Drawing *March*: A Conversation with Nate Powell

by Michael Ray Taylor

Nate Powell is a graphic novelist perhaps best known as a coauthor of March*, Congressman's John Lewis's 2013 memoir of the Civil Rights movement, from Selma to the March on Washington in 1963. He attended the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York and is also known for his bestselling graphic novels* Any Empire*,* Swallow Me Whole*, and* The Silence of Our Friends*.* Book Two *of the projected* March *trilogy, which Powell coauthored with Lewis and Andrew Aydin, was published in 2015;* Book Three *is scheduled to be published in August. The following conversation took place September 23, 2015, as journalist Michael Ray Taylor drove Powell to his childhood home for a visit with his parents, shortly after the three* March *coauthors had given a presentation on the books and the civil rights movement at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia.*

Michael Ray Taylor: What was it like growing up as a comics fan in Little Rock?

Nate Powell: Well, my family moved back to North Little Rock, Arkansas, from Alabama when my dad retired from the Air Force in '88, so by that point I was well steeped in comics, mostly *Transformers*, *Sargent Rock* but I also got exposed to the *The 'Nam*. Stuff like Mike Golden, Joe Cougar started popping up on my screen. I also had a little bit of exposure to alternative, idependent comics through Scott McCloud's *Destroy!!* One-shot in about 1986 and then I started getting into *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* right on the cusp, immediately before the launch of the toy line and everything. So I was fortunate enough to have this little bit of a window into this grainy, black and white alternative comics. But I really didn't understand what they were. So, moving back to 1988, Collector's Edition, which was Michael Tierney's shop, had a wonderful old, dusty comic book shop smell and feel. My best friend Mike Lierly was into comics and was already drawing comics by that point, so he and I would go on a weekly basis. It was the only shop in the area besides an obscure one called "Pie-Eyed" in southwest Litte Rock that I went to twice.

Michael Teirney moved his shop into a much better location just as comics really started peaking with the speculation boom in the early '90s. Tierney had a late '70s, early '80s self-published series called *Wild Stars*, and he had a soft spot for independent local self-publishers. Mike Lierly and I started working on comics together in the 1990s, superhero comics which turned into guns and boobs, dystopic superhero comics. We were obviously Marvel kids, but we had enough exposure through *The Dark Knight Returns* and through Frank Miller's work on Wolverine and Bill Sienkewicz's work on Elektra. We had these windows into something that gave us the awareness that there were further steps we could take outward from the point we were coming from. Also exposure to Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* and to Masamune Shirow's *Appleseed*, *Black Magic*, and *Dominion* really broadened our worldview. In 1992 we began publishing a series called *D.O.A.* and Michael Teirney was generous enough to give us shelf space at a time seven inches of shelf space was really coming at a premium. Money was just flying in and out of the comics world in 1992.

MT: Were these still photocopied, stapled?

NP: Oh yeah. Most of the print runs for *D.O.A.* were between sixty and a hundred copies. They were done at traditional size. It was sort of a no-brainer to fold things in half and have a smaller 5½" by 8½" comic but we read standard-size comics and we were gonna make a standard size comic. We would basically just use one of our parents' photocopiers at their office or sneak in to use the copier at the church we attended. At first it would break or jam and we would just quickly back out of the room. But by age fourteen, I'd gotten pretty good at photocopier repair and even up to five years ago, going to Kinko's or something, typically people will ask if I work there, if I can help them fix the machine. So I became a Xerox repairman in my teens. Yeah, so as I grew I was also getting involved, much more involved, with Little Rock's underground punk scene, playing in bands.

MT: What do you play?

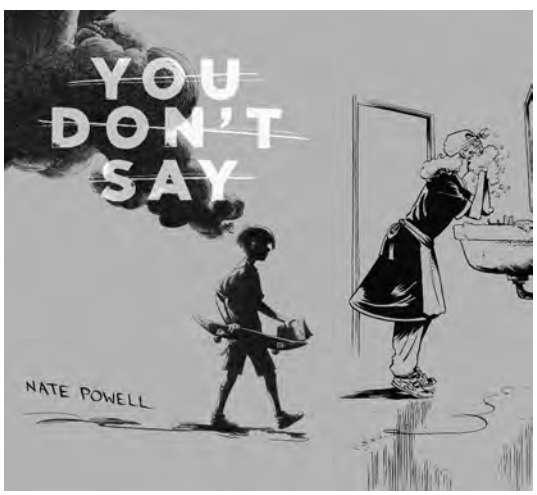
NP: I play bass adequately. In a couple of bands I played bass and yelled and sang. I guess my most well-known band was called Soophie Nun Squad. We started in 1992 in Little Rock. We played in clubs in 2006. Toured.

