

Interviewee: Bill Perlman

Interviewer: Max Krochmal

Interview date: April 16, 2010

Location: SNCC 50th Reunion, Raleigh, NC

Length: 1 disc, approximately 52 minutes

Max Krochmal: I'm Max Krochmal, as I said. I'm with Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies, and we're here at the SNCC Convention, Fiftieth Anniversary, April 16th, 2010. I'm working, of course, in collaboration with UNC's Southern Oral History Program. And you are Bill Perlman?

Bill Perlman: Yes, I am.

MK: Where and when were you born, Bill?

BP: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1947.

MK: Okay. 1947, so that puts you at –

BP: Sixty-three.

MK: Sixty-three. Great. And were you raised in Brooklyn?

BP: Yes.

MK: Okay. You know, I'm going to just stop this for one second. I want to –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

MK: So, you said, yes, you were raised in Brooklyn?

BP: Yes.

MK: Okay. What was your consciousness of racial issues growing up?

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BP: Well, it was acute. My family was a very politically active family. My mother had worked for the ILD, the International Labor Defense, in the '30s. And one of her jobs was reading hundreds of local newspapers and keeping track of lynchings in the South. So, I was raised with a very active view of what had been going on for many years.

MK: Okay. So, I imagine she was among – one of your more important influences. Were there others?

BP: Yes. My father also had been active in politics and a union organizer, Bank Tellers and Title Searchers Union.

MK: Oh, wow. Okay.

BP: My uncle is Victor Rabinowitz, who is a very active civil rights attorney. His law firm, Rabinowitz and Boudin, had been very active in labor and later in First Amendment issues, and the firm still represents the state of Cuba in this country.

MK: Oh, wow.

BP: So, he was – again, the family was extremely active, going back to my great grandfather, who was an anarchist and editor of a Yiddish anarchist newspaper. So, I was sort of born into political activism.

MK: My family is from similar political tradition. So, you mentioned Yiddish. Was religion also a part of your life growing up?

BP: No. The only part – I won't say religion. What we were made aware of was Jewish history and culture. So, we never celebrated any holidays that had a purely religious context, only those that had a historical story to tell. I was never Bar Mitzvah-ed. There was never any question of any religious belief.

MK: Okay. Do you think that those historical and cultural lessons – did that shape your values, I mean, did it bear on you later in life?

BP: Yeah. [Pause] Judaism is not only a religion or – I mean, it's a religion, I guess, in some ways, it's a race, and it's also a nationality. We don't have *a* country that we can identify with.

MK: Right.

BP: And so, my parents and grandparents also felt that it was important for us to understand our heritage, but not necessarily in a religious format, but in a racial and cultural context.

MK: Right. Okay, so, what brought you into doing political activism personally?

BP: Well, it was all around me. My mother had actually become a staff member of SNCC a year or a year and a half before I did. She worked in the New York office. I was in high school and I was a member of a Lower Manhattan Students for Peace in high school, which was a group that was primarily protesting against testing of nuclear weapons. But since she was at the New York SNCC office, I would go there a lot and help out, and I met many of the SNCC people while I was still in high school.

We also hosted fundraising parties. We had a house out on Long Island, and some of the field secretaries would come out for a rest. And I had been playing the guitar since about age eight and singing, and there was one fundraising party out there, and they didn't have a Freedom Singer available, so I played some songs. Jim Forman was there, and Forman told me – this was just as I was turning eighteen, I guess – that the Freedom Singers were looking for a guitarist, they were looking for a white guitarist, and would I be interested. And that's how I started in 1965.

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MK: So, Forman personally recruited you?

BP: Yeah.

MK: But before that, you knew some of the other field secretaries?

BP: Yeah, people who passed through New York, who came to the house, who were around and I met at one time or another.

MK: Now, what was your mother's role in the movement?

BP: She worked in the New York office, and her job was to maintain the mailing list, which at that time was kept on metal plates. And so, she worked there and did that as part of publicity and fundraising aspects, sending out mailings, keeping the list up to date, etcetera.

MK: Great. Okay, so Forman recruits you to go play guitar. Where did you go?

