

Give Your Hands to Struggle

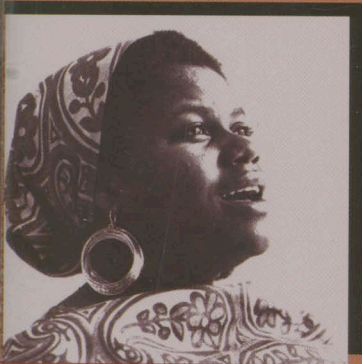
Smithsonian Folkways



BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON

Give Your Hands to Struggle

Since the early days of her participation in the Civil Rights Movement, when a generation of young people convinced our nation that legal segregation was wrong, Bernice Johnson Reagon has been on a song journey in search of freedom, justice, and equality. This reissue of *Give Your Hands to Struggle*, originally released on Paredon Records in 1975, features Reagon's vocal power in stunning, multi-tracked harmony with itself. There are twelve resequenced and remastered songs here – eleven from the original recording and one previously unreleased track, "We've Come a Long Way to Be Together." The enclosed booklet includes an introduction by E. Ethelbert Miller, an essay and annotations by Reagon, song lyrics, bibliography, and discography.



1. We've Come a Long Way to Be Together 3:46
2. There's a New World Coming 3:34
3. Room in the Circle 4:34
4. Old Ship of Zion 4:59
5. Why Did They Take Us Away? 3:11
6. In My Hands 7:04
7. Joan Little 3:21
8. They Are Falling All Around Me 3:11
9. Freedom in the Air 3:16
10. I Won't Crumble With You If You Fall 3:03
11. Had, Took, Misled 3:24
12. Give Your Hands to Struggle 3:59

Total time – 48:03

SF 40049

LC 9628



Smithsonian Folkways

Center for Folklife Programs & Culutral Studies | 955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600 | MRC 914
Smithsonian Institution | Washington, DC 20560 | © 1997 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

150
Smithsonian



Give Your Hands to Struggle

Originally issued on Paredon Records (P-1028, 1975)

1. **We've Come a Long Way to Be Together** 3:46
(Words and music Bernice Johnson Reagon, © 1968)
2. **There's a New World Coming** 3:34
(Words and music Bernice Johnson Reagon, © April 1975)
3. **Room in the Circle** 4:34
(Words and music Bernice Johnson Reagon, © 1968)
4. **Old Ship of Zion** 4:59
(Traditional – new arrangement Bernice Johnson Reagon, © 1975)
5. **Why Did They Take Us Away?** 3:11
(Words and music Bernice Johnson Reagon, © December 1974)
6. **In My Hands** 7:04
(Words and music Bernice Johnson Reagon, © August 1968)
7. **Joan Little** 3:21
(Words and music Bernice Johnson Reagon, © 1975)
8. **They Are Falling All Around Me** 3:11
(Words and music Bernice Johnson Reagon, © 1975)
9. **Freedom in the Air** 3:16
(Traditional – new words Bernice Reagon, © 1961)
10. **I Won't Crumble With You If You Fall** 3:03
(Words and music Bernice Reagon, © November 1974)
11. **Had, Took, Misled** 3:24
(Words and music Bernice Reagon, © 1969)
12. **Give Your Hands to Struggle** 3:59
(Words and music Bernice Reagon, © 1969)

Original sessions produced by Barbara Dane, 1975. Reissue compiled and produced by Bernice Johnson Reagon with Amy Horowitz. Introduction by E. Ethelbert Miller. Essay and annotations by Bernice Johnson Reagon.

GIVE YOUR HANDS TO STRUGGLE

At the dawn of the new century it is the voice of Bernice Johnson Reagon that many social activists still hear when they rise in the morning. Since the early days of her participation in the Civil Rights Movement, when a generation of young people convinced our nation that legal segregation was wrong, Bernice Johnson Reagon has been on a journey in search of freedom, justice, and equality. Reagon was perhaps “baptized” by a musical tradition which is an integral part of the African American church. The songs of her people have been the inspiration behind her ability to create her own compositions and extend the African American oral literary tradition.

One cannot discuss the Civil Rights Movement without acknowledging the importance and contribution of the “freedom songs” sung by singing organizers/activists like Reagon. These songs were battle anthems and hymns providing encouragement, strength, and comfort to demonstrators and marchers throughout the South. They

served as a balm during moments of sadness and loss, when Americans, Black and White, had to renew their belief in the power of the human spirit.

Reagon's career runs parallel not only to the Civil Rights Movement but also to the subsequent progressive social and political movements which have taken place in the world since the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement, however, was pivotal in that it taught activists how a culture could reform itself. It became an example of how the poor and powerless could organize and acquire power. It illustrated that military power, represented by the police and National Guard, could not overshadow or defeat people committed to transforming the space they lived in. This has become the legacy of the unsung heroes of Selma, Greenwood, Birmingham, Danville, and Albany, Georgia.

In 1975, Paredon Records released Bernice Reagon's *Give Your Hands to Struggle*. These compositions were new “spirituals” written when our nation was being challenged by the demands of Black Power within our

borders and the numerous revolutions taking place outside which would change the continents of Africa and Asia. Our modern society was forced to re-examine its values and even question the foundation on which it was constructed. Many activists during this period became introspective, while the federal government adopted tactics to slow, distract, or halt the attempt at democratic social transformation. This was the time of infiltration of activist groups by governmental agencies, the FBI's COINTELPRO operation being one of the most infamous. *Give Your Hands to Struggle* must be seen in this context; for at this historical moment, Reagon's music upholds the tradition of resistance and encourages the activist to continue the fight against racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression.

Bernice Johnson Reagon's compositions reflect the hope one places in the future. A song like "I Won't Crumble with You If You Fall" sees her building on the moral strength of Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Septima Clark. For Reagon, these women have

been the bridge on which one crosses the river of history. At the same time, this song questions the one who stays and stays and stays until nothing is left. Similarly, "In My Hands" finds its beginnings in the memories of African American women. Here Reagon, moving through time, captures the voices of the mothers and sisters of martyrs like Malcolm X.

