



Episode 20: Birdbaths and a Lockbox
First Aired: September 12, 2018

Pat: [00:00:00] Hey, this is Pat Mesiti-Miller. The following podcast contains language and disturbing content that may not be appropriate for all listeners. There's also one part that's ... kind of gross. Discretion is advised.

Protester 1: [00:00:13] We, like, org— we organize with people on the inside. Yeah so ...

Protester 2: [00:00:15] Does anyone want to walk or drive over to the other area as a group?

Nigel: [00:00:23] Earlonne, The tape we're listening to is the first time I recorded anything for 'Ear Hustle' outside of San Quentin.

Earlonne: [00:00:28] You didn't go that far.

Nigel: [00:00:30] No, [laughing] you're right.

Earlonne: [00:00:31] Those are the sounds of protesters a few Saturdays ago outside the prison walls. They were in support of a nationwide prison strike that's been going on.

Nigel: [00:00:39] It's hard to know how many prisons are participating in the strike, but we do know that the main grievance of the strike organizers is what they're calling "slave labor conditions in American prisons."

Earlonne: [00:00:49] So you and Pat Mesiti-Miller went outside the prison to record sounds of the demonstrators.

Nigel: [00:00:53] Yup.

Earlonne: [00:00:54] Meanwhile I went around inside and asked guys if they even heard about the prisoners strike.

Male Voice 1: [00:00:59] No.

Male Voice 2: [00:01:01] Negative.

Male Voice 3: [00:01:01] No. That's news to me. Prison strike? What's happening with that?

Male Voice 4: [00:01:05] Nope.

Male Voice 5: [00:01:07] I heard about it, but not too many people here in San Quentin heard about it. Um, it's a little whisper on it, though.

Male Voice 6: [00:01:12] And I found out about it on television, so nobody in here that I know of said anything about it and even heard about it, right, so.

Male Voice 7: [00:01:20] People don't strike here at San Quentin. It's just that simple. It's a different culture. It's a different place. Good education, a lot of self-help groups. People work 20 years to get here. [mysterious music]

Nigel: [00:01:37] It seems to me there's a disconnect between what was going on outside the prison walls and what people were saying in here.

Earlonne: [00:01:42] Right.

Nigel: [00:01:43] Guys inside just haven't heard that much about the strike.

Earlonne: [00:01:46] Yeah, that's true. And a lot of guys in San Quentin are on their way out and they don't want to do anything that might jeopardize their release.

Nigel: [00:01:53] Yeah.

Earlonne: [00:01:54] But that don't mean that they don't care about the issues the strikers are protesting. This is Lonnie Morris, who has been in prison since the 1970s and seen pretty much everything. [Music ends]

Lonnie Morris: [00:02:06] In this particular prison there are a lot of opportunities, a lot of programs, and I'm very thankful I'm here and able to participate in those programs. But in other prisons there aren't. You know, there are prisons where there's very few people who come into it because of the accessibility of the prisons. Some of the conditions are horrendous and people don't have some of the same amenities that we have in this particular prison, so I think it's good

that people find ways to protest and to bring attention to conditions that are inhumane, in some cases, and just not right. [hip-hop music]

Nigel: [00:02:38] Lonnie nailed it right there. We can't say this often enough: San Quentin is a prison that people actually want to transfer to, and we need to be clear about this with our listeners. What happens here is not necessarily what it's like in every American prison.

Earlonne: [00:02:53] Though San Quentin's got its issues, I've been through a number of prisons and if I had to be in any prison I'd rather be here.

Nigel: [00:03:01] Mhm.

Earlonne: [00:03:01] Most prisons aren't like this. Most prisons simply don't give you the opportunities that we got here.

Nigel: [00:03:06] Yeah, it's not like they're making it possible to produce podcasts at most other prisons.

Earlonne: [00:03:09] Speaking of podcasts ... [Music fades out]

Nigel: [00:03:13] Yes ...

Earlonne: [00:03:13] This is the first episode of season number three.

Nigel: [00:03:18] Yes! We are back and we want to welcome back our very patient listeners. [taps mic, laughs with Earlonne] You guys still there? [Theme music]

Earlonne: [00:03:28] You're now tuned in to San Quentin's 'Ear Hustle' from PRX's Radiotopia. I'm Earlonne Woods. I've been incarcerated for 21 years, and I'm currently housed here at San Quentin State Prison in California.

Nigel: [00:03:41] I'm Nigel Poor, a visual artist and now podcaster. I've been working with the guys here at San Quentin for about seven years.

Earlonne: [00:03:48] Say what?

Nigel: [00:03:49] Yep. I got seven years.

Earlonne: [00:03:49] You got seven in?

Nigel: [00:03:49] I got seven in.

