

Al-AMIN, Jamil Abdullah 1943-
(H. Rap Brown)

PERSONAL: Name originally Hubert Gerold Brown; became known as H. Rap Brown; assumed present name during 1970s; born October 4, 1943, in Baton Rouge, La.; son of a worker for an oil company; married Lynne Doswell (a schoolteacher), May 3, 1968. **Education:** Attended Southern University, 1960-64.

CAREER: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., librarian, 1964-65; Nonviolent Action Group, Washington, D.C., chairman, beginning in 1964; neighborhood worker in government poverty program in Washington, D.C., beginning in 1965; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC; renamed Student National Coordinating Committee, 1969), organizer in Greene County, Ala., beginning in 1966, Alabama state project director, beginning in 1966, chairman, beginning in 1967; imprisoned for robbery in state of New York, 1971-76; operator of a small grocery in Atlanta, Ga., c. 1976—.

WRITINGS:

(Under name H. Rap Brown) *Die Nigger Die!* (autobiography), Dial, 1969.

SIDELIGHTS: Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin was an outspoken young black leader who came to prominence in the late 1960s, when he was widely known as H. Rap Brown. In the aftermath of the struggle by Martin Luther King, Jr., to win black civil rights through nonviolent protest, some in Brown's generation believed that a more direct confrontation with white racism was necessary. Brown became known for his belief that black people should be prepared to use guns to assert their rights, and many charged that he was an advocate of violence. Brown countered that his views were necessitated by the virulence of racism. "I preach a response to violence," he wrote in his 1969 autobiography, *Die Nigger Die!*—"Meet violence with

violence." If someone deprives you of your human rights, Brown contended, he is being violent. "It's your responsibility to jump back" at your oppressor, because "if you don't, he knows that you're scared and that he can control you." The reactions to Brown varied widely. *Newsweek* magazine accused him of "hate-mongering," for instance, while Kiarri Cheatwood in *Black World* called him "a young man of deep sensibilities."

In his autobiography Brown recounted some of the experiences that led him to such controversial views. During the early 1960s he studied sociology at Southern University, a black college in his hometown of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He concluded, however, that the school's administration was unwilling to stand up to racial injustice. He worked briefly in a government antipoverty program in Washington, D.C., but sensed that blacks were being co-opted there. "The poverty program," he wrote, "was designed to take those people whom the government considered threatening to the structure and buy them off. It didn't address itself to the causes of poverty but to the effects of poverty."

Brown increasingly looked outside of traditional American institutions to change society. While chairman of the Washington, D.C., Nonviolent Action Group in 1965, he joined several black leaders at a meeting with U.S. President Lyndon Johnson. He gained notoriety for berating the strong-willed president. "I'm not happy to be here," he remembered telling Johnson. "and I think it's unnecessary that we have to be here protesting against the brutality that Black people are subjected to." The next year Brown went to Greene County, Alabama, as an organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), facing the hostility of white citizens and police as he encouraged local black people to exercise their rights to vote and to hold public office. He became the SNCC's Alabama project director a few months later and in 1967 was elected chairman of the entire organization.

Brown's post brought him national attention. He made repeated statements about the need for a violent confrontation with racism, becoming widely known for such remarks as "violence is as American as cherry pie." He suggested that the riots sweeping America's poor black neighborhoods heralded a political insurrection, and riots broke out in the cities of Dayton, Ohio, East St. Louis, Illinois, and Cambridge, Maryland, shortly after he spoke there. Authorities in Maryland indicted Brown for inciting the Cambridge riot and engaging in arson, and for the next few years he was mired in a succession of highly publicized legal battles involving such charges as illegally possessing a gun and violating the terms of his bail. Supporters of Brown argued that he was being harassed for his political beliefs.

At the height of his fame Brown wrote *Die Nigger Die!*, and the book garnered mixed reactions, as had its author. John Leonard of the *New York Times* found the work unsatisfactory both as autobiography and as political commentary, charging that Brown was "so busy proving his *machismo* that his material never comes into focus." But in the *New York Times Book Review*, Shane Stevens asserted that *Die Nigger Die!* expressed the author's "essential humanism . . . cloaked though it may be in fear and hate." Citing Brown's ability to combine his outrage with an irreverent sense of humor, Stevens wrote that "the cutting edge of deep pain is there. But so is the raucous, sometimes slightly hysterical, laughter of life." Cheatwood stressed Brown's political analyses, lauding his "depth," "historically-shaped consciousness," and "mature

thought." As an example, Cheatwood observed that "perhaps better than anyone before him," the author outlined "the responsibilities of Black students to their people."

In 1970 Brown went into hiding, delaying the start of his riot trial in Maryland. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) promptly placed him on its list of most-wanted criminals. The next year New York City police took him into custody near the scene of a barroom robbery. He remained imprisoned while he was tried and convicted of taking part in the holdup and was sentenced to further time in jail. When he pleaded guilty to eluding his Maryland trial, authorities in that state dropped their riot and arson charges.

During his incarceration Brown converted to Islam and adopted his current name. Paroled in 1976, he moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where he operates a small grocery. Though no longer in the national headlines, he has given occasional interviews to journalists. In 1985 he met with *Washington Post* columnist George F. Will, who found him "enveloped in a strange serenity." Brown's life, Will suggested, was now centered on his Muslim faith, and the onetime political activist was working with neighbors on plans for a religious school. "Many people reckon time from the '60s," Brown observed, because "time stopped for them then." He added, "I don't miss the '60s."

BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICAL SOURCES:

BOOKS

Brown, H. Rap, *Die Nigger Die!*, Dial, 1969.

PERIODICALS

Black World, October, 1975.

Chicago Tribune Book World, May 11, 1969.

New Republic, June 14, 1969.

