



Episode 2: Misguided Loyalty  
First aired June 28, 2017

Yard Talk [00:00:01.07]: [Overlapping voices]

Nigel [00:00:04.27]: Hey, do you think it's quite enough?

Earlonne [00:00:06.16]: Nope, never is.

Nigel [00:00:08.12]: It's never friggin' quite enough in here, man.

Earlonne [00:00:10.06]: Never quiet. That's prison for you. All right, everybody, we're gonna need some quiet.

Nigel [00:00:15.15]: All right. We're recording.

Earlonne [00:00:17.27]: You're now tuned in to San Quentin's 'Ear Hustle' from Radiotopia.

Listener Alert [00:00:22.22]: The following podcast contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners.

Female [00:00:27.28]: [pleasant musical beat] Thanks to MailChimp for supporting 'Ear Hustle'. MailChimp is the world's largest marketing automation platform. 15 million customers from small e-commerce shops to big online retailers use MailChimp to reach customers and grow their business. Whether you need to sell your products, share some big news, or tell a story, MailChimp makes it easy to create email campaigns that best suit your message. Get started free at [MailChimp.com](https://mailchimp.com). MailChimp, build your

brand, sell more stuff. Support for 'Ear Hustle' comes from Bombas. Four years ago, two guys quit their jobs to make a difference in the world with socks. They learned socks are the most requested items at homeless shelter and realized there was a gap in the market for a better sock. They spent two years thinking about every single detail to engineer the perfect sock and Bombas was born. For every pair Bombas sells, they donate a pair to those in need. That's over 2 million pairs of socks so far. Bombas offers a money-back guarantee and 20% off your first order. To support 'Ear Hustle' and order your new favorite socks, go to [Bombas.com/hustle](https://Bombas.com/hustle). That's [Bombas.com/hustle](https://Bombas.com/hustle).

Shakur [00:01:42.09]: [creepy music] In 1985, I'm in a liquor store, and I see this brother come in and I say, "What's up, homeboy?" And he like:

Male: [00:01:52.28] "What that West Side Rollin 60s like?"

Shakur: [00:01:56.02] Now, that was the worst thing he could have said to me at that point because I was at the height of my career as a gangbanger.

Earlonne [00:02:04.02]: In 1985, Tommy Shakur Ross was 19 years old. What happened next at the liquor store is why he's here with me in prison thirty years later. [intro music] I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel [00:02:18.16]: Earlonne is serving a 31-year to life sentence for attempted second-degree robbery, and he's the co-host and co-producer of 'Ear Hustle'.

Earlonne [00:02:25.18]: And that's Nigel Poor. She's a visual artist who works with incarcerated men here at San Quentin, and she's the co-producer and my co-host, and together we're going to take you inside.

Nigel [00:02:41.06]: This is only our second episode of 'Ear Hustle'.

Earlonne [00:02:43.10]: Yeah.

Nigel [00:02:44.05]: And we have been totally amazed by the response we've received so far.

Earlonne [00:02:48.09]: Totally.

Nigel [00:02:49.04]: Thank you to everyone who's been listening and who has subscribed on iTunes and to our newsletter.

Earlone [00:02:56.22]: And website and social media. And, thanks to all of you who've written emails and postcards with questions for us. One reason we wanted to do this podcast was to get people thinking about what life is really like in prison, so we appreciate your interest and your curiosity.

Nigel [00:03:12.04]: Yeah, but can I put a request out there for more postcards? Because I really love mail.

Earlone [00:03:16.15]: I like letters too. I like when an officer walk by and call my name. "Hey, Woods."

Nigel [00:03:22.10]: Being excited about mail is just a universal thing.

Earlone [00:03:25.20]: It's the old art of writing.

Nigel [00:03:28.03]: OK, so ear hustle is prison slang for eavesdropping, and we want this podcast to be your ears into what life is like for millions of Americans currently serving time.

Earlone [00:03:36.10]: 2 million.

Nigel [00:03:37.17]: But Earlone, the story we're going to hear today from Tommy Shakur Ross mostly takes place outside of prison.

