

## Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life* and the "Long Civil Rights Movement"

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Stevie Wonder's 1976 album *Songs in the Key of Life* is an enduring masterpiece of popular music that reflects what U.S. historians have recently called the "long civil rights movement." That concept, as Jacquelyn Hall and others have argued, challenges the master narrative of a "short" civil rights movement beginning with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and ending by the mid-1960s with the passage of federal civil and voting rights legislation. More important, for Hall the "long civil rights movement" is a corrective against distortions of the movement's meaning and legacy that have developed over the last generation. Perhaps the most common of such distortions is the appropriation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream of a color-blind America by conservative opponents of civil rights.<sup>1</sup> King's little-remembered words of 1967 are just as relevant for our time as they were when he wrote them: "We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing'–oriented society to a 'person'–oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motive and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy."<sup>2</sup> Americans often forget that Dr. King was once reviled by a majority of his fellow citizens for his unpopular stand in opposition to the war in Vietnam and his advocacy of economic justice.<sup>3</sup>

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Supporters of civil rights, including the iconic African American musician Stevie Wonder, worked to establish King's birthday as a national holiday. Yet King's legacy continues to be hijacked by those who oppose civil rights or who seek to implement conservative agendas antithetical to social justice.<sup>4</sup> One means of challenging such distortions is by examining the relationship between the movement and American popular culture. Popular music brought issues of social change and the politics of race, class, and gender to mass audiences in the United States during the 1960s and '70s. An appreciative contemporary reviewer of *Songs in the Key of Life* noted that the album "seeks quite openly and passionately to reestablish some of the sociological urgency and sense of community that has been missing from a highly fragmented, all too unaffecting pop music scene during much of the 1970s."<sup>5</sup> Wonder viewed the album as a throwback to the days when popular musicians claimed a political voice, either directly or metaphorically: "One of the great things about music is that it can bring people together. That's what was so exciting about the late 1960s. There was a feeling of such unity and celebration. So much was happening . . . Motown, Dylan, Hendrix, the Beatles, Sly [and the Family Stone]. I hope we can get some of that feeling back before the '70s are over."<sup>6</sup>

The historian David Chappell helps us understand the influence Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement had on Stevie Wonder. Chappell argues that prophetic ideas rooted in African American Christianity were crucial for the movement's overthrow of Jim Crow segregation in the South. Prophetic religion helped mobilize masses of blacks and their allies to oppose an unjust and immoral social order through nonviolent direct action. For King and many others segregation was the essence of a corrupt and sinful society. Unlike American liberals who optimistically believed that freedom would flow naturally from post-World War II economic prosperity, King and other activists saw that White Citizens' Councils, mobs, and vigilantes were more than willing to resort to violence in defense of their so-called way of life. Overcoming fear and intimidation, civil rights activists and demonstrators answered to a higher authority in denouncing the system and exposing the complicit silence of politicians and clergy. The theologian and civil rights activist James Lawson viewed nonviolent direct action as a means of achieving "a social order of justice permeated by love." Through nonviolence, Lawson wrote in the 1960 founding Statement of Purpose of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), "Courage displaces fear; love transforms hate . . . hope ends despair . . . faith reconciles doubt. . . . The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social

immorality.”<sup>7</sup>

Another leading prophetic voice during the 1960s and '70s that made an impression on Wonder was the African American novelist and essayist James Baldwin. As a precocious youth with a troubled relationship with his domineering stepfather, Baldwin became a preacher in an Afro-Baptist church. He left the church shortly thereafter, began publishing essays and book reviews, and eventually moved to France in search of personal and artistic freedom. No longer willing to observe civil rights struggles from overseas, Baldwin returned to the United States during the late 1950s as a renowned writer and public intellectual. In such books as *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963) Baldwin developed his indictment of northern liberalism. Specifically, Baldwin criticized what he termed the innocence of many northern whites who, preferring to view racism strictly as a southern problem, remained blind to their role in the suffering of their black fellow citizens. Baldwin held out a redemptive social vision of love as the solution: “If we—the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”<sup>8</sup> During 1968 Wonder was quoted in the press as having recently read Baldwin’s *Nobody Knows My Name*.<sup>9</sup> In that book, Baldwin wrote of finding his voice as a novelist while in self-imposed exile in Switzerland by listening to recordings of Bessie Smith.<sup>10</sup> Wonder may have felt a strong kinship with Baldwin’s view of black music as an inspiration. Though Baldwin’s title implied that African Americans’ humanity and cultural achievements were invisible to the white American majority, Wonder went on to use his prodigious talent to make African Americans better known to themselves and to the world.

Much of Stevie Wonder’s music, particularly the 1970s albums culminating in *Songs in the Key of Life*, shared the movement’s prophetic religious outlook and vision of nonviolent social change. The album meditates, sermonlike, on a social conception of love that King described with the Greek word *agape*. King distinguished *agape* from the other Greek words for love, *eros* (romantic love) and *philia* (the reciprocal bond of friendship). As King elaborated, “*Agape* means understanding, redeeming good will for all men. It is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. . . . It is the love of God operating in the human heart.” For King, *agape* was disinterested love, directed toward friend and enemy alike. Moreover, “*agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community.”