These songs reflect the resiliency one often discovers in the blues and spirituals as well as in the more recent writings of African American women. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor describes the loss suffered by her character Lucielia Louise Turner as something that links her not only to the Middle Passage but to more recent horrors such as Dachau. In making this comparison Naylor addresses universal suffering. One discovers a similar element when listening to Bernice Johnson Reagon. "They Are Falling All Around Me" is Reagon's funeral spiritual. It captures that sense of loss one feels when death takes those who are foundational to one's life. And yet, the lyrics of this

song promise to go on holding on and radiating the lessons that have come as gifts from the lives of teachers now gone. In "Give Your Hands to Struggle," we find her seeking higher ground as well as common ground. This work serves not only as a measurement of her talent but also indicates the direction she would take later in her career. From the original SNCC Freedom Singers, then to the Harambee Singers, to the outstanding voices of Sweet Honey In The Rock, the voice of Bernice Johnson Reagon has been a pillar on which we can build freedom's house.

Bernice Johnson Reagon's research and scholarship – extensions of her artistic vision – represent a second pillar. For twenty years Reagon worked as cultural historian and curator for the Smithsonian Institution. She founded and directed the Program in African American Culture at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Here she created a space where the general public and scholars could interact and benefit from research and analysis while constructing an archive

for African American 20th-century culture. In 1989 she was the recipient of a MacArthur Award, and in 1995 she won a Peabody Award for her National Public Radio Series "Wade in the Water." This was an outgrowth of fifteen years of research in which she formed and led a team of scholars in examining the sacred traditions of African Americans. In October 1995 she received a Presidential Medal, the highest honor bestowed upon an American citizen, the Charles E. Frankel Award for outstanding contribution to public understanding of the humanities. It was another tribute to a woman whose voice and life have been a beacon of hope for so many.

Smithsonian Folkways reissues *Give Your Hands to Struggle* in a new time. On the international front we have witnessed the end of the Cold War with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and we have lived to see the abolishment of apartheid in South Africa. However, activists throughout the world cannot rest. Ethnic conflicts and terrorism (Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, India, China, the Middle East...) con-

tinue to spread around the globe. Injury to our environment has not stopped. These conditions make the singing of "There's a New World Coming" all the more prophetic. We must all answer the question, "Where you gon' be standing when it comes?" Domestically, the country stumbles in the face of its many challenges. Our people are increasingly inundated by so many crises: the expanding AIDS, drug, and violence epidemics; a health care system that will not take care of its citizenry; for the young, a withdrawal of open and easy access to higher education; the faces of those who are homeless in our communities – men, women, children, the elderly, the sick. The current environment also sees the recurrence of overt racism as many recognize what African Americans have known too long – that there is a strand within police culture that is prone to violent expression of racism while in the line of duty; African American churches, that institution that once hosted the Civil Rights Movement, are set afire by those who

hate justice, who want no peace in this land.

And Bernice Johnson Reagon is still a freedom singer. This protects her from the commercialization that too often embraces many of our artists. The songs Reagon recorded back in 1975 are a testimony of her genius as well as vision. One is grateful for this woman who has taken the time to look over her shoulder ... and who today continues her journey.

Reagon is fully aware that there is much work to be done. Whether in the company of her sister singers, Sweet Honey In The Rock, or alone, she knows there are things to tear down as well as to build. As Bernice Johnson Reagon continues to sing from her heart, we shall enter the new century knowing God will be there ... and she will hear these songs.

*E. Ethelbert Miller
Jessie Ball Dupont Visiting Scholar
Emory & Henry College
Emory, Virginia*

Looking Back ... *Bernice Johnson Reagon*

I was contacted by Barbara Dane early in 1975 about recording some of my new songs for her recording company, Paredon Records. Paredon was a small label founded by Dane to record songs created by singers involved in freedom struggles around the world. During the spring, I traveled to New York from my home in Washington, D.C., and for two days recorded the songs that became *Give Your Hands to Struggle*.

The invitation from Tony Seeger and Amy Horowitz of the Smithsonian to revisit this material, to reissue *Struggle* for the Smithsonian Folkways label, has been both affirming and humbling. After agreeing to the project, I began to think about some of the things we could do with this offering that had not happened in 1975. I knew I wanted to have the longer versions of the traditional songs "Freedom in the Air" and "Old Ship of Zion" in the collection. Paredon cut them because of the limited space on the album. When we

reviewed the Paredon tape in the Smithsonian archives, we did not find the longer performances, so I decided to try to reconstruct them. That was the humbling part. At one point trying to get back to a vocal place I had been over twenty years ago, I felt that maybe this kind of project should be done after one is dead and no longer around to complete something that is finished. Looking back over one's shoulder takes commitment. Excitingly, we found one song that did not make the original project, my first song of Kwanzaa, "We've Come a Long Way to Be Together."

Give Your Hands to Struggle was the first project where I used the multi-track capability to explore my creative range in harmony. The harmony systems that I have matured in later solo multi-track work and in my work with Sweet Honey In The Rock are fully present here. My memory of the experience is one of reaching and finding access to the chorus that is always within me. It is a chorus of memory, singing I heard long before I was form, long before I was anything –

anywhere. And through technology I was able to give it what songs need to live – I could give this heretofore inside chorus air to ride on.

I have worked with Amy Horowitz putting together this program of twelve songs with the idea of balancing my expression as a singer of traditional songs, as a composer of new songs, as a creator of strong harmonies, and as an articulator of musical statements about our determination to be free.

— Washington, D.C., 1996



I was born Bernice Johnson in Albany, Georgia, in 1942, the daughter and third child of Reverend Jessie and Beatrice Johnson. I grew up in the Mt. Early Baptist Church, where my father served as pastor. I have linked political struggle with music since 1961, when I joined the Albany Movement in Georgia. It was there as a songleader that I saw first-hand how Black culture has always supported our people when we are involved in struggle.

