

BOBBIE LEE, Da Mayor of Fifth Ward: The Black Invisible Social Construct

By Aaron P. Goffney



Artist Lucas Gray, son of the Da Organiser director Michael Gray, designed and created this animated version of Bobbie Lee, Da Mayor of Fifth Ward. Photo courtesy of Lucas Gray.

“I ain’t no ordinary nigger; I’m only talking to you because of Joshua. I don’t just let anyone in my house, but any friend of Joshua is a friend of mine.”¹

You could have heard a pin drop on plush carpet. The mood turned quiet; he had my undivided attention. Joshua Sutton, a dear friend of mine, introduced me to a warrior, an organizer, and now friend, Bobbie Lee, Da Mayor of Fifth Ward. As I sat with Bobbie Lee, I immediately felt his energy. His passion for war and history steamed my interest. I knew this man had something to say. Upon our introduction, we shook hands, he asked me to state a little bit about myself. I told him that I am a single father majoring in political science and history. He then handed me *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu and told me that no community organizer or great warrior succeeded without reading this book.

With a deep voice and a commanding tone, Lee formally introduced himself, “My name is Robert E. Lee III; I was born in Jasper, Texas. My mother was born in Jasper County and my father Henderson County.” He spoke on the controversy of his name, Robert E. Lee, saying that his father named him purposely after the Confederate General. “My name was both a gift and a curse,” he said. Lee explained that he grew fond of General Lee and had great admiration for his horse Traveler that carried the general through the entire Civil War.

Located near the intersection of Lyons Avenue and Jensen Drive and adjacent to Crawford Elementary School, “The Fruits of the Fifth” mural welcomes visitors to the ward and features twenty-one individuals either from Fifth Ward or strongly associated with it. Reginald Adams from the Museum of Cultural Arts Houston directed Phillis Wheatley High students in building the mural in 2006.

Photo by Patricia Pando.



Robert E. Lee III later became Bobbie Lee. His parents moved to the Fifth Ward community for work after World War II. His father fought in the war but never mentioned anything about it. The young lad only gathered information about the war through his father's friends. "The war changed my father's life – returning home he introduced me to the Quran in 1947." Lee's father came full circle with a vengeance in his heart like most soldiers during this time subjected to oppression. "Many black soldiers who returned from the war were ready to confront the injustices of black people." After all, many had served in North Africa and fought in the Battle of the Bulge for the sake of freedom. Lee's father was an officer in the 761st under General Patton in World War II.

Raised in the Black Underworld at his parents' bar and restaurant, Lee's Congo Bar and Grill, Bobbie Lee recalled his father being a hustler refusing to have his wife work in a white woman's kitchen. No one talks about the Black Underworld. It served as an economic system and a justice system that provided protective services against violence. It also boosted the confidence of progressive movements seeking to better black urban society. Funding the likes of the NAACP and the Urban League as well as overseeing gambling, the numbers racket, and "female sex merchants," the Underworld played a dominant role in the communities' basic needs. "Preachers didn't have no money, teachers didn't have no money, funding came from the black gangsters — through gambling, bootlegging and female prostitution." He went on to mention, "police didn't care about a black rapist in urban neighborhoods — justice came from the invisible social construct."

The Black invisible social construct refers to a societal dynamic that serves multiple purposes. When police failed to pursue criminals, certain community members in the neighborhood took it upon themselves to dispense justice. Bobbie Lee also applied the term to the various mentors who influenced great pioneers.

The Black Underworld did not agree with integration. The middle class aspiring to move out could destroy the black communities, thus eliminating the economic growth of Fifth Ward and other areas. Many great historic businesses grew up in the segregated Fifth Ward; the Lyons, De Luxe,

