

The background of the entire cover is a repeating pattern of small, teal-colored stars or floral motifs on a light cream or off-white background. The pattern is dense and uniform across the surface.

# *The Theater Is in the Street*

Politics and Performance in Sixties America

BRADFORD D. MARTIN

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*For Heather*

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## THE THEATER IS IN THE STREET

## INTRODUCTION

### *The Convergence of Art, Politics, and Everyday Life*

I am for an art that is political-erotic mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum. I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap and comes out on top. I am for an art that tells you the time of day, or where such and such a street is. I am for an art that helps old ladies across the street.

CLAES OLDENBURG

The march was stopped about a block and a half from the campus by 40 city, county, and state policemen with tear gas grenades, billy sticks and a fire truck. When ordered to return to the campus or be beaten back, the students, confronted individually by the police, chose not to move and quietly began singing "We Shall Not Be Moved."

BOB ZELLNER

During the 1960s, artists and activists transformed notions of how public spaces might be used, expanding the range of cultural and political expressions beyond the substantial restrictions they had faced in the early postwar era. Echoing a widespread sentiment among 1960s artists, the sculptor Claes Oldenburg asserted that for art to be vital it must do more than "sit on its ass in a museum," embracing subject matter and venues familiar to people's everyday lives.<sup>1</sup> "Public space" or, more colloquially, "the street" provided the locus for this sea change in the arts. Describing a civil rights movement confrontation in Talladega, Alabama, the activist Bob Zellner highlighted the centrality of singing to the struggle for desegregation, which by its nature involved public spaces and accommodations, from lunch counters to public parks and beaches to educational facilities.<sup>2</sup> By mobilizing singing as an organizing tool, communications medium, and tactic of social contestation in the struggle for desegregation, movement activists reintroduced to the public space a vibrant cultural form that had largely vanished during the McCarthy years. Just as focus on everyday life catalyzed a new movement in the arts, singing assumed a key role in the culture of the civil rights movement, infusing American public life with a strong performance element that received considerable publicity from both television and print media. These two trends intertwined throughout the sixties as cultural forms increasingly moved into public venues, frequently conveying pointed political content.



During the sixties, art, theater, and politics permeated everyday life; public performance in the streets served as the principal forum for this development. But what constitutes a public performance? Were civil rights activists who sang freedom songs as part of the civil rights movement performers in the same way as, say, the avant-garde theater company the Living Theatre, who led its audiences into the streets as the climactic act of its 1968 production Paradise Now? In modern parlance "performance" has been used to refer to a broad range of sometimes quite dissimilar activities. Marvin Carlson has argued for recognizing "performance" as a "contested concept" and for acknowledging "the futility of seeking some overarching semantic field" to encompass all the term's uses.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the tendency of various sixties collectives to bring their art and politics into public spaces suggests that some narrowing of the performance concept is possible. Erving Goffman's definition of performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" resounds with relevance for the public performers of the sixties in both its allowance for a wide range of performative activity and its suggestion of a quest to "influence" and involve audiences.<sup>4</sup> The performance studies scholar Richard Schechner cites eight "sometimes separate, sometimes overlapping situations" in which performances occur, including everyday life, the arts, popular entertainments, business, technology, sex, sacred and secular ritual, and play.<sup>5</sup> At various times, sixties public performers drew from all these areas, including aspects of the business, technology, and sex varieties not usually part of performance-theory discourse. Public performers of the sixties tended most often, however, to mesh some combination of the everyday life, arts, popular entertainment, ritual, and play aspects of performance.

"Public performance" can be defined as a self-conscious, stylized tactic of staging songs, plays, parades, protests, and other spectacles in public places where no admission is charged and spectators are often invited to participate, and it conveys symbolic messages about social and political issues to audiences who might not have encountered them in more traditional venues. In the sixties, arts and cultural groups reconceived the relationship between politics and culture, using public performance to express their politics. While their specific political objectives varied, these groups shared the impulse to stage their performances and actions in public spaces, eschewing museums, theaters, and other halls of culture. This crucial choice allowed the freedom singers of the civil rights movement, the Living Theatre, the Diggers, the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) and the Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG) to narrow the gulf between everyday life and politics, broadening the definition of politics

in a way characteristic of both the New Left and the counterculture of the sixties, and redefining the uses of the public space.

This process recalls the historian Mary Ryan's analysis of nineteenth-century public ceremonies, festivities, and performances. Ryan contends that such events "brought city residents together in a short-term commitment to some larger civic identity." During the sixties, singing freedom songs, creating street theater vignettes that invited audience participation, and protesting museum policies all embodied performances of the kind of shared identity Ryan describes, though often such performances arrayed themselves in opposition to mainstream values. Yet the "short-term commitment" Ryan mentions, in the sixties as well as in the nineteenth century, could also carry potential long-term effects. Ryan argues that the earlier public ceremonies promoted "cultural cohesion" and facilitated the development of a common language that citizens could mobilize to address other civic or political concerns.<sup>6</sup> Public performers of the sixties nurtured the development of such a common language and hoped to wed this vocabulary to a range of activist concerns and idealistic goals from civil rights to personal liberation to democratization of art-world institutions.

