



**Episode 61: August 21, 1971**

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**John “Yahya” Johnson:** I’m John “Yahya” Johnson, co-producer of the Ear Hustle podcast and the campaign coordinator for the Repeal California Three Strikes Law Coalition. The following episode of Ear Hustle includes strong language and mentions of violence and suicide. Discretion is advised.

[sound collage comes in featuring the sounds of metal doors clinking and abstract industrial sounds]

**Speaker 1:** One day I let a friend of mine read an article, and so he brought the article back... and, you know, I threw it on my bed and walked out to chow. And it just so happened that the tier officer went in my cell, did a cell search, and read the article. And on the front of the article, it had a picture of George, right, and when I was in chow somebody came and told me, “Hey, Ken, you got like 15 officers at your cell.” And when I walked back up to my cell, they cuffed me and put yellow tape on the outside of my cell and took me to administrative segregation.

**Nigel Poor:** In 2007 Kenneth Oliver was in prison at California Men’s Colony in San Luis Obispo. The article he left on his bed had a picture of George Jackson on its cover.

**Earlone Woods:** When George Jackson was incarcerated in California in the 1960s, he wrote the books *Blood In My Eye* and *Soledad Brother*. He died violently in San Quentin on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1971.

[ambient sounds from inside prison]

**Kenneth Oliver:** And so, I'm like, "What are you taking me administrative segregation for? I haven't done anything."

And he said, "Well, you know, you're not supposed to be having reading material like this."

And I said, "Reading material like what?"

He said, "Well, we saw this article and then we saw you had this book, *Soledad Brother* and *Blood In My Eye*. And, you know, what are you doing with it?"

I said, "I've had these books for ten years, ever since I've been in prison. Y'all let it through R&R, and I never knew there was a problem with it."

And he said, "Well, you know, we've been told to get rid of you."

"What do you mean get rid of me?"

And he said, "They want you to go to the SHU forever."

**Earlone Woods:** It wasn't forever, but Kenneth ended up spending over eight years in the security housing unit—the hole—because of George Jackson.

**Kenneth Oliver:** How are you scared of somebody who's been dead for 40, 50 years? I mean, George Jackson must have been the most powerful cat on earth for you 40-something years later to be so scared that somebody reads a paragraph that he wrote [Ear Hustle theme music comes in] that you willing to neutralize that person forever because you so scared that you might wake up the George Jackson in me.

**Nigel Poor:** Today on the show, 50 years after George Jackson's death at San Quentin, we pick up that question: What *was* and what still *is* so dangerous about George Jackson? I'm Nigel Poor.

**Earlone Woods:** And I'm Earlone Woods. And this is Ear Hustle from PRX's—

**Nigel Poor:** [interrupting Earlonne] —Wait, wait, wait! Oh sorry, Earlonne to interrupt you. [Ear Hustle theme fades out into silence] But before we do that, OK, this isn't just any Ear Hustle episode, right? [laughs]

**Earlonne Woods:** You right, Nyge. This is the first episode of Season— What season we in?

**Nigel Poor:** OK... five, six, seven... OK, Earlonne, you know me, I count on my fingers and I'm about to run out of them. Can you believe it? We are on Season 8 of Ear Hustle.

**Earlonne Woods:** Yep! And it's the fourth season since I got out of San Quentin.

**Nigel Poor:** I know. It's a real triumph. OK, let's get to this. [Ear Hustle theme songs comes in] I'm Nigel Poor.

**Earlonne Woods:** And I'm Earlonne Woods. This is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.

[music comes in]

**Nigel Poor:** E, do you remember when you first heard about George Jackson?

**Earlonne Woods:** Yes, I was in the Youth Authority. [Nigel affirms] [music fades out] And I read one of his books, but it seemed kind of academic to me at that time. [Nigel affirms] Like, way beyond my comprehension.

**Nigel Poor:** But still it was a book circulating in the Youth Authority? I mean, who gave it to you? And what made you think you wanted to read it in the first place?

**Earlonne Woods:** Well, I got the book from a dude named Poindexter.

**Nigel Poor:** [laughs] Oh my God, perfect name!

**Earlonne Woods:** Yeah, that was his handle! He was smart as hell, glasses and all. [Nigel affirms] And he recommended it, and he was like, "Man, this is something you want to read."

**Nigel Poor:** Right.

**Earlonne Woods:** What about you Nyge?

**Nigel Poor:** I'd heard of George Jackson growing up, but it was just another one of those crazy 1970s stories, you know? [Earlonne affirms] For me it was up there with the Mansons, and Patty Hearst, and the Weather Underground. I heard about it, but I didn't really understand all the details.

**Earlonne Woods:** But I'll say this though — the man looms large in San Quentin; he's part of the knowledge. [music comes in] When we started this podcast, Nyge, I knew eventually we had to do a story about George Jackson.

**Nigel Poor:** But this is a super-sensitive subject for the people who work in corrections in California. We were all nervous about how CDCR would respond to the idea.

**Earlonne Woods:** They weren't thrilled, at all. George Jackson: is a red flag, even today. [music comes in] The CDCR thinks of him as a troublemaker, a thug — a killer. But some guys inside think of him as a role model, a righteous dude, a great thinker who was targeted by California prison officials. And there's no bridging the two sides together on this one.

**Nigel Poor:** Nope.

**Earlonne Woods:** To this day the name George Jackson is a source of tension in California prisons.

**Nigel Poor:** Oh man, it sure is — for both COs and incarcerated people. I mean, I've noticed when I've asked people about it, Earlonne, [lowers voice almost to a whisper] this a weird vibe comes over the room.

**Earlonne Woods:** I remember you would never, *ever*, ever see a George Jackson book in its cover.

**Nigel Poor:** Oh, really?

**Earlonne Woods:** Nah. But they are in there, and they do get passed around. Sometimes guys would take a hard bound book and just put a different cover on it. Or they'd photocopy the book and then carry it around like a notebook or something.

