

Out of Angola

Robert King Wilkerson talks about resistance, the Black Panther Party, and life inside Louisiana's maximum security prison in Angola.

interview by
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Sometimes organizing around political prisoners feels like a necessary impossibility. The people in control have laws, police, and facilities to control those who disagree. We make fliers, call the media, and rally support, but ultimately it is a legal battle that frees incarcerated individuals. So, when we found out that Robert King Wilkerson had the chance to go free in the first months of this year, it was incredible news. It was the kind of news I didn't want to repeat or tell people until I was absolutely sure, until I saw him walk through that gate. On February 8, 2001, the state of Louisiana overturned King's murder conviction. A plea bargain to avoid a lengthy retrial allowed him to walk out of Louisiana's maximum-security men's prison later that afternoon.

The Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola is notorious for holding onto people; 85 percent of the inmates sent to Angola will die there. Just north of Baton Rouge, Angola is on an 18,000-acre former plantation, which from the end of Reconstruction to the turn of the century was run as an incredibly violent and inhumane convict-lease system. In 1901 the state of Louisiana bought it and turned it into a state-run sugar plantation. Angola's brutality and corruption was infamous, reaching a point of crisis and notoriety in the early '70s. According to the *Angolite*, "...violence was a brutal, daily reality. Double bladed hatchets, swords, long steel knives and Roman style shields were commonplace. Men slept with steel plates and JC Penney catalogues tied to their chests; even in maximum-security cellblocks, men slept with their doors tied and with blankets tied around their bunks as a means of protection and security." In 1975 a U.S. District court declared Angola "an extreme public emergency" and began 15 years of federal oversight by U.S. Magistrate Frank Polozola.

It's within the belly of this nightmare that Herman "Hooks" Wallace and Albert Woodfox formed the first official chapter of the Black Panther Party inside prison walls. In 1972 they were joined by King, who a year later was convicted of killing another inmate in a fight, the charge that landed him a life sentence. All three men know that they were targeted by the administration at Angola for organizing their fellow inmates, stopping rapes and sex slavery, doing legal work for themselves and others and for working across race lines and other divisions designed to keep 4,000 men under control.

Robert King Wilkerson served almost 29 years in Angola's solitary confinement cells, CCR, before finding some measure of justice. His co-defendant repeatedly claimed to be the only one responsible and the state's witnesses later recanted their testimony. In the Promethean world of prisoner appeals, these facts didn't make a difference until his federal hearing in June of 2000, where one judge berated the state prosecutor for al-

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lowing this man to sit in jail for 28 years without a case against him. A year later he is a free man.

His two comrades, Albert Woodfox and Herman 'Hooks' Wallace, however, are still there serving time in CCR for the murder of an Angola guard, a murder they did not commit. King, Woodfox and Hooks have been the forces to buoy each other over these long years. They are each other's best friends, strongest support and most diehard warriors. With King on the outside, Herman and Albert have gained the most powerful force to win their own freedom. We interviewed King at the National Coalition to Free the Angola Three's office in New Orleans. King's story is the story of many young black men in New Orleans, with a police record and harassment that starts as a young man. It is also an incredible story of a man released after a staggering 28 years in solitary confinement, a story of freedom gained through determination and struggle, a story of hope.

What year did you first go into prison?

My first time in Angola was some time in September 1969.

Angola was the first correctional facility you were in?

First adult facility. I had went to LTI, what they call the Louisiana Training Institute. At the time, it was called the State Industrial School for Colored Youth located in Baton Rouge. I was there a year or so.

When you were growing up, things were segregated at that point?

Yes indeed, it was totally segregated, I remember times I used to get on the bus and there was a sign "for colored patrons only" and you would get on the bus and we would have to sit behind that sign. Lots of times we would take that sign and put it way up front. It used to amaze me even at that age; I was around eight or 10 years old, how segregation was brainwashing. It was psychological. I say this because when we would take the signs and put them up front, there was scores of empty seats beyond the sign and I noticed that whites would get on the bus and they would never allow themselves to go beyond that sign, even though there were lots of empty seats. I found it was ironic and a little foolish, and I learned to think of it later on as psychological, and that people were unable to rise above this perception. It was the status quo, Jim Crow, but they just couldn't rise above it.

