Rhythm and Blues protest songs: voices of resistance

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

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M.Div. INTERDENOMINATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTER, 1994

RHYTHM AND BLUES PROTEST SONGS: VOICES OF RESISTANCE

Advisor: Josephine Bradley, Ph.D.

Dissertation dated: May 2007

This study was an investigation of seven selected rhythm and blues black protest songs, from 1964 to 1975, and their relationship to black empowerment during the era of the Black Power Movement.

The songs were analyzed using content analysis and revealed three expected themes of self/black identity, racial equity and self-determination. A fourth theme, social change, evolved during the study. The study focused on the political, cultural and economic ramifications, especially of black music, as a form of protest against a system that proved to be one of inequality, and prejudicial segregation in every aspect of the black life. The rhythm and Blues black protest songs were seen as efforts to empower the black community to take responsibility for its own survival.

Of the seven artists who participated in the Black Power Movement, Nina Simone, Curtis Mayfield and Sam Cooke were the most prolific musical contributors to
the protest movement of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in its efforts to deal with segregation. The four musicians wrote and performed music that was geared specially for transformations in social justice and to engage the American society, both black and white people, in substantial and lasting social change. The music of the other artists was instrumental in bringing Rhythm and Blues into a revolution. The musical revolutionaries were James Brown, Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, and Stevie Wonder. The analysis, however, did not reveal whether or not the rhythm and blues black protest songs contributed to or led to black empowerment during the Civil Rights-Black Power era.
RHYTHM AND BLUES PROTEST SONGS: VOICES OF RESISTANCE

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF ARTS IN HUMANITIES

BY

EDDIE YANCEY

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MAY 2007
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

O God, You have taught me from my youth; and to this day, I declare

Your wondrous works (Psalm 71:17). In the name of our Peace, Yeshua

I first acknowledge and honor the Master and Creator and the beginning and the end. I thank the support staff, and my dissertation committee, Dr. Josephine Bradley, Dr. Timothy Askew, and Dr. Karamo Barrow. I pay homage to my fore-loved whose KA (Spirit) helped me through this and other endeavors. Dearly, I am thankful to my loved ones and friends: Mama Mia Yancey, “our” wife (Tonya), my children (Destiny, Princess, Precious, Ebony, Travis, and Trelle), my grandchildren (KK, Kam, Kia), my brothers (Arthur, Sr., Earl, LeRoy, LeOtis, Donnell, Khalid, and Mike), my sister (Claudia), brother Eaves, the ministers, and the faithful.
# ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>BAM</td>
<td>Black Arts Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>BPP</td>
<td>Black Panther Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>BET</td>
<td>Black Entertainment Television</td>
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<tr>
<td>CORE</td>
<td>Congress of Racial Equality</td>
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<tr>
<td>FBI</td>
<td>Federal Bureau of Investigation</td>
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<tr>
<td>KKK</td>
<td>Ku Klux Klan</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAACP</td>
<td>National Association for the Advancement of Colored People</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOI</td>
<td>Nation of Islam</td>
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<tr>
<td>R and B</td>
<td>Rhythm and Blues</td>
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<tr>
<td>SNCC</td>
<td>Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>U. S.</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<td>UNIA</td>
<td>United Negro Improvement Association</td>
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the revolutionary significance of seven selected Rhythm and Blues protest songs, from 1964 to 1974, as they relate to black empowerment, black identity, and racial equality. The study focused on the political utilization of black music as a form of protest against a system that proved to be one of inequality, and segregation in every aspect of black life. This is an exploratory study of the rhythm and blues black protest songs that were seen as efforts to empower the black community to take responsibility for its own survival. Harold Cruse in his book, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, states that any empowerment efforts by the black community must simultaneously focus on cultural, economic, and political matters.¹ Many challenges confronted the black community in its struggle for survival and its demands for the right to humane treatment by the dominant society. Thus, not only rhetoric, but all forms of survival strategies were deemed essential to the struggle, including militant force (as engaged in by the Black Panther Party), art, literature, and music.

Significance of Study

This research, therefore, is significant in that it provides an interpretation of an art form, Rhythm and Blues protest music, with the socio-cultural, political and economic protest of African-Americans during the height of the Black Civil Rights protests, especially the Black Power Movement. There is limited research on the value and relevance of black protest music as a humanistic and artistic transformation for African-Americans in their struggles for racial equity, self-determination, and racial identity, thereby, leading to black empowerment. Further, this study offers an initial examination of the revolutionary significance of the black Rhythm and Blues protest songs through the lens of a cultural and political framework that provides a form of protest through a musical genre. The analysis offered herein provides an opportunity to clearly acknowledge and examine the political and social commentary on the life of a group defined and treated as being on the margins of American society. In addition, this research adds to the body of African-American Studies by providing an analysis of the black artist as creator of protest songs with a humanistic purpose—that of placing a marginalized group at the center of the study with the goal of self-empowerment.

Individuals connected with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were very adamant about the challenge of self-empowerment with the statement:

In an attempt to find a solution to our dilemma, we propose that our organization (SNCC) should be black-staffed, black controlled, and black financed. . . . It is also important that a black organization (devoid of cultism) be projected to our people so that it can be demonstrated that such organizations are viable.²

Moreover, music as art influences the people's self-definition or specifically in the lives of black people, their black identity and their level of black consciousness. The black artists analyzed in this study have continued a pattern that has been for white Americans a cultural disconnection between the African heritage and the relevance of music in the lives of African-Americans. As Angela Davis comments: "Black people were able to create with their music an aesthetic community of resistance, which in turn encouraged and nurtured a political community of active struggle for freedom." Van Deburg is very emphatic in his position that Rhythm and Blues provides transmissions of historical memory and serves as a repository for providing motivation for raising the level of black consciousness. The lyrics emerged as the embodiment of oppression, resistance, transformation, but perhaps most importantly, as a strategy for self-identity and survival. The artists are joining the activists in that the Black Panther Party, SNCC and the Black Power Movement in the drive for racial equality.

Primarily, while the focus was on the latter part of the civil rights struggles by African-Americans for racial equity, any analysis has to include a discussion and recognition of the earlier Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Further, scholars such as James B. Stewart, refer to this era as the Civil Rights—Black Power Movement, especially in their analysis of black music from rhythm and blues to


hip hop. Many blacks appear to have given up on Christianity's philosophy of "turn the other cheek," civil disobedience and nonviolence. As a result, the ideology of Black Power arose as a protest against the cry by the white political structure to "Go Slow." Black Power became the central focus, however, because it was a proactive endeavor in embracing the Black Arts Movement as part of the survival thrust necessary for social change. The self empowerment approach of blacks in control of their organizations was unlike the earlier Civil Rights Movement protests led by King in that it was an inclusive approach to social changes that of non-violence. The black rhythm and blues artists had limited personal involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, but many artists, such as Nina Simone, took the role of activist during the Black Power era in the struggle for racial equality.

**Factors Impacting the Continuation of Black Protest**

Ron Bowman asserted that, "Rhythm and Blues originated from the sociological, industrial and technological changes that took place in the United States just prior to and during World War II (1939-1945)." Changes included the widespread shift in American demographics, especially for African-Americans, who because of better paying wartime employment opportunities, began the great black migration. The migration saw blacks moving from the south to the Midwest, to the Northeast and to the cities of the West.

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Coast. This shift in demographics included the changes in the music of the day—the urbana sounds of Rhythm and Blues were created.\(^7\)

There were three recognized sociological changes of World War II that had impact on Rhythm and Blues music: first, the invention of the electric guitar in the late 1930s and second, the discovery of the German-invented tape records by the music industry, which made recordings of music a reality. Such recording companies as Atlantic and Chess led not only to the recording of music, but also the production and distribution of the rising Rhythm and Blues songs. The recording of music made it accessible to a mass audience. People began to purchase music for their listening pleasure at home. The third change was the introduction of television in the late 1940s and the increase in the number of radio stations that catered to the newly emerging black urban audience.\(^8\) Another challenge involved the recognition by African-American veterans that while they had fought for democracy and freedom on foreign soil, they were, upon their return to America, treated as second class citizens. Their wartime bravery had not guaranteed a move toward first class citizenship. These sociological changes also impacted the economic life of the performers and creators of black music in that they received pay for recordings of their songs, and the composing of their music.

Tremendous legal adjustments were made from the end of World War II forward. President Harry Truman banned segregation in the armed forces; President Dwight Eisenhower ended discrimination in federal assistance programs and Civil Rights

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\(^7\)Ibid.

\(^8\)Ibid.
committees were assembled to investigate and report on racial injustices. While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 set the stage for the end of Jim Crow, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. led to violence in black communities. There were race riots in Harlem, Watts (California) as well as other parts of the United States. Between 1965 and 1968, there were 150 riots, and in 1967, 83 people were killed and 1,800 were injured in riots. Property damage was estimated to amount to 100 million dollars.\(^9\) It is this era of violence, denial of rights, and limited efforts to correct an otherwise corrupt political struggle that gave birth to the Black Power Movement as well as black protest songs found in the genre of rhythm and blues. Black musicians, artists and intellectuals were seeking vital strategies to engage a movement toward self-pride, and self-empowerment.

Further, the 1960s brought about change African-Americans had demanded by their participation in the Civil Rights Movement as well as those African-Americans who cared about socio-cultural change for all Americans. However, African-Americans, like all Americans of this era, were confronted with economic realities such as major economic recessions, limited economic progress, the shift from manufacturing industries to service industries, job shifts by regions, as well as the ongoing efforts to maintain a system of economic deprivation for African-Americans. American scholars introduced the notion of a “culture of poverty” with three emerging themes:

- There were persisting cultural patterns which helped explain the behavior of various ethnic, racial and income groups.

• Destitution stemmed from economic problems and not cultural deprivation.
• Racism blocked aspirations of minority groups.  

As a follow-up to the culture of poverty theme, President Lyndon Johnson introduced the “War on Poverty” in 1964. However, it was acknowledged that the programs set up under the War on Poverty to address elimination of economic disparities did not provide for the people involved, or what they felt that they wanted and needed the most: jobs and a fair level of income. It was as though, poverty with all of its negative ramifications and denial of opportunities, was rediscovered during the 1960s and 1970s. Musicians rediscovered it with their music; for example, Stevie Wonder’s *Living for the City*.

Hence, this time period saw an increase in the poets, writers and musicians from the black community who created their own written and musical response to the world in which they were living. Different musical genres began to emerge and rhythm and blues was one of them.

Furthermore, in the 1960s, three styles of Rhythm and Blues emerged: 1) the Chicago Soul which was influenced by gospel music songs; 2) the Motown sound that was a combination of the political songwriting with straightforward vocal delivery by the artists; and 3) the Southern soul which was constituted mostly of gospel.  

Of social significance was the fact that blacks developed a musical style that was an integral part of

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11 Bowman, *Rhythm and Blues*. 
a much larger black subculture, that is, language, fashion, demeanor and attitudes. The sociological as well as musical changes brought about philosophical and ideological changes for blacks.

The historical moment, as seen through the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement in addition to the Civil Rights Movement, presented the need to seek black identity, self-determination and racial equality in a more practical, realistic way and in a more proactive manner. Black identity, related to whether or not Negroes were to be called black and/or Afro-American or whether or not wearing an Afro hairstyle and African clothes provide the level of consciousness needed for being black in America. On the other hand, self-determination was seen as the drive to determine and build one’s own destiny. However, both identity and self-determination were essential parts of the race issue that America lived with during the era under study. Even the few concessions that emerged as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, desegregation of public schools, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, were met with massive resistance by some white southerners. For example, there was the Birmingham bombing of the church that killed four little girls and there was the cry by black America of “Black Power.” These events, in addition, to others embedded the historical moment with protest, especially through the words and music of black artists. Moreover, the 1960s proved to be an unusual historical era for African-Americans. There was a definite emergence of being black and being proud of it.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{12}}\text{ibid.}\]
Larry Neal posited that “The Black Arts Movement and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American’s desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics, the other with the art of politics.”\(^\text{13}\) Hence, there are black scholars who argue that black music, whether gospel, spirituals, Rhythm and Blues, or the blues, is a form of protest. As a form of protest, the music delivered the message of dissatisfaction with and the necessity of living under “a dream deferred.”\(^\text{14}\) The state of affairs of the United States left its mark on the minds and souls of black people. Thus, being an oral people, the music for black Americans became a voice and the musicians became the griots of each era of activist based social movements.

**Music and Black America**

Moreover, music emerged as the liberator for African-Americans. The music, especially Rhythm and Blues, provided a venue for the communal sharing of joys, pains, hopes and liberation of the enslaved mind. Music became the authentic articulation of the African-American struggle for recognition, liberation and equality. Scholars maintained that music for black Americans provided for “aural public space” which details their collective experiences. Mark Anthony Neal stated that music is a political act, that is, it has the “power to stir the masses; it has a language of its own and that music was a force that both contained the stories of a people and offered them the forum


to express their ideas with one another and the world."¹⁵ Ultimately, many scholars concluded that Rhythm and Blues black protest music served as a major factor in the social change and social justice trials and tribulations of black Americans especially during the Civil Rights-Black Power movements.

Thus, black music, during the era under investigation as in the past, was considered a prevailing voice in addressing the racial disparities in America and many songs rose primarily as a cry that said, "a change is gonna come."¹⁶ The music demonstrated the notion that something needed to happen in order to deal with and/or change the conditions under which Americans lived. Larry Neal stated:

> The two movements postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas—one black, one white. The black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of black people. Therefore, the main thrust of this new breed of contemporary writers is to confront the contradictions arising out of the black man’s experience in the racist West.¹⁷

Not only the writers’ words, but also the musicians’ lyrics, resonated with the challenges of black invisibility as well as blacks being the recipients of the hostility of white Americans. The music proclaimed the frustration and uncertainty of black life in America, which based on the actions of the dominant group, placed a limited value on black life regardless of age, sex, class and gender. For example, Nina Simone is said to have used her recording of *Mississippi Goddam* as a response to the horrific church


bomblng of four little black girls in Birmingham, Alabama. *Mississippi Goddam* solidified Simone’s interest in, as well as her acknowledgement of, the civil rights movement. Two events led to the writing and performance of the song: the aforementioned bombing of the Birmingham Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the murder of Medgar Evers. For Simone, the two events were her socio-political “road to Damascus... it came as a rush of fury, hatred and determination. In church language, the truth entered me and I ‘came through.’”\(^8\) The song called forth the reaction of black people to the disparities of being black in America. The song was released in 1963 and became the unofficial anthem of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) Mississippi Summer Program in 1964. Ward maintained that *Mississippi Goddam* was the closest Rhythm and Blues got in the early 1960s to King’s “Letter from the Birmingham Jail.”\(^9\) Finally, it was out of these types of tragedies and other race related struggles that Rhythm and Blues protest songs were often used as an effort by black American musicians to tell of the pain, frustration, violence and misery confronting blacks on a daily basis in America.

Hence, the challenges as to what constitute Rhythm and Blues protest music, or ways in which Rhythm and Blues protest music differs from any other black music genre, became critical ones in the examination of the intent of the music. Rhythm and Blues black protest songs were initially referred to as “race music.” One can argue that there is


a difference in the genre based on the era in which it emerged as the popular voice for and of black America. While in the late 1950s, Rhythm and Blues songs generated a world audience, the thrust of this particular music came from and was written for black people. It can be further surmised that the black musician primarily wrote for the black audience while it may well be perceived that the music is black music because of the artist and the lyrics. In many instances, the songs addressed black empowerment through acknowledgement of and acceptance of one’s blackness (for example, I’m Black and I’m Proud by James Brown), and one’s self-determination. The songs had many aspirations, particularly as the struggle shifted to a more demanding or radical agenda. The black protest music appeared to adjust, in that it seemed to address the prevailing issues faced by black Americans. The acknowledged era of blacks forcefully and openly challenging the white-dominated political agenda brought about changes, not only in the general black population, but that of the black popular artists. The musicians seemed compelled by both the black civil rights movements, as well as the continued black struggle, for equality and liberation. Thus, the music, with the agenda of political consciousness, emerged as an entity of protest for blacks who sensed an awakening within themselves for social change which would culminate in black empowerment and self-determination.

Moreover, it seems that the black artist was trying to tell the world of the plight of blacks. The musician used music as the mechanism of choice to voice the plight of blacks because of its power to capture the minds of people. In other words, what is it that music does for people that the spoken word alone cannot do? For example, the spoken word is for the moment delivered to a particular audience at a particular time, while music can be
heard over the airwaves throughout any given day at any given time. It is, thus, a penetrating force sending its message forth to the people, regardless of race, in a repetitive manner. People listen to the music, it seems, because of the power of the music to create within people behavioral changes. Music causes people to react to a situation or it can be used to provoke, to soothe, to inspire, to bond people together. It has the elements to continuously engage the listener in a call and response with the artist. The motif, that is, the theme, is one of repetitiveness of thought—such that the songs became revolutionary as they told the story of injustice, as they served as the call for social change and social justice. Moreover, the songs challenged black Americans to take the initiative in instilling the notion of black empowerment into their daily lives. Mahalia Jackson comments: “There’s something about music that is so penetrating that your soul gets the message. No matter what trouble comes to a person, music can help him face it.” Perhaps Jackson speaks with the voice for the artists’ under study when she states:

A song must do something for me as well as for the people that hears it. I can’t sing a song that does not have a message. If it doesn’t have the strength it can’t lift you.