Assessing the influence and impact of these performances is notoriously problematic. On the one hand, it is impossible to quantify the impact of a multifaceted participatory spectacle such as the Diggers' Invisible Circus, since different participants each experienced the same events through the lens of their own experiences and prejudices. There is rarely a "smoking gun" of audience testimonials to attest, conveniently, that the AWC's poster of the My Lai massacre, for example, displayed in front of Picasso's *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art, moved a critical mass of spectators to a new awareness of the museum's myriad links to the military-industrial complex and its use of art to "sanctify killing." Thus it would be reckless to claim that these groups' public performances definitively shaped public consciousness about the evils of segregation or the war in Vietnam. Yet palpable trends in anecdotal evidence, as well as the ubiquity of public performance by the late sixties as a cultural aesthetic and protest strategy, suggest the resonance of this idiom. During the Living Theatre's 1968-69 U.S. tour, audiences did accept its invitation into the streets to begin the work of nonviolent anarchist revolution on a nightly basis. Whether or not spectators were in close agreement with the company's politics, various accounts suggest that they regularly got caught up in the participatory spirit of the moment. Similarly, anecdotal evidence demonstrates that even southern white segregationist prison guards could be moved by the freedom songs of incarcerated activists, and the fact that the



## 6 INTRODUCTION

antiwar movement and women's liberation movement both adopted singing (sometimes using the very same songs as the civil rights movement) to promote unity, build morale, and show resolve indicates that this form wielded considerable power.

The relationship between public performance and activism tended to broaden definitions of politics, since the goals, philosophies, and tactics of these groups reflected the New Left's and the counterculture's expansive rethinking of politics and lifestyle. For instance, freedom singers in the civil rights movement drew from earlier musical traditions within the black church and the labor movement, and through their own struggles influenced the movement culture of the predominantly white New Left. The Living Theatre's landmark production *Paradise Now* reflected the counterculture's communitarian and aesthetic sensibilities. The criticism the AWC and GAAG hurled at prestigious art world underwriters such as the Rockefellers resounded with New Left analysis that linked America's corporate elite to the Vietnam War. Taken together, the careers of these groups refute the notion of the sixties political left and cultural left as separate entities. The heightened social tensions and political crises of the sixties catalyzed public performance as a newer, more symbolic, but also more immediate way of "doing politics" than conventional political protest. Reflecting the New Left's egalitarian ideals, performing in the streets allowed arts and cultural groups to lessen the distance between performers and audience, which in turn allowed political ideas to be discussed more freely. One of the main accomplishments of this phenomenon was to reintroduce political discourse to art, theater, and cultural life in the sixties after its virtual eclipse in the early postwar era. As cultural and political expressions intertwined and influenced each other, these groups manifested considerable overlap between the New Left and the counterculture in terms of personnel, ideology, and culture. Finally, the careers of individuals in these groups after the groups changed or disbanded gives the lie to the motion of sixties radicals as abandoning politics after the decade ended. Their activism and concern for social change persisted into the 1970s and beyond.

Public performance links these groups and provides a window on larger political and cultural transformations, such as the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the counterculture. The SNCC Freedom Singers and other civil rights activists sang songs such as "We Shall Overcome," "This Little Light of Mine," and "We Shall Not Be Moved" on the front lines of sit-ins, marches, and other protests. After performances of *Paradise Now* (1968–70), the Living Theatre accompanied its audience into the streets to begin what it called the "beautiful nonviolent anarchist revolution." The Diggers

performed puppet shows on the streets of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighborhood and distributed free food in Golden Gate Park. Sculptors, painters, and other artists in the AWC staged imaginative public protests against the Vietnam War in New York City's streets and museums. GAAG's guerrilla actions subverted museums' institutional prestige by disturbing business-as-usual, provoking authorities and challenging the art world by exposing its relationship to the American military-industrial complex.

These groups reflected a broad set of political influences, which resulted in diverse connections to larger cultural and protest movements. The Freedom Singers' music embodied their commitment to the nonviolent direct action politics of the civil rights movement in the early sixties. Living Theatre founders Julian Beck and Judith Malina enjoyed relationships with the writer and philosopher Paul Goodman and Dorothy Day of the *Catholic Worker*, producing some of Goodman's plays and getting arrested with Day in the General Strikes for Peace of the 1950s; Goodman's anarchism and Day's pacifism inspired the Living Theatre's work. The Diggers, a community-oriented group with theatrical roots, drew from a variety of political influences, including the seventeenth-century English utopian sect which was their namesake. Anarchism pervaded Digger politics. They advocated circumventing the money system, which they saw as "blocking the free flow of energy."<sup>7</sup> Influenced by the broader New Left, the AWC and GAAG spearheaded the antiwar movement within the art world, also focusing on issues concerning artistic freedom.

The diverse realms of cultural life these groups represent demonstrate the pervasiveness of politically oriented public performance in the sixties; that the Freedom Singers, the Living Theatre, the Diggers, the AWC, and GAAG all gravitated toward a shared sensibility of expression suggests the vitality of this broad-based phenomenon. Several theater groups along with the Living Theatre combined politics and public performance during the sixties, but the activity of cultural groups from a variety of media confirms that this trend transcended the theater world. The AWC and GAAG, for instance, followed the art world lead of Happenings in staging events outside museums and galleries. The Diggers' theatrical background and position at the counterculture's Haight-Ashbury epicenter allowed them to create festivals, performances, and events on their neighborhood's streets. The Freedom Singers provide an especially useful measure of this use of public spaces, since they were a predominantly black group, originating in the rural South, with stronger ties to the civil rights movement than to the artistic and cultural worlds per se. Freedom singing's emergence in the early sixties provided a precedent for the

use of public spaces for performance, and the practice flourished as the decade progressed.

