

Bernice Johnson Reagon, U.S. civil rights activist and musical icon, dies at 81

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New York, July 18 (RHC)-- Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, civil rights activist, scholar and musician who started the vocal ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock and co-founded the Freedom Singers and the Harambee Singers, died Tuesday at the age of 81.

In the early 1960s, Bernice Johnson Reagon performed with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's musical group Freedom Singers, bringing liberation songs to marches, jails and organizing meetings.

She joined Democracy Now! in 2008 with an interview to celebrate the life and work of another civil rights musical icon, Odetta, and recalled her own musical trajectory.

Bernice Johnson Reagon said: "Sweet Honey in the Rock, which came out of a theater workshop, was going to be a cappella, was going to do songs that came out of the struggles and the stages of life of people, on a community-based level, calling people to pay attention to issues that we needed to be addressing as responsible citizens, and that singers, that artists really had a big role to play in challenging our society and culture to transform itself and to do better. And so, absolutely, the Freedom Singers and the freedom song in the civil rights movement is formative for me, both as a singer, as a composer and as a scholar."

Bernice Johnson Reagon's daughter Toshi Reagon, also an acclaimed musician, shared the news on social media Wednesday and included a quote from her mother: "I was here before I came and when I die, I am not leaving..."

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