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Let Freedom Ring

Photographer Bob Fitch captured a changing nation

By Stacey Vreeken

Bob Fitch has taken some of the most recognizable photographs of iconic civil rights leaders Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez, but those are not the images that mean the most to him. It's the photos of everyday people that loom large on the walls of his modest Watsonville home.

"The black Civil Rights Movement was not a result of celebrity, leadership, or media," said Fitch, now 75. "It was the result of hundreds of years of Afro-American families nickel-and-diming on behalf of local community organizations to achieve dignity. These millions of people, and the thousands who were lynched, were the scaffold of the Civil Rights Movement."

Fitch was a photojournalist for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, hired by King to document the movement for African-American news outlets that couldn't risk sending their own reporters to the South. Fitch, who is white, could travel more freely throughout Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia, where he chronicled violence against black citizens, community organizing, demonstrations, voter registration, and political campaigns. He later was hired by Chavez to cover the United Farm Workers movement.

"Although there are photos of celebrities and leadership, my work was mostly photographs of those workers who were tenacious, courageous, and passionate — the scaffold of justice," Fitch said.

His photographs show a lifetime dedicated to the causes of social justice, and his deeply felt stories reveal his profound commitment. His speech, now slowed by the onset of

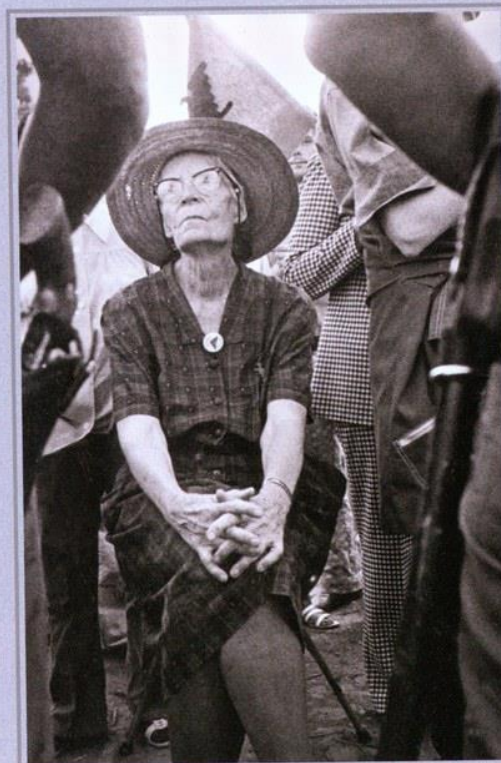


Photo: © Bob Fitch Photo Archive/ Stanford University Libraries

(Top) During the Mississippi Meredith March (June '66), a church bell was discovered along the route which evoked an enthusiastic playful ringing. (Right) *Catholic Worker* journalist and social activist, Dorothy Day, faces off with sheriff officers on a United Farm Worker picket line.