How about with the police? Were they something that was constant in your community?

They were patrolling the black community sort of regular. At that time I had a fear of the police, like anyone else who came up in that day. They were seen as something akin to God or omnipotent or all powerful. As I grew into PEOPLE

adulthood, I remember coming into contact with the police. I would have a job, but there was a law on the books called the vagrancy law, if you couldn't show visible means of support. The police at that time used that law to harass, intimidate and arrest a lot of bloods in the community. I used to keep a job. I like to have things, so if I could find a job I always did work, even when I really young. I cut grass. I worked on vegetable trucks. I had no problem with work, but I did have a problem that when I did get a job when I got off into adulthood, sometime on a Friday or a Saturday, during the weekend, I remember being arrested many times on the weekend on a vagrancy law, showing no visible means of support. And I would have check stubs and envelopes where I would have my pay, and the police would come to a place where we might have congregated, it could be a bar room or some other facility. They would arrest you; they didn't like the way you looked, didn't like the way you talked and you'd be arrested. At that time it was a 72; they'd keep you in jail for investigation allegedly to see if you had a job, but by that time if you had a job that required your presence, well if they arrested you for 72 hours, like on a Saturday, you didn't get out until Monday evening; you go back to your job, it was gone. So, that was my early experience with the police. Back to your question whether or not it was segregated; it was the law, whites and blacks didn't congregate.

What was it like when you first went to Angola in 1961?

For some reason, I had a vague idea of how it would have been during chattel slavery. When I got to Angola, coming from New Orleans, an urban area, and going out there in this rural environment. It was almost like I had entered a different era, I mean the mannerism of the bosses who were at that time all white, the people in general, and the location, it was like I had entered the past. When they spoke to you they spoke to you like you lived in the past, like something you might read out of a novel. If you addressed a letter, if you put the term Mr. in front of your name on the return address, it would come back to you, no such thing as Mr. then. You had to address all the officers by their title, you had to address them 'boss' or 'mister' or something along those lines. Some guys wouldn't call them boss and they didn't want to say sir every time they said anything, or mister, so we invented a name which was 'chief' and for some reason it caught on, because they loved that name. I guess it denotes you the chief of-

ficer, you the top notch, big-time, so they accepted that. Guys sort of invented this new colloquialism, so to keep us from having to say boss or mister.

But it was sarcastic?


Well, yeah, but I don't think they perceived it as sarcastic. They saw it as you referring to them as chief, and I think they acted the part, they played the role. That was one way guys achieved not having to call them boss all the time.

Guys worked in the field under the gun. They had inmate guards too. The inmate guards had the guns and they were worse than the officers. They held the guns, they lived in different areas or locations of the prison. During that period of time, it was pretty rough. They had orders to shoot a prisoner if a prisoner accosted free personnel. I know one guy who got shot due to an altercation with an officer. But then I've known two guys were killed in one day in the field. You would walk in the field and if you deviate left or right they had the option to shoot and some of them would shoot you. One day, one guy was wounded and two guys were killed as a result of stepping out of the guard line; they made a mistake and stepped out of the guard line. Here was a line maybe five feet from the regular inmate working line and you could deviate, you could step to the left maybe a foot, a foot and a half, and you were nowhere near the guards. But they had the option and they had the orders, if they wanted they could shoot you.

Was the inmate population segregated at Angola at the time?

At that time yeah, there was a partition even in the kitchen. Actually before I was clerk I

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worked in the kitchen, I got on a cook shift. You had two shifts, a shift for whites and a shift for blacks. The dormitories that I lived in, I lived in Hickory at the time, Walnut and Hickory were supposed to be black. They was all black, colored inmates. Then there was Pine and Oak. Those were for the white inmates. I was on what they call the big yard in the main prison at the time.

Was there different treatment for black and white inmates?

Oh yeah! There wasn't any doubt. Even now, but it's a little more subtle, there's a difference now, but at that time, it was blatant. I used to watch both lines, work details out in the fields. You had only one white line, maybe two, but you had 10 to 12 black lines. I would see the truck drive up and take all the white lines out. Don't get me wrong, whites were in the field too. But there were many times I saw they would go to the posts, the officer would take them out to the field and they would have everything all set up, but they would set out there for maybe an hour or so and they'd say well your line is cancelled and they'd send them back to the dormitory.

