

Personal Reflections: Lest I Forget the Civil Rights Movement, the Ligon Jubilee Singers, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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*Tell me, do you dream? I know you do.
Dreams, how real they seem.
That's why I dream.*

One of my fondest dreams became a reality when, in September 1967, I became the vocal music teacher at my high school alma mater, John W. Ligon, in Raleigh. My former teacher, Emily May Morgan Kelly, had taught music for more than forty years in the city's only high school for blacks. Mrs. Kelly had dedicated her life to exposing African American children to the best of classical choral literature.

During the 1950s, when I was a student at Ligon, it was considered an honor to be a part of a chorus and, especially, to be selected for one of the special ensembles. When I returned to Ligon as a teacher, that was no longer the case. European classical music had little appeal to many of the students. Some students' interests were sparked by the new electives that were designed to prepare them for a world of advancing technology. And a group of underprivileged and disadvantaged youth was being snared into a false vision of hope and fulfillment through the use of drugs such as marijuana and heroin. But an amazing number of drug users came from prominent families in Raleigh. They knew that when tested for the military draft into the Vietnam War, they would be rejected if a trace of any illegal substance were found.

Shocked, slightly bewildered, and overwhelmed, I faced a challenge to recruit young people to the choral program. Since class schedules had become final before school ended the previous year, I had to create a group that would meet before the regular school day began. I designed a class that exposed students to the rich cultural heritage of traditional African American music. An outgrowth of the class was the development of a pageantlike music-drama presentation entitled "Black Music in Historical Perspective." Auditions were held to select thirty-eight talented students—the number that could fit on a chartered bus with two chaperones when we traveled to perpetuate the singing of black music. Including members of the morning group and my regular chorus enrollment, one hundred voices sang at our first performance of Peter Wilhousky's arrangement of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," on the stage of the Raleigh's Memorial Auditorium. The

mission to revive an interest in the choral program at Ligon High School was accomplished.

The classes in the regular music curriculum—Mixed Chorus, Boys’ and Girls’ Ensembles, and Music Appreciation—were filled to capacity. The early-morning group became the Ligon Jubilee Singers, who performed throughout the city of Raleigh at schools and churches in black and white communities. Leading soloists and sectional leaders, to the surprise of teachers and students, were also star athletes, cheerleaders, and others. Between 1968 and 1971, before the integration of the school, the Ligon Jubilee Singers performed concerts in Virginia, New Jersey, New York, and Massachusetts, captivating audiences with selections ranging from plantation work songs and “signal songs” used along the Underground Railroad to concert arrangements of traditional spirituals. (The Fisk Jubilee Singers, from whom the Ligon Singers got their name, introduced the spiritual to the world in 1871.) William Dawson, Nathaniel Dett, Jester Hairston, and H. T. Burleigh were favorite black composers whose arrangements the Ligon Jubilee Singers performed. Some of my most unforgettable experiences occurred during my years as music director of the Jubilee Singers. In this article, I hope to convey the impact that the Civil Rights movement and the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had on my life and on the lives of my music students.

At sunset on April 4, 1968, a shot rang out. Dr. King, who had been standing on the balcony of his room (No. 306) at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, lay sprawled on the balcony floor. He had traveled to Memphis on a mission to lead a march in the city in support of striking sanitation workers. Walter Cronkite had almost completed his report on the *CBS Evening News* when he received the news that Dr. King had been wounded. All over the city of Raleigh, as in cities throughout the United States, families huddled together to hear the final word. It was after seven o’clock on April 4 when King was pronounced dead. CBS interrupted regular programming as Cronkite discussed King’s life and his contributions to the Civil Rights movement. The network presented footage of King’s speech “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” which he had delivered in Memphis on April 3 at Mason Temple, the headquarters of the Church of God in Christ. (This address has been called “prophetic,” as King had hinted at the end of the speech that he might not live to see the end of the Civil Rights movement.) No television reporters were on the scene when King was shot, because of an official curfew imposed in Memphis in an attempt to prevent civil rights violence. However, as soon as the media announced his death, riots and disturbances reportedly broke out in more than 125 cities in America. Students from St. Augustine’s College paraded through the neighborhoods in east Raleigh (where I lived), chanting words of protest.