PHOTOGRAPHS BOB FITCH

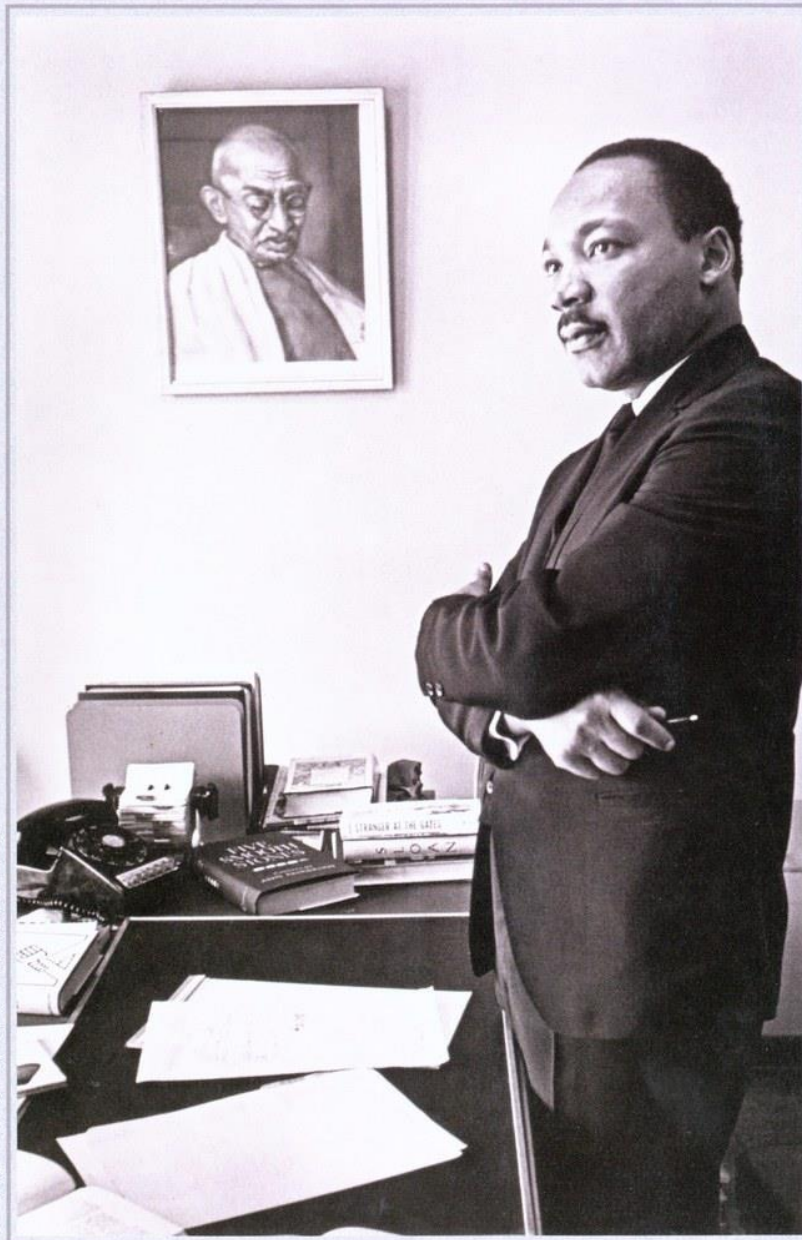


Photo: © Bob Fitch Photo Archive/Stanford University Libraries

(Above) Dr. Martin Luther King in his Southern Christian Leadership Conference's office in 1966, with Mahatma Gandhi's portrait affixed to the wall behind him, King cited Gandhi as an inspiration when he accepted his Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. This photo was published on the cover of King's last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*

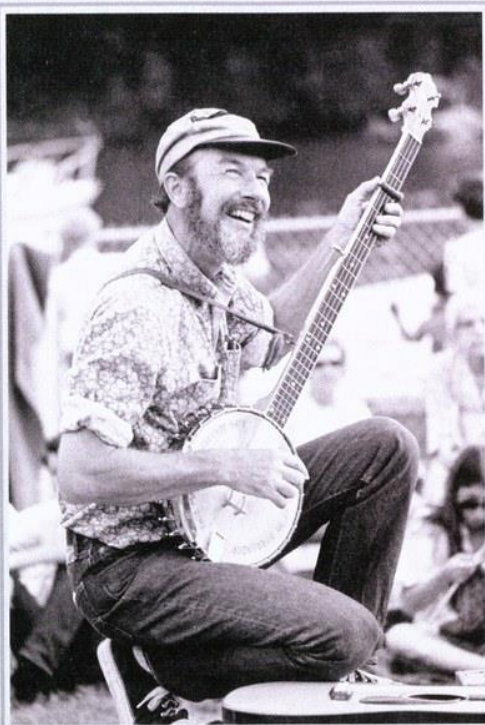


Photo: © Bob Fitch Photo Archive/ Stanford University Libraries

(Above) Social activist and folk singer Pete Seeger during the 1969 Clearwater Festival to save the Hudson River.

Parkinson's disease, just gives the telling more weight. Fitch described how he discovered "the scaffold" of the Civil Rights Movement when sheriffs jailed him for trespassing while taking photos of a segregated, all-white school in Eutaw, Alabama.

"They put me in an iron-bar cell," Fitch recalled. "Did not allow me to make a phone call. Fed me for four days on cornbread and beans." But the dedicated photojournalist didn't worry; he was certain the leadership staff would find him eventually.

"One day, the sheriff clanged the door open and said, 'Bail has been made. You can go.' I asked to see the bail documents to see who signed them," Fitch said. "I expected to see Dr. King's signature, maybe Andrew Young's. Not there. Maybe Hosea Williams, my immediate boss. Not there."

Instead, what Fitch saw were the names of three African-American farmers from Eutaw. He had never even met them, but they had mortgaged most of their property to get him out of jail. Those farmers, and people like them, were the scaffold of the movement. And they were Fitch's heroes.

His ongoing work in social justice went on to include photographing the farm workers movement and the movement against the Vietnam War. He captured images of pacifist Dorothy Day of the Catholic Workers Movement facing off against police at a United Farm Workers picket line in California. He snapped photos of anti-war activist priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan hugging each other in a safe house while hiding from the FBI.

Through it all, Fitch was not merely an outside observer. He was steadfastly committed to the cause. His commitment continues to this day. The Civil Rights and United Farm Workers

movements did result in progress, Fitch said, but the work is not finished.

"All the same stuff is going on now," he said, "but in much more devious forms." Fitch called police shootings of unarmed black men modern lynchings, but he said there are many more subtle issues as well. "What the conservative entities learned from the '60s is you don't have to use billy clubs and violence; you can control with fiscal planning, property planning laws, infrastructure mismanagement, and a continuous atmosphere of fear. Subtleties no one would imagine, such as who gets driver's licenses, who gets citizenship, what ID is needed to vote — all the processes of what it takes to claim political power."