Did you feel like there was any inmates at the time who were attempting to organize?

During that time, this was around '61, I remember on one occasion guys did come together. This was an incident where one of the white officers had beat up a black prisoner, kicked him around pretty good, then they put him in CCR. This guy was kind of well known, so what happened was the guys on the big yard got together and they initiated what they call a buck. This was a buck against food, which would mean to them not eating. I took part in the buck. They took us as a result after a couple of days, a day or two of not eating, they took us out of the dormitory, loaded us up on cattle trucks, and we had to go through a gambit of inmate guards and free people. And the guys who were real well known got roughed up pretty bad because they had picked them out as the ones who had started the buck. That was about the closest they would ever come to organizing, when something blatant would happen.

As far as anyone being politically conscious at the time or politically aware of what was really taking place, or define what was going on, there wasn't anything like that at all. Not until late '60s, '69 or '70, at the time when students, white and black, were taking part in protests out here on the street and of course during

the emergence of when the Black Panther Party came on the set. You had chapters around the country and you had some of those people, such as Woodfox and Herman, joining the party when they went to Angola. Ronald Ailsworth, he was another one who went to Angola. There was lots of others who were affiliated and guys who became politically aware of what was taking place who went to Angola. I think they put a political spin on what was taking place in larger society so they put a political spin on what was taking place in Angola, and they could see historical connection that Angola was just reflecting the larger society. This is when the political spin came on struggling and resistance. It was as a result of the Black Panther Party, Albert, Herman, and others, later on I joined them.

What's your first contact with consciousness and black power?

I knew about Malcolm, Martin Luther King, and even during the early '60s I had read a book called *Born a Slave, Died a King*. It was dealing with the Haitian revolution, Henry Christophe, Jean Jacque Dessaline, all of them. I was a rebel from way way back, even before I went to Angola, but I couldn't articulate the way I felt. It wasn't until about well '68 or '69 that I became aware, what was going on inside of society. You couldn't help but feel it because there was a level of consciousness taking place, especially among black people. It seemed as if blacks were trying to redefine themselves as opposed to having been defined by hundreds of years by the definition the system had accorded them. That was during the period when blacks started wearing what they considered was more rooted to their culture. People had stopped processing their hair, were wearing naturals and Afros, dashikis and what have you. Later on I learned it doesn't define you because for some people it was just a fad but for others who are sincere about their roots it wasn't a fad.

Were you on the streets in '68 and '69?

I was on the streets in '69 and I caught a little bit of what was taking place. I saw and felt the change in society. I was arrested in early '70 and that physical arrest arrested me psychologically too. I had the opportunity to look at what was going on. I was arrested and charged with another crime and being subsequently found guilty and sent to Angola. I felt at this time with the experience I had already had with the system, that the police knew that I shouldn't have been found guilty, because the persons who had robbed a supermarket uptown didn't remotely

resemble me at all. I was offered a cop-out, which means if I would have took 10 to 15 years without a trial and everything would have been all right. They were using me just to clean the books on a robbery that someone else had committed. So I refused and I went to trial and I was found guilty and I was given 35 years, and it was then that I took a good look at what was going on. I was like whoa man, this is wild. I think at that time the real me emerged because I rebelled and I escaped. I see myself as a slave and that's a right, one of the only rights a slave has, is to rebel and you take that right, they don't give it to you. So, I escaped. It was short lived.

Where did you escape from?

New Orleans Parish Prison. This took place in maybe May or June 1970. I was charged with aggravated escape and I was given eight years. We grabbed some of the guards, locked them up in the cell. Our objective was not to hurt anybody and nobody got hurt, except the inmates who they caught that night, but none of the guards got hurt. The idea was to escape and I achieved that, I was one of the few. Incidentally, one of the guys, six hours later that night, he was killed by a deputy sheriff. He was seen somewhere uptown on the street. They say he had a gun, and he pointed it at the deputy and he was killed, but they found out the gun didn't have a firing pin if in fact he had a gun. Anyway, I was arrested not long after that.

How many escaped?

