

Remembering Houston's Black Panthers

'We were just saying that they needed to stop killing us'

By Camilo Hannibal Smith, Houston Chronicle Feb. 16, 2016 Updated: Feb. 17, 2016 9:55 a.m.

Local // Gray Matters



1of20The scene outside the People's Party II headquarters, 2828 Dowling St., in July 1970, before a police shootout resulted in the death of Carl Hampton, the group's founder. (For more photos, of both the Houston and national movement, scroll through the gallery.)

Photo: Bill Thompson, Houston Post



2of20Scene outside People's Party II headquarters, 2828 Dowling St., before the gun battle on July 26, 1970.

Photo: Bill Thompson, Houston Post

3of20In the gunfight between Houston Police and members of the People's Party II, Carl Hampton, one of the group's founders, was killed.

Photo: Houston Chronicle Files

The Black Panthers are having a moment. The original Black Lives Matter group, the one that erupted into the turbulent, revolutionary 1960s, The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense will celebrate its 50th anniversary in October. And in those years, the organization has undergone a radical change in its mainstream reputation: Once considered a violent criminal group, it's now considered a pillar of the

Civil Rights movement.

Already in this young year, Beyoncé's Super Bowl appearance has propelled the Panthers back into pop-culture relevance. And the documentary *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of The Revolution* is airing on PBS and [available on its website](#).

The PBS documentary makes a brief reference to Houston: We're listed as one of the places where the Panthers clashed with police.

It's a stunning piece of history, one that's still in dispute. In July 1970, during a gun battle police shot and killed Carl Hampton, 21, the founder of the People's Party II, a Houston chapter of the Panthers.

There's considerable disagreement over the facts of the day. In the gun battle outside the group's Third Ward headquarters, some eyewitnesses say that the police fired first. But a grand jury chose not to indict the officers involved. (Bayou City History has a great long account of [the incident and its aftermath](#).)



The People's Party II slowly dissolved not long after Hampton was killed, says John "Bunchy" Crear, the Southwest Regional Representative of the Black Panther Party Alumni Association. The remaining Houston activists became "a full-fledged branch of the Black Panther Party."

Crear joined the Black Panthers in 1971, after his freshman year in college. He helped with the group's medical and food programs, working out of an office in the Third Ward.

Surprisingly, they received help from white Houstonians, including art patron Dominique de Menil. "We could go to her house and tell tell her 'Dominique, we need this,'" Crear remembers.

The Menil family paid for many of the Panthers' community

programs, he says — and on occasion, provided bail money.

Over the years, the national party's leadership split, splintering the group. Some high-profile members were killed; others went to prison; still others fled the U.S.

About 10 "Panther alumni" live in Houston, Crear says. And they're enjoying the group's return to the national conversation.

"There's a lot of things that people don't know, " he said. "They look at the sensationalism and the same thing that the media tries to put out, that we were racist, or that we were anti-police. Nah, we were just saying that they needed to stop killing us. It's the same thing that our young brothers and sisters are saying today.

The Black Panther Moment

[The Black Panthers: Vanguard of Revolution](#) aired 8 p.m. Tuesday on KUHT Houston Public Media. It will rebroadcast on Feb. 18 and Feb. 20. And [you can stream the whole thing, for free,](#) on PBS' website.

Watch the video of "Formation" on Beyoncé's web site. It's available either [clean](#) or [dirty](#).

In "[Why the Black Panthers love Beyoncé,](#)" Camilo Hannibal Smith discusses Bey's Super Bowl appearance. And there

are photos.

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