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Wakin' Us Up

Civil Rights Movement: *Disc Jockeys Play Civil Disobedience*

By Tanya Teglo
February 2022

Editor's Note: Following is the second in a series of articles by writer Tanya Teglo on African American culture and social issues. They will continue throughout February as Americans celebrate Black History Month. The articles were first published as part of the 2021 Erie Blues & Jazz Festival.

As time progressed, the issue of police brutality and the African American community did not lessen. Depending on the area of the country, it became more blatant and authority figures were sometimes very outspoken regarding their feelings about the search for civil rights that occurred throughout the American South.

In 1961, Birmingham, Alabama Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor permitted the Ku Klux Klan to wreak havoc on the Freedom Riders in his city. “The Klan had unofficial authorization from Police Commissioner Bull Connor to get the Freedom Riders out of town. Columnist Diane McWhorter writes that Connor “assured Klansmen that the police department would give them fifteen minutes to assault the Freedom Riders.”[1] Connor stated that “I don’t give a damn if you beat them, bomb them, murder them, or kill them. We don’t ever want to see another n***** riding on the bus into Birmingham again.” [2]

To overcome the tactics used by Bull Connor, many different types of music and media played a vital role. During marches, quite often protesters sang gospel music in the streets, most notably songs like “We Shall Overcome,” made famous by Mahalia Jackson. Within “We Shall Overcome” there is a powerful message about not being afraid, yearning to be free, and walking hand in hand. The lyrics are as follows:

We'll walk hand in hand. We'll walk hand in hand. We'll walk hand in hand
someday ... Oh, deep in my heart I do believe We shall overcome some day....
We are not afraid We are not afraid. We are not afraid someday (Mahalia
Jackson, “We Shall Overcome,” 1961, available [here](#)).

After the violence occurred with the Freedom Riders, there were other protests in

Birmingham such as the Children's March of 1963, where disc jockeys used multiple forms of music to assist in the protests. WENN station personnel, mainly the DJs, played a critical role in setting up one of the biggest protests for civil rights in our nation's history. WENN DJ Shelley Stewart remembered "I and other radio personalities ... of WENN began using codes to help civil rights demonstrators outmaneuver Bull Conner's police department." [3] A challenge for those at WENN was distracting the police so that the demonstrators could integrate lunch counters in places like Woolworth's and Newberry's. The DJs would simply distract the police by sending out several meeting locations that may or may not have been a protest site. The DJs bought the protesters valuable time to assemble at the correct locations.[4]

To spread the message, the DJs at WENN used special codes to ensure that the meetings would be kept a secret. An example of what the listeners heard on radio appears in Ellen Levine's "Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Story." One listener, Larry Russell, remembered that both Shelley Stewart and "Tall" Paul White would inform their audience about mass meetings by referring to the locations of parties and dances: "We good old Baptists knew there wasn't going to be any dance." The reason why a code was necessary was to protect both the DJs and the protesters. Stewart recalled, "An agreed-upon song would be played on a signal from a leader such as the Reverend King, N.H. Smith, or Andrew Young. It could be anything from '[Wade in the Water](#)' to '[Yakety Yak](#).'" [5]

On the day following a meeting, either Stewart or White sent out a message so that the audience knew how many people had participated in the previous night's meeting. Russell recalled that Stewart would say, "Last night there was a mass meeting at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and it appears there were 1,600 people there." Stewart would cover this in a nonchalant manner, acting as if it were part of everyday news.[6]

After the logistics of the march were plotted, the personnel at WENN used their coded messages to relay relevant information to demonstrators. Williams cited McWhorter as referring to the DJs' technique as a "whisper campaign." [7] Kathleen Merryman interviewed Stewart, who recalled a broadcast with these words, "Kids, there's going to be a party at the park. Bring your toothbrushes because lunch will be served." The location of the "party" was really the meeting place, and his request for them to bring things like toothbrushes and coats was because he knew that the marchers were going to be arrested and these would be the essentials needed to get through a night in jail.

As a march unfolded, the police were spraying the demonstrators with fire hoses, but the kids would run up and they would sing and dance. One of the songs they would sing was white artist Bobby Darin's hit song "[Splish Splash](#)." Newsweek magazine also reported that "Negro [children] jeered and danced and mockingly turned their backsides to the spray." While the protesters in Birmingham were able to prevail over Commissioner "Bull" Conner, and some basic civil rights were able to be achieved, the issue of police brutality and police scare tactics continued to plague the African American community. Thus, music still needed to provide a vehicle to freedom. Police brutality has been a long-lasting plague that was sung about in almost every genre of music, including pop, soul, rhythm and blues, and rock 'n roll. The fight for the African American community to be free from police brutality and oppression was soon picked up by artists such as Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen, and many others.

In Detroit, DJs used other creative methods to try to improve community relations with police officers and to curtail police brutality and violence. Martha Jean “The Queen” Steinberg, a DJ who started her career at WDIA but ended up being a leading voice in Detroit radio, believed in trying to keep a community peaceful and safe. She not only broadcasted tirelessly on the radio during the 1967 riots in order to quell the violence, she also later launched a special initiative called “Buzz the Fuzz.” The Michigan House of Representatives described the merits of “Buzz the Fuzz”:

‘Buzz the Fuzz’ presents both sides to all problems – the good and the bad parts of police-community relations are openly acknowledged. In an atmosphere of complete openness both sides are allowed to see each other as human beings, rather than as stereotyped and hostile symbols. ... ‘Buzz the Fuzz,’ a program which has also been periodically shown on television, has received local, as well as national acclaim. More than fifteen major cities throughout the nation have indicated their interest in the program. ... ‘Buzz the Fuzz’ does not cost Detroit or the State one cent; all participants give freely of their time and efforts, including Radio Station WJLB and the work team of Martha Jean “The Queen” Steinberg, Police Commissioner John F. and Mr. Robert T. Marquart.[8]

Unfortunately, not everyone followed in the footsteps of the DJs. In the 1970s, Marvin Gaye’s Inner-City Blues highlighted the dilemma of being African American in the inner city. He sang about the struggle of poverty, police brutality, and crime and violence. In an effort to try to shed light on police brutality, the lyrics of the song “Inner City Blues” were as follows:

Oh (ow) crime is (woo) increasing Trigger happy policing.
Panic is spreading God knows where we're heading.
Oh, make me want to holler They don't understand
(Marvin Gaye, “Inner City Blues,” 1971.)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author and historian Tanya Teglo specializes in African American history. She has written articles for many academic journals, including “Nat D. Williams: Beale Street Historian” for the West Tennessee Historical Society Papers, as well as “WDIA and the Black Press: A Powerful Partnership” for the Tennessee Historical Quarterly. Teglo has also spent many years serving the disabled community, having been a member of various committees and workgroups in Pennsylvania government dealing with disability policy. In addition to writing and research, she has taken an active role in assisting her alma mater, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, in enhancing its disability services.

End Notes

[1] Diane McWhorter, *A Dream of Freedom: A Civil Rights Movement 1964 to 1968* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 2004), 63.

[2] *Ibid*

[3] Julian Williams, "Black Radio and Civil Rights: Birmingham, 1956–1963," *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 12 no. 1 (May 2005), 55.

[4] Shelley Stewart and Nathan Hale Turner Jr., *The Road South: A Memoir* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 247

[5] Ibid

[6] Larry Russell quoted by Ellen Levine in *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activist Tell Their Own Story* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1993), 83-84.

[7] McWhorter quoted by Williams, 57

[8] *Michigan House of Representatives, House Resolution no. 388*, 1972, 193.

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