Interview on Battle Hymn of a Freedman

By Po Silagan-Bush and Dr. Clarence Anthony Bush


When did you make the decision to perform Battle Hymn of a Freedman at Fort Pillow State Park in Tennessee?

My great grandfather was in the Second Regiment, Light Artillery, Battery H of the U.S. Colored Troops. His regiment’s Battery F was actually at Fort Pillow.

Even though he didn’t join until after the Massacre at Fort Pillow was over (he joined in June of 1864 - the battle was April 12, 1864), I put the massacre in the play because it was so important to African American soldiers. It set the tone for their experience in the war. They could not surrender because they would not be treated as prisoners of war. They had win or die. There was no alternative. Once I discovered my great grandfather’s regiment---not my great grandfather himself but his regiment---was at Fort Pillow, I felt compelled to be at the 150 anniversary. Then once I decided to go, I realized that there had never been an official commemoration service for the fallen Black Soldier and their officers. At Fort Pillow Park, the history of the massacre had been entirely white washed.

In the past, a decision was made by the southern leadership to remove the bodies of the massacred United States Colored Troops (“U.S.C.T.”) from the trenches and move them to Memphis. Theoretically, something might have been said to honor the soldiers at that time of the move but we don’t know and I doubt it. The movement of the bodies in the mass grave at Fort Pillow was a political decision and African Americans had no political power. Really, it was move to sanitize the massacre.

So I felt the need as a Minister of Jazz Worship at Ascension Lutheran Church, Landover Hills, Maryland, to do a memorial performance of the play and memorial service for the fallen U.S.C.T. To my knowledge no Black people had ever spoken about the massacre while at Fort Pillow. Of course the survivors gave testimony in the 1864 Congressional Investigation. Another part of it was that my original plan to perform the play at Columbia University had hit a road block. They were unreceptive but I wasn’t going to let that stop me. I felt it was time to honor the U.S.C.T. who had been killed at Fort Pillow and, to put it bluntly, faced the devil there at what is now a park where locals go to celebrate what they consider to be an historical Confederate victory.

Anyway those are the factors that drove me and my colleagues to do the play at Fort Pillow. It took courage on everyone’s part to go there and face this horrible history. My
friend Bobby Coles was the real engine though. She set the whole thing up by calling them and contacting the park ranger and setting it in motion.

**Describe your experience at Fort Pillow?**

When we got to Tennessee I can say that everyone in the cast and in the band had some fear. When we got there, we discovered that Fort Pillow was not talked about among Black people in Memphis and many did not know the history. There was not one white person in Tennessee that was not shocked to find out that we had shown up to go to what the locals consider to be the annual commemoration of a Confederate victory. The two white people that I spoke to on the way up to the park on the day of the performance knew that there was a massacre and were surprised that we were even going up there. That did not add to our sense of security! And the fact the general who ordered the massacre was Nathan Bedford Forest, who you might recognize as the founder of the KKK, did not calm our nerves either. That really tells you something! Also the fact that everyone that I encountered referred to it as a battle instead of a massacre and saw it as something to be reenacted and celebrated gave us a few clues about the climate that we were walking into.

On the day of the event, we left at about 5:30 am which is near the same time that General Forrest showed up a hundred fifty years ago. Thornton Hudson and I drove one car with instruments. David Murray and Sam Reese road in another car, and Tim, Bobby Coles, Greg Cooke, Sissel Bakken, and Frank Wells’ granddaughter followed not far behind on the way to Fort Pillow.

It was eerie driving through Tennessee that day. Every time we interacted with a white person on our way there, we were always met with surprise like, “you’re going up there?”

When we got close to Fort Pillow it looked like we were driving on a road that had once been river bottom, spooky dead trees and tangled vines along the river bank until we came to some water where a guy was launching his boat and we asked him for directions because at that point we were lost. He was also surprised to see us going up there.

Finally, we came upon the Union re-enactors and that made us feel more secure. So I jump out the car and I said, "We're here to do the play Battle Hymn of a Freedman," and they said, "They told us you weren't coming." We were not expected, even though we had planned the whole thing way in advance! Then we went through the proper entrance to the park and it looked like a state park, like how you’d expect. So there we were, driving on Nathan Bedford Forrest road and it seems like we're driving forever.
Finally, we located the place where we were going to perform, but we didn’t know it at the time. Anyway, there was a battery of cannons facing the stage where we were to perform, about four or five of them and the confederate re-enactors were preparing to fire them just as we showed up. So I parked the car and went to the ranger’s station and was greeted by the staff and they were surprised to see me. They said, “We didn’t expect you.” This was a surprise for us because we had called the day before saying we were in Memphis and we were coming! The fact that they did not have a generator and electrical equipment emphasized that they were really not expecting us to show up. They thought we would be too chicken. So that added to the tension.

There was always an element of hostility even before we got there. While I was arranging the trip to Fort Pillow I had to plead with the park ranger to let me be a part of the ceremony because I needed to be there. I felt compelled to be there. His initial response was anger but then he called back a few days later, and, then, he said come on and do the play. We’ll make space for you. We’ll put you in a big tent across from the confederate camp, which he did. But he didn’t say the cannons would be opposite the tent with the barrels facing in the direction of the tent. So as we were unpacking our gear they began to fire those cannons and that scared our actors and musicians because they did not expect that and had never experienced the percussion of the cannons. I believe Sissel and some of the others dropped to the ground when they heard the cannons. It was funny, when the cannons were going off, David Murray put on a union hat and an officer’s coat and started playing when Johnny comes marching home and screaming “ahhh” every time they fired a shot. He was feeling the spirit.

