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ARTLOG BROWSE MAGAZINE

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13 SEP. '11

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Interview: Black Power Mixtape 1967-75

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Original footage by Tom Goetz, Angela Davis, 1967-1975.
Courtesy Third Streaming.

The recent release of Tate Taylor's *The Help* (2011) has allowed a heated, ongoing debate plaguing American cinema to resurface. From *Mississippi Burning* (1988) to *The Blind Side* (2009), mainstream cinema has shown a tendency to make historical narratives rather soigné and palatable. Revisionist impulses are cloaked under the veneer of inspirational vehicles that skirt more nuanced views of our country's racial politics. Among other misdemeanors, these movies often cast a self-congratulatory light on the enlightened, rich white liberal, who is assumed to be instrumental in the "liberation" of the minority.

The primary way to combat such a problem may, perhaps, be to eschew fictional narratives altogether – to provide a cinema of facts. Such is the case with Swedish director [Göran Hugo Olsson's *Black Power Mixtape: 1967-75* \(2011\)](#), a documentary film that has received extensive press after this year's Sundance Film Festival, where it won the prize for World Cinema Documentary Editing. Concurrently with the film's theatrical release in New York, [Third Streaming](#) showcases a number of film stills, unseen footage, and other era-specific memorabilia through October 15. The film, co-produced by Danny Glover and Joslyn Barnes of Louverture Films, is an assemblage of archival documentary footage from Swedish journalists. Curious about a movement that was portrayed as akin to terrorism, these journalists traveled to the United States and interviewed key figures of the Black Power movement. Upon discovering the neglected 16mm footage, Olsson took it upon himself to release it to mass audiences.

Olsson's film makes a time that was unhinged, chaotic, and fraught with danger look seductive. His style is voluptuous and dynamic, appropriately capturing the fervent idealism that characterized the period. The soundtrack, drawing from The Roots and Jackson 5, suggests that the past endures into the present. He sets the voices of contemporary figures – Erykah Badu, Harry Belafonte, Melvin Van Peebles - against footage of Angela Davis, Elaine Brown, and Stokely Carmichael. There is a certain, tacitly understood link between the two generations. Both speak with cultivated precision, and Olsson seems to realize that such eloquence provided groundswell for the movement's success and traction. The legacy of these well-educated but disenfranchised folk seems to have been lost in a culture that tends to misremember the seventies as a time of failed counterrevolutions and anti-establishment dreamers.



Original footage by Tom Goetz, *Angela Davis*, 1967-1975. Courtesy Third Streaming.

Mayukh Sen: Joslyn Barnes, one of the film's co-producers, recalls being somewhat shocked when you - "this tall, lanky Swede" – approached her about making the film. Did you encounter a lot of skepticism?

Göran Hugo Olsson: No, no, no, no. The contrary. I think I benefited from being Swedish in the same way that the filmmakers and the journalists who dug up the material in the sixties and seventies did. Everyone has been so generous, so welcoming, and they understand that I don't have the complete picture. I don't have the firsthand experience growing up in America, but that made them explain things to me. And that would not have been the case if I were an American, or maybe even a British, filmmaker. Yes, another person could have done this, no problem, but I benefited in that people were really generous. I know that filmmakers back in the day also had the same experiences. They also knocked on the Black Panthers' doors and said, "Hi, yes, we're from Sweden, we're very different from you." If it was ABC News, it'd kind of be a "prove yourself" situation. If you're a foreigner people are more friendly.

MS: Right.

GO: I'm not saying they shouldn't be friendly to another person, but they were really generous. And when I asked really naive questions they gave me very intelligent answers.

MS: What was it like growing up in Sweden? I know you've described your childhood as a time when you gained a deep sympathy for liberation movements - being surrounded by children of Holocaust survivors, pogroms, exile communities under Allende; being raised in the time of Poland's Solidarity strikes, and so on. What was your exposure to the Black Power movement?

GO: When you talk about the Black Power movement, I see it as the time from '67 to '75. People ask me where that struggle went, and of course it went to different levels in society within America. But it also went abroad with the struggle for democracy in South Africa. We were growing up as the Swedish solidarity movement changed its focus from urban America to South Africa. Because I was ten years old in '75, I remember this from television, but I didn't understand anything. That struggle was the heritage of the American struggle. All the people who inspired the Black Power movement also inspired the African National Congress. There would be no ANC without DuBois, Malcolm X, King.

MS: Were there feelings of anti-Americanism in Sweden? There's a point in the documentary when we learn that *TV Guide* branded Swedish television "anti-American." And today, there's so much made about how Europe perceives America in light of the post-Bush era: dumb, narcissistic, obese.

GO: You know, I sometimes went to the library in my town to read *Interview Magazine*, and we loved the music, the stars, what have you. It wasn't all, "America is bad." To us, it seemed that Liz Taylor was the biggest person on Earth. Michael Jackson too. Also, we loved your products. But I think that Europeans have, for a very long time, felt a duty to criticize America.



