

# New Stage Theatre Education Presents



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# Fannie Lou Hamer “America’s Freedom Fighting Woman”

## Meet Fannie Lou Hamer

Fannie Lou Hamer, the daughter of sharecroppers, became a voting rights activist after being recruited by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1962. She soon became an important fieldworker, and fundraiser for the SNCC. One of the founders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, she traveled with a delegation to the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City to present an ultimately unsuccessful challenge to the all-white, all-male Democratic delegation as not representative of the population of Mississippi. President Lyndon Johnson famously called a televised press conference in order to keep her testimony off the air. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Mrs. Hamer turned her attention to local efforts, developing cooperative farm and building houses for the poor of Sunflower County. Fannie Lou Hamer died in 1977. Inscribed on her grave in Ruleville is her most famous quote: “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.”





# Ella Baker “The Mother of the Movement”

## Meet Ella Baker

Ella Baker became one of the leading figures of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. Following her early work for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, she was among the founders of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1957, she ran SCLC's Atlanta, Georgia, office and served as the organization's acting executive director; however, she also clashed with King and other male leaders of the SCLC, who allegedly were not used to receiving pushback from such a strong-willed woman, before exiting the organization in 1960. During her time with the SCLC, Baker organized the event that led to the creation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960. She offered her support and counsel to this organization of student activists. She helped them form the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in 1964.

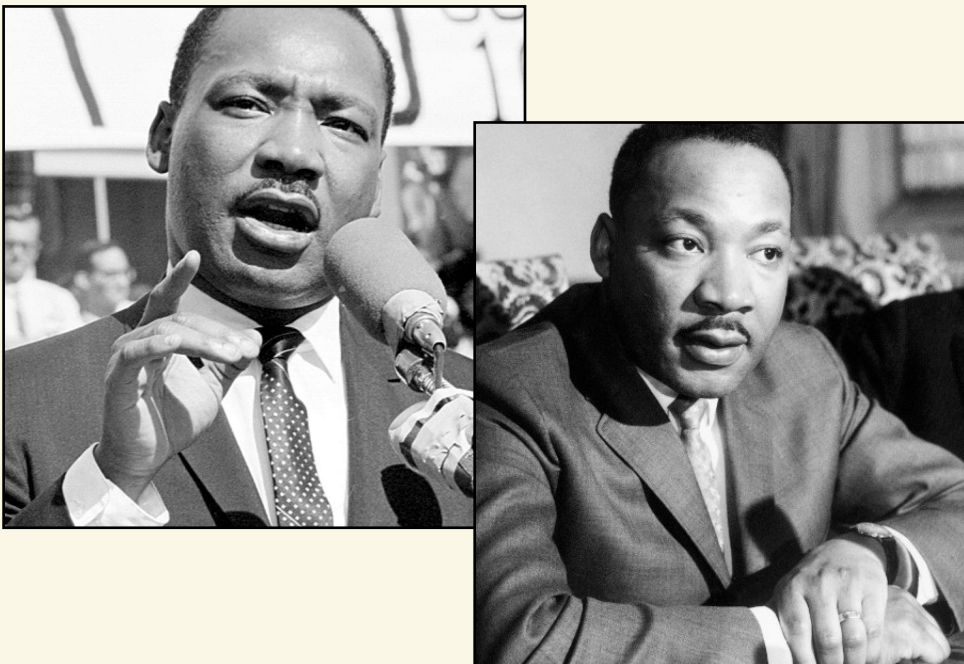




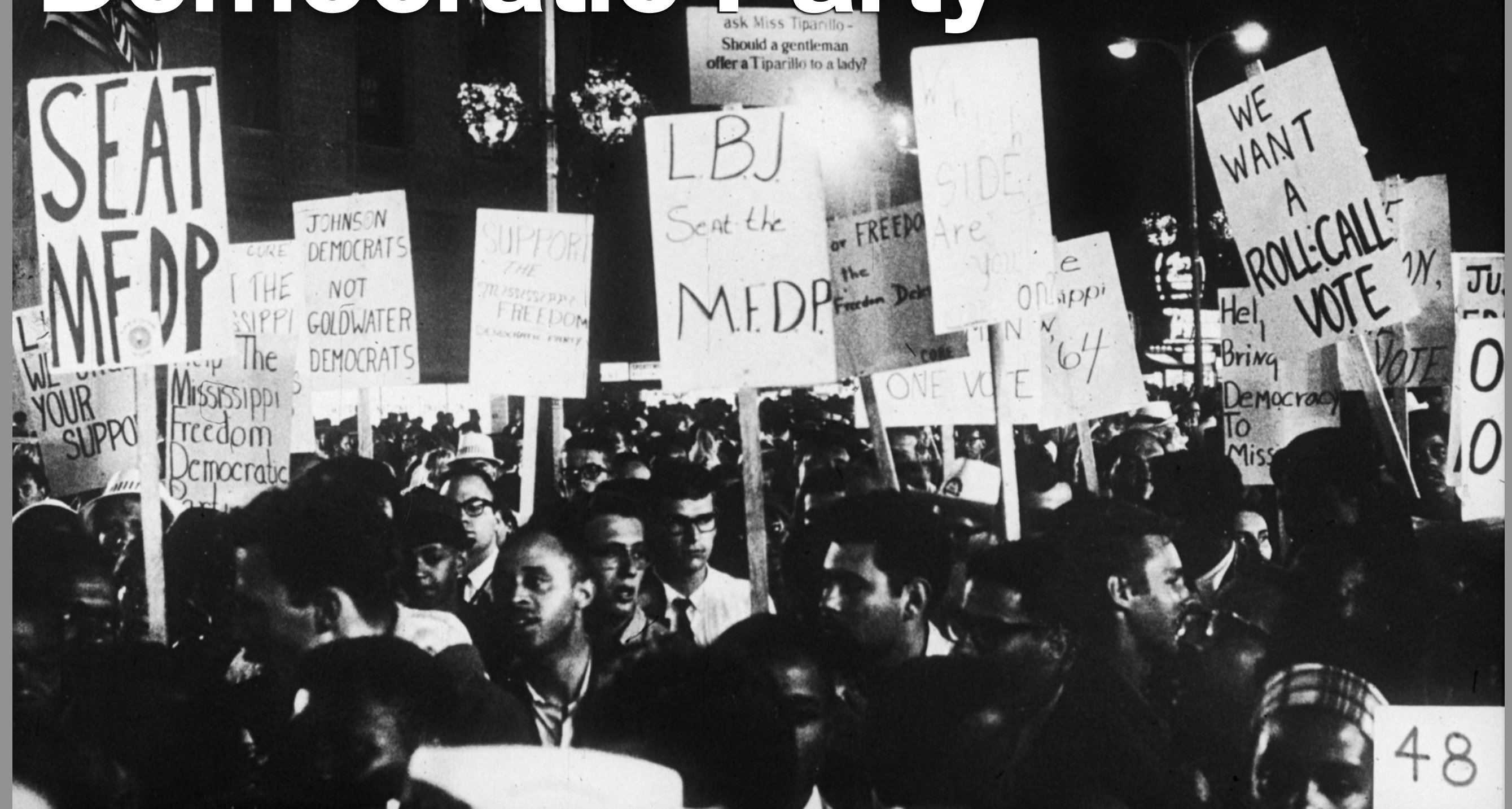
# Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “Leader of the Movement”