MT: I've heard of you.

NP: Oh! Awesome! Ok, so we were becoming more involved with punk and playing in bands but also I was getting, I started making zines and I was still making comics, but not only did I not put together that the zine and the comic didn't need to be a separate thing, but I still didn't really have much exposure to comics that weren't superhero in narrative. So, I wanted to make comics and I was less interested in superheroes, but I didn't know what to do with that. In Little Rock, it's not like we were the starting point of this movement, but we started to publish the most issues. Between '92 and '94 there was a small dedicated little circle of self-publishing comic book artists. There's Grant Westerlin, Chris Raymond, and, uh, Jeff Jackson, Jayson Fentless, Importantly, Le Ron McAdoo—also an M.C. and radio DJ in town. His comic *Sly* was my favorite—the superhero was Flavor. And yeah, he was the first, he was the first pro whose table I ever saw at a convention. Little Rock would have a comic book convention in the basement of the La Quinta Inn on 630 and University. I went to two of those and would buy *Judge Dredd* comics for a dollar. It was in one room, maybe twenty by twenty, and you paid one dollar to get in. The last one I attended I saw Le Ron McAdoo selling self-published, photocopied comics. I thought, "Wow! You can do that?" It never occurred to me I should call someone to ask how I could do that. It would take another eight years before I actually wound up getting a table of my own anywhere in the ocuntry, much less Little Rock. But that was sort of an awakening point that I can take my identity as a creator and actually exist as a professional, even though I'm also just photocopying them.

MT: Were you tempted to try to submit things to publishers?

NP: Oh, I did my share of submissions. I have, yeah, I did Daredevil submissions, X-Men



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submissions. I drew entire X-Men issues but then I knew the Marvel guidelines. They just wanted two to four pages so. I still have my Marvel rejection letters. I've kept them very carefully saved. They're, they're so cute. Yet, it's important to note something that I now take for granted. It was a world before the internet, a world in which now, in 2015, I don't understand how my band found people's houses on tour without Google Maps and Mapquest, just by looking at atlas maps in a car. How do you find someone's address? I can't really remember how you get there. I guess you just call them to get very exact directions.

MT: You get lost a lot.

NP: You get lost a lot. So, in a world that's entirely pre-internet, there's really no way for an Arkansas teenaged comic book artist to become aware of technical process, of, quote, "professional tools and methods." Early on we had no idea that people didn't usually draw at size. We knew comics were printed 7" by 10", so we would take like this Wolverine *Bloodlust* comic, because it was a prestige edition and it was thicker. We would draw around it for the border of every comic. Comics were printed on news print, so we drew on newsprint and we probably had four-hundred pages of comics on these horribly decaying dollar pads of sketch paper.

MT: So that's basically like putting ink on a sponge.

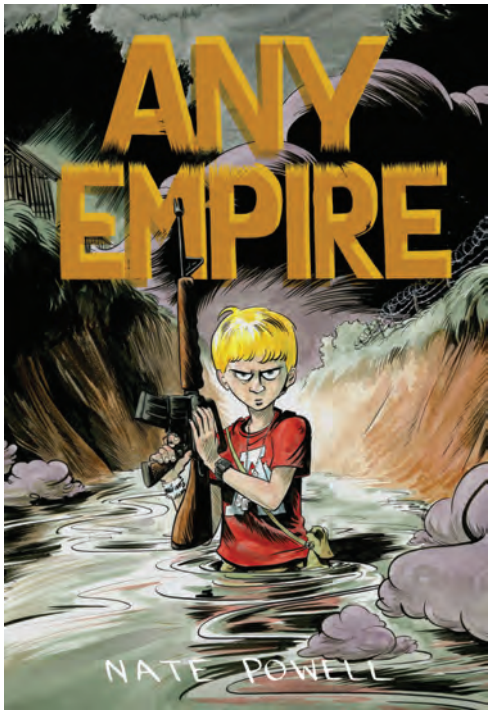
NP: Oh yeah, you bet. A real watershed moment for me was for Christmas 1991 my parents gave me *Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics*, which had come out recently, a nice coffee table book of Marvel comics. In the back was a step-by-step process section that showed Mark Texeira doing a complete page of *Ghost Rider*. It featured a photograph going from script and marking up the script to thumbnails, pencils, letters, inks, hand colors by whoever was coloring it, color separation, etc. That changed my life, seeing the division of labor. There were a couple of photos that showed Mark at his desk working, and I became obsessed with breaking down every little thing that was on his desk or in his room. Figuring out, what on Earth—how are you using that brush to make beautiful lines? What is the toothbrush effect? Nib pens—I'd never seen lettering, I'd never seen lettering nibs. I didn't even know they existed. I would look at them in Hobby Lobby, it was just a blank, I couldn't understand them. It was my first exposure to see what Bristol board was. That was really my starting point in terms of upping my game and in recognizing things that had next steps to take in terms of professionalism.

