

Interview with **Bernice Johnson Reagon**

January 23, 1986

Washington, D.C.

Interviewer: Chris Lee

Production Team: C

Camera Rolls: 589-592

Sound Rolls: 1539-1540

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 589]

[sound roll 1539]

[slate]

[sync tone]

Reagon: I have to ask a question.

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY.

Reagon: I have to ask you a question.

INTERVIEWER: NO, NO, I JUST WANT YOU TO ANSWER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: NO, SHE HAS TO ASK YOU SOMETHING.

00:00:22:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Reagon: I have to ask you a question.

INTERVIEWER: YOU HAVE TO ASK ME A QUESTION? OH, OK. YEAH, OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

INTERVIEWER: YES, THANK YOU.

00:00:27:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

Reagon: You ready? In 1961, I was a college student in Albany and I lived outside of Albany in what would really have to be a family enclave with my grandmother, my uncles and aunts in houses around me. I had to ride into town to get to school. I'd graduated from a black high school. We didn't call it a black high school, we called it Negro. We were Negroes then, with a capital "N." And between my house and the college was a white settlement when the soldiers had apartments and then there were these rich white houses and then you had Albany State College. We would go downtown on Saturdays and we would be on Broad Street. We had about two blocks that we stayed around on Blod—Broad Street. And the rest of downtown, we would go to stores around the corner, but always where we sort of gathered, where black people gathered, was Broad Street. There was a Harlem in Albany. I guess the strongest, my strongest sense is not even describing that, but Albany in 1961 was really me and my family and church. And my world was really black. I left it very rarely. I cleaned at a beauty parlor at—I had to be there at six in the morning. And I, it was finish, I was finished in two hours to get to school. That beauty parlor was white. I ironed for a lady named Miss Wight, but her name was W-I-G-H-T. I never rode the bus because living outside of Albany there was no transportation and, in fact, we'd been so recent—we had so recently had buses to get to school, but the city bus that was segregated I never rode in Albany. That was other people's experiences, but there were city buses that were segregated. All of the policemen were white and if a policeman stopped you, you were in trouble. A policeman was never your friend. It was an amazing experience for me to learn that occasionally you could ask a policeman something and they actually would be of some help to you.

INTERVIEWER: PLEASE STOP A MINUTE, CHRIS.

[cut]

00:03:35:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLLING.

[sync tone]

Reagon: I grew up in a, I grew up in a family in Albany but I grew up in—I keep saying compound. That's not a word I was aware of in 1961, but I'm aware of the, the feeling of cluster and being raised by a whole community of people. I went to school and I went to church and I really felt many times that those things were organized against me. It's like there was a conspiracy among these people to control what you would do in your life. So like no matter where I was when I was growing up in Albany, Georgia there were major forces, I mean, these, these grown people who had a right to like just correct me, redirect me, and tell me what I was supposed to be doing. And that's talked about a lot, but it was very, very conscious as I grew up. Church was, my father's a minister, and so I grew up in a church and we didn't get a piano in that church until I was eleven. So my early music was acapella and so my first music is vocal music and it is the sound of people singing and the first instruments are hands and feet. And to this day, that's the only way I can deal, comfortably, with creating music, but church was not the only place that music occurred because the same thing happened on the playground. And my school and my teacher had a seven grade, one room red school house. And at noon time, my teacher was outside in the rain teaching us the games. All of those games are also feet-hand singing. Then in the morning we would sing, at noon day we would sing. We were always rehearsing for programs and that all of those, those are like song repertoires. They're all different. Mamie Daniels was my teacher, taught me "Steal Away" and "Did My Lord Deliver Daniel?" and "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord," for Easter. And I went to the church and I learned, "Let Me Ride, Jesus" and old "Swing Low Chariot" which is different from "Swing low, Sweet chariot, coming from [sic] to carry me home," which I learned from Maimie Daniels, which is different from "Yea Go Miss Lily," which I learned on the playground. And then there were competitions between these little red school houses. It was May Day, May Day and we would all—and Blue Spring, I went to Blue Spring School. Blue Spring would always get the first prize. And I was an orator at, at seven years old. I was in the fourth grade when I was seven because Mamie Daniels had me to come to school when I was three and I passed that first year. And she was teaching the, the Langston Hughes poem, "I've Known Ri—Rivers" was the poem. She was teaching it to my older sister who was in the seventh grade and one day she said, Bernice, say the poem. Well, she knew I knew the poem because I learned everything that was happening in the school. I got up and I said the poem. Well, when the contest occurred, I was doing "I've Known Rivers" and there was this, these other grou—people who were twice my height, who were in seventh grade, doing "I've Known Rivers." And, of course, Miss Daniels had me to swing my arms on "my soul, have grown deep like the rivers." This is the Negro speaks of rivers. I won the first prize. Now, I was teaching first, second, and third grade when I was in the fourth, fifth and sixth grade, because there was one teacher. Now, I thought I was teaching them. I was really taking them over their reading lessons, I know today. But she would say, Bernice do the reading for the first grade. Now, when she said that to me the first time I was in the fourth grade. So I was a teacher. I guess I'm trying to describe being in an environment where, where there were these people who thought they knew who you were and who you were supposed to be and the late—Miss Daniels did the Easter program for the local church. So like the teachers and the, the, the ministers and the Usher Board and all of that stuff was so tight that it was very difficult to get away from 'em. You could try to grow up outside of that environment in Albany, but you'd have trouble going against that kind of force. And, I think, the singing is just an echo of the community

