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POWER TO THE PEOPLE - THE BLACK PANTHERS BY PHOTOGRAPHER STEPHEN SHAMES

Stephen Shames' friendship with Bobby Seale, a founder member of the Black Panthers, ensured the photographer unparalleled access to the group of revolutionary activists. As a major exhibition of his work opens in Lille in northern France, Shames talks about the Panthers, their work, and why the mobile phone has replaced the gun

By: Guy Lane – October 1, 2018



"I don't know how it happened but at one point I started. I must have gone by the Panther office, neither Bobby Seale nor I can remember, but I went by and they liked my pictures and they wanted to use them in their paper so I started taking

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pictures for them. But really I hadn't been a photographer for even a whole year. I wasn't a professional and I didn't quite know what I was doing."

"The Black Panthers had a unique approach to organising. The first thing they did was they patrolled the police, which they did with a law book and a gun; and that's the media image of them. But in addition they ran more than 60 community programmes, the most famous of which was supplying breakfasts for schoolchildren, which they started before the United States government was feeding schoolchildren. They also started free medical clinics. They would escort senior citizens shopping so they would not get robbed. They provided free clothing. They bused families to prison for visits. The Panthers were really in the community. They did it because they felt they had to do something for the people, but also to show the contradiction that in the United States, maybe the richest country in the history of the world, people were hungry and living in extreme poverty. The Panthers wanted to highlight this."

"Jailed Panther George Jackson's younger brother took a judge hostage and tried to break George out of jail, and he and the judge got killed. A year later George was in solitary confinement in the maximum security San Quentin prison. The story was that he had a gun, in solitary confinement, and that he tried to break out, and that's why they murdered him. That was the prison's story. You can make your own mind up."

"Panthers would get up at four or five in the morning. They would then go and prepare breakfast for schoolkids who would eat at 7 or 7.30, and then have to be at school. The Panthers would then have different things to do: some of them sold the newspaper; some of them went out organising. People would come by the Panther office if they had problems - if someone in their family was arrested or if they lost their job. If they had a problem with their landlord, the Panthers would go with them and try to negotiate. That's what they did until late in the evening. It wasn't a 9-5 job; it was 24/7."

"The Panthers made coalitions with groups. They were instrumental in getting the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican street gang, to become a political organisation. And there was a group in uptown, the Young Patriots, who actually had the confederate flag on the back of their jackets, who made a coalition with the Panthers. Bobby Seale said he welcomed anybody who was a progressive, who wanted to make change. He said: 'We're not a black nationalist group, we're not going to fight racism by being racist.'"

"At the time, the Panthers were one of the most progressive organisations in terms of women and also in terms of gay rights. Huey Newton spoke up for gay rights at a time when it wasn't very popular, especially in the black community."

"The Panthers were very, very media conscious. They understood how to get the image out there, how to use the media, and how important that is in this day and age."

"The Panthers all lived in various houses together. Then later they made separate homes for the children because the police under President Nixon started raiding their houses and assassinating them. They made them separate houses, figuring that the police wouldn't raid them and kill the children."

"If you talked to Bobby Seale now, he'd say: 'If we were starting the Panthers now, we wouldn't carry guns. The mobile phone is the best weapon for monitoring the police today.' He said that. You know, everyone has one, you just take the pictures and put them on the internet. Bobby said: 'If I were founding the party today that's what we'd use.'"