

**Thomas Houck interviewed by Bob Short**  
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**Thomas Houck**

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BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short. This is Reflections on Georgia Politics sponsored by the Duckworth Library at Young Harris College and the Russell Library at the University of Georgia.

We are here at Manuel's Tavern, an Atlanta gathering place for political and other misguided souls. Our guest tonight is Tom Houck, well known Civil Rights activist, advisor to numerous political figures, radio talk show host, and a man about the town in Atlanta. Welcome, Tom.

TOM HOUCK: Well, it's quite an honor to be with you, Bob Short, and a shout out here to Cathy Cox up there at Young Harris.

SHORT: Okay. From Boston to Jacksonville to Atlanta. Tell us about your early life and how and why you came here.

HOUCK: Well, I guess you could say on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1947, in Cambridge, Massachusetts in a public hospital an instigator *provocateur* was born; and that man was me. They called me Buster in the hospital because I was crying and yelling and screaming from the moment I came out of my mother's womb. And I lived in Somerville, which is actually a poorer section of Boston just outside of Cambridge, for the first six years of my life. Very working class Irish and Italian neighborhood.

I come from Irish German heritage, and my father was a machinist when he could find work; most of the time he was unemployed. My mother was a waitress at Howard Johnson Restaurant, in several Howard Johnson Restaurants. They got a little money together. They finally moved out of the suburbs to Framingham outside of Boston where I started to develop some of my own social consciousness. My second grade teacher was a black woman, and in those days -- this was

back in 1953 -- segregation in public schools in most places in the country, not so much in the northeast, although it was *de facto*, was mandated by law. It wasn't until the Brown versus Board of Education decision in 1954 that changed that. So I was very fortunate as a young fellow to have an African American teacher who, Ms. Thompson sort of became my guidance, if you will, to where I would go down the road.

Television was just becoming a major thing back in those days -- not really a major thing. If you had a television, the whole neighborhood would be down the street watching it at your house, and we had a TV. I sort of moved towards/gravitated towards the news, started to watch the news. And I started to see what was happening in terms of the Brown versus Board of Education decision in 1954, and I asked my second grade teacher about this. And she told me that in many sections of the country colored and negro students couldn't go to school with white students.

Well, I just couldn't understand that. I couldn't understand why that was. Here I am at eight or nine years old.

So then at that moment, I would say is what you would say is the defining moment, why I became involved in the Civil Rights movement and why in many ways I came to Atlanta, Georgia later in my life, was because of what happened in 1954 in the Brown versus Board of Education decision and television, all of those kinds of things mixed together.

And when I was 12 years old, I was in Cambridge visiting a friend, and his uncle was a Unitarian minister and said he was going over to Woolworth's to picket, a Woolworth's to give support -- and this is 1960 -- for the students in Greensboro, North Carolina who were getting arrested for sitting in at lunch counters. So that was my first actual time carrying a sign, a picket sign, when

I was 12 years old outside a Woolworth's store in Central Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

SHORT: When did you meet Dr. Martin Luther King?

HOUCK: Well, I met Dr. King actually, I'm sure he wouldn't remember this, but actually met him in Selma in 1965. I had been going to a high school named for the founder of the Ku Klux Klan, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, and I was in Jacksonville, Florida living with an aunt. I caused quite a stir at that high school; but you asked me how I met Dr. King, so what I did was, me and a couple of other students from Nathan Bedford Forrest, which was an all white high school, they were still segregating in Jacksonville. Went to Selma the week after Bloody Sunday, when our good friend now Congressman John Lewis and Hosea Williams led the march where they were brutally attacked with horses and dogs and billy clubs and regular violence by the Alabama State Troopers. That was in March of 1965.

I actually went into a meeting of the SCLC staff, which was right down the street from the church in Selma where everybody was congregating for the big march, the Selma Montgomery March. And I actually met Dr. King that day. It wasn't until about a year later that I actually came part of the SCLC staff, and actually my boss was Hosea Lorenzo Williams. He was the field director for SCLC, and I went to work for SCLC. And so it was through Hosea that I really met Dr. King.

SHORT: Tell us a little bit about SCLC.

HOUCK: SCLC started out of Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, '55 and '56. And it was started by Ralph David Abernathy, Reverend Dr. Joseph Lowery, and by Dr. Martin Luther King, along with a number of other people in the Montgomery Improvement Association, which was the organization in Montgomery that basically organized the demonstrations in the successful year-long boycott of the Montgomery buses led by the arrest of Rosa Parks. So what happened was, there was a number of churches across the south -- the one thing that the authorities and the government couldn't do in the south was to stop black churches. Black churches were the places where folks could go, where folks could sing, where folks could pray, where folks could organize, where folks could get out there and do the job of trying to right the wrongs of the past couple hundred years.

So there were preachers all across the south, and they started this organization based in Montgomery, which Dr. King by the way had gone to Montgomery, funny enough, because he didn't want to be in his father's shadow in Atlanta. So in Montgomery found himself in what they would call there a high yellow church, which would be a church that was sort of made up of mailmen and mail women, mostly mailmen in those days, black mailmen and mail women, rail porters. The higher economic groups, doctors and teachers went to Dexter Avenue over there. He wasn't interested in getting in the movement, by the way. Dr. King just wanted basically to get on his own and preach on his own and not be under his father's shadow in Atlanta. So when he went to Montgomery, he had no idea that he was going to be leading a bus boycott within a year, and neither did the people in his church. Because, as I said, this was a middle income

church, a stone's throw from the cradle of the confederacy over there, the Capitol on Dexter Avenue in Montgomery, Alabama.

But what Dr. King was, when he became that leader, we're talking about a man of 25 years old.

He was 25 years old when he led that Montgomery bus boycott and went on the national scene.

Well, in 1957, the year after the Montgomery bus boycott ended and was successful, the organization was created and it was thought by most of the preachers that rather than having Montgomery as the headquarters, that the logical place would be Atlanta. So two years after Dr. King began pastoring at Dexter, he moved to Atlanta and set up headquarters here on Auburn Avenue right down the street from his father's church and became associate pastor. He was never pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. Daddy King would let people know that as well. He was always the associate pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church.

SHORT: He was born on Auburn Avenue.

HOUCK: He was born on Auburn Avenue and came back and put the headquarters of SCLC on Auburn Avenue, was associate pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church on Auburn Avenue, and his funeral was at Ebenezer Baptist Church and the 150,000 people on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1968, marched down Auburn Avenue.

SHORT: Well, tell us a little bit about your association with him when you were his chauffeur.

HOUCK: Well, let me tell you about that, how that happened. I was actually over working under Hosea, I was working in the field department of SCLC, and we were over in Grenada, Mississippi. And we were doing a peaceful demonstration September of 1966, and it was a support march of desegregating a high school there. And Dr. King and SCLC, which didn't have a lot of high presence in Mississippi. That was pretty much SNCC and other Civil Rights organizations. SCLC was for Georgia, Alabama, and other parts of the south; but Mississippi was very strong with SNCC but we went over there.

There were about 20 SCLC staff people sitting around, and Dr. King's talking about the fact that he had a lot of mail that he had to answer in Atlanta. He had a lot of mail that, you know, he was not getting answered and he needed some volunteers. So I raised my hand in the staff meeting, and I said, "Dr. King, I can help answer mail." He said, "Tom, you haven't even finished high school." And I said, "well, I didn't finish high school because I got kicked out of high school." When I went to Selma, they suspended me for two weeks. They wanted to give me my diploma, and I refused it as a badge of honor.

