

# “We Insist! Max Roach’s Freedom Now Suite”—Max Roach (1960)

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Essay by Christa Gammage (guest post)\*



*Max Roach*

During the Civil Rights Movement, many Jazz artists utilized their music to bring attention to the issue of racial equality in the United States. Jazz was an opportunity to critique the treatment of African-Americans through art and took on a new meaning in the 1960s. Jazz musicians felt an imperative to express through music how the circumstances of racism had affected them and their fellow African-Americans over the centuries. Due to the influx of massacres, bombings, and various other violent and horrific acts that plagued the South both during and prior to the Civil Rights Movement, Max Roach was inspired to create a highly political piece to reflect the collective experience of the African-American in the United States.

“We Insist! Freedom Now Suite” by Max Roach, in collaboration with his wife and singer Abbey Lincoln, lyricist Oscar Brown, Jr., drummer Michael Olatunji, and tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, expressed a need for freedom and individual equality in the United States that still resonates today.<sup>1</sup> The album is emblematic of the struggles faced by African-Americans in the United States, from the beginning of the slave trade to present-day 1960s. The album was meant to reach audiences far and wide, and in 1963 Roach announced that the album was available free of charge to any “fund-raising organization requesting it.”<sup>2</sup> Roach’s dedication to spreading the message of racial equality and how important he felt his music was to the movement is illustrated by his continuous emphasis that proceeds should be donated towards Civil Rights organizations.

The album was performed for the first time on January 15, 1961 at an event at New York’s Village Gate sponsored by the Congress for Racial Equality to highlight the movement’s most influential works so far.<sup>3</sup> It went on to be performed at the 52nd annual convention of the NAACP in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, that summer, and there was even talk of a tour in the fall given the album’s success.<sup>4</sup>

The album received mixed reviews; some critics claimed the album displayed a “bitter mood” and felt it was “new-frontier club stuff and most likely a little too far out in uncut timber for most tastes.”<sup>5</sup> However, Roach and his contemporaries received enough praise that in 1964 Roach performed the work at the prestigious Newport Jazz festival with Lincoln, tenor saxophonist Clifford Jordan, bassist Eddie Kahn, and pianist Lonnie Liston Smith.<sup>6</sup>

Meaning to communicate the African-American experience, “We Insist!” “includes” five songs that bring the listener on a journey from the heart of the American South in the

Antebellum era to the modern struggle against racial inequality taking place in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Consisting of solely politically-charged material, the music progresses through the last three hundred years in five movements: “Driva’ Man,” “Freedom Day,” “Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace,” “All Africa,” and “Johannesburg.”<sup>8</sup> Each song represents a different time in the history of African-Americans and has a particular sound to draw the listener in.

The actual presentation of the record when it was released also reflects its function as a work of political and social commentary. The cover depicts a photograph of three black men sitting at an American diner counter, with a white man serving them. This illustrates a visualization of the ideal world the artists were working towards.<sup>9</sup> At the time of the album’s release in 1960, it was meant to serve as “a ‘boost’ for the sit-ins” that were taking place across the south. The sit-ins, which had begun on February 1, 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina, were a specific reference on the cover of “We Insist!,” connecting the album’s material to the modern movement.<sup>10</sup>

In another act of solidarity, “We Insist!” further highlights the Civil Rights Movement in its liner notes by featuring a quote from Civil Rights Activist A. Philip Randolph: “A revolution is unfurling--America’s unfinished revolution. It is unfurling in lunch counters, buses, libraries and schools--wherever the dignity and potential of men are denied. Youth and idealism are unfurling. Masses of Negroes are marching onto the stage of history and demanding their freedom now!”<sup>11</sup> This opening note of the album portrays the musicians’ dedication to the message of the Civil Rights movement and commitment to its cause. As many musicians were unable to be on the front lines of the sit-ins and other forms of protest in the South, artists such as Roach and Lincoln turned to art to express their dismay towards anti-Black prejudice and violence, continuous cruelty and suffering, and the call for change through activism concerning the overall treatment of black people in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

The music of the “Freedom Now Suite” exemplifies the bravery of African-Americans throughout American history and how their experience has shaped their story in the United States. The violence occurring in the American South during the Civil Rights movement was a mere continuation of the long-standing violence experienced by African-Americans throughout American history.

The album reflects this continued violence towards African-Americans starting from 100 years before its release to the present day, and provides a foil to the happy American life commonly portrayed in post-World War II media. In fact, the urgency of the sit-in movement actually pushed the album’s release to an earlier date than was originally intended. The album was originally meant to be released as a centennial celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation. However, “We Insist!” was released two years earlier than originally intended; in 1960 rather than 1962 due to the rapid progression of the Civil Rights movement.<sup>13</sup> Before they could achieve true freedom through overturning racial prejudice, Roach and his fellow jazz musicians used their musical freedom as a metaphor for “emancipation from racist restrictions.”<sup>14</sup> Jazz embodied the message of the Civil Rights movement and its emphasis on individual expression that serves a group beyond oneself. In order to produce a functional musical piece, each musician must work with one another and listen to the ideas of others.<sup>15</sup> This same expression of democracy is what African-Americans were fighting for in their everyday lives.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.