

Interview with **Betty Shabazz**

Date: October 12, 1988

Interviewer: Carroll Blue

Camera Rolls: 1003-1006

Sound Rolls: 102

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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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 #1003]

[sound roll #102]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Camera roll 1003. Team A. Sound 102.

[slate]

Interviewer:

Dr. Shabazz, what should young Black people know about Malcolm that we don't already know? What is his legacy?

00:00:27:00

Betty Shabazz

What should young people know about Malcolm? I, I think one of the most important things in the view of contemporary society that they should know about his internal strength and discipline and understand that, that a lot of people can climb the mountains, and deal with people on a very affluent level but don't understand what is happening in the valleys. And that if they are going to be future leaders that people are going to have to understand the diversity of people, ethnicity, political, religious. You know? And if you've, you, you really look at our society today, you find the Baptists preaching to the Baptists and the Methodists preaching to the Methodists, and the Buddhists to the Buddhists, and the Muslims to the

Muslims. I think religion will have to cross those various lines and deal with people on an ecumenical basis or level. And I think that people will have to put humanity above the power of politics. We need to understand the struggles, the, the whole situation of, of, of struggle, as I said before. The challenges and the resources that face people not just in America, not just next door, but all over the world have people in such conflict for power that they will level a country, neighborhoods, civilians regardless. Women, and children, and old men, and old women for that power that we are gonna have to come together as people and understand that whole humanitarian dilemma. And, and understand where—and the importance of power. You know? So that I think Malcolm had conquered all of that and was moving towards those extreme ends that have our country and the world, as a matter of fact, so divided today that I think it would be important for young people to understand all of that and know that the answers are here on earth. The answers are within our grips. But if we don't have the internal fortitude or internal strength or integrity, a loyalty to ourselves and other human beings, that we might go to sleep and not wake up as a world people. And I think if, if young people understood that and the fact that they have a responsibility to deal with themselves and find answers to those challenges that confront us all, and I might say getting worse.

Interviewer:

Stop [inaudible].

Cameraman:

OK.

[cut]

[slate]

00:04:17:00

Interviewer:

When was the first time you saw Malcolm speech, Malcolm X speak?

00:04:23:00

Betty Shabazz:

When, when was the first time I saw him speak?

Interviewer:

Yes.

00:04:26:00

Betty Shabazz:

OK—

Interviewer:

[inaudible]

00:04:27:00

Betty Shabazz:

—because there was a newspaper. He, he, he started a, a newspaper. Well, the first time I saw him speak, I was a student, and, and had gone to the mosque with a friend.

00:04:42:00

Interviewer:

And what were your reactions?

00:04:43:00

Betty Shabazz:

Well, I thought that what he had to say was important and had a lot of validity. I had not been accustomed to his, his kind of phrasing, his kind of clarity, his kind of openness. I thought surely, you know, something was gonna happen drastically. Because I was reared by—my folks were Methodist. And we lived a very limited kind of lifestyle. And it was church, and school, and work, and committee meetings, and that sort of thing. And I could appreciate and follow his talking about the world, various places on earth. But his openness and his inclusion of the African diaspora as part of all of this was a bit new to me. Enlightening, enjoyable, you know, like, hey, you know, I, I am in this picture after all. You know, I'm not an appendage. I am not apart of the begging class, the welfare class. You know? Not that I was reared to think that. But once you leave home, and you are exposed to the broader society, you began to think that your very existence is, is perhaps not welcomed. You know? And so that, it, it was a delightful meeting. And I enjoyed meeting him, obviously.

00:06:44:00

Interviewer:

Now, what kinds of philosophies did he have in the nation of Islam? Can you give me a story that illustrates what you—how you learned from him there?

00:06:56:00

Betty Shabazz:

Well, at that particular time, it was, he was talking about togetherness, and he was talking about Elijah Muhammad, who my parents knew in Detroit, Michigan. The terms were not so favorable. But of course I just interpreted that as the lack of understanding of my parents. But, he was involved in raising funds to take Elijah Muhammad's sons from their various jobs, non-professional jobs, to have them work with the father so that he spearheaded a drive that would provide enough money for their salaries. And of course he, his whole philosophy was rooted in history. Malcolm was the, the son of a Baptist minister, and his father was a Garveyite. And of course you know at that particular time, it was not the thing to do, to be a Garveyite. And so that he would use to explain not only a—the religious sense but a historical sense of our people, to explain the need for this or that so that he explained in not only religious terms but historical terms of why it was necessary for Elijah Muhammad's sons to leave those menial jobs and, and work with the father to be more helpful because the nation was growing. And I might add that Malcolm was directly responsible for that growth. When my husband got out of prison, Elijah Muhammad had six mosques and—populated by older members. And even Elijah Muhammad said in Philadelphia before my husband was expelled from the movement that he was, he single handedly was responsible for the growth. And at that particular time that the Nation of Islam had mosques in every major city in the United States. So that he explained his explanation to me was new because usually people dealt with the bible and kind of left it at that level. You know?

