

CHAPTER 47

Music, Cosmopolitanism and Transformative Harmony

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Music, Cosmopolitanism And Transformative Harmony: Singing With Yusuf Islam

Yusuf Islam – Yusuf - Cat Stevens – Steven Georgiou is the same human being, an outstanding artist for peace, searching for harmony, transforming his personality, winner of several peace awards, viz., the 2004 Man of Peace Award of the World Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates for his "dedication to promote peace, the reconciliation of people and to condemn terrorism", and the 2014 "Islamic Economy Award for Arts".

The music of Cat Stevens earned him wide fame. His songs and albums have sold around the world in a great number since the 1960s. He converted to Islam in 1977 and in July 1978 changed his name to Yusuf Islam. He then started giving away to charity the royalties to his songs he considers 'anti-God' and made the decision to devote his life to educational and philanthropic causes.

Over the years he has founded a number of schools for Muslim children and in 2000 he started "Small Kindness", a charity to help needy children and families around the world.

He was also a UNICEF ambassador in the 1970s. Yusuf started making music of an entirely religious nature in the 1990s, showing the way for younger musicians to produce Islamic-themed content.

Although he was out of the secular global music scene for close to three decades, his work had made such an impact on generations of musicians that he was inaugurated into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2014. He returned to live performing in 2014 to sell-out concerts. Yusuf now makes music of a universal appeal based on his explorations and understanding of a deeply Islamic and spiritual nature.

In his autobiography, *Why I still carry a guitar: The Spiritual Journey of Cat Stevens to Yusuf*, Yusuf Islam explains in detail his conversion to Islam, his understanding of Islam as a religion for peace¹:

Justice and wisdom demand that a person puts first things first. Ironically, at almost every mosque on Friday, the Imam usually ends his sermon by repeating the primary command to be just and good:

Verily! Allah orders justice and kindness and giving to relatives, and forbids lewdness, bad conduct and oppression. Allah instructs you that perhaps you may be reminded (The Qur'an, Surat An Nahl, (The Bee), 16:90).

Yusuf Islam reminds us of the origin, the root of the very word "Islam" in the concept of "Salam" which is contrary to "war, bloodletting and revenge", but only realised by "good character and behaviour", with the knowledge and power of education, social interaction and non-violent communication through the media².

"It's good to remember (and some Muslims seem to forget this point) that the word Islam finds its root in the word, *Salam*, which means peace and security – how far we had drifted."

"Cause on the edge of darkness
There rides a Peace Train
O, Peace Train take this country
Come take me home again."

— Cat Stevens, "Peace Train"

Back in his childhood, Yusuf Islam remembers his Greek Cypriot father always saying 'Allah Karim, Allah Karim' (God Is Most Kind) as a token of gratitude to God for blessing his family with enough food and shelter (Islam 2014:21f). As early as 1978 Cat Stevens released his last record album "Back to Earth" with 'Bismillah' (in the name of Allah) on the cover (Islam 2014:20). His intention was

to use music for positive purposes, good news based on the concept of ‘Istihsan’ (seeking what is good or better).³

Commemorating the era of medieval Bagdad and Islamic Spain maintaining a balanced command of law and freedom for its subjects, he stresses the great patron of arts, music and literature like Harun Al Rashid whose Baghdad Library had been the largest in the world and during whose reign *One Thousand and One Nights* was written and compiled, one of the most imaginative and influential novels ever published⁴:

Late in eighth-century Islamic Spain lived an extraordinary Muslim endowed with myriad talents called Ziryab: he was a courtier, a poet, a musician, singer, astronomer, chemist, geographer and strategist. According to records, Ziryab is credited as having introduced and improved the ‘Oud (the lute – the father of guitars) by adding a fifth string and was a great influence on Spanish music and the Andalusian Music traditions of North Africa. So the Blues, and Rock and Roll owe Ziryab some credit.

