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A Revolutionary in the Spotlight and in Exile

Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)
By Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell Scribner: 836 pp., \$35

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Stokely CARMICHAEL became internationally famous at 25 when he launched the cry "Black Power" at a 1966 Mississippi civil rights rally. Two years later, when he moved to the West African country of Guinea to work for Pan-African revolution, his political relevance was already in full eclipse.

Carmichael emerged as a significant member of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, soon after enduring his first civil rights jailing at 19. In 1964 he served as a top organizer in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project, and in 1965 he initiated an independent black political party in rural Alabama whose symbol, the Black Panther, was soon adopted by young African American activists in California. Elected chairman of SNCC in early 1966, Carmichael became a lightning rod as arguments raged over his use of the inflammatory slogan Black Power and its potentially anti-white connotations. Leaving the chairmanship in 1967, Carmichael traveled to Moscow, Hanoi and Havana. Eventually, he settled in Guinea and marrying world-famous singer Miriam Makeba. Adopted as a political protegee by former Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah and Guinean dictator Sekou Toure, Carmichael lived out the balance of his life there. Kwame Ture -- the name he had adopted in homage to his two mentors -- was diagnosed with metastasized prostate cancer in early 1996 during one of his semiannual speaking trips to the United States. He was just 57 when he died in Conakry, Guinea's capital, in November 1998.

"Ready for Revolution" is a huge, sometimes winsome but rarely self-critical posthumous oral history and autobiography brought to publication by Carmichael's former SNCC colleague Michael Thelwell, now an African American studies professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In an introductory note, Thelwell terms Carmichael the "composer" and himself the "arranger," but he also notes that Carmichael had "read, edited and approved only six" of the book's 24 chapters before his death. The balance, Thelwell says, is "in effect, [Carmichael's] first draft." Thus, while the first quarter of this volume offers a polished, lyrically attractive account of Carmichael's childhood and secondary school years, later chapters offer a selective but nonetheless instructive account of the crucial 1961-67 years, then an incomplete, sometimes confusing self-defense of the final 30 years of his life.

Born in Trinidad's capital city, Port of Spain, to a young working-class couple, Carmichael came to the United States at 11 and had a surprisingly idyllic boyhood as the only African

American child in a largely Italian neighborhood in New York City's central Bronx. He was accepted into the elite Bronx High School of Science in 1956, where he became friends with Eugene Dennis Jr., son and namesake of the leader of the U.S. Communist Party.

Carmichael's only "early window into an African-American worldview and sensibility" had come at the central Harlem barbershop where he got his hair cut. Then he heard civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, "the quintessential radical activist" and an impressive orator, speak at a gathering. He immediately told Dennis, "That's what I'm gonna be when I grow up." Seeing Rustin also made Carmichael -- who by then had been drawn to Young Communist League events -- realize that what he "had been missing" in his almost all-white world "was a powerful and compelling black presence." On a league trip to Washington, D.C., to protest the House Un-American Activities Committee, Carmichael met young members of the Nonviolent Action Group at predominantly black Howard University and was hooked.

He enrolled at Howard in the fall of 1960 and immediately joined the student group's Washington-area civil rights protests. At the end of his freshman year he went on one of the Freedom Rides to Jackson, Miss., and was rewarded with a stay first at the Hinds County Jail, then at the infamous Parchman Penitentiary. Carmichael calls that first imprisonment "life altering ... a turning point," and when SNCC took form in 1961 as "a collection of mobile organizers" who would become the cutting edge of the Southern civil rights movement, Carmichael at 20 was already a "movement veteran."

Carmichael remained in college until his 1964 graduation, but his summers, like most of his time outside the classroom, were devoted to the movement. In early 1964, SNCC's Robert Moses chose Carmichael as one of his top deputies for the upcoming Mississippi Freedom Summer, and Carmichael spent the ensuing months smack in the middle of what he calls "the boldest, most dramatic, and traumatic single event of the entire movement."

