

where a Great Dane is loved by a little girl who saw the opening bullfight on television, some of the beef to a French restaurant where it is served to a woman whose daughter is soon killed in an accident and whose liver is flown to Spain to save the matador's life. There is more, but I mention only that the film also includes therapy sessions in a swimming pool with sixteen naked men and women, young and otherwise, who have just met.

What keeps the film from the imme-

diately ridiculous—postpones the ridiculousness for a while—is the fact that Gleize gets reasonable performances from her cast and composes every shot with an acute painterly eye. But, even if later rather than sooner, the sheer pointlessness of the enterprise smothers it. No kind of thematic point is engaged: every episode could be replaced by a different episode. The whole is just a wan rejection of traditional story, as well as a weak slap at those who still bother to attack the story tradition. ■

*David J. Garrow*

## The Party of Freedom

The golden age of civil rights.

**B**AYARD RUSTIN ONCE GREETED the blind proprietor of an antiques store and asked if he could have a closer look at a piece hanging high on one wall. "Certainly, Mr. Rustin," the owner answered. "How do you know I'm Mr. Rustin?" the startled visitor replied. "I used to work for the FBI," the man answered with a gentle smile, "and I recognize your voice from our wiretaps."

It was a story that Rustin loved to tell, and one that captured multiple facets of a remarkable life: his civil rights work as the prime organizer of the March on Washington in 1963, his passion for collecting, and his uniquely distinctive voice, which remains unforgettable even sixteen years after his death. John D'Emilio's superb and powerful biography, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, gives both the highs and the lows of Rustin's often poignant life. Rustin was a gifted speaker and singer who became one of America's best-known pacifists during the 1940s and 1950s, but his principles forced him to endure twenty-eight months in federal prison from 1944 to 1946 rather than submit to military conscription. Yet that sentence was far from his most traumatic jailhouse experience. A sexually active gay man in an era when homosexuals appeared in the media only in police-blotter stories, Rustin was arrested in Pasadena in 1953 for consensual sex with two other men in a parked car. This in-

**LOST PROPHET: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BAYARD RUSTIN**  
By John D'Emilio  
(Free Press, 568 pp., \$35)

**TIME ON TWO CROSSES: THE COLLECTED WRITINGS OF BAYARD RUSTIN**  
Edited by Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise  
(Cleis Press, 354 pp., \$16.95)

**ELLA BAKER AND THE BLACK FREEDOM MOVEMENT: A RADICAL DEMOCRATIC VISION**  
By Barbara Ransby  
(University of North Carolina Press, 470 pp., \$34.95)

**WHITE: THE BIOGRAPHY OF WALTER WHITE, MR. NAACP**  
By Kenneth Robert Janken  
(The New Press, 477 pp., \$29.95)

**THE DREAM: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND THE SPEECH THAT INSPIRED A NATION**  
By Drew D. Hansen  
(Ecco, 293 pp., \$23.95)

cident derailed his life, and for the next decade it threatened his civil rights activism with an ignominious stain.

Rustin is best remembered for a single day: August 28, 1963, the March on Washington. Yet his most significant his-

torical contribution may have been to press Martin Luther King Jr. into capitalizing on the success of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama in 1956, which first brought King to national fame, by setting up a new South-wide civil rights group called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC was ostensibly founded by a regional network of young black ministers who believed, like King, that non-violent direct action could galvanize the struggle for freedom in the Deep South. But the vision of the SCLC was fundamentally Rustin's, in primary conjunction with two fellow New Yorkers who also became exceptionally important behind-the-scenes actors in the civil rights movement of the 1960s: Stanley D. Levison and Ella J. Baker.

Levison became King's most influential personal counselor. His earlier secret life as one of the two most significant financial operatives of the American Communist Party opened the door to the FBI's aggressive surveillance of King and his advisers, which began in 1962 and lasted until well after King's death in 1968. Levison's pre-1956 life is so deeply buried in the shadows of history that no critical biography will ever be possible, but his day-by-day telephonic advice to King has been preserved for the ages thanks to the FBI's ubiquitous wiretappers.