Newsweek, August 7, 1967, June 3, 1968, February 12, 1973.

New York Times, August 13, 1967, April 30, 1969, November 7, 1973, September 25, 1976.

New York Times Book Review, June 15, 1969.

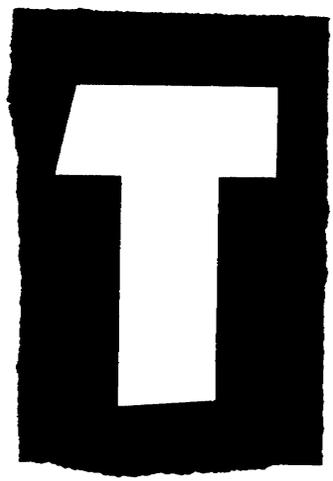
Saturday Review, May 3, 1969.

Village Voice, November 2, 1967.

Washington Post, June 15, 1978, September 19, 1985.*

PRIVATE REVOLUTION





Twenty-five Years Ago, Civil Rights Leader H. Rap Brown Told Black People to Get Their Gun, to Tear Down the System Before It Tore Them Down. His Name Remains Synonymous With the 1967 Riot That Rocked Cambridge on the Eastern Shore. A Little More Than 20 Years Ago, While Awaiting Trial for Armed Robbery in New York City, Brown Found God—Allah, That Is—and Changed His Name to Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin. These Days, He's the Spiritual Leader of a Group of Muslims in Atlanta. But He Hasn't Mellowed. His Struggle Continues. He's Still Committed to Radical Change. Only Now, Instead of Advocating Black Separatism, He's Calling for Islamic Separatism, Running His Grocery Store, and Shooting Amazing Hoops.

BY JOHN LEWIS □ ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN KACHIK

African blues
 does not know me Their steps, in sands
 of their own
 land A country
 in black and white, newspapers
 blown down pavements
 of the world Does
 not feel
 what I am

—from “Notes for a Speech,”
 by LeRon Jones

Jamil Abdullah Al Amin's Community Store sits on Oak Street in Atlanta's West End—two blocks from Ralph David Abernathy Boulevard, named for the former president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and six blocks from the house of Joel Chandler Harris, the man who created the fictional folk philosopher Uncle Remus. Unlike the bustling boulevard, Oak Street is quiet and mostly residential, with little automobile traffic. A string of free-standing, one-story homes is interrupted only by a basketball court and a cluster of three stores—a laundromat, an incense and fragrance shop, and Al Amin's Community Store, which is a small grocery.

On a mid-December afternoon, the store has no customers. Dressed in a black dashiki, green khaki pants, gray socks, sandals, and a gray knit cap, Al Amin stands bent over in a corner, squeezing a plastic gun that spits out price stickers, which he affixes to boxes of laundry detergent. Around him, the store's sparsely stocked shelves hold a motley group of household items: cereal, candy, cleansers. When he spots me, Al Amin straightens his lanky six-foot-five-inch frame, extends his hand, and mouths a greeting.

The serious look on his face softens somewhat when I ask if he makes much use of the basketball court across the street. In minutes, Al-Amin finds me a pair of sneakers, which I begin lacing up, while he pulls on kneepads, sweat pants, and eye goggles. “I might pull a muscle just getting ready,” he jokes self-deprecatingly. Then he tosses me the basketball he keeps stashed behind the store's wooden counter.

Out on the court, the 43-year-old Al Amin moves gracefully. He drives to the hoop confidently, controlling the ball with the long fingers of his right hand, and when he shoots a jump shot, the sound of the ball flicking off his fingertips is usually followed by the whoosh of it passing through the net. Between points, he walks gingerly, but when the action picks up, he's a blur of movement.

During the game, Al-Amin never stops talking. He provides a running commentary, which entertains a few spectators standing nearby, and generally talks trash. He quickly disposes of me by a score of 24 to 10. Then, in rapid succession, he sets about beating two new opponents, both of whom appear to be about half his age.

During the third game, the call to prayer is sounded from the neighborhood mosque, located on West End Place, around the corner from the Community Store. “They're

calling me,” Al Amin tells his opponent. “Here comes a run.” With that, he sinks a shot. “Nothing you can do about it,” he adds, then sinks another. And another. And another to end the game.

“They were calling me,” Al Amin explains, as he walks off the court. “Had to go.”

“Oh man, I was just off today,” his opponent quips.

“Off?” Al-Amin asks in mock amazement. “You were beaten. I'm lucky the police weren't around, 'cause they'd have locked me up for child abuse.”

Everyone laughs, and Al Amin heads toward the mosque to make prayer.

Twenty-five years ago, Jamil Abdullah Al Amin called himself H Rap Brown. The notorious H Rap Brown, Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,

Black Panther. The man who preached revolution in the streets. The man who allegedly incited a 1967 riot in Cambridge, in Dorchester County, on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The man whose name at one time appeared on the FBI's most-wanted list. That H Rap Brown.

Brown first came to national prominence in May 1967, when he became chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), considered to be one of the civil rights movement's most militant organizations. That summer, Brown was living in Atlanta, where SNCC's headquarters were located, and making speeches around the country, one of which occurred on July 24 in Cambridge.