Interviewer:

How was he different?

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Sure.

Camera crew member #1:

We have—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Camera crew member #1:

—we should change magazines.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #1004]

00:09:57:00

Camera crew member #2:

1004.

[slate]

00:09:59:00

Interviewer:

We're gonna continue our discussion.

00:10:01:00

Betty Shabazz:

OK. [phone rings] What was different was that Malcolm [phone rings] not only dealt with the Christian bible, which—

Camera crew member #1:

Hold on a second.

Betty Shabazz:

—most—oh.

Camera crew member #1:

It's not that one.

Camera crew member #2:

It's not that one?

Camera crew member #1:

It's unplugged.

Camera crew member #2:

OK. Alright. Let's go. Continue [inaudible]—

Betty Shabazz:

What—

Camera crew member #2:

—sorry, can you—?

Betty Shabazz:

—oh—

Camera crew member #2:

Can you ask, ask the question again so we can start from the beginning?

00:10:19:00

Interviewer:

OK. Then we're, again, talking about the teachings that you were learning from Malcolm—

Betty Shabazz:

Mm-hmm.

00:10:26:00

Interviewer:

—and how it was different.

00:10:27:00

Betty Shabazz:

Well, what was different was that Malcolm not only dealt with the Christian bible, which most of us were familiar with, and most people in this country people are familiar with, but he also dealt with the Koran, and he also dealt from a historical per, perspective. And as, as a matter of fact, it was, appeared in *The New York Time* [sic] [phone rings] through a minister who was named Henry at that particular time—I, I believe he died, and I hope God have mercy on his soul. And this interview, it said that Elijah Muhammad said that the, the Blackness that was brought into the Nation of Islam was brought in by Malcolm, and it was never intended. But you have to understand that Malcolm's father was a Garveyite, and he remembered that. And it could have been an ode to his father.

00:11:26:00

Interviewer:

How was he different? [phone rings] The public man from the private man?

00:11:31:00

Betty Shabazz:

Well, I don't know if he was really different in the sense. I, I would say that he smiled a lot in, in private. He was very gentle and understanding, yet firm with his children. I found him an excellent husband. But I guess his long years in prison and then getting into the religion, he was extremely disciplined. And, you know, sometime it was just no let up, you know, just kind of all business. But his—

Interviewer:

[inaudible]

Betty Shabazz:

—you know—

00:12:09:00

Interviewer:

[inaudible] story around that?

Betty Shabazz:

Could I do what? [laughs]

00:12:11:00

Interviewer:

Give me a story around that, that illustrates that.

00:12:14:00

Betty Shabazz:

What? How disciplined he was?

Interviewer:

00:12:15:00

Interviewer:

You said he was extremely—[laughs]

00:12:17:00

Betty Shabazz:

Well, he was. He was extremely disciplined. I mean, it was just, it was just unbelievable. You know, he said five prayers a day without fail. He used to write me from various parts of the world to say to me that, Please pray sometime. And I wrote him a letter back, you know, very quickly, and I said, If you do your job, I won't have to pray at all. [laughs] Which was, you know, probably what I should not have done, but I just thought I would do that. You know? But he was a very disciplined man. And he could read the average difficult book in, in three hours, four hours. He just did a lot of things. He was just, just really a remarkable person.

00:13:17:00

Interviewer:

After his expulsion, what changes did you notice in him? I [unintelligible]—

00:13:23:00

Betty Shabazz:

Well, he behaved, you know, no, he behaved the same way. He was, he was goal oriented. And he decided that this was the time for him to travel, to do some research, to find out some answers for himself. He had at one particular time been very disappointed not only in the movement but in the leadership. That a lot of things that he had heard even when he first entered the movement, that there was a possibility they were true. The reason that the leader was runned from, from Michigan, that various people showed him pictures, and, and talked,

and cried, you know, about what had happened. So that he felt that the movement was a good movement. It was, the structure was, was good. That one needed to be disciplined and more caring about our people. And—but that he needed to do some research so that he was invited to the Summit Conference the first time that a Black American had been so honored to come to the Summit Conference and represent Black people in America. And of course he traveled throughout Africa, and the Middle East, and part of Asia. And made some startling discoveries. And of course at that particular time, there was a lot of things going on in this country. And one of them was the irritation in this country by decision makers that he should not have been allowed to, to travel that far and not knowing that he was gonna meet the kind of people that he met. And so then they started gathering forces to anoint a leader that would supersede him. So, that was of course in the American papers that they, they had a, a poll [phone rings] that said he was not a leader thought [phone rings] well of and that other people were much more popular with the people. And then we got a call one day that said that someone was gonna get a grand prize. You know? And it was an attempt to set leadership not only, not only against him but above him. That what he was doing was not appreciated by his own people, and this, that, and the other. So—