Earlone [00:03:43.17]: Yes and no. I say no because the one thing you hear a lot of in prison are these kind of stories. They be like stories like why guys ended up in San Quentin, what they did to get here, who they were on the outside. And sometime, a guy tell you himself the truth. Sometime, they'll tell you a lie. But other times, you'll just hear about it. But these are the stories about why we're in here, and we think about them a lot. And if we're lucky, our stories will change.

Nigel [00:04:10.14]: The story Tommy Shakur Ross came into prison telling was probably a lot different than the one he tells now. It's not that the facts have changed. He's changed, and the way he tells the story has changed. But before we get into that, Earlone, let's go over what we just heard.

Male [00:04:27.03]: "What that West Side Rollin 60s like?"

Nigel [00:04:29.24]: Shakur said that was the worst thing this guy could have said to him.

Earlonne [00:04:32.09]: Right. Shakur was a member of the Eight Tray Gangsters and the West Side Rollin 60s are a rival gang. Saying that to a rival gang member is a deliberate provocative act.

Nigel [00:04:42.07]: Let's start by going back in Shakur's story, long before he had that run-in at the liquor store.

Shakur [00:04:49.06]: I grew up in South Central Los Angeles. [melancholy music] Both parents was in the household. I'm the middle of 5 siblings. My mother, she was a nurse. She was a kind, churchgoing woman. Brown eyes. We favored each other with full lips. You know, the gap in my teeth. She had like this warm, melting smile, and she was just really a genuinely nice woman. My father was a Baptist minister. I grew up going to church. Eventually, I started to like resent going to church. There were things I wanted to do, like play football and take karate, but it conflicted with what my parents wanted me to do. See, my parents had this ideal that I was going to grow up and be this minister to follow in my father's footsteps. Some of the conflicts between me and my father was for things like misbehaving in church, and I would get like these harsh whippings. But, in his mind, he felt like he was doing the right thing because he came from that old-school Bible perspective: spare the rod, spoil the child. So, I started to resent my father for whipping me, you know, because I didn't really understand why I was getting these whippings, you know. That really affected me, because I began to really resent authority.

Nigel [00:06:16.01]: Loving mother, super strict father, rebellious son.

Earlonne [00:06:20.08]: Yeah, but a lot of guys grew up with that and even worse and don't end up in gangs. Here's how Shakur could explain the path he took.

Shakur [00:06:27.20]: [playground chatter] What drew my attention to gangs was, one day, I'm coming home from school. I went to this taco stand and, after ordering my food, three young men approached me and they was like, "Where you from, Blood?" I'm like, "I'm from nowhere, man." So, one of them flinches at me, you know, as to make me jump. Then, another one, he grabs the bag of tacos. And then, and then, another one hit me. I tried fighting them, but I was overwhelmed because it was like three to one. So, I ran. I'm running down the street, and I'm crying. I'm feeling like I've been humiliated because they took my tacos. So, I was, I was really mad, man. I was really upset. So,

that's when I decided I was going to join a gang. I was 13 years old. [calm groovy beat] I started hanging around one particular person, and he was a good friend of mine, and he just happened to be from Eight Tray. I figure like, "OK. I'm gonna be from Eight Tray." I like what I saw in terms of like the togetherness. I was just really amazed with all the different dances and the gang signs, you know, the overall culture, the style of dress, the music, like Parliament-Funkadelic. So, I was really excited and I felt like I was being a part of something. I see one of my older homeboys. He comes out of a car and he has like these two shotguns on his shoulder, and I'm like, "Wow." So, we're walking down 79th street. One of my homeboys my age, he's like, "Yo, he want to be from the set."

Male [00:08:10.22]: [rushing sound] Keep your head up. Keep your head up, homie.

Shakur [00:08:14.01]: [thump and ringing sound] So, he hits me and the only thing I could think of in my mind was, "Don't fall. Don't fall." Another one, he put his gloves on, right, and the next thing you know, three others jump in. [fighting sounds] I take my beating. And one of my older homeboys, he comes in between us and stops it. So, he's walking with his arm around me. He's like, "Start coming around." So, I'm like, "OK." And, even though I was beat up, and I had two black eyes, my face was swollen, I really felt proud.

