TOM HOUCK INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

TOM HOUCK
Organizer, SCLC
Interviewed by Trey Ellis
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Total Running Time: 1 hour 18 minutes

00:00:06:00 TREY ELLIS:
I'd like just to begin really sort of simply with how- how- your story, how you first met Doctor King and- and- you know, and got here to this point.

00:00:14:00 TOM HOUCK:
Well, in nineteen sixty-six I had been working in Birmingham, Alabama for Hosea Williams, I had just started working for SCLC. It was like Birmingham Two. Even though the Voting Rights Act of sixty-five had passed, you still had to get federal registrars in to many of the towns across the South, and Birmingham being recalcitrant as it has always been, we were doing that. So, we were getting- blocking intersections, and getting kids out of school, much like they did in nineteen sixty-three. There weren't any- there weren't any dogs or fire hoses around this time, but it was just as violent in the sense that five to ten thousand people went to jail. Ultimately, the feds came in and we got federal registrars. So, Doctor King had come to Birmingham. He had been to Birmingham several times when I was there. I got arrested three times in Birmingham and actually filed suit with Hosea Williams in Birmingham to desegregate the jails in Jefferson County, which is the county Birmingham was in. I was in jail for two and a half days, they were really- vicious treatment. You know, as a white dude in the civil rights movement, when I would get arrested in demonstrations, they wouldn't put me with the brothers, they would be putting me in with the- well, I won't say "crackers," but I just used that word, but- and that was a very, very, very difficult situation. You hear the brothers singing, "Oh,

freedom!" And I'd be sitting there listening to these people talking about me being a nigger lover. You know, everybody was white that was in the movement, and I'm not Jewish, thought I was a Jew and they'd call me kike and all these other kinds of things.

00:01:44:00 But anyways, so Hosea Williams and I filed suit in Birmingham and then Doctor King came over to Birmingham to basically congratulate everybody for winning the victory because we were starting to register thousands of people a day in Birmingham where they were registering ten to twenty people a day. And he was just kind of kidding and he was talking to Bernard Lee, who was his associate, his assistant, and really his assistant, and he said to Bernard, said, "You, Bernard, I've got so much mail back in Atlanta," he said, "You think that anybody in here could help out?" And Bernard said, "No one can write in here," you know, and Doctor King said- I raised- so I raised my hand and he said, "I had heard Tom that you haven't even finished high school, how can you write?" And I said, "Well, I was on my high school newspaper before I got kicked out- before I quit, actually." And I said, "I'm a pretty good writer, I can answer mail." And he said, "Well, you can come back to Atlanta and stay at the freedom house, you want to ride back tomorrow with someone or do you want to take the bus back?" you know, get- I said, "Well, I'll take the bus back on Sunday."

00:02:44:00 So, I took a bus from Birmingham to Atlanta, and the bus- bus came down Auburn Avenue and let me off in front of the SCLC office. In those days there were no cell phones, you know, at all, so you had to go across the street and put a nickel into the payphone and I called the SCLC. We used to have freedom houses here. SNCC had one, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and SCLC had one at Doctor King's old home, which has unfortunately been torn down now. But- so I was expecting someone to come pick me up, so I was waiting in front of SCLC's office on Auburn Avenue. And Doctor King's church, of course, was down the street and he had just gotten through preaching. It was about one thirty, quarter to two in the afternoon, he saw me standing outside. He said, "Oh, Tom you're here." I said, "Yeah, I'm waiting for someone to give me a ride to the freedom house." And he had

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Coretta and the four kids in the car, so I didn't think they'd have room for me anyway, and, you know, I said, "Oh, I'll wait for the ride." And he said, "No, I'll give you a ride over there." And then he- so the kids got- all four kids got in the back, Coretta got in the middle and I- I- I was at the window, his was a green nineteen sixty-six Bonneville that he owned. And we went over to his- ac- no, we got in the car and he said, "Why don't you come have lunch with us?" I'm- here I am, nineteen-year-old kid, you know, and here Martin Luther King Jr.'s asking me to come to their house for Sunday lunch.

00:04:10:00 You know, in those days I was considerably lighter, but I had far more hair. And so, I said okay, so I went over to the King house. I mean, kind of nervous although Coretta was asking me a lot of questions, the- wanted to know where I'm from and, you know, so forth and the kids in the background. And then Marty shouts- shouts out, "Can you play football?" I said, "Yeah, I can play a little bit of football." He said, "Would you play football with us," he says, "My friend Ralph Abernathy's coming over," his friend Ralph Abernathy, "and my cousin Isaac," and he said, "we're going to have a little football game in the front yard." So, I said, "Well, I'm just going to have lunch and probably go back to the freedom house, but we'll see." So, we got- get in, and Doctor King- it was a long table, I guess maybe twelve people were at lunch. This is a Sunday lunch so it was chicken this, chicken that- Doctor King loved chicken, chicken wings, chicken gizzards, chicken livers, you know, breast, fried chicken, corn pudding, two or three different kinds of greens and then a big pie. Now, most of the cooking was done by- Doctor King and Mrs. King had a cook, slash, house keeper. Her name was Lockhart, and Mrs. Lockhart was never referred to by her first name by the Kings at all, they referred to her by her last name, it was always Mrs. Lockhart. And so, after she got through serving everybody, Doctor King said the blessing and Mrs. Lockhart sat down, and had lunch with us, so the household help, if you will, was part of the family and at the dinner table.

00:05:40:00 So we got through dinner and Doctor King said he had to go to his- he had a little office in town, he said he had to go to that office, "You want a ride over to the freedom house?" I said, "Yeah, let me call Hosea, and see if he's there." And Hosea

wasn't there, and then Coretta says to me, she says, "Well, Tom why don't you stay and chat for a while, and you know, we'll talk, I'd like to find out about Boston and stuff like that." So, I said okay, and so I started talking with her, and the kids dr- dru- actually drug me outside, and they took me out in front of the house and I saw- I started playing football with them. And as we were playing football, they came up with this, an affectionate, a very affectionate term, I guess you could say, a double entendre if you will, "Uncle Tom." And that's what they called me. And so, I enjoyed playing football with them. I went back in and Coretta was on the phone, and I said, "I'm going to call and get a ride back over to SCLC." 'cause Doctor King hadn't been back yet. She says, "No," she says, "Chat and stay for a while."

00:06:39:00 And so, she was very- Coretta was very op- o- outgoing, and so we chatted and she said, "By the way, do you have your driver's license?" And I said in a kind of a strange way, "Yeah." I said, "I have my driver's license. I don't have a car," but I said I had my driver's license. She said she has been having some trouble with her driver, that person that has been assisting her, and she really could use some help taking the kids to school. Now you got to remember, this was nineteen sixty-six, a white boy, you know, taking four black kids to school, Daddy King had some problems with it, I'll be honest with you. Martin didn't seem to mind at all. But she never really asked to see my license. It wasn't until the next day when I actually drove the kids to school- in those days, by the way, you had no GPS's, so you had to look at everything in a map, and so I agreed that I would take the kids to school. And Hosea said, "What- have you..." I mean, he just got all in a huff about being over there and having lunch and of course the brothers and the sisters that were in there were just kind of jealous of the fact that I was eating lunch with Doctor King, you know, and "now you're going to start driving for him." It was kind of contentious, kind of, you know, people ribbing me, you know, "What's this white boy doing over here?" You know, you know, kind of, you know, my- but- you know, I mean, it rolled off my back.

