

Bob Adelman's best shot

'I hid behind a tree to keep my camera dry. Later, I gave Martin Luther King a print'

Interview by Leo Benedictus

Thursday January 3, 2008



'Beauty out of so much pain' ... Bob Adelman's photograph of civil rights protesters in 1963. Photograph: Thames & Hudson

In the spring of 1963, I hitched a ride to Birmingham, Alabama, and checked into the hotel where Martin Luther King was staying. A lot of attention was being focused on the town, and I knew something terribly important was happening. Most of the organisers of the civil rights demonstrations were still very accessible then. I actually had breakfast with King a couple of times. The organisers proposed getting high school students involved, since they were running out of demonstrators. Their parents were consulted and the consensus was that the children had the least to lose in terms of reprisals, and the most to gain in terms of future opportunities. So thousands of young people filed into Kelly Ingram Park - and were promptly arrested. They went to jail gaily, which was weird; but they filled the cells, so the police were paralysed as more people flooded into the downtown area. At some point, the police lost their temper and brought out the dogs and fire hoses.

The hoses were so powerful that people were knocked down and propelled 15 or 20ft. But instead of running away, some began to hold on to each other and stand up. I was hiding behind a tree - to protect my person and keep my camera dry. I managed to shoot several rolls with a Nikon F and a telephoto lens, even though I was appalled, frightened and very upset. I tried to find that moment when the water and the people were both readable and formed some sort of a pattern. Afterwards I went up to Doc - which is what we called Dr King - and gave him a print of the picture. He said he was startled that beauty could come out of so much pain.

Curriculum vitae

Born: Brooklyn, New York, 1930

Studied: "I studied under Alexei Brodovitch in New York. He was not a kindly, nice man, but he could really help people find their way."

Inspirations: "My great hero was Lewis Hine, a wonderful photographer, very idealistic."

High point: "Every time I take a wonderful picture I'm high for a week. Winning a Guggenheim was also a big high."

Low point: "When Dr King was killed."

Pet hate: "The old dependence on chemistry. With digital, you can just look at the camera."

Dream subject: "There are many late, great friends of mine I'd love to see again and photograph: Michael Harrington, the social critic, and Ralph Ellison, the writer, for example."

Bob Adelman's Mine Eyes Have Seen: Bearing Witness to the Struggle for Civil Rights is published by Thames and Hudson. Photographs on exhibit at Westwood Gallery, New York City.