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Wakin' Us Up

King Arrest Thrust Police Brutality Into Spotlight

By Tanya Teglo
February 2022

Editor's Note: Following is the third 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.

The issue of police brutality and the use of excessive force has periodically prompted outrage and calls for reform throughout American history. In 1991, the issue thrust itself into the national spotlight with the beating of Rodney King. According to National Public Radio (April 26, 2017):

King, who was on parole for robbery, had led police on a high-speed chase through Los Angeles; later, he was charged with driving under the influence. When police finally stopped him, King was ordered out of the car. Los Angeles Police Department officers then kicked him repeatedly and beat him with batons for a reported 15 minutes. The video showed that more than a dozen cops stood by, watching and commenting on the beating. King's injuries resulted in skull fractures, broken bones and teeth, and permanent brain damage. Ultimately, four officers were charged with excessive use of force.”

The officers, Sgt. Stacey C. Koon, 41 years old; Officers Laurence M. Powell, 29; Theodore J. Briseno, 39; and former Officer Timothy E. Wind, 31 were acquitted on all charges.[1] Despite the acquittal, the graphic image of the beating would not leave public consciousness. The video has been preserved [on YouTube](#). Shortly after the verdict was made public, a riot erupted in Los Angeles as tensions in the city reached a fever pitch. Those who had followed the trial had seen amateur video of the Rodney King beating. The riots and the Rodney King beating served as pivotal points for those in the music industry who began to speak out against police brutality and violence.

The issue affected musicians involved in many different genres of music, thus making an issue that was once very much limited to genres such as Blues, Jazz, Hip Hop, R&B, and Rap become a central focus for all of types of musicians and

communities in America. David Bowie was looking to purchase a house when the riots occurred. [2] He wrote about how he felt and what he saw around him in his 1993 song, [“Black Tie, White Noise”](#):

I'm lookin' through African eyes, Lit by the glare of an LA fire, I've got a face, not just my race, Bang Bang I've got you babe. ... We reach out over race and hold each other's hands, Then die in the flames singing 'we shall overcome'... There'll be some blood no doubt about it, But we'll come through don't doubt it, I look into your eyes and I know you won't kill me. ... Oh Lord, just let him see me, Lord, Lord just let him hear me, Let him call me brother, Let him put his arms around me, Let him put his hands together. ... Reach over race and hold each other's hands, Walk through the night thinking we are the world. (It is available on You Tube [here](#).)

The issue of police brutality and the impact of the L.A. riots caused many other musicians to continue to speak out. Artists like [Rage Against the Machine](#), [Sublime](#), [En Vogue](#), [Tupac Shakur](#), [Ice Cube](#), and [Aerosmith](#) all lent their voices to the struggle following the riots.

The riots tore the city apart. Not only in terms of race relations, but they also called to question the types of changes the police department needed to make. These issues were elevated in the midst of severe physical damages that the city suffered. Regan Morris reported, “Anger led to days of looting and burning, 54 deaths and \$1 billion of damage to the city.” [3] In response to the protests and the riots, it was decided that the LAPD had to engage in a culture of reform. Morris highlighted how the riots and the Rodney King beating forced the LAPD to change, and cited interviews with Connie Rice and former LAPD Deputy Chief Bernard Parks.

An investigation former Secretary of State Warren Christopher “focused on boosting multiculturalism in the police force, so that the officers would better reflect the communities they patrol. The force has slowly shifted from a paramilitary style to more interactive, community policing.”[4] Morris quoted Civil Rights Lawyer Connie Rice: “Their job is to help communities become healthy so crime plummets in those housing projects. These cops will get promoted for demonstrating how they avoid arresting a kid.”[5]

While the LAPD did make an effort to reform its policies regarding especially the type of brutality that Rodney King faced, it did not signify an end to the problem. This type of reform did not go far enough.

After some of the spotlight faded from the issue of police brutality, the King of Pop Michael Jackson brought the issue back to the forefront with his song and video, “They Don’t Really Care About Us,” which premiered in 1996. There were three different versions of the video released, with versions in Ghana and Brazil speaking to police brutality as an issue that affected all parts of the world. The prison version of the video describes the inequalities of the American prison system and the undying issue of police brutality. The lyrics to the song speak to the issue:

Beat me, hate me, you can never break me. I am the victim of police brutality, now I'm tired of being the victim of hate. Black male, blackmail, throw the brother in jail. Tell me, what has become of my rights? Am I invisible 'cause you ignore me? Your proclamation promised me free liberty, now. Beat me, bash me, you can never trash me Hit me, kick me, you can never get me. ([Michael Jackson, “They Don’t Really Care About Us,” 1996](#))

The video also focuses on the Rodney King beating and the L.A. riots. Although the video and song contain a powerful message regarding what was happening in the African American community, many critics dismissed “They Don’t Really Care About Us” at the time because of the controversies occurring in Michael Jackson’s personal life, including allegations of child molestation and abuse. Jackson was also under fire for using derogatory slurs and words in his lyrics regarding the Jewish population, therefore undercutting the value and message of the song itself. [6]

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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] Seth Mydans, “THE POLICE VERDICT; Los Angeles Policemen Acquitted in Taped Beating,” *The New York Times*, April 30th 1992, available [here](#)

[2] Danilo Castro, 10 Classic Songs Inspired By The 1992 L.A. Riots, April 3rd, 2020, available [here](#)

[3] Regan Morris, “LA riots: How 1992 changed the police,” *BBC News Los Angeles*, April 29th 2012, available [here](#)

[4] Ibid

[5] Connie Rice quoted in Ibid

[6] Dinitia Smith, *Michael Jackson Apologizes For Hurt Caused by Lyrics*, *New York Times*, June 17th, 1995

In Case You Missed It

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