Earlonne: [00:03:51] Wowee. And together we're going to take you inside. [fade theme music]

Earlonne: [00:04:05] We are so happy to be back. We got so much to talk about.

Nigel: [00:04:09] But dammit, Earlonne, we are far behind.

Earlonne: [00:04:12] We are seriously behind schedule, and it's not our fault, though.

Nigel: [00:04:16] No.

Earlonne: [00:04:17] This summer, when we were supposed to be getting ahead on our new stories, San Quentin went on lockdown. You never know when it's gonna hit, but lockdowns do happen, even here in sunny San Quentin.

Nigel: [00:04:30] [Carousel music] Lockdowns happen when the administration deems there's a credible threat to the safety and security of the institution, like when keys go missing.

Earlonne: [00:04:37] Or they're looking for a weapon. Either way, a prison-wide search begins and we prisoners are stuck in our cells: can't go to class, can't go to the yard, can't go to our jobs. For three weeks, Nigel, as you know, 'Ear Hustle' was on ice.

Nigel: [00:04:51] Oh, I know because I couldn't come in. You and I couldn't communicate.

Earlonne: [00:04:56] Right.

Nigel: [00:04:56] And basically we couldn't do a bunch of the interviews for season three, but for our first episode, we're going to take that lemon and we're gonna make some lemonade.

Earlonne: [00:05:03] We're gonna make some bomb-ass lemonade with a gang of sugar. [both laugh] [Music ends]. 'Ear Hustle' is about what it's like to be in prison, so our first episode is about what it's like to be in a prison lockdown.

Nigel: [00:05:15] And as soon as that summer lockdown was over we started recording.

Michael Williams: [00:05:24] [Drilling sound, then slamming prison door] I love Graham crackers, banana, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Nigel: [00:05:28] That's Michael Williams, and like a lot of other guys, man, they really talked about food during the lockdown. I mean a lot.

Michael Williams: [00:05:36] Well, you know, one day you may get Graham crackers, so you got to hold onto the graham crackers. Then the next day you'll get a banana. So you save that. And then when you get your peanut butter and jelly you can make a Graham cracker, peanut butter and banana sandwich ... jelly sandwich. And those are the best sandwiches. [Music...]

Earlonne: [00:05:57] [laughing] I think he might be right.

Nigel: [00:05:57] Really? Is that your favorite sandwich?

Earlonne: [00:06:00] Nah, that's like the easiest go-to sandwich. You know, my favorite sandwiches — when I got a chance to — is just put the bologna, lettuce, cheese, mayonnaise, mustard, pickle.

Nigel: [00:06:12] Yeah ... Oh, pickles. Yeah.

Earlonne: [00:06:13] We don't get all that shit at the same time. [Nigel laughs]. You gotta put that shit together [laughing].

Nigel: [00:06:16] What about the chips? What about putting chips in there?

Earlonne: [00:06:18] Well, yeah, if you got it. I do put chips in some of my sandwiches, but they've got to be the right chips, not all. In any case, food is what gets you through the day, and most guys are really careful about how and when they eat the meals that's brought to them during lockdown. Lunch is delivered in the morning with breakfast, and I asked this one cat named Jay, who was sitting with his friends, about his strategy of saving his lunch for later. [Music fades].

Jay: [00:06:40] OK, I'm gonna mix the vegetables with the main course. I'm gonna put half of it in the bowl to eat that later with the lunch. You know what I'm saying? You know, and the stuff that you would never eat ... like the soggy-ass salad. The salad is just like soup. It's just ... just horrible. I mean, it's just a lot of stuff that you wouldn't eat normally. You eating that now. You eating it and you try to convince yourself, "Man, this ain't that bad." And it's horrible. Yeah, I think that's when you ... when you ... when you really about to lose it, though. [laughter, crosstalk] Know what I'm saying? This shit ain't never been good. You know what I mean? This ain't never been good. And all of a sudden [claps hands], "Damn, man. That was kinda good." [music, slow]

Nigel: [00:07:32] So, E, from what I've heard, on a lockdown, the prison gives you the daily recommended amount of calories, but nothing more.

Earlonne: [00:07:40] Nothing more. Right.

Nigel: [00:07:42] So here's my question [both laugh, nervous]. I didn't see you for about three weeks during the lockdown and I can't help but notice that you didn't really —

Earlonne: [00:07:51] I know you not finna [both erupt in laughter] —

Nigel: [00:07:53] Look any thinner when I saw you. In fact ... mmm.

Earlonne: [00:07:58] Look like I put on a few I put on some pounds? Healthy? Didn't miss a beat?

Nigel: [00:08:00] Didn't miss a beat.

Earlonne: [00:08:02] Well, you gotta understand, Nigel, I've been locked up 21 years, so that's because I'm a planner.

Nigel: [00:08:09] Yeah?

