

THE SINGING IS OVER

Julius Lester / The Angry Children of Malcolm X

No one caught the fury that swept over the young blacks of SNCC after Freedom Summer of 1964 better than Julius Lester, a songwriter, folk singer, essayist, and journalist who was himself a member of the movement. In the following article, which first appeared in 1966 in *Sing Out!*, a folk song magazine on which he served as an editor, Lester comments on the increasing disillusionment of blacks with the interracial civil rights movement.

The brutality of the law-enforcement authorities toward blacks and the tokenism of the "liberal" federal government finally led SNCC to decide that black people must take charge of their own liberation, leaving whites the responsibility of eliminating racism among their own people. Violence had been used by whites through the years to subjugate blacks, and, Lester warned, it might be necessary for blacks to use the same tactic to free themselves. In so doing, they would find themselves a part of the revolutionary Third World, and thereby they would stand a chance of gaining self-determination and freedom from white domination.

The world of the black American is different from that of the white American. This difference comes not only from the segregation imposed on the black, but it also comes from the way of life he has evolved for himself under these conditions. Yet, America has always been uneasy with the separate world in its midst. Feeling most comfortable when the black man emulates the ways and manners of white Americans, America has, at the same time, been stolidly unwilling to let the black man be assimilated into the mainstream.

With its goal of assimilation on the basis of equality, the civil rights movement was once the great hope of black men and liberal whites. In 1960 and 1961 Negroes felt that if only Americans knew the wrongs and sufferings they had to endure, these wrongs would be righted and all would be well. If Americans saw well-dressed, well-mannered, clean Negroes on their television screen not retaliating to being beaten by white Southerners, they would not sit back and do nothing. *Amor vincit omnia!* and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was the knight going forth to prove to the father that he was worthy of becoming a member of the family. But there was something wrong with this attitude and young Negroes began to feel

from Julius Lester, "The Angry Children of Malcolm X," *Sing Out!*, XVI (October-November 1966), pp. 21-25. Copyright © by Julius Lester 1966. Used with permission of the author and Ronald Hobbs Literary Agency.

uneasy. Was this not another form of the bowing and scraping their grandparents had had to do to get what they wanted? Were they not acting once again as the white man wanted and expected them to? And why should they have to be brutalized, physically and spiritually, for what every other American had at birth? But these were only timid questions in the mind for which no answer was waited. You simply put your body in the struggle and that meant entering the church in Albany, Danville, Birmingham, Greenwood, Nashville, or wherever you were, entering the church and listening to prayers, short sermons on your courage and the cause you were fighting, singing freedom songs—Ain't Gon' Let Nobody Turn Me Round, Turn Me Round, Turn Me Round and you would name names, the sheriff's, the Mayor's, the Governor's and whoever else you held responsible for the conditions and—always at the end—We Shall Overcome with arms crossed, holding the hands of the persons next to you and swaying gently from side to side, We Shall Overcome Someday someday but not today because you knew as you walked out of the church, two abreast, and started marching toward town that no matter how many times you sang about not letting anybody turn you around red-necks and po' white trash from four counties and some from across the state line were waiting with guns, tire chains, baseball bats, rocks, sticks, clubs and bottles, waiting as you turned the corner singing about This Little Light of Mine and how you were going to let it shine as that cop's billy club went upside your head shine shine shining as you fell to the pavement with someone's knee crashing into your stomach and someone's foot into your back until a cop dragged you away, threw you into the paddy wagon and off to the jail you and the others went, singing I Ain't Scared of Your Jail 'Cause I Want My Freedom. Freedom! Freedom! Was it a place somewhere between Atlanta and Birmingham and you kept on missing it everytime you drove that way? It was a street in Itta Bena, Mississippi. Ain't that a bitch? Freedom Street! Ran right by the railroad tracks in the Negro part of town and Love Street ran right into it. Freedom and Love. It would be nice to have a house right on that corner. Freedom and Love. But from what you'd heard it was just a street in Itta Bena. Maybe it was a person—Freedom. Somebody sitting on a porch somewhere. You wondered what he looked like as you sat in the jail cell with ten, twenty, thirty others and one toilet that wouldn't flush and one useless window stopped up with bars. If it was summer the jailer would turn the heat on and if it was winter he'd turn it off and take the mattresses and you'd sing Freedom Songs (your brother sent you a note and said you looked real good on the six o'clock news on TV walking down the street singing) until the guard came and said Shut Up All That Damn Noise and you'd sing louder and he'd take one of you out at a time and everybody'd get quiet and listen to the screams and cries from the floor above and then that one would come back, bleeding, and you'd sing again because if one went to jail, all went, if

