

UNDERSTANDING THE MAN

INTERVIEW THREAD ONE: HUMOR

TOM HOUCK

“. . .And he was — how would you describe it, a jovial person in terms of cracking jokes. So many instances I can think of, but I think one — what happened was a lot, a lot of auto dealers from the North would send cars to the South for civil rights workers to use. And there was this one Chevrolet, which actually Doctor King gave to me to drive around in, which had a — had a hole in the floorboard in the back.

“So, he had called to the house and wanted to know if I was there, I said, ‘Yeah.’ He said, you know, ‘Come pick Ralph [Abernathy] and I up at the airport.’ And I said, ‘Yeah, I’ll come pick you up.’ And so, he said, ‘I don’t want you to bring my car, I want you to bring that car I gave you, that Chevrolet with the floorboard, and we’re going to put Ralph through the hole in the back.’ And so, we get, we get to the, get to the airport, and then Ralph’s standing there, you know, making his little moves, and Doctor King says, ‘Now, Ralph you got to stay in the back, I’m sitting up front with Tom.’ And so, as Ralph gets in, he goes right down through the floorboard. And Martin starts, I mean, starts laughing and I was worried about Ralph. Ralph actually bre — he tore his pants. And so, Ralph says, ‘Now, why did you do that to me, why did you do that to me?’ And then he said, ‘Well, I was just trying to have some fun with you, Chops.’ And so — you know, but it was — and kind of — he’d do that constantly. I mean, he would also show the kids, they had a small pool table, not a big pool table in the house, he’d show the kids his latest pool moves when he came home. He even mentioned he sort of saw himself as a little hustler.”

CLEVELAND SELLERS

“I remember when Doctor King was — we decided on the Mississippi Meredith march, the Black Power march, that we couldn’t take the march through Philadelphia [Mississippi], but it was the anniversary of the murder of the civil rights workers there. So, we decided to get maybe 10 cars and we were going to take the leadership over and we were actually going to march in Philadelphia, and we did that. And when we were marching, everybody was told that we’re going to march up to the courthouse, and we had already decided because the steps of the courthouse was lined with police officers, and so we decided at that point that we didn’t want to put Doctor King at the front and say that prayer. So, Abernathy led the march. And we got up to the steps and Doctor Abernathy turned around to the crowd and he was beginning to open up and he said something like, and I’m paraphrasing, I’m not giving the whole thing, but he said something like, you know, ‘I want to — I want to be able to be here today and memorialize the three victims and I want to ask for redemption for those who — and forgiveness for those who murdered these three young men in Philadelphia, Mississippi.’ And somebody in the crowd behind him said, ‘Yeah, and we standing right behind you.’ And at that point Doctor Aber — Reverend Abernathy’s eyes opened and he finished this prayer with the eyes open and then walked down to the group and said, you know, ‘We need to leave here as fast as we can.’

“And so, I was not in the car with Abernathy and Doctor King, but on the way back to the car, Doctor King asked Abernathy, Ralph Abernathy, said, you know, ‘We’re, we’re Baptist ministers.’ And he said, ‘Yes, sir.’ And he said, ‘Now, were you, were you, were you scared when you were up there?’ ‘No, sir.’ He said, ‘Well, that was the first time I’ve seen a Baptist preacher pray with his eyes open.’ And everybody kind of fell out, I mean, that was Doctor King’s joke, he was comedic too, he told jokes all the time. The funny part about him telling jokes was, he didn’t have the rhythm for jokes, so they would be all kind of — you know, you say, ‘Okay, alright, I’m going to laugh, but I’m going to laugh at you telling that joke, I’m not going to laugh at the joke, but I’m going to laugh at you telling that joke.’ But everybody fell out laughing, but we had to get back in those cars and get out of Philadelphia and Neshoba County very quickly and we got back over.”

DIANE NASH

"I said to an audience one time that I had double dated with Martin Luther King. And I was really surprised they laughed, and I didn't understand why they were laughing. People generally do laugh when I say that now. And I think it's because they don't associate Martin Luther King with dating. But he was very human and not at all the perfect, super human, saintly, remote kind of impression that a lot of people, a lot of young people especially, have. He was very human and his humanness was one thing I found endearing about him. He had a sense of humor. He — I remember he often enjoyed playing table tennis with the staff, and talking smack, and laughing and it was just really, really clear that he was having a great time, as the staff was. Sometimes they would crack jokes and try to top each other's jokes, you know, a joke here, and then somebody would crack another one, another one.

"So, this particular time, though, Martin was going to the Bahamas Islands to work on one of his books. And Jim Bevel surprised me and — with a trip. We were going along also. We were in the Atlanta airport, and I remember we had just come from someplace. And I was like, 'Bevel, we're going the wrong way. Ground transportation is that way.' And so, he said, 'No. We're going to the Bahamas.' And so, we joined Coretta and Martin. And I have lovely memories of a great restaurant that was cut into the side of the hill and the moon was shining through the palm trees. And for somebody from Chicago, the moon shining through the palm trees is a big deal, and as you can imagine, you know, great conversation. He was a fun person to be with, and Coretta, it was a really nice evening and then the next day a long boat ride. And so, he was to me a likable person.

"I admired a lot of things about Martin Luther King. I remember really admiring him for the amount of work that he could grind out in a day. He was a person that had an open mind to the extent that he could grow and change his mind over a period of time. I respect that a great deal in a human being. He was steadfast. He didn't waiver. He kept his hand on the freedom plow, to borrow a phrase from the gospel song. And he didn't want to die. I really relate to that. I didn't want to die either. But he did what was necessary to change things. I admired that deeply. There was a lot to him. He was serious at times. He was courageous at times, a many-faceted human being."

ANDREW YOUNG

"What I remember about Airlie House was, I mean, his sense of humor, because we were up there on that balcony and we were being served iced tea and lemonade by a group of students from University of Virginia in white coats. And we were looking out over the land and there was a tractor out there mowing the grass. It was a beautiful scenery, and he says, 'You know, I can't blame white folks.' He said, 'This plantation system looks pretty good from up here.' You know, we were rocking back and iced tea, and he had a, I mean, he had a very good sense of humor laughing at things like that.

"And I think that what got him that I didn't realize, was that he was constantly aware of the imminence of death. And he used to say that to us all the time, you know, 'You're going to die, and you can never say what you die f — I mean, how you're going to die, when you're going to die, or where you're going to die. Your only choice is what you give your life for.' And I've heard him say that 40 or 50 times in different situations. And he was warning us, but I think at the same time he was reminding himself that whenever his end came he wanted it to be for the purpose of the least of these, God's children."