

NEW BEDFORD

'Lift every voice and sing'

Poetry, music, artwork create stirring civil rights event

By Mike Lawrence
mlawrence@s-t.com

NEW BEDFORD — As Candida Rose sang the final notes of "Strange Fruit," a song about American racism, lynching and trees in the South with "blood on the leaves and blood at the root," there was a moment of absolute silence in the New Bedford Art Museum.

The crowd, which had gathered Saturday afternoon for "Freedom Songs: Poetry and Music of the Civil Rights Movement," featuring nationally known poet Everett Hoagland, let Rose's final notes hang in the art gallery air. There were a few quiet murmurs. Then the applause began, and it seemed to celebrate not only Rose's powerful rendition of the protest song made famous by Billie Holiday — with lyrics including "black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees" — but also the resilience, activism and strength that grew out of the unfathomable horrors the song describes.

Strength was a theme of Saturday's event, which brought poetry, music and art together to tell stories of civil rights icons during Black History

Month.

"Don't leave life to chance or fate — organize and agitate!" Hoagland said, reading from his "Just Words?" The poem reflects on the escape of abolitionist Frederick Douglass from slavery in Maryland to freedom in New Bedford.

Hoagland read his own poetry and others' in between thematic songs by Rose. The backdrop in the art gallery was "Icons of the Civil Rights Movement," an exhibit by Pamela Chatterton-Purdy. The 32-piece exhibit portrays figures ranging from Douglass to Martin Luther King Jr. on painted plywood with descriptions and symbolic ornamentation.

Half of the pieces will be displayed through March 2 in New Bedford Art Museum/Artworks! on Pleasant Street downtown, while the other half will hang through Feb. 27 just around the corner at Alison Wells Fine Art Studio & Gallery on William Street.

Chatterton-Purdy, a 75-year-old resident of Harwich Port on Cape Cod, said it took her seven years to create the 32 pieces.

The exhibit is hosted by the New Bedford Historical Society.

"I think it's very important to celebrate our common heritage," Historical Society President Lee Blake said. "People often forget what the struggles were that brought us



New Bedford singer Candida Rose honors African-American women in song Saturday at the New Bedford Art Museum. MICHAEL SMITH/STANDARD TIMES SPECIAL/SCMG

to this point in time."

Saturday's "Freedom Songs" event was a powerful reminder.

"The civil rights movement is an ongoing movement," said Hoagland, 73, who spoke several times Saturday about segregation issues in Philadelphia during his childhood.

The former UMass Dartmouth professor also led the crowd in a "Black Lives Matter" call-and-response while reading one of his poems, "Many Thousand-Thousands Gone." The poem

listed the names of numerous African-Americans — such as Trayvon Martin — killed in racially charged tragedies in recent years.

"How many Emmett Tills have we had?" Hoagland asked rhetorically, referring to the African-American boy lynched in Mississippi in 1955, at age 14.

Till is one of the icons depicted in Chatterton-Purdy's exhibit. The artist pointed out that rulers bordering Till's portrait intentionally are cut off at 14 inches.

At the end of the poems and songs Saturday, members of the crowd joined hands and stood in a loose, multi-layered circle to join Rose in singing "We Shall Overcome." The moment expressed how far the civil rights movement has come, and how far it has yet to go.

"It's no mystery — today's news comes out of history," Hoagland said.

—Follow Mike Lawrence on Twitter @MikeLawrenceSCT.