Earlonne: [00:08:09] I had my lockbox fully stocked.

Nigel: [00:08:13] OK. I'm going to ask you about that in a minute, but here's another guy who told us about lockdown boxes. We caught up with Aaron Taylor by the basketball court and, man, he loves to play.

Earlonne: [00:08:24] Aaron "Showtime" Taylor.

Nigel: [00:08:25] But because of the lockdown he hadn't been able to play in weeks.

Aaron Taylor: [00:08:31] [Guys playing basketball on the court]. A lockdown box is ... well, we call it an earthquake kit. So it originates from being on the level four where the lockdowns extend. You know, they can go minimum three months all the way up to two years, if necessary. So what you want to have in your lockdown box is food because if you're getting served in the cell they're going to bring you only so much food out of the chow hall on that tray and it's not really enough really to sustain a grown man, but it'll keep you alive. But you want to have some food in there. You want to have some cosmetics because you won't be going to the store, so you want to keep *at minimum* two toothpastes inside of a lockdown box, a minimum of two deodorants inside of a lockdown box. You want to have some soap up in there because you're going to be taking birdbaths, because on a real lockdown you're only going to be bathing in the shower area once every 72 hours. You want to have a couple of writing tablets up in there and you want to keep at least one book of stamps up in there for writing your letters and whatnot because you will not be using the telephone [fade out on court, guys shooting hoops: "Get in there!"].

Nigel: [00:09:38] So Aaron mentioned taking birdbaths, and I know what that is, but can you explain how it's done? [Music]

Earlonne: [00:09:43] Taking a birdbath ... it works just like a bird in a puddle, just shaking around. Rrrr.

Nigel: [00:09:48] [laughs] Just dipping into the water?

Earlonne: [00:09:51] Same thing.

Nigel: [00:09:51] OK, I can picture that.

Earlonne: [00:09:52] But, instead of a puddle, I use my lockdown box.

Nigel: [00:09:55] So that's one of those large plastic storage containers.

Earlonne: [00:09:57] Exactly. And what I do is I just take it and I dump all that stuff on my bunk; I fill it up halfway with water, step into it and get my lather on. And I take some regular water, clean water, and just pour it over me, and it's over. I'm clean and fresh, smelling good.

Nigel: [00:10:14] Nice. OK. Then when you're done you put everything back in your lockbox?

Earlonne: [00:10:17] Then when I'm done I've got to clean up, wash everything out and I put all my food back in my lock box neatly.

Nigel: [00:10:23] OK. So now I've got to know: what's in your lockbox?

Earlonne: [00:10:27] Alright. [music picks up speed, edited for overlapping effect] So usually I have potato chips, cheese popcorn, golden puffs. I have about 20 bags of rice, some sweet corn. I have cookies, three cases of 24 noodles, 24 clams in a box, sausages, gang of oatmeal, tin roast beef, chocolate peanut clusters. This is at that fat boy shit. Famous Amos cookies, coffee. You've gotta have coffee. This right here, you need hot sauce. I have salt and pepper, cheese sticks, coffee creamer, sugar, loose macros, and tuna, peanuts. Peanuts, they used to cost a dollar. Now they went down to 70 cents. Brisk iced tea, Nutty Bars, which is another part of my fat boy diet. [crunches bag of chips] Hold on, hold on, hold on. I've got one more thing, man. Let's see if these tater chips need to be freshened up a little bit [music ends]. Maybe I need to — [crunches into chip]. No. They're not stale. They're good. But I'm gonna have to go and eat them since I opened the bag. They're good. They're salty as fuck, though. [keeps eating, FX: prison door slams].

Nigel: [00:11:31] [Music] So I've also heard about guys getting written up for having too much state-issued food squirreled away. So how come you're not written up?

Earlonne: [00:11:39] Well the difference is they have state food, that's the food that the state provides for you. And like your lunch, you have to consume that within four hours, but canteen food and packaged food, that's your personal property.

Nigel: [00:11:52] Oh, so you can have as much of that as you're able to buy.

Earlonne: [00:11:54] Well, as long as it fits within six cubic feet.

Nigel: [00:11:56] Because six cubic feet is the limit on personal property.

Earlonne: [00:12:00] Right. But the problem is if the lockdown is really long, no matter how strict your eating routine is or how well stocked your lockbox is, you're going to run out of zoom zooms and wham whams. This is Michael Williams again.

Michael Williams: [00:12:13] So one day I'm sitting there and I'm hungry. So I looked at my bowl. I had some Thousand Island dressing. And I made me a Thousand Island sandwich. And I've told myself: never again will I eat a Thousand Island sandwich. Never again. That was my lowest point of my life, to have to eat a Thousand Island sandwich.

Nigel: [00:12:34] Yeah ...