This conception of love as a social act and mission also animated much of the writing and public speaking of James Baldwin. Indeed, with varying degrees of subtlety, message songs with themes of love, antiracism, and appeals for “brotherhood,” reconciliation, and freedom were a prominent genre of popular music during the 1960s and ‘70s.<sup>11</sup>

At the time of the album’s release, Wonder reflected on his aesthetic and political intentions: “As soon as I came up with the title, I knew I had the direction I wanted: the concept of life in as many facets as we could cover. . . . If we could just touch on some of the most important experiences to show how very much we all have in common . . . we could help break down some of the stereotypes that are used to separate people.”<sup>12</sup> In this album Wonder employs a global panoply of musical styles, sounds, and emotions to convey his message of love, spirituality, and community. All is not sweetness and light, though, for the album echoes the movement’s prophetic renunciation of worldly injustice and inhumanity. Wonder also displays a complex historical consciousness, affirming an African American cultural heritage through his rendition of gospel, jazz, and classical musical styles. A sense of history is further demonstrated by his tributes to such ancestors as Duke Ellington (“Sir Duke”) and Crispus Attucks (“Black Man”). *Songs* enacts a social vision that includes the following: a multicultural American nation, solidarity with the dispossessed in the song “Village Ghetto Land,” and a panspiritualism that transcends racial, cultural, and religious differences. Throughout, Wonder exhorts his listeners to reject a past tainted by human suffering and to intervene in human history guided by a vision of a utopian future. In my discussion of the album, I will attend closely to the album’s music, lyrics, and historical and cultural contexts to shed some light on its significance and its continuing relevance.

#### LOOKING BACK

In the liner notes to *Songs in the Key of Life*, Wonder writes: “I’ve never considered myself an orator or politician, only a person who is fortunate, thanks to all of you, to become an artist.”<sup>13</sup> The civil rights movement provided the backdrop for Wonder’s understanding of his bond with his audience and his sense of himself as citizen-artist. Wonder and other artists traversed the Jim Crow South as part of the Motortown (Motown) Revue. After a performance in Birmingham, Alabama, on November 9, 1962, when singers and musicians began to board the tour’s chartered bus, shots rang out, shattering several windows. No one was injured, but the incident dispelled

any misconceptions among the musicians that their celebrity insulated them from racist attack. That incident occurred roughly a year after the Freedom Riders, an interracial group organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), endured beatings and firebombings as they sought to desegregate interstate travel during May 1961.<sup>14</sup> Detroit, a city with a long and brutal history of racial segregation, was no stranger to civil rights activism. In June 1963, 250,000 Detroiters, the overwhelming majority of them African American, marched through the city's downtown calling for an end to discrimination, in the North and South. Many of them had heard King give an earlier version of what became later his historic "I Have a Dream" speech, which he delivered at the March on Washington on August 28.<sup>15</sup>

Freedom struggles in the North and South thus provided a crucial backdrop for Wonder's aspirations for artistic control and commercial success as a Motown recording artist. As appeals for civil rights morphed into demands for black power, the movement energized the music of Wonder and many of his contemporaries, including Curtis Mayfield, Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye, and Nina Simone.<sup>16</sup> The freedom movement also shaped the reception of popular music by audiences. As historian Suzanne Smith has observed in her study of Motown, if a black artist recorded a song, it was likely to be invested by audiences with political meaning regardless of its content.<sup>17</sup> Television magnified the impact of popular music and culture, showing mass audiences both the promise of change and its attendant anxieties and limitations. The distance between Baldwin's dream of interracial comity and lingering racial and sexual taboos was on view in the contradictory spectacle of such popular regional and nationally televised teen dance programs as *American Bandstand*, where minimally integrated gatherings of white youth danced the latest African American social dances to black music recordings.<sup>18</sup>

Wonder began work on the music that became *Songs in the Key of Life* in 1974. Released in 1976, the album projected the movement's integrationist vision long after the promise of the civil rights movement had waned and foregrounded the nation's unresolved racial and social conflicts. The most popular movie that year was *Rocky*, whose white boxer protagonist's heroic defeat at the hands of a brash African American heavyweight champion tapped into white working-class resentments that had recently erupted in mob resistance to court-ordered desegregation in Boston. By mid-decade, Americans' confidence had been shaken by the Watergate scandal and the looming defeat in Vietnam. For supporters of civil rights and those dismayed by the ominous turn of events during the 1970s, Wonder's album

must have been a welcome relief from the spiraling inflation of the mid-decade and the advent of talk radio shock jocks pandering to white resentment. In addition to keeping the ideals of the civil rights movement alive, Wonder chronicled the effects of deindustrialization, the fragmentation of black communities as upwardly mobile blacks moved away, and the fading hopes of African Americans in ghettos untouched by the social progress of the movement. Unlike the often uplifting soul music of the 1960s, black music of the mid-1970s increasingly reflected deferred dreams of change and the erosion of community spirit with such melodramas of mistrust and selfishness as presented in the O'Jays' "Backstabbers" and "For the Love of Money."

