



DVD Review: *What We Want, What We Believe - The Black Panther Party Library*

Written by [El Bicho](#)

Published November 27, 2006

The Black Panther Party was considered one of the most dangerous militant groups in America back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and I never really understood why. To be honest, I haven't come across much information regarding the BPP, with the exception of a few documentaries about those times where for brief moments the Panthers were mentioned.

Here on a four-DVD set, Roz Payne has graciously given us a chance to look closer into this movement with footage from Newsreel Films, the unofficial documenters of not only the Black Panther Party, but the whole leftist revolution that was breaking through during some of the most violent times in this country's history. *What We Want, What We Believe* isn't a documentary, but a living history preserved on film to show future generations how citizens united in a common cause can get the attention of the U.S. government.

The first disc contains footage from Newsreel Films, who became the default documenters for the BPP, and has interviews with founding members such as Stokely Carmichael, Bobby Seale, and Huey P. Newton. The first segment is called "Off the Pigs," a rally chant used at BPP demonstrations; it, along with the next two segments, "Mayday" and "Repression," deals with the filmed events that the Panthers put together: demonstrations, speaking appearances, and the Breakfast Program, which gained mainstream media recognition as being one of the improvements that the Panthers had brought about to their communities. Feeding the poor always runs well with the press, as long as they make their money on it. The Panthers did it for the kids, and not for the praise.

The second segment has a great interview with party member, Field Marshall Donald Cox. Payne gives the retired general almost two hours of airtime here, and it is well worth it. He gives a great view from the inside of the party, and runs down certain reasons why the BPP came about. One of my favorite parts happens as Cox is explaining why the Panthers carried guns. He explains that, not only did they have the right as American citizens, but that the cops at that time were targeting black males and that if the cops had gun "...we have guns too, and if you're gonna shoot at us, we gonna shoot back motherfuckers." As the statement finishes, Cox brings a joint to his lips and takes a big drag. This Kat has got my vote...for anything. The

final segment of disc one ends with the 35th Reunion of the BPP, which shows interviews with members past and present.

The highlight of disc two is the interview with FBI agent William A Cohendet, known as WAC due to his initials on the reports that were filled and processed by him to send back to Hoover, who was anxiously waiting in back in D.C. WAC's reports became famous not because of the great intelligence that the FBI was gathering on the BPP, but because the way WAC had written them. He created some of the most humorous federal reports ever because he and his team had come to realize that the Panthers were not so dangerous, and like every revolutionist party, the infighting and paranoid attacks on each other would be the un-doing of the Panthers.

Payne brings up the Counter Intelligence Program, or COINTELPRO, which the FBI used to deal with the Panthers. Seizing on the paranoia, the Federal Bureau of Intimidation added fuel to the fire by sending letters to party members that reinforced the paranoia that each member was out to get the other. The rest of disc two along with three and four contains more interviews with other FBI agents and with the filmmakers at Newsreel. Their stories lend truth to the so-called paranoia.

Additional material, like press releases and photos are included, along with a 12-page liner note pamphlet in which Payne explains her own involvement and what this DVD library is about. She also gives credit to those who helped the Panthers, such as the Falk family and Gail Dolgin.

For any of us who love history, this is an archive that should be added to the collection. Payne has given us one of the most in-depth looks at an organization whose ideals still can be felt. To be a black American back in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement was to be a target for any reason. The Panthers stood up for themselves as best as they could and they laid out some pretty radical plans for that time period, but what they really did is give empowerment to the black community and to show them they could stand up for themselves if they united together.

The Panthers legacy, as reported by the mainstream, and I hate saying mainstream, because other than murdering everything is mainstream, was one of imploding zealots who were mysteriously taken out of the picture for reasons still fuzzy in my mind. *What We Want, What We Believe* is a fantastic journey back to a time when equal rights were the name of the game, and the price to pay for them was very high. And if it were not for the efforts of Roz Payne and the brave folks at Newsreel, the true legacy of the Panthers would have probably faded away.

Written by Fumo Verde