

DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE

Voices for Freedom: Opera at Mount Holyoke College tells the story of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer

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Andrea Chinedu Nwoke Sings During a Rehearsal of "Dark River" - Photo by Jerrey Roberts

Unless you've been living on a remote desert island for the past 60 years, you know the names of at least some of the leaders of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s — Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, and others.

What about Fannie Lou Hamer?

Hamer was the daughter of dirt-poor sharecroppers from Mississippi, a woman who had little formal education but who became a leader in the effort to register African-American voters in Mississippi in the early 1960s — and

she won national recognition for her speech at the 1964 Democratic National Convention on the violence she and others suffered at the hands of whites.

Hamer's life has been chronicled in a few books and articles over the years, and now she's getting her due in artistic form. "Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story," is an operatic exploration of her life that, in its East Coast debut, combines the efforts of a composer and a director from California, a former Northampton resident and arts promoter, and the Mount Holyoke College Symphony Orchestra.

The opera, written by Oakland, Calif., composer and pianist Mary Watkins, will be presented Friday at 7:30 p.m. and Saturday at 3 p.m. at Chapin Auditorium at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley. Additional information about the program and tickets is available at darkriveropera.org.

Watkins conceived of writing an opera about the civil rights movement after reading the 1988 book "Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63," the first part of historian Taylor Branch's award-winning trilogy on the civil rights era. "I found that book so inspiring that I wanted to create something that would capture the scope of it, and I thought an opera could do that," she said in a recent phone interview.

The idea stayed with Watkins but didn't take form until she revisited it in 2006-07, by which time she'd done further reading on the civil rights movement, including a biography of Hamer, and decided to build the piece around her.

“Her life had great drama, and it was a way to focus all these things I’d read and been thinking about,” said Watkins, who has written music for a range of performers over the years, including orchestras, jazz ensembles and choral groups.

Growth of an opera

Her opera — Watkins wrote both the music and the libretto — was first performed in Oakland in 2009, though with just a small musical ensemble for support. Then, with encouragement and financial backing from a group founded by former Northampton resident Martha Richards, she scored the piece for a full orchestra.

Richards, now living in Berkeley, saw “Dark River” and afterwards got in touch with Watkins to discuss developing the piece further and bringing it to other venues. Richards is director of WomenArts, an organization she started in Northampton in 1994 as the The Fund for Women Artists; the nonprofit group helps female artists on several fronts, from funding to networking to helping them develop business skills.

“Musically, I thought it was a wonderful piece, and it’s a very powerful story,” said Richards, a former director of StageWest in Springfield. “And I thought if we could find a way to expand it, hopefully we could find some other venues and audiences for it.”

Richards also says the Supreme Court decision last year to strike down a provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the effort by several Republican-dominated states to reduce early and absentee voting, make the opera particularly timely today.

Richards and Watkins looked at different possibilities for “Dark River,” including staging the opera in Atlanta, then found a strong proponent in Ng Tian Hui, director of the Mount Holyoke Symphony Orchestra, who had learned of the show. Ng, who liked the interdisciplinary nature of Watkins’ music — it adds elements of the blues, gospel and jazz to its classical structure — offered the services of the orchestra for the production, thinking it would be a good opportunity for his students and an inspiring story for a women’s college.

In addition, Ng, who is from Singapore, was drawn to the struggle African-Americans waged to gain full rights as citizens; he notes that Singapore was once plagued with racial conflicts, most notably in 1964 when riots between Malays and ethnic Chinese killed 36 and injured hundreds. The opera’s theme, Ng said, “really resonated with me ... and we [the orchestra] look for music that speaks to those themes.”

An epic story

At a rehearsal last week, several members of the cast — there are 16 in all — were rehearsing in a room at Pratt Music Hall at Mount Holyoke. In one scene, set in a Mississippi church in 1962, Ernest Jackson plays the role of a minister and civil rights activist who asks for African-Americans to register to vote.

With pianist Bob Hansler accompanying her, Andrea Chinedu Nwoke, playing the role of Hamer, stood up and sang in a rich voice, “I will go, if I can do some good. I will do it for Emmett Till ... my name is Fannie Lou Hamer, and I will go.”

Till, an African-American teen from Chicago, was murdered by whites in Mississippi in 1955 after allegedly flirting with a white woman; his brutal death drew national attention and is generally considered a pivotal event in sparking the civil rights movement.

The opera's director, Darryl V. Jones, nodded his head as he listened to Nwoke. "That's good, that's lovely," he told her. Jones, who teaches and directs theater at California State University in the Bay Area, directed the first version of "Dark River" in 2009 in Oakland, and helped Watkins develop it before bringing it to the stage that fall.

"It needed some restructuring, and to have the chance to have input and to shape it, that was really attractive to me," he said.

But what really grabbed him about "Dark River," he adds, was the diversity and depth of Watkins' music, as well as the scope of the story itself — the arc of Hamer's life and what she accomplished against seemingly insurmountable odds. An opera, he says, is a fitting artistic vehicle for celebrating her life.

"It's really an epic story," he said. "[Hamer] rose from absolute poverty — essentially indentured servitude — to educate herself, to galvanize a community to take all kinds of risks, and to do it in the face of unrelenting opposition. ... To me, that's a story that needs to be told, and to be told at an appropriate scale."

Drawn to the fight

Born in 1917 in Mississippi, Hamer was the youngest of 20 children in a family of sharecroppers and was picking cotton by the time she was 10. She would later marry but would be unable to bear children after a white doctor sterilized her without her knowledge, as part of a state government plan to limit the growth of the African-American population.

Hamer was eventually drawn to the fight to end segregation in the South, though she suffered physically and emotionally from that commitment. Because of her efforts to register African-American voters, police severely beat her in 1963, leaving her with permanent damage to her kidneys. She also had to leave her husband, Pap, and their adopted children behind when their landlord threatened to throw the family off his property because of her voter registration work.

All of these elements are part of the narrative in "Dark River" — and so is Hamer's most famous moment, when she led activists to the Democratic National Convention in 1964, in Atlantic City in New Jersey. The "Freedom Democrats," as they were known, challenged the seating of Mississippi's all-white and anti-civil rights delegation as unrepresentative of the state.

Leading Democrats, including President Lyndon Johnson, tried to placate Hamer's group with promises of future reforms; they feared any concessions they made immediately would drive Mississippi politicians and voters to Republicans. But in a speech at the convention that drew national media coverage, Hamer insisted African-Americans needed help now: Describing the violence they suffered in the South, she said "Is this America, the land of the free and home of the brave?"

Hamer would go on to earn a seat on the Mississippi delegation to the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

"It's an inspirational story," said Watkins. "The fact that she was not going to give up, that she became this determined leader, makes her such a compelling figure."

And, Watkins notes, Hamer, who died in 1977, was also a very spiritual person who regularly led civil rights activists in songs like "This Little Light of Mine" to build community and confidence. "They basically sang their way through the movement, and as a musician and composer, that really appealed to me. ... I hope people will take to her story."