And so Dr. King said, "What can you write?" I said, "Well, I was a sports editor of my high school newspaper." And he says, "Well, can you really answer mail?" I said "I can." And so Dr. King looks at Bernard Lee, who was one of his assistants at that point, and Hosea wasn't in the room, thank goodness. Had Hosea been in the room that day, I probably never would have been Dr. King's driver because he would have refused to let me go. But Hosea I think had already left, so he wasn't there. So Martin said, "Well, you want to wait for a couple of days and ride back" or he said "do you want to take a bus and we'll get you a bus ticket, go back to

Atlanta." I said, "well, I'd love to take a bus because I've never been through Memphis and I'd have to take a bus to go from here to Memphis to get to Atlanta" and I wanted to see what Memphis looked like.

So I got back to Atlanta, and I got back there on a Sunday morning probably around 10:00, and I went down to the SCLC headquarters, which was right now the street from Ebenezer, and there was no one there. And in those days, there were no cell phones. There were no iPhones. I mean, you had to go to the phone across the street at the VFW, put a nickel in, and make a phone call, which I did to the Freedom House, where I was going to stay. They said "Someone was going to come get you."

Well, that went on for an hour and a half. No one came to get me. And finally, Dr. King had finished his sermon down the street at Ebenezer, which I should have gone down to but didn't; and he drives up in front of Ebenezer and says, "Tom..." he says, "Nobody's picked you up from the Freedom House yet?" I said "No." He said "Why don't you come have lunch with us?"

Lord have mercy. I mean, have lunch at the King household, I mean, it was incredible.

And so as chance be, I went to have lunch at the household. Kids were in the car with me, and Dr. King had to go to a meeting, and Coretta started talking to me about Boston and my past and all that kind of stuff. And what happened was she asked me if I had my driver's license. I said yeah. I said "Why do you ask me that question?" She said she's had trouble with her drivers, and she said why don't you think about taking the kids. I said I really know nothing about Atlanta, but I was probably GPS before that happened, I knew how to get to places very quickly and look at a map.

So Coretta asked me if I would take the kids to school the next day, and I said I would be delighted to. You know, I'll check in with Hosea, see what he has to say since he was my official boss. And she said "Don't worry about it, I'll have Martin call him." And so I wound up driving the kids to school the next day, and then for a couple of weeks went back and forth driving the kids to school and helping to answer mail. And then Dr. King asked me if I would come on the road with him at times when he was traveling. But always in Atlanta my job was basically to take the kids around and take Dr. King to the airport or wherever he had to be when he was back in town.

SHORT: My wife Diana wanted me to ask you what you had for lunch.

HOUCK: Who asked that question?

SHORT: My wife Diana.

HOUCK: Why did she ask that question?

SHORT: She was curious.

HOUCK: What did I have for lunch? I had a grilled cheese sandwich.

SHORT: So then I guess that answers her next question, which was: Was Mrs. King a good cook?

HOUCK: Yes. Let me bring you into the household, if I can, the intimate side of this. By the way, I'm still in the process of putting together my memoir, "Driving Dr. King: Looking at History in my Rearview Mirror."

Dr. King and Coretta King actually had four or five people on staff that worked for them. Dr. King had a great income. He could have chosen to live in those days at the Beverly Hills of the black community in Atlanta, Collier Heights, where his daddy lived and other prominent blacks lived; but he chose to live in Vine City. So when he moved from what became the Freedom House, which unfortunately was torn down on Johnson Avenue, he moved over to, really the ghetto in Vine City in Atlanta. Everybody was saying, oh, no, no, no; you know, Dr. King needs to have a better house. And he said he didn't need a big house; he didn't need to have all the trappings of a big house. And neither did Coretta. They had a very basic brick bungalow on Sunset Avenue in Atlanta, where Coretta lived until the year before her death just a few years back. So she had a staff of like four people.

When I say a staff, Mrs. Lockhart was their cook and housekeeper. But Coretta would cook more often than she would. Now, there's one thing that Coretta wouldn't cook. She wouldn't cook chitterlings. And Dr. King loved chitterlings. One of his favorite and best friends was Juanita Abernathy, Ralph Abernathy's wife, who was an expert chitterling cooker.

So, my first smell of chitterlings was at Juanita Abernathy and Ralph Abernathy's house. But

yes, Coretta was a good cook.

SHORT: Before we get too far along, let me ask you about and let's talk about Hosea Williams.

HOUCK: Well, I don't think there's anybody like him. Little David. He was a man that served his country, came back from serving his country and was beaten down in Attapulcus, Georgia at a water fountain. And it was from that moment on that he decided that he was never going to be beaten by anybody again in life, that he was going to be a crusader. Moved on to Savannah and got involved in the Civil Rights movement in Savannah, taught at Morris Brown College for a while, was a chemist. And he was the field director of SCLC. He was not necessarily a devotee to nonviolence in the sense of what nonviolence was; he was a character bigger than life, a hell of an organizer.

Hosea was what Martin used to refer as his "kamikazes." Wasn't afraid of nobody, no one, no where. And he liked a little taste every once in a while and was noted for his driving a car while under the influence, we'll put it nicely.

But Hosea probably is underrated in a sense, there's now a statue on the other side of the Alabama River in Selma that commemorates the march with he and John Lewis, and John is a very good friend of mine. But Hosea I think in many ways was underrated in terms of his leadership in the Civil Rights movement and what he did. He brought four or 500 students down here in 1966 that helped really change in terms of voting rights and all across the south. Hosea was tenacious in his ability to organize and keep a good staff going and keep on going strong.

And he was the leader, if there's such a thing in a Civil Rights movement in the '60s. He was the leader of the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights movement. He was the sergeant out there, Bob.

SHORT: Well, back to Dr. King, what did you and Dr. King talk about while you were driving him?

HOUCK: Oh, all kinds of things. You know, those days you didn't have telephones in the car. You didn't have a cell phone. So, I mean, he was trapped; I was trapped, however way you want to look at it, you know, in terms of talking. So we talked about everything from music to what was happening in the organization and there was other people in the car. I'm a 19-year-old kid now, remember, I'm a 19-year-old kid driving around at this point the leader of the March on Washington, had already won the Nobel Peace Prize, had led major movements in Selma and also Montgomery and, you know, was seen all over the world as the man of the millennium.

And here I am driving him around in one of two cars. He had a Pontiac Bonneville, and he had a blue Bel Air Chevrolet. And oftentimes he'd drive me. I would just have the car, and he'd take me out to the airport. It was the old Atlanta Airport; in those days you didn't go through a lot of security, there was no security, actually. I mean, you just walked right into the airport.

And so we talked about music. We would talk about, you know, what was coming up. Dr. King didn't have, by the way, today everybody would have an entourage around them or they'd have a security guard. They'd have, you know, people with little earpieces in their ear. Dr. King didn't have any of that. He had me. But it was always an interesting aspect to hear him talk about

politics and where politics would be. I don't think, had Dr. King lived, that he would have followed the path of a Jesse Jackson and run for President or a Andy Young and run for Congress. I think Martin would never have run for public office.

