

"Stokely: A Life"

Written by Book Review by Kam Williams



"It was Thursday, June 16, 1966... Less than a year before, President Lyndon Johnson had signed the Voting Rights Act... Stokely Carmichael was now in Mississippi to ensure that the federal laws... would apply to black sharecroppers living in plantation communities...

[Just] released from his latest stay in jail... Stokely's voice broke through the humid Mississippi night...'This is the 27th time that I've been arrested,' he shouted, 'and I ain't going to jail no more... We want black power!'

Carmichael made a case for political revolution. 'We have begged the president. We've begged the federal government... Every courthouse in Mississippi ought to be burned down tomorrow!'

His life changed that night, and so did America's civil rights movement. Black Power provoked a national reckoning on questions of civil rights, race and democracy."

-- Excerpted from the Prologue (pages 1-2)

Stokely Carmichael (1941-1998) was born in Trinidad but moved to Harlem at 11 where he joined his parents who had already emigrated to the U.S. An outstanding student, he attended NYC's prestigious Bronx High School of Science and Howard University before turning down a full-scholarship from Harvard Graduate School in order to do pursue his passion, namely, civil rights work in the South.

Stokely rose to the rank of Chairman in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, in which capacity he would forge a close relationship with one of his idols, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. However, he tired of the passive resistance approach after being repeatedly arrested, attacked, intimidated and terrorized by white supremacists for organizing poor black folks who just wanted to exercise their right to vote and to sit at a lunch counter.

Another one of Stokely's heroes was Malcolm X, a militant firebrand who was no fan of turning the other cheek. And when Malcolm was assassinated in 1965, a huge leadership void was created in terms of African-Americans advocating an "eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" political ideology.

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The very next year, Stokely, a charismatic speaker whose magnetism was matched only by his ambition, emerged as Malcolm's heir apparent upon delivering his historic Mississippi speech during which he coined the term "Black Power." He rapidly skyrocketed to icon status as he crisscrossed the country on the college and inner-city circuits. In 1966, he also founded the Black Panther Party which eventually blossomed into the preeminent, national, radical organization.

Given Stokely's notoriety and resume, one would think that a biography of him would've been published before now. After all, both Malcolm and Dr. King have been the subject of beaucoup bios.

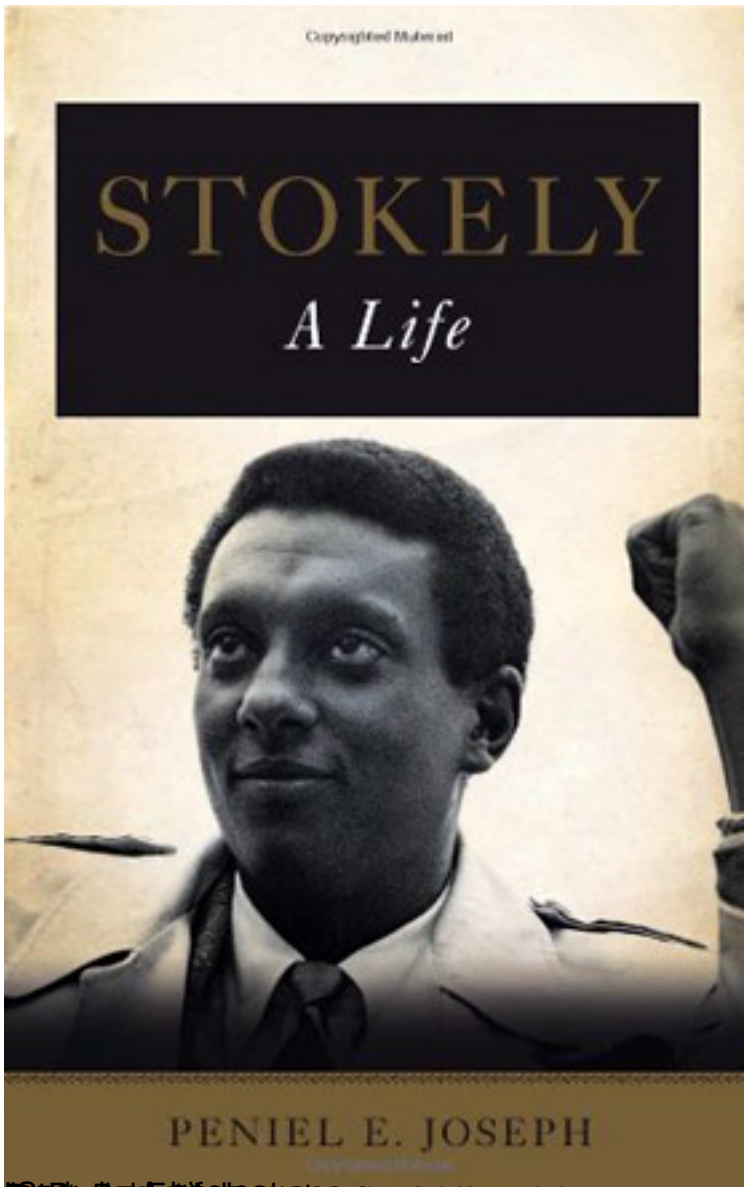
Perhaps Stokely's been bypassed because he wasn't a martyr, or because he left the U.S. for good after marrying singer Miriam Makeba in 1968. Regardless, thanks to Tufts University Professor Peniel Joseph, the fiery iconoclast is belatedly getting his due.

Meticulously-researched and painstakingly-detailed, "Stokely: A Life" is a fast-flowing, informative read which intimately follows its subject from the cradle to the grave in absorbing fashion. In the process, this powerful portrait effectively repositions him as an uncompromising prophet who played a pivotal role in the struggle for black equality.

A visionary of far more substance than the rallying cry he'd been reduced to by history.

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