

IN FOCUS

# Profiles of Black resistance

By **Peter Keough** Globe Correspondent, Updated February 10, 2022, 5:21 p.m.



Fannie Lou Hamer spoke to Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party sympathizers outside the US Capitol in 1965. WILLIAM J. SMITH/ASSOCIATED PRESS

During February, Black History Month, various venues have programmed documentaries on race relations in the United States. If they make some viewers uncomfortable, that is the point. Here are two of them.

Joy Davenport's deftly edited and stirring "**Fannie Lou Hamer's America**" celebrates the civil rights leader of the title who made famous the words "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired." The phrase is even carved on Hamer's tombstone, a fit epitaph for

the firebrand who rose from the cotton fields in Mississippi to a career including campaigns for Congress.

Born in 1917, one of 20 children in a family of sharecroppers, Hamer (who died in 1977 at 59) was picking up to 300 pounds of cotton a week for a pittance when she was 13. She says in one of the film's many archival interviews that she "couldn't understand why we worked all the time and never had enough to eat."

Were she alive today, Hamer might be dismayed that the situation hasn't changed much. If so it's not for her lack of trying. In 1962 she attempted to register to vote, but local whites threatened her, so she sought refuge with friends. Eighteen shots were fired into the house where she was staying. Davenport cuts from the bullet-riddled door to an interview with the then Mississippi governor. 'I don't find there is any great deal of intimidation,' he says. Then he adds, "[But] we're going to see that law and order is maintained and maintained Mississippi style."

Hamer describes an instance of that style of law and order that occurred in 1963 after a voter registration event she attended when she and others were arrested. Screams came from an adjoining cell and then the guards came for her. They ordered Black inmates to beat her with a blackjack until they were exhausted.

She survived, though she suffered a permanent kidney injury and a blood clot over her left eye. Nonetheless she persisted and in 1964 cofounded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as an alternative to the state's racist Democratic party. Their delegation went to the 1964 Democratic National Convention and though the group was not seated, Hamer delivered an address that electrified a national audience. "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave?" she asked. The question is as relevant now as ever.

*"Fannie Lou Hamer's America" screens on Feb. 18 at 7:30 p.m., at Emerson's Bright Family Screening Room. A live discussion will follow moderated by GBH's Callie Crossley with the director Joy Davenport, executive producer Monica Land, and*

*panelists Noemi Ramos, Christine Chen, and Tanisha Sullivan. The film can also be seen on Feb. 22 at 9 p.m. on PBS's "America Reframed" and on Feb. 24 at 8 p.m. on the*

*World Channel and streamed on worldchannel.org, PBS.org, the PBS Video app, Amazon Fire, and other platforms.*

*Go to [artsemerson.org/events/fannie-lou](https://artsemerson.org/events/fannie-lou) and [www.fannielouhamersamerica.com](http://www.fannielouhamersamerica.com).*

Fannie Lou Hamer makes a brief appearance in Brad Lichtenstein's "**American Reckoning**" in a clip in which she delivers a speech to a church congregation during a voter registration drive. The film, though, focuses on another civil rights activist, Wharlest Jackson, a father of five who held three jobs in addition to his work as the treasurer of the Natchez, Miss., NAACP. The area was notorious for its Ku Klux Klan violence but the protection of an organization of armed Black men called the Disciples of Defense and Justice together with a successful boycott of white store owners challenged the Klan's dominance.

Jackson, meanwhile, accepted a promotion at the Armstrong Rubber and Tire company where he worked, taking a better paying job that had always been held by a white person. Perhaps that was why on Feb. 24, 1967, he was killed by a bomb in his pickup truck. Everyone knew the perpetrators belonged to a Klan offshoot called The Silver Dollar Group. But an FBI investigation failed to turn up any hard evidence and no one was arrested.

Lichtenstein covers a subsequent FBI investigation of the killing, brought on by the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act of 2007 — an initiative of the late Georgia Congressman John Lewis. The filmmaker interviews Jackson's son, Wharlest Jr., who recalls being one of the first at the site of the explosion. He recovered his father's shoe, which turned out to have part of a foot still inside it.

The film also includes rare footage from "Black Natchez" (1967), a documentary by the late New England filmmaker Ed Pincus and co-director David Neuman, which was shot in 1965 when the Klan and local police brutalized a voter registration drive by the

in 1955 when the NAACP and local police organized a voter registration drive by the NAACP. Some scenes are hard to watch — and especially today, as the achievements of these courageous activists are being undone.

*“American Reckoning” broadcasts Feb. 15 at 10 p.m. on PBS “Frontline” and can be streamed beginning Feb. 15 on [pbs.org/frontline](https://pbs.org/frontline) and in the PBS Video App.*

Go to [www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/announcement/frontline-and-retro-report-present-american-reckoning](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/announcement/frontline-and-retro-report-present-american-reckoning).

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