JOHN LEWIS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

JOHN LEWIS
Board Member, SCLC
Interviewed by Trey Ellis
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Total Running Time: 34 minutes

00:00:00:00 TREY ELLIS:

Thank you so much for having us. Could we talk about- it's a very personal story about King the man and his legacy. Could you talk about when you first met him what your impressions, just walk us through a little bit of that?

00:00:18:00 JOHN LEWIS:

Well, I first heard of Martin Luther King, Jr. in nineteen fifty-five when I was fifteen years old. I grew up only about fifty miles from Montgomery. I had seen the signs that said "White," "Colored," "White Men," "Colored Men," "White Women," "Colored Women," "White Waiting," "Colored Waiting." I heard Doctor King's voice on the old radio. His words inspired me. I heard of Rosa Parks at the same time. The action of Rosa Parks inspired me. I grew up in segregated rural Alabama and I didn't like the signs that I saw saying "White" and "Colored," "White Men," "Colored Men," "White Women," "Colored Women," "White Waiting," "Colored Waiting." The action of Doctor King inspired me to find a way to get in the way. I had been told by my mother, my father, my grandparents and great-grandparents when I would

ask questions they would say, "Don't get in trouble. Don't get in the way." But I felt like Martin Luther King, Jr. was speaking directly to me saying, "John Robert Lewis, you too can do something."

00:01:40:00 So, in nineteen fifty-seven, at the age of seventeen, I wrote Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. a letter. I didn't tell my mother, my father, any of my sisters or brothers or teachers. I wanted to attend a little college ten miles from my home called Troy State College. I applied to go there, submitted my application, my high school transcript. So, I wrote this letter. Doctor King wrote me back and sent me a roundtrip Greyhound Bus ticket and invited me to come to Montgomery to meet with him. So, in September nineteen fifty-seven, I boarded a bus. I traveled from Troy, Alabama, rural Alabama, past Montgomery to Nashville to go to school. An uncle of mine gave me a hundred-dollar bill, more money than I ever had. He gave me a footlocker. I put everything that I owned, my few books, my few clothing in that footlocker and took a Greyhound Bus to Nashville. And while I was there studying, Rosa Parks came to speak at Fisk University and I heard her. I met her.

00:03:01:00 And Doctor King later heard through one of my teachers that I was in Nashville studying, so Martin Luther King, Jr. got back in touch with me and told me when I was home for spring break to come and see him. So, in March of nineteen fifty-eight, by this time I'm eighteen years old, I boarded a bus, I traveled from Troy to Montgomery. And a young lawyer by the name of Fred Gray, who was a layer for Rosa Parks and Doctor King and the people involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, met me at the Greyhound Bus station and drove me to the First Baptist Church in downtown Montgomery, pastored by the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, and ushered me into the pastor's study. I saw Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy standing behind a desk. I was so scared, I didn't know what to say or what to do. And Doctor King said, "Are you the boy from Troy? Are you John Lewis?" And I said, "Doctor King, I am John Robert Lewis," but he still called me the “boy from Troy.” And he said, "You know, if you want to go to Troy State College, we will support you. You may have to sue the state of Alabama. We may have to sue

Troy State, but we're prepared to help you. Go back home and have a discussion with your mother, your father. You know, your home could be bombed?" That's what he said. "Your home could be burned. Your family could lose their land. You could be beaten. You could be harmed."

00:04:51:00 And I went back and had a discussion with my mother and my father. They were so afraid that something could happen to me, could happen to them or we could lose the land, lose the farm, so they didn't want to have anything to do with my attempting to enroll at the school and I continued to study in Nashville. And from time to time, Martin Luther King, Jr. would come to Nashville to speak at Fisk University at the City Auditorium, tell the story of the movement. Rosa Parks would come there. I stayed in touch with Doctor King and he became, in a sense, my hero. In a sense he became my big brother. And he would say over and over, "Stay in school, get an education and when you finish school maybe you can come and work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," his organization.

