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**Skirball Cultural Center unveils details for West Coast debut of
This Light of Ours:
Activist Photographers from the Civil Rights Movement
October 21, 2023 - February 25, 2024**

Tickets on sale Thursday, September 7, 2023

LOS ANGELES, CA—Today, the Skirball Cultural Center unveiled additional details for the West Coast debut of *This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement*, opening October 21, 2023. The exhibition is presented by the Center for Documentary Expression and Art and the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage.

This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement presents the visions and voices of a group of photographers who committed themselves to the crucial cause of the Southern Freedom Movement in the 1960s. More than 150 photographs by nine photographers—Bob Adelman, George “Elfie” Ballis, Bob Fitch, Bob Fletcher, Matt Herron, David Prince, Herbert Randall, Maria Varela, and Tamio Wakayama – reveal the daily life, struggle, and strength of disenfranchised Black communities, and the vital work undertaken by a broad coalition of activists during the Civil Rights Movement, particularly within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). These photographers lived within the Movement and documented its activities by focusing on local people and socially-engaged students to portray community life as well as protest.

This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement shines a light on the interracial collaborations within the Civil Rights Movement through the work of photographers who identified variously as Black, white, Jewish, Christian, Native American, Mexican American, and Japanese Canadian. Unlike photojournalists who only reported on breaking news events, they captured an insider's perspective of the Movement's inclusive coalition of diverse volunteers led by young Black activists who produced a revolution in social justice, creating a model of true allyship that we hope to emulate today.

"The Skirball is incredibly honored to present *This Light of Ours: Activist Photographs of the Civil Rights Movement*," said Jessie Kornberg, Skirball Cultural Center President and CEO. "As a minority group that has faced perpetual discrimination, Jews have seen a parallel to their own struggles for safety and equality in the stories of the Black Freedom and Civil Rights Movements. The photographs in this exhibition highlight a diverse array of young Americans who aligned to support the Black Americans leading these Movements. The marches from Selma to Montgomery were a critical moment of solidarity between Black organizers and Jewish allies. They demonstrated Black Americans' resistance to segregation and desire to exercise their constitutional right to vote. And they visibly demonstrated the cross-racial and inter-religious support for Black Americans."

Exclusive to the Skirball's presentation of *This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement* are historic artifacts that reveal how SNCC used photography to raise awareness of their activism. Additionally, the exhibition concludes by highlighting the enduring fight for voting rights taking place in Los Angeles and across the country today, offering a way forward as our society continues to grapple with anti-Black violence and broad discrimination and disenfranchisement.

This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement is presented in five sections. **Section One: Black Life (What We Saw)** documents the harsh realities of the segregated South that were largely ignored by national media and

the dangers inherent in grassroots organizing as well as the strength and dignity of people risking everything to pursue equality. **Section Two: Organizing for Freedom, 1963-1966** shows how SNCC applied their progressive, community-driven approach to voter registration, and the punitive reactions to these efforts. **Section Three: State and Local Terror** reveals how local authorities often worked hand in hand with the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups to terrorize potential Black voters throughout the South and to brutalize Civil Rights workers. **Section Four: Meredith March Against Fear and The Birth of Black Power** highlights the story of James Meredith who, in 1962, became the first Black student ever admitted to the University of Mississippi. His subsequent solo 1966 march through Mississippi turned into a major event after he was shot, with Civil Rights leaders and thousands of supporters continuing the march in Meredith's honor. **Section Five: Unfinished Business**, expanded by the Skirball Cultural Center, examines the ongoing assault on the crowning achievement of the Civil Rights Movement, the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement features more than 200 objects, including 157 black-and-white photographs, plus audio testimonials, music, posters, newspapers, maps, and informational booklets. Highlights of items on view include:

- A photograph of march leaders (wearing Hawaiian leis) as they prepare to leave Selma at the start of the third march including John Lewis, an unidentified nun, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Bunche, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.
- SNCC song books and albums, created as part of fundraising campaigns, that combine photography and music as a way to educate and inspire people through shared song (exclusive to the Skirball's presentation).
- A series of SNCC posters that combined powerful images with provocative slogans, including "One Man One Vote" and "NOW." In one poster, with a caption reading "come let us build a new world together" John Lewis and two others kneel on the ground to pray (exclusive to the Skirball's presentation).

- Louis Lo Monaco's poster created for the 1963 March on Washington, featuring a part of Bob Adelman's photograph of protesters being attacked by fire hoses within a deconstructed American flag. Lo Monaco connects the protesters to Renaissance artist Michelangelo's hand of God from the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, anointing these individuals as they hold hands to stay standing amid the assault. (exclusive to the Skirball's presentation).
- Photographs depicting everyday life in the South including one of a rural Alabama woman on her front porch in the midst of laughter.
- Photographs of volunteers as they join hands and sing "We Shall Overcome" before boarding a bus bound for Mississippi, with the probable fate of James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael "Mickey" Schwerner, three missing Civil Rights workers, weighing heavily on their minds.
- A photograph of Jewish activist Jim Leatherer who marched the entire 50 miles from Selma to Montgomery on crutches, despite having only one leg.

