



Martin Luther King Jr. displays the Poor People's Campaign poster on March 4, 1968, in Atlanta.

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## Sweet Martin's Badass Song

by SCOTT SAUL

**D**uring his life Martin Luther King Jr. was, in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "buked and scorned"—and by a quite diverse cast of enemies and associates. Segregationists called him "Martin Luther Coon" and "Martin Lucifer." J. Edgar Hoover had an FBI pet name for him—"burrhead"—and in public labeled him "the most notorious liar in America"; King's "I Have a Dream" speech so incensed Hoover that he stopped informing King of plots against his life and assembled FBI leaders for an all-day conference dedicated to "neutralizing King as an effective Negro leader." Lyndon Johnson reportedly called him "that goddamned nigger preacher" after King denounced the war in Vietnam, and neither Johnson nor the two living ex-Presidents attended King's funeral.

Within the civil rights movement, King faced constant heckling. Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr., who once welcomed King to his vacation home in Bimini, gloated shortly before his assassination that the day of "Martin Loser King" had "come to an end." Thurgood Marshall, who helped mastermind the legal attack on segregation but represented a more moder-

*Scott Saul, an associate professor of English and American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties. He is writing a critical biography of Richard Pryor.*

### The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me

*The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King, Jr.*

By Jonathan Rieder.

Harvard. 394 pp. \$29.95.

### From Civil Rights to Human Rights

*Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice.*

By Thomas F. Jackson.

Pennsylvania. 459 pp. \$39.95.

### Going Down Jericho Road

*The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign.*

By Michael K. Honey.

Norton. 623 pp. Paper \$17.95.

ate wing of the movement, called King an "opportunist" and a "first-rate rabble rouser." Those who sought purposely to rouse the rabble also taunted King. The young activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee mocked him as "Slick," or "De Lawd," and distinguished their grassroots-style organizing from his pulpit-based leadership. Malcolm X often referred to him as a "modern Uncle Tom"—an epithet given the twist of "Uncle Chicken Wing" by the Invaders, a Black Power group that injected a volatile energy into King's final campaign in support of striking Memphis sanitation workers.

Perhaps it's not surprising that King, who aimed to challenge and bridge long-

standing divisions within the black community, the liberal-left community, the labor movement, the church and American society more generally, was such a lightning rod during his lifetime. Prophets, after all, preach from a lonely mountaintop, and a prophet who doubles as a movement strategist will raise even more hackles. More surprising has been the academic reassessment, over the past few decades, of King's role in the civil rights movement. Historians in the 1980s and '90s took a cue from King himself, who wrote that it was "the people who moved the leaders, not the leaders who moved the people," and dedicated themselves to recovering the unheralded efforts of the movement's foot soldiers, those activists who organized in Montgomery and elsewhere before King arrived and who kept doing so after he left. These historians helpfully directed our attention from the pulpit to the pews, and from there to union halls, student centers and beauty parlors.

Inevitably, perhaps, the larger-than-life King, the Moses of the movement, was downsized—into merely its megaphone. (Revelations about King's adultery and plagiarism no doubt accelerated the process.) As Clayborne Carson speculated in 1987,

If King had never lived, the black struggle would have followed a course of development similar to the one it did. The Montgomery bus boycott would have occurred, because King did not initiate it. Black students probably would have rebelled—even without King as a role model—for they had sources of tactical and ideological inspiration besides King.... The black movement would probably have achieved its major legislative victories without King's leadership, for the southern Jim Crow system was a regional anachronism, and the forces that undermined it were inexorable.

This from the historian who was hand-picked by Coretta Scott King to head up the Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. project, and who has since edited six impeccable volumes of King's speeches, writings and ephemera.