In the early 1960s, while I was attending Albany State College, my singing experiences covered many music genres. I sang alto in the college choir and was a contralto soloist studying Italian arias and German *lieder*. In the choir we sang the spirituals arranged for concert performance by such composers and choir directors as R. Nathaniel Dett, Hall Johnson, and William Dawson. Socially, I was like most of the students on campus, very involved with rhythm and blues; I loved the recordings of Carla Thomas, Ray Charles, Ike and Tina Turner,

Wilson Pickett, and Jackie Wilson.

When I was twelve, my church bought a piano and my oldest sister Fannie organized the gospel choir. The Mt. Early gospel choir was formed from the parents and children of three families, the Johnsons, the Drakes, and Deacon and Mrs. Laster – about twelve singers across three generations – and we could sing!!! My favorite gospel groups were: the Roberta Martin Singers, the Davis Sisters, the Gospel Harmonettes, the Caravans, and the Staple Singers. I also loved quartet singing, and in Southwest Georgia, there were hundreds of great local groups!

Prior to singing in the gospel choir, my singing experience was totally with unaccompanied music – in school, on the playground, at home, and in church. In church, I saw people sing and pray until they shouted. There were the slow songs – hymns, lined out by strong leaders and raised by the singing church with full, powerful, richly ornate congregational responses. As a child, I liked best the more moderately upbeat, clapping, call and

response songs like “Let Me Ride, Jesus,” led by Deacon Theodus Drake, and “I’m a Soldier in the Army of the Lord,” led by his wife Sister Rosie Drake.

In our services, the music was like the breath of the church the way I knew what church, and where and when church was – in the real material world and within myself. I also came to know this music as a part of a cultural expression that was powerful enough to take people from their conscious selves to a place where the physical and intellectual being worked in harmony with the spirit. I enjoyed and needed that experience.

The Civil Rights Movement transformed my view of music. The transformation began after my participation in the first march in Albany in December 1961. We had left the campus at Albany State to carry out a support demonstration for Bertha Gober and Blanton Hall, who were still in jail after having been arrested for attempting to purchase tickets from the White side of the Trailways Bus Station. After we circled City Hall (also the

local jail) twice, we returned to the Union Baptist Church near the college campus, and I was asked to lead a song.

I began to sing the spiritual, "Over My Head I See Trouble in the Air," and in the course of singing changed the lyric "trouble" to "freedom" so that it made sense for that particular moment. Although I was not consciously aware of it, this was one of my earliest experiences with how my music was supposed to function. This music was to be integrative of, and consistent with, everything I was doing at that time; it was to be tied to activities that went beyond artistic affairs such as concerts, dances, and church meetings.

The next level of awareness came while I was in jail. I had grown up in a rural area outside the city limits. We rode school buses to get to junior and senior high school. We traveled by car to get to college. I had no direct experience with public transportation. My life had been a pretty consistent, balanced blend of church, school, and proper upbringing. I was aware of

being a part of a complex Black community with many levels. While we were rural, there were those – cityfolk – who had never been to the country. There was a Black educated class like the teachers who taught me in elementary, junior and senior high, and college; there were people who owned their own businesses, and they were themselves of different classes as far as education and social life were concerned. There were the working people who daily used the city buses I had never boarded. All of the children of all of these adults attended Carver Junior High and Monroe Senior High School. A few of us went on to the local college, and a still smaller number went to college out of town and sometimes out of state.

I went to jail with all of these people. All ages. In my section there were women from about thirteen to eighty years old. There were ministers' wives and mothers, a few people from my college classes, and teachers' wives who had only nodded at me, clapped at a concert, or spoken to my mother. A large number of people were from

the city and had ridden the segregated city buses daily. Two women in those cells had been drinking along the two-block stretch of bars and hangouts we called "Harlem." As the march went by, slightly drunk, they ran to be with their people and sobered up, to their surprise, in jail with the rest of us.

While we were of one accord as a group, one to one we did not always agree. There were minor clashes. Should we pray? Should we sing only church songs? Was cursing wrong at a time like this? Was it proper to giggle about your boyfriend? Should you do a "number two" if the toilet was stopped up? We got through because there was always a way to call us to higher ground. We sang more than we did anything else.

The Albany Movement was already a singing movement, and we took the songs to jail. There, the songs I had sung because they made me feel good or because they said what I thought about a specific issue did something else. I or someone else would start a song, and everybody would join in. After the song, the differences among

us would not seem so great. Somehow, making a song together required an expression of that which was common to us all. The songs did not feel like the same songs I had sung in college. In jail this music was like an instrument, like holding a tool in your hand.

I found that, although I was younger than many of the women in my section of the jail, I somehow shifted into a leadership role – first as a songleader and then in other matters concerning the group, especially in discussions, or when speaking with prison officials. Leadership seemed to be based on who was clearest and willing to step forward in a way that resonated with most of the group. And there was always more than one leader, more than one spokesperson, more than one songleader. It did not have to do that much with age, although we clearly had women who were elders, and who spoke out of experience about how to take care of ourselves in a trying situation.

I enjoyed being in jail because of the communal experience and because

being in jail was a part of fighting against racism in this country. I was fighting for freedom and willing to go the distance to be in the Freedom Movement. I fell in love with the songs that became freedom songs because they worked for us in jail and on the marches and in the rallies. I saw that to define music as something you listened to, something that pleased you, was very different from defining it as an instrument with which you can drive a point. In both instances, you can be singing the same song. But using it as an instrument of your living makes it a different kind of music.

The next level of awareness occurred during the first mass meeting after my release from jail. I was asked to sing a song, and I started the song I had changed after the first march. When I opened my mouth and began to sing – “Over my head, I see Freedom in the air” – there was a force and power within me I had never heard before. Somehow this music – this singing I could use as an instrument to do things with, music that was mine to shape and change so that it made the state-

ment I needed to make – became a way of expressing a new kind of power, and it called forth a level of concentrated vocal energy I did not know I had. I liked the feeling.