We can say that Yusuf Islam intends to return to ‘Da’wah’ (Conveying the message of Islam; calling people to God) through Transformative Harmony⁵:

Socrates is reported to have inspired the saying, ‘Ignorance is the root of all evil’. No matter whose saying that is, it’s a wise one. It is an indisputable fact that knowledge is the first key to practicing Islam and to the correct behaviour for a Muslim. Imagine not giving the chance for someone ignorant about Islam to be killed in its name. This is the greatest injustice and must be condemned as a complete aberration of Islam and its enlightened Divine objectives.

Yusuf Islam – according to John Lennon’s hymn of peace “Imagine” – wants the people of knowledge and moderation regain the original vision of making the world a happier place for all⁶:

I dream of an open world, borderless and wide
 Where the people move from place to place,
 And nobody’s taking sides
 Maybe there’s a world that I’m still to find.
 Open up a world and let me in
 Then there’ll be a new life to begin.

— Yusuf, “Maybe There’s A World”

We should not underestimate the full solidarity of Yusuf Islam with the Arab Spring, a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests in the Arab world that began on December 18, 2010, in Tunisia with the Tunisian Revolution, and spread throughout the countries of the Arab League and its surroundings⁷:

How incredible that the new people's revolution was started (in a way) by a poor simple vegetable seller, Mohammed Bouazizi. This young man from Tunisia spent most of his days pushing a cart to sell his vegetables, but when town officials confiscated his cart, and his pleas for justice and mercy were ignored – something broke. A young man's fury against the system is now helping to transform the Middle East – but how will it end?

And Yusuf Islam recorded his song with a simple chorus of two words “My People” in Berlin 100 yards from where the East-West wall fell⁸:

My People
 When you gonna leave my People?
 Give them room to breathe
 My People
 Stop oppressing
 My People
 All they want is bread and clothes
 Space to rest and left alone
 My People
 When you gonna free my People?
 Let them live in peace
 My People.

“Change has to start with looking after the weaker elements of society, that was always the structure and principle in the Prophet's teachings: Next to Prayer (*Salat*) comes Charity (*Zakat*); paying the poor due to those in need. Remember also that the Arab awakening began with a poor vegetable seller!”⁹

“The way to peace and bridging divisions is again, through hard work. And that comes back to ‘Da’wah’ [...:]

By [the passing of] Time/Verily mankind is in loss/Except such as believe and do good works, and enjoin on one another Truth, and enjoin on one another, patience (The Qur'an, Surat Al' Asr, (Time), 103:1-3).

The Prophet (peace be upon him) warned us also about partisanship, the greatest destructive curse on the world today, and he enjoined us to avoid backbiting, hurting others, especially ‘fitnah’ (trials, conflicts and discord), which

Allah says in the Qur'an is worse than slaughter (The Qur'an. Surat Al Baqarah, (The Cow), 2:191). It is easy to get angry at the state of the world and that's when certain voices get louder and may pressurise us. But we should beware of falling into more evil.¹⁰

Steven Georgiou began to search for explanations during his young years when a friend of his had given him a copy a Buddhist book called *The Secret Path*. He then studied Hinduism, Taoism, Vegetarianism and Zen. But only when his elder brother David – along with his Jewish wife from Tel Aviv—went to Jerusalem in 1975, he started to take a keen interest in the peaceful aspects of Islam and shared his impressions one year later with his brother when he presented him a translation of the Qur'an.

The songs of Cat Stevens inspire millions of people all over the world, one of them “Peace Train” (1971):

Now I've been happy lately
Thinking about the good things to come
And I believe it could be
Something good has begun
Oh, I've been smiling lately
Dreaming about the world as one
And I believe it could be
Some day it's going to come.

And this peace train is moving to transform people's hearts to a new harmony:

Now I've been smiling lately
Thinking about the good things to come
And I believe it could be
Something good has begun
Oh, peace train sounding louder
Glide on the peace train
Come on the peace train
Yes, peace train holy roller
Everyone jump upon the peace train
Come on the peace train.

And this peace train brings back people's minds to realise that non-violence is truth:

Get your bags together
Go bring your good friends too

'Cause it's getting nearer
It soon will be with you

Now come and join the living
It's not so far from you
And it's getting nearer
Soon it will all be true.

