

# 'King' Disappoints NBC and Controversy on Film's Accuracy Flares Up Among Black Activists

## Some Civil Rights Leaders

By ROGER WILKINS

**T**HE dramatization of the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ran into controversy over its accuracy even before the film was completed. Though that conflict was muted by the intervention of Dr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, it flared again this week when the three-part series was shown on NBC.

The reactions are emotional, in part because, to each of those who participated, the civil rights period and their memories of Dr. King are emotionally important.

The earlier argument arose when the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, a close associate of Dr. King through his life, and his successor as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, saw an early version of the script last summer and thought that Dr. King was portrayed as being cowardly. Mrs. King quickly squelched that objection by defending the film as a drama that should be judged as such, rather than as a documentary, which would have required literal fidelity to the details of the civil rights leader's life.

Some of those who were close to Dr. King are prepared to ignore what they perceive to be historical inaccuracies and omissions of individual and group contributions because they believe the film to be a moving and useful evocation of King the man and his movement. Others are simply enraged at what they take to be deliberate distortions of an intensely personal part of their own histories and an important part of the history of the struggle of black people in America.

The Rev. Hosea Williams, now executive director of Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, has issued a harsh statement charging that the film "distorts the true image of Dr. King" because it portrays him as weaker, less decisive and more fearful than Mr. Williams remembers.

But the United States representative of the United Nations, Andrew J. Young, who served as the executive director of the S.C.L.C. under Dr. King, thinks the film was a successful dramatic evocation of both the man and the period and was somewhat impatient with much of the criticism.

"Some of the critics didn't even watch the whole thing, and some of them weren't there during the whole period, and some of them have their own personal grievances about being left out," Ambassador Young said.

Marian Wright Edelman, director of the Children's Defense Fund, who worked in the 1960's for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in Mississippi and was for a time the only black civil rights lawyer in that state, agreed with Mr. Young.

"I was watching it with my 8-year-old son," she said, "and for the first time he began to understand what my

childhood had been. My reaction was very personal. It reminded me of how horrible the fear was in those Mississippi days. I had forgotten that, even though it is so recent, I was scared all the time. After the first night, I had nightmares that Andy Young got shot, that Julian Bond got shot, that everybody was getting shot."

Stanley D. Levison, a white New York lawyer whose role in Dr. King's movement is central to the film, believes that, while it has major distortions, its overall impact is powerful and beneficial. "I don't think the rest of the movement was portrayed adequately at all," he said. Nonetheless, Mr. Levison is clear about his judgment of the impact of the film:

"This is both the story of Martin King and of the courage of the black people. Martin wouldn't have had anybody to lead if that courage hadn't been there."

Others who were in the movement aren't so sure about the overall impact of the film. They think the fierce concentration on Dr. King has distorted it beyond redemption.

"Martin was a great man, there's no doubt about that," said one such person who requested anonymity, "but Bob Moses [an early S.N.C.C. leader] was a great man, too, and those S.N.C.C. kids were as brave as anybody on the face of the earth and the N.A.A.C.P. was always around bailing everybody out. That was part of Martin's story, too, and it shouldn't have been left out."

Dr. Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X, had a more specific complaint. She said she was "outraged" by the portrayal of her husband as a man whose "total philosophy was based on hate." She said it was not necessary in paying tribute to Dr. King to "disparage and defame the memories of other leaders," and she has announced her intention to sue NBC and the producers of the film.

Charlayne Hunter-Gault, now a television news analyst, who with Hamilton Holmes integrated the University of Georgia in 1961, is one of those who feels the omissions keenly.

"All of those people in S.N.C.C. were my friends," she said. "I don't see how S.N.C.C. could have been sold so short when obviously Julian's (Bond) presence in the film suggests S.N.C.C. was there in a significant way. It's mooshy, a mish mash."

Abby Mann, who wrote and developed the film, says he can understand the S.N.C.C. criticism, but he staunchly defends the general thrust of the film.

"What people don't understand," he said in a recent interview, "is that this is the kind of film Martin Luther King wanted. He told me, 'Don't make me a saint or people won't believe that they can go out and do what I did.'"

One of the film's major themes is the contribution of Mr. Levison, who dropped most of his private activities

to work with Dr. King but whose role has been clouded for many years by Federal Bureau of Investigation assertions that he was a Communist influence on the movement. In a recent interview, he went to great lengths to describe the major contributions made by other organizations. He noted that the Freedom Rides were initiated by the Congress of Racial Equality, that the murders of Michael Goodman, James Cheney and Mickey Schwerner, mentioned prominently in the film, occurred in a project substantially led by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and that the Atlanta department store desegregation program was also a S.N.C.C. project, while the film shows Julian Bond persuading Dr. King to lead it.

"While Martin King tapped the enormous wells of black courage," Mr. Levison said, "they were there because some organizations and movements had existed to keep that courage alive."

In a book, "Kennedy Justice," on the Justice Department during the years of Robert F. Kennedy's attorney generalship, Victor Navasky reported that it was the Levison connection that served as the justification for the F.B.I.'s taps on Dr. King's phones and the bugs in his hotel rooms.

Mr. Levison has rarely discussed the F.B.I. charges against him, but against the background of this film, he agreed to do so.