But he did say, and it was interesting to hear, this was recently. In a BBC interview back in the 1960s Dr. King said that he fully expected that an African-American would be elected President not in his lifetime but shortly thereafter. And they asked him within 40 years, and he said maybe less, which was very prophetic in a sense of where he thought this would be, where this country would be today. And he would talk about the opportunities that he saw coming. But he also saw an economic hardship as being much more difficult to break down in terms of the poor in this country than the color barrier. And he said that he thought that that would last way beyond, way beyond that century, which was the last century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

SHORT: What was his opinion on the massive resistance to desegregation among the politicians in the south?

HOUCK: Well, you know, interestingly enough, the way you put it, okay, Lyndon Johnson had said I think to Richard Russell that when he signed the Voting Rights Act, he said he lost the white vote, Democrats had lost the white votes for the next century or half century. And Martin saw it the same way. He realized that there had to be a new breed of white politicians. There was already a number of whites across the south who had a conscience and had been involved the Civil Rights movement. Many of them had to leave the towns and cities they were in, like

Charles Morgan, Jr. had to leave Birmingham after praising Dr. King on his Birmingham jail letter. But Dr. King I think saw that there would be a new breed of white leadership that would rise up in what you'd call the 11 southern states of the old confederacy. And I think he saw that there would be a day when there would be more Ivan Allens, and Ivan Allen was already around in 1964 when he testified. And there would be more Charles Weltners here in Atlanta. There were a number of white politicians that stood out in terms of where, in his time, where the south was headed. He saw more Ivan Allens and Charles Weltners coming along.

SHORT: Did he have any hobbies?

HOUCK: Yes; swimming. I mean, he was a great swimmer, which he had in common with Andy Young. Softball, he loved playing softball. He used to love the bug, for those of you that don't know what the bug is, that's the lottery. And we used to go an old shop down on Auburn Avenue here, oh, my god, one of the biggest lotto guys in the south, or was bug man of the south, a guy named Charles Cato, bless his soul, who used to run a little operation at the corner of Auburn Avenue and Piedmont. Dr. King would go in there and, you know, play the numbers.

SHORT: Did he ever win?

HOUCK: Occasionally he'd win, occasionally he'd win. But it was something that he would occasionally -- he also loved to travel. And a reader, I mean, he'd bring ten books with him

when he was on the road. I mean, he would just read, read, read. He was also quite a historian, besides being a biblical scholar.

SHORT: Well, you drove the King children to school. Were they enrolled in public schools?

HOUCK: When I was driving them, they were. Yolanda went to school at Spring Street Elementary School, which is now the Puppetry Arts Center of Atlanta. And she went on to go to Grady High School. Interestingly enough, two of the children that would ride in the car that I'd pick up and drive them to school with, one was Maria Saporta, who went on to become a columnist here in Atlanta for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. And another was Eric Roberts, whose sister is now the famous actress out in California, Julia Roberts. And the Roberts family had a theater workshop here for kids, children's workshop. And Yolanda went to the theater workshop with Julia's parents, and I was there at the workshop when Julia's mother was pregnant with her.

SHORT: Is that right? You're going to tell us your age in a minute if you aren't careful. Did the King children ever talk about racial segregation?

HOUCK: Not really. I mean, not in those days. Then of course, since then, you know, but daddy King used to worry quite a bit, by the way, talking about Coretta wanted to know how safe it was -- we're talking about 1966, me driving, a white guy driving four black kids around

Atlanta. You know, I mean, obviously they knew that, you know, and went through the process of their father and mother in the movement. Coretta, by the way, was very much a part of the Civil Rights movements. But why they couldn't get their shoes fit in the same, you know, shoe store as the white kids, why they had to go to a segregated water fountain, all this stuff. Those things happened.

But Coretta and Martin made sure that their children had everything that the white kids had and made sure that their household was integrated at all times. And it was.

SHORT: How much was she involved in his Civil Rights activities?

HOUCK: Coretta was involved every day. I mean, Coretta was an unpaid first lady of the Civil Rights movement. And she did a lot of freedom concerts around the country; she was a singer. She was an opera singer by training. And so she would do these freedom concerts around the country that raised quite a great amount of money for SCLC. And she was a tenacious fundraiser for the movement, and she didn't want to leave the kids very often. And by the way, Dr. King and Coretta both took the kids on what they would consider to be safe demonstrations and marches around, of course, in those days what was safe? And so the kids traveled with them extensively as well, and you would see photos of them, for example, when the Montgomery Selma March reached the Capitol in Montgomery in 1965. The kids participated in that march.

SHORT: Well, it's well known that Dr. King fashioned his nonviolent approach on Mahatma

Gandhi and his teaching. Did he ever meet Mahatma Gandhi?

HOUCK: He did. He was in India. He and Coretta went to India. As a matter of fact, Congressman Lewis and Ambassador Andrew Young just came back from a trip to India last year that retraced the steps of Dr. King and Mrs. King in the late '50s. The Kings went to India and spent three weeks. And Martin King III went over there as well with them. And the influence of Gandhi in the household was tremendous. I mean, Gandhi -- there were photos of Gandhi around; there were statues of Gandhi around; there were writings of Gandhi around. And of course, a great deal of history of Gandhi's relationship to South Africa was around. So Dr. King was a Gandhian philosopher and bringing together Christianity with that nonviolence.

SHORT: His nonviolent approach was not always supported by many Civil Rights activists, particularly among younger ones and Black Power activists. What do you think about that?

HOUCK: Dr. King knew that he couldn't sell his philosophy to everybody or that other people would buy into nonviolence as being the only method in which social justice would take place. For example, he was great friends with Malcolm X, and Malcolm X a lot of people would say would be a black separatist. He was friends with Stokely Carmichael, who really echoed the cry of black power. He was friends across the board with people who didn't have his own philosophy. He would hope that people would choose to come under the banner of nonviolence in SCLC, but it was in Memphis 1968 that Dr. King -- before you could march in Dr. King's

marches or demonstrations that he led or the SCLC led, you had to go to nonviolent workshops. So that would, right then and there take out a lot of people from participating in those things cause they would say "well, I'm not going to turn the other cheek, you know, if somebody hits me, I'm going to hit them back." That's a hard to do, is to go in there and not have that happen. But in 1968 in Memphis, one of the few demonstrations that Dr. King actually led turned into violence in the streets, and that's what caused Dr. King to go back in there to put together another demonstration to prove that nonviolence could work as we were organizing the poor people's campaign in Washington, which was going to be the largest nonviolent demonstration in the nation's history to build tents in Resurrection City.

But one of the worst demonstrations and not just talking about the south, but one of the worst demonstrations that Dr. King ever faced in his life was an open housing demonstration in Chicago. There was a great deal of resentment and hate and hostility in 1966 when King went to Chicago. Then the late Richard J. Daley, mayor of Chicago, didn't take to having Martin Luther King, Jr. bring his nonviolent end-of-slums and open housing demonstrations to his city. And it was his city. And so it caused a great deal of problems. I think it was one of the few battles that King actually lost, was in Chicago in 1966, and probably one of the most violent demonstrations he ever faced, was going to an open housing demonstration in Gage Park in Chicago in '66, when he actually got hit by a rock.

SHORT: You were on the march to Washington, weren't you?

HOUCK: I wasn't in 1963. I was living in Cambridge, Maryland then, still involved with the Civil Rights movement. I had just moved from Cambridge, Maryland to Jacksonville, Florida with my aunt. But, no, I wanted to be there. I was 14, 15 years old at the time. But shortly thereafter, my legs got to moving in marches.

SHORT: With Hosea?

