



Interview with **William 'Bill' Greaves**

Date: May 15, 1989

Interviewer: Henry Hampton

Camera Rolls: 9012-9014

Sound Rolls: 907-908

Team: A

Interview gathered as part of ***Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s***. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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Interview with William 'Bill' Greaves, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on May 15, 1989 for ***Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s***. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of ***Eyes on the Prize II***.

[camera roll #9012]

[sound roll #907]

[wild sound]

00:00:11:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Hey, this is pretty fancy. Boy, this is a high-tech org-operation. Look at that.

Interviewer:

[Inaudible].

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Oh, I can see where all your profits is at.

Interviewer:

OK.

William 'Bill' Greaves:

[laughs] It's going into your slate.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[laughs]

Interviewer:

Are we ready?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

Interviewer:

All right, marvelous.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just a second.

[cut]

00:00:32:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible] get low. OK.

William 'Bill' Greaves:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[laughs]

William 'Bill' Greaves:

No, this is where she goes to get sleep. She, she knows what she's doing.

00:00:45:00

Interviewer:

Bill, it's 1972, after Kent State, after Martin's death, after, yeah, Jackson State and Orangeburg, and it's, it's before Gary.

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

My question is, when did you first hear about the Gary convention and what were your feelings about that?

00:01:03:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Well, a, a Black leprechaun came into my office from outer space and told me that there was gonna be this incredible event, this meeting of Black people from all over America, and that I had to be there and I had to film it. And I was not to worry about the cost. That the cost would be, you know, we would recover our investment, which he was sure that we could make, [laughs] that we would recover our investment in this film that he wanted us to make on this, and document this important event. And he really persuaded me. The fella's name, Garland Roberts was his name. And then I began reading in the newspapers and so on, and I became very excited about this event. And I began hearing rumors that this person was gonna be there and that person was gonna be there. That, you know, that Betty Shabazz was gonna be there, Baraka was gonna be there and Hatcher and all of these people. And so I, I said we gotta shoot this thing, you know. So this is what happened. We gathered our crew together, my son, David, and some very talented filmmakers and we went to Gary and set up shop. And it was really quite an experience.

00:02:31:00

Interviewer:

What, why was it such an unusual event that—

00:02:34:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Well, it was unusual because, you know, what you had there was this wide variety of people. I mean, there was this diversity of people, diverse in their thinking, that is, were Black, but diverse in its, in, in the thinking. We had people who were Black Muslims there. We had New Africa people there. We had Democrats, Republicans. We had all kinds of people there. People from the National Urban League and people from the Black Panther Party. You know, they were all there. And it was just marvelous to see this coming together of all these people under one umbrella. Adam Clayton Powell had wanted to do something like this and was unable to really pull it off to this extent. As a matter of fact, they dedicated the—they made him, I think, Honorary Chairman of the, of the convention. But you had all these people there who were of one mind. I mean, the, the, the shots that were fired at Martin Luther King and Malcolm X focused the attention of the Black community, you know. On the significance of what it was that these men were doing and that obviously, they were doing something right that someone felt obliged to stop them. They were feared for, for the, for the message that they were bringing to Black America, which was freedom, liberation, equality, and things of this kind.

00:04:13:00

Interviewer:

Why didn't the, where was the White media?

00:04:16:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Well, you know, the White media was accustomed to depicting us in their own distorted and biased way, you know. And so here was a coming together of Black people surfing on the waves of Black consciousness that were being generated during the '60s, who now were talking about things like Black power, political empowerment, economic empowerment, you know, social empowerment, cultural and so on. And this was disturbing and it's the, it's the kind of subject matter that White media people have a lively disinterest in, you know. I mean, I was very interested, fascinated. And I thought ultimately that this subject matter would be very valuable to America, because clearly it serves, doesn't serve anybody any good to have a, a major group within the society so, as powerless as Black people have been, you know. So this was the, the central thrust of, of the event and it was the business of empowering Black Americans in America.

00:05:39:00

Interviewer:

Did, did people react to you differently as a Black media [unintelligible]?