one got a beating, all got beatings and then that night or the next day or the day after the people would've got up enough money to bail you out and you'd go back to the church and march again and your brother would see you on the six o'clock news for thirty seconds between the stock market report and Jackie Kennedy flying to Switzerland with her children for skiing lessons.

But a response did begin to come from the nation. All across the North young white kids held sympathy demonstrations and then with the Freedom Rides in 1961 whites came South to go to jail with Negroes—for Freedom. Those who came said integration was their fight, too, because they could never be whole men, either, in a segregated society. Some whites stayed after the Freedom Rides and moved into Negro communities to live and to work.

At that time there was a split between activists in The Movement. Some felt that more and more demonstrations were needed, while others felt that the effect of demonstrations was limited. Power was what was needed and power came through having a say in the system. That came through the ballot. Once you had some say in government, you could have a say about jobs. After all, what was the point of desegregating a lunch counter if you didn't have the money to buy a hamburger?

So began the slow tedious work of going into a town, finding someone who wouldn't be afraid to have a civil rights worker living in his house and would help the worker become known in the community. The civil rights worker had to find a minister courageous enough to let his church be used for a mass meeting and then he had to go around the community asking people to come out to the meeting. At the mass meeting there was usually hymn singing and a prayer service first. Then the minister would make a few remarks before introducing the civil rights worker, who by that time, if he were a veteran, would've been through the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, five or six different jails and a lot of hungry days. He had dropped out of college, or quit his job if he had never been to college to become a full-time organizer for SNCC. His job was simple: organize the community to march down to the courthouse to register to vote. In small Mississippi towns, though, he didn't even think of organizing the community. He would feel good if he could convince five people to go. If five went and if the inevitable happened (violence, arrests), he had a good chance of organizing the community. It was not important at that time if one name was put on the voter registration rolls. The most important thing was to get the people organized.

It was out of Mississippi that one of the most important concepts of "the movement" came. Let the people lead themselves. SNCC field workers provided the impetus to a community, but let the community choose its leaders from its own ranks. To symbolize their new feeling, they began wearing denim work overalls, saying that they, too, were one of the community,

that community of the poor. They rejected the idea of the "talented tenth," who would come out of the colleges to lead. There would be no "talented tenth." Only the community.

There were still demonstrations, but now they were not aimed as much at public accommodations, the most obvious symbols of oppression. The picket line around the courthouse, the symbol of the seat of power, was the new target. The immediate result was the same. Heads that had been beaten before were beaten again. Heads that had never been beaten were beaten. New bloody heads were on the six o'clock news alongside ones that still had scabs from the last head-whipping session. If you were a civil rights worker in Mississippi you learned many things quickly. Don't sleep by windows if possible. Don't answer a knock at the door in the middle of the night unless your caller showed you nothing less than his birth certificate. If you're on the highway at night you learned to drive as if you were training to be an astronaut. If a car was following you while you were doing ninety and it didn't sound a siren, it was safe to assume that the people in that car were not delivering a telegram. One SNCC worker, an ex-stock car driver, learned how to make a U-turn while doing ninety. (Take your hands off the wheel and pull the hand-brake. The car will spin around. Release the hand-brake and accelerate.) Each organizer had his own little techniques for staying alive. Non-violence might do something to the moral conscience of a nation, but a bullet didn't have morals and it was beginning to occur to more and more organizers that white folks had plenty more bullets than they did conscience.

How naive, how idealistic they were then. They had honestly believed that once white people knew what segregation did, it would be abolished. But why shouldn't they have believed it? They had been fed the American Dream, too. They believed in Coca Cola and the American Government. "I dreamed I got my Freedom in a Maidenform bra." They were in the Pepsi Generation, believing that the F.B.I. was God's personal emissary to uphold good and punish evil.

