



Bob Adelman

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Interviewed by Tavis Smiley

Bob Adelman initially planned to be a lawyer. Instead, he channeled his passion for justice into photography. The world-renowned photojournalist has covered social and political issues for a wide variety of publications, including *The New York Times Magazine* and London's *Sunday Times Magazine*. His photographs are in major museums and have been exhibited at the Smithsonian. Adelman has also written and/or produced numerous books, including *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, a chronicle of the civil rights struggle.

Tavis: Bob Adelman and his camera had a front row seat to the civil rights movement in the 1960s, along the way capturing some of the most powerful and enduring images of the era. A collection of his work is now called "Mine Eyes Have Seen: Bearing Witness to the Struggle for Civil Rights." Mr. Adelman, what an honor to have you on the program.

Bob Adelman: It's my privilege.

Tavis: Let me start by just saying thank you for your work and bringing us these pictures over the many years. How did you - there are a number of photos that we're going to show throughout our conversation, but let me start by asking how does a White guy get involved at the movement in this level?

Adelman: Well, I grew up during the Eisenhower years when there wasn't any politics, and I was very idealistic. And when the Black students started to sit down, it seemed like that was real politics, something could change, something might be improved, and I was very, very drawn to this issue.

Why? Well, as a young - about 15 or 16, I used to sneak into Birdland and I'd see Billie Holiday and Miles Davis and Charlie Parker, and I never had the idea that Blacks were inferior. I thought they were from another planet, somehow extraordinary, special people. And the fact they were badly treated just struck me as the most un-American thing I knew about.

Tavis: What did you think you could do, then, by training your camera lens on it?

Adelman: Well, I had a strong feeling about documenting it, and I hoped by photographing it I might help change it. If people saw what was going on they wouldn't accept it any longer, and that's really what did happen. The images of police brutality in Birmingham changed the nation. John Kennedy was the first president - imagine, it's 100 years later, the first president that said that segregation was wrong. Nobody had said that before.

Tavis: Speaking of segregation, tell me your recollections about covering the movement itself. So you head down South to start covering the movement. Take me back.

Adelman: Well, I was just a young photographer and I was looking for something really worth photographing. And as soon as I heard of the students sitting in at the counters, I said, "This is something I've got to get into." And I joined up with CORE and SNIC, which were civil rights pressure groups, and I became the photographer for the movement, really.

Tavis: How does a White guy get that job covering the movement as opposed to a brother?

Adelman: Well, I always like to say I never took any work away from a brother. It just wasn't a job (laughter) that any brother should have - it was bad enough for me. But the ideal person to do all of this stuff probably would have been a very dainty White, southern aristocrat who could have talked to the people properly.

But it was very dangerous work, and for a Black photographer, probably impossible. There was a wonderful fellow, Moneta Sleet, who occasionally appeared, but he couldn't regularly cover it.

Tavis: Yeah, Mr. Sleet not just a great photographer, as you know, but a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer. Mr. Adelman references a wonderful Black photographer named Moneta Sleet Jr. who worked for "Ebony" and "Jet" for many, many years. And we don't have the photo in this book because it's obviously not his photo, but you'll recall the photo that he won the Pulitzer Prize for.

The photo of Bernice King, Dr. King's youngest child, laying on her mother's lap at the funeral service of her father. That picture was taken by Mr. Sleet, who went on to win a Pulitzer Prize for that photo. Just passed away a couple years ago, but a great photographer he was.

Adelman: Good man, good man.

Tavis: Yeah, yeah. Speaking of Dr. King, there's a great - first of all, Jonathan, show me the cover of the book again. On the cover of the book, speaking of Dr. King, a picture of Doc and Coretta, of course, both now no longer with us, but a gorgeous cover of Dr. King doing what he did best, along with Coretta, marching. But beyond the book's cover, inside the book, some wonderful photos of Dr. King. As we show these photos, tell me your relationship with Doc.

Adelman: Well, I met him at the Gaston Motel. I had breakfast with him.

Tavis: A. G. Gaston, yeah. (Laughter)

Adelman: Soon to be bombed. I think it was bombed more than three - they used to call Birmingham, "Bombingham," with good reason, there were so many. That's a wonderful picture of Dr. King. You see something of his spirituality and there he is marching into Montgomery at the end of the summer march. It was extraordinary.

Tavis: What'd you make of him as a man, your relationship with him?

Adelman: Well, he was - first of all, he was a person who gave you his full attention when you talked to him. He believed in personalism and he thought all of us were children of God and worthy of dignity and respect. They couldn't let him walk out of his office because he'd stop and talk to everybody along the way who came up to him.