**Nigel Poor:** Always a work-around.

**Earlonne Woods:** Yep.

**Nigel Poor:** Ken Oliver, the guy we heard from earlier, first heard of George Jackson when he was a young man in California State Prison, Sacramento. A guy in the cell next to his passed him a copy of *Soledad Brother*.

**Kenneth Oliver:** I think reading *Soledad Brother* was the first time [music comes in] that I was moved spiritually and emotionally—viscerally by reading a book. The first thing that he taught me was how to be unapologetic about who you were. I just remember learning so much about history... and revelation that was occurring in my mind about why I was sitting in a solitary confinement cell at 19 years old... some of the things that led to that trajectory that I never knew 'cause I was just in it.

**Earlonne Woods:** The man woke up a lot of guys inside when he was living and long after he died. And even though his books are not officially banned, George Jackson is still a painful thorn in the side of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

**Nigel Poor:** To explain how he became such a divisive figure we need to get into a little history. [music fades out] So Earlonne, you wanna kick this off?

**Earlonne Woods:** George Jackson was born in Chicago in 1941. In his book *Soledad Brother* he writes, "My family knew very little of my real life. In effect I lived two lives, the one with my mama and sisters, and the thing on the streets."

**Nigel Poor:** Jackson writes about getting picked up by police a couple of times for mugging, and he ran away from home a lot. So, in an effort to keep George out of trouble, his father moved the family out to L.A. in 1956.

**Earlonne Woods:** But [laughs] L.A. didn't keep me out of trouble, Nyge.

**Nigel Poor:** Mm.

**Earlonne Woods:** And it didn't work for George either.

**Nigel Poor:** Nope. Like you, he ended in the California Youth Authority. Then, in 1961, when he was 18, he was arrested and sentenced to one year to life for the armed robbery of \$70 from a gas station.

**Earlonne Woods:** One year to *life*.

**Nigel Poor:** Mmf.

**Earlonne Woods:** That's what called an indeterminate sentence, kept guys in prison for long periods of time. And George was no exception to this bullshit practice. He got written up 47 times, and those were used against him every time he went up for parole. His sentence just kept getting longer and longer.

**Nigel Poor:** But while he was getting himself in trouble, Jackson was also educating himself, mentally and physically. He became a serious student of martial arts. [music comes in]

**Speaker 2:** He'd just be showing all kinds of punches and kicks and side kicks and all that. And he had all these magazines, martial arts, and stuff like that.

**Nigel Poor:** This is John Clutchette. He and George Jackson were incarcerated together at Soledad Prison in 1969, before Jackson had written his books and become famous. E, didn't you used to cell with Cluchette's son?

**Earlonne Woods:** I did. But I didn't know his dad. [Nigel affirms] I finally met him last year in the transitional house he was living in. He'd only been out a couple years. He told me that back in Soledad, [ambient sounds come in from the yard] he and George used to spar with each other out on the yard.

**John Clutchette:** [ambient noise continues with sounds of punching a punching bag] Matter of fact he used to use me as a punching bag too. [John laughs] I had to do it... [indistinguishable] I'm thinking I'm learning some martial arts. [John and someone else laugh heartily] [indistinguishable] But... shit, I'd be all beat up and hurt up... and I used to tell him, "Wait a minute, man. Wait a minute. When am I gonna get a chance to do some punching or something?" [laughs]

**Nigel Poor:** Jackson was also getting deep into politics, and political philosophy — reading books by Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Trotsky. [music comes in] And he was examining America through their eyes.

[archival audio comes in]

**George Jackson:** I'm convinced that fascism exists in this country.

**Earlonne Woods:** This is from a recording of Jackson made by a journalist who interviewed him inside in 1971.

**George Jackson:** The impressions that we get from the movies and from the propaganda system that fascism is a period of doors being kicked down and people being gunned down in concentration camps, that's just the transitory period of a fascism. Once it's established itself it's not necessarily for the fascists to maintain themselves any longer with the out-and-out brutal force.

**Earlone Woods:** George became a communist. A left-wing, radical revolutionary.

**Nigel Poor:** Which wasn't that uncommon. I mean, it was the late '60s, you had the Vietnam War raging, Black power groups like the Black Panthers were getting national attention, and you had white, left-wing radical groups like the Weather Underground. I mean, Earlone, it was just very revolutionary times.

**Earlone Woods:** Right. And George was talking about all this stuff to John Clutchette and other guys at Soledad.

**John Clutchette:** He talked about all of these revolutionaries from Germany and Russia and all this— man, I couldn't even pronounce their names or half the words in the books he wanted me to read! So I take the book back, and I look and I said, "Brother I can't understand what's going on with this book."

He said, "Take the Russia out of it and put the Los Angeles in it, the California in it, and the police over here in Long Beach in it. And basically you notice it's the same things going on, it's just in a different place!" So that way it was a lot easier for me to understand. [music fades out]

**Nigel Poor:** Soon Jackson and other guys at Soledad were conducting political education classes. First on the sly, and then out in the open. And was really being like a conduit. [Earlone affirms]. You know, like bringing all these revolutionary ideas into the prison.

**Earlone Woods:** Yeah. I mean, he wanted to wake people up in there.

**Nigel Poor:** Right.

**Earlone Woods:** Show them that their incarceration wasn't an accident. 'Cause to Jackson, you couldn't understand prison without understanding things like racism, capitalism, and fascism.

[archival audio comes in]

**George Jackson:** Fascism destroys a sense of community among the lower classes. And then the upper class says, “They have a great community of interest.” We have to establish a community interest of our own from the bottom.

