



AN INTERVIEW WITH MATT JONES:  
SINGING ON FREEDOM ROAD

by Ray Korona

The Album: MATT JONES THEN AND NOW  
Relevant Records  
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This album presents Matt Jones singing and playing a dozen of his original folk songs that have drawn praise from Pete Seeger, and jail terms in the rock quarry in Danville, Virginia. In a fine tenor voice, Matt sings convincingly of his own experiences, and those of a people fighting to be free of segregation, discrimination, and oppression.

These are not only important songs about the history of the civil rights struggles in the country and the quest for human dignity, the songs themselves are also a significant part of that history. In fact, some of Matt's songs are being permanently preserved at the Smithsonian Institute.

In addition to the absolutely riveting lyrics, Matt Jones has created a wonderful collection of some of the most singable folk songs available. "Tree of Life," a beautiful and timeless song of affirmation, is so infectious that it could easily hold its own between a couple of classics such as, "Simple Gifts," and "How Can I Keep From Singing?"

There are other tunes of this calibre on the album as well as some of the best and most convincing story songs I have ever encountered. For example, Matt's first song, "Freedom Road," takes an intimate look at the people involved in a bus boycott in Macon, Georgia. "Uncle Tom's Prayer" focuses on the moral conflict that one goes through in deciding whether to express real views on a vital issue (segregation in this case), or remain silent and keep one's job and one's home. These songs are quite specific and yet their themes are timeless and universal.

In short, Matt Jones Then and Now is a very special album, and should not be missed.

The Interview:

Ray: How did you get your start as a singer?

Matt: I began singing when I was about three years old. I learned spirituals in church and by the time I was five, I was travelling around to schools, singing them in three-part harmony with my sister and brother. In fact, when we were very young, my mother told me that someone from Decca Records was interested in us, but that the minister didn't approve of the music they would want us to do. So we just kept singing in churches. Then I did stop singing for a while when I started getting a lot of kidding from the other school children about being a boy soprano.

RK: When did you first become involved in the civil rights issues that have been so much a part of your life?

MJ: When I was in second or third grade, my father made some comments in public about how the windows had been broken out of the black school where he was the superintendent. That night some members of the Klu Klux Klan came to our house looking for him. Fortunately, he had been tipped off about this and so when they arrived, he was gone. That was how he came to leave North Carolina.

RK: How did your singing and your concern about politics and civil rights come about?

MJ: Well, around 1960, people were doing a lot of singing of old songs that they knew with some new words added. For example, they changed the song, "I'll Be Alright" to "We Shall Overcome." "Hit the Road Jack" came out with lines like "Get your rights, Don't you be a Tom no more, no more, no more." The song "This Little Light of Mine" got transformed into a protest song

called "Go Tell Mayor Pritchett." Some of the songs would be less specific about individuals and events, but would have new words expressing the hopes and fears of the people of the time, such as the lyric, "Over my head I see freedom in the air."

RK: How did it happen that you began writing your own songs instead of just continuing to sing these slightly altered traditional songs?

MJ: In 1960, I was a teacher around the time that there was going to be a bus boycott in Macon, Georgia. I was determined to participate, because I had decided that I was no longer going to move to the back of any bus when it would ride through a white community, which was what we were supposed to do. My principal told me that I could go to the rally if I would perform a musical selection, but that I could not speak. So I put my thoughts into a song called "Freedom Road" and then sang it at the mass meeting at the church. That was my very first song, and it was also how I lost my job at the school.

RK: It sounds like songwriting was a pretty risky business in those days.

MJ: Yes, but it was really part of a bigger problem. People knew what they felt and what they wanted to do, but they were afraid to express themselves, because it could mean the loss of your house and your job and your means of providing for yourself or your family. That's why in 1963, I wrote, "Uncle Tom's Prayer" about trying to understand a person with fear. The album has a "Freedom Medley" which I have dedicated to Ralph Featherstone, a non-violent black leader whose car got blown up in Maryland. I also have a song there about Medgar Evers who was killed by an assassin's bullet. This song was previously recorded on Mercury Records. The "Legend of Danville" is a song about one of the worst beatings I ever witnessed. For my part in the demonstration, I was thrown in-

to a rock quarry and put on a daily diet of bread and water.

In 1964, I wrote "Oginga Odinga" which became a favorite of Malcolm X. The song involved a demonstration at a segregated restaurant and hotel in Atlanta, Georgia. The demonstrators bought stock in the company that owned the facility so that when they would be arrested, the local police would be, in effect, throwing the owners into jail.

RK: It's great to see that after all these years, you have finally been able to put together an album collecting these important songs. How did that come about?

MJ: I got a lot of support from a number of people who are mentioned on the album jacket. A very important contribution came in from the We Shall Overcome Fund in New Market, Tennessee. I also got a lot of help from friends and supporters. Without the interest and help of so many people, this album would have been impossible to make.

RK: Thank you very much for sharing all of these things with us, and I am sure that there will be many, many people who will find this album to be wonderful to listen to, and an inspiration as well.