

THE ARTIST AS ACTIVIST

SNCC 60th Anniversary Conference

October, 2021

Speakers include:

Andrew Aydin - Co-author for March and Run

Emory Douglas - Artist & Former Minister of Culture, Black Panther Party

Jonathan Lykes - Founder & Executive Director, Liberation House

Sonia Sanchez - Poet, Activist, and Scholar

AB Spellman - Poet, Music Critic, and Former Director at the N.E. of the Arts

This discussion focuses on the impact of the Black Arts Movement, particularly how various artistic expressions were used to promote civil rights efforts and help usher in a cultural shift within the Black American community.

A.B. Spellman- Good afternoon. Today, we have a brilliant assembly of artists to discuss the interesting topic of the artists as activists. My name is AB Spellman, and I have the privilege of moderating this discussion by way of introduction. I want to acknowledge one of the great exemplifiers of the artist-activists. The late John O'Neal. John was a field secretary with SNCC[Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] when he organized the Free Southern Theater ¹; the Free Southern Theater traveled the rural south performing socially relevant plays for audiences that, for the most part, might have lived their entire lives without ever seeing a play.

Then, the after-play discussion to show how the themes of the work related to their lives and prodding the audiences to work with the SNCC organizers in voter registration. He continued to make socially relevant theater for the rest of his life. John O'Neal was truly a great artist-activist. Our first speaker is Emory Douglas. Emory was the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party from 1967 until the early eighties; you know him best as a great graphic artist with a distinct style.

His eyes seemed to penetrate the soul of his subject, and his portraits of Huey Newton, Amiri Baraka, Stokley Carmichael, and other heroes of the movement are still burned into my memory. More than 50 years later, his work has been shown in museums from San Francisco to New York City, from Beirut to Lebanon to Brisbane, Australia. Thank you for joining us, Emory Douglas. It is an honor. Now, let us look at a video to show the audience what your work looks like.

[Video Begins]

¹ Free Southern Theater- Founded in 1963 by SNCC field secretaries/staff member John O'Neal, Doris Derby and Gilbert Moses, the Free Southern Theater was created to show the perspective of black Mississippians and promote the organizing efforts of SNCC through plays and theater, by using music genres of blues, gospel.

Emory Douglas- My name is Emory Douglas, and I consider myself to be a social justice designer and graphic designer. Some of my colleagues who worked in the [Black Panther Party](#) New York chapter mentioned that they used to sell the paper each week by turning it over on the back cause people wanted to see the illustrations. [\[End of the Video\]](#)

AB Spellman- The work is still strong and alive. Emory. I often wonder what brought artists into activism. Was there any precipitating event or any moment when you decided that this is what you must do, that your work must speak of these issues and of these people?

Emory Douglas- When I got into the black arts movement ²during the sixties, and when I went to city college, developing my skills and working with the collective to change the colonial name of the black student unions from “Negro student unions” to BSU [Black Student Unions], I became involved in the [black conscious era](#), the black awareness era. That is where I began to develop my work.

A. B. Spellman City College of San Francisco, correct? And when did you join the Panther Party?

Emory Douglas- Yes. City College of San Francisco. I joined the Panther party about three months after its inception in late January of 1967. It started on October 25th, 1966, and I got involved and began to work on the newspaper about four or five months thereafter. But initially, one of my first art images that I did was for sister, [Sonya Sanchez](#) asked me to do the cover of her first book called *Homegoing*.

A.B. Spellman- Well, the Panther party made it a point to integrate into the community and made sure that it had activities that were much more than rhetoric to offer the people, but also were factors that could affect their lives. How did you conceive your art as being a factor that could affect the lives of people?

Emory Douglas- Well, the art reflected the party's philosophical and ideological perspective, which was about serving the people's body and soul based on our 10-point platform and program about quality-of-life issues. The art reflected that in many ways, as well as the feelings and expressions of the community, the desires, their pain, their love, and their frustrations. Out of that, there is self-determination to make changes in their relationship if the art is all about those issues.

[\[Black Panther 10-Point Platform\]](#)

A.B. Spellman- Thank you, Emory. We will come back to you, Emory. Let us move on to our next panelist, who is the wonderful Sonya Sanchez. Sonya Sanchez is a great poet. One of the world's great poets, her poems sing resistance against the oppression of history, of love, of self, and love of all people in them. The issues of the day become human.