**Earlonne Woods:** John Clutchette wasn’t just getting schooled by George Jackson in martial arts.

**John Clutchette:** You got drilled on everything. You can't say, ‘I just read it’ [laughs] and then expect that someone ain’t gon’ drill you on it... ‘cause we were all trying to educate ourselves ‘cause some brothers had been educated, some hadn't been educated. Don't forget we come from them schools in Watts and stuff; and they weren't the best schools in the world. But... we were all just trying to be better people when we came home. [music comes in] You understand what I'm saying? Better Blacks though. We wanted to be an asset to our communities when we went home.

[archival audio comes in]

**George Jackson:** I believe in the commune, the ideal of the central city commune. I believe in the commune, the ideal of the central city commune. And through the communes as we fill in vacuums that the power elite, the governing elite, and the upper classes have left, as we fill in these vacuums and give people *something* to hold — something to *defend*.

**John Clutchette:** He was, too, adamant about us not having separation; and that would make him be separated from this brother over here that wanna be this, or this brother over here that wanna be that, you understand? So, if he ever said that “Well, I'm a BGF”, you're not gonna listen to him If you a Crip or you a Blood... or you’re a Muslim. And I never heard him do any of that! Solidarity is still the same thing. As a people we're supposed to be accountable for one another.

[archival audio comes in]

**George Jackson:** We are not acting individually inside the prisons here. We're all together. And we have perfect discipline, and we have a *rank* and file. [music comes in]

**Nigel Poor:** So, that’s a bit of background on George Jackson and what he believed. Now we’ve got to get into the complex and controversial story of what happened in San Quentin fifty years ago.



[ambient sounds from inside San Quentin come in]

**Earlonne Woods:** And we've called on an Ear Hustle friend who has helped us before with San Quentin history, Lee Jaspar.

**Lee Jaspar:** [as narrator] By 1970, tensions in California prisons were boiling over. Racial division between Black incarcerated people and mostly white correctional officers often led to violence. [sound design comes in - voices chattering in the background and twisting sound of handcuffs being placed around wrists] 9 guards and 24 incarcerated people were killed in 1970 and 1971.

In 1970, in Soledad Prison, three Black incarcerated people were shot to death in a racial riot thought to have been instigated by prison staff. A correctional officer was then killed, apparently in retaliation. A few days later, George Jackson and two incarcerated people, were charged with the murder of that CO. Jackson and his two co-defendants became known as the Soledad Brothers. Their case became a rallying cry for leftist celebrities and intellectuals like Marlon Brando, Angela Davis and Noam Chomsky. Later that year, *Soledad Brother*, a collection of Jackson's prison letters, was published. It was a literary sensation. Jackson was becoming an international icon of the struggle of Black freedom and revolution. The Soledad Brothers were transferred from Soledad to San Quentin to be closer to their trial in San Francisco.

In August of 1970 George Jackson's younger brother Jonathan took hostages at the courthouse near San Quentin in an apparent attempt to force Jackson's release from prison. Jonathan was shot and killed outside the courthouse by California corrections officers. A judge and two incarcerated people were also killed.

[music comes in]

**Nigel Poor:** At San Quentin, the Soledad Brothers were housed in the Adjustment Center — that's the prison's maximum-security unit. Jackson had been at San Quentin before, but the Adjustment Center is a whole different world. And E, every time I go into San Quentin, I walk by that building.

**Earlonne Woods:** Right.

**Nigel Poor:** You know, it's on the left, and it's got that there's a scary, gothic font that says "Adjustment Center". And man, you know serious stuff happens in there.

**Earlone Woods:** Yeah, it's hella isolated. If you go to AC, that's a wrap. It's the black hole. Once you're in there, you're gone. Inside the AC back in 1971, the antagonism between "convicts" and COs was rough.

**John Clutchette:** *Phew.* Man, uh... police every time— you know, we used to just sit there the stir up feces and piss in a cup and let sit over there with a top on it for two or three, four, five days when he come slappin' it right in his face. You know what I mean? And then— *oh*, they'd be so mad. They wanted to drag out after a while. They didn't never bring us out of our cell without handcuffs on. So we're just showing them that it didn't make no difference who you did it to now; we was all for one and one for all. It was 26 of us down there on that bottom tier. And every one of us down there was down there for some kind of attack or murder of a guard.

**Earlone Woods:** Word soon got out in the general population at San Quentin that George Jackson was in the AC.

**Gerard Trent Jr.:** [speaking with strained voice] They used to come in and bring him out of AC. And that would tell us not to salute him.

**Nigel Poor:** Gerard Trent Jr. was in San Quentin when George Jackson got there. And he's back there now. New York and I brought him into the studio.

**Gerard Trent Jr.:** And saluting him was a closed fist above your head.

**Nigel Poor:** "A closed fist above your head," he said. Trent had throat cancer, which is why his voice sounds strained.

**Gerard Trent Jr.:** But we did it anyway.

[in response to Gerard]

**Rahsaan "New York" Thomas:** [quietly] That's right.

**Gerard Trent Jr.:** Because he earned that. [pauses] That's the very least we could do.

[to Gerard]

**Nigel Poor:** Was there a punishment for doing that? For saluting him?

**Gerard Trent Jr.:** No.

**Nigel Poor:** No.

**Gerard Trent Jr.:** No. There's power in numbers. And it was an awful lot of people doing that. Awful lot of people.

[as narrator]

**Nigel Poor:** Meanwhile, a lot of the staff felt threatened by the Soledad Brothers.

**Speaker 3:** Most of the people that I worked with realized that these guys wanted to kill us. [chuckles]

**Earlone Woods:** Robert Ayers was a young guard at San Quentin.

**Robert Ayers:** You still had to deal with them, but all the time you knew that if they had half a chance, they would kill you. You know, he thought himself a revolutionary and a political prisoner; but to me he was a killer, OK. He murdered people.

**Nigel Poor:** In 1971, Ayers had only been on the job about three years, after doing a stint in Vietnam.

**Robert Ayers:** This was right in the middle of— I'm not sure I'm going to get the term right, but I'm gonna say an awakening of Black awareness among the inmate population. You saw a lot more Black inmates talking politically, OK. As opposed to shuckin' and jivin' on a yard and talkin' this, talkin' that. A lot more political dialogue. And again, this was kind of confusing because nobody really knew how to take this... is this, you know, what's going on here is this serious.

