

The Bond Between Civil Rights' First Wives

Written by Aisha I. Jefferson, The Root
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Like most people, Mary J. Blige had some knowledge of Malcolm X but knew very little about his widow, Betty Shabazz.

So after business partner and friend Polly Anthony brought her a movie script about the friendship Shabazz shared with another famous widow -- Coretta Scott King -- Blige found herself not just portraying the wife of a civil rights icon but also getting schooled in a way that she'd never expected.

"I didn't know she could dance, first of all, and she loved to do it. And I didn't know that she was the one ... keeping it light and telling the jokes [after their husbands' assassinations], trying to be up and happy through all the trials," Blige said in a press conference call that The Root took part in.

Blige, 42, stars alongside Angela Bassett, who plays Coretta Scott King, in Lifetime's *Betty & Coretta*, which premiered Feb. 2. Blige and her husband, Kendu Isaacs, are among the project's co-executive producers. Actress and civil rights activist Ruby Dee -- who, along with her late husband, actor Ossie Davis, was a very close friend of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and their wives -- also stars as a historical witness who narrates the movie. Davis delivered Malcolm X's 1965 eulogy -- a soul-stirring remembrance that he reread at the conclusion of Spike Lee's 1992 biopic, *Malcolm X*. Bassett, known for biographical portrayals, starred as Shabazz in that movie as well as in Mario Van Peebles 1995 film, *Panther*.

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Starring in *Betty & Coretta* also proved to be a full-circle experience for Malik Yoba, who portrays Martin Luther King Jr.

"I know [Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz's daughters] Attallah and Ilyasah; we grew up with them," Yoba said. "My mother was friends with Betty, and my father was friends with Malcolm, so that was a bit of a trip, too, being in Montreal and being in the production office and seeing pictures of the house and looking at the driveway where I first learned to pedal a bike as a kid." Yoba, 45, was raised in a Muslim household and was 6 when he learned to ride his bike at the Shabazz house.

Yoba said it was a treat to portray Dr. King, sharing that the Southern Baptist preacher is a "hero" who inspired his own philanthropic endeavors.

Even though *Betty & Coretta* isn't Blige's first foray into acting (she has guest-starred on TV shows including *30 Rock* and last year appeared in the big-screen musical *Rock of Ages*), the biographical portrayal did require the multi-Grammy winner to do some digging in preparation.

"I went online to YouTube to pull up everything I could on Betty. And then I read some books," she said. Yoba, like Blige, scoured the Internet and read books to ensure a spot-on performance. He said that his co-star did "a good job" and gave a "believable" performance.

"I thought, for one, it was pretty courageous because she was pretty nervous," Yoba said.

The Queen of Hip-Hop Soul, once slated to star as Nina Simone in a biopic about the iconic singer and civil rights activist (actress Zoe Saldana has replaced her), says she's open to starring in other biographical roles if the right script comes along. The work would have to touch Blige like the "great experience" she's had working behind and in front of the camera on *Betty & Coretta*

. Blige said she found herself in awe of the deep friendship the widows shared.

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"We were blown away by the script -- by the fact that Betty and Coretta were even friends. We had no idea until they brought us the material ... This is information that no one knew, so we definitely wanted to be a part of that," said Blige, describing the two as "family women" whose biggest challenge was dealing with the assassinations of their husbands and having to raise their children in the aftermath. Betty Shabazz and Malcolm X were married for seven years and had six daughters.

Shabazz and Coretta Scott King's closeness may have come as a surprise to most because, while the intentions of the women's husbands were the same -- creating peace and equality -- the methods of achieving them appeared vastly different. For this reason, the legacies of Malcolm X (also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) and Martin Luther King Jr. were often pitted against each other, particularly to the American public. The two men met only once, a brief encounter in 1964 immortalized by a now-famous photograph of them grinning and shaking hands. Eleven months later, Malcolm X would be killed.

Blige never got a chance to meet Shabazz, who died in 1997, but she did meet Coretta Scott King during Oprah Winfrey's Legends Ball nine months before Mrs. King's 2006 death. At the three-day historic celebration, literary great Maya Angelou -- also a close friend of the women -- called Blige over to meet Mrs. King. The singer said she was unsure if Coretta Scott King and the other older women were familiar with her or her music.

"I turned around [and asked], 'Do you guys know who I am?' [And they said,] 'We all know who you are.' And I went and spoke with them and hugged them. And Coretta said she [loved me and] was proud of me," Blige said. "I gained confidence from that experience in my own life."

Two weeks ago, the singer says, she met another person very close to Shabazz: her third-oldest daughter, Ilyasah Al-Shabazz, whom she ran into at a restaurant. The chance meeting led to a lengthy conversation between the two and Al-Shabazz sharing intimate family photos with her. Blige said that Al-Shabazz is "positive" and "beautiful," like her mother.

Al-Shabazz said that it makes sense that her mother and Coretta Scott King would be friends.

"My sincerest hope," she said, "is that the film *Betty & Coretta* will inspire women to see the gracious, intelligent, incandescent person that was Betty Shabazz and empower a new

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generation of women to forge meaningful bonds of friendship and support; and further, it will inspire us to always persevere through adversity to reach our highest potential."

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