A clutch of recent books on King, however, suggest that the pendulum may be swinging in the other direction—toward a renewed appreciation of King's talents and impact. Taken together, they offer two corrections to the conventional view of King. First, they argue against accounts of King as mainly a civil rights leader who took on segregation: Michael Honey's riveting reconstruction of the 1968 Memphis strike and Thomas Jackson's intellectual biography

underline King's perennial commitment to economic justice and the plight of the poor, to a social gospel that targeted "materialism" and "capitalism" as value systems. They highlight the King who quipped, "It's a nice thing to say to a man, 'Lift yourself by your own bootstraps,' but it's a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps."

Second, they convincingly describe how King's virtuosity—in church sermons, mass meetings and even closed-door strategy sessions—was integral to the movement's course. Uniquely among the civil rights leadership, King was able to stir black audiences and translate the black experience to those who stood outside it. It wasn't an easy balancing act to pull off, especially if both parties were listening in. "You just can't communicate with the ghetto dweller and at the same time not frighten many whites to death," he confessed in 1966. Yet he continued to try. An unusual sort of prophet—at once exhorter, therapist, great brain and badass—King gave the movement its fire in the belly and its half-concealed, half-inviting cutting edge.

**K**ing the "badass" is just one of many unconventional topics explored in *The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me*, Jonathan Rieder's eye-opening study of King's "righteous performance." Rieder considers King a moral virtuoso, but he takes an appealingly irreverent approach to the question of how King took on the prophetic mantle: "Becoming a moral virtuoso, like becoming an auto mechanic, a ballet dancer, or a surgeon, requires an unsentimental education." While other studies focus on King the political animal, Rieder meditates on King the performer, the preacher who made good on the boast he made to his mother at age 6: "You just wait and see. I'm going to get me some *big* words." Using big words—the biggest of which was *The Word*—Rieder's King is a man who delights in mixing Schopenhauer and slave songs, Paul Tillich and Paul of Tarsus, philosophy and prophecy; his power springs from his "uncommon ability to glide in and out of black, white and other idioms and identities in an elaborate dance of empathy."

The image of King as a crossover artist without compare is not an unfamiliar one, but Rieder refreshes this idea by following King far from the usual signposts of his "Letter From Birmingham Jail" and "I Have a Dream" speech, and by examining King's performances with an unusual amount of scrutiny. "King the performer" includes the King who vented his mind in late-night shmoozefests, who played basketball with his

## — A Call to the Media —

**F**or many years men have awaited, impatiently to be sure, evidence that Maitreya\* does in truth exist, and carries out his work among us. Why this doubt should for so long persist is, perhaps, difficult to understand, given the vast transformations of our world which have clearly taken place, each one foretold by Maitreya, and made available to the public and world media.

What prevents the acceptance — even as a hypothesis — that such a welcome event has indeed transpired?

The media of the world know every facet of this information, however little they inform the public of its nature. Many of its representatives have met Maitreya, have heard him speak, and yet stay silent themselves.

### Laws

Why should this be so? What inhibits the public announcement of this welcome news? In the main the problem is fear: fear of ridicule, fear of disbelief; fear of loss, of their status or jobs; fear that they are somehow beguiled, that they did not see what they saw or hear what they heard. It is easier to set their experiences aside and to leave it to Maitreya himself — if he does indeed exist — to come forward and show the world his factual presence.

This view, logical enough to those who thus wait silently, shows little understanding of the Laws which govern the appearance of a Teacher of Maitreya's stature.

Many worthy Teachers come into our lives, do their work, and cause few ripples on the surface of men's thought and action. They seldom need forerunners to prepare their way.

Maitreya, however, is the World Teacher, Head of Hierarchy, and intends to serve as such for the next world cycle. His impact on humanity cannot be comprehended. His coming is a truly momentous happening, which must be prepared for beforehand, and adequately explained to men of every station.

The world's media are ideally placed to acquaint men with the true happenings of our time. They are looked to for information, and often guidance, by millions of people thirsty for the truth, for knowledge and hope. It behoves the men and women of the media, men and women of goodwill, to acquaint *themselves* with this information, where necessary, and to serve the public by its serious introduction. Then will they see Maitreya openly, ready to show us all how to set to rights the world.



"The media of the world know every facet of this information, however little they inform the public of its nature."