Further, if music has the power to change people’s behavior, then it is understandable that music has the power to call forth a need for people to reexamine who they are in America. Also, music has the power to increase the acknowledgement and acceptance by black Americans of their blackness with pride. According to R. M. Sellers


21 Ibid., 446.
and others, there are four ideologies that African-Americans utilize in defining their racial identity. These ideologies are: (a) a nationalist ideology, which stresses the uniqueness of being of African descent; (b) an oppressed minority ideology which stresses the similarities between African-Americans and other oppressed groups; (c) an assimilationist ideology, which stressed the similarities between African-Americans and the rest of society; and (d) a humanist ideology, which stressed the commonalities of all humans. 22 Thus, in the end, blacks actively engaged in black empowerment struggles as a collective act. Hence, Rhythm and Blues is a form of protest because of its longevity and its ability to promote action. It was this power of music that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s that black people called forth when the pain and devastation of inequality became the controlling factor related to the treatment of blacks in America in the twentieth century. Hence, the matrix of domination, that is racial inequality, oppression and subjugation, controlled and contained blacks within a given space. Thus, a content analysis as a methodological approach allowed for a thorough examination of the power and meaning of the messages of the artists in their Rhythm and Blues black protest songs.

Seemingly, Rhythm and Blues protest songs were geared toward a more subversive context of blackness and/or socio-political connotations. The music, with its mainstream music credence, and the hard rhythm and bass beats, represented a music

fusion of black expression from the musical genres of jazz, soul, spirituals, gospel, blues, rock and roll and freedom songs. For example, James Brown's *Say It Loud, (I'm Black and I'm Proud)*, was recognized as addressing the challenges of racism and black identity. Most importantly, the power of the words cannot be overlooked as demonstrated in the lyrics of Brown's masterpiece:

> Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves
> We tired of beatin' our heads against the wall
> And workin' for someone else
> A-look-a-here
> There's one thing more I got to say right here
> Now, now we're people, we're like the birds and the bees
> We rather die on our feet than keep livin' on our knees.  

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In essence, rhythm and blues told a story of the plight of black Americans during the Black Power era. The plight of black Americans was set to music with a beat that enticed people to listen, not only to the rhythm, but the lyrics. It was the lyrics that told them how to act, and what to think about their social conditions; thus, distinguishing the rhythm and blues genre from the blues. The blues is the commentary on one’s sadness and inability to change, or in some cases, to change the state of one’s affairs, as well as that of a group of people. Rhythm and Blues, like its counterparts of jazz, blues and gospel, is not just an entertainment venue, but rather a tool of resistance and an avenue toward freedom, self-empowerment, self-definition and independence, struggle for providing a level of consciousness, self-knowledge and transformation for the listeners.

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Further, some scholars have noted that when civil and social institutional structures fail, popular cultural music styles also change in an effort to respond to the continued display and political activity surrounding the social ills which some groups within the social structure are confronted. For instance, a popular mainstream Rhythm and Blues song like, *A Change Is Gonna Come* by Sam Cooke, emerged as a song that paralleled the theme of the struggles for civil rights. As with the music that is, the spirituals and slavery, that related struggles of the past, the Rhythm and Blues black protest music also emerged as a musical form that addressed the politically based objectives of the dominant ruling group in America.

Likewise, the term protest, as it relates to black music, is often theoretically, compared to the Black Power/Black Nationalist music genre heard in such music as Elaine Brown’s *Seize the Time*, the Last Poets’ *Niggas Are Scared of Revolution*, the Watts Prophets’ *I’ll Stop Calling You Niggaz*, the Lumpen’s *Bobby Must Be Free*, Gil Scott-Heron’s *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, and Sam Cooke’s *A Change Is Gonna Come*. Thus, the musical issue is whether or not the various civil rights movements provoked the music or if the music provoked the Movements or did the two, the music and the Movements, emerge simultaneously? It can be surmised, therefore, that historically, as well as analytically, that black songs or previous eras were most often connected to a particular event and/or time period just as the Rhythm and blues protest songs specifically affixed themselves to a particular Movement—the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement. For example, when people hear the freedom song, *We Shall Overcome*, it is almost always associated with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.
When people hear the spirituals, *The Old Ship of Zion, Steal Away, or Wade in the Water*, the immediate association was with slavery and the escape to freedom. Molefi Asante notes that “While lyrics provided a motivational thrust, there was still a need for programs of collective consciousness as demonstrated by the Black Power Movement, especially in Lowdes County, Mississippi and Alabama. . . . There can be no effective discussion of a united front, a joint action, a community of interest until we come to good terms with collective consciousness, the elementary doctrine of economic, political and social action.” Further, Asante commented that language is liberatory, especially as seen in the language of the Black Power Movement ideology. Asante noted that “There can be no freedom until there is freedom of the mind. The first rule for the freedom of the mind is the freedom of language.” Black protest songs were the example of the freedom of language with the expectations that it would lead to freedom of the mind and the demand for social change.

**Rhythm and Blues as Academic Discourse**

Hence, this study pursued the argument for more academic discourse that would provide the music of the people, Rhythm and Blues black protest music, the validity needed to make it a subject worthy of academic consideration, that is, discussion in the college classroom in Music courses, African-American Studies courses and Humanities courses. The inclusion of the black protest music in the academy requires a framework

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25 Ibid., 41.
by which to examine the phenomenon of Rhythm and Blues protest music as an acceptable music genre. A study analyzing Rhythm and Blues protest songs as part of the academic arena emerged for several reasons. First, there are very few studies conducted by African-American Studies scholars concerning the Rhythm and Blues protest songs and their focus on black empowerment during the era of massive black civil rights struggles and Movements. Moreover, systematic analysis of Rhythm and Blues black protest songs has been relatively slow in the acceptance of the music as a valid form of music and as a literary genre in the academy. This research has provided some insight into the Rhythm and Blues debate. Second, many studies detailed the nature of the rhetoric of the songs, while other scholars examined the nature of protest songs alone. However, few studies examined the relationship between the music and major events that may have occurred in a designated historical moment such as the Civil Rights Movement-Black Power Movement. Lastly, the analysis of Rhythm and Blues black protest songs was viewed from the perspective of its functionality, that is, as entertainment and as a commodity. Most research to date, with the exception of the James B. Stewart essay in *The Journal of African American History*, “Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music From Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop,”26 did not suggest an investigation of Rhythm and Blues protest songs and their relationship to black empowerment, thereby viewing the music, its significance and its relevancy through the lens of blackness. Kerran L. Sanger wrote, “In spite of the

centrality of songs in black protest, however, relatively little scholarly work has been
done to account for its incredible appeal to African-Americans as a communication
outlet. Brian Ward posited:

The historiography of slavery is full of attempts to reconstruct antebellum black
consciousness from what we know of popular culture of slaves, and there have
been numerous attempts to use blues, jazz, and gospel to illuminate the black
mental and material experience in the twentieth century. Yet, rhythm and blues,
the most pervasive and demonstrably popular form of black cultural production in
post-Second World War America, has rarely been used by historians of the
contemporary black experience and race relations in similar ways.

The Conceptual Framework

The black aesthetics theory, which has its foundation in the Black Arts
Movement, guided this analysis of Rhythm and Blues black protest music and its
relationship to black empowerment. Larry Neal commented:

[T]he political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding
concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets,
choreographers, musicians, and novelists. A main tenet of Black Power is the
necessity for black people to define the world in their own terms. The black
artist has made the same point in the context of aesthetics.

The aesthetic defined the musician as the artist—the creator of the rhythm, the deliverer
of the blues, the voice of the struggles and challenges of black America during the era of
the Black Arts/Black Power Movements. The Black Arts Movement, also called the

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27 Kerran L. Sanger, *When the Spirit Says Sing! The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights

28 Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race

Black Aesthetic Movement, was a period of artistic and literary development among black Americans in the 1960s and early 1970s. Based on the cultural politics of Black Nationalism, the movement created a radical art form to promote the idea of black separatism. This black separatism occurred not only in the literature, and the art, but it was heightened by the music, specifically rhythm and blues. Black artists produced poetry, music, and literature by black people, for black people, and about black people. Their art spoke to the condition of being in America, but not of it.\(^{30}\) Larry Neal in his 1968 essay, “The Black Arts Movement,” proclaimed Black Arts as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.\(^{31}\) That is, the Black Aesthetic is a way of perceiving form as more than simply aesthetic beauty; it is a set of criteria by which readers can judge whether or not a particular work is truly “black.”\(^{32}\) The Black Aesthetic had similar criteria by which the listener determined whether or not a Rhythm and Blues song is a form of black protest—with the artist serving as the voice of an oppressed people. Black Power and the Black Arts Movement are intertwined due to their objective which is the enlightenment of and the empowerment of black people.

Both the Black Power Movement and BAM are part of the continuous struggle for equity and social justice through the spoken word. After all, poets and musicians of BAM were often compared to African-American preachers. Theologian James Cone noted that the


\(^{32}\) Ibid.
black poets or musicians provided a language describing the struggles African-American people were experiencing during the Black Power era. Further, BAM as a movement provided community and spiritual significance in place of the centrality of the Eurocentric religious thrust to which African-Americans had adhered.

Thus, the Black Arts Movement represented a threat against oppression at its very core in that its aesthetics as in its literature, its art, its drama, its religious proclamations, its music, its cultural declarations and its strivings sought to produce within and for the people a genuine “reflection of black feeling and the continuous repository of black consciousness.” Clayton Riley claimed that black music worked to “show black people how much it is possible to love themselves for being what they are.” In other words, the proponents of the movement took the heart of black America, gave it a beat—through the music, specifically rhythm and blues, and fused the two elements in order to provide black America with an authentic voice against the oppressions of segregation and its legal ramifications. The Black Arts Movement became the revolutionary voice for black Americans. The Black Arts Movement became the voice calling for a revision of the white voice that had either omitted the black voice or had made it subservient to the white voice. Black Art evolved out of a radical stance against the white contradictions and the white based traditional writer and the social/cultural functions of art. The development of a Black Aesthetic was essential for the black artist, for:


Unless the black artist establishes a ‘Black Aesthetic’ he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live. The black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends (and purify old ones by fire). And the black artist, in creating his own aesthetic, must be accountable for it only to the black people.36

Further, for Neal, a Black Aesthetic assumed that there was already an aesthetic that existed for black Americans and was comprised of an African-American cultural tradition. After all, according to Neal “the motive behind the Black Aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world.”37 The lack of the European-American’s cultural sensibility allowed for continuous domination of the black psyches, of not only the black masses, but black artists and intellectuals as well. Hence, as noted by Neal, the black creative artists must find a way to destroy the conflicting cultural sensibility of European-Americans before blacks can have a meaningful role in the transformation of society.38

By the same token, though the movement was relatively short-lived, its challenges to the status quo helped institutionalize African-American literature, music, and culture as legitimate objects of intellectual scrutiny. It continues to exert a powerful influence on artists’ ideas about themselves and their art. William J. Harris has written, “No post Black Arts artist thinks of himself or herself as simply a human being who happens to be

36Ibid., 258.


38Ibid.
black; blackness is central to his or her experience and art.”

Therefore, the black aesthetic became the voice of the culture, a voice by the people and a voice for the people; a people defined as struggling daily with interracial tensions, sociopolitical differences and limited knowledge about the relevance of African/African-American history and culture to blacks in the United States.

Unquestionably, music, especially rhythm and blues, emerged as one of the forces to be reckoned with in the transformation of society. James Stewart observed:

In general, the impact of the lyrical content on the psyche or behavior of single or multiple audiences depends on several factors. These include the forcefulness, sophistication, and creativity of the message content; the efficacy of the style of delivery; and the perceived salience of the message. . .the stylistic conventions that defines a particular genre will, of course, set the boundaries prescribing the format of any associated political commentaries. Moreover, the conditions and events specific to a given time period will heavily influence the subjects of political lyrics and will determine the target audiences as well as the content of the commentary.

Methodology

Seven rhythm and blues black protest songs were selected for analysis of their socio-cultural, political and economic structures related to black self-determination, black identity and racism during the era of the Black Power Movement. An examination of the socio-cultural, economic and political messages/lyrics of the black protest songs was undertaken utilizing the content analysis research methodology. The objective of this

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40 Stewart, 200.
investigation was to determine the impact of the songs on the collective action of blacks during the era of the Black Power Movement, especially in terms of their political action that subsequently led to black empowerment. The study utilized the concept of political commentary in the same manner as James Stewart: "... to consist of explicit or implicit descriptions or assessments of the social, economic, and political conditions of people of African descent" in America during the era 1964-1975.41

The seven songs selected for analysis were: *A Change Is Gonna Come*, by Sam Cooke; *Living in the City*, by Stevie Wonder; *People Get Ready*, by Curtis Mayfield/Impressions; *Respect* by Aretha Franklin; *Mississippi Goddam* by Nina Simone, *What’s Going On* by Marvin Gaye; and *Say it Loud, (I’m Black and I’m Proud)* by James Brown. While there are numerous Rhythm and Blues songs from the Civil Rights—Black Power era reflective of the motif of black protest, the seven songs were selected because of: 1) their messages reflective of the pain and suffering of blacks during the era of segregation with its Jim Crow laws; 2) the call for some level of black awareness—black consciousness; 3) the popularity of the songs and the artists; and 4) the impact of the music on both the artists and listeners to the collective political, social and economic, cultural statements pertaining to black life, that is, the political, cultural, and the social messages inherent in each song. William Van Deburg states that “as an indigenous expression of the collective African-American experience, [rhythm and blues] served as a repository of racial consciousness [that went beyond] the medium of entertainment [and]
provided a ritual in song with which African-Americans could identify and through which they could convey important in-group symbols.  

Content analysis was the methodology of choice because it allowed for a textual analysis of the seven black protest songs selected through an examination of words, ideas, and messages revealed in the lyrics. The content analysis permitted a study of the impact of societal change, message characteristics and the relationship to the real world in which the artists/musicians found themselves and about which they wrote the lyrics to the songs. Further, content analysis was selected for the following reasons:

1) It allowed the researcher to probe the content of the songs away ordinary way looking for the aspects of the music that are generally overlooked, but are often obvious depending upon the context in which the text is being presented.

2) It allowed the researcher to examine communication directly via the lyrics of the selected songs especially certain aspects of social interaction between the listeners and the artists in their efforts to bring about social change. In this instance, the lyrics, as well as the actions the advocates of Black Power, spoke to the masses of Black with messages pertaining to black life in America that required change.

3) The research was guided by examining the impact of the lyrics and their vivid descriptions of black identity, self-determination and the call for social change and social justice.

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4) It provided valuable historical/cultural insights over time through analysis of the lyrics and available texts related to black protest and music. The historical/cultural events of black life became the lived texts of the lyrics. The lyrics were a reflection of and a call for resistance to the status quo. That is, the artists and the activists joined forces in addressing the challenges of living in America as a black person. The artists and intellectuals of the era joined forces, intentionally or unintentionally, of proposing means of resistance leading to social and racial equality. Blacks sought change in their political and economic lives and the analysis of the content of the lyrics of the protest songs under examination demonstrated their cry for such change.

5) It provides an opportunity to assess the protest songs as a powerful subversive tool in addressing the social and political ills blacks faced during the Black Power and Black Arts Movements.

6) It provided insight into complex models of human thought and language use through an analysis of the lyrics of the songs selected for examination. Each of the songs selected has its own message, but yet speaks to the message coming forth from those engaged in the Black Power and Black Arts Movements.

7) It provided an opportunity to engage in a textual analysis of each song and the relevancy and revolutionary significance. A textual analysis also allows for an assessment of the presence of certain words or concepts of each song. In
this instance, the songs have been categorized based on the themes of racial
equality, self-determination, and black identity.

Category systems selected were mutually exclusive, exhaustive and reliable.43 Efforts
were made to ensure that each song fit in one overarching category based on the presence
of certain words or the overall commentary of the song. The songs selected also were
considered black popular songs during the timeframe of the study, 1964-1975, whether
“jazzy” or Rhythm and Blues. Additionally, the selected songs were hits in their music
genre, that is, they were on the top 20 on the charts for Pop/Black Music Charts. Also,
the artists were known for their subversive lyrics, that is, they were known for having
songs that seemed resistive in nature, hence, a black protest voice. Thus, the black protest
songs selected for investigation were songs that called the people together and advocated
racial harmony, yet, left the audience and listeners to ponder “what’s going on.”

Therefore, two research questions emerge:

1. What major characteristics found in selected rhythm and blues black protest
   songs, from 1964-1975 influenced the black struggle for black empowerment?

2. What are the socio-cultural, economic and political ramifications guiding
   rhythm and blues black protest songs during the Black Power era?