## Meet Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Widely recognized as the most prominent figure of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. was instrumental in executing nonviolent protests, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the 1963 March on Washington, where he delivered his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech. The following year, the Baptist minister became the youngest person to win the Nobel Peace Prize at just 35 years old. Throughout his life, the civil rights leader was reportedly imprisoned nearly 30 times for acts of civil disobedience, among other unreasonable charges. (Montgomery, Alabama police once jailed King for driving 30 miles per hour in a 25-mile-per-hour zone.) While behind bars in 1963, King penned his famous Letter From Birmingham Jail, which included the famous quote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

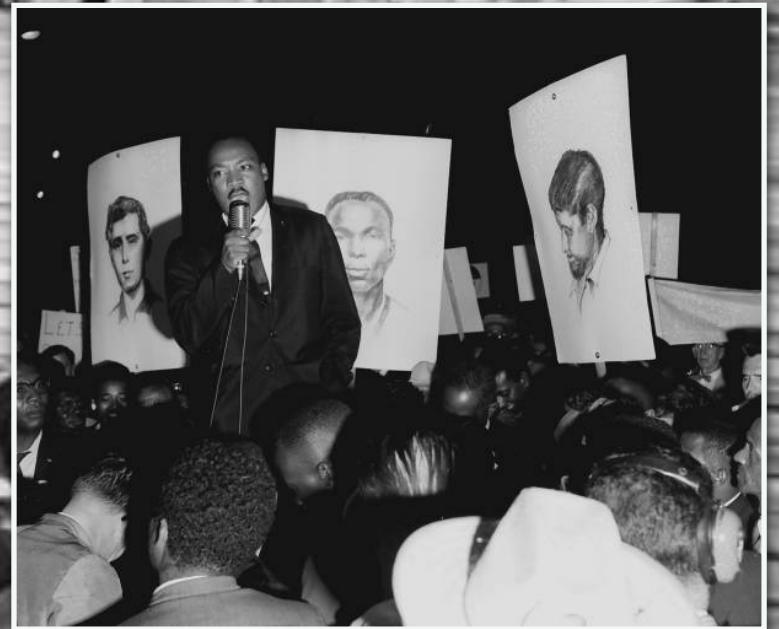


# The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party





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# The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)

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A major roadblock to gaining voting rights in Mississippi and indeed, across the South, were the state Democratic Parties. “Dixiecrats” as southern Democrats were known, dominated state governments. A web of law, intimidation, official and unofficial force, and violence terrorizing Blacks seeking voting rights, kept Black people from voting. For all practical purposes, in Mississippi and across the South, the Democratic Party was “whites only.”

The Council of Federated Organizations’ (COFO) voter registration projects helped to expose Black disenfranchisement, yet the organization’s efforts were ineffective in generating new Black voters in politically meaningful numbers. Much the same was true in other areas of the South where efforts aimed at expanding Black voter registration and political participation were unfolding. So, in Mississippi, COFO began discussing the ways and means of challenging the legitimacy of the state’s Democratic Party at the national level. As a first step, COFO workers organized a “freedom registration” and “freedom vote” in the fall of 1963. This was to prove that Blacks would register and vote if they could do so at unintimidating polling places; that apathy was not the problem, but violence, reprisal, and fear was.

In April 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was founded. Open to all without regard to race, it was a parallel political party designed to simultaneously encourage Black political participation while challenging the validity of Mississippi’s lily-white Democratic Party.

The MFDP decided to challenge the seating of the so-called “regular” state party at the national party’s convention being planned for August in Atlantic City, New Jersey. With the help of hundreds of young volunteers who came to Mississippi in the Freedom Summer of 1964, the MFDP slowly built up its membership and organized parallel precinct, county, and regional meetings. This culminated in a state convention to select delegates for the Atlantic City convention. The 68-person MFDP delegation included a wide variety of homegrown activists known for their determination and militancy in the face of harsh racial oppression. They included E.W. Steptoe, Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray, Annie Devine, Hartman Turnbow and Hazel Palmer, among others. Using ideas developed during the local, county, and regional meetings, the MFDP crafted a political platform.

