Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

REVIEW: 'MLK/FBI' Explores the Roots of an American Ill Will

By MARK KENNEDY

There's an iconic photograph of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. that was taken as he triumphantly boarded one of the first integrated buses in Montgomery, Alabama.

It was 1956 and King looks out a window, firmly at the front of the bus, almost gazing toward his movement's next big social hurdle. The image was taken by Ernest Withers, a key chronicler of the civil rights movement — and an FBI informant.

That the FBI wanted someone close and watching King is at the heart of director Sam Pollard's engrossing documentary "MLK/FBI," a film that artfully explains how the two sides of that slash came to be enemies.

Pollard is a veteran producer and filmmaker who co-directed two episodes of "Eyes on the Prize" and earned an Oscar nomination for editing Spike Lee's blistering 1997 film "4 Little Girls."

In "MLK/FBI," Pollard explains how J. Edgar Hoover used the full force of his federal law enforcement agency to attack a progressive, nonviolent cause. That included wiretaps, blackmail and informers, trying to find dirt on King. "I think this entire episode represents the darkest part of the Bureau's history," notes former FBI Director James Comey.

> "I think this entire episode represents the darkest part of the Bureau's history

There is nothing terribly new in the telling, no huge revelations or bombshells. Most of the details — including King's infidelity and the use of Withers as an FBI informant — have been known for years.

But that's not Pollard's interest. His canvas is large, stretching back to post-Civil War Jim Crow, exploring how notions of Black sexuality were turned into social weapons and into the way FBI agents were made mythical in popular culture.

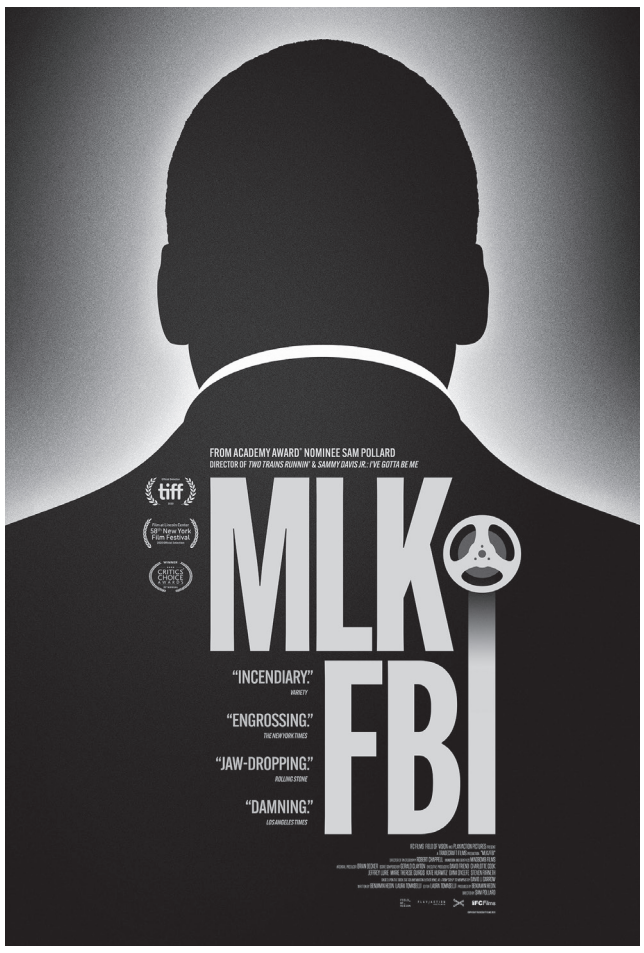
Pollard is patient and thoughtful, leaning his film on David J. Garrow's book "The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr.: From 'Solo' to Memphis." The most salacious stuff must wait until three-quarters through, until the filmmaker has pulled all the historical threads together. Then the picture is clear — and frightening.

King's famous March on Washington took place on Aug. 28, 1963, and two days later, in a memo, William C. Sullivan, the head of FBI domestic intelligence, wrote, "We must mark him now as the most dangerous Negro in the future of this Nation," adding, "and we must use every resource as our disposal to destroy him."

There are lessons for 2021, for sure. Having Communist leanings in the '50s and '60s was as smeared as the socialism of today. "I Am a Man" placards at protests echo the "Black Lives Matter" signs of today. White America's anxieties around Black empowerment have not changed much.

"MLK/FBI" has a different feel than traditional documentaries, eschewing the usual pattern of old footage punctuated by talking heads, in favor of just footage and soaring songs, like "Lord Don't Move the Mountain" by Mahalia Jackson and "Oh Freedom" by

See FILM on page 19



This image released by IFC Films shows poster art for "MLK/FBI," a documentary that shows how FBI director J. Edgar Hoover used the full force of his federal law enforcement agency to attack King and his progressive, nonviolent cause. That included wiretaps, blackmail and informers, trying to find dirt on King. (IFC Films via AP)

The Skanner News **would like to thank the following sponsors for their support of the 2021 Martin Luther King, Jr. Special Edition**

AARP
Care Oregon
City of Portland
Eli Lilly
Home Forward
Kaiser Permanente
Legacy Health
Multnomah County
OHSU
Oregon Alliance of Clinical Researchers
Oregon Lottery
Pacific Power
PCRI
Pepsi
PGE
Portland Community College
Portland Trailblazers
Prosper Portland
RALI Oregon
TriMet
Turner Construction
U.S. Forest Service
University of Oregon
Vancouver Avenue Baptist Church
Washington Department of Health
Wells Fargo