That was before the countless demonstrations where the F.B.I. took notes standing next to cracker cops while they were wiping nigger blood off their billy clubs and checking the batteries on their cattle-prods. That was before the promises of the Justice Department began to sound like the teasing of a virgin who never gets down to where it's at. Sure, it was nice to see that picture of Bobby Kennedy up all night at his desk during the Freedom Rides. He looked almost like a civil rights worker drinking coffee with his shoes off, but it took those Freedom Rides to make the ICC rule out segregated seating on interstate bus travel. It was Birmingham, '63 that finally forced the Image of Youth and Liberality, John Kennedy, into proposing a Civil Rights Bill, which was then almost immediately compromised into ineffectiveness when the Brother of the Image, Bobby the K, appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee. They didn't like the

idea of the March on Washington, but managed to turn it into a Kennedy victory by finally endorsing it as being in the American tradition, whatever that means. After the march the American Monarch had the Big Six Negro Leaders over to the White House for tea and cookies and to chat with Jackie about the Riviera in the winter (it's a whole lot better than the Delta I hear). The Monarch, his face rugged from the spray of the wind-swept Atlantic, as thousands of eulogies have proclaimed since his swift demise, stood there smiling, feeling pretty good because all the liquor stores and bars in Washington had been closed for the day so there was no danger of a bunch of niggers getting a hold of some fire-water and forgetting that they weren't in Harlem, Buttermilk Bottom and all those other weird-named places niggers pick to live in. (The order forbidding the sale of alcoholic beverages is one of the biggest insults Negroes have ever had hurled at them. It would've been much easier to take if it had simply been said The Great White Father can't trust his pickaninnies if the bars and liquor stores are left open.) Jack could also stand there and smile because John Lewis of SNCC had had his speech censored by the more "responsible" leaders, who threatened to withdraw from the March. Even censored, Lewis' speech raised pertinent questions—questions that had been on the minds of many, those not leaders, those not responsible. "The party of Kennedy is also the party of Eastland. The party of Javits is also the party of Goldwater. *Where is our party?*" But Jack could smile, because John Lewis had deleted from his speech the most pertinent question of all "I want to know—which side is the Federal Government on?"

A lot of people wanted to know that, particularly after Lyndon Baines Johnson became President of the United States in a split second one Friday afternoon. When he asked for the nation's help and God's in that cracker drawl Negroes began pulling out road maps, train schedules and brushing up on their Spanish. A lot of them had always wanted to see what Mexico was like anyway and it looked as if the time to do that thing was near.

But Big Lyndon, despite his beagle hounds and daughters, fooled everybody. Not only did he strengthen the civil rights bill and support it fully, he started giving Martin Luther King competition as to who was going to lead "the movement." King lost.

With the push for the civil rights bill in Congress there began talk of a white backlash in the '64 elections. It seemed that whites were getting a little tired of picking up the papers and seeing niggers all over the front page. Even if they were getting their heads kicked in half the time, four years of seeing that was about enough. The average white person didn't know what niggers wanted and didn't much care. By now they should've gotten whatever the hell it was they said they didn't have and if they hadn't got it by now, they either didn't deserve it or didn't need it.

What was really bothering northern whites, however, was the fact that The Movement had come North. De Facto Segregation and De Facto

Housing were new phrases, meaning No Niggers Allowed in This School and You Damn Well Better Believe No Niggers Allowed in This Neighborhood. If you believed the liberal press, though, it wasn't as serious a problem as the one down South, because in the North segregation wasn't deliberate. It just sorta happened that way. Many Negroes never found out exactly what De Facto meant, but they assumed it was the De Facto and not segregation they ran up against when they couldn't find an apartment to rent outside of Harlem. Soon, though, the mask fell from the North's face. In New York it happened when CORE threatened a stall-in on all of the city's expressways the morning of the World's Fair opening. The threat alone was enough to make over three-fourths of the people who drove to work leave their cars in the garage and take the train or simply call in sick. The threat alone was enough to make New York's liberal newspapers read as if they had come out of the editorial room of the Birmingham News and the radio and television commentators sounded as if they had acquired southern accents over night. A few months later an organization arose in New York which called itself SPONGE—Society for the Prevention of Negroes Getting Everything. It was difficult to speak any longer of a North and a South. As Malcolm X once said, everything south of the Canadian border was South. There was only up South and down South now, and you found "crackers" both places.

