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Winter 2025

KEITH SNIPES: MUSIC IS HIS MINISTRY

By

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"Music is my ministry," Keith Snipes told me in a recent interview. It is his way of promoting change for the better. And he believes humanity needs a change for the better at this point in history. "Freedom is on the line in America today," he said. "Freedom from racism, freedom from violence, reproductive freedom, freedom to love whom one chooses to love."

In several recent concerts-at An Die Musik, Keystone Korner, the Matthew 25 Conference, and others since I wrote this profile-Snipes has sung songs of freedom drawn from the Civil Rights movement and has recited original poetry about and in the voice of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Snipes draws on his experience as an actor to effectively convey the meaning of songs and poetry. He infuses a theatrical feel throughout his performances. Backed by several of Baltimore's best musicians (bassist Obasi Akoto, pianist Aaron Hill, pianist Justin Taylor, pianist Ryan Hansler, saxophonist/trumpeter Clarence Ward III, and others) his performances are musically strong and deliver a powerful political message to confront social injustice at this critical moment in American history.

His performances are enhanced by his appearance. He is a stately man with a rich voice, a cultivated manner, and a sense of elegance and decorum. For Snipes there is a strong connection between music and spirituality. "Music is about conveying the realities of our humanity. Rhythm gives life to our humanity. It's what makes it possible for us to come together." The Matthew 25 Conference was particularly important to Snipes because it refers to the Biblical pronouncement by Jesus, as quoted by Snipes: "Whatever you do unto the weakest among us, you do unto Me." He believes that he has an obligation to do what he can to improve humanity and that this can be done with music. He explained that this conviction comes from his mother, who was a profoundly important influence, a true inspiration, throughout her life and after her "transition."

Snipes was born in Baltimore in 1958. His father was a pastor, but his parents were separated. He and his three siblings were raised by his

mother. She had wanted to be a professional singer. Instead she devoted herself to raising her children. She expressed her love of music by convening them into a small homegrown choir, and under her direction their singing was a frequent occurrence in the household.

Snipes grew up “poor in the projects” where his mother struggled to make ends meet. At 16 he looked for a summer job . He met State Delegate Hattie Harrison, a woman of considerable political influence who was connected to the Mayor’s Office of Art and Culture, where he was given a job that required him to learn how to be performing artist. That summer he played two roles Sportin' Life in Porgy and Bess and Officer Krupke in West Side Story. Powerful plays with profound social meaning, they had considerable influence on Snipes' developing the conviction that the stage can be used to bring about social change.

His skills led him through a series of jobs involving communications and exposure to current social issues. He served with the Maryland Department of Human Resources as a freelance writer to help implement the state's social welfare program. He hosted an award-winning talk show on Radio One, where he interviewed various public figures—journalists, performing artists, politicians and more. Later he became a public information officer for the Department of Human Resources, rising to become assistant to the Secretary of the department. He told me "These professional experiences provided a window into the racial and social disparities that inform my music today.

While earning his living with these jobs, he also acted and wrote performances. These included *Malcom X*, *Then and Now*, which he performed all over the country, and a performance called *Dr. King*. Along the way he was hired by North Carolina Symphony and the Durham Symphony to do "Eulogy for A Dream." Which was first performed at Duke University

It’s only within the last 5 years that Snipes decided to sing in public. “When my mother passed away, it just washed over me, and I had this strong desire to sing.” At first, he sang at open mics despite lacking confidence. But he got a positive response and support from musicians who helped him learn the craft. Lately, in addition to the concerts I have already noted, he has sung with the Handel Choir of Baltimore and the Baltimore Svmphony and has performed at BJAs Baltimore Jazz Fest.

Wherever he performs, his goal is always to use music and recitation to focus his audiences on the injustices of this world and to encourage them to work to enhance justice and improve humanity. Music is indeed his ministry.