00:05:52:00 So, I got involved in the sit-ins, went on the Freedom Rides. And the first time I got arrested I felt free. I felt liberated. I felt like I had crossed over. And then a group of us left Washington, D.C. to go on the Freedom Ride, thirteen of us. We were beaten. We were left bloody at the Greyhound Bus station in Rock Hill, South Carolina and later at the Greyhound Bus station in Montgomery, Alabama. Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. heard about that we had been beaten in Montgomery. He was on a trip to Chicago with Reverend Ralph Abernathy and he made a decision to return to the South. He flew from Chicago to Atlanta and made a connection on a flight from Atlanta to Montgomery and we met with him the evening of that Saturday.

00:07:02:00 And we started planning a mass meeting at the First Baptist Church, the same church where I first met him. And he said, "We're going to have to this mass meeting. We're going to support you all." By this time there were twenty-nine Freedom Riders that had been beaten and left bloody at the Greyhound Bus station in Montgomery. He said, "We will support you all, all the way." And that night, that Sunday evening,

while we were waiting to become part of the rally there was an attempt to bomb the church, to throw stink bombs in the church, to tear gas the church. The church was full to capacity and at one point Doctor King was so concerned he went down into the basement of the church and made a call to Bobby Kennedy and told him that it was a dangerous situation there. If he didn't act, or someone, hundreds or maybe thousands of people could be killed. And President Kennedy and his brother Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General, responded and placed the city of Montgomery under martial law.

00:08:24:00 TREY ELLIS:

I'd like to jump ahead. You talked about Riverside Church. You were at the- we talked about the decision to, his decision and his struggle to come out against the war and your part in that, what you know about that and what it was like to hear that speech at Riverside.

00:08:41:00 JOHN LEWIS:

The night of April fourth, nineteen sixty-seven I believe that Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered probably one of the best, the most powerful speeches I ever heard him deliver. I've heard many sermons, many speeches along the way. I was at the March on Washington, the youngest speaker, and out of the ten people that spoke that day I'm the only one still around. But I think the speech at Riverside Church was his best. He literally preached. There was hundreds of ministers, religious leaders, nuns, rabbis and just plain everyday people. He said, in effect, that he was not going to butcher his conscience. He said as a nation we talk about nonviolence here in America and then we engage in violence abroad in Vietnam. He said, in effect, that

the bombs that we're dropping in Vietnam, they will be shattered over America. He felt good. He knew he was getting over. He literally poured out his heart, the depth and essence of his soul. He felt very strongly. Doctor King believed in the way of peace, the way of love. He believed in the discipline and the philosophy of nonviolence.

00:10:34:00 TREY ELLIS:

I was going to jump to the assassination. You were working with ... Were you with Bobby Kennedy then?

00:10:40:00 JOHN LEWIS:

In nineteen sixty-eight, I was in Indianapolis, Indiana organizing for Bobby Kennedy. And a group of us were planning a rally in a transition neighborhood, this outdoor rally. And there was some debate about whether Bobby Kennedy should come and speak. Some of us had heard that Doctor King had been shot, but we didn't know his condition. And I, for one, kept insisting that Bobby Kennedy had to come and speak to the crowd that were waiting, and he did come and speak. It was Robert Kennedy who announced that evening on April fourth, nineteen sixty-eight that he had some bad news. He said, in effect, that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated and a hush came over the crowd. Some people cried. And I said to myself, "Well, we still have Bobby." And I started crying a little and a little more, ‘cause if it hadn't been for Martin Luther King, Jr. I don't know what would have happened to me growing up very, very poor in rural Alabama.

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00:12:13:00 Doctor King had provided a light for some of us, provided hope for some of us. He was the embodiment of our future. Bobby Kennedy suggested that a young man by the name of Earl Graves, who was on his staff, and myself to take a flight to Atlanta and help in preparation for the funeral. I will never forget going back to Atlanta and visiting Ebenezer Baptist Church that he co-pastored with his father. In the evening before the funeral, Bobby Kennedy and other members of the Kennedy family wanted to go down to the church and it was my responsibility to lead them through the educational building, down the flight of stairs to view the body of Doctor King. That was a sad and dark time in the history of the struggle for civil rights and for America and for people around the world. ‘cause as Nina Simone said in one of her songs, “the king of love is dead.”

