

# How sam cook and the freedom singers impacted the civil rights movement with thei...

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The late 1950s and 1960s was an era of tremendous social upheaval throughout the country; (Weber, 2013). It is during this time that the Sam Cooke and Freedom Singers sang their hearts out in a quest for equal rights. The original Freedom Singers musical group started in 1962 in Albany. Its purpose was to raise funds and awareness for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). They were a group of four young African-Americans, namely, Rutha Mae Poles, Charles Neblett, Cordell Reagon and Barnice Johnson Reagon. All four members of the original group were under age 21. Three of whom were daughters of Baptist ministers.

It was during the same period that the voice of Sam Cooke rung in the air, "A Change is Gonna Come," in his Swan Song of freedom. He was born in January 22, 1931 in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Being also a son of a Baptist minister, his singing career started in church before he quickly rose to fame at a young age of 15 years when he became the lead vocalist of the Soul Stirrers, the number one gospel group at the time.

On August 28, 1955, Emmet Till, a 14-year-old black boy from Chicago suffered a severe beating and eventually died after whistling at a white woman in Mississippi. This could have been one of the earliest incidences credited with the start of the civil rights movement. Several months later, Rosa Parks, a black woman, refused to give up her seat to a white passenger, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott followed. The revolution was now fully on, while on the other hand, Cooke's fame was at an all time high. He had taken to touring the country, performing in prestigious venues. Leli (2010) informs that during these tours Cooke and his band experienced the vile racial prejudice and segregation of the South. His group could not

get accommodation, food and other basic services simply because they were black. They had to make their own food such as sandwiches in their cars. They took baths in stopover washrooms. They had to travel hundreds of miles to find boarding houses that would take them in. In addition, the KKK tried to cancel their performances when they heard that a black man was performing. At one time, in Little Rock, when he learnt that he would be performing two shows, one for the white audiences and the other for the blacks, he refused and played to a room split literally down the middle. He was one of the first performers to do so (Leli, 2010).

In 1961, he cancelled a show at Ellis Auditorium in Memphis two hours before it began because the organizers denied his requests to have the audience members seated together. He did not back down even after he was met with threats. This was a major boost to civil rights activism because by 1962, Cooke was the second best-selling artist after Elvis Presley. On October 8, 1963, after his concert, Cooke attempted to check into a hotel in Shreveport. He had made his reservation by phone, but the hotel turned him and his group away when he showed up in person, on realization that he was black. When he refused to walk away, the police arrested him. These incidences and the song "Blowin' in the Wind" by Bob Dylan, inspired Cooke to write The Swan Song of Freedom which was to be adopted as the civil rights movement anthem.

In her dissertation, Weber (2013) explains the civil rights movement acquired its momentum and drive from songs and as a result she calls it "a movement of song". Most singers however failed to use their songs to educate the public about the activities of that time. According to her, only

the SNCC Freedom Singers managed to use their music effectively to educate the public and pass on inspiring messages from the great leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. This group performed in 200 college campuses in the United States informing listeners of current events at the time in the civil rights movement

The civil rights movement leaders had recognized the power of song and performance in putting across their message. In the summer of 1964, Cooke donated "A Change Is Gonna Come" to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) for the album "The Stars Salute Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.". Later, Dr. King requested him to participate in a civil rights benefit concert. According to Leli (2010), this was a privilege reserved only for the most effective artists, as far as spreading the message of the civil rights movement was concerned. These artists had a great impact on the masses. The original freedom singers from Albany inspired many other groups to carry on with the work they had started. Some of these groups even adopted the name "freedom singers" and from their singing emerged a collection of songs, which later acquired the name "freedom songs". This included songs like Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come", and "We Shall Overcome" among others. Poole (2013) informs that some of these were gospel songs, which the masses adapted, with the help of the civil rights activists and singers, to suit the moment and carry the message of the struggle.

They later used these songs in demonstrations and sit-ins among other gatherings that agitated for equal rights. One instance of freedom singing was in the spring of 1961, when college students challenged the existing segregation laws in the south of America. Four hundred black and white

students associated with Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) planned to ride Greyhound buses through Alabama, Louisiana, North Carolina, Virginia, and other states to protest illegal segregation in the South. According to Reagon (2006), as they rode, they sang freedom songs. In Mississippi, the police arrested many of them but even in the prison cells, they continued to sing these freedom songs. This was their only weapon in their non-violent protest against racial segregation.

It is with song and performance that Sam Cooke contributed to the civil rights movement (NEH, 2011). His voice became synonymous with the civil rights revolution between 1955 and 1968. For example, in his song “ A Change Is Gonna Come”, he sang, “ It's been too hard living but I'm afraid to die, Cause I don't know what's up there beyond the sky” (Sam Cooke, 1964), words that the black American could identify with. This could have been what every single African American felt at the time, and they could easily identify with the words in his songs at the time. Wenner (2013) states that his impact was huge because his iconic black American image and status as one of the greatest pop idols put a lot more potency in his words.

According to Neal (2012), a professor of Black Popular Culture in the Department of African and African American Studies at Duke University, Cooke's impact was evidently much greater than the songs. He was proudly black in both looks and singing style. The Gospel ring in his pop music appealed to most of the church-going folk. He was the embodiment of Black pride and therefore the perfect role model for a generation of young Black artists (Neal, 2012). He led them to protest through non-violent means, in a

quest for equal rights, and where he left off in death, his songs carried on in the revolution.

Indeed Sam Cooke charted the way forward for other black musicians to follow suit in an era where the blacks had no voice. He became their voice and a role model to many other black musicians that came after him. In the words of martin Luther King during the Albany movement, Music and singing played a critical role in inspiring, mobilizing, and giving voice to the civil rights movement. He said the songs gave “ the people new courage and a sense of unity. I think they keep alive a faith, a radiant hope, in the future, particularly in our most trying hour”.

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