Goddam.” Her exasperation was not only directed at political and religious leaders who preached “go slow,” but also to

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105 Simone and Cleary, _I Put a Spell On You_, 88.
106 Wilkins and Mathews, _Standing Fast_, 290.
passive Americans who chose to merely observe violent opposition to the Movement from a safe distance. In the third stanza, Simone asks “Can’t you see it / Can’t you feel it.” She confronts her audience, both black and white, to notice the chaotic state of race relations. Simone returns to the same theme near the end of the song, inquiring of those same people “Why don’t you see it / Why don’t you feel it.” By that point in the song Simone’s frustration is at a fever-pitch level, and she no longer accepts detached passivity from anyone. Her intent mirrors the frustration King felt during his Birmingham campaign of 1963. King denounced gradualists who adhered to “a mythical concept of time” while lecturing blacks to wait for a “more convenient season.”

Several days before his death, Evers expressed his fear of being killed to his wife. She remembered the two of them sharing a “bottomless depth of hopelessness, of hurt, of despair.” The essence of the Evers’ emotions is captured in “Mississippi Goddam.”

Simone saved her most scathing attack for whites who refuse to support civil rights. In stanza nine of “Mississippi Goddam,” she sarcastically mocks common stereotypes associated to blacks in the South:

Washing the windows / “do it slow”
Picking the cotton / “do it slow”
You’re just plain rotten / “do it slow”
You’re too damn lazy / “do it slow”
The thinking’s crazy / “do it slow”

Simone’s recitation of prejudicial beliefs revealed her distaste for stereotypical thinking. Her lyrics allude to menial labor such as window washing and picking cotton, jobs often seen as black occupations. Simone’s reference to picking cotton is especially meaningful, for it connects back to 19th-century images of slaves picking cotton on Southern plantations. Her lyrics point out that many whites, even a century later, still viewed blacks as their ancestors had perceived them. The references to “lazy” and “crazy” also link back to a long-standing perception of blacks by many in the white South. Such condescending depictions were often used by whites as proof of blacks’ inferiority. Meredith acknowledged the demeaning characterizations of blacks, which he felt consigned him to a subhuman role


in society simply because he was black.\textsuperscript{110} He expressed the exasperation and resentment felt by many others.

Simone also broached gender issues in her song, and noted that the dehumanizing of blacks affected women as well as men. She reminds her audience that the fight for equality included black women, stating “All I want is equality / For my sister, my brother, my people, and me.” After that line, Simone goes on the offensive, adopting a mocking but angry tone:

“Yes you lied to me all these years / You told me to wash and clean my ears / And talk real fine just like a lady / And you’d stop calling me Sister Sadie.” In those lines, Simone criticizes whites for promising equality for women like her, with the insinuation that black women could only achieve that level if they acted like proper ladies. The inference was that black women needed to talk and act more like “refined” white women. Simone’s accusations also point out to whites their stereotyping of black women as dirty, as if they were inferior people who needed cleansing. Simone’s angry statement reveals that she understood that all the promises made to her people were merely lies, and that those untruths were just attempts by whites to keep things as they were. She rejected those actions as racist and sexist, and through her lyrics announced things were going to change for blacks.

Simone vocalized the frustrations of her race in “Mississippi Goddam.” In stanza seven, Simone states “I don’t belong here / I don’t belong there.” Earlier in the stanza, she claimed America as “this land of mine,” but she indicates that the country did not give her and her people a place of their own. Her lyrics express her exasperation with segregation and its clear demarcation of “whites” versus “colored.” Simone challenges that inequality in her song, but admits she does not know what her role should be. She asks of herself “Where am I going / What am I doing / I don’t know / I don’t know.” Simone indicates that something, anything, needed to be done to end segregation, whether by nonviolent action or militant means.

Simone’s overwhelming anger is apparent in the song’s title. By titling her song “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone revealed her immense frustration by using a reactionary cursive that also points to deeper religious meanings. Several scholars have interpreted the meaning of the title. Daphne Brooks interprets the repeated abrasive cursing phrase as

\textsuperscript{110} Meredith, \textit{Three Years in Mississippi}, 5.
Simone’s announcement of her opposition to the faith-based nonviolent coalition. Brooks states that Simone’s profanity was the “insurgent fulcrum of her song” that revealed her disconnection with the segregated South, and that the curse clearly separated Simone’s composition from traditional religious civil rights songs.\textsuperscript{111} Rasheedah Jenkins sees a subtext to the profanity, indicating that Mississippi’s history in race relations placed it in a position that should suffer God’s damnation.\textsuperscript{112} Although insightful, these analyses miss an important aspect regarding the meaning of the title.

“Mississippi Goddam” reflects Simone’s view that people throughout the South were cursed by the shackles of segregation. In stanza six, Simone states “\textit{Black cat cross my path / I think every day’s gonna be my last.}” The line might be interpreted as a popular 1960s slang reference to a young black man, or a depiction of a militant Black Panther. Neither reading works in the context of the song. Simone was not known to use slang, and the Black Panthers did not come into existence until 1966. The line is a reference to superstition as opposed to a religious belief, emphasizing the common myth that a person crossing the path of a black cat would be afflicted with bad luck. The sentiment of blacks being a cursed race is evident in the song’s title, and is further confirmed in the “black cat” reference.

“Mississippi Goddam” references religion beyond the title’s use as a cursive term. Reva Marin singles out the line “I’ve even stopped believing in prayer” as evidence of Simone’s rejection of the comforting nature of religion, which Marin suggests offers a rejection of the philosophy of non-violence supported by King and others.\textsuperscript{113} Jenkins’ analysis leads her to a different conclusion, stating that Simone offers prayer as the cure for enduring subjugation. Jenkins notes that Simone exhibits the power of prayer in two verses. The first asks that “\textit{Somebody say a prayer,}” which is a plea for someone to call on God to help alleviate the mounting racial tensions. The second verse is Simone’s personal prayer to God: “\textit{Lord have mercy on this land of mine.}” Jenkins asserts that Simone does reveal some ambivalence about the power of prayer when she balances the two prayer lines with her

\textsuperscript{111} Brooks, “Nina Simone’s Triple Play,” 182-83, 188.

\textsuperscript{112} Jenkins, “The Songs of (Black) Women Folk,” 48.

\textsuperscript{113} Marin, “Protest Notes,” 46-47.
statement of disbelief in prayer.\textsuperscript{114} If these lyrics are interpreted in isolation only in the context of individual lines, it leads to conclusions such as the ones offered by Marin and Jenkins. Simone’s true feelings on faith and prayer are more nuanced than what these two scholars have previously suggested.

The shifting and often conflicting lyrics in “Mississippi Goddam” have led some scholars to believe Simone rejected prayer or was ambivalent about the usefulness of faith. Yet, if the lyrics are observed within the context of the entire song and through the prism of Simone’s religious background, a much different reading of her thoughts on prayer and faith are revealed. Deeper analysis reveals that Simone had a deep spiritual belief that was undiminished by the time she wrote “Mississippi Goddam.” Simone understood the limitations of prayer, but she felt that faith was a still a vital tool for activists.

Simone stated that influences from church, especially in the form of gospel singing, were a main part of her music.\textsuperscript{115} A frenzied state of religious inspiration inhabited Simone during the writing of “Mississippi Goddam,” compelling her express her feelings because “in church language, the Truth entered into me and I ‘came through’.”\textsuperscript{116} Simone recognized the strong spiritual influence that the song held for audiences. When she first began performing “Mississippi Goddam,” she noticed that “[I] began to feel the power and spirituality I could connect with when I played in front of an audience.” Simone came to the realization that she had the ability to make “people feel on a deep level.”\textsuperscript{117}

Two lines reveal Simone’s belief in the power of faith. Scholars have deemed the line “I’ve even stopped believing in prayer” as a concrete rejection by Simone of religious faith. The position of that line in the stanza shows a different intent. Simone’s strong declaration comes at the end of a stanza that reveals both her frustration with the state of civil rights as well as her call for action:

\begin{quote}
Lord have mercy on this land of mine  
We all gonna get it in due time  
I don’t belong here
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{114} Jenkins, “The Songs of (Black) Women Folk,” 48.
\textsuperscript{115} Simone, \textit{I Put a Spell On You}, 17, 19.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 91-92.
I don’t belong there
I’ve even stopped believing in prayer

“I’ve even stopped believing in prayer” was not a line rejecting prayer. Faith was important to activists as a shared common bond, but it alone could not help the Movement reach their goal “in due time.” In this context, Simone did not view prayer as the all-powerful force driving change in civil rights. She asserts throughout the song that action will deliver civil rights to America, and that people must take those steps to achieve that goal. Simone’s dramatic statement told activists that prayer could only take the Movement so far. Simone captured a common feeling, one vividly portrayed by activist Anne Moody in her autobiography. After learning about the church bombing in Birmingham, Moody recalls her exasperation with religious faith. She questions God, asking “Why us?” She goes on to vent her rising anger, telling God “I’m through with you.” and declaring “I will be my own God, living my life as I see fit.”

Moody’s diatribe reveals her frustration with the limits of prayer, and it shows her realization that actions and not prayer will push the Movement to its goal. James Meredith understood this reality as well, stating “[Blacks] know it is up to them—not God or some ‘selected’ individual—to do their part to bring about the changes necessary.”

Two lines reveal Simone’s belief in the power of faith. At the end of the third stanza, she pleads “Somebody say a prayer.” Later, Simone implores “Lord have mercy on this land of mine.” As with the first line, she is asking for God’s help to bring equality and peace to her people. These lines are not the statements that would be made by a full-fledged militant, as some scholars consider Simone to have been at that time.

Through her lyrics, Simone assumes two different personas to showcase her activism in “Mississippi Goddam.” Simone occupies the role of an interrogator confronting gradualists with dark warnings of impending violent repercussions. In another part, Simone inhabits the role of civil rights participant, projecting herself into protest actions. By taking these two perspectives, Simone attempted to motivate black and white audiences in different ways.

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119 Meredith, *Three Years in Mississippi*, 253.
Simone’s angry declarations forced whites to face the fractured state of race relations in America. Her words demanded that blacks receive equal rights. She warned of the dire consequences of allowing the inequity between the races to fester. Beginning in stanza seven, Simone challenges gradualists to face the inevitable, stating “We all gonna get it in due time.” In the next stanza, her tone becomes much more forceful to make her point abundantly clear: “Don’t tell me / I tell you / Me and my people are just about due.” With these words, Simone expressed the pent-up frustration felt by many in the Movement. Blacks wearied of waiting for fulfillment of civil rights promises made to them by the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.

