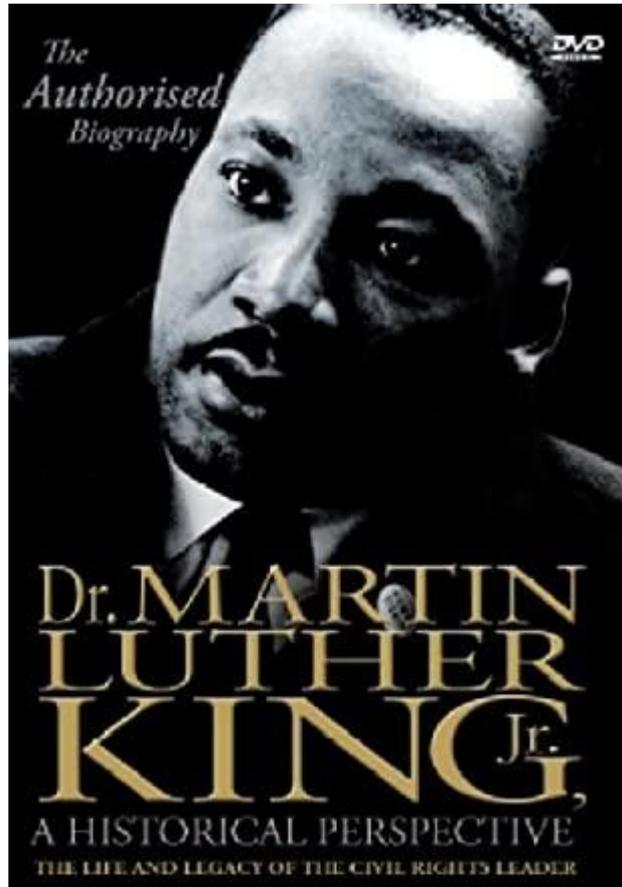


GUEST DVD REVIEW:

**Dr Martin Luther King: A Historical Perspective [DVD] [1994 / 2005]
Contributors: Thomas Friedman, Arthur Burghardt**



This is a sympathetically interpretive account of the role Dr Martin Luther King played in the struggle for civil rights for blacks in America in the late 1950s and 1960s. It takes a chronological rather than a thematic approach, selecting interesting footage from the considerable television archive to elucidate this complex period of American social history, and bears witness to the power of television as an instrument of change. Without television, it is doubtful this struggle would have achieved the necessary legislative victories in the time frame in which they occurred. Television is what brought the struggle to the masses both domestically and internationally, and to the considerable embarrassment of those in places of high office. It was thus a democratising force of the kind the internet was later to become, empowering people 'from the bottom up'

by bringing their message of struggle into people's living rooms both graphically and authentically, as the horrific scenes of state repression were played out for all to see. Friedman and Burghardt recognise this; and they display a considerable talent for fusing the visual images with their analytical narrative, this being a major strength of the DVD.

Often, a person's charisma does not transfer well onto the screen; it is why opera singers, for example, have been known to wince at TV recordings of their performances, which, to them, seem unable to capture the live essence of the moment, even when the programme is being transmitted live. I am sure there is a dimension to charisma for which there is no substitute for being there (in the moment) – in other words, for experiencing the full emotional force of the performance in the flesh. No doubt, this was the case as regards several of the speeches delivered by Dr King in those heady days of the late 1950s and early-to-mid 1960s. This was a time when sections of white America were confronted with their day of reckoning for the inequalities that existed for blacks; in part, a legacy of the slavery stain and its economic, social, political and cultural after effects. Yet, I have found myself moved to tears on more than one occasion as I have watched King's speeches on screen: the controlled passion, the flawless articulation, the clever use of body language as a way of heightening the drama in the delivery (unapologetically drawing on his gospel preaching techniques), the sheer oratorical mastery that was at his disposal, the sense that he was born for that role and no other. It was therefore somewhat disappointing to find that (presumably owing to copyright laws) there are several occasions in this DVD where the narrator has had to resort to reading out sections of King's speeches; and, unsurprisingly, with far less expressive flare. A further gripe is that too little time is spent analysing the seminal 'I Have a Dream' speech, delivered by King in Washington in 1963 to such national and international acclaim. Overall, though, this DVD is a well-crafted, historically accurate account of the events as they unfold, and one that is well worth revisiting at a time when, via the Black Lives Matter movement, we have seen how the struggle for equality for blacks in America is nowhere near resolved. Moreover, it seems to me that King's passionate commitment to non-violent protest still has much relevance, not least for an America that has seen far too much street violence over the last few years, in part stirred up by Trump and his followers, many of whom openly display racist sympathies.

I was one of those who had thought that, with the election of Barack Obama as president back in 2008 and his re-election in 2012, this was, in some way, indicative of the progress that has been made since King's death, on advancing the cause of black equality in America; today, I am far less sure of the extent of that progress.

Dr Joe Forde