



September 18, 2024

Mayor Leonardo Williams &
Members of the Durham City Council
101 City Hall Plaza
Durham, North Carolina 27701

Re: Recognizing Durham’s ties to Sam Cooke’s “A Change Is Gonna Come”

Members of the Durham City Council,

December 11, 2024 will mark sixty years since the untimely death of the legendary soul singer Sam Cooke, and on December 22, 2024, sixty years since the posthumous release of his most famous single, “A Change Is Gonna Come.” In anticipation of this anniversary, I ask that the city consider marking the occasion, given the historic character of the song and the fact that it was written in Durham. While there is more that can be learned about the subject, I have tried below to detail what is known of Mr. Cooke’s connections to Durham and to the state of North Carolina, including his authorship of the song. The letter concludes by proposing three ways the City Council could choose to honor Mr. Cooke’s connection to the city and the role Durham played in the development of perhaps the most enduring piece of art to emerge from the civil rights movement.

Mr. Cooke’s song occupies an unparalleled place in American history and is among the most celebrated singles in recorded music. *Rolling Stone* placed it 3rd in its most recent iteration of “The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.” The Library of Congress describes the song as an “anthem” for equal justice, stating that its lyrics were written by Cooke “on a bus after speaking to sit-in protestors in Durham, N.C.” However, the connection to Durham is not particularly well known, and even lesser known is that those protestors were students from North Carolina Central University, then known as the North Carolina College at Durham.

The courage exhibited by the students he met in Durham inspired Sam Cooke, moving him to write a song that would inspire the movement’s biggest leaders, future Presidents, and people around the world. To be sure, those leaders also inspired him. Cooke was moved by his associations and conversations with the key civil rights figures of the day, including Malcolm X, Julian Bond,¹ and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., each of whom encouraged him to explore social issues in his music and to deepen his involvement in the movement. In the last year of his life, Cooke did just that. On March 17, 1964, he headlined a concert in Philadelphia to benefit the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. A few months later, following his visit to Durham, he encountered Dr. King in Atlanta and “committed not only a song to him, but agreed to organize other artists for a compilation album of

¹ In the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s first newsletter, Bond echoed Walt Whitman with a poem that emphasized the role that popular music could play in strengthening the resolve of social movements, writing, “I, too, hear America singing / . . . / But sometimes / I hear Ray Charles / Drowning in his own tears / . . . / Then I don’t mind standing / a little longer.”

folk and gospel songs[.]”² Cooke was killed before he could do the latter, but he did donate “the use of both the composition and the recording [of ‘A Change Is Gonna Come’] for an album to benefit Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference.”³

King remains closely associated with the song. Some commentators have described it as “a musical companion to [his] ‘I Have a Dream’ speech,” with “lyrics [that] express a similar longing and hopefulness, a dream that must have felt near-impossible during the darkest days of the early 1960s.”⁴ Four years later, when news reached Rosa Parks that Dr. King had been assassinated, she played “A Change Is Gonna Come” on her turntable. Cooke’s voice was “medicine to the soul,” she would later say. “It was as if Dr. King were speaking to me.”⁵

In the decades since, the mournful, solemn, but ultimately hopeful message of “A Change Is Gonna Come” has continued to resonate with people and artists, giving it an enduring character matched by few other compositions. President-Elect Barack Obama, taking the podium for the first time on the night of his historic election in 2008, referenced the song’s famous refrain: “It’s been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America.” The song would later be performed at his inauguration. “Change” has also featured in several movies. Spike Lee played it in its entirety in *Malcolm X*, during one of the most memorable scenes, as the minister makes his fateful drive to the Audubon Ballroom. Leslie Odom Jr., in an Academy Award-nominated performance as Cooke, performs the song on *The Tonight Show* in Regina King’s acclaimed *One Night in Miami . . .*⁶

The song has also developed into a symbol of tribute, performed by some of the country’s biggest artists at key moments in history. Aretha Franklin, recovering from treatment for pancreatic cancer, performed the song in tribute to Nelson Mandela upon his passing. Beyoncé surprised her audience by performing the song in a salute to the people of Detroit, a day after it became the first American city to declare bankruptcy. Patti LaBelle sang it at a ceremony honoring Nobel Peace Prize laureates. The list goes on.

