

To the Mountaintop: The Music of Martin Luther King (Martin Luther King Day, Jan. 17, 2022)

Each passing year adds one more to the number of anniversaries since that darkest day, April 4, 1968, when an assassin's bullet robbed humanity of one of its greatest.

In the interim Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has ascended to mythological status, a man of peace, who faced down absolute evil with a message of love and redemption and whose speeches and sermons were themselves a kind of marvelous music from a better place.

During my travels as a musician, I occasionally had the very great good fortune to speak to a few people who had actually known Dr. King well, who heard him live countless times: willing volunteers in that perilous cause to which ( to paraphrase Lincoln at Gettysburg) King was to give "the last full measure of devotion".

Mrs. Juanita Abernathy, when I met her around 1992, was the widow of Dr. King's right hand man and logistical genius, Dr. Ralph Abernathy. The Rev. Billy Kyles was another great figure in the liberation movement. He and Rev. Abernathy were alone with King in that fateful room on the second floor of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on the evening of April 4, 1968.

In old black and white photographs you can see Mrs. Abernathy on the front lines, arms linked, in a chain including Dr. and Mrs. King and her own husband, Ralph Abernathy, leading another march into harm's way, armed only with faith and love.

Rev. Kyles is perhaps best known from a famous photo taken moments after the assassination. Dr. 's prone body, facing upwards, is just visible at the bottom of the frame. Rev. Kyles is the man with the goatee reaching up and pointing in symmetry with others towards the building from which the fateful shots had just been fired.

I still remember the three hour "lunch" I had with Mrs. Abernathy. With her typical modesty, she said of of the civil rights movement: "You know that whole thing wasn't planned. It just happened!"

In the late 1990's I played as soloist with the Memphis Symphony and while in Memphis was able to meet Rev. Kyles. He took an hour out of his day to meet with me in his church and to recall minute by minute (just the two of us standing close together in a room off the sanctuary of his church!) what happened. "There were just 3 people in that hotel room that evening: Martin, Ralph and myself. I am the only one still alive...At first we thought it was just firecrackers."

The night before, King had spoken at the Masonic Temple in Memphis. It's a big room holding over 3,000 people. I went there too and stood awestruck behind the well worn lectern that King must have used when he delivered what was to be his final oration, the famous "Mountain Top" (also known as the "I See the Promised Land") speech.

This was a speech that almost did not happen. With biblical overtones, a furious storm had ripped through Memphis. The weather was terrible. The tempest had torn the roofs off of some houses.

Only a small turnout was expected on the night of April 3rd. King was not even there at the start of the rally in support of the striking sanitation workers he had traveled to Memphis to support. To Rev. Abernathy's astonishment, the place was packed anyway, and the national press corps had turned out in force. Abernathy immediately got on the phone to King back at the Lorraine: "Martin, get over here now!"

Once King had arrived, Abernathy began to warm up the crowd. Normally this meant a *short* introduction. (Rev. Kyles told me, “Usually after 5 minutes someone would start to say, ‘Amen, Amen...’ and that was usually the cue for the introductory speaker to finish up and get off the stage.) But for unexplainable reasons, this evening that didn’t happen. Instead, Abernathy began to reminisce about the entire history of the Movement, recalling all the battlefields he and King had been on together. The introduction went on for 20 minutes.

Then King took the stage: “As I listened to Ralph Abernathy in his eloquent and generous introduction and then thought about myself, I wondered who he was talking about! It’s always good to have your closest friend and associate say something good about you, And Ralph is the best friend I have in the world.”

From that lighthearted beginning King began tracing the course of human history, from the bondage of the Israelites under Pharaoh in Egypt, through the ancient Greeks, on to his defiant namesake, Martin Luther; then to Lincoln through FDR (“the only thing we have to fear is fear itself”) to the convulsions of the 1960’s: “Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars.”

Then he turned to back to earth, to the sanitation workers: “There are thirteen hundred of God’s children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out...we know how it’s coming out! For when people get caught up with that which is right and are willing to sacrifice for it there is no stopping point short of victory.”

King was a great lover of music. Through his wife, who earned an undergraduate degree at and was later awarded an honorary doctorate by the New England Conservatory, he came to know opera. At the March on Washington in 1963, King’s favorite singer, Mahalia Jackson, was asked to perform, joining many other famous musicians (including Aretha Franklin, Nina Simone, James Brown, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan) at the March.

In the Movement the “sound of music”, self - made on the spot, accompanied and sustained the non- violent marchers and buoyed their spirits. From the police paddy wagons to the jails into which they were packed like sardines. “We’d see the jailers looking through the windows and being moved by our words and our songs,” King recalled.

In fact, King’s oratory itself was music, inspiring a movement that is still underway in America and around the world, anywhere where people are still “yearning to breathe free”.

Today, thanks to you tube and other outlets, we can follow Dr. King live, experience first hand his manifold, interwoven themes, the marvelous variations he spins out from them. We can ride the rise and fall of his cadences and be transported by the endless shadings of color and context of this master musician, this *ne plus ultra* maestro of pitch and rhythm, wielding a magical baton.

At the end of the Memphis speech, in a way that send chills down the spine, King soars into prophecy: “Like anybody I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