00:07:53:00 And I- so I had actually driven the car, which I was driving, a blue Impala, which is still around, a nineteen sixty-six Impala, back to the freedom house and so- that's

where I stayed, which is where everybody in the field would stay, what they called the "foot soldiers." And so, I came back and I stayed there and I started to drive for the family and Doctor King. I'd pick him up at the airport and he and Ralph and Ber- you know, I'd go to the office with him, get the mail. And so, the first few days I wasn't really answering mail, I was really working around things at the King household. But it was that moment that I really developed a relationship with Doctor King and the King family and for me, Atlanta. I mean, every- from my dentist, to my doctor, to, you know, everybody else. I met everybody in their circle, you know, Xernona Clayton, you know, I mean, all these people in their circle. But I was still on SCLC's payroll, which was twenty-five dollars a week then, it wasn't a whole, whole lot of money. And Andy Young said to Martin, he said, "Now, Tom's working for you, you need to pay him out of your payroll." And so, Andy, when he was head of the list- Andy was Executive Director of SCLC, so every time he'd come up- every month on the payroll, he would take me off the payroll and put me on Martin, and Doctor King would say to him, "Andy, no, Tom works for us, works for SCLC." And so, he- I think Andy gets a joke out of this, but I think he fired me four times and every time he fired me, Doctor King would put me back on the staff.

00:09:26:00 TREY ELLIS:
Could you back up a little bit about how you actually got down from Boston to here coming out of school, and how old you were when you came.

00:09:33:00 TOM HOUCK:
I was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in nineteen forty-seven, and I went to- well, actually I was living in Somerville, Mass which is right next to Cambridge, and that's where I kind of grew up until I was six or seven, then my family moved to the suburbs, alright? But I really got involved in the movement in Somerville, in a way. There was a black kid who had a hearing aid and this white kid punched him and his hearing- his hearing aid fell out, and at that moment I ran at- it was bullying, in a sense bullying and racism, but both at the same time, and it was at that moment I

realized that, you know, what was going on, not just with that kind of situation, but around this whole country, I started reading and hearing about, you know, slavery. I started- you know, I mean, I didn't- you know- know any of that kind of stuff. This is a six-year-old kid, six, seven-year-old kid and so I became fascinated by the movement and I kept watching it. Of course, television was coming of age then and we- we had a TV set.

00:10:39:00 So, we moved to Framingham and my third-grade teacher was a black woman. And so, she and I would go back and forth, and this is around the time of Brown vs. the Board of Education, right after that. And I was just asking, "What was segregation like?" *[Unclear]* and so forth. And then I would drive down to the South, we'd go to Florida and, I mean, we'd- you'd hit New Jersey and you'd start seeing "colored" and "white" signs all over the place and, you know, I would always- you know, my parents weren't particularly racist, but they used- they were no progressive human beings on the planet either in terms of race. So, I would start going into the colored restrooms, I would start drinking out of the colored water fountain, and, you know, I was still following the movement on TV and so forth and so on and I realized, you know, what that was like. And my father you know, said, "Bust…" They used to call me Buster, he said, "Buster, you can't do that!" He said, you know, "That's- that's for people- that's for colored people, not for you." And I said, "No, it's for everybody." And that's kind of like I- how I really started getting involved in the movement. Then I had a friend whose father was a- who I remained friends with from the time that I was in Somerville, whose father was a Unitarian minister and they were picketing in front of a Woolworths in Central Square, Cambridge, Mass and in- in support and solidarity with the sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina. And that was my first time and it felt good, that- I actually participated in a demonstration at twelve.

00:12:14:00 My mother died shortly thereafter and I wound up being partly a ward of the state of Massachusetts, which was really good for me in a way because it put me in Peabody in a school for boys where I met black and Hispanic, Asian kids, and- all- every- everybody rather than just being with- being around a bunch of white folks, and that really began to, you know, get my politics going. And then my aunt from Cambridge,

Maryland, which was having a huge movement at the time, said that she would like to take me, well, like- you know, get me out of this boys' school. So, I stayed in this boys' school for about three or four months, then moved to Cambridge, Maryland with her and, of course, and Cambridge, Maryland was a hotbed. Gloria Richardson headed up a movement in Cambridge and they were integrating, you know- even though I was in school here, an all-white school, I mean, and this is Cambridge, Maryland in nineteen sixty-three, it was a time- sixty-two actually, sixty-two, sixty-three when Cambridge, Maryland that really brought me out and told me that this is my endeavor, this is my goal, this is what I want to do, this is my- I'm going to organize, I'm going to change the face of America's racial inequi- ineq- inequality.

00:13:30:00 And so, I actually started to go over to the mass meetings, and I've got two or three other white kids actually to come join me over to these meetings. And my aunt was kind of a progressive woman. She- you know, and at any rate, while I was living in Cambridge, her son-in-law had just finished in Annapolis and plane went down in Jacksonville, Florida in a naval station down there. So, we moved to Jacksonville. And then I wound up going to a high school named after the founder of the Ku Klux Klan, Nathan Bedford Forrest. And I immediately got myself involved in political action. I mean, it was kind of an interesting thing. I was sociable and you know, I got along with people in- in the school. And matter of fact, this was a time that these white kids, even in the South were dealing with, you know, Vietnam and dealing with the- you know- so I got about a hundred fifty kids really organized to go to weekly NAACP meetings, youth council and demonstrations downtown. The first time I went to St. Augustine and I met Hosea in Saint Augustine. This was nineteen sixty-three and I was still in high school. So, I stayed in Jacksonville, I got kicked off the- my high school paper because I tried to change the name of the paper and the school, and then Selma came along. And this wa- I had about had it at this point, so I saw John and Hosea as they led the march across the Edmund Pettis Bridge, I saw them getting whipped and I saw the way that the- that the movement was and how- you know- So I decided I was going to go to Selma and that's when I really started- never really looked back after that. I worked in the summer of sixty-six, sixty-five

rather in Mobile, Alabama and Greenville, Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, but more with SNCC and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, but I knew people from SCLC from my Saint Augustine experience and you know, followed the movement very closely; I knew all the cast of characters.

00:15:32:00 TREY ELLIS:
So- so when you find yourself driving Doctor King and the kids around, what was it like, let's say with Doctor King, you describe him like- what's his personality, the music he would listen to, what was that like?

00:15:45:00 TOM HOUCK:
Well, he listened to WAOK Radio, which is- and WERD, which is also, was upstairs from Doctor King's office. And you know, you didn't have cell phones as I- as I mentioned earlier, there's no cell phones, so, I mean, it was just me and him and maybe Abernathy on a- on a- he liked to play a lot of tricks on Abernathy, hoax, you know, kind of, you know, he called him Pork Chops, that was his nickname for Ralph, Pork Chops. And that was his best friend, I mean, there was no question about it, I mean, he was everywhere with Ralph, Ralph was very, very close to him. So, driving around with Doctor King would be- he would kid me about my driving, saying I was driving too slow. And then, you know, he would say, you know, he would ask me questions like, you know, "What are the kids doing?" And you know, "What kind of looks are you getting driving the kids around town?" You know, he would talk to me a little bit about the movement, about what was happening and just particularly then about going into Chicago and end the slums and the battle against housing discrimination, the open housing. And I- you know, I was telling him- always they would say, he's just, "Tom, you don't really want to drive, do you?" And I said, "Not really, I'm a hell of an organizer, I want to get our here and organize again." But you know, we would- we would- he would talk about the family, talk about, you know, the music, you know, he loved Aretha, I mean, absolutely loved Aretha. And if you wanted to listen to the gospel station, when WERD was more of a

gospel station, he loved Mahalia Jackson. I mean, he one time said, I think at a mass rally, that a voice like hers comes along once in a millennium.