\*This article, published in *Share International* magazine, was written by a Master of Wisdom. The Masters, headed by Maitreya, the World Teacher, are highly advanced teachers and advisors of humanity who are planning to work openly in the world very soon.

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lieutenants on staff retreats, who knew how to play the dozens, even the King who committed adultery in a hotel room bugged by the FBI and yelled, "I'm fucking for God!" and "I'm not a Negro tonight" in the throes of passion. The rewards of this method are obvious: while the various Pulitzer Prize-winning biographies of King have documented his political trajectory with admirable precision, they have also shied away from exploring the patterns of King's mind, how his faith was channeled into language that mixed polish and fervor, aggression and empathy, as it confronted the dilemmas of black liberation. Rieder provides the best anatomy of King's verbal imagination yet.

Because Rieder spends most of his book

## No American Gandhi, King was able to straddle the line between the prophetic and the pragmatic.

dealing with King in black settings, his "crossover King" looks quite different from the fuzzy icon of interracial understanding often eulogized at King Day celebrations. For Rieder, King crossed over many boundaries that were just as significant as the color line—for instance, the boundary between tough and tender. Crossing that divide partly involved a division of labor in the movement, with King providing the tenderness and his staff the toughness: while King preached nonviolence from the Birmingham pulpit, for instance, his streetwise lieutenants roamed the aisles, scouted out young punks in the pews and roused them to give up their weapons. But the boundary was crossed in King's sermonizing, too. As King advised his staff at a 1967 retreat, in his own translation of Jesus' instructions to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew: "Be ye as strong and as tough as a serpent and as tender as a dove." (The King James translation reads, "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves"—not quite the advice to give to a liberation army on the move.) The apostle of nonviolence had to be bold enough to tell Bull Connor to let his people go.

The tender-tough King was also, according to Rieder, a master at straddling the line between the prophetic and the pragmatic. It's easy to turn King into an icon of moral purity, an "American Gandhi" who levitated above real-world uncertainties through his unshakable commitment to nonviolence. Rieder will have none of it: King's moral virtuosity, he argues, was premised upon his ability to take on the hard-boiled questions "Will it work?" and "Why risk

my life for this cause, this way?" The latter was a question that couldn't be waved away: at least twenty-six civil rights workers were murdered between 1960 and 1965.

In a striking section on King's performances at mass meetings, Rieder suggests that King succeeded by scrambling the customary calculus of pain and gain, the conventional framework of rational choice. With his motto "We will win you with our capacity to suffer," King rang a new variation on the archetypal badass, the man whose courage is so great that he forces his antagonists to factor irrationality into their equations of cause and effect. As a "prayer warrior," of course, King acted like a manifestly spiritual badass: he was emboldened—and emboldened

others—with the premise that suffering was redemptive, that getting slammed by high-pressure fire hoses was a "baptism," that the tang of blood in your mouth was the taste of freedom. Success, in this new calculus, was measured not by legislation passed but by the existential "freedom high." Or, to use a metaphor King often drew upon: if you felt like you were in the wilderness, that was a sign that you were among God's chosen people, living out the Exodus story in real time.

In teasing out the subtleties of King's moral virtuosity, Rieder aspires to be something of an analytical virtuoso himself. Where King had an unparalleled ability, in Robert Penn Warren's words, to "affirm and absorb the polarities of life," Rieder is an analyst who refuses to let a paradox lie, a maker of fine and finer distinctions. He dilates, for instance, on how King used the sound figure "ohhh" as a "substitute" for the black preacherly tradition of whooping and hollering:

Sometimes it had a wincing quality. It could be filled with pathos, at times preceding King's tender "I know," as if he had leapt right inside the audience's mind to absorb their pain. A grave, admonitory quality could suffuse it. As a prelude to "it has a power," "ohhh" was a channel to divine mysteries.