It is difficult to measure the political impact of Wonder's *Songs*, but there is little doubt that the double album (plus a four-song extended play, or EP), recorded while at the height of his powers as singer, composer, instrumentalist, arranger, and producer, was critically acclaimed and a huge commercial success for Wonder and Motown records, entering the U.S. pop charts at the number one position.<sup>19</sup> In his construction of the album, Wonder was as much playwright as recording artist; in addition to performing most of the album's instrumental and vocal tracks, he "plays" several characters, some autobiographical, including an oracular "friendly announcer," a besotted new father, a connoisseur of music acknowledging such ancestors as Duke Ellington, a spurned lover with more than just an ordinary pain in his heart, a preacher with a message of eternal love, and a visitor from Saturn who can neither abide nor understand the cruelty and avarice of earthlings.

In 1963 James Baldwin wrote of urban African Americans struggling to maintain hope at a moment of crisis and impending despair: "What will happen to all that beauty?" If Baldwin feared that the life-affirming sensibility at the heart of African American culture was imperiled, Wonder was thinking of the immortality of that vision through art. At a similarly unsettled moment for many Americans, Wonder, by this time a world-renowned and inspirational figure, insisted that *Songs in the Key of Life* is . . . an idea of [a] positive tomorrow for all people. It is not a temporary thing and can last in our hearts and minds forever.<sup>20</sup>

#### SONGS IN THE KEY OF LIFE

One might regard *Songs in the Key of Life* and much of Wonder's work as a realization of the Senegalese poet Leopold Senghor's concept of Negritude, his view of the cultural unity of the black world. Wonder rightly envi-

sioned a global and universal appeal for his music, reflecting Senghor's claim that black culture was a contribution to universal world culture. In addition to having encountered Baldwin's discussion of the concept of Negritude in *Nobody Knows My Name*, Wonder was a familiar presence in a black public culture defined by pan-African and cultural nationalist sensibilities.<sup>21</sup> Wonder embraced Afro-diasporic performers and musical styles from all over the world. He performed some of the songs that would appear on *Songs in the Key of Life* at the historic Wonder Dream Concert in Jamaica in 1975, and performed with Bob Marley on that occasion, as well. Like Marley, Curtis Mayfield, Nina Simone, Donny Hathaway, and others, Wonder sang of black consciousness as a moral and ethical stance during the civil rights and black power era.

Wonder's social concerns in *Songs* parallel efforts by activists, writers, and musicians during the Black Arts movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s to affirm, in the spirit of Negritude, the richness of black art and culture. Wonder's albums of the early 1970s, before *Songs*, explored themes of community building, black consciousness, spirituality, and injustice, along with traditional pop fare of romantic love and heartbreak. With his wife and lyricist Syreeta Wright, Wonder explored African Americans' relationship to the antiwar, counterculture, and women's movements. Wonder and Wright composed emotionally honest songs about their marriage and its breakup after less than two years. They continued to collaborate—Wonder produced Syreeta Wright's first two albums—and they remained close friends until her death in 2004.<sup>22</sup> Not surprisingly, Wonder (and Wright) rejected the rhetoric of armed struggle, following King's commitment to non-violence and echoing the views of Toni Cade Bambara and other black women activists who viewed the excesses of revolutionary nationalism as obstacles to egalitarian gender relations. For Bambara and other black feminists, the need to strengthen black communities trumped pseudorevolutionary nationalism.<sup>23</sup>

For Wonder sonic experimentation was essential for his aesthetic practice. His use of synthesizers placed an infinite number of instrumental voices and textures at his disposal. These technologies helped him maximize creative control, artistic innovation, and to realize his expansive view of what popular music could be. Wonder's use of sound technologies lent depth and meaning to his music. He uses the talk box on "Ebony Eyes" to generate a background chorus of electronically distorted "cyborg" versions of his singing voice. Praising a beautiful black woman, Wonder's cyborg male chorus destabilizes race in the service of the song's pro-black message. Indeed,

from Wonder's sightless perspective, references to the woman's voice, wisdom, and ability to make others happy all testify to the importance of the inner, spiritual dimension of beauty.<sup>24</sup>

Though uneven in quality, lyrics credited solely to Wonder relied on metaphor, allegory, and novel expressions of pop conventions to engage in prophetic social critique and explorations of his utopian vision of peace and universal love. He eschewed anthems, expressing his social views aesthetically in dense, multilayered songs, musical statements whose excellence, he hoped, would both reflect and transcend the moment of their creation. His music was a synthesis of pop, classical, blues, jazz, funk, gospel, Latin, and other styles. These African American-derived styles grounded Wonder's music in African American history and culture.

What follows is a critical appreciation of *Songs in the Key of Life*, setting forth some of its major themes and its contexts in both African American history, culture, and within American popular music and the larger body of Wonder's career as a recording artist. Rather than provide a detailed exegesis of every song on the album, I hope to convey enough of its spirit to suggest that listening to the album is as rewarding an experience today as it was at the time of its original release in 1976.

