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# CLIMBING TO THE MOUNTAINTOP WITH MARTIN LUTHER KING

By David J. Garrow

AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN
By Ralph David Abernathy. Harper & Row. 638 pp. $25. Illustrated.

Rev. Ralph Abernathy has not been much in the news for some 15 years now, but to those who know the history of the black-freedom struggle in the South during the 1950s and '60s, he is one of the most notable activists of that era. More than any other person, Abernathy was at the side of Martin Luther King Jr. from the first day of the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott in 1955 until the moment of King's death in Memphis in 1968. Remembered by some for his relatively unsuccessful stewardship of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the years immediately after King's assassination, or for his 1980 endorsement of Ronald Reagan, Abernathy's most significant contribution to civil rights lay in the supportive companionship that he provided King during those 12 1/2 tense, hectic years.

Abernathy is now 63 and senior minister of Atlanta's West Hunter Street Baptist Church, where he has pastored since 1961, but he has been slowed by several strokes and by glaucoma that has seriously weakened his eyesight. He thanks several friends and aides for substantial assistance with this autobiography and acknowledges the important support of his wife, Juanita Jones Abernathy, but the portions of this memoir that are most important and most evocative clearly come from Abernathy's own firsthand recollections.

Far and away the most charming and impressive sections are those describing Abernathy's childhood and adolescence in Alabama's rural Marengo County and his young manhood as an Army draftee at the close of World War II. These are beautifully written and richly evocative chapters and will predispose any reader toward a supportive response to Abernathy's subsequent accounts of well-known civil rights campaigns such as Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma and Chicago.

Those latter chapters, however, are at times disappointing, while nonetheless valuable and significant. They are disappointing, because they oftentimes omit important stories Abernathy has told before, such as the dramatic siege of Abernathy's First Baptist Church in Montgomery by a violent white mob during the 1961 Freedom Rides, and King and Abernathy's only face- to-face meeting with FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, in 1964. They are also disappointing because of the number of chronological errors and misspelled names of fellow activists that Abernathy's editorial aides failed to catch. Hence Abernathy and King discuss the Brown decision at their first dinner in Montgomery in January 1954 -- four months before it happened -- and the September 1963 fatal bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church is placed a full year after it actually occurred. King's 1964 Nobel Peace Prize is never mentioned, and Abernathy's account of King's first speech during the Montgomery boycott bears little resemblance to the tape recording of it that has survived and been widely quoted. Some important activists are mentioned not at all -- e.g., Ella Baker -- while others have their names or

identities mangled: Montgomery's Erna Dungee becomes "Emma"; Selma murder victim Viola Liuzzo becomes "Violet"; NAACP executive John Morsell becomes "Sam Morcell"; and CORE director Floyd McKissick, a North Carolina lawyer, is presented as a Baptist minister in St. Augustine, Fla.

Obvious errors such as those are the responsibility of transcribers and editors, not a seeing-impaired memoirist. Abernathy emphasizes at the outset that his autobiography is "a narrative of how it felt rather than of everything that happened," and acknowledges that "the eyewitness is a fallible narrator," both points that readers will do well to keep in mind. At times, however, more subtle but also more substantive errors of omission or commission occur, often in the context of either distancing other close colleagues, such as Andrew Young, from emotional proximity to King or unnecessarily overstating Abernathy's own presence.

Those shortcomings aside, however, Abernathy's intimate portrait of King is of considerable importance in detailing and supporting interpretive themes that have been presented in previous biographies. He stresses King's "unflagging capacity to have fun" when not on the public stage, and frankly addresses King's repeated tendency to suffer severe exhaustion and fatigue at times of particular emotional crisis. Abernathy also speaks honestly and repeatedly about King's "morbid imagination" and "melancholy moodiness" that at times left King "preoccupied with the imminent possibility of his own assassination."

Abernathy also deals forthrightly and at times in some detail with King's non-monogamous personal life and the FBI's obsessive preoccupation with it. King "had a personal charm that ingratiated him with members of the opposite sex," and manifested a "love of women" that "was apparent in ways that could not be easily pinpointed -- but which women clearly sensed, even from afar." "I was always a little bewildered," Abernathy writes in friendly commentary, "at how strongly and unerringly this mutual attraction operated."

The FBI's buggings and wiretapping, Abernathy confirms, worried those closest to King more than they affected King's own behavior. On one occasion, Abernathy confronted his friend with the fact that supportive reporters as well as hostile agents had become well aware of King's serious involvement with one woman, but King rebuffed Abernathy's concern. "The FBI can do whatever they please, but I have no intention of cutting off this relationship."

Abernathy's frank portrayal of King's personal life culminates in the 24 hours immediately preceding King's assassination, a time when King was "preoccupied and depressed" and undergoing "severe strain" with respect to both the Memphis sanitation strike and the SCLC's nascent Poor People's Campaign. Late on the night of April 3, 1968, just after King's now famous "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech, King went for a late dinner and intimate visit with a Memphis lady friend. After returning to the Lorraine Motel early in the morning of April 4, King spent most of the night with another longtime female acquaintance who had just arrived from Louisville. These absences, Abernathy reports, tremendously upset King's closest woman companion, a major figure in his life who also was staying at the Lorraine. After dawn, she confronted King, who asked Abernathy to help reassure her.

Neither man succeeded, and she chastised them both.

"Suddenly Martin lost his temper," Abernathy writes. " 'Don't you say a goddamn thing about Ralph,' he shouted and knocked her across the bed. It was more of a shove than a real blow, but for a short man, Martin had a prodigious strength.. . . She leapt up to fight back, and for a moment they were engaged in a full-blown fight, with Martin clearly winning. Then it was all over. They glared at one another, eyes flashing, breathing heavily. Then she rushed past him and out the door. He watched dumbly for a second, then shouted, 'Don't go! Don't go!' But she was gone, on her way to the airport, headed home. The next thing she knew for certain about Martin Luther King was that he had been shot and killed. It must have been doubly bitter for her, remembering those last few hours, knowing that they had parted in anger."

Sadness and emotional toll were as much a part of Martin Luther King's life as triumph and acclaim, and Ralph Abernathy is in as significant a position as anyone to depict that poignant but inescapable truth. Abernathy quite correctly speaks of himself as King's "counselor and sounding board," and gently rejects the views of other SCLC aides who have sometimes suggested "that I was no more than an appendage to Martin, someone who served as a part companion . . . but who never played an important role in the decisions." What they forget or ignore, Abernathy rightfully says, "was the degree to which Martin depended on me for counsel when we were alone." Now, with "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down," Ralph David Abernathy has also given his closest friend an honest and sometimes moving portrait, in an important memoir that will serve his memory well.

David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," which received the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in biography and the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award