

Remembering James Groppi

Joey Ski (January 22, 2008)



Activist James Groppi (1930-1985) marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in the struggle for freedom.

This morning on the radio I caught [Max Roach's drum improvisation](#) [2] to Martin Luther King's now famed 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Years of (s)hallow tributes featuring truncated quotes from the finale can not detract from [King's powerful oratory](#) [3], which like the demonstration itself, helped "to dramatize a shameful condition." The phrase "the fierce urgency of Now" remains a powerful rallying cry in our troubled times.



On this day that the nation reflects on King's contributions/struggles and ponders the promise of America's freedoms, albeit some what reluctantly, all too often awkwardly, and unfortunately in the reign of Baby Bush hypercritically, I couldn't help but think of James Groppi's contribution to the civil rights movement.

James Groppi (1930-1985) was one of twelve children born in Milwaukee to Italian immigrants from Lucca. Ordained in 1959, Father Groppi served St. Boniface Church, a predominately African-American parish in inner city Milwaukee. He was instrumental in dramatizing segregation in housing and the public schools in that city. He participated in the 1963 March on Washington, the Selma-Montgomery March in 1965, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference voter registration project. In his capacity as NAACP advisor, Groppi organized an all black male group called the "Milwaukee Commandos" that helped quell violence during local marches and mounted a lengthy demonstration for fair housing in the city.

In the book *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*, religious scholar James McGreevy wrote that Groppi "became one of the most recognized figures in the civil rights movement" (1998, **202**). **Dr. King wrote that Groppi was able to** "be militant and powerful without destroying life or property" and that he succeeded in finding "a middle ground between riots and sentimental and timid supplications for justice" (Ibid.).

In her essay, "Father James Groppi (1930-1985): The Militant Humility of a Civil Rights Activist," literary scholar Jackie DiSalvo notes that "Groppi has not been the focus of any larger study" despite the recognition he received in his time (2003, 229). Her essay in the important collection *The Lost World of Italian-American Radicalism*, edited by Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer, looks, in part, at Groppi's Italian-American background and his thirst for social justice. DiSalvo's quotes Groppi: "The Italian was in pretty bad shape [when his father immigrated around 1913]. But nothing as far as the black man is concerned. . . . An Italian is white, and that's everything. . . . Some of the worst bigots in this country are Italians who had gone through terrible suffering in their past" (235).

On this day when we examine anew how to, in Dr. King's words, "hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope," I pay tribute to James Groppi.

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