#### "LOVE'S IN NEED OF LOVE TODAY"

The comedian Richard Pryor satirized racism in 1970s America with a routine that contrasted the liveliness of African American religious services with, in his view, the far more reserved style of worship among whites. To drive home his point, Pryor adopted the charismatic persona of a black preacher who announced his text as "The Book of Wonder," launching into a grandiloquent recitation of the lyrics of Wonder's 1973 song "Living for the City." Pryor exaggerated cultural differences across the color line, but his choice of Wonder as a symbolic link between the black church and popular entertainment was an apt one.<sup>25</sup> Religious themes are prominent in Wonder's music and lyrics, and *Songs in the Key of Life* is no exception. And, indeed, Wonder's relationship with his audience, both in live performance and recordings, often resembles a minister's bond with his or her congregation. Wonder seems to always imagine a personal connection with his audience, especially at live performances. The album seeks to establish this connection between artist and audience with the neogospel hymn "Love's in Need of Love Today." In the song's opening lines, Wonder greets his audience as "friends," introducing himself as "your friendly announcer." The announcer



has “serious news” of impending disaster, which needed little explanation at that moment of national and global strife. This sense of a communal bond joining artist and audience occurs in “Pastime Paradise,” which exhorts listeners to reject the illusions and divisions of the past and work to bring about a liberated “future paradise.” Wonder implicates himself and us, his listeners, in the human predicament of being torn between living in the past and actively working to build a better future: “How many of them are you and me?”

From a historical standpoint, Wonder’s gospel-singing “announcer” suggests not only the importance of the black church as a political and cultural resource but also the important community-building role played by black-owned radio stations during the heyday of the civil rights movement. The song’s gospel setting and the urgent message of Wonder’s announcer would have been right at home in black radio’s insurgent mix of sacred and secular programming, which offered live broadcasts of church services and public affairs programs alongside broadcasts of gospel, rhythm and blues, and jazz music, with the verbal pyrotechnics of DJs providing the exclamation points. “Love’s in Need” evokes black radio’s exemplary legacy of social engagement through the song’s plea for ethical action in the face of present threats: “The force of evil plans / to make you its possession / and it will if you let it / destroy everybody.” As the song settles into a lengthy meditation, Wonder’s vocal improvisation references 1960s vintage message songs (“what the world needs now . . . L-O-V-E love!”).<sup>26</sup> The song ends softly with his gentle injunction, “Just give the world love.” “Love’s in Need” opens a suite of three songs including “Have a Talk with God” and the jeremiad “Village Ghetto Land,” whose narrator, his voice acidic with irony, asks if we would like to accompany him on a tour of the hideous poverty and blight resulting from racial segregation that many of us would prefer to ignore.

#### “SIR DUKE”

The struggle between forces of love and hate, and the realities of human suffering, yield to the celebratory “Sir Duke,” preceded by the jazz fusion instrumental “Contusion.” “Sir Duke,” of course, pays tribute to Duke Ellington, the legendary jazz pianist, composer, and bandleader who died in 1974. Wonder’s description of music’s “equal opportunity for all” to enjoy affirms that from Ellington’s time to his own the world of African American music had been synonymous with struggles for freedom—personal, artistic,

and social. Far from being just a throwaway phrase, the civil rights resonance of music's equal opportunity for all to sing, dance, and clap hands in communal participation asserts that African Americans have struggled for freedom, not just for their own sake but for human rights and freedom for all.

Wonder's lyric "Just because the record has a groove / don't make it in the groove" rephrases Ellington's famous dictum "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." In the irresistible chorus to "Sir Duke," lyrics and instrumentation resoundingly affirm the physical and emotional power of music: "You can feel it all over." Verse and chorus are linked by an eight-bar jazz-swing interlude played by the horn section, a fitting musical tribute to Ellington reminiscent of the maestro's demanding up-tempo arrangements such as "Bragging in Brass" and "Cottontail." "Sir Duke" salutes other jazz greats, including Count Basie, Glenn Miller, Louis Armstrong, and Ella Fitzgerald. Wonder knew that he stood on the shoulders of Ellington and the others who rose above the indignities of their times to create music whose beauty anticipated a more liberated future.

In praising Ellington, Wonder hinted at his own artistic ambitions. The affinities between Wonder and Ellington are many. Both offered musical figurations of cosmopolitan Afro-diasporic blackness, making indelible contributions to black cultural identity. Both demonstrated that the spirit of artistic innovation inherent in the African American cultural tradition expressed an ethical commitment to remaking the world. Black music and art were infinite in their creative possibilities and universal in their appeal. Both artists challenged stereotypical views of black music and culture by venturing into compositions with extended form. Both composed love songs centered on the lives and emotions of black people and praising the beauty of black women; for Ellington, such songs were revolutionary for their time. Wonder's aforementioned "Ebony Eyes," his exuberant ode to "a devastating beauty . . . born and raised on Ghetto Street," nods to Ellington with its lyric, its placement within an otherwise wordless chorus, "pretty black beauty." "Black Beauty" was the title of Ellington's 1929 tribute to the legendary African American musical theater actress Florence Mills. Ellington's career was as closely tied to African Americans' freedom struggles as Wonder's. In 1959, as the civil rights movement gained momentum, Ellington rerecorded his "tone parallel" of African American history, *Black Brown and Beige*, with the gospel singer and close friend of Martin Luther King, Mahalia Jackson. In both Ellington and Wonder, the spiritual and social strivings of African Americans are synonymous with those of humanity. Wonder's next

album, *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants* (1979), emulated Ellington both in its extended-form compositions and by incorporating global non-Western musical styles.