MT: They're all in Bristol boards now?

NP: Oh yeah, I still do. Actually in 1992 I did. Almost immediately after that I got my first nib pens and brushes and I did horribly at them. There's some pages of *D.O.A.* number 3, the third comic we put out, where I attempted to use nib on everything. I might've inked the whole thing with the nib. It was just awful. It wasn't until I went to school at SVA in New York city that I spent intensive time finally understanding how to correctly use those tools. To this day those are my traditional tools. I use a Hunt 102 Crowquill, even though I don't really like the quality anymore,and I use a Winsor Newton Number 2 Kolinsky sable brush for my ink. Yeah, the classics.

MT: Have you made the transition at all to creating digitally?

NP: No. I think this is another good point that ties into the vacuum before the internet when we had no information readily available. I graduated high school in '96 and that was the last year at North Little Rock High School that computers were more readily available in Art and Journalism departments for work. There was no instruction. We had to use Superpaint and we used another program that wasn't even



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Photoshop one, a pre-Photoshop program that we would use to format lettering font so they would form into shape. There was no computer instruction at all. When I went to SVA my cartooning class was the very last class before students were required to take a computer art class of some kind, even for coloring or lettering. I slipped right between the cracks there, and then at this point, or even for the last decade, who has time? I wish, I really like flat application of tones and colors. There's a part of me that wishes I had the time for an immersive education in how to do that. Every once in a while, I'd get best friends to give me a crash course in certain things in Photoshop, but I lose most of the information so I scan and clean up and assemble my files in Photoshop but everything else is purely visible.

MT: But you have a pretty sophisticated draft by the time you transfer it to digital?

NP: Oh yeah, it's done. I just need to clean up, sterilize. Even when I have to do somehting with multiple layers, I just still Lightbox it with tracing paper, and I just keep it mighty twentieth century.

MT: In your youth you were immersed in the world of the superhero and the traditional comic. What was your awakening to other forms, to nonfiction, real life, character development, and so on?

NP: In the early stages one of the ways I tried to break out of the superhero mold was reading *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens in 9th grade. The characters fascinated me, but more than anything else, I think that was the first time I saw a classic plot structure and progression for what it was. I was like "Oh!" I had a wonderful english teacher at North Little Rock High School, Jeff Huddleston, "Mr. Hudd," who was also a comic book artist, and that was important. He still draws comics for the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* and he was always a strong, beloved teacher. Everybody would buy him a pair of Air Jordans at the end of every year. He was like the cool teacher, where, when you watch the '70s *Romeo and Juliette* movie after reading *Romeo and Juliette*, he'd go to the bathroom during the weird scene where there's a boob for a split second and he'd go, "Oh, I'm back. Sorry if I missed anything." He was very encouraging. He actually came to my first signing when I was a ninth- or tenth-grader. He imparted a lot about narrative structure and character development in a way that allowed me to try to bring it to the comic page. I even did a superhero comic that I tried to make based on the general themes of *Great Expectations* in terms of the life switch-a-roo and having to deal with repercussions around 1993. I never published it.

I became aware of repetition the first time with Michael Golden's work in the *The 'Nam* back in the '80s, but in terms of panel-to-panel transitions and repetitions, what really changed things for me came in 1997. I went a year of school in DC, at Normal College, but I trans-

ferred at the end to SVA. So I read a comic called *The Long Walk Nowhere* by North Carolina/Chicago cartoonist, musician, theatre writer Al Burian—and since I've done several short story collaborations with him. He was born in 1971, so it was a short comic about him as a thirteen-year-old metal head lighting flyers on a telephone pole on fire, and his neighbors beating each other up, and walking the streets of his home town, Chapel Hill. Then it's sixteen years later, and he's still living in his hometown, walking the streets, passing the same telephone poles. At the end of the story, it's the end of the night and sun is rising and he returns home and makes coffee. That's what happens. It's a reflection upon this existence he feels stuck in. This was my first real exposure to the fact that comics could be about anything and immediately after that I read Chester Brown's *I Never Liked You*, which did that in spades. But also Chester Brown draws each panel individually on a separate sheet of paper. He'll cut them out and arrange them on a bigger sheet of paper to actually get his page flow correct or the way he likes it. In reading *I Never Liked You* there were uneven, joggy panel layouts across the page that activated the space in a way I'd never seen before.

