

Southern Oral History Program
North Carolina Poverty Fund
“No Easy Walk” Conference Participants
Omni Hotel, Durham, NC

Si Kahn Session, December 13, 1996

cassette one of one

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SI KAHN SESSION
DECEMBER 13, 1996

ALICIA ROUVEROL: This is the No Easy Walk Conference at the Omni Hotel in Durham, North Carolina. We're about to tape record Si Kahn's performance, followed by Eva Clayton's keynote speech. This is Alicia Rouverol with the Southern Oral History Program, and today's date is December 13, 1996.

SCOTT COOPER: My name's Scott Cooper. I'm the program manager at the Southern Rural Development Initiative. First of all, I want to congratulate folks for making it through our next-door neighbor's party here—I don't know what that was, maybe the prom. Quick poll: how many people stopped to get a shrimp along the way? [applause] All right. I was asked to say a little bit about why I initially got involved in the North Carolina Fund action project. I think what drew me to it initially was a real sense of curiosity about what it is that can awaken in young people through volunteer experience where they have meaningful opportunities to get to know folks. Also, curiosity about how we can build organizations that are sustainable, that can last for a while and be committed to the long haul. Another piece was that we didn't want it to be a normal gathering, we wanted it to be a chance to renew our spirits and have a chance for folks who have been around a while to meet with young folks who are interested in the struggle.

I've been asked tonight to introduce Si Kahn, who's going to play a few songs for us here. A few years ago when I was getting started, I had a meeting with a guy named John Fish out of Chicago, and I was basically going for some general advice on how to get started on doing some good work in the South. He gave me a few tips, and said, "You've got to meet with a few people," and listed a few names. "And you've really got to meet with this guy named Si Kahn, do you know him?" I said, "No, but with a name like that, I bet that guy's pretty intense." A few months later, I did have the chance to have lunch with him, and I can assure you he's a man of strong spirit. He's the founder and director of Grassroots Leadership, and he's been a champion for people committed to the struggle for a while. It's

my pleasure tonight to introduce Si Kahn. [applause]

SI KAHN: [singing] My hands are as cracked as an August field

That's burned in the sun for a hundred years
With furrows so deep, you could hide yourself
But I ain't choppin cotton no more this year

I'll just sit on the porch with my eagle eye
And watch for a change of wind
The rows are as straight as a shotgun barrell
As long as a bullet can spin

You know how hard it gets in Mississippi
You know how dry it gets in the summer sun
The dustclouds swirl all down the Delta
I just hope that I don't die 'fore the harvest comes

Black clouds gathering on the edge of town
But no rain's gonna fall on us
Crows rise and fall in a distant field
[Birthdates?] are beating for all of us

I thought I heard the angel of death overhead
But it's only the cropduster's plane
Crows rise and fall like the beating of wings
Lord, send us freedom and rain

You know how hard it gets in Mississippi
You know how dry it gets in the summer sun
The dustclouds swirl all down the Delta
I just hope I don't die 'fore the harvest comes

This song is my memory of the Sixties. I'm going to speak for five minutes tonight, and I want to do two things. First, I'm going to tell you why I believe that the decade that we don't know how to pronounce—it's kind of like the Artist Formerly Known as Prince, this is the decade that will be known as the double aughts or the two zeros, whatever we're going to call it, the decade that comes after the year 2000—why I believe this decade will be more powerful and will accomplish far more than the Sixties ever did. And secondly, as someone who was sixteen in 1960, who was twenty-six in 1970, as someone who was a member of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, the militant student wing of the

Southern civil rights movement, I want to say very briefly what I think was wrong with the Sixties. We've heard a great deal about the accomplishments and the power and the beauty of much of what happened in the Sixties. But I think, as several speakers have said, we cannot romanticize, and we have to have critical and analytical tools to look at what happened in the Sixties, and to understand some of the failings of the Sixties as well. So I'm going to suggest seven things that were wrong with those of us who worked in the Sixties, that I think in many cases are no longer wrong with people who are between the ages of ten and twenty-five today.

First, race. In the Sixties, we saw race through the lens of segregation, but we did not understand racism. These are very different ways of looking at what happens to race in the world. Seeing the problem as segregation, which is to say, a legal system, we didn't understand the ways which structure and power operated against people of color in this country. Therefore, the strategies that we pursued didn't have the depth and the power that they could and should have had, and we were caught surprised when forty years later, the problems of racism, in my belief, are as ingrained and as violent in this country as they were forty years ago.

Gender. Although much of the work and in fact, probably most of the work of the civil rights movement was done by women, although much of the most visionary leadership came from women, like Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker, the power and position within the civil rights movement was taken by men. The civil rights movement therefore did not recognize and honor the role of women, or structure women and women's vision at a level of power into the long-range goals of the movement, nor did it deal with the issues that women face. If you follow, for example, the arguments made by a very fine North Carolina historian, Sara Evans, from Rich Square, North Carolina, the experiences of both African-American and white women within the Southern civil rights movement, of discrimination and exclusion, were part of what started this wave of the women's movement that we still experience and feel the power of today. I want to be clear here. I'm talking not simply about

the North Carolina Fund, but the very broad arena of social change in the 1960s.

Third, sexual orientation. Although many of the warriors of the civil rights movement and other movements of the Sixties were lesbian, bi-sexual, and gay, this was only known within that community. There was no recognition, there was no public reward, it was a secret that was not spoken about in a public way. There also, the leadership, the power of the contributions, were not recognized in terms of who people were as well, and the issues that were raised were not dealt with.