**Earlone Woods:** "Shuckin' and jivin'" Nyge?... I think we'd call that choppin' it up today.

**Nigel Poor:** Yeah...

**Earlone Woods:** In any case, George Jackson spent an entire year at San Quentin in the Adjustment Center. The Soledad Brothers case dragged on through a lot of changing judges, changing venues... you know, all this pre-trial stuff.

**Nigel Poor:** Finally, the trial was about to begin.

**Earlone Woods:** Then, came August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1971.

[music fades out]

**Nigel Poor:** There is a lot of debate about what happened in the Adjustment Center that day, but the Prison's official account goes something like this... and it's a wild story: A lawyer working with George Jackson smuggled a gun to him during a visit. When Jackson was searched on his way back into the AC, a guard spotted something in Jackson's hair.

**Earlone Woods:** George then allegedly pulled a gun out of what the guard said was a wig and pointed it at them. He then made them unlock the cells of the 25 other people on the AC's first tier. Then... mayhem.

**Nigel Poor:** Guys started grabbing guards, tying them up, and dragging them into cells. John Clutchette had just returned to the AC from a visit with his lawyer.

[music comes in]

**John Clutchette:** At that time George said something... I don't know he went down the tier. He was just kind of walking back and forth and just... he wasn't— you know, he was— like, you know how you be in the zone? He was just kind of just shaking his head like this back and forth. So I go back in the back and I see the guards, some of them tied up back there. And they'd been stripped down to their drawers and stuff, and I think they thought all of them were dead but they weren't.

**Nigel Poor:** Three guards were killed — their throats were slit, and two of them were also shot. Two incarcerated people also died after their throats were cut.

**Earlone Woods:** Three other guards also had their throats cut but survived. It has never been determined who committed which acts of violence.

[prison alarm blares in the background]

**Nigel Poor:** The incarcerated guys on the first tier were in control of that part of the Adjustment Center for about 30 minutes.

[loud repetitive banging comes in]

**John Clutchette:** I hear somebody banging on the glass. [imitating pounding on the glass sound] *Clack-clack-clack-clack-clack.*

[music fades out]

And then... it just got real quiet 'cause we know somebody outside. And... next thing I know the door bangs open—I don't know if somebody opened it from the outside or somebody opened it from the inside—but I think I kinda like stepped back in my cell. And... the door bangs open. [whistle blowing in the background and sound of someone panting as they run comes in] George goes out the building. That was it.

[Prison alarm continues sounding off and then all sound design fades out]

**Nigel Poor:** Nobody knows why George Jackson left the Adjustment Center. Nobody knows what he was thinking when he ran across the yard. Officials say he was trying to escape.

**Earlonne Woods:** He made it about 30 yards before he was shot and killed by a guard. He was 29 years old.

**Nigel Poor:** Dick Nelson, a guard at San Quentin, was off duty that day. But he lived nearby, and he'd rushed down when he heard something was happening at the Adjustment Center.

**Earlonne Woods:** He grabbed a sub-machine gun from the armory, went to the yard right outside the AC, and started firing into it.

**John Clutchette:** Next thing I know, they come in there with a machine gun, a 45-caliber machine gun, and got to shooting up the building. Somebody told me them holes is still in there. They left all them holes still in the walls and stuff.

**Nigel Poor:** Nelson didn't hit anyone, but the show of force did bring an end to the AC rebellion. It was the most violent incident in the long history of San Quentin State Prison.

**Earlonne Woods:** Today, the gun Dick Nelson used is in the little museum just inside the San Quentin gate.

[music fades out]

[archival news audio comes in]

**News Reporter:** A gun battle occurred in the yard of San Quentin Prison in Marin County today. Three guards and three prisoners were killed in the disturbances, including George Jackson.

[archival news coverage continues]

**News Reporter:** There's a general lockup throughout the institution. Prisoners have been fed in their cells. Tomorrow there'll be no visitors at San Quentin. The institution is described as quiet, but tense.

[music comes in]

**Nigel Poor:** So much about this story is strange. I mean, if Jackson was making an escape attempt, it was pretty ill-thought out. It's impossible to escape — I mean, there are those 30-foot walls; and he'd have to run for a while out in the complete open.

**Earlonne Woods:** Right. And the bigger question is how did the gun get in there? [Nigel affirms] I know they said he brought it in in a wig... but I'm not quite sure about it.

**Nigel Poor:** Yeah, I mean, to this day there is no definitive proof of a lot of things. We just don't know what happened in there. And there are a lot of theories.

**Earlonne Woods:** There are definitely Jackson supporters who think he was set up — eliminated. CDCR folks say no way. And people who knew Jackson have long speculated about what really happened that day, and what led him to leave the AC.

**John Clutchette:** Some people say he ran out, you know, 'cause he know if he didn't go out there they was going to come in and kill all of us. And... it was a combination of a lot of things probably going on in his head. I can only guess.

I saw such a dramatic change in his personality after Jonathan got killed.

[music fades out]

**Nigel Poor:** Remember, Jonathan was George Jackson's younger brother.

**John Clutchette:** I don't know if he could call it guilt or whatever... he just... he didn't hardly talk anymore, whereas he used to sit up and lecture and stuff for hours and

hours. He didn't do that anymore. He just kind of became kind of sullen. I don't know, I-I don't want to say he was trying to commit suicide, which, you know, I guess all of us was trying to commit suicide when you're in the devil's house and fightin' with his children. So, you know, I don't know man.