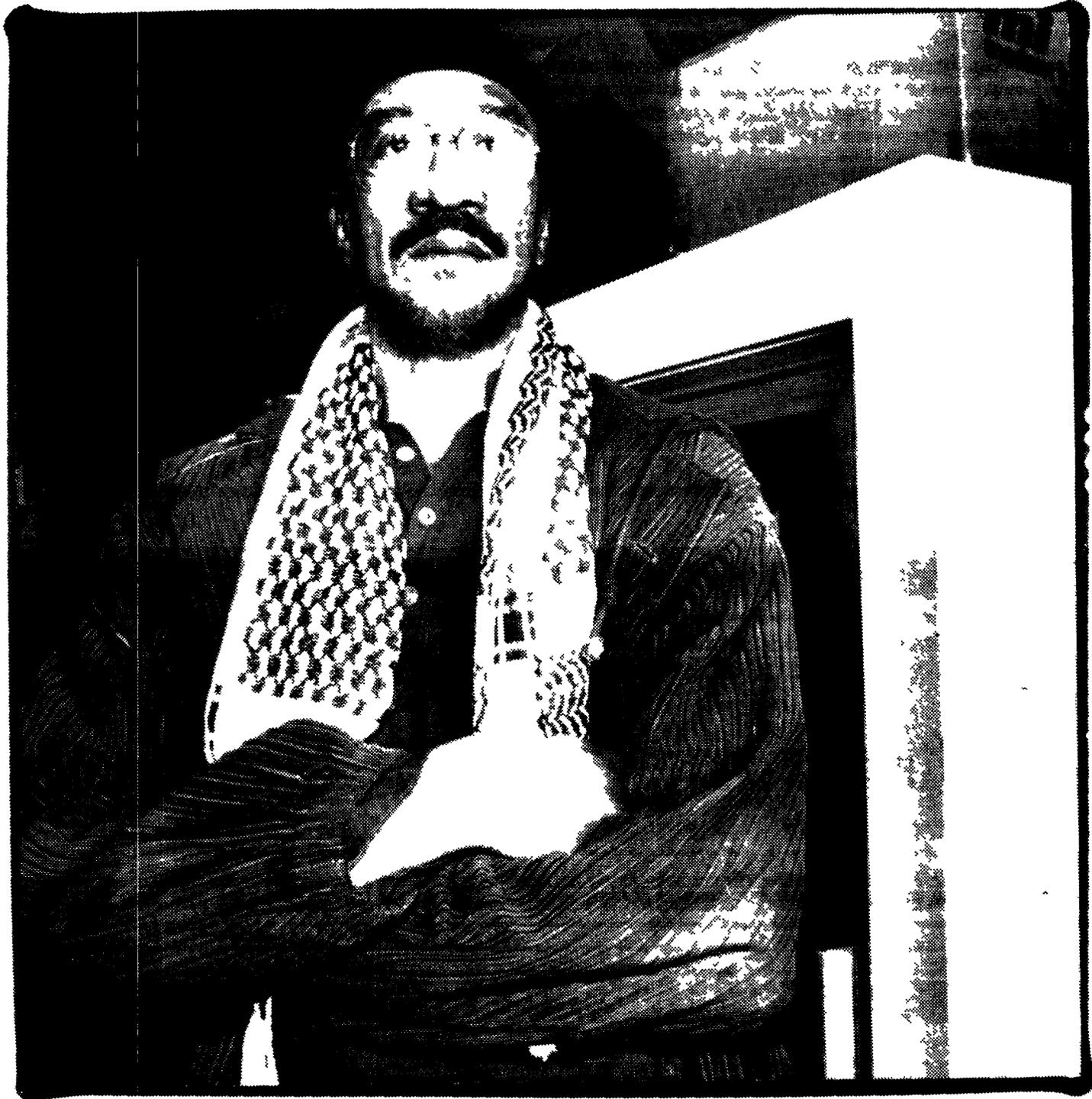
According to an August 7, 1967, report in *U.S. News & World Report*, Brown urged the black citizens of Cambridge to “burn this town down. But don't tear down your own stuff. When you tear down the white man, you are hitting him in the money. Don't love him to death. Shoot him to death. Get yourselves some guns. This town is ready to explode.”

Cambridge's Pine Street Elementary School, along with two blocks of homes and businesses, went up in flames the night of July 24. Two days later, FBI agents arrested Brown at Washington, D.C.'s National Airport, and charged him with unlawful flight to avoid prosecution. On August 14, the State of Maryland charged Brown with inciting a riot.

A \$100,000 bond was posted for Brown, and he continued speaking around the country as SNCC chairman, opposing the war in Vietnam and touting the virtues of black separatism and violence. Additionally, in February 1968, Brown and other prominent SNCC members were assigned leadership roles in the Black Panther Party—Brown was named the Panthers' minister of justice. Arguably, he was the civil rights movement's most volatile speaker. In 1967, in front of a crowd in Washington, D.C., he said, “If you're going to loot, loot yourself a gun store. You got to arm yourself, brother.”

The same year in Detroit, he said, “Violence is as American as cherry pie.” Those words would ultimately surface in John Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*. The Detroit speech ended with Brown declaring, “This country has delivered an ultimatum to black people. America says to blacks, ‘You either fight to live or you will live to die.’ I say to America, ‘Fuck it! Freedom or death.’”

Brown's speaking appearances came to a halt in March 1970, when he was scheduled to stand trial in Bel Air in Harford County for allegedly inciting a riot. Accord-



ing to Judge William Yates II, who served as Dorchester County state's attorney at the time, Brown's case was moved from Dorchester County to Harford County at his request following a July 1968 hearing in Cambridge "I didn't like the atmosphere in our county at that time," he says now, alluding to the 1967 riot "It was not a good situation to try a case in"

Legal maneuverings by Brown's attorney, William Kunstler—the prominent and controversial civil rights/counterculture lawyer who served as special counsel to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference and who defended the Chicago 7 and several Black Panthers—delayed the trial for nearly two years, until March 10, 1970 That day, Brown, who had been free on bail, did not show up for his trial That night, an explosion killed two of his associates, civil rights workers Ralph Featherstone and William Payne