HOUCK: With Hosea. I met Hosea, by the way, in St. Augustine when I was still in high school. He was in St. Augustine in 1964, which was trying to get public accommodations integrated, and that was in 1964 when I met Hosea and J.T. Johnson and a number of other Civil Rights figures that were down there, Dorothy Cotton, a number of people in the SCLC. That was my first real association with the SCLC. I was in Jacksonville, Florida, where there was really no SCLC chapter but an NAACP chapter, and that's where I would bring all these white kids every Wednesday night, to the NAACP youth meetings, and from this white high school.

SHORT: How did Dr. King – I might have asked you this. But how did he react to these Georgia governors and senators who used him as an issue in their political campaigns?

HOUCK: Well, you know, the politician in the King family was daddy King. Daddy King was the politician in the family, and Dr. King didn't really participate in politics, although in 1960 it was his jailing here in Georgia down in Albany that probably changed the course of the election

for John Fitzgerald Kennedy. And daddy King broke with a number of other black leaders here who were supporting Richard Nixon because in Georgia you had essentially a Democratic party, as you well know, that was all white. And the Republicans allowed black folks to participate. So most blacks in the south, and particularly in Georgia, in Atlanta who were registered to vote were Republican. But daddy King split in 1960 with William Holmes Borders, who was another famous black preacher here in Atlanta whose granddaughter is running for mayor of Atlanta. Borders went with Nixon. And King always used to say, daddy King used to say that "Borders are always Republicans and they're going to always be Republican; they're going to be Republican no matter what." And daddy King went for John Kennedy, and that reverberated around the country and probably changed enough votes from black folks in other parts of the country from Nixon to Kennedy, changed the election.

But King, daddy King got along with Georgia governors. You know, he'd go up there and he realized that there was segregation and a lot of that wasn't going to change. But getting certain things done I think is the way he looked at it. I think that in the latter part of the '60s, King died in '68 now, as you well recall, things began to change rather dramatically. I think that the entire Civil Rights movement was in distress when Lester Maddox was elected governor. I mean, this is a man that came out and shooed people who were wanting to close his restaurant down rather than serve black folks. So I think that, and in later years, I mean, when I was doing talk radio, of course I got to know Lester a little bit better. He always called me Mr. Tom, by the way...Lester. So I got to know him a lot better over the years. You know, I think that he regretted a lot what people saw towards him as what really took place. And of course, George

Wallace on his dying bed apologized to the country and the world for saying "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." So I think that that dynamic in the Civil Rights movement worked.

Unfortunately, Bob, is that too much of what happened in the reformation of white democratic governors in the south is nowadays called the Republican Party in the south.

SHORT: Well, you're probably right. Tell me, was Dr. King ever concerned about the FBI and the government's continual...

HOUCK: You know, I knew what you were going to say. He said, "You know, as long as they're around, I'm protected." And I mean, King used to see the FBI as, you know -- people used to say, "Well, you've got all the tapes of him with women and all this other kind of stuff." Dr. King knew that his phones were being bugged. Dr. King knew that his mail was being checked. Dr. King knew that they were outside his house. Dr. King knew, and he actually saw that as not a fear because, you know, he kept saying, well, you know, he was trying to do right. He kept saying that with them there, that would keep some of the racists and segregationists away from him. I mean, amazingly enough.

SHORT: Well, Tom, I know you've been asked this question hundreds of times, but I must ask it for the sake of keeping our interviews authentic.

HOUCK: Absolutely.

SHORT: Was Dr. King the lady's man he's been accused of being?

HOUCK: No more or less than you, Bob.

SHORT: Then I guess the answer is no.

HOUCK: What's that old saying? Those who know don't say and those who say don't know.

SHORT: All right. Well, you understand I had to ask you that question. Let's talk some more.

HOUCK: Well, I had to respond that way.

SHORT: You did. You gave a very good response. Let's talk a little bit more about your role with the SCLC. Tell us about some of the activities that you were involved in during that period.

HOUCK: Well, I helped do a lot of different things with SCLC. I was in Birmingham, Alabama in 1966 when we went back to make sure that -- after the Voting Rights of 1965 a lot of places still didn't want to register black voters. And they wouldn't add additional voter registrars. They wouldn't add additional days or hours, and there were thousands of black people all across

the south that wanted to register to vote because it was going to be their first time to register to vote. So what we had to do is we had to keep up the vigilance of making sure that these cities and towns would register people to vote.

Well, Birmingham, which shouldn't be a surprise to many people, continued its policies of basically allowing black voters or black potential voters only in on three days of the week, two hours a day. This is a year after the Voting Rights Act was passed.

So we went back to Birmingham in 1966. And my job was to organize and help develop demonstrations with Hosea and with a number of other people, Stoney Cooks who worked in SCLC in those days. Andy would come over. And Dr. King came back to Birmingham and Shuttlesworth and other people, Reverend Gardner. So my job was to get these high school students from Parker High School to the demonstration downtown to block the intersection at 5:00. In those days in Birmingham they didn't have expressways, they used to have viaducts that led across to the suburbs and these other places.

And I went to Parker High School, and my job was to get these kids out to march in the demonstrations, and I broke the lock that had put together this fence in the back. And the Birmingham Police and the notorious police wagon saw me doing this. And here's a white guy at a black high school doing this, you know, and my job was to get them out of there.

Well, in the process they found me later in the day and arrested me and put me in jail, charging me with disturbing the peace, resisting arrest, assaulting an officer, threw the book at me. It was much more dangerous for me -- I went to jail probably 18 to 20 times in the Civil Rights movement, but it was always more dangerous for me to be put in jail for my own life because I

was a white guy that wasn't put in jail with the brothers; I was put in jail with white folks, those same white folks out there that couldn't stand seeing a white nigger lover, you know, come into their town. It wasn't nice. It wasn't pretty.

But after Birmingham, after this incidence, it was a very bad incidence that occurred there. I was in jail for almost 30 hours. Hosea and I filed suit against Birmingham, Jefferson County, and the law to desegregate the jails. And that lawsuit wound its way through the state courts in Alabama. Of course, they rejected the notion of desegregation of the jail, went to the federal court, and Frank Johnson in Montgomery who favored us, but the Alabama Attorney General tried to overturn that. Went all the way to the Supreme Court.

So one of the most famous cases that I was involved in was Houck and Williams v. Birmingham Jefferson County to desegregate the jails; it went all the way to the Supreme Court, which made it happen.

SHORT: And you won.

HOUCK: We won.

SHORT: Who was your attorney?

HOUCK: Well, two attorneys: Howard Moore, who represented Julian Bond's brother-in-law, and Charles Morgan, Jr., who has just recently passed away, a very good friend of both of ours

for years.

SHORT: That's right. Chuck was a great man.

HOUCK: He was a great man.

SHORT: Tell us a little bit about Chuck.

HOUCK: Chuck was a man of great courage. Born in Birmingham and became a fierce advocate for civil liberties and became a wealthy lawyer actually when he was in Birmingham, came from a wealthy family in Birmingham. And he spoke out loudly and very affirmatively in Birmingham after Dr. King wrote his letter and after the demonstrations happened in Birmingham, after the kids were part of the demonstrations out there, where the kids were fire-hosed and brutalized very badly. And he came out and basically wrote his own letter to his Birmingham fellow white citizens, and they gave him a resounding "get the hell out of town," ultimately winding up in Atlanta where he became the regional director of the ACLU and was heading up the ACLU voting rights project in the south. Went on to represent a number of people. One of his most famous cases I would imagine would be Mohammed Ali. And he was successful in representing Mohammed Ali, the champ. He went on to Washington to live and died in Destin, Florida not too long ago.

