[Snap Judgment]

**Glynn:** Snappers, you know we love some Ear Hustle over here at Snap Judgment. It's the show created by people and stories from San Quentin State Penitentiary, a short drive from Snap Studios. They're Snap family, and they just launched their Eight Season. Their first episode focuses on the offense of August 21st, 1971. The date marks the deadliest day in San Quentin history, and it's still a painful topic. It’s centered around one man whom you may not be familiar with, George Jackson. But George's legacy, just like George’s stories, refused to be forgotten.

[abstract sounds]

**John:** I’m John “Yahya” Johnson, co-producer of the Ear Hustle podcast and the campaign coordinator for the Repeal California Three Strikes Law Coalition. The following episode of Ear Hustle includes strong language and mentions of violence and suicide. Discretion is advised.

[prison sounds]

**Ken:** One day, I let a friend of mine read an article. He brought the article back and I threw it on my bed and walked out to chow. And it just so happened that the tier officer went in my cell, did a cell search, and read the article, and on the front of the article, it had a picture of George. When I was in chow, somebody came and told me, “Hey, Ken, you got like 15 officers at your cell.” When I walked back up to my cell, they cuffed me and put yellow tape on the outside of my cell and took me to administrative segregation.

**Nigel:** In 2007, Kenneth Oliver was in prison at California Men’s Colony in San Luis Obispo. The article he left on his bed had a picture of George Jackson on its cover.

**Earlonne:** When George Jackson was incarcerated in California in the 1960s, he wrote the books *Blood in My Eye* and *Soledad Brother*. He died violently in San Quentin on August 21st, 1971.

**Ken:** And so, I'm like, “Why are you taking me administrative segregation for? I haven't done anything.” And he said, “Well, you're not supposed to be having reading material like this.” And I said, “Reading material like what? He said, “Well, we saw this article and then we saw you had this book, *Soledad Brother* and *Blood in My Eye*. And what are you doing with this?” I said, “I've had these books for 10 years, ever since I've been in prison. Y'all let it through R&R, and I never knew there was a problem with it.” And he said, “Well we've been told to get rid of you.” “What do you mean get rid of me?” And he said, “They want you to go to the SHU forever.”

**Earlonne:** It wasn’t forever, but Kenneth ended up spending over eight years in the Security Housing Unit, “The Hole,” because of George Jackson.

**Ken:** How are you scared of somebody who's been dead for 40, 50 years? I mean, George Jackson must have been the most powerful cat on earth for you 40 something years later to be so scared that somebody reads a paragraph that he wrote, that you're willing to neutralize that person forever because you're so scared that you might wake up the George Jackson in me.

**Nigel:** Today on the show, 50 years after George Jackson’s death at San Quentin, we pick up that question: What was and what still is so dangerous about George Jackson? I’m Nigel Poor.

**Earlonne:** And I’m Earlonne Woods. And this is Ear Hustle from PRX’s Radiotopia.

[Ear Hustle theme music playing]

**Nigel:** E, do you remember when you first heard about George Jackson?

**Earlonne:** Yes, I was in the Youth Authority. I read one of his books, but it seemed kind of academic to me at that time, like *way* beyond my comprehension.

**Nigel:** But still it was a book circulating in the Youth Authority? I mean, who gave it to you? And what made you think you wanted to read it in the first place?

**Earlonne:** Well, I got the book from a dude named Poindexter.

**Nigel:** [laughs] Oh, my God, perfect name.

**Earlonne:** Yeah, that was his handle. He was smart as hell, glasses and all. And he recommended it, and he was like, “Man, this is something you want to read.”

**Nigel:** Right.

**Earlonne:** What about you, Nyge?

**Nigel:** I’d heard of George Jackson growing up, but it was just another one of those crazy 1970s stories. For me, it was up there with the Mansons, and Patty Hearst, and the Weather Underground. I heard about it, but I didn’t really understand all the details.

**Earlonne:** But I’ll say this though, the man looms large in San Quentin. He’s part of the knowledge. When we started this podcast, Nyge, I knew eventually we had to do a story about George Jackson.

**Nigel:** But this is a super-sensitive subject for the people who work in corrections in California. We were all nervous about how CDCR would respond to the idea.

**Earlonne:** They weren’t thrilled, at all.

**Nigel:** Mm-hmm.

**Earlonne:** George Jackson is a red flag, even today. CDCR thinks of him as a troublemaker, a thug, a killer. But some guys inside think of him as a role model. A righteous dude, a great thinker who was targeted by California prison officials. And there’s no bridging the two sides together on this one.