00:05:44:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Well, yeah. I mean, you see, the—just to finish off my thought on the White media; so the White media came just to capture these sensational moments when, you know, someone would say, We gotta have Black power, or something like that. They would, [laughs] you know, that would be something that they would be excited about. But as far as their interest in the human interest aspects of that event, their interest in the, the, the, the, the very human stories that were developing there, people who had saved their money to come to this place, you know, people were coming there, you know, there from all over the country. And they were at great expense to themselves. I mean, because, you know, we are not a, a, a people with a, a great deal of financial resources, I mean. So a lot of sacrifice was, you know, made to, to come to this event. And the White media was not sensible and sensitive to that, for example. So they only got a piece of that event. And I like to think that, you know, when we filmed, we filmed the entire event in various aspects. And—

Interviewer:

Do you—

William 'Bill' Greaves:

—that, that, that our, our, our filming of that event became the official, you know, record, you know, of the, of the convention.

00:07:10:00

Interviewer:

Do you remember any specific individuals, you're there the day before it opens, I assume?

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Right?

00:07:16:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Well, I mean, you know, I have memories of, of Byron Lewis and Wally Sadick [?] and Baraka and, before the event, you know, just organizing and setting up things. Baraka was

just absolutely incredible. I mean, I was totally unpre—I mean, he, he, he was one of the shocks of my life at the convention. Because the thing that I, I mean, I had been hearing about, I never met, well, I, let's see, I did meet Baraka a couple of times, but I'd been getting all these stories in the media about Baraka. About his being this and that and, you know, he was a radical this and crazy that and this sort of thing. He was so marvelously cool, very collected, very organized, very, he orchestrated, coordinated, and managed the event in a beautiful way. I mean, it was, it was really quite a lesson to me in just watching him operate there.

00:08:20:00

Interviewer:

How about other characters showing up early? I mean, Queen Mother Moore, maybe.

00:08:25:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Queen Mother Moore was just an absolute delight. I mean, you know, Queen Mother Moore was, you know, she was the Black Earth mother of all time there. I mean, she, she was, she was the soul of the, of the event. And she put her finger right on the, the basic issue of the Black experience in America, which is an experience in which a great deal of time, energy, labor had been performed by Black people for over three hundred years, totaling trillions of dollars if you were to add it all up in terms of what the Black American is owed for the construction of America, you know. I mean, you're talking about free, free labor. Well, she talked about reparations. I mean, that was, that was the only thing she had on her mind, you know. Reparations. She said, We've gotta, we've gotta get paid back some of this, you know, some of this money, you know, that we've been cheated out of. I mean, and she was a very, you know, it's funny.

00:09:38:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about reparations again. I think we lost it.

00:09:39:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Well, I, I was saying that she, she conceived, not conceived, she perceived, which is what this, you know, Black mother presence, I mean, that has been watching over this brood for three hundred years. I mean, she was the soul. She was the, you know, quintessential Black mother. You know what I mean? And she knew that her children had been laboring without pay for three hundred years. And she constantly talked about the issue of reparations. And

she was determined that everybody understood that there had to be reparations for energies and labor, you know, work performed.

00:10:19:00

Interviewer:

Who else was there? Anybody else you remember?

00:10:21:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Well, gosh. There, you know, Dick Gregory was there. And he was, I thought, amusing but yet very political in his statement. But I tell you, the, there were two speeches there that I was most taken with. One was by Richard Hatcher, who, I mean, that speech that he made will have to go down in history as one of the great all-time speeches of, of, of a Black political figure. And of course, Jesse Jackson. I mean, Jesse Jackson literally, I think—I don't know that if he'll ever give a speech that was as mesmerizing and, and, and transforming in its impact as he gave. I mean—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

William 'Bill' Greaves:

—a lot of what we see today coming out of Black America—

00:11:23:00

Interviewer:

Ran out.

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Oh.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #9013]

[wild sound]

00:11:30:00

Interviewer:

Did people ever, were there arguments in the hallways late at night? Were people—

00:11:35:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Well, you know, you, you, you know, there were heated, heated--

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take three.

William 'Bill' Greaves:

—you know, heated debates and discussions, but I didn't—

[slate]

William 'Bill' Greaves:

—what I got was this overriding sense of un-unity, you know. There was just an overriding sense of unity that—

00:11:52:00

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

William 'Bill' Greaves:

What's that?

00:11:54:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

There was this overriding sense of unity that permeated the place so that even when people were arguing with each other, you, you felt that they were all going in the same, you know, direction. And it, it was a very moving, you know, experience for me. I mean, it was something that, you know, I had hoped for, you know, as a Black American. To see the

coming together of all of these different people or different, representing different lines of thinking within the Black community.

