



Black Panthers from Sacramento, Free Huey Rally, Bobby Hutton Memorial Park in Oakland, Calif., 1969.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PIRKLE JONES AND RUTH-MARION BARUCH

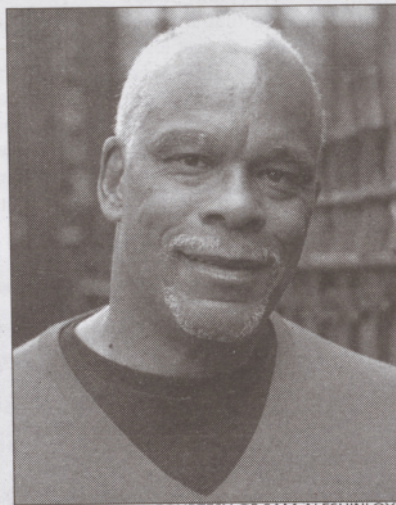
Echoes of the Panthers

Director Stanley Nelson's new film "The Black Panthers" sheds new light on the controversial party for a post-Michael Brown audience

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT
STAFF WRITER

Before "Black Lives Matter" and "Hands Up Don't Shoot" were chanted by activists across the U.S. "Black is Beautiful" and "Power to the People" echoed through the same streets as activists of the mid-20th century fought against the same issues of police brutality and racial and housing injustice that we as a country face today.

The Black Panthers, perhaps the most visible and controversial black political organization at the time, were dismantled nearly 40 years ago, but the legacy of their work and the images of their raised fists, leather jackets and black berets have endured as symbols of resistance and revolution. Despite the Party's iconic status, the full story of the Panthers' rise and fall has never fully been detailed in a feature film until now. Emmy-Award winning documentary filmmaker and MacArthur Genius Stanley Nelson has brought a fuller story of the Panthers to the big screen with the release of his latest film, "The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution," coming to the Hollywood Theatre on Oct. 9 and to be broadcast on PBS in 2016. "The Black Panthers" uses interviews, archival footage and newly unearthed historical documents to transport audiences to the revolution-charged '60s and '70s. However, seven years in the making, the film resonates with viewers today in a way



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Stanley Nelson

Nelson and his team could have never predicted. The acclaimed director spoke with Street Roots via phone to discuss the Black Panthers' influence, the film's timing and the effect it has had on viewers.

Ann-Derrick Gaillot: *You started making "The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution" in 2008. The public discourse around race and racism in this country has changed and evolved so much over that time. Did you find your approach to making the film changing in response to current events as they unfolded?*

"You can't help but think about — when you see the film — how 50 years later these things are still with us. Police brutality, it's right there in the front of our minds. And it's not like it left and came back, it's been there."

Stanley Nelson: No, not at all, because we're telling a historical story and it is what it is. We talked about what's going on in this county now, but we thought that those are connections that the viewer can make for themselves. I think what's happened has only made people be able to kind of understand the film in a much more sympathetic way than they might have a year and a half ago, where maybe it would be hard to be sympathetic to a group like the Black Panthers that said, "We have to police the police." But I think it's something that many more people in this country and around the world can say, "OK, let me see what the next thing in the film is" rather than rejecting the Panthers and who they were outright.

A.G.: *What lessons do you think that people today and activists today can learn from the Black Panther Party?*

S.N.: I think that there's so much that they can learn from the story of the Black Panther Party, both good and bad. I think the Panthers were incredible at using the media and seizing the media and using that in a lot of ways to their advantage. I think they were obviously incredibly successful for a time at galvanizing young people. I think that there's a negative message in terms of the fact that they were infiltrated by the FBI. In some ways the FBI was able to manipulate certain portions of the Party and the Panthers kind of got into the internal squabbles and fights that helped to destroy the Party. I think all of those things are lessons both good and bad.

A.G.: *Yeah, one thing that I notice, a difference between Black Lives Matter and the Panthers is that the Panthers did a really great job of marketing their leaders, like with the "Free Huey" campaign, and "Black Lives Matter" sort of wants to take attention away from like a leader or a hierarchical power.*

S.N.: Elevating Huey to almost godlike status had its good and its bad points and I think that my understanding of what "Black Lives Matter" is trying to do is really avoid this kind of elevating leaders to that kind of status, and we'll see if it works or not. I mean, if you don't pick your own leaders, it's hard for the media not to pick them for you. So all of a sudden if somebody appears on camera three or four times, you know, the media starts calling them leaders and then you have to battle for them not to be. Kind of an interesting strategy. We'll see if it works.

A.G.: *You've done many films on the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, but in doing this film, even with all that knowledge of that time, was there anything you discovered that surprised you?*

S.N.: The whole story surprised me — that the Panthers were so young, that the majority of Black Panthers were women. I think that's incredibly surprising. Who knew? I think that one thing that surprised me early on in the production was that the Panthers basically lived in communes, that being a Black Panther was not like you had a 9-to-5 job and after work you went and put on your beret and your leather jacket and became a Panther. The Panthers were — like — Panthers 24/7. And very quickly they moved into these communes, or as they called them in the film, Panther Pads, where they'd live together, partially for protection, partially for economic reasons. It was this huge commitment. A lot of Panthers, as some of them say in the film, that's their families. That was all new.

A.G.: *I also want to ask about your conversations with audiences after the screenings. What have you learned from these conversations?*

S.N.: The conversations have been incredible. We've had a beautiful mixture of people at the screenings. They've ranged from people who were around back then, both black and white. A bunch of Panthers always come to the screenings. And a lot of