

InClass

A spotlight on faculty and their work

History is a part of becoming truly free.

—JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

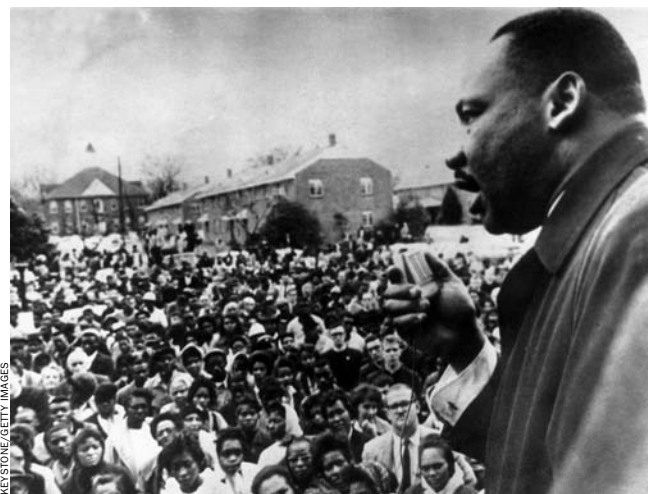
LEWIS BALDWIN REMEMBERS the day in 1965—Feb. 15, a Monday afternoon, chilly perhaps and just a bit cloudy, though some of those specifics are beginning to fade. But there

is still the mental picture of the crowd, right there in the heart of the Alabama black belt, where the Civil Rights Movement was then in its infancy. Several hundred African Americans, including himself, had gathered on the lawn of Antioch Baptist, coming together at the little wooden church to listen to the words of Martin Luther King. King was speaking that day in the village of Camden, telling the people who had turned out to hear him that they were living on the threshold of history.

For many it was a curious message even then, for they were residents of Wilcox County, just a few miles south of Selma, and this was a part of rural Alabama where the white minority had grown frightened and hard. The movement that was gaining momentum in Selma was spilling over now to the counties around it, and almost everybody understood the stakes. The issue

in 1965 was the right of African Americans to vote—a revolutionary demand in a part of the South where that privilege had long been denied.

Dr. King promised there would soon be a change. They were on the move, he said, and would not be defeated, for the arc of justice was on their side. Looking back on the moment after more than 40 years, Baldwin understood that King and his followers were only a few months away from winning their fight. He came to see that clearly as a King



Martin Luther King Jr. speaks to civil rights marchers in Selma, Ala.

biographer and professor of religion, a 20-year member of the Vanderbilt faculty who studies the history and theology of the movement. But at the time it was happening, he was only 15, standing with his brother at the back of the crowd, and seeing everything through a teenager's eyes.

He noticed, oddly, that King was short,

Living History

Lewis Baldwin witnessed history in the making. Now his task is keeping it real for today's students. By FRYE GAILLARD, BA'68

not even as tall as Baldwin's own father, a Baptist preacher who traveled back then from one country church in Alabama to another. The elder Baldwin, also named Lewis, was a passionate believer in civil rights, willing to let his own children march, particularly the boys, and the younger Lewis was often in the ranks. Like many others he was emboldened on the day King came to town, seeing this man, so small and unimposing in stature, confronting the sheriff of Wilcox County.

Sheriff P.L. "Lummie" Jenkins had a fearsome reputation—a small-town lawyer with an overbearing style. But now here he was shaking hands with King, responding politely to King's overtures on behalf of black citizens who were seeking to vote. From Baldwin's position near the back of the crowd, he couldn't hear much of what was said, but he remembered King's poise and attitude of calm, and many years later he knew this was a part of the triumph. The movement was confronting the old culture of fear, all those years of domination by whites, when the slightest misstep could cost a black man his life. The fear was

crumbling as the people came together, and with the passage of the Voting Rights Act, 1965 became a watershed year. It was the moment when the balance of power would change, and African Americans in the segregated South would take on greater control of their lives.

continued on page 86



Lewis Baldwin was, like Martin Luther King, a preacher's kid from the South. Baldwin's emphasis on the great influence of King's black Southern roots sets him apart from most white King scholars.

In Class *continued from page 26*

As a high school sophomore, Baldwin was too young to really understand it—not reflective enough to look for the larger meaning of the moment. Instead, he simply scrawled in his yearbook, “I saw Dr. King.”

But two years later, when he finished high school and went away to Talladega College, he began to grow serious about the history he had witnessed. Talladega was the first black college in Alabama, founded in 1867 by a pair of former slaves, William Savary and Thomas Tarrant. On the walls of the library were murals depicting the Amistad rebellion—a slaveship uprising in 1839 led by Cinque the African, a Mende tribesman from Sierra Leone. Baldwin learned the story during orientation, and it blended easily with the civil rights dramas he had lived through.