00:12:32:00

Interviewer:

You must have been, as a journalist, aware of the tension and the possibility of it spinning itself apart.

00:12:41:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

00:13:52:00

Interviewer:

Do you remember a moment in the convention when people began to shout "Nation Time"?

00:13:57:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

00:14:59:00

Interviewer:

Did the White media cover that at all?

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Not to my, not to my knowledge. I mean, you know, you know, the production that we did, we—

Interviewer:

You have to tell me the, the White media.

00:15:10:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Yeah. The, the, the White media was not particularly interested in the psychospiritual empowerment of Black people. I mean, they're not interested in that. I mean, the White media, like the rest of White America, had been accustomed to us as slaves, as ex-slaves, as second-class citizens. You know, it was only until, you know, the, the '60s that we really broke out of there. You know what I mean? And they weren't ready for us, you know. And they didn't want to really deal with, with this business of, you know, psychospiritual empowerment, you know.

00:15:49:00

Interviewer:

There was a day of, the first day when Coleman Young, sorry about that, not Coleman Young, Diggs tries to put through a vote.

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And, you know, the ayes have it, when clearly the ayes didn't.

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

People reacted immediately. Do you remember that—the intensity of the feelings that—on the first day?

00:16:08:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

No. I don't. But you mentioned the Coleman Young event, I mean, with the, the Michigan delegation, which was a, you know, really a real downer. I mean, because, you know, people said, Well, what's that all about? You know, What, what is he trying to do? What's, what's his problem? I mean, here we are trying to, you know build, be constructive and build something and, and he and—is, is trying to walk, take this delegation out of the, out of the convention. And the interesting thing is that not all of them went, you know. Because they didn't really agree with him. But I, you know, when it was happening, I said, You know, what is his problem?

00:16:51:00

Interviewer:

It, it was unusual to have a Baraka, not a political figure standing at the podium.

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Sure. Sure.

Interviewer:

I mean, was that clear to the people?

00:16:58:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Yes. I mean, I, I was, I tell you, I, I mean, I was really surprised to see Baraka in that position. That is, in the position of a coordinator of this conference. But clearly, Hatcher and Diggs had recognized and identified in his intelligence that he had these skills and capacities, which he demonstrated beautifully. I mean, even after we finished shooting the picture, I mean, he would come to the editing room and, and just make comment, you know, on, on what this meant or what that. I mean, he was very clear, very lucid. And I, I, I must tell you, I was very impressed with Baraka. I became a, you know, a Baraka fan, you know.

00:17:44:00

Interviewer:

The, your reaction to Jesse's speech, people, I guess this was the first big speech he makes—

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Yes.

Interviewer:

—after the—

00:17:52:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Oh, yes. Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. The Jesse Jackson speech was, I think, [car alarm] the absolute apex of—I, I, I have not heard him make a speech like that one since. I mean, Jesse Jackson was, you know, he had come off of the assassination, you know what I mean? He had seen what had happened to Malcom X and he didn't care about the sensibilities of offending this group or that group. I mean, he said, I'm gonna tell the truth about what is going on in this country. I don't care if White America doesn't like it. I don't care if Black America doesn't like it. Because he spoke about drugs and the, the, the ripping off of Black people by Black people. He spoke about the oppression of Black people by White people. I mean, he, and he spoke about the necessity, and this is the key fact of his speech, the necessity of Black people taking these chains off of their brains and taking, getting the slums, he said that, the slum is in your mind. You know what I mean? That your problems is not, the problem isn't being, living in the slums. The problem is that the slum is living in your mind. And, and the problem is to clean up one's thinking. And this was the thing that I think he really left the audience with the necessity to—for mental self-reliance, you know, as I call it, a psycho-psychospiritual self-reliance. I mean, that, that, because if you have that, then everything else follows quite naturally, you know. One can then go on to—

00:19:44:00

Interviewer::

Break.

Camera Crew Member #3:

That's a cut. You're hearing some of the police lots around here.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Stop down.

[cut]

00:19:52:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Settling.

00:19:55:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

No, I was, as I was saying, that Jackson was very, he was very passionate in that speech of his. I mean, you really felt that he was, you know, this—he recognized this is the most important moment of his life, in a sense, the most important opportunity, not moment, but opportunity to communicate something that he felt would have some kind of impact if he communicated it correctly, you know. And it was, it was a very, you know, moving moment.