Fourth, in terms of economics. I think Dr. King said it best, that people earned the right to sit in a lunch counter, and discovered they didn't have enough money to buy a cheeseburger. That sums up the misunderstandings that we had about the terrible economic divisions that were not simply a measure of race, but of the way that the economic system within this country functioned to the exclusion and the detriment of people of color, of women, and of many other people as well. This inequality has in many cases deepened and grown harsher over the years. But it was our failure to understand this and to build this into our strategies. We had an analysis that was based on race alone, and it did not take into account class or gender, and it therefore led us to create strategies that were less than what they could have been.

Fifth, the international aspect. A number of people within the movements of the Sixties understood how much what happened in this country was inspired by the anti-colonial movements in Africa. But we did not understand the international political and economic role which our own country played. Therefore, we didn't understand the context in which much of this was taking place. Again, our strategies were less than they could have been because of this.

Sixth, organizations. The civil rights movement was a movement. The movements that began later in the Sixties—the anti-war movement, the women's movement—were movements, and we did not understand the power of grassroots organization. While there are

organizations that are at a broader and larger scale, such as some of those talked about this afternoon that remain from the Sixties, there are almost no grassroots organizations. In building movement, which is necessary and wonderful, we did not understand how to create permanent and powerful grassroots and community organizations through which poor people, people of color, women, other people who were excluded from power, could have a base from which to struggle for their piece of democracy.

Seventh and last, the environment. There wasn't one in the Sixties—there was no environment. We rode down the road to freedom pitching Coke cans and beer bottles out the window. We had no sense of what we as movement activists were doing to the natural world in which we lived. And yet despite what I think were some serious failings and lacks on our part, the Sixties were extraordinary, they were earthshaking, they were powerful, they were wonderful, they were visionary, and they created things that have changed life for the better, for many people, in this country and in other countries, at the same time that life is worse for many people.

We tend to forget, because those of us who are from the Sixties generations have all aged so gracefully, that the leadership of the Southern civil rights movement came primarily from people who were teenagers and in their early twenties. Even the famous names that we know today were eighteen and nineteen and twenty at the time. This is a piece of history that has to be remembered. So when we ask ourselves what's going to happen in the double aughts, what's going to happen in the generation that starts with the year 2000, the answer comes from the leadership of people who are now in the sixth and seventh and eighth grade, of people who are now in junior and senior high school. The senior statespeople will be people who are now in or recently out of college. The good news, and why I want to say in closing tonight that that decade will be far more far-reaching, powerful, and able to accomplish far more, is the people who are tonight ten, twelve, sixteen and eighteen years old. I think that the failings of the Sixties generation, the things that we did not yet understand or

know, are much better known and understood by people who are now the age that we were then. I'm not saying that there is a perfect understanding or attitudes around race and gender and sexual orientation and the environment and international issues or organizational issues, but I am saying that people of that age today are starting at a place far beyond where we ever got in the Sixties, and are therefore capable of providing a level of leadership that people like me and the friends I worked with thirty-some years ago simply weren't capable of doing because of a lack of understanding. So this is what to me is the good news: I believe that the generation that is now between the ages of ten and twenty-five is simply the best generation of leadership that we have ever seen in this country. It's more diverse, far-reaching, self-conscious, strategic, and has a better understanding of fundamental issues. This to me is the good news. Even as we appropriately honor the work of everyone who was a part of the Sixties, let's also analyze and understand what the past means that we bring into the future. Let's also be honest about our failures and our shortcomings. There's no need to apologize for them, but let's use them to understand what we didn't do, as well as what we did do. Let's count on those who today make up the leadership of the movement of which we are all a part. Let's honor the insights and experience and leadership that they bring.

[singing] Old fighter, you sure took it on the chin
 Where'd you ever get the strength to stand?
 Never giving up or giving in
 You know I just want to shake your hand

Because people like you help people like me go on, go on
 Because people like you help people like me go on, go on

Old battler, with a scar for every town
 Thought you were no better than the rest
 Your warrior colors every way but down
 All you ever gave us was your best

(chorus)

Old dreamer, with a world in every thought
 Where'd you get the vision to keep on
 You sure gave back as good as what you got

I hope that when my time is almost gone, they'll say that people like me...

(chorus)

[applause]

J. B. BUXTON: My name is J. B. Buxton, and I'm a member of this working group, and I work with an organization that advocates for public education. To work in public education is to understand the fundamental degree to which children's opportunities are often governed by the place of their birth, if not their residence. To work in public education is to understand the absolute need to always be involved in responsible action which affects people's abilities to live lives of meaning and productivity. For many people in this room, a person like Frank Porter Graham inspired them to be involved in the lives of people. For others it was Martin or Malcolm or Fannie Lou Hamer, or Bobby Seale or W. W. Finlater just down the road here, or maybe folks closer to home and closer to the community who helped inspire a commitment to be involved in the lives of others and to advocate for the needs of your fellow people. For people of my generation, there is someone at the national level who can do that for us. While many of this generation cry out for leadership, cry out for the kind of progressive agendas that have been laid out by people in this room in the past, there are in fact leaders that we can look to.

I want to introduce a leader tonight who, at a time when people are increasingly frustrated by what they see as a lack of quality in our political life, a lack of restlessness and energy, and often discouraged, at times reasonably or unreasonably losing faith in some of our political leaders, there is a member of the North Carolina delegation in whom no one, and I guarantee you no one on either side of the aisle loses faith in terms of her vigor and purposefulness, and in her advocacy for issues that matter to North Carolinians, whether it be in health care or education or housing. That person is Representative Eva Clayton. We're honored to have her here tonight, I am deeply appreciative that she is here. Folks, please welcome Representative Eva Clayton. [applause]

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