Earlonne: [00:12:34] I mean, it seems tasty. Thousand Island. Hey, man, that's the — hold up. Thousand Island is the secret sauce for Burger King.

Nigel: [00:12:40] Yeah, but just on bread?

Earlonne: [00:12:40] They put it on a bun!

Michael Williams: [00:12:40] Yeah, just Thousand Island and bread. [crosstalk]

Nigel: [00:12:47] No, that is a low point. Sorry. That's a low point

Earlonne: [00:12:47] I mean, I think just bread in water might be a low point.

Nigel: [00:12:52] Yeah, OK, OK, OK. [laughter]. I guess you're right, yeah. It can always get worse.

Michael Williams: [00:12:55] There's been times, you know, there's been times on lockdowns where I have to call a couple doors down to see if they got some bread because I got the peanut butter and jelly. I just ain't got no bread.

Nigel: [00:13:01] And people actually will share?

Michael Williams: [00:13:03] Well you got to fish down there to get it. You know? "Hey, you guys got some bread down there?" And they say, "Come on down!"

Nigel: [00:13:13] [Music, slow] So fishing is something we talked about in season two.

Earlonne: [00:13:15] Right.

Nigel: [00:13:16] You send a line out from your cell.

Earlonne: [00:13:18] Mhm.

Nigel: [00:13:18] Somebody pulls it in.

Earlonne: [00:13:19] Mhm.

Nigel: [00:13:19] They hook something on it.

Earlonne: [00:13:20] Right.

Nigel: [00:13:21] And then you pull it back up.

Earlonne: [00:13:22] Yep.

Nigel: [00:13:23] Could be food, could be a note.

Earlonne: [00:13:24] Could be anything.

Nigel: [00:13:25] But what if nobody on your tier has what you want? [music fades out]

Earlonne: [00:13:29] Backend fishing.

Nigel: [00:13:30] Yes. This was new to me [laugh]: fishing on the backend [FX: prison door slams].

Nigel: [00:13:37] Hey Jessie, when was the last time we spoke with you?

Jessie Vasquez: [00:13:39] Last season, I think a couple of months back. We talked about my first fishing experience. I learned how to tie a line and catch something from another.

Nigel: [00:13:49] Last season, Jessie explained the technique of fishing on your tier, so we brought him back to explain how backend fishing is done. And this is kind of the gross part, [laughter], so don't say we didn't warn you.

Jessie: [00:14:03] And so there are certain ... there's certain times when you don't — you can't fish out the door, so you figure out a different way to talk and fish at the same time. So we take the water out the toilet.

Earlonne: [00:14:14] So run with us. How do you take the water out the toilet?

Nigel: [00:14:17] Yeah. How do you take the water out of the toilet?

Jessie: [00:14:18] Yeah. It's not a laborious process. It's just kind of nasty at first, you know, because you've gotta get a milk carton, empty milk carton, or plastic cup, then you pull it out and then dump it in your sink.

Nigel: [00:14:31] Yeah, OK.

Jessie: [00:14:31] And then it goes down the drain, right? But once you get it to where it's low enough, then you've got to put your hand inside with the carton in order to pull out as much water as you can. And then you hear, you know, the air running through the pipe.

Nigel: [00:14:43] Really?

Jessie: [00:14:44] Yeah. And you hope that nobody flushes.

Nigel: [00:14:47] Have you done this?

Earlonne: [00:14:47] So I'm used to this conversation, so I'm gonna let you enjoy your interview. Go.

Nigel: [00:14:52] OK, but I just want to ask you this. Have you ever — you've done this?

Earlonne: [00:14:53] Yes. I've done it. I've done it, but he said he put his hand in the toilet, see, so when it get to the level and I can't get no more, I do booty scoots on it. Booty suction. [Nigel laughing]. You know what I'm saying? You just sit on the toilet and you go up and down. And it suctions it. It stops the air so the pressure's pushing the water down.

Nigel: [00:15:14] But where does the water go?

Earlonne: [00:15:15] It goes somewhere else. It goes to somewhere else.

Jessie: [00:15:18] The problem with that is I couldn't do it because my butt wasn't big enough, you know, to cover the whole toilet seat. You know? So I really couldn't do that, that part.

Nigel: [00:15:27] OK, so Jessie told us about one of his adventures backend fishing, and this is the really gross part.

Jessie: [00:15:33] I was on the third tier and I was actually fishing some food with the guy on the second tier. I was trying to get him the food, but one floor is like 12 feet.

Nigel: [00:15:44] Right.

Jessie: [00:15:45] You know, so I had to make a fish line.

Nigel: [00:15:47] Yes.

Jessie: [00:15:48] Out of a sheet. So I cut a sheet and then attached a staple on it. And then when I flush here, my line has to go past his toilet.

