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The Life & Legacy of Odetta:

“The Voice of the Civil Rights Movement”

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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When Rosa Parks was asked what music inspired her the most, she said, “Essentially, all the songs Odetta sings” (Zack 167). Likewise, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called her “the queen of American folk music.” If you are curious to learn more, I recommend Odetta: A Life in Music and Protest by Ian Zack, a biography published last year by our own Beacon Press, which is owned by the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Odetta was born in 1930. As a child, she was drawn to opera music. When the Metropolitan Opera came on the local AM radio station, Odetta, her mother, and brother would stop whatever they were doing to listen. In her words, **“I was into classical music, and I had swallowed this whole pill that society had given us: that if it was classical and from Europe it was legitimate”** (14).

Odetta, of course, not only enjoyed opera, it turns out that she could sing. When Odetta was eleven years old, her mother signed her up for piano lessons. And one day while waiting for the teacher to arrive, she was playing scales and vocalizing aloud with each note. As Odetta tells the story, “The teacher walked up when I was hitting something like a C above a high C and it was really just a screech but she was very impressed.” So at age thirteen, she started taking singing lessons as well (15).

In college, she studied European classical music (24), and there was buzz that

Odetta had the potential to be the next Marian Anderson (1897 - 1993), who in 1955 became the first African-American to perform at the Metropolitan Opera ([Jacobson](#) 1). In response, Odetta would confess, “I adored Marian Anderson, and still do. But I knew **I didn’t want to be anybody else, didn’t want to be ‘another’ anything**” (3).

Moreover, she came to experience classical music as a “nice exercise,” but “it had nothing to do with my life” as a black woman living in a segregated society (3). She began instead to fall in love with folk music (4). In her words: **“There was no way I could say the things I was thinking, but I could sing them”** (1)

One night in 1951, she heard recordings of the African American folk and blues singer known as Leadbelly (1888 – 1949), who had died a few years earlier in 1949. She was deeply moved by his music, and felt inspired to learn how to play the guitar (Zack 28).

And as she learned more about the history behind those field songs, prison songs, work songs, and spirituals that she increasingly resonated with, she began to fall in love with Black history and Black culture. And in 1952 that led her to make the unusual choice at the time to wear her hair short and natural. In her words, folk music —“literally the music of the ‘folk,’ of the common people— **straightened my back and it kinked my hair**” (Jacobson 11-12).

As Odetta began to navigate this transition from classically trained opera singer to world famous folk musician, let me tell you one of my favorite stories about how her voice could command attention.

Keep in mind that we are still in 1952, more than a year before her first album would be released, so few people had heard her sing. She was living in Los Angeles, California, where she had grown up. And one evening, along with a number of other musicians—including Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie—she had been invited to a party at a home in Topanga Canyon. Various musicians were taking turns singing. She was quite shy at the time, but when she was persuaded to take a turn singing, it was one of those moments when a hush falls over the crowd, movement stops, and everyone turns to focus their attention on the special and surprising event that is unfolding. In Pete Seeger’s words, **Odetta’s performance was “power, power,**

intensity and power” (Zack 1).

The song she chose that night was Leadbelly’s “Take This Hammer,” a prison, logging, and railroad work song. If you listen to even a brief clip, you can appreciate why one music critic titled his review **“Odetta Was Born with a Voice Like a Weapon”**:

Odetta...can harden her voice into a blunt cudgel, deadly with hatred. She can rumble it like a distant thunder, freighted with vengeance. She can slur with sobs, thirst from a heartbroken soul. She can breathe it out, light as thistledown, or turn it out perfectly formed, every word etched and delineated....” (Jacobson viii)

But even with her massive talent—that she had honed through years of study and work—Odetta faced significant hurdles to grow her career in a racist society.

And let me draw an important connection here to the 11-week Tuesday evening study that Jen and I are co-leading on **“Widening the Circle of Concern.”** That class is about the *institutional* changes—far beyond individual behavior—that are needed to shift further away from being a predominantly white monoculture toward being a multicultural beloved community.

Along those lines, here’s an example of White Supremacy Culture from early in Odetta’s career. In 1957 (five years after that fateful party in Topanga Canyon), she received her first invitation to sing on national TV as a guest musician on NBC’s Today Show. The good news is they did give an up-and-coming black woman a chance. The bad news is that the network was worried that most of her repertoire was too political. As a compromise, she ended up singing “The Fox,” a cute, but innocuous traditional English folk song (Zack 65). Notice that the powers that be were ok with her singing music from a majority white European colonial power, but not music rooted in the struggles of historically oppressed groups.

Two years later in 1959, a welcome exception to that tendency happened when CBS and Revlon (the cosmetics company) agreed to give the African-American singer, activist, and actor Harry Belafonte (1927 -) complete creative control to produce a prime-time variety show special. He chose to include Odetta, gave her permission to sing whatever she wanted, and in a final twist—directly in the face of the sponsor,

cosmetic company Revlon—said, “And there will be no need to make her up” (Zack 83). Belafonte knew and respected Odetta’s commitment to her natural appearance. In his words, it was about her commitment to showing the world that, **“My blackness unadorned is in itself its own adorning”** (86).