The move of cultural performances into the streets marked a sharp contrast to the early postwar era.<sup>8</sup> The 1947 House Un-American Activities Committee "Hollywood" hearings, designed to uncover Communist subversion in the motion picture industry, served harsh notice about the limits of cultural expression in cold war America. The episode heralded a period of retreat from overtly political subject matter in the arts during the fifties, reinforcing the prevailing view that art and culture ought to be separate from politics. "During the McCarthy era," the Living Theatre's cofounder, Julian Beck, recalled, "the repression was so great that even the critics would say 'You cannot mix art and politics.'"<sup>9</sup> The trend toward "apolitical" art also marked the visual arts, where abstract expressionism became the dominant form. The art historian Serge Guilbaut has shown how abstract expressionism, though a rebellion in artistic form, was so "neutral" and devoid of ideology that American politicians deployed it as cold war propaganda symbolizing the "freedom" of the individual artist under American capitalism.<sup>10</sup> Abstract expressionism's hegemony persisted until the sixties, when new forms emerged that were inspired by the materials and routines of everyday life.

Prior to the cold war era, there were several important antecedents to groups such as the Living Theatre and the Diggers. In the 1910s, the Provincetown Players produced innovative theater that stressed both personal liberation and community goals based on the premise that cultural expressions could transform society. The Provincetown Players even practiced a form of what the Living Theatre (and Students for a Democratic Society) later called "collective creation." Many of the Players participated in the 1913 Paterson Strike Pageant, a theatrical spectacle written by John Reed, in which fifteen hundred silk workers reenacted their strike before an estimated audience of fifteen thousand at the old Madison Square Garden. The Paterson Strike Pageant blurred the lines between art and everyday life, creating a spectacle in a venue not usually used for theater, staging the performance to maximize audience participation, and anticipating sixties participatory events such as Happenings, the Diggers' Invisible Circus, and the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now*.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, in the 1930s, groups such as Harold Clurman's Group Theatre and Orson Welles's Mercury Theatre led the "People's Theatre" movement that has been called "the left-wing theatrical renaissance of the depression."<sup>12</sup> Even the government-funded Federal Theatre Project, part of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, often addressed contemporary social issues and did not shirk controversy. In particular, the Federal Theatre's Living

Newspaper unit, led by Joseph Losey and Nicholas Ray, staged innovative dramas that explored specific social problems and their solutions and anticipated the Living Theatre's interest in the anti-naturalist theater of the Soviet director Vsevolod Meyerhold and served as an antecedent to the Diggers' creation of spectacles that collapsed the boundaries between art and everyday life. In the visual arts as well, from the influential Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, to the public art of the Treasury Section of Fine Arts under the Public Buildings Administration, to the radicalized striking cartoonists at Walt Disney Studios, artists' work reflected the dignity of work and collectivism central to the Popular Front's cultural agenda.<sup>13</sup> Although the seeds of later repression were sometimes evident, as in the scraping of Rivera's now infamous Rockefeller Center mural with its image of Lenin and in Congress's cutting of the Federal Theatre's funding from fear of Soviet influence, on the whole the cultural milieu of the Depression encouraged artists, writers, and playwrights to grapple with the pressing issues of the day. This encouragement contrasts sharply with the repressive period following World War II.

While the McCarthy-era injunction against combining art and politics weighed heavily on theater groups in the fifties, the Living Theatre drew on another innovative cultural influence to expand its range of expression: the Beat literary movement. The Living Theatre's production of Jack Gelber's *The Connection* (1959), inspired by Beat experiments and improvisations, shattered the taboos of fifties artistic expression in form and content.<sup>14</sup> These elements of the Beat literary aesthetic were themselves influenced by improvisational jazz, and many of the characters in *The Connection* were jazz musicians, whose performances featured extended live jazz interludes. *The Connection* combined scripted dialogue and improvisational sections to depict the daily lives of junkies. At times, the staging was such that audiences were convinced that the junkies the actors portrayed were real, an effect enhanced by the Living Theatre's use of actual junkies to play some of the minor roles.<sup>15</sup>

*The Connection* marked a watershed in the Living Theatre's culture, introducing an unprecedented level of improvisation, topical subject matter, and an interracial cast, all of which proved hallmarks of the company's subsequent work. Jazz musicians involved with *The Connection* introduced Julian Beck and Judith Malina to smoking marijuana, which was part of a complex of communal activities that shaped the Living Theatre's identity in the sixties. The Diggers, too, often used drugs recreationally or to augment their creativity. Popular memory associates the Diggers and the Living Theatre with the counterculture, and (as opposed to the SNCC Freedom Singers, the Art

Workers Coalition, and the Guerrilla Art Action Group), marijuana, LSD, and amphetamines played a significant role in the culture of these groups.

The sense of group identity—the self-conscious understanding by individual members of belonging to a collective—varied among these groups, but it typically played an important role in their cultural sensibilities. The SNCC Freedom Singers represented a more formal manifestation of the larger body of freedom singers in the civil rights movement. For this larger group, singing was just one element, though probably one of the most important elements, of their identity as activists in the civil rights struggle. The Living Theatre embraced communal living well into its career—while in residence in Europe during the mid-sixties—but this new collective ethic soon came to inform the company's process and politics in fundamental ways. The Diggers functioned as a collective from the start, almost from the minute that key Digger personnel split with the San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1966. Though the struggle for individual freedom, construed as pursuing the authentic self, figured prominently in the Diggers' message, it did so in a communal context that increasingly required personal preferences to be subordinated to group needs. The collectivist ethic was weakest among the visual artists in the AWC. At the outset, the AWC adopted the word "coalition" as part of its name, as the word implied a more tentative alliance than "union." Individual participants could thus coalesce over discrete issues rather than embracing an entire ideological platform. Indeed, the AWC first convened as an umbrella organization to lobby for the artistic rights of visual artists. Only later did the AWC, and its related but more radical offshoot, GAAG, begin to protest the war in Vietnam. At no point did communal living play a vital role in the careers of the AWC or GAAG.<sup>16</sup>