Later in the song, Simone bluntly confronts gradualists, stating “Yes, you lied to me all these years.” This line lays the foundation for the most caustic and controversial lyrics in the song:

> Oh, but this country is full of lies  
> You’re all gonna die and die like flies  
> I don’t trust you anymore  
> You keep on saying “Go slow!”

This passage has been interpreted as Simone’s declaration supporting militancy measures in civil right, while rejecting nonviolence. This stanza offers a defiant tone in its bold warning of impending racial clashes. Simone verbalized the increasing hostility between races, and commented on the inevitable violent reactions that would occur if society did not change its stance on civil rights. “You’re all gonna die and die like flies” was an ominous prediction by Simone that foreshadowed the uprisings and riots that would occur later in the 1960s. The line has been read as an implied threat, a militant statement declaring that violence would be used against civil rights foes. “I don’t trust you anymore” reveals Simone’s exasperation with government officials, who kept promising civil rights would come. Simone reflected the disillusionment felt by activists like James Meredith, who declared after Evers’ murder that the federal government had offered no real help in civil rights.120 Simone strongly rejected that gradualism could change race relations.121 Simone’s lyrics forced gradualists and apathetic whites to face that reality.

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120 Ibid., 305.
Simone’s condemnation of gradualism in “Mississippi Goddam” did not mean she rejected leaders who used nonviolence tactics. In actuality, Simone’s lyrics mimic King’s views on gradualism, which he expressed in his speech at the March on Washington and in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” In his Washington speech, King declared “There is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquillizing drug of gradualism.”\textsuperscript{122} King’s rejection of gradualism in his speech reaffirmed the position he staked out earlier in his letter directed at white clergymen. He stated “For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” King went on to lecture the clergymen, saying “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”\textsuperscript{123}

King, like Simone, dismissed the notion of “go slow” in civil rights. Although strongly opposed to militancy, King was realistic about what America’s future held if blacks did not gain their rights. King’s words painted a portrait of a violent future, much as Simone did in “Mississippi Goddam.” In his letter, King somberly predicts what will occur if civil rights are denied to blacks, stating “millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies—a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare.” King then states the obvious, proclaiming “Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever.”\textsuperscript{124} At the March on Washington, King offered a further warning:

> It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an ending, but a beginning. And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. And there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{122} King, “I Have a Dream.”
\textsuperscript{123} King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 83.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{125} King, “I Have a Dream.”
King was not alone in expressing frustration with the excruciatingly slow pace of gradualism. Two years earlier, Roy Wilkins criticized President-elect Kennedy for not planning a civil rights legislative agenda for the first year of the presidency. Wilkins attacked Kennedy’s for his extreme caution in his approach to civil rights. He stingingly reminded Kennedy that blacks had contributed significantly to his election and that they expected him to do what was right. Blacks were running out of patience awaiting the unfulfilled promise made by the Supreme Court in 1954. The aggressive criticisms by King and Wilkins match the tenor of Simone’s message in “Mississippi Goddam.”

Bayard Rustin too became angered by the hollow promises offered by gradualists. Rustin was a firm supporter of nonviolence, but he gave a statement that could easily be read as being militant. He declared “Our need is to exert our own power, and the main power we have is our own black bodies, backed by the bodies of as many white people as will stand with us.” Rustin went on to suggest that blacks needed to create situations that did not allow society to function unless their demands were met. Like Wilkins and King, Rustin tired of patiently waiting for civil rights to arrive on the slow timetable favored by gradualists. Rustin understood that racial tensions would continue to escalate unless things changed socially and politically in America. After the Watts Riots in 1965, he warned “If you wait until youngsters are forced to riot to listen to their grievances, woe onto you and damn you, for you will get nothing but violence.” Rustin’s stance on gradualism and his prediction of violent responses are themes shared by Simone in “Mississippi Goddam.”

Some scholars point to a line in the last stanza as Simone’s militant stance in support of racial separatism in America. “You don’t have to live next to me / Just give me my equality” seems to suggest that she is promoting that ideal. Yet, Simone’s declaration is less a pronouncement that supported racial isolation than it was a statement reflecting the mood of the country. In a Harris poll conducted in 1963, 78 percent of white Americans admitted that the country’s racial problems cannot be defended. Yet, 55 percent of those polled also objected to blacks living next door, which is what Simone details in her song. The poll

128 Ibid., 186.
shows that whites acknowledged that blacks deserved equality, but many were uncomfortable with the thought of it occurring in their neighborhood.  

Simone’s provocative rejection of gradualism struck a chord with frustrated activists. She deepened her connection with them by adopting an alternate perspective that put her in their shoes. In stanza six, Simone began to project herself as a protester. Simone describes “Hound dogs on my trail / School children sitting in jail.” The reference to “hound dogs” is Simone’s reference to the slave era, where masters would use dogs to track and find runaway slaves. The children in jail that Simone refers to were the young blacks jailed by the thousands in Birmingham during the “Children’s Crusade” during the summer of 1963. The first line showed that Simone shared an understanding with them of the long history of subjugation and racial discrimination. The second line brought the narrative to contemporary times, and provided a historical link that acknowledged just how long the civil rights battle had been waged.

When Simone later declares “I think every day’s gonna be my last,” she illuminates the concerns many activists had about possible deadly consequences. Like Farina did in “Birmingham Sunday,” Simone was simply noting how violence stalked the everyday life of southern blacks. This line shows Simone’s sense of foreboding, and reflects her reaction to the deaths of Evers and the girls in the Birmingham church bombing. Violence hovered constantly over activists, and they easily related to Simone’s prediction of imminent death. Evers understood the danger he faced as an activist. He was fully aware of death threats made against him, stating at a rally a few days before his death “If I die it will be for a good cause.” James Meredith, Ever’s friend and fellow activist, recalls their discussion about the real possibilities of dying a violent death. Both men knew they were listed on the Mississippi “death list” kept by segregationists who marked Movement leaders for elimination. Meredith notes “Death, in those days, was not a distant possibility: it was quite real in the lives of many blacks in the South. And it was something any leader had to take into account.”

King shared that view, stating that Movement leaders were well aware that

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129 Harris, “Majority of Whites on Discrimination.”
130 Evers, Evers-Williams, and Marable, The Autobiography of Medgar Evers, xvi.
for them “the whine of the bullet from ambush, the roar of the bomb have all too often broken the night’s silence.”

By the latter half of “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone clearly enunciates her ultimate goal. In stanza twelve, she alludes to civil rights events when she mentions “Picket lines / School boycotts.” This is a reference to white demonstrations against black students enrolling at Central High and other schools across the South. At the end of the stanza, Simone clearly states why these actions are necessary, pronouncing “All I want is equality / For my sister, my brother, my people, and me.” These lines cemented for the black audience that Simone was truly involved in the Movement.

In her lyrics, Simone targets three Southern states in particular as the objects of her wrath. “Alabama’s gotten me so upset” was a reference to the killings of the four girls in the church bombing, as well as a reaction to the resistance to the demonstrations that occurred in Birmingham throughout the spring and summer of 1963. “Tennessee made me lose my rest” alludes to demonstrations against segregation during the summer of 1963 in that state, especially in Nashville and Chattanooga. Mississippi, the state highlighted in the title, was where Evers was assassinated.

Simone’s spotlighting of Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi exposed the centrality of those states as the strongest examples of racial injustice. Though scholars perceive that Simone rejected nonviolence, her emphasis on those three states linked back to King’s vision for America. At the March on Washington, King admonished Americans to “let freedom ring” in Tennessee. He had harsher words for segregationists in Alabama and Mississippi, bemoaning the “vicious racists” of Alabama and Mississippi as a state “sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression.” King, like Simone, was upset with the state of civil rights in America, and like her wanted to motivate others to take action to change it for the better.

132 King, Why We Can’t Wait, 159.
133 Garland, The Sound of Soul, 176. Garland states that once “Mississippi Goddam” was widely broadcast “blacks were informed of her inner status as a true ‘soul sister’ who had been with them all along.”
134 King, “I Have a Dream.”
The lyrics of “Mississippi Goddam” were empowered by the vocal techniques Simone used while singing. Simone viewed her voice as simply another instrument to be blended into her musical performances. In defining her voice, she stated “I used my voice as a third layer, complementing the other two layers, my right and left hands.” In describing her vocal style, Phyl Garland states Simone captured her audience through a reedy voice that possesses “an earthy naturalness, the compelling coarseness of a homemade instrument.” She is described as possessing an intensely lacerating voice that hooked listeners with its power. Music scholar Richard Middleton states that her highly focused tone, using minimal vibrato, centered the audience’s attention on her performance.

Simone uses her voice in “Mississippi Goddam” to powerful effect by changing vocal phrasing to match the changing perspectives and emotions inherent in the lyrics. She begins the song with spoken words: “The name of this tune is Mississippi Goddam / And I mean every word of it.” This opening statement sets the tone of the performance and notifies the audience of the message. Simone lets the audience know immediately that her “tune” had a serious message about the racial disconnect in the country. Simone opens the song with the strong spoken statement in order to grab the listeners’ attention, and those lines serve as the opening scene to the first “act” of the song.

Simone uses spoken narrative twice more in the song. After singing about her state of frustration in the first third of “Mississippi Goddam,” she stops the flow of the song to state “This is a show tune / But the show hasn’t been written for it, yet.” For Daphne Brooks, this statement signifies Simone’s acknowledgment of the limitations of her “show tune” songs to effect change. This appears to misread the statement, which must be analyzed within the context of the entire message of the song. The statement bookmarks the beginning of the second “act” of the song, which turns more confrontational toward the audience. Simone’s

135 Jessie L. Freyermuth, “An Analysis of the Musical Interpretations of Nina Simone” (master’s thesis, Kansas State University, 2010), 13. According to Freyermuth, Simone’s vocal training came from her exposure to church revivals and gospel music, and from her childhood voice teacher.


137 Garland, The Sound of Soul, 169.


comment about the “unwritten show” is a pronouncement to the audience that the “show,” in
the form of the Movement, was not close to being over.