That evening she opened with the song “Water Boy,” which comes out of the tradition of songs sung by enslaved people working on cotton plantations. If you take time at some point to listen to Odetta’s version of that song, notice her percussive vocals: “the sharp, guttural [sound], mimicking the sound of the hammer striking rock that’s heard on field recordings of prison work songs.” Notice also, in the words of one music critic:

the way Odetta...drags this sound behind the beat by just a split second, so that [we the listeners are] made to feel the immense effort and the burden of the work. This, for Odetta, was the very point—**not the song as song, but as a record of collective pain, sorrow, rage, indomitability, defiance, and resilience.**” (Jacobson 22)

Many folks tuning in to that pathbreaking TV special in 1959 had never heard anything like it.

There is so much more to say about the life and legacy of Odetta, so I will have to limit myself to giving you just a few more highlights. Here’s one that any of you who are big Bob Dylan fans may know. In 1960 when Dylan was a senior at the University of Minnesota, listening to Odetta’s album *Ballads and Blues* changed his life. In his words:

The first thing that turned me on to folk singing was Odetta. I heard a record of her...back when you could listen to records right there in the record store.... Right then and there, I went out and traded my electric guitar and amplifier for an acoustical guitar.... I learned almost every song off the record. (Zack 107)

Odetta was a significant influence on Dylan’s early career.

And although there is a lot more I would like to say about that and the intervening years, allow me to fast-forward a decade to 1970, the year Odetta turned 40. You may remember that earlier in her career, she had been quite shy, and was most known for her striking arrangements of traditional folk tunes. But as she approached

and entered her fourth decade, something changed, in a good way. in the words of her biographer;

The crowds at her concerts noticed it. The reviewers noticed it. Friends noticed it. Maybe it was age. Or experience. Or the demise of a bad marriage. But **the woman who had devoted so much to the cause of freedom was herself becoming freer on stage, more comfortable in her own skin.** (176)

This shift is powerfully embodied in the song “Hit or Miss,” which was released in the same year she turned forty. As you consider the opening lyrics, remember what she said about loving the Black opera star Marian Anderson, but not wanting to be the “next Marian Anderson”—about not wanting to be ‘another’ *anything*.” She just wanted to be Odetta.

And in this critically acclaimed song, she says:

Can't you see
I gotta be me
Ain't nobody
Just like this
I gotta be me
Baby hit or miss (192)

That track is my favorite by her, but she was best known, in her final years, for singing “This Little Light of Mine.” For more than a decade from 1983 to 1995, she sang that song at the annual New Year’s Eve candlelight peace vigil at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. If you’ve never been there, it’s a gigantic Gothic revival-style sanctuary, the world’s sixth-largest church by area, and “when Odetta sang ‘This Little Light of Mine’ *a cappella* from the pulpit and ten thousand people holding lit candles joined in, their voices soaring up to the church’s immense vaulted ceiling, it [was] transformative” (205).

In 2007, as an allusion to that beloved song, she released her final album titled *Gonna Let It Shine* (221). The next year at age 77, she was hospitalized in early November due to kidney failure. Only four days earlier, Barack Obama has been elected as the first Black president, and “her dream at that time was to live long enough to sing

at President Obama's inauguration." As inspiration, one of her friends taped a three-foot tall poster of Obama on the wall of her hospital room (223). Although she died in early December before that dream could become a reality, she was joyful until the end, telling friends that Obama's election was one glorious success in the struggle for freedom and equality to which she had committed her life (224).

As I move toward my conclusion, let me say just a few words about her legacy. In 2011, *Time* magazine published a list of the top one hundred "most extraordinary English-language popular recordings" since 1923, when *Time* was founded. That list included Odetta's version of "Take This Hammer," the first song we heard earlier (226).

More recently, some of you may recall that in Ava DuVernay's powerful film *Selma*, the soundtrack as the peaceful marchers are being beaten for trying to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge is Odetta singing her version of Bob Dylan's "Masters of War" (227).

And although I very much encourage you to listen to Odetta herself, I should also add that perhaps the most direct heir to Odetta alive today is the inimitable Rhiannon Giddens, who "channeled Odetta in a new version of 'Water Boy' on her solo debut (227).

For now, I'll close with an excerpt from the *Time* magazine obituary of Odetta:

Odetta's stage presence was regal...planted on stage like an oak tree no one would dare cut down, wearing a guitar high on her chest, she could envelop Carnegie Hall with her powerful contralto as other vocalists might fill a phone booth.... She used that amazing instrument to bear witness to the pain and perseverance of her ancestors. Some folks sing songs. Odetta testified.

For a handful of black singers, their discography is an aural history, centuries deep, of abduction, enslavement, social and sexual abuse by the whites in power—and of the determination first to outlive the ignominy branded on the race, then to overcome it. **[H]er commanding presence, charismatic delivery and determination s[a]ng black truth to white power.** (Jacobson 117-118)