² Black Arts Movement- a cultural movement that occurred from the 1960s to 1970s, whereby artistic expression such as poetry, music, and theater was used to express and promote black pride, civil rights, and black resilience.

We feel the tension of the social evil that surrounds us and the release of his fight against it. We celebrate the manifold beauty of African American people and the magnificent culture that we have built amid the racism that we endure. There is a fire and music in the lines of this gentle and loving woman. It is good to see you again, Sister Sonya. I am going to ask you the same question I asked Emory: What is it that brought you into the work, into talking to the people through your work?

Sonya Sanchez- I have been a poet since the moment my grandmother told my aunties in our house in Birmingham to teach that girl how to read and give her a notebook so she could write. I was four years of age at that time because I constantly bugged her about reading to me. I was writing, you know, the alphabet and my aunties did that.

I grew up in a place called Birmingham, Alabama, and I remember so much about it and how, on many levels, we had to live some of the things that happened to us, but I also remember when my father brought us to a place called New York City. We lived in a place called Harlem; Harlem was a place with all Black folks but also was a place where the garbage people did not come regularly. The apartment building we lived in did not have heat, and you could hear the rats inside the walls.

It was a huge difference to Birmingham, where we had lived with my grandmother, and to New York City. However, what I loved about New York City was the opportunity to visit libraries and sit and read. I also had the chance to meet some teachers who gave me books because they thought I looked like someone who enjoyed reading and writing.

While I was in college, I looked out toward the South and saw students engaging in work that challenged the country. We had made small efforts to challenge the country in the past, but this was something major, my dear brothers, something that made you stop whatever you were doing. It glued you to the television.

It made you start asking questions about what they were doing in the South. All the things you read about in stories of heroes—my heroes and sheroes became those brothers and sisters. They were the ones boarding those freedom buses, even when it meant seeing a bus burned. Watching people walking to work, sitting together, gathering, and laughing with each other were my heroes. I did not need to read about Superman anymore.

I already had Superman and Superwoman in places like Alabama and Mississippi. I was glued to the "idiot box," the television, watching them move. And what that meant for me was that I began searching for myself. I was searching for my soul. I was searching for the blackness I saw radiating from their very bones.

At some point, it led me to Amsterdam Avenue and the CP [Communist Party], and from there, to many other organizations. I eventually became involved with New York CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]. But the point was that my eyes were always on the people in the South. I always watched them. I used to say to people, "These are fantastic people. These are heroes. These are sheroes. These are extraordinary individuals challenging a system that would kill them—people who would not hesitate to stop them from doing what they needed to do."

I would lean back and watch with my own eyes as they were beaten in places across the South, and the tears came. But something else happened: my poetry began to change. My writing took a turn because, at the same time, in a place called New York City, we not only had SNCC, MLK [Martin Luther King Jr], and all the others, but we also suddenly had someone by the name of Malcolm [X] in the North. At that moment, we began to move, and my poetry started to transform.

All the others, but we also suddenly had someone by the name of Malcolm in the North. At that moment, we began to move, and my poetry started to transform. I am sorry, I did not mean to interrupt you. Let us go to the video now and proceed with some samples of you in your element. Thank you.

A.B. Spellman- It is hard to believe that graphic novels have been with us for about 40 years now, with the graphic memoir emerging somewhat more recently. Two of the finest examples of this genre are the graphic books co-produced by Andrew Aydin and the great [John Lewis](#)—the former SNCC secretary, frontline hero in the struggle for civil rights, and an unswervingly progressive member of Congress. Through these books, *March* and *Run*, Andrew has made John Lewis's life and work accessible to generations of young people.

Andrew Aydin is the co-founder of Good Trouble Productions, which creates nonfiction graphic works and multimedia projects. He is a National Book Award winner and currently serves as an artist in residence at Georgia State University. In addition, he was Congressman Lewis's digital director and policy advisor. Thank you for being with us, Andrew. How did you come to produce those with John?