On the afternoon of April 5, 1968, students at Ligon High School could hear a crowd of angry voices chanting, “Burn, baby, burn!” Later we learned that students from nearby Shaw University ran down Fayetteville Street in outrage. Hudson Belk, a department store close to the Shaw campus, was set ablaze. Sirens drowned out the angry voices as smoke fumes filled the air. It would have been difficult to contain my students in the classroom if the principal had not announced over the intercom that students leaving the building would be expelled for the rest of the year. I don’t remember discussing with

other teachers how they calmed their students, but I exclaimed to my students' watchful eyes and attentive ears, "You know those rioting must not be from Raleigh. Why would Raleigh citizens want to destroy their own property?" It angered me to see Dr. King's principle of nonviolent resistance being cast aside so soon. Then I began to share with the students some historical facts about the Civil Rights movement. The first SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), an offshoot of the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), had been organized on Shaw's campus in April 1960. The SCLC had been founded and led by Dr. King, who sought to promote harmony among blacks and whites as a war was waged against all forms of injustice. By the time of King's assassination, groups had formed in opposition to his philosophy of nonviolent resistance. We were witnessing this rejection in the cry for "black power" from militant students.

Some of Raleigh's civil rights leaders joined the group to calm the angry mob. When school was dismissed at Ligon, parents were waiting to escort their children home. Students who had to travel by public transportation were alarmed to see the National Guard patrolling the downtown area, using bayonets to control the actions of the protesters. Fear hovered over the city that day and persisted throughout the period until King's funeral.

Two of my talented Jubilee Singers lingered at the close of the day with questions about the Civil Rights movement and comments about their parents' involvement in the movement. I shared with them my involvement with the college students at Shaw University and St. Augustine's College from 1960 to 1962 in strategic workshops that prepared us to "sit in" and "stand in." We picketed in downtown Raleigh and protested nonviolently against segregation at lunch counters, public parks, theaters, and swimming pools. Once we were drenched with water sprinklers as we paraded on the lawn in front of the segregated Howard Johnson motel. I also told the students that renowned civil rights leaders had visited our city to outline plans for the 1963 March on Washington. I will always remember James Farmer, founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), because he ate dinner in my house after one of our strategy workshops at the Davie Street Presbyterian Church. A bus of Freedom Riders had stopped in Raleigh to aid our civil rights leaders in organizing citizens for picket lines. Some of the Freedom Riders camped out at the farm of a local white citizen who was active in the movement. Others slept at the homes of involved Raleigh citizens. Some people, afraid of losing their jobs for publicly protesting, contributed to the cause by providing meals for the weary marchers. Not until they arrived in South Carolina did the Freedom Riders experience trouble, and some were jailed, though they protested peacefully.

"Do you think that King's dream of racial equality will become a reality?" asked one of my students. I did not give an answer. I remember walking to the piano, sliding along the piano bench, skimming over the keys in a jazz-blues progression. For the first time, a melody with lyrics emerged. As I sang, the other student rushed to get a tape recorder. Was I being inspired from hearing the speech "I Have a Dream"? Could it have been surfacing—my own dream, which I envisioned after living one year in an International House with thirteen women from different cultures around the world? (In 1958

segregation laws prohibited my attending the University of North Carolina for graduate study. The state had to award me a grant to attend a university of my choice, and I chose the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.)

I wish it were possible for you to hear the soulful melody that I composed on that day, April 5, 1968. Here are the lyrics for “I Had a Dream Last Night.”

*I had a dream last night.
I dreamed that men of all races,
Forming one nation,
Would one day be in our history.
And love, justice, and equality,
We'd have these three.*

*I had a dream last night.
It took me wandering in space
To some unknown place,
Searching for peace and a little unity.
Lord, won't You please let these be?*

*And then I had the strangest dream.
An angel beckoned me near,
Pressed close to my ear.
I heard him say:
“Child, you're on your way. This is the day!
A day when dreams can drift out of sight.
A day when darkness must give way to light,
So truth can reign.”*

*OH! Oh! Oh, oh, oh!
I had another dream last night.*

I stopped and looked into the eyes of my students and added this “tag”:

*Tell me, do you dream? I know you do.
Dreams, how real they seem.
That's why I dream.*

