

Angela Davis informs, educates, inspires at August Wilson Center

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ANGELA DAVIS addresses the audience at the August Wilson Center, Feb. 21. (Photos by J.L. Martello)

After she was formally introduced, a slight pause occurred, followed by her quiet footsteps progressing toward center stage.

That was the last quiet moment of the night.

Almost in unison, the sold-out crowd stood, clapped and vociferously cheered as they realized they were witnessing history, witnessing an icon.



KAYLA BOWYER, right, and friends pose for a photo with civil rights icon Angela Davis after her speech, Feb. 21, at the August Wilson Center. (Photo by J.L. Martello)

Angela Davis, a civil rights activist, educator and scholar, spent the next 90 minutes educating the engaged audience on everything from the importance of Black women, women’s contributions to jazz, and the true meaning of freedom.

“There are those who are critical of Black History Month, and of Latino Heritage Month...because they think we should not set aside a mere month, but should celebrate Black History Month every month of the year,” Davis said. “But then there are others who argue that these celebrations are racist, and that if we persist in celebrating Black History Month, then there ought to be a White History Month as well. What these critics don’t recognize is that Whiteness has always been the unacknowledged standard for history, as it has been the standard for judging the accomplishments of humanity.”



ANGELA DAVIS, surrounded by students who heard her speech.

Davis told the audience that humanity “is still assumed to be raced as White, and freedom is frequently assumed to be a White state of being,” drawing the comparison of Blacks who were slaves, and Whites who were not. Whites knew they were free simply because “they were not slaves... marginalized and subjugated communities seeking freedom are basically attempting to achieve what White people have already—you might say, a White way of life, a White state of being.”

Sure, February is a good month for Black History Month, Davis said, noting that African American figures like Frederick Douglass, Rosa Parks and Toni Morrison were all born in February. But, from an overall perspective, Black History Month is about celebrating the “accomplishments of an entire people, of a people who unrelentingly refused to surrender as they moved from slavery in the direction of freedom—and over 150 years later, are still dramatically enthralled in the quest for freedom,” Davis said.

As an African American woman, Davis told the Pittsburgh audience that Black women, for the most part, never get their just due. “In any Black movement, it’s the women that do all the work,” she said, drawing praise from the crowd.

She cited Black Lives Matter (started by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi) and the #MeToo campaign (started by Tarana Burke) as recent examples.

And what about women's contributions to jazz? There are many, Davis said. "There is a relationship between music and struggle... Geri Allen (the director of the jazz program at the University of Pittsburgh) was dedicated to the preservation of women's legacies, especially Black women's legacies...she had innumerable tributes to Mary Lou Williams, who still has not received the credit she deserves within the field of jazz."

Davis added: "She was concerned not so much about herself as an individual, but about preserving a space for women, and especially Black women."



ANGELA DAVIS raises her fist in a Black Power salute after being introduced by Rev. Ralph Abernathy, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in Dallas, Texas, Aug. 17, 1972. (AP Photo/Charles Bennett)

Allen died as a result of cancer on June 27, 2017. She was 60.

Born in Birmingham, Ala., and the daughter of schoolteachers, Davis first studied philosophy at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. As a graduate student at the University of California, San Diego, she became associated with groups such as the Black Panthers and an all-Black branch of the Communist Party. While teaching at UCLA, Davis was fired by the university due to her association with communism, but later got her job back after a court battle.

Later, she was sought by the FBI and placed on its Most Wanted List in 1970 after guns registered to her name were used during a court-takeover by Jonathan Jackson, whose brother, George, had been on trial with two other men (The Soledad Brothers) for murdering a White prison guard. Jonathan

Jackson burst into the California courtroom with weapons registered to Davis, and attempted to free The Soledad Brothers. During the ordeal, which spilled outside the courtroom and onto the street with police firing at a vehicle carrying hostages and alleged suspects, Judge Harold Haley was killed, along with Jonathan Jackson and two of the three Soledad Brothers (George Jackson survived). Authorities believed Judge Haley died as a result of a shotgun that was registered to Davis.

Labeled a fugitive, Davis fled, but was eventually arrested in New York City in October 1970, returned to California and spent 16 months in jail. She then was acquitted of kidnapping, murder and conspiracy charges by an all-White jury in 1972.

Before her acquittal, Davis had garnered nationwide support from both political and entertainment circles. The fact that the guns were in Davis' name was not enough to convict her of the murder and kidnapping charges levied against her, supporters argued. A jury agreed.

Following Davis' speech, questions were asked, including a "plea for help" of sorts from David Brown, of Carrick. He asked Davis how he should speak to his niece and nephew in a way that will better prepare them for their future.

"I think I've largely understood my role as making sure that those around me, most immediately my family, are taken care of," Brown told the New Pittsburgh Courier. "But up until I had a niece and nephew, I don't think I gave much thought to what kind of world I was setting them up to take on. I want to make sure I'm speaking things into their ear that invite them to think bigger than, maybe, I did."

Kayla Bowyer, who has spent years mentoring local high school students, said it was "very affirming to hear her (Davis) talk about racism, colorism and populism."

High School students were in attendance, including a group from Neighborhood Academy. "High schoolers are very vibrant, energetic and they're down to fight for the cause, they just need to know where to direct their energy," Bowyer said. "It was good to hear high schoolers interested and wanting to know more about what they can do to eradicate racism in their own way, because Angela Davis said we have our own part to play in changing the world."