00:17:23:00 And, you know, his- his- his enjoy of- you know, we'd always stopped, by the way, at a little store around the corner from his house on Sunset where he would go in and get- buy a bug ticket, you know, which is now the lottery, and it's- you know so he would- but he would play the bug, he enjoyed that. He also would come across the street with- and I'd go with him, from SCLC's office where there was a VFW hall. In the VFW hall, some of the staff would come in, and he'd sling back a beer, have a little bit of scotch and you know- he would- you know, be a regular person, he was not- you know, Doctor King had no security around him. Doctor King didn't have any, you know, posse, you know, so, I mean, it was nothing- like- I mean, until the day he was assassinated, in Atlanta, there was no police presence outside of his house except for the FBI, but it- by and large, King was just a very regular person and there was no airs about him.

00:18:23:00 A couple times he'd fall asleep in the car and did snore, and he- but, you know, he didn't- he didn't- I mean, it was- it was like- he loved the O'Jay's, by the way too, I mean, there were several people he liked in terms of music. You know, and he and Coretta often went to the old Royal Peacock Club down here on Auburn Avenue and over to La Carousel Lounge in Paschal's Hotel, which was the place to be prior to nineteen sixty-four and the Public Accommodations bill- actually, Atlanta was a bit earlier than that, sixty-two when they integrated the hotels. But Doctor King liked to go to clubs, he enjoyed- enjoyed the music. I didn't see him dance much, but I knew he could dance. But Coretta could dance very well. And he was- how would you describe it, a jovial person in terms of cracking jokes, so many instances I can think of, but I think one- what happened was a lot- a lot of auto dealers from the North would send cars to the South for civil rights workers to use. And there was this one Chevrolet, which actually Doctor King gave to me to drive around in, which had a- had a hole in the floorboard in the back.

00:19:39:00 So, he had called to the house and wanted to know if I was there, I said, "Yeah." He said, you know, "Come pick Ralph and I up at the airport." And I said, "Yeah, I'll

come pick you up." And so, he said, "I don't want you to bring my car, I want you to bring that car I gave you, that Chevrolet with the floorboard, and we're going to put Ralph through the hole in the back." And so, we get- we get to the- get to the airport, and then Ralph's standing there, you know, making his little moves, and Doctor King says, "Now, Ralph you got to stay in the back, I'm sitting up front with Tom." And so, as Ralph gets in, he goes right down through the floorboard. And Martin starts, I mean, starts laughing and I was worried about Ralph. Ralph actually bre- he tore his pants. And so, Ralph says, "Now, why did you do that to me, why did you do that to me?" And then he said, "Well, I was just trying to have some fun with you, Chops." And so- you know, but it was- and kind of- he'd do that constantly. I mean, he would also show the kids, they had a small pool table, not a big pool table in the house, he'd show the kids his latest pool moves when he came home. He even mentioned he sort of saw himself as a little hustler.

00:20:51:00 TREY ELLIS:
So, would he, like- how about smoking cigarettes too, was that a-

00:20:55:00 TOM HOUCK:
Yes. He smoked about a couple packs a day, L and M's, and usually he'd cut a hole in the bottom of the cig- of the package and I said, "Doctor King," you know, "To keep the tobacco fresh," is what he would say. And Coretta hated it, I mean, she absolutely- you know, was trying to get him to stop, tried to get him to stop. He didn't smoke very much around the kids, I'll say that, you know, he did not do that. But at one point he started asking me to hold his cigarettes because Coretta would always check as we would come up the stairs, check if he had any cigarettes in his pocket. So- but he had a little room in the house, which is like his office, where he smoked most of the time, and then of course he smoked in his own office here- and in those days, everybody smoked, so, I mean, it was no- you know, in nineteen sixty-six, sixty-seven, sixty-eight, you know, I mean, it was nothing- smoking was- the cigarette- tobacco companies were the major sponsors on TV.

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00:21:51:00 TREY ELLIS:
And in terms of being the pool hustler, how about with that same world, how about like dressing and cologne, was he like a dapper in a kind of way?

TOM HOUCK:
Well, you know, Ralph was the cologne freak and Martin would kid him about it. My- m- you know, he- he- he said, "Ralph has taking a shower today in that cologne, just a shower." And that, by the way, has moved generational. His son was a big cologne person and Isaac Farris is Doctor King's nephew, Christine King-Farris' son, loves cologne too. Martin was not a big cologne person. He did wear cologne, but he was not a big cologne person. Doctor King, you know, said, "Ralph had enough to go around." He said, "You could always smell Ralph before you see him."

00:22:36:00 TREY ELLIS:
Did he ever joke about the fact that he was- had a white driver, a black man with a white driver?

00:22:40:00 TOM HOUCK:
Well, you know it was interesting, Daddy King more than anybody else was really concerned about it. You know, I mean, he said, "This is Atlanta." And he said, "This is- you know, we're not talking about New York City, we're talking about Atlanta." And you know I did get, you know, very strange looks. I- and matter of fact twice I got pulled over, really for not doing anything, but driving with, you know, driving black folks. And- and- but, you know, I picked the kids up at school and, you know, I got to know some of the parents. And, you know, some of the- of course I know- I got to know a lot of the kids' friends, but both times that I got stopped, one ticket was for running a stop sign, which I didn't do, and I think the other ticket was going thirty-five in a thirty. Daddy King actually got the tickets fixed. He was a good political person in Atlanta, and he earned it. I mean, he went in the forties, he was a

leader in getting the first black cops in Atlanta and, you know, he was the one getting streetlights on Auburn Avenue. Mundane things, but back in nineteen forty-eight, I mean, you had a very segregationist, Jim Crow era, you know, it was-you know, Atlanta was a reg- you know, Atlanta changed a lot, but Atlanta was very- still a very rigid, segregated city. You name- you know, William Hartsfield was not an integrationist mayor. William Hartsfield, for those who don't know, his name is on the airport with Maynard Holbrook Jackson, who is Atlanta's first black mayor.

00:24:12:00 TREY ELLIS:
Did you get the feeling that Doctor King understood how historic everything wa- while it was happening did he understand that he was liv- they were living history?

00:24:22:00 TOM HOUCK:
You know, I- of course, being around Doctor King and- while he was in the office at SCLC, helping him answer mail, which I did with Dora McDonald, who was his- I realized that Doctor King was not only cognizant of what was going on, okay, but really far ahead of his time. He obviously knew and he- he would- he would preach about it, he would say, you know, "I've- and I've won all these awards, but that doesn't make any difference," you know, "Call me a drum major for justice." He understood what his role was and he of course stayed on the phone with- I would say three or four, but Harry Belafonte being one of them, but, you know, probably Andy, Andy Young, of course Ralph and with Harry Wachtel and Stan Levinson, who were two of his good friends who were New York lawyers and they worked very closely with Doctor King and with Coretta. So, he would constantly, and I would overhear, even though I was not asked to be part of the strategy session, I would overhear what, you know, they were talking about and where they were going to go.

00:25:33:00 The first time I really realized it was when they were going to Chicago and, you know, I mean, he wanted to have- it was always kind of an interesting role that he and Jesse Jackson played and- and so I would hear the conversations that he was having with people regarding that, and I would hear conversations that he would

have on the strategy of dealing with Daley in Chicago and how that was going to work out. Doctor King had won all of the battles in the South except for maybe Albany, Georgia. He had won most of- almost all the battles that he went into. He had a strategy using nonviolence as a way to break down those violent and hateful sheriffs and mayors and, you know, white folks that were opposed to integration, opposed to "mixing of the races" as they would say. So, he understood clearly what role he had.