Nigel [00:08:55.29]: I know you were in a gang.

Earlonne [00:08:57.07]: Yes, I was.

Nigel [00:08:58.13]: What I don't get about being jumped in is people you want to be friends with beat you up.

Earlonne [00:09:02.28]: Right.

Nigel [00:09:03.12]: They hurt you.

Earlonne [00:09:05.00]: Yep.

Nigel [00:09:05.23]: And then, you don't have any animosity towards them?

Earlonne [00:09:08.19]: Nope. You wear that shit like a badge of honor. [effervescent music]

Nigel [00:09:12.02]: When you were in a gang, did you go by the name your mom gave

you?

Earlonne [00:09:15.06]: Actually, I did. I had a moniker. Everybody knew me by my name and my name is cool. I'm the only Earlonne you will ever know.

Nigel [00:09:22.06]: But if it's not a cool name, then you have to change it?

Earlonne [00:09:24.24]: Right. Say for instance, if I met somebody from another gang, I'd identify myself as my moniker.

Nigel [00:09:30.08]: Is it a secret what your gang name was?

Earlonne [00:09:32.24]: It was Emac.

Nigel [00:09:34.02]: Oh, Emac.

Earlonne [00:09:35.15]: Little Emac.

Nigel [00:09:37.25]: Well, when Shakur joined his gang, his new moniker was Joker. It was originally because his friends said that he looked like Joker from Batman when he smiled because of the gap in his teeth, but I think there was a lot more to it.

Shakur [00:09:53.07]: [playground chatter] I was influenced mainly by my peers. It was more or less like teenagers. You had guys that were like selling drugs, driving lowrider cars. It was more or less the image of being like this ghetto star, and I wanted some of the ghetto fame. So, I would write Joker and the gang I was from on the wall. It was almost if I was like campaigning myself and, to go along with that, I was also engaged in delinquent activities, such as fighting in school, stealing cars, snatching purses. You see, those are some of the things that I was arrested for as a juvenile. I was looking for acceptance. Some of the older guys were like 15 or 17. I looked up to them and I wanted to emulate them. So, if these guys were doing the violent crimes, then I wanted to do the violent crimes, you know, more violent than them. I wanted to establish myself, you know, to a level that was beyond what they were capable of doing.

Earlonne [00:10:56.19]: In 1979, the Eight Tray Gangsters started warring with the Rollin 60s, which Shakur says was the first time a Crip gang started fighting against another Crip gang.

Shakur [00:11:06.02]: Prior to that, it would be Crips against Bloods. Initially, a Eight

Tray killed a Rollin 60, and then they retaliated and then we retaliated and then we retaliated. So, the idea was for us to like one up one another. But prior to that, we had these real close knit relationships with one another. But here it was now. We was like deadly rival enemies. So, my thing was, I had to represent. I had to be hard. I had a name to protect and I had a reputation to uphold, and so it would just go back and forth, back and forth, back and forth where there was no end.

Earlone [00:11:48.12]: When gang members start killing one another tit for tat, you hear most people call it "senseless violence", which it is, but it had its own logic. The best description of it I've ever read is from a book called 'America's Conduct: Inner City Escort'.

Nigel [00:12:01.26]: It's by Larry Davis and he wrote that book when he was in prison. Earlone, you knew him.

Earlone [00:12:07.17]: Yep. I knew him. We grew up in the same part of town, but since he's not at San Quentin, we got someone else to read a passage out of his book.

Male [00:12:15.24]: "The way it was set up in juvenile hall, camps, and youth authorities were by whatever set you were from. Whoever your enemies were, it was your duty to fight them the moment you saw them no matter what. If we as a unit were walking to school and saw someone from a neighborhood we didn't get along with in another unit going in the opposite direction, we had an obligation to run out of line and attack that person. And if we didn't, the other gang members would frown upon us and look at us as punks. The pressure was great to perform and perform we did. Black people were taught early on how to destroy themselves and we took pleasure in doing it.