26, yeah 26.

You hit the streets and just scattered?

Yeah, I went my way and that's the reason why a lot got rearrested soon after or moments after the escape, because it was really unorganized. At that time I wasn't trying to organize, I had one objective in mind, escape and I made sure I escaped. The rest of the guys, I think three of us got free that night, the rest were caught somewhere in the vicinity of the prison, but I made it. I was rearrested later.

I remember meeting some of the brothers who were busted in the shoot out, in the ninth ward, Black Panther Party. I met up with them and it was at this time that I really put everything in perspective, rather they put it in perspective for me. I was able to see that I was dealing with a monster, that I was dealing with a system that oppresses blacks and poor alike, whites and everybody else. If you didn't have the dollar, you were lost, you was out of here, it didn't make a difference. I still saw the discrepancy

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and the double standard they showed towards blacks and whites. Usually any organization that comes on the set has a tendency towards nationalism, but sooner or later it becomes internationalism. The Party embraced all, some people think that they were a group of individuals as some call them lumpen proletariat, with a criminal mentality, but no, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, they weren't criminals, they were intellectuals. They created an ideology centered around analyzing the historical plight of blacks in this country and they used other incidents of people's revolutionary struggle to define what was taking place in America. The Black Panther Party had an international ideology and it engulfed all forms of revolutionary struggle. With blacks being most oppressed, it may seem as if it was confined to just cover blacks, but it covered poor and oppressed people. It was an ideology centered around eliminating the oppression of black people, but it tried to get blacks and poor whites and Mexicans and Native Americans and anybody else who had common interest. It was something that I could really relate to and I could embrace it. I never saw myself as being opposed to humans, I saw human beings as being equals and so I never had a problem living with whomever. Not that I didn't see color and even if I didn't want to see color, I was forced to see it.

You met the New Orleans Black Panthers at Orleans Parish Prison?

I think they were 12 of them, two females and 10 males. C1 at that time, that was the tier they eventually called the Panther tier, this is where most of them resided at. On C1 they steel-plated the windows and everything for the first period, but we were still able to communicate with them. Guys have ways to communicate; it wasn't no problem. Even the sisters who was being held in a different area of the prison, they were able to get letters over to their comrades who were in the Parish Prison. We communicated; it was no problem to communicate. I was on C3 at the time and they were on C1 which

only one tier separated us. That was until around maybe '71. There was another protest against conditions in the Parish Prison, and Ronald Ailsworth and Shelly Batiste they were Panthers, they were on the tier where I was. We used to hold political education classes and we initiated a food strike to try and affect some changes, because the food was bad and the tier was built to house no more than 48 prisoners, but they must have had 80 or 90 on the tier, maybe more. Guys were sleeping on the floor on filthy mattresses, roaches three inches long, biggest you ever saw a roach, rats. It was pretty weird, so we initiated a hunger strike. We sent out fliers, sent out letters, said what we were going to do. As a result of that, a few days later, they shipped what they called the ringleaders out. They came on the tier and got about five of us, off the tier and we went to what they call the Annex, which was located on Rampart Street, formerly the first precinct. They called it the Parish Prison Annex, but it was also a place where guys were being shipped out to the war in Vietnam, or they were being brought back to the Federal detention center for going AWOL. We met a lot of those guys who were shipping out and we tried to tell them not to go to war and the ones that went AWOL, we applauded them. I was over there about six months and they eventually sent me back to Parish Prison, but shortly thereafter they sent me to Angola. The National Guard was coming by in armored trucks and we were being loaded up on armed trucks and were being escorted by the National Guard to Angola.

Because you were political?

Because of that and because I think the guards were scared because that jail was full. Guys were being held in the prison on charges that they should have went to trial for and whatever they were going to do with them and shipped them out and even the ones who had been to trial and had time, they were being held in Parish Prison. So, I guess the guards felt it was time to ship them out. They were shipping out truckloads everyday. I had a battery charge,

aggravated battery against one of the deputies, so they shipped me to Angola in '71, by these armored trucks escorted by national guardsmen. But what they did, they sent me back a day or so later. I stayed in Parish up until April, from November '71 until the latter part of April 1972.

You met Herman and Albert then in Orleans Parish Prison?