BP: Well, at first I was introduced to Matthew Jones. Went up to his house, sort of got interviewed, played some, and I guess he decided that I was up to the task. So, we went over a lot of songs, a lot of keys, and then the first time I met the rest of the group was at a fundraiser in Fire Island. And I go out on the ferry and meet them for the first time, and that night we performed.

The next time we performed was at Carnegie Hall, so it was quite a start to a career [laughter], kind of starting at the top. And I stayed with them through '66 until the Peg Leg Bates meeting. And at that point, whites left the organization, and the group itself broke up.

MK: So, were you in attendance at the meeting?

BP: No, I was not.

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MK: Okay. What way – or, I guess, how did you learn about what transpired there?

BP: Well, it was announced pretty quickly afterwards. My mother was still working at the New York office, and word spread almost instantly. And there was quite a reaction, quite a lot of conversation about it. I thought it was an unfortunate thing, but that's the way it was.

I continued on after that playing and performing with Cordell Reagon. He and I had become very close friends. And later, as things went on, various different formations of the group would get together and perform. And so, we've been doing it on and off now since then.

MK: Okay. Just to back up for a minute, what was your mom's name?

BP: Lucille Perlman.

MK: Okay.

BP: She's now ninety-six. She's still living in New York and still fondly remembers everything that went on, and was sorry that she couldn't make it down for this.

MK: Do you know when she first got involved with SNCC?

BP: '64, I would say, probably, although she and my Uncle Victor and some were involved immediately after the 1960 meeting in doing some of the planning.

MK: Okay.

BP: I have an aunt, whose name is Joanne Grant, who married my Uncle Victor. And she had been active and knew a lot of the SNCC people and was connected and active with them back as early, I guess, as '61. She was an author and a filmmaker. One

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of the books that she had written was called *Black Protest, 1619 to the Present*, so she had done a history of the entire movement in this country, from the day the first slave set foot on land here and through the present, which I guess at that time was mid '60s.

MK: Okay, so then you get involved in '65. You leave in '66. Where did you go next?

BP: [Sighs] I had been bitten by the bug of performing, so I continued on my own doing folk music. Got into the college tour, went around a lot of coffee houses, things like that. I linked up with other people periodically, played with other groups, did some backup for people. Got involved in 1968 with a theater production, where I did live music onstage behind theater work. And that started almost another career, and I worked from then through about, oh, the late '70s on about thirty different theater productions in New York, doing sound, music, technical work, etcetera.

MK: Okay.

BP: Lots of meaningless jobs in the interim, and then finally in 1975 I went back to college after having a bunch of false starts and ended up getting a degree in electrical engineering in 1980. And I stayed in that for twenty years or so.

MK: Did you get in other political organizations or movement groups?

BP: Well, in '68 I worked as a campus organizer for the Peace and Freedom Party. Before that, in '66 or '67, Cordell Reagon and I went up to New Haven, Connecticut, and ran a campaign for a guy named Fred Harris, who was a black candidate for State Assembly and who did miserably in the election, but it was an interesting campaign. And I stayed in touch with a lot of people that I knew. But once I got out of

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engineering school, things kind of went on hold. I was certainly aware of what was going on, but I wasn't particularly active in anything until 1990.

MK: Let me stop you just for one second.

BP: Sure.

MK: Sorry.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

MK: All right, we're back. Sorry for the interruption.

BP: Okay. I guess the one thing I didn't mention was in 1966 I went on the Meredith March.

MK: Oh, you did?

BP: Yeah.

MK: Okay. Well, tell me about that, and we'll come back to the other stuff.

[Laughs]

BP: Well, it was – [laughs] you know, the call went out after Meredith had been shot. And I wasn't doing anything of any merit at the time, so I went down and just participated in the march. Nothing [pause] –

MK: So, when did you – so, you just – did you fly down, or you took a train?

BP: I drove down. There were groups of people being put together, and I got carpooled with a bunch of other people and drove down. And got there, and, of course, there were a lot of SNCC people there, so I kind of got drafted into what they were doing.

MK: Who did you march with?

BP: Well, Cordell was there, Stokely was there, Willie Ricks. One of the things that I did for a while was drive a car and go off to try to get water jugs filled, and that put us out into the community some. Got shot at once.

MK: Really?

BP: Yeah.

MK: Where was that?