Civil Rights Movement's Music, Cosmopolitanism and Transformative Harmony

The quest for peace and harmony we find in the strivings of Cat Stevens or Yusuf has a longer genealogy in our world. We can trace back to civil rights movements of the 1960s where art and music played an important role in rekindling hopes of peace and harmony and in creating a new cosmopolitan imagination and consciousness. In the beginning, there was the sound of music – anything else followed later ... in such a way best described is the impact and role of music in the civil rights movements of the past century. It is the word becoming matter and it is the slogan becoming force. And it is the inspiration of the aspiring, inspiring and disobedient masses guiding progress to the destination of social reform and revolution. Without the song, there were no more social and progressive movements; without the music there would be an empty void, lost space, missing links and chances without use.

Millions of youngsters as myself (born in the year 1960) could choose their language and music teachers because of the golden era of the worker's songs, of the civil rights' and peace movement for the emancipation of mankind from slavery and war. Never again has music become as meaningful as during the times of emancipatory movement in economic, international and social matters of concern breaking the bondage of slavery.

And the names of those who composed the wise lyrics and fine melodies and tunes for these voices of dissent remain eternal in the minds of their audiences: creators of folk songs of the peoples and pioneers of the universal desire for a sound ecology, peace, and social justice. In many cultures, in many nations – most of all visible have been the modern teachers of the English language as a medium, like the great American and British poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But their words became music transformations, easy to commemorate, easy to quote, easy to recite, easy to sing a cappella or in choirs.

Woody Guthrie, Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly), Pete Seeger, Peggy Seeger, Ewan MacColl, Malvina Reynolds, Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Jim Glover, Tom Paxton, Joan Baez, Richard and Mimi Farina, Peter (Peter Yarrow), Paul (Noel

Stookey) and Mary (Mary Travers), Joni Mitchell, Graham Nash, Neil Young and the voices of the U.S. American Civil Rights Movement of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers and all their co-workers and friends: Odetta (Odetta Holmes), Harry Belafonte, The Freedom Singers (Cordell Reagon, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Charles Neblett, and Rutha Mae Harris), and the gospel and spiritual music of Marian Anderson and Mahalia Jackson, bridging the pulpit of the church to the podium of the speaker – just to name some of those unsung heroes of the Anglo-Saxon and African-American political folk music with their ballads, canons, hymns, rhymes and topical songs.

1. Let us take as example: “We Shall Overcome” – the tradition of this song is connected with the history of the Highlander Research and Education Centre, formerly known as the Highlander Folk School, a social justice leadership training school and cultural centre located in New Market, Tennessee, founded in 1932 among others by the social activist Myles Horton (1905-1990).¹¹

Horton was influenced by observing rural adult education schools in Denmark started in the 19th century by Danish Lutheran Bishop Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872). During the 1930s and 1940s, the school's main focus was labour education and the training of labour organisers. During the 1950s, it played a critical role in the American Civil Rights Movement, a training centre for civil rights activists like Rosa Parks prior to her historic role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, as well as for many other movement activists including the members of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Septima Clark, Anne Braden, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Bevel, Hollis Watkins, Bernard Lafayette, Ralph Abernathy and John Lewis in the mid- and late-1950s. In 1961, it reorganised and moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, where it reopened, later becoming the Highlander Research and Education Centre.

Zilphia Horton (1910-1956) was an American musician, community organiser, educator, civil rights activist, and folklorist, best known for her work with her husband Myles Horton at the Highlander Folk School where she turned songs as “We Shall Overcome”, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize”, “We Shall Not Be Moved”, and “This Little Light of Mine” from hymns into songs of the Civil Rights movement. For example: “We Shall Overcome”, which derived from an early gospel song, “I’ll Overcome Someday”, by African-American composer Charles Albert Tindley (1851-1933). The great Civil Rights activist and folk song pioneer, Pete Seeger (1919-2014) from New York State, remembered ¹² :