00:26:31:00 He already won the Nobel Peace Prize by the time I met him. He had already led the March on Washington and had his famous speech that is heard around the world on January fifteenth, every year, "I have a dream." He had already led, you know, the march from Selma to Montgomery. The Voting Rights Act had already passed. The Civil Rights bill of nineteen sixty-four had already passed. So, Doctor King was moving into new grounds, a lot of new grounds, taking on the establishment, not only the establishment in Washington, the black political establishment in the country, about Vietnam and beginning to talk against the war, which pissed L- LBJ off greatly. And LBJ was a great ally, I mean, he- you know, as much as you, you know, hear how he talked, he did something that I don't know whether Kennedy could've gotten done, which is pass the sixty-four Civil Rights Act and pass the sixty-five Voting Rights bill. And so, you know, I'm sure that the language that LBJ was using in the White House- and Martin was mimicking him. He used to kind of talk like how LBJ would talk. And you know, he- and he knew how that was pissing him- Lyndon off.

00:27:53:00 And he also knew that, you know, Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young and others, you know, say that, you know, we should keep one battle going at a time and our battle is still the civil rights movement, it's not the anti-war movement. It's not going into the economic issues you're beginning to talk about, changing the economic structure of America. And so, I mean, you know, he would talk about that constantly. And he knows people in the organization, and this is back in sixty-six and sixty-seven, sixty-seven particularly, I had left driving for Doctor King and started to organize what- we started a college department in SCLC, and my job was to help organize anti-war

demonstrations. And as a matter of fact, I was inducted, and Doctor King actually wrote a letter to my draft board, which was Jacksonville, Florida where I was living at the time, which was turned down. Doctor King wrote a letter to my draft board and asking that I be given CO status, which is conscientious objector status, with SCLC.

00:29:00:00 And so, what happened, okay, was that at this point the movement was changing so dramatically. You know, I mean, SNCC was no longer the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, it was Stokely and Rap *[unclear]* different things with Stoke- I actually became friends- a lot- this is interesting. A lot of people when I was working for the King's and, you know, I was just nineteen, twenty years old, would want to- want- want me- want to meet me around and Cleave Sellers and Stokely who worked for SNCC who I'd known, but you know, I became better fiends with them in sixty-six. And of course, John Lewis, who is still one of my best friends today. But John- you know, so I spent a lot of time with John and Julian Bond. And Julian was actually Martin's neighbor, lived down the street when Julian was elected to the state House of Representatives and his seat was denied because of white Democrats in the Georgia general assembly suggesting that Julian, you know, had committed a treasonous act by supporting- being against the war in Vietnam. For I guess almost two elections thereafter, kept- kept him out of his house seat. Doctor King led marches for Julian, and I mean, it was his neighbor as well, so- and Coretta actually marched. Coretta marched, Ralph marched, we all marched for Julian in sixty-six, and he would talk about how horrendous it was that these white racists were able to put up and do what they did, you know, to keep him out of his seat. And these were Democrats. In the South until, you know, the sixties, if you were black, you had to be a Republican because you couldn't vote- the Democrats had white-only primaries.

00:31:00:00 TREY ELLIS:
You were talking- I'd like to go back a little bit, you were talking about the pivot to Chicago after all these successes. If we can go to Chicago and the idea of white,

northern racism and his troubles there. As you know from Boston, and I'm from the Northeast too, that how it changed and how the media, how he was viewed differently by whites.

00:31:19:00 TOM HOUCK:
He knew going into Chicago, and I was around then, I actually spent about a month in Chicago, and I didn't get arrested. There weren't a lot of arrests on our side, there were a lot of arrests on the white folks side, but the white folks side were- and Doctor King mentioned this many times over, worse than anything he'd ever seen in Mississippi in terms of the hatred and in terms of their- I would say their vicious racism and, excuse me- and it was like- it was like, he thought- King thought and he- you know, Al Raby really headed the movement up in Chicago, and Jesse was very much a part of the movement in Chicago. And then there was a big dispute, I can remember hearing the conversations about- with James Orange, who was- Doctor King had brought to Chicago with him Bevel, Jim Bevel had come to Chicago with him. Andy came to Chicago, of course. Andy, I'll tell you something funny, Doctor King used to say, "We don't need any white boys, we have Andy." And Andy- and Andy- In terms of going to negotiate with these people, we don't need to have white folks, we have Andy. I would always joke to Andy about being a Republican.

00:32:33:00 But it was- it was Chicago that I really saw him for the first time more in a close sense, because I had driven for him and get to know him and the family that- just imag- of how strategic he was and, you know, how he would understood what needed to be done and, you know, how you maneuver in a movement, your tactics, your strategy. So, Martin Luther King wasn't just a great orator, he was a great strategist. And I saw that in Chicago even though Daley signed off on open housing in Chicago. He never really thought King should've come there anyway, that there was nothing wrong in his city. And sadly today, many of the neighborhoods we went into, Lawndale and Edgewood on the southwest side of Chicago are some of the most violent neighborhoods in the country. And in the old days in sixty-six, that violence was perpetrated by the whites that lived in those neighborhoods and now

today it's black on black crime and that- which- 'cause those white folks, once black folks started moving in, southwest side of Chicago, the West Side of Chicago, they started- white folks started fleeing en-masse.

00:33:52:00 TREY ELLIS:
Also, in Chicago it was the first time it felt like that the media had seen a turn, was sort of questioning Doctor King.

00:34:02:00 TOM HOUCK:
Yeah. A lot of people thought that King should not have taken on a battle on- in Chicago against Daley on open housing. Actually, the campaign was not called an open housing campaign, it was basically called the war for the poor. And it was- it was basically, you know, end slums. That's what the title of the movement was for Chicago, end slums. And so many people from the organization came in, so much of the resources that came in. This wasn't Doctor King's first real foray in the North. He helped elect- what you call it- mayor of Cleveland, and so he actually had gone- SCLC had sent people to Cleveland. Carl Stokes, elect Carl Stokes, the first black mayor of a major city and that was in sixty-six. And then he took on Chicago after that. But he was really in a turmoil. So, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, what role and, of course, there's black ministers all over the country that were members of SCLC, and, you know, they had-and Operation Breadbasket started in Chicago, but what role would SCLC have in a northern movement and just how far would they go in that movement and how successful could they be?

00:35:17:00 Well, Chicago was a tad of a slap down. Daley signed off, as I said earlier, on basically opening up housing and stopping red lining, and which he never really did, but, you know, to get King out of there, that's what he said. So, he- he was very- he was- Doctor King left, I mean, he left Chicago and I think that he didn't feel- I didn't think he felt like he had to really recalibrate his- his aspect of the movement, that it was no longer just a civil rights movement. It was now an economic movement. It was now a movement to involve all different kinds of people all over the country.

And that began to evolve when he started to come out against the war in Vietnam, setting himself not only apart, but also moving forward to the Poor People's Campaign which was going to tear down the walls of injustice in D.C. and build a wonderful Resurrection City that was going to do a- a total- total reorganization of- reorganizing of the economics and the economic system of the country.

00:36:36:00 TREY ELLIS:
Did you think there were any parallels today between the white backlash of the white working class in Chicago and the election of Trump and the sort of white working class northeastern- you know, the election results-

00:36:52:00 TOM HOUCK:
They just moved to the suburbs and voted for Trump. No, I'm- I'm not kidding you. I mean, what happened in Chicago I think was, in a sense, a wakeup call for King in a real sense that- that what you had in the South was mirrored- mirrored, you know, was mirrored at least ten times over in the North. And even though the unions in the North, and many of those people that were out there, you know, throwing firebombs and bricks and rocks in Chicago and turning over cars, and so on, were union workers, you know, were union workers, you know? I mean, they- they- they worked- many of them worked for the city and, you know, and they had their nice little brick- little, you know, small house out there, they wanted to protect that, you know, they didn't want any niggers coming in and just turning them around. And Doctor King realized that, very, very, very succinctly, that this was a movement that maybe he hadn't thought through it as much as he should have, you know. And there was people that wanted to march into Cicero which he refused to. You know, I mean, he saw the dangers of creating what, you know, what was a race war, essentially, you know, and the tactics of nonviolence, which he always demanded in terms of the demonstrations, you know, was, like, very hard to deal with. You know, I mean, Chicago had two thousand police out there protecting us, but, you know, I mean, that didn't help because we had five to ten thousand of these white men mostly, you

know, you know, setting fires to cars. And many of the cops were relatives of the people throwing the rocks and the stones and the bottles.