Chapter Organization

This dissertation consists of four chapters. Chapter I provides the introduction to
the research, the conceptual framework and the methodology utilized. Chapter II reviews

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the relationship between the music and the Black Power Movement. Chapter III focuses
on the findings and interpretations of the songs and their relevance to the Black Power
Movement and, ultimately, black empowerment. Chapter IV offers the conclusion and
recommendations.

Definition of Terms

Aesthetics: The branch of philosophy that deals with the nature and expression of beauty, as in the fine arts.

Black Aesthetics: is a way of perceiving form as more than simply aesthetic beauty; it is a set of criteria by which readers can judge whether a particular work or is truly “black.” An aesthetic based upon economic and class determinism is one which has minimal value for Black people. For Black writers and critics the starting point must be the proposition that the history of Black people in America is the history of the struggle against racism.

Black Empowerment: “economic independence, and a heightened awareness of Black history and culture. Its goal is to acknowledge and honor the dignity and humanity of Black people.”

Black Identity: is who blacks are and where they came from; it says that the people are from a homeland, a place of pride and dignity, a place of ownership, a place of culture, and a history and heritage, “which furthers a sense of community and belonging.”

Black Nationalism: in the United States, is the set of beliefs or political theory, which African Americans should maintain social, economic, and political institutions separate and distinct from those of whites. Also, a member of a group of militant black people who urge separatism from white people and the establishment of self-governing black communities.


Black Power: called for Black flight from an America defined by the values and desires of the White oppressor, for revolution, and, as Larry Neal asserts, the Black Arts Movement was its "aesthetic and spiritual sister." It envisioned an art that spoke directly to "the needs and aspirations of Black America." The tandem movements advocated "a cultural revolution in art and ideas."

Blues: A state of depression or melancholy. Often used with the. A style of music evolved from southern African-American secular songs and usually distinguished by a syncopated 4/4 rhythm, flatted thirds and sevenths, a 12-bar structure, and lyrics in a three-line stanza in which the second line repeats the first.

Economics: Of or relating to the production, development, and management of material wealth, as of a country, household, or business enterprise. Of or relating to an economy.

Culture: The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.

Jazz: A style of music, native to America, characterized by a strong but flexible rhythmic understructure with solo and ensemble improvisations on basic tunes and chord patterns and, more recently, a highly sophisticated harmonic idiom. Big band dance music.

Nationalist: Devotion to the interests or culture of one's nation. The belief that nations will benefit from acting independently rather than collectively, emphasizing national rather than international goals; aspirations for national independence in a country under foreign domination.

Political: Of, relating to, or dealing with the structure or affairs of government, politics, or the state. Relating to, involving, or characteristic of politics or politicians.

Popular songs: Songs that create socially shared meanings by exploring and celebrating in a state of awareness or consciousness which a particular audience identifies with as an expression of its emotional and moral precepts.

Protest songs: Songs that characterize grievances with a particular hegemonic structure which adversely affects a particular group.


49 Larry Neal, The Black Arts Movement, 185.
Racism: "the oppression and exploitation of people because of their race."\textsuperscript{50}

Rhythm and Blues (R and B): A "generic term encompassing most forms of post-war Black popular music outside the sacred and jazz traditions, such as Rhythm and Blues, Black rock and roll, Black pop, soul, funk, and disco. Rock and Roll: a genre of popular music originating in the 1950s; a blend of black rhythm and blues with White country and western; rock is a generic term for the range of styles that evolved out of rock’n’roll.

Spirituals: Of, relating to, consisting of, or having the nature of spirit; not tangible or material: Of, concerned with, or affecting the soul: Of, from, or relating to God; deific: Of or belonging to a church or religion; sacred: Relating to or having the nature of spirits or a spirit; supernatural

\textsuperscript{50}Bobby E. Wright, \textit{The Psychopathic Racial Personality: And Other Essays} (Chicago: Third World Press, 1984) 3.
CHAPTER II
MUSIC AND THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT

Music is the product of the culture. Therefore, this chapter focuses on black protest music and its relationship to the black power ideology that emerged during one of the most pivotal times in American history, 1964-1975. This period was pivotal in, not only the history of America, but just as importantly, in the socio-cultural, economic and political life of African-Americans. While African-Americans had engaged previously in various forms of protest pertaining to the oppressions and inequalities they suffered as Americans, the era 1964-1975 produced a myriad of social movements that utilized a revolutionary strategy rather than the passive, non-violent one of the earlier protest efforts. This era saw the results of the Civil Rights Movement (led by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.) with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act. Other movements included the Black Power Movement led by Stokely Carmichael, the Black Panther Party led by Huey Newton and Bobby Seal, The Nation of Islam anchored in protest by Malcolm X. It was a period of the Black Arts Movement led by Amiri Baraka, and US created by Maulana Karenga. It was also an era in which school desegregation at the collegiate level, especially in the South, escalated. For example, efforts to desegregate predominantly southern white colleges and universities met with overt hostile acts especially as seen in the attempts by Autherine Lucy to enter the
University of Alabama in 1956. In 1962, James Meredith was barred from desegregating the University of Mississippi. In addition, in 1963, George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, stood in the doorway of the University of Alabama in an attempt to stop the enrollment of Vivian Malone and James Hood. Public school desegregation continued under many guises, such as private academies established for white students; and the closing of public schools, as well as busing strategies.

Hence, the strategies of each of these movements became a vital instrument in naming the black struggles and oppressions experienced on a daily basis by African-Americans. African-Americans responded to the dilemma through their political involvement with the various movements, their social and cultural involvement through the arts including music, literature, visual arts, theatre and dance. Each strategy was an invitation to blacks to seek a black identity, to engage in development of a black consciousness and black self-empowerment. Stokely Carmichael, utilizing the black tradition of orality inherited from Robert F. Williams, gave voice to the slogan “Black Power” and later the Black Power Movement. The slogan grew out of a desperate attempt to regain black leadership and power within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The slogan became a radical act that called for blacks in America to seek the means for the expression of a racial consciousness. One of those means of seeking expression was through the music, especially rhythm and blues.

Rhythm and Blues as a music genre emerged during the 1940s and 1950s combining elements of pop, gospel, and the blues traditions. Also in the 1960s, Rhythm
and Blues evolved into "Soul Music." The music essentially viewed as an urban product was reflective of a drive toward black self-identity, black consciousness and black pride. Thus, the music, Rhythm and Blues or Soul music, provided identification with the Black Power thrust of the 1960s and 1970s.¹ The music that emerged captured the essence of what are now termed rhythm and blues protest songs. Unlike its predecessors, the spirituals and gospel, many of the songs labeled rhythm and blues utilized their music as more than just the entertainment factor. In addition, rhythm and blues was a means of protest and resistance. Thus, black music and black protest movements continued as a way of life for blacks during the era 1964-1975.

Historically, music has been an instrument of survival and protest for black Americans since slavery. Marshall Bowden noted that the very creation of jazz and blues music in America was a process of protest and resistance and much of the subsequent history of these musical genres has been about reclaiming that process of defiance and revolutionary strategies for social equity and social transformation of the American political system.² Moreover, part of the debate pertaining to black music genres has been over interpretation of the musical forms and the fact that much of it was music for the masses, based on the philosophical ideologies of the black experience in America. The music of black people, especially Rhythm and Blues, was not of any significance in African-American studies.


The music also called for an awakening of the dormant black consciousness of black people. Rhythm and Blues became the awakened angry voice of black America responding, to not only the atrocities of inequality and inferiority, but also the voice calling for action by blacks for black self-determination and black empowerment. Thus, the emergence of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, described by some researchers as the vanguard of the Black Power Movement, was just one of many opportunities in which blacks participated that were directed toward self-empowerment.

Positively, it was in 1963 that the historic March on Washington occurred. The legacy of the March was not only King’s “I Have a Dream Speech,” but also the freedom songs that carried over from the Montgomery Bus Boycott. From all indications, people were able to endure the torture by whites, especially acts of hostility inflicted by white police officers, by singing songs together. The songs seemed to have provided a source of comfort and courage. The song with the most force was *We Shall Overcome*. African-American textile workers initially created this song in the 1940s at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Many musicologists and academicians noted that freedom songs became the lifeline of the Civil Rights Movement. Protest, even though freedom driven was the real song, *In The Mississippi River*, written by Marshall Jones during the summer of 1964 following the disappearance and subsequent location of the bodies of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner, who were three Freedom Riders in Mississippi. As people searched the local rivers for the men, they discovered many other bodies. In essence, the 1960s and early 1970s were ones of turmoil plagued by an uproar of violence, assassinations, riots, and war.

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For example, on March 25, 1965, thirteen days after Bloody Sunday (the Edmond Pettus Bridge confrontation), white patriots attacked Viola Liuzzo, Gregg Fauver, a white Freedom Rider and Leroy Moton, a black civil rights worker, on route back to Montgomery. Liuzzo and Moton had driven five other passengers to Selma after a Civil Rights march. When boxed in by two cars full of whites as they drove to Selma, Ms. Liuzzo began singing freedom songs: “And long before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free.” Members of the Ku Klux Klan eventually killed Liuzzo. Gary Thomas Rowe, an FBI informant, a member of the Ku Klux Klan and a co-conspirator in the murder of Liuzzo, received immunity for testifying against the other Ku Klux Klan members charged for the murder. However, later, the court acquitted the men of her murder. Rowe’s testimony was as follows:

After the passengers were delivered, he and three other members of a KKK ‘missionary squad’—Collie Leroy Wilkins, Jr., William Orville Eaton, and Eugene Thomas—spotted Liuzzo and Moton as a traffic light in Selma. They followed her car for twenty miles. While she attempted to outrun her pursuers, she sang at the top of her lungs, ‘We Shall Overcome.’ About half way between Selma and Montgomery, the four men pulled their car up next to hers and shot at her. Liuzzo was killed instantly. Her car rolled into a ditch. Moton escaped injury.

Other fatal and horrific violence during this time period included the assassinations of: Medger Evers, civil rights activist; John F. Kennedy, President of the United States; Minister Malcolm X, Muslim leader; Robert Kennedy, United States Attorney General; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights activist; the three Freedom

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5Giannino, “Viola Liuzzo.”
Riders, Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner; and Edwin Pratt, Seattle’s NAACP chapter President. James Meredith, civil rights activist and early pursuer of an education at the all white Mississippi University, survived an assassination attempt while participating in a civil rights march in Mississippi. Fannie Lou Hamer and Annell Ponder, both civil rights activists, survived horrific beatings in jail cells; Hamer, so severely beaten, limped for the rest of her life. Major riots also occurred during this era under investigation: Harlem Riot of 1964, the Watts riot of 1965, the Chicago riots of 1965 and 1966, the Detroit riot of 1970 and the Kent State University riot of 1970. However, from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, the war in Vietnam became the backdrop and the underlining depiction of violence for America; it commenced and ended this era as well.

Consistently in the lives of black people, their racial experiences have produced music that provided a sense of communal unrest, sadness and outrage and subsequently, mistrust of others and low self esteem. Hence, music emerged as the ties that bind a people together. Often the songs allowed the group to determine its level of oppression, depression and sense of loss of self-determination and empowerment. Some purport that songs in which the anger supported black pride offset such songs and distilled rage into a desire for productive change.6 As Harold Courlander wrote, “for a long time the blues have provided a convenient outlet for protest against racial injustice. The blues attacked the injustice with a unique combination of subtlety and power that has stimulated black activists without most whites even suspecting that this music was dangerous.”7 Mary


7Harold Courlander; quoted in Mary Ellison, Lyrical Protest, 19.
Ellison, author of *Black Music Protest*, wrote “But any music that tells the truth is dangerous, and blues have always told nothing but the truth.”

Music’s effectiveness, whether or not the songs were the blues or soul, reggae or Afro-beat, funk or some new fusion, seems connected to the collective or individual experiences of black people. According to Ellison, the music that projects those experiences with intensity and power is the music that people will relate to and identify with. Blues singer and pianist, Otis Spann, said that for people the “blues...is something like a book. They want to hear stories out of their own experiences and that’s the kind we tell.”

In general, songs provided a powerful outlet for the common person’s experience, and served as a panacea to the ailing conditions of America during 1964-1975. During a time of massive violence (war, riots, assassinations, and racism), overt hatred by the Ku Klux Klan, and disrespect for human rights, black songs again, as they did during slavery, propelled black people to regroup and to refocus their aggressive energies. As in the past, black music artists responded to the sound of the despair by rendering soul stirring ballads as well as songs of protest and resistance. Somehow, the black musician diverted the pain and tears and turned them into a fighting voice for the people who in term responded with such powerful slogans as “Power to the People,” “Black is Beautiful,” and “I’m Black and I’m Proud.” Ron Welburn, a black music theorist, said, “Our music

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 18.
10 Otis Spann; cited in Ellison, Mary *Lyrical Protest*, 17-19.
is the foremost expressive quality of our being; black music describes and celebrates life through black people. The degree to which we shape our music and protest it will dictate the full range and extent of our survival in the United States.”11 He further asserts that the black musician is ahead of everyone in the expression of true black sensibility. Further, he stated, “Our music [black music] is our key to survival. It is also a key to unlock the door of change.”12

Emergence of Rhythm and Blues

In addition, the black music phenomenon called Rhythm and Blues, and the newly named Billboard Magazine, created to promote race records, was enormously popular with urban blacks. The music created a new audience of radio listeners and new artists, as well as also creating a number of record companies. The new independent record labels that catered to the new market of urban blacks included: Specialty (Art Rupe, Jewish-American), Duke/Peacock, Federal/King (Syd Nathan, Jewish-American), Vee Jay, Sun Chess (Leonard and Phil Chess, Jewish-American), and Atlantic (Jerry Wexler, Jewish-American). The success of radio airplay and these companies, mostly white and Jewish owned, paved the way for the establishment of Detroit’s Motown in 1959. Motown was the most famous of all independent record companies and the most famous of all black-owned American businesses.

Nevertheless, the ascent of the Motown Corporation paralleled the significance of integration of schools, voting opportunities and the expansion of residential housing

11 Ron Wilburn, cited in Ellison, 145.
12 Ibid.
communities for many African-Americans during the Civil Rights era. In an industry dominated by whites and Jewish-Americans corporate interests, the ability of a company owned and managed by an African-American to thrive was significant as well as inspirational for black communities across the nation. Motown served as an authentic alternative to the Stax/Atlantic southern soul music ideal because of its artists and the types of music produced. Underlying the movement was the idea of “soul.” “Soul” emerged as the source of life of the music of and for black America by black Americans. Hence, in an essay initially published in *Esquire Magazine* and again in his book, Claude Brown wrote, “The language of Soul—or, as it might be called, ‘Spoken Soul’ or ‘colored English’—is simply an honest portrayal of black America. The roots of it are more than one hundred years old.” Brown’s commentary provided the impetus for understanding the larger social and cultural connotations related to the word “soul.” Generally associated with the genre of music that bore its name, “soul” music throughout the 1960s linked primarily to the authentic, though obviously essentialized blackness, that under girded the [black movements] that soul music has come to be associated. Further, William L. Van Deburg commented:

“Soul’ was closely related to black America’s need for individual and group self-definition. . . . In this sometimes crazy quilt world of the cool, the hip, and the hustle, stylized forms of personal expression were developed which not only conveyed necessary social information, but also could be utilized to promote a revitalized sense of self. At its most fundamental, soul style was a type of in-group cultural cachet whose creators utilized clothing design, popular hair

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treatments, and even body language (stance, gait, method of greeting) as preferred mechanisms of authentication.\textsuperscript{15}

The commodification of and consumerism of soul music had the political power to dismantle the cultural and social markers that have defined blackness. Corporate entertainment industries addressed the issues of diversifying their market activities while also acknowledged a black middle class and working-class of blacks that represented the black buying public for the rhythm and blues records. Steven Haymes wrote that the presentation of blackness, such as blaxploitation films, Soul Train and network television, ultimately, transformed black culture “into signifiers, absent of historical references to black life and absent of signification other than making luxury consumer goods pleasurable to middle-class whites. This stripping of history and signification from black culture has reduced it to a simulacrum.”\textsuperscript{16}

However, there remained in black cultural expression that vital concern with renewal and rebirth. Doubtless, this steadfast preoccupation was represented in the rise of Afrocentrism and Black Aesthetic movements, which began around the late 1960s when black studies, African attire and black art flourished. Afrocentrism clearly arose in reaction to racist mythology of black inferiority and black exploitation. The ideas of Afrocentrism are not new, and bring together, for example, strands of African traditions, Pan-Africanism and Garveyism. Five factors influence the ideas of Afrocentrism. First, there is an African consciousness that is antithetical to a European consciousness.