✓ Why did these diverse collectives thrust themselves outside traditional arenas of cultural expression and into the streets in the sixties? The answer involves a pervasive effort to move beyond bourgeois cultural venues such as theaters, concert halls, and museums, and to democratize culture by trying to communicate with broader audiences where the performer-activists encountered them, most often, in the streets. In the SNCC Freedom Singers' case, artistic considerations always remained subservient to their commitment to the larger civil rights movement. As movement activists, the Freedom Singers had already participated in direct-action protests in public spaces. Moreover, singing represented a widespread movement practice that publicly symbolized its ideals of unity, equality, and freedom. When the Freedom Singers were organized as a formal group for fundraising and to publicize the movement outside the

South, they simply expanded the work that the larger body of freedom singers had already begun. Integration and voting rights constituted the movement's key goals in the early sixties, reflecting the activists' desire for inclusion in mainstream American life as opposed to its radical overhaul.

These goals of full citizenship might suggest that the Freedom Singers embraced the mainstream to a greater degree than the Living Theatre, the Diggers, the AWC, and GAAG. Certainly they differed from these groups by remaining political activists first and foremost. Yet they also established a precedent of using the streets to dramatize their political beliefs, creating cultural space for public performance from which the other groups benefited. Though the other groups shared an antipathy to American capitalism that seemingly set them apart from the Freedom Singers and propelled them into the streets, it is important to remember the more radical turn the civil rights movement took after 1965 toward issues of economic justice and cultural identity. The music changed to reflect this turn. For instance, the Chicago movement adapted "This Little Light of Mine" to reflect the movement's new urban, economic focus in the song "I Don't Want to Be Lost in the Slums." Other Chicago movement songs derided hazardous lead paint and threatened rent strikes if landlords failed to address substandard housing conditions.<sup>17</sup> Thus the post-1965 songs of urban discontent and economic rights constitute important context for understanding the complete trajectory of freedom singing.

Both the Living Theatre's and the Diggers' work featured criticism of the money system as a central theme. The Living Theatre's *Paradise Now* opened with the "Rite of Guerrilla Theatre," in which the actors intoned five key phrases to provoke audience response. The *Paradise Now* production notes explained one of these phrases, "You can't live if you don't have money," by arguing that "there is no way to sustain yourself on this planet without involvement in the monetary system."<sup>18</sup> "The Rite of Guerrilla Theatre" criticizes this state of affairs; taken further, however, the critique implied by "You can't live if you don't have money" was that it was morally and ethically inconsistent to make theater calling for social transformation in traditional theater venues with their high ticket prices. The Living Theatre's eventual shift to street theater in the seventies was a logical outgrowth of this critique.

✓ The Diggers adopted a more direct approach to fusing politics and action during the sixties, distributing free food in the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park and clothing in their free store. The group's numerous broadsides and manifestos labeled the food and clothes "free because it's yours." That slogan emblemized the Diggers' more communal understanding of property than

existed in mainstream American society. While the Living Theatre lamented about the impossibility of living without money, the Diggers staged a "Death of Money Parade." This street theater action featured a bizarre funeral procession with Diggers and members of the San Francisco Mime Troupe (SFMT) clad in eclectic beggar costumes carrying a black-draped coffin around Haight-Ashbury.<sup>19</sup> Though members of the SFMT started the Diggers, and some Diggers possessed traditional theater backgrounds, the group's presence in the streets and public spaces was driven by the hippie scene in Haight-Ashbury during the mid-sixties. The emergence of hippie street culture in the Haight coincided with the apex of the Diggers' influence in the community.

Opposition to the Vietnam War became the principal focus of the AWC, but its earliest demands in a protest directed at the Museum of Modern Art included two free evenings a week for working people to visit the museum. The AWC sought to make the New York art world more accessible to a broader economic cross-section of the public. Resistance to such demands contributed to the AWC's decision to stage their guerrilla action protests in the public spaces in and around New York's museums, making the actions accessible to the general public. GAAG, though not embracing any specific anticapitalist program, engaged in a critique of capitalism that exposed the art world's links to the corporate underwriters of the Vietnam War and railed against the commodification of art. GAAG's public actions dramatized this critique, which owed much to the New Left's efforts to redefine legitimate corporate behavior during the sixties.<sup>20</sup>

These groups are not the only ones that combined politics and public performance during the sixties. Certainly the mix can be seen in several highly theatrical, symbolic, public protests in the late sixties, from the Yippie-led initiative to "levitate" the Pentagon as part of the 1967 Stop the Draft Week activities to women's liberationists crowning a live sheep to protest the 1968 Miss America Pageant for its objectification of women. This element defined the aesthetic sensibility of a critical mass of the era's socially conscious artists. In the theater alone, collectives such as the SFMT, El Teatro Campesino, and Bread and Puppet Theater also brought their work to the streets. The groups featured here, however, comprise a cross-section of the cultural world, whose primary backgrounds represent not only theater, but music and the visual arts as well. My focus on groups representing different media suggests the pervasiveness of public performance as a strategy for addressing politics during this period. Analysis of the diverse obstacles, challenges, and pitfalls that confronted groups in various media allows for a richer, more nuanced discussion of politicized cultural expressions than would restricting the study to a single medium.