Featherstone and Payne were driving in Bel Air when a bomb exploded in their car Later, state police determined that the two men were transporting the bomb, which exploded accidentally Brown's case was postponed, then rescheduled for May 4 in Howard County Circuit Court Again, Brown failed to appear, prompting the FBI to issue a warrant for his arrest for unlawful flight

On May 6, the FBI expanded its most wanted list from 10 fugitives to 11 Brown was number 11 (Before Brown, the last person to achieve this dubious distinction was James Earl Ray, who was sought by the FBI for the April 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Brown remained a fugitive for the next 17 months, until the night of October 16, 1971, when he and three other men attempted to rob the Red Carpet Lounge, a Manhattan bar Brown was wounded during a shootout with New York City police, he was taken into custody and held at Rikers Island, a New York detention facility Eventually, he was convicted of armed robbery and assaulting a police officer, and in

to get involved in state cases)

While behind bars at Rikers Island awaiting trial, Brown did something that would forever change his life—he converted to Islam

"[Converting to Islam] was a continuation of a lifestyle," Al Amin says now, sitting behind the wooden counter at his store At his left hand, two books are stacked the Qur'an and *Developing an Islamic Environment in North America*.

"It became evident that to accomplish the things we had talked about in the [civil rights] struggle, you would need a practice," he continues "Allah says, 'You will not change the condition of people until they change that which is in themselves' This is what Islam does, and it points out right from wrong It points out truth and falsehood [In the struggle], we were familiar with Islam in different ways, because there was a lot of conversation in media on it at that particular time Being active and traveling around, I had come into contact with Muslims, but I hadn't actively investigated Islam"

His conversion to Islam at Rikers Island was a gradual process He recalls that "the Muslims would come inside the prison and they would have services on Friday [Jumm'ah, the Islamic day of assembly] They extended an invitation for me to come down to services, and I attended I came down to Jumm'ah, but I didn't become Muslim on the first time or any thing"

He had been going through what he describes as "a continuous process of trying to make sense out of things that were happening," so he began to study and scrutinize the teachings of the Muslims But he wasn't blindly going to follow anything "I began to ask myself, 'In terms of what [the Muslims] are talking about, what's wrong with it'" Al Amin remembers "I couldn't find anything wrong, in terms of the Islam That caused me to investigate it even more, which required my becoming Muslim"

At the same time, Al Amin says he

the Nation of Islam, until he became disillusioned with the Nation of Islam's black separatist policies and with its leader, Elijah Muhammad In April 1964, Malcolm X broke from the Nation of Islam and accepted what Al-Amin calls "true Islam," changing his name to El Hajj Malik El Shabazz)

In his autobiography, Malcolm X noted that "America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem I have never seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color With racism plaguing America like an incurable cancer, the so-called 'Christian' white American heart should be more receptive [to Islam as] a proven solution to such a destructive problem."

That made sense to H Rap Brown In late 1971, he declared his faith in Islam H Rap Brown became Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin

The youngest of three children, Hubert Geroid Brown was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1943 His father worked for more than 30 years as a laborer for Esso Standard Oil, while his mother taught children at the local orphanage and worked as a maid As a teenager, Brown helped the family by working odd jobs like digging ditches, cleaning out petroleum tanks, and waiting tables in a nightclub Tall and physically strong like his father, he also excelled in basketball and football at McKinley High School and Southern High School

Although he graduated and went on to attend Baton Rouge's all-black Southern University from 1960 to 1963, Brown maintains that his *real* education took place on the street corners of Baton Rouge, where he looked up to older men he knew as Pie man, Hawk, and Lil Nel, with whom he played craps, cards, and pinball

In his part autobiography/part political treatise *Die Nigger Die!* (published in 1969

called the Dozens In his book, he defines the Dozens as "a mean game, where you try to totally destroy somebody else with words" He listed the following example:

I fucked your mama

Till she went blind.

Her breath smells bad,

But she sure can grind.

I fucked your mama

For a solid hour.

Baby came out

Screaming, Black Power.

Elephant and the Baboon

Learning to screw

Baby came out looking

Like Spiro Agnew

"We exercised our minds by playing the Dozens," he wrote "We played the Dozens, like white folks play Scrabble."

Around the same time, Brown became acutely aware of the racial inequality that plagued Baton Rouge and the rest of the country "It was from watching white people, what they had, and what we had, that I learned about this country," he wrote "I lived near Louisiana State University, and I could see this big fine school with modern buildings and it was for whites Then there was Southern University, which was about to fall in and that was for the niggers And when I compared the two, the message that the white man was trying to get across was obvious Nigger, you ain't shit Die Nigger Die!"

In 1962, Brown began spending his summers in Washington, D C, staying with his older brother Ed, who had moved there to attend Howard University Rap Brown read Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, and Richard Wright, and he sat in on student

AL-AMIN THINKS THAT THE MEDIA'S CURRENT PORTRAYAL OF HIM CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE FACT THAT MAINSTREAM AMERICANS WANT TO BELIEVE IN A DEFANGED H. RAP BROWN

May 1973, Brown was sentenced to five to 15 years in Attica State prison

(In November 1973, as part of a plea bargain between Brown and the State of Maryland, the inciting-a-riot charge against Brown was dropped, with Brown pleading guilty to a misdemeanor charge of failing to show up for his trial three years earlier He was sentenced to a year in jail, to be served concurrently with his term in New York State As is the custom, the federal unlawful-flight charge against Brown was dropped Typically, the FBI uses the charge

reflected on the life of one of his contemporaries in the civil rights movement, Malcolm X, "in terms of his odyssey from his early life to being a Muslim when he died He was a visible image," Al Amin says now, "and I'm sure his conversion to *true* Islam [from the Nation of Islam] had an impact on many different people It made me look at [Islam] even more seriously than I would have"

(Malcolm X had been a Black Muslim in

by Dial Press and now out of print), Brown recalled that he "knew who I wanted to identify with It was the bloods in my neighborhood, the guys who hung out down on the corner I always hung out with cats who had made hanging out a profession I found that it took special skills to hang out 14 hours just laying and playing"

On the street, Brown's reputation for being a scathing wordsmith earned him the nickname Rap Twenty years before rap became a musical phenomenon, Brown was creating and reciting his own raps in a game

activists' meetings at Howard.

