



# Fannie Lou Hamer as a Martyr

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# What is a Christian Martyr?

(Summary from 25 February 2025 Presentation by Katy Dickinson)

- Martyr comes from μάρτυς, Greek for *witness* or *testimony*.
- Traditional Christian martyrs were killed for their faith or testimony for Jesus, usually in circumstances of government persecution. Christian martyrs today died because they selflessly went into harm's way to help others, or were killed because of their faith. Martyrs are celebrated as role models to inspire faithful action.
- Jesus says in the Gospel of John 15:12-13, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."
- The first Christian martyr was Stephen (Acts 7) who was stoned to death c.34 CE for criticizing and defying religious authorities.
- In modern times, those killed for political or social stands are commonly called martyrs (whether they were religious or not). Three examples:
  - Alexei Navalny (died 2024), Russian dissident in a culture that glorifies defiant sacrifice.
  - Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (died 1968), American religious and civil rights leader, is honored by several church denominations as a martyr.
  - Queer martyrs like Matthew Shephard (died 1998) and Harvey Milk (died 1978) who were killed for their LGBTQ identity.

## What is a Martyr in Islam?

- David Cook writes, “Definitions of martyrdom in either Sunny or Shi’i Islam are difficult to come by” (Hatina and Litvak, p.78).
- Cook continues, “The paradigmatic martyr for Sunnis has been Hamza, the Prophet Muhammed’s uncle, who was killed in the Battle of Uhud (625)” (p.80).
- Cook writes of the centrality of martyrdom for Shi’is of Husayn at Karbala’ in 680, “as his sacrifice is seen as paradigmatic and redemptive...it is also an actual sin that must be expiated from generation to generation” (pp.84-85).
- In modern times, Cook writes, “The martyr must face some trial or temptation to be considered worthy of the battlefield...The martyr is a hero; he boldly confronts the enemy and usually takes a number of them with him when he dies” (pp.81-82).
- Abdel Hashemi writes that in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, “for ibn Mubarak, the default definition of ‘martyr’ is one who is killed on the battlefield” (p.138).

## Timing of Death in Islamic Martyrdom

- Robert Gleave discusses in different rituals and qualifications for martyrs. He says in some traditions it matters whether someone is killed during battle or dies afterwards from their wounds (p.56).
- Abdel Hashemi writes that over time, “the definition of martyrdom expanded to cover many kinds of death other than dying on the battlefield.” (p. 124) He continues, “later *hadith* compilers widened the definition of martyrdom simply as dying in the path of God...According to some later traditions, becoming a martyr does not even require dying” (pp.142-143).
- David Cook describes categories of martyrs, including a problematic group, “people who did not actually die in battle or whose killers are unknown, and who are conventionally called *shahids* (martyrs), simply because of the prestige of the title” (p.90).

# About Fannie Lou Hamer

- Fannie Lou Hamer 1917-1977 was a powerful and eloquent speaker for Black civil rights, particularly voting rights. She was a deeply religious Baptist Christian and singing hymns was part of her public activism.
- Hamer was the youngest of 20 children and started picking cotton at age 6. She left school at age 12 and was a sharecropper for 18 years. Hamer lost her job and house when she tried to register to vote in racist, Jim Crow era Mississippi. She was forcibly sterilized without consent by a white doctor as part of a program to reduce the Black population. Hamer called this a “Mississippi appendectomy.”
- While registering Black voters in Mississippi in 1963, Hamer was arrested and severely beaten by local law enforcement. Hamer died at age 59 of breast cancer, hypertension, and the aftereffects of that jailhouse beating.
- Reflecting on his Nobel Peace Prize, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., thanked the “great people,” like the “Fannie Lou Hamers” whose “discipline, wise restraint, and majestic courage has led them down a nonviolent course in seeking to establish a reign of justice and a rule of love across this nation of ours.”
- 48 years after her death, in 2025 President Joe Biden awarded Hamer the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Nation's highest civilian honor.