### LOVE SONGS

The festive mood of “Sir Duke” continues onto side 2 with “I Wish,” Wonder’s joyous recollection of childhood that would have elicited knowing smiles from Motown colleagues victimized by the spirited child’s practical jokes and irreverent sense of humor. The ascending bass figure that opens and carries the song, punctuated with comic slide effects overdubbed by Nathan Watts, conjures up the image of Steve and his “hoodlum friends” cavorting through the streets in search of their next escapade. The song’s “nappy-headed” opening lyric matter-of-factly asserts black pride as it recalls youthful joys and pleasurable, if problematic, acts of mischief. Perhaps more than childhood, the song honors the nurturing love of family, including Wonder’s second “family” of fellow Motown artists. And despite her appearance as a disciplinarian, Wonder pays loving tribute to his mother Lula Hardaway, who insisted that Steve’s brothers and sisters treat him as they would a sighted child. Lula is referenced again by the album’s final song (actually on the EP), “Easy Goin’ Evening (My Mama’s Call),” an instrumental whose simple harmonica melody summons the mental image of the golden hour before nightfall and the enveloping love of his mother that awaits Steve on his return home.

Moving from familial love, the album’s side 2 essays further reflections on love, romantic and spiritual. Exquisite productions, “Summer Soft” and “Knocks Me off My Feet,” are conventional love songs. The tone shifts to the panspiritual theme of “Pastime Paradise,” which yearns for the coming of the “savior of love.” That song’s minor-key, cross-cultural fusion of neo-Eastern percussion and Western classical harmony builds to a climax as “Hare Krishna” chants are joined by a black American gospel choir singing the civil rights anthem “We Shall Overcome.” Wonder’s impassioned vocal over the chanting and singing in the final section of the song implores us to work toward a “future paradise” of love and peace, his phrasing reaching a crescendo until the dramatic conclusion of a descending trill of a synthesizer’s violin section and the striking of a gong. As recorded bird calls fill the silence left by the music, the song’s utopian spiritualism is finally grounded in the natural world.

The downside of romantic love is explored in the dialogic breakup song,

“Ordinary Pain,” which concludes side 2. “Ordinary Pain” drastically alters the mood of the love songs that come before it. In “Knocks Me off My Feet” the lyric and arrangement suggest the vulnerability of love through the physical act of falling. “Summer Soft” likens the precariousness of romantic attraction to sudden changes in the weather, but any anxiety is shrugged aside by the joyful whoop of Wonder’s ascending vocal and jazz organ solo that segues into “Ordinary Pain.” In the first part of the song, a midtempo ballad, Wonder morosely sings of a relationship’s end, with female backup singers joined by his ex-wife Syreeta Wright. As Wonder’s self-pitying lament trails off, an aggressive funk groove cues the brash lead vocal of Shirley Brewer singing the woman’s account of the failed relationship. “You’re just a masochistic fool,” she begins, and it gets much worse. Brewer’s abrasive vocal humiliates the hapless former lover, while a mocking background female chorus repeats the song’s title. “Ordinary Pain” recalls Richard Pryor’s brutally candid comedic mining of his own relationship woes. Similarly, Wonder presents an image of masculinity hoist on its own petard that, while certainly not unusual in popular music, nevertheless was light years away from the macho bluster of Led Zeppelin or James Brown. Like Pryor, Wonder may be acknowledging personal foibles through the song’s account of the male partner’s transgressions.

Still another facet of love is explored on side 3, which begins with Wonder’s celebration of fatherhood. “Isn’t She Lovely” finds the artist so overjoyed by the recent birth of his daughter Aisha (meaning “life” in Swahili) that when he is not splashing her in the bath (the song includes audio recordings of Aisha’s bath time and other interactions with the baby) he can’t seem to stop playing variations of the melody on his harmonica. The joy of new parenthood finds Wonder returning to his first musical “loves,” as heard in the lengthy drum-happy introduction that accompanies the infant’s warbling and, later, his insistence on playing his harmonica just one more time, recalling his first hit single, “Fingertips (part 2),” in which the young artist’s unplanned refusal to exit the stage on cue was the catalyst for the record’s thrilling live performance and ambience.

