BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON

BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON was a college student in Albany, Georgia, when she participated in Albany's first civil rights march in 1961. Reagon was known as a soloist in her church choir, so it was no surprise when other marchers turned to her to lead them in song. Carried by the moment, she adapted the words of a well-known spiritual and sang, "Over my head, I see freedom in the air." The song became a favored anthem of the civil rights movement.

Reagon became a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Freedom Singers, and throughout the sixties she was one of a group of musicians who used music as an organizing tool in the struggle for desegregation and civil rights. In 1973, she founded Sweet Honey in the Rock, an African American women's a cappella ensemble whose repertoire continues to be characterized by politically and socially progressive ideals. As Reagon says of Sweet Honey, "We plough the path forward with sound."

Reagon's own role as a warrior for change has been multifaceted—as activist, singer, composer, scholar and producer. She serves as a Professor of History at American University in Washington, DC, and Curator Emerita at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History. She has published numerous books and articles, and produced the radio series "Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions" for National Public Radio and the Smithsonian. The series received the 1994 Peabody Award for Significant and Meritorious Achievement in Broadcasting.

In the following interview, Reagon reflects on four decades of civil rights activism—on the role of the organizer, strategies for sustaining focus and momentum, and making space for the next generation of leadership. She describes how collective action invites people to step across internalized, societal lines, and how "when you cross that line, you're free."
Claire Peeps: Can recall when you first realized that singing could be a tool in social organizing?

Bernice Johnson Reagon: My sense is that I only came to realize it when I began to try to explain what I’d already been doing for more than 15 years. I don’t think I had that kind of naming for music, it wasn’t necessary to separate out music from anything else I was doing. I came up in Albany, Georgia, as a singer. I joined the church when I was eleven and by the time I was twelve the church got its first piano. My sister played the piano for the choir. I was a contralto, and I did a lot of the solo leads. Everybody in the family sang. There were three generations in that choir—teenagers, parents, and grandparents. You don’t see that a lot now in choirs. It is an amazing thing, working across generations in singing.

When I was a senior in high school, at sixteen, I became secretary for the local youth chapter of the NAACP. Throughout that time and into my college years at Albany State, if there was singing in any of the meetings, people would turn to me and I would lead a song. It just happened naturally.

So when the civil rights movement started in Albany in 1961, I was one of the people in Albany known as a singer. There were a few of us: Rutha Harris was another. There were also other people who were solid singers who could lead almost anything but they’d never been in a choir, they could do a really great alto or tenor. It was a great singing culture, and there was a real freedom with people leading songs. There was no “I can’t sing that well” attitude. Anybody could start a song. And in addition to the people who could sing, there were those like my mother who said, “I can’t sing, but I love to sing,” who sang all the time. There just didn’t seem to be a lot of space where people weren’t singing. That’s the kind of culture I grew up with.

The first march in Albany happened in December of ’61. Two students had been arrested for buying tickets at the white window of the Trailways bus station. Four others were also arrested for joining in, so there were six in all who were taken down to jail. The four others were from the NAACP youth chapter, which had a strategy to get people charged and booked so they could push cases into the legal system, things to court. So they bailed out the four NAACP students. The other two students, Bertha Goba and Blanton Hall, refused to post bail, saying that they had not done anything wrong. We did a sympathy support demonstration for them. We marched around the campus twice, and we knew we couldn’t go back because the campus administration was very hostile to activism. So we went into the closest church, the Union Baptist Church. Charley Jones, a SNCC field secretary, said, “Bernice, lead a song.” I began the spiritual “Over my head, I hear music in the air, over my head, I see trouble in the air, over my head,