[music fades out]

**Earlonne Woods:** After Dick Nelson shot up the AC with the machine gun, the guards quickly took back control.

**Nigel Poor:** And then... there were consequences.

**John Clutchette:** They made all of us getting naked, one by one, and back out. Everybody was backing out; they was beating us with guns, rifles and shit— beating us with guns, butts and stuff, handcuffing and shackling. They got us like that and they pullin' the chains up. We was like that for hours, like your body just went numb. You had to let your head, your brain go numb 'cause your body was hurting so bad.

**Watani Stiner:** August 21<sup>st</sup>, I remember that day. And I remember it clearly.

**Nigel Poor:** It wasn't just the guys in the Adjustment Center who felt the rage of the guards. Watani Stiner was in the general population that day.

**Watani Stiner:** We were on the upper yard. I don't know if I heard the shot first or the whistle, because there was a whistle that was blowing. Everybody had to... "Get down! Get down on the ground!" And it was just like, guards running wild around there. They was racing down there and then the rest of them was on the gun tower. And they making sure nobody gettin' up, threatenin' to shoot people if they move and stuff. Everybody's trying to figure out what was going on the yard. Then people started yelling, "Man, what happened?"

[music comes in]

[to Gerard]

**Rahsaan "New York" Thomas:** So what do you remember the day was like when George Jackson was killed?

**Gerard Trent Jr.:** It was living hell. It was living hell.

**Nigel Poor:** Gerard Trent Jr. again.

**Gerard Trent Jr.:** This was the month of August. And usually for August, it's usually pretty warm outside. But for some reason that day it was very, very cold. They had us buck naked and spread eagle on the upper yard for about four and a half hours. The police went in to the gym and got duffle bags of baseball bats... and passed out. And if you raised your head up to look, you might have got hit, and some did. It was a very, very chilling day. And it's the only time... it's the only time in my life I've ever asked God to let me die [New York affirms] — to kill me. Because I could hear people screaming. They was the people who decided maybe they was gonna look up.

**Earlone Woods:** Robert Ayers, the young San Quentin guard, wasn't scheduled to go in the day after the killings, but he did anyway.

**Robert Ayers:** I went in the next day, Sunday morning

[to Robert]

**Nigel Poor:** Why did you feel compelled to go in?

**Robert Ayers:** [pauses] Because it had to be done. I was not the only one who took it upon themselves to come in. Nobody got called in. They just all came in. The institution needed help.

**Nigel Poor:** What were the emotions you were going in with?

**Robert Ayers:** Anger, sadness, confusion... Violence towards staff, it wasn't like it was *infrequent*, but nothing to that magnitude. And I think there was a sense at the time — *What the hell is going on? What just happened? What have we experienced here?* [chuckles]

**Nigel Poor:** But what *do* you think you were experiencing? What *was* going on?

**Robert Ayers:** Um... I thought we were experiencing a part of the— a revolution, I really do. I'm going to tell you something here and, uh... I don't think many people... want to talk about it. But... in the— probably the week after August 21<sup>st</sup>, the aftermath, we did some things I'm not really proud of, OK. I'm not talking necessarily about beating people up... but we took out our anger and rage on everybody. Everybody. This is how bad it was, OK. I went in Sunday and I did some miscellaneous things, Sunday. Monday, we started searching the East Block and the word was “standardize it.”



[as narrator]

**Earlone Woods:** This is when they go in cell to cell and bust you down to regulated property, meaning they basically take everything but your boxers and your state-issued stuff. Guys often end up losing a lot of personal stuff in the process.

**Robert Ayers:** And anybody that complained about being standardized was unceremoniously hauled over and thrown into ad seg. For what? We didn't have to have a reason. They were an inmate. They were at San Quentin, and staff died. And you're gonna pay. One has a hard time coming to grips with the level of anger, frustration in the aftermath of something like that. It's really... you know, for me was an awakening experience.

**Nigel Poor:** Hm, what changed in you?

[music fades out]

**Robert Ayers:** Well, um, my mentality came together that, OK, we say we're the good guys and you're the bad guys. OK? And if we're the good guys, why are we doing bad stuff to you? I mean, it doesn't compute when you really think about it.

**Earlone Woods:** We're going to take a short break.

**Nigel Poor:** When we get back: How the fallout from August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1971, is still being felt inside San Quentin today.

[music comes in]

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** So, we are in the peace officers' memorial here at San Quentin that memorializes all the staff members who lost their life in the line of duty here at the prison. Just as you walk into the prison, when you look to the right, you see our chapel complex. When you look to the left, there's the Adjustment Center. And just before the Adjustment Center, a few steps in, is our Memorial Plaza. This is where we are.

**Nigel Poor:** A little while back, New York and I met Lieutenant Sam Robinson at the Officer's Memorial.

**Earlone Woods:** 14 correctional officers who died in the line of duty are memorialized here, including the three that were killed when the Adjustment Center was overtaken back in 1971.

[ambient sounds from outside come in]

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** You have Sergeant J.P. Graham, who was murdered on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1971. Correctional Officer P.W. Krasenes, who was murdered on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1971. Correctional Officer F.P. DeLeon, who was also murdered on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1971.

**Nigel Poor:** Nearby there are other reminders of how that day changed San Quentin. Sam pointed to the Adjustment Center just a few feet away.

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** When I began here, there would be windowpanes that were missing. And idea was as they were strategically placed all throughout the building, you're trained early on that if something bad took place on the tier, if someone got out of their restraints and were attempting to take over the facility, that your first responsibility was to take your keys and drop them out the window. And so you would be on the tier with no way to exit the tier that you're on, but it also compartmentalize the area. And ultimately the idea was to prevent what happened in 1971 from happening on the day that you were there. You may have given up your life, your partner may have given up their lives; but you were isolating the incident right there.

[to Lieutenant Robinson]

**Nigel Poor:** So, basically you are locking yourself in there with no way to get out.

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** Exactly. [New York says "Wow" quietly in the background] [music fades out] Yeah. There was people whose blood was spilled on these tiers. [chattering heard faintly in the background] Guys who we memorialized here in memorial today, [sound of metal clanging lightly in the background] their blood was shed on those tiers. And so, there's a— I want to find the right word for it. There's a... there's a *lore* that's in that building... that's in that place that you have respect for.