The Freedom Summer Project produced the famous Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, but when local party activists subsequently decided to work within the structure of the Democratic Party, Carmichael's preference for "separate parties truly responsive to their communities" led him elsewhere. In early 1965, when the hugely publicized Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march traversed rural Lowndes County, Ala., a poor, predominantly black community without a single registered black voter, Carmichael launched a new and highly successful SNCC project that soon put a full list of independent black candidates on the ballot for the county's 1966 local elections.

Carmichael's track record as an organizer made him an understandable choice when SNCC's members voted to dump longtime chairman John Lewis (now a U.S. representative from Georgia) in May 1966. Five years ago, in his own autobiography, "Walking With the Wind," Lewis dismissed Carmichael as "the last person I'd respect." Thelwell says he encouraged Carmichael to respond but that the author told him, "This is not going to be that kind of book." Indeed, no insults to anyone appear.

Within weeks of Carmichael's election, Mississippi activist James Meredith's "March Against Fear" led to a series of tussles within the civil rights movement. Early in the march, with Carmichael linked arm-in-arm with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., a Mississippi lawman shoved King. Carmichael recounts what ensued: "I yanked free to go after him, got one arm free, but Dr. King had my right hand and was not letting go. I was fighting to get to that cracker. But Dr. King hung on to my arm shouting, 'Get Stokely, somebody, lay on him.' "

Even his SNCC colleagues told him, "Man, you really messed up," and an embarrassed Carmichael apologized to King, who advocated nonviolent protest. But a few nights later in Greenwood, Miss., a furious Carmichael, who had just been released from jail, told participants at a voter registration rally: "We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin'. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power." The slogan's ambiguity stoked controversy. A Time magazine journalist who covered the march is quoted observing that what the slogan "meant was never clearly defined." Carmichael says in the book that "being pro-black didn't mean you were anti-white," but at the time his speeches led hostile listeners to conclude that their worst fears were indeed correct. "When you talk of black power, you talk of building a movement that will smash everything Western civilization has created," Carmichael told black audiences.

Carmichael's greatest error was not his rhetorical fireworks but his self-indulgent inability to step out of the media spotlight. During his 12 months as SNCC's chairman, he recalls, "everything happened so fast it seems I spent the entire year in constant motion." Once Black Power became "the hot media topic ... I instantly found myself in great demand as a speaker." He says that this "kind of instant media celebrity ... came with the job," but he fails to acknowledge how gross a departure from SNCC's real work and his own impressive track record this represented: "Even if I wasn't organizing on a project, all that traveling and talking was indeed organizing," he asserts.

Carmichael's American denouement came in a black neighborhood in the nation's capital on the night after King's assassination in April 1968. As the Washington Post later described it, Carmichael "waved a gun over his head and shouted, 'Stay off the streets if you don't have a gun because there's going to be shooting.'" Thelwell quotes Cleveland Sellers, one of Carmichael's closest SNCC colleagues, as explaining that Carmichael "is volatile and tends to have little control over his emotions when he is angry."

Early in this memoir, Carmichael describes his mother as "voluble, passionate, impulsive, and excitable. Her spirit is fiercely confrontational." He doesn't acknowledge how that description might likewise apply to him, yet he admits that by 1968, "Thanks largely to the media, I'd accumulated this incredible trash pile of negative political baggage in the public mind."

Granted, Carmichael was only 25 and 26 during his two-year star turn in the nation's headlines. King was just 26 when the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott catapulted him to national fame. But King was mature enough to harness the media, rather than letting it consume him; Carmichael instead was chewed up and spit out at 27. A year earlier, he told journalist Gordon Parks, "I need time to read. Reflect. I think perhaps more than anything I'd like to be a college professor someday." But the 1966-68 whirlwind bequeathed him only a futile and disappointing exile. *

PHOTO: ORGANIZER: Stokely Carmichael spent his final years in Africa as Kwame Ture.
PHOTOGRAPHER: Los Angeles Times