These groups enjoyed considerable notoriety and influence during the sixties. The SNCC Freedom Singers published books of the songs used in direct action protests, performed in Carnegie Hall, and eventually spawned the popular African American a cappella singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock. The Living Theatre's 1968-69 tour resulted in mass arrests in several cities, usually for public nudity, and garnered national media attention. The rock singer Jim Morrison's highly publicized 1968 arrest in Miami on obscenity charges occurred shortly after he attended *Paradise Now*, which encouraged spectators to take off their clothes.<sup>21</sup> The Diggers figure centrally in contemporary media coverage of the development of Haight-Ashbury's hippie scene and the emergence of the counterculture. The AWC and GAAG were the subject of extensive, often hostile, debate in the mainstream art press, including the writings of the *New York Times* art critics Hilton Kramer and Grace Glueck, and art journals such as *Artforum*, *Arts Magazine*, and *Studio International*.

The work of these groups conveys a strong sense of the sixties as a time of expansive possibilities. The title of the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now* proclaimed that personal and communal liberation loomed as a tangible, immediately gratifiable possibility. These groups shared a fundamental optimism, fueled in part by the spectacular economic growth of the early and mid-sixties. "We thought we were going to change everything," the Living Theatre's Malina recalled, underscoring the period's buoyant mood.<sup>22</sup> Despite rising inflation, the still-expanding economy generated a sanguine outlook on politicized cultural expressions as a legitimate vehicle for change. Economic abundance empowered these groups to assume that positive political and social change was attainable, and that art, theater, and culture had a role to play in this transformation. It seemed possible that sympathetic affluent liberals would generously fund such work; after all, liberals dominated the American political mainstream for most of the decade. Though sixties arts and cultural groups may have putatively opposed liberals, they shared some of the same core values, such as a sympathy with the civil rights movement, a desire to ameliorate poverty, and a commitment to free expression. At the very least, these groups existed in a climate that did not overtly attempt to repress culture that criticized American capitalist society. ✓

Simultaneous with an expanding economy, an emerging set of values associated with young people in the sixties, which the historian David Farber has called the "values of consumption," informed the sizable expectations with which these groups approached their work. Personal creative freedom, liberated self-expression, and immediate gratification, the mainstays of the con-

sumption ethos, became institutionalized in youth culture.<sup>23</sup> Not only did the values of consumption influence artistic and cultural work, they provided a rationale for "authentic" public self-expression as consistent with the egalitarian politics of the era.<sup>24</sup> The groups featured here believed in the imperative for authenticity epitomized by the Diggers' credo, "Do your thing," and felt compelled to express their beliefs publicly. Thus the movement to the streets with politically charged theatrics represented an attempt to "re-enchant" and re-animate politics by self-consciously eroding the boundaries "between politics and art, politics and culture, politics and everyday life."<sup>25</sup> This book examines groups enmeshed in this process of re-enchantment through authentic public expression.

Chapter 1 investigates the SNCC Freedom Singers and others who used music to support the political activism of the civil rights movement. In the process, these activists were key players in resurrecting a tradition of protest song largely dormant since the thirties, despite the efforts of the less-publicized folk movements of the fifties, such as the one associated with the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Singing in SNCC was often led by local songleaders who had been trained by SNCC field-workers to use freedom songs as organizing tools in meetings. This process reflected SNCC's philosophy of trying to develop local leadership at the grass roots and thus embody the equality of their social and political agenda within the organization. The Freedom Singers and other civil rights activists worked from an eclectic body of songs drawn from a variety of sources, such as African American spirituals, the labor movement, and contemporary rhythm and blues. With only a few exceptions, they tended to avoid original compositions, choosing rather to adapt and rework their existing repertoire to fit new situations of social contestation in the civil rights movement.<sup>26</sup> The chapter concludes by considering why singing declined in importance just as the civil rights movement shifted toward separatism and black nationalism in the mid-sixties, suggesting both that the freedom songs reflected an integrationist ethos that no longer held relevance to the movement's vanguard after 1965, and that on some level, the music remained, but was transformed to reflect the movement's focus on economic justice.

Chapter 2 examines the Living Theatre's transition from poetic drama and formal experiments in the fifties to overtly political theater in the sixties. The collaborative process the Living Theatre developed, "collective creation," strove to embody the politics of equality in a manner similar to that of SNCC. The Living Theatre developed collective creation while in European "exile" from 1964 to 1968, as the company self-consciously adopted a communal

identity.<sup>27</sup> The company's European experience marked its U.S. tour of 1968–69, when its pacifism proved discordant with the cultural moment following the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. *Paradise Now* and the other works in the repertoire on the 1968–69 tour sought to minimize the distance between performers and audiences, ultimately propelling the Living Theatre into the streets, as street theater became a mainstay of the company's work after the late 1960s.

Chapter 3 considers why the Diggers focused on questioning and subverting the money system. The Diggers asserted themselves as a political conscience for the Haight-Ashbury counterculture, holding this new community accountable for living up to its ideals of love and personal freedom. The group's prolific broadsides, which they posted on neighborhood streets, furnish evidence of this sensibility. Digger writings criticized countercultural festival concessionaires for marketing "pseudo psychedelia," rock bands for aspiring to conventional music industry success, and hippie merchants for collaborating with the police to protect their private property.<sup>28</sup> In October 1967 the Diggers staged a "Death of Hippie" parade through Haight-Ashbury, attempting to rescue countercultural ideals from their perversion by "media poisoners."<sup>29</sup> This public performance and others like it dramatized the Diggers' utopian vision of a "post-scarcity" society. Finally, the chapter examines how key Digger personnel, frustrated by the deterioration of conditions in the Haight despite the Diggers' efforts, attempted to pursue their utopian inclinations in the hinterlands as part of the rural communard exodus of the late sixties and early seventies.