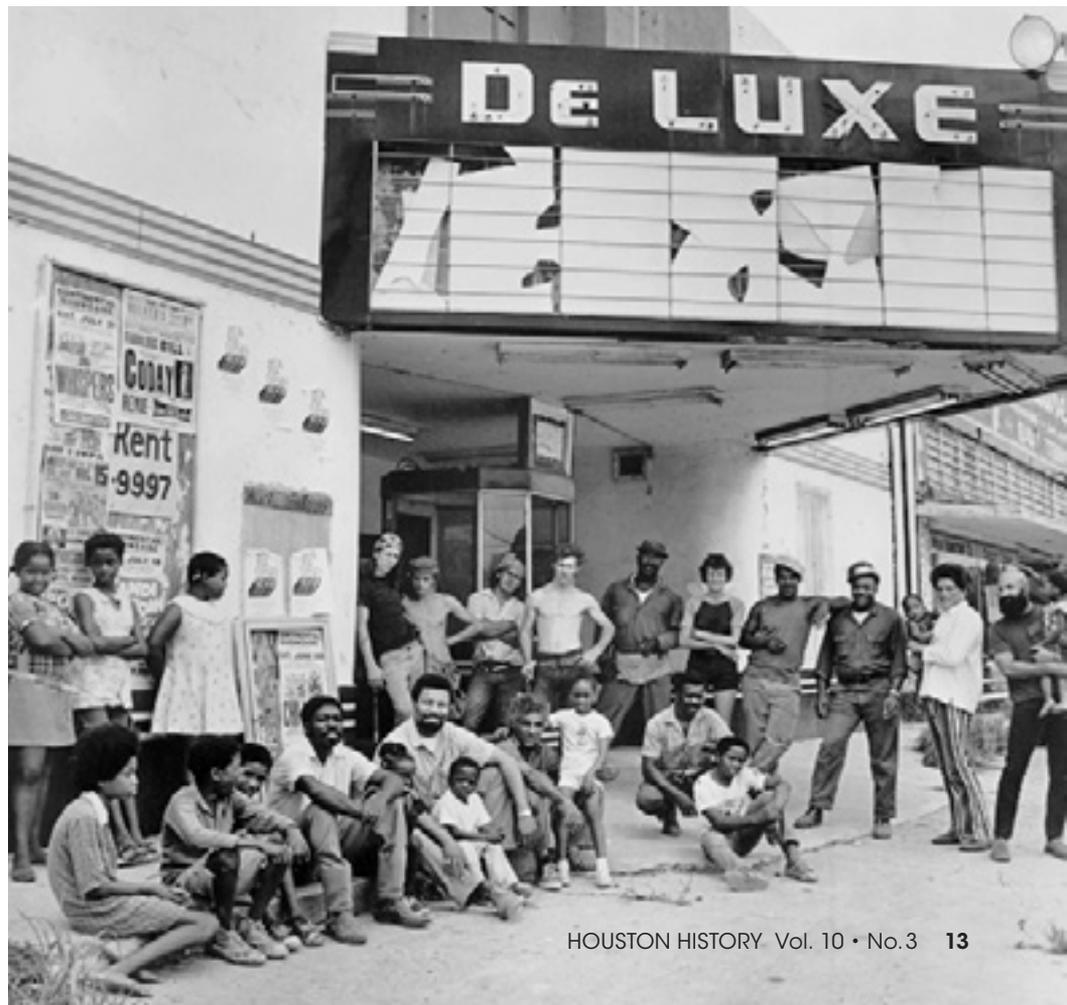
Community volunteers and Menil staff joined community coordinator Mickey Leland (second from the right) in converting the abandoned De Luxe Theater into an art oasis in 1971.

Photo courtesy of the Menil Archives, Menil Collection, Houston.

Roxy, and Justin's theaters drew packed crowds on Saturdays with kids while their parents shopped. Lee called this a circular distribution of income because the white merchants did not want the businesses of blacks. "We had an economic base because the white folks didn't want our money." Graduates of Prairie View, Tuskegee, and Huston-Tilliston opened other businesses, including tailoring shops, nursery schools, and restaurants. He added, "All of the great minds were forced together during segregation."

In 1958 and 1959, massive police raids took place in Houston's Third and Fifth Wards and in Galveston and Dallas. Police officers searched for gambling, numbers racketeering, and prostitution after realizing the amount of money being handled in these communities. Lee's father later fled Houston because he feared being caught; he spent the remainder of his life in New York. Growing up in the family business as the oldest child, Lee was exposed to more than the average nine-year-old running the streets of Fifth Ward.

One night, when Bobbie Lee was about eighteen years old and working at Lee's Congo Bar and Grill, he encountered a "disrespectful regular." Upset at the language that the man used in front of his mother, Lee dragged the man from his seat and physically persuaded the patron to take a different attitude. He believed that his mother was going to praise him as her hero, but instead she took him to the back room and fired him. She said, "Junior, everything that we have, everything we own, our food, our clothes, home, cars, comes from those





Congressman Mickey Leland, seated, with his Chief-of-Staff Rodney Ellis.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Congress, Wikimedia commons.

people out there, the customers. Now junior, you fired - it wouldn't sound right that Selma Lee son is jumping on the customers."

When the two worked together in the back room, Lee's father implored his son to be a strong black man and never settle. Though his father may not have always shown him a proper way to go about achieving this notion, it was his mother who gave him the positive influence to follow his father's ideals. From those words grew a different man who sought to improve his life not only for himself but also for others in his circle.