While the North was being shocked into realizing that there were Negroes in its midst, the South was sympathizing with the assault that Mississippi was about to suffer. Almost a thousand white students were going into the state in June, 1964, to work in Freedom schools, community centers and to register people in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, a political party organized that winter which was going to challenge the state Democratic organization at the Democratic Convention in August.

The Mississippi Summer Project was the apex of white participation in The Movement and marked the end of that participation. Within SNCC there had been widespread opposition to the idea. Many felt that it was admitting that Negroes couldn't do the job alone. Others felt that it would destroy everything which they had accomplished. Whites, no matter how well-meaning, could not relate to the Negro community. A Negro would follow a white person to the courthouse, not because he'd been convinced he should register to vote, but simply because he had been trained to say Yes to whatever a white person wanted. Others felt, however, that if they were to ever expose Mississippi's racism to America, it would only be through using whites. After all, SNCC had repeatedly informed the press of the five Negroes killed that year in Mississippi because of their involvement with The Movement. The press had refused to print or investigate the information. Put a thousand white kids in Mississippi and the press would watch everything and print it. And who could tell? Maybe one of them white boys would get himself killed and really bring some publicity. A few said it. Most thought it. It happened.

44

The murders of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney stunned the nation. Whites were shocked. Negroes were hurt and angry. Rita Schwerner, wife of one of the murdered men, reflected the feelings of Negroes when she commented that if James Chaney had been killed alone, no one would've cared. This was made even more evident the following year when Jimmie Lee Jackson's murder in Alabama evoked little reaction from whites, but the murder of Rev. James Reeb brought thousands of whites to Harlem in a march protesting his slaying.

The Mississippi Summer Project accomplished its purpose; the press came to Mississippi. The feature stories it wrote usually went something like, "Blop-blop is a blue-eyed blond from Diamond Junction-on-the-Hudson, New York. She's a twenty-year-old junior at Radcliffe majoring in oriental metaphysics and its relationship to the quantum theory when the moon is in Sagittarius. This summer she's living with a Negro family in Mississippi who has never heard of the quantum theory, etc., etc., etc." All summer the articles came about white boys and white girls living with poor Negroes in Mississippi. It didn't escape the attention of Negroes that seemingly no one cared about the Negro civil rights workers who had been living and working in Mississippi for the previous three years. Didn't anyone care about Willie Peacock, born and raised on a Mississippi plantation, who couldn't go back to his home town because he was an organizer for SNCC and the white people would kill him if he went to see his mother? Apparently not.

Mississippi was taken out of the headlines in July, however, when Harlem held its own Summer Project to protest the murder of a 13-year-old boy by a policeman. Summer Projects, northern style, usually involve filling a Coke bottle with gasoline, stuffing a rag down the neck and lighting it. *Things Go Better with Coke!* Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Rochester and Chicago sent Coke after Coke after Coke that summer with the grandaddy of them all, Watts, to come the following summer.

If the press had ever screamed as loudly for an end to segregation and discrimination as it screamed for law and order, segregation would be a vague memory today. Somehow, though, law and order becomes all important only when Negroes take to the streets and burn down a few of the white man's stores. Law and order is never so important to the press when police are whuppin' nigger's heads on the week-end. It slowly began to dawn on Negroes that whites didn't care as much about helping them get their freedom as they did about law and order. "Law and order must prevail" has become the cliché of the sixties. Law and order has always prevailed—upside the black man's head at every available opportunity.

The system was breaking down, but it was breaking in ways few had foreseen and fewer understood. The walls of segregation and discrimination were not crumbling and giving way to flowers of love and brotherhood. The walls were crumbling, but only to reveal a gigantic castle with walls ten times thicker than the walls of segregation. The castle was painted

a brilliant white and lettered in bright red were the words Racism. What it meant to the Negro was simple. The white man only wanted you to have what he wanted you to have and you couldn't get it any other way except the way he said you could get it. Racism. It was the attitude that closed the bars and liquor stores on the day of the March. It was the attitude which made newspapers and Government officials, even Big Lyndon Himself, say, "that if Negroes went about things in the wrong way they would lose the friends they already had." It was the attitude that made the press continue to call Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay even though that was no longer his name. But the movement was moving. It was no longer a Friendship Contest. It was becoming a War of Liberation.