Miss Baker—that is what everyone who knew her called her—lived a life less dramatic than Rustin's but almost equally influential. An important figure at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1940 to 1946, Baker was sent south by Rustin and Levison to be the SCLC's first executive director—indeed, its first staff member—in early 1958. Baker was a prim but forthright feminist, with a political vision focused on grassroots mobilization and egalitarian democracy, not on organizational hierarchy or ministerial pronouncements. Her three years at the SCLC were rocky and frustrating, but they placed her in the perfect position, come spring 1960, to become exactly what Rustin had become: the progenitor of a new organization that would re-define the civil rights struggle in the South.

*David J. Garrow is the author of BEARING THE CROSS: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE. (Morrow).*

That organization was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which emerged out of the lunch-counter sit-ins that swept the South that spring. Over the next six years, SNCC was as central as King to the evolution of the southern movement, even if it received vastly less news coverage. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, Barbara Ransby's biography of Ella Baker, confirms the accepted view that Baker "had more influence than any other single individual on the development and sustenance" of SNCC. Ransby also seeks to plumb the life story of an insistent private woman who, unlike Rustin, left behind only a very modest corpus of political writing.

**B**AKER ARRIVED IN HARLEM IN 1927, at the age of twenty-three, from eastern North Carolina, and bounced through a succession of left-liberal but non-Communist political jobs before gaining steady employment with the NAACP just as she turned thirty-seven. Rustin, eight years younger, arrived in Manhattan a decade after Baker, at the age of twenty-five. He likewise traversed a raft of political groups, including a brief sojourn in the Young Communist League, before attaching himself to the most respected man in black America, the left-wing labor leader A. Philip Randolph, in 1940. But as Baker moved into her NAACP work, traveling the country to recruit new members for the association's hundreds of local branches, Rustin became a staff member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a largely white group that was America's leading pacifist organization. Reared by his Quaker-influenced grandparents in southeastern Pennsylvania, Rustin came easily and wholeheartedly to FOR's advocacy of non-violence, and the group's leader, the Christian socialist A.J. Muste, became even more of a mentor to him than Randolph.

Baker was promoted to director of branches in early 1943, but she left the NAACP in 1946 after becoming increasingly frustrated with the national office's top-down approach to organization-building and its decided preference for elite-controlled litigating and lobbying rather than community organizing. As Ransby observes, Baker appreciated, "as the national leadership consistently did not, that the branches were the essence

of the organization's strength." In 1944, Baker voiced her desire to "transform the local branches from being centers of sporadic activity to becoming centers of sustained and dynamic community leadership," but her agenda ran up against a powerful organizational mentality. As Kenneth Robert Janken has detailed in his very valuable biography of Walter White, the NAACP's executive secretary from 1931 until his death in 1955, the national office of the NAACP emphasized "the branches' financial obligations to headquarters" to such an extent that the branches were "cash cows" in which "most members did little more with the NAACP than pay dues."

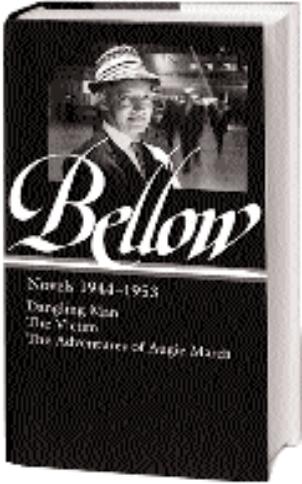
Like Ransby, Janken believes that, "as a thoroughgoing advocate of intra-organizational democracy," Baker "was a rare presence within the NAACP staff," and one whose resignation reflected the group's unfortunate limitations. She left the NAACP just a few weeks before Rustin was released from the federal penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. Rustin later called his imprisonment "the most profound and important experience I've ever had," but his homosexu-

ality had made his confinement difficult indeed. Eight months before his jailing, Rustin had begun a serious relationship with Davis Platt, a twenty-year-old white man who enrolled at Columbia University. "I never had any sense at all that Bayard felt any shame or guilt about his homosexuality," Platt told D'Emilio. "And that was rare in those days. Rare." Rustin began his prison term committed to a principled attack upon all instances of racial segregation inside the federal prison system, but his incipient success in those efforts ended abruptly when he was caught having sex with a fellow inmate. D'Emilio castigates Rustin's sexual activity as "an alarming lapse of integrity and judgment," which Rustin then compounded "when he lied to protect himself from disgrace." Agonizing letters to Platt and Muste disclosed how much "anguished soul searching" Rustin underwent in response to his embarrassment and his administrative punishment.

