Tracing the Dream

The discovery of a 1962 recording of Martin Luther King Jr. in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, establishes the small town as a key site in the civil rights movement

By David Hunt

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

— Langston Hughes

On Nov. 27, 1962, in the small town of Rocky Mount, North Carolina, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a phrase that ultimately would inspire millions.

“I have a dream,” he intoned from the stage of a gymnasium at a segregated high school where 1,800 African-American residents stood elbow to elbow, eager for a message of hope in troubled times.

Again and again in the 55-minute speech, King touched on themes that would resonate nine months later before a vastly larger audience gathered on the national mall in Washington, D.C., for the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

The latter speech, delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, is one of the most recognized and revered orations in American history. The Rocky Mount speech, on the other hand, has lived on only in memory — until now.

Earlier this year Jason Miller, an English professor at NC State, unveiled a long-lost audio recording of the address at a news conference on campus. As he played portions of the speech, Miller recounted how he arranged to have the fragile audiotape digitally preserved after it was discovered at a Rocky Mount public library.

A librarian told Miller she found the reel of old-
firestorm in August, generating worldwide coverage as Miller spent a week fielding calls from journalists. The news was reported by USA Today, CNN, the BBC, the Associated Press, the Miami Herald, the Boston Globe, the New York Times and hundreds of other media outlets.

But for Miller, the recording was more than a historical curiosity. The Rocky Mount speech is, he asserts, “incredibly unique,” marking a high point in King’s development of the “dream” motif as a rhetorical device.

Miller should know. He’s spent much of the past decade charting the evolution of the civil rights leader’s speeches and writings about King’s dream of a more just society. In a 2015 book, Origins of the Dream: Hughes’s Poetry and King’s Rhetoric, Miller documents how King’s vision was inspired by the poetry of Langston Hughes.

Hughes was a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance, the cultural and artistic revolution that took place in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood — a predominantly African-American section of the city — from the end of World War I to the mid-1930s. Hughes and King exchanged letters in the 1950s, at a time when King was beginning his civil rights activism.

“Hughes sparked King’s own poetic self,” Miller says. The influence was evident from the start, the professor explains, noting that King concluded his first published speech with a Hughes poem. But as King’s renown grew, he found it necessary to distance himself from the poet, who was gaining a reputation as a Communist sympathizer — a major political liability during the Cold War era.

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fashioned acetate tape sitting on her desk when she returned from vacation. Inside a box holding the priceless tape someone had penned a note in elegant handwriting: “Dr. Martin Luther King speech — please do not erase.”

In January 2016, the audio and a full transcript will be posted on a website Miller created: kingsfirstdream.com. Miller created 89 annotations, accessible through hyperlinks on the site, to help explain the historical and literary context of the speech. He hopes the site will draw researchers and students of English, rhetoric, history, politics and social sciences.

The discovery of a rare King recording set off a media
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King knew his enemies would try to use his personal and professional associations to discredit the civil rights movement. A Senate investigation later revealed that the FBI organized a disinformation campaign against the movement, falsely asserting that Communists and “outside agitators” were behind the efforts to secure social justice and economic opportunity for black Americans in the 1950s and 1960s.

Between 1960 and 1965 Hughes’ influence on King is hard to trace, unless you know what to look for, Miller says. He doggedly pursued the trail as he pored over Hughes’ poetry and King’s speeches from the early 1960s, looking for connections.

“The ideas from Hughes’ poetry are still there, but they’re submerged,” Miller says.

To make the effort easier, Miller bought a piece of butcher’s paper, three feet tall and 14 feet long, and began charting every known connection between Hughes and King, documenting “letters exchanged, poems sent, times they met.”

Miller anchored the right-hand end of the timeline at Aug. 28, 1963, the date of the March on Washington and King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Working backward, he made a notation for every time King uttered the word “dream” in a speech, publication or correspondence.

The exercise eventually brought Miller back to a speech King delivered on Aug. 11, 1956 — the first time the civil rights leader publicly spoke of the dream. In this speech, titled “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” King paraphrased Hughes’ 1926 poem “I Dream a World.”

The 16-line poem is a lyrical call to create the kind of “beloved community” envisioned by the philosopher Josiah Royce, where peace, tolerance and justice prevail:
I dream a world where man
No other man will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn.
I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.
A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,
Attends the needs of all mankind —
Of such I dream, my world!