Nigel: [00:15:58] Ok. Ok.

Jessie: [00:15:58] So that when he flushes his line it will get entangled on mine and he can pull my line into his cell. And once he has it in his cell, then we've got to take the water out of the toilets again.

Nigel: [00:16:13] Oh my god.

Jessie: [00:16:13] You know, and that's where, you know, the shitty part comes in because your hands are literally going to get feces on it, you know, because you're going to pull in this sheet, right. And it has to be thick because you're going to pull a soup, or a Snickers, or some rice, or some beans. And it has to be thick enough, you know, to withstand the weight and not get cut.

Nigel: [00:16:37] Yeah ... [grossed out].

Earlonne: [00:16:37] I think everybody is going to have this expression that Nigel has right now. [laughter]. She's like, "Ughhhh" [pained].

Nigel: [00:16:46] It just silenced me.

Earlonne: [00:16:46] Like, she's like no breath, like ugh.

Nigel: [00:16:47] I know. Like how much excrement is on it? And what are you wearing on your hands?

Jessie: [00:16:53] Skin.

Nigel: [00:16:55] You don't have gloves!? [laughing].

Jessie: [00:16:55] No. they're not gonna give you gloves.

Nigel: [00:16:55] Oh my god. So you've got someone else's shit all over your hands.

Jessie: [00:17:03] Yeah, yeah.

Nigel: [00:17:05] OK. OK. Alright. So the first time you fished like this, did it take a lot to talk yourself into doing it?

Jessie: [00:17:12] I was hesitant, you know, to put my hand inside the toilet, you know, and just pull something out of it, but necessity. You know, it was one of those things like, man, you know, I gotta do it. You know, guy's hungry. He already told me, you know, he needed some food and stuff and I had it. So it was one of those things where loyalty came before, you know, my own comfort. But it was — I even had time — a hard time eating for like two, three days because I didn't think that my hands were clean enough.

Earlonne: [00:17:41] But I'll say, you know what, so being on lockdown, it was probably fun for him.

Nigel: [00:17:47] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Earlonne: [00:17:47] Ain't nothing else to do, really.

Nigel: [00:17:47] Well, it's a good challenge, right? It's a challenge.

Jessie: [00:17:49] Yeah. I mean, you always find something fun to do, you know? Fishing gives you a pastime. [FX: toilet flushes].

Nigel: [00:18:01] OK Earlonne, I guess that's one way to pass time during a lockdown, but what else can you do? You're stuck in that tiny cell, and it can be for weeks and sometimes months.

Earlonne: [00:18:11] Yeah. We're stuck there, but like Michael Williams said earlier, they let us out every 72 hours to take a shower, and we take advantage of that shit. [FX: water on, chatting].

Michael Williams: [00:18:24] They give us 15 minutes to shower and they would tell us shower first and once you get out of the shower you can run around on the tier and grab books and magazines. And so people would give me Time magazine, People magazines, and I would read every single page, every page, even the advertisement pages, where it talks about medicine and tells you what will happen if you take this medicine and, "If you have this, let your doctor know." [laughs]. And I would just read the whole page!

Nigel: [00:18:56] So for you in the magazine, you didn't want to waste any words.

Michael Williams: [00:18:58] No, no, you can't waste the page because if you read it too fast or if you just read the pages you like, you're going to be bored. You're not going to have nothing to read, so you have to read it page to page. [FX: sound of pages flipping, prison door slamming, then guys chatting and playing on the basketball court].

[00:19:24] For me it was a vacation. You know, I hate to say it this way, but it could have lasted another month for me. So —

Earlonne: [00:19:32] You catch up on "Young and the Restless?"

[00:19:34] No. I don't watch much TV, but what I did catch up on was "Democracy Now!" I watched the PBS NewsHour, "Washington Week." On Sundays, I was able to get my Sunday morning politico on like this, right. 7:30 to 8 o'clock I watched "Face the Nation." At 8 o'clock I watched George Stephanopoulos. 9 o'clock I catch the second 30 minutes of "Face The Nation." And later on in the evening at 5 o'clock on 11.2 I can catch the new dude on there on "Meet the Press." And then if I miss that at 5 o'clock then I can catch "Meet the Press" at 2 o'clock in the morning, but yeah, I get to get all my political shows in. I'm a political junkie. [guys playing basketball fades out, music comes up].

Nigel: [00:20:14] So what about you, E? Were you relieved to not have to go to work every day? [both laugh] Did the lockdown give you a chance to catch up on "The Young and the Restless?"

Earlonne: [00:20:22] So the lockdown ... I did watch "The Young and the Restless."

Nigel: [00:20:25] You did?! Oh my god!

Earlonne: [00:20:25] I did. I did. I did.

Nigel: [00:20:28] What year did you start watching that?