Yet Rustin's "inner struggle over his promiscuity" continued unabated after his release from prison and his resumption of his high-profile job at FOR. "Rustin emerged from Lewisburg with a

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steely commitment to redeem himself and to prove that his sacrifice mattered," D'Emilio writes, and in early 1947 he was a courageous participant in the Journey of Reconciliation, a little-remembered effort to de-segregate interstate bus travel in the southeastern states. The interracial group of riders was set upon by a violent mob in Chapel Hill, just as the more widely heralded Freedom Riders were assaulted in Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery fourteen years later. Rustin ended up serving twenty-two days on a chain gang as punishment for his activism.

Rustin's "sexual adventuring" led to the end of his partnership with Platt, who ditched him in 1947 after "coming home one day and finding him in bed with somebody else," as Platt told D'Emilio. Much of Rustin's work for FOR kept him on the road for the better part of each year, speaking to campus groups and civic associations, and D'Emilio argues that the unusual "sexual energy that Rustin projected" encouraged a "whiff of expectant scandal" among his close friends and colleagues at FOR. His arrest in Pasadena in 1953, for which Rustin served sixty days in jail, led Muste to fire him. "The Pasadena arrest proved to be the pivotal event in Rustin's life," D'Emilio writes, one that trailed him "for many years afterward" and that "severely restricted the public roles he was allowed to assume." As D'Emilio rightly emphasizes, Rustin's arrest "was emblematic of gay life in this era," when hundreds of gay men were arrested daily in similar if less flagrant circumstances all across the United States. In the aftermath of the Pasadena trauma, Rustin settled into a low-visibility job with the tiny War Resisters League (WRL), which would remain his official organizational home until 1965.

**W**HEREAS RUSTIN'S PRIVATE life was all too public, Ella Baker's personal life has remained largely a mystery, first to her friends and now to her biographer. She spent the late 1940s and early 1950s piecing together an income "through a series of odd jobs," in Ransby's account, in part because she became in effect a mother in 1946, when her nine-year-old niece came to live with her in Harlem. In 1940 Baker had married T. J. Roberts, a beau from her North Carolina college days, but she never took his name and few of her political ac-

quaintances ever met him. Baker and Roberts lived together for eighteen years before divorcing in 1958, just as Baker headed south to work for the SCLC, but in subsequent years Baker never spoke about Roberts and few friends even knew that she had been married. In an earlier biography of Baker, Joanne Grant included a picture of Roberts along with the statement that the divorce occurred because he had become "depressed and morose"; but Ransby is understandably frustrated by her inability to learn why Baker never treated Roberts "as an integral part of her life" and why she always remained "so guarded about her private life."

After the Montgomery bus boycott was launched in December 1955, almost two months passed before the black community's remarkable achievement became a national news story. By this time Baker was already working with Levison in a small new group named In Friendship, which aimed to provide financial support to southern black activists. In late February, at A. Philip Randolph's behest, Rustin traveled to Montgomery and volunteered his assistance to the bus-boycott leadership. He was the first experienced outsider to come to their aid.

Martin Luther King Jr., chosen on the first day of the boycott as the black community's primary spokesperson, had already articulated a message of "love our enemies" before Rustin (and then FOR's Glenn Smiley, who likewise traveled to Montgomery) began encouraging him to articulate the boycott's message in the language of Gandhi as well as that of the Bible. Rustin and King quickly bonded, for King almost immediately realized how helpful Rustin could be with tactics, public relations, and writing. "Rustin came to King as damaged goods," in D'Emilio's words, and even cut short his first visit to Montgomery because his fellow New Yorkers feared that his record might tar the boycott. But his relationship with King developed apace. D'Emilio calls him "the perfect mentor for King at this stage in the young minister's career," and he correctly remarks that over "the ensuing months and years, Rustin left a profound mark on the evolution of King's role as national leader." But most importantly of all, "almost from his first meeting with King, Rustin raised the issue of a permanent organization" growing out of the boycott. By late 1956, when the Supreme Court's affirmation of an earlier lower

federal court ruling guaranteed that the boycott would end in success, Rustin was taking the lead, with Levison and Baker, in drawing up the founding documents of the SCLC.