SHORT: Right.

HOUCK: Great champion of civil liberties.

SHORT: I want to ask you this question now...

HOUCK: And a good friend, by the way, of our old friend, Zell Miller.

SHORT: Is he your old friend? Does that mean you're not longer his friend?

HOUCK: Old friend. I'm just putting that in quotes. Miller will always be my friend. You helped introduce me to Miller. Miller goes back in Civil Rights history as well. You know, Miller worked with Bob, and Lester Maddox. And between 1968 and 1974, there was a dramatic 380, well, not 380, 350 in Miller's political philosophy. And it was one that changed the political face of Georgia politics under Sonny Perdue was elected republican. And Miller was very instrumental in making that happen by putting together a coalition in this state of black folks, women -- he came up for the Equal Rights Amendment. That was a very radical thing to do back in the 1970s. And put together a coalition of black folks, low-income white folks, mountain folks, folks from down in South Georgia below the line, and women. And he beat a woman and he beat Max Cleland, who was a war hero at that point, a triple amputee coming back here and running for politics for the first time. We were successful in making Miller

Lieutenant Governor.

The only time I've ever worked in government in my life was working three months after Miller got elected in 1975, and it convinced me that I never wanted to do it again.

SHORT: Why?

HOUCK: Miller. Even though he and I were on the same page, there was a tornado that took place here. It hit the governor's mansion. I was down at the Capitol. It was about 7:00 in the morning, and I commandeered the state helicopter. Do you remember this?

And I was giving radio reports to WSB and WGST and in those days, there were a lot more news stations around town. And Miller heard me on the radio and said "what in the hell are you doing up there? How'd you get there?" He took me...I mean, he didn't speak to me for three days.

Didn't fire me, but didn't speak to me for three days.

SHORT: Well, my question was if Dr. King had not become the voice of the Civil Rights movement...

HOUCK: I wouldn't be here.

SHORT: ...who would have?

HOUCK: That would be a hard question to answer. I doubt you and I would be sitting here talking today had Dr. King not become that leader of the Civil Rights movement because what that did, that made Atlanta the center of this Civil Rights movement and was changed so much so because of King. I mean, King was obviously not the only person, I mean, there were a lot of people that were out there. But he was the leader of the massive movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968.

Atlanta became ground zero for that movement. Had it not been for Dr. King, SNCC probably wouldn't have been founded. SNCC actually was founded under SCLC's auspices. But had Dr. King not been from Atlanta and had not led the movement from Atlanta, based in Atlanta, Andy Young wouldn't be here. Tom Houck wouldn't be here. Joe Lowry wouldn't be here. We could go on and on. There'd be no Hosea Feed the Hungry because Hosea Williams wouldn't be here. I mean, John Lewis wouldn't be here; Julian Bond probably would be here because he was an academic. But he probably wouldn't be the president of the NAACP, the chairman of the NAACP today. So much happened because King was where he was and that movement he led. And it changed the whole equation of the city of Atlanta to bringing Maynard Jackson back from selling encyclopedias to running for mayor to the succession of him and Andy Young and the young Bill Campbells of the world from Raleigh that wanted to come to Atlanta to Shirley Franklin that left Washington, D.C. to come to Atlanta. Atlanta became a magnet for young black thoughts and minds.

SHORT: Let's go to 1973, the year that the city charter was changed. There was an election,

and it was the first time that black Atlanta had an opportunity to elect the public officials. Do you remember that year?

HOUCK: I sure do. As a matter of fact, I had just come back from registering 18-year-olds to vote, and I decided that I was heady enough after several million dollars in heading up a staff of about a hundred people around the country to register 18-year-olds only to vote in minor numbers and seeing Richard Nixon pull off a 49-state sweep over George McGovern. And I had just come back to Atlanta, and I ran for the board of Aldermen, pretty much an all-white district here in Atlanta.

But I remember then that Maynard Jackson decided that he was going to challenge Sam Massell. Sam Massell himself in 1969, after Ivan Allen, was very split because a lot of white people that supported Sam Massell, I mean supported Ivan Allen were more of the blue blood north side type that were not for Sam Massell. Sam Massell was Atlanta's first Jewish mayor.

And what happened was Massell came into power and probably made a few missteps along the way, including the police chief, John Inman, and it created quite a controversy in town and pushed Maynard Jackson into the race. Maynard Jackson had been vice mayor under Ivan Allen, I mean under Sam Massell.

It was a very heady time. Maynard Jackson was a very strong figure, a very -- when he would walk in a room, people would turn around and take a look at him, not just because he was 325 pounds and six-feet-three, but because he had that charisma. And he put together the first major organization. Now, Leroy Johnson had been elected prior to that and Q.B. Williamson was on

the Board of Aldermen here. But this was the first time that you were going to see substantive change in black political power flex its muscle. And it wasn't a very good campaign. I mean, it was a very hard fought campaign.

In the end Sam Massell was running ads, which I think he regrets to this day, about Atlanta being a city too young to die and having tumbleweed go down Peachtree Street in his ads.

SHORT: But the City Council was elected that year also, and as I recall there were -- except for Q.B. Williamson -- the first black members in many, many years.

HOUCK: There were several black members elected that year, three or four, one including a friend of ours, James George Bond was elected; Julian Bond's brother was elected. There were three other elected: Jim Maddox, who is retiring now after all those years, was elected city council that year. And there was a new, if you will, a changing face of city hall, and not just because there were black folks now holding city seats but because there was a feeling that for the first time there was going to be affirmative action and that city hall would be a place where black folks would be welcome.

SHORT: You've been an insider with every Atlanta mayor since Maynard in 1974. If you will, give us a thumbnail sketch of each of them and what you think they accomplished.

HOUCK: Well, I think Maynard obviously, as the first black mayor of Atlanta, was the person

that really set in motion a mechanism and machinery to help other blacks get elected and also to, in many ways, show that a black could be mayor. He had a tumultuous relationship with the business community; but he was proven correct when he said he was going to build a new airport under budget and on time. So his successes were in the economic development area and in jobs in Atlanta and in many ways making folks who had felt left out and left behind in government feel a part of government.

Then Andy Young came in after Maynard had really plowed a whole new area of political changes. And Andy really came to a position where he put Atlanta on the map internationally. Delta started to fly more internationally during that time. Andy had a good relationship with the -- Maynard did not have a really great relationship with the media, but Andy did. I think when Andy came in, one of the first things he ever said was, "You know, you can fight with the media, you can fight with the Constitution, the Journal, you know; he said you're not going to get anywhere, they buy ink by the barrel." And that was his philosophy. You know, so Andy kind of got along with everybody. And Shirley Franklin, who is now the mayor, really in many ways, ran the city under Andy. She was in charge of things. And Andy traveled quite a bit. But if it hadn't been for Andy Young, in 1996 we would not have had the Olympic Games. So the Olympics really, in terms of legacy and putting Atlanta into the international mode, was Andy's legacy.