Bobbie Coles told me that they started shooting live rifle rounds into the tree tops near us. We knew we were in for something then but the Lord was with us and their arrogance allowed them to believe that no Black people would show up to memorialize the fallen Black soldiers and that was probably why we were met with little resistance.

Throughout the park, rangers were courteous and continued to talk just in terms of the “Battle of Fort Pillow.” They wanted to do an introduction for us and they also wanted to know where every person came from. So that was interesting. I said that David came from Paris, France. Hudson from D.C. My brother Tim Bush came from CA. Bobby Coles came from Silver Spring, Maryland, Greg Cooke from Bethesda, Maryland, Sam Reese from Los Angeles, CA, Sissel from Arlington, VA, and Andrew Robinson from Virginia. I mean there weren’t many of us, but we came from everywhere to do this. We had also invited a local person by the name of Ekpe to perform. He brought music stands and played djembe drums. The ranger was pleased that we had a local involved! But the rangers did not stay for the performance. Someone told me that some plain closed policemen showed up when we got there.
So we started to play an overture and there were about an hundred and twenty people there, black and white when we started playing. The vast majority were white when we started playing.

As long as we were doing an overture, which consisted of the song “The Love In Ruth” by myself and “Red Car” by Butch Morris, people were coming over.

Lots of people were there. I mean this was like a glorious day for the south. Fort Pillow was a big “victory” for them. They were there to celebrate their victory and did not expect us to show up and mix things up. I think that was God’s work right there for sure, that we were there.

Anyway, once we started the play, the white people started to leave. That was the point when we started doing the part where the play questions motivations of the North and the Emancipation Proclamation. Then when we got to the section of the play with the bloody gory details of the massacre all but two or three white people left and forty to fifty African Americans remained. When we finished - man - they spontaneously broke into cheers and applause and they thanked us for giving the true history of Fort Pillow. And they said that when they heard we were there, they initially wondered if we had the courage to tell the truth!

So the performance itself told the story of the massacre and African involvement in the Civil War. There was a section in the play where we eulogized the men in the present and as if we were there at the massacre--- what I would call an inter-temporal eulogy. I gave the spoken eulogy but the real eulogy was in the form of the song “Fort Pillow” which was sung by Andrew Robinson. That song was created to let people know how important those Black soldiers’ lives were to the freedom of African Americans and saving the U.S. from being split into two nations. Andrew sang “David’s Dance” after the eulogy and his voice was filled with the Holy Spirit and extraordinary beauty. He also sang “I am always with you” about Jesus always being with the U.S.C.T. It was an excellent memorial service.

So we did what we came to do---to remember the massacre and give the fallen men a proper home-going. At the end of it all I said, “It is okay for us to come to the park because it is sacred ground but we have to remember why this park exists. It exists as the result of an act of historical revisionism, an act that sought to sanitize their dirty deeds and continuing their racism.”

We weren't looking for a confrontation. We were there to seek Christian reconciliation through the truth.

One point sticks out in my mind where things got really tense, though. One of our singers Sissel Bakken, who is a blonde Norwegian, sang the song “Tears for New
Market Heights 1865” and a gentleman in Confederate uniform came over with a gun and sat down and stared her down, like really creepily. The song Tears had already been a point of controversy among our group because of the politics of it--- a white woman singing about the spilled blood of brave Black men---and the context that we were going to perform it in.

Anyway, after it was over, the park ranger came over and asked Bobby and the group to stay around and be a part of the event but we did not want to linger. I had rented equipment to return. We got out of there!

When we got back to town, the hotel staff, who were all black, treated us like conquering heroes returning from war. I had told them what we were doing, and they had said “we going to pray for you.” I mean people were calling us up from home to make sure we were okay because they thought we were going to be killed. I mean, we were going to the site where the Massacre occurred and the spirit of the KKK was set in motion. It wasn’t until after it was all over and we were at the bar at the Sheraton that everyone admitted that they were afraid. The wind blew in our favor.

It was a strange experience all around, because we went to Beale Street and to the Withers photo gallery that documented the Civil Rights struggle in Memphis. We saw a picture of Martin Luther King stepping out of his room at the Lorraine Hotel, and then on the opposite wall was another picture of MLK dead in his coffin. So we experienced that two days prior to the performance, being reminded of the horrible history and enduring struggle that we were engaging with.

**Do you plan to do more commemoration ceremonies, to honor Black men who fought in the civil war?**

We plan to do a full production at Richmond, VA, to commemorate the fact that African Americans were first Union troops to enter Richmond, Virginia. Then we are going to do something in D.C., New York and then in a couple of places in California.

**What do you think needs to be done to change the current (problematic) discourse about slavery and the civil war? How would you challenge the problematic narratives that you encountered at Fort Pillow?**

Black people need to tell their own stories about the Civil war. There is plenty of history out there, like the stories of what happened to their families. White people may never tell the truth about Civil War but the military facts – war records - cannot be disputed. We need to engage with the history!