Andrew Aydin - It all started back in the summer of 2008. I had been asked to serve on the Congressman's reelection campaign as his press secretary. We were starting to talk about what we were going to do afterward. A lot of my childhood was spent reading comics, and I loved going to comic book conventions. So, during a conversation, everybody was sharing their plans—they were going to the beach or visiting their parents. I said I was going to Dragon Con in Atlanta. Everyone laughed at me except for the Congressman.

In his deep voice, he said, "Don't laugh. There was a comic book during the movement, and it was deeply influential." That was the first time I heard of Martin Luther King and Montgomery's Story. So, I went home that night, read it, and thought, why isn't there a John Lewis comic book? I started asking him about it, again and again, until finally, he said, "Okay, I'll do it. But only if you write it with me." And that is where it all began.

A.B. Spellman- Now, let me introduce our final panelist, Jonathan Lykes. Jonathan is a warrior for social justice who proudly wears the armor of Black queerness. He is the founder and executive director of Liberation House in Chicago and serves as the director of policy and programs for the Black Youth Project/Gen Forward. Jonathan was also a founding member of the [Black Youth Project 100](#) [BYP100]. Through that organization, he co-produced *The Black Joy Experience*, an album of freedom songs and chants. Jonathan embodies a wonderful synthesis of

progressive organizing, social policy advocacy, and artistry. Thank you, Jonathan, for joining us today.

Jonathan Lykes- Thank you so much for having me. I am so honored to be here, standing in your legacy. So, were you an active singer before you got into organizing, or were these simultaneous developments in your soul? I am a multidisciplinary artist. I grew up singing in church, much like many of the freedom singers from back in the day. I am also a guitarist and grew up writing and performing poetry within the movements. All of these are critical forms of struggle.

A.B. Spellman- They are true. We will talk a great deal more about those forms and how they affected the struggle today in the past, and let us look at some videos that will give us an idea of what Jonathan does in his life. It was very uplifting work, Jonathan. I am going to ask a simple question in a rather complicated way. We are facing the same issues today and the same opposition that we fought against in the 1960s. That is not to say we do not have victories in the struggle we do, but it seems those victories are not permanent. The opposition, the right, the reactionaries, and the neofascists do not quit. They keep these issues alive, doing their best to resuscitate them.

It feels as if they want to reinstitute the old [Jim Crow](#) within our current economic situation, which in many ways mirrors that of the 1960s. So, my question is this: What is different now in how struggle must be fought compared to how it was fought in the 1960s? And how is that difference carried forward in art? Let me ask one of our younger members, Jonathan since he was the last image we saw on the screen. How do you see it, Jonathan?

Jonathan Lykes- I agree with you, AB, that much of the progress we have made over generations has been undercut. To me, this underscores an even greater necessity for cultural workers to be on the front lines of the struggle. It is also essential for interdisciplinary cultural workers to collaborate and build together.

It is time for us to create a new world that does not perpetuate the systemic and institutional violence that continues to harm those living on the front lines of marginalization. The best-prepared people for this work are, as we have seen before, those in the [Black Arts Movement](#), [the Harlem Renaissance](#), and other movements where Black and Brown artists, both nationally and internationally, came together in solidarity.

We need that kind of collective effort now more than ever, especially at a time when art is being stripped from our schools and defunded at every turn. The cultural workers, the cultural producers, and those who are cultivating the land of culture in this time are the ones who are going to bring progress and a new world that is not temporary but permanent.

A.B. Spellman- Emory, do you recognize yourself and your influence in the work of younger artists emerging today and creating socially relevant art?

Emory Douglas- I am inspired by them, and many times I have been invited to interact and collaborate with them. Many murals I have worked on have involved a lot of young people. It is that continuation of "each one teach one," sharing in a historical context what I have to offer and passing it on to young people, encouraging them to be creative in new ways.

A.B. Spellman- Sonya, poetry has always been a form of agitation, a communication of struggle, and a recording of the history of the struggles since the very beginnings of poetry, from the days of the fife and drum, from the days of the bard. Do you see a difference in poetry's role and shape today, in the age of the performance artist, compared to how it was in the 1960s? Back then, we were more focused on print and laying the foundation for performance art.

Sonya Sanchez- Well, I do see some differences. I think one of them is the programs where people get up on stage and compete. Quite often, I was asked to be a judge for these events, and I would score all of them.

