

Reflecting on the legacy of the Black Panthers: in conversation with Billy X

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By Deborah Gabriel

Following the recent 40th Anniversary Reunion of the Black Panther Party and a new book documenting its history; former Panther Bill Jennings (aka Billy X) reflects on his life as a Panther and its legacy to the next generation.

The most prominent figures of the 1960s and the civil rights movement that springs to most minds are Martin Luther King Jnr, Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party (BPP). Whilst Martin Luther King pursued a strategy of non-violent protest, others embraced the principles of Malcolm X, most notably the right for black people to defend themselves.

Malcolm X articulated the disaffection of millions of black Americans in the North, who were plagued by racism, squalid housing conditions, high levels of unemployment and white aggression, mainly at the hands of the police.

These African Americans had been untouched by King's southern campaign to end segregation. The BPP was formed in 1966 by students Huey Newton and Bobby Seale who identified with and embraced the calls of Malcolm X for black pride, self-determination and self-preservation. For them, as Malcolm X once said, there was no such thing as an "American Dream" but an "American nightmare."

Speaking about his early experiences of racism, Billy X, former Panther and Director of the Black Panther Party Legacy and Alumni Association told Black Britain that his father was in the military and served in Korea, but when he returned, he was stationed in Alabama, which is where Billy lived until the age of four.

Life within a military complex shielded the family from racism to a degree but outside the complex the harsh realities were bitter experiences. On one occasion Billy was with his mother and had dropped his candy bar on the ground and wanted to go into the nearest store to get another one. They were both standing outside the Sears and Roebuck store but his mother would not go in:

"I said come on mom, we're right here. My mother looked at me and said 'we've got to go round to the back. I couldn't understand why we couldn't go through the front entrance."

On another occasion around Christmastime, Santa Claus came to the town where they lived and there was a crowd, but Billy couldn't see from where they were standing: "I said come on dad, let's move to the front, but my dad wouldn't do it. It was only later on I realised that you don't stand in front of white people."

Billy told Black Britain that when he got older he was able to put racism and discrimination together and realise what it meant to be black: "Living in America is a

'hellified' experience, especially then as well as now." he said.

Billy was a teenager during the era when the civil rights coalition was starting to falter. He was two months from graduating high school when Martin Luther King Junior was assassinated. But he told Black Britain that people who knew him back then would testify to his militant outlook, which he puts down to a family trait:

"The foundation of my militancy comes from my mother," he explained. When he was five his family moved to San Diego where they bought their first television set, which allowed them to see what was happening to blacks in the rest of America:

Militant attitude and sense of pride was instilled by mother

"We used to see stuff on the news – bus boycotts, people marching and my mother used to get so mad. She would look at me and say 'boy, don't you ever let people do that kind of stuff to you.'"

The family watched people being spat at and beaten, just for trying to register to vote and these images continued to confront Billy throughout his formative years. But his mother remained a strong influence on Billy in terms of encouraging self-respect and pride in her son:

"My mother was an ass-kicker. She was the type of person you don't mess with. You might be black, white or red – but you don't mess with my mom. Me and my brothers and sisters grew up with that same type of attitude." he recalled.

Billy X told Black Britain that along with his siblings he did not grow up endorsing the non-violent philosophy of Martin Luther King Jnr as their mother always instructed her children to "defend themselves."

"My mother told me once you let people push you around it's a downward spiral after that – and it's true. So all my life I believed in self-defence and defending myself."

It therefore seemed a perfectly natural thing to do to join the BPP, whose chief mission at the time was protecting the black community from white aggression, often at the hands of the police. Billy told Black Britain that the Panthers combined politics with the principles of self-defence and he became: "politically educated with the party at 17."

At the age of 17 in June 1968, Billy had moved with a friend to San Diego to avoid being drafted, which was more likely with the 'lottery' system that was in place, if you lived in a small town. By coincidence, Oakland was the birthplace of the Black Panthers.

He told Black Britain: "What attracted me to the Party was its militancy and the ten-point programme." The BPP Ten point Plan is a list of its demands of the federal government for black Americans, which include employment, decent housing, reparations, free healthcare and an end to police brutality.

The Panthers widely regard themselves as the legacies of Malcolm: "We call ourselves the sons and daughters of Malcolm. In fact we go as far as to say that if Malcolm X wasn't assassinated, there probably wouldn't be a need for the Black Panther Party. He

would have been organising the Organisation of Afro American Unity and we probably would have joined that.”

Billy told Black Britain that Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, co-founders of the BPP based the principles of the Party on Malcolm X’s ideas, which was formed as a direct response to police brutality. The seeds were sown, he said at the Watts riots:

“Black people were being killed left, right and centre in the Bay area and throughout America. It’s always been justifiable homicide or he had a gun, or it looked like he was moving too fast. This happened so much that Huey and Bobby who were college students themselves said we’ve got to do something about this.”

In Oakland and San Francisco former soldiers who had served in Vietnam were being hired as policeman, many who were from Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama:

BPP brought many benefits to black communities across the country

“They brought their racist attitudes to the Bay area and this increased the amount of oppression on black people,” Billy told Black Britain.

Billy believes that today racism and discrimination is still very much a fact of life for black Americans, the only difference being that it is less overt and more of an institutionalized nature: “It’s not really overt anymore, until something big happens like the Rodney King incident and it shows you how people react...they tore up LA.”

According to the Panther veteran: “The situation hasn’t got any better – things are worse than they were 20 years ago,” he said. The BPP as an organisation no longer exists, but the Black Panther Party Legacy and Alumni Organisation that replaced it, is very much about preserving and promoting the legacy of the Panthers and continuing its programmes of community survival.

“As a person who is conscious and a Panther, I would say the situation is very grave.” Billy believes that what African Americans need is for a national organisation to be established that has a focus on constructive uplift programmes to regenerate black communities: “There are a lot of groups and committees but we need national organisations,” he said.

At the recent 40th Anniversary Reunion held in October 2006, many former BPP members came together who had not seen in each other in 30 years. After the BPP started to disperse in the late 1970s, many BPP members organised their own community associations and many went back to college. Billy told Black Britain:

“We have a whole array of party members who are community organisers, lawyers, doctors, researchers, dentists or people who are city planners or in some kind of office.”

Reflecting on the era of the BPP, Billy X told Black Britain that it was very much associated with the Black Power Movement and at a time when black Americans stopped being Negroes and started embracing their cultural identity:

"Malcolm X used to say 'you're not a Negro you're an African American. Where's Negroland? Those kind of thoughts started developing people's social consciousness. It was the coming together of knowledge, information and self-awareness that was a big push for people."

But aside from the self-defence aspect of the party it brought many other benefits to black communities across America. One of those benefits was their pioneering of the Breakfast Programme. "The government feeds around 4.9 million school kids every day in America and I bet most of those kids don't even know that the Black Panther Party started that programme."

The BPP also established 11 free medical centres across the country before the government set up this type of facility and two are still in existence in Portland, Oregon and Seattle. The BPP also registered thousands of people to vote for the first time.

As part of their efforts to promote the legacy of the BPP, there is a website, newsletters are distributed and every year, several different events are organised, including a Black Panther History Month in Oakland. Concluding our discussion, Billy said:

"Our legacy continues to grow and our whole thing now is to educate people on the legacy of the Party. There are many lessons to be learnt from the history of the Party."

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