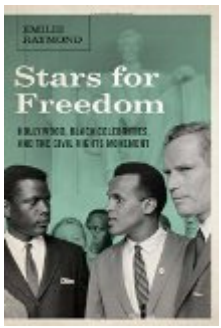
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emilie Raymond. *Stars for Freedom: Hollywood, Black Celebrities, and the Civil Rights Movement.* Capell Family Books Series. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. Illustrations. 352 pp. $40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-99480-2.



Reviewed by Mark Walmsley

Published on H-1960s (April, 2016)

Commissioned by Zachary J. Lechner (Centenary College of Louisiana)

Building on the work of Brian Ward (*Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* [1998]) and Ingrid Monson (*Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* [2007]), Emilie Raymond examines the contribution that a number of leading African American actors, singers, and comedians made to the civil rights movement. From the outset, Raymond maintains a realistic sense of these contributions, stressing in her preface that "the Stars for Freedom did not define the civil rights movement so much as fulfil an important niche as well-connected spokespersons and fund-raisers" (p. x). Her book is a welcome addition to growing literature that stresses the heterogeneity of civil rights protest in the postwar era.

One of the most impressive aspects of this work—particularly evident in her examination of Sammy Davis Jr. in chapter 2—is the way in which Raymond's case studies highlight what Hollywood stars stood to gain from civil rights activism, rather than simply concentrating on what they stood to (or did in fact) lose. Emphasizing that "black celebrities needed the civil rights movement almost as much as it needed them" (p. 39), Raymond manages to avoid canonizing the individuals she studies while simultaneously challenging those who have criticized them for being motivated by guilt or self-interest.[1] For instance, Raymond underscores the important role that these "Stars for Freedom" played as a bridge between such African American-led organizations as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the influence and finances of northern white liberals. At the same time, however, Raymond shows that many of these celebrities had "achieved stardom ... at the cost of somewhat dissatisfying black audiences" and that civil rights activism allowed these individuals to "cross back" into African American markets that would help to sustain their careers (p. 39).

Similarly, while analyzing the publicity that such stars as Dick Gregory could bring to failing projects in the South, Raymond highlights how the presence of such high-profile individuals could

also distract from important goals or shift work into less productive channels. Chapter 5, in which she thoroughly examines Gregory, is perhaps her best chapter; in it, she demonstrates the different roles that black celebrities could take as allies of the movement—not only by going to jail but also by fulfilling "a distinctive and important psychological function" for activists and community members alike (p. 147). Indeed, by highlighting how Gregory's experiences in the South began to shape the direction of his own career, this chapter provides another fine example of the symbiotic nature of celebrity activism.

Explaining how his evolution from "Gregory the Comic ... to Gregory the Crusader" undermined both his ability to raise money for the movement and his own commercial career, Raymond's illuminating discussion reinforces the reader's desire to hear more about the celebrities who operated at or beyond the fringes of mainstream acceptance (p. 155). However, while her work certainly provides fresh insight into the activism of high-profile celebrities, her focus on individuals who acted as "goodwill ambassadors" to white America overlooks the less well-known, but equally important, contribution that black stars made to more subversive and radical causes (p. 123). While Raymond acknowledges the relationships that some celebrities, including Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Gregory, maintained with Malcolm X in this period, the reader cannot help but wonder what a greater examination of these individuals would have yielded. Indeed, a case study on more controversial figures, such as Mohammad Ali or Maya Angelou, could have led to an interesting analysis of the confinement of the power of celebrity to a particular brand of what William Chafe has branded "acceptable dissent."[2] Instead, by claiming that the access celebrities provided to the "Northern liberal network" was "invaluable" to "a movement with the primary goal of integration" (pp. 112, 73), Raymond reinforces a particular understanding of what the civil rights movement actually was.

This narrative is most notable in the final chapter on Black Power. Discussing the commercial fortune of actors like Sidney Poitier in a new atmosphere of black self-empowerment, Raymond almost entirely omits the political connections between celebrities and activists. Given the considerable literature by such scholars as William Van Deburg (***New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*** [1992]) that examines the cultural impact of Black Power, it is strange not to see more analysis of the links (or lack thereof) between celebrities and the black freedom struggle after the Selma campaign. For instance, although she mentions James Brown, Raymond does not utilize James West's interesting research that compares his sanitized version of Black Power with such political leaders as Stokely Carmichael.[3] Instead, Raymond summarizes the continued activism of such individuals as Dick Gregory and Harry Belafonte in just two pages of her epilogue. Perhaps this gap is related to her belief that the death of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 symbolized the "dissolution of the civil rights movement" or perhaps it was simply an editorial decision to manage an ambitious project (p. 240). In any case, it leaves the reader wanting to know more about how celebrity activism responded to the changing demands of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This critique, though, is not meant to detract from the quality of this work. Raymond's archival research into the lives of such individuals as Davis and Gregory provides a treasure trove of information for scholars wishing to understand how these celebrities interacted with—and contributed to—the civil rights movement of the early 1960s. Indeed, as with all good books, Raymond's study provides both insight and avenues for further scholarly discussion and exploration. That it manages to do so while being highly entertaining and readable is an added bonus.

Notes

[1]. Gerald Lyn Early, ***This Is Where I Came in Black America in the 1960s*** (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003); and Wil Haygood, ***In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr.*** (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2003).

[2]. William H. Chafe, ***Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

[3]. James West, "James Brown, Stokely Carmichael, and 'Acceptable' Forms of Black Power Protest," ***Black Diaspora Review***, 4 (2014): 36-75.