**I**N CREATING THE SCLC, RUSTIN "had moved the struggle for racial justice a huge step forward," D'Emilio writes. But Rustin's hope that the SCLC would build a "mass movement across the South," with "disciplined groups prepared to act as 'non-violent shock troops'" in the belief that "direct action is our most potent political weapon," slowly came to naught. King and his fellow ministers had neither the time nor the experience to build such an organization from scratch, and even when Baker by her lonely self was sent to Atlanta a year later to get the SCLC up and running, her primary mission was to coordinate only a modest series of voter-registration rallies.

Baker's two and a half years at the helm of the SCLC were "more frustrating than fruitful," as Ransby reports. But in bringing together the young college students who cut their political teeth on the early 1960 sit-ins, and in giving those students the organizational room to create SNCC rather than affiliate themselves with the SCLC or any other existing civil rights group, she opened the door for the actual deployment of precisely the sort of "nonviolent shock troops" for which Rustin had hoped three years earlier. Baker emerged from the students' founding session as "the decisive force in their collective political future," and just as Rustin had such a significant impact upon King, Baker's "ideas and teachings permeated [SNCC's] discussions, shaped its ethos, and set its tone."

Reviewing the many letters of advice that Rustin sent King between 1956 and 1960, D'Emilio compares Rustin to a "teacher who formulates pointed questions for his pupil to consider as a way of crystallizing key issues." The characterization perfectly captures the way in which Baker guided the young people of SNCC toward her own long-standing belief that "people did not really need to be led; they needed to be given the skills, information, and opportunity to lead themselves." Baker's preference for "rank-and-file organizing built on pre-existing community networks" reached back twenty years to her fieldwork with the NAACP, but it had been intensi-

fied by her experience with King and the SCLC. The churchly emphasis upon King as a highly heralded individual leader did at least as much harm as good, Baker concluded, for “when ordinary people elevate their leaders above the crowd, they devalue the power within themselves.” As SNCC moved away from “transitory, high-profile events like the sit-ins and freedom rides to protracted day-to-day grassroots organizing in local communities” all across the Deep South in 1961 and 1962, its young staff members put Baker’s teachings into practice. Their work earned little of the front-page attention that King received, but what they quietly accomplished, often under conditions of grave danger from local whites, eventually represented the freedom movement’s most distinctive legacy.

Rustin spent those crucial years from 1960 to early 1963 once again in political exile. Randolph had envisioned staging significant protests in the summer of 1960 at both the Republican and Democratic conventions to highlight the parties’ tepid commitment to civil rights, but the renegade New York congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. decided to sandbag Randolph’s project. Why Powell behaved as he did has long been a mystery, but one particular tactic that he employed privately—threatening to spread a rumor that Rustin and King were sexual intimates—so frightened King that he backed away both from the convention protests and from Rustin. D’Emilio contends, based upon suggestive but far from conclusive evidence, that Powell was acting at the behest of Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the NAACP. Like Walter White before him, Wilkins loathed other activists, and King in particular, who posed a threat to the NAACP’s pre-eminence. Even a generation ago the incident was impossible to understand, but its effects were clear: King’s sudden jettisoning of Rustin “essentially dissolved Rustin’s relationship with King and the SCLC” and underscored again how “the stigma of his homosexuality might, at any moment, rise to curtail his influence.”

**A**LMOST THREE YEARS WENT BY before Rustin, thanks to Randolph, re-emerged on the civil rights stage. Which of the two men first expressed the idea for a march on Washington is unclear, but both viv-

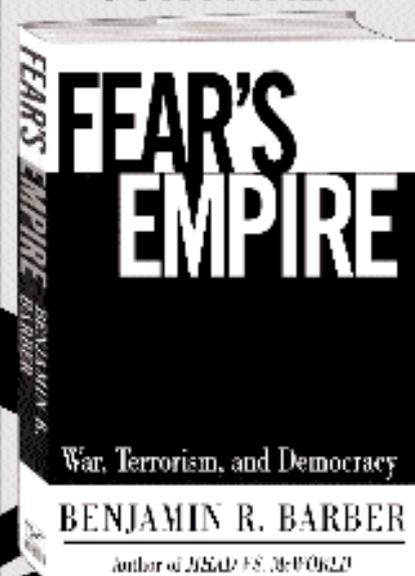
idly recalled how two decades earlier Randolph’s threat of a similar protest had been enough to force a reluctant Franklin D. Roosevelt to prohibit racial discrimination in federal military contracting. Rustin’s initial prospectus for a march in 1963 “put economics front and center,” and focused not on congressional passage of anti-discrimination legislation but on “a broad and fundamental program of economic justice” aimed at bringing black Americans to economic and social parity with whites.

