

BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON 2008

These days, I come as 'songtalker,' one who balances talk and song in the creation of a live performance conversation with those who gather within the sound of my voice.

As a student leader and activist in the Albany Movement, I sang and stood in the sound of the congregational singing of the freedom songs charging the air we breathed. For the first time, I understood how the singing not only pulled us together, but became our articulate collective testimony to all who stood within the sound.

For more than 45 years Bernice Johnson Reagon has been a major cultural voice for freedom and justice; singing, teaching—speaking out against racism and organized inequities of all kinds. A child of Southwest Georgia, an African American woman's voice, born in the struggle against racism in America during the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s. Reagon's life and work supports the concept of community based culture with an enlarged capacity for mutual respect: for self, for those who move among us who seem to be different than us, respect and care for our home, the environment—including the planet that sustains life as we know it.

Reagon was born in Dougherty County, outside of Albany Georgia the 3rd child of Beatrice and Rev Jessie Johnson. Home, church and school were partners within the small rural African American community that sheltered the Johnson family enclave. Reagon counts her participation in the Civil Rights Movement while a college student at Albany State College (from which was expelled after participating in a demonstration for which she and others participating were jailed) as a transformative rebirthing. She was a member of the original SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) Freedom Singers formed in 1962 by SNCC field secretary Cordell H. Reagon, and in 1966, a founding member of the Atlanta-based Harambee Singers.

Song and singing has remained a constant in her life. In 1973 while a graduate student of history at Howard University and vocal director of the DC Black Repertory Theater, she formed the internationally renowned African American women's a cappella ensemble Sweet Honey In The Rock. She led the group until retirement early 2004.

Perhaps no individual today better illustrates the transformative power and instruction of traditional African American music and cultural history than

Bernice Johnson Reagon, who has excelled equally in the realms of scholarship, composition, and performance. She is Professor Emeritus of History at American University, Curator Emeritus at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, and served as the 2002–2004 Cosby Chair of Fine Arts at Spelman College (her alma mater) in Atlanta, GA. Two of her major works are seminal to the study of this tradition: *Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions* and *Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery*. Reagon served as principal scholar, conceptual producer, host for Peabody Award-winning, *Wade in the Water*, the 26 show series produced by National Public Radio and Smithsonian Institution (premier broadcast 1984). She was the score composer for the Peabody Award-winning film series produced by WGBH TV, *Africans in America* (broadcast in a PBS documentary film series in 1998).

Dr. Reagon has served as music consultant, composer, and performer for several film and video projects, including the award-winning *Eyes on the Prize*, the Emmy-winning *We Shall Overcome*, and the feature film *Beloved*. In 2003, she created the music and libretto for the Robert Wilson production, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, which premiered in Germany and has also been presented in Italy, Spain, England, New York, Melbourne. In this work, Reagon's music drew upon her intimate and long term study and performance of African American music spanning 19th and 20th century genres. Nov/Dec 2005, *Temptation* completed a run at the Paris Opera House de Garnier (the first African American cast to play in the house since the 19th century) to sell-out audiences. The libretto for the production was inspired and adapted from a translation of the 19th century Gustav Flaubert novel of the same title. Reagon, with her daughter/collaborator Toshi Reagon and jazz pianist/composer Jeri Allen, was the score composer of the HBO Peabody award winning film "Beah: A Black Woman Speaks" produced by Jonathan Demme and LisaGay Hamilton. She composed a new work, "Liberty or Death," commissioned by the MUSE Women Choir of Cincinnati for the opening of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (premier, June 2004).

Her pioneering work as a scholar, teacher, and artist have been recognized with the Heinz Award for the Arts and Humanities (2003), the Leeway National Award for Women in the Arts (2000), the Presidential Medal for contribution to public understanding of the Humanities (1995), and the MacArthur Fellowship (1989).

Her publications include: *We Who Believe in Freedom: Sweet Honey In The Rock, Still on the Journey; We'll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African-American Gospel Composers*; and more recently *If You Don't Go, Don't*

Hinder Me: The African American Sacred Song Tradition. She compiled and wrote the booklet for the two-CD collection *Voices of the Civil Rights: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1965* (Smithsonian Folkways Records).

Among her solo recordings are *Give Your Hands to Struggle* (1975, re-released by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings in 1997) and *River of Life* (Flying Fish, 1986). She has produced many of Sweet Honey In The Rock recordings, including *Sacred Ground* (1995), *Still On The Journey* (1993), and *In This Land* (1995), all on Earthbeat! /Warner; the children's recording *All for Freedom* (1989) and *I Got Shoes* (1995) on the Music for Little People label; *Selections: Sweet Honey In The Rock, 1976-1988* on Rounder Records (1997); *Freedom Song* (Sony, 2001, sound score for the TNT film of the same title 2000); *Still the Same Me* (Rounder Records for younger audiences), and more recently *Alive in Australia, Sweet Honey In the Rock* (FreedomSong, 2002, Australian release only).

Bernice Johnson Reagon lives in Washington, DC.