

Music to Move By

I began this writing with no foreknowledge of Odetta; yet, with a deep respect for what I have learned thus far, and still, will learn in by its completion.

Born in Birmingham Alabama, Odetta Holmes found her place with folk music by way of Las Angeles. At the still young age of 19, she began her journey at a time of rising discontent in our society in the areas of civil rights and anti-war sentiment. Her emergence into to genre was no accident as she possessed both the talent and the timing to rise to the attention and complement of such well-known artists as Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Willie Guthrie.

As a black (or African-American) woman – originally from the south – she obviously had first-hand knowledge of discrimination and prejudice. It was undoubtedly her passion and the early practice of classical music lessons hat led to her ultimate undertaking as a flock artist and advocate for civil rights. In 1999, she received the National Endowment for the Arts’ Medal from the President along with subsequent recognition from the Kennedy Center and Library of Congress.

With this background, what might we draw from the title of this writing “Music to Move By” as well as the selected quote to the right? The title suggests some type of **rhythm** that invokes dance and harmony; but, of course, that depends on whether the music appeals to that – and whether one has rhythm to begin with.

*“No one can dub
you with
dignity. That’s
yours to claim.”*

- Odetta

Then there is the matter of “**dignity**” and whether it is an entitlement, is earned, or is understood to be pursued and acquired. How do we acquire dignity and, for the matter, do we want it in the first place? Maybe it is a matter that begins with the hard acceptance that you do not have dignity or, as most likely for Odetta, you are discriminated against because of color and race. Who knows better the value of dignity that one who has been without it?

When music “moves-you”, it doesn’t necessarily bring you to dance; but it does tap into your soul such that the move may be one of emotion or **passion**. Folk music is renowned for intending and cause such a response as it many times describes the plight of peoples, a person’s tragedy, or something similar; it is much more about the

words or lyrics than about the melody or musical score. In my attachment to folk music, the simplicity of the composition is half the attraction. Equipped often times with only a guitar or banjo, the folk artist can turn a song into a movement or campaign. Legends have been made into folk songs and, quite possibly, legends have been made from such music. From its origin across the sea, folk music was an early genre for our developing nation and continues to the day.

Recently, I came across several artist on Youtube® singing the classis 60's piece "Where have all the flowers gone?". Listening (and watching) several (Peter, Paul & Mary, Pete Seeger [originator], and Chris Slick), I realized that the social **context** is very important. When these songs were written and recorded (or when Odetta was rising), our culture or society was in turmoil – and the songs were an outcry of some people's opposition. To listen on the Web is not nearly the same; and while the song or recording may be appreciated by recollection, it does not altogether *move-you* as it moved those at the time or period.

People wanted peace from the current war; people wanted prejudice to end for women and minorities; and people wanted a host of other things too. To want is not enough however as a cause or campaign, however justified or rational, is not always sufficient or adequate to move others who to similar passion – and to get something done about the problem.

Odetta commented on her songs: "These songs come out of difficult times, and since the difficult times haven't been fixed, the songs are still her for us." Well, if "difficult times" was the context for these songs than who better to understand or be *moved* by them than those who know "difficult times". Yes, the context must be considered along with the understanding that comes to those who, as they say, *have been there*.

Another artist who knew "difficult times" was author and poet, Maya Angelou. Until I read her autobiography, I knew little about the women – of all her struggles from childhood. She wrote of Odetta:
If only one could be sure that every fifty years a voice and a soul like Odetta's would come along, the centuries would pass so quickly and painlessly we would hardly recognize time.
She obviously recognized the value of this contemporary that, like her, was raised in a time of much struggle and "difficult times". What music moves you – and if it does – what will you do? "That's yours to claim."