I scored all of them the same way I gave everyone A's because you cannot stand up and compete in a poetry contest and declare one person the winner. My perspective is that these young poets are a continuation of what was happening in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. There are some brilliant poets out there who write in ways that truly engage audiences.

One of the most important things we must continue to do, and many of them already do, is to hold workshops to help people write better and understand what is happening in the world. Poetry is not just about celebrating yourself; it is also about addressing what is going on in America and around the world.

I am utterly amazed by the voices and sounds coming from so many of our young people today. We know that rappers emerged from the motion and movement of the Black Arts era. Initially, people criticized them, condemning their work and labeling it as terrible. But if you had any real insight, you understood that they arose directly from that movement, getting up on stage, with or without music, and speaking about what was happening. They talked about schools, the Bronx, America, and even the military.

When Rakim did that piece about the casualties of war, accompanied by those images of bodies being brought home from overseas, it was incredibly powerful. It made such an impact that, suddenly, they stopped showing the bodies in body bags on television. That is the power of the poet—it's still there.

I believe, on many levels, that what we see in our young people today is extraordinary. But we must also encourage them to take it further: hold workshops, go into schools, and engage with their communities. Teach workshops on your porch, in your home, anywhere. Share the history and *her story* of what they are writing. Remind them that they are not the first poets on this earth. Take them back in time—back to the era of our ancestors, enslaved in the place called America.

I would read a poem to them, perhaps about a poet who once said:
*"My old master said he was gonna free me when he died.
 But my old master, you know, ain't died. And he's 47.*

*My old master said he was gonna free me when he died.
 My old master is 59, and I still ain't free.
 My old master said he was gonna free me when he died.
 My old master is 65, and I still ain't free.
 I guess I better help.
 My old master died.*

That was written a long time ago. When I read it to students, they often say, “Oh my God, that’s new.” And I tell them, “No, that’s old.” It is not just about the close reality of violence; it is about the humor, the unique black humor. That sense of saying, “Hey, something has got to change. If I am not free now, I may never be, despite all the promises.”

What I am saying is that I am constantly amazed and deeply in love with the poetry our young people create. I would be even more amazed if they came together more often, reading together, lifting each other up, supporting one another, and helping each other understand that poetry is a force that keeps people alive.

This poetry inspires us to change and to see the world in new ways. It reminds us that we must organize not only in the streets but also in the streets of our minds. We must use our voices, our words, and our pens to write. Poetry, in this sense, has the power to inspire a student in a school to look up and say, “Oh yes, I do want to study more. I do want to write poetry. Can someone help me do this?” And we say, “Yes, my brother. Yes, my sister. We will help you write a poem that will make you live, that will make us all live, that will make us smile, and that will help build a new world.

A.B. Spellman- Thank you, Sonya. Yes, one of the key differences between the 1960s and today is the presence of new media. We came up in an era of cassette machines; you might remember those, or mimeograph pages that left our clothes covered in blue ink after producing them. Those tools were the weapons of our day. Today, young people have many more media outlets available to them. But so does the opposition. Now, Andrew, I would like to ask you: how do you see new media being used as a tool for organization and artistic expression by today’s artists? And you all should feel free to talk and respond to each other after Andrew’s answer.

Andrew Aydin- Well, thanks, A.B[Spellman] and Sonya[Sanchez], which was fantastic. I completely agree with your points. The media environment we see today is still fundamentally about storytelling. In some ways, which is why the Congressperson had such great success with comics. A comic is not all that different from a tweet, a Facebook post, or a meme. As we engage with these new outlets, we must remember that this is the language of this generation.

It is a form of sequential narrative, the same language SNCC used in 1966 in Lowndes County with their comics. It is the same language Julian Vaughn used later that year in his Vietnam comics. It is the same language the NAACP[National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] used in the late 1950s and that the FOR [Fellowship of Reconciliation] used in the same era. These storytelling methods are now being brought online. The vehicle is being digitized, but the form of the narrative is essentially the same.