00:13:52:00 TREY ELLIS:

How did it personally effect Bobby Kennedy when he heard the news?

00:13:57:00 JOHN LEWIS:

When Bobby Kennedy heard that Doctor King had been assassinated, he was shaken. He invited us that evening to come to his room at a hotel in Indianapolis. We- some of us sat on the floor, others on his bed and we all mourned and cried together. Even ... He was shaken, visibly shaken by it all. I think he admired Doctor King. I knew that his brother, President Kennedy, admired Doctor King. They probably had some differences, but I remember the day of the march, the day of the march when President Kennedy invited all of us, all of the speakers, down to the White House, and he stood in the door of the Oval Office greeting each one of us saying, "You did a good job." He was beaming like a proud father. He got to Doctor King, he said,

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"You did a good job and you had a dream." That was my last time seeing President Kennedy. So, I felt that when President Kennedy was assassinated and later Doctor King, and Bobby Kennedy two months after Doctor King, that something died in all of us, something died in America. Some of that sense of hope and faith died.

00:15:40:00 TREY ELLIS:

And afterwards, with the idea of the Poor People's March- Let's go back a little bit, go back to the idea ... Marian Wright Edelman was telling us that it was Bobby Kennedy saying, "King, you need this march. Bring the poor to Washington." Were you part of any of those discussions?

00:15:59:00 JOHN LEWIS:

I remember very well being at one of the meetings discussing the Poor People's Campaign. At this time, I was serving on the board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. We met at Paschal's in Atlanta where Doctor King brought a group representing those that had been left out and left behind. There were low income whites, low income African Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans and Native Americans all meeting together preparing to take their issues, their concerns and the needs of poor people to Washington to camp out. People were ready. People were prepared to go and stay awhile.

00:16:56:00 And at the same time, there was a struggle going on in Memphis. Doctor King hadn't planned to go to Memphis, but a young man by the name of Jim Lawson, who became our teacher during the preparation for the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, Jim Lawson was one of these brilliant young Methodist ministers who had studied the

philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. Doctor King used to come to Nashville and speak. He had so much love and admiration for Jim Lawson. This young guy was just smart. He had studied Gandhi. He had studied Thoreau and civil disobedience. He prepared us. So, when Doctor King would come in and salute the Nashville movement, he would say Jim Lawson had a greater understanding of the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence than anyone he knew.

00:18:03:00 TREY ELLIS:

In terms of talking about Bobby Kennedy, when you were there, did you have any- We talked about, you know, now we know so much about Hoover and the wiretaps. Did you have any idea that Bobby Kennedy, as Attorney General, had to have signed off on them? Did you have any feeling of that?

00:18:22:00 JOHN LEWIS:

At the time of J. Edgar Hoover made the request to wiretap Doctor King, I hadn't heard anything about it. I didn't know anything about it until much, much later. You know, during those days we assumed that we all were being wiretapped or spied on or somebody, the federal government, local, states, city, that we all- I remember once in Montgomery talking on a pay telephone, and I hung up the telephone and picked it back up, I heard part of my conversation. So, we all just assumed somehow and someway there was somebody watching, somebody listening. But you couldn't- none of us lived in fear. You couldn't become immobilized by what others was doing or

saying. We felt we had a job to do. We were part of a movement and we would not let any person or any group stop us.

00:19:58:00 TREY ELLIS:

And once you found out later and what we know now about Hoover releasing the tapes and this, sort of, this vicious campaign against King even up to even later to fighting against the holiday in his name, what do you say of the detractors of King that try to use the evidence in those tapes or the voice in those tapes to sort of negate his message?