society that black people was and I'm, you know, echo is like something that bounces off something and so everybody talks about Albany singing, but the singing is just the echo of what concretely was really there. And there is this blend of all of these different songs, when you think about Albany. But these black people also were clear about education. My father went to the fourth grade, but my father and my uncle went to Mr. Cordell, who was the superintendent of schools, to ask for the first bus to get black people to be able to go to high school or transportation. That's during the '50s. So that there was, there was this real understanding, I don't know how conscious it was, but it was a real understanding that you had to have something of yourself if you were going to make it in the world. And that was so thick nothing else could get in. And that's all—the way you—who you were and who you be could become. You had all of these women, a little girl, you had all of these women you could become. But in addition to that, there was an understanding that that black community existed in another place and if this black person was going to exist in this other place you had to negotiate on the skills and agenda set by that place. So if they decided you could make it to high school you went. And there was such a heavy pressure and the pressure wasn't just from your family. You got named very early in your—by everybody, they decided. I mean to this day Mamie Daniels will tell me, well Bernice, you made it, you just didn't do what I thought you were gonna do. Cause they thought—they knew I was gonna be a doctor, but they didn't know I was gonna be—

00:11:06:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

00:11:07:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 590]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER: COME ON LET ME, LET ME ASK THE QUESTION. YOU KNOW WHERE IS—YOU KNOW WHERE?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

[cut]

00:11:16:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

[sync tone]

Reagon: Black people in Albany were people, people which means we're not Albany black people, we're black people, people. So that in '60 the agenda was set by what black people were doing in the country. That the Supreme Court decision of '54, Little Rock, Arkansas, the Montgomery bus boycotts, the sit-ins, the only question was when, how, what are the issues? And the, the, the, the lynchings are also important. The lynching of Mack Parker and Emmett Till occurred to everybody in Albany and that's not a localized situation. And we didn't belong to Albany, Georgia as a people. We belong to black people. And so, nationally black people were doing something and we would just say, when is it gonna happen? Now, in terms of the specific things, the list is so long. When I went to town on Saturday, if I asked for a drink of water my mama got mad with me, because there was Silver's and there was Belt's. Those were the only two places a black person could get water because they, they both had two water fountains; one was colored, one was white. Belt's had the best one. If my mama wanted to buy clothes in Albany there was only one store she could try on clothes and it was the expensive store so she never went there. So you always bought your clothes and took 'em home. I was shocked and felt very, very strange the first time I went into a store and they said, would you like to try on, try this on? It was a bra. I thought I was gonna die, because I had never been, been allowed to try on what I bought because I was black. There was the whole issue of Albany State College being right near this white district and white people going through that campus picking on girls, throwing eggs. In fact, they would catch white men in the girls' dormitories and if the football guys caught them the, the guards from Albany State College would put the guns on the football guys to let the white men go. The issues of employment in terms of where could you work, very defined. You worked in black schools, you worked in black businesses, you cleaned people houses. You were not on the police department. You didn't have a secretarial job in City Hall. You didn't have a secretarial job on the marine base, the biggest marine supply depot in the world is in Albany, Georgia. You didn't have clerical working at Turner Air Force Base. It was really gross, but in Albany you had a very, very organized black community. You know, you had all of those churches and you had a—the educated people. Black people in Albany were not just BA, BS degree people. You had Masters and you had Doctors in Albany so you had a very, very strong black community.