Second, there are African values that support an African consciousness. Third, there are cultural and political links that bind all African-descended peoples. Fourth, that knowledge of African history, particularly the history of ancient Egypt, is essential to the mental health and political consciousness of black Americans. Fifth, ancient Egypt is the foundation of Western knowledge and civilizations and whites have tried for several centuries to obscure these facts.¹⁷

Moreover, in the 1960s, much of black music articulated subliminal (hidden) and mediated (reconciled) messages that became quite familiar to the people and their plight for liberation from an oppressed and an underdeveloped society in terms of its race relations challenges. For example, black music commonly secularized the “Negro Spirituals,” which often addressed liberation (“Steal Away”), Heaven (“no more suffering”), and cultural justification (a chosen people/a royal priesthood) via salvation in the “Christ.”¹⁸ Hence, by the mid-1960s, along with the rise of black aestheticism and Afrocentrism, the notable Black Nationalist alliances, known collectively as the Black Liberation Movement, organized in efforts to change the condition of African-Americans in the United States. Organizations such as the Nation of Islam (NOI), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Black Panther Party (BPP), the Black Arts Movement (BAM), the Congress of Black People, the Black Liberation Army, the Cultural Nationalist Movement and even the


urban social clubs, organized against oppression and cultural exploitation. These groups were notable influences in the Black Arts Movement that sought to further political, social, economic, and cultural changes during the 1960s and 1970s. Positively, the Black Panther Party and the Black Arts Movement are often considered the Black Power Movement’s most esteemed offshoots of the era.

Thus, in response to black oppression, black resistance emerged. The younger generation of blacks became more nationalist, more opposed to the ideology of nonviolence, and to racial integration, but they were more willing to think about overthrowing the entire American system and more committed to cultural and social change within the black community. For the most part, the times had not only shifted in black music genres from blues to soul, but it shifted as well in black ideological concepts. Civil rights took on the new face of human rights, and ill-sorted segregation and integration took on the thrust of Black Nationalism, that is, a self-sufficient nation within a nation, or another radical “rebirth/renaissance.”

Often noted, Minister Malcolm X’s martyr-like death in 1965 exacerbated the dissatisfaction with the Civil Rights Movement by many young blacks who were growing increasingly impatient with the rate of change and the seemingly intractable nature of racism in American society. For example, black students protested on many college campuses across the country addressing such issues as racism in the admissions process,

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20 Early, “America Is a Harsh Mistress.”
police harassment, and the small number of black faculty and staff. However, there also arose a severe “backlash” by whites, not just southern whites who opposed integration and the destruction of their cherished Jim Crow laws, but also some whites who thought too much was being given to blacks at the expense of whites, such as Affirmative Action. In addition, many whites, regardless of regional location, were especially opposed to the integration of their neighborhoods and their schools.

The Meaning of Black Power

In essence, the Black Power Movement encouraged black pride, cultural awareness and the improvement of African-American communities, which was oppositional to the fight for complete integration. This approach may have offended some whites, especially certain Jewish-Americans, who had fought side by side in the Civil Rights Movement with blacks. Particularly, many people—black and white—seemed threatened and/or bothered by the use of the term and the espoused ideology of “Black Power.” Many African-Americans felt Black Power represented racial dignity and self-reliance, but those threatened by the term saw angry black people re-creating racism and perpetuating violence.

However, the Black Power Movement of the 1960s in the United States was seen by most of its advocates as the latest in a series of efforts to correct the injustices that existed in almost every dimension of life for blacks in America. The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, which was a Commission set up to find the causes for many of the nation’s riots of the 1960s, demonstrated the disparities between white/black economics, crime, health and education. For example, the
Commission found that the incomes of African-Americans were not only less than white incomes but growing at a slower pace, despite the fact that “the Negro upper income group is expanding rapidly and achieving sizeable income gains.”

Thus, the idea of Black Power rose and gained much of its momentum under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael. Carmichael’s contributing role was in the formation of the ideas and framework of the Black Power concept of the mid-1960s and 1970s. Carmichael popularized the term in his speech by chanting repeatedly in a call and response fashion:

Carmichael: “What do we want?”  
Audience: “Black Power.”
Carmichael: “What do we need?”  
Audience: “Black Power.”
Carmichael: “When do we want it?”  
Audience: “Now!”

The use of the term, “Black Power,” perpetuated a sense of black pride, black leadership responsibility and brought about the reorganization of SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality. Moreover, those associated closely with the mainstream movement, notably Carmichael and Adam Clayton Powell, discussed and operationalized the notion of black

\[\text{[Sources: McCartney, 1992; Myrdal, 1964; U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, 1968; Weisbrot, 1990.]}\]
power. In May 1966, on the campus of Howard University, Powell spoke to the need for rethinking the previous civil rights efforts when he stated:

Human rights are God given. Civil rights are manmade . . . Our lives must be purposed to implement human rights . . . To demand these God-given rights is to seek Black Power—the power to build Black institutions of splendid achievement.  

Carmichael also called for black people in the United States to unite, to recognize their heritage, and to build a sense of community. He advocated that African-Americans form and lead their own organizations and urged a complete rejection of the values of American society.  

In his book, *Black Power*, Carmichael stated:

One of the tragedies of the struggle against racism is that up to this point there has been no national organization, which could speak to the growing militancy of young black people in the urban ghettos and the black-belt South. There has been only a ‘civil rights’ movement, whose tone of voice was adapted to an audience of middle-class whites. It served as a sort of buffer zone between that audience and angry young blacks. It claimed to speak for the needs of a community, but it did not speak in the tone of that community. None of its so-called leaders could go into rioting community and be listened to. In a sense, the blame must be shared—along with the mass media—by those leaders for what happened in Watts, Harlem, Chicago, Cleveland, and other places. Each time the black people in those cities saw Dr. Martin Luther King get slapped they became angry. When they saw little black girls bombed to death in a church and civil rights workers ambushed and murdered, they were angry; and when nothing happened, they were steaming mad. We had nothing to offer that they could see, except to go out and be beaten again.  

Carmichael, not unlike Malcolm X, did not accept that integration was the solution to the problems of black Americans. He asserted that the concept of integration is based on the


25Ture and Hamilton, 50.
assumption that there was nothing of value in the black community and that little of value could be created among black people.

Carmichael argued that black people must redefine themselves and only they can do that. He noted, “In portions throughout the United States, segments of the black communities are beginning to recognize the need to assert their own definitions, to reclaim their history, their culture; to create their own sense of community and togetherness.”

Carmichael’s claim was that Black Power objections to the assimilation into white America was because the values were, in and of themselves, anti-humanist and their social forces perpetuated racism.

For Carmichael, black people must lead and run their own organizations. Only black people can convey the revolutionary idea—and it is a revolutionary idea—that black people are able to do things themselves. Some observers have labeled those who advocated Black Power as racists; they have said that the call for self-determination and self-identification was “racism in reverse” or “black supremacy.” However, Carmichael insisted that the goal of black self-determination and black self-identify—Black Power—was full participation in the decision-making processes affecting the lives of black people and recognition of the virtues in themselves as black people. He posited that, “The goal of Black Power is positive and functional to a free and viable society. No white race can make this claim.”

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26 Ibid., 37.

27 Ibid., 41.

28 Ibid., 46.

29 Ture and Hamilton, 48.
Moreover, the Black Panther Party (BPP) propelled the Movement to its much reputable level, coining such phrases as “Power to the people!” and “Black is beautiful.” The slogans also paralleled singer James Brown’s Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud. In 1966, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seals, was based upon a manifesto that included the Ten Point Platform and Program, which was a series of demands of the black movement. The Ten Point Platform and Program stated:

What We Want and What We Believe. That is, the Platform included the following elements: freedom and power; full employment; an end to the robbery by capitalists of the Black community; decent education for Black people; all Black men to be exempted from military services; an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people; freedom for all Black men held in prisons and jails; trials of Blacks by a jury of their peers or their Black communities; and land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace.30

The Black Panther Party’s political and cultural program became one of the most visible articulations of black power ideology at the time. The Ten Point Program closely resembles the Black Muslims’ statement, “What We Believe,” presented in the Nation of Islam’s paper since its inception in the 1950s.31

As the turbulent era continued, the Black Panther Party provided the cultural war on the streets with its highly publicized patrols to monitor police brutality, to oversee

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local electoral politics, and to carry out its “survival programs,” including programs for sickle cell anemia, free breakfast programs and voter registration drives. Mark Anthony Neal noted that the BPP represented the cutting edge of a new cadre of organizations who offered to revise the dominant model(s) of black protest. With a largely urban working-class and working-poor constituency, weaned on the martyrdom of Minister Malcolm X, the Panthers articulated the rage that Dr. King was either incapable or unwilling to expose.32

Moreover, Brian Ward noted the significant inability of civil rights organizations to utilize successfully the recording industry to either translate their message musically or to profitably record and distribute recordings of various movement events, such as the 1963 March on Washington.33 The Black Panther Party, with far fewer connections to established musical venues, was able to do this by authorizing recordings of various party members and events. The BPP produced *Huey!/Listen Whitey!* This album placed a recitation of the Ten Point Platform next to reactions to the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and recorded it during a live radio call-in show. The BPP also successfully promoted benefit concerts at which their band, the Lumpen, or other progressive, more established groups, such as the Grateful Dead, performed.34


33Ward, 268-275.

34Panther ideology was also successfully disseminated through the posters that advertised various party events. Many examples of this are available in the Stanford Black Panther Party Archives including Assassinated Malcolm X Poster, February 21, Black Panther Party Collection, and Stanford University. Revolutionary Intercommunal Day of Solidarity Bobby Seale, Erika Huggins, Angela Davis, Ruchell Magee and Post-Birthday Celebration for Huey P. Newton. March 5, 1971. Black Panther Collection, Stanford University. Also “Stanford Library Acquires Black Panther Party Archives” *Jet* 1 April 1996 [article on-line]; available from
Predating Gil Scott-Heron's *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* by three years, Neal wrote that groups like the Last Poets offered vitriolic, passionate and trenchant critiques of the black community and their involvement with western society. The Last Poets critiqued individuals who were defined and rooted in archaic definitions of blackness, suggesting these ideas [were] counter to the revolutionary needs of the larger community.  

The Black Arts Movement

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) headed by Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubiti and others accentuated the black artistic expression of the black power ideology. Those involved in the Black Arts Movement wanted to instill cultural and artistic values and ideologies through art. Thus, the artists focused on the political, economic, and social oppression blacks endured and sought to use art as a tool to fight the oppressions and cultural exploitation. They often turned to the people, the "common folk," for inspiration and approval. Larry Neal wrote of the merger of the Black Arts Movement and the black power concept. He claimed that both were nationalistic:

The two movements postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas—one black, one white. The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people. ... The black artist must, therefore, advocate a cultural revolution in arts and ideas.  


36Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 293. Also Napolita S. Hooper-Simanga, "Revolutionary Choices: The Life and Art of Haki Madhubuti" (Ph.D. diss., Clark Atlanta University, 1999), 5.

The black artists were the ones who incorporated black power into the lives and political activities of blacks and who believed that the black communities would benefit from their writings. Thus, the black power ideology became the impetus to the notion of a black aesthetic. The black artists who emerged were interested in looking inward to their own heritage, culture, and traditions and the belief that the inclusion of the black power ideology into the lives and political activities of blacks was a benefit the black community and led to a much-needed level of black consciousness. The insistence that blacks create such an aesthetic was yet another example of black empowerment. From all indications, the years of the Black Arts Movement were among the most important and productive for a number of black popular music forms, especially Rhythm and Blues protest songs. According to Ron Welburn, “black music has been the vanguard reflection of black feelings and the continuous repository of black consciousness.” Amiri Baraka stated:

Only Negro music, because, perhaps, it drew its strength and beauty out of the depths of the black man’s soul, and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the “lowest classes” of Negroes, has been able to survive the constant and willful dilutions of the black middle class and the persistent calls to oblivion made by the mainstream of the society... It [music] signified the existence of an Afro-American, and the existence of an Afro-American culture. And in the evolution of form in Negro music it is possible to see not only the evolution of the Negro as a cultural and social element of American culture but also the evolution of culture itself.39

Given its historical framework, Rhythm and Blues protest songs rehashed and revisited the cultural production and the political dynamic revolution-taking place at its


rise in the 1960s. This black political musical landscape described an amalgamation of Rhythm and Blues and Soul music with anthem like themes of self-determination, black identity, freedom, black consciousness and the demands for political expediency.

Rhythm and Blues protest songs often mimicked other black popular music forms such as jazz, the spirituals, and the freedom songs. All of which are embedded in the Afrocentric notions of resistance and liberation as well as its own aestheticism. An example of this was Nina Simone’s *Mississippi Goddam* that served as her response to the Birmingham church bombing in 1963. The song was written shortly after the church bombing and Simone stated of the recording:

I knew nothing about killing and I did know about music. I sat down at my piano. An hour later I came out of my apartment with the sheet music for Mississippi Goddam in my hand. It was my first civil rights song, and it erupted out of me quicker than I could write it down. I knew then that I would dedicate myself to the struggle for black justice, freedom and equality under the law for as long as it took, until all our battles were won.\(^{40}\)

Further, Ward asserted:

Rhythm and Blues provided some sort of explicit running commentary on the movement, with the men and women of soul emerging as notable participants, even leaders, tacticians, and philosophers of the Black struggle, they have usually depended more on partisan assertion than hard evidence.\(^{41}\)

Portia K. Maultsby, a black music theorist, suggested that African-Americans used the emergence of the socially conscious music to their advantage for responding to the issues of racial, social, political, and economic injustices. She also noted that throughout the


\(^{41}\)Ward, 290.
1970s, African-Americans took advantage of new opportunities to improve their social and economic status and to increase their political power.\textsuperscript{42}

Similarly, Alice A. Tait and John T. Barber, scholars in black studies and rhetoric, suggested that the power of African-American music was grounded in the historical reality of the black experience and the belief that things will change. Though they continued to release socially conscious music, some critics suggested that Rhythm and Blues artists remained outside of the categories identified in social movements.\textsuperscript{43} In some regards, music was simply a response by some black artists and the black community to the intense commodification, exploitation, and mass consumption of an organic black music form.

Thus, many critics suggested that the Rhythm and Blues protest music that accompanied the Black Power Movement did not fit into the movement from the traditional standpoint. That is, common consensus indicated that the so-called black protest songs of the Rhythm and Blues music genre misrepresented the truth pertaining to black protest music for the black struggle. Many critics stated that most people merely participated subconsciously in protest, while others consciously participated for the sake of needed social change. As such, very few agreed totally as to which music spoke for the community during the mid-1960s and the early 1970s.


Charles Stewart, a theorist in protest rhetoric, suggested that protest songs were designed and created for repetition, and they are often sung throughout the span of social movements. However, the leaders of the movements actively embraced the energy created from the protest songs. As in the case with the music that categorized the Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, the Black Power leaders utilized protest-inspired spiritual and folk songs during their peaceful demonstrations. Thus, historically, politically, and socio-culturally, the question remains as to why the full utility of Rhythm and Blues protest songs as protest music never seemed to flourish to the level of empowerment needed to revolutionize the black community.

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CHAPTER III
PROTEST SONGS: VOICES OF RESISTANCE

This chapter provides an analysis of the seven selected Rhythm and Blues black protest songs and their utilization of the message of protest during the Black Power era, 1964-1965. The themes of racial equality, self-determination, and black identity were examined as black America’s voice of resistance to oppression, marginalization and denial of basic human rights—especially, the freedom to vote. The research in its design was unable to determine whether or not the selected songs actually empowered black Americans to take an activist stance against segregation, whether de facto or de jure, and its subsequent Jim Crow laws.

Since the days of American slavery, the struggle for equality and humanity has long been a prevailing concern of black America. From 1964-1975, racism and cultural deprivation continued as a hardship for blacks in America. Thus, an analysis of black protest songs as a means of combating the various exploitations of blacks during this era was paramount for three reasons: 1) Blacks seemed determined to move forward “pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps.” Some songs even took on Malcolm X’s stance, “by any means necessary;” 2) Blacks appeared to be in search of a cultural and group identity as well as self-respect; 3) Humanity essentially overcame civil issues, and (4) Blacks often protested the ill circumstances and dehumanization they experienced in their daily lives based solely on skin color. Hence, many of the songs, such as I’m Black and
I'm Proud, produced a voice "for the people, of the people and by the people" in response to the denigration of blacks that was continuous and prolonged and appeared to have no end within the American political, social and cultural arenas.

The seven songs selected for analysis were: A Change Is Gonna Come by Sam Cooke; Living in the City by Stevie Wonder; People Get Ready by Curtis Mayfield/Impressions; Respect by Aretha Franklin; Mississippi Goddam by Nina Simone; and What's Going On by Marvin Gaye and Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud by James Brown. These particular songs provided the impetus for the political and socio-cultural platforms of black artistic protest and other avenues of black empowerment. Thus, three categories were selected as the framework for the assessment, and served as the guide for the analysis of the selected songs:

- Black identity: describes a group's cultural awareness, self-worth, values, ambitions, history, pride and life's preservation and destination. It is who blacks are and where they came from originally.