Earlonne: [00:20:30] Probably — so that's something you watch when you come to prison. So I'll say probably in 1988 when I first, first went. You know, that's where I first got up on soap operas because it just passed the time.

Nigel: [00:20:39] How many evil twins have they had in the plotlines?

Earlonne: [00:20:42] Well, I mean, you have a few. Right now, the plotlines ain't that, you know — sorry about that, "Young and the Restless," but y'all gotta step y'all stuff up. [music fades out]. I did get my sleep. I did read a little bit. I did respond to letters, some —

Nigel: [00:20:58] Oh, listener letters?

Earlonne: [00:20:59] Yes, yes. I had a lot of time to sit back and respond to a lot of letters.

Nigel: [00:21:03] So was there ever a point where you were lying in your bunk and you thought, "Man, this just sucks"?

Earlonne: [00:21:08] Not one minute of it. Not one second of it. You got to think.

Nigel: [00:21:14] What!

Earlonne: [00:21:14] Prior to being locked down those 18 days, we've probably been running raggily since the first season [both laugh].

Nigel: [00:21:20] This is true. We were running raggily. It's not only you, but a lot of guys here at San Quentin are running raggily.

Earlonne: [00:21:28] That's 'cause we're working hard. We run a tight schedule over here, Nigel. Like we said before, San Quentin has a lot of programming, a lot of classes. Guys have jobs. And a lot of us are really busy trying to keep up with things.

Nigel: [00:21:41] [Soft music] Yeah, just like people on the outside are. So since I've been here there's never been any super long lockdowns. I think the longest was three weeks, maybe four weeks. But in other prisons — maximum security prisons — they can go on for months and months, so I can see how three weeks off might feel like a vacation after all of that hard work.

Earlonne: [00:22:00] True. I mean, we have it easier here in San Quentin than most prisons, but some things are the same no matter where you go. You have bad food, TV, books, and, shall we say, limited social opportunities. I mean, basically, it's just you and your cellie.

Nigel: [00:22:15] And what if he starts to get on your nerves? [Earlonne laughs]. That has to happen.

Earlonne: [00:22:20] Just imagine being in a 5 foot by 10 foot concrete box.

Nigel: [00:22:24] No.

Earlonne: [00:22:24] With another person.

Nigel: [00:22:24] No.

Earlonne: [00:22:26] Not being able to get out when things go wrong.

Nigel: [00:22:28] Oh God, it's gotta be tough.

Earlonne: [00:22:31] It's fucked.

Nigel: [00:22:32] Ugh. Here's Michael Williams again, and he went through plenty of long lockdowns in other prisons before coming to San Quentin.

Michael Williams: [00:22:44] [music down, sound of shuffling cards] The lockdown like about six months and we're like about a month into the lockdown. And I had a younger cellie and we were playing blackjack just to waste the day. And we were playing for push-ups. He cheated me and wouldn't give me my push-ups, so ... I don't know. I just felt that since he was so young, to hurt him the most would put him on quiet time, to not speak to him would hurt him more than us fighting or me yelling at him.

Nigel: [00:23:16] Did you actually say, "You're on quiet time."

Michael Williams: [00:23:19] I think I did. I think I did say, "You know what? I'm not talking to you. You're on quiet time." And you're in this cell and the thing is that during lockdowns you create a program. I would get up at 9 o'clock, work out to 11. Once I get through working out I'll take birdbath, clean up. So before 9, he gets up and do whatever it is he needs to do. But we stay to that program, but we just didn't speak. For, like, two weeks we didn't speak, you know.

Earlonne: [00:23:48] So did you end up — you seem like you hurt yourself, too. You wanted to talk too, didn't you?

Michael Williams: [00:23:52] Yeah, yeah, yeah. There's times where we were sitting there and I'm watching news or something and I wanted to say, "Hey, did you see that guy? He's stupid." But then I remembered, like, "Oh yeah, I'm mad at him. I'm not talking to him." That's why I was sitting there with my teeth clenched. Everyday I'm just sitting there like, "Oh, I can't talk to this dude." You know?

Nigel: [00:24:10] So what broke the silence finally?

Michael Williams: [00:24:12] We were were both into playing Jeopardy, that our thing was we had to beat Alex Trebek. And to beat Alex Trebek you have to answer 10 questions or more. And that finally broke our silence, our love for Jeopardy. [Nigel laughs, FX: prison door slamming].

Jay: [00:24:35] My cellie, you know, he had two sweatshirts.

Nigel: [00:24:39] This is Jay, the guy with the soupy salad, and he's been through a lot of lockdowns with various cellies.

Earlonne: [00:24:44] But the cellie with the sweatshirts, he was memorable.

