

Negroes with Guns: Rob Williams and Black Power

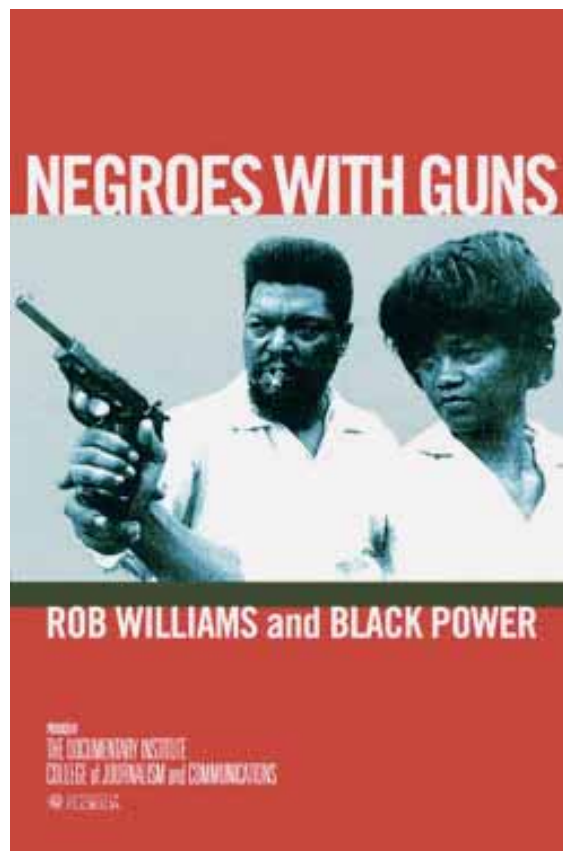
Robert F. Williams does not fit neatly into the customary categories that historians use to describe civil rights activists. He was a vocal advocate of African American armed self-defense or meeting violence with violence as he phrased it, but also participated in and provided logistical support for nonviolent direct action protests. He was a local organizer who confined his activism to his hometown of Monroe, North Carolina, but had an international reputation and lived in exile in Cuba and China for most of the 1960s. He was an icon of the black power era, but his affiliations with black power organizations were in name only. His enigmatic status as a civil rights activist has led to his marginalization in movement historiography. Historian Timothy Tyson was among the first to attempt to retrieve Williams from the margins of movement scholarship with his 1999 biography *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power*. Sandra Dickson and Churchill Roberts seek to do the same with their documentary *Negroes with Guns: Rob Williams and Black Power*.

Negroes with Guns is visually rich. Interspersed between black and white archival film clips of Williams and Monroe, North Carolina, are candid photographs of the civil rights organizer and fellow Tar Heel activists. Snapshots of newspaper headlines heralding shocking news about Jim Crow justice and Williams's activism are prominent throughout and leap from the screen. Contemporary color video of Monroe is also featured and makes the small southern city come alive. Thankfully, generic film clips of the civil rights movement are not overused, which greatly enhances the originality of the film. The absence of a narrator also adds to the documentary's uniqueness. Rather than the traditional voiceover, the codirectors splice together interviews with Williams and allow him to tell his own story. The soundtrack, which includes an original score composed by Terence Blanchard, is just as rich as the film's visual imagery. Most notably, it integrates appropriate period pieces seamlessly. A recording of troubadour Pete Seeger performing "The Story of Old Monroe," for example, is used to introduce a discussion

of Monroe's lunch counter sit-ins, while Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" can be heard after Mabel Williams, the wife of Robert Williams, cites it as the type of political music that they played on Radio Free Dixie, Williams's radio program broadcast from Cuba. *Negroes with Guns* also makes excellent use of original interviews. Mabel Williams is featured from the outset, as are several Monroe activists. Outside organizers who interacted with Williams, including former Freedom Rider and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Executive Secretary James Forman, offer insightful commentary. In addition, scholars, most notably Williams biographer Timothy Tyson and Martin Luther King, Jr. chronicler Clayborne Carson, share expert analysis of Williams's life and contextualize his activism and the public responses to it.

