

Growing up Panther

Former Black Panther Party captain Aaron Dixon reflects on an often misunderstood movement that still resonates today

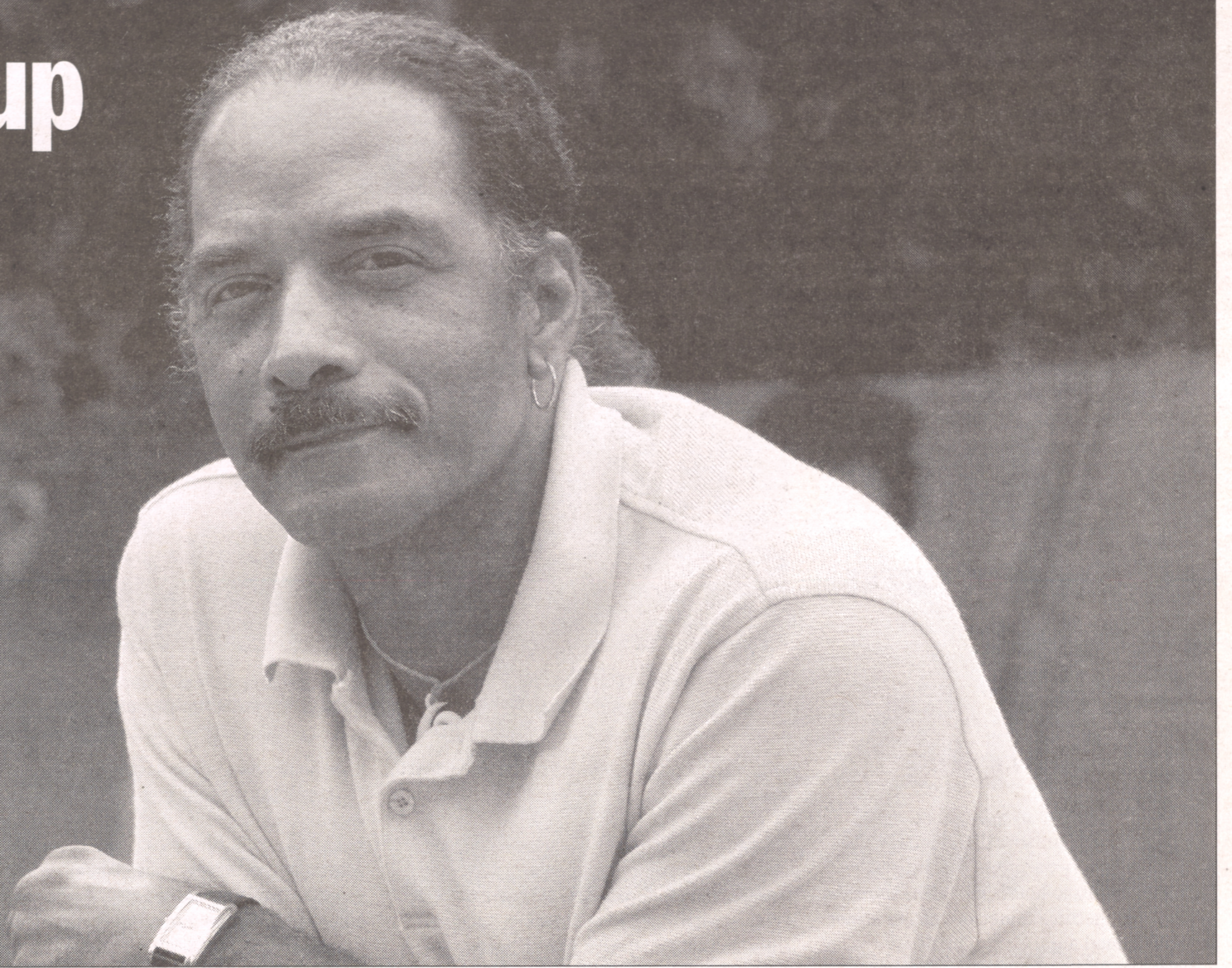


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In the era of Androids and iPads, it's easy to forget that 45 years ago, people used rotary phones and typewriters. Anyone who lived in Seattle in 1969 and picked up a phone and dialed EA5-8794 would have been greeted by the smooth baritone of Aaron Dixon, captain of the Black Panther Party of Seattle. Or maybe Dixon wouldn't have answered, due to the jail time served because of a certain typewriter. But that phone line patched directly to a man who played a pivotal role in the history of the Emerald City in the late '60s.

If you dial that number today, a voice will tell you the number has been disconnected. But Dixon's memory of that era is fully intact. And what an era it was: Black men with rifles, their Afros partly obscured by black berets, stood on the steps of the capitol in Olympia; protestors who supported black contractors arrested by Seattle police at the airport; Black Panthers, troubled by interactions with law enforcement, barricaded offices in Madrona. If Dixon, 64, wasn't there when these events went down, as the head of the local Panther party he was involved in some capacity. The role gave him a close-up view into the birth — and demise — of a revolution.

He tells the story of that era in his recent autobiography, "My People Are Rising: Memoir of a Black Panther Party Captain" (Haymarket Books, \$17.95). He's written a quiet book, calm and clear-eyed, with his recollections of moving to Seattle as a youth, starting the local Panther chapter at 19 and fighting to avoid serious jail time. Perhaps the smooth tone of the book makes sense. In person, Dixon embodies calm. Even when he speaks of the violence that swirled around him, the brother remains centered. When we sat down to talk, he laid it all on the line: his first time in jail, the loaded shotgun and the story behind the typewriter.