Now, after Andy was elected two terms, Maynard came back, Maynard came back, and I think people wish now that Maynard didn't come back because he really didn't move in that second, call it Maynard one, Maynard two, that second term, and he decided he wasn't going to run

again. But he anointed a young city council member who was his floor leader, William Craig Campbell. And Bill decided that he was going to have a different kind of legacy. Unfortunately, one of his legacies is he went to jail. But I think what people would say now in Atlanta is that Atlantic Station wouldn't be here today had it not been for Bill Campbell. You wouldn't have had a lot of the development downtown. He set in motion the kinds of things that now have brought 100,000 new people into Atlanta in the last nine years. He also hired a woman named Renee Glover to head up the Atlanta Housing Authority, which has become a model in the country in terms of bringing together mixed income groups and tearing down the housing projects that used to be a place of last resort to becoming a place where recidivism and crime was breeding.

And then Shirley Franklin came in after Bill Campbell, and for eight years now Shirley's been mayor. She says that she's not worried about her legacy, so I guess I shouldn't be. But I think if you want to take a look at Shirley's legacy, she has been the brick-by-brick mayor. She has been the sure mayor. She has been the person that has helped put the infrastructure back into place, but she's also been the mayor in many ways that has found in the last two or three years crime, whether it's for real or not becoming more violent in the city, and unfortunately for her the economic crisis in the country has brought about police furloughs and a lot of firing of city employees. I think Shirley will probably come away looking pretty good after eight years.

You've got to mention one more time that you're in the historic Manuel's Tavern, a place that Zell Miller, Jimmy Carter, great Georgia politicians, republicans and democrats, Sonny Perdue comes for lunch here, okay? I mean, this really is an institution.

SHORT: It is. Very historical place. Manuel was a very historical person.

HOUCK: He was.

SHORT: Why don't you tell us about Manuel Maloof?

HOUCK: Manny Maloof, he grew up in Atlanta. He grew up in a section of Atlanta right now not too far from Turner Field in a neighborhood that was the ethnic part of Atlanta where the Lebanese and Jews and Greeks lived next door to each other in Atlanta. And back in 1956 he opened up a 12 to 15-stool bar and just sold beer, which is a dry cleaning store prior to that, and called it "Manuel's". And he always had a love for politics and, being a Lebanese, had a desire to make it over here in the new country.

He became very early on involved in the political situation in Atlanta. I didn't meet him until 1967. People told me that this guy voluntarily integrated the bars in Atlanta before other bars were integrated here and that this was a place the political figures in Atlanta came to. And so in 1967 when I met him, Manuel had already well-established himself here, as Carl Sanders would come through here, Jimmy Carter would come through here, Bob Short would come through here. You know, in those days he just still served beer.

But he became a rational political force in Atlanta. People would come to Manuel's, particularly journalists. And so this became the media hangout. So this became the media and the political

hangout. So you'd have all of the folks that, you know, had their notepads and would come in. Paul Hemphill was a well know columnist here in Atlanta that came here. And so Manuel's became the place to be in the late '60s and has held on to the position for more than 40 years as if you're going to get elected in Atlanta you've got to come through Manuel's, and you need to have a party here, shake hands here, or be seen here, and in the old days drinking beer, but in these days I guess you would have an iced tea.

And Manuel went on to become an elected official in the south. He became chairman of the DeKalb County Commission. He was always perceived as being a very frugal man. I don't think anybody ever got a free beer from here. Somebody that was always willing to, in his own way, give his opinion, and you may have disagreed with his opinion and oftentimes if you disagreed with his position he'd say "Get the hell out of here." But by and large, you know, he was a man bigger than life, and his name will live on, you know, more than just in DeKalb County, but as a political institution in the city.

SHORT: You mentioned that you had campaigned for Zell Miller in 1974 for lieutenant governor. In 1990 when he ran for governor, one of his opponents was Andrew Young. Who were you for?

HOUCK: That's a very interesting thing. Jimmy Carter probably wouldn't be elected today had Andy Young and Zell Miller not run against each other. And I was on the radio luckily in those days, and I did one of the debates actually in 1990 between Andy and Zell. I think it was on

Channel 5 here. I had encouraged Andy to run, not thinking Zell was going to run. And when they both ran against each other, I was fortunately in a position of being on the radio. But I guess you would have to say that I supported Andy. But I would put it to you this way: It was a civil campaign, and it was a good campaign. Miller had two interesting people running his campaign that went on to great fame. James Carville and Paul Begalla. Miller had them on his side.

Andy had on his side George Stephanopoulos, Frank Greer, Mandy Greenwald who went on to the Whitehouse, and the chief of staff now in the United States for the United States President Obama, Rahm Emanuel. Rahm Emanuel used to go to Andy every day and get him to make phone calls to raise funds. Rahm became the fundraiser. Well, all of these folks that ran Miller's campaign and ran Young's campaign came together to elect Jimmy Carter president in 1992. So if it hadn't been for Andy Young, I think it was Andy Young who -- I mean, it was Zell Miller who introduced Carville to Bill Clinton. And I can remember the day after Miller was elected. That day he invited us all to come by, and Carville explained how the whole thing unraveled and said what a gentleman Andrew Young had been in his graceful endorsement of Miller in campaigning for Miller for the election in 1990 after he had lost.

**SHORT:** Two of your good friends are good friends of mine: John Lewis and Julian Bond. You were very close to both of them. Tell us a little about each.

**HOUCK:** Well, Mr. Lewis is an old and dear friend who I actually met in Cambridge, Maryland

when I was 15 years old. And he was chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He's a very serious man. He's a man of great integrity. He's a man that believes firmly that the American dream still must live on, that you must keep your eyes on the prize. He has become an icon. Time Magazine one time called him a living saint.

Well, Mr. Lewis isn't quite a living saint as much as a friend that he is to the nation, but he is a man of integrity. He's a man of great honesty and compassion. You know, he truly believes in a beloved community at peace with itself. And he has taken that throughout his entire life.

Probably there wasn't any major figure in the Civil Rights movement that had been as many times to jail or beaten as John Lewis.

Julian Bond, on the other hand, well, besides having James as his brother, he's a pretty decent guy. I mean, James is wonderful...wonderful family. His father is a great academic man, his mother a wonderful literary person and a sweetheart. But Julian, everybody in Atlanta thought after Julian was elected in kind of a disputed election in 1966 that they thought Julian Bond would be the congressman from Atlanta, the first black congressman from Atlanta. Well, as we know, it became Andrew Young. But when Andrew Young became ambassador to the U.N. and there wound up being an election between John Lewis and Julian Bond, which luckily again I was doing talk radio so we had to keep a fairly neutral position in that whole thing, although Lillian Lewis and John Lewis didn't think so. And I wound up not actually talking with John for about a year after the election, and Lillian maybe longer.

But I think Julian in many ways he was the intellectual side of the political equation. He would have been a great congressman, there's no question about it. John is, too. But, I mean, I think

Julian would have been a great congressman.

As chance has it, you know, he went on to Washington. He ran, as you well know. He ran for president and lost in the primary, but he ran. He was nominated for vice president and was too young in Chicago in 1968. He is a person of words. He's a wordsmith. Whereas John is a man of emotion, Julian is a wordsmith man. He went on, after his life in Georgia, went on to become chairman of the NAACP, a position he still holds.

SHORT: Let's get back for just a minute to the Civil Rights movement. After the death of Dr. King and the passage of several Supreme Court decisions against segregation and the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Act, has the movement been pronounced dead?

HOUCK: No. And I want to go back to something quickly here in terms of talking about the south. You asked earlier a question about how Dr. King and others perceived white politicians in the south, and I mentioned Ivan Allen and Charlie Weltner as an example. If it hadn't been for white male judges in the south between 1955 and 1968, the movement would have been dead. I mean, the white judges in the south in that period of time from the '50s through the '90s were real heroes in this country, and many of them appointed by the way by Eisenhower, which was a republican president.

