

# SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

## Roots of Organizing: Forms of Resistance

### Clip 1: Building Parallel Institutions

**Worth Long:** Right. But we benefited by the experience of the successes and failures in other places. So if you had—the Poor People’s Corporation is a good example of institutionalization around crafts.

**Maria Varela:** [...] Jessie Morris on developing those cooperatives. This is what it is. We had this learning curve. We and the folks we were working with, the local folks. That sometimes because history is so event-localized, you forget about how people—and so we’re moving now into this economic stuff. It’s the Freedom Labor Union. It’s co-ops. Including ASCS organizing because you had to get the farmers some money. I don’t say—the FDP continued the voter registration and running candidates. With support from SNCC organizers in terms of getting out the vote and getting the support materials for that and getting speakers, because that’s what people would ask for. Could you bring so and so in because we’re going to do a mass meeting and if you bring so and so. They did that but then SNCC folks—there is something very entrepreneurial about SNCC people. Many SNCC people in terms of their business orientation or developing stuff.

**Worth Long:** Innovation. Innovative.

**Maria Varela:** So there was a lot of that. That’s what I took with me to Northern New Mexico. Was watching the way Jesse did that. And the Liberty House. Remember they had store in New York. Gee’s Bend quilters, who have this fantastic exhibit. Which created some issues.

**Worth Long:** You’re talking about the new Reconstruction. We’re talking about innovation, but we’re also talking about parallel institutions. The development of parallel institutions. If what you are doing now doesn’t work, a co-op itself is a parallel institution to profit. It’s generally non-profit, or cooperative, which is in its name, but it’s an alternative to a profit system. But then to move in one phase in history and to repeat that lesson in another phase of history. The cooperative movement was at a certain particular time in history, but here we are, SNCC people, innovative—innovators of change. Change innovators. In many cases, third party innovators. We’re coming in to a community with a message. Even an organization. Most people were not aware of what a co-op was and what it could do. The difference was, I thought, that the organizers said here’s a co-op model that exists in this place. How would you do that in your community. Or more importantly, the question did we ask is, is it possible to benefit from this model in your community? As an organizer, you would ask it. And then people would say, “Well hell we used have a co-op. We used to do dinner on the grounds.” And he said, “Wait, wait, what do you mean? You do dinner on the grounds?” A potluck after the service. Everybody brought in some food and put it down on the table after church. I said well what about the money part of it. There was no money part. It was a sharing. It’s great. What did you do with your surplus. We took it home. It was like a bartering.

**Maria Varela:** The loaves and the fishes.

**Worth Long:** A bartering.

## Clip 2: Books for Survival

**Worth Long:** Now, '66 was much more travel. I was doing more sojourning into Arkansas and other places. Because I was building organizations, post-SNCC organizations. Basically I was traveling the same circuit but with fewer resources. But I helped organize a group in Arkansas called BUY: Black United Youth, that was a more militant than SNCC organization. But their thing on public accommodations, their relationship to the stores was to demand hiring. Not just in the Black community but across the board. So they were closing down various chains in the city. And then I organized bauxite workers out at [unsure]. And then Simmons, do you remember he talking about a network of workers, work organizations that exist, and he said Little Rock and Pine Bluff. I helped McFadden, who is now an attorney, I helped to pass on what I learned in civil rights to people no matter what kind of organization. No matter what kind of righteous direction they were going in. Had a bookstore. Organized a bookstore right off the campus in Little Rock, Arkansas. Thinking that could be a hub for information. We would bring in Dashiki. I'd drive to New York and get a boat of cloth. Hollander. Actually the print came from Holland, but you could cut a pattern of it and just sew the sides. You have to have a hole for your head, of course. But I had that going. And I had three young artists who were developing artistic expressions. One was a hand carved cone with a fist. Right? So and then the books we had were books that you couldn't get anywhere else. For instance, books by [unsure] who's from Vietnam. But I called it the book of logic. But it related basically to battlefield logic. And I felt people could learn from the experience he had with the French. It was mostly about their anti-colonial engagements. Now as I traveled that circuit, emphasis changed. So I was collecting music and organizing festivals. Once I had gotten, went to Newport Folk Festival and saw the basic pattern on how that's done and what effect it had with youth from around the world who came to Newport in—I was there in '64, '65, '66. In a school near Cambridge in '65. So I was there at least three years.

**Maria Varela:** Well I'm finding it interesting that you did a bookstore. I'm trying to think of when Drum and Spear went in. There's parallel thinking, you know what I mean?

**Worth Long:** Mine was a little different. Theirs was strategic. Mine was survival. I needed a place to stay. And the women of a fraternal organization based on my participation previously in Little Rock offered me free rent. For whatever I was going to be doing.