00:20:42:00

Interviewer:

The all Black experience, which in '72 was—

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

—heady.

00:20:45:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Sure.

00:20:48:00

Interviewer:

Do you remember anything that, that people were behaving differently, freer? Any, any partying going on [unintelligible]?

00:20:55:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

I, I, I think that 1972 was a period of, for me, it seemed to be a period of real optimism on the part of a lot of Black people. The feeling that this country is gonna really develop along the lines of, well, what Lyndon Johnson called the Great Society. It was really gonna become a really great society that, you know, given the time now that all the laws were in place, you know, here we suffered the loss of King, we suffered the loss of, of Malcolm X, but, and Char—and Medgar Evers. But these deaths ultimately weren't in vain because we were going to build on it. You know what I mean? There were all kinds of activities taking place which would, it was felt that we would be able to construct something meaningful for ourselves in the, in, in America. So I think, for me, it seemed to be a period of, of, of some optimism, even given the fact that there was this, you know, [car horn] these, these assassinations.

00:22:11:00

Interviewer:

But to be Black—

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. I'm sorry. I have to call cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

From the top.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #9014]

[sound roll #908]

00:22:18:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. Crystal.

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Oh, yeah.

00:22:27:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:22:31:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Yeah, I, you know, I'll tell you, the thing that really comes to mind, strikes me very deeply in as far as the memory is concerned is the, the crowds, you know. The crowds of the people there. They were, the energy, the feeling of the people. You had the feeling that they were charged up. You know what I mean? I, myself, when I was filming and I was doing some of the camera work myself, I mean, I was working off of this energy that was in this huge room, not room, it was a, a theater or, no, it wasn't a theater, it was a big basketball gymnasium, you know. And the, the, the place was just charged with electricity, you know, just charged with it. And you had the feeling that somehow or other, that even though Martin Luther King and, and Malcolm X had been killed, that the very act of their assassination had resulted in the multiplication of their personas. You know what I mean? That is, that they had, they, they, they had, through some cosmic miracle, instead of that one person being, or two people being killed, that suddenly it had generated, you know, ten thousand [laughs] Martin Luther King's and Malcolm X's in the same place. I mean, the, the consciousness in that room was just incredible. And I have memory of, of Richard Roundtree, for example, had done *Shaft*. And there was this wonderful entertainment period, that they had an entertainment section of the whole convention, when the major stars like Belafonte and all these people come to perform. And Richard Roundtree came on the stage and then they played the theme from *Shaft*, you know, and the women just went crazy over him. But they went crazy over him, not because he was so glamorous or, I mean, it was because of the, what he represented. He was part of this overall concept of, of Black people coming to the point where we love ourselves, you know, very much. You know, the way White people love themselves very much. You know what I mean? And it was really very wonderful to, to, to feel this energy, you know, constantly wave and wave, wave, upon wave of it just cascading in on the speaker's platform. I mean, and Jesse, when he was speaking, was, was surfing on these waves, you know. It was just won—and the final memory I have about the crowds is, is that after he finished his speech, "What time is it?" And he's said, "Nation Time." You know? And then they started to play some music. And all of these wonderful Black intellectuals just swaying [snaps] with this, you know, music. I mean, it was just absolutely gorgeous. I mean, I just loved it. And

we just kept rolling the cameras and, you know, just scanning and panning and, and seeing these people just, you know, just going with it, because there was a connection between the music, the soul, which is the soul and the, the mind. I mean, it was, there was a wonderful synchronicity operating there.

00:25:56:00

Interviewer:

Africa images, linkages—

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

—also present?

00:25:59:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

The, there, there are two very strong re—feelings that I have and memories I have of that event. One is a tremendous appreciation of history. An appreciation of American history, of Afro-American history and of African history. I mean, there was a constant resurrecting of these moments of history to underscore the various events that were taking place right there and then. The second was, this, this wonderful recognition of Africa as an ancient, a place where our ancient civilizations took place, where we were a people of dignity and the like. And the, the, the rediscovery of Africa. I mean, and the, the, the recognition of the significance of Africa, not only to us, but to America. And the tragedy, for me, of this event was the fact that America, in general, did not avail itself of the wisdom, you know, that was being generated by the various speakers. The, the, the wisdom that was coming out of the—

00:27:29:00

Interviewer:

Did you try to sell your stuff to the networks?