**Nigel:** Nope.

**Earlonne:** To this day, the name George Jackson is a source of tension in California prisons.

**Nigel:** Oh, man. It sure is. Both COs and incarcerated people. I mean, I’ve noticed when you ask people about it, Earlonne, this weird vibe comes over the room.

**Earlonne:** I remember you would never, ever, ever see a George Jackson book in its cover.

**Nigel:** Oh, really?

**Earlonne:** Nah. But they are in there, and they do get passed around. Sometimes, guys would take a hardbound book and just put a different cover on it. Or they’d photocopy the book and then carry it around like a notebook or something.

**Nigel:** Always a workaround**.**

**Earlonne:** Yep.

**Nigel:** Ken Oliver, the guy we heard from earlier, first heard of George Jackson when he was a young man in California State Prison, Sacramento. A guy in the cell next to his passed him a copy of *Soledad Brother*.

**Ken:** I think reading *Soledad Brother* was the first time that I was moved spiritually, emotionally, and viscerally by reading a book. The first thing that he taught me was how to be unapologetic about who you were. I just remember learning so much about history, and the revelation that was occurring in my mind about why I was sitting in a solitary confinement cell at 19 years old, some of the things that led to that trajectory that I never knew because I was just in it.

**Earlonne:** The man woke up a lot of guys inside when he was living and long after he died. And even though his books are not officially banned, George Jackson is still a painful thorn in the side of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

**Nigel:** To explain how he became such a divisive figure, we need to get into a little history. So, Earlonne, you want to kick this off?

[tense music]

**Earlonne:** George Jackson was born in Chicago in 1941. In his book, *Soledad Brother,* he writes, “My family knew very little of my real life. In effect, I lived two lives. The one with my mama and sisters, and the thing on the streets.”

**Nigel:** Jackson writes about getting picked up by the police a couple of times for mugging, and he ran away from home a lot. So, in an effort to keep George out of trouble, his father moved the family out to LA in 1956.

**Earlonne:** But LA didn’t keep me out of trouble, Nyge.

**Nyge:** Mm-hmm.

**Earlonne:** And it didn’t work for George either.

**Nigel:** Nope. Like you, he ended in the California Youth Authority. Then, in 1961, when he was 18, he was arrested and sentenced to one year to life, for an armed robbery of $70 from a gas station.

**Earlonne:** One year to life.

**Nigel:** Mm.

**Earlonne:** That’s what called an indeterminate sentence, kept guys in prison for long periods of time. And George was no exception to this bullshit practice. He got written up 47 times, and those were used against him every time he went up for parole. His sentence just kept getting longer and longer.

**Nigel:** But while he was getting himself in trouble, Jackson was also educating himself, mentally and physically. He became a serious student of martial arts.

**John**: He’d just be showing all kinds of punches and kicks and sidekicks and all that. And he had all these magazines, martial arts, and stuff like that.

**Nigel:** This is John Clutchette. He and George Jackson were incarcerated together at Soledad Prison in 1969, before Jackson had written his books and become famous. E, didn’t you used to cell with his son?

**Earlonne:** I did. But I didn’t know his dad. I finally met him last year in the transitional house he was living in. He’d only been out a couple years. He told me that back in Soledad, he and George used to spar with each other out on the yard.

**John:** Matter of fact, he used to use me as a punching bag too. [laughs] [unintelligible [00:10:01] I’m thinking I’m learning some martial arts. [laughs] But oh shit, I'd be all beat up and hurt up. And I used to tell him, “Wait a minute, man. When am I going to get a chance to do some punching or something?” [laughs]

**Nigel:** Jackson was also getting deep into politics, and political philosophy. Reading books by Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Trotsky. And he was examining America through their eyes.

[recording of George]

**George:** I'm convinced that fascism exists in this country.

**Earlonne:** This is from a recording of Jackson made by a journalist who interviewed him inside in 1971.

**George:** The impressions that we get from the movies and from the propaganda system that fascism is a period of doors being kicked down and people being gunned down in concentration camps, that's just the transitory period of a fascism. Once it's established itself, it's not necessarily for the fascists to maintain themselves any longer with the out-and-out brutal force.

