Articles

Wasn't That A Time: Stories & Songs That Moved The Nation: A Community Radio Broadcast For SNCC Freedom Singers Matthew & Marshall Jones

Freedom Singers Marshall Jones and Matthew Jones

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Oginga Odinga, Oginga Odinga,
Oginga Odinga of Kenya – who?
Oginga Odinga, Oginga Odinga,
Oginga Odinga of Kenya.
Uhuru Ha! Uhur Ha!
Freedom now! Ha!
Freedom now! Ha!

Oginga said "look-a here,
What's going on down in Selma?
If you white folks don't straighten up,
I'm gone call Jomo Kenyatta"

Oginga Odinga, Oginga Odinga,
Oginga Odinga of Kenya – who?
Oginga Odinga, Oginga Odinga,
Oginga Odinga of Kenya.
Uhuru Ha! Uhur Ha!
Freedom now! Ha!
Freedom now! Ha!

The white folks down in Mississippi
Will knock you on your rump
And if you holler Freedom
You'll wind up in the swamp.

Oginga Odinga, Oginga Odinga,
Oginga Odinga of Kenya – who?
Oginga Odinga, Oginga Odinga,
Oginga Odinga of Kenya.
Uhuru Ha! Uhur Ha!
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Words & Music by Matthew Jones © 1993 Wisdom Train, ASCAP; reprinted with permission.

Epilogue

A few years back — prior to Covid and Marshall's death — I produced a tribute concert for Matt at the Peoples' Voice Café in New York City for what would have been his 80th birthday. Matt was a regular at the venue, and during my ten-year stay in the Big Apple, we collaborated on a number of occasions. On this special evening, I collected tributes from folks — family members, personal friends, activist conspirators — to read throughout the night. Here's one, that my best friend and long-time partner penned for the show:

What happens when two tough, strong-willed, uncompromising individuals lock horns for the first time? A few missteps by Susie in her initial phone conversation with Matt Jones, led to his hanging up on her in the early 1990's. It could have been the end and not a beginning. Persistence and a passion for preserving and presenting songs of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement soon displaced distrust and initial misunderstandings and their relationship blossomed.

Susie and I first heard Matt's voice in the acclaimed television documentary, "Eyes on the Prize." One verse of "Ballad of Medgar Evers" was played in the episode 'Mississippi: Is This America? (1962 – 1964). We knew instantly that this song, along with his brother's "In the Mississippi River" must be part of Susie's CD project: Freedom Is A Constant Struggle: Songs of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. All she had to do was make a call. The call was made. She referred to Matt as Marshall — his brother's name, at least once.

Matt already had doubts about Susie's intentions, so calling him Marshall didn't help. But that wasn't the end of a beautiful relationship. For the next 20 years, Matt Jones would be an integral and willing participant in every project Susie created. The phone was their meeting place to work out the details of every venture.

It is likely that Susie spent more time on the phone with Matt over a ten-year period than anyone else, prior to her move to New York City. Often, Matt would sing songs over the phone to get Susie's take on them. Their lives were intertwined until the day Matt moved on in 2011.

I am fortunate to have known Matt Jones, and I treasure my time with him and his music. If you don't think that you know Matt well enough, then listen to some of his 500 songs. There's a history lesson in his music, for everyone. — Brad McKelvey

On August 21, 2017, Shelly Jones, Matt's widow, drafted the following birthday wish for her husband specifically for another *Wasn't That A Time* radio broadcast. She wrote:

My Dearest Darling Husband Matthew [pictured],

As I sit down to write your birthday message for our dear friend, Susie, to read on her radio program, Wasn't That A Time, I am crying and I can hardly breathe. I miss you so, and I am stumbling to find the right words. So, as I carry you in my heart and in my very breath, I reach for your guidance: ….Take this pain and give me freedom… [from Matt's beautiful song, I Won't Turn Back]

The recent horrific and shameful violence by the white right (KKK & Nazis) in Charlottesville reminded me of the time when we first met in the early1970's at the Many Races Cultural Center/ Hey Brother Coffee House in NYC founded by the late Frederick Douglas Kirkpatrick, or Brother Kirk, as we affectionately called him.