At first Rustin and Randolph had little success in persuading the major civil rights groups to embrace their plan. But then, as D’Emilio puts it, “Birmingham changed everything.” The mass protests that King’s SCLC organized there in early May 1963, at the request of Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth’s local activist group, catapulted the southern struggle onto America’s—and the world’s—front pages as never before. The international denunciations of the police dogs and the fire hoses that local lawmen deployed against the often youthful demonstrators forced President John F. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to begin drafting a comprehensive civil rights bill. And the protests also energized civil rights proponents far and wide: first King and then even Wilkins’s NAACP, as well as the National Urban League, quickly endorsed Randolph’s plan for a march. President Kennedy personally tried to dissuade the civil rights leadership from pursuing Randolph’s idea, contending that it would hurt rather than help the legislative prospects of his new bill, but Randolph refused to desist.

In a reprise of earlier events, Wilkins objected to Randolph’s desire to name Rustin as director of the march, but Randolph sidestepped the problem by saying that he would be the director and would choose his own deputy. In late June, August 28 was announced as the date for the march, and the ensuing “eight weeks were the busiest of Rustin’s life.” Working from a modest headquarters on West 130th Street in Harlem, Rustin and a team of young aides began pulling together the logistics for the event at the Lincoln Memorial and for all the transportation that would deliver people first to Washington and then back home in a single day.

Three weeks before the march, Senator Strom Thurmond, working with documents furnished either by the FBI (as

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D'Emilio asserts) or—more likely—by the southern network of segregationist state investigators who also rigorously monitored the movement, publicly smeared Rustin on the floor of the Senate by resurrecting the reports of his Pasadena arrest a decade earlier. Randolph immediately sprang to the public defense of Rustin's integrity, and Thurmond's attack melted away with surprisingly little impact. Thanks to the scurrilous Thurmond, D'Emilio notes, "Rustin had become perhaps the most visible homosexual in America."

**T**HIS PAROXYSM OF HOMOPHOBIA occurred just as final preparations for the march were building toward the culmination that was universally acknowledged as a rousing moment in American history. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, beautifully analyzed in Drew Hansen's new book, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech That Inspired a Nation*, was the climax of an event that in retrospect represented the movement's feel-good apotheosis. The enactment of Kennedy's bill as the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 followed ten months later, but by the time President Lyndon B. Johnson signed it into law, events in the South and in the North were carrying the movement in a decidedly new direction.

In the South, SNCC's application of Ella Baker's grassroots organizing principles had given birth in Mississippi to a new statewide political group, the Freedom Democratic Party, which was well on its way to challenging Mississippi's "regular" all-white Democrats for the state's seats at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in August 1964. But Johnson's fear that a loss of the segregationist South might somehow make him vulnerable to Barry Goldwater, the far-right candidate of the Republicans, led to the Mississippi Freedom Democrats being offered only a token two seats at the convention, which the party's grassroots delegation angrily rejected. Rustin joined King and other civil rights luminaries in unsuccessfully advising the Mississippi activists to accept Johnson's offer, but most young activists viewed it as proof that the liberal establishment could not be trusted to vindicate the southern movement's radically egalitarian goals. As Ransby writes, Atlantic City was a "watershed that signaled SNCC's de-

parture from the liberal fold toward much more radical directions."

In the North, the weeks just prior to the convention had witnessed serious rioting in Harlem, a modest harbinger of what Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and other cities would experience in the three summers just ahead. The Harlem unrest "so shook Rustin," D'Emilio notes, that he took the lead in persuading King and other movement chieftains to call for a moratorium on direct-action protests until the November presidential election.

