

To Die for the People

The Murder of Fred Hampton recalls a dark chapter in American history.

BY DAVID WALKER

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REVIEW

By 1969, Fred Hampton, leader of the Illinois Black Panther Party, was one of the most important and influential civil-rights leaders in America. The U.S. government thought he was one of the most dangerous.

Under Hampton's leadership, the Chicago-based party had grown into the largest and most powerful of all Panther chapters, operating successful programs such as *Serve the People*, which included a breakfast program for children, a free health clinic and political education classes.

Hampton had come dangerously close to recruiting the Blackstone Rangers into the ranks of the Panthers, which would have politicized the notorious street gang and transformed the party into a small army. And with key leaders of the Black Panthers either dead or in jail, Hampton had managed to move quickly through the ranks, until he was a key figure in the national party. At age 20, Hampton was charismatic, personable and outspoken, all of which, according to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, made him a threat to domestic security.

In 1968, producer Mike Gray and director Howard Alk began filming a documentary about Hampton and the Illinois Black Panther Party. The film began as a straightforward portrait of the dynamic leader, and the first half of it consists primarily of rare footage of Hampton speaking at rallies. Even though the grainy black-and-white footage is sometimes out of focus or overexposed, from these clips it's easy to see the power Hampton possessed. He was part militant revolutionary, part street philosopher, and part fire-and-brimstone preacher.

But it's what happened next, when Hampton's life came to an abrupt, tragic ending, that turned Gray and Alk's film into such a revolutionary document.

On the morning of Dec. 4, 1969, 14 Chicago police officers broke into Hampton's apartment under the auspices of serving a warrant to confis-

the head by two police officers at point-blank range; he was killed along with fellow Panther Mark Clark.

News of the raid spread rapidly through the media, with detailed accounts provided by the police and state Attorney General Edward Hanrahan. Just hours later, Gray and Alk began filming at the scene of the crime, and what they saw and captured on film directly contradicted news reports.

Chicago newspapers published photos of doors and walls, riddled with bullets, along with claims that Panther Party members had fired at police from inside the apartment. But what the film proved was that the bullets had been fired by police weapons, from outside the apartment. The police claimed the

Panthers had fired the first shots, but what the film revealed was that only one bullet came from a party member's weapon—the result of an involuntary muscle spasm after Clark was shot. The other 99 shots all came from police guns.

The Murder of Fred Hampton was instrumental in helping discredit police reports that were intended to cover up a cold-blooded killing. What the film doesn't reveal, because the facts didn't come to light until years later, was that Hampton's head of security, William O'Neal, was a paid FBI informant. O'Neal had drugged Hampton and the others the night of the raid after providing the police with a detailed map of the apartment. The raid and killings were part of the FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program, and Hampton's murder was part of a plan spelled out in a FBI memo that was designed to "prevent the rise of a black 'messiah' who could unite and electrify the militant black antinationalist movement."

This week marks the 35th anniversary of the murder of Fred Hampton. Gray and Alk's revolutionary film, which rarely screens in public, is showing in Portland this weekend in conjunction with *Louder than Words*, a touring photo exhibit curated by Bill Jennings, a former Panther. The photo exhibit will be at Reflections Bookstore (330 N Killingsworth St., 288-9003) on Saturday, Dec. 4. On Sunday, the exhibit will move to Reed College, where former Panther Billy X and Yippie founder Stew Albert will be speaking.

The Murder of Fred Hampton
Reed College,
Vollum Lecture
Hall, 3203 SE
Woodstock Blvd.
8 pm Sunday,
Dec. 5. \$3 sug-
gested dona-
tion.

"I believe I'm going to be able to die doing the things I was born for. I believe I'm going to die high off the people. I believe I'm going to die a revolutionary in the international revolutionary proletarian struggle." — Fred Hampton





SATURDAY DECEMBER 4th 6pm
on the 35th anniversary of Fred Hampton's murder
former BLACK PANTHER revolutionary & activist BILLY X
presents the LOUDER THAN WORDS photo exhibit!
It shows through stunning photography the REAL
Black Panther Party and it's survival programs.
BILLY X and former Portland Panthers will be
present to answer questions. This event is FREE!



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