- Self-determination: can be understood as a fundamental human right insofar as it serves to safeguard the ability for individuals as group members to participate in answering and acting upon the key questions of "who we are" and "what we want." The rights of choice and control as all people have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.¹

• Racial equality: refers to the free accessibility to resources and opportunities unencumbered by barriers based on race, skin color or ethnicity of people of African descent. It decreases the barriers between races.

Further, the study of African-American aestheticism itself has often been associated with political discourse during different periods of the black struggle. In each era, including slavery, songs often functioned as a tool of empowerment and self-expression. Spirituals provided guidance, served as codes for slave escape and resistance; told the history of a people and provided the similarities between the black experience and the Bible. Jazz told the story of the Harlem Renaissance and provided a form of resistance for some whites from mainstream American society and the restoration of black life through the aesthetics of the music and art. Blues, on the other hand, moaned the era of Jim Crowism, while the freedom songs offered strength, hope, resistance and faith during the Civil Rights era. As with the aforementioned periods and the music, black songs rose again in the form of popular music in the 1960s and often served to uplift blacks in their efforts to achieve basic human rights. From 1964-1975, Black America was figuratively and literally on "fire," in that several black activists met their demise; riots occurred in just about every major city; unemployment for blacks increased; political, economic, and social poverty soared; discrimination continued in the lives of blacks including the "double whammy" for black women, that is, being black and female; educational needs were still unmet and disenfranchisement for blacks continued. Thus, a cascade of young African-Americans took to the streets with their anti-establishment battle cries of "Black Power," and "Power to the People." It was at this time that the
musical artists also took their stance as well, albeit a different medium was selected—
music. Music emerged as the voice of frustration of not only the artists, but the masses of
the people as well. It was the words of the songs that made the artists popular with the
masses of black people and various protesting activists, white and black.

The simultaneous outcry of the artists and young black protesters created a fusion
of the two as each fed off the other thereby providing an avenue for strength, unity of
purpose and insight into the essence of the black/white conflict within America. R.
Eyerman and A. Jamison suggested that the movement’s ideas, images, and feelings were
disseminated in and through popular music. Concurrently, the movements of the time
influenced developments, both in form and content, in popular music. Each of the artists
whose music was analyzed represented different aspects of the spectrum of protest.

James Brown is credited with having “blackening” the sound of Rhythm and
Blues by espousing the ideology of black consciousness as well as sending forth the call
for acknowledgement and pride in one’s blackness. In addition to Brown’s contributions
to the soulful aspect of the music, he is also credited as being one of the first Rhythm and
Blues singers to detail socially conscious issues within his song lyrics. His Say It Loud!
I’m Black and I’m Proud, which was released in 1968, may have set the precedent for all
the songs and artists who followed. However, Sam Cooke has been described as the
lyricist who began the trend of expounding for the people the true significance and
magnitude of the civil rights movements. Cooke is viewed as the first black artist of

\(^2\)R. Eyerman, and A. Jamison, “Social Movement and Cultural Transformation: Popular Music in
the 1960s,” *Media, Culture, Society* 17 (1995):449-68. Also Sharnine S. Herbert, “Rhythm and Blues,

\(^3\)Herbert, 82.

\(^4\)Ibid.
mass appeal to deal with the issue of social change in American society. Thereafter, other black artists such as Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye, Nina Simone, Stevie Wonder, and Aretha Franklin followed in this nature of protest music by releasing songs that detailed the status of the movement to the people. Thus, a medium of mass representation seemed necessary to keep the people aware and informed of the social changes, strategies and current struggles within the movement for social justice and racial equality. The selected songs for analysis accomplished this task by incorporating and expounding on the themes of the movement, with the artists utilizing their popularity, singing style, personal experiences, and empathy with which the masses were able to identify. Each of the black artists joined the movement or sang about it for a myriad of reasons. For some, having lived in the South where racism was so prevalent impacted the psychological perceptions of whiteness and blackness. They chose to share the narrative of their experiences of racism through their lyrics. Thus, to understand the impact of his or her music on the civil rights era, a brief description of the artist is provided for each artist for the era under investigation. The discussion presented for each artist does not include his or her career after 1974.

Voices of Resistance

James Brown, who became known as the Godfather of Soul, was born May 3, 1933 in Barnwell, South Carolina. He is best known for his role in the evolution of rhythm and blues into soul and funk. Brown’s professional career began in 1953 and it was in the 1960s and 1970s, that he became a presence in American political affairs,
noted especially for his activism on behalf of African-Americans and the poor. Brown helped support his family by picking cotton, singing in Augusta-area halls or committing crime. At the age of 16 he was arrested, convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to a juvenile detention center in Toccoa, Georgia where he served only three years of his sentence.

The family of Bobby Byrd, whom he had met while incarcerated, was instrumental in Brown’s early release from prison. The family placed a condition on the help provided, Brown had to promise not to return to Augusta or Richmond County, Georgia and he had to find suitable employment. He worked as a boxer, a baseball pitcher and finally joined Byrd’s sister Sarah and performed in a gospel group called “The Gospel Starlighters.” He eventually left the group and joined Byrd to form the Famous Flame. The group signed a contract with Ohio-based King Records, and their first major hit was Please, Please, Please followed by Try Me. The group did not become well-known until the release of the album Live at the Apollo in 1963.

Brown remains the world’s most sampled recording artist, and Funky Drummer is the most sampled individual piece of music. His songs, Say It Loud-I’m Black and I’m Proud, released in 1968 and I Don’t Want Nobody to Give me Nothing in 1970, were hallmarks of his socio-political commentary on the black person’s position in society. In the late 1950s, Brown purchased radio stations in Augusta, Georgia and, in 1971, he recorded for Polydor Records and his subsidiary label, People, (which was part of his

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6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.
contract with Polydor). In the 1970s, Miles Davis and other jazz musicians acknowledged Brown's influence on their styles and Brown provided the score for the 1973 blaxploitation film *Black Caesar.* Brown was recognized as a singer-songwriter, musician (he played piano/keyboard), bandleader and record producer.

Another singer who emerged on the scene was Sam Cooke (January 22, 1931-December 11, 1964). Cooke was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and was active in the music industry from 1950-1964. Cook was one of eight children of the Reverend Charles and Mrs. Annie Mae Cook and the family moved to Chicago in 1933. Not unlike Brown, Cooke began his career with gospel music as a member of a family quartet with his siblings known as the Singing Children. This was followed with his being a member of the Highway OCs, a gospel group formed during his teen years. At the age of 19, he joined the Soul Stirrers and achieved significant success within the gospel community. Cooke created a record label, SAR Records, a publishing imprint company and a management firm as an extension of his careers as a singer and composer. He was active in the Civil Rights Movement. Following his death, many posthumous releases, especially *A Change is Gonna Come,* were hits. *A Change is Gonna Come* was an early protest song that is generally regarded as his greatest composition.

Rhythm and Blues as a musical genre included the “Queen of Soul,” Aretha Franklin. Aretha Louise Franklin was born March 25, 1942 in Memphis, Tennessee, but

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8 Ibid.


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.
was reared in Detroit, Michigan. Her musical roots are in gospel music, and at the age of 14 she was the featured soloist for her father, Reverend C. L. Franklin’s, church. At the age of 16 she was recording for JVB and Checker, and then from 1956-1960 she was recording for Columbia and in 1966 she relocated to Atlantic Records. While under contract with Atlantic Records, she released such hits as *Respect, Baby I Love You, (You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman, Chain of Fools, Since You’ve Been Gone.*

Franklin, according to her biography for the Kennedy Center Awards, was honored with Grammy Awards and Billboard magazine named her top female vocalist of 1967. The biography further indicated:

That the era has now become known as the ‘golden age of soul,’ and Aretha Franklin is its defining artist, giving voice to a black sense of identity at the time of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American civil rights movement. . . She explained the popularity of her recordings by saying, ‘I look for a good lyric, a good melody, something meaningful.’

Another artist of renown during this era was Marvin Gaye. He was born Marvin Pentz Gay, Jr. and was named after his father who was a minister in the Apostolic Church. The influence of the church in his early years played a formative role in his musical career, particularly from the 1970s onwards, when his songwriting shifted back and forth between mainstream and religious topics. In 1957, Marvin joined the Marquees and recorded for Chess Records and in 1960 he moved to Detroit and joined with Berry Gordy and Motown Records. It was not until 1962 that he started recording

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rhythm and blues with his first single hit *Stubborn Kind of Fellow*. Unlike his fellow colleagues, Gaye had success recording with Mary Wells, Kim Weston and in 1967, Tammi Terrell (this proved to be his most successful co-artist). Moreover, *What's Going On?*, was a major hit in 1971 along with two subsequent chart topped sounds, *Mercy, Mercy Me (The Ecology)* and *City Blues*, all of which reinforced Gaye's spiritual beliefs along with his increasing concern about poverty, discrimination and political corruption in American society.15

Curtis Mayfield was born June 3, 1942 in Chicago, Illinois. His rhythm and blues career started with his participation with the group, The Roosters, in 1956. The Roosters, in 1960, changed their name to The Impressions and Mayfield became the lead singer after the departure of Jerry Butler. In 1963, The Impressions' version of the old gospel song, *Amen*, was the soundtrack for the 1963 MGM film, *Lilies of the Valley*, which starred Sidney Poitier. Further,

Mayfield was among the first of a new wave of mainstream African-American R [rhythm] and B[lees] performing artists and composers who injected social commentary into their work. This “message music” became extremely popular during the period of political ferment and social upheaval of the 1960s and [the] 1970s . . . The Impressions reached the height of their popularity in the mid to late 1960s, with a string of Mayfield compositions that included *Keep On Pushing, People Get Ready, Choice of Colors, This Is My County, and We People Who Are Darker than Blue*. . . *We're A Winner* became an anthem of the black power and black pride movements when it was released in late 1967. . . Along with Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* and Stevie Wonder's *Inversions*, [the album *Superfly*, 1972] ushered in a new socially conscious, funky style of popular soul music.16

15Ibid.

Nina Simone was born Eunice Waymon in Tryon, North Carolina, February 21, 1933. She was one of eight children. Her talent as a singer (which began in the church) and pianist began during her early childhood. At 17, she moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she taught piano and served as an accompanist for singers. She studied briefly at Julliard School of Music, but was unable to complete her study because she lacked the financial resources needed. Her music included jazz, rhythm and blues, classical and soul. However, it was not until the 1960s that she concentrated on the themes of race and gender in her music.17

Simone spent several years making appearances at marches and fundraising events especially for SNCC. H. Rap Brown referred her to as “the singer of the Black Revolution because there is no other singer who sings real protest songs about the race situation.”18 Mississippi Goddam, written in 1963, became the anthem for SNCC Mississippi Summer Program. Ward maintained that Mississippi Goddam was the closest Rhythm and Blues got in the early 1960s to King’s “Letter from the Birmingham City Jail” in which he was accused of seeking too much racial change too quickly.19 Simone interpreted in song what King stated in his statement “wait has always meant ‘never’.” 20 Simone’s response was, “Do it slow” became the white mantra for “never.”21

Thus, she wrote:

17Ward, Just My Soul Responding, 303.
18Ibid., 302.
19Ibid., 301.
21Ward, 301.
Oh, this whole country's full of lies,
Y'all gonna die and die like flies,
I don't trust you anymore,
When you keep sayin'
"Go slow, go slow." ... 
But that's just the trouble
"Do it slow"
Desegregation
"Do it slow"
Mass participation
"Do it slow"
Do things gradually
"Do it slow"
But bring more tragedy
"Do it slow."

Even though *Mississippi Goddam* was written the year before Freedom Summer, it became their unofficial anthem. This decision about the use of her song was, according to *The Amsterdam News*, an excellent example of the ways in which the meanings of a particular song could be amplified, manipulated or simply imposed thanks to acts of creative consumption by its listeners.22

Lastly, another popular artist of this era was Stevie Wonder. Wonder was borne in Saginaw, Michigan on May 13, 1950 to Lula Mae Hardaway and was named Steveland Hardaway Judkins. The cause of his blindness is not specific; however, his mother did not allow his five brothers and sister to treat him in a special way because of his blindness. Wonder’s family moved to Detroit where he played instruments in church. At age 11, he signed with Motown and had his first major hit, *Fingertips*. Wonder has been with Motown throughout his career. He is a multitalented artist who not only sings, but also plays several instruments including the piano/keyboards, drums, bass guitar and

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22 *Amsterdam News*, 10 August 1963, p. 42; See also Ward, 301.
harmonica. Wonder has been described as “an American singer, record producer, musician, and social activist.”

Further, Wonder’s political involvement began in August 1971 with the release of his album *Innervisions*. His political considerations in his music emerged with two major works: *Higher Ground* (which was Number 4 on the charts) and *Living for the City*. *Living for the City* has been described as a memorable epic that found “Wonder more evocatively describing a time and space in American life. . .”

The discourse of such collective voices and the selected Rhythm and Blues protest songs indicated that the main factions of the Black Power era consistently favored the themes of black identity, self-determination and racial inequality. However, the means chosen by the artists and activists to achieve civil rights for blacks seemed a radical change from the ideology of non-violence of the earlier Civil Rights Movement. Yet, both Black Power and the Civil Rights Movement had the same aim, just different strategies—black empowerment. The following statement by Malcolm X summarized this sentiment:

> So our people have made the mistake of confusing the methods with the objectives. As long as we agree on objectives, we should never fall out with each other just because we believe in different methods or tactics or strategy to reach a common objective.25

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24 Ibid.

However, the voice of the Black Power Movement with its ideological stance, and the music and lyrics of the Rhythm and Blues protest songs, was in the voice of Stokely Carmichael when he wrote:

The philosophers Camus and Sartre raise the question of whether or not a man can condemn himself. The black existentialist philosopher who is pragmatic, Frantz Fanon, answered the question. He said that man could not. Camus and Sartre don’t answer the question. We in SNCC tend to agree with Fanon—a man cannot condemn himself. If he did, he would then have to inflict punishment upon himself... There’s another, more recent example provided by the officials and the population—the white population of Neshoba County, Mississippi (that’s where Philadelphia is). They could not condemn Sheriff Rainey, his deputies, and the other fourteen men who killed three human beings. They could not because they elected Mr. Rainey to do precisely what he did; and condemning him would be condemning themselves.26

Nina Simone’s *Mississippi Goddam*, augmented the rhetoric of Carmichael and reminded the public of the act of bombing, which led to the death of four innocent young girls, by men who were not found guilty. Each group, singer or spokesperson was considered as revolutionary in terms of perspectives and deeds surrounding blacks and equal rights. That is, each acknowledged that a political and socio-cultural revolution via means of the Black Power stance was taking place. Rhythm and Blues protest songs gave voice to the issues surrounding the revolutionary goals of the identified Black Power groups. James Boggs addressed succinctly in the essay, “Black Power: A Scientific Concept Whose Time Has Come,” that not since the term communism emerged on the American horizon had such a term, Black Power, frightened so many people in a relatively short period of time. According to Boggs:

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SNCC had begun to analyze the role white liberals and radicals could play in the movement, aptly characterizing it as one of supporting rather than decision-making. . . the cry of Black Power was seen by most people as deepening the gulf between the pro-integrationists and the nationalists. . . For these average whites [average white American, and white extremist or facist] reacted to the call for Black Power simply and honestly by reaffirming ‘white power.’ Their are not civil rights. . . They are concerned with power, and they recognized instinctively that once the issue of power is raised it means one set of people who are powerless replacing another set of people who have power. . . [Power] is something that you must make or take from those in power.\(^\text{27}\)

Given this state of being, the oppressive ideology worked exactly as planned; economic racism was not by accident. Thus, not only the discourse, but, also the music addressed these issues and the calls for black empowerment. Carmichael commented:

> The institutions that function in this country are clearly racist; they’re built upon racism. The questions to be dealt with then are: how can back people inside this country move? How can white people who say they’re not part of those institutions begin to move? And how then do we begin to clear away the obstacles that we have in this society, to make us live like human beings?\(^\text{28}\)

Further, according to Carmichael, Black Power represented beauty, empowerment, and unity as well as self and brotherly love.\(^\text{29}\) The Black Panther Party in its Ten Point Program reiterated the Black Power ideology:

> We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black community. We believe that Black people will not Be free until we are able to determine our destiny. We want education for our people that expose the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.\(^\text{30}\)

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\(^{28}\)Miller and Eidenmuller, “Stokely Carmichael.”

\(^{29}\)Ibid.

\(^{30}\)Ibid.
Hence, the aims of Black Power from all corners of the black community were focused on change that included education, knowledge of oneself and one’s group of primary membership, and one’s position within the society and the world. The selected protest songs reinforced these aims in the revolution of black empowerment.

**Themes of Rhythm and Blues Protest Songs**

Black empowerment invoked several themes for review and consideration through the selected protest songs. The themes emerged from the conditions under which blacks were living, thus, the continuous call for social change and social justice by activists and the musicians.