The third spoken statement occurs before the song’s most strident lyrical section. It emerges as a punch line in which Simone mocks her audience for underestimating her message. She states “I made you thought I was kiddin’ didn’t we,” and by saying this she reemphasized that the song’s serious message should not be lost amid the up-tempo musical score. Working as a narrator, she has now prepared the audience for the emotionally intense final act.

Simone fashioned a vocal performance around the three spoken statements that builds in volume and intensity. She did this to add to the confrontational tone of the lyrics that build throughout the song. Simone’s voice rises when she expresses her exasperation in “Can’t you see it / Can’t you feel it,” “I don’t belong her / I don’t belong there,” “Don’t tell me / I tell you,” and “Where am I going / What am I doing.” These lines build on the angry tone that accompanies the refrain, which comes to a loud crescendo at the end of the song.

Simone used a phrasing pattern in “Mississippi Goddam” common to the gospel music she was exposed to in her youth. In the two sections of the song that denounce gradualism, she used call-and-response to bring attention to the lyrics as well as provide a repetitive refrain for her message. Simone sings of washing windows and picking cotton, and in response her backing vocalists sing “do it slow” after each line. She uses the same pattern when she sings of civil rights events, engaging in a back-and-forth dialogue with her band mates to highlight the “do it slow” mantra. The use of call-and-response provided a sense of a sermon connecting a preacher to the congregation in active dialogue. This phrasing style was effective in reaching out to black audiences familiar with the vocalized give-and-take. The redundant singing of the phrase “do it slow” reiterated the mantra of gradualists that frustrated activists in the Movement.

The musical score of “Mississippi Goddam” accentuates Simone’s narrative and surrounds her voice in a jaunty beat that jars the audience. In this song and others, Simone forms music that mixes classical techniques of pianism with improvisational aspects of jazz and with modulated blues sounds. Simone describes her musical style as closer to folk and

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blues than to the jazz genre.\textsuperscript{141} All those different musical elements went into the creation of the score for “Mississippi Goddam.”

The song begins with an up tempo two-beat structure that consists of piano, bass, and drums all played so lightly that it is barely audible behind Simone’s singing. The lively score leads the audience to believe that the song will be a show tune. Only when Simone and her band reach the song’s initial refrain “And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam” is instrumentation heard at full volume. This musically underscores the refrain as the crux of the song, and this emphasis occurs each time the line is sung. The instrumentation reaches its climax during the song’s concluding lines of “Everybody knows about Mississippi / Everybody knows about Alabama / Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam.” These last lines serve as the “showstopper” that punctuates to the audience the song’s meaning.

Simone’s background in gospel music gave her great awareness of the power of music to shape the emotions and reactions of an audience. She learned valuable musical techniques in her childhood that later informed the creation of her vocal style. Simone explained that “Gospel taught me about improvisation, how to shape music in response to an audience and then how to shape the mood of the audience in response to my music.” Her understanding of how to formulate her music to engage and push her audience was incorporated into “Mississippi Goddam.”

Simone called the song a “show tune” for specific effect. The pleasant pop music groove throughout the song is at odds with the angry, accusatory lyrics. What Simone attempted to do musically was put her audience into the same mindset as her; a person frustrated with segregation and race relations in America. She was uncomfortable with what was occurring around her, and she wanted her audience to feel that same discomfort. The audience could sense the oppositional nature of lyrics versus music. That disconnection never allowed the audience to feel at ease while listening to the song.

On a secondary level, Simone uses the music to mock the whole race situation. As Richard Middleton interprets it, the music conjures up images of “blackface Uncle Toms” and “accommodating Mammies.”\textsuperscript{142} Unlike minstrel performers or submissive servants,

\textsuperscript{141} Simone and Cleary, I Put a Spell On You, 69.
\textsuperscript{142} Middleton, Voicing the Popular, 119.
Simone turns the table on the audience and forces them to face racial reality. She wanted ambivalent Americans to understand that all the strife occurring throughout the South was not some “show.” The music and impassioned vocals expressed a serious social message that demanded that the audience look inward at their own consciences.

Simone did not confine her confrontational manner solely to her vocals. Her gestures during performances added to the “show tune” she wanted to present to her audiences. Videos of Simone performing “Mississippi Goddam” in concerts from 1964 and 1965 offer examples of her powerful physical presence. During accusatory lyrical sections of the song, she made direct eye contact with audience members. While lecturing the audiences with “Don’t tell me / I tell you,” “Yes, you lied to me all these years,” and “Just give me my equality,” Simone glared out at the crowd. Her defiant stare heightened the air of confrontation her lyrics created.

Given Simone’s confrontational performance style in “Mississippi Goddam” in both concerts and on record, hostile reaction to the song in the South was not unexpected. Many white-owned stations refused to play the song. Simone noted that the single sold well everywhere except in the South, where there were problems with distribution. She described the difficulty in getting airplay for “Mississippi Goddam,” stating “The excuse was profanity—Goddam!—but the real reason was obvious enough.” The shocking title grabbed the attention of the public, but it was the song’s defiant denunciation of segregation and gradualism that made civil rights opponents uncomfortable. Copies of the song were sent back from Southern radio stations to Simone’s label office snapped in half. It was then that Simone realized such reactions confirmed the power of her message and that it meant “we were getting through.”

Things changed profoundly for Simone and her audience after the creation of “Mississippi Goddam.” Simone recalled the response to her song received the first time it was played live, saying “I went up to New York as planned and sang the song in public for the first time at the Village Gate. It brought the house down.”

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provoked passionate responses from the audience wherever it was performed. Simone states “I got the same reaction [to Mississippi Goddam] wherever I sang it.”144

What “Mississippi Goddam” instilled in Simone was a sense of a new, higher purpose for her performances. It also gave her a sense of the new direction for her music. Her growing awareness of the events happening around her inspired to speak out, and she used her faith as inspiration for her musical path. The woman who sang “I’ve even stopped believing in prayer” did not truly dismiss the importance of religious faith. For Simone, her beliefs were the driving force behind her performances. She stated “Whatever it was that happened out there under the lights, it mostly came from God, and I was just a place along the line He was moving on. With civil rights I played on stage for a reason, and when I walked off stage those reasons still existed.”145

Feldstein details two important facets that evolved out of Simone’s increased activism, both on display in the concerts the singer headlined for SNCC in 1964. First, Simone showed the audience and other activists that she was unequivocally committed to the Movement. Secondly, her well-attended benefit performances enriched the treasuries of civil rights organizations.146 These were important facets of Simone’s activism, but she discovered her influence went beyond those two aspects.

Simone knew she could connect with audiences and provoke responses from them, but she was taken aback to learn her influence extended beyond live performances. She stated “As my commitment deepened and I started to play benefits, go on marches and mix with a wide range of people involved in civil rights, I got to hear stories about what I meant to some of those activists.” What Simone discovered was that her records were played at SNCC meetings and were used to inspire the assembled participants.147 Through her civil rights songs, especially “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone reflected the tumultuous state of race

144 Ibid., 90.
145 Ibid., 94.
146 Feldstein, “I Don’t Trust You Anymore,” 1360.
147 Simone and Cleary, I Put a Spell On You, 94-95.
relations. As SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael later told her, Simone was the “true singer of the civil rights movement.”

Although many essays declare Simone’s entry into militancy began with “Mississippi Goddam,” she did not fully support the ideals of Black Power until 1966. After reading the Black Power manifesto of Stokely Carmichael and Black Panther leader Huey Newton, she felt that militancy had become the better path to civil rights. She stated “I knew that the right way—at that moment—lay with Stokely, Black Power and the Panthers.” Yet, at the time of her writing “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone was not fully invested into one camp of black protest. Her lyrics reflected the confrontational and often divided opinions among activists in the Movement. Her anger at gradualism and segregationists may have portended the defiant slogans of black nationalists, but they also reflected the frustration and exhaustion felt by those active in the nonviolence campaigns.

Neither Simone nor “Mississippi Goddam” can be easily pigeon-holed by a simple definition. Her song shows that black activism was not an “either/or” principle where participants who supported one civil rights strategy were automatically opposed to the other strategy. Roy Wilkins, a staunch supporter of nonviolent protest, described the complexity of thought and action in the Movement. He expressed admiration for Malcolm X, who he says served as a spokesman for blacks in places that needed representation. Wilkins stated that the image of “an aroused, black vengeance squad” created by Malcolm X would cause whites to deal with nonviolent leaders out of fear of dealing with militants. Wilkins felt that Malcolm X’s statements and actions would unintentionally assist in driving whites to heed the call of nonviolent protest.

James Farmer articulates what Simone reflects in her song, and offers clarity on the conflicted beliefs of most blacks:

It is incomprehensible to most white Americans that deep in the heart of every black adult lives some of Malcolm and some of King, side by side. The black

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148 Ibid., 98.

149 Ibid., 109-10. The cumulative effect of the killings of Evers, Malcolm X, and other civil rights leaders embittered Simone by 1966, leading her to declare a hardened stance in her view of non-violence. She stated “I, for one, was through with turning the other cheek, through with loving my enemies. It was time for some Old Testament justice.”

150 Wilkins, Standing Fast, 318.
experience has not been monolithic and the black response is seldom without ambivalence. The same audience that showered Martin with “amens” could punctuate Malcolm’s rhetoric with emphatic shouts of “right!”

Simone and her song show the complex and chaotic relationship between Movement groups, as well as the dysfunctional relations between races in America. Though her lyrics seem to be contradictory and her jaunty music appears jarringly at odds from her intense lyrics, Simone exposed the chaotic pulse of the Movement. Her musical mixture of indignation, condemnation, religion, and morality offers an enlightening glimpse into the intricately layered Civil Rights Movement.