**Nigel Poor:** Sam, why do you think that 50 years later this story still brings up so much emotion for people? I mean, it's a half a century ago.

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** From the police officer's side, I don't think that we feel that justice was served.

**[as narrator]**

**Nigel Poor:** In the aftermath of the Adjustment Center incident, six of the incarcerated men who'd been on the first tier were charged with assault and the murder of those three CO's, and also of Frank Lynn and Ronald Kane, the two incarcerated men who were killed that day.

**Earlonne Woods:** When the trial ended five years later, only one person was found guilty of murder. Two others were found guilty of the lesser charges, and three were acquitted.

**Nigel Poor:** The lawyer who was supposed to have brought the gun in to George Jackson was charged too. He fled the country and didn't face trial until 1986. He was also acquitted.

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** And so, I think 50 years later, 25 years later, right after the trial, people who worked here at the place, who ate with these people, who walked the line with these people, who developed friendships with these people, who grieve with their families, who tried to take care of their children afterward, justice wasn't served for them.

**Rahsaan "New York" Thomas:** I feel like you, you're still carrying a lot of the weight from it. Almost as if you were there.

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** I'll tell you this, man — when you work in a place that has a history, right, and then you have this shared experience with the people; you walk those tiers that you have people who are assaulting you, and you have people who are threatening your life, there's a weight that goes along with that. When you look out the building and you see the memorial, and you see the names of people who gave their life in the line of duty, and here in that same place where the same potential is there, there's a weight that goes along with that.

**[as narrator]** [music fades out]

**Nigel Poor:** I— you know, I understand what Lieutenant Robinson is saying, and, you know, I sympathize with it— actually, I sympathize with all sides of this [Earlonne affirms] totally messed up situation. I mean, what do you think, E?

**Earlone Woods:** I understand his point, you know, as a peace officer. But I've talked to people that were incarcerated in the '60's [Nigel affirms] and they said the atmosphere was as racist as it was in society. [Nigel affirms] Officers could kill Black people with impunity, which was basically what happened back at Soledad Prison that set all these events in motion. [Nigel affirms] So Black people in prison felt that basically they were at war with white prison guards. [Nigel affirms] I'm not justifying it, but that's probably how they felt.

**Nigel Poor:** Yeah, I hear you.

[music comes in]

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** So as you make a slight right turn...

[as narrator]

**Nigel Poor:** We asked Sam to point out another spot, just about 60 yards away from the memorial, around the corner of the chapel.

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** Just before the road starts to decline in elevation, George Jackson was gunned down right about this area here.

[to Lieutenant Robinson and Earlone]

**Nigel Poor:** This is where we walk every time we come into the prison to go down to the yard. So, I can't even count many times I've walked by here.

[as narrator]

**Earlone Woods:** So, the location where George was killed, incarcerated people can't walk that way because it's out of bounds, you know. [Nigel affirms] But every now and again, I'd be escorted that way going up to the chapel or something. I used to always think this is the spot where George was killed, you know? [Nigel affirms] 'Cause I remember seeing the picture of him laid out with his hand up.

**Nigel Poor:** And there's nothing there marking that spot.

**Earlone Woods:** Nah.

**Nigel Poor:** But guys inside have their own way of keeping the memory of that day alive.

**Earlonne Woods:** Black August.

**Nigel Poor:** Black August. I've been hearing about this for years, but Earlonne, I don't really know much about it.

[music comes in]

**Earlonne Woods:** Well, Black August is a time when a certain number of Black guys inside fast, they study, they exercise, and they have discussion groups about politics and things like that. And sometimes—if they can get away with it—they wear black armbands.

**Paul Redd:** You know, and for them 31 days, it was all about education.

**Nigel Poor:** This is Paul Redd. He did 45 years in prison.

**Paul Redd:** You have a book, a journal, and you make entries on what you're doing. So the next day, you take it a little farther. So you stretchin' yourself. Say you may read five pages a day; the next day you might jack it up to ten! You always try to push yourself. It was about us making ourselves better when you come out of August than what you was when you went into it. That was the whole thing.

[music fades out]

**Kenneth Oliver:** There was usually schedules, like written schedules. Like, this is what we do. We'd have our exercise routine wrote down, we'd have study periods wrote down.

**Earlonne Woods:** This is Ken Oliver again, the guy we heard from at the beginning of the episode who was sent to the hole because guards found George Jackson books in his cell.

**Kenneth Oliver:** We would have spread time, or break fast, you know? So there was a whole like protocol so to speak. And, I mean, it wasn't extremely strict, but it was guidelines, basically, that would kind of dictate what we were going to do from August 1<sup>st</sup> all the way through the end of the month. We would do political readings, we would fast all day, we would exercise and do burpees in the heat, you know, a hundred

burpees. [laughs] And, you know, you'd be ready to pass out, and then everybody would get together at night when it was available to it or at the end of the day, and cook, and break bread with each other. To me, that was life changing. To me, that was always magical.

[as narrator]

**Nigel Poor:** Guys started observing Black August in the late '70s. But over time, Prison officials started seeing it as a threat. So, they started to clamp down on it, and punish anyone obviously participating.

**Paul Redd:** Now when you wear a black armband, they want to lock you up in a hole. When you go to the chow house, all these officers in there, they lookin' to see if you eatin'. They lookin' to see if you observing Black August. And people realize you don't need to prove to them that you doing Black August, 'cause Black August is not for them — it's for you. So I can go into a chow house, and grab that tray. That don't mean that I'm gonna eat that tray. And I'd go over there and dump it. A lot of people did do that.

[music comes in]

**Nigel Poor:** Lieutenant Robinson says at least when he was working in the Adjustment Center at San Quentin, COs had to be extra vigilant when August rolled around.