Not content just to spend his summers in D C, in 1964, Brown moved to Washington, where he became politically active in SNCC Founded in 1960, SNCC recruited both blacks and whites to work actively and nonviolently to end racial segregation and discrimination in the South Additionally, it was the first civil rights organization to oppose the Vietnam War But by 1966, the group rejected all white support, and its

chairman, Stokely Carmichael, steered SNCC in a more militant direction by launching the black power movement

In the fall of 1966, Carmichael sent Brown to Alabama to work as an organizer. In his autobiography, Brown recalled that "at first, we just spent our time going to meetings and getting to know the people." Eventually, SNCC established a presence in the state.

Guardsmen Brown climbed atop the hood of a car, and shouted his appeal for the crowd to "take your violence to the honkies. You've got to get some guns. Burn and tear Cambridge down! If Cambridge doesn't come around, burn it down."

After the speech, according to a report that appeared in *The Sun*, "a group of 30 or 40 Negroes, led by Mr. Brown, began marching down Cedar Street toward a

vandals. Sidewalks and curbs have been cemented along the Second Ward's streets, replacing sometimes dusty, sometimes muddy walkways. Aluminum siding now covers many of the homes in the area.

Personalities have changed too. Rap Brown evolved into Jamil Abdullah Al Amin. Former civil rights activist Lemuel Chester was elected Dorchester County's first black county commissioner in Novem-

ber 1986, these days, in addition to serving as a commissioner, he also counsels drug and alcohol addicts. Fellow activist Dwight Cromwell reports the news for WCEM, a Cambridge radio station. And Gloria Richardson Dandridge now lives in New York, where she works for the Department of Aging as a contract officer. (Dandridge married a photojournalist who had been covering the civil rights movement in Cambridge, and they moved permanently to New York in 1965.) Now 69, Dandridge vividly recalls the night of the 1967 "riot."

"I was here in New York and I was on the phone all night [getting information from friends and relatives in Cambridge], until seven or eight the next morning," says Dandridge. "When I arranged for Rap to go down there, I knew it was treacherous and I knew how unstable the police department was. But Rap gave the same speech [in Cambridge] that he gave everywhere else, so I didn't really anticipate there being a riot and a fire."

IN A 1967 SPEECH IN WASHINGTON, D.C., BROWN PUMPED UP THE CROWD: "IF YOU'RE GOING TO LOOT, LOOT YOURSELF A GUN STORE. YOU GOT TO ARM YOURSELF, BROTHER."

The work in Alabama was hard. So were the conditions. "Up in Greene County, we used to starve like dogs," wrote Brown.

The house we lived in didn't have running water and it had newspapers on the walls and the floors. Still, Carmichael was suitably impressed with Brown's work to name him Alabama's state project director in November of 1966.

In May 1967, 23-year-old H. Rap Brown was elected chairman of SNCC, succeeding Carmichael. In its May 22, 1967, issue, *Newsweek* described Brown as "a disenfranchised ex-poverty worker who affects sun glasses indoors and out, a droopy mustache a bushy natural coif and a curdled view of the white world. He preaches armed eye for an-eye self defense for Negroes and packs a 12-gauge 'cracker gun' in his own dusty Plymouth." The magazine went on to describe SNCC's new chairman as being "far less flammable" than Carmichael.

Maybe. But two months later, Cambridge erupted in flames after Brown's impassioned call to arms.

On the night of July 24, 1967, Rap Brown was scheduled to speak at a civil rights rally in the mopey Eastern Shore town of Cambridge, the county seat of Dorchester County. (According to U.S. Census Bureau figures, in 1970, Cambridge had a population of approximately 13,000—two-thirds white, one-third black.)

Brown was supposed to speak at 7:30, but he missed his bus connection in Washington, D.C., en route from SNCC headquarters in Atlanta, and was delayed. While a crowd of 400 awaited Brown's arrival, civil rights activists/Cambridge residents Lemuel Chester and Dwight Cromwell addressed the crowd that had gathered on Pine Street in the city's predominantly black Second Ward.

When Brown finally arrived, more than an hour late, the area around Pine Street was ringed with policemen and National

guardsmen. Shots rang out, the Negroes fled. Mr. Brown, witnesses said, was struck in the left temple by a buckshot pellet.

The shooting touched off looting and random violence. At two in the morning, a fire started at the Pine Street Elementary School. Flying cinders ignited a rooftop across the street, and it wasn't long before the whole block was ablaze. Because the all-white Cambridge fire company feared a violent confrontation with the city's black community, the fire burned out of control for more than two hours. Eventually, desperate pleas from Second Ward residents persuaded the firemen to enter the area, and the blaze was extinguished shortly after five in the morning.

After the smoke cleared and the sun rose, residents saw that buildings along two city blocks had been destroyed. Additionally, Brown had disappeared, and Maryland State Police and the FBI had issued warrants for his arrest. The incident made national headlines, and the name H. Rap Brown became inextricably linked to the town of Cambridge.

Nearly 25 years later, much has changed in Cambridge. Its schools and fire department have become integrated. (To some extent, the police department was already integrated in 1967.) Housing is no longer segregated by race. Nor are public facilities. The city's population has dropped by more than 2000 people since 1970, according to 1990 Census figures, with approximately 6300 whites and 5100 blacks.

