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Reviews

Performance Profile: *Freedom Sings*

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Freedom Sings is a ninety-minute touring multimedia program that tries to “honor music that makes a point,” with a seven-piece live band, video screen, and expert narrator. It is profiled here for your consideration as a possible program for your campus or high school by a college professor who has seen the show twice. Contact information appears at the end. This is not a critical review.

Freedom Sings uses a selection of songs that have been censored, banned, or kept from the airwaves by corporate priorities to get audiences thinking and learning about the First Amendment, as they clap and sing along. Whether it’s The Everly Brothers’ *Wake Up Little Susie*, banned in Boston for being too suggestive, *Puff The Magic Dragon*, The Beatles’ *With A Little Help From My Friends* and *Yellow Submarine* pulled for alleged drug references, the overtly political *Ohio*, or simply a chilling rendition of *Strange Fruit*, music is used to demonstrate the importance of song as expression in American society. *Freedom Sings* is produced by the First Amendment Center (FAC) (www.firstamendmentcenter.org), housed at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Its mission statement describes it as “a forum for the study and exploration of free-expression issues.”

The show was conceived by Ken Paulson, former Executive Director of FAC (now editor of *USA Today*), who began his career as a music writer and rock critic. He is concerned that, “the land of the free has become the home of the easily offended.” With music built into many of FAC’s programs, they ably demonstrate his belief that, “at the core of protecting the First Amendment is treasuring it.” The performers in *Freedom Sings* are drawn from “Music City’s” vast pool of talent—not stars, but top-quality vocalists, instrumentalists, and songwriters who put the material across with power and conviction. Bill Lloyd, Jonell Mosser, Joseph Wooten, and Shonka Dukureh were among those in the lineup at a recent performance.

FAC was founded by John Seigenthaler in 1991 to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the ratification of the Bill of Rights. Mr. Seigenthaler, a career journalist, spent forty-three years at the *The Tennessean* in Nashville, peaking as its Editor/Publisher/CEO. He also served as an administrative assistant to Robert Kennedy at the Justice Department in the 1960s,

and as President of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. FAC is an operating program of the Freedom Forum (www.freedomforum.org), a non-partisan foundation also founded in 1991, by *USA Today* founder Allen H. Neuharth. The Freedom Forum has three central priorities: The Newseum in Arlington, Virginia, the First Amendment, and newsroom diversity. Its CEO Charles L. Overby states, “we don’t lobby or litigate, we educate and explain.” Despite what might appear to be liberal parentage, conservative columnist Cal Thomas has said *Freedom Sings*, “. . .is fun, and what I admire most is that it is scrupulously well balanced.”

Surveys done by FAC have consistently shown that about half of the American public think the First Amendment “goes too far in the freedoms it guarantees” (most recently, 41% “strongly agreed” and 8% “mildly agreed”). Hearing cherished songs ranging from labor, antiwar, and civil rights anthems to Public Enemy and Black Eyed Peas tunes, and how they’ve been threatened, encourages audiences to treasure freedom of musical expression at a personal level. Seeing that even patriotic songs like George M. Cohan’s *You’re A Grand Old Flag* were censored (original title, *You’re A Grand Old Rag*), teaches that attempts to restrict musical expression are not limited to rock’n’roll and hip-hop. The program touches on all five freedoms granted by the First Amendment.

Live performances of songs like *Louie Louie* with audience participation, are joyful, and are used to point out the offensiveness of the government (FBI) investigating the lyric content of pop songs. Particularly energetic audience members are rewarded with free t-shirts, CDs of selections from the show, and more. Music is acknowledged as an important channel of social, cultural, and political messages that must remain unfettered. After a snippet of Bob Dylan’s *The Times They Are A-Changin’* is played, the narrator notes that this is protected political speech and if Dylan had been around in the 1700s, he’d have been a pamphleteer like Thomas Paine. Tunes like Randy Newman’s *Short People*, and Stevie Wonder’s *Happy Birthday*, which lobbied for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, provide lighter moments too. The central message is that American artists and citizens should always have the liberty and courage to sing and say what we mean. This is as good an example of “edu-tainment” on this topic as one will find.

Performance content varies with the demographics of the expected audience, and is frequently updated to keep abreast of developing issues. The show has been touring campuses since 2000 and has played for promi-

ment groups like the National Association of Broadcasters, The Folk Alliance, and the Americana Music Association. If you think your educational community could benefit from raising these issues in so professional and enjoyable a manner, contact Jenny Atkinson at The First Amendment Center, (615) 727-1600, jatkinson@fac.org. Local print media are logical partners for support of the program.

Paul D. Fischer

PAUL D. FISCHER is an Associate Professor in the Department of Recording Industry at Middle Tennessee State University. He is an energetic protector of freedom of musical expression, and working on a book about how the record player was first brought to market.

Marc Weingarten. *Station to Station: The History of Rock 'n' Roll on Television*. New York: Pocket Books, 2000

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Station to Station is the first published history of the tumultuous marriage of popular music and television. In this easy, breezy romp Weingarten takes us from the fun-for-the-whole-family sing-alongs of the early local stations right up to the often controversial VJ culture of MTV and its imitators. Citing specific historical television moments and the personalities that went with them, such as Elvis' pelvis and Ed Sullivan, John and Yoko's week long love-in with Mike Douglas, and the rise and fall of David Cassidy, Weingarten attempts to show the highs and lows, the campy and the edgy, and how it's all kept adolescents and teenagers glued to their sets for the last fifty years.

His collection of quotes and interviews is staggering and full of life. They are very well laid out too. Quotes from musicians and producers seem to converse with one another, making each chapter an engaging narrative. Each event is portrayed snugly in its place in history, replete with references to national politics and with special attention to race relations. Weingarten does well to describe the social climate that births, nurtures, and responds to each musical/television phenomenon. At its most shining moments, *Station to Station* places the reader in the midst of pop culture

fever, as Weingarten has an knack for connecting each television event with the excitement of its viewers.

Weingarten's background is in journalism. His major credits include work in *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Vibe*. He writes like a journalist; the pace is fast, bordering on edgy, and his wit is quick. This style, however, lends itself to oftentimes forgoing facts and references for quick jokes and jabs. Clearly, he writes with his readers' entertainment value in mind. But his strengths in storytelling can also be a weakness when this book is read as historical material. In many instances, more specifically when discussing the key players on the legendary *American Bandstand* or the musical sitcom *The Monkees*, Weingarten tends to create "good guys" and "bad guys." This is not terribly surprising. The best music journalism brings the reader inside the tour bus, so to speak, to understand the personalities and inner workings of the bands. Many of his chapters focus on personality conflicts among artists, producers, and TV execs. And Weingarten unabashedly plays favorites. You might feel like you've been slightly gyped of a factual account.

Pete Vasconcellos

PETE VASCONCELLOS graduated from Northeastern University with a B.A. in music in 2001 and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology at the City University of New York Graduate Center. He worked for Boston's *The Weekly Dig* as a music journalist. As a youngster, Pete watched lots of MTV when his mother wasn't looking.

The *MEIEA Journal* is published annually by the Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association (MEIEA) in order to increase public awareness of the music industry and to foster music business education.

The *MEIEA Journal* provides a scholarly analysis of technological, legal, historical, educational, and business trends within the music industry and is designed as a resource for anyone currently involved or interested in the music industry. Topics include issues that affect music industry education and the music industry such as curriculum design, pedagogy, technological innovation, intellectual property matters, industry-related legislation, arts administration, industry analysis, and historical perspectives. The *MEIEA Journal* is distributed to members of MEIEA, universities, libraries, and individuals concerned with the music industry and music business education.

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