But going back to what you were saying about -- what was that question again?

SHORT: Whether or not the movement...

HOUCK: Is dead. Well, the movement is -- yeah, I mean, obviously. You know, you're not going to do -- as much as people want to get people marching again, getting people out in the streets again, the tea baggers have it these days. I mean, it's a movement that continues to exist. You know, the dream lives on and will never die. It's just different tactics and different times. Marchers were right. Marchers were absolutely correct in the '50s and '60s in this country. They brought about the change. Nonviolence was right as a tactic in those days. It brought about the change.

Today there are different kinds of techniques and tactics. I mean, you're not organizing like labor had to do in the '30s and the '40s and the '50s. And the picket line is not the same thing today as it was many years ago. So a Civil Rights movement per se, a new generation is coming along and in many ways that new generation is going to lead us into a different kind of movement than we have today. The election last year of Barack Obama in many ways is that new direction. And unfortunately in the south, you know, only 10 to 15 percent of whites voted for Obama. But around the rest of the country and the overall vote was very encouraging. You had more than 40 percent of whites in America to vote for a black man for president, one with the name of Barack Hussein Obama. So, I mean, there are many differences that are taking place in terms of the movement of the country.

We have a hell of a lot of work to do in the south though, Bob. And I don't think it's a movement that can be brought about by mass demonstrations or boycotts or those kinds of things anymore. It has to take place in a change of heart. And that change of heart is still very difficult

to come by in terms of many white politicians. And as I said earlier, you know, those courageous democrats in this country in the '60s and early '70s, many of them have died, have grayed or frayed or moved on. And I want to see a new breed of those folks that can come up here and can give leadership.

SHORT: Do you think there's anybody out there who could fill Dr. King's shoes?

HOUCK: By the way, I want to say this, too: Two white southerners were the only two democrats we had as president before we had a black African-American president.

SHORT: Okay. Now can you answer my question? Can you see anyone out there who could fill Dr. King's shoes?

HOUCK: I'm sure there will be someday, but probably not in my lifetime. I think Barack Obama to many today is what King was to many people of his era, particularly young blacks. And young whites as well, which I think the young whites and young blacks across the country see the hope and the dream in Barack Obama that they saw in the days of Martin Luther King. Was my excitement level as high with Barack Obama being elected President of the United States as it was working for Dr. King and driving him around, listening to his speeches and his sermons? No, I wasn't. But I'm saying it today: There are many, many people around this country and around the world that take new hope and inspiration in Barack Obama. So, I mean,

it's a different kind of leadership. It's a different kind of time. It's a different kind of movement than it was back in the '60s, '70s, and '80s.

Will we ever know another Herman Talmadge in Georgia? I don't think so. I don't think that Johnny Isakson or -- what's his name -- Chambliss can possibly tie the shoes of a Herman Talmadge. Herman Talmadge may have been a racist and segregationist, but he was the father of the food stamps. I mean, it was little things like that that these southern politicians did in their own ways in their own days.

SHORT: Let's talk a minute about the assassination of Dr. King and his funeral in Atlanta.

Where were you when that happened?

HOUCK: I was actually in Knoxville, Tennessee. I had been in Memphis on April 1<sup>st</sup>, and Dr. King had then announced that he was going back to Atlanta and then coming back to Memphis to speak and lead this rallying demonstration. And my job was in the poor people's campaign, which we were organizing. Memphis was in the middle of -- it was really a diversion in the poor people's campaign. We weren't scheduled to go to Memphis. The sanitation workers went on strike. Labor, which was very much a part of the Civil Rights movement and very much a part of resurrection city and the March on Washington, the poor people's march on Washington, really pushed Dr. King to go to Memphis against the wishes of many people, including Andy Young.

But what happened was I was in Knoxville, Tennessee with a guy named Ernie Austin who was

from Kentucky. And what we did was we were organized, we were speaking with the Tennessee council on human relations actually the night of the 4<sup>th</sup> to try to get them to get poor white folks involved in the Poor People's Campaign. What we were trying to do was bring together Hispanics, bring together Native Americans, bring together poor white folks all to march together in Washington with black folks. The first real rainbow coalition. So my job was to talk to the folks. And as I was going to the meeting at 6:00 in Knoxville, I can remember to this day, and I heard this kid yell out in the street, "Martin Luther King's been shot, Martin Luther King's been shot..." and I thought this kid is going to cause some trouble here in the street saying that kind of stuff. And then I get to the church and find out that indeed Dr. King had been shot. And I had called the house; and I got Ms. Lockhart, who was the housekeeper, on the telephone. And she told me that Coretta was getting ready to go to the airport, that Mayor Ivan Allen was coming to the house and picking her up and taking her to the airport. And I said, "well, do you think I should come back?" She said "Yes." I made several other calls, and I came back to Atlanta. We found out shortly after that Dr. King had passed. And for the next 48 hours essentially I didn't get any sleep at all. I came back, and I organized the transportation for the funeral.

But the mood in Atlanta was very interesting. While there were riots all over the country, Atlanta was relatively calm. And it was an eerie calm. As you recall, the day of the funeral, probably one of the biggest overreactions that Lester Maddox ever had in his political career was ringing the State Capitol with state troopers, which was certainly not necessary. It was overkill. The City of Atlanta remained peaceful for those six days between Dr. King's assassination and

that funeral. And the mood of this town, black and white, southerners and non-southerners and the people that flocked here, was to be as helpful as they possibly could be in giving a sendoff for King.

SHORT: Well, after your Civil Rights days, you became a talking head on the radio.

HOUCK: Yeah.

SHORT: How did you ever come to that decision?

HOUCK: Naturally. I mean, I was vaccinated with a microphone. No, I mean, really I think what happened was the first time I really became interested in doing talk -- as a kid, I'd pretend I was doing the Tonight Show under my blankets. I was an 8, 9 year-old kid. I mean, I always wanted to get in radio. I always wanted to be a part of radio. And I started writing a column for Atlanta Magazine and for the Atlanta Gazette called The Tattler. And the Tattler sort of was a political column and was also kind of like a gossip column. And this was back in 1976, '77. And I was at a basketball game, a Hawks basketball game.

A guy named Mike Wheeler went on to be one of the founders of HBO, was head of GST at the time, WGST Radio. And he asked me if I would put that Tattler on the radio every morning, and I said I'd love to do it. So he asked me to come on; so I started doing commentary for GST in '77. And that led to a talk show, part of it hosted by me and another part of it hosted by me

and Dick Williams, who was a well-known star. And another part of it brought Neil Boortz back into the business, and he was my counterpoint for about three or four months. It was either he was going to kill me or I was going to kill him. But Boortz was part of the show. I actually brought him back to radio. If he sees this interview: Boortz needs to give me part of his salary for life.

But at any rate, that's how I got into it. And then it evolved really big time in 1981 when Maynard Jackson was mayor. And there was the missing and murdered children of Atlanta, a terrible tragedy here where weeks and weeks went by and there were many children that were killed. And I did a nightly show, which was sort of like before Nightline, and that's when I got really into talk radio big time and everybody in town had to listen to this. As a matter of fact, I think Wayne Williams, who was the accused killer and convicted killer of a couple of these kids, his parents were slapped with an injunction for calling my radio show. So I became big time during that period.

SHORT: And then you were on television?

