

Charrise Barron:

Hi, I am Dr. Charrise Barron, and I am the composer for *The Lawsons: A Civil Rights Love Story*. I want to share a little bit about the process of creating the soundtrack for this play, as well as talk about each of the songs. I was commissioned to write the music for this play written by Melda Beatty, and Melda Beatty did an amazing job of taking the love story of William or Bill Lawson and Audrey Lawson and weaving that love story into the larger fabric of their lives together and their work in civil rights activism and church building in Houston, Texas during the mid 20th century.

So William Lawson was the founding pastor of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, which is one of the most revered black megachurches in the city of Houston, Texas. He was also instrumental in integrating the city of Houston during the civil rights era. He was a friend to Martin Luther King, Jr. And he was an activist who had a very lasting effect on the city of Houston. What's amazing about his life beyond his civil rights activism is that he and his wife Audrey Lawson, married each other after having met only about seven times in person across a couple of years. They courted each other through letters, and so they had an amazing story of love and romance through letters and then a lasting marriage. Audrey passed away some years ago, however, Reverend Lawson just passed away in May of 2024. I'm glad that he was able to see this play that honored his work and love story, which he shared with Audrey Lawson.

So let me tell you a little bit about the songs. *The Lawsons of Civil Rights Love Story* is a play with music. It's not a musical. However, the play does include eight original songs plus an overture. Music for this play includes gospel, it pulls from R&B across time—across the decades. The music for this play was also my chance to a Love letter to Houston Gospel, which has been a humongous influence on my musical taste and the ways in which I sing and otherwise perform gospel music.

“Letters”

The first song that I want to mention is the song called “Letters.” “Letters” is the main anthem for the play. It's a tune that is to invoke in your mind musical Broadway. So it's the big booming ballad that really speaks to the love story that Bill and Audrey shared. It was the first, perhaps it may have been the first song that actually came to me. So, the song is a duet between Audrey and Bill and throughout the song they're singing to each other. And then of course, Audrey closes out the end of the chorus saying, “Don't you ever stop writing me. I love every line of your letters.” So that's the main song of the play, the anthem that recurs throughout the play.

“Meet Up”

The song that occurs next in the play is a song called “Meet Up,” and this song is a fun playful number that pulls from R&B. What was fun about this song is it's a chance to lean into the romantic side of Bill and Audrey Lawson, the lyrics of the song basically talk about the personalities of both the characters and during this song we see in the play, the two finally meet in person.

“Time for Change”

The third song was one of the first songs that came to me as I was putting together music for this play. This song is called Time for Change. It is written to remind us of the music that inspired civil rights activists that was taken from black churches and reformed and refashioned to be part of the Civil Rights Movement. So this song is what one would consider a kind of congregational song in which everyone is invited and encouraged to sing along. This is one of those songs that you could sing fast, you could sing it

slow. It's like, <Dr. Barron singing> "It's time, it's time, time for change. Time is time. It's time for change. It's time for change. It's a new day, and it's time for change." And so we do iterations on that, and then we switch it up a little bit and we give a little quartet action. Bill Lawson and other men who are activists at the time are meeting with the mayor of the city and surrounding that event, which was a catalytic moment for integrating the retail stores....

"Bill's Prayer"

Then the next song, which is called Bill's Prayer, also gives us quite a bit of quartet music. This song is a prayer in which Bill is speaking to God about how to guide the students through this moment of activism in a way that doesn't cause catastrophic problems for the students and their education. So he's saying to God, basically, the students are really on fire. They really want to do a lot, but I'm concerned about them. I don't want them kicked out of school. I don't want them arrested. Where is the balance? God help me to lead these students and to fight. Bill starts the prayer with a bit of trepidation, but by the end of it, he's encouraged and charged.

