

'Freedom Songs' rock Waldorf West Branch Library

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The music of African American history – from the spirituals sung by enslaved peoples to jazz, rock, rap and R&B of the 20th century – helped shape and define this nation.

“Music is so important; it shaped our culture and our world,” said Danielle Harris, a performer with Bright Star Touring Theatre Company.

“Freedom Songs: The Music of Black History” was presented by Bright Star Touring Theatre at the Waldorf West Branch Library last Wednesday in recognition of Black History Month. Over 20 people attended the performance.

Bright Star Touring Theatre performers Harris, of Daytona Beach, Fla., and Stefan Funderburke of Heritage, Penn., travel the country performing songs and presenting history lessons in a back-and-forth dialogue with each other and the audience, averaging three performances a day.

The first enslaved Africans were brought to the Jamestown colony in 1619, Harris said. With them, they brought their own styles of music and songs, which became the African American work songs and spirituals of the 18th and 19th centuries.

“These songs helped lift their spirits in tough times and helped keep the day moving,” Harris said.

Many of the songs are believed to have contained hidden messages, including information about escape routes that got past the slave owners Harris said.

“The song ‘Wade in the Water’ told enslaved people that if they ever wanted to find freedom, they needed to escape to the riverbed in the streams. This would mask their scent making it harder for dogs to pick up their scent if they were being tracked,” Funderburke said.

Other songs, such as “Steal Away” and “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” also may have contained secret messages about the Underground Railroad. “Follow the Drinking Gourd” is believed to have referred to using the Big Dipper constellation to follow the North Star to Canada and freedom.

“These songs could be sung in front of their masters without their masters even knowing what they were really singing about,” Harris said.

Even after the abolition of slavery, life was difficult for many African Americans, and from that difficulty rose the style of music known as the blues, Harris said.

Ragtime also emerged from the African American community during the turn of the previous century, which in turn birthed jazz music.

The sounds of African American music inspired Elvis Presley, the “king of rock and roll”, who grew up in a largely African American community, which he brought to a wider audience. Little Richard was also a famous African American rock and roll singer from the time period.

A fusion of different styles emerged from the civil rights movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s, including “We Shall Overcome” and “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around.”

“The struggle for civil rights gave us a brand-new soundtrack of music that we still hold with us today,” Funderburke said.

The struggle for civil rights brought together individuals of different races and classes to put an end to segregation, Funderburke said.

“We learned nothing more important from this time period than the ability for us all to work together and become friends,” Funderburke said.

Soul, funk, be-bop, rhythm and blues, bluegrass rap, hip-hop and more styles found their origins in African American music, Funderburke said.

“We hope that the next time you listen to music, you understand that it is more than just the background in your car,” Funderburke told the audience.

“Music can be a beacon of hope in the darkest of times and bring together a nation,” Harris added.

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