MT: You'd been living on a grid up until then?

NP: Well, I was using a traditional Marvel/DC, '60s, '70s infuenced kind of dynamism—still based on a six-panel grid. But my stuff was, it was definitely more an Arthur-Adams-to-Jim-Lee continuum. That was a major influence, with Arthur Adams still my all time favorite cartoonist. But you had these dense black backgrounds with the panels in the gutters in the margins for *I Never Liked You*, and there were splash page, single panel pages, where the panel is really small and the . . . virtually the entire rest of the page was black. I'd never seen that before. It was a revelation. I think *I Never Liked You* might be the most single influential comic for me in terms of completely changing the way I think of a page. It made me understand the way that time can stop for a reader and the way a writer has control over that. Also, I read Eric Drooger's *Flood* at the same time, maybe even within the same week. It's a wordless graphic novel that's concrete and political but it spans the entirety of human existence in terms of struggle, survivial, the beauty of the world around us—the way colonialism, imperialism, and human ambition can threaten that. It's also done in a style that I think might actually be a Linotype or wood cut comic—or maybe it's just done with ink and made to look that way. Those were the three books that changed my life. Shortly after that, in the years following, I found *Hicksville* by Dillon Horracks, which I think is the best graphic novel ever made. I started getting into some of the "non-anthologies" which had Jordan Crane, Brian Ralph, and a bunch of other writers around the turn of the of the millenium. I feel like the next major game chager for me was the first obscure graphic novel by Dash Shaw, *Love*

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Eats Brains. His way of incorporating lettering and words as an active visual element in that book specifically was something I'd never really seen before.

MT: That reminds me of some interesting things you said last night about your own evolution of lettering and words in *March*. How did that come about?

NP: I grew up reading Chris Claremont's X-Men books. There was occasionally a scene in which a telepathic character, almost always female, would find herself in a situation in which she could no longer hold the telepathic perceptions back and so she's getting flooded and overwhelmed with all of the thoughts of the people around her. I remember being really impressed by these scenes because the lettering was physically overwhelming the character in the panel and there were some crushing the character from above. Even at the time I noted that it was still kind of weird that with these overlapping thought bubbles that were coming in, everything was still perfectly legible. Everything was at exactly the same size, done in the house lettering style. Everything was very "up to Marvel code." I didn't really have the vocabulary for it yet, but they were missing one step of this to really drive the point home.

The outlet I found for that came with my book *Swallow Me Whole*. When Ruth's character really started to develop and crystalize I realized the book was already pattern-heavy but also had a lot to do with the processing of the sound sensory information. There was a moment about twenty-five pages in where Ruth walks into her high school cafeteria to go find her step-brother. I wanted her to be overwhelmed by the cacophony of the sound of hundreds of kids eating lunch, with all these conversations going on, and I immediately went back to the telepath scenes. Except that was my opportunity to have these word bubbles actually compete with each other, which meant that the background noise should be illegible. So, I started lettering things instead of with my normal pen just with my Crowquill getting scratchier, getting partially legible, and eventually just scribbling. Just scribbling shit in the word balloons. Because on another level it didn't matter so far in the back. There's a visual shorthand which we all accept, even people who aren't into comics. Everyone knows how we visually represent in line art, visual atmospheric perspective. We know that when things are further away they get hazy and lines get thinner. We get less detail. I was applying the same principle to sound in a visual sense. It was that simple.

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What was interesting is that I would actually get some negative feedback, whether it was in Amazon comments or people would have questions about it. People were like "Man, my only thing was this book was printed too small and there's a lot of lettering that I can't even read. I got a headache just trying to read it." And I was like, "Oh, I've done my job." It does affect the amount of time spent on a panel, so there's a consideration there. I had a couple

more books where I was working on the applications of that, trying to activate the auditory component of comics visually and I think I was successful at that. I got nominated for the Eisner for best lettering for *Swallow Me Whole*. I was very honored by that and felt like that might be the only thing that I recognize that I may have contributed a little bit to the comics form, trying to pursue this activation of lettering a little bit more. A lot of that was thanks to being inspired by Dash Shaw, Alex Toth, Will Eisner, and also my contemporaries like Lille Carre. *The Lagoon* came out at the same time and was also doing a lot of the same stuff with music. When I was working on *The Silence of Our Friends*, there were some protest songs and I had a chance to not only weave those through panels but use it as a controlling device, a semiotic device to lead a reader through the page.

