Interview with **John Lewis**
Date: December 5, 1988
Interviewer: James A. DeVinney
Camera Rolls: 1049-1050
Sound Rolls: 120
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 #1049]
[sound roll #120]

00:00:00:00

Camera crew member #1:

Ten-four-nine; sound 1-2-0.

00:00:15:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Camera crew member #1:

Team A.

00:00:18:00

Camera crew member #2:

John, just a second, and OK.

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

OK, Congressman, if you could, tell me the first time you met Malcolm X. Describe that for me.

00:00:26:00

John Lewis:

I first met Malcolm on the eve of the March on Washington. It woulda been August 27, 1963, at the Statler Hilton Hotel in downtown Washington, DC. Malcolm had real respect and admiration for the young people in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. I think he was wishin' the people in SNCC, and me in particular because he knew that I had to speak to the next day wishin' me well.

00:00:55:00

Interviewer:

Why do you think he had respect and admiration for SNCC?

00:00:58:00

John Lewis:

Malcolm saw SNCC young people—the young Black and White student, not just from the North, but those young and Black students workin' in the South—as bein' somethin' like guerrilla warriors: that they were out there on the cuttin' edge, and he kept sayin', in a sense, that we're here. We will be there, be supportive, and he kept sayin', If they don't listen to you, then they will have to deal with us.

00:01:28:00

Interviewer:

Well, I know that you were very active in the South, and, of course, you were a Southerner. You'd been on the Freedom Rides; you'd been on the lunch counters; you had the Beloved Community and their whole SNCC philosophy of nonviolence. As a Southerner with that kind of background, what did Malcolm X mean or represent to you?

00:01:44:00

John Lewis:

Malcolm X represented a different brand of leadership. Many of us that grew up in the South had been deeply influenced by the church—by the preachin' of Black ministers—but also by the message, the philosophy, the teachin' of Martin Luther King, Jr., the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. We saw Malcolm as someone, in a sense, from the outside, comin' from the North, to tell us there was a different way, a different approach, and I think many of us in the South had some reservations about it because we kept preachin' the idea of an interracial democracy, the Beloved Community, an open society.

00:02:34:00

Interviewer:

And you didn't think Malcolm represented that?

00:02:37:00

John Lewis:

We saw Malcolm as bein' somewhat paradoxical to our own philosophy—to our own methods of operating in the South, but we were willin' to listen to Malcolm because, on one hand, Malcolm inspired us. Malcolm probably, in one way, said things in New York, in particular, in Chicago, but around the country, that maybe some people in the South or in other parts of the country didn't have the courage to say.

00:03:15:00

Interviewer:

OK, I'd like to step back. [unintelligible] because I—

00:03:16:00

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

[cut]

00:03:23:00

Camera crew member #2:

Just a second. OK, Jim.

00:03:26:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell us what you saw in Africa that affected you.

00:03:29:00

John Lewis:

I saw Africa as a place of independence, place of freedom, place where, particularly in West Africa and East Africa, where we visit as members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. For the first time, you saw a group of Black men and women in charge. Growin' up in the southern parts of the United States of America, where we had been talkin' and speakin' a great deal about one man, one vote in Guinea, in Ghana, in East Africa, in Zambia, we saw people makin' it real, makin' it happen. It was a source of inspiration for us to be in a—in a country—on a continent—where there was a greater sense of freedom and a greater sense of an appreciation for human dignity.

00:04:30:00

Interviewer:

Now, I know that you very often were visiting places right after Malcolm had been passing through. A lot of people talked to you about Malcolm. Can you describe what that was like?

00:04:38:00

John Lewis:

In all of our stops throughout Africa, particularly in places like Ghana, in Addis Ababa, in Nairobi, in Zambia; any place we went where we came in contact with local people—officials of the government but organizations and individuals that was in exile from Mozambique, from Angola, from South Africa—they would say—would ask, What is your relationship with Malcolm? In a sense, to make our own position a little more respectable—to give us a sense of credibility—we had to say, We know Malcolm; we've met Malcolm, that we had a appreciation and respect for Malcolm.