The ballad “Joy inside My Tears” seems to pay tribute to a lover. But it is more than just a straightforward love song. The chorus, “Baby it’s you—you—you / Made life’s his-to-ry / Cause you’ve brought some joy inside my tears,” speaks to a more spiritual aspect of love. Indeed, the philosophical mode of the verses, with their cosmic sense of gratitude, poses the question of just precisely who has made “life’s history?” A lover? An imagined ancestral spirit? The ambiguity between eros and agape aside, history is the

thread that links "Joy inside My Tears" to the songs that follow.

To say that "Joy inside My Tears" inhabits that category of pop song that blurs the line between eros and agape does not deny its originality.<sup>27</sup> As it happens, the reference to history is not accidental, as "Joy inside My Tears" is followed by the multicultural history lesson of "Black Man," which praises the contributions to the United States and the world made by African Americans, Latino/a Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and, in a generous spirit of inclusion, white Americans as well. (The song's gender politics lag considerably, as women are only represented by the somewhat contradictory examples of Sacagawea, native American guide to Lewis and Clark, and Harriet Tubman, a black woman who at great risk personally led scores of fugitive slaves to freedom.) "Black Man," was influenced by the multicultural setting of Los Angeles, where Wonder lived and worked much of the time. Once again, Wonder creates a sound collage, his insertion of the recorded voices of teachers and students echoing the somewhat didactic lyrics: "First man to die / for the flag we now hold high / was a black man" (Crispus Attucks). Reminding us that the United States was always multicultural, with its founding population of Africans, Native Americans, and Europeans, the song warns that the nation will repeat its tragic history unless all Americans become full participants in "the liberty that we defend." The theme of multiculturalism, this time with a global framing, continues on side 4 with "Ngiculela—Es Una Historia—I Am Singing," whose lyrics in the South African Zulu language, Spanish, and English promote the message of love through song, through the astonishing vocal performance of this concluding passage: "I am singing of tomorrow / I am singing of love / Let's all sing that someday sweet love will reign throughout this world of ours / Let's start singing of love from the heart." The gorgeous melody of "Ngiculela" rewards the listener for hearing out, as the liner notes all but concede, the preachy and overlong "Black Man."

"If It's Magic" is a ballad, backed by a solo harp, arranged and performed by the Detroit-based classically trained jazz harpist and cultural activist Dorothy Ashby.<sup>28</sup> Without once uttering the word, Wonder reflects on the universality of love and its fleeting nature. "It holds the key to every heart throughout the universe / It fills you up without a bite and quenches every thirst." This alchemical metaphor of love providing bodily sustenance leads us to imagine (perhaps à la John Lennon) a utopian conception of love as a quasimaterial resource, its availability contingent on a social order in which human needs have been met, where "there's enough for everyone." Wonder may have borrowed that last line from "The Edge of a Dream," a jazzy bal-

lad tribute to Dr. King written by his friend the singer Minnie Riperton and her husband Richard Rudolph, and recorded in 1974 on Riperton's album *Perfect Angel*. Wonder contributed his services to this album as producer and musician, and lent his band, Wonderlove, to it. He played piano on the song.<sup>29</sup>

### “AS”

The curiously titled “As” marks a climactic moment on the album, revisiting the “friendly announcer’s” plea for love that opens the album. At first, “As” might be a conventional love song, but it becomes an expression of eternal, immortal love: “Just as hate knows love’s the cure / You can rest your mind assured / That I’ll be loving you always.” Leaving aside the debatable matter of whether those who hate *really* know that love is the cure, over the duration of almost seven minutes, the song’s repetition of words and music takes on the aura of a worship service. The song’s use of repetition, including the A-minor ostinato performed by singers and musicians, replete with handclaps and the recurring line “Until the day that you are me and I am you,” suggests a renunciation of ego in which Wonder seeks to transcend the divide between artist and audience. “As” closes a circle, answering the heart-trampling forces of hate that run rampant in “Love’s in Need” with a vision of timeless, unconditional love. For emphasis, Wonder adopts the voice of a Baptist preacher, whose hoarse, full-throated delivery summons the African American tradition of the chanted sermon described by the historian of religion Albert Raboteau.<sup>30</sup> Wonder’s preacher shouts a prophetic message of faith and God’s abiding love to the congregation: “We all know sometimes life’s hates and troubles / Can make you wish you were born in another time and space / But you can bet your life . . . / That God knew exactly where He wanted you to be placed.” Wonder’s preacher exhorts listeners to “change your words into truth and then change that truth into love” for the potential benefit of future generations.

Though the work of a man in his midtwenties, *Songs in the Key of Life* was a wide-ranging reflection on Wonder’s experiences. In order to project civil rights ideals, he used music and metaphor. The jeremiad of “Saturn” comes from the unexpected persona of an extraterrestrial sojourner recoiling from the horrific human past and present blighted by war, pollution, and senseless suffering. Over an otherworldly synthesizer arrangement, punctuated by Wonder’s tom-tom heavy beat and fills, the world-weary narrator sings of packing his bags and going to “where the air is clean . . . on Sat-

urn.” Condemning humans’ use of the “gun and Bible” to subjugate others, Wonder gives the jeremiad a new twist: “There’s no principles in what you say / No direction in the things you do / for your world is soon to come to a close . . . / Tell me why are you people so cold?”<sup>31</sup> That’s why he’s “going back to Saturn where the people smile / Don’t need cars ‘cause we’ve learned to fly / . . . / Just to live to us is our natural high.” Synthesizers serenade the narrator’s spaceship as it disappears into the heavens at warp speed; the music ends, and our attention is redirected back to earth, where in another recorded vignette of everyday life we overhear African American children at play outdoors. The children, agreeing to take turns before singing to the tempo of their game of jump rope, offer a model for social cooperation and a reminder that a crucial measure of a humane society is how its children are treated. They are the reason that we must “change our words into truth and then change that truth into love.”

