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Walter Jones Performs Portrayal of Martin Luther King

By Eddie Davis

Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, but recently many Durham area residents have heard a voice that comes very close to duplicating the sound and flavor of the real civil rights leader. Walter L. Jones, of Easton, Pennsylvania, has performed a portrayal of Dr. King at various locations in the area over the past few weeks.

Hundreds by now have seen Jones' presentations which included several of King's more famous speeches and writings, such as "I Have A Dream", "I've Been To The Mountaintop", and "Letter From A Birmingham Jail". Jones performed "Dream" at the Rock quarry Music Festival several weeks ago and the "Mountaintop" speech recently at St. Mark's Church.

Although both presentations were impressive, the speech at St. Mark's seemed to be more authentic. Much of that authenticity probably had to do with the setting. King just seems to be better received at a church. Another reason probably has to do with the overabundant use of the "Dream" speech. It was refreshing to hear some of the variety of King's speeches.

Many people have recited the speeches of Dr. King. The aspect that makes Jones' presentations different is the research that has gone into capturing the mannerisms, the gestures, the tone quality, and the speech patterns of the Nobel Prize-winning leader.

In a pre-performance interview, Jones said, "I met King in Chicago in the early sixties and began to admire him greatly. I got all of the recordings of his speeches and read anything that I could get hands on that was by or about him."

With a theater background and some experience as a comic/impressionist, Jones said that he began to imitate the voice of King. But at this time, "I was only using the imitations because I admired the man for what he was doing for our people", said Jones. It was not until the assassination of King that Jones began performing to audiences.



WALTER L. JONES

"After the sniper shot and killed Dr. King in Memphis on April 4, 1968, I decided to use my theatrical experience and training to keep the memory of King and his works alive. I soon began to appear in churches, schools, and prisons in the Philadelphia area," said Jones.

According to the actor, the performances then were not like the ones he gives today. "I was only reading the speeches

then. I had not yet captured the essence of King's personality. That took much more time and practice." And practice is just what Jones did. For several years he would work days as a photographer and study or perform King at night.

The work was hard, but rewarding. "I realized," he said, "that much of the study came easier because of the similarity of my background

and that of King."

Both men were born in Georgia. Although Jones moved to the North as a child, he said that he had first-hand experiences with much of the discrimination and oppression that were experienced by King and most other blacks in the South. "I witnessed lynch mobs, police brutality," Jones said, "and other overt and subtle examples of racism."

Luther King, Mrs. Coretta Scott King.

As his reputation grew, Jones found himself being more and more in demand. He ventured beyond the state of Pennsylvania for performances. Soon he found himself traveling up and down the Eastern Seaboard.

Jones and his wife, Jackie, expanded the performance into a 90-minute drama that included lights, sound, and props. He said, "The highlight of my career thus far came this year on the 14th anniversary of Dr. King's death. I was invited to appear and perform with Alex Haley at the Martin Luther King Shrine in Memphis."

Since that time, Jones has had engagements on radio and television. He recently appeared on a syndicated television program with Durham evangelist, Shirley Caesar. In fact, it was through Ms. Caesar that Jones was introduced to the Durham community. He appeared this summer at the annual Caesar Crusade here in Durham.

At St. Mark Church, Jones gave the audience a look at the fear that traveled constantly with Martin Luther King. He brought to life the threats of harm to the King family made by enemies of equality. As in any good production, the audience soon began to use its imagination and conjured up images of the King personality.

Jones' voice was very convincing, but it was the gestures, the throwing of the head, and the emphatic waving of the arms that caused the attentive audience to nod with approval from beginning to end. He received a standing ovation at the end of the performance.

After his presentation, Jones and his wife circulated a petition encouraging the Congress to pass legislation that would make January 15, King's birthday, a national holiday.

Walter Jones' portrayal of Martin Luther King will be seen and heard by many in the future. It behooves any person who admired King to experience the talent and art of this very skillful performer.