Lee battled with his role in the streets because of his influences as a child growing up in the Underworld. He praised his mother for showing him better paths in life, bringing out a better side of Lee that easily could have been lost. He knew he had to change his ways and also encouraged his friends to take another route, urging them to strategize and organize in their neighborhoods and abroad. Many young males stray down a narrow path of crime not realizing the greatness they have to offer the world. Recognizing loved ones who helped deter him as a misguided child, Lee admits that if it was not for his mother, he could have ended up completely in the Underworld. But it was up to Lee to make the change. This is the catalyst that prompted him to make a difference in the Fifth Ward community.

During Bobbie Lee's high school days at Phillis Wheatley, he ran with his younger brother El Franco Lee, Mickey Leland, and Karl Hampton—his rat pack brothers—strategizing in the fight for the rights of African Americans at the height of racial injustice. I was surprised to learn that Lee's friendship with Leland began in their early childhood years.

The two met at Acton Elementary, by a crosswalk near Leland's route going home. Lee described how they met, "When Mickey was a little youngster, he looked white, light skin with grey eyes. I and a boy were crossing guards, and every morning the Broussard brothers would chase him. Every morning he'll be running! So one day

I figured I'd stop it!" He added that throughout his life, Mickey had a calm attitude and never fought. "I snatched one of the Broussard boys and slung them down, I loved to fight because I was raised around night clubs. I walked Mickey home, met his mother and we stayed friends for the remainder of his life."

During our conversation about Mickey Leland, I could hear the passion in Lee's voice as he detailed the attributes that Leland brought to the table. Lee explained that Leland was a leader and possessed those qualities early in life, "Mickey never smoked, never drank, he was a great athlete; he ran track, went both ways on the football field, and had great leadership qualities - Mickey was a wonderful human being."

Bobbie Lee helped introduce Leland, who became the representative for the Texas 18th Congressional district and later the area's U.S. Congressman, and El Franco Lee, who serves as Precinct One Harris County commissioner, to politics. In all-night meetings, he taught them how to organize Rainbow Coalitions in the community. Bobbie Lee believed strongly that all poor races shared a parallel of inequity. He believed that regardless of one's skin color, coming together in numbers served as a better strategy for resistance by people who share the same oppression. Lee pointed out, "It was real easy to organize around racism, real easy to organize around hate, because everyone has an oppressor. Racism is a satanic politic, because we are not born to hate. We are not born a racist. We are born in an act of love. There is no who's who in heaven for a racist."

During this era, Lee became interested in track and developed a passion for the high jump. Participating in integrated track meets required tough skin to endure the taunting of white critics who refused to accept the presence of a young black man regardless of his talent. "They gave us hell; all we heard was 'nigga, nigga, nigga.' I and another guy by the name of Darryl Dotson were the only black guys from Phillis Wheatley at this time to run in any integrated track meets." He adds, "I remember having to change in my coach's car." Surprisingly, Lee's favorite high jumper, who he considered a hero, was a communist from the USSR by the name of Valeriy Brumel. Despite the challenges at Wheatley, Lee earned a track scholarship to Southern University where he broke records among his peers.

Though he enjoyed participating in sports, Lee applauded musicians for their cerebral thinking and the connections they made to struggle for social, racial, and economic inequality of blacks. Just as athletes such as Muhammad Ali and Jim Brown were activists, the musicians, poets, and writers gained respect and popularity for their talent and outspokenness. During this era, musicians performed at night clubs in Fifth Ward and played for upper-middle-class whites, but they remained ostracized in many ways. Lee remembered, "When artist[s] like Count Basie and Duke Ellington came to Houston, they couldn't live in them white hotels; they had to sleep in the black community."