Jay: [00:24:47] So he would take one sweatshirt and wear it like a sweatshirt. And he would take the other sweatshirt and wear it like pants, you know, just to keep warm, right. So he had that on one day, [laughing] and he had these flip flops, these shower shoes, and the little piece where your toes go in, it kept coming out. It kept coming out, so he kept fixing it the whole day, right. He kept fixing it. So he was [laughing] standing at the door and the flip flop came out again

and he just looked at it and then he looked up to the ceiling to say, "God, please." [all laugh hard]. And I, I just — I just fell out laughing man. I just fell out laughing because ... because, you know, it felt like at that particular time we needed some divine intervention. [all laugh].

Nigel: [00:26:00] [Spanish guitar music] Earlonne, I spend a lot of time with you guys, and I've gotten used to how much you laugh over really hard things and these guys can laugh about lockdowns now, but I just imagine when you're in it, there's got to be some really tough times.

Earlonne: [00:26:13] Yeah. It can be hella stressful, especially the long ones [music fades out]. And it can really wear on a person's mental.

Nigel: [00:26:20] So what have you been doing the last couple of weeks?

Lee Jaspar: [00:26:22] Well, we just finished a long lockdown.

Earlonne: [00:26:30] One of the guys we spoke to after our latest lockdown was Lee Jaspar. Some listeners may remember him for his guitar playing on previous episodes.

Nigel: [00:26:38] Shortly before the lockdown, Jaspar got a new cellie.

Lee Jaspar: [00:26:43] 22-year-old kid. He was half black and half Hispanic. Very traumatic childhood. His father spent his life in prison. His mother's a dope addict. Just a miserable childhood.

Earlonne: [00:26:59] The young man's friends asked if he could cell with Jaspar, probably because he's kind of a father figure in here and a safe person to talk to.

Lee Jaspar: [00:27:09] And when I met him I invited him into my cell. I said, "You can," because he couldn't live anywhere else because he was slightly effeminate, though he doesn't claim to be gay. He's been harassed, and he's been abused and he's been assaulted because—

Nigel: [00:27:27] All in prison because of that?

Lee Jaspar: [00:27:28] Last Thursday before we got off lockdown, he went to bed and he looked real ... troubled. And I had been talking to him a lot. And I was real supportive of validating him and, you know, so I was helping him with his music and his writing. And he was really becoming very perky and excited. Everybody was saying he was doing so good. That night he looked really down and I said to him, "Are you are alright?" He goes, "No, I'm OK." And we went to bed. And in the middle of the night — because I've been blessed with an enlarged prostate — I sat up to use the bathroom, and the whole edge of my bunk was wet. And I went, "What is this?" And then a drop of something hit me on my leg. And I looked at it and it was blood. And it went like this, and I rubbed my nose because I thought maybe I had a nosebleed or something was wrong me. And there was nothing on my face. And I looked up and the edge

of the bunk above me had droplets lining it. And I went, "oh my God. What is that?" And I jumped up and I turned the light on and his whole bunk was full of blood. He put a tourniquet on his left arm and took two razor blades and put them into a toothbrush and just gouged out the whole vein, right? And I immediately went into action mode. I hollered for the cops, and they came over, and the cop came over and he looked in there. He goes, "Oh, shit!" And I said, "Yeah, and you better hurry because I don't know how long he's been like that." So they took him out and they saved his life. And now I understand he's back. And they're probably going to bring him back to West Block and put him in an observation cell, which is right from the officer's station. And I'm happy about that because I'll get a chance to go over and talk to him and let him know that he's loved, and valued, and that someone cares about him, and that if he needs anything I'm here, still here for him and I would never abandon him. I just want him to do better. You know, and the sad part of this story is that he's one of thousands, you know. And so that's how I spent my lockdown. [Deep sigh] And I can't talk about it anymore. [sad, slow guitar, then switch in music].

Nigel: [00:30:42] So this last lockdown lasted about three weeks.

Earlonne: [00:30:45] Right.

Nigel: [00:30:45] Earlonne, do you know if they ever found what they were looking for?

Earlonne: [00:30:47] You never hear that part. You hear rumors. Guys are always talking a gang of shit, but the truth is we don't know why these lockdowns began, we don't know why they end. Like a lot of things in prison, we have no control. [music ends, new music].

Nigel: [00:31:07] Thanks to Lee Jaspar, Aaron Taylor, Michael Williams, Jason Perry and Jessie Vasquez for sharing their lockdown experiences.

Earlonne: [00:31:16] When we come back from break we've got a Count Time for you.

Nigel: [00:31:20] And that's when we play a little audio that we just want you to hear.

Earlonne: [00:31:23] It could be a poem, a joke, anything, really.

Nigel: [00:31:26] This time we'll be back with a song about lockdowns.