00:38:41:00 TREY ELLIS:
So, it's true that while King's- part of the time while King was up in Chicago, you were in the South registering voters?

00:38:49:00 TOM HOUCK:
No. I was in- actually what happened was, I stayed with Doctor King driving for the family from I guess February, March of sixty-six until- and Chicago was in the summer of sixty-six. I was still driving for him, but I really wanted to go up and participate in the demonstrations, so I went up and participated in the demonstrations, and I wound up staying there, and kids were getting ready to go back to school, and so I came back to Atlanta and finished up probably another two or three months driving for the King family but becoming more involved in the organization and organizing. In Chicago, I actually visited the flat that Doctor King rented. Mrs. King went up there as well, Coretta went up there as well, and James Orange sort of oversaw that whole thing and Doctor King's foray into the West Side.
00:39:38:00 You know, he wasn't just dealing with open housing, he was dealing with rents, he was dealing with housing, and, you know, he was dealing with all the issues in Chicago besides just the open housing demonstrations. The open housing demonstrations in Chicago actually became a diversion from what King had originally set off to do in Chicago, which was to end the slums in the West Side of Chicago, but to do that you had to have access to housing. And that's when the aspects of the demonstrations came in the south- southwest side of Chicago, and it was very much like the Poor People's Campaign. The Poor People's Campaign in nineteen sixty-eight didn't set out to have a- have a march and demonstrations in Memphis. They said in order to bring everybody from three corners of the country to Washington to go to Resurrection City, so the original plan of the Poor People's Campaign was not to have Memphis as its nexus.

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00:40:40:00 TREY ELLIS:
What about the- tell us about- can you paint a picture of visiting with Coretta and the kids in Lawndale in that projects in that apartment, what was it like, how did the family react to living there?

00:40:52:00 TOM HOUCK:
It was a three-floor walk-up, you know, I mean, it was not- it was not the- kids didn't live there too long, I think the kids stayed a couple weeks. But, you know, I mean, now there in Chicago you did have- Doctor King did have security around him. And not of his own doing, but they decided that this is what they were going to do. So, you know, I mean, it wasn't as rat infested as some of the other places. Doctor King wanted to deal with the Cabrini Greens, which for those people who don't know, are big housing projects in Chicago, the old Taylor homes in Chicago, which really housed people like in cages. And he wanted to deal with those. He wanted to deal with all these kinds of things and he met with Daley several times about this. But the place in Chicago was- it wasn't- you know, James Orange, who oversaw the project who- James Orange was one of Doctor King's field organizers and lieutenants, you know, had the place fixed up, actually, got a new refrigerator, and, you know, painted different rooms, and so forth. So, it was not like he was living in the same kind of squalor as somebody else in the neighborhood, but it was quite a difference- change of that.

00:42:09:00 But then again, King, when he moved in nineteen sixty-three from Johnson Avenue in Atlanta, he could've lived in any one of the finer Atlanta neighborhoods. I mean, he could have gone out with Ralph Abernathy and where his father was, Daddy King, a new development that an Atlanta builder named Herman Russell had built and a lot of black folks are moving out there. And he chose not to, he chose to move to Vine City. You know, so, I mean, King- you got- you got to really look at him in the terms of what he wanted to do. He didn't want, you know, to have a sort of showboat kind of attitude about him. He wasn't bougie, and you know, and neither

was Coretta, but- so, I mean, he actually, as I heard the story 'cause I wasn't there then in sixty-three, that, you know, everybody wanted him, Daddy King and mother to move to Collier Heights, which is an upper class neighborhood in Atlanta and, you know, they're building all these new houses out there.

00:43:06:00 And he went out there to take a look at the houses and then he said, "No, I want to be closer to town." And he moved into a very historic neighborhood in Atlanta called Vine City on Sunset Avenue, a relatively modest bungalow, I mean, four bedrooms, but it was a modest bungalow. It was- it was a little bit different than the rest of Vine City. You could call it like the Vine City Heights, if you would, but right around the corner was Atlanta's first black millionaire, Alonzo Herndon who had founded Atlanta Insurance Company. He was dead then, but he built that house there, and you had a vibrant shopping area down there on Magnolia Street and at the corner of Doctor King's street was a- a- a music venue that was the head of the Chitlin' Circuit. And the Chitlin' Circuit was an amazing thing. And you'd have people like Bobby Blue Boy Bland come through there and B.B. King, and you know, you go through- you go through June Cla- all- all th- all the famous stars would come. They tore down that place, by the way, while I actually was driving with Doctor King; they tore down the Magnolia Ballroom. But- and then there was also down at the corner of the street at Sunset where Doctor King lived, not just the place where he'd buy his cigarettes and his bug tickets, but across the way there was- in the days of segregation there was a drive-in here and that drive-in was at the corner of Sunset, which is now Joseph E. Boon and the thing that separated that drive-in from the Varsity was they had a pole dancer in this place and Martin would always kid about that.

00:44:42:00 And he'd always- he had this big joke as well, because next to him on Sunset Avenue in Atlanta were four morticians. There were four owners of funeral homes that lived right next door to him, between he and Julian Bond. And he would always kid Julian and he said, "Yeah Julian, we have death row between us," you know. And Julian's first wife still lives there, by the way. And- but that's where- that- you know, they developed a good relationship, as did the kids. I think one time, I think this was after

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I left but I- Coretta told me the story. By the way, Coretta gave me my first permanent. She- I had a big black afro at one point in my life and she gave me my first permanent. But, you know, I got along with her in an unbelievable way until the day she died, I mean, you know, I was very close to her. Probably- I think that she probably saw me as a son figure in some ways, you know, so- but she always took me under her wing and, you know, she always- even after I left the movement, after I left working for SCLC we remained friends and real close.

00:45:56:00 And of course, I remained close to Dexter and to Marty, much closer to Dexter than to any of the other kids. Dexter probably has in his- in the way he thinks and the way he acts probably more than any of the other kids, he would have- I think that had Doctor King lived, that Dexter would have found a role far more significant in the movement. Marty or Martin, as he's known as today, he doesn't like to be called Marty anymore, and he would have been- he just- he just didn't seem like to have that- he didn't even finish Morehouse. He went to Morehouse, didn't finish it. And Yolanda was the actress, the theatrical person in the family, and she was wonderful. I mean, she passed away far too young. And- and Bernice, I don't know what happened to Bernice, I mean, I- I- I'm very close to Bernice, but not that close, Bunny as we called her back in those days. She became very much enamored with the powerful mega churches, or as I call them the ATM ministries, and worked with a bishop here Eddie Long for a long time, even though she got her theology degree from Emory, she, you know, became not a part of the movement for social justice churches like Ebenezer, still is under Ralph- Ralph- under Raphael Warnock or Big Bethel down the street on Auburn Avenue, the three big churches are still social justice churches. And you know, and so she kind of took a different path. With Eddie Long she even marched to Doctor King's grave against gay people and lesbians, and Coretta was very supportive of that cause, and I think Martin would have been as well.

00:47:49:00 TREY ELLIS:
Can we go back and quickly to the drive-in, did he ever go to the drive-in movie?