00:05:26:00

Interviewer:

What did they seem to think of Malcolm?

00:05:29:00

John Lewis:

Malcolm X, for many Africans, was a real hero. Many African leaders and individuals, particularly people involved in their liberation struggles, saw him as a fighter, saw him as someone that was trying to cement and build stronger ties between people of color in America and people in Africa.

00:05:58:00

Interviewer:

And sh—shortly after—how much time we got there, Bob?

00:06:04:00

Camera crew member #2:

Hold on a second.

00:06:06:00

Interviewer:

OK. You wanna stop it?

00:06:09:00

Camera crew member #2:

No. We have 180 feet, 60 feet.

00:06:10:00

Interviewer:

OK. I want you to describe your meeting with Malcolm and what came out of it. What was the point of all that, or what did you get out of that meeting?

00:06:21:00

John Lewis:

We met Malcolm at the New Stanley Hotel in Nairobi, and it was by chance that we met. It was one of the most movin' meetings that I ever had with Malcolm and probably was the longest meetin'. For more than two days, sat in New Stanley, we discussed not just the

problems and the issues in Africa, but we spent a great deal of time speakin' about the problems in America. The problem, the denial of the right to vote. This was right after the Democratic Convention in 1964, so the whole question of the right to participate in the democratic process was on the mind of Malcolm, as it was on the mind of my colleagues in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and he kept warnin' us and telling us to be careful. I remember on one occasion during a meeting at the little coffee shop at the hotel there in Nairobi, he was sayin', Always sit with your back to the wall so you can look out and see who is watchin' you. He told us to be careful, but I had a feelin', from my discussions and meeting with him, that Malcolm was in the process of becomin' a changed person, a changed man, because he kept sayin', over and over again, that he really wanted to be helpful and be supportive of the Civil Rights Movement, and he wanted to visit the South.

00:07:53:00

Interviewer:

Did he give any kind of a charge to SNCC?

00:07:56:00

John Lewis:

He told us, over and over again durin' our conversation, Keep fightin'. Don't give up. He said, You know, this is an ongoing struggle. Be prepared for the worst, but keep it up. Keep fightin'. People are changin'. There are people supporting you all over the world.

00:08:17:00

Interviewer:

It was only a few months later, of course, he was assassinated. You attended that as a representative of the SNCC. Why did SNCC think they should attend Malcolm's funeral?

00:08:24:00

John Lewis:

Those of us in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee that represented people on the frontline in the South, I think we felt very strongly that we had to be present, that we had to show a sense of solidarity with the philosophy, with the views, with the followers of Malcolm. Many of the young people in SNCC was greatly moved and inspired by this man. People throughout the South wanted, somehow, in some way, to see Malcolm emerge as a leader. They, they really felt that his greatness, his true greatness was yet to come, and there was a feelin', I think, on the part of us, that Malcolm was movin' toward that point of creating an interracial democracy, that he was movin' away from the idea and the philosophy

of a separate society, a separate community, and we felt that we had to be there. There was no other place to be but to be there to bear witness to the life and times of Malcolm.

00:09:33:00

Interviewer:

OK. I think we must be almost to the end of that roll, aren't we?

00:09:36:00

Camera crew member #2:

It's run out.

00:09:38:00

Interviewer:

It's run out?

00:09:39:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, we'll have roll out in ten-four-nine.

00:09:39:00

Camera crew member #2:

Sixty feet.

00:09:40:00

Interviewer:

Oh, we still have 60 feet?

00:09:41:00

Camera crew member #1:

Yep, no rollout. Still rolling.

00:09:43:00

Camera crew member #2:

You still rolling? OK.

00:09:44:00

Interviewer:

OK. Just—I wonder if you could just tell us something that you saw or something that you felt when you were attending that funeral. If you could, just give us a little picture of what it was like to be at that funeral.