To address your earlier question about policy implications and the challenges my generation faces, the movement was so successful and posed such a threat to the status quo that they responded with policies to suppress it. I think we have lost sight of how pernicious those policies are. For example, student loan debt is a form of control over activism. If you graduate with \$50,000 to \$100,000 in debt, it is nearly impossible to take a job as an organizer of SNCC, earning \$10 a week.

It is the same with the anti-war movement. They reorganized college campuses to make it harder for students to take over buildings, hold sit-ins, or stage protests. These changes were deliberate and designed to weaken movements that challenged the system.

In many ways, they institutionalized, on a national scale, the ability to subjugate student activists. That is the challenge my generation faces. At the same time, though, we also have opportunities to organize in new ways through social media, through the mediums and platforms you have been talking about. Ultimately, it still comes down to storytelling. As the Congressperson would have said, how do we dramatize our conflict in a way that shocks the conscience and creates a new dynamic around the policies that affect us?

It all circles back to the same lessons SNCC taught us so well: How do you tell your story? How do you dramatize the conflict so that everyone understands the struggle you are trying to make them see?

Jonathan Lykes- Yeah, I agree. It reminds me of the great [Courtland Cox](#), who always emphasized the importance of telling stories from the inside out and from the bottom up. I will say when it comes to social media, I am very hesitant. I am 31 years old and a millennial, and I am extremely cautious about the presence of social media in our lives, how it is eroding democracy, and how, too often, we replace in-person connection with digital interaction.

I love the idea of using social media to connect with people, especially during the pandemic. Yes, the pandemic is still here; it is not over. But I am hesitant about what we are doing, even within BYP 100 and Liberation House, to ensure we prioritize what Mama Sonya was just talking about. We must bring people together. We must build communities of support and systems of liberation where folks uplift one another and challenge each other's art. That is exactly what we decided to do this year with the *Black Joy Experience*³. We brought together 50 young Black trans, queer artists, and women in Atlanta to create collectively.

Poets, writers, singers, musicians, playwrights, and graphic designers all worked together in Atlanta, building a collective. We finalized a script for a play, created Volume Two of the Black Joy Experience album, and made space for artists to collaborate intentionally. This is not just about making articles about our freedom.

We do not produce culture in isolation from the liberation struggle. Art is part of our collective freedom, and we must always center that truth on our work.

³ *Black Joy Experience*- An music album created by Libration house inflation with Libration House which is a safe space for black and brown LGBTQIA+ community members.

A.B. Spellman- Right. Emory, how does that sound to you?

Emory Douglas- Well, it sounds amazing. It sounds like solidarity, like coming together as a family. At the same time, I'd like to speak on the digital aspect. For some people today, digital tools are the *only* way they can connect. We live in a world where you can physically get anywhere within 24 hours, but there are still places and people where digital communication is the only means to connect in solidarity, especially around issues of creativity. So, it is a tool, it is not everything, but it is a tool we can use for that purpose.

Jonathan Lykes- Well, I hear you, but it is also a tool the opposition uses to cause as much harm as we manage to do good with it. That is where I find myself hesitant. Yeah, I get that. It is a tool, and we need to be strategic in how we use it. Social media is a tool, but some people treat it like it is everything, and that is where I become cautious. We need to keep it in perspective as a means to an end, not the end itself.

Andrew Aydin- We also must choose carefully which platforms we engage with. It is becoming increasingly clear that some platforms are just toxic, and sometimes you must step away. At the same time, we are starting to rediscover tactics outside of those platforms that can still be effective. It is funny things like email lists are making a comeback. It is like newsletters from the 1960s all over again. Now you have companies like Substack pouring billions into recreating those same tools but in a modern way.

It is fascinating to see how the old becomes new again. You know what they say: "History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes." "We are seeing that rhyme play out in real-time. Honestly, I would love to get my hands on an old mimeograph machine and start a magazine again. That would be such a fun, full-circle moment.

Sonya Sanchez- What we used to do when we had a meeting at night was stand outside the subways, handing out flyers to people as they headed to work. We would also be in the subways putting up posters with messages like, be here, be there, or whatever the call to action was. People would stop, read the posters, take them down, and carry them onto the subway. The point is, there are many other ways to spread the message.

