“You Do Not Own What You Cannot Control: An Interview with Activist and Folklorist Worth Long”
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“The biggest thing you wanted to have was a singing movement. So we learned and taught the songs of the movement everywhere we went. Selma, there’s certain songs out of Selma, Alabama, which identify that movement. The song in Mississippi was Fannie Lou Hamer’s ‘Go Tell It on the Mountain.’ The song in Selma was ‘Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around.’ The song in Albany, GA, ‘Oh, Pritchett, Oh Kelly.’ Every movement was identified by the topical songs that were developed that did two things, maybe more.

“First of all, it brought solidarity and strength to the group. The second thing was that it articulated the feelings of the group. For instance, I would know what song you were going to sing as you marched downtown, as you tried to get people mobilized to go out the door. ‘Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around,’ or whatever it was.

“What I am talking about now is movement culture. There were elements of movement culture that helped you fight a battle during that particular time, by reinforcing people’s group solidarity, so that they felt that they could be strong even though they were afraid.

“You generally encoded song into the movement culture, songs that were from the church, from the traditional church. So you didn’t sing opera. You sang spirituals, labor songs that had been converted and transformed into movement song. And these songs generally conveyed the message that you needed to convey to strengthen people and also, in a topical way, to tell the story. “O Pritchett, O Kelly”: that’s the police chief and the mayor of Albany, Ga. And you can look at the song and what the song says, and it tells you in a real sense some of the things that you need to know for that occasion.

“For instance, what song do you sing for the Eucharist? Black folks sing ‘I Know It Was the Blood Saved Me.’ So there are appropriate songs that first of all articulate what it is you are trying to say, and, secondly, that are appropriate to the occasion. The other part was the sermon style. When you are up in a church, trying to get a crowd to do something, to go out, and there are four hundred policemen, you better call on more than the Lord. You had better call on some very good, traditional, what I call, traditional oratorical skills.

“You are talking about something more when I say traditional. There are certain sermons that my father preached that are in the community. They tell a story and they are encoded. One good sermon is “The Eagle Stirreth the Nest.’ C.L. Franklin, Aretha Franklin’s dad, sold a million copies of that thing. It tells a story. In *The Land Where the Blues Began* (a documentary film by Alan Lomax, John Bishop, and Worth Long), you hear a man preach the sermon, ‘The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest’: And the little eagle is in the nest. And the mama eagle comes in and brings the food to the eagle. It’s a feather nest. It is a soft, wonderful nest until a certain point. At a certain point, the mama starts putting thorns in the nest, less food. It becomes uncomfortable for the bird because it is time for the bird to fly. It is time for the bird to fly so she is stirring the next.

“So sometimes in the Freedom Movement people would use that as an analogy to stress that it is time for change, it is time for you to go out there on your own with your own wings, to spread your wings and to fly. I heard that sermon preached, and people would fall out. But during that particular time that was one of the sermons that would stir people. So you don’t have to preach the sermon as a speaker, but you can refer to it because people know it and they believe it, they believe there is a time, there is a correct time, you need to fly, you need to soar.

“Because people who were afraid would say ‘I would go out with you and march with you, I would go out that door, except that I’m violent. I might hit somebody.’ Basically they’re saying they’re afraid. So I would say things like, 'I know you would, I know you’d go out there and you’d hit four hundred policemen in the face.’ I said, ‘I’m scared too, but then we’re a group, we’re solid, we’re together, and we’re right. That is not to say that God is on our side, but we’re right in this matter. And why don’t you just go on and join the line? I’m scared, but come with me. We’ll be two scared people out there confronting these police.’

“Sometimes somebody would say, ‘You’re gonna take those kids out there in that street?’ You’ve got to be ready. If I tried to add logic to the situation, that wasn’t really going to work. So the ministers in SNCC—it was full of ministers—they would basically move to one thing or the other, to traditional oratory or to song. And song would knock out your argument. It sounds irrational, but you can answer a question of fear with song. You hear your strength when you sing loud in a group of three hundred people. There is a certain kind of feeling of strength that you have that is unlike anything else that I know.

“So the songs that were traditional songs were the major songs. ‘Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn us Around.’ If you’re gonna move out, you’re not gonna sing the song, ‘This May Be the Last Time,’ which is a beautiful song:

This may be the last time
This may be the last time children
This may be the last time
May be the last time, I don’t know.

“No, no. It may be the last time we have to sing together. It’s the wrong message. So you learn appropriate and inappropriate behavior as it relates to mass movement. Now there’s another thing. There are toasts and poems that people know. ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’ was at one time called the Negro National Anthem.

Lift every voice and sing
Till Earth and Heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies and liberty
Let our rejoices rise
High as the listening skies
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

“That is something that can shield? Anyone with any kind of sense would not march ten people through four hundred policemen, but ten people followed by about three-hundred-and-ninety more can do it if they have a common sense of purpose and they buttress that by song. So song was very important in the movement and the further we went into the movement the more they pulled up these songs that were traditional and were folklore in a real sense within the ethnic community.

“Everywhere I went there was music and songs and lullabies. I had a five state area, so my recreation was going up to people and talking to them about their wisdom, their folk wisdom. I didn’t collect anything because I couldn’t do that and do what I was doing. So I gave my tape recorder that I had away to someone who did, who recorded songs of mass meetings. Even the mass meeting was structured in a traditional way, almost like a church service but there was freedom, the word ‘freedom,’ instead of a religious reference. See we changed the songs, we secularized the songs and made them liberation songs. So that worked”