I met Herman in 1966; I met Albert in '65.

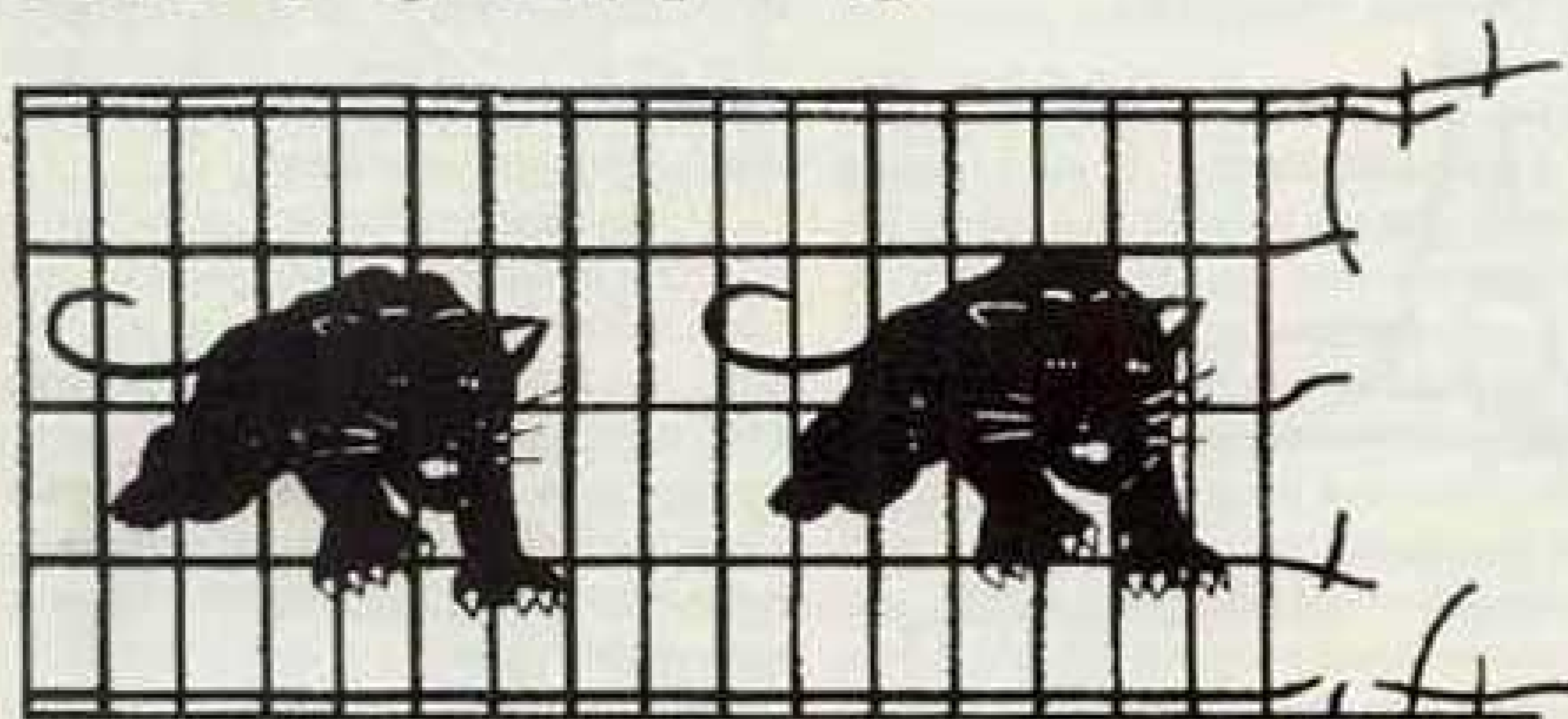
How about Hooks, what was it like when you first met him?

I was really impressed with meeting Hooks, because Hooks was arrested for robbing a bank. In 1966, even though it was being done, it was kind of unprecedented. I immediately liked him because he was a likeable guy.

In 1971, were you three tight, like real tight?