00:09:55:00

John Lewis:

Durin' the funeral of Malcolm, I recall seein' people there from all walks of life—Blacks—people that was pretty well off, but common people; Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee. I believe James Farmer, of course, was there, and there was other individual, nameless individuals that had participated in the struggle, in the movement. It was a great shock to many of us, so it was a very sad occasion, really, in 1965, because, for many of us, Malcolm had made an attempt to see us in Selma, Alabama. He came to Selma in February, early part of February 1965, and many of us, including Dr. King, were in jail at the time, and the local officials denied him the right to see us; so the last time, for me personally, seein' Malcolm alive was in, in Africa in 1964.

00:11:11:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's stop down there. I think we must be—

00:11:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Rollout on ten-four-nine.

[cut]

[camera roll #1050]

00:11:17:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it. Thank you.

[slate]

00:11:21:00

Interviewer:

OK, if you could just give us a very personal recollection of Malcolm and his death and what you were doing and how it affected you, that would be wonderful.

00:11:30:00

John Lewis:

Well, I will never forget the death of Malcolm. I heard about his death when we were drivin' from a small town in south Georgia, Americus, Georgia, by way of Atlanta to Selma, Alabama, and the way I remember the day so well, it was February 21, 1965, my birthday. I was 25, and I tell you, I really felt, at that time, that some of the possibilities died; some of the hope, some of the comin' together, the buildin' between the sorta Malcolm wing of the movement, if you want to call it that, and the Martin Luther King of the movement died because in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, in the Southern wing, those young, Black men and women were deeply influenced by the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. They believed in it. They believed in the possibility of buildin' an interracial democracy. On the other hand, you had Black students and White students, but primarily Black students, from the North that was deeply influenced and affected by Malcolm, and at some time at SNCC meetings, in formal meetings, people would get in these creative arguments about—well, according to Malcolm—according to Martin Luther King, Malcolm says such-and-such a thing, and people would play his speeches. They would read his writin's, and if Malcolm had lived, I think you would have witnessed a greater marriage between the Martin Luther King wing of the movement and the Malcolm wing of the movement.

00:13:15:00

Interviewer:

I'm a little surprised. Many people thought Malcolm was disruptive to the movement. You talk about almost a healing quality about Malcolm. Could you talk to that just a moment?

00:13:23:00

John Lewis:

Malcolm, in my estimation, after the man returned from Mecca, after he made that trip to Selma, Alabama, and spoke to the students at Brown Chapel AME Church—a group of high school student—this man was on his way toward buildin', toward reconcilin', the differences between people. I think he laid down, he was in the process of layin' down the burden of race and color.

00:13:56:00

Interviewer:

OK, I want to—

00:13:57:00

Camera crew member #1:

Can you say something else—

00:13:58:00

Interviewer:

Sure. Let's just stop down here and see.

[cut]

00:14:01:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:14:05:00

Interviewer:

By the summer of 1965, within SNCC, there seemed to be some major questions being raised about relations between Blacks and Whites in the organization, and I wonder if you can kind of talk to why there were such questions and what your position was in the midst of all that.

00:14:18:00

John Lewis:

In the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the summer of 1965, comin' on the heel of the assassination of Malcolm, after the Democratic Convention, after many people had returned from Africa, I think there was a growin' sense of Black awareness. It was a sense that the organization—not just SNCC but the civil rights movement—had to take on a different role. I continued, as the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, to preach the possibility of creating a truly interracial democracy. In SNCC durin' those days, I think many of us believed in the idea of a circle of trust and a band of brothers. I think some of us felt, at the time, that the only real and true integration that existed in the American society was within the civil rights movement itself; however, and in spite of the feelin' that people, Blacks and White, strugglin' together, goin' to jail together, in many instances bein' beaten together, some of our colleagues dyin' together, there was a sense, this feelin', that somehow, in some way, this movement must be more Black-dominated and Black-led.