There were other things I learned about my culture as a result of being in the Movement. After getting out of jail, I went to mass meetings every day. The Mother of the church my father pastored was always there. One day during a morning mass meeting at Shiloh Baptist Church being held before a march, Mother Merritt prayed the same prayer I had heard prayed in church many times. I had focused on its sound, tune, rhythm chant, the intensity, and how the moans from the congregation rose and fell in support. On this morning, I not only heard every word she said; I felt and understood every word. She did not have to change one word of the prayer she had been praying for much of her Christian life for me to know she was addressing the issues we were facing at that moment as we prepared to face the local police force of Albany, Georgia. She began her prayer with “The Lord’s

Prayer” or what some call the “Our Father”:

Our Father, which are in heaven, hallowed would be thy name. Let thy kingdom come, let thy holy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread. And forgive our trespass as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver our souls from sin and evil. For thine is power and the glory and all in heaven and earth are thine....

This morning, dear Jesus, here come me your meek and undone servant, knee bent and body bowed to the motherdust of the earth. I am asking you this morning to look down on your children with your tender eye of mercy. And I’m asking you to come by here for a little while. Lord, you know us and you know our condition – asking you to come by here if it is your will. We need your love and your mercy, we need your protection, dear Jesus....

More than just her personal prayer, it

felt like Mother Merritt was laying out an analysis of the Albany, Georgia, Black community and the struggle we were tied up in, and she was asking the God she had prayed to all of her life not to leave us to the White city fathers of Albany.

Working for freedom began in earnest during my last year in high school and continued through the Albany Movement, until finally I became a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). I left home and school in 1962 to do freedom songs as a member of the original Freedom Singers of SNCC. The core group pulled together by tenor Cordell Hull Reagon from Nashville (to whom I was briefly married) included: Rutha Mae Harris, Albany, soprano; Charles Neblett, Carbondale, bass; and me, Bernice Johnson, alto. The SNCC Freedom Singers used the songs, interspersed with narrative by Cordell, to convey the story of the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. The songs were more powerful than spoken conversation. They became a major way

of making people who were not on the scene feel some of the intensity of what was happening in the South. Hopefully, the songs would move people to take a stand, to organize support groups or participate in various projects in their local communities and in communities under siege in the South.

Being a songleader in the Movement brought me closer to my history. I met Bessie Jones and the Georgia Sea Island Singers when the Freedom Singers performed at the Newport Festival in 1963. This group, their singing, and the stories they told about their songs became a major link between the Freedom Singers of the Civil Rights Movement and the songs that have been used as resistance and protest throughout our history in this land. Bessie Jones, coming from within twenty miles of Albany, Georgia, had a repertoire and songleading style I recognized from the churches I had grown up in. She, along with John Davis, would talk about songs Black people had sung as slaves and what those songs meant in terms of their struggle to be free. The songs did not

sound like the spirituals I had sung in college choirs; they did sound very much like the style of singing I had grown up with in church. In church I had learned the songs as ways of worship, of giving praise to God and calling on the name of Jesus Christ. Bessie Jones, herself a Christian, helped me to understand that they were worship songs when they were; but that they were also songs that helped us express what we felt about being mistreated as Black people in America. They could also be and were our freedom songs, our protest songs.

I spent the next few years focusing on the culture I had become conscious of through the Movement. I sang and studied the new freedom songs of the Movement; I also began to pay serious attention to the old songs I knew through groups like the Georgia Sea Island Singers, the Moving Star Hall Singers, and other traditional groups. I found myself in the company of blues singers who were once again performing because of the folk revival movement. Musicians like Rev. Gary Davis, Son House, Fred McDowell, Johnny

Shines, and Bukka White became a part of my contemporary culture, which was moving in all directions at the same time.

Expanding from the songs of the Movement to the larger area of Black oral culture was a natural path for me. I enjoyed searching for ways to bring traditional culture into some of the establishment institutions where Blacks found themselves during the mid-1960s. I worked with Guy Carawan in organizing several conferences that brought activist songleaders together with people of the folk song and topical song movement then sweeping the country. I met and worked with Pete Seeger, Peter LaFarge, Phil Ochs, Gil Turner, Bob Dylan, Lena Spencer, Tom Paxton, Joan Baez, Peter, Paul and Mary, Alan Lomax.... I was surprised to find that my Spelman College professor, Dr. Willis Laurence James, was a respected member of any gathering of scholars addressing Black culture during this period.

Beginning to work as a cultural organizer, I met Anne Romaine, a

White Southern country singer and historian from Gastonia, North Carolina, then living in Atlanta, Georgia. Together, we organized the Southern Folk Festival. This traveling festival of Black and White traditional and contemporary progressive musicians went to audiences throughout the South. Through our collective efforts, I worked with singers like Hedy West, Hazel Dickens, and Nimrod Workman, who were White, Southern, and radical. With Dr. Stephen Henderson at Morehouse College, I helped develop the first Soul Roots Festival, which presented Black traditional materials to Black colleges, institutions which had rarely made space for this important aspect of our culture.

I was going deeper with the older songs, crossing sacred and secular lines, race and class lines, giving myself permission to change old songs and create new ones, meeting and working with others who were exploring and supporting the same thing.

My field collecting, study, and creation of Black music has been to a large extent about transmission: facili-

tating the process through which African American music culture – the songs, the singing, and the stories that singers tell about their music – can be there for others and for ourselves in other times and places.

My work with public schools in Atlanta involved teacher-training workshops. I developed a year-long program which integrated members of the Black community and traditional oral materials into the social studies curriculum. Becoming a part of the Black Nationalist and Pan African movement during the mid- and late sixties, I organized the Harambee Singers with Mary Ethel (Jamila) Jones and Mattie Casey. The Harambee Singers were a group of Black women whose repertoire represented a link between Black traditional materials and contemporary African and U.S. Black protest and unity songs.

