

Singing Our Way to Abolition

Mary Hooks

Mary Hooks is a Black, lesbian, queer, feminist, mother, organizer, and former codirector of Southerners on New Ground (SONG). Mary's commitment to Black and LGBTQ liberation is rooted in her experiences growing up under the impacts of the war on drugs. Her people encompass those of the Great Migration, factory workers, church folks, Black women, hustlers and addicts, dykes, studs, femmes, queens, and all people fighting for liberation of the oppressed.

For years, African descendants have worked to advance the freedom dreams of enslaved Africans, in the hopes of bringing about true liberation, both inside the US empire and across the diaspora. The demand for abolition—whether it be the demand to abolish chattel slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, apartheid, or mass incarceration—has always been rooted in the quest for self-determination as a people. As this iteration of the Black liberation movement continues to fight to change rules and laws and dismantle violent institutions like policing and the prison industrial complex, we know that the ultimate change must be that of hearts and minds. Our demands to defund the police are as much about our values and changing the ways in which we relate to each other as they are about taking power away from those that seek to kill and control us. It is a spiritual fight for who we want to be, and it is not just about having better material conditions. This is why art plays such an important role in the transformation of society. We must awaken the possibility and willingness to love ourselves and each other more than we hate the State.

Our work as organizers is to show the good news of abolition. Organizing is not just what we say and do but also *how we make people feel*.

I grew up singing. My sisters and I were a part of the trio called Mary's Angels. Our great-aunt, Ann H. Peel, who was raising us at the time, devoted much time and effort to ensuring that every Sunday, we stood in front of the small congregation and sang the latest Shirley Caesar hits. For a three-, four-, and five-year-old, we were very much out of our depths. Not one time do I remember us ever being able to finish a song without bursting into tears; the ushers in the church would have to come and escort us back to our seats. Decades later, I'm unsure if our tears were driven by our fear or by what singing did to our spirits. By the time I was a teenager and had found my way back into the church, I had also found my way back to singing. I learned that singing was medicine—throughout my life, it would be a place that remained sacred, and a place where I would connect to spirit.

When I came out as a lesbian, my traditional relationship with the church made it difficult for me to enter that sacred space. I was taught that to be a lesbian was to be against God, so I made a decision to be honest with myself and be exactly who I was, which also meant I let go of the singing that brought me much joy and comfort. When I moved to Atlanta, I discovered a community of radical Black lesbians and queer folks who were all in their twenties and discovering their purpose. Eventually, a few of us took refuge together and became roommates. We'd bring folks together to party, talk, watch TV, paint, and debate. Our time together reminded me of the ways I was taught to build community through the church. We always broke bread and welcomed a new stranger. For years, I would not bear to listen to any gospel music, a boundary that kept my voice harnessed and my spirit grappling with how I was to tap into a new voice, as a community organizer. However, one day, our rowdy household, which had become known as the Juicebox, was overtaken by the gospel music that I'd enjoyed as a young person; what had become a stony place in my memories became running wells of joy again. The sounds of Kirk Franklin's 1990s hit "The Storm Is Over Now" compelled the roommates and myself to grab our best faux microphones and sing like it was the Last Supper. By the end of the day, we'd sung all the songs our hearts could muster and our minds could remember. It was the start of a tradition that we still carry to this day.

This revival of singing was also happening at a time when I was being deeply politicized through the work of Southerners on New Ground (SONG) and Southern movement-building spaces. I began to learn words to freedom songs that likened to the gospel songs I'd learned in my church days. It was freedom songs that reminded me of the long history of struggle and resistance in the South. It was freedom songs that were sung as a way to unite a room and center us on our purpose. It was freedom songs that kept us steady and unrelenting when I engaged in my first direct action.



The day that singing arrived at the Juicebox, circa 2011.

Freedom singing has remained a sacred practice inside of SONG and other Southern freedom movements that were passed down by divine cultural workers like Bernice Johnson Reagon, Brother Hollis Watkins, Sister Tufara Muhammad, and Wendi Moore-O’Neal, to name a few. The more songs I learned, the more I understood the power of collective singing to declare our demands, fortify one another, teach history, and invite spirit into the work of getting ourselves free. For literally two years, the song “I’m On My Way” rang in my spirit and stayed on my tongue. It grounded me in work that has always been bigger than myself. If ever there was a time when we needed congregational singing in our movements, it would be now. The depth of isolation and mediocrity that plagues our lives and movements must be met with the salve of singing that frees everyone, in that moment, who is willing to lift their voice. Singing has been medicine and a balm in some of my hardest moments of fighting for freedom. I’ve sung to mothers locked in cages that we couldn’t get them out of, but in that moment, we’d elevate their hearts to a place outside of the cage. We sang when we shut down highways and disrupted meetings of politicians. We’ve used singing to encourage each other to carry our water and put our hands on the freedom plow when we were tired and weary. One of my greatest joys is hearing my kid sing the old freedom songs that have kept Black people standing when all else has failed us. Passing on this freedom tradition has been essential to those who have come before us and those whose voices are yet to be heard. Freedom singing tells our histories, but it can also speak of our possibilities. Singing is a tool we have to paint the vision of the world we are striving to create.

We must be able to have a vision and articulate it to the world. Even the good book says that without a vision the people perish. Do you think our ancestors knew the path north before they forged it? Nah, they took the

risk because to not try, to not be willing to get lost, to not run, would kill them and any possibility of the taste of freedom. One of my elder comrades, Mariame Kaba, says, “We must be willing to try a thousand experiments and fail until we bring about something new.” The truth of the matter is, we are not starting from scratch. Our ancestors and elders have much to teach us, especially in how we create a world that doesn’t rely on our enemy to come to our rescue when we harm each other or are going through crisis. What have your people done to care for each other? What have you learned from them about dealing with conflict and anger? How do you and your family deal with a crisis? What freedom traditions and familial traditions can be harnessed in those moments of disrupted peace? If you didn’t have to call the police, who would you want to be able to call for help? What types of people? Would having a bunch of kids show up to your house while a domestic dispute is happening stop you from abusing your partner? Would a squad of grandmothers who are also trained in mental health support be what you need? Are you willing to learn how to de-escalate heated arguments on the block? Do you know how to disarm someone? Are you a good solid hugger? Are artists willing to draw murals showing what a community without police can look like? What other things in our community do we need that promote life, love, and wellness? More gardens? A drive-in? A community grill? A conflict clinic? Affordable nice housing for people to own and rent? Dignified work that makes neighbors clap for each other when we get off the bus from work? A twenty-four-hour drop-in center for village members to build with each other? A community school that teaches us how to transition from trapping to being storytellers, teachers, and mediators for the young people? We all we got, y’all, and we got to believe in each other more than we believe in the state. Our lives do not belong to the state. We can govern ourselves. As one of the freedom songs we sing reminds us, “We’ve got all our medicine right here, right here.”