151 James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 224.
CHAPTER 4

“JUST GET ON BOARD”: MORALITY AND THE MOVEMENT IN “PEOPLE GET READY”

People get ready, there’s a train a comin’
You don’t need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’
Don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord

So people get ready for the train to Jordan
Picking up passengers coast to coast
Faith is the key, open the doors and board ‘em
There’s hope for all among those loved the most

There ain’t no room for the hopeless sinner
Who would hurt all mankind just to save his own (believe me now)
Have pity on those whose chances grow thinner
For there’s no hiding place against the kingdom’s throne

People get ready, there’s a train a comin’
You don’t need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’
Don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord

(lyrics by Curtis Mayfield)

The Uptown Theater in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was packed. Reveling in performances by the Temptations and the Impressions, the audience exhorted both R & B groups to continue to sing. The two acts alternated, with each attempting to outdo the other in front of the black audience. Curtis Mayfield, lead singer and songwriter for the Impressions, led the trio through their entire catalog, until finally they ran out of songs. Fred Cash, backup vocalist along with Sam Gooden, recounts what happened next, saying “We got down to when we didn’t have any more songs to sing, and Curtis was like ‘Let’s do ‘People Get
Ready.’ It had never been sung before, and it just tore the house down.” Inspired by their passionate performance of the song, the audience developed an immediate emotional connection to the lyrics and melody of “People Get Ready.” It was fall of 1964, and the audience members took to the song’s reflective and hopeful message promising a journey to salvation, perhaps linking the lyrics to events such as the passing of the Civil Rights Act earlier that summer. After the song’s release in February of 1965, activists and radio listeners would find vital meanings from the song as well. They would discover not only a powerful message of hope, but also a call for all Americans to follow the right moral path to lead them to a more equitable society.

Transcendence was a common theme in freedom songs. Mayfield invested elements of uplift into “People Get Ready,” and it is the focus of most scholarly studies of the song. Brian Ward points to transcendence in his analysis, opining that religious allusions in the song revealed a vision of black national unity and determined faith in the journey toward freedom. Similarly, Bill Friskics-Warren describes “People Get Ready” as an ode to black pride and uplift. Teresa Reed states its lyrics were a coded call for solidarity that directed blacks toward a level of empowering spirituality, which once achieved would allow them to persevere against the overwhelming political and social obstacles put in their way. All these scholars identify transcendence as the primary theme running through “People Get Ready” and place it within the traditional definition of a freedom song.

Some scholars found secondary meanings. Bill Friskics-Warren states that “People Get Ready,” also expressed the ideal of redemptive hope for all ethnicities. Teresa Reed


156 Friskics-Warren, I’ll Take You There, 147.
highlights how Mayfield invested the “journey by train” motif into “People Get Ready” as a historical link to 19th century spirituals, gospel songs that expressed the idea of passage from despair in life to hope in the afterlife. This link reminded blacks about the long struggle for freedom, and how faith was a necessary component for achieving civil rights. Paul Harvey identifies “People Get Ready” as an ode to the 1963 March on Washington.

For most scholars, “People Get Ready” is a song of transcendence that served as spiritual inspiration for activists and the black community. What scholars have failed to emphasize is that “People Get Ready” also refers to specific events and people in the Movement, and that these real-world references join with themes of transcendence and religious morality to form a strong emotional bond with activists and the public. “People Get Ready” did not simply offer uplift; it also issued a dire warning about the consequences of Americans rejecting civil rights. The multidimensional lyrics were combined with a gospel format adapted for popular consumption, creating recognizable cultural references for blacks while also establishing a connection with whites. Mayfield wanted to bridge the schism between blacks and whites in civil rights.

“Lyrically, you could tell it’s from parts of the Bible . . . It’s an ideal. There’s a message there,” stated Mayfield about the influences behind “People Get Ready.” The sermons and gospel singing in his grandmother’s church heavily influenced his perspective, and his religious upbringing informed the creation of the song. Mayfield’s observations of American society, especially as it related to civil rights, grounded the spiritual message of “People Get Ready.” In the Sixties, Mayfield stated, “the current event and things happening were my main topic.” For him, the song was both an expression of a spiritual journey and a reflection of the Movement at a critical point in the 1960s. The song provided an outlet for him to express his concern over the racial division in America.

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158 Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming*, 166.
“People Get Ready” uses religious imagery and language to create a moralistic narrative about the Civil Rights Movement and a commentary on American society. It was one of the first freedom songs to meld religious imagery with a social message in a popular music setting. In doing so, Mayfield set “People Get Ready” apart from previous religious freedom songs, which were reworked spirituals or gospel songs. The song was released in 1965 and entered the consciousness of Americans at a critical juncture in the campaign for civil rights. The lyrics and melody of “People Get Ready” powerfully harnessed the spiritual power of redemption in an attempt to unify a fractured Movement. In doing so, it inspired activists to overcome hardships while also reaching out people who stood outside the Movement. The song offered an alluring promise of racial healing for festering wounds caused by the violent actions of segregationists.

Social and religious influences moved Mayfield to create “People Get Ready.” On one level he made the song’s lyrics a description of a spiritual journey that he hoped all Americans would take. On another level his words alluded to physical journeys and civil rights events. Analysis of performances of the song in live settings, on record, and at civil rights meetings indicate it delivered statements beyond just a message of uplift. One message urged blacks to unify in support the Movement. “People Get Ready” also goaded whites to act morally and to support civil rights. Mayfield understood that detachment existed between blacks and whites in America, especially in the South. He also recognized that the various Movement organizations lacked unity.

An analysis of the reception of the song by both black and white communities shows that “People Get Ready” successfully crossed over to a diverse audience, bridging a racial gap by referencing common religious and moral beliefs. “People Get Ready” is not merely a song of transcendence or a general commentary on the Movement, but rather a song that used its multiple layers of meaning and its musicality to spur activists into action in the Movement. Just as important, it spread a strong message to millions of Americans about the urgent need for their participation in the fight for civil rights.

The religious tone in Mayfield’s songs, especially evident in “People Get Ready,” was drawn from his childhood participation in the churches around the public housing developments of Cabrini-Green on the North Side of Chicago. The most influential person in the shaping of Mayfield’s spiritual outlook was his grandmother, Annabelle Mayfield. In the
1950s, Annabelle Mayfield became a preacher and started her own church, the Traveling Souls Spiritualist Church. Although the church was Spiritualist in nature, it was firmly grounded in African-American Baptist and Pentecostal traditions that valued the singing of songs of faith and redemption by both choir and congregation. As a youth, Curtis Mayfield spent many Sundays attending bible classes and services at his grandmother’s storefront church in Cabrini-Green. He freely acknowledged that his grandmother was the driving force behind his worldview and his means of expressing that view. Curtis stated “My heart and soul came from my early days in the church . . . it was through her that many of my song ideas came about.” Mayfield’s religious influences emerged in his songs through church language, which allowed his message to be accepted and understood by blacks who shared a similar background.

The gospel-inflected vocal patterns found in “People Get Ready” and Mayfield’s other songs were a direct result of his exposure to gospel singing in his grandmother’s church, and from performing spirituals in churches throughout the neighboring communities. Mayfield’s introduction into singing and harmonizing came from his performances at those churches. Mayfield would later incorporate the gospel elements he learned into “People Get Ready” to create music attractive to the religious faithful.

The main influence for the lyrical structure of Mayfield’s songs came from his mother, Marion Washington. She read to him constantly as he grew up. Mayfield recollected “My mother always read me lots of Paul Laurence Dunbar. I loved Dr. Seuss, limericks. These [became] the foundations for my hook lines and rhythmic patterns.” Dunbar was the first black poet to attain prominence in America in the early 20th century, and his poems depicting the struggles and perseverance of his race influenced the social messages of Mayfield. The verse rhymes and hidden meanings in Dr. Seuss’s books were also adapted by Mayfield, who used those aspects to give his song a distinct flow. Much like the rhyming

161 Williams, “Everything Was a Song.”
162 Reed, The Holy Profane, 122, quoting Curtis Mayfield.
164 Williams, “Everything Was a Song.”
lines of Dr. Suess, Mayfield’s words could be read in various contexts. The rhythmic structure he took from Dunbar and Dr. Seuss provided audiences with a soothing and familiar pattern.

Mayfield was deeply attuned to the social problems around him. Growing up in a crowded urban ghetto, Mayfield witnessed poverty, racial violence, and social injustice in his community as rampant as in any neighborhood in the South. Blacks living in Cabrini-Green were frequently victimized by racially motivated bombings in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Mayfield was keenly aware of the violence and discrimination inflicted upon the people of his community.

One brutal act of racial violence especially affected Mayfield, and pushed him toward activism. As a young teen, he learned about the brutal murder of Emmitt Till that occurred in August of 1955. Till was a fourteen year old black youth who was murdered in Money, Mississippi by two white men in response to the youth’s alleged flirting with a young white woman from town. Till was beaten and shot through the head, and his mutilated body was thrown into the Tallahatchie River. Till, like Mayfield, was from Chicago, and was roughly the same age. These similarities left a haunting impression on Mayfield, one that heightened his awareness of racial discrimination and the physical dangers blacks faced in America. Till’s murder, as well as the constant violent persecution of blacks living in Cabrini-Green, brought home to Mayfield how widespread racism and intolerance were in 1950s American society. Mayfield’s recognition of these social issues would later provide the foundation for the commentary in “People Get Ready.” He understood the need for artists to shed light upon the societal problems that affected many of his listeners.

As the Movement gained momentum in the first half of the 1960s, Mayfield drew inspiration from civil rights protests and its leaders. The popularity and success of Martin Luther King, Jr. inspired Mayfield to join in and speak about the Movement. He felt compelled to implore people to make things equal for blacks. Mayfield talked about the need to speak out:

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165 Werner, *Higher Ground*, 32.
166 Williams, “Everything Was a Song.”
167 Ibid.
I’ve always sensed myself to be quite observant through current events, things around me. The movement was very strong with black people and their equality during those years of the 1960s. Of course, as a youngster, my heart was very strong for love. When you combine these things, you couldn’t help but get songs such as “People Get Ready.”

Mayfield wrote “People Get Ready” on the eve of one of King’s visits to Chicago in 1964. Social and religious influences were channeled by Mayfield into the song. He knew he had written a commentary on the status of the Movement, but he also wanted to offer a religious message of hope for those who would continue to fight for civil rights. Mayfield recalled “[People Get Ready] was taken from my church or from the upbringing of messages from the church . . . I must have been in a very deep mood of that type of religious inspiration when I wrote that song.” Although uplift is quite identifiable in the song, it was not the only message to be revealed from it.

Transcendence is woven throughout “People Get Ready,” but it should not obscure the song’s other meanings. The song reflected the actions and words of civil rights leaders and referenced specific events. Young notes that in Mayfield one could hear “the spiritual power of Martin Luther King.” Mayfield confirmed such meaning existed in his songs, stating “I don’t claim to be Martin Luther King or a preacher, even though maybe there are signs of these in my lyrics.” The lyrics in “People Get Ready” point to two critical events which involve King. Mayfield used religious allusions in his song in the same manner that King employed in his speeches and sermons.