He developed, he says, a “growing sense of black history,” and before he finished his time at Talladega, he began to consider his own contribution. He was fascinated by Martin Luther King, and he came to believe that understanding King’s movement could become, in a sense, a final piece of liberation.

“I began to ask myself,” he says, “how can I contribute to the ongoing struggle? More and more the answer seemed to be that I would devote myself to scholarship and teaching. My first semester at Talladega, I took Black History under Dr. Harold Franklin, and he was a major source of inspiration. He was tall and impressive, a dark-skinned man about 6 feet 1, and a very serious teacher in class. On the first day, he scared the devil out of all of us. But I began to think about what I was learning, and to put it into the context of my own life—my father, for example, this man who had a fifth-grade education, driving people to the polls to register to vote.

“He used to pastor four little churches, getting paid \$10 and a sack of corn, and sometimes he would preach about the social gospel, about the need for justice in the here and now. I remember he would show us the lynching trees, where terrible things had happened in the past. He wanted to see a change. He had a deep interest in civil rights.”

Even now, says Baldwin, his scholarship is driven by a combination of memory and academic study, which continued to grow as he finished his history degree at Talladega

and set out for Crozer Theological Seminary—the place where Martin Luther King had studied. In 1973 Baldwin earned an M.A. in black church studies and, in 1975, his master of divinity degree. In 1980 he finished his Ph.D. at Northwestern and four years later joined the Vanderbilt faculty.

In the years that followed, he became more convinced that despite the growing body of work on King, he could make his own mark. In many ways he admired the work of other King scholars—David Garrow, for example, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his King biography, *Bearing the Cross*, or Taylor Branch, who followed soon after with *Parting the Waters*. But these were white authors, and in Baldwin’s mind there was a certain myopia at the heart of their work.

They tended, he thought, to underplay the importance of King’s black Southern roots—to emphasize, for example, the simmering tensions between King and his father, rather than seeing King’s family as a “bulwark.” In studying such things, Baldwin discovered that he often confirmed his own intuitions, for he, like King, was a preacher’s kid from the South—a black Southern Baptist who saw the church as an extension of the family. It came as no surprise, therefore, that King drew heavily on the strength of his raising, and was moved by the lessons of his childhood faith.

*There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul.*

That old Southern hymn, which traced its roots all the way back to slavery, embodied Dr. King’s understanding of the church. It was a place of optimism and hope, where people came together in the midst of their despair, knowing that better times were ahead. It was true that his thinking evolved over time and he chafed, for example, at the fierce fundamentalism of his father. But in the end, all the new notions he absorbed in his life only served to deepen the identity of his youth. “It was part of the air,” says Baldwin, “part of the ground on which he stood.”

As a result, Baldwin wrote, “Black southerners recognized King as one of their own—one who shared their cultural roots and experiences, spoke their language, reflected their profound spirituality and rhythmic con-

sciousness, possessed their gift for story-telling and deep laughter, embraced their festive and celebrative approach to life. . . . The black experience and black Christian tradition were the most important sources in the shaping of King’s life.”

In his classes at Vanderbilt, Baldwin talks to students about such things, pacing behind a broad wooden desk, his lecture notes scattered across the top. His classes are nearly always full; 41 students in 2007 registered for his Martin Luther King Jr. and the Social Roles of Religion course. They are divided equally between black and white, listening intently to the lecture, which, for most of the hour, echoes the cadence of a black Baptist preacher.

Baldwin tries not to deify King, tries to keep him “real,” as one student puts it, but he also talks about King’s vision. During 13 years on the public stage, from 1955 to 1968, King crusaded successively against segregation and in favor of the vote, and then turned his attention to poverty and peace. There was danger at every step of the way, as Baldwin himself had seen in Alabama—policemen swinging their clubs with such force that the skin was torn off a protester’s skull. But in the final years of his life, when King shifted focus to the American economy, the stakes and the dangers increased exponentially.

“When you start talking about people giving up wealth and power,” Baldwin told his students, “they are going to kill you.”

After one class session in late January, a few of the young people waited behind, debating the lessons among themselves. “In my formal education,” said Dante Bryant, a master’s-degree candidate in theological studies, “King was presented almost like a messiah. He becomes untouchable. But in this class we are learning about him in a much different way—his faults, his honesty. I come away thinking, ‘I’d follow him.’”

Baldwin smiles when he hears such things. It carries him back to his own college days and the doors of the mind that were opened for him then. It was a time when King and the movement grew real, and that is a quality he wants to preserve. Too often in the popular culture, he says, King’s legacy is sanitized into irrelevance. But a deeper understanding can still change the world—or at least prompt a few young people to try. ▼