When I first began to do research in the 1960s, I worked within the boundaries of what was then accepted as folk music. My work did not consider other African American genres such as jazz, rhythm and blues, or gospel. It soon

dawned on me that during the Movement we had used all those forms. When we were relaxing in the office, we made up songs using popular rhythm and blues tunes. Songs based in rhythm and blues also came out of jails, especially from the sit-in movement and the march to Selma, Alabama. “Oh Wallace, You Never Can Jail Us All,” written during the Selma Campaign of 1965 by SCLC organizer James Orange, was set as a rhythm and blues song of freedom. “You Better Leave Segregation Alone” came out of the Nashville Freedom Rides and was based on a hit by Little Willie John, “You Better Leave My Kitten Alone.” With Carlton Reese’s influence, gospel choirs became the major musical vehicle in the urban center of Birmingham. The SCLC-led movement of Chicago also had a gospel choir and an instrumental ensemble led by Ben Branch.

Jazz had not been a strong part of my musical life, but I began to hear it as I traveled north. Thelonious Monk and Charlie Mingus played at the first SNCC benefit at Carnegie Hall. I

heard of and then heard the music of Coltrane. Then I began to hear works that had been recorded by Charlie Parker and Coleman Hawkins – whole lifetimes of music that had not filtered into my Southwest Georgia world as a child and teenager. This music had no words, but it had power, intensity, and movement under various degrees of pressure; it had vocal texture and color. I could feel that the music was active and knew how it felt to be Black and Angry, Black and Down, Black and Loved, Black and Fighting.

I now believe that Black music exists in every place where Black people run, every corner where we live, every level on which we struggle. We have been here a long while, in many situations. It takes all that we have created to sing our song. And we need it all – blues, gospel, ballads, children’s games, dance, rhythm and blues, jazz, love songs, topical songs – doing what it has always done. We need Black music that functions in relation to the people and community who provide the nurturing compost that makes its creation and continuation possible. I

believe that Black musicians/artists have a responsibility to be conscious of their world and to let their consciousness be heard in their songs.

As I witnessed and participated in this wedding of political action with music, where songs served to bind segments of the Black community together in jails and on the marches, where songs provided the necessary strength to help demonstrators endure abuse, where songs articulated for the masses of people what their struggle was all about, I made a lifetime commitment to always remain a Freedom Singer.

Bernice Johnson Reagon

This essay, with some new material, is drawn from the 1975 biographical liner notes of Give Your Hands to Struggle and an article “Black Music in Our Hands” that first appeared in Sing Out!: The Folk Song Magazine in 1976 (Volume 24/Number 6).

1. We've Come a Long Way to Be Together

Words and music: Bernice Johnson
Reagon, © 1968

During the late sixties and early seventies, my family began to practice Kwanzaa along with a few other African American families in Atlanta. "We've Come a Long Way to Be Together" was one of the songs I wrote to help celebrate the season. From the beginning, I altered the Kwanzaa ritual. The structure created by Maulana Ron Karenga had a place and symbol for the children, the father, the harvest – but no symbol for the mother. I was by then a mother raising two children, so I edited my table – kept the candles and the harvest and created a special family ritual with my children that they remember and appreciate to this day.

*We've come a long way to be
together, you and me. [2x]
It's been a might distance,*

*dangerous journey to be here.
[2x]*

*It's taken the sacrifice, so many of
us to be one. [2x]*

*Refrain:
And we'll stay holding to each
other fighting and trusting as we
grow.*

2. There's a New World Coming

Words and music: Bernice Reagon,
© April 1975

The end of the long liberation struggle by the Vietnamese people – first against the French and then against an international military force led by my country, crippling the lives of so many young people in my age group – represents a decisive shift of power and direction in the international world climate. Developing my warrior experience as a fighter in a Movement committed to non-violence and at the same time finding myself in support of Vietnamese liberation represented another expansion for me: I would not

tell other peoples how they should shape their struggle for justice and self-determination. "New World Coming" was my way of saying "Amen" to the idea that the big and the mighty are often wrong and sometimes do not win.

*Chorus:
There's a new world coming!
Everything's gon' be turning over.
Everything's gon' be turning over.
Where you gon' be standing when
it comes?*

*Verses:
For far too many years
I been marching, singing, and
talking
Doing things I thought would
make me free
While people halfway 'round the
world
They been fighting, dying, and
bleeding
And now it seems that they are
gonna be!*

*You know the book, the Bible?
You read it and you'll see
It will surely come to pass
This is how it's gonna be
Those that were meek and humble
Would come to gain the earth;
Them that shuddered at the
bottom
Would rise and rule the world!*

*The nations of Asia and Africa
They're taking over their lives.
The sisters and brothers south of
us
Are finally gettin' wise.
Then take a look, United States
Of the North American clime,
With your strange mixture of
wealth and hate
You won't be exempt this time!*

3. Room in the Circle

Words and music: Bernice Reagon,
© 1968

The "circle" song came to be in 1968, when I began to want the Vietnamese people to win. I began to see the Vietnamese struggle in relation-

ship to our freedom struggle. It is one of my first efforts at addressing the fact that there were people outside of Albany, Georgia, who were also being squeezed to death because their space, too, was being defined by a minuscule but powerful group whose primary aim was their own profit rather than the meeting of human needs. Looking back, I can see that when I first tried to draw the human family together, I wrote lyrics naming people by physical traits – humbling to look back at yourself....

*Black people taken from an
ancient land
Suffered trials by cruel White
hands
In this circle, there's gotta be
room for them.
Move on over, make more (a
little) room for them
There'll be trouble if there's no
room for them....*

*Vietnamese with slanted eyes
Fighting for their land, not*

*standing by
They can't make it if there's no
room for them.
Move on over, make more (a
little) room for them
It won't hurt you if there's more
room for them....*

*Little brown boy with straight
black hair
In India's land there's no food
there
He can't make it 'cause there's no
room for him.
Move on over, make more (a
little) room for him
There'll be trouble if there's no
room for him....*

*Seneca, Black Hawk, Cherokee
Choctaw, Cheyenne, Sioux,
Pawnee
They can't make it if there's no
room for them.
Move on over, make a little room
for them
It won't hurt you to make a little
room for them.
Way overdue now, there's gotta*

be room for them....