The thing about relying on digital media is that it can be cut off at any time. I remember asking this question years ago, and someone said to me, "Sister Sonia Sanchez, you had great turnouts at those meetings, but now we can get a thousand people just like that with social media." I replied, yes, but if they cut you off, how will you communicate?

My challenge to them was to figure out how to organize and communicate without relying on that little device. We did it before and got a thousand people to show up. The question is, how did we do it? And how will you do it, too? Americans are not foolish; they understand how these tools work, how we use them, and how they, in turn, use us. This is not an anti-technology message; it is simply about rediscovering alternative methods. Yes, you can use social media, but at the same time, learn how to get a thousand people together without it. It is possible. It has been done before. Ask the elders how they did it; you might be surprised by what they tell you.

Yes, you have got to do it because this country doesn't give you something without taking something else away. I remember being at my father's house once when the TV suddenly went out. He was panicking, saying, "Oh my God, the TV's off! What are we going to do?" I said, well, we could talk, or listen to music, or sit on the balcony and watch the planes fly over LaGuardia. I was being facetious, but the moment stuck with me. It dawned on me how reliant we have become.

I also remember when Brother Malcolm[Malcolm X] was assassinated and later when Brother Martin [Martin Luther King Jr] was assassinated. I was at San Francisco State, and after hearing the news, I rushed home to call people. But for three days, there was no phone service. We could not rely on the usual systems to connect, and we had to find other ways.

They cut service. So, the question at our next meeting was: How do we communicate if they cut off the wire service or the phones? It was a real, viable question. People started coming up with alternative methods of communication. There was a plan: if you could not reach me for an hour or two, here is how we would connect. I will not go into details now, but this is an essential conversation for all of us to have: how do we communicate if they take these tools away?

This is not hypothetical; it is real. People give you tools only to take them back when it suits them. They give you platforms, but those platforms also control and surveil you. Yes, we can use these tools to gather a thousand people for a rally, but what if those tools suddenly disappear? How do we organize, then? Other movements in other countries have figured this out. We must, too. That is the challenge.

Jonathan Lykes- It reminds me of the phrase, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Last summer, at some of the occupations, we noticed our phones acting strangely, glitching, and malfunctioning. We knew the government was monitoring us. While we were demanding to defund the police by a billion dollars in New York, we knew our devices were being tapped. Do not say "maybe." They were tapping their phones.

Exactly. The very tools we rely on to communicate can be turned against us. That is why we not only need digital platforms but also the wisdom of our elders. We need to ask: How did SNCC organize the March on Washington? How did you bring together millions of people without social media? These are critical lessons we need to carry forward.

Last summer, we saw some incredible moments of art and activism colliding. Artists took to the streets, painting and graffitiing messages across cities nationwide. They painted sidewalks leading to bus stops, and people stopped to look. It reminded me of those subway stations where you would see people pause to read posters. These moments of creativity and resistance were beautiful and powerful.

But as much as we embrace the present, we must also revisit the past. Not to retreat into it, but to learn from it. There are lessons in history worth bringing forward. Because I can guarantee you that the tools we rely on now on these digital platforms will be diminished or taken away when the time comes. When things escalate, those in power will tighten their grip, and we will need alternative ways to organize.

A.B. Spellman- Before we move to the Q&A, I want to make one more point. One thing that connects the artists of my generation with the artists of yours is the need to organize. For us, creating art and organizing as activists were inseparable. We started organizations like the Black Arts Center in Atlanta, theaters, galleries, and workshops. These spaces appeared in cities across the country, driven by the same imperative: art and activism together. That same imperative must appear today.

Andrew Aydin- Yeah, I completely agree. What we are seeing right now is that these spaces are being limited; they are being shut down in many ways. That is why so many conversations are being forced online earlier than they would have otherwise. What drives me crazy, though, is this: when we talk about alternative methods of organizing, they start dismantling those, too. That is why the postal service is being taken apart; it is a backup communication system. And they are taking that away from us as well.

That is my biggest fear; it is not just about controlling what we say or do. It is about controlling who we can say and do it with. The pandemic has shown us the government's incredible ability to exercise power in the name of public safety. But what happens when a bad actor gains control of those powers? That is terrifying.

