

# Deputy to the King



Bayard Rustin (right) was a key player backing Martin Luther King.

**A powerful new documentary examines the gay man who was the linchpin of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s crusade for civil rights** **By David Ehrenstein**

**Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin** ■ Directed by Nancy Kates and Bennett Singer ■ PBS ■ January 20 (Check local listings)

**B**ayard Rustin—a key ally of Martin Luther King's and the major architect behind the 1963 march on Washington—was gay, openly so, decades before the Stonewall uprising or even the semiclandestine Mattachine and Daughters of Bilitis movements of the early '50s. And, as revealed by the startling new documentary *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*, airing January 20, he triumphed, even if the mainstream history books have up until now given him a minor role in the key political struggle of the last century. But as filmmakers Nancy Kates and

Bennett Singer demonstrate, Rustin was absolutely central. He *was* the civil rights movement.

Bayard Rustin protested segregation in West Chester, Pa., public accommodations long before Rosa Parks's fabled Montgomery, Ala., bus ride. Raised by a fiercely political-minded Quaker grandmother, who never objected to his sexuality, Rustin was a strikingly charismatic figure from the first. Tall, handsome, well-spoken, and possessed of a beautiful singing voice, he could have pursued a career with musician Josh White's quartet. But Rustin's true career was in activism.

Refusing to be inducted for World War II, Rustin urged others to burn their draft cards and served three years in prison for it. He was arrested again after the war in Chapel Hill, N.C., for

the crime of "sitting with a white man on a public bus" and was sentenced to 22 days on a chain gang. His most significant conviction, however, came in 1953 in Pasadena, Calif., where he was charged with "lewd vagrancy" in a public park—a George Michael moment that haunted the rest of his life.

When he went to Montgomery in 1956 to advise a political novice named Martin Luther King, the radical Rustin was quickly spotted as a threat to the movement by influential Democrat Lyndon Baines Johnson, who encouraged leading black politico Adam Clayton Powell to attack Rustin, citing the Pasadena arrest. Because of this, Rustin was forced to resign from King's organization. But he returned in triumph in 1963 for the march on Washington.

The success of the march led Rustin to an alliance with his former enemy Johnson, who, after assuming the presidency, pushed forward civil rights legislation that had lain dormant for years. This alliance in turn found Rustin reluctant to protest the Vietnam War. Yet he was engaged in that same period in intense verbal battles with leaders of the then-rising Black Power movement. Rustin felt a joining of civil rights and labor held the key to the future, which is why he encouraged King to come to Memphis to support a sanitation workers' strike—the scene of King's assassination. Yet as always with Rustin, he managed to rise above hardship and continue his work protesting injustice throughout the world on many fronts. In the film's last scenes he's seen at a gay and lesbian march, declaring that the community had become "the barometer for human rights." Were he alive today, there's no doubt Rustin would be on the front lines for same-sex marriage. As for gays in the military—well, that's a matter about which he would doubtless beg to differ. ■

*Ehrenstein is the author of Open Secret: Gay Hollywood 1928–2000.*



## **Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin**

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

**An eye-opening documentary by Nancy Kates and Bennett Singer about the most sophisticated and charismatic of the civil rights leaders, enhanced by insights about why he became the most neglected. A onetime singer in Josh White's quartet, the Carolinians, a communist between 1938 and 1941, and a conscientious objector imprisoned during World War II, Rustin (1912-1987) helped to school Martin Luther King in pacifism—and persuaded him at an early stage not to own guns. Ultimately Rustin was driven to the margins of the movement for being outspokenly gay and refusing (on tactical grounds) to oppose the war in Vietnam. Without overemphasizing either of these factors, this intelligently balanced account offers a complex and nuanced portrait of a complex and nuanced individual. 84 minutes.**

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# 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

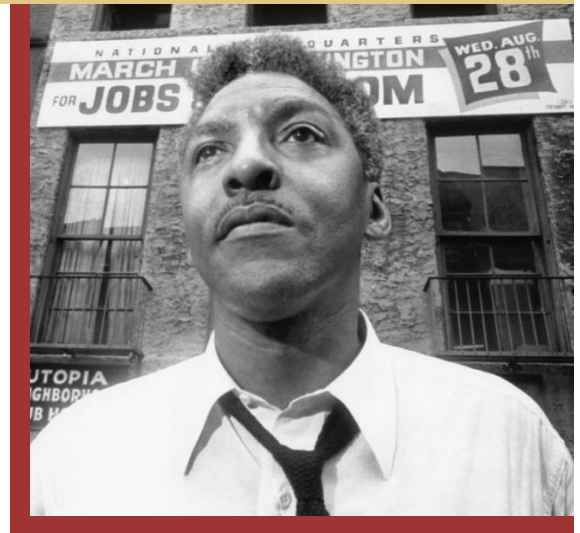
Martin Luther King, Jr., of course, Rustin’s friend and younger brother figure during the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, when the older tactical genius came down to help a 25-year-old pastor lead his first major protest. And there’s A. Philip Randolph, the aging labor leader and originator of the idea 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