00:15:51:00

Interviewer:

Well, there did seem to be some, some divisions of thought there that, and some differences that developed within SNCC that may have lost the chairmanship of SNCC for you to Stokely Carmichael, and I know I may be hitting on something that's a little sensitive to you, but I wonder if you'd kind of talk to me—why you think you lost to Stokely in that election.

00:16:09:00

John Lewis:

Well, in 1965, Stokely Carmichael, along with two or three other people, did mention the possibility of challengin' me for the chairmanship of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. I was re-elected in 1965 and continued to serve until the spring of 1966. I think there was a feelin' in SNCC, on the part of some of the people, like Stokely and others, that they needed someone who would maybe not be so nonviolent; someone who would be Blacker, in a sense; that would not preach interracial efforts or preach integration. I remember very well in the spring of 1966, I had been invited to go on a trip to speak to Scandinavian students—to Sweden, Norway, and Denmark—about the Civil Rights Movement, about the effort to end the war in Vietnam, and when I came back, ***it was almost like a coup. People were sayin' that we need someone who would stand up to Lyndon Johnson, we need someone who would stand up to Martin Luther King, Jr.,*** and it was at that time that the real battle for the chairmanship of SNCC took place. It was May 1966. I made a decision that it didn't matter what happened, I was gonna to continue to advocate the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence, that I believed in an interracial democracy, that I believe in Black people and White people workin' together.

00:18:06:00

Interviewer:

John, you, you were beat over the head I don't know how many times, jailed I don't know how many times, and then you lose out as the chairman of SNCC. This must have come as kind of a personal loss for you.

00:18:15:00

John Lewis:

Well, it was very disappointin'. You know, after goin' to jail 40 times and bein' beaten on the Freedom Ride in '61 and almost facin' death during the march—the attempted march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, to be challenged and unseated, to be reelected and de-elected the same evenin' as chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was a personal disappointment. It was a personal loss; but at the same time, I said to myself and to those supporters that supported me, primarily Southern students, a great many of my White colleagues in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, that the struggle was an ongoin' struggle, and I was goin' to continue to advocate the philosophy, the discipline of nonviolence and the sense of community, that all of us, Blacks and Whites, were in this boat together.

00:19:12:00

Interviewer:

Stokely, of course, was speaking Black Power on that march from, on the Meredith March. How did you feel about that?

00:19:19:00

John Lewis:

Well, I never, durin' the Meredith March, that was the turnin' point for me. I continued to be a part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, but the preachin, the chantin' of slogans, was never something that was easy for me to become part of because I felt, durin' the Meredith March, some of those in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, used the march to get the message or get the words, to get the slogan of Black Power across. ***It was empty rhetoric. It was not a message, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had a rich history of bein' involved in programmatic efforts and not just the use of slogan. It was at that point, during that march, that I made a decision to leave the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.***

00:20:25:00

Interviewer:

And let's stop down for just a moment.

[cut]

00:20:33:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:20:34:00

Interviewer:

OK, just make your statement.

00:20:36:00

John Lewis:

We saw our struggle in Americus, Georgia; in Selma, Alabama; in Birmingham, Alabama; bein' inseparable from the struggle in Angola, in Mozambique. It was a worldwide struggle. People of color, people that had been hurtin' and sufferin' and left behind, needed help, and we felt that we had to be identified as part of a worldwide struggle.

00:21:03:00

Interviewer:

Relate that to the position on Vietnam.

00:21:07:00

John Lewis:

So, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee felt very strongly that we had a moral obligation, really, to take a position against the war in Vietnam. We saw people of color, poor people, strugglin' for self-determination, that we didn't have a right to go thousand and thousand of miles away or to send other people to bomb, to kill, to destroy, and we took a strong position against the war in Vietnam and encouraged the young men in SNCC not to support the draft.

00:21:52:00

Interviewer:

All right. Thank you very much, Congressman. I think that that's a—that's a stop down.

00:21:58:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:01:00

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