Jonathan Lykes- We need to build our infrastructure. When we were at the occupation last summer, we set up our own internet network. That is the level of creativity we need. We must develop communication systems on our own terms. With the Black Joy Experience Artist Collective, we launched the American Artist Collective earlier this year. Next month, we are expanding internationally; we will be in Sierra Leone and Ghana. These movements must be global, connecting Black, queer, and trans artists, as well as Black and Brown women from all over the world. That is how we are tackling the challenges of this moment.

That is amazing work. But as you build, I would urge you to give serious thought to how you are going to sustain it. One thing we learned the hard way is that relying on funding from sources not fully committed to your cause can be dangerous. Right now, we are seeing gestures from funders, foundations, businesses, and corporations offering financial support for various projects. But when you grow dependent on that funding, and it gets pulled, your work can collapse overnight. We have seen that happen far too often, and it is heartbreaking.

A.B Spellman- We will now move to the Q&A portion. If you have questions, feel free to type them into the chat. We have one here for Emory: What was the significance of material culture, such as buttons, posters, flyers, and signs, to the Black Panther Party and the civil rights movement more broadly? What role did these tangibles play?"

Emory Douglas- Material culture was essential. It was part of PR but also part of the culture of the times. These items—buttons, flyers, and posters were not just tools of communication; they symbolized belonging. When you wore a button or carry a flyer, you became an extension of the movement. Wherever you went, you represented and promoted the cause. That is how you connect with people and create visibility for the struggle. It was grassroots advocacy in its purest form.

Jonathon Lykes- Yes, and we learned a lot from you on that one, Emory. If you look at the Black Joy Experience Artist Collective, our jackets, our pins, and BYP 100, too. Just look at them. We wear our politics. We learned that not only from SNCC but also from the Black Panthers. So, thank you.

Andrew Aydin- It is taking over even in the comic space. When John Lewis accepted the National Book Award, he was wearing a button we made with our printer that said "March" on it. We had tuxedos, and then we had our little handmade buttons. And the kids my age are using stickers now. I have never seen such a demand for stickers! It is like they have taken everything you all did and put it in a new light. I think the influence of these movements has only just begun to be documented.

A.B. Spellman- Okay, Andrew, here is a question for you about working with Marvel. Do you see it?

Andrew Aydin- Yeah, I do. I was very fortunate when Marvel approached me. They wanted a story about the Avengers and Captain America in the civil rights movement. My first response was that I did not want to write a white savior narrative, and they gave me the freedom to go in a different direction.

The story became about Captain America failing. It is about him trying to punch racism, realizing that is not how you solve the problem. He is in my version of the Mississippi Freedom Summer, and the underlying lesson is that he must listen to the local people. Too often, superhero stories overlook that idea.

I think Marvel has been doing a good job lately with stories like these. They have Ta-Nehisi Coates writing Black Panther, and other creators are working on more reflective projects. For me, the most powerful moment was writing the last line of my story, where Captain America reflects: "I was created to fight America's enemies. But how do I fight America?"

Being able to include that in Captain America's canon was incredibly meaningful. It is symbolic of the way the sixties-era Captain America glossed over our politics and how he only began to grapple with them in the seventies, particularly during the Nixon era, when he became a Nomad and started addressing more systemic issues. Comics are such a reflection of who we are as a people. They are our modern myths. I am just grateful to have been able to contribute that piece to Captain America's mythos.

A.B. Spellman- We have a question here for you. Who are your poet heroes?

Sonya Sanchez- That is a good question. Not just poet heroes—someone asked me that the other day, and I realized I had missed a few names. So, I went back and wrote some down. I look up to people like [Paul Robeson](#), [Chinua Achebe](#), [Margaret Walker](#), [Pablo Neruda](#), [Sweet Honey in the Rock](#), [Nicolás Guillén](#), [Audre Lorde](#), [Toni Morrison](#), [Fannie Lou Hamer](#), [Angela Davis](#), [Chuck D](#), [Rakim](#), [Malcolm X](#), [MLK \[Martin Luther King Jr.\]](#), [June Jordan](#), [Alice Walker](#), [Haki Madhubuti](#), Emory Douglas, and [AB Spellman](#). Goodness, the list just goes on.

