

A Documentary for Our Times: The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975

By BILL MORRIS posted at 6:00 am on September 21, 2011



1.

The morning after I saw the timely new documentary, *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975*, I picked up the *New York Times* and read [an article about the Attica prison uprising](#), which came to its bloody end exactly 40 years ago and is prominently featured in the documentary. The article quotes newly discovered audio tapes of phone calls New York Gov. **Nelson Rockefeller** placed to **President Richard Nixon** after he had ordered 1,000 police, including sharpshooters, to storm the prison, where rioting inmates had taken 33 guards hostage.

"They did a fabulous job," Rockefeller crowed to Nixon hours after the four-day uprising was snuffed by a rain of bullets that left 39 people dead. "It really was a beautiful operation."

At the time, the truth was not yet out – that 10 white guards were among the dead, and that the dead inmates and hostages had all been shot by police sharpshooters, not, as was originally believed, by the rioting inmates. Another truth was that negotiators had been close to a settlement with the leaders of the uprising, who were willing to free all hostages unharmed in return for amnesty from prosecution. But Rockefeller refused to go to Attica to talk directly with the inmates, fearing he would appear to be capitulating, and he adamantly refused their demand of amnesty. Instead he ordered a bloodbath.

The decision won Nixon's hearty approval. "The courage you showed and the judgment in not granting amnesty, it was right, and I don't care what the hell the papers or anybody else says," Nixon told Rockefeller during their first phone call on Sept. 13, 1971. "If you would have granted amnesty in this case, it would have meant that you would have had prisons in an uproar all over this country."

In a follow-up call to Nixon the next day, after the truth had begun to come out, Rockefeller was a bit more subdued but far from repentant. "Well, you know, this is one of those things," he said. "You can't have sharpshooters picking off the prisoners when the hostages are there with them, at a distance with tear gas, without maybe a few accidents."

"Well," Nixon replied, "you saved a lot of guards and that was worth it. You stand firm there and don't give an inch. Because in the country, you see, the example you set may stiffen the backs of a few other governors that may have a problem."

And then the other shoe dropped. "Tell me," Nixon said, "are these [prisoners] primarily blacks that you're dealing with?"

As the divisions of class and race continue to harden and widen in this country, I say we could use more leaders like Stokely Carmichael and Angela Davis, with their beautiful, hard-earned fury.

BILL MORRIS is a staff writer for *The Millions*. He is the author of the novels *Motor City* and *All Souls' Day*. His writing has appeared in *Granta*, the *New York Times*, *L.A. Weekly*, the *(London) Independent*, the *Washington Post Magazine* and *The Daily Beast*. He lives in New York City.

"Oh yes," Rockefeller replied, "the whole thing was led by blacks."

Later that day, Nixon, the master of spin, asked his chief of staff, **H.R. Haldeman**, if reports from the prison included the fact that the uprising was "basically a black thing." Then Nixon fretted that Rockefeller's "beautiful operation" might backfire: "That's going to turn people off awful damn fast, that the guards were white."

A state commission later reported that the riot was driven by black inmates unwilling to submit to the "petty humiliations and racism that characterize prison life."

2.

The footage that makes up *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975*, including footage of the Attica uprising, was shot by Swedish television crews and shown on various Swedish TV programs in the '60s and '70s, then consigned to a basement archive for some 40 years. It was recently discovered there by a documentary filmmaker named **Göran Hugo Olsson**, who stitched the footage together and added contemporary interviews with some of the people onscreen and others whose lives they influenced, including **Abiodun Oyewole** of **The Last Poets**, the poet **Sonia Sanchez**, and the musicians **Erykah Badu** and **Questlove**. The result is an impressionistic portrait of how racism gave birth to the pacifist civil rights movement led by **Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.**, how that then morphed into the more militant Black Power movement, and how the U.S. government managed to tear it apart through acts like the Attica raid, spying on militants, aggressive prosecutions, and even, according to some activists, the introduction of heroin into Northern ghettos. It's a sobering, inspiring, and ultimately sad picture, and it shows, in black-and-white and in grainy color, how far this country has come and how far it still has to go. **Barack Obama** may be a huge improvement over Richard Nixon, but **Rick Perry** is waiting in the wings. Meanwhile, according to a new U.S. Census report, poor and middle-class blacks continue to sink even farther and faster than their white counterparts.

