

“We’re Fighting for a New Trial”

July 2007 Mumia Abu-Jamal Interview with Margaret Prescod for Her KPFK Program “Sojourner Truth”



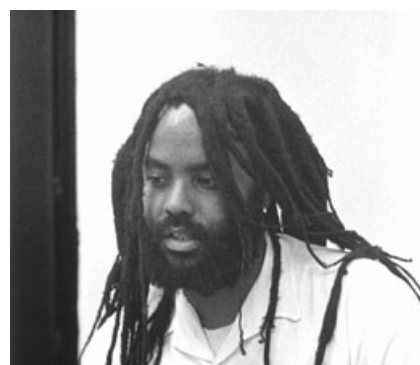
Margaret Prescod: On behalf of Pacifica Radio Network, Mumia Abu-Jamal, thank you so much for joining us.

Mumia Abu-Jamal: Thank you for the invitation, Margaret.

MP: Mumia, people argue over how you should be defined: as a taxi driver, as an investigative journalist, Black Panther, black militant, jailhouse lawyer – how do you see yourself?

MAJ: Well, in a way, all of those things and more. I mean, when people argue, sometimes people argue for simplicity, when life is rarely that simple. Life is complex. All of those things, many other things, an herbalist, a jailhouse lawyer, a writer, a poet – not a great one, but I try –, a father, a grandfather, a husband; you know, all of those things are correct.

MP: Can you say how you manage to get the information and the focus to do the weekly commentaries that are played on more than 100 radio stations around the country?



MAJ: I read, quite a bit, good, interesting books on political subjects, sometimes history books, I try to read several newspapers, and also try to keep my eye on what’s happening here, around me, so you know sometimes a local story is better than, say, a commentary on the war [laughs]. So you don’t lose your journalist’s eye. This is just, I guess, another beat, so to speak.

MP: How do you structure your day? About how many hours a day you have outside, and how do you use that time?

MAJ: Death row is what is actually in many states comparable to what’s called solitary confinement. By that I mean you’re in a cell by yourself, solitary. And with the exception of two hours a day, when you’re in a cage; some people call it yard, but I think the proper reference is, cage, you’re either alone or with one other person. So, for 22 hours a day, that’s a lot of time to think, to read, to write, and so, while it may astound a lot of people, I actually have probably more time [laughs] than the average reporter or the average commentator working on a radio station or for a general publication.

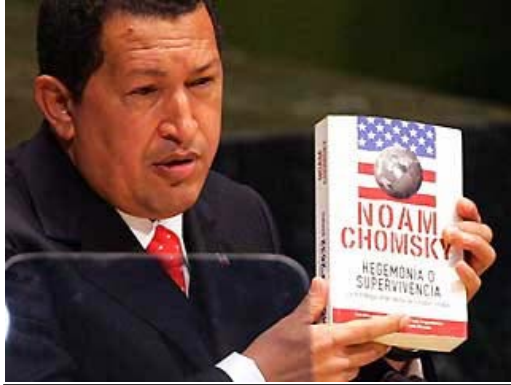


MP: So in terms of structuring the 22 hours you’re spending reading, writing, and thinking etc. and then the two hours you have some time for some exercise, perhaps...

MAJ: Yes, yeah. Well,

exercise in a cage really means, sometimes jogging around, doing pushups and what have you. For me, I've become an aficionado of handball. That's like tennis without rackets. [Both laugh] And it's very vigorous, it's a good workout, and usually three days a week, I'm able to get a good game, and I got a very, very good set-up game early this morning.

MP: How has prison life changed in the last quarter of a century?



Good, interesting books on political subjects...

MAJ: In ways that were not conceivable certainly over 30 years ago. It was unthinkable then that several decades later, we would be looking at, let's say, roughly three million people, you know, that there are more people in the prison system in the state where you're at, in California, right now than in the whole country of France. It's crazy, I mean, it's un – you couldn't even conceive of those kinds of numbers.

So in the last quarter of a century, what we're really looking at is what many people have come to call the prison-industrial complex. There is a great deal

of money, there's a great deal of business, there's a great deal of social power to be gained by the prison industry, in this sense, that many of the people who populate the prisons, who come from the urban core, the cities, and they're transported to the rural districts, where population has traditionally been very sparse.

But what a lot of people don't know is that everybody in prison is counted as part not just of the census, but of political districts, and if you want to talk about a cause of revolution being taxation without representation, or at least counting without representation – we're counted in congressional districts, but obviously, you know, our voices, our concerns, our livelihood – none of our interests are counted when it comes to those people whose numbers help get them elected, so to speak.

MP: When you are inside, Mumia, and your major supporters are outside, there's a real problem. How do you give direction to their support work?

MAJ: Usually in personal ways, and that is writing letters to people and just calling people up and talk to them, and usually also through supporters, who are able to communicate at a deeper, more intense level with younger supporters. We work people to people, you know, person to person, that's the only *real* effective way I think to really arm someone to do this very arduous task of being an anti-prison activist.

MP: What about how you see your case in influencing that of other prisoners?