Rustin's stance at Atlantic City, like his advocacy of the protest moratorium, signaled a major evolution in his thinking, which he forcefully articulated in an essay titled "From Protest to Politics," which appeared in *Commentary*—at that time a liberal magazine—in February 1965. As D'Emilio says, even "more than a generation after its writing," Rustin's essay "still reads as a compelling piece of political analysis." The crux of Rustin's argument was his assertion that "the future of the Negro struggle depends on whether ... a coalition of progressive forces ... becomes the effective political majority in the United States." In Rustin's view, only a black-labor-liberal alliance, operating through a Democratic Party shorn of its segregationist baggage, could win the enactment of the economic policies that his initial prospectus for the March on Washington had identified as necessary for true black equality.

**B**UT RUSTIN'S STRATEGIC VISION faced a huge obstacle: the war in Vietnam. Rustin had already called for the withdrawal of all American forces from South Vietnam, but his advocacy of an intimate political alliance between the freedom movement and the increasingly militaristic Johnson administration infuriated many of his longtime pacifist allies. Within the movement, too, anti-war and anti-Johnson sentiment grew markedly during 1965 and early 1966, but Rustin remained silent on the war. Instead he focused almost exclusively on fashioning a detailed economic program that would provide substantive grounding for his coalition politics strategy. Operating after mid-1965 from the A. Philip Randolph Institute, a new AFL-CIO-funded entity that would be Rustin's organizational home for the rest of his life, Rustin put forward a "Freedom

Budget" that D'Emilio rightly describes as an "ambitious" and progressive expansion of Johnson's "rhetorically inspiring but programmatically modest" War on Poverty.

The Freedom Budget forthrightly championed "a redistribution of wealth" in America, but as a policy initiative it was an "utter failure," as D'Emilio remarks, because any "opportunities for a progressive coalition were evaporating" into the unbridgeable political chasm that opened between the anti-war left and the pro-Johnson Democratic centrists. What's more, even though King's own leftward economic evolution made it seem "as if Rustin still worked as his ghostwriter," King's harsh attacks on Johnson's war policies sundered the political partnership that he and Rustin had largely restored in the two years following the great march.

Just as Rustin and King diverged, Ella Baker's role as "resident elder and intellectual mentor" of SNCC came to a clear and telling end. Baker had played a major role in the Atlantic City challenge, but she did not attend SNCC's most decisive subsequent conference, and as internal strains increasingly pulled the group apart, she was not present to work for SNCC's survival. "There was not a sharp break but a gradual drift and erosion of the relationship," Ransby writes. Baker "attended fewer and fewer meetings and was called less and less for consultation," and by the time Stokely Carmichael, the new chairman of SNCC, popularized the call for "black power" in 1966, the ethos of 1960 seemed much more than six years distant.

Rustin's trajectory in the late 1960s is difficult for D'Emilio to explain. "Despite his early statements against the war and his decades as a pacifist, Rustin was nowhere to be found in the largest anti-war movement in the history of the United States," D'Emilio pointedly notes. Rustin's absence was "glaring," but "no simple explanation ... deciphers the mystery of Rustin's detachment from the war" and from the burgeoning protests against it. While it would seem that nobody with Rustin's record of principled self-sacrifice could have done anything other than speak out loudly, D'Emilio suggests that the intensity of Rustin's commitment to his economic coalition agenda precluded him from acknowledging that Vietnam was an issue of at least equal significance.

**L**OST PROPHET is the third major biography of Rustin in the last six years, and now a new collection of Rustin's writings, *Time on Two Crosses*, edited by Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise, makes many of Rustin's essays easily available. The first biography of Rustin, Jervis Anderson's *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen*, which appeared in 1997, was unenthusiastically received; Anderson's reticence or discomfort in fully and frankly addressing Rustin's homosexuality was the primary weakness of his book. Daniel Levine's *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement*, published in 2000, gained little attention but was significantly more illuminating. Levine was the first to unearth the Federal Bureau of Prisons records that so richly detail Rustin's incarceration from 1944 to 1946, but Levine sometimes was far too trusting of erroneous oral-history recollections, an error that D'Emilio carefully avoids.

Late in his life Rustin told an interviewer, "I spent years looking for exciting sex.... I overemphasized sex." Perhaps Rustin was acknowledging that Davis Platt's rejection in 1947 should have led him to alter his course well before his arrest on the streets of Pasadena. Only in the final decade of his life did Rustin find what D'Emilio terms "a comfortable domesticity," after meeting Walter Naegle, a young white man almost forty years his junior. Until his sudden death in August 1987, Rustin spent much of his last fifteen years traveling the globe, often on behalf of the International Rescue Committee, as his energies moved decisively away from domestic policy reforms.