**Table 1. Themes of Rhythm and Blues Protest Songs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Songs</th>
<th>Racial Equality</th>
<th>Self-Determination</th>
<th>Black Identity</th>
<th>Social Change</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What’s Going On</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People Get Ready</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living For the City</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mississippi Goddam</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Say It Loud</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Change Is Gonna Come</td>
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Three themes were identified as impacting whether or not black empowerment was the result of black self-determination, racial equality and black identity. However,
what the analysis revealed was that while the songs related to the selected themes, a fourth unexpected theme emerged—social change. Social change, as included in the lyrics to the songs Mississippi Goddam, People Get Ready, and A Change is Gonna Come, addressed the challenges confronting African-Americans in their daily lives. Social change refers to the call for faith, and readiness for the future without racial inequality and lack of pride in one’s blackness. Mayfield in People Get Ready challenged people to:

Get ready, there’s a train comin’
You don’t need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’
You don’t need no ticket you just thank the Lord

People get ready, there’s a train to Jordan
Picking up passengers coast to coast
Faith is the key, open the doors and board them
There’s hope for all among those loved the most
There ain’t no room for the hopeless sinner whom would hurt all mankind
Just to save his own.
Have pity on those whose chances grow thinner
For there is no hiding place against the kingdom throne.

The lyrics, in delivering their message of social change, utilized metaphors for calling people to action. According to Ward, Mayfield in his composing of the black protest songs, as demonstrated in People Get Ready, relied on the Exodus motif to invoke a vision of black unity and the dogged faith required to complete the journey into freedom. The call for social change also required those seeking to participate in the civil rights movement to do so without fear, or the need for baggage, both psychologically as well as literally, but rather to get on board based on faith and racial self-determination and pride. Mayfield’s music initiated a pattern of social reaffirmation of the humanist

\[31\text{Ward, 299.}\]
response to people by people. His intent was to instill the drive for social change through religious transformation. Ward commented:

Mayfield was unusual among the soul stars of the early-to-mid 1960s. In his willingness to tackle social and racial issues regularly. Yet, because Mayfield favored gospel imagery and rich allegory over simple documentary-style narratives, few of his early lyrics made explicit mention of race or the Movement at all. Instead, their racial politics were made manifest by their use of black religious and secular idioms, and their setting amid the soulful black harmonies of the Impressions. It was this combination of sound, sense and style which bound Mayfield’s songs to the new black consciousness generated by the Movement.\(^{32}\)

**Resistance: Music and Ideology**

The first of the anticipated themes of the songs selected for analysis was black identity. Black identity relates to the individual’s connection with one’s race in terms of acknowledging and understanding society’s perceptions of the race and the individual’s perceptions of their race. It entails being proud of being black and not finding fault with one’s blackness. The researcher concluded that these two songs, in particular, reference the ideology of black identity, and the call for racial equality: Nina Simone’s *Mississippi Goddam* and James Brown’s *Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud*. In *Mississippi Goddam*, Simone lamented:

> You don’t have to live next to me  
> Just give me my equality  
> Everybody knows about Mississippi  
> Everybody knows about Alabama  
> Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam  
> That’s it!

\(^{32}\)Ibid.
Simone insinuated that it is not necessary for whites to live next to blacks; however, the charge is equality and the right to be black and proud. The words remind the listeners that the depth of the social problems experienced by blacks have occurred with the most violence in the states of Mississippi and Alabama. The violence against innocent blacks that were protesting for a change in the social and political fabric of the day went unpunished. In other words, the dominating political and social systems of the South, segregation through the Jim Crow laws, were intended as control mechanisms for the behavior of blacks. Anything that went against the system had to be corrected—hence, the violence. Hence, the song was a reflection of the times and the lifestyle of the people, both black and white, residing in the two southern states.

The idea that Simone referenced in Alabama and Mississippi was related to two very significant facts. First, a large percentage of blacks in America, in the 1960s, resided in the states of Mississippi and Alabama. Second, among other hideous murders and lynchings, three of the most publicly and historically known violent acts occurred: the death of three Freedom Riders (James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman); Emmett Till who was murdered for whistling at a white woman; and the four little black girls (Addie Mae Collins, Carole Roberts, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair), who were killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The lyrics, “Everybody knows about Mississippi,” and “Everybody knows about Alabama,” implied that the anti-black philosophy was known throughout America and America in many ways accepted the violence by not enforcing civil laws and the dismantling of Jim Crow laws. Further, the song implied that people should not be surprised by the appalling murders in these two particular states because
hideous killings of blacks were the norm. Simone’s choice of words for her song was
daring and reactionary. She took the risk needed to bring to the attention of America its
racist ideology.

Hence, revolutionary beauty, cultural pride, and psychological transformation all
describe Simone. She was the voice of a movement. Mark Anthony Neal commented:

Deep blues, even darker hues, from the Delta to Dakar. When the old
Guard (Stokely, and Martin and Ralph and dem)—in the days before
Aretha—talked about the ‘voice’ of the movement, they always invoked
Nina Simone. Ms. Simone to all those who couldn’t wrap their minds
around this woman, black woman, protest woman, ironical woman, the
one woman whose voice summoned the spirits lost in middle passages,
by overseer’s lashes, and charred fruit from southern trees—the spirits
of blues whisperers, sacred singers, heavenly shouters and insatiable
desires. This woman, Black woman, was the voice of a people.33

Simone recorded other black protest anthems like Billy Taylor’s I Wish I Knew How It
Would Feel to be Free, which had been a long-time favorite of protest marchers, and
Why? The King of Love is Dead, her musical eulogy to Martin Luther King, Jr. As a
black woman, Simone spoke to burgeoning black feminists and womanist activists.
However, when she sang, “This whole country is full of lies/You all gonna die, die like
flies,” it is clear that she was in a totally different psychological space—one that was in
opposition to the non-violent stance of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement as well as
the women activists of the era.

The ideas of recognition of the ramifications of segregation on the minds and
souls of both blacks and whites are reflected in the lyrics of other Rhythm and Blues

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33Mark Anthony Neal, “She Put a Spell on Us (For Nina Simone),” Popmatters, May 2003 [article
on-line]; available from http://www.popmatters.com/music/features/030501-simone.shtml; Internet;
protest artists of the period. James Brown’s lyrics, especially in *Say It Loud! I’m Black and I’m Proud!*” provoked the following message:

I worked on jobs with my feet and my hands  
But all the work I did was for the other man  
Now we demand a chance to do  
Things for ourselves.

We are tired of beating our heads against  
The wall and working for someone else.

The lyrics definitively singled out the themes of self-determination and self-empowerment. Brown called on blacks to no longer accept working for “the man” but rather, to seek avenues for working for self. This approach required that blacks pursue education, business skill development, but most, importantly, that blacks form a positive identity about who they are in America. He stated that pride was an essential requirement for progress and self-empowerment. Black empowerment rang out in the lyrics with the change of pronouns from “I” to “we.” This implied that the “I” had to develop a sense of self-worth and then move to the “we.” In other words, Brown made inferences about the conditions and circumstances of this time era and used the lyrics to reinforce the call for self-examination by blacks of their responsibilities for producing social change. Brown positioned himself within the black masses by placing himself in the midst of black chaos and the ethnic work stereotype—that is, “working for the other man,” and “beating our heads against the wall.” His song called forth the anthem, “Change has to come from within.”

*Say It Loud! I’m Black and I’m Proud!* a song by Brown, represented the voice for black Americans. The song indicated a call for something that Brown himself had pride in—his blackness. The assumption being, that if he, as artist, could define
blackness and pride, then this could become the cradle of social and behavioral change for black Americans. In other words, blacks did not have to see blackness as a stigma or badge of humiliation, because they had accomplished and identified themselves. Further, the song brought about a transformation within Brown himself. In fact, Brown’s entire wardrobe and hairstyle changed with the times. He went from wearing the silk outfits to wearing dashikis, and from the “slick-down process”—many referred to as an imitated white hair style—to wearing an afro (natural hair style for blacks). Brown’s music also grew from blacks’ reaction to segregation and its ramifications to black inner transformation based on acceptance of one’s identity. In the James Brown biography by Wright Max Ehlers, Brown offered his explanation of Black Power:

Black Power meant different things to different people, see. To some People it meant black pride and black people owning businesses and a voice in politics. That’s what it meant to me. To other people it meant self-defense against attacks like the one on Meredith. But to others it meant a revolutionary bag.  

Brown explained that he saw nothing wrong with self-defense, but that problems should be solved through education and not with violence. This ideology was the reason he began his “Don’t Be a Drop-Out” campaign. Ultimately, he favored non-violence, despite his oft-quoted statement: “Die on your feet, Don’t live on your knees, Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud.” This approach gained Brown popularity with the Black Cultural Nationalists due to his compliance with their aesthetic as described by Van Deburg:

Their major goal was to spur growth of a dynamic, function black

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aesthetic that (1) emphasized the distinctiveness of African-American culture—along with its unique symbols, myths, and metaphors; (2) extolled the virtues of black life-styles and values; and (3) promoted race consciousness, pride and unity.35

Brown’s lyrics emerged as the musical expression of black soul. Brown’s goal, based on his music, evoked feelings of black pride and unity in his audiences.

Brown’s music of the era, especially Say It Loud! I’m Black and I’m Proud, also demonstrated the themes of black identity and black culture. The song depicted a call for a cultural revolution because it echoed the sentiments of the masses of black people during an era of civil unrest. Lyrically, the song illustrated the necessity of black pride as the primary principle of black self-empowerment. The repetition of the call-and-response between the chorus and Brown helped to support the message. Essentially, when Brown called—“Say It Loud!” and the chorus responded—“I’m Black and I’m Proud!” there was the boldness of the statement of being black and being proud of what the blackness meant. Herbert maintained that Brown was not militant, but made the song so that blacks could feel proud of themselves.36

On the other hand, Marvin Gaye described a black lifestyle in What’s Going On, by calling for an examination of what was taking place in America. America was presented as a nation experiencing varied forms of unrest. The lyrics expound on the unrest:

You know we’ve got to find a way
To bring some lovin’ here today, hey

Father, father, we don’t need to escalate
War is not the answer, for only can conquer hate
You know we’ve got to find a way

35 Ibid.

To bring some lovin’ here today

Mother, mother, everybody thinks we’re wrong
Ah, but who are they to judge us
Simply ’cos our hair is long
Ah you know we’ve got to find a way
To bring some understanding here today.

The song had a double meaning. On one hand, Gaye lamented the racial divide in America and on the other hand, he protested the Vietnam War. In both situations, Gaye maintained that part of the solution was to stop hating one another, and to learn to love one another. The call was for people to come together and seek ways of resolving conflict without having to go to war either internally, in America, or externally with other countries. He proclaimed that America was in a continuous binary state: we/they relationship. Gaye aimed at the heart of the matter in What’s Going On by implying that Americans in general, but blacks in particular, needed to practice love for self as well as love for humanity. When Americans reached this state, then a true, realistic understanding between people will occur. In essence, Gaye called for the fulfillment of Martin Luther King’s cry of non-violence as a means to addressing the myriad of problems confronting black Americans as they sought to gain a piece of the American dream.

Gaye’s repetitive use of the lyrics “what’s going on,” was asking the question that many people were during this era. There were protests against the War, as well as protest against racial injustices, and the assassination of King that ended in riots in major black communities. The song brought the issue of social, political and civil unrest to the
foreground for public consideration and action. He used the words to engage in the strategy of legitimating, or justifying and vindicating the actions of the activists.\textsuperscript{37}

Essentially, Gaye asserted that picket lines and picket signs were the reactions to the racist system as well as to the war. Arthur L. Smith, author of \textit{Rhetoric of Black Revolution}, stated that in legitimating, the rhetorician's goal was to suggest that the reaction was not planned but evoked.\textsuperscript{38} Gaye also used the stylistic form of repetition to reinforce his message, in the question form of "What's going on?" which Leon C. Philips stated reinforced the message.\textsuperscript{39} Gaye engaged in triangular discourse with his listeners, himself and the politicians who were in a position to bring about change both internally and externally to America. The dialogue was bound in the words, "talk to me, so you can see, what's going on." Gaye did not exclude himself from the discourse. He can perhaps be described as a qualifier in that he, not unlike his fellow black Americans, was experiencing the same duress as they were. He related the fears and frustrations of mothers who saw their sons and daughters experience the harshness of segregation and racial inequalities, as well as sons dying in a foreign war without major benefits for America. The song cried out "Mother, mother, there's too many of you crying." Death as implied in the song was used metaphorically to refer to people dying from the lack of progress or racial equality, as well as people dying from war, murder and lynchings. In this instance, Gaye sang, "Brother, brother, brother there is far too many of you dying." Then he moaned, "Father, father, we don't need to escalate, War is not the answer, for

\textsuperscript{37}Herbert, 102.


\textsuperscript{39}Herbert, 103. Also L. Philips, "A Comparative Study of Two Approaches to Analyzing Black Discourse" (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 1983).
only love can conquer hate.” As demonstrated throughout the song, Gaye perceived love as the remedy to the problems facing America. In the last verse to the song, Gaye sang, “Talk to me, so you can see, tell me, what’s going on, I’ll tell you, what’s going on.” The lyrics were a call to action. That is, the lyrics of the protest songs challenged blacks to take action by participating in the marches and boycotts of the black social movements. The song also called for action by black political leaders to talk to one another and to seek ways to bring about a united front on the attack on racial inequality.

Hence, *Living in the City* by Stevie Wonder offered a clear portrait of the effects of living in a segregated society. While blackness and poverty often were viewed as one in the same, Wonder’s rendition of the song challenged, yet encouraged attempts to redefine the essence of blackness and self. Once again, Mississippi was mentioned as a symbolic “eye sore” to the American society. According to the lyrics of the song:

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A boy is born in hard time Mississippi
    Surrounded by four walls that ain’t so pretty
His parents give him love and affection
    To keep him strong moving in the right direction
Living just enough, just enough for the city...
His father works some days for fourteen hours
    And you can bet he barely makes a dollar
His mother goes to scrub the floors for many
    And you’d best believe she hardly gets a penny
Living just enough, just enough for the city...
His sister’s black but she is sho’nuff pretty
    Her skirt is short but Lord her legs are sturdy
To walk to school she’s got to get up early
Her clothes are old but never are they dirty
Living just enough, just enough for the city...um hum
Her brother’s smart he’s got more sense than many
His patience’s long but soon he won’t have any
To find a job is like a haystack needle
Cause where he lives they don’t use colored people
Living just enough, just enough for the city...
Living just enough. . .
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For the city... ooh, ooh

His hair is long, his feet are hard and gritty
He spends his life walking the streets of New York City
He’s almost dead from breathing in air pollution
He tried to vote but to him there’s no solution
Living just enough, just enough for the city...
yeah, yeah, yeah!
I hope you hear inside my voice of sorrow
And that it motivates you to make a better tomorrow
This place is cruel no where could be much colder
If we don’t change the world will soon be over
Living just enough, stop giving just enough for the city!!!

Many things were happening within the song. First, Wonder mentioned black and pretty, not only to imply the need to redefine blackness, but also to underscore the beauty of blackness as well. Second, he told the story of black survival within a segregated society by emphasizing that regardless of the age of one’s clothes, that is, whether or not the clothes are old or new, they are worn with pride because the prize is the education one receives that helps improve one’s lifestyle. Third, he mentioned three strengths of black people that are often overlooked—those are the work ethic of blacks, the strength of achievement orientation and family orientation. For example, with the work ethic Wonder described the work habits of the parents and that their work ethic made it possible for the family to survive. Further, the implication was that black life, regardless of the southern environment, and in spite of poverty, had value. That is, black parents loved, as well as trained their children, in the lessons needed to surmount the hurdles placed in their way. Parents helped their children to define themselves for themselves and told them the story of being black in America. Wonder associated being black and hard times as a reality of black life rather than an excuse for not doing anything to change

their life circumstances. The means of survival was the black family. Although the
song depicted some gloomy circumstances for blacks in America, it was not a song
without hope. The song told the story of the conflicts of a young black boy caught up in
growing up in Mississippi.

Fourth, the song told the saga of America’s racial inequality as experienced by
blacks. As the griot, Wonder told the story of blacks in America during the Jim Crow era
as he explored through song various aspects of living and being black, especially in the
southern state of Mississippi. Mississippi became the symbolic representation of all
southern states and the lifestyles of both blacks and whites living there. Wonder used
Mississippi as the metaphor for America’s racial discrimination. As the story teller, he
graphically described the living conditions in the words,” surrounded by four walls that
ain’t pretty.” Wonder alluded to black males still picking cotton and black women
working as house servants making just enough and “living just enough, just enough for
the city.” Wonder’s words expressed the economic bondage of black Americans when he
sang: “To find a job is like a haystack needle; Cause where he lives they don’t use
colored folks.” Further, the song called for change in how people are educated, hired for
a job and lived out their lives—those qualities inherent in the doctrine of the right to a
satisfying quality of life.

Wonder knew that the struggle often had negative effects on black people—socio-
cultural, political, economic and psychological. Black men, according to the song, were
often portrayed as being unable to earn enough money to take care of the family—“His
father works some days for fourteen hours, and you can bet, he barely makes a dollar.”
On the other hand, Wonder sang, “Her brother’s smart he’s got more sense than many,
His patience’s long, but soon he won’t have any.” This implied that the brother’s experiences would not prevent him from the humiliation and trauma of his blackness.