*Songs in the Key of Life* is not only a distillation of Wonder’s engagement with the spirit of the civil rights movement and such iconic figures as Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Baldwin. The album complicates our understanding of the political, focusing its social and artistic enterprise at the level of human relationships and community building, and on spirituality as a communal resource against injustice. Moreover, as befitting his tributes to Duke Ellington and the people of all backgrounds who contributed to America and the world, Wonder challenges us to embrace the past and its wisdom that can guide human efforts to create a more just global order. More than just a classic album, *Songs* captures a historic era crucially shaped by black urban migration and the social, political, and cultural transformations that resulted from this mass movement, including increased cultural ties between African Americans and African peoples. Just as Wonder was inspired by the immortal voices of King and Baldwin and their message of love, so he has inspired generations all over the world with his enduring music and message. As part of the worldwide audience for Barack Obama’s inauguration, Wonder is likely to have heard that message carried forward in a question posed by the poet Elizabeth Alexander in “Praise Song for the Day”: “. . . What if the mightiest word is love? / Love beyond marital, filial, national, / love that casts a widening pool of light, / love with no need to preempt grievance. / . . . / praise song for walking forward in that light.”<sup>32</sup>

## NOTES

This is a revised version of my presidential address given at the 44th annual meeting of the

JAAS held on June 5–6, 2010, at Osaka University. I am grateful to the editors of the *Japanese Journal of American Studies*. I thank Noriko Ishii, Hiroshi Takei, Mishio Yamanaka, Stephen Kelly, Melinda Russell, Alice Echols, Eric Weisbard, Barry Shank, Julius Scott, Robin Means Coleman, and Penny Von Eschen for their suggestions and their support.

<sup>1</sup> Against public distortions of the movement, Hall defines the “long civil rights movement” as being characterized by an alliance between civil rights organizations and the labor movement that took root during the New Deal and the Popular Front, accelerated during World War II, and extended to northern cities and other locales beyond the South. This movement, led by grassroots activists, persisted with considerable force into the 1970s. Jacquelyn Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233–63; Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 5–6.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Bantam, 1968), 216.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King’s Death and How It Changed America* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See Edward P. Morgan, “The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 137–66; and David John Marley, “Riding in the Back of the Bus: The Christian Right’s Adoption of Civil Rights Movement Rhetoric,” in *ibid.*, 346–62. There are numerous biographies of Stevie Wonder, but among the works that situate him to some extent within the civil rights movement, see Craig Werner, *Higher Ground: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield and the Rise and Fall of American Soul* (New York: Crown, 2004); James E. Perone, *The Sound of Stevie Wonder: His Words and Music* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006); Dennis Love and Stacy Brown, *Blind Faith: The Miraculous Journey of Lula Hardaway, Stevie Wonder’s Mother* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002); Ted Hull (with Paula L. Stahel), *The Wonder Years: My Life and Times with Stevie Wonder* (Tampa, FL: n.p., 2002); John Swenson, *Stevie Wonder* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986); and Constanze Elsner, *Stevie Wonder* (New York: Popular Library, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Hilburn, “Stevie Wonder Seeking the Key to Unlock Hearts,” *Los Angeles Times* (October 17, 1976), M–1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 44–66. Lawson is quoted on page 68.

<sup>8</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 105.

<sup>9</sup> Pete Johnson, “Record Sales Rise for Stevie Wonder,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 27, 1968), C–32; Conrad Clark, “Stevie Wonder Still Number 1,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (August 10, 1968), A–11.

<sup>10</sup> James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Delta, 1962), 5. For Baldwin’s discussion of the innocence of northern liberals, see page 65.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 104–5. See also Martin Luther King, Jr., “Love in Action,” in *Strength to Love* (1963; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 39–48. On the social dimension of popular African American music, see Mary Ellison, *Lyrical Protest: Black Music’s Struggle against Discrimination* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Hilburn, “Stevie Wonder Seeking the Key.”

<sup>13</sup> Liner notes to *Songs in the Key of Life*, Tamla Records, T–13–340C2 (1976).

<sup>14</sup> Suzanne Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 50–51.



<sup>15</sup> Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land: C. L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 252–54.