The two blocks along Pine Street have been rebuilt, and the site of the former Pine Street Elementary School is now an outdoor amphitheater. The Harriet Tubman Restaurant and Gentleman Joe's Lounge sit across Pine Street from the amphitheater. Around the corner, the once stately Muir Street home of former civil rights activist Gloria Richardson Dandridge—she spearheaded the civil rights movement in Cambridge and invited Brown to speak there—has long been vacant, its battered exterior a victim of the elements and rock-throwing

vandals. Sidewalks and curbs have been cemented along the Second Ward's streets, replacing sometimes dusty, sometimes muddy walkways. Aluminum siding now covers many of the homes in the area. Personalities have changed too. Rap Brown evolved into Jamil Abdullah Al Amin. Former civil rights activist Lemuel Chester was elected Dorchester County's first black county commissioner in Novem-

ber 1986, these days, in addition to serving as a commissioner, he also counsels drug and alcohol addicts. Fellow activist Dwight Cromwell reports the news for WCEM, a Cambridge radio station. And Gloria Richardson Dandridge now lives in New York, where she works for the Department of Aging as a contract officer. (Dandridge married a photojournalist who had been covering the civil rights movement in Cambridge, and they moved permanently to New York in 1965.) Now 69, Dandridge vividly recalls the night of the 1967 "riot."

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Still, the incident didn't surprise Al Amin, who has always maintained that "conditions cause riots, not rhetoric." He recalls circumstances in Cambridge just prior to his speech: "Two weeks before I came over and spoke, people had burned the black elementary school [Pine Street Elementary School], because it had been a rat infested, roach infested place. People were paying their tax dollars, and the students were forced to go to a school in that condition. It was terrible, man."

Chester and Cromwell, now ages 45 and 43, respectively, confirm that the school had been burned weeks before Al Amin's speech. Both men feel Al Amin should not have been blamed for its being burned again. "Somebody threw Molotov cocktails at the school a few weeks before he came to town," says Cromwell. "Arson had become so common [in the area] that folks watching a fire would say, 'See you at the next one.'"

she was afraid to go by herself. Myself and two other people were walking her home, and some dudes opened fire on us with shotguns from the bushes. We found out later [the gunmen] were *black policemen*. I was hit. They were shooting at us a long time, and after I got hit, I dove to the ground, rolled over, and made my way over to a ditch and went into somebody's yard.

After the shooting, there was a lot of commotion, man. People went out in the street and just started tearing everything up, and a few hours later they burned the school again."

Al Amin also remembers seeing the mob vent its anger on a group of unsuspecting white motorists. "Some white people had driven into the neighborhood in cars," he says. "I guess they were just on their way home, but they were victims then. They came into a situation where people were enraged by [the shooting]. [The rioters] took them out of the cars, beat them up real bad, and burned the cars. That's what happened in Cambridge. I spoke and I left."

How Al Amin eluded state and federal authorities after the Cambridge incident has become something of a folk tale over the years. Cromwell says Al Amin was placed in a coffin, hoisted into the back of a hearse, and driven to the nearby town of East New Market, where he was transferred to a waiting car and whisked out of the area. Dandridge says Al-Amin was holed up for a few days at a variety of Dorchester County residences. In fact, a few locals now claim to have spotted him at a farmhouse off Route 343, a few miles from Pine Street.

When these tales are recounted to Al-Amin, he laughs heartily, but declines to offer his own version of what happened. "You didn't hear the helicopter one, man?" he asks jokingly. "All of them are accurate. If they've become folk tales, I don't want to disturb them."

After Al-Amin left Cambridge, he was sought by both state and federal authorities. He needed legal representation. Accordingly, Dandridge enlisted the services of Kuns-

der (aided by John Lubell), then headed for Cambridge "I went down there a few days after the fire, because they needed me," says Dandridge

Kunstler arranged for Al Amin to surrender in New York, but he never made it that far "Kunstler made a deal with the FBI that I would come to New York and surrender on the steps of the courthouse, or some thing like that," Al-Amin says "I got to [National Airport in Washington, D.C.] and [the FBI] rolled on me, man I tried to tell them, 'Look, we got this deal working' I was trying to explain to them what the situation was, but they had their own plans They took me to Virginia and locked me up Eventually, I was bonded out at \$100,000 and I was able to continue speaking, but after Cambridge, the legal thing was always there "

After things quieted in Cambridge, Dandridge returned to New York and settled into what she calls "armchair politics."

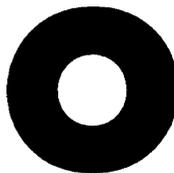
"I'm not [politically] active like I used to be," she says, "but I usually visit Cambridge once a year to see family and friends "

During her visits, Dandridge says she's sensed a "difference in the [city's] collective psyche I see changes that have occurred because of the movement Now people realize they can fight City Hall, and from time to time, they do that."

With Chester as a county commissioner, Cambridge's black residents have representation *inside* City Hall In 1986, the U.S. Justice Department forced Dorchester County to create a predominantly black voting district through redistricting, which in turn facilitated Chester's successful run for office (Elected every four years, five county commissioners serve in Dorchester County)

"I didn't amount to a drop in the bucket to them a few years ago," Chester says of his fellow commissioners "It was a culture shock. It took them a while to get adjusted to me "

Chester says racial integration in Cambridge has been fairly smooth, and that the



One year after Al-Amin won parole and resettled in Atlanta in 1976, he organized the West End mosque With money pooled by its members, the West End Muslims purchased a small, nondescript, wooden house on West End Place, which they converted into a mosque Then they selected Al-Amin as their *imam*, or spiritual leader (Besides the West End mosque, there are three other mosques in Atlanta, a city that Al-Amin estimates is home to 25,000 Muslims About 200,000 Muslims live in Detroit, the city with the largest Muslim community in the U.S.)

