The Porter’s Gate’s songs give voice to the realities of 2020

A collective of Black, White, and Latino church songwriters makes liturgical music for resistance.

by Amy L. Sherman in the November 18, 2020 issue

The Porter's Gate (photo from Facebook)

In 1961, Martin Luther King Jr. joined fellow civil rights protesters who were working to end racial discrimination in Albany, Georgia. There he affirmed how critical the movement’s music was. “The freedom songs,” King said, “are playing a strong and vital role in our struggle.” Bernice Johnson Reagon, a member of the Freedom Singers, a group that formed in Albany, recalled in a 2006 interview that “it was important to us to have songs that named what we saw in our world, and what we

wanted to happen with what we saw.”

The Porter’s Gate, a collective of Black, White, and Latino church songwriters, recently released two albums that name today’s realities and offer fresh expression for those continuing the struggle today. My friend Isaac Wardell, who cofounded the Porter’s Gate, told me the aim was to create music that people “could take with them to the protests.”

Four of the eight songs on the *Justice Songs* album have had me high-stepping about the house. “We Will Make No Peace with Oppression” facilitated the most energetic engagement I’ve ever had with a line from the Book of Common Prayer. The driving chorus—“We will make no peace, no peace, no peace with oppression / We will make no peace, no peace”—calls forth an assiduous marching:

The song notes particular contemporary injustices: destructive politicians, corrupt systems, overflowing prisons. But the title line has been in the prayer book for nearly a century:

> Almighty God, who created us in your image:
> Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil
> and to make no peace with oppression;
> and, that we may reverently use our freedom,
> help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice
> in our communities and among the nations.

Two songs employ the call-and-response style of Black gospel. “His Kingdom Now Is Come” bursts open with a thumping piano bass, followed shortly with these announcements and echoes: “The light shines (the light shines) / In the darkness (in the darkness) / And the darkness cannot overcome (and the darkness cannot overcome).”

The steady drumbeat and exuberant proclamation—“Behold! Behold! His kingdom now is come”—urges you to stomp your feet.

“Justicia,” written and performed by Tina Colón Williams, joins heavy percussion with a syncopated piano. It’s easy to imagine the singer brandishing a bullhorn as she calls for justice in both English and Spanish:

“There’s something so uniquely powerful about singing together in the face of oppression and injustice,” says Williams. Most group singing is on hold during the pandemic, and I listened to this song alone. But I felt connected to the peaceful demonstrators marching in innumerable cities.

In “We Believe in the Name,” Liz Vice’s muscular but velvet-wrapped voice commands, “Say his name!”

It makes me think of a similar line in a very different context: demonstrators insisting that we remember Breonna Taylor and “say her name.” It pulls me back from my dejection to consider that Jesus knows her name—and the names of so many others whose humanity has been dismissed. Jesus names and renames, makes and remakes. With its repetition of “we believe in the saving power,” the song calls me to reaffirm my faith and find new hope.

Lament Songs is more sober and yearning than *Justice Songs*; it’s also lighter on vocals. The songs put my own inarticulate complaints into words, thus achieving the goal of biblical lamentation. As Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote in these pages last year, the psalms of lament help the grieving by speaking not only to us but for us.

I played one of the *Lament Songs* for my church small group recently. “O Sacred Neck, Now Wounded” initially left the others speechless, as it did me my first time through:

It’s the edgiest song on the album, an intricate interweaving of the doctrines of incarnation and imago Dei. Set to the familiar German hymn tune popularized by J. S. Bach, the song presses us to see Jesus in the face of the beaten:

> O sacred neck now wounded,
> Pressed down by blows and knees,
> This son of God surrounded by silent enemies.
> Will no one stop and listen?
> Will no one rise and speak?
> Of violence and oppression
> Which hanged you from that tree?

“With this song, we ask with the psalms, ‘Who is he, this king of glory?’” explains songwriter Keith Watts. “How does his unjust death inform our sense of faithful lament and our action toward justice? Will we see the image of God in our neighbor?” Jesus himself says we can find him in the face of the hungry, the poor, and the imprisoned (Matt. 25). That is, if we’re looking.

The artists of the Porter’s Gate draw on a variety of sources for inspiration. The folky guitar sound of “The Zaccheaus Song” echoes Peter, Paul, and Mary:

Its words are straight out of Luke 19. “How Long?” is an adaptation of Psalm 13. “O Jerusalem” is rich with biblical allusions to the new heaven and earth:

> They have told us of a city where our tears are washed away
> And every shadowed valley is washed in endless day.
> They have told us of a table where the poor are honored guests,
> Where all the weary wanderers come in to bless and rest.

These songs attend so well to the painful particularities of 2020. I was surprised when Isaac told me that the project began before the pandemic. Several of the songs were finished or at least under way months before the protests. When the artists gathered at a farmhouse in rural Virginia for a week in July 2020, they recorded the songs that had already been written, put finishing touches on others, and wrote a couple of new ones. They talked plenty about “the current moment,” Isaac said, “and wrote specifically for our time.” But the lyrics didn’t have to pass a relevancy test. “When the words we sing are true, when the questions we’re asking are real questions, I think people are going to feel a connection to those things.”

Indeed, the project taps into universal ideas. “Wake Up, Jesus”—an anguished cry from the perspective of those getting swamped in the storm—connects with the despair felt by all mourning the far-too-long denial of the full inclusion of Black Americans. But it also offers succor to my friend Della as she laments the cruel illness that has largely confined her son to his bedroom for eight long years.

I thought “Precious Woman” was an encomium to Breonna Taylor. (“You are more than what we made you . . . You deserve more than what we gave you.”) In fact, the songwriter penned it after listening to the testimonies of single women who spoke of feeling invisible in the church. “Drive Out the Darkness” references the longings we

all have for light and healing, for an end to violence and injustice.

Like the soundtrack of the civil rights movement, *Justice Songs* and *Lament Songs* connect listeners to the groans of African Americans still treated like second-class citizens. This is music that produces grief. I'm finding I need that to get down below the easier emotion of anger, to face my own prejudices and self-delusions.

But this is also music spurring hope. And hope, as Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative has long asserted, "is the enemy of injustice." Colón Williams says, "I stay amazed at the ability of music to stir up hope in goodness beyond what we see, goodness we so desperately need."

The Porter's Gate has crafted memorable, formational songs to counter tribalism and fear. These albums are fuel for reshaping and refining Jesus followers toward a faith that requires both personal, sacrificial action and expectant rest in the one who "will not grow faint . . . until he has established justice in the earth."

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