INTERVIEWER: OK, CUT.

[cut]

00:15:05:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ONCE MORE. I DIDN'T QUITE CATCH THAT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THANK YOU.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: THAT WAS SECOND STI—LIGHTS.

Reagon: I was Secretary of the NAACP junior chapter. Our advisor was Thomas Chapman. And in the fall of '61, I was helping with registration at Albany State College and Charles Sherrod came up to me and said, what do you think about Terrell County? And I said, it's a little bitty, it's a little bitty county. Then he turned to Otis, I can't remember his last name now, Turner and asked him. And Otis was from Terrell County and Otis started to run down what it was like to be black in Terrell County in terms of black people and white people. And I remember thinking, God, I wish that I'd not been so flip and had taken the time to like take Sherrod, ser—I didn't know who he was. That was my first contact with what became SNCC. The first problem I had with SNCC was the name. They said they was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Now I had problems with two words in there. I understood student and I understood co—committee. I had read coordinating, but I'd never said coordinating in my life. So that was not a functional word for me. Nonviolent I had never really read in my life on paper. Now, my way to get outside of Albany was always through reading. So that, that half of their name—I just told them I thought it was a stupid name. Half of their name was totally beyond me. I used to ask them, what was nonviolent? And Cordell Reagon would say, nonviolent is love. Love for your fellow man, and it just clicked a blank in my head. I had—there was nothing in my program that allowed me to understand what they were, but given the stupid name—and then when I said, well, what do you call it? And they would say, SNCC, and I couldn't even say S-N-C-C. I, I—it was very difficult. But given the stupid name, one thing was very clear and that is they were there full-time and they were from the movement. And the way I knew that is because they talked about—Cordell talked about being on the Freedom Rides. Charles Sherrod talked about what he was doing. They had already been to Terrell County and had already decided they couldn't stay and that if they were gonna do anything about those counties that have more black people than white people. So should be logically organized to overthrow the white power structure. They had to start in Albany, Georgia. And they started by coming to the NAACP meetings. And so, my first response to them was not understanding, intellectually, some of their name and not being able to handle the philosophy, but there was a very clear thing they were for and they were for freedom. I understood that and I had been waiting. And there was already some activism in Albany, so they just came in. Student government had already been suspended when they got there.

INTERVIEWER: HOLD ON.

00:18:38:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: HOW MUCH DO I—GUYS CUT.

00:18:40:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLLING.

[sync tone]

Reagon: The NAACP junior chapter, youth chapter, had been meeting for quite a while and the SNCC people were coming to that meeting. There were some problems with that, because the NAACP didn't want the SNCC chapter, SNCC to be robbing their chapter. So SNCC started to have separate meetings and we used to have nonviolent workshops in Bethel A.M.E Church in Albany, Georgia. The ICC ruling was tested by the NAACP youth chapter and by SNCC and the NAACP decided they would get two people, get them arrested, get out of jail so they could have a test case. SNCC decided they would do two people and they would stay in jail. And that was the initial major act coming on the heels of a number of other things that had happened over a year-and-a-half that launched what, I feel, was the Albany movement. The first major thing was the first march to protest Bertha Gober and Blanton Hall, who were in jail, and it came from Albany State College. That was my first major demonstrations. We had had rallies at Albany State College. We had made the president come to support the sit-ins. I mean there had been all of these other things we had done, but walking from Albany State College down to City Hall and circling City Hall twice and then going back to the college that was the first march in Albany and it was amazing because when we left Albany State College there were so few people. We had walked through the classes, we had tried to get people out of classes. Bobby Birch had picked up Mr. Ford. Troy S. J. Lattimore [sic] had tried to run her, her people out of her history class, you need to go work on your freedom. And there was nobody. And so, I started walking for the bridge and I refused to look back cause I couldn't contend with the fact that this was a failure. And Annette was next to me, Annette Jones, and we got to the corner and Annette said, Bernice, look back. And I looked back and there were people stretched all the way back to the campus. I thought I would die, you know, it was just wonderful. And there was this discussion about, once we got to City Hall, what will we do? You know, would we sing or—and so, finally, Cordell said, two by two, hand in hand, silently with dignity. The—that concept, you know, getting that instruction was totally new in my mind. So like we tried to make up what two by two, silently di—with dignity was. We did that twice. And then, of course, they hadn't expected all of these people. They were scared. They had more people than—they didn't know what was gonna happen. And where did we go? We couldn't go back to the campus. We went to Union Baptist Church and when we got into the Union Baptist Church, Charlie Jones said, Bernice, lead a song. Now there had been a rally in the gym and we were protesting the white people running through the campus, white men on the campus. We threw in the bad food in the dining hall, I mean, that's the best way we could do a rally at those times. And so, I said, Bernice leads a song.