HOUCK: Well, about that same time over at Channel 2, Andy Fisher, who was the then news director at Channel 2, WSB TV, put together a little talking heads show on Sunday called Sunday News Conference. So he put together me, Dick Williams, a fellow named Bill Ship, and Rick Allen. And we were hosted at that point by a preacher, Ron Sailor, who was a black commentator over there. We continued over there at Channel 2 for several years until a conflict

arose between an opinionated news political reporter, Bill Nigut, and Ron Sailor. And that's when we moved our show to Channel 36. But it became kind of like the Sunday morning thing to do, would be like to listen to Tom Houck and Dick Williams go at each other and Bill Shipp try to sort of moderate it. And Rick Allen being sort of the more moderate person over there. But we had great fun doing it. I did it for 20 years.

SHORT: Twenty years?

HOUCK: Left in 2001.

SHORT: You're not doing any of that anymore?

HOUCK: Every once in a while. Every once in a while I'll do something on CNN or I'll do something on MSNBC or something, but not on a regular basis. I'm writing my book.

SHORT: Tell us about your book.

HOUCK: The book is a lot of what we talked about right here. I hope that it will be out within the next couple of years. I ran into Doug Blackmon the other day, who's the Wall Street Journal bureau chief here. He's written a Pulitzer Prize winning book called "Slavery by Another Name". So I said, "Doug, how long did it take you to write your book?" He said "Seven years."

I said, "well, I've got three more years to go maybe" but I hope to have it out within the next couple of years. It basically travels that memoir road of how that little scrappy kid from Boston wound up in the household of the Kings and what all happened and occurred during that time with great insights that I don't think other people have ever written about regarding the King family and the Civil Rights movement.

SHORT: I'm anxious to read it. You've always been a loyal democrat. What has happened to the Democratic Party in Georgia?

HOUCK: Well, I could say two words -- Bobby Kahn -- but I won't. That's terrible. But, well, I think a lot of things have happened. I think that the party had its problem with the national party. I think that, you know, leaders like Zell Miller have gone from being liberal to moderate to conservative, and that's happened with a number of other people in this state. Miller I guess right now has come full circle. He started off conservative, then he went to a liberal, then he went to a moderate, then he went back to conservative. So he's made a complete switch. So, I mean, a lot of those guys out there like Miller, you know, have become republicans.

And the general assembly and the governor's office -- well, the governor's office for the first time went, as you well know seven years ago, to a republican. There is not a Tom Murphy that can bring together the various forces, and he actually gerrymandered himself out of being reelected many years ago. I mean, that was the kind of guy he was. But Murphy was able to bring the rural and urban folks together, and the Democratic Party in the state of Georgia even

after the Civil Rights bill was more of a club than a philosophy. And so as a club, they could organize under the name democrat, but it didn't have to keep one specific philosophy. So they didn't have to be in the national party.

So we continued to elect democrats as President, democrats to the Senate and I think probably it really came down when the national movement in this country, abortion and a lot of the far right-wing causes, finally crept in. And those people that called themselves democrats really aligned themselves closer to the Republican National Party. And that's how we lost a lot of that. But I blame Bobby Kahn for losing that election. I think Roy Barnes could have beat Sonny Perdue eight years ago had Bobby Kahn not been the campaign manager. I don't mind saying that either, by the way. And I think if Bobby Kahn is in the race this year, okay, with Roy Barnes, I think Roy, I think he would get defeated again. I think this guy's a loser.

SHORT: If you had the power, Tom, how would you fix these problems?

HOUCK: Make sure Bobby Kahn doesn't get involved. I mean, how would I fix these problems? I would campaign like Roy Barnes is beginning to campaign. I would try to bring together around common purpose and common goals some of the things that Barnes is talking about in terms of education, in terms of dealing with resources and water, in terms of dealing with the non-controversial big issues that affect us on an everyday basis -- the economy, jobs, those kinds of things, education. I think that that's one of the first things you have to do.

Then I think what you have to take a look at is that race is still a factor, and it divides too many

people in this state. But the state is changing. I mean, it's changing dramatically. The Hispanic that lives in Gwinnett County or lives in Cherokee County or lives in Spalding County or Paulding County or lives up in Hall County or those that live up in Dalton, Georgia, those folks aren't voting, but their kids will. And when that happens within ten years, we can begin to see a new dynamic in this state in a larger Hispanic vote coming together with the black vote and the progressive white vote, which I think is the future of the Democratic Party in this state. I think there will be sufficient numbers then to be able to turn back the red tide in Georgia. So I think that we may not be able to turn it around in the next four or eight years, but I think that there's going to be a new coalition of democrats here within the near future that's going to substantially change the -- I think we'll see more democrats elected after this next census than we have right now. I think the Democratic Party, it needs a vibrant leader in the top, not to blast Jane Kidd who I like and respect very much from Athens. I mean, she's a good lady. But we don't have the dynamism. We don't have the force out there of somebody that can really bring people together. And we lost eight years of organization because when Bobby Kahn was executor or director of the Democratic Party of Georgia, what he did was not organize those house districts and those house seats out there; all he did was try to organize against Sonny Perdue. So we lost house seats. We lost senator's seat. We didn't have any organization out there, and we had no funds out there. So we had to get the funding together, needed to get the organization together, and I think we needed to come up with a dynamic leader. If Roy Barnes is elected governor in the next year, I think the Democratic Party would be well on its way to getting its house back in order.

SHORT: It's been said that the republicans defeat the democrats in Georgia because they have what they call a better bench, which means that they train their candidates, they carefully select their candidates.

HOUCK: Well, do you think John Linder is a good bench?

SHORT: I can't pass judgment.

HOUCK: But do you think that Dr. Price is a good bench?

SHORT: I can't pass -- you know, I'm like you in that Miller-Young race and that Bond-John Lewis, I plead -- I'm what Marvin Griffith would call a "tweensy."

HOUCK: I don't think they've got a good bench; I think that what they have been having is they've -- with Ralph Reed and others -- you know, Ralph Reed lost his election here.

SHORT: He did, yes.

HOUCK: That philosophy, okay, that was originated back under Richard Nixon back over there from our old friend Lee Atwater in South Carolina has really ruled the south for the last 40 years.

And I think what Lyndon Johnson said to Richard Russell was correct, that after he came out and voted for the Voting Rights Act and voted for the Civil Rights bill of '64 and '65, he told Richard Russell we've lost the next 50 years of democrats. But that 50 years is almost up.

SHORT: Exactly, exactly. Tom, you're certainly an interesting gentleman. I've enjoyed talking with you. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about?

HOUCK: No. I think that James is hungry and that Harold over there looks like he needs to eat something.

Look, I would like to say that I hope that whatever happens in the election in Atlanta this year, that this city continues to grow and prosper, and I think it will. I think that, you know, the talk of having a white woman elected mayor of Atlanta is a possibility. I don't put that aside. I think that we've come a long way though from 1973 to 2009. And if there is a white mayor this time in Atlanta, which would turn the clock of history either back or forward, depending on what your viewpoint would be, I think that it would not be the end all of the progressive aspects of this city. I think that even if Lisa Borders or Kasim Reed gets elected, that it's time for the changing of the guard at city hall, so to speak. And I think that no matter who's elected, that's what you have to look at. You have to look at a new Atlanta. 100,000 folks have moved here in the last five years. That's a lot of people to come into this town. Atlanta has a lot of new young blood. We need to tap into that.

SHORT: Thank you, Tom Houck.

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