

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Happy Birthday

STEVIE WONDER

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In 1981, the immensely talented and popular American singer and songwriter known on stage as Stevie Wonder (born in 1950 as Stevland Hardaway Judkins; he changed his surname to Morris) wrote and released this song in protest against the opposition to having a national holiday in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Its popularity here and abroad helped rally many supporters to the cause, and two years later Congress enacted the necessary legislation.¹

The song is of interest to us here because of the reasons Stevie Wonder adduces to honor King. Gathering evidence from each stanza, what are the reasons Wonder gives for why there should be a celebration of King's birthday? What, according to the song, is the special contribution for which King should be so honored? Do you think that these reasons add up to a defense of a specifically American holiday, rather than a universal human one? Do we—and should we—celebrate King as an apostle of peace and love, rather than, say, of freedom and equality?

You know it doesn't make much sense
There ought to be a law against
Anyone who takes offense
At a day in your celebration

'Cause we all know in our minds
That there ought to be a time
That we can set aside
To show just how much we love you

And I'm sure you will agree
It couldn't fit more perfectly
Than to have a world party
On the day you came to be

¹ To watch Stevie Wonder perform the song, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=inS9gAgSENE.

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(Chorus)

Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday
Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday

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I just never understood
How a man who died for good
Could not have a day that would
Be set aside for his recognition

'Cause it should never be
Just 'cause some cannot see
The dream as clear as he
That they should make it become an illusion

And we all know everything
That he stood for time will bring
For in peace our hearts will sing
Thanks to Martin Luther King

(Chorus)

Why has there never been a holiday, yeah
Where peace is celebrated
All throughout the world

The time is overdue
For people like me and you
You know the way to truth
Is love and unity to all God's children

It should be a great event
And the whole day should be spent
In full remembrance

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Of those who lived and died for the oneness of all people

So let us all begin
We know that love can win
Let it out don't hold it in
Sing as loud as you can

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(Chorus twice)

We know the key to unify all people
Is in the dream that you had so long ago
That lives in all the hearts of people
That believe in unity
We'll make the dream become a reality
I know we will
Because our hearts tell us so

Happy birthday
Happy birthday
Happy birthday

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