You and I were invited by Bro. Kirk to join him and some other members to participate in an interracial Book Mobile Caravan that traveled throughout his home state of Louisiana. We traveled throughout the state holding freedom song rallies and distributing books that we had collected on African American history. On one occasion, in Haynesville, we were surrounded by state troopers who were pointing their rifles directly at us. Suddenly, you grabbed my hand and led us all in singing We Shall Overcome. I can hear us now singing from the very depths of our beings, …We are not Afraid. We are not afraid right now… The events in Charlottesville also bring to mind the time that you were badly beaten and hit over the head with a steel chair by a jeering white mob yielding metal chains in Atlanta, Ga. In 1964. You and three other SNCC workers (Karen Haberman, Wilson Brown & Charles Neblett) had dared to walk into a States Rights rally spearheaded by the late Governor George Wallace.

Where would you be today? I say you would be in Charlottesville, VA with the family of Heather Heyer, giving them strength and comfort and encouragement to carry on with the freedom fight, during this terrible time for them grieving the loss of their beloved daughter. You would be leading them in singing…Take This Fear And Give Me Courage…I won't turn Back…

You are indeed no stranger to the racism and bigotry in Virginia, where you developed and created the Danville Freedom Voices, as a SNCC Field Secretary, organizing in the tobacco fields of Danville in 1964. Yes, sent there by your dearest brother-friend, the late great SNCC leader, Avon William Rollins Sr. [pictured] Both of you would be cheering and shouting for joy. Supporting the young people who are tearing down the statues /symbols of the confederacy across the nation.

So Happy 81st Birthday my darling. I also give you birthday love from your sons Matt 111, Gerald and Ellis Lebron, grandchildren, and yes, great grandchildren, from Chattanooga, TN. We love and honor you today on your birthday and every day!

So I end this letter the way we always ended our letters and cards to one another.

I loveth thee so forever and ever and throughout eternity

Your very own wife

Shelly

I'm going to close out this column with the lyrics to, "We Must Rise Again." Matt incorporated the words into the portrait he submitted for publication in, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: An Anthology of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. The reprint of this book, which I edited, was released in November of 2021.*

"Here's a song that I wrote in 1986 in tribute to all my brothers and sisters in SNCC who gave of themselves in a struggle for a better world." — Matthew Jones, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: An Anthology of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, edited by Susie Erenrich, p. 172, © 1999 Black Belt Press; 2021 NewSouth Books.

We Must Rise Again
My life has come and gone
And new life is a-dawning
But I can't take no rest
Until I see the morning
I know that I must come again
If we are going to win
I don't see how we can take a rest
Until we pass the test
You can't count us out
You think that you have bought us
Now don't forget our past
There is a lot our past has taught us
I know that I must come again
If we are gonna' win
I don't see how we can take a rest
Until we pass the test
If you're feeling kind of low, brother, sister
Here is one thing that I know, brother, sister
Together we defeated the army of the Klan
We can do the same today, I hope you understand
I know that we will rise again
A new day is dawning, we see the morning
We will see the morning
Together we will rise we will see the evil crumble
So tell us no more lies
Or you will take a tumble
I know that we must come again
If we are gonna win
I don't see how we can take a rest
Until we pass the test
We will breathe new life
We will see the light a-dawning
We will take no rest
Until we see the morning
If you're feeling kind of scared, brother, sister
Don't close the eye inside, brother, sister
Our children don't know the truth
They are watching the video
But if we rise again
They will surely know I know that we will rise again
A new day is dawning
We will see the morning

[Spoken] I am a freedom fighter. I am all oppressed people rolled into one. I am African, Native American, Jew, Palestinian, Irish—all rolled into one. Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!

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