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00:47:53:00 TOM HOUCK:
I'm not going to say, what is a drive-in movie. It was a drive-in restaurant where they had a pole dancer out there in the middle of the place. Oh yeah, he went there. I mean- well, I mean, everybody did, you know, it was like the varsity, which was kind of an interesting thing. But Doctor King, you know, I mean, you could build him up into sainthood all you want, I mean, you know, he was a regular human being and he liked to have fun. Few weeks ago, I do civil rights tours- I might as well, get a plug in here, I do civil rights tours in Atlanta where I take people to many of the locations we're talking about today. And about two or three weeks ago I had this ninety-two-year-old woman who had gone to college with- Martin was only, you know, fourteen to seventeen- when he finished Morehouse, he was seventeen, and he was fourteen when he finished high school at Washington High School. But she remembers him specifically and the person that she had on the bus was 88 and was a good friend of Christine King Farris, who was Doctor King's sister. Doctor King, if he was alive today, this'd be- this'd be the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination, but if he was alive today he'd be eighty-nine years old. I mean, he'd be a very different Martin Luther King today than what we saw at thirty-nine, because he was only thirty-nine when he was assassinated.

00:49:15:00 So, when I was driving him and I was twenty years old, I was working with him until the time he was assassinated, in which I was, what, twenty-three, and I spent another year at SCLC, he was a very young man. I mean, we're not talking- we were- twenty-five, twenty-five years old when he led the movement in Montgomery. You know, I mean, he was- he was- you almost couldn't conceive of that today of somebody that young having that much power and having that much ability to be able to change the dynamic of the situation. And he wasn't supposed to do that. I mean, he became in sixty-five, I'm sure you've gone over this, in '55 rather, but he became- Ralph Abernathy was really the big church in Montgomery and Martin had- would- Ralph's church was- was called Brick Church- Brick by Brick Church, which is actually built by masons, and so forth. Martin had this little church on Dexter

Avenue which his son's named after, which was kind of a- what Ralph used to call it- and I would hear them talk about this, by the way, talking about conversations I would overhear, and he used to talk about, "When I- when I came to Atlanta, you know, you had your dad and that big church over there, Ebenezer," he said, "I had to find myself a church." But Ralph had the big church in Montgomery and Martin had the small church, but it was the small church he wanted and it was a church that had a lot of professionals in Montgomery that- whether nurses and doctors and postal workers, by the way, which was considered then in the black community a great job, and teachers and professors from Alabama State, and so forth. So, Doctor King had kind of a- as Ralph would call it, kind of the uppity crowd, and he said, "I had the people."

00:50:58:00 TREY ELLIS:
Did Coretta and Martin ever- they have like a date night where they would...?

00:51:01:00 TOM HOUCK:
00:00:00:00 Yeah, I mean, they would hang out with Ralph and Juanita Abernathy, you know, quite a bit. B. Clayton was a good friend of hers and she had several other friends. I mean, they went out frequently. They would go to the La Carousel Lounge, as I said, you know, they would go there quite a bit. And Doctor King loved- they would take the family on vacation. The whole family would go over to Paschal's and to have dinner and he would go probably I would say two or three times a month. They would go to the movies or Coretta loved music, so they would go to, you know, here in Atlanta the symphony orchestra, so I mean- I would say probably- I would say they went probably more to the symphony orchestra than anything else and- and that was Coretta's influence on that one, I man, she basically called the shots on that one.

00:52:04:00 TREY ELLIS:
And when they walked around the town, were they seen as royalty, when they came in to Pascal's? Were they celebrities or were they...?

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00:52:09:00 TOM HOUCK:
Oh, yeah, wherever- wherever Doctor King went he was a celebrity. I mean, he was- he was bigger than Michael Jordan, you know, I mean, he just really was. I mean, he was, you know, I mean, people just looked up- I mean, can you imag- imagine, there was only two pictures that were in a lot of black folks houses in the South, one was Martin Luther King- well, maybe three pictures- one was Martin Luther King Jr., the other one was Jesus, and the other one was John Kennedy. So, yeah, he was analyzed, I mean, everywhere he went, you know, even here in Atlanta, the white cops- the white cops in Atlanta, you know, if I were driving, you know, they'll say, "Oh, there's Doctor King, that's Doctor King." You know, I mean- and that was such an unbelievable difference. Just five years, six years earlier he was put in Reedsville because he was arrested for- with the students in the student movement here and he had an outstanding ticket for I guess not having a proper driver's license or tag and they took him in shackles to Reedsville.

00:53:10:00 And that probably changed, that probably changed the election in nineteen sixty-six. Nixon, who was a friend of Daddy King's wouldn't help out, so Coretta wound up going to the Kennedy's and the Kennedy's talked Richard Russell into- not Richard Russell- yeah, Richard Russell into getting Doctor King out of jail. Coretta was very concerned about him in that jail by himself and- and- but that was only six years earlier, so I mean, that was not that long from the time I started driving him until that violent attitude towards King in Georgia existed. And of course, then you got to realize as well, after that- after he won the Nobel Peace Prize, there was a lot of people that were reluctant to honor him in a dinner here. And it took Robert Woodruff from Coca Cola, you know, throwing down the gauntlet and saying, "Damn, you're going to organize this thing here for Martin Luther King," as he would chomp on his little cigar, you know, I mean, he just said, you know, 'We got to do this." But that took some pushing and some rabbis and some priests and preachers had to do that.

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00:54:16:00 TREY ELLIS:
What about the FBI, did they ever- I know that Xernona said that they came around the SCLC, did you ever notice, did you have a feeling that they were lurking?

00:54:24:00 TOM HOUCK:
Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. There used to be this guy named Charlie Webster who worked for- I think he was a mole. And they hired him for the American Friends Service Committee and he would always come around SCLC's office and he'd be smoking a pipe and he'd- he'd- he'd have his hat on and he'd drive a black Chevrolet, much like you'd see outside Doctor King's house. You know, there wasn't Atlanta police out there for protection, but you'd see the FBI out there frequently, you know, monitoring King and watching him. Oh, yeah, that was a- oh, yeah you could see- well, inside SC- SLS- SCLC inside itself, the comptroller for SCLC, Jim Harrison was on the payroll of the FBI and he sat right next- downstairs to Ralph and he signed the checks.

TREY ELLIS:
When did you realize he was an informant?

00:55:17:00 TOM HOUCK:
You know, Jim- back in sixty-six, sixty-seven, alright, you know, I mean, I kind of pretty much liked the guy, he was a cool guy. He had an apartment over here at when they had- a club we used to hang out called the Bird Cage, which Doctor King went to as well, and over on Fair Street, it's over by the Atlanta University complex. And he had an apartment in there. And everybody at SCLC would figure out, how is Jim making all this money, you know, I mean, having an apartment there, having the thing- so a lot of people had real skepticism about what he was doing and, you know, whether he wa- where he was getting his money because he wasn't making that much money at SCLC and he wasn't cooking the books, you know, but it's- and- but he was- he remained close to Abernathy- downs- and as I said, sat downstairs. Jim

was the comptroller for SCLC, but yeah, so was the FBI directly involved inside of SCLC? Obviously, I just- one case I'm just pointing out, how many others I don't know. You know, they- you know, I guess a lot of the records will be unsealed next year, or this year.

00:56:27:00 TREY ELLIS:
Can you take us through the Poor People's Campaign and the- and your work- you know, recruiting folks?