Oh yeah, we was tight tight, real tight, say because when I had got arrested and just before I escaped, Hooks was on the tier with me in C3. It so happened he had been coming backwards and forwards, filing post-conviction to get back, try and get that time back, and about two weeks before I escaped they had just sent him back to Angola. Boy was he mad. Said I waited until he left. He wanted to escape also. He subsequently escaped again and he was rearrested again. Albert, he escaped from Parish Prison in '69 after he was convicted for an armed robbery. I think he was given 50 years, and he left and he went to New York. In the Tombs, he joined the Black Panther Party. He gone and escaped and they rearrested him and he met those guys there. So we knew each other and we was real tight. And when we got back together again it was 1972, in CCR because at that time because when they sent me back in April '72, they were on B tier and I was on D tier. It wasn't until '73, well they split Albert and Hooks up, Albert and I ended up on the tier together, and we were next door to each other for years. We held political education classes, we taught guys how to read and write, if they didn't know how to read and write, and lot of other

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changes and other things that we engaged that we felt would kind of change our conditions. It was bad. They would feed you underneath the door, push food underneath the door. You would be handcuffed and shackled anywhere you go outside the cell. Prior to them putting them on they want to strip search you and go through an anal search and then when you come back, even if you didn't come in contact with nobody, they want you to go through the same thing. We had to kind of struggle against that. We got some changes done.

Did you go immediately to CCR (Closed Cell Restricted-solitary confinement)?

I went straight to CCR. Initially they told me I was playing lawyer for the inmates, that's why they put me in CCR, but then some years later I found out I was being investigated and didn't know what it was and still later found out they were investigating me for that Brent Miller killing.

I know it was because of my affiliation with the Black Panther Party, that I was placed in CCR.

They wanted to keep you out of the general population for organizing?

Yes.

Was there any fear when George Jackson got killed and others were getting killed in prisons in other parts of the country; was there any fear that that would happen to you all?

No, I was angry and it was a regrettable loss, I saw it as a loss, I was hoping he would've gotten out. I was just angry; it intensified what I already felt.

Were there any guard threats on you all for being organizers? Especially after Brent Miller's death?

There were lots of them, yes indeed they came to CCR many times. I don't know if this has been exposed yet, but they came one time on the tier. I think we was protesting something, they say it's in the record that they came on the tier with guns and they was discussing and debating who was going to kill Woodfox and who was going to kill Hooks, and this is on tape. They was debating who was going to kill who, and it just so happens the gun misfires though. I remember another time an inmate came on the tier with a pistol, telling Woodfox he wanted to escape. He had the gun on him, showed him the gun, the gun was checked out and it didn't have no firing pin.

So, it was a set-up?

Obviously. Those are just some. There have been cases where we had been gassed, beaten and you know we fought back. You can fight back for so long. You make your little showing, let them know you not totally intimidated. After that you know, things improved. They might not like

you, but they learn to respect you a little, I think that's what we achieved.

There was a time when you all seemed lost, we had never heard of the Angola two, three, even in New Orleans, but around critical resistance in 1998 is when people rediscovered your situation. What happened in that interim?

We communicated mostly with our relatives. We kept up with current events that were taking place. We were familiar with activists doing things, but we weren't in contact with any organization or no person. It wasn't until, like you said, 1998, when Albert got ready to go to trial. I think they put it on the Internet, 'Black Panther being retried for crime that took place whenever...' and so forth. And I think it was then that people really got some interest in the case. But prior to that time, no, it was sort of like we were in exile.

Did you all talk about the lack of support outside that nobody knew, or did you not even consider that there should be?

Well, we may have thought over the years that we should have, but we never griped over that. We felt like we had a stick to carry and this was our own stick. We didn't have any lawyers working on our cases; this is why we filed our own stuff. We filed our own post-convictions; we initiated that ourselves. We weren't looking for someone else to do something for us. If we were, we wouldn't be as far as we are now. Then you know the court was taking a different approach to dealing with post-convictions and so forth. At one time, you could wait any length of time to file a post-conviction and you weren't barred from the court, but things don't stand still. They don't wait on you. Some dudes are stuck out now, some guys are real stuck out in jail, they're legally dead, they're legally barred from the court. Like I said, at one time you could always go back in court, but now there are laws that have been erected both on a state and on the federal level that prevents you from going to court, to get you back in court after a certain period of time. In other words, you become procedurally barred if you don't initiate post-conviction proceedings after a certain period of time. It doesn't matter whether you are innocent or whether you are guilty; whether you are factually innocent or whether you are actually innocent. If you wait a certain period of time, and unless new evidence surfaces that allows you to get back in court, you are legally dead, you can't get back in court and at one time it wasn't like this. So good thing we had initiated our own post-conviction because we would have been legally barred with the laws that subsequently came up that have prevented people from getting back in court. As a result, Hooks is still legally alive, and Albert is still legally alive, and I was up until the time I was released.

