When John Lewis died many emotions arose, sadness for his passing but inspiration for his leadership. African-American music also came to me. He had none of this professionally, as did other descendants of slaves and sharecroppers like Louis Armstrong, Chuck Berry and B.B. King, and yet a thought stirred.

In the Bible, the 137th Psalm tells of slaves who pondered their fate as they were about to be shipped away. This passage became the basis of a song, made famous by reggae artists, also descendants of those put in chains in Africa and shipped away. The key lines are “They required of us a song/Now how can we sing the King Alpha’s song inna strange land?”

The descendants of some of these captured men and women created a major axis of American music, from creole to the Mississippi Delta blues. These also included voices that come but once in a century, like Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson.

Having heard the “Rivers of Babylon” many dozens of times, not until now had I recognized the full dimension of its pathos. Okay, sure, like many white people who are trying to understand what America’s inaugural toxic stain of racism meant and still means today, I think I am cool. After all, in the 1960s I read Claude Brown’s “Manchild in the Promised Land,” watched the movie “Nothing but a Man” and fell in love with James Baldwin’s spellbinding pen. All good, right? No, not at all. Nor am I absolved for now having become part of a new “white chic” by having known about and read sociological dissections of race in America, like Robin DiAngelo’s “White Fragility,” or by emailing Black friends and colleagues about George Floyd.

When John Lewis died, I realized that not only were these shores unfamiliar to his forebears and made all the more terrifying by the chains and unknown fates, but that, as in the Psalm, there was a
loss of their “Zion,” their entire West African culture. How indeed would they sing their song in “a strange land?”

Music was extraordinarily powerful in the culture of those so cruelly brought to these shores and did create so much of the canon of American music, so joyfully. But to truly “sing their song” took many years, and many lives.

John Lewis, and others in due course, wrote a new songbook. Its chords rose to the enrichment of America. He was the choirmaster. He sang his song in a strange land, as is so for every African-American. We white Americans must learn how very strange this country is for African-Americans, every day, at every traffic stop and in so many ways. If we can come to understand how pervasive and penetrating are these constant affronts, we will be taking our first step in joining John Lewis’ choir, and to have the privilege of following his gifted baton.

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