

THE REVOLUTIONARY ART OF EMORY DOUGLAS RETURNS TO PHILADELPHIA

By Dr. Yvonne King

The Church of the Advocate in North Philadelphia was the appropriate venue Saturday, November 10, 2007, for looking at the history of the Black Panther Party (Party) through the creative genius of its former Minister of Culture, Emory Douglas.

The church is the long-time home of community activist Father Paul Washington, currently the home of Art Sanctuary, and site of the International Black Power Conference in 1968.

The prolific poet Sonia Sanchez reminisced about the Black Arts Movement in San Francisco, CA, where she met Douglas. Some in the audience of 100 might not have known that Emory designed the cover of her first book of poetry entitled *Home Coming*. She held up the book while describing the barefooted black "warrior-girl" poised for battle with spear in hand.

Sonia last met Emory two years ago at a book fair in California. He came up to her and asked if she still remembered him. "Do I remember you?" Sonia replied, "Every time I look at *Home Coming* and every time I look at the very real and naturalistic art that other people picked up on that you all were doing in the 'Black Panther Paper,' I see you and know that you exist." She went on describing his memorable work to this crowd who came from near and far, most of whom had never met the artist of this very popular and important work. "His artwork was a symbol of a time. His artwork said to people, 'Gather, come, come together, and move together. This great artist named Emory Douglas; let's welcome him.'"

All in the room stood for this dynamic internationally-renowned and, yet, humble man, who thought in 2005 that Sonia Sanchez might have forgotten him. Emory spoke for about thirty minutes describing the scope of his artwork, which reflects the ideology, policies, and survival programs of the Black Panther Party, as well as the struggles for liberation in other countries. Members who gathered in the Church of the Advocate to learn more about Emory's work also learned more about him, especially what



(left to right) Emory, former Panther Bullwhip and Freedom Theater's Walter Dallas

inspired him to produce his amazing images that donned the front and back covers of the weekly editions of "The Black Panther News." In response to a jazz musician who asked Emory who influenced his artwork: "This art comes out of a Movement. Without the Black Panther Party, this art would not have existed." Douglas related that like Bobby [Seale] and Huey [Newton] used to say that in forming the Party they were inspired by Robert Williams and Malcolm X; however, they never intended to copy them, nor did he (Douglas) ever try to copy other artists. During the question and answer period, a former Panther sister shared how people responded to Douglas' illustrations when she sold papers in the community. "Your pictures represented what was in their hearts." She reminded us that many people didn't always read the articles but were always attracted to the images, which often expressed their interests.

One of the most moving moments of the evening was an expression of appreciation by a man who recalled when "I was 16 years old living in the projects in Kansas City, I used to read the paper. The paper inspired me to become who I am, and it still inspires me to do certain things." He pointed out, as so many do, that the Ten Point Platform and Program is still relevant

today. Finally, he told Emory, "Thank you for your courage and thank you for your example." In response, Emory asked all of the former Panthers in the audience to raise their hands, after which there was loud applause. Former Panthers from New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Oakland were there to reunite with their former Minister of Culture and one another.

Although due to technical difficulties, Emory was unable to show his slides, his book *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas* published this year was on sale at the event. The owner of Robin's book store, the oldest independent one in Philadelphia, supplied Emory's book and others on the Black Panther Party. Emory signed the ones purchased. This book not only has 200 of Emory's full-color illustrations, the contributions by Bobby Seale, Kathleen Cleaver, Amiri Baraka, Danny Glover, and others paint a picture of the times, especially the rich history of the Black Panther Party.

The community must thank and commend the architect of this event, Emory's friend and comrade, Barbara Easley Cox, who solicited the willing assistance of Art Sanctuary. Art Sanctuary's able Program Director Jeffery Hart served in his familiar role of emcee.

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