The delegation was hopeful traveling to Atlantic City, and during their first days there, many delegates expressed sympathy for the plight of black Mississippians. Mrs. Hamer’s powerful testimony in which she vividly described her life behind the closed doors of Mississippi society brought some to tears: “Is this America, the land of the free and home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?”

But ruthless counter-action by President Lyndon Johnson, seeking a peaceful, non-controversial convention and fearful of a Dixiecrat walkout, battered MFDP supporters. Threats were made against supporters in line for federal appointments, and United Automobile Workers leader, Walter Reuther, threatened to withhold money from Martin Luther King’s SCLC.

Finally, a compromise was announced by then-Minneapolis Attorney General Walter Mondale: two seats for the MFDP and full seating of the so-called regulars. No discussion had been held with the MFDP about this “compromise.” The MFDP delegates rejected it after a parade of civil rights leaders and other liberals urged acceptance at an intense meeting. “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats since all of us is tired,” said Mrs. Hamer. <https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/alliances-relationships/mfdp/>



# The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)

## MFDP Challenge at Democratic National Convention

The 1964 Democratic National Convention of the Democratic Party, took place at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City, New Jersey from August 24 to 27, 1964. The convention took place less than a year after President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. President Lyndon B. Johnson was seeking to be nominated for a full term with Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota as his vice president.

Almost immediately after arriving in Atlantic City, the MFDP delegation set up a 24-hour vigil for James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner on the busy and popular boardwalk. With the city bustling with visiting politicians and media, MFDP delegates wanted to be sure that the three civil rights workers murdered in Neshoba County earlier that summer were not forgotten or ignored. The MFDP delegation knew that it had a tough fight ahead although they had been given verbal support from some of the Democratic Party leadership. They were challenging real power at the national level and the needs of Black Mississippians had never been much of a priority there.

Black Mississippians, with the help of summer volunteers and SNCC field secretaries, had spent the entire summer building the MFDP. Now, sixty-eight delegates from Mississippi—"black, white, maids, ministers, farmers, painters, mechanics, schoolteachers, the young, the old"—were in Atlantic City to take the next step.

Dressed in their "Sunday best," they, along with COFO and SNCC workers pressed the validity of the challenge to delegates from other states. James Forman even spied SNCC's "Ivanhoe Donaldson and Charlie Cobb, the blue jean twins of Mississippi ... all dressed up in Ivy League outfits ... lobbying with delegates from Northern states, and lobbying hard." The MFDP delegation was optimistic. Democrats from New York, Oregon, and Michigan, as well as civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and CORE's James Farmer, endorsed their bid for the seats.

However, the delegation had to convince the Credentials Committee, a jury of 108 party members, of the legality of the Convention Challenge. A number of witnesses testified that Black Mississippians were systematically excluded from the regular state Democratic Party. The last to take the stage was Fannie Lou Hamer, a former sharecropper who was evicted from her home for trying to register to vote and viciously beaten in the Winona Jail for her civil rights activities. "She had Mississippi in her bones," remembered Bob Moses later. And, recalled Charles Sherrod, "no human being confronted with the truth of [her] testimony could remain indifferent to it."

Mrs. Hamer's testimony was so powerful that President Lyndon Johnson called a press conference to push her off the air. Johnson's nomination was certain, and he knew he had locked up the Black vote. But he feared a white Southern backlash if the MFDP was seated. Therefore, he used everything in his arsenal to derail the challenge and force MFDP supporters to back down.

Finally, after much arm-twisting from the Johnson administration, party leaders offered the MFDP delegation two at-large seats at the convention to be filled by Aaron Henry and Tougaloo College chaplain Edwin King. The party also pledged to eliminate racial discrimination in all future conventions. The delegation rejected this "compromise." As MFDP vice chair Fannie Lou Hamer put it, "we didn't come all this way for no two seats."