00:20:20:00 JOHN LEWIS:

Well, I think the people who made the tapes, made the recording, and sent them out to reporters, to newspaper editors, are really sick. I think J. Edgar Hoover hated, despised Doctor King. He tried to suggest that the movement was communistic inspired, but we didn't need anyone from Moscow or any other place to tell us that segregation and racial discrimination were bad. We didn't need anyone to tell us that we were being discriminated against. We didn't need any foreign power, any outside force to tell us that people of color could not register to vote simply because of the color of their skin. We didn't need anyone inside of the federal government or outside to tell us that people were forced to count the number of bubbles in a bar of soap, the number of jellybeans in a jar. The black lawyers and doctors, college professors were being told they could not read or write well enough.

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00:21:42:00 TREY ELLIS:

After the assassination and the sort of, the violence that broke out across the country, how did you feel about that as a practitioner of nonviolence? And h ow did that affect you? Because already in the movement between, you know, between SCLC and SNCC and this idea of questioning nonviolence the riots were sort of a flashpoint.

00:22:10:00 JOHN LEWIS:

Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. would say that the riots became the language of the unheard and somehow, he would say, we have to give people some victory. We have to give people a sense of hope. I never liked violence. Doctor King didn't like violence. I think we grew to accept the way of peace, accept the philosophy of nonviolence as a way of living, as a way of life. It said, in effect, you may beat me, you may throw me in jail, you may even kill me, but I'm going to adhere to the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. And many of the young people, many of the students that came out of the movement, young people, lived that way. They were willing to put their bodies on the line.

00:23:24:00 TREY ELLIS:

How did you ... You were young and people your same age, the other black activists, were turning their back on nonviolence. Was it hard for you to stay with it?

00:23:36:00 JOHN LEWIS:

It was not hard. It was not difficult for me to stay with the philosophy of nonviolence. It became part of my DNA. During that period of the early sixties, mid-sixties, I was arrested, jailed, beaten, left bloody, unconscious. I almost died on that bridge. I had a concussion. I was arrested forty times during the sixties, and since I've been in Congress, another five times, and I'm probably going to get arrested again for something. My philosophy, a philosophy that Doctor King shared, when you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have a moral obligation, a mission, and a mandate to do something, to say something, to speak up, to speak out and find a way to get in the way of what I call “good trouble” or “necessary trouble.”

00:24:43:00 TREY ELLIS:

As Black Power rose, Martin Luther King understood that it was, as a term or as a method, it was problematic. Did you ... And he also talked of himself as not just a black leader, but sort of expanding the movement. As the movement started to change, what were those kind of discussions like with you and him? How did you struggle?

00:25:07:00 JOHN LEWIS:

Well, I never really had a long-term discussion with Doctor King about the concept or the idea or the philosophy of Black Power. I remember how the term emerged. I was here in Washington, D.C. It was during the Howard University graduation, and I believe Adam Clayton Powell had spoken and he used the phrase "audacious black power" and he used "black power" or "blackness" two or three times in this speech. And Stokely Carmichael shared it with me and I think that rang a bell for him and then he started using the phrase. But in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee, we seldom ever used slogan or rhetoric. We believed in programs, the one-two-threes, the ABCs of doing this or doing that. So I never really used it.

00:26:26:00 TREY ELLIS:

Can we talk about ... You've had this commitment to nonviolence to this day and so I'd like to talk about how did nonviolence ... Is nonviolence still a tactic to this day? You've personally, you've talked about how you've used it recently.

00:26:41:00 JOHN LEWIS:

Well, nonviolence, the philosophy is more than a tactic for me. It is one of those immutable principles that you cannot deviate from. It got to be part of your whole being. You come to that point where you respect the dignity and the worth of every human being. And you cannot give up on it if you're going to create what Doctor King called the "beloved community," if you're going to be able to redeem the soul of America you cannot and must not give up on this concept, this belief, this way of life. 'Cause as A. Philip Randolph indicated to many of us, this unbelievable man who was the dean of black leadership during the sixties, who had this whole idea of a March on Washington during the days of Roosevelt, the days of Truman, and it all came together during the days of Kennedy. And somebody who was meeting Mr. Randolph would say over and over again, maybe our foremothers and our forefathers all came to this great land in different ships, but we're all in the same boat now. Doctor King put it another way. We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters. If not, we will perish as fools. And Doctor King probably would say something like this today: it doesn't matter whether we're black or white, Latino,

Asian-American, or Native American, we're one people, we're one family, we all live in the same house, not just an American house, but the world house.