“I’ll Overcome, more often called *I’ll Be All Right*, was a gospel hymn sung in black churches through much of the South. [...] In 1945 several hundred tobacco workers, mostly women, mostly black, were on strike in Charleston, South Carolina. To keep their spirits up they sang on the picket line. One of the workers, Lucille Simmons, loved to sing this hymn in the extremely slow “long meter” style, and the first words became *We will*. A white woman, Zilphia Horton, music director at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, learned it from them. It became her favourite song. In 1946 she taught it to me in New York, and in 1950 I taught it to Guy Carawan and Frank Hamilton in California [...]. In 1958 I even had a chance to sing it at Highlander. Zilphia had died, only forty-five years old. Myles Horton wrote me, “Can you come to Highlander for our 25th reunion? Without Zilphia, we need others to lead songs.” It was there I met young Dr. King and his colleague Rev. Ralph Abernathy. Anne Braden (one of the courageous southern whites who openly helped the fledgling civil rights movement) was driving them next day to another speaking engagement, and she remembers King in the back seat saying, “We shall overcome. That song really sticks with you, doesn’t it?”

But the song really got around in the spring of 1960, when Guy, aged thirty-two at the time, organised and helped run a South-wide workshop at Highlander on songs for the civil rights movement. And three weeks later some of those who had attended the workshop sang the song with Guy at the founding convention of SNCC in Raleigh, North Carolina, for several hundred black and white students. Within a few months it was known as the unofficial theme song of the movement.”

The hymn “We Shall Overcome”, thus, became rhythm and soul with the first line repeated thrice:

“We shall overcome some day. Oh deep in my heart I do believe:
We shall overcome some day.

We’ll walk hand in hand some day. Oh deep in my heart I do
believe: We shall overcome some day.

We shall live in peace some day. Oh deep in my heart I do believe:
We shall overcome some day.

The truth shall make us free. Oh deep in my heart I do believe: We
shall overcome some day.

We are not afraid today. Oh deep in my heart I do believe: We shall
overcome some day.

Black and white together now ! Oh deep in my heart I do believe:
We shall overcome some day.

The whole wide world around some day. Oh deep in my heart I do
believe: We shall overcome some day.”

2. Let us take as second example how the non-violent tradition influenced the political folk song:

Joan Baez (born 1941) has become one of the worldwide known voices of the civil rights and peace movements of our time. She was highly influenced by the Quaker tradition, and the messages of Dr. King and Mahatma Gandhi. Here is a small autobiographical account of hers¹³:

“My parents are Quakers. I like the idea the Quakers have of silent meditation [...] I do believe this. There is a supreme power that makes us do the good we do, that makes our conscience tick. Some supreme power supplies all the everyday miracles that take place. [...] I was finding friends through a more unlikely source, too – the Quakers, or more specifically, their social action wing, the American Friends Service Committee. That year [1956], along with three hundred other students, I attended a three-day conference on world issues held at Asilomar, a beautiful spot on the pine-speckled, foggy beaches of Monterey. [...] I found that I spoke forcefully in groups both large and small, and was regarded as a leader.

There was great excitement about our main speaker, a twenty-seven-year-old black preacher from Alabama named Martin Luther King, Jr. He was a brilliant orator. Everyone in the room was mesmerised. He talked about injustice and suffering, and about fighting with the weapons of love, saying that when someone does avail to us, we can hate the evil deed, but not the doer of the deed, who is to be pitied. He talked specifically about boycotting buses and walking to freedom in the South, and about organising a non-violent revolution. When he finished his speech, I was on my feet, cheering and crying: King was giving a shape and a name to my passionate but ill-articulated beliefs. Perhaps it was the fact of an actual movement taking place, as opposed to the scantily attended demonstrations I had known to date, which gave me the exhilarating sense of “going somewhere” with my pacifism.

It was also through the Quakers that I met Ira Sandperl the following year. [...] I couldn’t know when I first met him that he would end up being my political/spiritual mentor for the next few decades.

Ira read to the teenage First Day School from Tolstoy, the Bhagavad-Gita, Lao-tse, Aldous Huxley, the Bible and other texts we had never discussed in high school. For the first time in my life I looked forward to going to Meeting. Ira was a Mahatma Gandhi scholar, an advocate of radical non-violent change. Like Gandhi, he felt that the most important tool of the twentieth century was organised non-violence. Gandhi had taken the concept of Western pacifism, which is basically personal, and extended it into a political force, insisting that we stand up to conflict and fight against evil, but do so with the weapons of non-violence. I had heard the Quakers argue that the ends did not justify the means. Now I was hearing that the means would determine the ends. It made sense to me, huge and ultimate sense.”