March really just brought that to the next level. You have the mob scenes. With *March* as a first-person historical document, we have a lot of hoops we need to jump through, especially with it being in so many schools and libraries. We have to conform to certain standards so it will be accepted as a historical work. We have to know where our limitations are or we're gonna lose the credibility that we require just for people to be like, "This is a historical account of the movement." So, there are instances where if we can't find concrete evidence that someone said something at a certain time, we can't take the risk. So, there's also this tangential value to this illegible lettering and this wildly varied expressionistic application of yelling and chanting and everything, because frankly it kind of covers us a little bit. The reader gets it. We all get tired of seeing the "N" word in *March* pretty quickly. It's part of the point, this the whole story is an unflinching view, and this is Congressman Lewis bringing the story to life. This is his mandate. You've got the "N" word, it's going to be in there, But in terms of my applying it to just random people filling the streets of Tennessee or Alabama, I don't feel that it's my place to interject that word anywhere where it's not a direct quote. That's where the partially legible and illegible lettering also serve to benefit.

MT: Describe how this applies to the lettering in the first moment where the Bible is quoted in *March*.

NP: I had a great question last night. The only person who's ever really brought up this panel. There's a page maybe twenty pages into *March Book One*, and it's the first time that John Lewis, as a five-year-old, is really struck by a passage from the Bible. I guess he started reading when he was four. At five he got a bible. He's reading the book of Mark regarding "the Lamb of God who shall taketh away the sins of the world." It was my first time to encounter a bible passage in *March*, and so just a couple of pages later as John Lewis is preaching to chickens, the Bible verses begin to happen in cursive script. So, they are very flourished, they're legible, and I'm trying to express that they are not his words. They are coming from something that, from his perspective, is *beyond*. But in this initial moment he is struck so profoundly as a five-year-old by this line, and he doesn't even exactly know why at the time. I have the words in negative filling up his silhouetted body as he is sitting on the porch reading the Bible. Basically what I did was I used my Lightbox and I traced that outline of John Lewis's body. Then I took a dull pencil and furiously scratched the lettering onto a separate sheet of paper and then in Photoshop I made a negative and more or less just pasted it inside his body. I wanted to have a direct way to show the script, show the text literally embodying him, and to show him consuming those words, essentially eating this perceived spirit of the divine in a way that never happens again in *March*. It's a singular moment which led him on a path from an ambition as a preacher, as a minister, which then led him through the social gospel to become an activist.

MT: There are also some key moments in *March* where information comes across a radio

and the lettering is distinctive—how did you come up with that?

NP: In general I have about seven different go-to lettering formats. I saw Gilbert Hernandez talk at a small press expo in '08 or '09. I almost never go to panels, but I sat in on this one and he's so prolific from his *Love and Rockets* work and all these offshoots from his nature narrative. He basically talked about what to do with these moments that are super text heavy—what are your considerations for how it affects the layout? This really deeply affected me that he's like, "Well, you know some of your pages just aren't gonna be as good as the other pages." So, if I have to have kind of a busted visual every once in a while and phone it in so that I can squeeze in a bunch of texts for one panel to move on, he's like, "That's fine, it's no big deal. Not every page is gonna be my greatest." I realized I should go to a particular set of lettering styles and reach out as I'm drawing or lettering when necessary, but try not to make too big of a deal about it.

So when I was working on *March*, as soon as the radio started coming in I asked, "Okay, what's this going to be?" I already used a classic sort of electrical transmission lettering balloon outline for the radio, and it comes out sort of like a water spout, coming out from the radio, whether it's in a home or a car or whatever. I use my nib pen. I thought, well, I'll just do this with a classic, just heavy-handed Crowquill lettering. I'll let it stay a little dirty to indicate the crackly nature of AM radio in the 1940s in rural Alabama—especially a transmission that's coming from Montgomery. It's one that looks good enough but also it doesn't look that professional or that good. Objectively it's some of my worst lettering in the book. But that's kind of the point. I want it to affect you. The 1980s *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and the dirtiness of Eric Talbot and Kevin Eastman's collaborations visually has always had me sort of gravitating whenever possible to allowing . . .

MT: . . . an homage to your own underground work and roots?