These sorts of ruminations disclose the artistry of King, the gradations of tone that make his oratory so powerful. But there is a thin line between the clever and the fanciful, and on occasion Rieder crosses it. Most sensationally, he dissects the meaning of the phrase King uttered in the heat of passion, "I'm not a Negro tonight," suggesting that this was part of King's attempt to "imagine

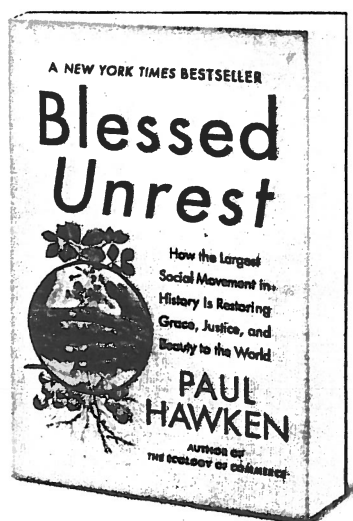
[himself] escaping from blackness"—evidence of King's "postethnic" ambition to transcend race. Was it really? Here Rieder strains propriety and credulity at once. Perhaps "I'm not a Negro tonight" meant "I'm no longer the respectable leader of Negroes" or—taking a cue from Rieder himself—"I'm a badass tonight!" In either case, what Rieder interprets as an escape from blackness may just as well have been King's embrace of its darker hues.

This particular misstep points to a larger limitation of Rieder's book: its insistence on King as a "postethnic" man who could articulate his complex sense of self by drawing from a rich repertoire of rhetorics and identities. "Blackness for King was in certain respects incidental and interim," Rieder writes, arguing that King's preaching shouldn't be classified as black theology. It's an odd turn for a book that has demonstrated how the black Baptist tradition gave King the genres he mastered and his lexicon of deliverance. The weight of Rieder's analysis pulls in another direction—toward a recognition of the universalistic strain within black Christianity. As he insightfully underlines, King's most universalistic messages were often expressed during moments of Afro-Baptist abandon, when King let loose the "fire locked up inside." To see these moments as signs of King's postethnic identity risks turning every black preacher who testifies to God's boundless grace into a spokesperson for the desire to transcend race. Better to say—as Rieder does—that King's universalism often worked to "blacken" the whites in his audience. At the climax of "I Have a Dream," King asked white America to imagine singing "Free at last. Thank God almighty we're free at last"—asked them, audaciously, to imagine black ancestors as their own.

Thomas Jackson uncovers a quite different King: the student of political economy and the crusader for the rights of the poor. Jackson's *From Civil Rights to Human Rights* rebuts the usual view of King as a '50s reformer who was then radicalized in the '60s, arguing that from an early age King fixated on the problem of economic justice. Though raised in an environment of relative privilege—his preacher father had changed his son's name from Michael to Martin Luther after being sent by his congregation on a religious tour of Germany and the Holy Land—King grew up wondering about black life outside that bubble. During summers off from college (where he majored in sociology), he worked as a manual laborer, partly to learn about workers' "problems and feel their feelings," and seethed at the wage gap between blacks and whites; he

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ended up walking away from a job at Railway Express after the foreman called him a "nigger." While a seminarian, he took home *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto* as his Christmas break reading, and proposed in his notes that "Capitalism carries the seeds of its own destruction," since it failed "to meet the needs of the masses." As a PhD student in the early '50s, he read Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward*, in which state ownership of industry solves the problem of scarcity, then wrote to Coretta that he was "much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic."

King's socialism at this point was largely speculative, general in its outlines, rooted in his skepticism of a value system that exalted the profit motive over the ethic of care. Jackson traces how the experience of the civil rights struggle forced King to sharpen his strategic thinking about the road to social democracy. How to tap into white working-class power without provoking white resistance? How to ensure, after the legal apparatus of segregation was dismantled, that blacks did not remain locked out of decent-paying jobs? How to leverage the federal government into taking on the inequalities rooted in "monopolistic capitalism"?