As celebrated as it is, the song’s connection to Durham is not particularly well known. As far as I can tell, the city has never acknowledged, let alone embraced, its connection to this music. That may be because there is no definitive account, and because what is known about its composition must be gleaned from myriad sources. However, the city’s relationship to the song seems clear: The Library of Congress acknowledges the connection, as do the liner notes for the comprehensive Cooke anthology *Portrait of a Legend 1951-1964*.⁷ Both sources refer to Cooke’s

² Cary O’Dell, *On the Recording Registry: “A Change Is Gonna Come” (1964)*, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS BLOG, February 26, 2021.

³ Liner Notes, *Sam Cooke, Portrait of a Legend 1951-1964* (ABKCO Records 2003), available online at http://albumlinernotes.com/Portrait_Of_A_Legend.html.

⁴ Jeremy Helligar, *For Black People, Sam Cooke’s ‘A Change Is Gonna Come’ Was the ‘Imagine’ of Its Time—and of Today*, VARIETY, Feb. 5, 2021.

⁵ PETER GURALNICK, *DREAM BOOGIE: THE TRIUMPH OF SAM COOKE 651* (Back Bay Books 2005).

⁶ Cooke performed the song on *The Tonight Show* on February 7, 1964—a controversial decision made after much deliberation. The appearance was largely overshadowed by the Beatles’ arrival in America and appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* two days later. Remarkably, no copy of Cooke’s performance is known to have survived, although a copy of the artist performing “Basin Street Blues” on *The Tonight Show* that same night did. It is available on YouTube.

⁷ Library of Congress, *Recordings by Historical Figures and Musical Legends Added To the 2006 National Recording Registry*, March 5, 2007, <https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-07-039/>; see also Liner Notes, *supra* note 3.

May 1963 visit to Durham. From May 18 to 21 that year, N.C. Central students and their supporters “converged on Howard Johnson’s in the largest protest in Durham’s history, demanding the integration of all public facilities in the city.”⁸ In response, Mayor Wense Grabarek appointed a committee that ultimately negotiated the desegregation of public accommodations, including restaurants, hotels, and movie theaters throughout the city.

Cooke was impressed by the people he met in Durham and the power they collectively brought to bear. Following his meeting with the student activists, he returned to his tour bus and composed the first draft of what ultimately became “A Change Is Gonna Come.”⁹ The song marked a departure for him lyrically: “It’s been too hard living,” he sang. “But I’m afraid to die / I don’t know what’s up there / Beyond the sky.” This was a startling notion coming from a preacher’s child and man who had come to prominence as a gospel singer. But the song was not a renunciation of faith or the promise of justice in the hereafter. It was a call for justice on earth.

“Change” was not the first time Cooke’s songwriting was influenced by his travels through North Carolina—one of the few Southern states he played with regularity, on account of his refusal to play segregated venues.¹⁰ The artist’s ties to the City of Durham, in particular, were significant. In the fifties, the city’s concert halls regularly hosted shows for The Soul Stirrers, the legacy gospel act Cooke led from 1950–56, before the launch of his solo career. Cooke’s good friend, Jimmy “Early” Byrd, a renowned gospel DJ perhaps best known from his time in Boston, was a DJ in Durham in the 1950s and regularly hosted Cooke and the Stirrers on their visits to North Carolina. Cooke also championed, wrote music for, and toured with the Winston-Salem-based group, The “5” Royales, who were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2015.¹¹ Cooke’s A&R man, Robert “Bumps” Blackwell, though born in Seattle, also had family roots here.