NP: Yes. I still love using a toothbrush whenever possible. So, whenever grit really is necessary I try to make sure my splatters remain on the page and I did that with the crackly radio. We were able to get quotations often from when a news bulletin came in as the Freedom Rides continued and so on. But in the original version of the script for *Book One*, before we'd really, like, caught up to speed with each other, those elements of the script didn't really have the meat of the broadcast. When Dr. King first comes over the radio and fifteen-year-old John Lewis hears him preaching, I think the caption by them said, "And that was Dr. Martin Luther King, junior." I was like, "Well, that's great, but there's no way that that's going to be all that he's hearing on the radio." So most of the secondary dialogue that comes before and after—I'm making up, and so part of the lettering is covering myself. It's partially legible, but it comes out of an illegible state. The meat of it is there, so the rest doesn't matter. I'm being imaginative, but trying not to be too assuming historically, and I'm using the remainder of it to accentuate the low fidelity.

MT: You mentioned coming up to speed in the collaborative process. One of the things that struck me about *March* is the great variation from two-page spreads with a tiny figure to pages with lots of panels but very differently placed. As the artist on the project how hard was it to sell those ideas because I'm betting they were not in the script originally?

NP: Oh no, no. There might've been. There were a couple of splash pages, but the first book I was much more heavy-handed with my choices, my flow, my pacing, but by *Book Two* we had a very even collaborative process. I think Andrew and his script writing was predicting certain things that I would do, so it was nice because there were a lot fewer adjustments I'd have to do, but *Book One*, I think in some ways, was easier at establishing what I was going

to be doing with the saga in a visual and narrative sense. I saw pretty quickly on that most of the panels were five to six panels and there'd be descriptive caption, there'd be an action and a bit of dialogue. It'd be the same kind of repetition. Maybe my most important responsibility at the time was breaking that up as much as possible. I think this is where there was more conceptual compromise—compromise not being a bad word. I think that Andrew's initial "final version" of the script had *March* owing a pretty great layout debt to that 1957 Martin Luther King, Montgomery comic. I saw it as being very Silver Age, very much relying on that six-panel grid. I was into that, but it's just not how I make comics.

So, there was part of me that was seeing that in my mind's eye and cherishing it, but then I was like "Okay, well here's the *March* I'm going to do." It became a lot of fun to recognize the moments that needed three quarters of a page or just the silhouette of the farm house at night with the caption ". . . and I was a preacher," after he's done preaching to the chickens. When the phone rings at the end of *March Book One* to announce that the movie house has been bombed, in response to trying to defend the SNCC activists' support, initially that was the first panel of the following page. But that was before we recognized, before it had crystalized, that the phone ringing was the visual motif of *March*. So, I was like "Oh, the phone against black just ringing with the date." I didn't even want the date there. On the page prior we have Congressman Lewis and Andrew and they're leaving the office headed to the inauguration. They're going in different directions for different reasons but then as they leave, I think I might've actually interjected, maybe it was Andrew, injected the phone ringing from inside the office. We realized that by adding a couple of spot illustrations of different phones ringing that we had established a rhythm which was going to dictate the rest of the saga. I think that's when Andrew really started to step up his game in seeing that I was going to pull out these moments and isolate them. So, a lot of the stuff like that in *Book Two* were by Andrew's choosing and I think they were good choices.

MT: You were learning each other's processes?

NP: Oh yes, definitely. I love flipping through *Book Two* after I flip through *Book One*. To me it's a very different book. It shows a kind of collaborative maturity. But, *Book Two* was one of those rare moments where when the book was finished we were just completely happy with it. We did well. This is good. We all did our best. Let's print it. That certainly doesn't happen a lot. I think it was a testament to our constant contact and collaboration and compromise.

MT: One thing I wanted to ask you about that I think I saw even more in *Book One* than in *Book Two*, but I can't swear to it because I didn't get a ruler and check, but it appeared to me that there are no two panels printed at exactly the same size anywhere. There was always slight variation. Was that intentional?

NP: The major difference in dealing with content between *One* and *Two* was that for John Lewis and the student movement, at the end of *Book One* their struggle is over a relatively minor concession for which they're asking: something they are owed; something they are deserved, which is just to be able to get a hamburger like anybody else. The physical violence that escalates compared to *Book Two* is quite minor, so it's terrifying in *Book One*. One of the main points in *Book Two* was that we had to show the way that these minor, almost insignificant, gains in the grand scheme of things were met by such overblown opposition. Physical opposition, legislative opposition. As the action increases throughout *Book Two* the response is equally exponential. I think the layout of the pages started to become much more dynamic, with many more diagonal angles. This is when I started falling back into being more influenced by Masamune Shirow and a couple

of ’80s and early ’90s Japanese cartoons. I started embracing diagonals. The only spot in *Book Two*, I think, where there is any kind of grid or panel of quality might be as you’re approaching a TV broadcast, I might start to set up as a six-panel grid, just so I can have like a TV standard size. But yes, I think you’re right.