00:56:34:00 TOM HOUCK:
Bernard Lafayette actually had come to me and he said, you know, you got- "You know, there's people around here talking about what you're doing, you know, what are you up to these days? You're not driving for the Kings, what's happening?" He says, "I've beginning to develop this idea that Jack O'Dell and a few other people in the movement were about bringing people from Appalachia, uptown Chicago, poor white folks, bringing people from the Bronx, and, you know, Puerto Ricans, bring people from the west, you have Denver and- and- and Los Angeles, and- and New Mexico, Chicanos, together in Washington for the Poor Peoples Campaign." He said, "Would you like to organize," Bernard had said, "Would you like to organize and come work with me on this?" And I said, "Well, with Andy, you know..." At this point there was a new Executive Director of SCLC, Bill Rutherford. Doctor King realized that he was going to have to raise money from new sources and Bill Rutherford was one- was a black guy who he thought could raise money and he thinks that- he didn't think that Andy could raise the money. So, he put- well, the board put Bill Rutherford as Executive Director of the SCLC and Andy as Vice President. So, Andy- out of the day-to-day role of running SCLC, and it was run in his last year of Martin's life, not by Andy, but Bill Rutherford. A lot of people thought Bill Rutherford was a spy, by the way, as well, but I don't think he was, but a number of people have thought that over the years.

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00:58:09:00 But, so anyway, Bernard went to Bill Rutherford and Bill said, "Yeah, let's put Tom on this, let's do this." So, I organized the meeting here in Atlanta along with Bernard to bring together about a hundred, which we had paid for, SCLC paid for, which a lot of people inside SCLC were not happy about it, particularly Hosea Williams. But- he didn't think that black folks' money should be spent putting together- organizing poor white folks and Hispanics, Asians, or you know, anybody but black folks. So, we put together this meeting at Paschal's. And I was kind of, like, briefing Doctor King around the office, we were talking about who was going to be there and one of the people that was going to be there was a guy named Reies Lopez Tijerina and Tijerina had taken over one of the National Parks Service's national parks in- in New Mexico and- and had a bandero, you know, had guns and so forth. And you know, Doctor King said, he said, he says, "Why did you invite him?" He said to me, "Why did you invite him?" I said, "Because he's promising that he would do this in a nonviolent way and he wanted to meet you and he understood you as being a great leader, you know, and he was prepared for your leadership." He said, "How am I going to tell people that this guy carrying a gun and taking over national parks is going to be in the Poor People's Campaign?" He- he- you know, he was kind of questioning me. I think Bernard left the room at that point, but he- it- I said, "Well, you can let me handle it."

00:59:52:00 So, we get in the elevator going upstairs to where the meeting was at Paschal's, Paschal's restaurant here and Jack Nelson, was a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, he worked for the *Associated Press* and for the *Journal Constitution*. He won a Pulitzer Prize, actually, but Jack was- gets on the elevator with us, there's about eight or nine of us on the elevator, and he looks at Doctor King and he says to Doctor King, he says, he says, "Doctor King, I know you're going to this meeting with all these people, but have they sworn to nonviolence?" And Doctor King says- you know, grins, "Now, Jack, yes, you know, we're going to be talking about that in the meeting." He said, "Well, why did you invite Reies Lopez Tijerina?" This is for the first question, this is what Jack Nelson from *LA Times,* I think he was then with- and was that- with then. And Doctor King looked at him and said, "Tijerina who?" But

Tijerina actually did come to Washington and put down his guns and brought about fifty people for the Poor People's Campaign, of course the Poor People's Campaign happened after Martin's assassination and, you know, this was his last campaign. And there were periods during that time when Doctor King was really wondering where the support and where the, you know, where were his old allies?

01:01:15:00 TREY ELLIS:
Can we talk about that- like about the- I heard that- Bernard was telling us there was a- he did a hunger strike for a couple days to get the- to get his Vice Presidents all together. Could you talk about just the strife that he- he'd lost a lot of his friends, this may be his lowest point, maybe his most- his least popular point.

01:01:34:00 TOM HOUCK:
We- it was, we had- we had- we had a retreat down- we used to have retreats in a place called Frogmore, South Carolina, the Penn Center. And- and Doc would- came to the retreat and no one saw him for a couple days and, you know, wanted to know where he was- everybody called him "Doc," by the way, everybody in- in SCLC called him Doc, and you know, and he had just said that he just wanted to make- "Have all you argue this thing out, I'll just come in at the end here." You know, and, you know, but he had come and relatively was to himself for a couple of days, and was, you know, I mean, it was hard for him to make that transition even though he- because he had such a hard sell, even with the staff of SCLC. I mean, the staff of SCLC questioned, you know, about being able to bring down this country in terms of its economic powers and many of his friends from around the country, you know, were really questioning it as well, and he wasn't getting any money from the organizations. I mean, he- Doctor King gave almost every penny he made on the speech circuit to SCLC. He donated his winnings from- the winnings- the purse from the Nobel Peace Prize to SCLC. So, I mean, Doctor King was really- and he was having to do a lot more of that.

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01:03:06:00 He- he was having to go make a lot of speeches, and this was in sixty-eight, and he was- you know, I mean, I saw him on April first, which was three days prior to the assassination, I was working the Poor People's Campaign, I was in Knoxville, Tennessee that night, but I think that his mood was one, you know, not that he wasn't caring, but how in the hell did we get to Memphis, you know what I mean? And I think that wha- he- more than anything else, but not the fact that these sanita- sanitation workers were making twenty-five cents an hour, which was of major concern to him, but how was it gon- how that was going to divert the attention of our going to Washington by getting involved in a movement in Memphis. And I think Hosea more than anybody pushed for that. The march from Hosea's- however, it started off in Marks, Mississippi, which was the poorest city- county in the country, and then it progressed towards Memphis. And then as they had the demonstrations in Memphis, the violence occurred and Doctor King couldn't leave Memphis after that, he had to stay in Memphis. And I think that staying in Memphis and the whole aspect around the sanitation workers strike was- AFSCME was probably one of the- said, if you want money for your Poor People's Campaign, and Doctor King was looking every source he could get for Washington, he knew it was going to be expensive, and AFSCME said if you go and do these things in Memphis, we'll- do a big fundraiser for you, fundraising campaign, give you hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Poor People's Campaign.

01:04:50:00 TREY ELLIS:
Could you walk us from there, from Memphis to hearing about the last time you saw Doctor King through the- through the end and then the funeral?

01:05:00:00 TOM HOUCK:
I saw him here, he was on his way to Memphis and he was- Andy and he were together and, you know, he said that, he was saying, "I hear you and Bernard are bringing all these people from Chicago..." Not Chicago but, "from California and New Mexico," and then he wanted to know who this guy Corky Gonzales was. He

keeps hearing people asking about Corky Gonzales, he was a Chicano leader in Denver. And so we were just talking about that and then he asked me if I talked to Coretta, and I said, "No, I haven't talked to her." And he said, "You got to give her a call." And they were off, then went off- I didn't give them a ride to the airport, I wasn't driving him anymore, I was an organizer. But at any rate, that was the last time I actually saw him. And they had an executive staff meeting in- in- in Memphis, which I did not go to. I went- I was heading up to Appalachia to organize poor white folk.

01:05:52:00 And so, I was in Knoxville and it was around six o'clock at night, and I was heading to a meeting at the Tennessee Council on Human Relations with a guy who taught at the University of Kentucky, but was from Appalachia, Ernie Austin, and these kids come out in the street and said, "They shot Martin Luther King, they shot Martin Luther King!" I said, "Man," I said, "these kids- they're going to create some stuff around here if that happens." And then we turned the radio on and there was a radio report that Martin Luther King had been shot. Well, I called the house immediately back in Atlanta and, of course, Coretta was getting ready to go to the airport. And so, I spoke to Mrs. Lockhart for a few minutes and she told me what had happened. And so, we went inside the meeting, which was supposed to be at this church in Knoxville and I explained to people that, you know, what I was doing and I was having to get back to Atlanta as soon as possible. The campaign, the Poor People's Campaign, was still on and that, you know- and then I found out moments later that indeed King had passed.