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](http://Africana.com) ■

Andrew Sullivan

# The “Invisible Man”

## Why Bayard Rustin is the unknown hero of the civil rights movement

**H**E WAS, TO PURLOIN RALPH ELLISON’S PHRASE, THE “invisible man” of the civil rights movement. In the struggle for African-American dignity, he was perhaps the most critical figure that many people have never heard of. Which is why, as we prepare to observe Martin Luther King Jr. Day on Jan. 20, it’s worth taking a look at the life and lessons of one Bayard Rustin.

Born in 1912 into a Quaker family in West Chester, Pa., Rustin from an early age dedicated his life to social causes. Trained as an activist by the Quakers, Rustin went to New York City and, unfortunately, dabbled in Communist Party activity before quitting in disgust in 1941. Mentored by black labor organizer A. Philip Randolph, Rustin worked in the trade-union movement before becoming a conscientious objector in World War II. He took his pacifism to an extreme, going to a federal penitentiary rather than in any way aiding the war effort.

It was in the late 1940s that Rustin found his real calling—initiating one of the first Freedom Rides through the South to protest and confront legal segregation and becoming a key background figure in encouraging the desegregation of the armed forces. As an advocate of pacifism and non-violence, Rustin was critical in advising a young and still uncertain Martin Luther King Jr. on how to conduct an effective civil rights protest in Montgomery, Ala. But Rustin’s greatest achievement was organizing the 1963 March on Washington, immortalized by King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Thereafter, Rustin never gave up his advocacy for a variety of causes at home and abroad, and was a brave and eloquent voice resisting the Black Power movement that raged in the wake of King’s assassination.

Reading about and watching the poignant new PBS documentary about his life (co-produced and co-directed by Time Inc.’s Bennett Singer and scheduled for national broadcast on Jan. 20) and reading his prose, one is struck by a central, inspiring fact. Rustin never wavered in his belief in true racial integration. He saw the civil rights movement not as a protest against America or an indictment of it but as a way for America to live up to its own principles. In stark contrast to Malcolm X, with whom he civilly debated, Rustin empha-

sized not what white Americans owed blacks or what blacks could do in a separatist ghetto but what blacks could contribute in a truly equal and integrated America. “I believe the great majority of the Negro people, black people, are not seeking anything from anyone,” Rustin told Malcolm X in 1960. “They are seeking to become full-fledged citizens.” The simplicity of that statement is as impressive as its moral clarity.

So why his invisibility? Rustin, you see, was a proud and exuberant gay man. From adolescence on, he displayed an ease with his sexual orientation that was extremely rare at that time. He seemed to feel neither guilt nor shame. He had two very public relationships in his life (both with white men), and he came to see his struggle as a homosexual as inextricable from his struggle as a black man in America. But neither mainstream society nor even the civil rights leadership could cope with his honesty. In 1953, he was arrested for sexual activity in a car—a “morals charge” that embarrassed his allies, humiliated him and was brutally exploited by, among others, Strom Thurmond. So, like many public gay men, Rustin was forced into a defensive crouch because of his sex life. Having struggled for his dignity as an African American, he was still subject to the dehumanization implicit in homophobia.

But, amazingly, Rustin never showed bitterness. He had every right to be inflamed against the white establishment, which at one point sentenced him to hard labor on a chain gang as punishment for his early civil rights protests. And he had every reason to be embittered by his black allies, for their acquiescence in the gay baiting. Yet somehow he rose above both. In one telling incident, he completed his sentence on the chain gang by writing a conciliatory letter to the sadistic white officer who ran the prison. Somehow, Rustin never succumbed to the anger that was his right; his spirit remained as light and as positive as his beautiful tenor voice. And all these years later, that’s what endures: the memory of a man unbeaten by the hate around him, dreaming of a future in which the work of integration, black and white, gay and straight, is the moral—and joyful—duty of all of us. ■



Rustin, right, with King during the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956