In contrast to Rustin, Ella Baker never traveled outside the United States, and after 1970 her energies were taxed by asthma, arthritis, and finally Alzheimer's. While Rustin and Naegle's midtown Manhattan apartment overflowed with more art objects than a small museum, Baker lived out the balance of her life in a light-filled but somewhat sparse Harlem high-rise apartment with her niece. She died on her eighty-third birthday in December 1986, nine months before Rustin was felled by a heart attack following surgery for a burst appendix.

Rustin's and Baker's lives tracked much of the course of twentieth-century African American history, from the peak years of A. Philip Randolph and the NAACP to the loss of King and the dissolution of SNCC at the end of the 1960s.

Neither lived an easy or restful existence, and Baker's reticence may have shielded private wounds just as painful as Rustin's public ones. But both of them fundamentally altered and improved the course of the freedom struggle in their time. Bayard Rustin was as significant a political influence on Martin Luther King Jr. as any other individual, and without Rustin the SCLC may well not have come into existence. Ella Baker was predominantly responsible for the creation of SNCC, and her profound impact on its young activists stimulated their pivotal commitment to community organizing in the Deep South's toughest

locales. That neither Rustin nor Baker was able to alter the course of events after 1966 only underscores how great and how sad a turn those later years witnessed. Barbara Ransby and John D'Emilio have written valuable and important books. *Lost Prophet* is a particularly superb accomplishment. Bayard Rustin's extraordinary voice now survives only on old tape recordings and film footage, but his life of courage and perseverance, even in the face of repeated abandonment by those closest to him, is a human achievement that will live as long as Americans choose to remember their history. ■

## David Thomson Chick-Chicky-Boom

**BALL OF FIRE:  
THE TUMULTUOUS LIFE AND  
COMIC ART OF LUCILLE BALL**  
By Stefan Kanfer  
(Alfred A. Knopf, 368 pp., \$26.95)

**T**HIS IS A WONDERFUL AND poignant book about one of life's perfect storms: the collision, the marriage, and the consequent art of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Anglo and Cuban, not only unlikely but very nearly illegal for their time, and surely one of the most endearing marriages in the history of American culture. Near the end of his book, in a summation of the achievement of Desilu, Stefan Kanfer cites Douglas McGrath: "A rerun of *I Love Lucy* starts, and just as the heart is closing around the title, the tears well up in my eyes because of the contrast between the triumph of love of the fictional Desi and Lucy, and the fact that they broke up in real life." I'm not sure that anyone will do better at capturing the lasting appeal of *I Love Lucy*. Truly, it is a show about the dance between romance and reality, as well as one of the best justifications for that uncanny domestic intruder known as television.

The story is taken for granted now, I

*David Thomson's THE NEW BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF FILM was recently published by Knopf.*

think: how Lucille Ball, born in Jamestown, New York in 1911, had knocked around show business (and been knocked around) for close to forty years before she suddenly burst forth in a kind of stardom that not even her desperate gaze had foreseen, and which show business itself hardly understood. Yet this wild Cuban guy, Desi, seemed to have the whole cockamamie thing already in his head, if you could ever understand more than two sentences of what he said. If nothing else, this story is the celebration of what it can be to be Cuban-American—a version of the tale somewhat different from the riot that goes on in Al Pacino's gorgeously lipping Tony Montana in *Scarface*, and in the never-to-be-forgotten brief melodrama that was Jose Canseco in the 1980s.

But notice this. Canseco was a force of nature (maybe steroids helped), a bull turned loose, and a bash brother in Oakland who dominated the white-bread Mark McGwire and had his own tabloid marriage to someone named Esther who was, like, Charo's gloomy sister. And Tony Montana is the animal turned loose in Miami, as well as a wanton Ricardo III who overwhelms the wan, WASPy Michelle Pfeiffer. I mean, these guys are all threat. But here was this Ricky Ricardo—wearing a tie, mon!—not just a business success, but an executive, who somehow had this ditzzy wife at home, and wow, was she lucky to have him to