Global Campus of Human Rights

SOUNDS OF JUSTICE PODCAST

Episode 2

Music and Liberation Politics in the African Diaspora

SHANA REDMOND

in conversation with IGNACIO SAIZ

Ignacio Saiz: Hello and welcome to Sounds of Justice, a podcast on music and human rights brought to you by the Global Campus of Human Rights. I'm your host, Ignacio Saiz.

Throughout history, music has been central to how people imagine justice and how they demand it. From the blues to flamenco, across cultures and genres, in the face of oppression music shapes identity, it carries memory and voices aspiration.

Over the next two episodes of Sounds of Justice, we'll be exploring the many ways in which music and sound have propelled struggles for human rights in several different contexts: firstly, the demand for justice for people of African descent in the United States and elsewhere; secondly the movements against caste-based discrimination in India; and finally, the struggle for the human rights of the Palestinian people. And as usual we and our guests have selected some compelling sounds that speak to the issues we're discussing.

Obviously, there are many connections across these contexts, not just their common roots in colonialism, racism and systems of economic oppression, but also how music in each of these contexts has given shape and voice to collective experience. But beyond these more obvious commonalities, we're also going to be exploring the distinct historical, political and spatial dynamics that have sculpted the soundscape in each context.

My guest for this episode is someone who has deeply shaped our understanding of sound as a political force. Cultural historian and scholar Shana Redmond. Shana is professor of English and comparative literature at the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University in New York. Her work focuses on music as a strategy of liberation politics and social movements in the African diaspora. She's the author of two acclaimed books, *Anthem: Social movements and the sound of solidarity in the African diaspora* and *Everything Man: The form and function of Paul Robeson*. With Shana, we'll be talking about how songs build movements, how anthems travel, and the power of sound to propel action for human rights. Shana, thank you so much for joining us.

Shana Redmond: Thank you for having me.

Ignacio Saiz: Shana, you've written that black life and history has been dynamically displayed and contested through sound. Can you unpack that a little for us? Why have sound, music and song, been such a powerful force in movements and struggles for racial justice?

Shana Redmond: There are a lot of reasons why music and sound and groups of creative animation have developed throughout the African world and around the world, more generally, towards liberation movements. I think there are some reasons around form that music has been important. It's important because it's transportable, infinitely transportable, especially in this day and age. It's always something that people carry with them, and that means both that it is accessible in its creation, but it is, it is an opportunity to connect with people where they are.

Because we're constantly listening, because we're constantly engaging with music, whether it's on the subway or in our churches, in our homes, this is an opportunity for people to gather together, which is important, right, to share space with one another, but also to be actively participating in a world that they can pick up at any given moment and time.

Part of it is also about the compositions themselves, songs that have particular kinds of rhythmic patterns, right, that might move people as they march on a picket line or as they march down the street for racial justice, for global human rights. Sometimes they're written in multi-part harmony, but quite often, the melodic lines are more straightforward. They're easy to carry for people, they don't require a high level of training in order to participate, and they often are repetitive. So, there are opportunities for these songs to become more like chants that we might otherwise hear at demonstrations.

So, I think there are all of these form elements that the composers, the creators of the music, but also the people who mobilize them take into consideration when they're looking towards which songs are actually going to do the work, the political work that we need them to do, which is absolutely about the text, about the language. But it's also about how do we gather as many voices as possible? And so that's been really central to thinking about how anthems arise for my work. How are people beckoned? How are they called into the practice of singing together?

So yes, there's the strategy, there's the form, but it's also about what are you saying and developing in the emotional core of people that allows them to feel participatory but also to feel kind of compelled to be present with you? It touches people so deeply that it's being shared beyond the event, beyond the rally, beyond the political occasion that brought them together. And so, you want songs that are emotionally compelling. You want songs that are catchy. You want songs that are easy to access for people through technology, through song books, through other forms of dissemination, that when they hear them, they know what they mean. And so all of those elements together begin to develop a formula towards songs with political import and longevity.