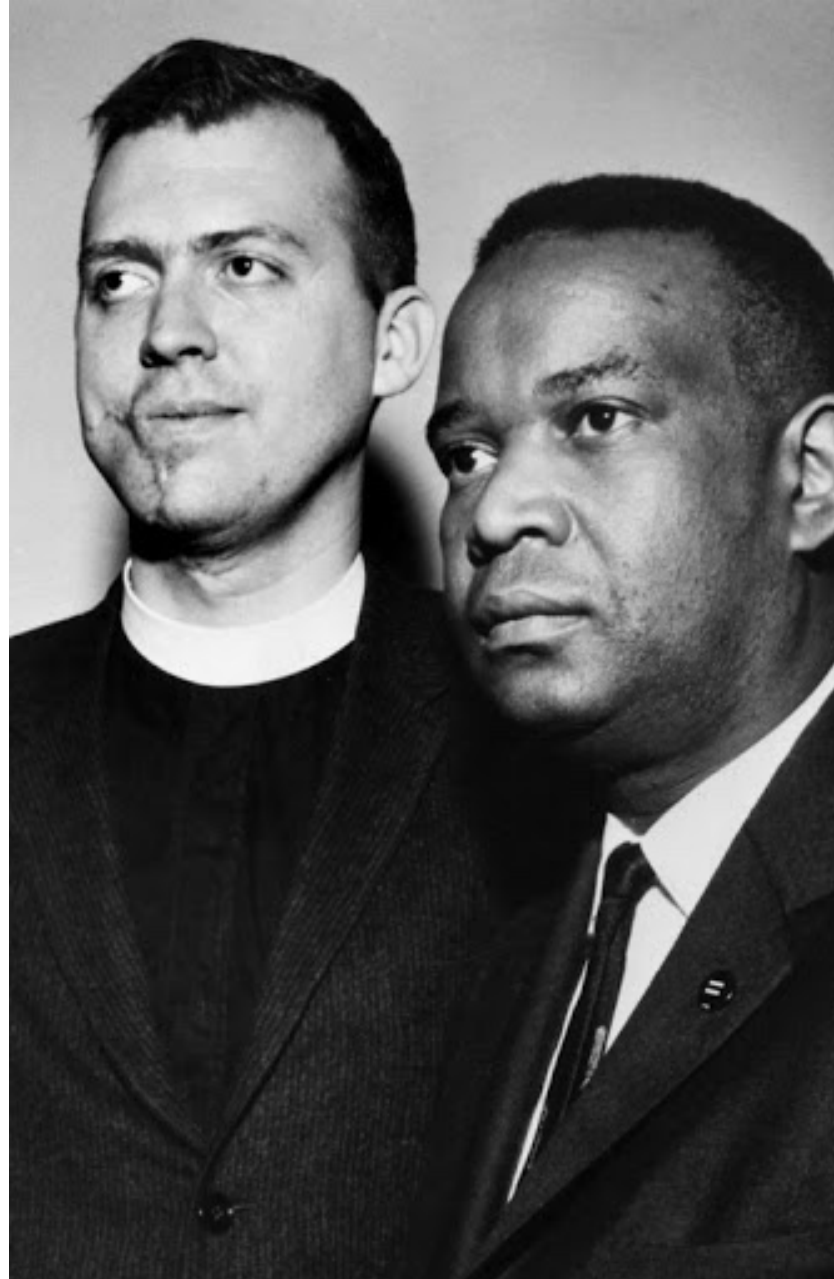
For SNCC, the MFDP rejection was a turning point in the organization's history. "Never again were we lulled into believing that our task was exposing injustices so that the "good" people of America could eliminate them," recalled Cleveland Sellers. "After Atlantic City, our struggle was not for civil rights, but for liberation." For all of this, the MFDP campaigned for the Johnson-Humphrey ticket in the fall, and their efforts at the Atlantic City convention forced reforms in the national Democratic Party that expanded the participation of women and minorities going forward.



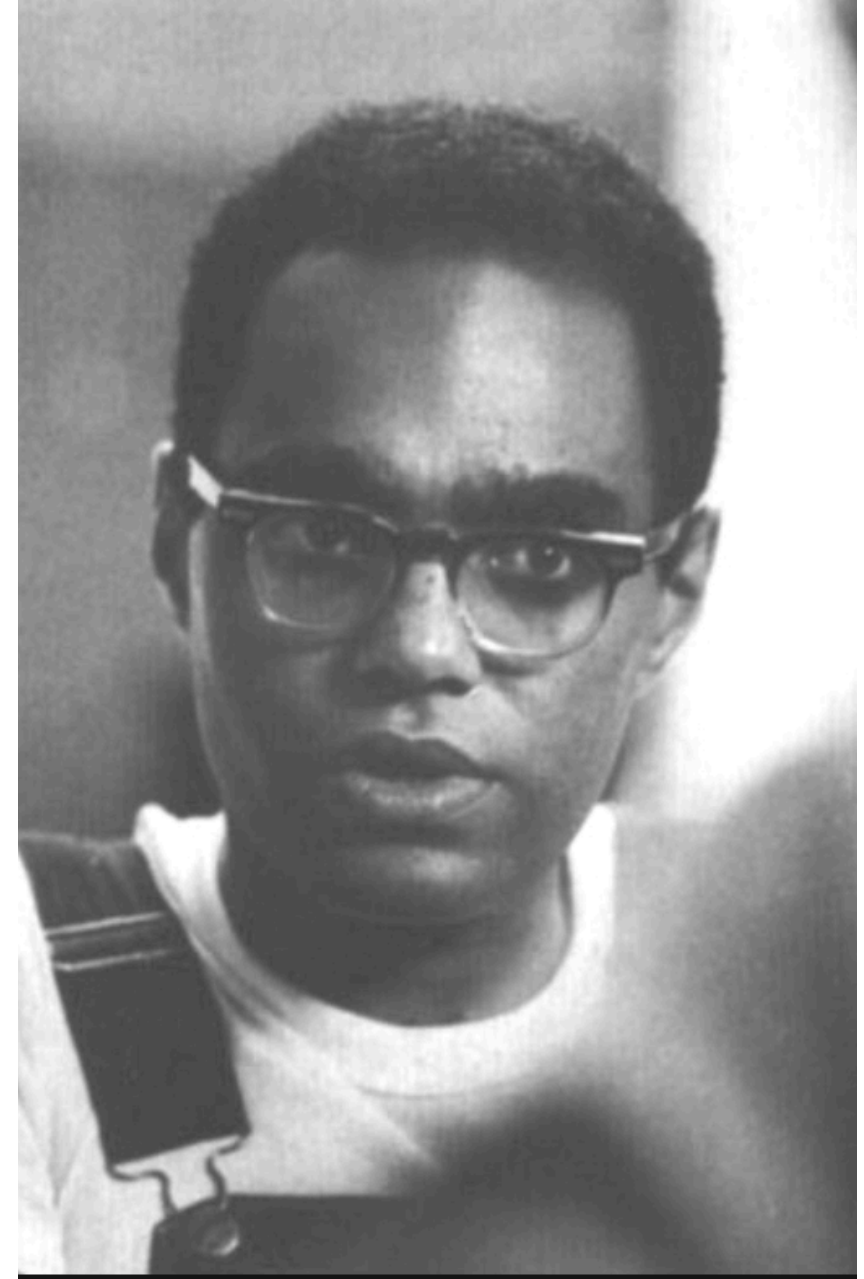
## Additional People to Know



Aaron Henry, chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation, speaks before the Credentials Committee at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 1964



Edwin King and Aaron Henry. During Mississippi's 1963 gubernatorial election, Aaron Henry was on the mock ballot for governor, and Edwin King, chaplain at Tougaloo College, was on the ballot for lieutenant governor.