When the “March on Washington” was held in August of 1963, thousands of people from various states boarded twenty-one chartered trains and sixteen regular trains that would transport them to Washington D.C.

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170 Bowman et al., *Movin’ On Up*. In *King’s Dream*, Eric Sundquist states that people responded to King because his biblical language was familiar to them. Mayfield’s lyrics in his song tap into that same familiarity.

groups to travel to the nation’s capital by train. People clamored to board the train to show their support for the massive civil rights event. Mayfield alludes to those participants from across the country who traveled by train to the nation’s capitol: “It’s picking up passengers from coast to coast.” The song goes on to declare “Faith is the key, open the doors and board ‘em,” which reflects the faith that participants exhibited when they boarded the trains. They had a sustaining belief that their actions would lead to positive change in society. While Mayfield implored listeners to join a redemptive spiritual journey by way of moral action, he also referred to the physical journey to Washington taken by activists. He used the references to civil rights events to prod the public into action. Mayfield used train references to call on Americans to join a civil rights journey not yet completed.

Mayfield clearly uses the image of a train journey to offer a spiritual aspect to the Movement. Mayfield touches on a common use for the train in southern religious imagery, which Harvey indicates positioned trains as a path to salvation. The reference to a “train to Jordan” alludes to an important episode in the Bible. The “train to Jordan” mirrors the journey taken by Joshua and his Hebrew followers across the Jordan River. The crossing of the river was done to settle the Promised Land and “worship God as a united people” (Joshua 22-24). The theme of unity is a core theme that Mayfield promotes throughout his song. Jordan is also used in “People Get Ready” to allude to Moses leading the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. This reference correlates with blacks escaping the bonds of segregation and social inequality. The Movement would lead people out of their bonds to reach the

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173 Kenneth G. Bielen, The Lyrics of Civility: Biblical Images and Popular Music Lyrics in American Culture (New York: Garland, 1999), 63; Reed, The Holy Profane, 123; Darcy A. Zabel, The (Underground) Railroad in African American Literature (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 31, quoting Sarah H. Gordon. Most scholars have viewed the symbolic value of the train journey referenced in “People Get Ready” in terms of religious ideals in 19th century spirituals, which evoked images of a spiritual journey for oppressed blacks. Kenneth Bielen associates the song’s train references with the chariot in the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” that promises to take the oppressed to a spiritual reward. Similarly, Theresa Reed relates the lyrics of “People Get Ready” as a call for people to board a metaphorical train that will take them from a socially restrictive position in society to a new form of human consciousness. Sarah Gordon states the train was an important symbol in not only black music, but also in literature and religion. She feels the train exemplifies the journey blacks took to find a better way in life

174 Harvey, Freedom’s Coming, 161.
“promised land” of equality. Such biblical references in the song would not be lost on either black or white listeners, most of whom were active in their churches.

Mayfield’s use of the image of the Jordan River held an additional spiritual aspect for “People Get Ready.” The Jordan River is an important religious symbol because that is where John the Baptist baptized the masses and confessed their sins. As written in Acts 22:16, sinners needed to “rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins.” Theologian Geoffrey Bromiley notes the importance of the ritual, stating “it symbolized the spiritual cleansing and renewal of the repentant and the reformed sinner.”

This religious significance is invested in “People Get Ready,” which uses the image of a train journey to Jordan to refer to a movement toward spiritual renewal for those who would renounce segregation and racism and join the Movement. Mayfield wanted to unite blacks and whites to work toward a shared goal of earthly equality and spiritual reward.

On April 16, 1963, King wrote an open letter to eight white Alabama clergymen who opposed the civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham. At that time, King was in confinement in Birmingham’s city jail for leading a nonviolent march during Easter week. King and other civil rights leaders were protesting the segregationist policies implemented by businesses that were supported by the city government. From his jail cell, King wrote his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” as a response to the gradualist statements of eight white clergymen. King rejected their calls for patience and criticized their support of the social status quo. He felt their views and their inaction went against God’s will. This theme is evident in “People Get Ready” with its admonishment of civil rights opponents.

In his letter, King rebukes the white clergymen and their churches for failing to support meaningful change in civil rights. In one passage he states:

So often the contemporary Church is a week, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch-defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the Church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the Church’s silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.  

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King’s condemnation of white resistance against civil rights is made more powerful through his warning to the clergymen stating “But the judgment of God is upon the Church as never before.”¹⁷⁷ King’s portrayed white support for segregation as a moral failing, and worse, a sin before God. Evers also felt that blacks and whites shared religious moral values. He stated that there were white Mississippians who wanted to improve race relations because “their religion tells them there is something wrong with the old system.”¹⁷⁸ Both races relied on religion to provide them with a structured valued system. This allowed for the recognition of what actions constituted sin, reflected in the definition Mayfield gave in “People Get Ready.” His song indicates the dissonance between races, but sought to unite them through a shared religious-based moral foundation.

The third stanza of “People Get Ready” offers a stern warning for people opposed to civil rights. It declares that “There ain’t no room for the hopeless sinner.” A common scholarly interpretation of the lyrics identifies the line as a broad condemnation of oppressors.¹⁷⁹ By positioning white resistance against a religious framework, the song emphasizes how immoral actions would adversely affect salvation. The censuring statement echoes King’s castigation of whites who willingly accommodated segregation and racial discrimination.

“One ain’t no room for the hopeless sinner/Who would hurt all mankind just to save his own” was Mayfield’s message to groups like the moderate white clergymen King rebuked in his letter. Mayfield communicated via the same declarative language used by King. Both men sought to invalidate the position of whites who supported the inequitable social standing of blacks. They dismissed the misguided notion that barring civil rights protests would quell racial unrest. The word “hurt” offers a subtle reminder that people who condoned inaction were implicitly supporting violent reactions to protests. When Mayfield states “For there’s no hiding place against the kingdom’s throne,” his lyrics mirrored King’s

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¹⁷⁹ Bielen, *The Lyrics of Civility*, 63. Bielen was one of several scholars to see condemnation of segregationists in that line.
warning that God would provide the ultimate judgment against immorality. By presenting such a pointed warning in “People Get Ready,” Mayfield revealed his support for King’s position on civil rights and placed it within a religious context of morality familiar to both black and whites in the 1960s.

At first glance, the third line of the stanza does not appear to correlate to King’s letter. Mayfield speaks to the bleak socioeconomic status of blacks when he states “Have pity on those whose chances grow thinner.” The line connects to statements issued by King, who criticized the clergymen for their indifference to the economic imbalance between races. He stated, “You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations.” King recognized that economic opportunities were limited for blacks who lived in a city controlled by whites. King castigated Birmingham’s white political and religious leaders for leaving the black community with no alternative but to protest.\(^{180}\) King deplored the disadvantaged economic standing of blacks in America, which he declared showed “negroes are still at the bottom of the economic ladder.”\(^{181}\) Mayfield’s lyrics mimic King’s call for whites to acknowledge the social and economic disadvantages placed upon blacks.

Mayfield’s warning to segregationist “sinners” did not echo King alone. Malcolm X also referred to religious judgment against white oppressors. Malcolm X proclaimed “God’s wrathful judgment is close upon this white man stumbling and groping blindly in wickedness and evil and spiritual darkness.”\(^{182}\) His declaration is cloaked in militant tones, yet revealed views about sin and punishment that were presented in “People Get Ready” and by King. This shows that the spiritual foundations and religious frames of reference of nonviolent activists and militants were surprisingly similar, despite disagreements between the two factions regarding protest tactics.

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\(^{180}\) Ibid., 189.

\(^{181}\) King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 11.

Mayfield used simple word phrases to move his commentary from the personal to the universal and back to the personal, connecting to the listener on both individual and group levels. Note the repeated use of the words “you” and “need” in the first and last stanzas, which reflect a direct dialogue aimed toward the individual:

People get ready, there’s a train a comin’
You don’t need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’
Don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord

Mayfield’s repeated use of “you” personalized his message to the listener. It expressed unequivocal directions for individuals to rely on faith in activism and in their religion. With the recurring use of the word “need” in the first stanza, Mayfield emphasized the path the audience must take, urgently declaring faith as indispensible to the success of the Movement. By reprising the lyrics of the opening lines in the final stanza, Mayfield emphatically underscored the level of faith required of each individual in the Movement. He understood that some of the country’s populace remained detached from civil rights, and that he needed to appeal to those people directly through religious language. Mayfield’s unwavering belief in religious faith is a stark counterpoint to the ambiguous stances to religion’s role in the Movement as expressed by Farina and Simone in their songs. “Birmingham Sunday” and “Mississippi Goddam” reflected a pragmatic view of the value of religion to empower people to act. The success in attaining meaningful civil rights legislation gave Mayfield reason to deliver a more optimistic message than those offered by Farina and Simone.

While the first and last stanzas establish a personal connection, the two middle stanzas offer a universalistic approach. The word “you,” so evident in the beginning and ending stanzas, does not appear in stanzas two or three. Instead, “there” is used three times in conjunction with either images of hope or depictions of condemnation. Mayfield further pointed to universality by using the word “all.” In the second stanza, the phrase “There’s hope for all among those loved the most” offers spiritual redemption for everyone that boards the Movement “train.” Line two in stanza three offers a rejection of the alternative, dismissing those “Who would hurt all mankind just to save his own.” Mayfield set up a universal moral standard that clearly marks which actions were righteous and which were
sighful. His criticisms of people who resisted the Movement mirrors King’s criticism of whites who did not support civil rights. Mayfield insinuates that everyone, and not just blacks, would be injured by the sinful actions of segregationists. His emphasis on inclusiveness showed his belief that all races shared a common goal in civil rights; they just needed to work together to achieve it. Mayfield lyrics indicate he believed in universalism, and felt that the Christian religious moral code he promoted in his song was shared by nearly all Americans. By using such words as “all” and “people” he was trying to deemphasize the differences in races and promote shared ideals instead.

Mayfield’s widow Altheida recollects how “People Get Ready” and other songs performed by the Impressions affected their audiences. She recounts that their performances moved audiences to feel as if the music went right through them. Curtis Mayfield insisted that his sincerity and emotion went into “People Get Ready,” and this was reflected in the performances of the song by the Impressions. His display of earnest passion in performances allowed audiences to more easily connect to the song and trust the message it delivered.