00:16:31:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop for just one minute please—

Camera crew member #1:

Sure.

[cut]

[slate]

00:16:39:00

Betty Shabazz:

I don't, I don't really know if Malcolm's original agenda from the knee of his father ever changed actually. He perhaps was able to discuss it more openly and intellectually. In the time that I met him, he said freedom by whatever means necessary to bring about a society where people of African descent are recognized and treated as human beings regardless to where they lived, you know, as long as it was on earth. And if, if you really understand that—and a lot of people defined it perhaps negatively. They talked about militancy. But it wasn't really militancy in a, in a negative sense. It was the internal strength, the fact that I'm a human being. His whole notion of changing the civil rights struggle to one of human rights, that if you changed it to t a human rights struggle you would have your civil rights and that you would have more support. And of course, when he came from Africa, a lot of the leaders felt that his thrust was wrong, that he had no business in Africa. He had no business in the

Middle East. He had no business in Asia seeking support. He should concentrate his time in Mississippi. And of course I think now retrospectively that his analysis was correct. That of human rights, and of course human nations are cited for human rights violations. But Black people are still abused. And ours is still in the realm of discrimination and civil rights. And it really needs to be taken to a higher level. So, that I, I think his analysis were correct. I think that people or I should say decision makers at the time, I'm sure that they recognized that there was a great deal of validity to what he was saying and just wanted a little more time to get a lot of things in order. I can remember when they were really criticizing him severely for wanting to change it to a human rights struggle—that Arthur Goldberg threatened to take Russia to the world court at that particular time for just three million Jews in Russia because they—of human rights violation. And I, I thought it was remarkable. It was honorable. I mean, that's, as a leader, that's really what he should have done for his people. And—but I also thought Malcolm was correct to take, to discuss the whole possibility of taking this country to the world court, the UN, where such items are discussed for its maltreatment of the more than 22 million at that particular time, Black people. And of course he was demonic and, and all of the bad names that could be thought of. But I, I think that, that he was correct.

00:20:32:00

Interviewer:

Would you share with me a story of your family and how—

Camera crew member #1:

We have to change rolls.

Interviewer:

—oh, OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #1005]

00:20:39:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, rolling.

Camera crew member #2:

Ten oh five.

[slate]

00:20:43:00

Interviewer:

OK.

00:20:43:00

Betty Shabazz:

Well, I don't know if I, I really have any Malcolm X stories or, or not. I just know from, from reality that he contributed personally to the caring for three or four families because he did not take the time to really counsel the men in the family. They felt they couldn't work for White people because they were, you know, racist, and, and this, that, and the other. And he said, he would say to me every time of the week when I was to get my allowance along with the children's nursery money and the food money, and he would say, As, as soon as I get time, I am going to counsel, you know, the brothers. I'm going to get them all together because I, I know you would like to do more things, you know, like go shopping, right? And somehow he never got around to it. And after his assassination, I could be walking down the street, and I would see one, and they would cross on the other side of the street, you know? And I guess it must have been maybe about five years ago, I saw a brother, you know, who was one of them who apologized for his lack of strength. And I said to him that money is not everything. You know, you can encourage people or be around people or whatever. But it was that he needed at that point for someone to be around him. And I think of all the people that helped me in my own survival of will that—I often think of him and smile. I don't know if that's a Malcolm X story or not, but it's a part of history. And it was something that was real.