The 1967–1968 school year ended, and the Ligon Jubilee Singers traveled to Asheville in the Blue Ridge Mountains and to the Luray Caverns in Virginia. For many, it was their first time to the mountains, and for all of us, a first time to the caverns. This was a period of peaceful reflection after a busy, eventful, and yet productive school year. We continued on to Richmond, Virginia, where we had been invited by a chorus member's relative to give a concert at a local church. The performing area was much smaller than the large churches and auditoriums to which we were accustomed. We made that adjustment by eliminating from our performance the long line of people portraying slaves

being driven from a slave ship to a plantation. (The wails and chants of the moving line of slaves set the mood for the songs of sorrow that followed as spontaneous cries against the conditions of life on the plantation.) We began the story by having the slaves huddle together after a day's work, and I provided narration to connect the origins of black music. Then a group of singers in the church in Virginia awed us with a song that they had created about Dr. King.

When we returned to school after summer vacation, the Jubilee Singers reminded me of that song. I began to arrange a piece for my group to perform, borrowing the Virginia group's chorus. I called our rendition "Po' Martin" and dedicated it to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Beginning with a poetic monologue, I set the mood for our bluesy folk piece.

Martin Luther King is dead, but blessed be wise Martin. He lived a life of nonviolence. He wanted peace amid the hatred and grief. He felt no humans were too low to stoop and lend a hand. We all shall reap, for he did sow a seed of love in man.

However, it is impossible to feel the power of "Po' Martin" without hearing it performed vocally.

(The group performs the following with sections of the chorus entering at random.)

Low Voices: *Martin Luther King is dead!*

Group 1: *Who killed po' Martin?*

Female Trio: *Po' Martin.*

Group 2: *It's a shame! Shame, shame, shame.*

Group 3: *What a waste! Lord, help us!*

Verse 1 (Solo Voice):

An assassin at the window of a Tennessee town. He waited until he saw him, and then he shot Martin Luther down.

Chorus (sung to an old spiritual, "Oh, I Know I've Been Changed"):

Oh, ain't it a shame!

Oh, ain't it a shame!

Oh, ain't it a shame!

They shot Martin Luther down.

Verse 2 (Solo Voice):

Martin Luther, yes he died, and the world ne'er forget all the doors Martin opened. Oh, he lives forever yet.

Chorus:

Oh, ain't it a shame!

Oh, ain't it a shame!

Oh, ain't it a shame!

They shot Martin Luther down.

Verse 3 (Mrs. Smith sings solo):

But remember at that same window, the Lord stood by Martin's side. For the blood of our Savior Martin claimed long before he died.

(Mrs. Smith continues):

No, it ain't no shame.

Oh no, it ain't no shame.

No, it ain't no shame.

To live and die in Jesus' name.

To follow Martin Luther's fame.

(The last line is repeated with all singing in harmony.)

(The song ends with every voice chanting Martin's name at a pitch they choose. This creates a dissonance that represents the pain and frustration experienced because of King's assassination.)

Martin Luther King! Martin Luther King!

(The final word, *Dead*, is spoken emphatically and is repeated over and over, with the voices diminishing until there is silence.)

Dead!

In the midst of bleakness and distress, and in exchange for despair, defeat, and destruction, Martin Luther King Jr. mustered up the faith to dream. The Ligon Jubilee Singers and their teacher dreamed as well. When the Ligon School was integrated in September 1972, the transition went smoothly. Elite whites from north Raleigh had been introduced to blacks from low- and middle-class environments through the Ligon Jubilee Singers' performances throughout the city. Though conflicts reportedly occurred in other schools, the Ligon School experienced no disturbances. The group called the Ligon Jubilee Singers dissolved as the high school students moved into other high schools in the city. The Ligon Choraliers, a group of junior high singers, emerged. This multicultural group warmed hearts in Raleigh with its repertoire of patriotic and folk songs geared toward establishing better relationships and respect for everyone. Today the Ligon School, established in 1954, is celebrating fifty years of excellence in the Raleigh community.

Ann Hunt Smith is a former teacher and student at Ligon High School in Raleigh. She wrote the song "Po' Martin" and has been a champion for change during her adult years. At the time of this article's publication, she was a composer, a playwright, and a music director for two outdoor dramas and an indoor theater production.