Bob Moses, The director of SNCC's Mississippi Project.

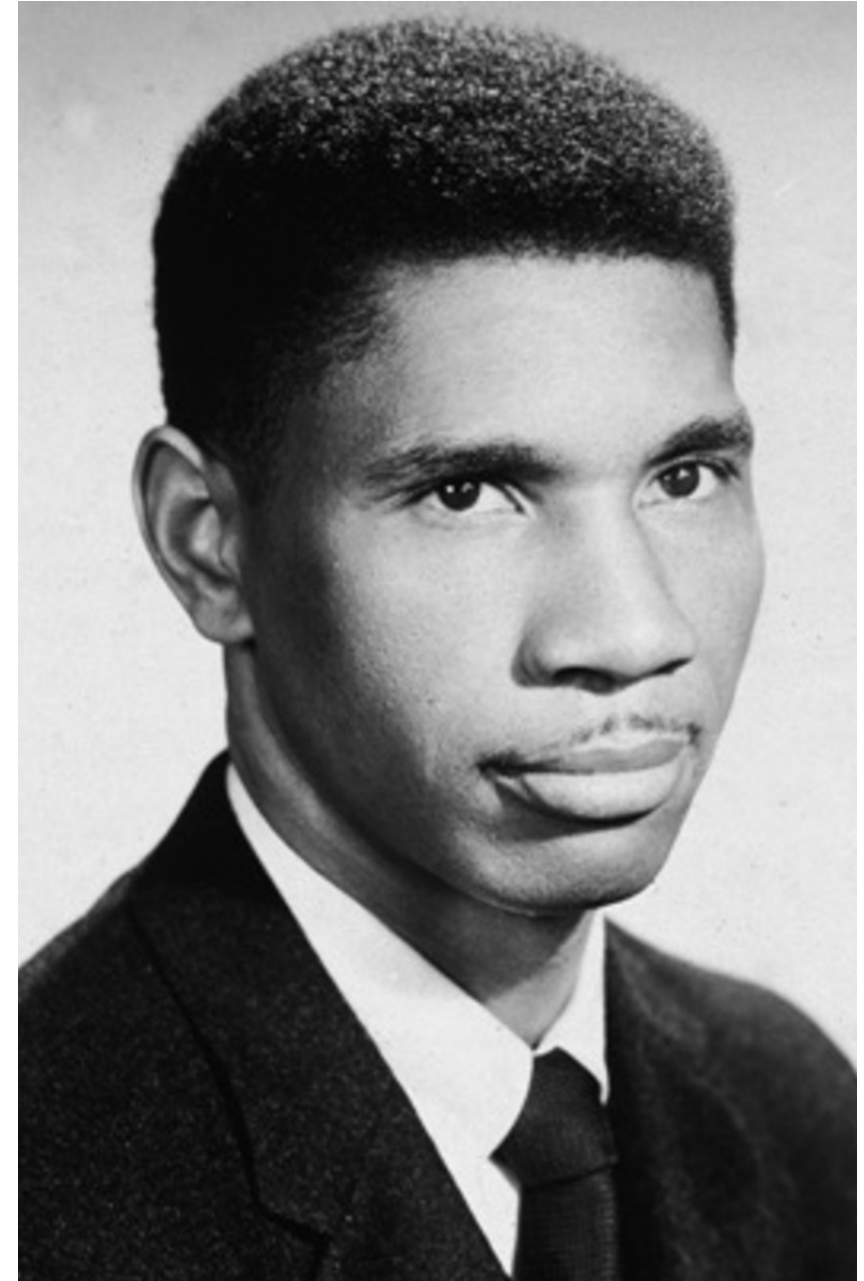
# Additional People to Know



Lyndon Baines Johnson, often referred to by his initials LBJ, was the 36th president of the United States, in office from 1963 to 1969. He served as the 37th vice president from 1961 to 1963 and assumed the presidency following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.