*White man, we know you don't
know how
To save the circle, let me tell you
how:
Loose your hold, there's gotta be
room for all.
The circle will break, man, if
there's not room for all.
Move on over, make a little room
for all
In this circle, there's gotta be
room for all.*

*Save the circle, make more room
for all
In this circle, there's gotta be
room for all, room for all.*

4. Old Ship of Zion

Traditional: New arrangement, Bernice Johnson Reagon, © 1975

The unaccompanied music of the Black Baptist rural congregations of Southwest Georgia was created by hardworking Black people. Many of

them were sharecroppers and renters, people who worked on the land. They gave me my first experience with music. The Southern sharecropping system is notorious, and its basic principles are that the sharecropper family plants and harvests all the crops, foots the bill for everything in that process, and then pays from one-half to two-thirds of what it makes to the landowner for “the use of the land.”

Outside of the constant drudgery of farming, the life of these people is centered on church activities. Ever since I was old enough to be aware of music, I heard and drank in the music created by these, my people, in that church. The music had the strength of their whole lives in it. As they sang about all the hardships they had to endure, they were using music in the same way Black people have used it for centuries.

“The Old Ship of Zion,” a spiritual and a gospel hymn, is also associated with the culture of the 19th-century Underground Railroad. A congrega-

tional singing of this song goes on for many verses, as the singers build it together. You can add as many verses as you like about this image of a ship bringing hope and life, set against the memory of that other ship of slavery and death. The song has probably remained so important because of its connection to those of us who are living evidence of having survived that experience.

Verse:

*I was lost in sin and sorrow
Tossed about on life's raging sea.
Then I saw so far in a distance
'Twas a ship, seem to be.
Then I saw the Captain beckon
Savior-like, His hand to me.
'Tis the old ship of Zion
Get on board, follow me.*

Chorus:

*'Tis the old ship of Zion [3x]
Get on board, get on board.*

Other choruses:

It will carry you through

danger....

It has landed many a thousand....

5. Why Did They Take Us Away?

*Words and music: Bernice Johnson
Reagon, © December 1974*

In December of 1974, I was returning from Ghana to the U.S.A. It had been my second trip to Africa. For the first time in my life, I talked to Ghanaians who referred to the fact that in a certain period of their history, long ago, they had suffered a great loss when many of their sisters and brothers were taken forcibly from them. I was powerfully moved by this: they were talking about me! I was hearing from Africans themselves that they knew we were gone and that they had missed us. Musically this song is heavily influenced by Salisu Mahama, a master Dagboni praise singer and *gonje* player with whom I spent some days in Ghana. His singing and the relationship between his voice and his instrument were the same as I had

witnessed with blues musicians.

The function of the lyrics in the praise song is to advise, criticize, praise, commend, or to offer whatever a situation warrants. The function of the blues is to tell the story, to carry the news, not always in details like a ballad but in proverbial texts and symbolic phrases. Blues as a musical form is African, and the blues men of the Mississippi Delta could be called praise singers, too.

Why did they take us away? [3x]

*I can't reach out my arms. [2x]
I stand on shifting sand.*

*I hold on to my song. [2x]
It makes me know my name.*

*My sun is burning high. [2x]
Come watch my golden flame.*

*I can't roll back the years. [2x]
I must keep moving on.*

6. In My Hands

*Words and music: Bernice Reagon,
© August 1968*

In 1968, I was asked whom I would vote for: Hubert Humphrey or Richard Nixon. I tried to answer that question with "In My Hands." At the time, I was becoming increasingly involved in the Black Nationalist movement. Black people were looking to their own community for solutions, rather than to the usual White American symbols and institutions. I was still too close to the Civil Rights Movement to be able to evaluate fully what it had accomplished. I was critical of conservative traditional Black leadership and emphatic about my own responsibility to help build a world that would not have to kill a Malcolm.

Chorus:

*In my hands, in my hands
In my hands, in my hands, in my
hands.*

Verses:

*I have held the children,
Of mine and of ours
And of them and of theirs
And of him
And of whosoever will
Let him come.*

*I have held the sympathy of
Thomas Jefferson,
The freedom of George Wallace,
The peace of Lyndon Johnson,
The love of God through Billy
Graham,
And it spells death to us all.*

*I have held the promises of your
parties
You call Democrats, and your
Republicans.
But people, the lesser of six evils
Are nonetheless evil,
And only empty hands bother.*

*I have held, the compromise of
Booker T. Washington,
The patience of Roy Wilkins,
The radicalness of White liberals,
The silence of the affluent,*

They never say a mumbling word.

*I hold the fire of a panther
Pinned to your red, white, and
blood walls
A knife for a-carving
A niche for a Malcolm
In a land that said it could never
be
The power to rise or to fall
Or to rot or to crumble
Or for the world
To grow on turning.*

*I must hold the Strength to build
A New World in a New Land
Or die trying.*

7. Joan Little

*Words and music: Bernice Reagon,
© 1975*

When I first heard of Joan Little, I thought about the reaction she might have received from certain segments of the Black community. If you come from what is considered a “respectable family,” there is incredible pres-

sure on you to associate with “respectable people.” People who get into trouble – most commonly a girl who gets pregnant without being married – are automatically taken off your list of desired associates. A person who has been in jail is certainly nobody to spend time with. Some people might ask of Joan Little, “What was she doing in jail in the first place? You don’t have problems like that unless you’re in the wrong place to start with.” This song is my response to that positioning. It is a refusal to allow society to dictate my opinions of, or relations with, members of what I consider to be my Family. “Joan Little, she’s my sister” was the first line that came to me. I worked with that for a long time before I could come up with anything else. The most important thing I wanted to convey was, “You are messing with my sister!”

Chorus:

*Who is this girl? And what is she
to you?*

*Joan Little, she’s my sister
Joan Little, she’s our Mama
Joan Little, she’s your lover
Joan’s the woman who’s gonna
carry your child.*

Verses:

*I’ve always been told since the
day I was born
Leave them no-good women
alone.
Keep your nose clean, keep your
butt off the street
You gon’ be judged by the compa-
ny you keep.
I’ve always walked by the Golden
Rule
Steered clear of controversy I
stayed real cool.
'Til along came this woman not
even five feet tall
Charged and jailed with breaking
the law.
Then the next thing I heard as it
came over the news
First-degree murder, she was on
the loose.*

Now I ain’t talking ’bout the roar-

ing West
 This was 1975 at its most oppressive best
 North Carolina state, the pride of this land
 Made her an outlaw hunted on every hand.
 What did she do to deserve this name?
 She killed the man who thought that she was fair game.
 When I heard the news I screamed inside
 Lost all my cool, my anger I could not hide.
 Joan is you and Joan is me,
 Our prison is this whole society.
 We live in a land that brings pressure to bear
 On the head of this woman whose position we share.

