We shall Overcome?
Bob Dylan, Complicity, and the March on Washington 1963

By Frank Mehring

Contemporary reports had been surprisingly quiet about the sounds and soundtrack of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on 27 August 1963 where Martin Luther King, Jr. held his famous I have a dream speech. When journalist Lerone Bennett Jr. from the influential magazine for the African-American market, EBONY, reported on the March on Washington, music was more or less absent. As the most significant effect of the march, LIFE magazine emphasized the Negroes orderly demonstration of their potential as a moral force (20). The New York Times zoomed in on the political speeches emphasizing particularly Martin Luther Kings speech, which touched all the themes of the day, only better than anybody else (1). There is hardly any mention of the power of music, which permeated the event. This silence of the contemporary press begs the following question: Is there a musical signature that can be connected to the March on Washington?

The music of the March of Washington cannot be seen exclusively from the perspective of the African American struggle for freedom but also needs to be understood by drawing attention to the connection between youth, ethnicity and the folk revival in the early 1960s. While white teenagers in the mid-1950s turned to musical styles such as rocknroll to distance themselves from their parents generation, the tensions over civil rights and second class citizenship of African Americans, especially in the South, increased the conflicts between emerging baby boomers and their parents. During the Kennedy presidency, a large number of white college students began to turn to folk music in order to re-signify the political heritage of the 1930s folk music towards an expression of political dissent. The folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s emerged from the songs of the folk and blues musician Lead Belly and John and Alan Lomax ethnomusicological work of archiving folk music. Figures such as Pete and Mike Seeger, as well as Phil Ochs, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan offered some of the most influential contributions to the folk movement. Folk music repertories often have a specific function in order to motivate the formation and dissolution of groups, as Philip Bohlman points out (288). During the civil rights movement, folk music functioned as a sounding board to give expression to resistance regarding discrimination on racial grounds.

One of the iconic figures, who emerged from this spirit and became a leading voice, was Bob Dylan. With his nasal, thin, and sometimes broken voice accompanying his sharp poetical compositions on acoustic guitar clearly evoked the spirit of Woody Guthries folk songs and political messages of the preceding generation. For white folk music performers, the 1963 Newport Folk Festival from July 26th-25th functioned as a kind of warm-up for the
March on Washington. Attracting about 40.000 visitors, the line-up at the final concert featured Theodore Bikel, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Pete Seeger as well as Ruth Mae Harris, Charles Neblett, Cordell Reagon, Bernice Johnson, joined together in singing We Shall Overcome (see Cohen 237). The well-known photo by John Byrne Cooke shows performers joining hands as a sign of solidarity with the African-American struggle for civil rights. The singing of We Shall Overcome is part of a performance, which links political themes with music and social gestures to signify unity in protest. W.E.B. DuBois has called on African Americans to close ranks during times of war. The reference to the military vocabulary of a march on the capital with singers of different skin colour joining hands translates DuBois’s call for unity into a powerful symbol turning to music as the glue to close ranks. Many photos of the March on Washington show the audience in a similar position of joining hands as the photo form the 1963 Newport Folk Festival.

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Participants holding hands in front of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington, August 28, 1963. Photograph by Leonard Freed.
The singing of “We Shall Overcome” has by now become part of a ritual to and signal for joining hands and closing ranks of people of different colour. As the program for the main stage of the March on Washington shows, the song functioned as an overarching theme of the event. “WE SHALL OVERCOME” is printed in bold capital letters at the end of the program. Visually, it offers a conclusion, musically it resembles a culmination of the day regarding the struggle for equality and freedom. As a universal theme, “We Shall Overcome” translates Friedrich Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” at the end of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony from the classical concert stage to the political stage. “Alle Menschen werden Brüder” [all men become brothers] touches on similar themes on a poetical and musical level. The final movement of Beethoven’s symphony suggests that the musicians, the choir, and the audience are invited to get a glimpse of the transcendental joy associated with universal brotherhood. The theme of human bonding, of overcoming what separates people, be it racial, ideological, or religious differences, is recognized all over the world. In the German context of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Leonard Bernstein conducted the Ninth Symphony as a powerful symbol that in 1989 the people at the Brandenburg Gate could re-unite with their fellow-German citizens who had been separated by a seemingly unsurmountable wall defined by the ideological oppositions of the Cold War. Beethoven’s anthem sounded out the hope for unity at the Brandenburg Gate. “We Shall Overcome” touches on similar themes albeit in a specific US American context defined by racial segregation and the trauma of slavery.

When Dylan entered the stage at the March on Washington, he was announced as needing no further introduction based on the tremendous applause. Apart from his excellent achievements as a singer and songwriter, he also did not need an introduction since by 1963 he had become a media phenomenon. While many musicians gained fame and popularity by appearing in the prestigious Ed Sullivan Show, Dylan used the show to his advantage by not appearing. In 1963, Dylan walked off the set after rehearsing his “Talkin’ John Birch Society Blues” in fury since the producers considered the song too controversial at the time for a television broadcast on CBS. In a satirical fashion, Dylan’s paranoid narrator of the song falls victim to the extreme right-wing, anti-Communist organization propaganda that Communists are invading the United States. The confrontation between Dylan and CBS made front-page news. Nationwide, Dylan became recognized as a protest singer who would not sell out to the mainstream media. There is an ironic twist that Dylan’s refusal to appear in the medium television actually increased his popularity. “[…] the uproar about this blatant act of censorship did Dylan considerably more good, by portraying him as a rebel and counterculture hero, than if he had appeared on the show and performed […] to an uncaring national TV audience” (Heylin 71). Within the folk movement, he became appreciated for his uncompromising integrity. Another crucial performance, which connected the early protest songs of Dylan with the cause of the March on Washington, was his appearance at a voter registration rally in Greenwood, Mississippi, organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) on July 6, 1963. In Greenwood, Dylan performed one of the songs, which he also deemed most appropriate for his appearance in front of the Lincoln Memorial to join the cause of the marchers: “Only a Pawn in Their Game.” The song is an appropriate selection due to the timely tragedy of the killing of Medgar Evers. The performance creates an intertextual link with the program and speeches on the main stage. Following the opening remarks by A. Philip Randolph and remarks by Dr. Eugene Carson Blake (Vice chairman, Commission on Race Relations of the National Council of churches of Christ in America), the “tribute to Negro Women Fighters for Freedom” was presented by no other than Mrs. Medgar Evers to honour Daisy Bates, Gloria Richardson and Rosa Parks among others.

In the lyrics, Dylan talks about the assassination of the civil rights activist Medgar Evers, who was shot on June 12, 1963, in Jackson, Mississippi.
Rather than putting the blame exclusively on the white Southerner, he identifies the real criminals behind the deed in the political and social milieu responsible for propagating racial hatred and violence. Apart from the Ku Klux Clan, Dylan refers to the political rulers: “The deputy sheriffs, the soldiers, the governors get paid / And the marshals and cops get the same / But the poor white man’s used in the hands of them all like a tool” (http://bobdylan.com). The assassin is only a wheel in a large machine that still runs on the fuel of slavery, racial segregation, and class boundaries. In a surprising twist, Dylan takes away part of the blame from the perpetrator in order to address larger political and philosophical issues that remained unresolved in the United States: “From the poverty shacks, he looks from the cracks to the tracks / And the hoofbeats pound in his brain / And he’s taught how to walk in a pack / Shoot in the back / With his fist in a clinch / To hang and to lynch / To hide ’neath the hood / To kill with no pain / Like a dog on a chain / He ain’t got no name / But it ain’t him to blame / He’s only a pawn in their game” (http://bobdylan.com).

This article is part of Mehring’s larger research project entitled “Civil Rights Sounding Signatures in the Summer of 1963.” It ties in with my interest in the Soundtrack of Liberation. See my recent book Soundtrack van de Bevrijding: Swingen, Zingen en Dansen op Weg naar Vrijheid (Vantilt, 2015).