The artist’s second most-successful single, “Chain Gang,” which peaked at #2 on the *Billboard* charts, was also inspired by his travels in North Carolina. The song, an ode to prisoners on a chain gang who he met and bought cigarettes for while traveling through the state, is propelled by a beat made to sound like men hammering on an anvil. The singer’s upbeat delivery works to disguise its otherwise bleak lyrics (“Give me water / I’m thirsty / My work is so hard”). Similarly, the song “Meet Me at Mary’s Place,” a highlight of Cooke’s final studio album, *Ain’t That Good News*—the same to feature “A Change Is Gonna Come”—is a tribute to gospel promoter Mary Trapp, whose home in Charlotte regularly hosted Cooke, the Soul Stirrers, and America’s top gospel acts when they came through the state. Although not overtly political in the same way as “A Change Is Gonna Come” or “Chain Gang,” Cooke’s tribute was published at a time when Trapp

⁸ Museum of Durham History, *Black Protest and the Integration of Restaurants in Durham*, April 15, 2015, <https://www.museumofdurhamhistory.org/black-protest-and-the-integration-of-restaurants-in-durham>.

⁹ See, e.g., Jeff Meshel, *Sam Cooke, ‘A Change is Gonna Come,’* Jeff Meshel’s World, <https://jmeshel.com/152-sam-cooke-a-change-is-gonna-come/>. As *Portrait of a Legend* explains, “Sam Cooke was constantly writing. On napkins. In the car. In hotel rooms and, later, in a notebook he kept, filled with his sketches as well as his lyrics.” It was likely in this notebook that Cooke composed the first draft of “A Change Is Gonna Come,” although the song was written in stages over the course of 1963. Some of the lyrics, particularly the third stanza (“I go downtown / Somebody keep tellin’ me, ‘Don’t hang around’”), refer to his wrongful arrest in Shreveport, LA on October 8, 1963, a few months after his visit to Durham. On the 50th anniversary of the song’s arrest, the City of Shreveport publicly apologized to Cooke.

¹⁰ See, e.g., GURALNICK, *DREAM BOOGIE*, *supra* note 5, at 258, 368–71.

¹¹ Cooke was included in the first class of inductees into the Hall in 1986.

was facing unwarranted scrutiny from law enforcement, based on false rumors and on account of her associations with the country's top Black artists.¹²

REQUEST

Durham has a proud civil rights history. The Durham Civil Rights Mural on Morris Street, dedicated by the late Rep. John Lewis in 2014, depicts many of the important figures and moments from this history. In 2013, I played a very small role in painting the mural under the supervision of organizer Brenda Miller Holmes. Being (only then vaguely) aware of Durham's connection to "A Change Is Gonna Come," I proposed at the time adding a few lyrics from Cooke's song to the mural. Unfortunately, it was too late in the process, and the final design had already been locked in. More than ten years later, however, the mural remains in excellent shape, and there remains space to add lyrics—or some other tribute to Cooke—to the image. I offer this as one suggestion of something Durham might do to honor the city's connection to the song.

Other options might include erecting a historical marker along the lines of the one honoring Black Wall Street. Although it is unclear where in the city Cooke sat when he penned the first draft of the song (other than in his parked tour bus), the Howard Johnson hotel being protested by the students he visited was located at 4001-4011 Durham Chapel Hill Boulevard, near the present location of Office Depot. However, given that the protests were driven by students from North Carolina Central University, a marker might be more appropriately placed on or near campus, in recognition of the students' contribution to the development of "A Change Is Gonna Come."

If neither of these options seems feasible, particularly in time for the upcoming 60th anniversary, or perhaps even if they are, the City Council might also consider adopting a resolution honoring Sam Cooke's contribution to civil rights history, the importance of "A Change Is Gonna Come," and the role Durham college students played in its creation.

I understand this is an unusual request, and I appreciate you taking the time to read and consider it. Our organization believes finding a way to recognize and honor Sam Cooke's connection to Durham is a worthwhile endeavor. Should the city wish to pursue this matter, please let me know if I can be of assistance moving forward.

Respectfully,

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¹² See, e.g., *State v. Stogner*, 264 N.C. 163 (N.C. 1965); *State v. Hord*, 264 N.C. 149 (1965).

¹³ Emancipate NC is a Durham-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit civil rights organization, founded nearly 50 years ago as The Prison and Jails Project of North Carolina.