**Earlonne:** George became a communist. A left-wing, radical revolutionary.

**Nigel:** Which wasn’t that uncommon. I mean, it was the late 60s, you had the Vietnam War raging, Black power groups like the Black Panthers were getting national attention, and you had white, leftist radical groups, like the Weather Underground. I mean, Earlonne, it was just very revolutionary time.

**Earlonne:** Right. And George was talking about all this stuff to John Clutchette and other guys at Soledad.

**John:** He talked about all of these revolutionaries from Germany and Russia and all of that. I couldn’t even pronounce their names or half the words in the books he wanted me to read. So, I take the book back, and I look and I said, “Brother, I can't understand what's going on with this book.” He said, “Well, take the Russia out of it and [chuckles] put the Los Angeles in it, and the California in it, and the police over here in Long Beach in it. And basically, you notice it's the same things going on, it's just in a different place.” That way, it was a lot easier for me to understand.

**Nigel:** Soon, Jackson and other guys at Soledad were conducting political education classes, first on the sly and then out in the open. And he was really being like a conduit, bringing all these revolutionary ideas into the prison.

**Earlonne:** Yeah. I mean, he wanted to wake people up in there.

**Nigel:** Right.

**Earlonne:** Show them that their incarceration wasn't an accident. Because to Jackson, you couldn't understand prison without understanding things like racism, capitalism, and fascism.

[recording of George]

**George:** Fascism destroys a sense of community among the lower classes. And then, the upper class says, “They have a great community interest.” We have to establish a community interest of our own from the bottom.

**Earlonne:** John Clutchette wasn’t just getting schooled by George Jackson in martial arts.

**John:** You got drilled on everything. You can't say, “I just read it.” [chuckles] and then expect that someone ain’t going to drill you on it, because we were all trying to educate ourselves, because some brothers had been educated, some hadn't been educated. Don't forget we come from them schools in Watts and stuff; and they weren't the best schools in the world. But we were all just trying to be better people when we came home. You understand what I'm saying? Better blacks though. We wanted to be an asset to our communities when we went home.

[recording of George]

**George Jackson:** I believe in the commune, the ideal of the central city commune. And through the communes, as we fill in vacuums that the power elite, the governing elite, and the upper classes have left, as we fill in these vacuums and give people somethingto hold, something to defend.

**John:** He was too adamant about us not having separation; and that would make him be separated from this brother over here that want to be this, or this brother over here that want to be that, you understand? So, if he ever said that, “Well, I'm a BGF,” you're not going to listen to him if you a Crip or you a Blood, or you a Muslim. And I never heard him do any of that. Solidarity is still the same thing. As a people, we're supposed to be accountable for one another.

[recording of George]

**George:** We are not acting individually inside the prisons here. We're all together. And we have perfect discipline, and we have a rankand file.

**Nigel:** So, that’s a bit of background on George Jackson and what he believed. Now, we’ve got to get into the complex and controversial story of what happened in San Quentin 50 years ago.

**Earlonne:** And we’ve called on an Ear Hustle friend who has helped us before with San Quentin history, Lee Jaspar.

**Lee:** By 1970, tensions in California prisons were boiling over. Racial division between black incarcerated people and mostly white correctional officers often led to violence. 9 guards and 24 incarcerated people were killed in 1970 and 1971. In 1970, in Soledad Prison, three black incarcerated people were shot to death in a racial riot thought to have been instigated by prison staff. A correctional officer was then killed, apparently in retaliation.

A few days later, George Jackson and two incarcerated people were charged in connection with the murder of that CO. Jackson and his two codefendants became known as the Soledad Brothers. Their case became a rallying cry for leftist celebrities and intellectuals like Marlon Brando, Angela Davis, and Noam Chomsky. Later that year, *Soledad Brother*, a collection of Jackson’s prison letters, was published. It was a literary sensation. Jackson was becoming an international icon of the struggle of black freedom and revolution. The Soledad Brothers were transferred from Soledad to San Quentin to be closer to their trial in San Francisco.

In August of 1970, George Jackson's younger brother, Jonathan, took hostages at the courthouse near San Quentin in an apparent attempt to force Jackson's release from prison. Jonathan was shot and killed outside the courthouse by California corrections officers. A judge and two incarcerated people were also killed.

[tense music ends]

**Nigel:** At San Quentin, the Soledad Brothers were housed in the Adjustment Center. That’s the prison’s maximum-security unit. Jackson had been at San Quentin before, but the Adjustment Center is a whole different world. And, E, every time I go into San Quentin, I walk by that building.