00:22:14:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Reagon: Me and Marion Blunt—

INTERVIEWER: JUST RAN OUT.

00:22:17:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 591]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, READY?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

[sync tone]

Reagon: You ready? I had done—we had had mass rallies on the campus and Marion Blunt—

INTERVIEWER: THESE PEOPLE ARE YELLING OUT HERE NOW. WE REALLY HAVE TO STOP FOR THAT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: CUT.

INTERVIEWER: YEAH.

[cut]

00:22:38:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ONE.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ONCE MORE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SECOND.

[sync tone]

Reagon: Well, Marion Blunt and I sang at the first rally, we did, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” I remember being surprised that everybody in Albany State College gym at that time didn't know the Negro National Anthem which in Albany you learned from the time you were born. That was one of my first awareness’ that all black people didn't grow up like we did in Albany. After this first march, we're at Union Baptist Church, Charlie Jones looks at me and said, Bernice, sing a song. And I started, “Over My Head I See Trouble in the Air.” By the time I got to “trouble”—where “trouble” was supposed to be I didn't see any trouble, so I put “freedom” in there. And, I guess, that was the first time I really understood sort of using what I'd been given in terms of songs. I'd always been a singer, but I'd always, more or less, been singing what other people taught me to sing, that was the first time I had the sort of awareness that these songs were mine and I could use them for what I needed them to. And this sort of thing was important, because I ended up being arrested in the second ways [sic] of arrest in Albany, Georgia. And I was in jail. And when we got to jail, Slater King was already in jail and he said, Bernice, is that you? And I said, yeah. And he said, sing a song. Or if there was a discussion or an argument somebody would say, sing a song. So songs were used to pull people to a common place. And, and it's, it—there's an important thing, it never settled the issue, it never—in, in my jail cell there were women from high school all the way to like seventy years old. And there were church women and street women and there were like women with degrees and college women. I remember this high school person, who had just fallen in love with Sherrod in jail, and she was swooning and carrying on and the la—church ladies just thought, God did not like that particular kind of thing and she just didn't like—then there was somebody who cursed all the time. So that these black people were not together and from a together place in terms of what their culture was or what their class was, but there was a together experience that all of us had. One had to do with the movement. The other had to do with who we were and the naming of who we were always took place through song, always.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MINUTE, CHRIS.

[cut]

00:25:49:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

[sync tone]

Reagon: Growing up in Albany, I learned that if you bring black people together, you bring them together with the song. To this day, I don't understand how people think they can bring anybody together without a song. However, I do know that people try to do that, poorly, I think. Now the, the singing tradition in Albany was congregational. There were not, really,

soloists. There were song leaders and a song leader gives out a song. So like if, if Slater came and said, Bernice, sing a song, or, we want somebody to give us a song. Now you're not asking for a solo, you're asking somebody—the other one is, we want somebody to raise a song. You're asking somebody to plant a seed. The minute you start the song then the song is created by everybody there. Nobody else will say, come on and sing. There is really almost like a musical explosion that takes place. Now that song, all of my life, but the singing in the movement was different from the singing in church. And all of this is relative, because the singing in church, most people have never heard that we—the way we sing in church all the time. The singing is the kind of singing where you disappear. When I work with singers, I say, would you get off the stage and let the song be there. You go away; you turn yourself totally over to the song. And it's almost like there is this song in this room now if I can get up to it. Am I up to it? Most of the time, in Albany, Georgia, in the Albany Movement, we were up to it. But the song singing I heard in Albany I'd never heard before in my life in, in spite of the fact that I was from that congregational singing culture. And the only difference was that in Albany, Georgia black people were sort of doing some stuff around being black people. And I know a lot of people talk about it being a movement and when they do a movement they're talking about buses and jobs and all of the list. Po-black policemen and they're talking about the ICC ruling and the Trailway bus station and those things were just incidents that gave us an excuse to be something of ourselves. It's almost like where we had been working before we had a chance to do that stuff was in a certain kind of space. And when we did those marches and went to jail, we expanded the space we could operate in and that was echoed in the singing. And it was a bigger, more powerful singing. The voice I have now, I ha-I got the first time I sang in a movement meeting after I got out of jail. Now I'm describing to you, I'm past that first meeting in Union Baptist, I've done "Lift Every Voice and Sing." I am a song leader, I lead every song in jail. I—and it's not the voice I have. I did not lead the songs in jail in the voice I have now. And the voice I have now I got that night and I'd never heard it before in my life and they did what they usually do, they said, Bernice, would you lead us in a song? And I did the same first song, "Over My Head I See Freedom in the Air," but I'd never heard that voice before. I had never been that me before. And once I became that me, I have never let that me go. And, I guess, what I like people to, to know when they deal with the movement is that there are these specific things, but there is a transformation that took place inside of the people acting that need to also be quantified in the picture, because that's the only thing I remember. And the singing is just the echo of that. And if you have a people who are transformed and they create the sound that lets you know they are new people, then certainly, you've nev—never heard it before. They have also never heard it before, because they've never been that before.

INTERVIEWER: STOP DOWN. YOU'RE GOOD.

00:30:46:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: WHEN YOU GIVE ME, WHEN YOU TALK TO ME AND GIVE ME

THIS ANSWER WOULD YOU BE A LITTLE BIT MORE SPECIFIC?

00:31:00:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to sound roll 1540]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

[sync tone]

Reagon: When I was in—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M SORRY, COULD YOU START AGAIN? ALL RIGHT.

Reagon: When I was in the mass meetings, I would be part of a group. There would be Rutha Harris, Andrew Reed, Charlie Jones, Cordell Reagon, Charles Sherrod. We would be young people. We would be up at the front leading the songs. The meetings always started with these freedom songs and the freedom songs were in-between all of the activity of the mass meetings. *Most of the mass meeting was singing in Albany. There was more singing than there was talking. And so, most of the work that was done in terms of taking care of movement business had to do with nurturing the people who had come and there would be two or three people who would talk, but basically songs was the bed of everything.* And I'd never seen or felt songs do that. I'd had songs in college and high school and church, but in the movement, all the words sounded differently. "This Little Light of Mine, I'm gonna let it Shine," which I'd sung all my life said something very different. "All in the streets, I'm gonna let it shine," I'd never even heard that before cause I mean who would go into the street that was not where you were supposed to be if you were an upstanding Christian person. "All in the jailhouse, I'm gonna let it shine." All of these new concepts of where, if you said it, this is where you could be. It's also interesting it's the first time I heard some of the old prayers: "Lord you know me, you know my condition, I'm asking you to come by here and see about me." And this prayer was prayed every second Sunday in Mount Olive Baptist Church. Number two by the mother of the church, but when she did it in a mass meeting just before a march, I heard the words for the first time and, I think, it's because it's almost like a coming of age—

00:33:24:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: JUST RAN OUT.

Reagon: —in some way.

00:33:26:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 592]

Reagon: When I was in mass meetings—

INTERVIEWER: HOLD ON ONE SECOND.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK THIS.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

Reagon: When I was in a mass meeting, I don't think about excitement. I'm not a butterflies person. I've never been a butterfly, a nervous person. I think about being—what, what I can remember is being alive and knowing what I was doing. Being where I was supposed to be. That was the way it was in jail too and on the marches. It was like for the first time, being so clear. And, you know, the verse in “We Shall Overcome” that says “God is on our side,” there was a theological discussion that said maybe we should say, we are on God's side. But, you know, God was lucky to have us in Albany doing what we were doing. I mean what better case would he have? And so, it was really like God would be very, very happy to be on my side. And there's a bit of arrogance about that, but that was the way it felt. And what, I think, about is just being very alive and very clear. The clearest I've ever been in my life that every minute, I was doing what I was supposed to do.

INTERVIEWER: STOP DOWN.