8. They Are Falling All Around Me

Words and music: Bernice Reagon,
 © 1975

This song, written in 1975, is for the musicians who lived to make their

music and died singing. John Davis, King Curtis, Lee Morgan, Peter LaFarge, Skip James, Fred McDowell, and Mahalia Jackson are names that come to mind of singers and musicians who have touched my life. The list grows with each passing day. The song text is inspired by the poem by the Senegalese poet Birago Diop, "Breaths."

They are falling all around me.
 [3x]

The strongest leaves of my tree.

Every paper brings the news that
 [3x]

The teachers of my sounds are
moving on.

Death comes and rests so heavy.
 [3x]

Your face I'll never see no more.

But you're not really going to
leave me. [3x]

It is your path I walk
It is your song I sing

It is your load I take on
It is your air I breathe
It's the record you set that makes
me go on
It's your strength that helps me
stand

You're not really going to leave
me.

I will try to sing my song right.
 [3x]
Be sure to let me hear from you.

9. Freedom in the Air

Traditional: New words, Bernice Reagon, © 1961

During the Civil Rights Movement, I was "born again." In the Baptist Church this means a new life, new talk, new walk, new song, a new being. "Freedom in the Air" came out of my participation in the first street demonstration in Albany, Georgia, in December 1961. I don't really know where the song came from. I took a deep breath and there it was: "Over

My Head I See Freedom in the Air." I had known the song as "Over My Head I See Music in the Air" and "Trouble in the Air." But I had just taken part in a defiant protest involving 200 students. I saw no trouble, just freedom. "Freedom in the Air" became my first "new song."

Over my head I see freedom in the
air [3x]

There must be a God somewhere.

Other lines:

Over my head I see glory....

Over my head I hear singing....

10. I Won't Crumble With You If You Fall

Words and music: Bernice Reagon,
 © November 1974

On one level, the song reflects my growing awareness that our struggles need to be so deeply connected with principles and ideology that we can keep an eye on what we are doing and where we are going even when it means leaving someone in our own

community behind. The realization that much of what was destructive to the Black community was coming from people inside that community was, and still is, painful. "Crumble" refers to close relationships and to the responsibility we have to give all we can to each other as partners – sisters and brothers. It also states clearly that we also have a responsibility to know when we must move on in order not to go down with the rot and the decay.

On a deeper level, there is a gender meaning. People have always identified me with the mother/earth/rock image. This has to do with the idea of Black women who stay, wait, and hope, being there if and when things get better – if they ever do – and being there anyhow, holding their own and the "own" of their children, the future, and their people. "Crumble" says in this context: yes, I will do all I can, and I expect the same in return. But there is an end, and there are limits. It says that my primary responsibility is to the kind of life I lead and

to the future it suggests. Relationships that are supportive and responsive to support, relationships capable of growing, are the ones I can afford to have.

*I will wake in the morning if you call
And I'll stand beside you long as I can.
I will hold back the evening of your sun
But I won't crumble with you if you fall.*

*I will shadow the heat of your day
And I'll drink from the sweat of your brow.
I will walk to the tune of your song
But I won't crumble with you if you fall.*

*Come walk with me and hold to my hand
Touch me, let me know I ain't here by myself.
Stretch my night dreams into my day*

Stop short of falling apart if I go down.

11. Had, Took, Misled

*Words and music: Bernice Reagon,
© 1969*

I was at the University of Ohio one day in 1969, sitting in on an English class. The recording *Malcolm X Speaks* was playing, and in the middle of his "Ballots or Bullets" speech he said, "We been had, took, and misled." I wrote it down immediately, thinking that it would make a song, and on the plane going home I worked it out. The song was often sung by the Harambee Singers of Atlanta.

*Chorus:
Don't you know we been had
Don't you know we been took
Don't you know we been misled
We been had, we been took, we been misled.*

*Verses:
Well, the food on our table
For a long time we done grown.*

*Now we're packed in the cities
Where no seeds can be sown.*

*For a long time the four seasons
Came clear as a ringing bell.
Now the West world done messed up the weather
And this is a dying hell.*

*Now, don't get caught in the trick of
Trying to talk yourself free.
Mama say "Sticks and stones may break my bones
But child, talk will never hurt me."*

*The words of my song
I'm talking about my text
They were taken from the "Ballots or Bullets"
Speech of Malcolm X.*

12. Give Your Hands to Struggle

*Words and music: Bernice Reagon,
© 1969*

Septima Clark celebrated her 75th birthday in 1974 by winning election

to the Charleston, South Carolina, School Board. Half a century earlier, she had struggled in that same county to organize the NAACP and win for Black teachers the right to teach in the public schools in the city of Charleston. Whenever Septima Clark would talk about her battles for freedom, she would speak of the necessity to continue always in a state of struggle. Without struggle there is no friction, there is no movement, there is no life, and no future.

*If you see me stumble
Don't stand back and look on.
Reach out now, brother
Give your hands to struggle.*

*Refrain:
Give your hands to struggle. [4x]*

*If you feel my heart break
Don't just count the sound waves.
Hold me close now, baby
Give your arms to struggle.*

If you hear my love song

*Don't just pat my shoulder.
Help me go on, right on
Give your strength to struggle.*

*Then we'll be moving
We'll be really moving
Building up our union
If we give our all to struggle.*

SELECTED WORKS BY AND ABOUT BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON

Publications

We Who Believe in Freedom: Sweet Honey In The Rock Still On The Journey (Anchor Books, 1993). Editor and contributing author.

We'll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992). Editor and contributing author.