**Maria Varela:** And they had a building? Is that how it worked?

**Worth Long:** It was a building next to their lodge. It was like a duplex kind of. They offered me one space. And then someone donated—we tried not to use glass. Across the wall we made spaces for the books. And I got what you call remainders. I would go to New York, and you could buy a book for 25 cents to a dollar. And I would pile up my Volkswagen van with these books and drive them back. And if they cost a quarter, we would charge a dollar. We'd say a dollar sale. No book more than a dollar. Well people would buy books that they didn't need. But we selected the books based on their political or cultural or social content. Mostly history books or books as I said that they would not ordinarily have access to or buy. People didn't care as long as it didn't compete with them. Because we are in the African American or in the Black community, they didn't give a damn anyway. Not that many people were buying books in downtown Little Rock. I could also order books on the campus of the school, across from the Charmaine Hotel, which is the Black hotel. And we had built a shopping center by that time, so we were using the shopping center as our Pascal's. [Laughs] Organizing people coming in, organizing them. And the Black United Youth, I named the group: BUY, Black United Youth. BUY. You can buy or you can build or you can burn. I think somebody said something like that. I didn't do the text. The

thematic element. But you can buy—or we can—I think that’s what they finally came up with. And it was not just a militant, male organization. A lot of women at the very beginning were participating.

### Clip 3: Come On Over to the Lovin’ Spoonful

**Worth Long:** I lived close to Vine City. Only two blocks from the old SNCC office. In a shotgun house. A shotgun house, you could shoot from the front, and it will go out the back. There’s a hallway down. And in part of ‘66, the two women who had started the after hours cafe, or the little club called—do you ... Ruth Howard and her name starts with a C. She and Mendy Samstein had a thing. And then she married and went to Sweden or somewhere with a drummer. But she was a damn good organizer. But the two of them started a thing called the Loving Spoonful. The Lovin’ Spoonful. But both of them got involved in romance, which was a recruiter’s nightmare in SNCC. The turnover from that. But what happened was Julius Lester and I were passing through Atlanta. We agreed for the summer of ‘66 or ‘67 to keep the thing open because most of the students who were coming in there would be gone for the summer until the next September. And one of the ways for me to do that was for me to sleep on the counter. [Laughs]

**Maria Varela:** Why am I not surprised.

**Worth Long:** Over Alex’s Barbeque. And the program: Monday night for Bernice singing and there’s a poet’s night. Sometimes poets and groups would come through on the weekend. And they would play at Pascal’s carousel. And then we would say if you wanted to go on and party and play, you can come over to the Lovin’ Spoonful. And they said yeah you got a ride. I said well you know it’s just a block. [Laughs]. We’ll carry your instruments. The drums were the only problem. We had a drum there. So we got some really good stuff coming in to the Lovin’ Spoonful. Baraka did poetry there. The former Leroi Jones in his early years—the person who wrote Martin Luther King’s speech at New York on the war. He went to seminary out in Colorado. He taught at Spelman. I’ll think of it at some point. But he wrote poetry. And he had a poem, not to the Black soldier, but he had a beautifully crafted poem that spoke to generations of Black soldiers that he delivered there. Also we had an open mic, which is a reflection of my basic concept of how you can begin to organize of an anarchistic organization. Open mic, right? Some who didn’t really have a poem but who made a poem. And we couldn’t sell alcohol at the club. We were upstairs from Alex’s Barbeque. But next door was Abernathy’s Church.

**Maria Varela:** That’s right because there was a zoning thing, wasn’t there.

**Worth Long:** The zoning thing, right. So then we had during the winter mulled cider. Mulled cider with peppermint—the stick that you could put in there. Cinnamon stick, right! But anyway, we could get some folk singers especially would come in. Ben Chandler played there. And then later—remember I said that the Back to Black, I wrote the song that basically said, “Let’s pull together, let’s pull together and get some power.” Well the Harambe singers would come in and sing. Sometime Bernice was not available. She had kids. But they could sing. Finally, I’ll wrap it up, Stokely would surprisingly read or remember poetry.

**Maria Varela:** Serious?

**Worth Long:** Right. Sterling Brown’s poetry and some other stuff. Stokely came by there all the time because it’s a watering hole. And it’s always open. I don’t think we had a lock for the key. We did not lock the place. You go up the stairs over Alex’s Barbeque. Now Alex’s Barbeque would be locked. But at that time there was no danger because someone was always sleeping behind or on the counter.

**Karlyn Forner:** So there was always someone there.

**Worth Long:** There was always basically someone there. But I don't think we locked the door when we left. There was nothing to steal. That concept was very important for that particular time because people were--it provided a venue at which you could express yourself. Creatively express yourself. You weren't just singing to the choir.