FEATURED PHOTOGRAPHER BIOGRAPHIES

Bob Adelman (1930–2016)

Working with the Congress of Racial Equality, Jewish photographer Adelman documented efforts to desegregate restaurants and bus terminals on Route 40 between Washington and New York. He went to Birmingham in 1963 with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, where the images he captured garnered national and international recognition. He authored twelve books, including *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (2007), a retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement published in *Life* magazine's 2007 "Great Photographers Series."

George "Elfie" Ballis (1925–2010)

After working in Mississippi in summer 1964 for the Southern Documentary Project, Ballis returned to his California home and spent the next seven years documenting Cesar Chavez and the emerging United Farm Workers union. He also produced several important documentary films, including *I Am Joaquin* (1969), a Chicano

film-poem, and *The Dispossessed* (1972), about the struggle of California's Pit River Indians to regain tribal lands.

Bob Fitch (1939–2016)

A Los Angeles-born activist and ordained minister, Fitch was twenty-four when he joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as a staff photographer in 1965. After nearly two years in the South, he spent the next two decades documenting social justice activities in California, including the work of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement's houses of hospitality, and the efforts of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers union.

Bob Fletcher (b. 1938; lives in New York City and Clearwater, FL)

After working for the Harlem Education Project in New York, Fletcher photographed for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Alabama and Mississippi from 1964 to 1968. Becoming interested in documenting African life and culture, he worked on a documentary about Mozambique's war of liberation, among other films shot on the continent. He later graduated from New York University's law school and became an attorney.

Matt Herron (1931–2020)

One of the few photojournalists to bring his family with him to the South, Herron covered the Civil Rights struggle for *Life*, *Look*, and *Time* magazines while also providing images for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. During the 1964 Freedom Summer he organized the Southern Documentary Project, and his 1965 image of a Mississippi policeman wrestling an American flag from a Black child won the World Press Photo Contest. His memoir, *Mississippi Eyes: The Story and Photography of the Southern Documentary Project*, was published in 2014.

David Prince (1942–2015)

The only full-time college student employed as a photographer in the 1964 Southern Documentary Project, Prince, along with writer Jerry DeMuth, was severely beaten by a Selma sheriff's posse at a voter registration site. That notorious incident led to a US Justice Department investigation. Prince continued

to cover events in Mississippi until returning to school at Ohio University, where he later became a professor of film and a documentary filmmaker.

Herbert Randall (b. 1936; lives in New York City)

A Black and Native American photographer, Randall spent the summer of 1964 photographing Freedom Schools, voter registration drives, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party campaign, and the people who served the Movement. Returning to his home in New York, he received the Creative Artists' Public Service Grant for Photography for 1971–1972 and later consulted for the National Media Center Foundation. He helped found a New York–based forum for Black photographers.

Maria Varela (b. 1940; lives in La Puente, NM)

A Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee staff member from 1963 to 1967, Varela, a Mexican American photographer, specialized in photos illustrating the organization of economic cooperatives and voter registration campaigns. She later collaborated with Mexican American and Native American artisans and livestock growers to preserve pastoral cultures through sustainable development. She teaches about SNCC's organizing methods and legacies at Colorado College, where she is a visiting professor. She contributed to the collection *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (2010).

Tamio Wakayama (1941–2018)

A Japanese Canadian photographer who spent his childhood in a World War II incarceration camp, Wakayama skipped his final year of college to join the Civil Rights Movement in 1963. He became a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee staffer in the Atlanta office, designing posters and fliers and managing the darkroom. In the summer of 1964, he worked as a field photographer in Mississippi. In 1978 he published the book *A Dream of Riches: The Japanese Canadians 1877–1977*.

Tickets for *This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement* at the Skirball Cultural Center will be released on **Thursday, September 7, at**

10:00 am PST. Pricing: \$18 General; \$15 Seniors, Full-Time Students, and Children over 12; \$13 Children 2–12. Exhibitions are always free to Skirball Members and Children under 2.

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This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement exhibition and its related educational programs at the Skirball Cultural Center are made possible by support from Margaret Black and John Ptak, Stephanie and Harold Bronson, Nancy Sher Cohen and Robert Neil Cohen (z"l), and US Bank, with additional support provided by Christine and Patrick O'Donnell. Media support is provided by KBLA Talk 1580.

About the Skirball

The Skirball Cultural Center is a place of meeting guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger and inspired by the American democratic ideals of freedom and equality. We welcome people of all communities and generations to participate in cultural experiences that celebrate discovery and hope, foster human connections, and call upon us to help build a more just society.

Visiting the Skirball

The Skirball is located at 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90049. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, 12:00–5:00 pm; Saturday–Sunday, 10:00 am–5:00 pm; closed Mondays and holidays. Admission to the Skirball's upcoming exhibition *This Light of Ours: Activist Photographers of the Civil Rights Movement* includes General Admission. Special Pricing: \$18 General; \$15 Seniors, Full-Time Students, and Children over 12; \$13 Children 2–12. *RECLAIMED: A Family Painting* and *The American Library* by Yinka Shinobare CBE RA will be included with admission to *This Light of Ours*, or as part of General Admission: \$12 General; \$9 Seniors, Full-Time Students, and Children over 12; \$7 Children 2–12. Exhibitions are always FREE to Skirball Members and Children under 2. The permanent exhibition Noah's Ark at the Skirball is ticketed separately. Advance timed-entry reservations are recommended. For general information, the public may call (310) 440-4500 or visit skirball.org.