00:27:30:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

I tried, I, I had assumed that when we had—because we, we had the wonderful, we had wonderful access to everything. I mean, the, because we were a Black crew, they knew,

everyone knew we were sympathetic and, and identified with what was going on, we had total access to. And I said, Well, this is marvelous, you know, that the networks are certain to jump at this material when we put it all together. Well, I put it together and no network was interested in it. As a matter of fact, the film that we made has never been shown on television, if you can believe that. But it is—Baraka loves it, Hatcher loves it. I mean, it is the, you know, definitive record of the, of the event.

00:28:11:00

Interviewer:

What did you think afterwards, leaving Gary?

00:28:15:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

I felt enriched. I felt very, I felt that, that as a people we're gonna make it. You know? I felt that, you know, that I had been really refreshed and reenergized. It was like plugging a, taking a plug and plugging it into a battery and getting a charge. You know what I mean? It really charged me up. I, I had the good fortune of filming the first World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal in 1966. That was a major charge. And this was the second major charge. And I'm looking at this for the third. [laughs] You know?

00:29:00:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hold.

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member #3:

[inaudible]

[cut]

00:29:08:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:29:12:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

You know, I mean, you, you had this, with people arriving there, you had this terrific air of expectancy. Of people, not being apprehensive, but well, yes, being apprehensive to some degree and wondering was this gonna turn into another, you know, acrimonious, dissenting, everyone just pulling in so many different directions kind of event, or was this something in which we would really come together, you know what I mean, as a people? And to try to do something very constructive and productive. And, so there was this kind of ambivalence and apprehension and at the same time a tremendous feeling of, of elan and expectation and expectancy, you know. And I felt that the people eventually became progressively more and more enthusiastic as they, as the, as the sessions were wa—continued. There was this increasing confidence. That's right, that we could come together, we could work together in a constructive, productive way. Which is what they, they, they ended up doing, because, I think, that a lot of what took place there, one can see traces of even today, you know.

00:30:33:00

Interviewer:

Just, just—

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Because everybody was there.

00:30:34:00

Interviewer:

—just think back and give me certain images. Do you remember any images?

00:30:39:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

[sighs] The, the, the image that stays in my mind is the image of all of these wonderful, middle-class at that time, Negroes, some of them call themselves Black and some Afro-Americans, but these middle-class types who were, you know, pointed in the direction of, of Black political, economic, and social power, you know, and had come to realize that Jews, Irish, Italians, had done the same thing before. And what was wrong with us? Why, and what, what is it that prevented us from, from doing it? It was a problem of our minds being

enslaved. That what, we were still mental slaves. And the realization that we needed, you know, mental liberation, which is what Jesse was talking about, you know.

00:31:45:00

[production discussion]

[beep]

[cut]

00:31:51:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:31:54:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Yeah. The, the wonderful thing, for me, was the fact that after we finished this shooting, that—and we cut the film together, that Belafonte and Sidney Poitier were available to us to do the narration of the film. I mean, I thought that was a very, and they did it for nothing. I mean, they were just so, you know, themselves. So committed to what was going on that, you know, people cooperated in every conceivable way. My only regret is that we didn't make [laughs] any money on that. But it was, it's a marvelous archival piece. It's a marvelous look at who we were at that time and where we were going, which I think is very important for us to have that kind of a film.

00:32:43:00

Interviewer:

And where can they get this film?

00:32:45:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

William Graves Productions, 88th Avenue, [laughs]—

Interviewer:

[laughs]

William 'Bill' Greaves:

—New York 10011. No. But, no, seriously, we, we are distributing the film now. We—

00:32:56:00

Interviewer:

This isn't gonna make the cut, Bill. [laughs]

00:32:57:00

William 'Bill' Greaves:

No, I know that. I know, I know you'd cut me off. Yeah.

00:33:01:00

Interviewer:

[laughs] Cut, cut.

Camera Crew Member #3:

That's fine.

Interviewer:

All right?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah, I wanna roll [inaudible]—

[beep]

Interviewer:

[unintelligible] doesn't know when to be quiet.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[laughs]

William 'Bill' Greaves:

There we are.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[laughs]

Interviewer:

[laughs]

William 'Bill' Greaves:

Yeah. Touché.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:33:11:00

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