“That’s the first real iteration of ‘I have a dream.’ You can see it,” Miller says. “It has the same ideas. But King takes those ideas and changes and develops them in the coming years.”

Tracing the evolution of King’s dream along the timeline, Miller comes to the Rocky Mount speech, six years later. Like the speech in 1956, this one is titled “Facing the Challenge of a New Age.” But unlike the first speech, which lightly touched on the dream theme, the Rocky Mount speech is a deeply personal statement.

“So my friends in Rocky Mount, I have a dream tonight,” King declared. “It is a dream rooted firmly in the American dream. I have a dream that one day down in Sasser County, Georgia, where they burned two churches down a few days ago because Negroes wanted to register to vote, one day right down there little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls and walk the streets as brothers and sisters. I have a dream.”

The dream King spoke of in Rocky Mount is far more than a paraphrased version of Hughes’ ideals. This is King’s own dream, fully developed and articulated.

“This is the turning point,” Miller says, the place where Hughes’ utopian vision is transformed into King’s bold vision for a just society.

Miller smiles as he recalls the journey he took, in the North and the South, searching for this piece of the puzzle.

“I’d been to Atlanta twice, I’d been to Boston for over a week, I studied everything they had on Hughes at Yale, and the most amazing piece of evidence I found was an hour and a half away from my office,” he says.

THE POWER OF POETRY

Although researchers have studied King’s philosophy and rhetoric for decades, Miller is one of the first to focus on how the civil rights leader incorporated poetry and poetic devices into his speeches and writings.

“Poetry is compelling and important because it’s the most imaginative form of expression, and it connects that imaginative aspect with memory,” Miller continued.

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— Martin Luther King
Poetry has the capacity on many levels to give people breakthrough insights that they just can’t forget. It doesn’t just inspire; it actually motivates people to act.”

King’s use of poetry is a case in point. “He thought of himself in artistic terms, not simply as an orator,” Miller says. “When he got up to deliver a speech, he thought of it as his chance to perform. It wasn’t just rhetoric. It wasn’t just a speech. It was a way of bringing poetry into the world of public speaking and communication.”

The results changed many lives.

In the kitchen of his home in Rocky Mount, Herbert Tillman recounts how King’s poetic oration changed the story of his life, from his childhood in a public housing project to his retirement at age 54 after a career as a mechanic and engineer in a textile mill. The rags-to-riches story is inspirational, demonstrating a classically American ability to overcome poverty, disadvantage and discrimination.

Tillman traces the source of his inspiration to that night in 1962 when he stood with friends, relatives and neighbors in the gymnasium at Booker T. Washington High School in Rocky Mount as King stepped forward to address the African-American community.

Rocky Mount, like cities throughout the South, enforced the segregation laws of the Jim Crow era.

“We weren’t getting beaten by police or attacked by dogs because we weren’t marching and protesting,” Tillman says. “But we were part of the struggle.”

King’s words sent a wave of excitement through the crowd in the gymnasium.

“I was sitting there listening to him. Everybody knows the hardships that we as blacks were going through at the time,” Tillman says. “He came with a message of hope. He said, ‘I have a dream about tomorrow.’ He said, ‘These are the things we need to do, but we need to do them in a peaceful way.’”

The words stayed with Tillman. A few years later, when he was passed over for a promotion at Burlington Mills because whites wouldn’t work for a black supervisor, Tillman left the plant for a job at Abbott Laboratories.

“I told the folks at Abbott my story. I said, ‘If you all are going to hold me back because of my skin color, I don’t want to work for you either.’”

The hiring manager, who respected Tillman’s reputation as a mechanic, assured him he would get fair treatment.

Today Tillman is heartened by the changes he’s seen in the past five decades since King visited his hometown.

“I think Martin Luther King would be proud,” he says. “To be honest with you, I’m proud of Rocky Mount.”

Listening to the recording of King’s 1962 speech brings back a flood of memories for Tillman.

“I praise the Lord that I was able to be there and witness that event,” he says. “Not just to hear the speech but to be in that atmosphere.

“If you were back there then you would realize how far we’ve come. We’ve come a long way. Not just as black people but as people of the United States. We have all come a long way.”

ABOVE: The fragile 1.5 mm acetate tape recording of King’s 1962 speech was found at a public library in Rocky Mount.