These were thorny questions, and the cascading events of the mid- to late '60s—the national white backlash that coalesced around George Wallace, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, the wave of urban riots, the rise of Black Power—made them still thornier. To his credit, as Jackson shows, King acknowledged their complexity. His sociological writings became increasingly hard-bitten, as he explored how black poverty coexisted with white privilege. In 1964 he described poverty as "an airtight cage"; a few years later, he concentrated on who had built that cage and why. "The suburbs are white nooses around the black necks of the cities," he wrote in 1967's *Where Do We Go From Here?*: "Housing deteriorates in central cities; urban renewal has been Negro removal and has benefited big merchants and real estate interests; and suburbs expand with little regard for what happens to the rest of America." At the end of his life, King began suggesting that some combination of a domestic Marshall Plan and an attack on runaway corporate profits was necessary to make the "war on poverty" a success.

As King's analysis became more astringent and penetrating—and as he came out openly against the Vietnam War—his circle of allies contracted. In 1968 he decided to launch a campaign for poor people, hoping that poor people themselves would provide the ground troops for a huge rally in the nation's capital. But then he had to confront the

limits of the civil rights organization he had built: the black middle-class ministers who were his most devoted lieutenants knew how to rally the faithful but were inexperienced in reaching out to the hard-core poor. "There's no masses in this mass movement," King worried a month before the date of the rally. He slept poorly; sometimes he could hardly speak from the constant stress on his vocal cords. This is perhaps, for King's admirers on the left, the most sobering aspect of his life: that he never felt lonelier than when he marshaled all his eloquence to condemn American militarism and inequality.

This was especially the case in a campaign usually treated as a coda to the civil rights movement and to King's life—the fight by Memphis sanitation workers for union recognition. It's an episode that Michael Honey's *Going Down Jericho Road* reveals to be an epic struggle, with a cast of characters and a gripping plot that put it on the level of a biblical spectacular. In some sense, Honey has spent almost four decades building up to this book: he worked as a civil liberties organizer in Memphis in the '70s, then trained as a historian and has since written a labor history of the Memphis civil rights movement and an oral history of black labor under Jim Crow. *Going Down Jericho Road* takes the long view on the Memphis campaign—King does not arrive in town until page 292—but the book is lovingly and scrupulously detailed, evoking the high drama that ensued after "the lowly" demanded respect. In the process, it also suggests indelibly how the movement made King, and how King made the movement.

The strike was triggered by a grisly outrage: two garbage collectors were killed, crushed in the compactor of their truck, when the equipment malfunctioned. (They had gone into the compactor to ride out a rainstorm—a typical practice. A union organizer had complained about this particular truck and had his grievance ignored—also typical.) The sanitation workers labored under conditions not far removed from slavery. They had no regular breaks, no place to go to the bathroom, no uniforms, no place to shower after work; their wages were abysmal, and when it rained—as it often did in Memphis—they would be sent home with only two hours' worth of pay. Their white supervisors often came from plantations in the Mississippi Delta and treated their employees accordingly: "boy" was the common term of address, even for elderly men, and some bosses even carried sidearms. On February 12, 1968—after discovering that the city had offered the widows of the two killed workers barely enough to cover burial expenses, and had docked their pay on that rainy day too—



the sanitation workers decided to strike.

The strike rallied black Memphis in unforeseen ways, taking on a keen intensity. Police sprayed Mace on a peaceful march of black workers and clergy, radicalizing preachers who had formerly sat on the sidelines of labor struggles. Mayor Henry Loeb won an injunction banning union leaders from marching, picketing or making public speeches, but—in a perfect illustration of the law of unintended consequences—the injunction forced black ministers to assume leadership in the struggle and to mobilize the community as a whole; the strike thus became, in Honey's words, "one of the last unified mass movements of the civil rights era." Throughout the strike, the workers marched twice every day, and a different church hosted a mass meeting every night.