Chapter 4 considers the Art Workers Coalition and a related but separate group, the Guerrilla Arts Action Group, examining the political agenda behind their protests and actions. For example, the AWC's list of demands in 1969 to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) included greater representation for black and Latino artists, issues of artistic freedom, and making the museum more accessible to working people. Ultimately, the most noteworthy AWC/GAAG protests centered on the Vietnam War. In April 1969 the AWC initiated a "Mass Antiwar Mail-In," in which members paraded with mailable antiwar art works, addressed to "The Joints Chiefs of War," to the Canal Street Post Office and mailed them to Washington, D.C. GAAG staged its "Blood Bath" action in MoMA, littering the museum floor with lists of their demands, ripping off each other's clothes, and spurting fake blood to dramatize the "mess" of Vietnam.<sup>30</sup> As the AWC and GAAG increasingly engaged in antiwar protest, the content of some members' artwork became more politicized. Yet many artists kept politics out of their art; rather, they chose to

politicize themselves by adopting a set of conditions under which they gave and withheld their art. The various strategies for politicizing art, and the reaction to such strategies by the larger art world, constitute a central concern of this chapter.

These groups and their efforts to take artistic expression into the streets have received little sustained scholarly attention that examines the relationship between their artistic and historical contexts. For instance, the Living Theatre has figured prominently in dramatic criticism, but such accounts dwell on the company's theatrical innovations rather than on how its notoriety coincided with a particular cultural and historical moment. Most of the material published on the Living Theatre focuses on its history through the 1968–69 tour, scarcely mentioning the company's seventies work, which most successfully blended its artistic and political sensibilities.<sup>31</sup> Histories of the civil rights movement often treat singing as an anecdotal sidebar to the larger movement, albeit a positive one, never foregrounding the significance of the singers' presence in public spaces, or the songs' role in maintaining courage and resolve and in sending messages to segregationist forces.<sup>32</sup> Early historians of the sixties typically either dismissed the Diggers' antics as outrageous, alluded to them anecdotally as emblematic of countercultural zaniness, or cast them as foils to the "straight" New Left, but recent scholarship has focused more sustained, serious attention on the ideas and politics undergirding Digger actions; it is my intention to contribute to this trend by examining the Diggers' public performances and participatory events.<sup>33</sup>

The AWC and GAAG have attracted the least scholarly attention of these groups. Though the art historian Lucy Lippard has assessed their contributions, she focuses primarily on the groups' relationship to developments and institutions in the larger art world.<sup>34</sup> The meaning of the AWC's and GAAG's innovative public performances in a larger trans-media cultural context is only a secondary focus in Lippard's insightful work. The present study identifies the political and ideological commonalities of these two groups, focusing on their public performances and arguing that they deserve a place among the dominant cultural and political trends of the sixties and early seventies.

My work rejects many of the earliest interpretations of the sixties which tended to treat culture and politics as separate categories and acknowledged only those individuals and groups who tried to achieve legislative and structural political changes as legitimately political while portraying the counterculture as a sideshow separate from politics.<sup>35</sup> I contend that cultural groups' own understandings of their political purposes furnish the most appropriate starting point for a discussion of their political content. The groups I discuss

were linked to the New Left and to the counterculture. Thus they resist the conventional definition of an apolitical counterculture bent on "tuning in, turning on, and dropping out" without confronting mainstream American institutions directly. By the same token, that the groups' ideologies reflected influences rooted in the political Left demonstrates the applicability of New Left ideas to the cultural sphere. Their experiences argue for a closer relationship between the ideas and lifestyles of the counterculture and the New Left than occurs in works that conceptualize the two as separate phenomena, contend that the counterculture folded when faced with the "pressures of politicization," or maintain that New Leftists viewed "the crush of countercultural hedonism" as destructive to their movement.<sup>36</sup>

Recent scholarship articulates a more nuanced view of the relationship between the counterculture and the New Left. Rejecting the theory of a split between the New Left and the counterculture as the sixties wore on, one line of recent scholarship argues that the two increasingly intertwined as the decade progressed. Though initially "the hippies maintained an arm's length relationship with the politicians," beginning with the October 1967 Pentagon demonstration, the distinction between the antiwar movement and the counterculture "blurred" as Vietnam policy and mainstream values became targets of the youth challenge.<sup>37</sup> In another variation, Todd Gitlin, a veteran of Students for a Democratic Society, portrays the political Left and the cultural radicals in a halting, tenuous alliance that was alternatively nurtured and ruptured in the second half of the decade. For instance, according to Gitlin, while the 1967 Human Be-In self-consciously sought to fuse the sensibilities of Haight-Ashbury hippies and Berkeley politicians, it also underscored tensions between these groups. By contrast, the cathartic street rioting of the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention and the Columbia University confrontations unified radicals and counterculturalists against the authoritarian brutality both faced.<sup>38</sup> Several scholars have noted the role that "consciousness-expanding" drugs played in promoting and discouraging, fusion between the two groups.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, the People's Park movement in Berkeley, which again self-consciously attempted to facilitate collaboration between cultural and political radicals, actually proved divisive when these groups were challenged by the armed repression of the National Guard called out by Governor Ronald Reagan. Political radicals interpreted the violence as a call to heighten both their rhetoric and resistance, sometimes invoking the need for paramilitary training, while the People's Park's countercultural contingent shifted to an ecological sensibility or abandoned politics altogether.<sup>40</sup> The cultural historian George Lipsitz characterizes the counterculture as alternative rather than oppositional,

arguing that its imperative that personal transformation and enlightenment precede changing the world "did too little to interrogate the axes of power in society." Lipsitz cites institutionalized racism and sexism, the imperialistic brutality of the Vietnam War, and the ease with which capitalist society co-opted hippie social and economic innovations as forces too powerful for the counterculture's alternative lifestyles to combat.<sup>41</sup>

