

**Bernice Johnson Reagon, *Eyes on the Prize Interview***

*The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle, 1954-1990*, edited by Clayborne Carson, et al. (New York: Viking, 1991), 143-145.

I know a lot of people talk about it being a movement and when they do a movement they're talking about buses and jobs and the ICC ruling, and the Trailways bus station. Those things were just incidents that gave us an excuse to be something of ourselves. It's almost like where we had been working before we had a chance to do that stuff was in a certain kind of space, and when we did those marches and went to jail, we expanded the space we could operate in, and that was echoed in the singing. It was a bigger, more powerful singing [...]

I like people to know when they deal with the movement that there are these specific things, but there is a transformation that took place inside of the people that needs to also be quantified in the picture. And the singing is just the echo of that. If you have a people who are transformed and they create the sound that lets you know they are new people, then certainly you've never heard it before. They have also never heard it before, because they've never been that before.

When I was in the mass meetings, I would be part of a group up at the front leading the songs. There would be Rutha Harris, Andrew Reed, Charlie Jones, Cordell Reagon, Charles Sherrod. We were all young people. The meetings always started with these freedom songs and the freedom songs were in-between all of the activities of the mass meetings. Most of the mass meeting was singing—there was more singing than there was talking. Most of the work that was done in terms of taking care of movement business had to do with nurturing the people who had come, and there would be one or two people who would talk but basically songs were the bed of everything. I'd had songs in college and high school and church, but in the movement all the words sounded differently. "This Little Light of Mine, I'm Going to Let It Shine," which I'd sung all my life, said something very different: "All in the street, I'm going to let it shine." I'd never even heard that before, 'cause, I mean, who would go into the street? That was not where you were supposed to be if you were an upstanding Christian person. "All in the jailhouse, I'm going to let it shine" -- all of these new concepts of where, if you said it, this is where you could be.

What I can remember is being very alive and very clear, the clearest I've ever been in my life. I knew that every minute, I was doing what I was supposed to do. That was the way it was in jail, too, and on the marches. In "We Shall Overcome" there's a verse that says "God is on our side," and there was a theological discussion that said maybe we should say, "We are on God's side." God was lucky to have us in Albany doing what we were doing. I mean, what better case would he have? So it was really like God would be very, very happy to be on my side. There's a bit of arrogance about that, but that was the way it felt.

I think Albany settled the issue of jail and I think songs helped to do that because in the songs you could just name the people who were trying to use this against you—Asa Kelley, who was the mayor, Chief Pritchett, who was the police. This behavior is new behavior for black people in the United States of America. You would every once in a while have a crazy black person going up against some white person and they would hang him. But this time, with a song, there was nothing they could do to block what we were saying. Not only did you call their names and say what you wanted to say, but they could not stop your sound. Singing is different than talking because no matter what they do, they would have to kill me to stop me from singing, if they were arresting me. Sometimes they would plead and say, "Please stop singing." And you would just know that your word is being heard. There was a real sense of platformness

and clearly empowerment, and it was just like saying, "Put me in jail, that's not an issue of power. My freedom has nothing to do with putting me in jail." And so there was this joy.