

# Songs of Black Folk

A FILM BY JUSTIN EMEKA & HALEY WATSON



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE







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## LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKERS

*Dear friends,*

When we began *Songs of Black Folk*, we set out to capture a concert — but what we found was a story of homecoming, memory, and resurrection. Through the lives of composer Ramón Braxton-Bryant, his uncle Rev. Dr. Leslie Braxton, we encountered a lineage of faith and creativity that has kept Black communities in the Pacific Northwest alive for generations.

In Tacoma and Seattle — places often left out of the national story of Black America — we found music that carries the sound of survival. These are songs that were once whispered in the fields, now lifted in symphony halls. They remind us that joy can be a form of resistance and that art can be a language of healing.

This film is a portrait of two men working to build something greater than themselves — a concert that becomes a ministry, a collaboration that turns memory into movement. It is a love letter to the families who made a way out of no way, and a reminder that our stories are not confined to one region, one rhythm, or one time.

As the concert unfolds and the music rises, we are reminded that freedom is not a single moment in history, but an ongoing act of creation — something we must keep making together.

With love and gratitude,  
— Justin Emeka & Haley Watson

## COMMON CONCEPTS & LANGUAGE

### **Faith and Art:**

In *Songs of Black Folk*, the spiritual and the artistic are inseparable. Faith fuels creativity; creativity becomes testimony.

### **Juneteenth:**

Commemorates June 19, 1865, when the last enslaved people in Texas learned of their freedom. For many, it marks not just emancipation but the enduring pursuit of self-determination and dignity.

### **Spirituals and Gospel:**

Rooted in African rhythm and Christian devotion, spirituals and gospel music are sonic expressions of Black endurance — songs that hold sorrow, praise, and prophecy in a single breath.

### **Legacy:**

The inheritance of love, wisdom, and culture passed down through generations. The film shows how legacy lives not only in words, but in melody — through a grandmother's lessons, a pastor's prayers, and a composer's notes.

### **Homecoming:**

Returning to one's roots not only in geography, but in spirit — the act of reconnecting with family, community, and calling.

### **Resilience:**

The ability to turn hardship into harmony. As Rev. Braxton prays in the film, *"It is out of our brokenness that our genius flows."*

# Key Issues

## **Cultural Memory and Black Identity in the Pacific Northwest**

The film confronts a rarely told story: that of Black life and creativity in places like Tacoma and Seattle, where the community's presence has long been overlooked. It reveals how churches, families, and schools sustained a vibrant Black culture amid isolation and erasure.

## **Art as Healing and Resistance**

Ramon and Leslie's musical vision — to celebrate the fullness of Black musical tradition — becomes an act of restoration. His music bridges the sacred and the symphonic, reclaiming space for Black excellence within classical and spiritual forms.

## **Intergenerational Legacy and the Role of Elders**

At the film's emotional core is the relationship between Ramon and his grandmother, Ailene Bryant.

Her faith, her stability, and her quiet wisdom shape the foundation of his artistry. Her passing marks both an ending and a beginning — the moment when her teachings are transfigured into song.

## **Faith, Loss, and Transformation**

The collaboration between nephew and uncle — musician and minister — unfolds against the backdrop of illness, grief, and rebirth. Their shared belief that beauty can rise from brokenness becomes the film's spiritual heartbeat.

## **Juneteenth and the Ongoing Work of Freedom**

Set amid a community still learning the meaning of Juneteenth, the film underscores that freedom is a continual practice — renewed through art, storytelling, and remembrance.

# Key Participants

## **Ramón Braxton-Bryant**

Composer, conductor, and visionary whose music bridges classical precision with gospel passion. A Tacoma native, Ramón's journey — from church pianist to symphonic composer — embodies the beauty and struggle of Black creative life in America.

## **Rev. Dr. Leslie Braxton III**

Pastor and theologian, whose dream of a Juneteenth concert celebrating Black excellence becomes the catalyst for the film. His reflections on faith, family, and perseverance frame the story's moral center.

## **Alene Bryant**

Matriarch, grandmother, and spiritual anchor. Alene's passion was teaching music to her family and community. She led music ministry at her church, where Ramon attended with her. Music was her vehicle for expression and storytelling - a vital skill to her. Though in failing health during the making of the concert, her presence hovers over every note. Her wisdom — *"Stay in the music; it's safe there"* — becomes the film's final benediction.



# Background Information

## Black Communities in the Pacific Northwest

Historian Dr. Quintard Taylor reminds us that the story of Black America extends far beyond the South. In his work *The Forging of a Black Community*, Taylor documents how, during the Great Migration, Black families settled in Seattle's Central District and Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood. They built churches, civic organizations, and music programs that became pillars of belonging amid segregation and displacement.

In Tacoma, where *Songs of Black Folk* unfolds, these institutions provided refuge during the turbulence of the 1980s crack epidemic. The film honors this dual reality — a community scarred by systemic neglect, yet sustained by faith and artistry.

## Juneteenth in the Northwest

While Juneteenth's origins are rooted in Texas, its celebration in the Pacific Northwest speaks to a universal truth: that freedom's song must be sung everywhere. By centering the concert on this holiday, the film situates local history within a national and spiritual context — where liberation is both historical and ongoing.

## Black Sacred Music as American Classical Tradition

From the sorrow songs of slavery to the symphonic works of William Dawson and Florence Price, Black sacred music has long carried the depth and rigor of classical form. *Songs of Black Folk* continues this lineage, demonstrating that the spirituals are not relics, but living compositions — as complex, elegant, and eternal as any European canon.

# Discussion Prompts for Audiences

## Personal Reflection

1. Which moment or song in the film moved you most deeply? Why?
2. How does Ramón's relationship with his grandmother influence your understanding of legacy?