I am going to rewind a little. Could you talk a

bit about some of the things you guys organized around in Angola? I know that Albert talked a lot about early on trying to organize against sex slavery, but other things as well...

That was part of prison culture, sexual slavery. I guess almost in any prison, you got weaker and you got stronger guys, or what they may consider weaker or stronger guys. What I saw, what Albert saw, and what Hooks saw, the only way that you can really prepare a person's thinking or thought process for change is the person himself has to change. Even though sexual slavery at the time was a big part of the prison culture, and it was something that the stronger prisoners took for granted to prey on the weaker prisoners, they had to be convinced that what they were doing was wrong. And it was equal to what was being done to the overall prison population. The only way that this could be done was to educate them politically. It stands to reason that the only way a person can really change society is to change himself or herself. So, if you are trying to change society, but you have a mentality or practice that is inconsistent with the ideology that you were trying to portray, it doesn't make sense. And not that Albert or I or anyone else was against homosexuality, because we know that that is part of the larger society, but it was just forced homosexuality. Guys didn't want to participate and they were being forced to participate and this is the thing that Albert and Herman and I spoke against. If this is what they wanted, it was cool, but being forced off in to it was a thing that the Black Panther Party and progressive people took issues with. Many of them said "Yeah bro, I can see where you're coming from." I think dialogue was a good weapon that the Black Panther Party used, basically and mostly it was dialoging with guys, but sometimes if it was a forced rape, if you needed to show equal strength to prevent it, at times we were willing to do that.

I was thinking that it was a time of reform and that some gains had been made, but recently a lot of that has been rolling back.

When federal mediators got off into the prison, there were some changes in procedure in how the prison operated. What they did though, these changes weren't designed to protect the rights of the inmates, but it was done mostly to protect the rights of the prison. There was a growing trend in the courts and laws that were being erected which were centered around prisoner rights. If the state violated these rights they was subjected to having to compensate the prisoner for violating his rights. So the Federal mediator and federal laws were affected mostly to protect the laws of the state of having to issue out any money for guys having their rights violated. Angola was living in the 16th century. They wasn't aware, some of the lawyers, some of the judges out there in St. Francisville who oversee Angola. They weren't aware of certain laws based on prisoners' rights. Where if pris-

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oners' rights were violated that they could seek redress in the court and the state would have to pay. So, these laws they really only brought Angola up to par with what was taking place across the country. In actuality, it was to protect the officials from being sued. A person can look at it like prisoners have more rights today than they had, but those are rights that you should have had a long time ago that was on the books but Angola wasn't practicing. Are we slipping back? I was and Hooks and Albert were still in solitary confinement, going on 29 years now. They might try to beautify or give you certain things that other prisoners in a men's prison might have. The thing is they can't really beautify, they can't justify, keeping a person in a cell for that long. I don't think they can.

Because your rights are still grossly violated.

Right. So even though Angola was brought up into what you might call the 21st century, they still apply to a certain degree, some of the age-old archaic laws that they were doing back in the '60s and '70s. So is there any change? Some people might say there was a change. But to me they could have given me a computer, they could have given me a car, they could have given me a woman 24 hours a day. They could have given me everything I wanted in that cell. As long as they kept me in that cell 23 hours a day for 28 years, nearly 29 years, they wouldn't have done anything except continue to violate my human rights. When they got guys to frame me up, to include me into an event that took another inmate's life, and later on these guys recanted saying that they were put up to do this by the prison officials, anytime they could do this and get away with it, that's not much change. Anytime they could do this with Albert and Herman, get guys to lie, pay guys off to say they participated in the murder of a guard. Anytime they can send guys to Angola who are actually innocent of crimes because they want to clean the books and can keep them there and violate their human rights for the rest of their lives, I can't see where there's much change. Like I say, some people are satisfied with seeing much of nothing. They strive for mediocrity. I don't see any change, I think it's human rights violation to the utmost.