"'Nobody Knows the Trouble I See,' or 'By and By I'm Gonna Lay Down My Heavy Load,'" *The Journal of American History*, June 1991.

"Women as Culture Carriers in the Civil Rights Movement: Fannie Lou Hamer," in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torch-bearers, 1941-1965*, eds. Vicki L. Crawford, Jaqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods. Part of a sixteen-volume series, *Black Women in United States History* (Indiana University

Press, 1993 [Carlson Publishing, 1990]).

"The Lined Hymn as a Song of Freedom," *Black Music Research Bulletin*, Columbia College, Chicago, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1990. Foreword to *Re-imaging America: The Arts of Social Change*, eds. Mark O'Brien and Craig Little (New Society Publishers, 1989).

"African Diaspora Women: The Making of Cultural Workers," in *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, eds. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, and Andrea Benton Rushing (Howard University Press, 1987).

"Let the Church Sing 'Freedom,'" *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 7, 1987.

Compositions One: The Original Compositions of Bernice Johnson Reagon (Songtalk Publishing, 1986).

"Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (Kitchen Table Press, 1983).

Compositions and Productions (Theater, Film, Video)

"Frederick Douglass: The Lion Who Wrote History," Roja Productions/WETA-TV production for PBS, November 1994. Producer, performer, composer of soundtrack.

"Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions," a twenty-six-hour radio series produced by Smithsonian Institution and National Public Radio; broadcast began January 1994. Conceptual producer and host narrator.

"Songs Are Free: Bernice Johnson Reagon with Bill Moyers," 60-minute production of Public Affairs Television, 1991. Gail Pellett, producer and director.

"Roots of Resistance," film of Underground Railroad, PBS, American Experience Series, Roja Productions, 1990. Music consultant, composer, and music producer.

"We Shall Overcome," film, Ginger Productions, 1988. Music consultant.

"Eyes on the Prize," video series, Blackside Productions, 1987. Music consultant, performer, and music producer.

Sound Recordings

Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs, 1960-1966, originally issued by Smithsonian Institution Press as R023, 1980. Programming and booklet author. Reissued as Smithsonian Folkways 40084, 1997. Reissue produced by Bernice Johnson Reagon.

Sweet Honey In The Rock, *Sacred Ground*, EarthBeat! Records, 1995. Co-producer and performer.

Sweet Honey In The Rock, *I Got Shoes*, EarthBeat! Records, 1994. Co-producer and performer, recording and accompanying booklet.

Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions, four recordings on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1994. Producer, compiler, and accompanying essays.

Sweet Honey In The Rock, *Still On The Journey*, EarthBeat! Records, 1993. Co-producer and performer.

Sweet Honey In The Rock, *In This Land*, EarthBeat! Records, 1992. Co-producer and performer.

Sweet Honey In The Rock, *All For Freedom*, Music for Little People, 1989. Producer and performer.

Sweet Honey In The Rock, *Live at Carnegie Hall*, Flying Fish Records, 1988. Co-producer with Steve Rathe and performer.

Jailhouse Blues, Women's A Cappella Songs from Parohmen Penitentiary, Library of Congress field recordings, Rosetta Records, 1987. Contributing author to liner notes.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, *River of Life*, Flying Fish Records, 1987. Producer and performer.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, *Folk Songs: The South*, Folkways (2457), 1965.

ABOUT PAREDON RECORDS

Founded in 1969 by Barbara Dane and Irwin Silber, Paredon Records was part of a wave of cultural expression that accompanied the broad social movements of the mid-20th century.

The fifty titles released include some of the most relevant and moving song, poetry, and oratory of the times, created by the artists and leaders who lived them.

They are singular documents of the worldwide struggle for economic, racial, and social justice and national liberation.

Paredon Records was donated to the Smithsonian Institution in 1991 to ensure the availability of this material to posterity.

ABOUT SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Moses Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are available on high-quality audio cassettes, each packed in a special box along with the original LP liner notes.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings was formed to continue the Folkways tradition of releasing significant recordings with high-quality documentation. It produces new titles, and reissues of historic recordings from Folkways and other record labels. In collaboration with other companies it also produces instructional videotapes and recordings to accompany published books, as well as a variety of other educational projects.

The Smithsonian Folkways, Folkways, Cook, Dyer-Bennet, and Paredon record labels are administered by the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies. They are one of the means through which the Center supports the work of traditional artists and acts on its commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding.

You can find Smithsonian Folkways Recordings at your local record store. Smithsonian Folkways, Folkways, Cook, and Paredon recordings are all available through:

Smithsonian Folkways Mail Order
414 Hungerford Drive, Suite 444
Rockville, MD 20850
phone (301) 443-2314
fax (301) 443-1819
orders only 1 (800) 410-9815
(*Discover, MasterCard, and Visa accepted*)

For further information about all the labels distributed through the Center, please consult our internet site (<http://www.si.edu/folkways>), which includes information about recent releases and a database of the approximately 35,000

tracks from the more than 2,300 available recordings (click on Data Base Search).

Or request a printed catalogue by writing to: Catalogue, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 955 L'Enfant Plaza, SW, Suite 2600, Smithsonian Institution MRC 914, Washington, DC 20560, USA. Or use our catalogue request phone: (202) 287-3262, or e-mail folkways@aol.com

CREDITS

Originally produced by Barbara Dane,

Paredon Records P-1028, 1975

Originally engineered by Jonathon Thayer

All vocals by Bernice Johnson Reagon

Smithsonian Folkways reissue compiled and produced by Bernice Johnson Reagon with Amy Horowitz

Introduction by E. Ethelbert Miller

Essay and annotation by Bernice Johnson Reagon

Remastered by David Glasser at Air Show, Springfield, VA

Original tracks remixed with new tracks by Jim Robeson and

Bernice Johnson Reagon

Audio supervision by Pete Reiniger

Production coordinated by Mary

Monseur and Michael Maloney

Editorial assistance by Carla Borden and Peter Seitel

Front cover design by Richard

Montgomery and Rey Searles;

booklet designed by Rey Searles