

Corrected version  
Movie review

## 'Soundtrack for a Revolution': a powerful mix of music, civil-rights history

"Soundtrack for a Revolution," a documentary by Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman, is a brilliant capsule history of the civil-rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, punctuated by stirring performances from John Legend, Wyclef Jean, the Roots and others.

By [Tom Keogh](#)  
*Special to The Seattle Times*

"Soundtrack for a Revolution" is ostensibly the story of the civil-rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, as told through the songs that helped keep morale high and emotions focused among nonviolent activists during dark and terrible times.

Except, to be honest, this illuminating and sometimes devastating documentary isn't quite what it's billed. Not that there's a problem. "Soundtrack" may very well be the finest, broad history on film of the Southern Freedom Movement years as measured from the Montgomery bus boycott (beginning in 1955) to the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1968).

The movement's major campaigns, strategies and high points between those events are each generally but insightfully discussed by a number of figures who survived the bloody trenches of civil disobedience. That golden group includes now-Congressman John Lewis, Andrew Young, Lula Jo Williams, Julian Bond, the Rev. Samuel "Billy" Kyles and Dorothy Cotton, among many other, often lesser-known veterans.

These participants and eyewitnesses not only explain the tactical and moral purposes of the famous lunch-counter sit-ins and Freedom Rides and voter-registration drives and Selma-to-Montgomery marches. They also offer personal accounts of what it meant and felt like to go from one objective, one place, to the next, knowing each time they would be beaten, jailed or worse.

Hearing Lewis say he thought he was a dead man the day white police savagely attacked him and fellow marchers in Selma — and then seeing footage of him as a young man courageously leading that march — can leave one shaking with just a fraction of the rage civil-rights activists had learned from King to transcend.

As for the music: Co-directors Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman ("Nanking") front-load "Soundtrack" with testimony about the importance of songs during the movement's best and worst of times. "They can take away everything except the songs," someone says, "which means they can't take our souls."

But it isn't long before the role of music in "Soundtrack" proves subtly dissimilar to the music in, for example, Lee Hirsch's outstanding 2002 documentary "Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony." ("Amandla!" focuses on songs as a form of mass communication among blacks in apartheid-era South Africa.)

In "Soundtrack," songs are largely emotional punctuation in a story still very difficult to confront so many decades later. Toward that cathartic, spiritually restorative purpose, a number of beautiful performances in the film, shot in the confines of a cozy studio setting, stand out.

Among them are the Roots' spare and warm take on the ever-hypnotic "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around," John Legend's stirring version of the traditional "Woke Up This Morning," Wyclef Jean and Jerry Wonder's knowing rendition of Phil Ochs' "Here's to the State of Mississippi," and Anthony Hamilton and the Blind Boys of Alabama's gorgeous "This May Be the Last Time."

Tom Keogh: [tomwkeogh@yahoo.com](mailto:tomwkeogh@yahoo.com)

Information in this article, originally published April 29, 2010, was corrected May 3, 2010. A previous version of this story incorrectly misidentified the Selma-to-Montgomery 1965 civil-rights marches.



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"Soundtrack for a Revolution" shows images from the '50s and '60s, including sit-in participants.

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### Movie review ★★★★★

'Soundtrack for a Revolution,' with John Lewis, Andrew Young, Harry Belafonte, Julian Bond, Dorothy Cotton, Lula Jo Williams, the Rev. Samuel "Billy" Kyles, the Roots, Angie Stone, John Legend, Wyclef Jean, the Blind Boys of Alabama, Richie Havens, Joss Stone, Mary Mary, T.V. on the Radio. Written and directed by Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman. 82 minutes. Not rated; for mature audiences. Northwest Film Forum.

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