[ambient sounds from inside San Quentin come in]

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** 25 years after the incident, all the way up until recent times, Black August was something that staff had to be aware of here at the prison, because there were people who in the name of George Jackson, in the name of the cause, would attempt to harm people here in this building. I spent three or four summers in there myself, right. With my staff on alert, with my staff getting assaulted year removed from that day because people were still honoring George Jackson, I guess, or the cause with violence. Um... I don't know what type of cause that is. I don't know what you get from that.

**Earlonne Woods:** For Paul Redd though, Black August was never about violence towards officers.

**Paul Redd:** It was a bogus myth that correction officers was to get killed during August. And it wasn't about that. It was about us internalizing, educating ourselves, making

ourselves better when you come out of August better than what you was when you went into it. That was the whole thing.

**Nigel Poor:** So, Earlonne, [Earlonne affirms] George Jackson led to Black August, and CDCR doesn't have a lot of tolerance for either one of them. Any sign of either could be seen as gang activity. So this was why guys ended up in the hole for having Jackson books.

**Earlonne Woods:** But CDCR has had to bend a little. Paul Redd did over 30 years in the SHU. Jackson material was part of what kept him in for so long. But he eventually got out, partly because of a hunger strike and lawsuit he was party to.

**Nigel Poor:** And Ken Oliver, the guy at the beginning of the show who was sent to the hole for having George Jackson material, he also sued and got some money.

**Earlonne Woods:** Ken Oliver and Paul Redd are both out of prison now.

[music comes in]

[ambient noise comes in – voices chattering in the background]

**Nigel Poor:** We wanted to know how people in San Quentin do... or don't... remember George Jackson today.

**Earlonne Woods:** So we sent our inside guys, NY and Rhashiyd, out to the yard.

[music fades out]

[ambient noise continues on the yard - voices chattering in the background]

**Rhashiyd Zinnamon:** Who's George Jackson?

**Speaker 4:** [laughing] I was a brother, man. I was one of the comrades, man. Old school Soledad Brothers and all the business, man, who was locked up in San Quentin State Prison. And he knocked him down, man, 1971, Black August, man.

**Rhashiyd Zinnamon:** Do you know who George Jackson is?

**Speaker 5:** Oh, for sure, Big George. I understand what those brothers fought for and what they did.

**Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:** Who was George Jackson?

**Speaker 6:** Man, I have no idea— Oh, ain't that the... the Black man? The-the-the... yeah, I don't know.

**Speaker 7:** I don't know, matter of fact, I wanna say a president.

**Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:** Who was George Jackson?

**Speaker 8:** Uh... the Jefferson's, I don't know. [New York laughs] You know what I'm saying?

**Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:** No, I don't know.

**Speaker 9:** Oh, George... didn't George Jackson smuggle in a firearm and shoot some people? Yeah, he had it sittin' on the top of his head.

**Rhashiyd Zinnamon:** What does the name George Jackson mean to you?

**Speaker 10:** George Jackson stands up for Black people's rights. Survival in the community, getting people together to do other things than crime.

**Speaker 11:** He's eloquent, you know, to be so young. You know, I never read a book where I had to go pick up a dictionary to understand some of the stuff he was saying.

**Rhashiyd Zinnamon:** I'm gonna throw a name out: George Jackson.

**Speaker 12:** George Jackson. [pauses] A fighter.

**Rhashiyd Zinnamon:** You know who he was?

**Speaker 12:** Yeah.

**Rhashiyd Zinnamon:** You care to elaborate a little bit?

**Speaker 13:** George Jackson... you might have to give me a little bit of the history

**Speaker 14:** He is Judas in the Black. [someone says “Yeah” in the background]



**Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:** Who we talkin’ ‘bout is Judas, bruh?

**Speaker 14:** No, no, that's the movie that was portrayed on George Jackson.

**Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:** I thought that was Fred Hampton.

**Speaker 14:** Oh yeah, well, you see I'm wrong. Oh my God. [New York laughs]

[ambient sounds fade out]

**Nigel Poor:** Well, Earlonne, it's a mixed bag. Some guys knew about him, and obviously, some guys didn't.

**Earlonne Woods:** Yeah, it's a trip because, you know, in my time, I didn't know too many people that didn't know about George Jackson. [Nigel affirms] You know what I'm saying? He was just... he was prison lore. [Nigel affirms] But if Jackson's memory is going to survive inside, it's going to be because of guys like this:

**DeAngelo Prince:** My name is DeAngelo Prince. I've been incarcerated for four years now. At San Quentin for two years.

**Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:** How old are you, man?

**DeAngelo Prince:** I'm 21.

**Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:** 21 years old? You 21 years old?

**DeAngelo Prince:** Yep.

**Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:** OK, you probably not gonna know the answer to this then — Who was George Jackson?

**DeAngelo Prince:** George Jackson was incarcerated at San Quentin in 1970. And he died in 1971. [New York laughs in disbelief and someone in the background says, “Man, so much for that.”]

**Rahsaan “New York” Thomas:** 1971 was before you was born — How do you know about George Jackson?

**DeAngelo Prince:** I mean, 'cause I grew up in a pro-Black house, and George Jackson is somebody like for history, Black history. When we mention Black history, we gotta mention George Jackson.

[as narrator]

**Nigel Poor:** Prince told them about a conversation he had with some CO's up near the Adjustment Center.

**DeAngelo Prince:** And I was just playing around with the police. I'm like, "Yeah, man." I'm like, "You gotta know your history about San Quentin." I'm like, "If you ask me, San Quentin is cursed." I'm like, "You know George Jackson died up here."

And CO's like, "Who's George Jackson?"

And then the older sergeant guy was downstairs, and he was probably about in his mid-sixties, and he's like, "Yeah, George Jackson was in here on the first tier."

