

Live from death row

Review of *Live From Death Row*

Author: Mumia Abu-Jamal

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They've been here a long time, living yet not living, dead yet not dead.

Wilbert Rideau, "Conversations With The Dead" in *Life Sentences: Rage and Survival Behind Bars*

The poet and the king must never become too friendly because the poet's job is to bear to the people unglad tidings the king would just as soon nobody hears.

Chinua Achebe, Nigerian novelist

Live From Death Row is a collection of political essays written by journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal, who has been living on death row since his conviction in 1982. Abu-Jamal's "call it as you see it" essays are commentaries on prison life, the American justice system and the racism that is most clearly seen by looking at the faces behind bars.

Engaging in conversation about politics, race, and the still present danger of using one's voice to criticize the status quo, Abu-Jamal takes the reader into the "valley of the shadow of death". Abu-Jamal gives a not often exposed view of life: life, as it happens, from Huntingdon Prison's death row in south-central Pennsylvania. Abu-Jamal's loud, clear voice rings as a reminder of those who have been banished. Abu-Jamal tells it like it is, on a level that too few students of criminal justice confront outright. Too often the *structural* elements of our justice system are examined, statistically manipulated, postulated and regurgitated into various forms. Too rarely are students of criminal justice examining what happens to the *people* who are the recipients of such policies and practices. The reader stands behind Abu-Jamal, looking out, rather than from the more comfortable stance of looking in. It's the paradox of living to die that Abu-Jamal wants readers to reconcile for themselves.

In three parts, "Life on death row", "Crime and punishment", and "Musings, memories, and prophecies", Abu-Jamal discusses the issues that define our system of justice. Not as managerial, policy, or academic issues, but as the direct effects of this 'particular institution' on the person.

The introduction by John Edgar Wideman, Rhodes Scholar, college professor, novelist, and author of *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), a book where he and his brother, a convicted felon, discuss their lives, [End page 42] begins to make the connections between "us" and "them", connections that are at the heart of Abu-Jamal's message. Confronting the "burden of our history" is essential to creating a future that will be different and better than our past. Wideman places the writings of Abu-Jamal in a historical context, connecting our definitions of criminal and deviant to slavery, political activists, and agitators who are all viewed as threatening to the status quo. Listening to Mumia Abu-Jamal's message is a difficult, yet historically important responsibility that any person concerned with justice needs to address. Continuously applying "quick fixes" to the social problems that plague our communities shows an unwillingness to learn from our history. Prison walls are "the walls we hide behind to deny and refuse the burden of our history" (p.xxxvii). "Prison walls are being proposed as a final solution. They symbolize our shortsightedness, our fear of the real problems caging us all. The pity is how blindly, enthusiastically, we applaud those who are constructing the walls dooming us" (p.xxx).

LIFE ON DEATH ROW.

The essays in part one cover many issues addressed by students of criminal justice: control, humiliation, isolation, violence in prisons, the politics of the judiciary and the blackness of death row. Abu-Jamal cites court cases, Camus, and journal articles, including his own published in a recent issue of the *Yale Law Journal*. He gives fairly recent statistics on who is on death row and more importantly, who is *not*.

Never searching for pity, Abu-Jamal occasionally uses humor to capture the paradox of this life alongside death. The journey begins with death row inmates hearing the bleak command, "Yard in!" The inmates on death row are allowed outside, into a pen, for two hours per day (the remaining 22 hours are spent in their cells). The command signals the end of fresh air and daylight for another 22 hours.

"Yard in! Shit, man, we just got out here!" The guards adopt a cajoling, rather than threatening attitude. 'C'mon fellas--yard in, yard in. Ya know we can't leave y'uns out here when it gits thunderin' and lightnin.' 'Oh, why not? Y'all 'fraid we gonna get ourself electrocuted?' a prisoner asks." The day's yard lasts barely ten minutes, "for fear that those condemned to death by the state may perish, instead, by fate" (p.4-5)

Rules and regulations are the norm on death row. Television, family visits, and regulations on hair length are among the tools used as a "psychic club to threaten those who dare resist the dehumanizing isolation of life on the row" (p.9). Television becomes an "umbilical cord, a psychological [End page 43] connection to the world they have lost" (p.9), it is the "privilege" that is taken away when the rules are broken. Television provides company and a distraction from an otherwise lifeless life. Resistance becomes too expensive when the price paid is losing the last hold on the outside.