While change is slow, change was coming, but the people did not experience immediate change. No matter the status of the black man, which was based on education and employment outside of the cotton fields, humiliation followed the black man no matter where he goes. The songs called for blacks to stand up and act on the premises defined by the black leadership, to change the educational categories to ensure equity in resources for all American children. However, as Smith asserted, “all black revolutionary rhetoric suggests that unity among blacks is necessary for liberation.” Living For the City, Mississippi Goddam, and A Change Is Gonna Come were examples of black protest songs promoting social change while coming to grips with the challenges of one’s blackness and its meaning in America during the era under study.

People Get Ready by Curtis Mayfield was another song that spoke to the issues of black identity:

People get ready, there’s a train comin’
You don’t need no baggage, just get onboard
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’
You don’t need no ticket you just thank the Lord.

Mayfield, who was reared in the black church, used the train as a metaphor for social change. He encouraged blacks to have faith in the present based on the civil protests that were taking place and that baggage was not needed because the old segregation laws would be no more. Mayfield noted that unlike the horrific voyage suffered by the Africans during the middle passage, and the challenges confronting blacks during the era of segregation, that the message to “gather your love ones and get on board the freedom
train,” did not imply a slave ship of dehumanization, but one of positive change. Thus, *People Get Ready* aimed at the religious undergirding of black culture and black identity. Many blacks viewed religion as the main ingredient that kept hope alive for the people, especially during slavery and the Underground Railroad days of escape. Religious songs, as during the Civil Rights Movement, and thereafter, became the hallmark for signaling what people were expected to do to move toward freedom. The Black Church, after all, was born out of the cry for freedom of worship and, thereafter, became the seat of social change—the train for freedom. However, critics often dismissed *People Get Ready* as a form of protest for blacks, and thus, often placed the song in the realm of popular culture and general protest songs, but not black protest songs as with *What’s Going On*.

Hence, self-determination, which is the opportunity and ability to decide one’s future or the future of the group, became the second main theme for analysis of the Rhythm and Blues protest songs. Self-determination implies that people no longer embrace the bondage syndrome that supports their continuous constraints socially, economically, spiritually, and mentally. The freedom agenda, especially self-determination, served as one of founding principles of the Black Power era. The Black Panther Party’s Ten-Point Platform became one of the first Black Power strategies to definitively respond to the cry of black liberation. The Black Panther Party’s Ten-Point Platform included such demands, as “We want power to determine the destiny of our black community. We believe that black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.”

ideological concepts. However, some critics differed and expressed the notion that Rhythm and Blues protest songs used too many metaphors and therefore, were not subversive enough. In particular, metaphors serve as a way of understanding ideas through analogy and comparison and black music was often that channel.42

Sam Cooke evidenced several metaphoric examples in the lyrics of People Get Ready and A Change Is Gonna Come. In A Change Is Gonna Come, the lyrics referred to the subtle demand of freedom from oppression: “I was born by the river, in the little tent, oh, and just like the river, I’ve been running ever since.” Keith Harrison commented regarding the “river,” “Perhaps one of the reasons why people have been drawn to rivers since time immemorial and why they have regarded them as sacred is because they are the perfect metaphor for our lives.”43 The metaphor, “life is like a river,” indicated that life, too, is “always moving forward; life has a source and an end (like a river); starts small and gains substance from its bed and its tributaries; has a history; does not maintain a constant speed; meanders, floods; change in depth and breadth of channel; and thus, reacts to forces around it.”44 Further, Cooke used the word “long” in the line “It’s been a long, long time coming,” as a metaphor for the fight for freedom, from slavery freedom struggles to the Civil Rights Movement.

Cooke provided in one stanza of A Change Is Gonna Come an empowering illustration of life’s metaphor for self-determination: “It’s been too hard living, but I’m afraid to die. . .” The line embraced the recognition that life in America has been

42Herbert, 88.


44Ibid.
wrought with excessive hard times in areas such as employment, voting, and social recognition as human beings. Cooke is not certain that dying will equalize the differences between blacks and whites, not even in Heaven. What is certain is that Cooke cried out for change. He called for a rethinking, an envisioning of the American dream.

Similarly, Curtis Mayfield, like Cooke, was an artist whose life represented the black church/religion and, thus, he relied heavily on that experience in creating metaphors as part of his protest music. Hence, the spirituals and the gospel merged together to render a political and social message through the Rhythm and Blues protest songs.

The third theme in the selected Rhythm and Blues protest songs was the call for racial equality. Racial equality is an element identified in the discourse of the Black Power era and for whom the end result was the achievement of racial justice in all aspects of black life—economic justice, social and political justice in such areas as voting, and education. The songs selected for analysis told the saga of racial inequality as experienced by blacks in America during the Black Power era. For example, Stevie Wonder’s *Living for the City* demonstrated the racial inequality being experienced by one’s father, and other black men like him, as well as his mother and other black women like her. The examples of economic disparities caused by racial inequality can be found in such lines as: “His father works some days for fourteen hours, And you can bet he barely makes a dollar. His mother goes to scrub the floors for many, And you’d best believe she hardly gets a penny.”

The entire stanza of the song told the saga of America’s response to blacks, especially the ways in which racial inequality was maintained as a white southern way of life. From poor housing to poor education, from underemployment to no employment,
the song left very little to the imagination regarding the black experience during the era under investigation. The song, not unlike the other songs presented, from the beginning to the end, lamented of the results of racial inequality on the lives of black and white Americans. Wonder's lyrics expressed the 'doubleness' (being Negro and being American) blacks find in their lives and thus, used the song to help align with Black Power and Black Aesthetics ideologies. However, the song ended as it began with the repercussions of economic bondage: "To find a job is like a haystack needle, 'Cause where he lives they don't use colored people."

Critics' skepticism of Living for the City took on similar challenges as with the other black Rhythm and Blues protest songs. The song has been viewed as just a black song addressing the conditions of blacks during that time period in rural Mississippi and not in urban America. Wonder's words, however, had relevance for black life regardless of location, that is, whether or not one was living in rural black America or urban black America—the dynamics of living were the same. The title of the song, Living for the City, is different from the chorus line—"Living just enough for the city." This adaptation prevented the song from being considered subversive in content. A similar change occurred with the Sam Cooke song A Change Is Gonna Come. In one version of the song, the lines "I go to the movies and I go downtown, Somebody keep telling me, don't hang around" is taken out of the aired version for fear that it was too subversive and it would "hurt" record sales.

Another call for racial equality can be found in Nina Simone's Mississippi Goddam. Through her life and music she epitomized the essence of the black
American—and especially the black female. Terms used to describe Simone include: revolution, beauty, cultural pride and psychological transformation—she was the voice of a civil rights movement. Ward wrote:

There was a self-possessed assurance—critics would call it arrogance, and bloody-mindedness—about Simone; an independence of mind, spirit and action, which seemed both refreshing and inspirational. It was this combination of message, music and manner, which made her such a potent figure for the Movement.

It was because of her experiences with the Movement that Simone wrote and recorded her most potent critique of American racial inequality. She transformed her rage with America into the scathing political statement — *Mississippi Goddam.* Further, as a black woman, Simone also spoke to the emerging black feminist and womanist ideologies. Prior to the theorists' discussions of the realities of postmodern identities, Simone presented a portrait of black femininity that spoke to various intersections of race, color, caste, sexuality and gender. In *Mississippi Goddam* Simone sings, “All I want is equality for my sister, my brother, my people and me.”

Aretha Franklin’s *Respect* continued the drive for black women’s racial equality. The song, originally recorded by Otis Redding, was not intended to represent any kind of protest for blacks or for women. The song really elevated as a form of protest in later years when women and black advocates for racial equality adopted the song as their

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46 Ward, 302

47 Neal, “She Put A Spell On Us.”

48 Lewis, “Nina Simone.”
theme for various movements. As one of the most known radical songs of its time, *Respect* seemed to have taken on several empowering translations during the era of black activism and was seen as a rally cry for human equality. The song, the call for psychological transformation and recognition, continued the task begun by Billie Holiday. Simone and others making American music, but especially black protest music, equalized the music industry from a black male business to also a black woman’s business. *Respect* became, not only for Franklin, but for black women, a quest for recognition and racial equality, but more explicitly, the song called for women’s need to give and receive love, to be acknowledged as a social equal and to be treated with respect. As Franklin defined it:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{All I'm askin' } \\
\text{Is for a little respect when you come home (just a little bit)} \\
\text{Hey baby, (just a little bit) when you come home.}
\end{align*}
\]

As Neal further explained:

The power of Aretha Franklin illuminates the significance of spiritual transcendence, spirit possession, and tonal semantics within the soul tradition. The significance of Aretha was her ability to articulate the essence of the Chitlin’ Circuit aesthetic at a time when black humanity was being severely tested publicly and daily and was often reclaimed in this sphere. The fact that Aretha arrives as a highly public and commoditized, though not wholly mediated product is part and parcel of the discursive ruptures initiated by Malcolm X and the burgeoning Black Power Movement. These tensions, which Franklin represented in a politically casual nature and Martin Luther King’s assassination deepened, are realized in black popular recordings from the era.\[^{49}\]

As with Simone, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, Franklin infused public narratives of black rage and militancy with the cries of black Americans for acknowledgment and

\[^{49}\text{Neal, }\textit{What The Music Said, 51.}\]
respect, and human decency. Thus, there is no denying that the appearance of Franklin on the music scene, particularly the singular impact of her 1967 recording of *Respect*, galvanized many segments of the movement in a language that was accessible in both working-class and petit bourgeois neighborhoods across the African-American Diaspora.\(^5\)

Thus, the main idea of the collective Rhythm and Blues protest songs selected for analysis was to help solidify the relationship between the music, the masses of black people, the call for black identity, black self-determination, racial equality and black empowerment. Essentially, the music allowed the masses, not just the physical protesters, to participate in the movement through the songs. The songs further allowed the masses to embrace spiritually and psychologically the concepts of empowerment, self-determination, black identity and racial equality. The musical artists were able to intersect with the audiences when the designated black leaders were unable of doing so, primarily because of their roles within the movement.

Music has always been an accurate barometer for the feelings of the people making and listening to it. Through the universal language of music, many people were able to voice their opinions, support causes, and even send messages to the listeners. The 1960s and the 1970s were among the most productive and meaningful eras in musical history in America. The events of that era called for change through the music of the decade—that is, music dedicated to urging protest by blacks against an oppressive system. These political songs were not only representative of popular culture, but also

\(^{50}\)Ibid.
they were memorable and noteworthy artistic documentation of the Black Power era in America.

Neal wrote that the quality and breadth of black protest art during the 1960s and early 1970s are unmatched in any other historical moment.\textsuperscript{51} He continued by remarking that underlying many of these vibrant expressions of political and cultural resistance were efforts to maintain the very communities of resistance that produced other black discourse of protest. Random violence, a heightened military (police and National Guard) presence, and a general decline in the safety and stability of their public institutions, by and large, defined Black communities of the era.\textsuperscript{52} However, there was not total agreement among the black leaders of the impact of Rhythm and Blues protest music. Very few critics and leaders agreed totally as to which “music” spoke for the community during the mid-1960s and the early 1970s.

Some critics felt that the strategic use of Rhythm and Blues protest songs during the Black Power era suffered on an organizational level due to a lack of congruity among the different protest groups. For example, many leaders of the Black Power era maintained a love-hate relationship with the music industry, whereas a few were completely opposed to its usage. Huey Newton (leader of the Black Panther Party) and Maulana Karenga (leader of the Cultural Nationalist Movement) both believed that the music was outside of their revolutionary efforts.\textsuperscript{53} Karenga relied more on the notions of African cultures as being the source of Black identity for the struggle and felt more of an

\textsuperscript{51}Neal, \textit{What the Music Said}, 56.

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{53}Ward, 409.
inclination towards the jazz music of the time as characterized by Archie Shepp, Charlie Parker, and Eric Dolphy. The lack of appeal for Soul or Rhythm and Blues protest music was too closely associated with white capitalist structures. Karenga claimed that the black community was "lost," culturally ignorant. He stated: "The Negro has more records than books and is dancing his life away." He further implied that the Rhythm and Blues music, sometimes ascribed to the Black Power Movement era, is not the music which serves the very nature of its people, for music is a time apparatus and it should function as such.

However, the Black Panther Party leaders felt that the jazz scene was too intellectual and did not reach the masses. Although the Party, like the Cultural Nationalists, was critical of some of the most popular Rhythm and Blue music artists, including James Brown and Aretha Franklin, felt that music had a distinctive role in the struggle. It was their contention that the music should be a clear medium to introduce and espouse the ideas of the revolution, but was not doing so, therefore, serving little purpose outside of entertainment and capital gain. The Black Panther Party was, however, supportive of groups, such as the Lumpen, who were not associated with the white record companies and sang songs that dealt solely with the revolution. Although the Black Panther Party, unlike the Cultural Nationalists, recognized the utility of Rhythm and Blues as a viable outlet for the movement, both groups failed to acknowledge the enormous impact Rhythm and Blues artists had on the mass audiences and the music industry. Also, musicologists have often asserted that a clear relationship

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
between Rhythm and Blues and the masses in the late 1960s and early 1970s is unclear. According to Ward:

[Rhythm and Blues] provided some sort of explicit running of commentary on the movement, with the men and women of soul emerging as notable participants, even leaders, tacticians, and philosophers of the Black struggle, they have usually depended more on partisan assertion than hard evidence.56

Portia Maultsby, on the other hand, suggested that African-Americans used the emergence of the socially conscious music to their advantage by responding to the calls related to racial, social, political and economic injustices. She also argued that throughout the 1970s, African-Americans took advantage of new opportunities to improve their social and economic status and to increase their political power.57 Blacks often utilized the themes of social change that were available in the music to modify their current situations. Similarly, Alice A. Tait and J. T. Barber suggested that the power of African-American music was grounded in the historical reality of the Black experience and the belief that things will change. Though they continued to release socially conscious music, some critics argued that Rhythm and Blues artists still remained outside of the categories identified in the movements.58 The artists themselves oftentimes wavered in their subversive aspirations. The music industry itself was also a culprit in the misappropriation or misunderstanding of the Rhythm and Blues protest songs. When black songs were considered too subversive in content, their record sales and public image often suffered or the artists was advised to change the lyrics in order to have a

56Ward, 290.

57Herbert, 63.

successful song. The Black Power ideologists also refuted Rhythm and Blues black protest songs as legitimate claims toward black liberation and revolution and often dismissed the songs for not being “black enough.”

Initially, Rhythm and Blues protest songs had the ingredients for bringing about a level of black empowerment. The songs had (1) continuity; (2) accessibility; (3) soul; (4) the call for social change through social justice strategies; (5) level of black consciousness; (6) appeal to the African-American community and (7) political leadership. Specifically, what Rhythm and Blues did not have included (1) political leaders capable of institutionalizing and following through on social change; (2) belief in the ability of the music to create and instill in blacks, the true need for continuing social change and social justice; (3) an ability to organize the people into a power driven social change force; (4) an ability to organize the black community, including all classes, into a unified force to confront the dominant society. However, there were spurts of action that appeared relevant to the lyrics of the songs. For example, the Black Panther Party initiated social programs that even today have relevance: the breakfast program for children, sickle cell anemia programs and voter registration activities. Similarly, SNCC initiated summer programs related to voter registration in Mississippi, and the activists of places like Mississippi challenged the dominant political parties for recognition and inclusion in the political process.

Hence, based on the facts presented in this analysis, that is, that there were black artists during the Black Power era who espoused the causes being put forth regarding black liberation, there was also ideological confusion regarding the worth and contribution of the Rhythm and Blues songs as forms of legitimate protest. Clayborne
Carson indicated that since the black power movement was unsuccessful in its efforts to “produce greater power for black people,” and may have “led to a decline in the ability of African-Americans to affect the course of American politics, its lasting contributions were more significant in the intellectual and cultural rather than the political arena.”

Finally, the analysis does not permit a definitive conclusion that the songs with their messages related to black identity, racial equality and black self-determination led to black empowerment. However, rhythm and blues protest songs and the Black Power Movement must be recognized for helping to re-define black identity by galvanizing grassroots blacks to embrace the call for self-determination and racial equality. The Black Panther Party was a leading advocate for Black Power. The other organizations that emerged during the era 1964-1975 called for improvement of the life of African-American communities through means other than non-violence and integration. The Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee advocated that whites no longer possessed leadership responsibilities for black communities. That is, blacks had the abilities to provide their own leadership. While it cannot be definitively stated that there is a direct relationship between the rhythm and blues protest songs, the changes called for were addressed by black communities.