There are many unforgettable sequences in this documentary, which won acclaim at the Sundance Film Festival in January and is now playing in New York. (There is an accompanying exhibition of still photos, artifacts, and a video at [Third Streaming](#) gallery in SoHo, and next spring Haymarket Books will publish transcripts of the interviews Olsson conducted for the film.) In one sequence, a Swedish TV crew is trying to interview **Stokely Carmichael's** mother Mabel in her living room in 1967 while her famous son sits quietly on the floor nearby. She's reticent, obviously uncomfortable about being interviewed. Frustrated by what he's hearing, Stokely, who by then had graduated from the pacifist Freedom Rides and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to a far more militant stance, grabs the microphone from the reporter and sits on the sofa beside his mother. Speaking softly, Stokely gets her to open up and explain that the family was poor because her husband, a carpenter, was frequently laid off jobs. Why, Stokely persists, why was he laid off so often? Finally he coaxes it out of her. "It was because he was colored," she says, adding, almost apologetically, "In those days we didn't say Negro." This last remark lends the interview its proper sepia tone, establishing it as a relic from a long-gone era. And it emphasizes just how far the young man with the microphone had to travel before he could dare to coin the electrifying slogan "Black Power."

Another memorable sequence is a 1972 interview with **Angela Davis**, the former student of **Herbert Marcuse** who, at the urging of California Gov. **Ronald Reagan**, had been fired from her job teaching philosophy at UCLA because of her affiliation with the Communist party. The interview took place in the jail cell where Davis was awaiting trial on trumped-up charges that she was the owner of a gun that was used in a courthouse shootout. (President Nixon applauded the FBI for capturing this "dangerous terrorist" after she fled California. She was later acquitted.) When the jailhouse interviewer asks Davis how she responds to charges that the Black Power movement is violent, she bristles. In a stinging, sometimes shrill voice, she delivers a thumbnail sketch of what it was like to grow up black in **Bull Connor's** Birmingham, Ala., what it was like to have friends die in church bombings, what it was like to live in constant fear of vigilante violence. "And you ask me about violence?!" she cries indignantly at the Swedish reporter.

These two segments put a personal and very human face on the roots of a movement that has, over time, come to be remembered largely for its rhetoric, its slogans, and its icons, including the raised clenched fist, the Afro, the black panther, the gun-toting men in berets, shades, and leather jackets. This humanizing is a great service. In addition to Carmichael and Davis, we see **Harry Belafonte** chatting with Dr. King in Stockholm, we see the articulate **Bobby Seale**, a founder of the Black Panther Party, being interviewed in Stockholm, and we see a frayed and chain-smoking **Kathleen Cleaver** in Algeria in 1969. The Black Panther Party's communications secretary looks



haunted, hunted. Without saying so outright, the movie implies that such a look comes with the territory when you're married to a man who was on the run from an attempted murder charge, a man capable of writing a book as incendiary as [*Soul On Ice*](#).

3.

There is, mercifully, a bit of dark humor here too. The movie reminded me of something I had forgotten – that when Swedish Prime Minister **Olof Palme** likened the U.S.'s 1972 bombing of Hanoi to Nazi war crimes, the U.S. froze diplomatic relations with Sweden. Nixon's infamous "enemies list" was, obviously, capacious enough to accommodate entire nations. Sweden comes in for more heat in the documentary when the editor of *TV Guide* is shown slamming Swedish journalists for their "hostile" coverage of American news. The documentary then points out, dryly, that *TV Guide* was published by Nixon's wealthy crony **Walter Annenberg**, who was then the U.S. ambassador to Great Britain.

The charge against the Swedish journalists is not only fatuous and self-serving, it's simply wrong. As *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975* demonstrates, these journalists approached their interview subjects with great openness and compassion, which is more than can be said of many American journalists in that era. The result is three-dimensional portraits of people who were responding to 400 years of repression in the only ways they knew how – sometimes through prayer, sometimes through passive resistance, sometimes through fiery slogans, sometimes through political organizing, and sometimes through violence. As the divisions of class and race continue to harden and widen in this country, I say we could use more leaders like Stokely Carmichael and Angela Davis, with their beautiful, hard-earned fury. The time for the Nelson Rockefellers, Ronald Reagans, and Richard Nixons and their "beautiful" operations is gone. Now, with the poor of all races getting poorer and with the middle class sinking fast, it's time to dust off an old question and an old slogan. The question: Where is the outrage? The slogan: All Power to the People.