

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 79 – Alvin C. Jacobs, Jr. – Image Activist

A Choice of Weapons

And now a personal word,

I met Alvin Jacobs at a consciousness party. Michael and Laura DeVaul invited their friends to their home for food, wine, and conversation. In their invitation, Michael and Laura said with so much going on in the world, we need to spend time with “conscious people” to help create a more civil society. My wife and I showed up, not sure how politically or culturally conscious we were, but thrilled to make new friends in Michael and Laura’s home.

My wife and I were talking with other guests at the kitchen table when Alvin pulled up a chair. He soon commanded the conversation talking about exotic cars and motorcycles, expensive watches, and the investment value of Air Jordan sneakers. He talked about wealth and poverty. He talked about the racial divide in America. He talked about white privilege and white power and the oppression of black communities. We asked questions. He answered.

Alvin reminded me of Michael Eric Dyson. Dyson is a professor of sociology at Georgetown University, a *New York Times* contributing opinion writer, and a contributing editor of the *New Republic*. Dyson speaks and writes passionately about the black experience in America. He addresses history, politics, sports, and culture, noting how black Americans continue to suffer from generations of racial oppression. Dyson is a brilliant polemicist. He is an academic with a street edge. He comes at you fast and hard, pivoting quickly, commanding the room, making provocative points with authority and conviction. I listened to Alvin thinking he could give Dyson a run for his money.

I called Alvin a few days after the party and asked him if he would be a guest of the podcast. He agreed. This time we sat at my kitchen table. Talking about life and meaning into a microphone is a different dynamic than meeting new folks at a party. Alvin spoke deliberately, more personally, more intimately. He spoke about documenting the struggles of our most marginalized neighbors. He spoke about the twists and turns of his life. He spoke about his camera as a weapon. This time Alvin reminded me of Gordon Parks.

Gordon Parks is among the most preeminent photojournalists and social documentarians of race and class in the twentieth century in America. Born the last of fifteen children on a farm in Kansas in 1912, Parks grew up in a segregated and racist community. He did not finish high school. He moved to Minnesota as a teenager. His first job was playing piano in a brothel. He took menial jobs from there: a busboy, a traveling waiter, a singer, a semipro basketball player, a porter on a railroad dining car. At times he was homeless. He struggled to survive. But he kept trying new things. He wanted a better life.

In 1937, when Parks was twenty-five years old, he bought his first camera at a pawn shop in Seattle, a used Voigtländer Brilliant, for \$7.50. He took photographs of seagulls and fisherman along the Puget Sound. He returned by train to Minneapolis. When clerks at Eastman Kodak developed his very first roll of film, they were so impressed they offered to exhibit his photographs.

Gordon Parks found his calling. He borrowed equipment and asked for work. He took fashion photographs of models and everyday people on the street. His photographs garnered immediate praise for their honesty and composition. He gained a fellowship to take photographs for the Farm Security Administration in Washington, DC, beginning a series on poverty in America. He sought to reveal the root of discrimination and bigotry. In 1942, Parks took an iconic photograph of a cleaning woman named Ella Watson holding a mop and broom in front of an American flag. He entitled the photograph *American Gothic*.

Gordon Parks became the first black photographer hired by *Vogue* magazine. He created a signature style of taking photographs of models in motion. He became the first black photographer at *Life* magazine. For the next thirty years his photojournalism documented poverty and crime, racial disparities, the civil rights movement, athletes and celebrities, and the cultural achievements and strength of black America. He took photographs of Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and Stokely Carmichael. He composed music, published poetry, authored novels and autobiographies, cofounded *Essence* magazine, and wrote and directed films. His movie, *The Learning Tree*, was one of the first twenty-five films listed on the National Film Registry. He directed *Shaft*, about a black urban hero, and worked with Isaac Hayes on the score.

Alvin C. Jacobs Jr. talks about lost moments and hard times, about finding his way, about the years of work he put in before his photographs were recognized. He was thirty-four years old when he began taking photographs of social movements and racial disparity. I went to see his exhibit at the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture, photographs Alvin took of people in the Brookhill neighborhood of Charlotte. I saw photographs of men and women in their homes. I saw photographs of

children playing. I saw photographs of folk making their way. The images are dignified. Honest. Affirming. It takes sensitivity and insight to take those pictures. It takes a lived experience. The images reveal an artist who has found his calling.

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