I wanted to get your perspective on how things have changed coming back to New Orleans. I think people our age want to know whether you see a change in say race relations or class war. You are in a unique position, having a time lapse to life on the street.

The class war between the rich and the poor hasn't changed, I don't think. What I have seen is change in perception and mentality. I've seen with younger whites and younger blacks, I think there is a more ongoing dialogue, and working relationship than existed when I was out here 30 some years ago. Recently at Critical Resistance at Columbia University, I saw a lot of young students who were real interested in the state of affairs of America. It reminded me of 1968 when the students became involved in trying to prevent America from continuing the Vietnam War. I've been inspired by what I've seen so I imagine you can call this change. For awhile there seemed to be a period where change had stopped, there seemed to be a rest period. I think there is a renewed focus and a wave of momentum, a momentum that is taking things in this country that probably can affect that gulf that exists between the rich and the poor. So in that sense there I guess there is hope, there is the possibility that there could be some change. I tell you what; the foundation for change is being laid, so for that I am encouraged. I'm very encouraged about that. What's taking place now, we have to be consistent. Like someone told me not long ago, there has to be some continuity in what we're doing. As long as we keep doing what we're doing, as long as we keep growing, as long as we stay focused.

We should wrap this up. But the last thing, where do we go from here?

My commission is what it was while I was in Angola, to affect change. My commission whatever time I have left on this planet is the work, keep focus on the Angola Three and other groups, to work for prison reform and to continue on doing whatever is necessary to bring about these changes. Hopefully some changes will come about. In any event, I'll continue to hope for the change and to work for the change and do whatever I can, to try to affect these changes work with whomever I can. I will work

with whomever will work with me to bring about these changes. I'll continue. If I've got to speak at this place or that place, if I've got to travel here or there, hey, so be it, bring it on, I'm ready to go. I've been resting 31 years and I'm not tired.

Albert Woodfox achieved the retrial that broke the A3 story to the world. Filing all his own legal work, Albert's conviction was overturned and in December 1998, he was retried. With supporters organizing only several weeks before the trial and with painfully inadequate court appointed attorneys actually doing the courtroom work, Albert was reconvicted and sent right back to CCR at Angola. From there, he resumed his efforts of legal work on his and others' cases. Originally from the Tremé neighborhood, a self-described 'knucklehead' and petty-criminal, he was in and out of penal institutions as a youth, he escaped from a New Orleans courthouse in 1969 and went to New York City, where he hooked up with Black Panther Party there in the NYC Jails. He was extradited back to Angola shortly after, but his focus had permanently shifted to liberation struggles, both for himself and others.

Herman 'Hooks' Wallace has his first shot at freedom in a long time. On June 28, as this article goes to print, Herman will have a hearing in Louisiana's 19th Judicial District Court. The state will argue that Herman's time limit for a new trial has expired. From a legal standpoint, this is clearly not the case. There is no evidence to tie Hooks or Albert to the Miller murder, except testimony of other inmates long since dead and who received early release based and thanks from the warden after this case closed. Local supporters are turning out to show that Herman has a community that cares and is watching what happens, that we cannot let the state railroad this case any longer.

For the complete story of these three men and their situation, plus updates on what you can do to get involved, go to <http://www.prisonactivist.org/angola> or www.prisonactivist.org/angola. To find out how to start a chapter of the National Coalition to Free the Angola Three, call 504.940.6756. The fight is not limited to them. There are political prisoners throughout this nation, many still serving time as a result of vicious COINTELPRO activities in the '60s and '70s. With the heightened surveillance and intimidation of today's activist community, we must learn from the past and never forget. In 30 years, it may be some of our comrades that we fight for. ★

Anytime they can send guys to Angola who are actually innocent of crimes because they want to clean the books and can keep them there and violate their human rights for the rest of their lives, I can't see where there's much change.

Radical Cheerleaders ★ Sebastião Selgado ★ Bob Kerrey in Vietnam ★ Pontiac

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