

Chavis Believes Civil Rights Movement Still Alive

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Staff Contributor

Reverend Ben Chavis represents a unique Black leader to emerge from the civil rights movement of the sixties. Among the last generation of Blacks to be born and mature under the old "separate-but-equal" system, at twenty-nine, Chavis can freely recall the rugged realities and imposing indignities of the late Jim Crow South.

Born seventy-odd years after radical Reconstruction gave way to a North-South detente less concerned with the fundamentals of human rights, especially racial equality, Chavis became involved in civil rights at age fourteen. The then high school freshman and CORE worker joined the first sit-ins in a successful attempt to break the grip of Jim Crow (Southern styled apartheid) at the lunch counters in Greensboro and Durham. After fifteen years of civil rights work in the South, Chavis is now a co-defendant with the Wilmington 10 and faces a possible thirty-four year sentence in North Carolina prisons.

Q. Would you like to start by telling us something of yourself.

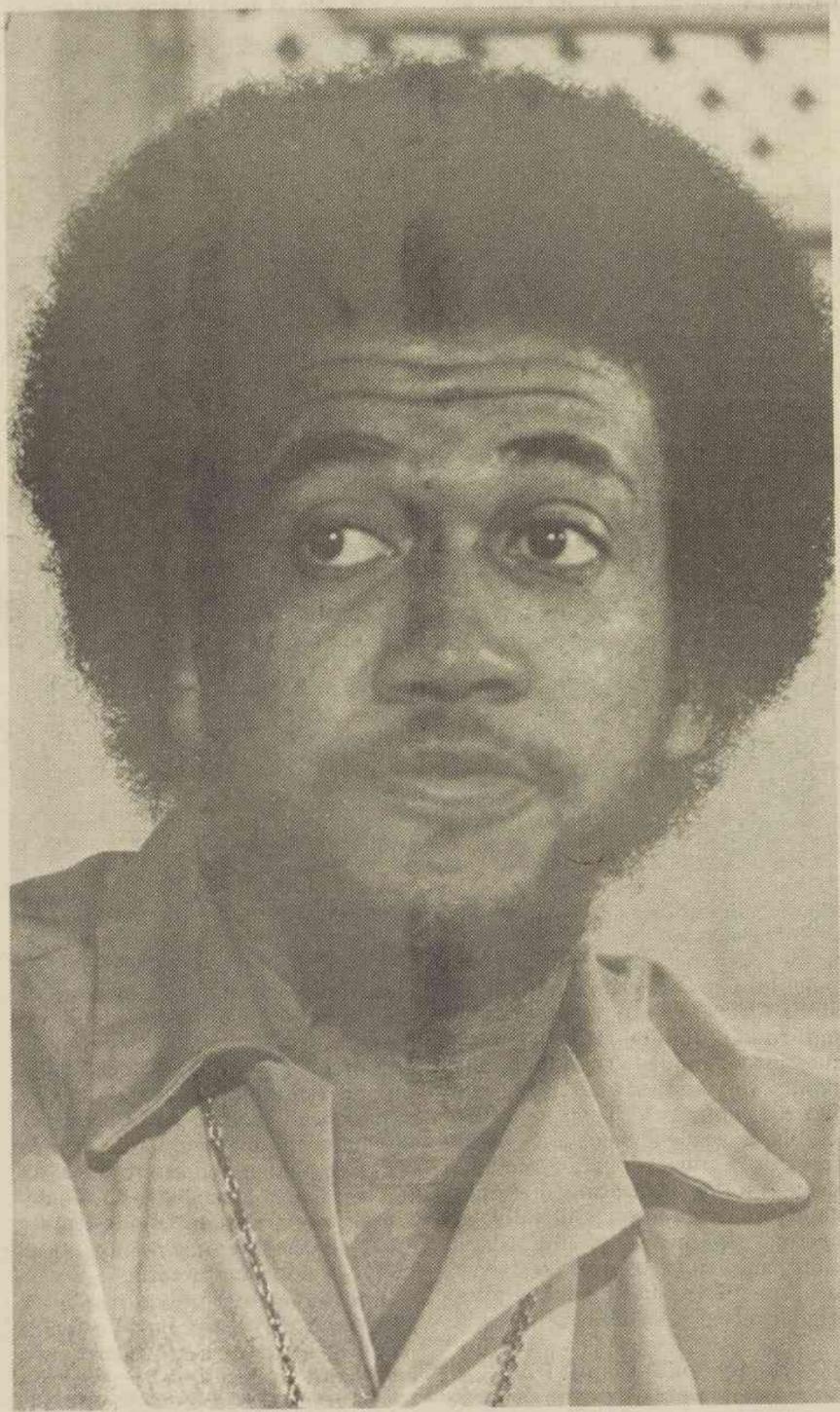
"I am Reverend Ben Chavis, one of the co-defendants in the Wilmington 10 case. I am a native of Oxford, North Carolina and twenty-nine years old. I've been involved in the civil rights movement in the South for the last fourteen years. I previously worked with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP and for the last seven years I've been working for the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice which is headquartered out of New York.