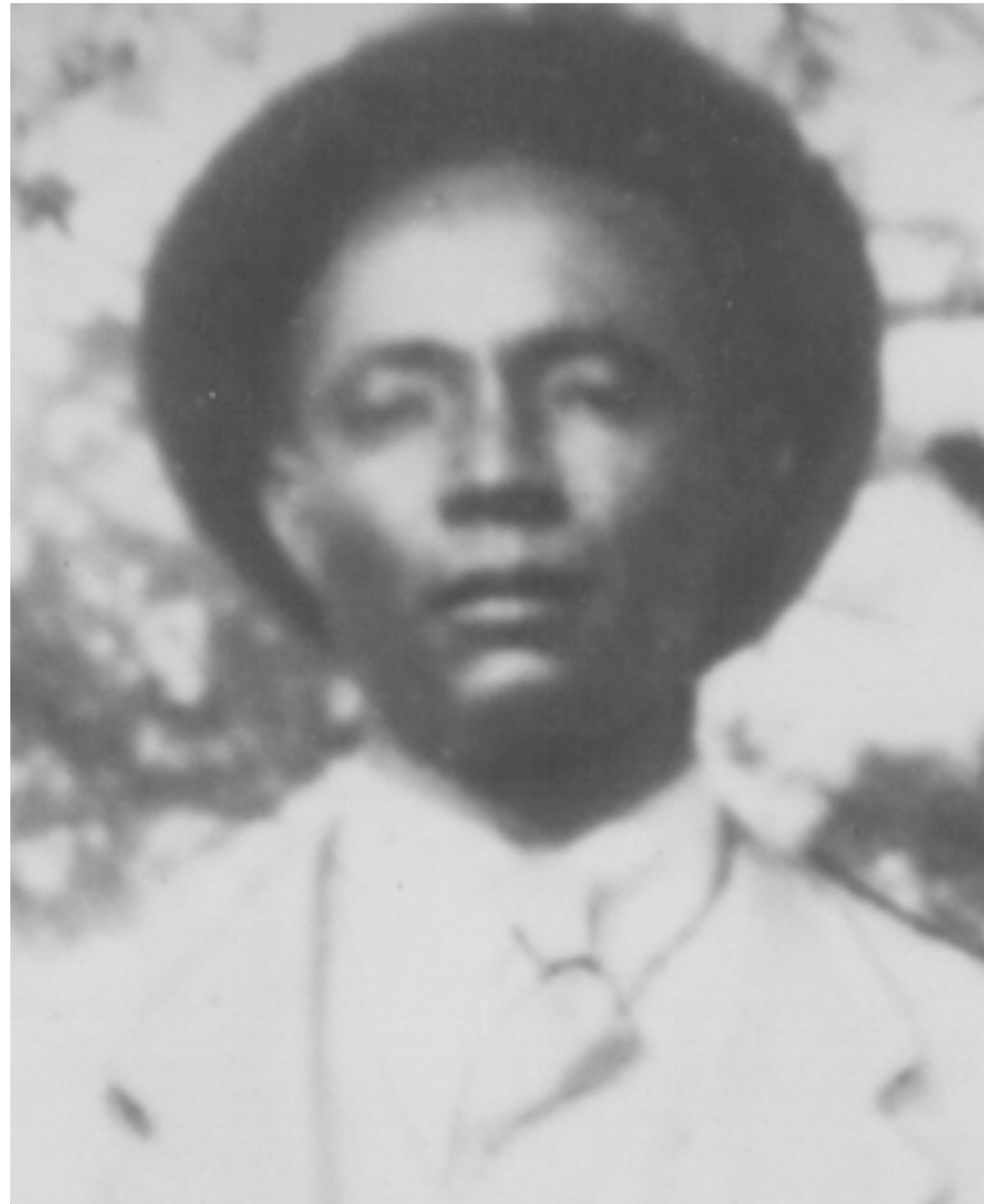
In 1964, at the Democratic National Convention, President Lyndon B. Johnson asked the convention to select Hubert Humphrey as the Vice Presidential nominee.



Medgar Evers, a WWII Vet and the first field secretary for the NAACP in Mississippi. Evers was one of the first state-wide leaders of the civil rights movement in Mississippi.



# Additional People to Know



**Herbert Lee** (above) was the first local person to be killed because of his involvement with SNCC. On September 25, 1961, Lee drove to the cotton gin in Liberty, Mississippi. State legislator E.H. Hurst approached Lee with a gun in his hand saying he wanted to talk. Hurst ran towards Lee's truck and shot him.



**Michael (Mickey) Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman**, the three young civil rights workers were murdered in Neshoba County on June 21, 1964.



**Lewis Allen** (left) A World War II veteran with a seventh-grade education, he was also a landowner. SNCC was active in the county, but Allen did not attempt to register to vote or become involved in the Movement. Allen's life changed on the morning of September 25, 1961, when he witnessed the murder of NAACP leader and SNCC supporter Herbert Lee by Eugene Hurst, a state legislator. After learning that Allen was willing to testify before a grand jury, he was murdered in his driveway.

# Words to Know

**Civil Rights:** personal freedoms that belong to all citizens as guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

**Credentials Committee:** a committee (as at a national party convention) for examining the credentials of delegates and deciding upon contested claims to represent certain groups of the membership.

**Discrimination:** unfair treatment of people simply because they are different; preventing them from getting jobs, going to school, eating in the same restaurant, etc.

**Dixiecrat:** Also called States' Rights Democrat, member of a right-wing Democratic splinter group in the 1948 U.S. presidential election organized by Southerners who objected to the civil rights program of the Democratic Party.

**Freedom Summer:** campaign in Mississippi during the summer of 1964 where volunteers attempted to register African American voters.

**Injustice:** violating the rights of others.

**Integration:** the act of uniting people from different races in order to achieve equal rights.

**Jim Crow Laws:** named after a black character in minstrel shows, these laws from the 1880's to the 1960's enforced segregation.

**Literacy Test:** a test to determine whether a person qualified to vote was used to keep African Americans from voting before the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

**Mississippi Delta:** Northwestern section of Mississippi which has a unique racial, cultural, and economic history.

**Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party:** political party which formed as an alternative to the dominantly white Democratic party in Mississippi.

**Political Parties:** group of people with similar opinions who work together to get candidates elected to public office.

**Prejudice:** negative feelings or opinions about other people as a group without good cause.

**Racism:** negative feelings about people because of the color of their skin.

**Segregation:** action that separates groups of people from one another.

**Sharecropping:** families who rented small plots of land and in return the landowner would get a portion each year's crop.

**Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC):** student led Civil Rights Movement organization in the 1960s.

**Voting Rights Act of 1965:** federal law aimed to overcome legal barriers that prevented African Americans from exercising the right to vote.