BP: Near [Batesville], I think. We stopped at a farm, and the local – it was an area of some shacks and things, and we stopped, and they told us we could go ahead and fill the water jugs. And we were doing that, and then the farmer and farm owners came with a couple of other people. And we jumped back in the car and left, and they fired a couple of shotgun blasts at us, but no harm done.

MK: Were you scared? Were you worried, or did you just figure they –?

BP: Yeah. I mean, it's not a fun feeling getting shot at [laughter], but they were – fortunately, it was a shotgun, and they were pretty far away, and we just got out of there in a hurry. The whole thing was scary. The police finally hit us in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and I got cracked on the head pretty good there. But the march was a successful one. We got through down to Jackson without any major injuries. Nobody was killed.

Part of the problem that I saw on that march is that it was a joint effort, and Dr. King was alternatively on the march and then periodically going up North to try to raise some money and get supplies down and things like that. And from my point of view, at least as a marcher, during the time that he was gone, there was no authoritative leadership on the march. Jesse Jackson was there, Reverend Abernathy was there, Stokely

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Carmichael was there, and nobody seemed to be in charge, you know, the ultimate authority. And there was a lot of – again, I felt there was more time spent looking for press coverage than there was looking after the marchers.

MK: Right. [Speaking to another person] Right, you want that, yeah, that too. I'm sorry.

BP: So, it was a little disorganized. But, again, a lot of the people there had experience before, and so we kind of kept it together. But there was a lot of – again, from what I could see, from my perspective, there was a lot of competition at the top.

MK: Um-hmm. Among –?

BP: Among, you know, Jackson, Carmichael, and others.

MK: Right. So, how long were you marching? How long did it last?

BP: Oh, God, I can't even remember. It seemed like forever. [Laughter] But, you know, there was a huge rally in Jackson when we got there, and then everybody went home. I later met Meredith during that campaign we led in Connecticut. He came up to a rally we had and spoke. He [pause] was an interesting character, has since become quite conservative in his views. And the speech that he gave –

MK: Oh, I'm sorry. I've got to stop you again real quick.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

MK: Yeah, there we go.

BP: Okay.

MK: So, you were talking about – let's see, where were we? You were talking about leadership in the march, Meredith's politics.

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BP: Yeah, it was – there seemed to be – there was certainly competition. SNCC and SCLC had never been on the best of terms anyway.

MK: Right.

BP: And, so, it was kind of natural that when the sort of guiding spirit of things, when King left, there was quite the competition as to who was in charge, who would be making statements, who would be kind of upfront on this thing, and, in fact, there was. And, again, my feeling from sitting back in the pack is that there was a little bit less management than there should have been.

MK: Right. So, you came in in '65, and Forman brought you in?

BP: Yep.

MK: Did you travel around the South performing?

BP: Both. We traveled – the Freedom Singers' job primarily was fundraising.

MK: Right.

BP: And we did lots of concerts in the Northeast from DC up through Connecticut, Massachusetts. We did a month-long tour through Canada. But then we also played in Atlanta and various other places around the South, both for fundraising and for, you know, bringing music.

MK: And you were an integrated group, right?

BP: Well, with me, yes.

MK: Yeah. Did you ever – I imagine when you were in the South you played in black venues?

BP: Yes.

MK: So, you didn't have to have issues with white theaters there?

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BP: Well, we had – [laughs]. I remember driving down to Atlanta once – it was really my first experience with it – and stopping for gas. There were four of us in the car. Chuck Neblett was driving, and there were two black women and myself. Chuck was filling the car with gas. I went in and ordered food. And they brought the food out in a bag. And I said, “No, no, we don’t want to take it out. We’ll eat it here.” And he said, “No, you won’t.”

And Chuck came in and said, “What’s going on?” And I said, “Well, we’d like to sit and eat,” and they refused to do it. And Chuck said, “Well, I’m not paying for it unless we can sit down and eat it.” And we started arguing, Chuck left some money for the gas, and we went out to the car.

And as we were getting into the car, we could see that there was a bunch of people leaving the restaurant and climbing into two pickup trucks. And they chased us for miles. This was somewhere – I don’t know where, but somewhere in South Carolina. And they stayed behind us for a long time.