Shakur [00:12:59.24]: [street noise] I was inside a liquor store in my neighborhood on Florence and Normandie. Florence and Normandie was a site where the L.A. riots took place in 1992 where you see one of the guys pulling this white older man from his truck and beating him. That was the neighborhood that I came from. In 1985, I'm in a liquor store on that corner. [store noise] And I see this brother come in and he has on blue 501 Levis. He got blue and black Pumas. He has a blue sweatshirt on and he has like this chain earring in his ear. He has waves in his hair. He also has a lot of tattoos. So, I knew he was a gang member. I knew he was a Crip. I thought that maybe he was from a gang that was nearby who we shared an affiliation with. And I say, "What's up?" And he like:

Male [00:13:59.19]: [rising music] "What that West Side Rollin 60s like?"

Shakur [00:14:04.18]: Now, that was the worst thing he could have said to me at that time because I was at the height of my career as a gangbanger. I was age 19. I had already been to camp. I had already been to Youth Authority. I had already been involved in many altercations between Eight Trays and 60s. So, when he did that, I felt disrespected. So, when he said, "What that West Side Rollin 60 like?" I said, "What? F Rollin 60. Fool, this is Eight Tray Gangster." So, at that point, I see another guy in the liquor store. He's standing by the door. I'm thinking that I'd been set up and now I'm gonna get ambushed. The next thing you know, it seemed like everything slowed down. A guy I know came into the store and he's like, "What's happening, Joker?" I say, "Ain't nothing, man." I say, "These n-ers are trying to get with me." So, all the sudden, I see an opportunity to go outside. So, I do a beeline to the door. [street noise] I go out to the car I was in and I retrieve the weapon that I had. When he came outside the liquor store, it happened so fast. It was automatic. [muted gunshot noises] I didn't really think about it. I shot him. I shot him 5 times. His eyes. I remember his eyes. His eyes were really big. His eyes were really wide open. I seen terror in his eyes. I saw fear on his face. [ambulance siren] The person I shot outside the liquor store was Stanford Bursey. And he died for no reason. He died basically over words. After the shooting, I ran across this busy street and [rhythmic beat] I ran around this corner and I heard two little girls screaming. "Joker did it! Joker did it!"

Nigel [00:16:17.09]: Shakur killed a man and there were witnesses who could identify him and knew him by name and you would think that would put him into a panic, but that's not how Shakur reacted.

Shakur [00:16:28.03]: In the gang culture, the way my peers looked at the murder was another form of validation. They were like patting me on the back like good job. You know, that was like accolades, and I was enjoying it. I wasn't thinking about the consequences of my action. I wasn't thinking about that I had actually killed somebody. That didn't register with me. It was more or less that, "I'm in this gang. Yeah, they accept me, and I'm this ghetto star." [high droning beat] The next day after I murder Stanford Bursey, it was like a ghost town in my neighborhood, and I'm telling myself that I need to get off the streets, you know, because they may be a form of retaliation. The murder I committed occurred on September 7th, 1985. [phone ringing] Four days later, I was in my homeboy's house when the phone rings. [phone rings]

Male [00:17:30.15]: "Hello?"

Shakur [00:17:32.03]: And it was somebody I knew who was telling me that my mother



and brother had just been murdered. "What? Hell nah." [phone ringing] I knew right away that it was retaliation for me killing Stanford Bursey. [phone ringing] I attempted to call my home. No one answered. "Damn." [phone ringing] I just started crying. It was unbelievable. I kept thinking in my mind, "I hope it's not true. I hope it's not true. Please, don't let it be true. Please, don't let it be true." [phone ringing] But, in my heart, I knew that it was true. It was the most devastating moment in my life. [phone ringing] [rhythmic beat and car driving] [car breaking] [dog barking] [door slamming] So, it was my understanding that the rival gang members, what they did was, they went to my parents' home. [hard door knocking] And, when my younger brother, who was 15 years old at the time, David, when he answered the door, they shot him. [clinking noises] And when my mother came out of her room to see what was going on, they shot her as well. It was very shocking on the community because here it was. You had a churchgoing mother and son who was murdered, innocent blood, who had nothing to do with a gang and they were murdered. Because prior to that time, family members weren't involved.