Ignacio Saiz: Before we delve more into the question of anthems, let's listen to a piece that you have described as iconic that illustrates many of the issues that you've just mentioned. Do you want to set it up for us and how it illustrates, or how it speaks to those characteristics, the rallying, the touching, the moving, the accessibility that you just described?

Shana Redmond: So one of the more iconic songs that developed from the middle century civil and human rights movement as it developed in the United States is Nina Simone's Mississippi Goddam, which she wrote in 1963 and is a perfect example of how music written in the immediate fever of a political moment can transcend that moment and become a more diffuse, more widely adopted piece for people in different moments. But Mississippi Goddam was written by Simone in a fit of anger in

response to the bombing of a Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in which four little girls were killed, and this becomes a pinnacle moment in the struggle for civil rights. And this song was written by her from her home in New York City and became her option in response to an anger that she said would have otherwise led her to pick up a gun. This song became her weapon instead, in response to this moment.

[MUSIC: Nina Simone, Mississippi Goddam]

Ignacio Saiz: Nina Simone there with Mississippi Goddam. Shana, let's talk about anthems. in your wonderful book on anthems, you describe them as 'the songs through which 20th century black political struggles resounded'. It's curious in the book how you talk about how anthems can also be dynamic. They can be reborn across different struggles and contexts. And you talk beautifully about how anthems travel. So, let me ask you 100 questions in one: what makes a song become an anthem, and what is it that explains that enduring power that they have to move us across different times and spaces?

Shana Redmond: So, I talk about anthems in a relatively narrow way for the purposes of generating this initial history of the form within the African world. But for my purposes, these were songs that were both a set of organizing ideas and a set of organizing strategies. These were songs that were intended to move people toward new political horizons and then how to mobilize them on the other side of that membership.

So, I'm less concerned with trying to narrow them as far as their style, and more invested in thinking about them as a technique. So, my argument is that anthems are songs that we only know by their use. How do we hear them appear within our political landscape? Where do these songs appear and toward what ends? Does it repeat, appear repeatedly? In what scenes? What kinds of political stakes are attached to these songs? Are they participatory in any number of ways?

Some of them have really bright public lives at the point of composition and mobilization with an organization, and then then they fade for a generation or more. But I've heard songs like Lift Every Voice and Sing, which was the anthem of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and remains its anthem. It had many different kinds of lives having been generated in the early 20th century, having another high pitch moment during the Civil Rights Movement, and then it fades over the post liberation, post decolonization moment, but I heard it arise again in mobilizations for the movement for Black lives. I heard it arise in protests around COVID policy and practice in the United States. So, these are songs that even though in certain moments they may seem passe or may fall out of favor, might reappear in an amended form, in a remix, in a sample, in an acoustical set, but in ways that are meant then to draw upon our long-standing sensibility. We know this song when we hear it. We know what it's meant to make us feel and believe when we hear it, and that too is a signature element of an anthem. It's meant to make us believe certain things, and there's a shared sensibility around what some of those beliefs are when we hear it, whether it's in its original moment of eruption or it's a generation later.

Ignacio Saiz: So let's listen to Lift Every Voice and Sing, or at least a fragment of it. What can you tell us about this particular performance and use of this anthem?

Shana Redmond: Rene Marie is a jazz singer and performer and someone who came to my attention for this song, in particular, for this spectacular reimagining of Lift Every Voice and Sing, which she premiered live in 2008 in Denver, Colorado, at the State of the City address. This was just in advance of the Democratic National Convention meeting in Denver, which, at that moment, was going to

nominate Barack Obama as their nominee for president. And she was asked to come to this event as a local performer and sing the national anthem. And from the stage, she made the choice as a Black woman to sing a hybrid version of Lift Every Voice and Sing, the lyrics of Lift Every Voice and Sing to the tune of the Star-Spangled Banner, and it's just a phenomenal mashup of these parallel and sometimes competing forms of nationalism, of community building, of racial ideology, very explicitly, and she does a brilliant, brilliant job.

[MUSIC: Rene Marie, Lift Every Voice and Sing (to the tune of The Star-Spangled Banner]

Ignacio Saiz: Shana, what drew you to write about the figure of Paul Robeson?