And I remember coming into Atlanta and people telling me how this was the liberal stronghold of the South, and yet there was the Confederate flag on the Statehouse, [laughter] along with the U.S. flag. And it was – you know, if that was the liberal stronghold of the South, then I knew we were in for it for a while. I didn’t get into Mississippi until the Meredith March.

MK: Um-hmm. It’s all bad, though. [Laughs]

BP: Yeah. [Laughs]

MK: So, what was – did you have other sort of educational moments while traveling?

BP: Oh, I can't even begin to – first of all, we spent hundreds of hours, the six of us, in a station wagon. And we spent lots of time talking back and forth about the movement, about their experiences, about Judaism and the beliefs we were – you know, exploding myths. We were learning about each other, and there was just – I never felt a racial divide. I felt more that there were six people in a tight little space, and the problems were primarily interpersonal: you know, personality clashes, whatever it may be.

The group that I was in was Chuck and Chico Neblett – they were brothers. Matthew and Marshall Jones were brothers. And Cordell and myself sort of naturally spent the most time together because – we used to joke about it when we introduced ourselves. You know, “Matthew, my brother Marshall; Chuck, my brother Chico; Cordell, my brother Bill.” [Laughter] And that was the way that went. And Cordell and I spent most of our time outside of performing together.

Yeah, it was a learning experience for everybody. And there were days we all got along; there were days we weren't. But, again, it wasn't a cultural conflict. It wasn't a racial conflict. It was just six strong personalities in a car. I was by far the youngest. I was eighteen. Cordell, when I joined the group, was twenty-three, and he had been the youngest, on up to Matthew, who was well into his thirties.

MK: So, what did you understand as the goal of the movement at the time? What were you supporting, raising money for?

BP: [Sighs] That's a hard question. Well, in some ways it's an easy question. I mean, we were raising money to support the people who were fighting for the rights of individuals for a discriminated group of people. The underlying philosophy was different

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all over SNCC, as it was different all over a lot of the left movement. There were people who were true revolutionaries, whose goal ultimately was a socialist society and to overthrow this government. There were others, like mine. Mine, in particular, was the fact that I thought that this country *had* the potential to really be a democracy and to really give its people freedom, and I was pushing it to achieve its potential. And there were people in the movement whose way of life was nonviolence; that was their choice. And there were others where nonviolence was a tactic. It was not a philosophic choice for their life, but it was a tactic that was used in this particular place and time.

So, the question of integration was there at the time. And I think one of the dividing lines was the Peg Leg Bates meeting where that finally came out and was finally rejected as a specific goal, that this was not achievable based on the fact that a lot of the people in SNCC felt that when many people said "integration," what they meant was black people being invited into a white society and to leave their own heritage and their own way of life behind. So, it was a question of integration versus assimilation, and assimilation was not an acceptable result.

So, it was a difficult time for everybody. But a lot of the questions, as you got further into the movement, as you made small successes, as you began to achieve some of the things you set out to do, then some of the other things which were sort of less critical questions at a beginning time became more critical. You know, here we are at some kind of juncture; where are we going from here? We have established ourselves as a force. We have established ourselves as – I mean, there were boycotts, there were sit-ins. So you were a social force, and you began to be an economic force, and now the question is where are you going? And a lot of that had not been decided at the very beginning. So,

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those questions were continually being raised, and there were very great differences, again, in the goals. And these things eventually affected SNCC and its image and its purpose and its leadership.

MK: So, who in your mind were the people, I guess, that you had contact with in the movement that you really looked up to or that you took guidance from with all these many questions?

BP: Well, first and foremost was Jim Forman. But there were so many. Again, I was a fair amount younger than a lot of the people who were there. In 1960, when this first meeting happened fifty years ago, I was thirteen. So, obviously, I was not involved then. And I guess I entered just after Selma. I remember when I graduated from high school, that June I went to Washington as sort of a graduation present, but I spent most of my time in the lobby reading a news ticker waiting to see what happened to Goodman and Schwerner and Chaney, because that was – when that took place in 1964.

But I had met Ivanhoe Donaldson, I had met Jimmy Travis, I had met Forman and a bunch of other people in and around the New York SNCC office before I joined. And then, once getting down to Atlanta and meeting more of the field secretaries, I really looked up to all of them. It was an extraordinary group of people – Julian Bond. So, I can't say, other than Forman, again, who stood out massively, but it was just –

MK: That's fine.