Nigel [00:19:20.23]: You were living in L.A. when this happened.

Earlonne [00:19:22.12]: Right.

Nigel [00:19:23.10]: And even though you were a teenager, you remember it.

Earlonne [00:19:25.23]: Exactly.

Nigel [00:19:26.24]: So, it marked a big change in gang culture?

Earlonne [00:19:28.18]: Hell yeah, a hell of a change, because if individuals didn't know gang bangin' was real, when this shit happened, they knew it was real. The old unwritten rule of not going after families of gang members was suddenly a thing of the past.

Shakur [00:19:41.15]: In my mind, it didn't make no difference anymore what the rules were. Now that they were involving families, I'm going to involve families too. I wanted revenge. But fortunately, on September the 15th, 1995, [police siren] I was arrested. I really had bad intentions. I really had bad intentions, and I'm glad that they arrested me when they did. [cell slamming shut] So, I was 19 years old when I was first arrested. I felt like a complete failure because here it was. I was responsible for the murder of my mother, my little brother, and Stanford Bursey. I did want to go to the funeral. I was in the county jail at the time, and I can recall the sergeant telling me that I wasn't going to be allowed to go to the funeral. I felt so bad that I wasn't going to be able to say my final

goodbye to my mother and little brother. My father eventually sent me the obituary. So, it was the obituary of my mother and little brother. [piano music] So, my mother, she has on this like church hat and she has this smile on her face. And my little brother, he wanted to become an actor, so he has all these headshots taken where he's looking around a tree. He just looks so innocent, in the prime of his teenage years. I just recall looking at the photographs in the obituary and crying. I can recall like listening to the song 'Purple Rain' and just crying, just crying, and I would like play that song over and over again, 'Purple Rain', thinking about my little brother, thinking about my mother. When he says, "I never meant to cause you any trouble. I never meant to cause you any pain." Right? You know? "I only want to see you laughing in the purple rain." It just really resonated with me because it was never my intention for my mother and little brother to pay the price for my actions. I always felt like, since I was the one gangbanging, that they should of came for me.

Nigel [00:22:01.23]: Shakur killed a man for his gang. His mother and his brother are killed in revenge. And now, he's looking at a very long time behind bars. His real family is in total disarray, but what about his gang family?

Shakur [00:22:15.04]: [droning music] They came to visit me, I think mostly out of sympathy. Right? For what had occurred in my life. But, as the years rolled on, all that started to dissipate in terms of the outside support from gang members. So, at that point, I really realized that, you know, I gave my all to something and it wasn't what I thought it was going to be. I felt betrayed in a sense. I really felt betrayed because of the image that I created, this monster, this Joker person. The hardest thing for me initially was when I was shedding the skin of Joker, that self-image of Joker, how others would see me. They automatically expect that I'm going to respond as if I was still Joker.

Nigel [00:23:02.07]: This gets at something really important because Shakur didn't want to be Joker anymore, but everyone still sees him as Joker, and that has to make it really hard to change.

Earlonne [00:23:12.10]: Yeah. Well, Shakur had one of those infamous cases. I mean, a lot of people heard about it. Some people are going to always see him as Joker.

Nigel [00:23:19.16]: Right, right.

Earlonne [00:23:20.03]: I mean, there's nothing he can do about that. But, prison does different things to different people. Some guys are the same guys that walked in here years ago, they just older.

Nigel [00:23:29.21]: Yeah.

Earlonne [00:23:30.11]: It's like they're frozen in time, suspended animation or something. Other guys, they change. They go through all the groups and all the shit and they think about what they've done. They say things like, "The guy I murdered..." for instance.

Nigel [00:23:46.07]: Yeah.

Earlonne [00:23:46.20]: You know, they take responsibility for the things that they did 20, 30 years ago, even though they know they're not the same person anymore.

Shakur [00:23:56.07]: I would say from my arrest in 1985 until 1996, I was going through a period of wanting to retaliate. [Islamic prayer] But in 1996, I started 'tending Islamic services and it had a huge impact on my life in a way that I viewed things. I actually had an opportunity to meet the brother of one of the guys who was arrested for killing my mother and little brother. He was a Muslim. So, even though I had changed, I didn't want to face him. I didn't want to deal with him. And, eventually, we began to talk. We weren't actually good friends but we were good brothers in Islam.