01:06:57:00 So, I came back to Atlanta, drove back to Atlanta from Knoxville that night, and the SCLC office was a state of all kinds of people- confusion, you know, I mean, mourning, crying, I mean, it was- it was a- a very, very, very sad place to be. And Bernard and others, you know, Bill Rutherford said, "You know, we're going to have to organize, you know, get people together here for what will be a week of mourning and a funeral. And so, people started meeting and parceling out different jobs for people and then Doctor King's body was brought back, I think it was Bell Street is where he was taken, and- funeral home. And it was decided that he was going to lay

in wake at Spelman and he was going to- Morehouse Spelman, and he was going to lay in wake at the- at Ebenezer Baptist church just prior to the funeral. And my job was to coordinate the transportation for people coming in and out of town, cars, you know, and working on making sure people got around, got picked up at the airport, you know, it was almost like going back to my old job. But that was my task, and during a period of heavy mourning, aright? And so, I actually stood watch over Doctor King's body for about fifteen minutes at Ebenezer the night before the funeral.

01:08:30:00 The day of the funeral, which was- probably people started to arrive two days before the funeral, and, you know, Ebenezer is a small church and, of course, it's very hard to get in, and a who's-who from the world was here, you know, including Bobby Kennedy who two months later himself would be assassinated. So, my job was to make sure that people got transportation over to the funeral- I guess you could call them VIP's and help get the VIP's over to Coretta's house on Sunset where she would meet and greet them, people who were play- coming to give their condolences. So, I actually was ahead of the funeral. About a hundred fifty thousand people marched that day. The first part of it over to Morehouse is with a mule-drawn hearse carriage and then a hearse picked him up at Morehouse after Doctor Benjamin Mays, who was his mentor gave the eulogy. Ralph gave the Eulogy at Ebenezer and then Daddy King and a couple others gave the final words over at where- he was first buried at Southview Cemetery, probably eight thousand people were at Southview Cemetery for that. And he was buried there for three years but- amazing how calm and collective Coretta was during the entire service and the affair. I mean, she was- held her composure tremendously and she did a wond- I mean...

01:10:08:00 And of course, the movement was just in a state of- what in the hell are we going to do now, I mean, there's no Martin Luther King around. And that's not meant to rhyme, but you know, it's in- in a sense it's- you know, even though so much had happened between S- you know, when you talk about that short time period from nineteen fifty-five to nineteen sixty-eight, was incredible what occurred in this country in a very short span. And then from nineteen sixty-five to nineteen sixty-

eight, so much changed, from, you know, a black power movement, you know, beginning to deal with Vietnam and the war and, you know, and- and then the- the whole battle that Doctor King was facing with- in the black civil rights community not being supportive of his moving into these new areas. So, I mean, it was a very changing, changing time and it was one that SCLC continued to progress up to- you know, move forward with Abernathy, the election of Abernathy. Abernathy was elected by acclimation. They mentioned Jesse's name as one of the people who would succeed him and Andy took his name out of contention, so it was just Ralph and-

01:11:26:00 TREY ELLIS:
Can we go back for a second to the- just you personally how you felt when you said, that night, just you alone with the casket.

01:11:34:00 TOM HOUCK:
I wasn't alone with the casket by myself, there was several other people standing guard around the casket. You know, I mean, it was- how could this happen? I mean, he- I mean, I never talked with him directly about death. I never really had- he had some discussions with other people about it, he didn't fear it, you know, he said, "We all die sometime," you know? I think he kind of knew that there were people out there, probably the FBI in collusion with others, that would like to see him gone, even some radical black folks would like to see him gone as lon- along with the normal basket of deplorables, excuse the use of that word. But it's- you know, I mean, in a sense that's who he- who he understood that there was always that out there. I mean, from Montgomery when he had a gun, and his house was bombed, you know, what I mean? It was- he always understood that there was the end.

01:12:43:00 But it didn't really hit me about the assassination of King until about two weeks later when we had, you know, first staff meeting and a lot of the people I hadn't seen because they had been at one place or another and gotten around, that's what made me really think exactly what on the- what in the hell are we going to do now? I

mean, because he was not- as I said before, he wasn't just the preacher, he wasn't just the leader, he was the strategist, you know, he was one that was able to pull various- without him around, a lot of these factions wouldn't, you know, be able to get together so I- I began to feel at that time, I knew what the kids were going through and Coretta certainly going through. I mean, she started to work on- almost day one after the funeral on building the Martin Luther King Center- Nonviolent Center and- for Social Change. But there was- there was a- not only a void in the movement, but- and the world, you know. I mean, you can't quite compare it to a Mandela situation, when Mandela was in jail for all these years. Martin was- you know, he was the voice, he was the face of what changed this country, and he was to me a friend, he was to me a person who I grew to love as a close friend, and- you know, a confident. I could talk to him. I mean, when I needed a car, my first car, he went to dad who was on the board of a local bank in Atlanta and asked dad if he would, you know, sign for my loan, and he did. I mean, those are the kinds of things that I missed about Doctor King a lot about, because I mean, he was- he was closer to me than just the movement and the face of the movement.

01:14:41:00 TREY ELLIS:
And sort of thinking about our life today and the struggle- and the political climate today, what are the lessons you learned from that struggle then?

01:14:51:00 TOM HOUCK:
Well, it's that old- it's that old saying- it's that old saying, "dare to struggle, dare to win." You know, we are probably, you know, and I hate to say this in the dusk of my life, alright, things are almost going back to where they were when I was in my twenties and in the movement, There is so many things that are happening at really a fast, rapid pace in this country today that if Martin Luther King were alive today, and he'd be eighty-nine years old, but you know, what would have changed had he stayed alive, what would have been different had King lived, had King continued to be able to have successful campaigns? Was he going to hit the wall in Washington

like Ralph Abernathy did and the rest of us in the Poor People's Campaign? Would he have been able to help get involved in politics and you know, elect Hubert Humphrey over Richard Nixon in nineteen sixty-eight? King was dead by that time, so was Bobby Kennedy dead. But, I mean, what- what would have changed had King lived? I mean, what would have changed in terms of the dynamics of where we are as a country in social justice? What would have changed, you know, in terms of SCLC? And would Doctor King today not be the kind of mortal hero that we now revere had he lived? I mean, was he bigger and has he become bigger in death than he was in life?

01:16:36:00 TREY ELLIS:
What would you say to people today, like, what can we do now to sort of honor his legacy the most?

01:16:44:00 TOM HOUCK:
You know, I mean, people ask me that question every day, you know, I mean. I think people have to participate in the system we struggled so hard to get, which was the electoral system, I mean, you know, and the vote, even though over the last five, six years it's been- the vote has been under attack not only by state legislators and state representatives and governors, but by the Supreme Court. And, you know, I mean, those are the kinds of things we got to stay vigilant at. We got to deal with questions like Black Lives Matters are bringing up today on the question- Now, Doctor King was very good on that one, by the way, I mean, people would always say Martin and Malcolm- I'm jumping around here, but Martin and Malcolm weren't friends, they were. They would say, you know, Martin and Stokely weren't friends, they were, you know. I mean, it was- it was a very interesting aspect, but Martin was able to get along with everybody, and he may not have agreed with your philosophy, but he would get along with you. So back to what you were saying, okay. What else can people do today? Well, you know, they can stay vigilant, you know. It- there was a speech that Doctor- part of his 'Letter in Birmingham Jail," you know, talked about

silence being a betrayal, and I think that those words "silence as a betrayal" is what he would- want more than people to start speaking out, start- you know, the demonstrations, I think he would have been very proud what happened last year in Washington, or this past year in Washington with the Women- Women's March. I think he'd be happy to- he would do everything he could- I don't think Donald Trump would've been elected president had Martin Luther King Jr. lived, I just don't think that would've happened.

01:18:30:00 END OF INTERVIEW