00:23:20:00

Interviewer:

And the last days of his life were, again, was that changing him? As he was moving around so harriedly—

00:23:30:00

Betty Shabazz:

Well, yes, there was a, there was a change only in developing or ironing out the rough spots of, of his new methodology. That, you know, number one, a lot of people wanted him to come to their country to help, to advise. I was in Europe, on my way to Hajj, and I met a man who said that, We have been observing him for the last four years. And quite frankly, we were delighted when he was expelled from the movement because the religion, Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, was not considered as orthodox Islam and they wanted him,

you know, to help them in, in their country. But he felt that his responsibility was for Black people because most of the leaders somehow had disappointed Black people. And he wanted at least to see a directional gain. We have dealt in the relationship, you know. High visibility, high relationship, but not—we have not gained on the task level. And he was more interested in the task level. You know, you can like me, but you need to understand that I have certain rights as a human being. So that I think his goal was to change the thinking and the attitude just, just very simply. If you change the thinking and the attitude, you know, you can have a bloodless revolution actually. So that the challenge still face us. All he did was hold up a mirror of, of what had been going on in this country, and people really could not take that. So that they said that he was the God of violence. You know, and he did not commit any violence in his lifetime other than his death, and he didn't commit his own death. So that I, I think about Malcolm sometimes when I see the, the young men on the corner or the—all of our young brothers in prison. Of course there are, there are women, too. But—and the lack of grounding of our people, flighting to this or to that without due course that, This is mine. And I wonder where, where are we going, you know? And I sometimes observe people, not all of the leaders, but who are more willing to please others than themselves and their people, please in terms of that internal stability. You know, that, This is mine. That is, that is necessary. So that we need perhaps to relook at our needs and assess where we're going and choose people to be our leaders on those basis.

Interviewer:

Let's hold it for a minute.

Camera crew member #1:

OK, cut?

Interviewer:

Yes.

[cut]

[slate]

00:27:35:00

Cameraman:

OK.

00:27:37:00

Betty Shabazz:

Well, his love of humanity, his willingness to work, the fact that our young people need to accept the responsibility—all young people, not just Black. But all young people need to accept the responsibility to do what is best to salvage civilization. We talk in terms of nuclear warfare, and we think in terms of drugs, and polluting the, the sea. And, you know, everything is destruction. You know, surely people of good will can come together to salvage the world. I'm wondering now though, with Malcolm gone—they don't have anyone to point to. And, and I look at all of the violence, and the discrimination, and, and all of the people who was against Malcolm, somehow they have not gotten together to get rid of, of all of the things that, that ails us, so that Malcolm is at peace. He did all of the things that he had to do, and, and, and should have done. I would not have had it any different. But I wonder about all of those people who are still [clears throat] involved in a high relationship type of leadership, you know? I wonder where they will lead us. And you look at the world. It is really in torment. And Malcolm is dead 25 years. So that, he was totally correct in his assessment. And I think that people need to know that.

00:29:33:00

Interviewer:

Right, thank you very much.

[cut]

[camera roll #1006]

00:29:38:00

Interviewer:

—that strength and power for Malcolm?

[slate]

00:29:39:00

Betty Shabazz:

Well, I think, I, I think you should ask me that, that, that question, yes.

Interviewer:

Mm.

Betty Shabazz:

Because I'm not—

00:29:46:00

Interviewer:

That question I'm asking—that strength and power of Malcolm, can you share with us an incident that you observed?

00:29:52:00

Betty Shabazz:

Oh. Well, I wasn't married to him at—

Interviewer:

At the time—

Betty Shabazz:

—at the time that you are talking about—

Interviewer:

Mm.

00:29:58:00

Betty Shabazz:

—the, the demonstration. But I was close to it.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Betty Shabazz:

And of course, the police had wrongly abused one of the men who was considered a brother for no apparent reason other than mistaken identity and of which there was a settlement. But everyone was, was just very frightened of that whole group of Black men who were later joined by some women. And it was felt that Malcolm was—

Camera crew member #1:

Stop.

Camera crew member #2:

Keep rolling.

Camera crew member #1:

Starting over.

Interviewer:

He's rolling.

Camera crew member #2:

Oh, OK.

Camera crew member #1:

Don't roll.

00:30:51:00

Camera crew member #2:

I'm rolling.

[cut]

00:30:54:00

Cameraman:

OK, go.

00:30:54:00

Cameraman:

10 oh six.

[slate]

00:30:58:00

Betty Shabazz:

It was felt that no Black man should have that kind of strength or power to dispatch Black men in that kind of demonstration. And of, of course it was—I thought really not the proper thing for people to say, maybe to think, because what we want to do is to have people to have allegiance to themselves. You know, everyone fight for the allegiance of, of Black people. And if a, if, if, it appeared to me that if—that because they had allegiance to Malcolm at that particular time that he was considered a threat. And a lot of negative dialogue began to emanate, that these Black men and women adhered to his instructions to go or to come. Everyone fights for the allegiance of the Black people, you know? But when Blacks have allegiance to Black, that seems to be still considered very dangerous when it is the most natural there is. Of course there was no fear on their part either. And that was one of the things that I found with my own parents when I was going to a Southern school and came home and began to talk about the discrimination and the difficulties that I had when I would go into town. And my parents really could not deal with it because—and I understand, and I of course love them no less. But they were afraid. And a lot of people do things because internally they've been bred on fear. Fear that if they show allegiance to Blacks that something would happen, you see. And so my parents were very fearful, and that was the one very striking thing about Malcolm. That he had no fear. And I am, of course, not as strong as he. But I am very grateful that I had the conference experience to be around him for years and experience a Black man who was goal oriented and had a lot for his people. And made his contribution as he should and as we all should, but without fear. He feared God, and that was it.

