

How Music Moved the Movement: Civil Rights and the Blues



By *Kristy Houle, Educational Opportunities Coordinator*

Blues music traces its roots to the spirituals, work songs, and chants of African-American culture, and many of its best-known and earliest artists were African-American. As such, both Blues and Jazz music played an important role in the Civil Rights movement, which hit its peak in the 1960s.

The movement, a turbulent time in United States history – particularly in the south – was marked with nonviolent protests and campaigns of civil resistance aimed at achieving change through nonviolent forms of resistance.

Most musicians involved with the movement came from a mixture of backgrounds, and the music served as a source of empowerment for those who shared similar sentiments with those performing it. Musicians sang these songs for multiple purposes: to motivate them through long marches, for psychological strength against harassment and brutality, and sometimes to simply pass the time when waiting for something to happen. During these times, radio and television were a way to bring high-profile events to families that couldn't be part of them. It gave them hope and courage during the toughest times.

Martin Luther King Jr. said that “jazz speaks for life. The blues tell the story of life’s difficulties — and, if you think for a moment, you realize that they take the hardest realities of life and put them into music, only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph. This is triumphant music.”

Martin Luther King Jr. was undoubtedly the most prominent figure of these times, but there were many others that walked the wearied path to freedom with him. Others such as Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and Ralph Abernathy were just a few pivotal activists, but alongside them were some of the greatest blues musicians ever known.

“We Shall Overcome” by Mahalia Jackson became the unofficial theme song for the people of the movement. This song influenced the people to overcome the hardships of the time and reassured the people that freedom can be reached. Other musicians such as Sam Cooke, Nina Simone and Larry Goldings used their passion, influence, and outspoken personalities to advance the cause through their music.

During the march for voting rights in 1965, the song “Selma March” by Grant Green reflected the jubilation felt upon the completion of the march. Some people tend to forget that there were two previous attempts to make the journey earlier in the month.

The first march ended in bloodshed, while the second one was met with a restraining order. That ruling was quickly overturned, and the historic four-day march began. Green’s upbeat guitar instrumental kept hope alive during those four days, and the pride can still be felt when listening to it today.

The beauty of the blues music and the Civil Rights movement is that it was not only an inspiration during those difficult times, but also helped to heal the hostility in the years that followed. People who couldn’t find anything in common were finally able to come together in the music of the times.