MAJ: That's difficult to assess because it's difficult to communicate farther than people on your block. It's difficult also for people outside of prison to understand how truly isolated people are in some prison systems because of the differences in terms of construction with new prisons as opposed to old prisons.

In the old prisons, people were able to communicate and move around far better and easier than they are now. The new prisons have been built and constructed with an eye towards isolating people. So there might be a guy on the next block, but you may not see that person for six months, a year, I mean it's really quite that isolated, so it's difficult to communicate beyond what you can see on your own part of your own block.

MP: What are the older prisoners like in contrast to the younger prisoners? I mean, is there a difference that you have noted between those who have been inside for a long time, and the

newer prisoners coming in? How do the younger prisoners compare with what you are like, for example?

MAJ: Well, when I came in, I was considerably older than many of the young people who are coming in now. I was 27, 28 years old, which sounds like a kid to me now, but when you consider that many of the guys coming in now are in their late teens or 20, 21, this means that there's a profound difference between then and now.

Many of the older guys tend to be – ah, I have to say many, not all – but many tend to be more settled, more sober, and I think more patient, more conscious – that I think is a safe assessment. Many of the younger guys, especially in more recent years, it isn't just that they're younger, but that they come from a situation that is far more dire, far more provocative than those of the ones who came maybe 20 years from now.

By that I mean, the situation in many communities, especially, let us say in Philadelphia, is far more dangerous, far more economically unstable, far more socially disastrous frankly, than it has been 20 years ago. You can see that when you meet young people who really, I think, are in a constant state of rage, in a *constant* state of an inability, an unwillingness to listen to older people.



Berlin, Germany, May 2007: salsa drums for Mumia, demand for a new, fair trial

MP: Now, turning to your situation... I'd like you to tell us a little bit about this push for a new trial. Your legal team and your supporters are pressing for a new trial. Why a new trial, and why now?

MAJ: Why now? Well, of course, it didn't begin now. We've been fight-

ing for that for many years, in many places across the state, and many courtrooms. We've only been in the federal courts for the last, almost the last decade, but certainly since 2001, since the ruling came down. We're now, of course, in the Court of Appeals. We're fighting for a new trial, and I am reminded when I think of our new trial of what a former attorney who was on the case used to say: We're fighting for, not just a new trial, but a *true* trial, because in front of the former judge, Albert F. Sabo, who was a life member of the Fraternal Order of Police, who was referred to by many people who've practiced in front of him as a "prosecutor in black robes," it cannot be said that that was a true, reasonable, fair, just trial by any standard.

MP: If you are granted a new trial, can we expect to hear anything new?

MAJ: I think we will hear *a great deal* that is new. I said, many years ago, that the jury didn't hear a great many things, and heard things that were, frankly, quite unfair, untrue, and not representative. I said that in 1982 to the jury. I think if we have a new trial, we can prove that.

MP: And if you're denied your right to a new trial?

MAJ: I am not a negative person. I don't think in negative terms. That's simply not my nature; I can honestly say that I'm not a person who is pollyannaish – but I think that we have made a good, strong case! And I think the results will be good.

MP: How do you keep yourself together, Mumia? I mean, it's been 25 years, you've been through all of this miscarriage of justice, the overwhelming racism in the first trial – and now here you are on the battle front again, struggling for a new trial. How do you keep yourself together?

MAJ: I guess I can best be described as a busy person. It's not a new thing, but it's a true thing; I've always been the kind of person who feels like there is not enough hours in the day, 24 hours certainly isn't not enough. I always have projects unfinished, requests that cannot be met, letters that have not been [laughs] written frankly that I thought were written, art that I want to draft or draw or paint, pieces that I want to write – so, there are many hours in the day, and I try to use them well, but I've always been busy, and I think that's helpful. Also, I've been surrounded by extraordinary people. I've *met* extraordinary people. From my first day, many years ago, down in Philadelphia, in the county, all across the state. Extraordinary men, on death row. And I have also met people from many walks of life, who are remarkable, men and women, writers, activists, you name it. So that has been helpful – that has been very helpful.

MP: Are you hopeful?

MAJ: I'm always hopeful, believe that. [Both laugh.] You know, people can't escape their essential nature. Well I said I'm not pollyannaish, but I've always been hopeful, and that's just how I look at the world.

MP: Certainly that comes across. Anything else you would like to say to those who are listening around the country and online indeed around the world?

MAJ: I just wish people would understand that I am very, very appreciative and thankful for the many expressions of love and support that I've seen from people for many years. Every day I get letter; unfortunately, I can't answer them all, but I try to read them all. I've had a problem in the last weeks because about seven times a week at least I get letters from friends in Germany, but I, I am not quite able to read German yet! [Both laugh.] So I can't say I've read it all!

But I wish I could tell those people, you know, one on one, thank you! Thank you for taking the time to write to me, thank you for your thoughts, thank you for the good wishes, and thank you for the love and support. That I appreciate it, that I feel it, and I'm immensely grateful.



MP: Mumia Abu-Jamal, thank you so very much for joining us.

MAJ: Thank you, Margaret.