## Faith, Family, and Art

3. How do Ramón and Rev. Braxton use faith and music to respond to grief and loss?
4. What does the film suggest about the role of art in sustaining community?

## Culture and Geography

5. How does *Songs of Black Folk* expand or challenge your understanding of Black life in the Pacific Northwest?
6. What connections can you draw between geography, identity, and creativity in the film?

## Freedom and Continuity

7. How does the Juneteenth concert serve as both celebration and act of remembrance?
8. Rev. Braxton prays, “*It is out of our brokenness that our genius flows.*” What does this mean to you personally or in the context of the film?

## Legacy and Inspiration

9. How does the film inspire you to honor your own lineage — familial, artistic, or spiritual?
10. What does it mean, for you, to “stay in the music”?

## Sources & Further Reading

If you would like to engage more deeply with the ideas, music, and histories *Songs of Black Folk* brings to life, here are some meaningful resources for further study, discussion, and community action.

## Books & Scholarship

- *James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues* — A foundational text in Black liberation theology exploring how spirituals and blues embody a theology of hope born from suffering and survival.

- *Quintard Taylor, The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* — A groundbreaking history of Black life and migration in the Pacific Northwest, tracing how families built enduring institutions and artistic traditions.
- *Eileen Southern, The Music of Black Americans* — A comprehensive history of African American musical traditions and their profound influence on American culture.
- *W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk* — A seminal collection of essays exploring double-consciousness, the Black spiritual tradition, and the quest for freedom.
- *LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Blues People* — A groundbreaking study of African American music as the living history of Black experience and transformation.
- *Mildred D. Taylor, Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry and Let the Circle Be Unbroken* — Classic novels for young readers that illuminate the resilience, dignity, and love that sustain Black families through struggle and change.

## Archives

- *Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture – “The Sound of Freedom” Exhibit*: Explore archival materials on spirituals, gospel, and the Black sacred music tradition.
- *PBS LearningMedia – Juneteenth Collection*: Educational videos and discussion materials exploring the origins and legacy of Juneteenth.

- *University of Washington's BlackPast.org* (founded by Dr. Quintard Taylor): A comprehensive archive documenting Black history in the American West and beyond.
- *MoPOP: Never Turn Back* — An exhibition at Seattle's Museum of Pop Culture exploring the legacy and cultural impact of Black musical traditions. <https://www.mopop.org/exhibitions/never-turn-back>

## Organizations

- *SongsofBlackFolk.org* — The official site for the concert and ongoing community initiatives celebrating Black musical heritage in the Pacific Northwest.
- *Northwest African American Museum (NAAM)* — A Seattle-based institution preserving and celebrating the history, art, and culture of people of African descent in the Pacific Northwest.
- *LANGSTON (LangstonSeattle.org)* — Seattle's premier Black arts & cultural organization, dedicated to strengthening and celebrating Black art, artists, and community through education, performance, and cultural programming.



# Taking Action & Reflection Activity

## OPTIONAL

At the end of your discussion, take a few quiet moments to reflect on what the film awakened in you. Invite participants to breathe, write, or share aloud one of the following reflections:

*"If I had never had a problem, I wouldn't know that God could solve them." — Rev. Dr. Leslie Braxton*

### 1. **Resonance:**

Think of a song, poem, or phrase that has helped you through a difficult time. What strength did it give you? What does it connect you to?

### 2. **Legacy:**

Who are the "Ailene Bryants" in your life — those elders, mentors, or ancestors whose love still shapes you? How can you honor them in your daily life?

### 3. **Creation as Freedom:**

Ramon returns home not only to care for his grandmother but to create something that will outlive them both. What might it look like for you to create — in art, community, or faith — as an act of freedom?

## Community Engagement Suggestions

If your group would like to carry the spirit of the film into action:

1. **Host or attend a local Juneteenth event or concert** that highlights regional Black artists and musicians.
2. **Partner with a school or church** to organize a "Songs of Our People" storytelling night where elders share the songs or stories that sustained them.

# Taking Action & Reflection Activity (cont.)

3. **Create an intergenerational music workshop** in your community — pairing youth and elders to write or perform music that celebrates heritage.
4. **Support regional Black arts organizations** in Seattle, Tacoma, and beyond that preserve cultural traditions through performance and education.

## Closing Reflection

*Songs of Black Folk* is not only about one concert — it's about how a people keep singing, even when the world forgets their song. In the final words of Ramon Braxton-Bryant, we are reminded that music is not escape; it is refuge, remembrance, and revelation.

**Stay in the music. It's safe there.**

# Credits & Acknowledgments



Photo by Tanya Rosen-Jones

## About the Author

**Justin Emeka** is a scholar, director, and filmmaker whose work blends cultural research, rigorous artistry, and community-centered storytelling. Born in Englewood, New Jersey and raised across several states, he found an early creative home in Seattle, where spaces like the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute and Seattle Children's Theater helped shape his artistic imagination. Now a tenured professor of Africana Studies and Theater at Oberlin College, Emeka is recognized for reimagining classical texts through Black cultural and historical perspectives. His influential chapter, "Seeing Shakespeare Through Brown Eyes," in *Black Acting Methods* has become an essential resource for artists seeking culturally grounded approaches to performance. As a director, he has created acclaimed work with Pittsburgh Public Theater, the Old Globe, and Classical Theatre of Harlem, while his films—including *Biological* and *Six Winters Gone Still*, expand the narrative landscape. As a teacher and longtime practitioner of Capoeira Angola, Emeka builds interdisciplinary curricula that blend performance, history, and embodied knowledge. Across his work, he is committed to expanding the reach of theater and film by inviting new communities to see themselves reflected in powerful, timeless stories.

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