Choosing his words with great care, he said, "Usually if the question is put to me, 'Are you or were you ever a member of the Communist Party?' it evokes memories of the destructive days of the 50's, and my inclination is to reply that privacy is a right and that the question is improper."

"However, these are special circumstances, so my direct answer is, No—I was not nor am I now a member of the Communist Party, and if the F.B.I. could have proved it they would have

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# \$5 Million TV Documentary Show Is Regarded as a Rating Disaster

By CAREY WINFREY

**W**HATEVER its virtues as history or drama, NBC's \$5 million documentary drama about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a ratings disaster. "King," the six-hour special that ended a three-night run on NBC with its concluding episode Tuesday evening, scored nowhere near the viewership of "Roots," the ABC-TV dramatization of a black family's life in the slave era, whose success NBC executives had hoped to repeat.

On the average, two out of three Americans watching television were tuned to "Roots" when it was shown on eight successive evenings more than a year ago. Only one in five watched the first two episodes of "King" (overnight ratings in New York for the concluding episode showed only a slight increase to 21 per cent).

"Roots" had an average Nielsen rating of 44.9; the first two episodes of "King" averaged 13.8. In nearly every city on each of the evenings it was shown, "King" trailed offerings on the other networks.

NBC executives may commission surveys and conduct post-mortems to learn why "King" was watched by so few. But in a Harlem restaurant on a morning after, the answer seemed pretty clear.

"I know the story, I knew the man," said Nathan Watson, a retired longshoreman. "I figured they'd show all

this stuff about Montgomery, Alabama, and it would just turn my stomach: sickening dogs on people; turning water hoses on women and children. I didn't want to see it."

He left the restaurant briefly and returned with a framed photograph that showed him in the front rank of a march down Seventh Avenue after King's assassination in 1968.

Sarah Dostér, another patron of John's Place on Seventh Avenue at 138th Street, said that she began to watch the first episode Sunday night. "But then company came by," she said, "and they thought it would make them all weepy, so we went into another room while my husband watched it."

Gladys Bigger, the restaurant's cook and day-time bartender, said: "It made me very, very sad. I didn't feel as sad with 'Roots.' This was a very sad affair, and I don't like sadness too much. It also made me feel bitter, and I don't like to feel that way, either."

## 'Roots' Termed a Revelation

"'Roots' was a revelation," said Byron Coleman, an engineer, offering another explanation for its greater popularity. "And it was more romantic and had a more dramatic build-up." Still, Mr. Coleman thought that the "King" production had been very well done and particularly praised Paul Winfield's portrayal of Dr. King.

"He came across so well," he said of the actor. "I was in Washington for the March, and seeing it again, it came back with the same feeling I had then."

Joseph Kirkpatrick, the restaurant's owner, agreed that "Roots" had been more skillfully produced. But he said that 30 people, nearly as many as had watched "Roots," had been on hand each evening at his restaurant to watch "King."

Lisa Simmons, who said that she was too young to remember much about the civil rights movement of the early 60's, was one of those whom the program infuriated.

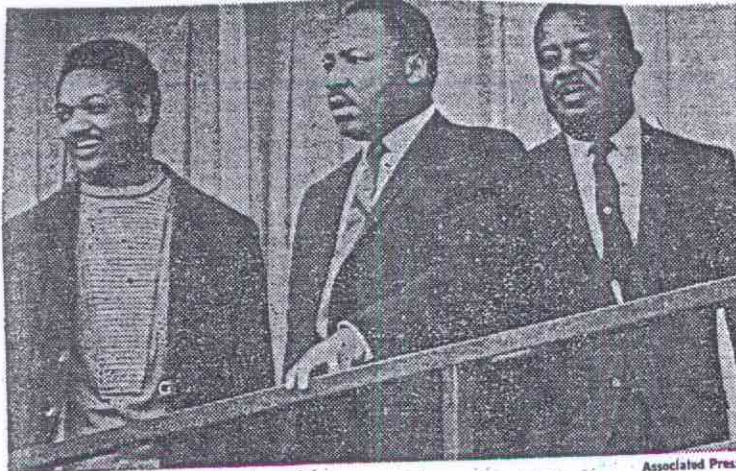
"I was getting mad watching it," she said. "It's lousy, the way they were treated down in the South. It's hard to believe that human beings could treat other human beings like that. We've come a long way."

But another patron, E. Adams, over-hearing Mrs. Simmons, disagreed with her about how far the nation has come since the events portrayed in "King."

He said that the program "made me realize that all the advances he had gotten together—as much as they were heralded at the time—none of it has been followed through," and added: "There've been laws, and they've found ways to evade them. As they say, you can't legislate the mind."

Asked to compare "King" to "Roots," Mr. Adams said, "One is just the continuation of the other."

been delighted to do so." "And," he concluded, "there's another major point. No one with a modicum of sense, particularly with the availability of the F.B.I. resources, could have concluded that a man with the force of intellect and fierce independence that Martin King had could have been dominated by anybody. It's really a product of racist contempt for the intellect of a black man. And if there had been any domination in the relationship, the greater probability was that he would influence and perhaps dominate me."



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with the Rev. Jesse Jackson, left, and the Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy in Memphis, April 3, 1968.