MT: It’s also very cinematic in terms of low shots, medium shots, long shots, the use of lightness and darkness and asymetrical balance. It’s incredibly complex visually. I couldn’t help but think this is intentional.

NP: It certainly was. What’s interesting is that the older I get—I’m thirty-seven now—I feel like my generation was like a 2003 to 2008 crew of incoming indy cartoonists. I really feel like I became a blip on the radar at the end of that in 2008. But since then, I think that SPX, the Small Press Expo in the DC area, and TCAF, the Toronto Comics Arts Festival, have become the two primary showcases of up and coming talent in independent comics. Peers of mine who I think are absolutely brilliant, like the Michael DeForge-Sam Alden class following mine, have almost transitioned to a new sub-generation of cartoonists. I feel like the turnover is very quick. As a thirty-seven-year-old I can see more acutely each year the debt that my comics’ storytelling owes to being a child of the ’70s and ’80s and to reading Marvel comics. It’s funny because I still do think there are choices that I’m making that are daring. That’s what makes comics fun and exciting. I feel that I’m pushing things in a lot of different directions, but I’m also increasingly aware of the way that my comics’ pages—not just in *March*, but, on my own book cover and in working on this book *Too Dead* with Dan Jensen—owe a debt to superhero comics from the 1980s. I feel like that makes a market distinction, especially as I’m reading, consuming and loving Sam Alden’s comics or whatever.

It’s the kind of thing with incoming, independent cartoonists where I wonder where the line of perceived relevance is. I live in southern Indiana, I have two kids, and my life is in a different place. I feel like one of the most important thing for cartoonists is, as you go to comic shows and keep putting out work, you remain relevant. You keep meeting newer, younger people who are dedicated to doing things. As I fall out of that being a part of my regular life of a cartoonist, I definitely have anxiety about being less relevant, or being perceived as less relevant. This is funny in that *March* is such a huge comic, but to me it’s about this community of creators. Punk is also a very youth oriented subculture, and it does kind of twist external politics, but there’s also a way in which people grow out of punk. There’s a lot of baggage, because it’s twenty-year-olds or twenty-two-year-olds dictating an ethos that everyone can move past. There is a degree of independent comics that I think is the same, but it is self-imposed.

MT: But at the same time you have developed an artistic identity, and the more an audience embraces it, you also have to maintain that identity in some sense.

NP: Certainly. Actually this is kind of interesting, because we weren’t anticipating that *March* would be three or four books and that it would take five years to complete. It was originally one volume of about two-hundred and fifty pages when I got the script. Now, one of the things I’m actually grappling with as I’m starting to ink on *Book Three* is that my style has changed since the beginning of *Book One*. I know that there’s a small consideration that I have, and I think that maybe my editor might have had slightly larger consideration for consistency of form and style within *March*. So there is a line, there is a discussion, insuring there’s room for growth, but recognizing a relative need for consistency or questioning that. I’ve been having a lot of fun inking *Book Three*. There’s a high drama first scene, recounting the absolutely horrible bombing of 16th street Baptist church in Birmingham. In a visual sense it’s very dynamic. It’s very exciting, which is a bad word, but literally speaking it’s a

very exciting narrative to do. I've kind of set myself free into the experience not caring about that consistency of form. I'm doing everything with brush, letting the brushes run out and get scratchy. I'm drawing things in the way that I think they should be looking when no one's looking at my comics. it's very liberating because I think I've self-imposed a lot of that need for consistency over a five-year-stretch of time on myself. It's nice because I'm recognizing that I've imposed the limitations, perhaps, on my growth that don't necessarily need to be there. So, it's exciting to recognize that now is the time to continue growing and pushing visually even as I'm doing *March: Book Three* so that in the long run you can read the collected edition and watch an evolution in form in addition to the evolution of the story.

MT: One thing I saw from *March: Book One* to *Two*, which I suspect will be true as the series continues, is that it's not just advancing and becoming more complex visually, but in the storytelling also. Is that because as a team you've become more comfortable working together?