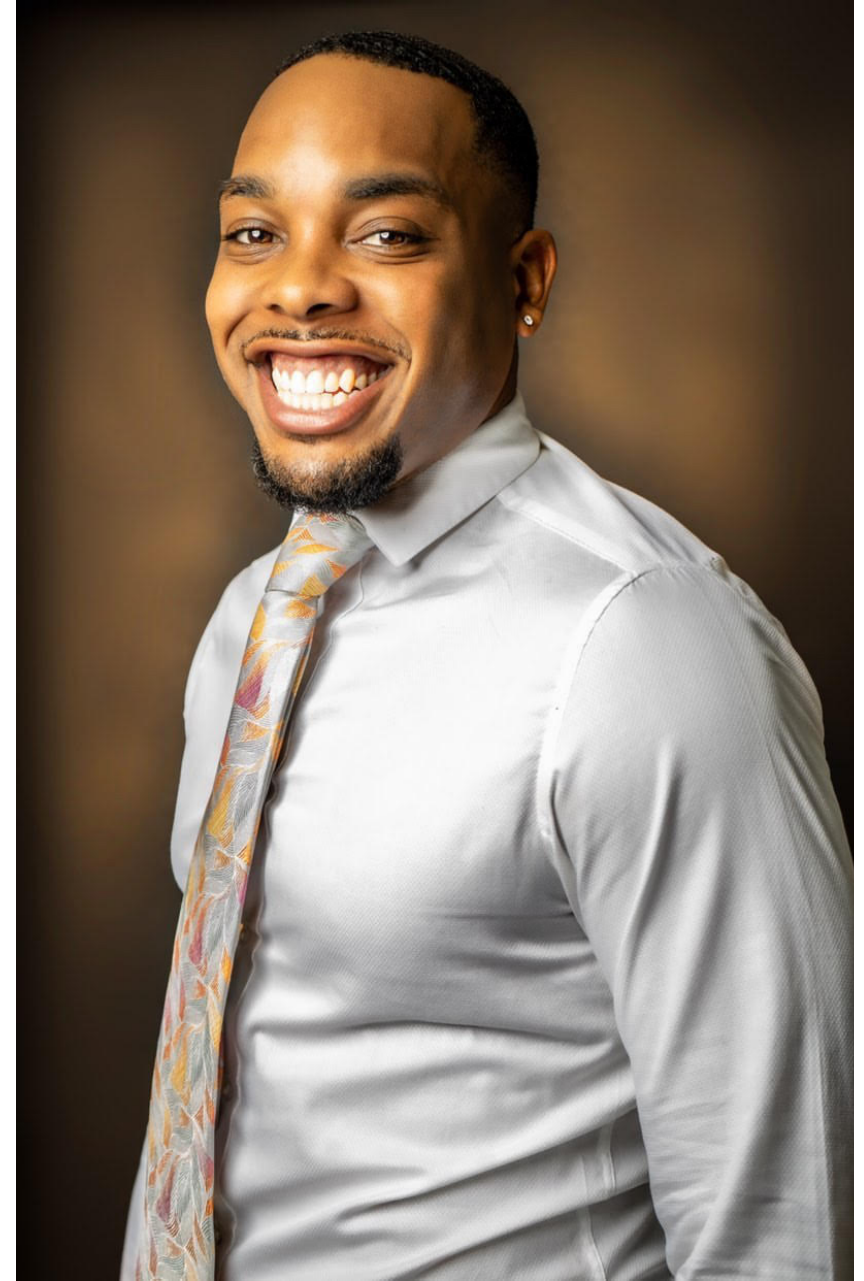
# Meet the Actors



**Sharon Miles as Fannie Lou Hamer**



**Ashia Benford as Ella Baker**



**Devin Hunter as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**



# Ashia Benford as Ella Baker



Ashia Benford as Ella Baker

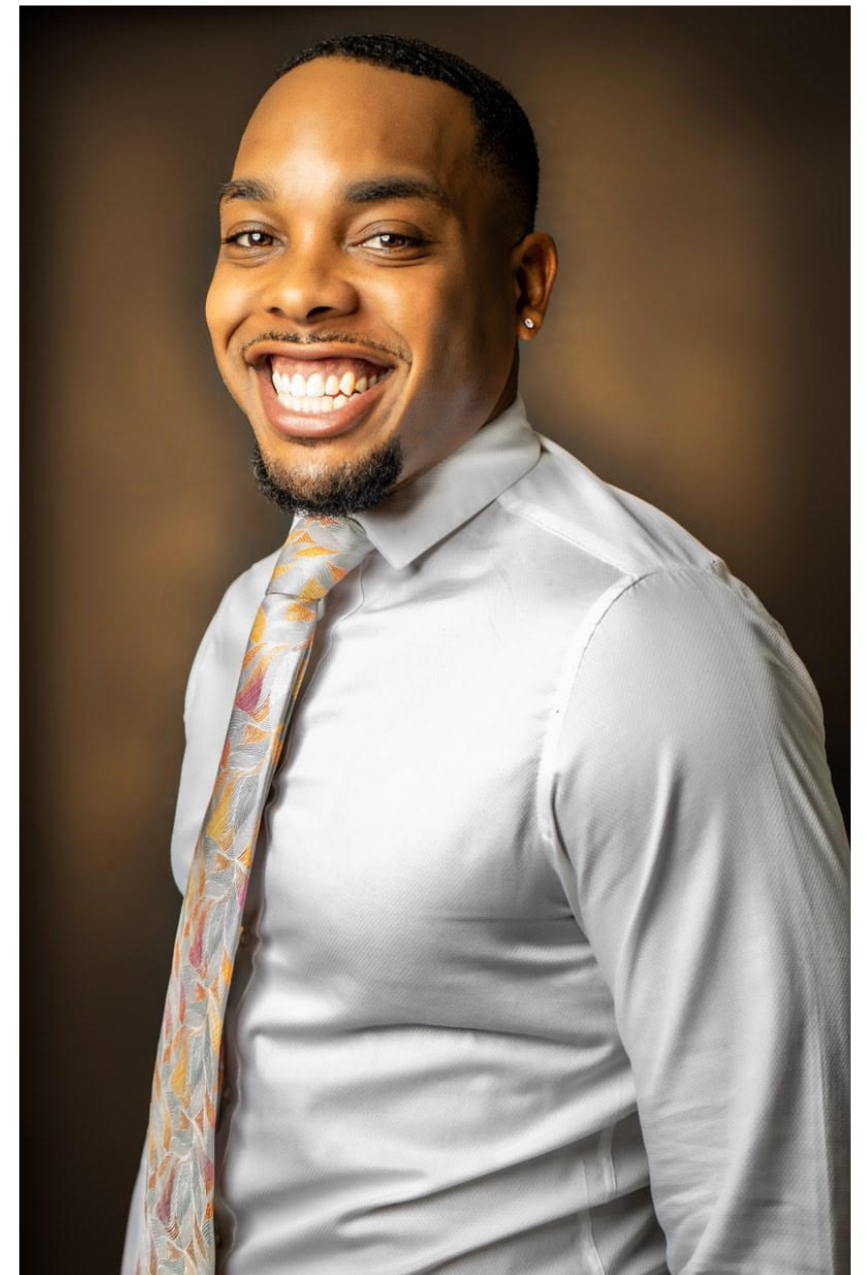
Ashia Benford is a 2012 graduate of Jackson State University where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and minored in Theatre. After graduation Ashia received a professional acting internship at New Stage Theatre where she was seen in: Race, 9 Parts of Desire, Mahalia: A Gospel Musical, and Hairspray. After her internship she married Destin, her college sweetheart and began working in education. She is currently a local actor/director and teaches beginner to advance level acting classes privately. Ashia recently started a theatre company, Stage DNA, where they believe that everything you need to excel is already embedded in your DNA. She is also earning her Masters degree in Counseling with hopes of integrating her experience in theatre to provide holistic healing.





# Devin Hunter as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Devin Hunter: is a Tallahassee, Florida native who graduated from Florida A&M University. Recently, Devin was cast in, Hands Up! 7 Testament 7 Playwrights as Holes in My Identity. Devin also completed a Professional Acting Apprenticeship at New Stage Theatre in Jackson, MS. While there, Devin not only toured the entire state of Mississippi performing three productions for grade school students, but also performed in main stage productions: A Christmas Carol (Apparition, Dick Wilkins, Mr. Topper), Matilda the Musical (Doctor, Adult Ensemble); and the title role of Omari in Dominique Morisseau's



Devin Hunter as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



# Sharon Miles as Fannie Lou Hamer



Sharon Miles as Fannie Lou Hamer

Sharon Miles is an actor, singer, director, playwright and the Education Director at New Stage Theatre. Her original script, *If Not Us Then Who: Freedom Rides to Freedom Summer* chronicling the Freedom Rides of 1961 and Freedom Summer of 1964- toured through out the state of Mississippi through New Stage's Theatre's award winning education program. Born and raised in Mississippi, Sharon is an avid lover of Mississippi History and seeks to use theatre arts to teach character development, youth empowerment and empathy.

Additional original Scripts include: *Who Are You Calling Ugly: A Modern Duck Tale*, *The Middle Passage*, *Andrea and the Lion: A Gratitude Story*, 8:46 and most recently *The Debate for Democracy*.

Sharon collaborated with Frank Kuhn to create a one woman show about civil rights champion Fannie Lou Hamer entitled: *Let It Shine: Visit with Fannie Lou Hamer*.