Nigel [00:24:52.21]: [upbeat music] So, he met the brother of one of the guys who was convicted of killing his mother and brother. That could have gone really bad.

Earlonne [00:24:58.19]: Hell yeah, that could have gone bad. But at this point, like we said, Shakur had done a lot of work to change who he was, but prison is full of guys who haven't figured it out yet. Shakur sees that all the time.

Shakur [00:25:11.10]: I was too busy living in the moment. I was too busy being impulsive and that's pretty much what is going on today. The youngsters are caught up in the image. They caught up in pop culture. They caught up in what it means to be a thug. Everybody wanna to be a thug. You have Beyonce on TV talking about, "I want a soldier. I want a soldier." Right? And so, these are the images that these guys are trying to live up to. And when you're trying to live a particular image, in order to be true to that, you're going to have to represent that at some point, even if that's not who you really are. If you're put in a place where you feel like a person disrespected you, yet you call yourself a gangster, how are you going to respond to somebody disrespecting you? 31 years in prison, murdering someone's son, and being responsible for the death of my mother and little brother. Some ghetto star.

Nigel [00:26:13.18]: [rhythmic beat] Shakur's been in prison since he was 19.

Earlonne [00:26:15.26]: Right.

Nigel [00:26:16.13]: He's in his early 50s now, and I think it's safe to say that prison changed him.

Earlonne [00:26:21.25]: I think he just grew up. I mean, he's not the same person that entered prison. Like, I'll give you a good example. He's no longer Joker. He's Shakur.

Nigel [00:26:30.13]: But it's not like the facts of his crime have changed.

Earlonne [00:26:34.22]: You can't change the factors of your case. He committed an atrocious crime and an atrocious crime was committed against him and his family. You can never change that. The only thing you can do is move forward with your life and try your best to become a different person. Muhammad Ali says it best. "The man who views the world at 50 the same as he did at 20 has wasted 30 years of his life." And, if you're going to change, the story you tell about yourself has to change, and that's true if you're inside or outside of prison.

Nigel [00:27:06.06]: That's it for this episode of 'Ear Hustle'. Thanks to Tommy Shakur Ross for telling his story. Our sound designer is Antwan Williams who's incarcerated here at San Quentin with Earlonne.

Earlonne [00:27:17.21]: Pat Mesiti Miller is our outside production advisor. Our story editor is Curtis Fox and the executive producer is Radiotopia's Julie Shapiro.

Nigel [00:27:27.12]: We also want to thank Warden Ron Davis and every episode has to be approved by this guy here.

Sam Robinson [00:27:33.10]: I am Lieutenant Sam Robinson at San Quentin State Prison and I approved this story.

Earlonne [00:27:40.12]: 'Ear Hustle' is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Radiotopia is made possible with support from the Knight Foundation.

Nigel [00:27:49.25]: Next time on 'Ear Hustle', meet Roach, a man who loves to nurture

critters. [insects buzzing]

Roach [00:27:55.14]: I used to have a pet black widow and I used to feed it insects. I'd be, I'd be out in the yard being pimped by a spider. And then, I'd come in with bugs, bees, crickets, and I'd put them in a container and it was action. It was theatre, comedy. It was really good.

Earlone [00:28:16.24]: Got a question for us? Send us a postcard and we might be able to answer it in a future episode. You'll find our mailing address and a link to sign up for our newsletter on our website [earhustlesq.com](http://earhustlesq.com).

Nigel [00:28:29.18]: That's [earhustlesq.com](http://earhustlesq.com). You can also find us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Please tell your friends about us.

Earlone [00:28:39.03]: Tell them about us.

Nigel [00:28:40.11]: I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlone [00:28:41.05]: And I'm Earlone Woods. Thanks for ear hustling with us.

Radiotopia outro [00:28:49.29]: Radiotopia from PRX.

Female [00:28:58.02]: Thanks for listening and thanks to Adzerk for providing their advertising platform to Radiotopia.