Original footage unknown, *Kathleen Cleaver*, 1967-1975. Courtesy Third Streaming.

MS: When did you first visit America?

GO: In the eighties.

MS: What was your response to it then, with regards to what you'd read in magazines and such?

GO: You can't imagine. We were so into America that we knew everything – especially about New York, LA, all the clubs, Studio 54, all that stuff. We were aware of what was going on in America. I lived for a year in Brooklyn, but I never understood American society. New York is one thing, and the country is totally different – the cars, the malls, driving.

MS: Moving onto your film – it's very stylized, and it seems to pride itself upon that, especially because it's called a mixtape. And I find this stylistic choice has a lot to do with making this narrative more hip and jazzy to today's generation. Did you ever worry you were sacrificing substance for style? Do you think you struck a balance?

GO: Of course I think I achieved a good balance. I didn't want to do a remix. I didn't want to do fast-paced editing. I wanted to keep some of the feelings from the archives, but I also wanted to capture some of the feelings I had while watching them. The material is very virgin. I wanted to keep that. I wanted to do a mixtape. You try to structure your favorite songs, the greatest songs.

MS: Who are your influences, cinematically and musically? If anyone?

GO: I actually think that the great American documentary filmmakers like Leacock and Pennebaker were my biggest influences. Also, I love music with some sort of social issue connected to it. I made a documentary about Philadelphia soul in the seventies before this, and I think that embodies the perfect mix. It's bedroom, romantic kind of music, but also political – it's the best combination in music so far I've encountered. Some sweetness, some spiciness to it.

MS: I was reading a few reviews of your film that criticize it for glorifying the Black Power movement. The movement must have died out for a reason that didn't only have to do with outside, institutional forces. It crumbled from within as well, I think. How do you respond to this criticism?

GO: I think that – well, it's true. It's also in the eyes of the beholder. Some may look at this and say, "Wow, I didn't know anything about this movement!" Others may say, "Well, I knew everything about this." My goal was not to make a film that goes to film festivals and that's shown in the cinemas. This is meant to be shown in libraries, schools, and universities around the world. So if you're studying Angela Davis, yes, you can read her books. But you can also see the film to get a feeling for her and who she was, to meet her in a different way. To complement the reading. I would like to have the film in libraries. My dream is that this will be in libraries so that five years from now, ten years from now, people will still find it relevant.



Original footage Anders Ribjösö, *Harlem Steps*, 1967-1975. Courtesy Third Streaming.

MS: I can definitely say that I was taught very little of this in school.

GO: Well, also, I think that people in your generation underestimate themselves. Because when I talked to a lot of young people who saw the film in the States they said they didn't know much about the movement, but they knew all the names. Where did they get this? They didn't get it in school; they didn't get it from books; they got it from music. It was the name-dropping in the music they were listening to. You shouldn't underestimate the power of the information you get from that source. There's a strong verbal tradition of telling these stories in one way or another.

MS: What was it like meeting Angela Davis?

GO: She's this super-intelligent scholar, academic. I have a tremendous amount respect for her. She's the kind of person who's right even when she's wrong. Her life was crazy. She was facing capital punishment for something she didn't do. I was scared she'd be one of those standoffish people, but she came up and was super warm, funny, cracking jokes with me. I felt guilty for having that image of her. I was embarrassed with myself. She's famous, so people might expect her to be shy, reluctant, waiting for you to make the first move. But she was not like that. Sometimes you can misinterpret some of the things these big names do as being snobbish when they're really just afraid of being hounded all the time.

MS: Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael, Elaine Brown – all of these people spoke with such nuance and passion. They were clearly so educated. And I think another big part of this film is that there's this same urgency in some of the contemporary voices you've interviewed. I wonder if you think America is capable of

doing this again. I can't expect you to forecast history, I know, but is there a place for this kind of radical impulse in today's America?

GO: I think this a rare opportunity in time. I was talking to a friend who was telling me that revolutions, demonstrations in history can never happen again, that they're not part of our time. And then, a few weeks later, Egypt happened. I think in Egypt, especially, they suppressed and oppressed young people for too long. You can't do that. Another thing about Egypt was the education factor, which you pointed out. Every person within this Black Power movement was the first one in their family to get an education. They were just getting truth in the university. Even the Black Panther movement, some people think it came out of violence. It didn't. It came out of poetry. It came out of the same environment as the gay movement did. They were at university.

Actually, I think the media or common perception of the Black Panthers still suffers from the FBI's point of view. It should take ten minutes to read the program and to see what they actually did. The Free Breakfast program was for anyone poor. All of the incidents were caused by police provocation.

MS: I've also been fed myth of the Black Power movement as the violent one.

GO: I understand. Even things like the movie *Mississippi Burning* can be counterproductive. Some rednecks are racist, yes. But when the system creating these problems is glorified, that's the problem. When people watch movies like that, they don't see anything wrong with it. I guess it just shows how manipulative this medium can be.



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