



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Bernice Johnson Reagon
Oral History Interview, 1986

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title:	Bernice Johnson Reagon Oral History Interviews
Identifier:	Accession 009612
Date:	1986
Extent:	3 audiotapes (Reference copies).
Creator::	Reagon, Bernice Johnson, 1942-, interviewee
Language:	English

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

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Use Restriction

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Historical Note

Bernice Johnson Reagon was born October 4, 1942. Her father, Reverend Jessie Johnson was a Baptist minister. In her youth, Dr. Reagon participated in community church services and sang at funerals. It was in this environment that she learned black traditional music, which established the foundation for her later artistic career.

In 1959, she entered Albany State College, where she majored in music. Discouraged by her inability to master the piano, she changed her major to biology in her second year. In 1961, during her junior year at Albany she was suspended for participating in civil rights demonstrations. During the next five years she was active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and further contributed to the movement as a freedom singer, field researcher, and organizer of community-based events.

In 1962, she married Cordell Hull Reagon, a SNCC field worker from Nashville, Tennessee. The couple had two children, Toshi and Kwan Reagon. They were divorced in 1967.

Dr. Reagon received a B.A. in history from Spellman College in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1975, she completed her Ph.D. in American History from Howard University. Her research emphasized Afro-American history and cultural and oral history methodologies.

Professionally she has emphasized two different but complimentary careers: music and the study of black culture and the African diaspora.

Bernice Johnson Reagon recorded her first album as a member of the Freedom Singers in 1963. In 1964 she recorded her first solo album, "Songs of the South," on Folkways Recording. In 1973 she formed her a cappella singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. The group has performed nationwide and has several recordings on the Flying Fish label.

Dr. Reagon has written, researched, and lectured extensively in Afro-American history and culture, including the history of the civil rights movement and also traditional black music forms. An ardent proponent of the African diaspora movement, she has been instrumental in the spreading the concept of black linkages and a common African culture worldwide.

Dr. Reagon began working with the Smithsonian Institution in the 1960's as a field researcher, and with several projects relating to black culture. In 1974 she joined the Division of Performing Arts and was instrumental in creating the African Diaspora program for the Festival of American Folklife. The bicentennial festival of 1976 was the zenith of her efforts. Dr. Reagon traveled internationally, promoting the concept of African diaspora and recruiting black artists for the festival. In 1976, she transferred to the National Museum of American History as the Director and Cultural Historian for the Program in Black American Culture. In 1988, she was named Curator of the Division of Community Life at the National Museum of American History.

Introduction

The Oral History Program is part of the Smithsonian Institution Archives. The purpose of the program is to conduct interviews with current and retired members of the Smithsonian staff who have made significant contributions, administrative and scholarly, to the Institution. The project's goal is to supplement the published record and manuscript collections in the Archives, focusing on the history of the Institution and contributions to the increase and diffusion of knowledge made by its scholars.

The Reagon interviews were accessioned into the Oral History Collection because of her significant role in the development of the Festival of American Folklife and African-American scholarship at the Smithsonian.

Descriptive Entry

The Bernice Johnson Reagon Interviews were conducted during two sessions between in 1986. John Warren Jackson, a student in Dr. Pamela M. Henson's Oral History Seminar at the University of Maryland, conducted the interviews as his class research project. The interviews consist of approximately 3 hours of tape and 76 pages of transcript.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

African Americans -- History
African Americans -- Music
Choral music
Civilization -- History
Interviews

Musicology
Oral history

Types of Materials:

Audiotapes
Transcripts

Names:

American University (Washington, D.C.)
Jackson, John Warren, interviewer
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
National Museum of American History (U.S.)
Reagon, Bernice Johnson, 1942-
Sweet Honey in the Rock (Musical group)

Container Listing

Interviews

Interviews

Interview 1: December 3, 1986

Interviews

Covers her family, musical career, involvement in the civil rights movement, and her affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution (Division of Performing Arts, Festival of American Folklife and the National Museum of American History), c. 1966-1986, including: Development of Smithsonian programs in black culture in the 1960's including "The Afro-American Experience," "Black Voices through the Language of the New World," and an oral history project in Arkansas. Development and planning of the African Diaspora Program for the Festival of American Folklife of 1976. Travel and impressions of Africa and the Caribbean while recruiting performers for the African Diaspora program. Presentation of African, Caribbean, and Afro-American music to audiences across the United States. Demise of the Division of Performing Arts (1982). Scholarship in black culture (1980's) and work in the Division of Community Life, the National Museum of American History. Alan Lomax, contributions and attitude toward the black middle class. Early music career with Folkways Recording and the Freedom Singers of the SNCC. Preservation of folk music as an art form. Family and social influences and later civil rights activism. The role of black political organizations and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Albany (Georgia) Movement, 1961. Criticism of historical scholarship on the Albany Movement. Origin of the Freedom Singers and role of music in the Civil Rights Movement. Reminiscences of Pete Seeger and influence of Toshi Seeger.

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 1-29. Audio recording, 1.0 hour.

Interviews

Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour

- Note:
- Original Masters: 1 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotape
 - Reference Copies: 1 cassette audiotape

Interviews

Interview 2: December 5, 1986

Interviews

Covers her education and early influences, the Civil Rights Movement, her work with the Smithsonian in black folk culture and music, her singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, and the tri-continental concept of African diaspora, including: Role and focus of Smithsonian programs relating to the Afro-American experience and culture. Festival of American Folklife, especially its use of rural and urban folk expressions. Influences on the development of Afro-American music. Live performance as a means to disseminate traditional black music forms to younger audiences. Geographic and cultural variations in black music in the Southeastern United States. The tri-continental concept of black culture. The use of music in the civil rights movement, especially the SNCC Freedom Singers and Congress for Racial Equality (CORE). Her singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, including its

musical and political philosophy and relationship to D.C. area audiences. Contributions of E. D. Nixon, and black civil rights activism in the 1930's and 1940's. Archie Green's criticism of the use of black folk culture as a scholarly means to promote black political awareness in the 1960's. Role of the NAACP, CORE, SNCC, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Black Panther Party, and the National Urban League in the 1960's, and the status of these organizations in the 1970's and 1980's. Historical role of black reconstruction colleges, present status, and black studies in higher education. Influence of Vincent Hardy, Howard Zinn, Willis Lawrence James, Fela Sowande, and Bessie Jones. Contributions of Katherine Dunham, Zora Neale Hurston, and Paul Robeson. Her list of songs important to the national and black folk culture. Role of Rosie Lee Hooks, administrator of the African Diaspora Program in the Festival of American Folklife. Reorganization of the Division of Performing Arts, Festival of American Folklife and the African Diaspora Program, 1976-1977. Role of the African diaspora movement in promoting a positive self image in black society. Cuban-Smithsonian collaboration in African diaspora.

- Note:
- Yoruba and Orisha influence in America. Traditional role of black women in Afro-American culture.

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 30-76, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.

Interviews

Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours

- Note:
- Original Masters: 2 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes