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Influence of Ray Charles's Music toward The African-American Movement

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Without any exaggeration, music is able to change to world. Ray Charles, one of the black musicians, had proved that music could influence the Americans during the African-American movement. It could even break the barrier between black and white Americans. Greater than that, it is one of the elements that generate the United States to become a land of the liberty and equality in nowadays, as long as it could permeate people everywhere.

Born with gifted, Ray Charles composed several marvelous songs and also his own style of music, the "Soul", during his life time. Facing with impoverished and racially segregated, he grew up with a full capacity of emotions which mostly convey through his songs. As his work was entirely extracted from his heart and soul, therefore it could permeate and influence every individual's soul and also the society as well. Besides, the influence of his music toward American's society can be recognized into two main dimensions. Firstly, this dimension will be concerned with the acceptance. As the music has spread through the media; radio and recordings, it becomes more accessible to people in the society. In particular, his music contains the lyrics which mainly based on his past experiences and his own style of rhythm, these make his song becoming unique and more

attractive. Thereby, his music becomes widely accepted among Americans; without discrimination as white or black. Secondly, influence of music can be served as a linkage that joint differences together. For example in the social movement during 1960s, music served as a bridge that united people with different status groups together; between black and white supporters, between highbrow and lowbrow and between leaders and supporters. Moreover, it also helped a song leader in creating group identity and reinforcing solidarity.¹

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I'll sit at the table

When company comes,

Nobody'll dare

¹ Eyerman, Ron and Jamison, Andrew. *Music and Social Movements*. 1998. p.74-78,94-100.

Say to me,

“Eat in the kitchen,”

Then.

Besides,

They’ll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed-

*I, too, am America.*²

Being oppressed so long, black Americans felt inferior and thereby moved out to solicit for their equality and rights. This was starting point of the African-American Civil Rights movement. The period of movement provided the space for those blacks to express their attitudes and also provided the opportunity for musical development. While the black power movement was extending, a new kind of music, “Soul”, emerged. This musical innovation was created by Ray Charles, a blind-talented musician. Later, Radio audience surveys showed that the soul music became popular on the charts.³ Since the soul music could appeal to a younger generation of black listeners, it reflected the increasing influence of youth in the movement. Thereby, this can be remarked as the initial success of the movement.

² Eyerman, Ron and Jamison, Andrew. *Music and Social Movements*. 1998. p.74.

³ Piero Scaruffi. “The Founding Fathers of Soul Music.” *Scaruffi*. 22 Aug. 2012.
<<http://www.scaruffi.com/history/soul.html>>

As Ray Charles and his music were widely accepted among Americans, one of his songs, “Hit the Road, Jack.” was brought to use for the civil rights movement. With the changing in texts but maintaining the original playful rhythm, “Get Your Rights, Jack,” became popular song in the movement. It went:

Get your rights, Jack,

And don't be a “Tom” no more,

No more, no more, no more.

Get your rights, Jack,

And don't be a Tom no more.

The new version of “Soul” was used as musical expression that revealed the political focus with intensity because such song was greatly playful and also contained hidden references in a form of serious jest.⁴ Besides, this song was a powerful media that helped uniting people together in order to struggle for their rights. Not only his music that played role in the movement, but he also came out to show his dissentient attitude toward racial segregation. He canceled to perform a show after being told his audiences would be segregated because his income from the concert could not be worth with the equality that everyone should deserve.⁵

⁴ Eyerman, Ron and Jamison, Andrew. *Music and Social Movements*. 1998. p.99.

⁵ Web admin. “Remembering Dr. Martin Luther King.” *RayCharles.com*. 11 Sep. 2012.
<<http://raycharles.com/2011/01/17/remembering-dr-martin-luther-king/>>

After African-Americans have been struggled for rights and equality for a long time, they deserved them back as a great triumph. They gained their equality back as the United States abolished a racial discrimination and their rights as their voting rights were restored. Furthermore, the court also approved policy toward prohibiting discrimination in the use of public facilities.⁶ From that day, it was legal for blacks and whites to eat in the same restaurants, having a hair cut in the barbershops, use the same restrooms, and intermarry with each other. Nowadays, more blacks became educated as the statistics shown that “By 1950, Black enrollment in colleges had increased 2,500 percents over the previous decade”, gain higher quality of life and opportunities; such as sports, military, and the entertainment field. In particular to entertainment field; “Georgia on My Mind”, the Ray Charles’ song was declared as the Official State Song of Georgia, this officially signified the acceptance toward Black people.⁷ Other examples are Sidney Poitier (the first black actor who won “Best Actor” award), Benjamin Davis, Jr. (the air force’s first Black general), Gwendolyn Brooks (a female poet who won a Pulitzer Prize) and Barack Obama (the first African American president)⁸

Existing everywhere on the world, music has been at the heart of every human society; it became a useful tool to explain the political phenomena and tradition toward the society. Besides, music, known as social glue, bound everyone together to lead senses

⁶ Wikipedia contributors. “African-American Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968).” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 9 Sep. 2012. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Civil_Rights_Movement_\(1955%E2%80%931968\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Civil_Rights_Movement_(1955%E2%80%931968))>

⁷ Web admin. “Remembering Dr. Martin Luther King.” *RayCharles.com*. 11 Sep. 2012. <<http://raycharles.com/2011/01/17/remembering-dr-martin-luther-king/>>

⁸ Web admin. “50 years after civil rights movement.” *blogcritics*. 15 Sep. 2012. <<http://blogcritics.org/culture/article/50-years-after-civil-rights-movement/>>

of identification and solidarity; these made the social movement becoming powerful. One of the popular music, which significantly influenced during the movement, was composed by Ray Charles. His music served as bridge that reduced the gap between black and white Americans, changed a prospect toward each other, and increased in acceptance. In addition, his music also urged the awareness toward respectfulness in human rights and equality without impartiality and discrimination. As music could change people by gradually altering their prospects, it could eventually change the world. Hence, there was no doubted why it was acclaimed as a miracle.