BP: Everybody that I met was extremely impressive.

MK: Was there anyone that you can think of that played an important role that might not have been recognized or still hasn't been recognized?

BP: Cordell.

MK: Yeah. Is he here this weekend?

BP: No, Cordell was murdered quite some years ago.

MK: Oh.

BP: But I think none of the people in this movement, in SNCC anyway, got the recognition they deserve. SNCC didn't have a charismatic leader. SNCC did not have a Martin Luther King or a Malcolm X that was the standout person.

MK: Right.

BP: The leadership of the organization changed: Chuck McDew was the head at one point, and John Lewis was the head at one point, Jim was the head at one point, Stokely at one point, and others. It wasn't a group of people supporting the work of one person. The organization itself didn't exist for its own purpose. It existed to work in the communities and to help and teach and attempt to empower people in the communities.

MK: Did you have much contact with those people?

BP: In the communities?

MK: Yeah.

BP: No. No. When we performed in a couple of places, but primarily not. These were people who had, again, been older and been in the movement longer than I had. So, SNCC was less – it was intensely organized, but it was less of – there was no icon in SNCC that people were promoting.

MK: Right.

BP: And as such, a lot of the organizations that spun off remained, and a lot of them remained for a long time and did their purpose. There have been labor unions, there have been medical teams, there have been political movements, all kinds of things that

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were under the radar of the main media. And so, I think that the vast majority of people who worked there are names that nobody knows in the general public, and it wasn't an organization that was set up to support an individual.

MK: Right, yeah. I guess then the question is: Do you think that that was a good model, or would it be better to have – the scholars will call it “group-centered leadership,” is what SNCC exhibited, right? It was a group of people doing things, whatever. Do you think that was effective?

BP: Well, clearly.

MK: Or would you have rather had a Martin?

BP: It's not an either/or.

MK: Okay.

BP: I don't know whether SNCC would have been as successful had it not been for King. I don't know whether – King certainly played a *huge* role in the thing. He was *the* leader of the civil rights movement as far as the world was concerned. But under that are the people who did the work, the people who went from individual to individual and recruited one person at a time, instructed one person at a time, empowered one person at a time in these communities so that they could form small groups and that the SNCC person could step back.

And there was – it was a wake-up call. The SNCC people were irreverent. They were disrespectful. They took no crap from anybody. And there were a lot of complaints about them from other organizations, saying, “Hey, you're –.” But that was what was needed. That was the two-by-four on the head of the donkey that woke it up.

But it was also the hard work and the work that took time in a community. King would come in, he'd make a speech, he'd be there for a day or two, there'd be a march, they'd leave. SNCC stayed.

MK: And where did music fit in?

BP: Everywhere. Everywhere, whether it was fundraising as we were doing, whether it was on a line of march, whether it was in jails and things like that, the music carried the message, the music created the courage and the strength. It just was an underlay – it helped the foundation of everything. And again, a lot of the songs had been rewritten from union music, a lot of the songs had been rewritten from gospel, and a lot of these things – and if you look back at other movements, you'll find the same thing. You'll find "Which Side Are You On" is the same tune as "To Join the NMU," the National Mine Workers Union. The music has the spirit, carries the spirit, lifts the spirit, and it's just crucial to every aspect of the movement.

MK: Great. Did you keep playing? Do you still play?

BP: I kept playing and I, again, later became very politically active, but this time from the *inside* of the government. When I moved to a little town in western Massachusetts, I got elected to their select board, a three-person panel that ran the town. And I was on that for fifteen years, and I'm still the head of their county government.

So, I went back after that twenty-year break and started again being politically active and got involved in all kinds of aspects of politics and government from the inside. I ended up being the municipal representative to the Homeland Security Council out where we are, which is a bunch of cops and firemen and all kinds of emergency service

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directors, but then there's me representing a hundred and one towns and cities in western Mass.

And I was able – the nice thing about working in a town like Ashfield, which is eighteen hundred people, in a county like Franklin County in Massachusetts, which is the poorest county in the state, is that you're working in an environment that's small enough that occasionally you can even see the results of what you're doing. And that has been very gratifying, extremely stressful at times.

MK: Did your experiences in the movement shape what you did in government?

BP: Oh, absolutely.

MK: In what ways?