Ending his track career at Southern, Bobbie Lee was

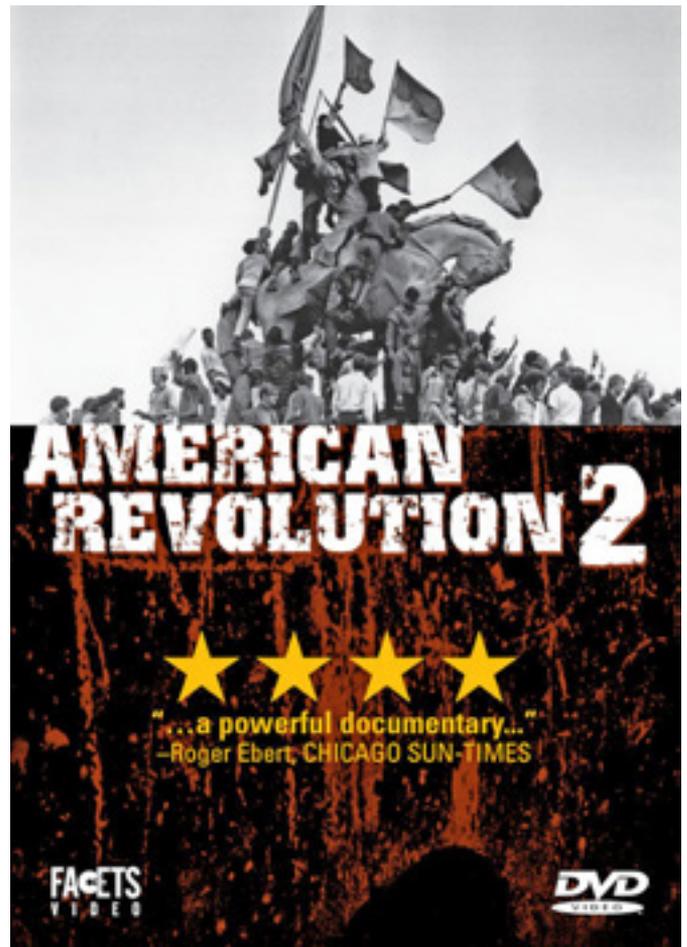
accepted to Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). VISTA was created as part of the War on Poverty to prevent and reduce poverty across the United States. Working in the handicapped division allowed Lee to train in archery, baseball, and track and field for the blind. “When I got to the school in San Francisco, I’ve never seen so many handicapped kids in my life man, it changed my whole life.” Bobbie Lee later moved to Chicago after being promoted to a sister branch for the domestic Peace Corps, located in the South Side where the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican gang, controlled the territory. Bobbie Lee interacted with the gangs at the YMCA where members rented rooms as they became vacant. Coming from an Underworld background, Lee successfully reached out to them in a positive way because they respected him. “I had an instinct because I was raised on the water front of the Ship Channel at Lee’s Congo Bar and Grill, I didn’t play marbles as a kid.” Bobbie Lee knew of gang activities like robbing and “slanging dope.” He served to keep them out of trouble by embracing their friendship. Lee reminded me in the interview that he is “non-short of ordinary” and was true to encouraging the youth to find other alternatives than the Underworld.

In 1968, Bobbie Lee’s cousin, Black Panther Bobbie Seale, introduced him to the Panther movement. Taking his aggressive attitude to the streets, Lee soon showcased his ability to organize during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Michael Gray, a film producer from Chicago, discussed Chicago’s South Side neighborhood. “I was upstairs in the office working when my counterpart came in and told me that the police were violently beating residents in the streets. I couldn’t believe it. Sure as a day, I went downstairs with my camera to see white and Spanish folks subjected to police brutality.”²²

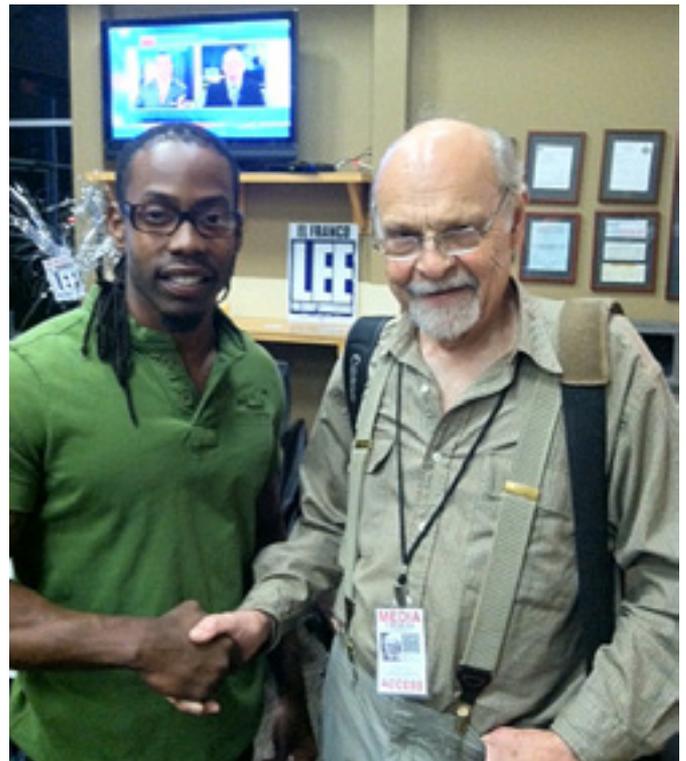
With many people protesting for various reasons, such as the Vietnam War, civil rights, economic inequities, and police brutality, violence broke out across Chicago. Invited to a neighborhood meeting by the Young Lords and the Young Patriots (some former members of the Ku Klux Klan) to help strategize for the welfare of the community, Lee found himself starting a Rainbow Coalition. This group helped to push the issue of economic inequity in Chicago without provoking the police to violence. Community organizing strategies helped spread the message and demands for the residents. With the Black Panther movement becoming involved in helping other races, Bobbie Lee took advantage and gathered a coalition of great minds. Michael Gray’s film, the *American Revolution 2*, documents Lee’s involvement.