"Take This City"

The next song that appears in the play after Bill's prayer is a very big number called "Take This City." And this song begins with a trio, and the trio is performed by three women who are called in the play—they're called the Charter Chicks. The Charter Chicks were founding members of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church. And, at the start of this song, they're singing about integration taking over the city. At this point in the play, the men have met with the mayor and begrudgingly they have gotten a commitment from the mayor to integrate the stores. You remember—those of you who may be from Houston may remember stores like Foley's, right? The mayor was now going to step in and help ensure that those stores were integrated. "Take This City" is a song that basically celebrates the integration of the city. The beginning of the song starts rubato with the charter chicks singing Improvisationally and in harmony talking about and celebrating the integration of the city of Houston. When the play was performed, it would get quite a bit of reaction from the audience. It's a lively tune.

"The Plea"

After "Take the City" we get into a period in which Bill Lawson is arrested and goes to jail because of his activism. And so "The Plea" was perhaps the toughest song for me to write. This song is a prayer to God that Bill and Audrey are praying. But, it's also a conversation between the two. Bill's circumstance is that he's in jail and concerned about what's going to happen with the people that he is caring about and wanting to fight for. And Audrey is frustrated, of course, because her husband is in jail and the work that they've been doing has been taking a toll on the family.

In this song, they're talking to each other, and they're both starting from a place of some frustration or concern. And then by the end of the song, they move to a place of resolution as in resolution to continue the fight. It concludes with them saying to God, "Speak to me, and I'll be strong. Give me faith to hold on. Speak to me, and I'll be strong. Give me faith to fight on." The song starts with Bill and Audrey asking, "Why am I sitting here by myself." Or, "God, please tell me why I'm sitting here by myself," is what Audrey is saying, while Bill is saying, "God, speak to me while I'm sitting here by myself." In that chorus that starts the song, you get a bit of gospel. And then once we move into the verses where Audrey and Bill are outlining the issues that they're facing, we get some R&B. Then when we move into the pre-chorus where they're saying, "Through the pain and the suffering, God, please let your hope spring eternal, peace like a river." In those moments, it reminds me of the call to action and the call to courage that civil

rights anthems are known to bring. And then once we get to the end, we get a kind of militaristic kind of percussive drive—it's a drive to fight on, to overcome. So again, we find a song here in the play in which they move from concern or trepidation or anxiety to a place of faith and confidence, knowing that God's got them as they face the challenges together.

I had the distinct pleasure of having an ensemble at Brown University perform "The Plea." And Professor Nadine Lee, who was a visiting professor at Brown, taught this song to their ensemble, and they did a beautiful interpretation of that song.

"Welcome to the Avenue"

"Welcome to the Avenue" is my interpretation of a welcome song for Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, which is one of the most celebrated black megachurches in the city of Houston. And the vibe of the song is a black church offering song in which people bounce a little bit and walk around as they give money in the offering. So, it's a lot of fun.

"The Amen (Going Home)"

The last song that's introduced in the play is "The Amen." "The Amen" is a song that's performed in the play during the funeral for Audrey Lawson. The first part of the song that I wrote is the actual end of the song—the amens, which is why the song is named "The Amen" and in parentheses "(Going home)," because I started with the amens. But, the beginning of the song starts with the lyrics, "I'm going home. I'm going home, where I can rest in power and peace. Jesus will welcome me home." As I was writing the chorus and vamp of the song, my inspiration was Thomas Whitfield's, "Soon as I Get Home," also known as "I Shall Wear Crown." And so, the idea of this song is to provide a song that can be sung at funerals even beyond this play.

So that's pretty much the music of the album. It has been an absolute honor to be a part of the creative team that brought the story of Bill and Audrey Lawson to life. I am especially thankful for the artistic director, Eileen Morris, who trusted me with writing this music, and it was such a pleasure to work with her and to work with the playwright Melda Beatty to bring this to life. So I'm hoping that as you listen to this music, you will think on the impact that Bill and Audrey had in the city of Houston, in the black Christian community—across America. I hope this music helps you to revel in the audacity, and the ingenuity, and tenacity that was their love and their love story.