But I was mainly working for the commission in the South and that's what led me to go to Wilmington, North Carolina in 1971 and subsequently led to frame-up charges which then led to the Wilmington 10 being sentenced to 282 years imprisonment in North Carolina.

Q. As a product of the sixties, are you personally satisfied with the "progress" of the overall Black situation in America?

CHAVIS. No, I'm very displeased. From being involved in the sixties and from personally witnessing the gains that we made in the sixties through the struggle, I think that we are in worse shape today than we were in the sixties.

First of all, in terms of the vitality of the movement, it's at a very low ebb now. I don't think the movement is dead; some people say the civil rights movement is dead



Ben Chavis, a Wilmington 10 co-defendant on why he and colleagues are imprisoned: because we fought against racial discrimination and for the rights of all people.

now. I think it's alive, but it's certainly at a very low ebb.

The momentum is down, the movement has decreased in terms of numbers, and that's for a whole lot of reasons why the movement decelerated instead of accelerating. One of the most important factors contributing to the decline of the civil rights movement was the assassination on April 4, 1968 of Martin Luther King, Jr. Since that time, there has been a week by week, month by month, year by year decline in activism around Black issues.

I guess it's one out of fear, one out of apathy on part of Black people supporting Black organizations and movement organizations.

A third and real factor is governmental repression of the civil rights movement. I think we're finding out now that even some part of the government may have had something to do with the assassination of Martin Luther King. There have been well documented cases of prosecutor-police organizations — particularly in the South, framing up many civil rights organizations and civil rights activists. And that's one reason why I'm in prison today, not because a grocery store burned down in Wilmington in 1971. The reason why we're in prison is because we were fighting racial discrimination and because we stood up and took a vocal stand and still stand vocally for the rights

of all people, Black and white. That's why they're trying to keep us in prison.

Q. So you are saying that there is a Black movement but it's at the point of apathy?

CHAVIS. Right. It's at the point of apathy. There's a lot of fear. And I think that one of the things we need to engage in as Black people is a period of self-criticism — Why this apathy has set in?

I think the state of our oppression is not only the white man's fault, but we have to accept some of the responsibility as Black people, in terms of leadership and how sincerely we support the few organizations that are still alive. And if we are to survive as a people and if we are to gain ultimate liberation, then we're going to have to go back to the sixties and do some of the things we did in the sixties all over again. But this time keep the momentum going. Statistically and socio-economically, we as Black Americans are in worse shape today than we were ten years ago, and part of it is our own fault.

Q. How do you feel having grown up in the South under segregation in a small town affected your outlook?

CHAVIS: I think if I had grown up in some other part of the country, I wouldn't have become as involved as I did and I am now. I grew up in small town Oxford in a rural tobacco economy, agriculture situation where there was gross exploitation even on the menial level, where you had hundreds of Black families just trapped on still plantations, harvesting crops every year for the man and still having no money.

And then, when I grew up, I remember when I couldn't sit downstairs at the local movies. I remember when I couldn't use the public library. I remember when I couldn't sit down at the lunch counter in Roses, Eagles, or at the five and dime store. I remember I had to use a special 'colored' water fountain, use a special 'colored' bathroom.

And all that affected me at a very early age and when I got around twelve years old, then thirteen, I decided that if I saw an opportunity to challenge some of this I was going to join. And I did. Back in the early sixties when they had some of the first sit-in movements in Greensboro, and some in Durham, I joined CORE (Congress for Racial Equality) and have been involved ever since.

Q. Was this the point where you became active in civil rights, during the sixties?

CHAVIS: Right. During the early

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