“People would accuse us of being naïve and impractical, and I was soon telling them that it was they who were naïve and impractical to think that the human race could continue on forever with a build-up of armies, nation states, and nuclear weapons. My foundations in non-violence were both moral and pragmatic.”

In 1958, at age 17, Joan committed her first act of civil disobedience as a conscientious objector by refusing to leave her Palo Alto High School classroom in Palo Alto, California for an air-raid drill.

The early years of Joan Baez's career saw the civil-rights movement in the U.S. become a prominent issue. Her performance of “We Shall Overcome”, the civil-rights anthem written by Pete Seeger and Guy Carawan, at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom permanently linked her to the song. Baez again sang "We Shall Overcome" in Sproul Plaza during the mid-1960s Free Speech Movement demonstrations at the University of California in Berkeley, California, and at many other rallies and protests.

Her recording of the song "Birmingham Sunday" (1964), written by her brother-in-law, Richard Fariña, was used in the opening of “Four Little Girls” (1997), Spike Lee's documentary film about the four young victims: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair, killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on Sunday, September 15, 1963.

Highly visible in civil-rights marches, Baez became more vocal about her disagreement with the Vietnam War. In 1964, she publicly endorsed resisting taxes by withholding sixty per cent of her 1963 income taxes, and she founded the Institute for the Study of Non-violence (along with her mentor Ira Sandperl) and encouraged draft resistance at her concerts.

3. There are several elements which characterise cosmopolitanism and transformative harmony of the popular folk song movement during the civil rights and peace movements during the last century. Let us finally summarise some of them with some significant verses written by Malvina Reynolds (1900-1978):

I. Grass Roots' Dignity and Movements¹⁴:

God bless the grass that's gentle and low,
Its roots they are deep and its will is to grow.
And God bless the truth, the friend of the poor,
And the wild grass growing at the poor man's door,
And God bless the grass.

II. Antimilitarism and Pacifism¹⁵:

From way up here the earth looks very small,
They shouldn't fight at all
Down there, upon that little sphere.

III. Civil Disobedience and Civil Rights¹⁶ :

It isn't nice to block the doorway,
It isn't nice to go to jail,
There are nicer ways to do it,
But the nice ways always fail.
It isn't nice, it isn't nice,
You told us once, you told us twice,
But if that is Freedom's price,
We don't mind.

IV. Nuclear-Free World and Solar Age¹⁷:

Just a little boy standing in the rain,
The gentle rain that falls for years.
And the grass is gone,
The boy disappears,
And rain keeps falling like helpless tears,
And what have they done to the rain?

V. Ecology and Equilibrium¹⁸:

The world's gone beautiful because it's about to die.
I never saw such flower faces or so intent a sky ...
I want to hold this world and never let it go,
I want the sun to always rise on the kids next door.
Whether I go or stay, that question still abides,
Posed by rainbows in the river spray.

What answer do you give
A world that asks so bitterly to live?

Endnotes

1. Islam 2014:46
2. Islam 2014:51
3. Islam 2014:52
4. Islam 2014:54
5. Islam 2014:47f.
6. Islam 2014:80
7. Islam 2014:85
8. Islam 2014:86
9. Islam 2014:87
10. Islam 2014:89
11. Myles Horton about Highlander cp. Seeger/Reiser 1989:3-7
12. Pete Seeger about "We Shall Overcome" cp. Seeger/Reiser 1989:8, and cp. Seeger 1993:34f.
13. Baez 1987:39-42
14. Reynolds 1984:29 (God Bless The Grass)
15. Reynolds 1984:34f. (From Way Up Here)
16. Reynolds 1984:40 (It Isn't Nice)
17. Reynolds 1984:90 (What Have They Done To The Rain ?)
18. Reynolds 1984:93 (The World's Gone Beautiful)

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