Bobbie Lee’s efforts in Chicago were short lived, however. After the police gunned down Black Panther leader Fred Hampton during a police raid of his home, the original Black Panther Party soon dismantled. Shortly after, the words of Lee’s mother and father influenced him to come home. He remembered them saying, “You can protest about the pig all day in Chicago, but it means nothing until you return home and work in these communities.”

Upon Lee’s return to Fifth Ward, he learned that the



Cover of director/producer Michael Gray’s *American Revolution 2* featuring Bobbie Lee in the segment on *The Rainbow Coalition*. Photo courtesy of Michael Gray.



Aaron P. Goffney and director Michael Gray at El Franco Lee’s postelection victory party, 2012. Photo courtesy of Aaron P. Goffney.



Ebony pencil sketch of People's Party II gathered in front of their headquarters on Dowling Street on July 26, 1970. Their guns represent their right to bear arms and to protect themselves. On the same day, they were involved in a shootout with the Houston Police Department killing People's Party member Karl Hampton.
Drawing by Aaron P. Goffney

Houston police shot and killed his friend Karl Hampton (no relation to Fred Hampton) at the Black People's Party II office on Dowling Street across from Emancipation Park in July 1970. "I warned Karl not to open his office on Dowling Street because it'll wolf the police, but he didn't listen." Lee discussed the racism that came with police brutality and the crimes of whites against blacks that mostly went unpunished. Karl Hampton's story is told by authors who research Houston police hate crimes and I was overwhelmed to be sitting with a close friend of Karl's after reading about him.

Over two decades later, Ku Klux Klan members tied Bobbie Lee's cousin, James Byrd to the back of a pick-up truck and dragged him to his death in his hometown of Jasper, Texas, in 1998. During this trying moment in his life, Lee went to Jasper armed with a rifle to guard his family's homes alongside other relatives. Realizing events such as these were hitting close to home, Lee began to take another approach, focusing on educating communities about issues through his artistry.

Lee dedicated the rest of his life to creating pictorial-artistic-political satire collages of various subject matters. He writes blunt opinions in captions about the ills of racism and its ability to still exist in today's society. His artwork displays the deaths of his comrades, the fallen soldiers of the Black Panther Party, but also promotes the growth in the black community by showcasing the likes of President Barack Obama for his groundbreaking accomplishments. Da Mayor of Fifth Ward was rewarded

with Texas Senate Resolution #2 for the Fifth Ward Working Class for his devotion and art work that uplift the community and create awareness.

Bobbie Lee started the Houston Trailblazer Association with friend Patricia Smith Prather. They highlighted the great native black leaders that passed through Houston such as Hiram Wilson. An excerpt of his story can be found at the Kitty King Powell Library in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Bobbie Lee influenced his brother at a young age to enter politics, and El Franco Lee was sworn into office in 1979 as the first African American to serve as Fifth Ward's Precinct One Harris County commissioner. He recently won reelection in 2012 by soaring numbers.



Lee continues to inspire the youth, the elderly, and the sick even though he suffers from multiple sclerosis.

Photo by and courtesy of Michael Gray.

Lee turned seventy on December 16, 2012, and suffers from multiple sclerosis, but he continues to inspire the youth, elderly, and those dying of diseases such as cancer and AIDS. Bobbie Lee, Da Mayor of Fifth Ward, helped guide great minds, touched a lot of hearts, and encouraged many of his peers to do better. Black leaders and politicians who stand on the main stage were developed through the invisible social construct. Many of our leaders today have a story of someone close to them who played a significant role in their life, someone like Bobbie Lee who helped educate behind the scenes. Though few people outside of the black community know of Lee's contributions, his unselfish acts should motivate the minds of all young people to grab life by the steering wheel and direct future paths regardless of their past.

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