And then my heart dropped to my stomach. From that time on, I wanted to go to the cell that he was in. And just look around and just sit down and feel the vibe like, God, like—you know, it's like, me, if you asked me, that's like a museum type. I really feel like, from my point of view, that that cell no one should be able to move in there. Like, it should be murals of him painting in there.

**Speaker 15:** Man, how you know all this stuff?

**DeAngelo Prince:** I mean, I know my history!

**Speaker 15:** That's what's up.

**DeAngelo Prince:** You gotta know your history.

[music fades out]

**DeAngelo Prince:** Well, if you look from 50 years ago to right now, so if you go from 1971 to 2021, and you peep and understand that—like Tupac said—some things will never change; that's just the way it is, man.

**Earlonne Woods:** OK, we're almost at the end of the episode. This is where we give credit where credit is due, and then we usually hear Lieutenant Robinson's approval at the end.

**Nigel Poor:** But for this episode, we thought Lieutenant Robinson might have more to say than usual. And not just because he's in it; but because given the way that George Jackson still has inside San Quentin, he may have more to say. Also, we are just a little nervous that he might not like what we've done.

**Earlonne Woods:** You were nervous Nigel, not me.

**Nigel Poor:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. [Earlonne chuckles] Let's be honest, I was nervous.

**Earlonne Woods:** So, let's just get it over with and hear what he has to say now.

[music comes in]

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** Yeah, this was a different episode. This is an episode where I can't necessarily say that I like it or not, right? I do give my approval to it, but I definitely can't say that I like it. This event still has relevance, still has weight 50 years later. I think the one thing that's missing from this episode is really the voices from the staff who worked in the facility, who were at San Quentin that day. Dick Nelson who passed prior to the development of this episode, he had agreed to lend his voice to it. Dick Nelson saved countless lives, and it's unfortunate that his voice wasn't there. It's unfortunate that the survivors of that event, that their voices weren't included in this. And it's not because of you guys' effort —50 years is a long time, and those voices pass away and others don't have the energy to lend that voice. So, I don't know how to conclude an episode when you deal with such a topic that's as weighty as people not returning to their loved ones. This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson. I am the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison. And again, I approve this episode.

[music fades out]

**Nigel Poor:** All right, we got a lot of great stuff coming up this season. One thing I'm especially excited about is this Ear Hustle challenge. [Earlonne laughs] Yes, you laugh, Earlonne. For the month of October, the outside team is attempting to eat and exercise the same way our team members inside San Quentin do, and we're inviting listeners to join in. Yes.

**Earlonne Woods:** The only reason I'm laughing, Nyge—

**Nigel Poor:** Yes? [giggling]

**Earlonne Woods:** —is because I know you're a person that sticks to your routine.

**Nigel Poor:** Oh, hell yes.

**Earlonne Woods:** But there is gonna come a moment when you're going to be like, 'Why am I sticking to this?' [Nigel continues laughing]

**Earlonne Woods:** Also, this season, our email newsletter, The Lowdown, will be coming out *twice* a month.

**Nigel Poor:** Yes, very exciting.

**Earlonne Woods:** Each issue will feature bonus material from our latest episode.

**Nigel Poor:** You can sign up for the newsletter at [earhustlesq.com/newsletter](http://earhustlesq.com/newsletter).

**Earlonne Woods:** And you should definitely do that now, [Nigel affirms], because for this episode, we have something pretty cool.

**Nigel Poor:** Yes, we do.

**Earlonne Woods:** We talked to the political thinker, activist, soul sister #1: Angela Davis. She was a close friend of George Jackson's.

**Nigel Poor:** We're featuring that in interview in this week's issue of The Lowdown.

**Earlonne Woods:** [earhustlesq.com/newsletter](http://earhustlesq.com/newsletter).

**Nigel Poor:** This episode was produced by me, Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, John "Yahya" Johnson, Amy Standen, and Bruce Wallace.

**Earlonne Woods:** It was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams, with music by Antwan, David Jazzy, and Rhashiyd Zinnamon. Shabnam Sigman is our digital producer, and Julie Shapiro is the executive producer for Radiotopia.

**Nigel Poor:** And you know what was cool about this one, Earlonne?

**Earlonne Woods:** Tell me.

**Nigel Poor:** We brought in our old editor and friend, Curtis Fox to help with this episode.

**Earlonne Woods:** Curtis “Scissor Hand” Fox!

**Nigel Poor:** Yes. Thanks Curtis.

Thanks to Nathaniel and Claude at the Freedom Archives in San Francisco. They helped us throughout the project and provided the archival audio of George Jackson speaking.

**Earlonne Woods:** They also put together a cool project for this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, focused on the books that George Jackson had in his cell. Find that at [freedomarchives.org](http://freedomarchives.org)

**Nigel Poor:** Ear Hustle would like to thank Acting Warden Ron Broomfield, and... it feels strange not to be tossing to Sam here.

**Earlonne Woods:** Want me to do Sam?

**Nigel Poor:** [laughs] I think we got it earlier.

**Earlonne Woods:** This podcast was made possible with support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative: working to redesign the justice system by building power and opportunity for communities impacted by incarceration.

**Nigel Poor:** Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Radiotopia is a collection of independent, listener-supported podcasts.

**Earlonne Woods:** Some of the best podcasts around. Hear more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm).

I’m Earlonne Woods.

**Nigel Poor:** I’m Nigel Poor.

**Earlonne Woods:** Thanks...

**Nigel Poor:** [out of sync with Earlonne] Thanks... for listening...

**Earlonne Woods:** Hold on... 5, 4, 3, 2...

**Earlonne Woods and Nigel Poor:** [simultaneously] Thanks for listening.

**Earlonne Woods:** Are we off?

**Nigel Poor:** Just... [indistinguishable] [crosstalk]

**Earlonne Woods:** [crosstalk] Are we off on this first episode? Are we off on this episode, Nigel? Are we rustin'?

[music comes in] [Radiotopia jingle]

**END OF EPISODE.**