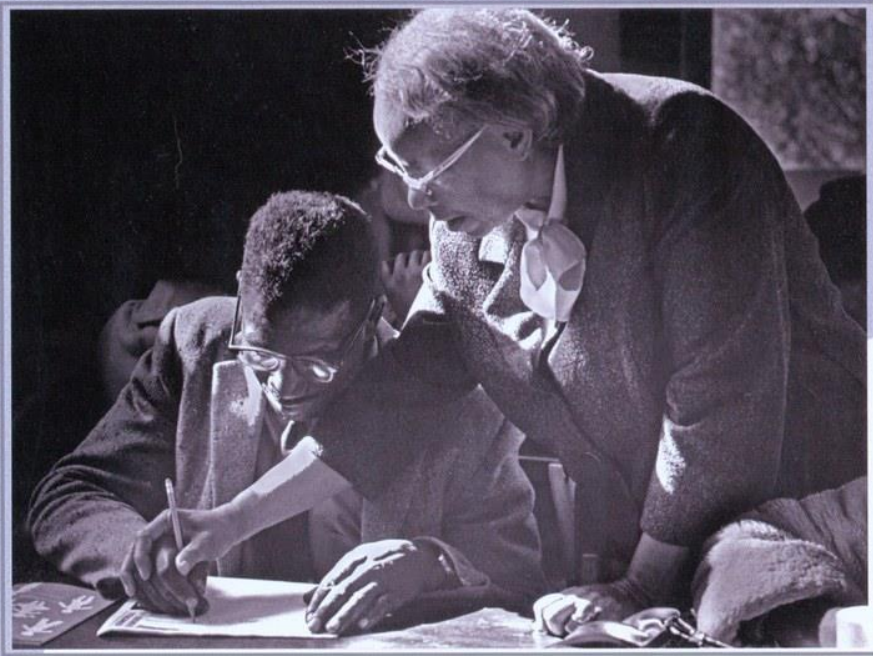
Fitch is a member of a progressive coalition in Watsonville, where voter registration, elector recruitment, and victory at the polls are changing the political landscape, he said. And he's



Photo: © Bob Fitch Photo Archive/ Stanford University Libraries

(Above) Dr. Martin Luther King with folksinger and activist Joan Baez during a march to integrate Mississippi schools (1966). Baez would help to make the gospel song "We Shall Overcome" an anthem for the Civil Rights Movement.

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(Above) Septima Clark, educator and civil right activist, assists a literacy student in preparing for the prejudiced registrar-administered test required to register to vote.

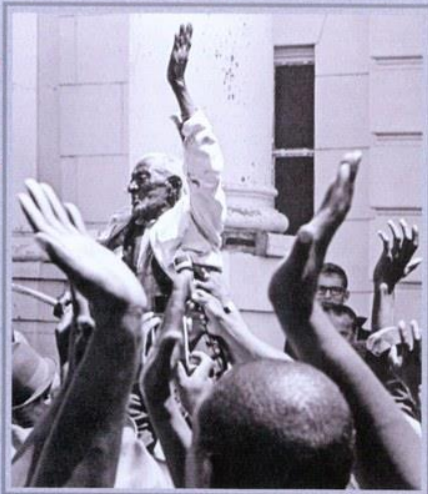


Photo: © Bob Fitch Photo Archive/ Stanford University Libraries

(Above) A celebration for El Fondren, 106 year old, former slave, after completing his first voter registration.

still photographing all of it.

How has he managed to fit in and capture even the most intimate of photographs over the years in so many diverse settings?

"The key issue is trust," said Fitch, pointing out that prejudice exists everywhere, even inside groups. "The currency of empowerment is trust."

The photographer developed firm guidelines for building trust. First, he always got license from the leadership of the organization. King and Chavez signed his contracts for their organizations. He always was clear about what side he was on, even with the authorities. He avoided getting involved in finances or tactical issues. He was in it for the long haul. Finally, he asked up front for total access—and he got it. The result was intimate photos of Chavez contemplating in his bedroom and King in relaxed, casual moments.

"You work to build your own credibility," he said.

That credibility is seen in his image that became the basis for the King statue in Washington D.C. and his image of Chavez that was the basis for the U.S. Postal stamp.

"In the commercial world, I may not get credit, but everyone knows," he said.

Fitch recently licensed Stanford University to place 5,000 of his most historic images on the Web to be used for noncommercial purposes. Nevertheless, there are people who use his work without permission or payment.

"I've seen my own photo walk down the street towards me on T-shirts," Fitch said. But he's not willing to fight for credit or royalties. "The more who see my work, the happier I am."



Photo: © Bob Fitch Photo Archive/ Stanford University Libraries

(Above) Dr. Martin Luther King, flanked by his young son and daughter during an Alabama voter registration tour in 1965.



Photo: © Bob Fitch Photo Archive/ Stanford University Libraries

(Above) Private armed guards protect non-union field workers from United Farm Worker's pickets and organizers in Salinas during a 1970 strike.