

A Riveting Portrait of a Behind-the-Scenes Genius

New film on **Bayard Rustin** is rich in humanity and alive with ideas

BY KATE TUTTLE

“I want no Negro to die. I want no human being to die or to be brutalized.” The words — dramatically paced, enunciated in round Victorian tones — issue from a faded newsreel but the speaker’s passion feels ageless. There’s no indication of when or where Bayard Rustin was captured appealing to his listeners’ sense of conscience, but that hardly matters, as *Brother Outsider*, the new documentary biography of the civil rights leader, makes clear — Rustin’s 60-plus year career as an activist, varied as it was, never deviated from his basic belief in the value of all human life.

Born in 1912 in West Chester, Pennsylvania, Rustin was the son of a Quaker mother (he never knew his father). High school classmates remember as “a brick wall” on the football field, yet a player who would recite classical poetry while boys he tackled regained their senses. The combination of fearless strength and a dandy’s eloquence would never leave him, nor would his openness — astonishing at the time — about his homosexuality. It was in West Chester, while still in high school, that Rustin launched his first political protest, integrating a local restaurant. He was arrested and bailed out by asking his friends to take up a collection, a dime apiece from all the black people and all the “decent-minded” white people.

The incident is related in Rustin’s own voice, an invaluable contribution to the film courtesy of extensive oral interviews provided by the Columbia University Oral History Research Project. Rustin’s voice comes through in other ways as well — a fine singer who majored in music at Wilberforce University (before he was asked to leave for organizing a protest against the school’s notoriously bad dining hall food), he later sang in a quartet with political bluesman Josh White. *Brother Outsider* is punctuated by Rustin’s singing, including the White quartet performing “Trouble” (“Well, I always been in trouble/ ‘cause I’m a black-skinned man”) and, even more hauntingly, his aching solo tenor on spirituals and work songs.

Brought to us by producers whose resumes include the second *Eyes on the Prize* project, *Brother Outsider* never lets us forget that voice, even as it brings in others, many of them better-known. There’s

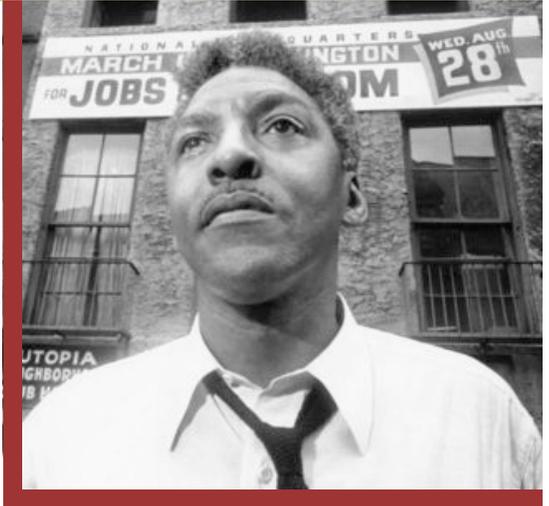
Martin Luther King, Jr., of course, Rustin’s friend and younger brother figure during the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, when the older tactical genius came down to help a 25-year-old pastor lead his first major protest. And there’s A. Philip Randolph, the aging labor leader and originator of the idea of a March on Washington, whose vision was finally realized under the expert guidance of Rustin (dubbed “the best organizer on the planet” by DC Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, who was one of Rustin’s young staff pulling together the 1963 March on Washington). Finally, there is the voice of Mahalia Jackson, singing at the March, with Rustin standing behind her shoulder, mouthing the words and then slipping into a brilliant smile.

It is the March for which Rustin is best remembered now, when he is remembered at all. Schoolchildren, well versed in their King and their

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Parks and maybe even their Tubman and their Douglass, are not often taught about the behind-the-scenes geniuses of any social movements. But Rustin’s range — from pacifism to civil rights to gay rights and back again and around and beyond — places him in a unique category. His versatility and ubiquitousness make him seem a kind of Ben Franklin or Thomas Edison of 20th-century social justice, present at the creation of anything that really mattered. He led protests in which men burned their draft cards — 25 years before Vietnam. He had himself arrested for sitting at the front of the bus — 15 years before Rosa Parks. He traveled to India to study civil disobedience, then came home and taught it to King. He saw the importance of gay rights as a “social barometer” years before it was acknowledged as such, and wrote so strongly about his “harrowing” and “degrading” experience on a chain gang that the state of North Carolina suspended that practice.

In short, Rustin was maybe the most important yet least known black leader of the 20th century. His sexuality kept him marginalized by those who would use it to tarnish the entire Civil Rights Movement (the film includes clips of a 60-something Strom Thurmond attacking Rustin, on the eve of the March,



for his draft resistance, his early Communist Party affiliation, and mostly his homosexuality), but it wasn’t only racists who attacked him for it. While some fellow blacks were merely complicit, as when King distanced himself from Rustin following veiled threats from President Lyndon B. Johnson (aired through powerful black congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.), others openly expressed their homophobia. Later in his life, when Rustin found himself at odds with the emergent Black Power movement, his critics included Amiri Baraka, who declared him in an open letter to be a “slaveship profiteer” and “paid pervert for the racist unions.”

Brother Outsider doesn’t shrink from such painful collisions, and in fact moves past the hopeful early history into a useful examination of the late 1960s unraveling of what Ambassador Andrew Young calls “the coalition of conscience.” When the old pacifist, seeking to help his people with jobs programs and Great Society politics, ends up on the opposite side of the barricades from his original allies, Rustin handles it with characteristic grace. He’s always a gentleman, whether debating Stokely Carmichael or quipping to a newsreporter that he’s “delighted” to be on Nixon’s enemies list. By the end, though, Rustin was reduced to an expatriate elder statesman, fighting for social justice outside the borders of a country that seemed to have moved on.

Kicking off this year’s high season of black culture — the film airs on PBS stations nationwide on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day — *Brother Outsider* is, like its subject, an enduring pleasure. Like Rustin, the film is alive with ideas, fast-paced and surprising, and rich in humanity. It’s beautiful like him — photos of Rustin alone and with his various partners suggest a devilishly stylish and tender lover. And it’s got rhythm — no elegiac Ken Burns-esque camera pans here; no fiddles. Instead, *Brother Outsider* is all feet marching, bold stares and bolder gestures.

Kate Tuttle is Senior Editor of Africana.com ■