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CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study was an investigation of the revolutionary significance of seven selected Rhythm and Blues protest songs, from 1964-1975, and their relationship to black empowerment, black identity, racial equity and self-determination. The racial inequalities of the American society impacted the self-concept and self-determination of blacks, hence, their participation in the struggles to dismantle racial discrimination and to establish a meaningful individual, as well as, group racial identity. Not just any racial identity was appropriate or acceptable to blacks, rather, blacks sought an identity that would allow them to Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud. One chosen means of addressing the issue of social change was through the protest songs of the Rhythm and Blues era of the 1960s and 1970s.

An analysis of the seven selected Rhythm and Blues protest songs added to the research on the impact of music to motivate African-Americans to engage in resiliency activities that ultimately would result in black empowerment. The seven songs selected for analyses were A Change Is Gonna Come by Sam Cook; Living in the City by Stevie Wonder; People Get Ready by Curtis Mayfield; Respect by Aretha Franklin; Mississippi Goddam by Nina Simone; What's Going On by Marvin Gaye; and Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud by James Brown. Black protest music, as a motivator for social change, has not been given the same level of study as black music as a humanistic and
artistic transforming activity. An investigation of Rhythm and Blues protest songs, while limited in scope (seven selected songs), demonstrated that there was a continuation of the development of black musical styles from eras of spirituals, ragtime, gospel, and jazz to the Black Power Movement era. Each era influenced the next and the music took on the guise of the literary text, that is, the genres became speakerly texts. According to Rob Bowman, blacks developed a musical style that is an integral part of a much larger black subculture of language, fashion, demeanor and attitudes.¹

The artists wrote and performed songs that stressed the themes of black identity, self-determination and racial equality. Their music, not only told of the racial struggles and racial inequities, but it also spoke to and became the musical call for social change and transformation. The music influenced the creation of the Black Power Movement. Three groups (there were other groups of this era) that were representative of the call for change that emerged during this era were the Black Panther Party, the Black Arts Movement, and SNCC. The thrust of the organizations was a response to the perceived slowness and uncertainty of the earlier Civil Rights Movement’s ideology of non-violence. Hence, the thrust of the three organizations, composed primarily of young people, was the idea of unification and black empowerment for the black community. The groups advocated a nationalist thrust, which differed from the assimilationist thrust of the NAACP and other organizations, as a strategy that promoted political and economic self-determination. Regardless of strategy ideologies, both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement had the same goals—black self-

determination, racial identity and racial equality, thus, the reference to this era as the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement. However, for this research endeavor, the emphasis was on the latter part of the era—the Black Power era.

The investigation revealed that three basic themes emerged: racial equality, black self-determination and black identity. If the black audience really heard the music, it was assumed that they would respond by taking part in some type of demonstrable black empowerment activity. Due to the level of involvement of the three aforementioned organizations, it can be assumed that in some ways the cries of the lyricists were heard and acted upon. However, one of the limitations of this study was the inability to measure the level of impact or relevancy related to whether or not the themes led to any significant action for black empowerment by the listeners. Meanwhile, what did emerge was a fourth theme—social change. Social change was specifically advanced in the songs, *A Change is Gonna Come*, *Mississippi Goddam* and *People Get Ready*.

Further, the songs indicated that the artists were aware of the significance of the civil rights struggles as well as the civil rights movement, especially Curtis Mayfield and Nina Simone. Mayfield penned several songs related to the Movement while Simone not only composed and performed; she was an active participation in movement events. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement era, black Rhythm and Blues musicians were more actively involved in racial struggles through their music during the Civil Rights-Black Power era. That is, the reliance on Negro spirituals and hymns as the motivator of the struggles of black people was replaced by actual musical responses to the socio-political-economic life experienced by black Americans. The central themes in black history, culture and black consciousness emerged as themes of deliverance and action in the
Rhythm and Blues music, especially in the lyrics of Curtis Mayfield, James Brown, Sam Cook and Nina Simone. The lyrics of Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, James Brown, and Marvin Gaye also served as calls for psychological, cultural and economic transformations of the American society for racial equity. All of the music under investigation served as calls for racial equity, thus, the Du Boisian question of “how does it feel to be a problem” would be answered.

The music of the artists during the Rhythm and Blues era was reflective of the oral tradition as part of the socio-cultural life of African-Americans. The music became the voice of the African-American masses as they told of their racial struggles of economic challenges, especially in Stevie Wonder’s *Living in the City*, Nina Simone’s *Mississippi Goddam* and James Brown’s *Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud*. Racial equality was called for in *What’s Going On*, *A Change Is Gonna Come*, *Mississippi Goddam*, and *Say It Loud*. All seven songs selected for analysis dealt with the theme of black self-determination.

While it cannot be determined if the songs provoked black empowerment actions, it can be surmised that the songs were used as one of the most productive means of educating people concerning humanity, including possible means of eliminating racial inequities. To some, these songs were intended to do what other revolutionary methods were not or unable to fulfill—to produce a meaningful form of black unity, self-determination, self-consciousness, employment opportunities, and educational equity for African-Americans. Hence, music for black Americans expressed the ideas of loosening the chains of containment by white Americans. An emphatic or adamant conclusion as to the real significance of Rhythm and Blues protest songs remains a challenge.
Additionally, musicians and other artists of the Rhythm and Blues era saw the protest music as a consequence of racial discrimination, thus, the music operated as the moral and humanistic call for racial equality. The Rhythm and Blues black protest songs were representative of the political arena for African-Americans as well as Americans in general. The protest songs called for civilities and civil rights for African-Americans. As African-Americans expressed a level of consciousness, it became apparent that the songs were their expression of the unrest felt by citizens against the silencing of their voice and their invisibility by the dominant group. The world of the Black Power and civil rights era was a race against war, unemployment, racial inequality and a government unwilling to listen to the voice of ordinary people. Thus, to be heard, the Rhythm and Blues black protest songs emerged, telling the stories and offering the cry for change. What emerged became almost a call and response to racial upheaval. That is, the dominant society issued, through its laws and continuous treatment of African-Americans, the call for business as usual. Blacks responded with such songs as *Mississippi Goddam; Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud*; and *What's Going On*.

Clayborne Carson indicated that the black power movement was unsuccessful in its efforts to “produce greater power for black people”; however, blacks demonstrated limited political gain, but their lasting contributions were in the intellectual and cultural arenas.  

2 Finally, the analysis does not permit a definitive conclusion that the songs, with their protest messages, related to black identity, racial equality and black self-determination led to black empowerment. However, the researcher acknowledges, and

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agrees with, Brian Ward who stated, “Rhythm and Blues often worked to express the
black experience in ways only dimly understood by white fans and subsequent
commentators, thereby encouraging the national sense of black pride and identity which
bloomed in the 1960s”.³

Hence, the recommendation calls for more research that might investigate
whether or not the protest songs did in actuality lead to black empowerment during the
civil rights and black power eras.

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³Ward, Just My Soul Responding, 204.
APPENDIX

1. WHAT'S GOING ON
   Marvin Gaye

   Mother, mother, there's too many of you crying
   Brother, brother, brother, there's far too many of you dying
   You know we've got to find a way
   To bring some lovin' here today, hey

   Father, father, we don't need to escalate
   War is not the answer, for only love can conquer hate
   You know we've got to find a way
   To bring some lovin' here today

   CHORUS #1:
   Picket lines and picket signs
   Don't punish me with brutality
   Talk to me, so you can see
   Oh what's going on, what's going on
   Yeah, what's going on, ah, what's going on
   Ahhh....
   Mother, mother, everybody thinks we're wrong
   Ah but who are they to judge us
   Simply 'cos our hair is long
   Ah you know we've got to find a way
   To bring some understanding here today

   CHORUS #2:
   Picket lines and picket signs
   Don't punish me with brutality
   Talk to me, so you can see
   What's going on, yeah what's going on
   Tell me what's going on, I'll tell you what's going on
APPENDIX

2. PEOPLE GET READY
Curtis Mayfield/The Impressions
words and music by Curtis Mayfield (1964)

People get ready, there 's a train comin'
You don 't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
You don 't need no ticket you just thank the lord

People get ready, there 's a train to Jordan
Picking up passengers coast to coast
Faith is the key, open the doors and board them
There 's hope for all among those loved the most
There ain't no room for the hopeless sinner whom would hurt all mankind
Just to save his own
Have pity on those whose chances grow thinner
For there is no hiding place against the kingdoms throne

People get ready there 's a train comin'
You don 't need no baggage, just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
You don 't need no ticket, just thank the lord.

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APPENDIX

3. LIVING FOR THE CITY
Stevie Wonder

A boy is born in hard time Mississippi
Surrounded by four walls that ain’t so pretty
His parents give him love and affection
To keep him strong moving in the right direction
Living just enough, just enough for the city... ee ha!
His father works some days for fourteen hours
And you can bet he barely makes a dollar
His mother goes to scrub the floors for many
And you'd best believe she hardly gets a penny
Living just enough, just enough for the city... yeah!
His sister's black but she is sho' nuff pretty
Her skirt is short but Lord her legs are sturdy
To walk to school she's got to get up early
Her clothes are old but never are they dirty
Living just enough, just enough for the city... um hum
Her brother's smart he's got more sense than many
His patience's long but soon he won't have any
To find a job is like a haystack needle
Cause where he lives they don't use colored people
Living just enough, just enough for the city...
Living just enough...
For the city... ooh, ooh

His hair is long, his feet are hard and gritty
He spends his life walking the streets of New York City
He's almost dead from breathing in air pollution
He tried to vote but to him there's no solution
Living just enough, just enough for the city...
yeah, yeah, yeah!
I hope you hear inside my voice of sorrow
And that it motivates you to make a better tomorrow
This place is cruel no where could be much colder
If we don't change the world will soon be over
Living just enough, stop giving just enough for the city!!!!
La, La, La, La, La, La,
Da Da Da Da Da Da Da Da Da Da
Da Da Da Da Da Da
Da Da Da Da Da Da Da Da Da Da Da
APPENDIX

4. A CHANGE IS GONNA COME
   Missing stanza
   Sam Cooke
   (S. Cooke)

   I was born by the river
   In a little tent
   And just like the river
   I've been running ever since

   It's been a long, long time coming
   But I know a change gonna come
   Oh, yes it is

   It's been too hard living
   But I'm afraid to die
   I don't know what's up there beyond the sky

   It's been a long, long time coming
   But I know a change gonna come
   Oh yes it will

   Then I go to my brother
   I say brother help me please
   But he winds up knocking me
   Back down on my knees

   There's been times that I thought
   I wouldn't last for long
   But now I think I'm able to carry on
   It's been a long, long time coming
   But I know a change is gonna come
   Oh, yes it will
APPENDIX

5. A CHANGE IS GONNA COME

   Complete version
   Sam Cooke

   I was born by the river
   In a little tent
   oh And just like the river
   I've been running ever since

   It's been a long, long time coming
   But I know a change gonna come
   Oh, yes it will

   It's been too hard living
   But I'm afraid to die
   I don't know what's up there beyond the sky

   It's been a long, long time coming
   But I know a change gonna come
   Oh yes it will

   I go to the movies, and I go downtown
   Somebody keep telling me,
   don't hang around

   It's been a long, long time coming
   But I know a change gonna come
   Oh yes it will

   Then I go to my brother
   I say brother help me please
   But he winds up knocking me
   Back down on my knees

   There's been times that I thought
   I wouldn't last for long
   But now I think I'm able to carry on
   It's been a long, long time coming
   But I know a change is gonna come
   Oh, yes it will
APPENDIX

6. RESPECT

Aretha Franklin
- written by Otis Redding

(oo) What you want
(oo) Baby, I got
(oo) What you need
(oo) Do you know I got it?
(oo) All I'm askin'

(oo) Is for a little respect when you come home (just a little bit)
Hey baby (just a little bit) when you get home
(just a little bit) mister (just a little bit)

I ain't gonna do you wrong while you're gone
Ain't gonna do you wrong (oo) 'cause I don't wanna (oo)
All I'm askin' (oo)
Is for a little respect when you come home (just a little bit)
Baby (just a little bit) when you get home (just a little bit)
Yeah (just a little bit)

I'm about to give you all of my money
And all I'm askin' in return, honey
Is to give me my profits
When you get home (just a, just a, just a, just a)
Yeah baby (just a, just a, just a, just a)
When you get home (just a little bit)
Yeah (just a little bit)

------ instrumental break ------
Ooo, your kisses (oo)
Sweeter than honey (oo)
And guess what? (oo)
So is my money (oo)
All I want you to do (oo) for me
Is give it to me when you get home (re, re, re, re)
Yeah baby (re, re, re, re)
Whip it to me (respect, just a little bit)
When you get home, now (just a little bit)

R-E-S-P-E-C-T
Find out what it means to me
R-E-S-P-E-C-T
Take care, TCB

Oh (sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me)
A little respect (sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me)

Whoa, babe (just a little bit)
A little respect (just a little bit)
I get tired (just a little bit)
Keep on tryin' (just a little bit)
You're runnin' out of foolin' (just a little bit)
And I ain't lyin' (just a little bit)
(re, re, re, re) 'spect
When you come home (re, re, re, re)
Or you might walk in (respect, just a little bit)
And find out I'm gone (just a little bit)
I got to have (just a little bit)
A little respect (just a little bit)
APPENDIX

7. MISSISSIPPI GODDAM
   Nina Simone

The name of this tune is Mississippi Goddam
   And I mean every word of it

   Alabama’s gotten me so upset
   Tennessee made me lose my rest
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam
   Alabama’s gotten me so upset
   Tennessee made me lose my rest
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

   Can’t you see it
   Can’t you feel it
   It’s all in the air
I can’t stand the pressure much longer
   Somebody say a prayer
   Alabama’s gotten me so upset
   Tennessee made me lose my rest
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

   This is a show tune
   But the show hasn't been written for it, yet

   Hound dogs on my trail
   School children sitting in jail
   Black cat cross my path
   I think every day’s gonna be my last
   Lord have mercy on this land of mine
   We all gonna get it in due time
   I don’t belong here
   I don’t belong there
I’ve even stopped believing in prayer
   Don’t tell me
   I tell you
   Me and my people just about due
   I’ve been there so I know
   They keep on saying “Go slow!”
   But that’s just the trouble
   "do it slow"
   Washing the windows
"do it slow"
Picking the cotton
"do it slow"
You're just plain rotten
"do it slow"
You're too damn lazy
"do it slow"
The thinking's crazy
"do it slow"
Where am I going
What am I doing
I don't know
I don't know

Just try to do your very best
Stand up be counted with all the rest
For everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam
I made you thought I was kiddin' didn't we
Picket lines
School boy cots
They try to say it's a communist plot
All I want is equality
for my sister my brother my people and me
Yes you lied to me all these years
You told me to wash and clean my ears
And talk real fine just like a lady
And you'd stop calling me Sister Sadie

Oh but this whole country is full of lies
You're all gonna die and die like flies
I don't trust you any more
You keep on saying "Go slow!"
"Go slow!"

But that's just the trouble
"do it slow"
Desegregation
"do it slow"
Mass participation
"do it slow"
Reunification
"do it slow"
Do things gradually
"do it slow"
But bring more tragedy
"do it slow"
Why don't you see it
Why don't you feel it
I don't know
I don't know
You don't have to live next to me
Just give me my equality
Everybody knows about Mississippi
Everybody knows about Alabama
Everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam

That's it!
APPENDIX

8. SAY IT LOUD, I’M BLACK AND I’M PROUD

James Brown

Uh! Your bad self!
Say it loud! – I’m black and I’m proud
Say it louder! - I’m black and I’m proud
Look-a-here!

Some people say we got alot of malice
Some say it’s a lotta nerve
But I say we won’t quit movin’ until we get what we deserve
We’ve been buked and we’ve been scournd
We’ve been treated bad, talked about
As sure as you’re born
But just as sure as it take two eyes to make a pair - huh!
Brother we can’t quit until we get our share

Say it loud – I’m black and I’m proud
Say it loud – I’m black and I’m proud
One more time, say it loud – I’m black and I’m proud - huh!

I’ve worked on jobs with my feet and my hands
But all the work I did was for the other man
And now we demands a chance to do things for ourselves
We tired of beatin’ our head against the wall
An workin’ for someone else

Say it loud! – I’m black and I’m proud
Say it loud! – I’m black and I’m proud
Say it loud! – I’m black and I’m proud
Say it loud! – I’m black and I’m proud
Say it loud! – I’m black and I’m proud - oow!

Ooo-wee, you’re killin’ me
Alright, uh! You’re out of sight!
Alright, so tough you’re tough enough!
Oowee uh! You’re killin’ me! oow!

Say it loud! – I’m black and I’m proud
Say it louder! – I’m black and I’m proud

Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves
We tired of beatin’ our heads against the wall
And workin' for someone else
A-look-a-here
There's one thing more I got to say right here
Now, now we're people, we're like the birds and the bees
We rather die on our feet than keep livin' on our knees

Say it loud – I'm black and I'm proud hu!
Say it loud – I'm black and I'm proud hu!
Say it loud – I'm black and I'm proud Lord-a-Lord-a-Lord-a
Say it loud – I'm black and I'm proud - oooh!

Uh! alright now, good God
You know we can do the boog-a-loo ....
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