NP: It is comfort, but you would not believe the demand of research and reference. I do my own but Andrew and Leigh Walton, the editor, have to be so meticulous. Leigh would be digging up stuff a week before we went to print with *Book Two*. We found out that there was a historical record that had the exact identities of the initial thirteen Freedom Riders wrong in most accounts. There was one person usually credited as being there who wasn't, and then there's one person that was usually omitted. So I had this X-Men line up-page about three pages into *Book Two* that was like, "These are the Freedom Riders!" We actually had to do swap out with Freedom Riders on that page. That is the primary thing that we're grappling with, inclusion of content. There's really very little exclusion of content, but a lot of it, I think in a narrative sense, as the movement grows throughout *Book Two*, those are the first times we step out of a situation in which John Lewis was there. The bombing of the bus was his bus, but he wasn't there because he was gone for exactly two days on the Freedom Rides. Then at the Birmingham children's march, he wasn't there. He was an essential inclusion. We had discussions as to whether those things could be included from John Lewis's account, but at the same time it's his account of the movement. He is admitting that he is not there and pressing to focus more and more on people besides himself. This is a great move, it's a very responsible move, but that also exponentially increases the amount of checking we need to do. I think that's where eighty percent of their work goes on the production end.

MT: How often were you creating panels based on a specific document or photograph?

NP: I tried to actually do that as little as possible. You can just find the photo if you want to look at the photo. I mean, I would use them for reference all the time, but that was my basic, boil-it-down-to-the-simplest-possible-response approach I would take: you want to look at the picture you go look at the picture. But, there was a moment in *Book Two* with a Cairo, Illinois, protest, a very famous SNCC poster, one of the most famous images in the movement in the '60s that has John Lewis and some other protestors kneeling to pray and it was used for the poster. The caption was "Come let us build a new world together." Danny Lyon was there snapping the picture that became the poster, and it was this moment of tranquility before this redneck with a pickup truck tries to run over everybody. So, I realized this is a moment where the flow of time, the passage of time, has to be different. Also, John Lewis is actually speaking about a poster made of a photograph taken by Danny Lyon. Danny is featured taking the picture right there, so that's when I changed my production style and I actually copied the photograph as a finished penciling rendering.

MT: There are moments where you stop

time.

NP: Right. So, another important thing about the discipline of nonviolence from Congressman Lewis's perspective is it's about dramatizing the movement, but it doesn't work unless not only are you applying your personal discipline, but you make sure as many people see that you are doing nothing and are getting the shit beaten out of you for it. So as *Book Two* begins, it really becomes about these photographers and cameramen and journalists. Not just taking pictures, but they're getting beaten up and hospitalized, too, and everyone is seeing that. There's a stand-in movement at the beginning of *Book Two* where they're protesting segregated movie theaters. People are throwing eggs and spitting, kicking people as police are beating people. Photographers are beginning to take pictures and publish them, so in *March* the narrative is increasingly punctuated by the camera flashes. I'm trying to lend this structure of repetition to the cameramen, basically flipping the camera back on them. In those moments where the photograph itself is relevant for being published, that's where I like to illustrate the photograph, but those are really the only ones.

MT: What's your next solo project?

NP: It's called *Covered*. It also takes place in Arkansas as do my other solo works, which sort of revolve around this nexus town of Wormwood that exists. *Covered* takes place in 1979 Ozarks. A remote hippie community that was established ten years earlier. Basically, whenever the Snickers bars run out some of the hippies leave. Families move back into town and give up on the dream, but this is 1979 with the people who are remaining raising their families. They're just a couple of miles uphill from a town is called Haden Station. Downhill is essentially a Eureka Springs called Hallelujah Springs. It's a book that's about intimacy, secrecy and privacy—about the need for these, between these interlocking concepts. So, the main character has a six-year-old boy, and she's having an affair with a married man. She's good friends with this woman who she's cheating on with this affair, essentially. Her son and the married couple's son are also best friends. There's a tiny little cave at the edge of town which is where almost everyone does their secret or sacred or most private things. Her little rendezvous happen there. Kids discover it and embed it with a magical quality. She brings a crystal orb in there. The kids also discover this, and it's embedded with this sacred quality, and they're exploring caves. I will have you know, cave exploration is a big part of this one. But the long and the short of it is one of the kids disappears, and some things happen which fill the main character with a sense of guilt that she bears some responsibility for this kid's disappearing. But she's also trying to cover her tracks in terms of her affair, and each step she takes to bury that makes her more guilty in a real way, as opposed to a perceived way, in terms of this kid's fate. I started working on this in its earliest form six years ago, so it changed a lot. It's become much more about parenthood in the last couple of years. I've had to delay the book for a long time because of the demands of *March*. It's actually been a very good thing. So, it is much more about what changes a person as a parent, and also about the way the layers of life fold away from each other through parenthood, your priorities shifting to revealing the world around you to a child. I'm just very, very excited about it.

MT: When will it be published?

NP: I'm hoping 2018 but maybe 2019. It's all written. It's all thumb-nailed. I have sixty pages penciled, but I do not have time to draw it until I at least finish *Book Three*. ▲▼▲