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Black Panthers at 50: New Exhibit from the Party's Go-to Photog

By Sarah Elizabeth Adler

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Stephen Shames arrived at our interview with a faded California Golden Bears cap in hand and a black power pin on his lapel. Apt accessories for the 1969 UC Berkeley grad who spent the years between 1967 and 1969 as the Black Panther Party's most trusted photographer.

The baseball cap was old, he explained, and he hoped to replace it while in town. The pin, however, was new—he had just purchased it at the Oakland Museum of California, where 18 of Shames's photographs will be on display until February as part of "All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50," an exhibit that commemorates the party's 50th anniversary.

An additional 26 of Shames's photographs are on display on the Graduate School of Journalism, where they'll remain until January. The photos featured in both exhibits were drawn from the book *Power to the People: The World of the Black Panthers*, which Shames compiled alongside his longtime mentor, party co-founder Bobby Seale.

The book, released this month, contains over 200 of Shames's photographs and commentary from Seale and other living Panthers. The book also contains excerpted writings by party co-founder Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, now deceased.

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“This book is a photo book and an oral history,” says Shames. “I’m not portraying it as a scholarly piece of work.” Rather, Shames hopes that the book’s text and photos will serve as a record of what Party members were thinking and feeling at the time. Readers, he says, “can judge for themselves.”

Shames was introduced to the Black Panthers in 1967, while he was still an undergraduate. At an anti-Vietnam War rally in San Francisco, Shames was captivated by two men selling copies of Chairman Mao’s Little Red Book, a communist text first distributed during China’s cultural revolution that later became popular with stateside radicals.

“I didn’t know who they were,” he says. “But they had such a powerful presence. So I snapped one shot.”

That photograph of the men, who turned out to be Seale and Newton, was taken with Shames’s first camera, a Pentax he’d recently purchased. It is, of course, included in the book.

Shames continued to encounter the group on campus, and eventually developed a friendship with Seale, who became his mentor. “I became very active with the Panthers under the tutelage of Bobby Seale,” Shames says. “He taught me a lot and got me really involved with the community.”

At the time, the campus was a hotbed of political activity, and, early on, Shames took on a more front-and-center role: he served as a monitor at peace marches and was elected to the Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC) senate as part of a progressive slate. Soon, though, he found that he was most comfortable behind the lens. “I decided I was going to be the artist of the revolution,” he says.

Shames says that he owes his photographic education to the services offered by the ASUC photo lab and art studio. He quickly ditched his Pentax for a Leica, and, later, a Canon camera. During the campus strikes of 1968, he rarely attended class. Instead, he found himself photographing campus activities almost every day, both for progressive publications like the Black Panther Party newspaper and the Berkeley Barb, and for mainstream publications like the Associated Press, The New York Times, and Newsweek.

Despite his burgeoning professional career, his working relationship with the Panthers was successful in large part because it was personal. “The Panthers and Bobby considered me someone they trusted,” he says. “So they let me go into the office and behind the scenes, which they really didn’t let anybody else do.”

According to Shames, the sort of photos that populate the book, such as one that shows Huey Newton holding a Bob Dylan record in his apartment, or a photograph of a Panther helping a senior at the supermarket, weren’t circulated widely at the time.

“The mainstream media and even the radical media tended to do the more militant images,” he says. For Shames, compiling the book offered him a chance to look through his archives and select images based on artistic merit—not just newsworthiness.

“I was looking at stuff I hadn’t looked at in 40 or 50 years,” he says. “I wanted to look at everything.” Shames estimates that, of the more than 200 photographs in the book, about half have never been published before.

Shames also hopes that the photographs shed light on some of the Panthers’ lesser-known community programs, like the charter school, free community health clinics, and senior assistance services, which Shames says are too often

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overlooked. Even though the Panthers had somewhere between 50 and 60 community programs, Shames says, the press primarily wrote about their breakfast program, which provided free meals for school children.

Despite their contributions to the community, Shames acknowledges that not all members of the party—several of whom have faced accusations of violence, including convictions for murder and rape—are faultless.

“There were some in the Panthers who wanted violent revolution,” he says. “There was a split over that issue.” Nevertheless, Shames says that a large number of violent instances were either instigated or encouraged by the police and the FBI, who, under the direction of then-FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, systematically targeted the Panthers.

Shames also says that criticism of the Panthers’ armed community patrols was—and is—contradictory. The armed Panthers, he says, were simply exercising their Second Amendment right to bear arms, one that he calls a “cherished American value.”

“We’re a gun culture country. The Panthers were right in the middle of that, and yet the press portrays it as if they were some radical group,” Shames says. “The FBI and Nixon talked about how the Panthers wanted guns so that they could kill white people, which absolutely wasn’t true.”

In addition to photos that document the Panthers’ less-publicized community programs, the book also features commentary by high-ranking Panther women like Kathleen Cleaver and Ericka Huggins. According to Shames, the Panthers were “on the cutting edge” in terms of the number—and standing—of women involved in the organization, who were estimated to comprise about half of the party’s membership. “They were by no means an organization where women were equal,” he says. “However, for the time, I would say they were probably the most progressive organization [in that regard].”

The Black Lives Matter movement, which was started by three black women in 2013, is often seen as an inheritor of the groundwork laid by the Panthers. Shames would agree with this to a certain extent, as both groups were born, in part, out of a desire to address police brutality in the black community. Nevertheless, Shames says, Black Lives Matter is primarily a protest movement. The Panthers, he says, were a political party.

Above all, it this political legitimacy that Shames hopes the public remembers. The Panthers’ voter registration efforts and political campaigns were aimed at securing institutional reform, and Panther leaders like Seale, Shames says, wanted an “electoral revolution”—not a violent one.

Shames continued to photograph the Panthers until Seale’s 1973 Oakland mayoral campaign and he went on to establish a successful career as a photographer. Despite the turbulence of his undergraduate years, he still managed to graduate on time, earning a B.A. in American history with a minor in anthropology. “But,” he says, “my real education was with the Panthers and the movement.”