

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Black Panther Party in Movies

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, March 10th, 2021



Judas and the Black Messiah

Two recent movies feature leaders of the Black Panther Party. In *The Trial of the Chicago 7*, written and directed by Aaron Sorkin, Bobby Seale is tried separately from the other 7 defendants, but sits in the courtroom, and, behind him, Fred Hampton gives him advice. In *Judas and the Black Messiah*, directed by Shaka King, the life and death of Fred Hampton are explored.

I knew about [Bobby Seale](#), founder of the [Black Panther Party](#) with [Huey Newton](#), because I lived in San Francisco in 1972, while creating *The Chicken Little Comedy Show*, and my dear friend Beverly Axelroad had been [Eldridge Cleaver](#)'s lawyer. But I was not aware of [Fred Hampton](#), Chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, who was murdered by the FBI on December 4, 1969.

I wrote a post about *The Trial of the Chicago 7* on the Reynier Village Blog, now I focus on the actors playing Bobby Seale ([Yahya Abdul-Mateen II](#)), Fred Hampton ([Kelvin Harrison Jr.](#) and [Daniel Kaluuya](#)), Deborah Johnson ([Dominique Fishback](#)).



Yahya Abdul-Mateen © Niko Tavernise-Netflix

Yahya Abdul-Mateen II played Black Manta in Marvel's *Aquaman* (2018), Cal Abad (husband to Angela Abad played by Regina King) in the DC Comics TV series *Watchmen* (2019).

"I grew up in Oakland, California, so I was familiar with Bobby Seale as a leader of the Black Panther Party, but I was shocked to find out about his mistreatment during that trial, when he was bound and gagged in the courtroom. That was a horrific reality to study and to experience.

"I was inspired by the movie, because it talks about the responsibility that we have, as citizens of the world, to be involved in improving conditions for poor or oppressed people, for all people, no matter their economic background, their racial or social status. We are living in a time where there's a lot of protests right now, and that lets me know that the spirit of activism is very much alive and well, that young people are not passively allowing this unjust system to continue."



Kelvin Harrison Jr. (c) HPFA 2019.

I admired the performances of Kelvin Harrison Jr in *Luce* and *Waves*, I featured him in my article about [Young Faces in 2019 Movies](#). I asked him about Fred Hampton when I interviewed him for *The High Note*.

“Alfre Woodard gave me some advice, she said, ‘go to where he lived, walk around the parks, take in the atmosphere, it should be a spiritual experience.’ He took over the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party when he was 17, and he was murdered by the FBI in his sleep when he was 21. He was fighting for education and for certain topics that were important to him during that time, he wanted to confront the injustices, always trying to find betterment for his community and to bring them together to achieve unity.”



Daniel Kaluuya (c) Armando Gallo-HFPA 2018

I had seen Daniel Kaluuya in *Get Out* (2017) by Jordan Peele, *Widows* (2018) by Steve McQueen, *Black Panther* (2018) by Ryan Coogler. I featured *Queen & Slim* (2019) directed by Melina Matsoukas from a screenplay by Lena Waite in [my article about Women Directors](#).

“What Chairman Fred was able to do during that time with the Rainbow Coalition is mind-blowing, uniting the [Young Patriots](#) and the [Young Lords](#), the white leftists and the Hispanics of Chicago, with the Black Panther Party. He believed that, if you come together and unite, big changes could happen.

“There’s clearly something happening at this present time, after the murder of George Floyd, people have had enough and they’re speaking up, there is a social awakening occurring. And this film articulates how many people feel in this current moment, it has the words and the thoughts, the ideas and the strategies in order to deal with that.

“I’m very conscious and aware that my career is a testament to the incredible work of Spike Lee, Denzel Washington, Viola Davis, Samuel Jackson, Sidney Poitier. I am grateful to all these artists who have broken down doors, and have passed me the baton, so that I am running this part of the race, and hopefully, when we give it to the next generation, it will be grown in a different way.”

The actor did not know what was the connection between Marvel’s Black Panther superhero and the Black Panther Party, both started in 1966. So I researched it, here’s [one of the articles](#) I found. The party’s name was inspired by a Black political organization founded by [Stokely Carmichael](#) in Arizona in 1965, but it’s unclear if Stan Lee and Jack Kirby knew about it.



Daniel Kaluuya, Dominique Fishback © Warner Bros

Dominique Fishback plays [Deborah Johnson](#), Hampton's pregnant girlfriend who was with him the night of his murder, the mother of his son Fred Hampton Jr. Both were consultants for the movie.

"For me personally, growing up in Brooklyn with a public school education, I didn't really know that we had heroes. We heard about Martin Luther King and a little bit about Malcolm X, but not that Fred Hampton was 21 years old and brought people together of all races under one Rainbow Coalition, with the idea that all oppressed people come together to fight against the oppressor. My life changed learning that.

"Growing up I didn't like my hair, I didn't think it was beautiful, and when I saw the Black Panther women with the Afros take up space like that, make a statement with their hair, I felt empowered."

This comment by a young black woman of today reminds me of when I was young myself and decided to free my curly hair, after years of straightening it during the 1960s, when I moved to Rome in 1970, became a hippie and joined the first feminist group in Italy, Rivolta Femminile.

It also brings to mind [Angela Davis](#), a member of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party, and her short Afro in the FBI Wanted poster.

Stay tuned for another article I'm preparing on the FBI investigating and murdering Black leaders, as explored in recent movies. Read [my article about *One Night in Miami*](#) for the role of the FBI in the assassination of Malcolm X.

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