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The Power of Live Events: The Importance of Solidarity

How do live events impact social behavior and group identity? This paper investigates the social impact of two American 1960's musical events that targeted underserved and marginalized audiences: James Brown's Boston concert following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Johnny Cash's series of prison concerts throughout the American South. At this time, American political upheaval was rife. In the wake of the assassination, with cities burning, President Johnson declared a state of emergency, yet Boston, despite some unrest, saw crime that night drop to below normal levels, credited to the concert. In a separate sphere, Cash's concerts had different but equally impactful effects. U.S. prisons were being cited for human rights violations; incarceration rates were rising. Convicts, after release, were pariahs, and prison became a lifelong cycle. The intended audience of each of these events was underserved and marginalized. Through the analysis of eye witness accounts, recordings, interviews, transcribing video, and the application of Social Capital and Stakeholder theories, the paper seeks to learn if and how the concerts created a lasting, constructive impact with their intended audience and what that was. The Social Capital theory surrounds the creation of the networks that connect people and communities through growing and creating opportunities for positive interaction. The Stakeholder theory is the concept that every participant (tangible or intangible), all take a risk when an event is held; the more willingness to take risk, the more opportunity for beneficial growth in social and economic contexts. The paper argues that the influences of these events were profound. Amongst volatility, Brown calmed violence and gave black Bostonians a community and moment to come together, even mourn, despite living within a wider community that was antagonistic to their identity. Cash's prison concerts gave an incarcerated population access to an idol whose presence affirmed them as human beings and ultimately positively influenced behaviors. Cash would go on to influence prison reform nationwide. It concludes that music events do have the capacity to affirm audience identity and strengthen community bonds during times of crisis, offering an encouraging and healing effect.