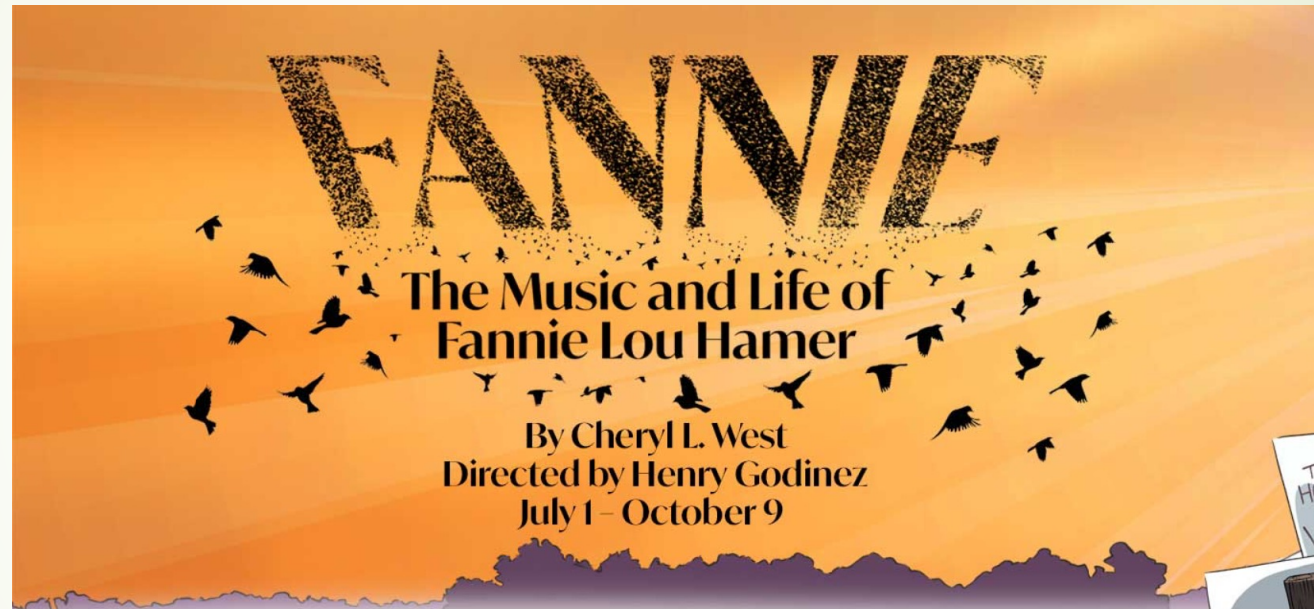
# Images of Fannie Lou Hamer

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13 May 2025, Katy Dickinson







2021 Oregon Shakespeare Festival – Summer House Program  
*Fannie* was commissioned by Goodman Theatre and Seattle Rep.  
<https://www.osfashland.org/en/house-program/Fannie.aspx>

# Fannie Lou Hamer's America

THE OFFICIAL WEBSITE OF THE AWARD-WINNING FILM AND THE FANNIE LOU HAMER EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER



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<https://www.fannielouhamersamerica.com>



# Fannie Lou Hamer's Biography



- Kate Clifford Larson, *Walk With Me: A Biography of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- “With Hamer, the things that happened to her — she faced the world by confronting that trauma, and that violence, without hate. And the only way she could do that was through her faith, and talking to God and saying: Where are you, what is happening here, give me the strength to carry this weight and to move forward.” - Larson

## How Is Fannie Lou Hamer a Martyr?

- Over many years, Fannie Lou Hamer selflessly went into harm's way to help others. Her lifelong inspiration and support was her Baptist Christian faith. She died in the path of God.
- Hamer's biographer, historian Kate Clifford Larson, was quoted, "She used the Bible in many different ways. She used it to shame her white oppressors who claimed also to be Christians, following the path of Christ."
- Fannie Lou Hamer was celebrated and continues to be remembered as one of the great leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, a role model who inspires faithful action.
- Two of the causes of Hamer's early death were aftereffects from her savage 1963 jailhouse beating, and hypertension.
- The American Heart Association says hypertension among Black people is among the highest globally and is tied to adverse social determinants of health. This may include the long-term effects of living in a culture of systemic racism.

# How Fannie Lou Hamer Inspires Me

- Growing up in San Francisco during the Civil Rights Movement, I was very aware of progressive leaders including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Cesar Chavez.
- However, I first heard of Fannie Lou Hamer in a 2019 class at Pacific School of Religion called “Transformative Leadership: Prophets, Heretics, and Social Entrepreneurs” by Dr. Dorsey Blake.
- I was inspired by how Fannie Lou Hamer dedicated everything she had, her voice, intelligence, energy, faith, organizing skills, and courage to changing our country for the better. She was born with profound disadvantages in education and social-economic privilege and she let none of that stop her.
- The murder in 1964 of three civil rights workers by the Ku Klux Klan led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act. Hamer said, “when they died there they didn’t just die for me, but they died for you because your freedom is shackled in chains to mine. And until I am free, you are not free either” (Raboteau, 190).

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