**E**nter Martin Luther King, exhausted from his efforts to piece together the Poor People's Campaign, detouring in Memphis over the objections of his advisers. King was shuttled to a mass meeting and was astonished at what he found: an enthusiastic crowd of more than 15,000, already deeply committed to a struggle for the dignity of the poor—a living illustration of the Poor People's Campaign of his dreams. King spoke as if from the whirlwind—"You are here to demand that Memphis will see the poor"; "If America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty...*she too is going to bell*"—and the crowd roared its approval. Improvising, then, in response to their excitement, King decided to try to translate it into action. "You know what?" he asked. "You may have to escalate the struggle a bit.... In a few days you ought to get together and just have a general work stoppage in the city of Memphis." By the time King had finished his description of what the general strike might look like, the crowd was clapping, dancing, singing. Plans for a general strike soon coalesced.

This episode suggests, in an obvious way, what King brought to the movement: he gave many a sense of their struggle's deeper meaning; he emboldened them to imagine their triumph despite the odds; and then he mobilized them to channel their newfound strength into specific and confrontational courses of action. This is all true and hardly to be minimized. But *Going Down Jericho Road* draws out a less obvious, less public gift that King brought as well.

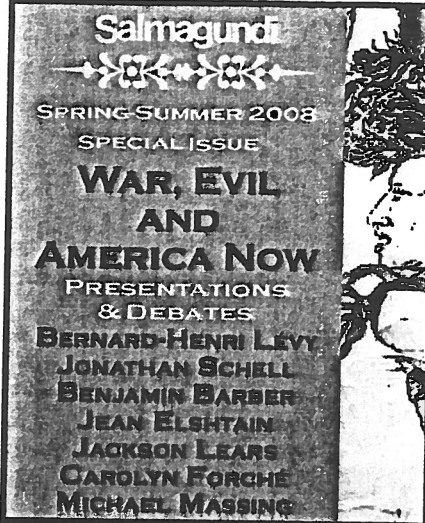
After King's first mass meeting in Memphis, very little went according to plan. The day of the proposed general strike, Memphis was swept by a freak blizzard, the second-largest snowstorm in its history; no one went to work, whether they sympathized

with the strike or not. A week later, King led a march that disintegrated into chaos when some young blacks vandalized storefront windows, setting off a panicked response from the Memphis police and a declaration of martial law from Mayor Loeb. As police battled blacks in the streets, King lay in his hotel bed, his bedcovers over his head, his movement in free fall.

The next day, though, he met with members of the Invaders, a Black Power group that had encouraged the rioting and publicly blamed the march's failure on King's outmoded leadership. In person King was firm but open-minded rather than accusatory: he wanted to know why they believed in violence as a method of protest, then asked them to consider "what must be done to have a peaceful march." He had determined, he later said, that "Either the Movement lives or dies in Memphis." The Invaders, for their part, were amazed and moved by his calm. "It was unbelievable to me," one remembered. "The man just looked like peace. He didn't raise his voice.... [It was] one of the few times in my life that I wasn't actually fighting something."

This sort of dialogue was not unusual for King. Even as, at the pulpit, he assumed the role of Moses leading his people to freedom, in private conversation he tended to be principled but not dogmatic, channeling nonviolence when more brittle words might be expected. Stokely Carmichael once confided to King that he had debuted the slogan of "Black Power" at a march King had led, because he knew that King's presence would guarantee the slogan national exposure. King replied, "I have been used before. One more time won't hurt." Thus did King keep alive the promise of future coalitions even at the moments when the movement seemed to be splintering to bits.

King was assassinated in Memphis four days before he was to lead the nonviolent march he had promised himself and the movement. On the appointed day, tens of thousands of marchers—including black community activists, union leaders and rank and file, and religious leaders from a full array of denominations—walked through the streets of Memphis, dignified and completely silent. Members of the Invaders acted as marshals, keeping discipline, telling anyone with a cigarette to stub it out. Mayor Loeb, who said of the assassination that "we wish the incident had happened elsewhere—if it had to happen," finally buckled under pressure from white businessmen and Lyndon Johnson's appointed mediator. He recognized the union but paid for their wage increases with a garbage tax that fell most heavily on the city's poor.




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