[cut]

00:34:51:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

[sync tone]

Reagon: I think Albany settled the issue of jail and I think songs helped to do that because in the songs you could just name the people who were trying to use this against you. Asa Kelley, who was the Mayor. Chief Pritchett, who was the police. And this behavior is new

behavior for black people in the United States of America. You would every once in a while have a crazy black person going up against some white person, they would hang him. But this time the—we were like—with a song the, there was, you—there was nothing they could do to block, in fact, what we were saying. Not only did you call their names and say what you wanna say, but they could not stop your sound. And it's different than talking. Singing is different than talking, because no matter what they do they would have to kill me to stop me from singing if they were arresting me. Sometimes they would plead and say, please stop singing. And you would just know that your word is being heard. And so, that there was a real sense of platform-ness [sic] and, and clearly empowerment. And it was like just saying, put me in jail, that's not an issue of power. My freedom has nothing to do with putting me in jail. And so, like there was this joy and, you know, it was like—oh God, the first time they had a demonstration and Annette had got arrested and I had gone to take a test. I was so upset. I was so worried that was gonna be the last arrest, but I was lucky.

INTERVIEWER: OK, STOP.

[cut]

00:36:45:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK IT.

[sync tone]

Reagon: All of the music that came into Albany changed in Albany. And it changed because of who we were, I guess. And as best I understand it is like, if you have, if you have a gold—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: STOP.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: CUT.

INTERVIEWER: YEAH, LET'S HAVE A CUT.

00:37:16:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: WE'VE GOT ABOUT FIVE MINUTES.

[sync tone]

00:37:17:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SORRY. SECOND STICK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SECOND.

[sync tone]

Reagon: *If you have a gold mine, then there is a point in the gold mine where you have the richest part, and that's called the mother lode. That's what Albany is to black people in terms of just the concentrated essence of the spirit of the people. And if you can imagine black people at our most powerful point in terms of community and peoplehood then that's Albany, Georgia* during the Albany movement. And the only way you get at it when people talk about the Albany movement is when they talk about the singing, because they miss everything else because of the way they try to evaluate the movement. And the singing is powerful because when you—it's—what, what black people, what we did in the mass meeting was extend ourselves beyond our bodies. People ask, were you scared? That was not an issue, because if I sing you have to walk into me, but if it is a people in song you're walking into a people. And you walk into the people way before you can get to our physical bodies. So there's a way in which bec-those songs kept us from being touched by people who would want us not to be who we were becoming. And there is a woman at Shiloh Baptist Church who would sing this song for an hour, I mean for an hour, and they talk about black music being repetitious and monotonous and so it is not a song anymore. We're not talking about a song. And people are clapping and the feet is going and she is just loming [sic] up and you could hear her three blocks away of Shiloh Baptist Church and that song was, "Come and Go With Me to That Land." And there's no way for me to sing it the way it's sung, but when I think about song in Albany, I, I'm, I'm not even really thinking about song, I'm thinking about singing, but I'm thinking about singing in a way that we do not have a definition for singing, but like a reflection of who these people are. And if you walk in it with your body, it is not a hearing experience. Your ears are not enough. Your eyes are not enough. Your body is not enough and you can't block it. The only way you survive the singing is to open up and let go and be moved by the singing to another space. So the singing really is just used to just move people. And for me, I don't know any other kind of singing that's worth my while.

00:40:37:00

Reagon: [singing] Come and go with me to that land / Come and go with me to that land / Come and go with me to that land, where I'm bound / Oh, come and go with me to that land / Come and go with me to that land / Why don't you come and go with me to that land, where I'm bound? [stops singing] The song would start like that. Nobody's clapping and there's nothing in that that says freedom or we're going down to march. But the song articulates a position and it says movement. And she would go, [singing] why don't you come and go to that land / Come and go to that land, why don't you come and go to that land, where I'm bound. [stops singing] And that second statement would be more powerful. Then she'd cut into it, [singing] well, there's nothing but peace in that land, nothing but peace in that land / Oh Lord, nothing but peace in that land, where I'm bound / Well, we'll all be together in that

land, all be together in that land, oh we'll all be together in that land where I'm bound / Oh, we'll all be together in that land, we'll all be together in that land Lord, we'll all be together in that land where I'm bound. [stops singing] There's a song that a Reverend Holloway would do and it's called "Shine on Me." [singing] Shine on me / shine on me / let the light from the lighthouse shine on me. Shine on me / shine on me / let the light from the lighthouse shine—

00:44:24:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Reagon: —on me. [stops singing] It's like claiming your space. We had been too long out of the light. It was our time. It still is.

INTERVIEWER: THANK YOU, THANK YOU.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:44:43:00

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