AB Spellman, I had to get dramatic with that one. These are the people I turn to when I write or give talks. I include them in my litany of names. There are so many, but to answer the question, those are some of the voices I turn to for inspiration.

When I write, I will often pick up something they've done or listen to them. For example, I listen to Rakim every morning when I wake up. Brother Rod is a bad, bad dude, okay? You should listen to him too, because, after my meditation, his words feel like a meditation of their own. They prepare you to go out into the world and confidently respond, "Uh-huh," when someone challenges you. That is the joy of it.

That is one of the wonderful things about made works—poems, prints, videos, or records. They do not just stimulate and push the moment forward; they also serve as references. They are there to revisit, to inspire new moments even years later.

In a workshop, not everything is fully formed, if you know what I mean. Sometimes, I sit on my porch at work, and these little children come by. I have roses in front of my house, and they start picking them. Lama will say, "Oh, don't pick Ms. Sanchez's roses." But I know the roses are there for them.

One day, one of them asked me, "Do you write poetry?" I said yes. Then they said, "Okay, can you make up a poem?" Of course, I made up a poem right there on the porch. The little kid looked at me, so I said, "Can you make up a poem?" She responded, and I made her create her poem. Even if it is just three lines, it matters.

Her mother, standing nearby, said, "Oh, I didn't know she wrote poetry." I said, "We all write poetry at some point." Teaching is about giving back. When you are asked to do something, make sure to give it back and empower others to create, too.

A.B Spellman- Jonathan, here is a question for you: who are your musical influences?

Jonathan Lykes- Great question. I have many musical influences, especially those who came before me as freedom singers and creators of liberation music.

Jonathan Lykes- I think of folks like [Nina Simone](#), Sweet Honey in the Rock, and creators of early R&B. Going back to Lauryn Hill and Erykah Badu, love me some John Legend. But I also want to lift contemporary freedom music creators, like the Dream Defenders, who just released The Free Tape. There is also the Revival Resistance Choir out of New York, which recently released an album called This Joy. Nitanju Bolade Casel, who used to be with Sweet Honey in Rock, is now creating powerful singles. I truly believe that freedom and liberation music deserve their genre.

We need to keep developing and pushing music that is dedicated to our liberation, joy, and freedom. Finally, I am inspired by the Black Joy Experience Artists Collective. The comrades I get to create and build with are some of the most brilliant musicians and artists I have ever interacted with. Shout out to all the freedom artists out there.

A.B. Spellman- Let us take that as your closing statement. Can we get closing statements from the rest of you, please? Andrew?

Andrew Aydin- Thank you. I just want to acknowledge this amazing, legendary SNCC anniversary conference. It is an honor to have been invited to make even a small contribution and to be inspired by it. Thank you very much. As Sister Bernice Johnson Reagon said, the civil rights movement exposed the structure of America, the way it works, and how it is organized. It does not sustain itself without oppressing someone.

Despite progress, riding city buses, opening jobs, and the economic structure of America remains a system maintained through exploitation. That is something we must constantly remember. I thank Sister Bernice for reminding us of that. Understanding the civil rights movement is about learning a roadmap to redeem the soul of America. Congressman Lewis often said, "You have to create the climate and the environment for change."

Art, storytelling, and poetry are the vehicles we use to create that climate. I am grateful to be here, talking about comics, the work I did with the Congressperson, and hearing these incredible stories. Thank you all.

Jonathon Lykes- I want to leave you all with the words of our founding national director at Black Youth Project 100, "Black joy comes alive and stays alive through our music. There's no way to think about the Black radical tradition without including how our ancestors and we today carry our resistance through sound." The Black Joy Experience album is the manifestation of our imaginations and our ancestors' dreams. It is a raw energy reminder to build rigor and discipline with joy.

When all else feels lost, sounds from our people lift us. My deepest hope is that the *Black Joy Experience* moves and fuels you to join and continue the struggle for our collective liberation. Thank you to SNCC for having me. It has been an honor to stand in your legacy. This has been an incredible panel. Thank you all for your work. Andrew, Jonathan, Sonya, and Emory, thank you for being with us today.

A.B. Spellman- To the audience, many more sessions are coming up at the conference. Take a good look at the agenda and continue participating in these important conversations. Thank you, and goodbye.