BP: Well, first of all, you realize that you couldn't – that who you were representing are the people, and that you needed to learn who they were, what they wanted. You needed to get information *from them*. I was a city boy. I moved to a rural community. So, there were questions on road maintenance. I didn't know anything about road maintenance. So, I went to the people who did it and asked. I spent fifteen years asking questions.

I didn't know anything about running a police department or a fire department, so I joined both and worked as a police officer up there for a number of years, worked as a firefighter up there for a number of years. It was an amazing experience because normally at age forty-five or so, which is when I started doing this, you're pretty well set in your ways and you just live your life out and not worry about it. But, for me, this was an incredible experience of having to be able to learn a whole new set of skills and experiences and things like that. And I've – going into a burning building is an

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experience that not a lot of people have, and being involved in a high-speed chase is not a lot – you know. But those things give you a different view of life and people and who they are, why they are, who they are, what helped them.

I've retired from the town government now, and I'm working on primarily – I'm beginning to look at environmental things, peak oil, climate change, and things like that, and trying to come up with ways technologically, because I do have a degree in electrical engineering, to help defray some of this. But also working with state reps, state senators, governors, commissioners, all that stuff, representing the town and volunteering for anything that came along, because it was a way to 1) give some help, and 2) to increase *my* influence, which is helpful to my constituency. You know, that was part of it.

MK: So, maybe a final question for me is: What do you think is the most important legacy or lesson from the movement for today?

BP: Well, there are several. One is that it's not over. It didn't start in the '50s or '60s, and it will never end, ever. I don't believe that there is ever going to be true equality anywhere. I think that there are always going to be people who have more, and those people are going to protect themselves against the people who have less and want it. I think that, with each successful movement, the people in control bury themselves deeper. This country used to know the names of everybody who was out there and in control of things. Vanderbilt and Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan and those others were – everybody knew who they were.

But I have no idea who the chairman of the board of Citibank is, or who they talk to, or these others. And I think that what has happened is that with each success, the power structure has managed to accept it, assimilate it, and still figure out a way to make

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money. A corporation's success these days is measured in growth. Are your sales this year more than your sales last year? Nobody thinks that anybody who has made *enough* money is successful.

MK: Right. [Laughs]

BP: And it's the same thing with any nation that has an imperialist bent. It has to grow. Well, at some point, you have outgrown your resources. You have outgrown – if somebody is growing, if there is a competitive anything in the world, if somebody is growing, somebody else is shrinking. And at some point, it has to stop. The only thing that is ever-increasing is [entropy]. Anything else that tries to ever-increase is going to end up collapsing at some point.

And I think the legacy of the movement is an extremely important one, because it's possible, in my mind, that this is going to be the last nonviolent movement that will be at all successful. I don't think that – the people in charge have no hesitation about killing us. There's no such thing as a sacred life. The three-year-old in the well gets five days of publicity, but six or seven million people dying in a conflict in the Congo doesn't hit the paper *at all*, and it's current. So, we're still being controlled. We're still being manipulated. We congratulate ourselves for the progress that we've made, but ultimately until something is taken over completely and changed completely, the legacy is that this struggle will never end.

MK: Um-hmm. Well, anything else you want to add?

BP: Well, the one thing I have to say is that this – the one little piece of this is that being relegated to the position of an oral history [laughter] is a little disturbing because I have to say that I still consider myself to be a current event.

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MK: Okay.

BP: And I'm hoping that I can still contribute something and I'm hoping that somebody actually watches these things, learns from them. I'm not seeing the kind of activism and the zeal on students – high school, college – that I saw forty or fifty years ago. I realize that there doesn't seem to be the galvanizing issue that we had, whether it was the civil rights movement – and it was *not* the Vietnam War that was the galvanizing issue. It was *the draft*. The fact that you could be drafted and *killed* – that was the galvanizing issue. We've had wars since, but as long as it's a volunteer army, it doesn't affect people. They don't come together as forcefully. And that's one of the things I think the power structure has learned. So, that's the only last thing I want to say, is that we need another generation to come along and start doing the same things we did. But don't relegate us quite yet to the dustbin. [Laughter]

MK: Well, we hope that people will see this, too, so thank you very much.

BP: Good. Okay, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Sally Council

October 6, 2010