Video recordings of the Impressions performing “People Get Ready” live do not exist. The only surviving video by the trio is a performance in September of 1965 on the show Where the Action Is. The Impressions are shown traveling down a river in a boat, lip-synching the words of the audio recording of their song. The video appears to offer scant historical value, but in reality illuminates the disjointed racial atmosphere of 1960s America. Where the Action Is was a syndicated variety show primarily directed at a white audience. In their video performance, the Impressions are shown languidly traveling down a river followed by carefree white boaters. This was meant to present an image of racial tranquility and tolerance. The scene is awkwardly artificial, given the agitated racial climate in the country. The video illuminates the disconnected white perceptions of the civil rights messages of black performers.

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A live rendition of the song performed by another group was captured during that year. In March of 1965, a gospel group known as the Chambers Brothers performed “People Get Ready” live on a show called Shindig. The song had only been released as a single by the Impressions the previous month. On the surface, the harmonizing by the Chambers Brothers seems to mimic the version by the Impressions. Yet, differences between the two versions reveal differing intents.

The Chambers Brothers’ performance of “People Get Ready,” as well as their subsequent recording of the song, reflects a traditional gospel rendering of the song. The Chambers Brothers closely adhered to the “call-and-response” gospel vocal phrasing in their performance. The lead vocalist sings the main verses in the style of a preacher and the backing vocals answer his call by singing back the secondary verses. This practice is deeply rooted in African folk songs dating back to the slavery era. Call-and-response was meant to invoke an instance in which the Holy Spirit moves the preacher (or in this case, singer) to speak to the congregation (or audience), and the congregation is moved to respond.185 The Chambers Brothers performance of “People Get Ready” was a reflection of African-American Baptist and Pentecostal religious traditions, and the call-and-response action was readily identifiable and meaningful to black audiences of the 1960s. The intent of the performance was to inspire active responses from that audience.

The Impressions’ recording revealed subtle vocal and musical stylings that shaped how their version was meant to be interpreted. Whereas the Chambers Brothers injected their performance with a guitar-driven and blues-based musical style popular with black audiences, the Impressions offered a more rhythmic and pop version that was intended to cross racial boundaries. Mayfield combined bells, horns, strings, and an understated guitar line to create a smooth, soothing musical score. This mutes the gospel nature of the song, reflecting his desire to make it accessible to all ethnicities. For the song to truly bridge the divide between black and whites, Mayfield had to create a song that spoke to the experiences of both races.

185 Spencer, *Protest & Praise*, 233-35. This description was how Spencer interpreted the vocal interplay between preachers and congregation.
The vocal parts by the Impressions were sung in a different manner than the version by the Chambers brothers. The call-and-response technique exists in the version by the Impressions, but its use is more understated. Mayfield sings the beginning verses of the song, followed by verses sung in rotation between Cash and Gooden. This interplay finally culminates with group harmonizing in the ending verses. Although Mayfield wanted to reach out to all races, he was very aware of the importance of keeping a spiritual connection with his black audience. The call-and-response interaction was vital to establishing that link.\(^{186}\) That call-and-response technique echoed the sermonizing style of King, whose powerful oratory “call” style scholars have described as mesmerizing to his audiences.\(^{187}\) As activist Bernice Johnson Reagon attests, such a recognizable choral song style established the union of song leader with his “congregation” in order to show the unity of group sentiments within individual expression.\(^{188}\) Call-and-response was recognizable not only to black audiences acquainted with its use in church, but was also becoming known to white audiences who were hearing more of that vocalization style in rock and roll and R & B songs of the early 1960s.

Mayfield used call-and-response in the first two stanzas of “People Get Ready.” Stanzas three and four depart from that vocal structure, and that changing dynamic moved group vocals toward an emphasis on the individual vocal part. In stanza three, the underlying message is a warning that God’s punishment will come down on the sinner. Unlike stanzas one and two, all of stanza three is sung solely by Mayfield, except for the final three words. In this stanza, Mayfield occupies the role of a preacher warning his congregation of the cost of sin. Mayfield confirms the authority of his message when he offers the seemingly off-hand comment “believe me now” after the second line. Mayfield uses his authoritative position as pseudo-preacher to establish a religious moral framework that solidifies his

\(^{186}\) Reed, *The Holy Profane*, 123. Theresa Reed suggests that the plaintive and subdued use of call-and-response in “People Get Ready” would have been evident to black listeners in 1965.


message. He pressed his listeners to use morality to guide them. In this role, Mayfield is not asking his audience to answer his “preaching.” Instead, he advocated for them to assume an active role in establishing racial equality.

In the last stanza, all three Impressions sing the lyrics. This gives powerful vocal depth to the singing performance, but also gives a vocal representation of solidarity. The trio no longer sings in a call-and-response mode that highlights a dialogue between preacher and congregation, nor does Mayfield sing alone in direct sermon style. Instead, the song closes with three-part harmony that embodies the consolidation of the Movement. The chorus of voices symbolizes the intent of the lyrics to be a call for unity in civil rights actions. Mayfield recognized that unity in purpose and action would bond together fractious Movement groups struggling to respond to violent opposition.

Call-and-response in “People Get Ready” provided a familiar vocal structure that attracted black listeners, but another form in the song strongly connects to audiences of all races. “People Get Ready” uses a loose anapestic tetrameter lyrical structure. It is a poetic format in which each line has four parts containing two unstressed syllables, known as beats, followed by a stressed syllable. The metric structure is considered loose in the song because the stressed beats in a few lines are either preceded by one or three unstressed beats, but all the lines seem to adhere to a four-beat structure.

As a songwriter, Mayfield was not only influenced by social messages of the black experience revealed in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poetry, but also by its poetic structure. Similarly, the written format of Dr. Seuss’s books provided a poetic template for Mayfield. Most of Dr. Seuss’s books use anapestic tetrameter, which provides a rhythmic pattern that pulls readers through the story.189 This poetic form served the same purpose in “People Get Ready.”

The anapestic tetrameter frames the vocal rhythm in “People Get Ready.” The four-beat structure draws the listeners into the song in a way that adds onto the power of the lyrics and the music. Performances of “People Get Ready” were driven by this potent poetic rhythm. Andrew Young spoke about the importance of rhythm and sound in songs like

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“People Get Ready,” stating “You like the music, you start patting your foot and singing it, and only later do you realize what the words are saying.”\textsuperscript{190} The rhythmic musical groove, melodic phrasing of the vocal line, call-and-response vocalization, lush instrumentation, and encoded religious lyrics gave “People Get Ready” a strong emotional connection with its audience on a personal level.

Musicologist Larry Starr and anthropologist Christopher Waterman identified important aspects of a successful performance, which are primarily found in the “riff” and the “hook.” They describe a riff as a repeating pattern that propels rhythmic momentum, while stating that a hook is a memorable musical phrase.\textsuperscript{191} “People Get Ready” contains strong examples of both structural elements, which offers a rationale for its wide acceptance by blacks and whites. The song provides a strong rhythmic riff through the four-beat repeated pattern heard throughout the song, offering a hypnotic feel that draws in listeners. As noted by Starr and Waterman, such repetition often produces music of great power.\textsuperscript{192} This power is on display in “People Get Ready.”

The memorable phrase, repeated at the beginning of three different stanzas, is the title of the song. The repeated use of “people get ready” is the hook that serves as an exhortation for Americans to participate in the Movement. The specific use of “people” in “People Get Ready” is important because it highlights a tone of inclusiveness in the song. The unifying intent of “people” becomes clear when contrasted with the well-known hook “we shall overcome” from the same-named civil rights standard, which lyrically positions Americans via the word “we” into one of two camps in regard to civil rights; “us” versus “them.” The lines that follow “people get ready” mention faith as the only key element needed for the physical and spiritual journey in the Movement. The memorable phrase, in union with the riff, left a lasting impression on the public and activists alike and symbolically broke down the racial barrier.

\textsuperscript{190} Bowman et al., \textit{Movin’ On Up}.


\textsuperscript{192} Starr and Waterman, \textit{American Popular Music}, 13.
Performances of “People Get Ready” were frequent in church gatherings and mass meetings. In Chicago, activists used it as a powerful tool to rallying the Movement. In the Chicago movement, lyrics were reworked to remove religious wording in favor of more strident language that would appeal to urban blacks. The first line of the third stanza, which originally announced “There ain’t no place for the hopeless sinner,” now proclaimed “there’s no hiding place when the movement comes” and criticized “Toms or any sorry Negroes, comin’ to me saying they won’t go.” The original version ends “You don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord,” but was rephrased in the new version as “Everybody wants freedom, this I know.” Mere months after the song’s public release, the revamped version of “People Get Ready” was printed in songbooks and widely distributed among neighborhood centers and churches.193 Activists understood its power to move people into active participation in civil rights.

Andrew Young recalls how young participants incorporated Mayfield’s songs into meetings. Young states, “They would start singing spirituals, and right in the middle of it, someone might start ‘People get ready, there’s a train a-comin.’”194 According to Young, “People Get Ready” had a deep and inspiring effect on activists. That message was counterbalanced by the song’s warning of punishment for those who opposed civil rights.

King adopted the song for use in his 1966 Chicago campaign.195 Young recalls “By the time we got to Chicago in1966, we began to know their songs . . . they were known in the black community. Always, ‘People Get Ready’ was one that we used. None of us had great voices, but this is music that everybody can sing.”196 The message of “People Get Ready” resonated with activists who gained strength from performing it. They used the song to inspire others to get involved with the Movement.

One meaning culled from “People Get Ready” is the theme of transcendence. This was a message that was very evident to activists, the black community, and the American public at large. Andrew Young saw Mayfield’s music as being imbued with confidence and

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193 Werner, Higher Ground, 125.
194 Bowman et al., “Extras.”
196 Bowman et al., Movin’ On Up.
positive energy.\textsuperscript{197} Young states that music with aspects of redemptive uplift allowed blacks to “transcend all those difficulties . . . and forge a new faith and strength.”\textsuperscript{198} He considers Mayfield and the Impressions to be lyrical prophets of the Civil Rights era who promoted a profoundly affecting message important that spurred change in the Movement.\textsuperscript{199}

For many activists, the song was more than just a plea for perseverance, it was also an inspiration. Gordon Sellers considered “People Get Ready” and other songs by Mayfield to be “warrior music” that inspired and prepared activists for upcoming civil rights battles. SNCC organizer Stanley Wise, commented on the critical timing of Mayfield’s music, stating “Curtis always seemed to be right on time.”\textsuperscript{200} John Lewis recalls the power of “People Get Ready,” stating that it spoke directly to the civil rights work that was being down in the South.\textsuperscript{201} The song was a tool used to unite activists on the front lines of civil rights protests.