Al-Amin was chosen by the community because of his extensive knowledge of the Qur'an, understanding of Islamic tradition, and leadership abilities "He is a wonderful teacher," says Nadim Ali, a member of West End's Muslim community "He's a leader who understands that Muslims can't just sit idly by He understands we have to try to change things And he's quite a basketball player too "

Each day, Al-Amin leads congregational prayers at the mosque, and on Friday afternoons, he presides over *Jumm'ah*, during which he recites prayers, gives the *khutbah* (sermon), and relates community events and news

West End's several hundred Muslims (estimates range from 200 to 400 members) have nearly outgrown their mosque At *Jumm'ah*, it's not uncommon for 100 worshippers to sit shoulder to shoulder, as they listen to Al-Amin in a room sparsely furnished with seven or eight oriental rugs and a brown wood stove

"We're at a point with the Muslims in this area where the facilities that we have are not large enough to accommodate the community," says Al-Amin "We have to begin to try to develop another building "

The West End Muslims have purchased two lots adjacent to the existing mosque, and Al-Amin hopes the land will someday be developed into a larger mosque, a community center, and an Islamic school.

Al-Amin quizzes the girl, who appears to be about six years old She looks toward the ceiling, thinking about the answer

"Three times what gives you forty-eight cents?" he asks

After she guesses 13, Al-Amin says, "How about sixteen?"

Using her finger, the girl traces invisible numbers on the counter as she works out the multiplication "Yeah," she says shyly, then hands over her money

"How was school today?" asks Al-Amin, as he counts out 16 pieces of gum

"It was all right," the girl says, before darting out the door with her gum

When his own child, Ali (who looks to be about 10 years old), drops by the store a few hours later, Al Amin quizzes him too

"How was school?" "Do you have any homework?" "Are you going to the mosque?" After Ali answers and chats for a few minutes, Al-Amin hands him house keys, and the young boy leaves Married for 23 years to Lyn Doswell, a former school teacher who is two years younger than he, Al-Amin declines to discuss his family, saying only that he "prefers to not include them in all this," meaning the media

Al Amin has been profiled in the media numerous times since his release from prison, and each time he seems to be portrayed as some sort of mellowed mystic, a total contrast to the rabble-rousing Rap Brown In a 1985 *Washington Post* piece entitled "Remember Rap Brown?" columnist George Will referred to Al Amin as the "boy from America's South, [who] has become a man of the distant East "

A 1979 *Wall Street Journal* profile made him out to be completely docile and without spark. The article referred to Al Amin's "peaceful new personality," and went on to say that he was "at peace with himself and with the world " The story included only a single quote from Al-Amin "If I am robbed, it is Allah's will If I am not, that is Allah's will "

A 1978 article, again from *The Washington Post*, snidely called Al-Amin "the radical

fact that mainstream Americans want to believe in a peaceful, defanged Rap Brown. "But it's not a true image of what I am," he says.

In fact, one of the reasons Al-Amin embraced Islam is its attitude toward violence—a philosophy that jibes with his past. "When I was twenty-three [in 1967], we were at war, man," he says. "It was heads-up murder That's my attitude about it now We knew we had been dealt an injustice We had been done wrong, so let's thump I don't have any regrets See, most people don't have a true picture of what Islam is Islam is not nonviolent There is a right to self-defense, and there is a right to defend your faith Allah says, 'Fighting is prescribed for you Fight tyranny and oppression, for tyranny and oppression are worse than slaughter, so fight them wherever you may find them.'"

Neither has Al-Amin lost his political edge He's still fond of using a quote from his past—a quote he first used after the 1967 riots in Detroit, a quote he attributes to French author Albert Camus "What better way to enslave a man than give him the vote and call him free?" In a speech he gave early last year, Al-Amin amended the quote, saying, "What better way to enslave a man than give him the vote, call him free, and tell him to choose between Bush and Reagan?"

Since then, he's altered the quote to fit the country's current political climate: "What better way to enslave a man than to give him the vote, call him free, and ask him to choose between Bush and Duke?"

"Duke is not by any means a mutant of American politics," Al Amin says of the former Klansman and current Republican presidential candidate. "He is an extension of the populace But his machine is not as functional as Bush's machine, although they're one in the same people Bush's policies aren't much different than Duke's, but Bush's political machine functions better than Duke's."

When considering this country's future,

"IN ISLAM, WE'RE NOT TALKING ABOUT GETTING THE POOR PEOPLE TO VOTE," AL-AMIN SAYS TODAY IN ATLANTA. "WE'RE TALKING ABOUT OVERTURNING THAT WHOLE THING, MAN."

city's current problems are economically rooted He says race is no longer a divisive force in the city "There's a lack of adequate housing for everyone," he says "Drugs are a problem, and the schools could be improved But it's not a racial thing anymore Now, blacks and whites are being affected by the same problems."

Donations for the construction of the proposed facilities will be solicited through the mail, but Al-Amin stresses that "any building is just an edifice The mosque is built to make prayer Prayer is the key to the community, not buildings The Islamic program is built around the making of prayer, and we've been able to establish and maintain the prayer [in the West End]."

As he finishes his sentence, a young girl enters the Community Store and asks him for "forty-eight cents' worth of gum."

"How many pieces is forty-eight cents?"

grocer "

"It creates an illusion," says Al Amin "The media would like to project that kind of safe image of me It's the opposite extreme of what happened in the 60s, when most people's picture of me came from the one-minute shot on TV, in which I was either being arrested or released from jail "

Al-Amin thinks that the media's current portrayal of him can be attributed to the

Al-Amin becomes even more critical and pessimistic He says the upcoming presidential elections are doomed to irrelevancy, and it doesn't matter if a Democrat or a Republican is in the White House.