More than any other person Malcolm X was responsible for the new militancy that entered The Movement in 1965. Malcolm X said aloud those things which Negroes had been saying among themselves. He even said those things Negroes had been afraid to say to each other. His clear, uncomplicated words cut through the chains on black minds like a giant blowtorch. His words were not spoken for the benefit of the press. He was not concerned with stirring the moral conscience of America, because he knew—America had no moral conscience. He spoke directly and eloquently to black men, analyzing their situation, their predicament, events as they happened, explaining what it all meant for a black man in America.

America's reaction to what the Negro considered just demands was a disillusioning experience. Where whites could try to attain the American Dream, Negroes always had had to dream themselves attaining The Dream. But The Dream was beginning to look like a nightmare and Negroes didn't have to dream themselves a nightmare. They'd been living one a long time. They had hopes that America would respond to their needs and America had equivocated. Integration had once been an unquestioned goal that would be the proudest moment for Negro America. Now it was beginning to be questioned.

The New York school boycotts of 1964 pointed this up. Integration to the New York City Board of Education meant busing Negro children to white schools. This merely said to Negroes that whites were saying Negroes had nothing to offer. Integration has always been presented as a Godsend for Negroes and something to be endured for whites. When the Board of Ed decided to bus white children to Negro schools the following year, the reaction was strangely similar to that of New Orleans and Little Rock. Today, whites in Chicago and New York chant at Negro demonstrators, "I wish I was an Alabama deputy, so I could kill a nigger legally."

When it became more and more apparent that integration was only designed to uplift Negroes and improve their lot, Negroes began wondering whose lot actually needed improving. Maybe the white folks weren't as well-educated and cultured as they thought they were. Thus, Negroes began cutting a path toward learning who they were.

Of the minority groups in this country, the Negro is the only one lacking a language of his own. This is significant in that this has made it difficult for him to have a clear concept of himself as a Negro. It has made him more susceptible to the American lie of assimilation than the Puerto Rican, Italian or Jew who can remove himself from America with one sentence in his native language. Despite the assimilation lie, America is not a melting pot. It is a nation of national minorities, each living in a well-defined geographical area and retaining enough of the customs of the native land to maintain an identity other than that of an American. The Negro has two native lands: America and Africa. Both have deliberately been denied him.

Identity has always been the key problem for Negroes. Many avoid their blackness as much as possible by trying to become assimilated. They remove all traces of blackness from their lives. Their gestures, speech, habits, cuisine, walk, everything becomes as American Dream as possible. Generally, they are the "responsible leaders," the middle class, the undercover, button-down collar Uncle Toms, who front for the white man at a time of racial crisis, reassuring the nation that "responsible Negroes deplore the violence and looting and we ask that law and order be allowed to prevail." A small minority avoid the crux of their blackness by going to another extreme. They identify completely with Africa. Some go to the extent of wearing African clothes and speaking Swahili. They, however, are only unconsciously admitting that the white man is right when he says, Negroes don't have a thing of their own.

For other Negroes the question of identity is only now being solved by the realization of those things that are theirs. Negroes do have a language of their own. The words may be English, but the way a Negro puts them together and the meaning that he gives them creates a new language. He has another language, too, and that language is rhythm. It is obvious in music, but it is also expressed in the way he walks and the way he talks. There is a music and rhythm to the way he dresses and the way he cooks. This has been recognized by Negroes for some time now. "Soul" is how these things peculiarly black are recognized by black men in America. In Africa they speak Negritude. It is the same. The recognition of those things uniquely theirs which separate them from the white man. "Soul" and Negritude become even more precious when it is remembered that the white man in America systematically tried to destroy every vestige of racial identity through slavery and slavery's little brother, segregation. It is a testament to the power of "Soul" that it not only survived, but thrived.

Now the Negro is beginning to study his past, to learn those things that have been lost, to recreate what the white man destroyed in him and to destroy that which the white man put in its stead. He has stopped being a Negro and has become a black man in recognition of his new identity, his real identity. "Negro" is an American invention which cut him off from those of the same color in Africa. He recognizes now that part of himself is in Africa. Some feel this in a deeply personal way, as did Mrs.