And when I took the Birmingham picture, well, I met him in Birmingham and the next time I saw him I brought him a copy of that water picture in Birmingham, which became an emblem of the beloved community - people standing up and resisting and not being intimidated any longer. And I gave it to him and he looked at it for a long moment and he turned to me and he said he was startled that out of so much pain, some beauty came.

He would just talk like that. And when he was in the churches talking, he spoke with such elevated discourse. He was a product of 300 years of culture, of the church, the litany, and the way he spoke. His speech was very, very complicated, but people understood. They felt it somehow, because people really did respond. And I often saw people kneeling down when he went calling out the lord, because he continued - he finished Lincoln's work.

Tavis: Let me go back, speaking of Lincoln - perfect segue, and I thank you. Let's go to the photo of Dr. King giving his speech at the March on Washington. I am fascinated by this photo. I've seen it many times but I'm fascinated by it because - the first question I wanted to ask you, as I will now, how did you get so close? How did you get that access?

Adelman: Well first of all, I was down there as a volunteer - I didn't have any press credentials. But everybody knew me, and I guess the rest of the press was covering the event. And I knew that he was the great orator that he

was and he was the last speaker, and so I kind of inched up and got real close and nobody bothered me. And there was nobody else there, but -

Tavis: Wait, what do you mean there was nobody else there? This is the biggest march that the country has ever seen, and you walk up without press credentials, (laughter) a White guy, and get this close, and there aren't a hoard of photographers in that area?

Adelman: No, no, no. No, they were all covering it from the - covering the massive event and everybody else.

Tavis: You were smart, then. You went right down where the action was; right to that podium.

Adelman: Well, I think you have to have an instinct for the flame, like the moth. And of course he was my hero, and I knew this was going to be the great moment. And I took probably two or three rolls to get just that - that he's saying, "Free at last, free at last."

Tavis: We all know the story now, but you were close enough to actually see this. Dr. King starts out that day giving his speech from prepared remarks.

Adelman: Yes.

Tavis: And if you listen to the tape of Dr. King giving that speech, you can hear in the background a woman at a particular point in the speech say out loud, "Tell 'em 'bout the dream, Martin, tell 'em 'bout the dream." That person, of course, is Mahalia Jackson saying to Dr. King, "Doc, tell them 'bout the dream." You saw him, because you write about it, take his speech after hearing Mahalia Jackson say that to him, put it in his pocket, and just start freestyling.

Adelman: Yes.

Tavis: You were close enough to see him put his paper in his pocket.

Adelman: Yes, yes. Well, he was an extraordinary speaker and this was the greatest moment of his life and certainly one of the greatest moments in the nation's life. And he just spoke from his heart and spoke - well, the dream is the American dream, and it's also a demand for the promissory note that had been made at the end of the Civil War, when America had fought itself and decided that all men were equal but did not deliver that promise.

Tavis: These are some great photos. They were taken by a wonderful photographer, by Bob Adelman; the essays here written by Charles Johnson. The book again is called "Mine Eyes Have Seen: Bearing Witness to the Struggle for Civil Rights." Mr. Adelman, an honor to have you on the program.

Adelman: My pleasure.

Tavis: Thank you, sir.

From his celebrated conversations with world figures, to his work to inspire the next generation of leaders, as a broadcaster, author, advocate and philanthropist, Tavis Smiley continues to be an outstanding voice for change. Newsweek profiled him as one of the "20 people changing how Americans get their news" and dubbed him one of the nation's "captains of the airwaves." Smiley hosts the late night television talk show, *Tavis Smiley*, on PBS, and his radio show, *The Tavis Smiley Show*, is distributed by Public Radio International (PRI). Smiley is the first American ever to simultaneously host signature talk shows on both public television and public radio. Smiley, who started his career as an aide to the late Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley, also offers political commentary twice weekly on the Tom Joyner Morning Show. In addition, he has authored eleven books. Smiley made publishing history when the book he edited, *The Covenant with Black America*, reached #1 on The New York Times Best Seller list. His latest book is *What I Know for Sure: My Story of Growing Up in America* (Doubleday). In 2007, Smiley moderated and executive produced the Democratic and Republican All-American Presidential Forums on PBS. This marked the first time in history that a panel exclusively comprised of journalists of color was represented in primetime television conducting a presidential debate. The mission of his nonprofit organization—Tavis Smiley Foundation—is to enlighten, encourage and empower Black youth. Tavis Smiley Presents, a subsidiary of The Smiley Group, Inc., brings ideas and people together through symposiums, seminars, forums and town hall meetings. DeWayne Wickham in USA Today declares that Smiley is "arguably the nation's most influential black journalist."