Seemingly irrational and illogical (and on many occasions, humiliating) rules that define this climate of control are the norm for those on death row. Contact visits are not allowed. Visits are conducted in a closed room. The prisoner is handcuffed and never has the opportunity to touch his visitor, a partition of shatterproof glass serves as a wall inside the walls, yet strip searches before *and* after visits are the rule. "Once the prisoner is naked, the visiting room guard spits out a familiar cadence:

"Open yer mouth. Stick out your tongue. You wear any dentures? Lemme see both sides of your hands. Pull your foreskin back. Lift your sac. Turn around. Bend over. Spread your cheeks. Bottom of yer feet. Get dressed" (p.10).

The reader is introduced to many of Abu-Jamal's companions on death row. Among the group there's the former correctional officer, now death row convict; the 57 year old who is persistently drugged by prison officials; the "professional white dude" released after his conviction was overturned--twelve years later. Each individual is coping with a strange and painful existence of life on the row. The point of these introductions is never to excuse or negate whatever actions may have been committed by these individuals but rather to communicate their states of being. Readers may be surprised to find themselves identifying with the frustrations caused by a lack of control over one's life. Referring to the fine line between life on the "outside" and life on the "inside", Abu-Jamal illuminates factors other than behavior that may cause one to become enmeshed in the criminal justice system. He tells of the commonalities amongst "we the caged...and you the not-yet-caged" (p.62).

Guard violence is a familiar thread throughout the descriptions of life on the row. Abu-Jamal recalls several instances of abusive behavior, either through intimidation, threat, humiliation, and/or physical force. The frustrations spill over from inmate to guard and back again, the environment is intense and stagnant.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT.

What is a crime and who gets punished? Abu-Jamal candidly describes the political process of [End page 44] criminalization. Race matters. Acknowledging that African-Americans are not always innocent victims, he argues that one's position in our society determines the extent of involvement in the criminal justice system. Abu-Jamal uses statistics to make the case of disparate treatment of offenders. He argues that the color of death row, and the general prison population, is a result of "state actors, at all stages of the criminal justice system, including slating at the police station, arraignment at the judicial office, pretrial, trial, and sentencing stage before a court, treat African-American defendants with a special vengeance not experienced by white defendants" (p.93).

However, differences between black and white are not a prime focus of this book. Abu-Jamal does not discount the impacts of crime nor the reactive system of dealing with crime on white America. There is no need for mutual exclusivity, there's enough injustice, humiliation and intimidation to go around. In discussing the popularly covered, yet small fraction, of death row inmates who ask to be put to death, Abu-Jamal points out that once again, race matters. "Prisons have become blacker and blacker [since the 1960s] a reality that can be perceived only as threatening and fearful to the average white prisoner. ... For whites, prison is a mark of social expulsion in extremis, and an affirmation of one's outcast status. Blacks have a longer history of rejection from this society..." (p.123-4). For some, the only way out is death, and Abu-Jamal hypothesizes that rejection and fear influence whites' requests to die.

Impacts of current politics are felt behind the walls. The recent crime bill that "outlaws knowledge" by eliminating Pell Grants to prisoners, can only increase crime, according to Abu-Jamal. "How any member of Congress can, in good faith, reason that human ignorance fights crime or protects society is beyond comprehension" (p.129).

The "crack attack". Abu-Jamal considers the effects of drugs, particularly crack, on the Black community. Disintegration of families, increased incarceration, and increased unemployment are just a few of the results of "the spell of the `caine" (p.97). Who is responsible for this demise? Abu-Jamal makes clear that there is a larger philosophy guiding the possible outcomes of drugs in the Black community. Without subtlety, Abu-Jamal indicts the government for its role in creating such hysteria and destruction, naming it a War on Drugs. "There is a precedent for such a diabolical scheme in U.S. history. How many Native "American" communities and tribes were devastated by the European introduction of "fire water" (alcohol, rum, etc.)..." (p.98-9). Tying the past to the present and back again, Abu-Jamal takes clear aim at those who often appear to be too far out of range. [End page 45]

MUSINGS, MEMORIES AND PROPHECIES.