R.R.: How about you tell me your first memory of a Black Panther.

A.D.: I'd been out playing tennis across the street from the house I was growing up in. My mother called me in for dinner at 6 o'clock, and I came in the house and went by the TV. The news was on, the national news, and they were talking about these protests being led by this organization. These black men had leather jackets on and

black berets, and they were carrying shotguns and rifles. And I looked at them and said, "Wow. Wow. Look at that." I thought that was cool. But actually I just wanted to hurry up and get back out to the tennis courts 'cause I was trying to be another Arthur Ashe.

R.R.: And what were your first recollections of coming to Seattle?

A.D.: The mountains and Lake Washington and, you know, all the white people, of course. We had lived in the south side of Chicago, and then we lived in Champaign, Ill., in a black neighborhood. And how quiet everything was (in Seattle) and how slow everything was and how peaceful everything seemed to be. It was almost like being in a country town.

R.R.: So how about if you talk about the first time you were arrested, in April 1968?

A.D.: I was a member of the BSU (Black Student Union at the University of Washington). I was one of the founding members. We had also organized a BSU at Garfield High School, had been trying to organize one at Franklin. Franklin High School was mostly Asian and black students, but none of the faculty was people of color, except for Roberto Maestes (founder of the cultural agency El Centro de la Raza, who died Sept. 22, 2010). There was a fight between a black student and a white student, and the black student was kicked out, and the white student remained in school. The black student called us and felt that both of them or neither of them should've been kicked out. So we had tried to negotiate with the school to get him back in, and they refused. We decided this was a good opportunity to lead a protest demonstration against Franklin. So we gathered all the BSU members from the University of Washington, from Garfield — must've been about 20 of us — and we marched into the principal's office chanting our Black Power slogans, demanding to meet with the principal. He refused. We went into his office and kept chanting, and he decided he was just going to send all the staff home. We were there with the students and decided to hold a rally in the auditorium. It felt victorious: We chased them outta there.

A couple of weeks later while I was doing some homework, the police knocked on my

door and told my mother they had a warrant for my arrest. So I was arrested, charged with unlawful assembly and taken down to the King County Jail. And when I got there Larry Gossett and Carl Miller were there.

R.R.: And you mean Larry Gossett, who is now chair of the King County Council?

A.D.: Mmm hmm. Also my brother Elmer had been arrested at Garfield High School.

The day we were arrested was April 4. We were sitting in the day room watching the news. Walter Cronkite said that Martin Luther King had been assassinated, so it was a double-whammy for us: The first time being arrested, being put in this archaic King County Jail, which looked like a dungeon, we find that Martin Luther King is killed. Martin Luther King was our hero. And suddenly he was gone. Riots broke out all across the country, and we could see it on TV. And here we were, sitting in jail.

R.R.: Whatever happened to that charge?

A.D.: I think we had six months probation.

R.R.: How much longer was it after that that you ended up meeting Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Black Panther Party?

A.D.: It wasn't long at all. Matter of fact, as soon as we got outta jail, we went down to San Francisco State College to a Black Student Union conference. The Black Panther Party (had been) out on the streets with guns, and they got into a confrontation with the police, and there was a shootout. Several Panthers were wounded, one Panther was killed, and 18 Panthers were arrested. The Panther that was killed was Little Bobby Hutton: He was the first Panther to join at 14 years old and the first to die at 17 years old. So when we went down there, we found out that they were having Little Bobby's funeral. So we went over to Oakland, and that was the first time we saw Black Panther party members face-to-face, lined against a wall. Marlon Brando was there. The funeral was really very emotional: His family was there crying and wailing, but on the other hand, the Panthers standing on the wall were very stoic. Later on that evening, Bobby Seale and Kathleen Cleaver (communications secretary who became the first woman to hold power in the national Panther party) came to San Francisco State College to do the keynote

address. Bobby Seale just came back from burying someone who was a very good friend of his. This was the first major attack on the Black Panther Party. It was probably one of the defining moments.

R.R.: In the book, you say that that's when you decided to start a chapter in Seattle.

A.D.: We approached Bobby Seale, made a beeline to him and told him we wanted a Black Panther Party chapter in Seattle. We gave him our contact information. A week later, he calls and says that he and the Minister of Information would be on their way up: Pick them up from the airport. We met at my mother's house for a three-day period, and there were young people from all over: SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), BSU. We were just so eager to learn, ready to take in whatever they had to offer. It felt more immediate: Martin Luther King, Jr. is dead. The nonviolent movement is over now. Now it's time for violence.

R.R.: When you say violence, what do you mean?

A.D.: The analogy that I used was: I decided that when Martin Luther King was killed, that the picket sign for me was gonna be replaced by a gun.

R.R.: And you were ready to use a gun?

A.D.: Yes. Most of us were ready.

R.R.: Had you ever used a gun before?

A.D.: Yeah, .22s, BB guns. Growing up everybody had a BB gun, .22s. We used a BB gun to shoot at bottles and birds and stuff like that.

R.R.: But shooting at a bottle and a bird is different than shooting at someone to prove your political point.

A.D.: Exactly. But when I say using a gun, we're talking about for self-defense. Because we grew up in an era of political assassinations starting with John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers (civil rights activist shot in his driveway in Jackson, Miss., in 1963), Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and