Fannie Lou Hamer who cried when she was in Africa, because she knew she had relatives there and she would never be able to know them. Her past would always be partially closed.

Many things that have happened in the past six years have had little or no meaning for most whites, but have had vital meaning for Negroes. Wasn't it only a month after the March on Washington that four children were killed in a church bombing in Birmingham? Whites could feel morally outraged, but they couldn't know the futility, despair and anger that swept through The Nation within a nation—Black America. There were limits to how much one people could endure and Birmingham Sunday possibly marked that limit. The enemy was not a system. It was an inhuman fiend who never slept, who never rested and no one would stop him. Those Northern protest rallies where Freedom Songs were sung and speeches speeched and applause applauded and afterwards telegrams and letters, sent to the President and Congress—they began to look more and more like moral exercises. See, my hands are clean. I do not condone such a foul deed, they said, going back to their magazine and newspapers, feeling purged because they had made their moral witness.

What was needed that Sunday was ol' John Brown to come riding into Birmingham as he had ridden into Lawrence, Kansas, burning every building that stood and killing every man, woman and child that ran from his onslaught. Killing, killing, killing, turning men into fountains of blood, spouting spouting spouting until Heaven itself drew back before the frothing red ocean.

But the Liberal and his Negro sycophants would've cried, Vengeance accomplishes nothing. You are only acting like your oppressor and such an act makes you no better than him. John Brown, his hands and wrists slick with blood, would've said, oh so softly and so quietly, Mere Vengeance is folly. Purgation is necessity.

Now it is over. America has had chance after chance to show that it really meant "that all men are endowed with certain inalienable rights." America has had precious chances in this decade to make it come true. Now it is over. The days of singing freedom songs and the days of combating bullets and billy clubs with Love. We Shall Overcome (and we have overcome our blindness) sounds old, out-dated and can enter the pantheon of the greats along with the IWW songs and the union songs. As one SNCC veteran put it after the Mississippi March, "Man, the people are too busy getting ready to fight to bother with singing anymore." And as for Love? That's always been better done in bed than on the picket line and marches. Love is fragile and gentle and seeks a like response. They used to sing "I Love Everybody" as they ducked bricks and bottles. Now they sing

Too much love,
Too much love,
Nothing kills a nigger like
Too much love.

They know, because they still get headaches from the beatings they took while love, love, loving. They know, because they died on those highways and in those jail cells, died from trying to change the hearts of men who had none. They know, the ones who have bleeding ulcers when they're twenty-three and the ones who have to have the eye operations. They know that nothing kills a nigger like too much love.

At one time black people desperately wanted to be American, to communicate with whites, to live in the Beloved Community. Now that is irrelevant. They know that it can't be until whites want it to be and it is obvious now that whites don't want it.

Does all of this mean that every American white is now a potential victim for some young Nat Turner? Does it mean the time is imminent when the red blood of blue-eyed, blonde-haired beauties will glisten on black arms and hands?

For many black people, the time is imminent. For others it simply means the white man no longer exists. He is not to be lived with and he is not to be destroyed. He is simply to be ignored, because the time has come for the black man to control the things which effect his life. Like the Irish control Boston, the black man will control Harlem. For so long the black man lived his life in reaction to whites. Now he will live it only within the framework of his own blackness and his blackness links him with the Indians of Peru, the miner in Bolivia, the African and the freedom fighters of Vietnam. What they fight for is what the American black man fights for—the right to govern his own life. If the white man interprets that to mean hatred, it is only a reflection of his own fears and anxieties and black people leave him to deal with it. There is too much to do to waste time and energy hating white people.

The old order passes away. Like the black riderless horse, boots turned the wrong way in the stirrups, following the coffin down the boulevard, it passes away. But there are no crowds to watch as it passes. There are no crowds, to mourn, to weep. No eulogies to read and no eternal flame is lit over the grave. There is no time for there are streets to be cleaned, houses painted and clothes washed. Everything must be scoured clean. Trash has to be thrown out. Garbage dumped and everything unfit, burned.

The new order is coming, child.

The old is passing away.