# Preparing for the Play

**Technology Requirements:** Internet access and a computer

**Length of Play:** 60 minutes

## **High School: Mississippi Studies Standards**

**MS.8 Evaluate the role of Mississippi in the Civil Rights Movement**

1. Analyze the significant figures, groups, events, and strategies of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.
2. Examine the conflict between the Federal and State governments during the Civil Rights Era.

## **High School: United States History 1877 to Present Standards**

**US.11 Civil Rights Movement:** Evaluate the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on social and political change in the United States.

2. Trace the federal government's involvement in the modern Civil Rights Movement
3. Explain contributions of individuals and groups to the modern Civil Rights Movement, including: Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the civil rights foot soldiers.



# The Debate for Democracy — Teacher Evaluation

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **School** \_\_\_\_\_ **Subject** \_\_\_\_\_ **Grades** \_\_\_\_\_

1. What was your overall reaction to the production?

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2. How do you feel about the values of the performance? (Costumes, Set, Performances etc.)

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3. How did your students react to the production?

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4. Please comment on the educational value of the program.

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5. What other plays would you like your students to see?

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# The Debate for Democracy — Student Evaluation

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **School** \_\_\_\_\_ **Subject** \_\_\_\_\_ **Grade** \_\_\_\_\_

1. What was your overall reaction to the production?

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2. How do you feel about the values of the performance? (Costumes, Set, Performances etc.)

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3. What was your favorite part of the play?

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4. Did you learn anything from this production? If so, what?

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5. What other plays would you like your students to see?

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# The Debate for Democracy — General Evaluation

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **Organization** \_\_\_\_\_ **Title** \_\_\_\_\_

1. What was your overall reaction to the production?

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2. Was there a particular part of the play that stood out to you?

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3. Please comment on the educational value of the program.

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4. What other stories would you like your students to see?

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5. Please share any additional comments below.

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