The last part of the book is about building bridges, making links, joining similar experiences to again point to the misrepresentation of separateness. Malcolm X, the Branch Dividians, Rodney King, Lani Guinier, Nelson Mandela and Mumia Abu-Jamal all have come under scrutiny for speaking out in support of "human rights of self-defense and a people's self determination, not for "civil rights," which as the Supreme Court has indeed shown, changes from day to day, case to case, administration to administration" (p.136). The problem is structural according to Abu-Jamal, its problems rooted in a racist, classist system.

Abu-Jamal argues police presence in Black communities has become more of a problem than a solution. Repeated incidents of abuse, directed at Black citizens particularly though not exclusively, is a thunderous warning of mounting tension. Sooner or later, it's going to come down. And who will fall the farthest? Abu-Jamal does not speculate. He is certain however, that the police are out of control.

Abu-Jamal's final message focuses on the responsibility of people, particularly Black people, to gather an understanding of the conditions they live in, in a way that makes connections. Shattering the myth of separateness and building the connections between people is the most powerful tool people have. "The people themselves must organize for their own defense, or it won't get done" (p.148). He refers to African-American youth specifically.

"Locked out of the legal means of material survival, looked down upon by predatory politicians and police, left with the least relevant educational opportunities, talked at with contempt and not talked to with love--is there any question why such youth are alienated?...This is not the lost generation...[T]hey are not so much lost as they are mislaid, discarded by this increasingly racist system that undermines their inherent worth. They are *all* potential revolutionaries, with the historical power to transform our dull realities. If they are lost, *find* them" (p.165).

Live From Death Row provides an opportunity to listen to those most affected by the criminal justice system. Making connections between those in prison and those who are not is crucial to influencing our approach toward the problems that haunt us. Its importance lies in the telling of the real consequences of our short-term, ineffective policies and practices that many academicians, politicians, practitioners and the public hold onto despite the overwhelming evidence of waste, both economically and psychologically. Mumia Abu-Jamal's message is clear: confront your fear, honestly examine the conditions we all live under and ACT. **[End page 46]**

NOTE: No references have been made thus far as to what Mumia Abu-Jamal was convicted of nor to the question "Why do we know who he is?". This reviewer has chosen not to delve into the details of the case, simply because it is not the direct focus of *Live From Death Row*. Mumia Abu-Jamal does not write an essay about his "innocence" or his "wrongful conviction". The afterword of this book is about the trial of Abu-Jamal. For information on the Abu-Jamal case, contact:

International Concerned Friends & Family
Of Mumia Abu-Jamal
P.O. Box 19709
Philadelphia, PA 19143
215-476-8812

Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Coalition
P.O. 650
New York, NY 10009
212-330-8029

Also, media articles from August 1995, particularly the week of August 13 are available. Mumia Abu-Jamal is currently at SCI Greene County, a new supermaximum prison which houses the vast majority of Pennsylvania's death row inmates. Abu-Jamal was scheduled to be put to death August 17, 1995 but due to national and international pressure calling for a new trial, was granted a temporary stay of execution.

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Naked Poison 2 (2002) Â». Live! From Death Row (1992). By rarelust | June 23, 2014 - 3:48 am | June 23, 2014 Thriller. Directed by: Patrick Sheane Duncan.Â But Dvorakâ€™s real intention is revealed when he takes Powers, her crew and two guards hostage, and demands that the television network broadcast an execution â€œ live. Preview. 897MB | 92:04mins | 640Ã—480 | avi <http://fboom.me/file/db48f06f67956/Liv92dth.rar> mirror <https://xx/u27xukXxKTW/Liv92dth.rar>. Live From Death Row (February 1996). "But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" â€œ1 Corinthians 15:35. No one can just drop in on Death Row Records CEO Marion "Suge" Knight Jr. without feeling the magnitude of his reputation. No one. On a cool Southern California evening, I arrive to see him at the Can-Am Building in Tarzana, a 30-minute drive north of Los Angeles. Live from Death Row, published in May 1995, is a memoir by Mumia Abu-Jamal, an American journalist and activist from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is known for having been convicted of the murder of a city police officer and sentenced to death in 1982. Abu-Jamal wrote this book while on death row. He has always maintained his innocence. Publishers Addison-Wesley paid Abu-Jamal a \$30,000 advance for the book.

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