In the DVD format, the film is divided into eight named chapters beginning with "Violence with Violence," which explains life along the color line in Monroe and Union County, North Carolina, and also identifies the origin of the Black Guard, the armed self-defense group that Williams organized in response to Klan violence and Jim Crow humiliations. This section does not, however, offer many details about Williams's life before his emergence as a local civil rights leader. His father is referenced as a familial influence, but little else is said about the early personal experiences that shaped his way of thinking.

Chapter two examines the internal workings of the Black Guard. Robert Williams explains that the organization had only a handful of core members but could call on as many as two hundred people at a moment's notice to defend the black community. Mabel Williams adds that black people from across the country sent donations to buy rifles for the Guard. These are important points that speak to the depth of African Americans' belief in armed self-defense. Interviews with former Black Guard members Yusuf and Roy Crowder also make clear that the group was uninterested in offensive violence and concerned only with



self-defense. They learned karate and stockpiled rifles and shotguns to defend the black community, not to invade white neighborhoods.

Chapter three chronicles two blatant miscarriages of justice that occurred in Union County and the responses of Williams and Monroe's black residents. Timothy Tyson introduces the first of these incidents, the Kissing Case, and explains how Williams's efforts to publicize it earned him an international reputation. The second case involved the acquittal of a white man who attempted to rape a black woman. Mabel Williams recounts the outrage that the not guilty verdict sparked among black women and their subsequent charge to black men to take action. The discussion that follows about the NAACP's suspension of Williams as the president of its Monroe branch for stating publicly that African Americans must meet violence with violence shines important light on the internal politics of national civil rights organizations.



Other 1960s documentary film suggestions:

Hearts and Minds
The War at Home
Winter Soldier
Sir, No Sir
In the Year of the Pig
Weather Underground
Woodstock
Berkeley In the Sixties
San Francisco Good Times
Gimme Shelter
Don't Look Back
The Sixties: The Years that Shaped a Generation
Chicano!
Alcatraz Is Not an Island
MLK: From Montgomery to Memphis
Malcolm X
Black Panther/ SF State
July '64
At the River I Stand
Freedom on My Mind
Murder of Fred Hampton
February One
Eyes on the Prize

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The next two chapters explore the intersection of nonviolent direct action and armed self-defense. In 1961, Williams led an unsuccessful effort to desegregate the city's swimming pool. Significantly, the willingness of his group to defend themselves by drawing their weapons on white mobs and refusing to surrender their guns to the police allowed the demonstrations to continue despite white intransigence. Similarly, the existence of the Black Guard created space for the Freedom Riders to picket downtown stores, and when whites eventually attacked the demonstrators the Black Guard rescued them. These events complicate the simplistic binary of violence versus nonviolence that tends to dominate the discourse on the civil rights movement.

"Accusation and Exile" is a short chapter that provides a clear explanation of the circumstances surrounding the kidnapping charge that forced Williams and his family to flee the United States. Chapter seven, meanwhile, documents Williams's stay in Cuba and explains the appeal of Radio Free Dixie. It also explores his influence on black power advocates beginning with the resonance of *Negroes with Guns*, his treatise on African American armed self-defense. Unfortunately, the overall treatment of Williams's connection to the black power movement lacks nuance and seems perfunctory. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense is the only black power organization that is named and concrete links between Williams and black power leaders are not discussed.

"The Journey Home" is the title of the final chapter, which begins with a brief look at the time that Williams spent in Maoist China. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), explains Tyson, thwarted the activist's repeated attempts to return stateside fearing that he would become a black messiah. The CIA finally relented in 1969 when it became clear that Williams had no interest in assuming such a role. Tyson also notes that the State Department was desperate for firsthand accounts of Chinese life. The chapter concludes with Mabel Williams describing her husband's final days in western Michigan in the 1990s, and with an assessment of his life by Clayborne Carson who describes him aptly as an heroic figure not only because he refused to be silent but also because he lived long enough to share his story.

Negroes with Guns gives voice and flesh to a man whose struggle for his people has been relegated to the sidelines of civil rights history. It mainstreams Williams by addressing forthrightly the critical issue of African American armed self-defense. The surprising lack of depth to the black power discussion, however, is a major disappointment. Nevertheless, this film is an impressive telling of Williams's activism that can be used effectively in the classroom as a springboard for a rich conversation about Williams and armed self-defense specifically, and the civil rights movement generally. □

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