



*the*  
**SNCC Legacy Project**

## *Remembering* Bernice Johnson Reagon



[Bernice Johnson Reagon](#): Sweet, Sweet Honey in the Rock

After a long illness, our Bernice passed away Tuesday July 16, 2024, to what must surely be a better and promised land. We cling to this belief in our sorrow. Part of what that means is that she is still with us, lodged within our souls.

She emerged as a youth leader while a student at [Albany State College](#) during the protests in Albany, Georgia that began in 1961. “One of the first indications internally for me that something had happened to me was when I did my first freedom song after the first march in Albany, Georgia. When we got back to the church they say ‘Bernice, sing a song’ and I sing ‘over my head I see freedom in the air.’

Now that's a spiritual; I know all the words to that spiritual and there is no ‘freedom’ in that spiritual. The first line I usually sing in that song is ‘trouble’ but I knew trouble [and] I didn't think that would help anybody and so as I sang the first line I flipped the text to ‘freedom’ and watched everybody in the room resettle under the singing of that song because they joined in the second line which repeats ‘over my head I see freedom in the air.’ And in some ways I hadn't just stepped out of place, I crossed something that I was never going to go back into.”

For decades her [powerful music](#) has strengthened us in struggle, given us succor in moments of pain and loss, and educated us about the power found in Black communities. Speaking during the [50th anniversary](#) of our founding, for example, she remarked of herself and the roots of Black music in southern fields, churches and neighborhoods:

*“I carry a 150-year-old cultural load. In this space it has something to do about knowing who you are. If you think what I'm saying is about some old songs, about some old people who are dead, you are actually missing an incredible wealth. You actually need to get this right about your life [or] you will not get through your life. . . . When we moved past slavery we were not empty; we were not beaten. We had immense intention.”*

We are compelled to say here that among the many things about the southern freedom movement that are misread, misunderstood, or simply ignored, Bernice’s words, the music of

her spoken words as well as the music found in her songs include the song heard in her thinking.



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