Though Lipsitz's distinction is compelling, it represents the counterculture's political content as a zero-sum game: either the counterculture was political or it wasn't. The communal identities and collective approaches that the groups featured in this study embraced, together with a sense of politics that owed much to the New Left, suggest a picture of convergence between the counterculture and the New Left as a complexly textured phenomenon. Overlapping ideas and influences between the two were fluid rather than static, were analyzed, selected, rejected, and transformed freely and for reasons that were sometimes opportunistic, capricious, and even whimsical. Interlocking personal and social relationships and overlapping personnel tied these arts and cultural groups to the counterculture and the New Left. For instance, in June 1967 four Diggers (a group usually associated with the counterculture) deliberately disrupted a Students for a Democratic Society alumni conference, leaving a large faction of New Left veterans "turned on by their theater of cruelty" and "shaken, intrigued, and tempted by the Diggers."<sup>42</sup> Emmett Grogan, a Digger and countercultural icon, discussed guerrilla theater with key organizers of a forerunner of AWC, "Angry Arts against the War in Vietnam," a week-long festival held in New York in the winter of 1967; performers in "Angry Arts" included musicians associated with the folk revival with whom the Freedom Singers often performed. Another AWC precursor, Artists and Writers Protest, published its condemnation of the Vietnam War in the SDS magazine, *Caw*. Not surprisingly, upon its 1969 founding the AWC bore a marked resemblance to the New Left in its goals, ideologies, and tactics. Julian Beck and Judith Malina, whose Living Theatre later became identified with the counterculture, participated with folk revival figures and the civil rights activist Bayard Rustin in the General Strikes for Peace of the early 1960s. During its 1968–69 American tour, the Living Theatre's audiences consisted of not just the student Left but young people identifying with countercultural rebellion. *Paradise Now*, the tour's centerpiece, linked immediate political issues such as Vietnam to a larger array of social and personal freedoms which the counterculture embraced.

These relationships demonstrate a convergence between countercultural figures and the "political Left" that involves a broader definition of politics

than the traditional view that cultural expressions are separate from politics since they occur outside the parameters of elections, party politics, and organized social movements. This book fits into a growing body of scholarship that reconceptualizes what constitutes "authentic" political activity as broader than solely that which takes place within established institutions.<sup>43</sup> One emerging line of argument is that far from serving simply as a weak substitute for politics, culture can become a sort of pre-political form, or a "rehearsal for politics." Within this framework, culture is seen as possessing a viable "oppositional potential."<sup>44</sup> Some observers have ventured further, suggesting that radical artistic expressions and cultural forms serve not merely as rehearsals for politics but rather amount to a form of "counterculture" or "oppositional stance," contesting mainstream values and society.<sup>45</sup> The groups featured in this study not only "rehearsed" deeply felt political beliefs, they performed their visions of politics publicly. Central to their politics was the moral conviction that personal choices, lifestyles, and acts of artistic creation are infused with important political dimensions. These groups shared this vision of personal politics with a larger movement that included the New Left, the counterculture, and the emerging feminist movement during the sixties. Most important, they addressed the relationship between politics and lifestyle, boldly imploding these categories in dramatic and provocative public spectacles.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Freedom Singers of the Civil Rights Movement: Delivering a Message on the Front Lines

The civil rights movement achieved its greatest triumphs by bringing to the fore issues of human and constitutional rights, morality, power relations, race, and culture, and giving these abstract concepts concrete shape in the hearts and minds of the American public. Movement activists accomplished this through a series of direct action nonviolent protests designed to call attention to the injustices of southern segregationist society. Many of the most celebrated direct action campaigns in the movement, from the Montgomery bus boycott to the lunch counter sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, involved activists' efforts to desegregate public accommodations. Thus the transformation of public space represented one of the movement's most visible and central concerns, and these campaigns spawned a body of freedom songs that became integral to movement strategy. The activists who sang these songs mobilized music as part of the daily struggle waged in the public spaces of the South. The term "freedom singer" applied to anyone who sang songs as part of the civil rights movement. Local campaigns also generated several freedom-singing ensembles that formed to lend their vocal capacities to the struggle. These included the Montgomery Gospel Trio, the Nashville Quartet, the CORE Freedom Singers, the Alabama Christian Movement Choir, and the SNCC Freedom Singers.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I focus primarily on the activities of the larger, more general body of freedom singers, highlighting at the end the SNCC Freedom Singers, who, apart

from television, did the most to spread the movement's music outside the South.

The evolution of the freedom singers' use of music—first overcoming a reluctance to singing in public spaces, then using singing to demonstrate courage and resolve to white authorities, and reworking lyrics to fit different situations of social contestation—demonstrates that they possessed a self-conscious awareness of the performative aspects of public singing and a concern for its effects on various audiences that links them to more overtly theatrical groups such as the Living Theatre, the Diggers, the Art Workers Coalition, and the Guerrilla Art Action Group. Later, after freedom singing was well established as an essential tactic within the movement and as a central part of movement culture, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee sponsored a formal group, the SNCC Freedom Singers, to travel outside the South and perform in concert halls to publicize the cause. With the development of this handpicked group of excellent singing voices who comprised the SNCC Freedom Singers, the performances of the larger, anonymous legions of freedom singers in the South appeared in more conventional ways and in more traditional venues.

