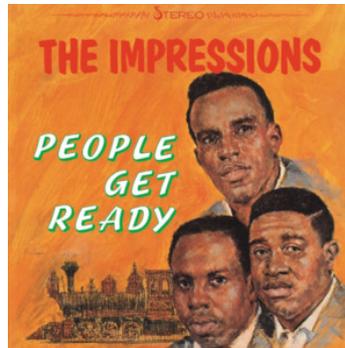


“People Get Ready”—The Impressions (1965)

Added to the National Registry: 2015

Essay by Brad Erickson (guest post)*



Original sleeve

As a small, dark child, Curtis Mayfield was stung by the nickname “Smut.” As a songwriter he would transform stigma into anthems of Black pride, yet when praised for his contribution to the Civil Rights Movement, Mayfield demurred, “I’m just an entertainer.”

Jerry Butler and Curtis Mayfield met as teenagers in a Chicago church choir. In 1958, they joined forces with a vocal trio from Tennessee to form the Impressions. By 1962, Mayfield, Sam Gooden and Fred Cash remained. Mayfield wrote the songs and played guitar with nuanced sensitivity. When the group teamed up with producer Johnny Pate in 1963, Pate’s polished arrangements propelled the Impressions to popular success.

Curtis Mayfield sings “People Get Ready” in a silken falsetto over pizzicato strings and Sam Gooden responds, “*There’s a train a-coming.*” Mayfield’s guitar marks time with staccato upstrokes over low French horns while bell-like glockenspiel tones rise to the heavens. “*You don’t need no baggage,*” sings Mayfield; Gooden and Cash respond, “*You just get on board.*” This is a train song; this is a gospel song delivering good news. But 1965 was the height of the Civil Rights Movement, when the suppression of Black voters spurred the march from Selma to Montgomery and police assaulted peaceful marchers.

To be confined in segregated schools, jobs, or neighborhoods is to lack freedom of movement. To be incarcerated, terrorized or dispossessed—and thus all too often to be Black in America—is to lack the mobility others take for granted. African American music has repeatedly linked liberation to images of mobility: highways, marching, biblical exodus, space travel and trains.

The first US passenger train set forth in 1830 and, by 1850, 9,000 miles of track sped the travel of those free to do so. But 1850 was also the year of the Fugitive Slave Act that put even free Black people in the path of predatory slave patrols. The train held special meaning for people denied freedom of movement. Starting in 1831, the clandestine network that enabled enslaved Africans to flee their white captors was called the Underground Railroad. More than a century before “People Get Ready,” the Underground Railroad’s most famous conductor, Harriet Tubman, used songs to link themes of travel, heavenly salvation, and deliverance from earthly bondage: *the promised land* meant Canada, and *Egypt* stood for the slave states. She sang “Go

Down Moses” to warn fugitives to stay hidden, but as she led them across the border, Tubman, known as “Moses” to her friends, called out, “Glory to God in the highest. One more soul is safe!”

“People Get Ready” is an American song about the sin of slavery never atoned for, the systemic racism that followed, and the promise of deliverance. Following a guitar interlude and modulation to a higher key, Cash and Gooden hum in harmony as Mayfield takes the listener to church:

*There ain't no room
For the hopeless sinner
Who would hurt all mankind
Just to save his own*

Who are the sinners beyond redemption? By 1965, many white allies had joined the Freedom Riders as they confronted racial segregation; surely these are welcome to board the train. But there were white lawmakers opposing the Voting Rights Act, white Klansmen murdering civil rights activists, and white police beating Black supplicants as they knelt in prayer. To be saved the sinner must stop sinning but the defenders of white supremacy ignore the call. Elijah Muhammad interpreted Ezekiel’s wheel as a bomb-laden Mother Plane that will mete out divine punishment to whites for their wickedness. Mayfield echoes this prophecy but gently and without rancor:

*Have pity on those whose
Chances grow thinner
There's no hiding place
Against the kingdom's throne*

Out of context, “People Get Ready,” like “Go Down Moses” before it, is a simple song of Christian faith. The train is God’s grace in the former and the refrain, “Let my people go” has no special resonance for African Americans in the latter. But Martin Luther King, Jr. named “People Get Ready” the unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement and often used the song to get people marching or to calm and comfort them. The racial subtext was obvious to African Americans and this encouraged Mayfield to write songs with explicit social messages. The following five years saw the release of “We’re a Winner,” “Choice of Colors,” “This is My Country,” “Move on Up,” “We People Who are Darker than Blue,” “Miss Black America,” and “(Don’t Worry) If There’s Hell Below We’re All Gonna Go,” all embracing pride in blackness and calling on the human family to do better. When Mayfield agreed to create the soundtrack for “Superfly” in 1972, he subverted the glamorization of drugs and crime with songs that exposed the emptiness of the pusher’s life and lifted up the humanity of the victim.

Beyond the Civil Rights Movement, “People Get Ready” was a popular success, reaching number three on the “Billboard” R&B Chart and number 14 on the “Billboard” Pop Chart. There have been many cover versions including Bob Marley & the Wailers’ joyful mash-up, “One Love/People Get Ready.” Mayfield’s lyrical guitar lines embellished by graceful hammer-on and pull-off techniques influenced Jimi Hendrix as he expanded the sonic potential of the

guitar. Various arbiters of taste have declared “People Get Ready” to be one of the greatest songs ever written but such grandeur seems at odds with the song’s humble grace.

The Library of Congress admitted “People Get Ready” to the National Recording Registry in 2015. Could the Freedom Riders of 1965 have imagined that, after five decades, the economic gulf between Black and white Americans would yawn even wider? Could Harriet Tubman have imagined that her descendants would still walk in fear of vigilantes and police 150 years after the terror of the slave patrols?

Iron rails form the long arc of the moral universe. “People Get Ready” communicates with the past while the title anticipates the future. Listening to “People Get Ready” in a period of resurgent white supremacy reminds us of the fragility of what we think is progress yet encourages us to fiercely hope and stubbornly prepare for a brighter day.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.