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Bruce Jackson On How He Became the Dean of Prison Folklore

Bruce Jackson

Prisoners in Arkansas' infamous Cummins Prison Farm, circa mid-'70s.

Bruce Jackson is an author and English professor at SUNY Buffalo, but he's better known in some circles as the dean of prison culture. Starting in the early-'60s, Jackson, then a young fellow at Harvard, began visiting prisons in the South, first to record folk songs and then to interview inmates about their life in and out of the criminal justice system. The work resulted in the classics "A Thief's Primer" (1969) and "In the Life" (1972), and, with wife and collaborator Diane Christian, the documentary film and book "Death Row."

Jackson also took photos while visiting the prisons, first as an aide memoir, then more seriously, and his photographs of inmates at the Cummins Prison Farm in Arkansas (dubbed at one point the worst prison in the country) have been exhibited at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. Jackson's latest book, "Pictures from A Drawer" (Temple University Press, 2009), examines a collection of 1930s-era prison photos that a Cummins inmate slipped him years ago during a visit.

Speakeasy happened to be in Buffalo recently and dropped in on Jackson for a conversation.

The Wall Street Journal: How did you first begin to write about prisons?

In 1960, I went to graduate school in Indiana and was part of the folk scene there. They had a folklore program. They all knew the songs I knew and they could play and sing better. I decided I would go and find some songs they didn't know. So I started going to prisons. I went to Indiana State prison. I went to Missouri State Prison. I started recording those songs and realized I was full of s*** as a musician. Here I am this Jewish kid from Brooklyn singing black convict work songs. It was fine in New York, but when I got to Texas and I'm standing in an Oak grove with a bunch of convicts, I felt like a very silly person. So I never performed again. But I recorded those songs and Harvard published a book of them called "Wake Up Dead Man."

You also began talking to prisoners about their experience.

It's rare in the penitentiary that an outsider is around who likes to listen to people talk and tell their stories. People would tell me stories and I would record them. I had no purpose in mind. The administrators let me in because I was recording

music and they thought it was totally of no interest to them whatsoever. If I said, 'I want to write about how prison works or the ethnography of prison,' they wouldn't have let me near the place.

How did "A Thief's Primer" and "In the Life" come about?

I got a grant from Harvard, which gave me three years to do whatever I wanted. I decided to go down to Texas and record some black convict work songs, which I'd heard on Library of Congress albums. The director of the Texas prison system was a man named George Beto. He was happy to have someone from Harvard visit him in Huntsville, Texas. However, it was really hot and muggy down on the Texas gulf. The two main prisons I worked in were Ramsey and Ellis. There were only two rooms in Ramsey that were air-conditioned. One was the warden's office, the other was the dentist office. I would go and hang out in the dentist's office.

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An inmate at Cummins.

There was a free-world dentist that would come in every once in a while, but most of the dental work was handled by a guy named Jim Miller, who had been a dentist until he got busted for narcotics. His assistant was a former safecracker and check forger. I'd sit and drink coffee with the check forger. He would tell me stories about being in the life. Or I would ask him what certain slang terms meant. I'd go in the evenings and record interviews. After a while I realized, this is worth a book itself. The interviews eventually coalesced into "A Thief's Primer."

That book and "In the Life" read like Studs Terkel goes to jail. You let the convicts tell their stories unadorned, in an oral history style.

What's interesting about "A Thief's Primer" to me is not just what he told me about crime and prison but his voice in doing it. It's not so much a book about crime but a thief's presentation about his life in crime. It's his version of what it is. Either his perception of his life or the way he wanted to present his life to someone else -– which is what we all do. "In the Life" is in a way a variant on the same thing, but with that book I used bits and pieces from hundreds of interviews in a lot of different prisons.

Was there greater interest from the public in those days about prison culture?

There was a greater interest in the world of the outsider. Remember, my work from '63 to '67 was funded by Harvard. Here's Harvard sending me to penitentiaries, out on the streets with drug dealers and drug users. I did a lot of work in the drug world then. We are all creatures of our time.

Do you still visit and study prison life?

Diane and I did a book and a film in '79 about men waiting to be executed in Texas. Every day we were working from five in the morning to 10 at night. After two weeks, we burned out. Death row was liking working in a cancer ward. It's a world full of death. It's death that gets you there, and it's death that for most of the people is waiting for you there. I'd sit in cells and talk with these guys for hours. Emotionally, we just got exhausted. I realized I had not only burned out on death row but I burned out on the world of prison and crime.

Yet your latest book returned to the topic after years of being away.

The very last day I was in Cummins prison, one of the convicts who worked taking mug shots said, I've got something that will interest you. He opens a drawer and it's full of these old yellow mug shots from the teens, '20s and '30s. He said, help yourself. I said, don't they belong to somebody? He said, 'The state. F— 'em.' So I started stuffing my pockets.

Part of what the criminal justice system has to do is fold us into a dossier, make us Number XXX. Not Joe, Mary, Fred. Part of the instrument of that are prison photographs, which are usually small, stapled into a folder, shown to nobody else. In prison mug shots, people aren't posing. They're not putting on their picture face. Back in the late-'70s when I first

wanted to publish them it would have been incredibly expensive. But I have a good scanner and Photoshop and a good printer. I realized one day that I can do this. I felt a real presence with those pictures.

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Inmates on a work truck at Cummins