00:34:15:00

Interviewer:

How was this man able to move from the streets of Harlem to a university like in Oxford and, and be able to talk on all different levels to all different—

00:34:27:00

Betty Shabazz:

Well, he was—

Interviewer:

—people—

Betty Shabazz:

—well read. He was, he was well read. He just was a prolific reader of the classics. You know, every day. He could deal with a difficult book in three or four hours. I mean—and, and his analytical skills, self taught. But was very sharp. And I can remember he would go through various skills at home, you know. And I couldn't remember who came, what time

they came, you know, who said what, or whatever. And he says, Girl, when I was in prison, there was so much time that if a fly flew through a window, you would not say, the fly flew through the window. You would say the fly flew through the lower right-hand quadrant and landed on its front legs. I mean [laughs] he was just, just very observant and very analytical.

00:35:34:00

Interviewer:

Two other questions. The 1967 visit to *Ramparts* magazine, the Black Panthers escorted you to that magazine. Can you describe that incident and, and your feelings around it?

00:35:47:00

Betty Shabazz:

I have no feelings. You know, I was really surprised that—sometime later I read where someone said that I was really in fear, you know? I didn't even know what was happening, let alone—you know, how could I be fearful? I just felt I was in the capable hands of these Black men all dressed up militaristically. I didn't know who they were or, or—I was invited there for a program, and [pause] as, as a matter of fact, I had gone the, to sleep on the plane. And I, I woke up, and we were landing. And when I got outside, there was all of these police I, I would imagine, lined on each side of the little area where you walked from the plane to the terminal. And when I saw them all standing there, you know, on both sides, shoulder to shoulder, I went, Oh my God. Someone was on the plane, and I didn't see them, you know? And I kind of criticized myself for going to sleep on the plane. And as I walked to the end of that walkway and made a, a, a slight right and saw the brothers standing out there dressed militaristically, I went, OK. I understand. And there was a young man reciting part of the constitution about carrying firearms. And I don't know. It really did something to me. I just said, Oh, wow. That's just really fantastic. And so that I got in a car and was swept away. And so that I certainly didn't have any fear. It was just an experience. And I did not know until afterwards what was happening. And we went to *Ramparts* magazine, and then they said, OK, we must go now. And I got up, and I left. And it was not until we got to the second place that I was told what had happened. And so we were all safe. So, you know—plus I was going back to New York [laughs] anyway.

00:38:24:00

Interviewer:

And in 1972, you went to the Gary Convention.

00:38:26:00

Betty Shabazz:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And I'd like for you to tell me what your thinking was and what the experience was—

00:38:33:00

Betty Shabazz:

I was—

Interviewer:

[inaudible]

Betty Shabazz:

—very pleased that number one, that organizers had the sensibility, correct sensibility to have the conference. I thought it was a very good thing. I still think it's a good thing when people come together and discuss their own agenda. It was brought out at the conference that people please vote in terms of self interest, not in terms of people who have paid their way. And it was a big joke. And, and I thought, Oh my goodness, you know, that people would come to the conference not for their own self interest, but Black people would come to the conference with the notion for someone else. I found that very, very strange. I think that if you are a free people, and an adult, and thinking about your own responsibility, and you have the, the right of the vote that you should vote whichever way you choose. So that I saw nothing wrong with the conference. There was some negative press, you know? A Black thing. And you know, of course it was kind of given the notion that if it was a Black thing it was not a good thing. You know, which I think is, is, is not such a good way to promote things. I thought it was healthy. If there are differences, if there are questions, why not, you know, an open forum? The Polish Union leader is, is supported with his differences. Why not any other ethnic group leaders support, supported? So, I thought it was, was very good and said so. Some people said, you know, it failed. It, no, it didn't fail. Because people came together and crystalized their thinking—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Betty Shabazz:

—and probably if there was any failure, it was that it didn't happen the next year, and the next year, and the next year.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:40:58:00

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