Shana Redmond: Paul Robeson is an absolute phenom, one of the most prolific, committed, focused musicians I've ever come across, perhaps the most actually. And not just for the rawness of his talents, which are tremendous. He was a bass baritone performer who had trained in oratory and languages, and so was amazingly articulate in his vocal practice, especially studious around his technique, but just had a stunning clarity of vision and commitment to his communities, to his political investments. And argued this quote that has stayed with me forever, that I saw him offer in response to challenges to his political beliefs. He said that he would not be moved from them, not even one thousandth of an inch, and he was just absolutely present and steadfast. And for that, earned the respect of hundreds of thousands of people all over the globe, and became truly a global troubadour. And he was the son of a formerly enslaved person. His father, who had absconded with himself, had found his own freedom, not by manumission, but by running away and became a preacher and was a profound influence on Robeson, who then went on to be valedictorian of his Rutgers University graduating class, who then went on to be star of stage and screen and one of the most significant political figures in US and global culture during the time of his career, which spanned almost 40 years.

So in 1950 his passport is revoked for eight years because he is identified as an enemy of the state for having everywhere he's gone throughout the world for his concert tours and films, having spoken to the needs of local communities, but also the rights, civil and human rights of African descended peoples all over the world, speaking of the miners in South Africa, the sharecroppers in the southern United States, but also working and laboring peoples all over the world. There was that element that made him an enemy of the US state, and so they worked very, very hard to insist that he never existed. And it's a really stunning example of how the state continues to be fearful of artists and be fearful of the musics that they produce. And Robeson was a pioneer in the use of music as political speech. And it was not because his songs were particularly political in their text, but because he understood their relationship to a broader world of sound, because he used the music to incite people, he used the music to change what people believe, and therefore to change what they do. And for that, he was deeply admired, adored, even, and it's been one of the great honors of my life to study this person.

Ignacio Saiz: Let's listen to a piece that is probably the most emblematic of what you describe as his sonic vibration.

Shana Redmond: Yes, so Ol' Man River is the song for which Robeson globally is most recognized. It is in part because it was his launch into a broad, popular recognition. It is drawn from the Oscar Hammerstein musical Showboat, where the character of Joe, who was a laborer on the Mississippi sings this song about a despised and kind of broken man who just longs for more idyllic days ahead and rest. And Robeson famously over the course of his career, changed the words to this song in order to meet the needs and demands of his communities and the political times of which he was part. He was a radical peace activist, and so made many anti-war overtures in the lyrics of the song

over the course of his career, and he also positioned this Ol' Man River as a fighter, as a rabble rouser, as someone who would remain confident and indignant in the face of abuses of power, both to his labor and to his person as a racialized subject, saying at the very end that the Ol' Man River who longs for days of disinterested peace is the old man I don't like to be. And so his amendments to the song over time marked it as uniquely his, and he set a new standard for adaption of songs as a means of then changing their political import and their impact on listeners.

Ignacio Saiz: Incredible. So let's listen. We're going to hear, in this extract, we're going to hear his spoken voice before, before we hear him sing.

[MUSIC: Paul Robeson, Ol' Man River with spoken intro]

Ignacio Saiz: I want to invite you to talk to us about another performance of his that you've analyzed from the perspective of the F sharp epistemology. What do you mean by that?

Shana Redmond: So, Paul Robeson is famed in the art world in particular for having substantially and committedly introduced the Negro spirituals to the concert stage. And he committed to this form throughout his career because Robeson was a student of the form and began study into both linguistics and global musics. And it is from that study that he recognized that the musics of the global south, the musics of the people with whom he was communing politically, oppressed and dispossessed peoples, that they shared a common scale, that their musics were organized around the pentatonic scale, which is a five tone scale, and the F sharp epistemology is a way of listening, a way of organizing one's listening around the black keys of the piano. And this is what Robeson insisted upon that we need to sing the Negro spirituals, but we need to sing them alongside Welsh ballads. We need to sing them alongside Chinese hymns. We need to sing them alongside Igbo chants, because all of these songs go together. They sound alike. They're organized around similar kinds of tonal properties, all of which are recognizable on the black keys of the piano. And so this F sharp epistemology was a way for him to bring the world together irrespective of those manufactured, created differences of race and class that were being wielded against us, and this was a big part of how he became such a formidable organizer, was his ability to actually sing to people in their language, in their tones, and to bring them into a broader concert with the rest of the world.

So Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel is one of those phenomenal examples of the Negro spirituals at work, and this was a piece that he stunningly sung during the period of his passport revocation in a transnational telephone concert with the Welsh miners of South Wales and he sings to them from New York City and they, as a choir from Porthcawl Pavilion, sing to him over the telephone, and they have this incredible, intense moment of synergy and camaraderie sung through song and his Didn't, my Lord deliver Daniel is perfectly tuned to the Welsh chorales that they returned to him.

Ignacio Saiz: What an extraordinary example of musical internationalism and the expression and the weaving of solidarity across borders, across struggles, through song and singing together. Let's, listen to a snippet of Didn't my lord deliver Daniel.

[MUSIC: Paul Robeson, Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel]

Ignacio Saiz: Paul Robeson, Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel. Shana, I was curious to see that you're currently working on a book about the musicality of Black life before state violence. Can you tell us a little about that?

Shana Redmond: So this project is interested in listening in Black homes and Black cars before the fatal execution of no-knock warrants and traffic stops. So in these moments of spectacular state violence, we see the state enact its at this point expected but still contradictory relationship to race and racialization, making Blackness criminal in a very consistent and spectacular way.

I wanted to actually think about these quieter moments before the hashtags, before the doors are kicked in, before the sirens are announced. I wanted to think about Black moments of listening, because I recognize, as all of my scholarship has, I hope, demonstrated, the power of music to people's sense of self, to their ability to survive, to their ability to imagine better futures, and in these moments of quiet before people's lives are taken, I believe and have found in the research that there are deeply musical things happening.

And this project came to me in response to a particular case that came out of Georgia, a man named Ahmaud Arbery who was a jogger and was chased down the streets by white members of his community who, for no other reason than his race, had reason to be suspicious of him, and that was the final run of his life. And I was curious in reading about this case, what was he listening to while he was jogging? This question, to me, is not ancillary. It is not secondary or outside of the concerns of this case. It's really important actually for us to understand who these people were, what gave them joy, what gave them pride? How did they understand themselves in the world? And because music is such a formidable element of how we identify ourselves in the world, how we understand ourselves in relation to one another, it was a really critical question for me that I think has been completely elided. There's no news reporting on that, on any answer to that question, what was he listening to?

And so I've taken it upon myself to answer those questions, and a lot of it is speculative, because the answers don't jump out at you in the record. But it's been a really beautiful exercise in thinking about the ways in which Black life is precious, first and foremost, but also about what music does to actually animate and create sociality, what it does to create and fortify people's imagination, and those are the things that I want to be pulling from these moments of devastation.

Ignacio Saiz: That work sounds phenomenally important and fascinating, and I think we can't wait for it to come out**.** Shana Redmond, thank you so much for giving us such powerful ideas and instruments to understand the extraordinary figures who've advanced the struggle for human rights and racial justice through sound, through music. And thank you for helping us listen more intently and more acutely to the sound of Black Lives and why those sounds matter. Shana, thank you so much.

Shana Redmond: Thank you. It's been my pleasure.

Ignacio Saiz: In this episode of Sounds of Justice, you listened to: Mississippi Goddam by Nina Simone; Lift Every Voice and Sing, written by James Weldon Johnson and performed by Rene Marie. You heard Paul Robeson singing Ol' Man River and Didn't my Lord Deliver Daniel. And some of the recordings are from the Anthem mixtape produced by Shana Redmond and the Dreadstar Movement as a soundscape for her book, *Anthem*. I thoroughly recommend that you give it a listen.

Look out for the coming episodes wherever you get your podcasts and on the website of the Global Campus of Human Rights. I'm Ignacio Saiz. Thank you for listening!

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RELEVANT LINKS:

Shana L. Redmond PhD

Anthem: The Mixtape (Shana L Redmond and The Dreadstar Movement)