Freedom singers sought primarily to advance the integrationist and egalitarian goals of the early civil rights movement. Despite the considerable recognition they received for their music, artistic concerns remained secondary to their roles as activists in a mass democratic movement. Singing, therefore, was important as a tactic, an aspect of movement culture rather than an expression of art for art's sake. Though this difference separated freedom singers from, for instance, the Living Theatre, for whom artistic concerns were always salient, it is less obvious in relation to the Diggers, the Art Workers Coalition, and the Guerrilla Art Action Group, whose expressions were inseparable from the social, political, and cultural upheavals of the sixties.

Though it was not inevitable that freedom singing would play as prominent a role in the civil rights movement as it did, an African American tradition of using music for social protest dated back to the days of slavery. Before the Civil War, slaves used music to resist oppression, singing spirituals about the "freedom train" that served as coded language to help relay practical information for escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad. Runaway slaves also sang to bolster their hope and resolve in the face of danger; Frederick Douglass recounts that the spiritual "Run to Jesus" signified not just the solace of the "world of spirits" but "a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state" in the here and now. This use of music as a tool of resistance continued during the Jim Crow era as African American spirituals were sung to provide comfort in everyday

life under racial oppression and in situations of social contestation. For instance, during the Atlanta riots of 1906, the black community sang a version of "Oh Freedom," with its statement of defiance, "And before I'll be a slave / I'll be buried in my grave," which later became a staple of the sixties movement. In the 1930s the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, which included numerous black locals, sang another future freedom song, "We Shall Not Be Moved," in its efforts to confront the poverty and oppression rural sharecroppers endured.<sup>2</sup> Thus singing in the civil rights movement traced a lineage back through African American history; yet in the early sixties, activists came to employ singing on an unprecedented scale, mobilizing freedom songs as a ubiquitous part of the movement's activities from mass meetings to direct action confrontations.

Despite the breadth of singing in the movement, adopting black spirituals did not necessarily come naturally to the middle-class black students in SNCC, the group most responsible for making singing a central element of movement strategy. These students were upwardly mobile, and some of them linked spirituals with slavery and social backwardness. Bernice Reagon has argued that the southern black colleges "as a general rule, attempted to free students from cultural traditions and ties that were distinctly rural, Black and old-fashioned." Rather than the music of the traditional church, black college choirs substituted meticulously arranged "Negro spirituals," which used typically European harmonies and musical structures. This formal training wrought a cumulative effect on black college students. Guy Carawan, music director at Highlander Folk School, referred to the students' singing prior to the sit-ins as "stilted and formal and showing a basic lack of pride in their traditional music."<sup>3</sup>

Yet the traditional spirituals supplied a body of songs with which middle-class students and rural sharecroppers were both familiar, and which could be easily altered or "updated" to address the most timely and pressing issues.<sup>4</sup> Movement activists made a conscious decision to use traditional black music, in conjunction with other forms such as rhythm and blues and gospel, because they believed it could provide a valuable historical link to a tradition of black social contestation. Mobilized in a variety of different situations, singing emerged as the most visible element in the movement culture of SNCC and the larger civil rights movement.<sup>5</sup>

By 1964, SNCC's movement culture included coed and interracial housing in Mississippi's "freedom houses," and even occasional marijuana smoking. The liberalized sexual mores and experimental use of substances that this culture facilitated are phenomena that many historians of the sixties assume

that the counterculture invented. Yet SNCC's "communal clustering" anticipated the wider countercultural movement of the mid- and late sixties. SNCC's communal ethos, in which singing functioned as an "organizational glue," links them to groups more closely associated with the counterculture, such as the Living Theatre and the Diggers, both of which pursued communal lifestyles more self-consciously.<sup>6</sup> The continuity of this communal impulse suggests an area of overlap between the political Left and the counterculture.

More than a part of movement culture, singing served as a deliberate and conscious movement tactic. It provided a means of reorienting black cultural identity and affirming a positive link with African American cultural heritage and with traditions of black protest. Prior to the civil rights movement, many African Americans suffered a negative self-image and feelings of inferiority to whites that stemmed from the lingering effects of slavery-era oppressions as well as the legal inequalities of the Jim Crow South.<sup>7</sup> Initially the movement focused on this publicly codified inequality, arguing that blacks should have access to the same rights and privileges of citizenship that whites enjoyed. As early as 1962, however, students in SNCC began to question assimilation, integration, and legal equality as the movement's ultimate goals. They argued that an enhanced sense of black cultural identity and of economic justice were necessary to create a racially egalitarian nation. Ultimately these sentiments evolved into the ideas of "Black Power" and black nationalism that dominated African American discourse by the late sixties, which transformed the civil rights movement from a struggle for integration to a struggle for identity in a society that activists wanted to remake in order to accommodate pluralism. By making the cultural link to traditional African American music, the freedom singers played a vital role in this transition from the early movement's concerns with social relations and voting rights to the focus of Black Power on economic self-determination and cultural expression.

Singing bridged a social gap between the middle-class black college students in SNCC and rural southern blacks, which served SNCC's goal of fostering indigenous leadership in rural black communities. Singing created a sense of unity within the movement and conveyed this unity to the public outside the movement. Moreover, activists regarded singing as crucial to overcoming fear and sustaining courage in the face of violence and hardship. As the forum for freedom songs was increasingly a public one, singing became an outward demonstration of resolve, both to hostile authorities and to Americans outside the South. Finally, singing helped create public sympathy for the civil rights movement. This was accomplished not only through the efforts of the formal group of SNCC Freedom Singers, but through the masses of grassroots civil