00:28:35:00 TREY ELLIS:

I was going to ask you, there's a white backlash, in terms of- as the movement moved into Chicago, then there's this white backlash. Do you feel that we're in a period of white backlash now? Is it cyclical?

00:28:52:00 JOHN LEWIS:

There's something happening in America today, but I wouldn't necessarily call it "white backlash." I think there is a philosophy or ideology that is moving around. There are forces in America today want to build walls, but there are other forces that want to build bridges. We're brothers and sisters. We all have to learn to live together on this little piece of real estate we call America or on this planet. And that must be the lesson not just for us, the adults, but for our children and unborn generations. If we can get it right here in America, just maybe we can serve as a model for the rest of the world.

00:29:56:00 During the height of the movement it was not just a black movement. There were hundreds and thousands of white Americans, many Asian Americans, Native Americans and Latinos participating. There were white people beaten and left bloody during the Freedom Rides in nineteen sixty-one. There were white people and others beaten Selma and murdered. When we were jailed in Mississippi during the Freedom Rides, more than four hundred of us, the majority were white men and women from all across America. And when we had the Mississippi Freedom Summer, the majority

of the volunteers ... And I will never, ever forget during the summer of nineteen sixty-four, Freedom Summer three young men, Andy Goodman, Mickey Schwerner from New York City, white and James Chaney from Mississippi, went out to investigate the burning of an African American church to be used for voter registration workshops. They were stopped by the sheriff, arrested, detained, turned over to members of the Klan where they were beaten and later shot, murdered. These three young men died together.

00:31:39:00 TREY ELLIS:

So, going back to King, just a personal memory, something about King's legacy, how it lives in you today and also a personal memory, something that makes you smile, something that's not political, just like a personal touch that really people don't know about King.

00:31:56:00 JOHN LEWIS:

Well, I remember one occasion, on one occasion, he knew I wanted to be a minister, he knew I wanted to preach the gospel. When I was a little boy growing up on a farm we used to raise chickens and I would get all of our chickens together in the chicken yard and my brothers and sisters and cousins would line the outside of the chicken yard and I would start preaching to these chickens. And se would ask me from time to time, "John, do you still preach?" And I would say something like, "Yes, Doctor King, when I'm taking a shower." And he thought it was funny and he just started laughing. But I remember on one occasion we were driving or riding in Mississippi and he saw some hole in the wall restaurant and he said we should stop and get something to eat. If we get arrested and go to jail, at least we go on a full stomach. It

was just a hole in the wall and none of us wanted to stop, none of us wanted to go there and try to get something to eat, and he'd just laugh about it, but we didn't think it was that funny.

00:33:04:00 TREY ELLIS:

Did you get the food?

JOHN LEWIS:

No.

TREY ELLIS:

Great. Is there any misconception about King's legacy that you'd like to clear up?

00:33:17:00 JOHN LEWIS:

Well, Doctor King was consistent. He was determined. He was a wonderful, wonderful unbelievable human being. I think if people got to know him, they would have loved to have had him as an uncle, a big brother. He was just a wonderful, nice, loving human being. I remember so well when I left the jail in, well, the state penitentiary in Parchman, where over four hundred of us went in nineteen sixty-one, and I wanted to return to school. And he said, "John, do you have the money to go

back to school?" And I said, “No.” He said, "I will help you get a scholarship," and he did. And that was very kind of him. When we were talking from Selma to Montgomery, after we had been beaten and left bloody, we were walking one day and it had been raining, the sun came out, he was wearing a little cap on his head. He took the cap off of his head. He said, "You've been hurt. You need to protect your head," and placed the cap on my head. That was very kind and thoughtful of him and I cannot forget that.

00:34:52:00 END OF INTERVIEW