<sup>16</sup> For the relationship between the civil rights movement and popular music, see George Lipsitz, *Midnight at the Barrelhouse: The Johnny Otis Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go?: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound*, foreword Quincy Jones and intro. Robert Christgau (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Gerald Early, *One Nation under a Groove: Motown and American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Waldo Martin, *No Coward Soldiers: Black Cultural Politics in Postwar America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Craig Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (New York: Plume, 1998); Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 171–72.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Cermatori, Emily Coates, Kathryn Krier, Bronwen McArthur, Angelica Randle, and Joseph Roach, “Teaching African-American Dance/History to a “Post-Racial” Class: Yale’s Project O,” *Theatre Topics* 19, no. 1 (2009): 1–14.

<sup>19</sup> Zeth Lundy, *Songs in the Key of Life* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 104–5; Vashti McKenzie, “Stevie the Wonder,” *New York Amsterdam News* (December 25, 1976), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Baldwin, “Princes and Powers,” in *Nobody Knows My Name*, 13–55. Wonder headlined a concert at a pan-African cultural festival in Los Angeles organized by the African American entrepreneur Dick Griffey. See Scot Brown, “SOLAR: The History of the Sounds of Los Angeles Records,” in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, ed. Darnell A. Hunt and Ana Christina-Ramón (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 266–82.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Perrone, “Syreeta, Motown Singer and Sometime Mrs Stevie Wonder,” *Independent* (UK) (July 9, 2004), 35.

<sup>23</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1970). On the black feminist critique of revolutionary nationalism, see Kevin Gaines, “From Center to Margin: Internationalism and the Origins of Black Feminism,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 294–313.

<sup>24</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all subsequent quotations are from lyrics to *Songs in the Key of Life*, Tamla Records.

<sup>25</sup> Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—the Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 548.

<sup>26</sup> Wonder’s vocal certainly alludes to Jackie Deshannon’s 1965 hit (number seven on the U.S. pop chart) “What the World Needs Now Is Love” and, perhaps, to Al Green’s 1975 hit (number thirteen pop, number one R & B) “L-O-V-E Love.”

<sup>27</sup> Similar examples of this pop genre are Percy Mayfield, “Please Send Me Someone to Love”; Timmy Thomas, “Why Can’t We Live Together”; and Al Green, “Belle.”

<sup>28</sup> Born Dorothy Thompson in 1930, she was the daughter of jazz guitarist Wiley Thompson. She studied harp at Detroit’s Cass Technical High School, where fellow students included future jazz luminaries Kenny Burrell, Gerald Wilson, and Donald Byrd. She studied piano at Wayne State University but focused her studies and performances on the harp after 1952. Beginning in the 1950s, she recorded several jazz albums as a leader for several labels, including Prestige, Atlantic and Cadet Records. With her husband, John Ashby, she led a theater

group, the Ashby Players, for which the Ashbys wrote, composed, and staged musical plays based on issues and problems specific to members of Detroit's black community. With the assistance of Bill Withers, Ashby became a much sought-after session musician, performing on recordings by Withers, Wonder, Dionne Warwick, Diana Ross, Earth Wind and Fire, Barry Manilow, and others, while continuing to release jazz albums. She died in 1986. See <http://www.spaceagepop.com/ashby.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Minnie Riperton, *Perfect Angel*, Capitol Records, SN-16145 (1974).

<sup>30</sup> Albert Raboteau, "The Chanted Sermon," in *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 141–51. See also the descriptions of the musicality of the preaching of Rev. C. L. Franklin in Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 82–84, 126.

<sup>31</sup> David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, "Praise Song for the Day: A Poem for Barack Obama's Presidential Inauguration, January 20, 2009" (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2009).

Wonder's sister Renee Hardaway also makes a vocal contribution to Songs in the Key of Life, delivering the scornful "You nasty boy!" that punctuates the album's lead single, "I Wish." The final track completed for the project, its lyrics originally dealt with war and "cosmic spiritual stuff" until Wonder attended a Motown company picnic. Sessions for Songs on the Key of Life yielded some of the finest songs in his entire canon, including the celestial "Knocks Me off My Feet," the intricate harmonies of "Love" in "Need of Love Today" and the Herbie Hancock-assisted "As." After basic recording was complete, Wonder insisted on endlessly remixing the tracks in an unlimited series of configurations. Your Privacy Rights. Ad Choices. PMC Entertainment. Wonder's work, especially with the electronic pioneers, Tonto's Expanding Head Band (Robert Margoulef and Malcolm Cecil), had been edging towards new forms of expressing black consciousness as well as eroding the boundaries of what 'soul music' could mean. But it was here that Stevie really pushed the envelope. The fecundity of his musical imagination simply beggars belief. While he grapples (and wins!) with just about every genre under the sun here it's never at the expense of the song and never gives the impression for a second that he's showing off. Both of Stevie Wonder's previous two albums to this were one of the few in pop history that can truly be called musical masterpieces. From beginning to end they were highly consistent and original. But this was something different. The concept was the cycles of life, love and observation of the world and Wonder himself really put it all out here, no matter how long it took for the album to make its appearance to the world. It was apparent that the length of time it took for this to come out was the result of how to the broad reaching subjects presented here accessible to most people. Also as previous musical ideas of Stevie's were being polished, arranged and combined into sleeker, more demanding sound ideas the end result was solid proof this was something worth waiting for.