"At this point, the system determines what the president is able to do," he says. "This particular form of government is in a

state of decline. While they're struggling to bring about something that will have some staying power, they're trying to tell us that unemployment is okay, they're trying to tell us that homelessness is okay, and they're trying to tell us that hunger is okay."

With more and more Americans becoming disenfranchised as the economy worsens, Al Amin senses a movement developing—a movement he predicts will be much different than the one that happened in the late 60s. "The 60s brought in an understanding of what the game was all about," he explains. "The 60s stripped away the government's sorcery and illusions as to the division of power. The conflict that's upcoming deals with more than just raising the level of consciousness, because you've got more groups that are malcontented, and this begins a kind of political agitation that eventually will build up into a mass movement again. We also have more groups that are prepared to deal militarily than we did in the 60s, so there is on the table a scenario of conflict. [The government] understands that, because they understand what time it is."

This time around, Al Amin is not looking for immediate change—the way that Rap Brown did. "The struggle is an ongoing process," he explains. "Many times, people mistakenly identify movement as struggle. Movement is only a phase of struggle. When the first slave rebelled against being a slave, he gave an alternative to slavery that

has been built upon until now. That's struggle, and there have been many movements in the struggle—the abolitionist movement, the antislavery movement, the populist movement, the civil rights movement, the free speech movement.

"It means they come, they serve a purpose, and they go out. We grew to understand that it was a vehicle that moved people from one level of understanding to another. The civil rights movement had to go out. It's ridiculous in 1991 to try to relive it, but the struggle still goes on."

Although since the late 70s he's maintained he will not assume a leadership position in any future conflicts, Al-Amin remains committed to radical change. Now, though, he advocates a more private revolution, one that is infused with the teachings of Allah, and he touts Islamic separatism instead of black separatism. "[Our] mission is something totally different than coexistence or being a part of the system," he explains. "[The government's] morals are wrong. Their ethics are wrong. Western philosophy, which is no more than Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian ethics with a blend of existentialist philosophy thrown in, has reduced man to food, clothing, shelter, and the sex drive, which means he doesn't have a spirit. [In Islam,] we're not talking about getting the poor people to vote. We're not talking about empowering poor people with money. We're talking about overturning that whole thing, man."

The next afternoon at *Jumm'ah*, Al Amin sits on a small stool in the eastern corner of

the mosque's prayer room. He quietly reads the Qur'an to himself. Dressed in long, billowing robes and a white turban, he projects the quiet resolve of a holy man.

As he continues to read, worshippers file into the room, face eastward, and perform a series of ritual bows and prostrations, then sit cross-legged on the floor. The smell of incense fills the air. Most of the men are dressed in dashikis and knit caps, while a handful of others wear sweat suits or suits and ties. About 75 men are present. West End Muslim Nadim Ali explains that "women make prayer at home, but they must be granted admittance to the mosque if they ask [to come]."

After standing and reciting a few prayers in Arabic, a language that has an almost musical quality, Al-Amin begins the *khutbah*. He prefaces his remarks by saying, "I seek refuge in Allah from misleading and from being misled, from betraying and being betrayed into ignorance by others. I begin in the name of Allah the magnificent, the merciful."

Over the next 40 minutes, he explains how Muslims need to "take a higher road and repel evil with good." He defines success as "doing those things that please Allah." And he stresses the need to "make prayer, instead of carrying the banner of the marketplace."

As he makes his points, he pokes at the air with the long, slim index finger of his right hand. Just like Rap Brown. When he criticizes the U.S. government for becoming the "world's policemen," the words

tumble out freely. Just like Rap Brown. And when he talks about possibly having to militarily defend the Islamic faith in the future, he says Muslims will have to "be ready to thump, because there ain't gonna be no time out." Just like Rap Brown.

After the service ends, Al Amin changes his clothes and reassumes his position behind the counter at the Community Store. Over the telephone, between bites of carrot cake, he makes last-minute preparations for a speaking engagement in Indianapolis, where he is scheduled to address an Islamic council. (For a fee and his expenses, Al Amin speaks at universities and Islamic organizations around the country. It's not uncommon for him to waive the fee, and whenever possible, he makes the trips in his Toyota 4Runner pickup truck.)

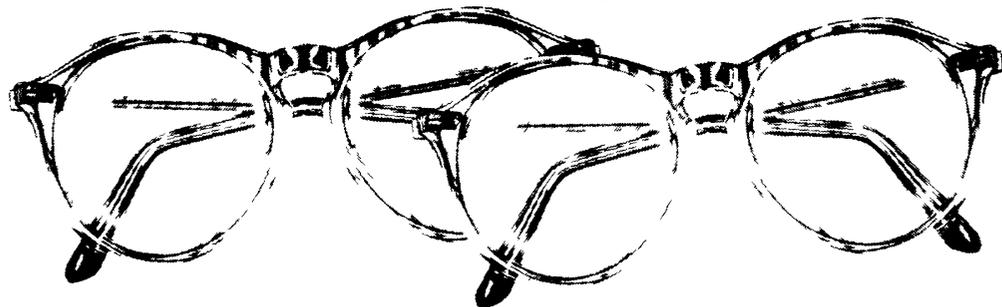
After hanging up the phone, Al-Amin says he must depart in a few hours. But he has a final point to make, a point that summarily addresses the fundamental differences between Rap Brown and Jamil Abdullah Al Amin.

"Allah has allowed me to understand that it is not race or color that is the issue," he says. "The only important thing is the word of Allah. Since Islam, I understand that truth is not relative. Truth is universal. There is no god but Allah. It is the truth on which the whole universe rests, and *nothing* changes that." ■

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