Radio was a critical medium for spreading the message of “People Get Ready,” especially stations described as “black radio.” According to historian Howard Dodson, by 1967 there were over 120 stations devoted to providing music for black audiences. Dodson states that the black community connected to the Movement through radio and not television.\textsuperscript{202} “People Get Ready” resonated deeply with many blacks. It climbed to number three on the Billboard R & B charts in 1965.

“People Get Ready” was well-received at Movement meetings and by black radio, but elsewhere the reception was not as positive. Groups like black militants and white conservatives created their own interpretations of the song based on their experiences and viewpoints. For militants, such songs were considered outdated and irrelevant. After activist James Meredith was shot at a march in June 1966, militant activist Julius Lester defiantly

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{198} Harvey, Freedom’s Coming, 172.
\textsuperscript{199} Bowman et al., Movin’ On Up.
\textsuperscript{200} Werner, Higher Ground, 66. Werner feels that “People Get Ready” tapped deeply into a gospel vision that offered activists inspiration.
\textsuperscript{201} Lewis and D’Orso, Walking With the Wind, 262.
declared “The days of singing freedom songs and the day of combating billy clubs with love [are over].”\textsuperscript{203} Militants felt freedom songs were not affecting real change in their lives. One vocal critic was Albert Cleage, Jr., who stated “You can sing . . . and you can talk about redemptive suffering, but neither of these will change your earthly condition.”\textsuperscript{204} Songs about redemption and transcendence were of little value to militants. Many felt that King and others like him used freedom songs to promote nonviolent actions that failed to better the lives of blacks. These men felt that violent opposition to protests could only be answered with similar violence. Such divisiveness of thought in the Movement was exactly what Mayfield sought to fix.

Militants were not the only group resisting the message of songs like “People Get Ready.” Many white-owned radio stations were unwilling to play music from the Impressions because of the social and political content in their songs. Mayfield admitted “I’ve run into frustrating obstacles, such as will a certain station play my records.” Cash confirms Mayfield’s statement, saying that many big radio stations would not play their songs.\textsuperscript{205} Mayfield realized that there were obstacles to overcome in distributing his music to the public, but he was determined to have his message heard.

Despite renunciation from black militants and rejection by white radio stations, “People Get Ready” found crossover success and reached a large, multi-ethnic audience. The single rose to number 14 on the Billboard pop chart, remaining on the charts for 10 weeks.\textsuperscript{206} The single version of “People Get Ready” would eventually reach over one million in sales.\textsuperscript{207} The album of the same name also sold well, spending nineteen weeks on the Billboard charts in 1965.\textsuperscript{208} “People Get Ready” was the first overtly religious freedom song to achieve popular success in America, exposing social and religious messages that

\textsuperscript{203} Spencer, \textit{Protest \& Praise}, 100.
\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{205} Bowman et al., \textit{Movin’ On Up}.
\textsuperscript{208} Joel Whitburn, \textit{Joel Whitburn’s Top LP’s, 1945-1972} (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, 1973), 71.
made a powerful connection with people. Mayfield succeeded in bridging some of the racial gap in America, which allowed his message to be heard across the country.

The success of artists such as Mayfield was not lost on civil rights leaders. King declared freedom songs to be the soul of the Movement. To him, the songs “bound us together, gave us courage together, helped us march together,” and through music blacks could reach into a dangerously negative situation and bring forth optimism with the help of God. King also understood the value that freedom songs had when people heard them on the radio. He felt radio was essential in promoting black music that constructed non-violent messages which built crossover bridges. “People Get Ready” not only fulfilled the role King envisioned for freedom songs, it was also one of the first and most influential songs to crossover.

Record label executives felt that the soft-soul musical style of the Impressions was the kind of music that had the most commercial viability. The wide radio airplay of the song, as well as the record sales, confirmed the hunches of those executives. “People Get Ready” reached beyond activists and influenced a wider audience. Young noticed the power of the song, stating that “the fact that Curtis Mayfield’s records were crossing over was saying he was integrating society. Martin Luther King was trying to do it legally and morally. But there’s a sense in which music has become even more successful, even than the courts and the church.”

Influenced by the Movement surrounding him, Mayfield wrote and performed with a clear purpose in mind. He stated that his group’s purpose was to educate as well as

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212 Bowman et al., *Movin’ On Up*; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1988), 792. Branch states that soul music stars were ahead of King in crossing over to a mass white audience, and that those singers unlocked shared feeling that King could not reach.
“People Get Ready” was the first of many songs by Mayfield that commented on civil rights and race relations in America. Mayfield was unusual among soul music stars of the 1960s because he was willing to tackle social and racial issues when other artists were unwilling to do the same.

Historians have recognized the transcendent qualities of “People Get Ready,” as well as how it reflected the general state of the Movement in 1965. Previous scholarship has failed to fully establish the vital function the song played in both the Movement and in American society of the 1960s. “People Get Ready” appealed to Americans across the country. It likely reached more listeners through performance, records, and radio airplay than the iconic freedom song “We Shall Overcome.” It was among the first songs to use religious allegories to refer to specific Movement events. “People Get Ready” gave activists and the black community a spiritual foundation on which to attach their hopes for obtaining civil rights. It connected large numbers of radio listeners to the Movement and framed their perceptions within a familiar religious moral code.

“People Get Ready” served as an inspirational message inviting all to join the spiritual journey to salvation, as well as delivering a demand for all Americans to act in a morally righteous manner. Unlike traditional freedom songs, it also offered a stern warning for all that opposed the goal of equality. Andrew Young sums up the importance of Mayfield, the Impressions, and “People Get Ready,” stating “Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions were lyrical prophets of our time.” He went on to conclude that they were “a very important part of one of the most positive periods of change in the world.”

When Mayfield wrote “People Get Ready,” he was deeply affected by the state of race relations in America and also by the contentious interaction among Movement organizations. He felt compelled to respond to the dissension and violence he witnessed around him. His song called for unity among races and civil rights groups, which he felt was the best way to achieve social equality for all. The vision of unity Mayfield promoted was denounced publically by militants. Yet, even the most hardened black nationalist could find

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213 Reed, The Holy Profane, 122.
214 Ward, Just My Soul Responding, 299.
215 Bowman et al., Movin’ On Up.
value in that ideal. In his autobiography of Malcolm X, Alex Haley describes an especially revealing incident he shared with the militant leader:

One day in his car, we had stopped for the red light at an intersection; another car with a white man driving had stopped alongside, and when this white man saw Malcolm X, he instantly called across to him, “I don’t blame your people for turning to you. If I were a Negro I’d follow you, too. Keep up the fight!” Malcolm X said to the man very sincerely, “I wish I could have a white chapter of the people I meet like you.”

Malcolm X admonished Haley to not reveal that incident to Elijah Muhammed, the leader of the Nation of Islam. What this episode illuminated was that Malcolm X understood the practical benefit of whites supporting the cause of civil rights, but he also realized the political fallout for the militant movement if he offered public support for such a position. Although he emphatically rejected the notion that nonviolent tactics containing movements of whites and blacks was the best way to achieve equality, he realized such actions held great value for many in the Movement. Malcolm X, for all his public berating of nonviolent leaders, reluctantly admired King. The message of “People Get Ready” was not just a paean to nonviolence. On one level or another, it spoke to the diverse group of Movement organizations, groups that differed on how to go about achieving civil rights though they shared the same goal of equality and freedom for blacks.

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217 Ibid., 462.
CHAPTER FIVE

LEGACY

“People Get Ready,” “Birmingham Sunday,” and “Mississippi Goddam” each reflect the civil rights struggle in the early 1960s. The artists who created those songs intended to motivate people to campaign actively for social equality. In the decades since their release, the compositions have been adapted and reinterpreted to serve purposes beyond this original intention. That the songs were still influential enough to be adapted for contemporary use showcases their enduring power.

The intertwining messages of hopeful religious faith and the call for moral action in “People Get Ready” inspired numerous artists. Mayfield’s emphasis on the word “people” invested the song with a feeling of inclusiveness that gave it universal appeal. Simultaneously, through the repeated use of the word “you,” the song also spoke directly to listeners to offer a personal message of inspiration and exhortation. The compelling dualistic nature of the lyrics of “People Get Ready” has moved a great number of artists to record and perform cover versions of the song.

The message of spiritual redemption through moral action motivated reggae artist Bob Marley in 1977 to combine “People Get Ready” with his own composition titled “One Love.” As a young man during the 1960s, he was inspired by Mayfield and the vocal harmonies of the Impressions. Like Mayfield, Marley was concerned with social inequality and was convinced that religious faith was the key to overcoming inequity. In his song, Marley implored the citizens of his poverty-stricken homeland of Jamaica to use God’s strength to overcome social barriers. Mixing his song with Mayfield’s, Marley extended the vision of a brotherhood of love. His song, like Mayfield’s, warned of punishment for those who wrongly subjugated their fellow man.

Over fifty musical performers have rerecorded “People Get Ready” since its initial release in 1965, spanning the spectrum of musical genres. Such artists as Rod Stewart, U2,

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Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and Alicia Keyes have given the song new contextual layers. Carlos Santana, a contemporary of Mayfield’s, offers a glimpse into why “People Get Ready” was so meaningful and influential. He states “It’s all of us, beyond black or white, getting into the train . . . and this train will take you the gates of heaven.” He sums up the song’s enduring value, saying “It goes to a place of real salvation for people. It’s an invitation . . . If you take those lyrics, it’s very spiritual.” With each new version of the song, a new generation of listeners created a connection to a version that spoke to their era and lives. The powerful aspects of spiritual faith and moral action in “People Get Ready” moved artists and audiences alike.

“Birmingham Sunday” also moved many people, but perhaps not as profoundly as it did for one man inspired to seek justice for the girls slain in the church bombing. Although the FBI began investigating the killings a few days after it occurred, they could not amass enough evidence to charge any individual with the crime. Fourteen years after the tragedy, charges were finally brought against a man long suspected to be a participant in the attack. In November of 1977, Ku Klux Klan member Robert Chambliss was brought to trial for murder by Alabama’s Attorney General Bill Baxley. Baxley was a law student at the time of the bombing, who later found himself driven to find justice for the murdered girls.

