

How James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* still lights the way towards equality

A new edition of the classic treatise on civil rights, featuring photojournalist Steve Schapiro's visual record of the struggle, provides a model for how to report in the Black Lives Matter era



*A long walk to freedom ... a photo of the Selma-to-Montgomery protest marches taken by Steve Schapiro in 1965, which appears in a new edition of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. Photograph: Steve Schapiro*

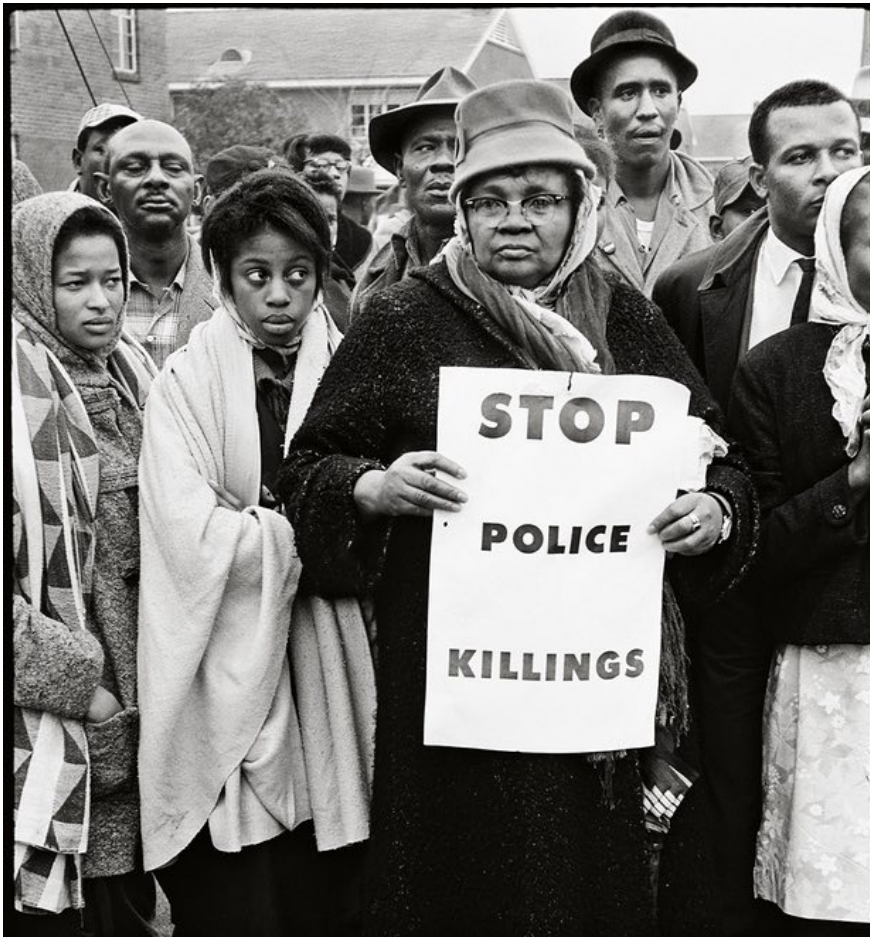
Steven W Thrasher
4 April 2017

There is never a bad time to encounter James Baldwin, and as the wide success of the Oscar-nominated documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* has made clear, the appetite in Trump's America for his prescient brilliance on race and civil rights is fierce and growing.

His 1962 classic *The Fire Next Time* was originally a letter, written by Baldwin to his nephew on the 100th anniversary of the so-called emancipation of black America. In the letter's penultimate paragraph, Baldwin writes: "This is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become." It is rhythmically similar to Trump's red-hatted mantra – but there's a big difference between trying to make America "great again" and focusing on what it once was, rather than what it "must become".

More than 50 years on, *The Fire Next Time* has been reprinted by Taschen in a beautiful new edition that pairs his text with images by the civil rights-era photographer Steve Schapiro. Baldwin was “the scribe of the movement, our illustrious griot, who knew our struggle because he lived it”, as congressman John Lewis writes in the foreword. But before mobile phone videos and Twitter allowed black Americans to directly telegraph their plight to the world, it was up to photojournalism to visualise the message, as Schapiro’s images did in *Life* magazine.

The Baldwin-Schapiro juxtaposition is an effective and powerful literary-visual pairing, not unlike the combination of Richard Wright’s words in the 1941 classic *12 Million Black Voices* with black-and-white photos from the Security Farm Administration’s Great Depression archive. Schapiro intimately captures many familiar faces – Lewis as a young activist in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Harry Belafonte and Martin Luther King – at a time when he “was not aware that [King] was going to be one of the most important people of our time”, as he writes in the afterword. He also photographs a nameless nun, and countless black children and activists whose names are either lost to history or deserve to be as well known as Schapiro’s beautiful portrait of Fannie Lou Hamer, or the gorgeous depictions of Baldwin and his smile.



A spectator at the Selma to Montgomery march with a sign condemning police killings presages the grievances of today’s Black Lives Matter movement. Photograph: Steve Schapiro

Many of Schapiro’s images – such as a woman at the 1965 Selma march with a sign reading “Stop Police Killing” – could have come from any Black Lives Matter protest

in the past three years. And despite their slightly less robust military equipment, the line of cocky, almost gleeful, police officers waiting to confront protesters could have come from any news story from modern Anaheim, Ferguson or Baltimore.

However much love and sympathy Schapiro may have for his subjects' black faces, his images are often of horrific violence: bombed houses, bombed cars, bullet holes, search parties looking for missing people who would all too often turn up dead. Baldwin's words, too, channel both a love of black people and an urge to document white violence: "When I was 10," he writes, "two policemen amused themselves with me by frisking me, making comic (and terrifying) speculations concerning my ancestry and probable sexual prowess, and for good measure, leaving me flat on my back in one of Harlem's empty lots."

Reading that made me reassess the fact that Carolyn Bryant – the woman who accused Emmett Till of whistling at her, triggered his lynching, helped his murderers go free and recently admitted that she lied – will not face punishment. While we know the name Emmett Till because of photos of his open casket (which his mother, Mamie Till, insisted upon), his voice was silenced. However, Baldwin's words give us some insight into the pain of being considered hypersexualised and dangerous by the same world that killed Till and Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin.



Ralph Abernathy (rear) and Martin Luther King lead the way on the road to Montgomery in 1965. The American flag was a natural symbol for a movement that called on the nation to live up to its principles. Photograph: Steve Schapiro

With the media under assault in the US, and when even the most nuanced conversations about the role of subjectivity and identity in the press can cause good journalists to lose their job, Schapiro's afterword in this new edition of *The Fire Next Time* is clarifying, revelatory and admirable: "Photojournalism did make a difference

in bringing attention to the civil rights movement and in helping to change attitudes around the country.” He does not say journalists must be neutral: “As press members – and white men – we were often called on to investigate a situation or find out someone’s condition in a hospital when the organisers felt they couldn’t.” There is no false equivocating with bigots.

Schapiro and Baldwin showed the possibility of what strong writing and photography could achieve in their time. In ours, we’d do well to look to them.