Male Voice: [00:32:03] [bell rings] Alright. Let's go. Let's go. Count time. Count time. Let's go.

Gregg Sayers & Maserati E, singing: [00:32:19] [Soft guitar music] I get tired trying to find my way // On this lockdown I'm a prisoner of my mind in my cell so far away // The years drag on so slow that it hurts // I'm so desensitized, victim of these lies, that the system really works // It's sad that the truth behind these words is something they may never know // If they can't see you then they can't free you, and you remain a ghost // Just keep us locked away to the public eye.

Everything's all right // Even they would have something to say. Take a look inside // Cuz time stands still in here while the world flies right on by // And not a damn thing changes while the world gets worse and the people walk by // And I get tired trying to find my way (trying to find my way) // On this lockdown I'm a prisoner of my mind and myself's so far away (and myself's so far away) // The years drag on so slow that it hurts (slow that it hurts) // I'm so desensitized, victim of these lies, that the system really works (that the system really works) // My mind's playing tricks on me just to make me feel OK // Just to break my heart when reality shows itself to me each day // It hurts so bad some days like my soul has no escape // Then I grab my guitar and I pick these strings and I sing the pain away // I get tired trying to find my way (trying to find my way) // On this lockdown time, a prisoner of my mind, and myself's so far away (and myself's so far away) // Years drag on so slowly it hurts (slowly it hurts) // So desensitized, victim of these lies, that the system really works (that the system really works) // [soft guitar interlude].

Maserati E, singing and rapping: [00:34:25] No lie, yeah. Prisoner of my mind. I've been losing track of time. I've been sitting in this cell for too long. Yeah // I see this system was designed to keep us blind and confined, but I won't let them prevail. I'm too strong. No lie // These lockdowns on the compound so cold, got you starving to death because the mess, they serving it up, and it's so gross // And you can't go to the store, so once that earthquake kit get low it's gon' shake up everything once everything is gone // Do you know what it's like to have no soap and only shower twice a week? // Mostly bathing out your sink with no toothpaste to brush your teeth? I swear it's deep // Do you think that's how you treat a human being? // I wish the ones that's in control would truly disagree. No lie cuz ... //

Gregg Sayer & Maserati E, singing: [00:35:34] Cuz I get tired trying to find my way // On this lockdown time, a prisoner of my mind, and myself's so far away (myself's so far away)// Years drag on so slow that it hurts // So desensitized, victim of these lies, that the system really works (that the system really works).

Earlonne: [00:36:08] That was Gregg Sayers and Maserati E performing their song, "Lost in Time." [music fades out, bell rings].

Nigel: [00:36:21] 'Ear Hustle' is produced by myself, Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: [00:36:24] And me, Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: [00:36:24] With help from outside producer Pat Mesiti-Miller, who also comes in to work with our sound design team. This episode was scored with music by Antwan Williams, David Jassy, and Lee Jasparr.

Earlonne: [00:36:40] Curtis Fox is our story editor. Erin Wade, our digital producer. And Julie Shapiro is our executive producer for Radiotopia. We want to thank Warden Ron Davis. And as you know every episode has to be approved by this guy here:

Sam Robinson: [00:36:54] This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public information officer at San Quentin State Prison. We are into season three. We are not locked down. And I do approve this story.

Earlonne: [00:37:05] Well ... so are you saying we're not going to be locked down when this episode airs September 12th?

Sam Robinson: [00:37:10] I can't make any promises, but as of right now with me in front of this mic, we are good to go. San Quentin is normal status.

Earlonne: [00:37:18] Next time on 'Ear Hustle': what it's like to be an immigrant in an American prison.

David Jassy: [00:37:26] Even though I was housed as black, all the blacks knew me from being from here. They're hearing me in the visiting room talking Swedish. [Says some words in Swedish].

Male Voice: [00:37:34] Man, you really spit that shit, huh!

Earlonne: [00:37:43] In the meantime, check out our website, earhustlesq.com, where you can sign up for our newsletter.

Nigel: [00:37:49] And Earlonne, guess what?

Earlonne: [00:37:51] What's that?

Nigel: [00:37:51] We have some new merchandise this season!

Earlonne: [00:37:54] Ah!

Nigel: [00:37:55] Mugs. Coffee mugs!

Earlonne: [00:37:56] That's what's up.

Nigel: [00:37:56] And they're available on our website, earhustlesq.com. 'Ear Hustle' is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Hear more at Radiotopia.fm.

Earlonne: [00:38:12] 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. I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: [00:38:24] And I'm Nigel Poor. Thanks for listening.

Jessie: [00:38:29] I'm not sure how many passes we actually did, but I managed to get a whole case of soup, which is 24 chicken soups, five bags of rice, five bags of beans, two snickers, a bag of oatmeal cookies and a bag of chocolate chip cookies.