Baxley methodically worked his way up through the legal circles of Alabama until he become Attorney General. Throughout those fourteen years, he reminded himself daily of the horrific tragedy. Baxley explains what motivated him to find justice for the victims:

“I got this record shortly after [the bombing], of Joan Baez, who was one of my favorites. And she had this song called “Birmingham Sunday” and it mentioned four little girls. And almost every morning of my life, until I became Attorney General, I played that Joan Baez song of “Birmingham Sunday.”

Inspired by “Birmingham Sunday,” Baxley successfully prosecuted Chambliss for the murders and sent the unrepentant racist to prison for life. “Birmingham Sunday” was meant as a protest song that would motivate white audiences to push for civil rights. The main goal was accomplished, but it also profoundly impacted Baxley’s quest for justice. In turn, Baxley’s successful conviction of Chambliss spurred on investigations by the FBI into the

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219 Bowman et al., *Movin’ On Up.*
220 Lee, *4 Little Girls.*
other men suspected in the bombings. In May of 2001, Thomas Blanton, Jr. was convicted of the murder of the four girls. Two years later, Bobby Frank Cherry was also convicted of the same crime.

Beyond serving as inspiration for Baxley, “Birmingham Sunday” continued to be a powerful tool for civil rights in other ways. In 1996, Spike Lee released his documentary *4 Little Girls*, which detailed recollections of friends and family of the girls, and the circumstances surrounding the bombing. Lee built upon the powerfully haunting lyrics and passionate vocals of “Birmingham Sunday” by connecting it to a series of stark images.

By beginning his documentary with “Birmingham Sunday,” Lee sets a tone that seizes the emotions of the audience. As Baez’s vibrant voice expresses Farina’s poetic lyrics, Lee presents powerful imagery to complement the somber message of the song. As the girls’ names are sung, Lee shows photos of their headstones, interspersed with family snapshots of the girls. Lee also frames the song within the larger historical context of the events in Birmingham at the time. He presented images of civil rights marches, fire hoses blasting children, and police dogs attacking protesters. Lee’s linking of “Birmingham Sunday” with stark images from the Movement and with portraits of the tragedy is intended to evoke passionate responses from viewers. The melding of song with vivid imagery quickly and pointedly establishes the tragic human cost paid in the Movement. It also revealed the inherent religious themes in both the song and the documentary.

The legacy of “Mississippi Goddam” was that Simone constantly reshaped its message. She reworked lyrics to reflect and comment on the ever-changing landscape in civil rights and race relations in America. She often changed the chorus line to reflect current events. At a benefit concert in March of 1965 in Montgomery, Alabama, Simone evoked cheers from the audience when she sang “*Selma made me lose my rest*” in response to the Selma-to-Montgomery marches for voting rights that occurred that year. At her performance at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1966, Simone referenced the violent race riot that erupted in the Watts area of Los Angeles the summer before, singing “*Watts made me lose my rest.*” In these performances of the song, Simone expressed the volatility and ever-

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changing nature of race relations, and gave the song an immediacy that made it relevant to the audience.

Another lyrical change offers a clearer reading of the most incendiary line in “Mississippi Goddam.” In September of 1964, Simone performed on The Steve Allen Show, changing the verse “You’re all gonna die and die like flies” to “We’re gonna die and die like flies.” This change reflected Simone’s desire for the verse to be a warning for both blacks and whites. It also indicates her intent went beyond issuing a threat aimed at the Movement’s enemies. She wanted all viewers, regardless of ethnicity, to understand the implications for America if the Movement failed.222

Simone did not create “Mississippi Goddam” to only reflect a singular static view of civil rights. Its changing nature reflected the complicated and passionate relationship Simone had with the song. At a concert in November of 1984 in New York, Simone described what “Mississippi Goddam” had come to represent for her, stating that the song was a memorial to King, one that showed the youth of America the history of their country. She stated “no one really commemorated or remembered in my opinion, enough, Martin Luther King, and ‘Mississippi Goddam’ brings him back.” She emphasized the importance of the song, stating “They need to know what we did there.”223 Simone’s comment about “Mississippi Goddam” indicates that she was never fully opposed to nonviolence. She just lost some faith in its ability to affect change.

Simone’s passionate support for civil rights took a toll. In the latter stages of her career, her performances of “Mississippi Goddam” were dramatically different from the original recording. In videos depicting concerts in South America and Europe from the 1980s, Simone’s singing and actions are noticeably subdued. Her vocals were no longer aggressive in nature. Where Simone once stared defiantly at her audience while singing accusatory lyrics, she would no longer look up from her piano. The musical vibe that revealed a mixture of classical and jazz music had morphed into a pop soundtrack that emphasized the electric guitar. Simone always played “Mississippi Goddam” in concert

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222 Cohodas, Princess Noire, 156-58.
223 Ibid., 324-25.
because she knew the song was important to so many people. She just wearied of repeating a message about the Movement she felt never truly fulfilled its goals.

For Simone, the personal legacy of “Mississippi Goddam” was her full-bodied entrance into activism. She would go on to record numerous other civil rights songs such as “Old Jim Crow” and “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black.” The civil rights events from 1963 inspired the creation of a song that confronted sectors of the American public opposed or indifferent to civil rights. Those events also pushed Simone to step out from the shadows to take direct action herself. “Mississippi Goddam” was Simone’s interpretation of the conflicted and disjointed nature of the Civil Rights Movement.

In a modern context, “People Get Ready,” “Birmingham Sunday,” and “Mississippi Goddam” have emerged to find new life in the medium of online video streaming. For all three songs, performances by various artists as well as personal video tributes created by individuals have proliferated at video sites such as YouTube. For “Birmingham Sunday,” several people created their own vision of the song’s meaning, often using Lee’s documentary as a guide. These videos give insight into how the song is still received and their ability to continue to affect change.

Numerous videos about the bombing and “Birmingham Sunday” have appeared on internet video-sharing sites such as “You Tube.” The most viewed video of “Birmingham Sunday,” has been viewed nearly 60,000 times. It and other similar videos connect photographic images with Farina’s emotive lyrics and Baez’s compelling vocals. Most notable in the videos are the focus on the repeated chorus of “And the choirs kept singing of Freedom.” Images of church choirs appear each time the chorus line is sung in the most popular video, showing both white and black choirs. The message was clear; choirs kept singing of freedom because nothing less was acceptable for blacks. Videos of “Birmingham Sunday” continue to spread the civil rights message that Farina’s lyrics and Baez’s vocals first communicated in 1965.

“People Get Ready” exists in numerous versions on YouTube. Over a quarter of a million video links are shown when the title search conducted. Performances by Curtis Mayfield, Jeff Beck, Rod Stewart, and other artists have been watched by several million viewers. The song’s spiritual message and moral declarations have been viewed widely
across the internet. These videos continue to provide new generations with inspiration and illumination on civil rights.

“Mississippi Goddam” continues to live on through video streaming on the internet as well. Simone’s legendary performances are captured in numerous videos that span her long career. These videos reveal the continually changing versions of the song performed by Simone. Hundreds of thousands of viewers have witnessed those performances. Viewers also saw videos created by individuals who were inspired by “Mississippi Goddam” to create their own compositions. The videos of “Birmingham Sunday” and “People Get Ready,” “Mississippi Goddam” reveal to today’s society the state of civil rights in the early 1960s and continue to spread the message of change that those songs attempted to get across to their audiences.

On February 9, 2010, President Barack H. Obama hosted a White House event that celebrated music from the civil rights era. One of the highlights of the evening was a duet by Smokey Robinson and Jennifer Hudson. They paid tribute to the contributions of Mayfield by singing “People Get Ready,” investing their rendition with conviction and passion that emotionally referenced the original version sung by the Impressions. Among the event’s attendees was Baez, who was honored for her civil rights songs that included “Birmingham Sunday.”

In a statement to his assembled guests and the public, Obama declared his belief that the Movement was sustained by music:

> It was a movement with a soundtrack, diverse strains of music that coalesced when the movement was right. But that soundtrack wasn’t just inspired by the movement; it gave strength in return, a fact not lost on the movement’s leaders.224

Obama insightfully pinpointed the unique relationship music had with the Movement. Civil rights songs, including the ones highlighted in this essay, did not only reflect a fractured society. It also motivated people to take action to mend those rifts in society.

The historical importance of “People Get Ready,” “Birmingham Sunday,” and “Mississippi Goddam” lies in their ability to offer a revealing snapshot of a critical time in history.

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civil rights, vividly exposed through the emotional and passionate performance of the songs. Those songs showed Americans the aspects of faith and determination that gave strength to participants in the Movement, and also exposed them to the anger, frustration, and discord that existed among civil rights organizations and between blacks and whites. The songs also made people face the violence that surrounded the Movement and urged them to take action against it. In speaking to those issues, the songs brought up subjects that the American public and leaders needed to confront.

In his June 11, 1963 national address on civil rights, Kennedy touched on numerous aspects that Farina, Simone, and Mayfield would highlight in their songs. Like the songwriters, Kennedy acknowledged the racial disharmony of the nation, stating that every city in every state had witnessed “a rising tide of discontent that threatens public safety.” Much like Simone’s revealing angry retort in “Mississippi Goddam,” Kennedy pointed out to Americans that the “fires of frustration and discord” were evident throughout the country. The president came to the same conclusion that Mayfield, Farina, and Simone did in their songs, which was that the country faced a moral crisis that could only be solved by action. The songs issued dire warnings of what would happen to the country if blacks were denied civil rights. In like manner, Kennedy predicted that “those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence.” In his address, Kennedy concluded that nothing less than a federal bill would achieve true civil rights for all citizens.225

It took another year for the Civil Rights Bill to become reality. The long delay spoke to the slow pace of change in the country. The excruciatingly slow process to gain civil rights agitated activists to continue to speak up for justice and prompted musicians to sing songs of protest. Within the chorus of civil rights songs, “People Get Ready,” “Birmingham Sunday,” and “Mississippi Goddam” occupy an important place in history. The three songs captured the complicated and chaotic nature of the Civil Rights Movement, and in doing so inspired Americans to create a more equitable society for all.

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