**Earlonne:** Right.

**Nigel:** You know it’s on the left, and it’s got that there’s a scary, gothic font that says, “Adjustment Center.” And, man, you know serious stuff happens in there.

**Earlonne:** Yeah, it’s hella isolated. If you go to AC, that’s a wrap. It’s the black hole. Once you’re in there, you’re gone. Inside the AC back in 1971, the antagonism between convicts and COs was rough.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** When we return, we'll take a trip inside the Adjustment Center, on the Ear Hustle Spotlight, August 21st, 1971, continues. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Ear Hustle Spotlight, August 21st, 1971. Sensitive listeners please note, the story does contain graphic imagery and explicit content. Discretion is advised.

Today, we join the Ear Hustle team, to take us back to the early 70s inside San Quentin State Prison where revolutionary, George Jackson, has been taken from the mainline and sent to the AC, the Adjustment Center, The Hole.

**Earlonne:** Word soon got out in the general population at San Quentin that George Jackson was in the AC.

**Gerard:** They used to come in and bring him out of AC, and they would tell us not to salute him.

**Nigel:** Gerard Trent, Jr. was in San Quentin when George Jackson got there. And he’s back there now. New York and I brought him into the studio.

**Gerard:** And saluting him was a closed fist above your head.

**Nigel: “**A closed fist above your head,” he said. Trent had throat cancer, which is why his voice sounds so strained.

**Gerard:** But we did it anyway.

**New York:** That's right.

**Gerard:** Because he earned that. [pauses] That's the very least we could do.

**Nigel:** Was there a punishment for doing that? For saluting him?

**Gerard:** No. There's power in numbers, and it was an awful lot of people doing that. Awful lot of people.

**Nigel:** Meanwhile, a lot of the staff felt threatened by the Soledad Brothers.

**Robert:** Most of the people that I worked with realized that these guys wanted to kill us. [chuckles]

**Earlonne:** Robert Ayers was a young guard at San Quentin.

**Robert:** You still had to deal with them, but all the time you knew that if they had half a chance, they would kill you. He thought himself a revolutionary and a political prisoner; but to me, he was a killer.

**Nigel:** In 1971, Ayers had only been on the job about three years, after doing a stint in Vietnam.

**Robert:** This was right in the middle of-- I'm not sure I'm going to get the term right, but I'm going to say an awakening of Black awareness among the inmate population. You saw a lot more black inmates talking politically, as opposed to shuckin’ and jivin’ on a yard and talkin’ this, talkin’ that. A lot more political dialogue. And again, this was kind of confusing because nobody really knew how to take this. “What's going on here? Is this serious?”

**Earlonne:** “Shuckin’ and jiving,’” Nyge? I think we’d call that choppin’ it up today.

**Nigel:** Yeah.

**Earlonne:** In any case, George Jackson spent an entire year at San Quentin in the Adjustment Center. The Soledad Brothers case dragged on through a lot of changing judges, changing venues, all this pretrial stuff.

**Nigel:** Finally, the trial was about to begin.

**Earlonne:** Then, came August 21st, 1971.

**Nigel:** There is a lot of debate about what happened in the Adjustment Center that day, but the prison’s official account goes something like this, and it’s a wild story: A lawyer working with George Jackson smuggled a gun to him during a visit. When Jackson was searched on his way back into the AC, a guard spotted something in Jackson’s hair.

**Earlonne:** George then allegedly pulled a gun out of what the guard said was a wig and pointed it at them. He then made them unlock the cells of the 25 others on AC’s first tier. Then, mayhem.

**Nigel:** Guys started grabbing guards, tying them up, and dragging them into cells. John Clutchette had just returned to the AC from a visit with his lawyer.

**John:** At that time, George said something. I don't know, he went down the tier. He was just kind of walking back and forth and just-- You know how you be in the zone? He was just kind of just shaking his head like this back and forth. So, I go back in the back and I see the guards, some of them tied up back there. They'd been stripped down to their drawers and stuff, and I think they thought all of them were dead, but they weren't.

**Nigel:** Three guards were killed. Their throats were slit, and two of them were also shot. Two incarcerated people also died after their throats were cut.

**Earlonne:** Three other guards also had their throats cut but survived. It has never been determined who committed which acts of violence.

**Nigel:** The incarcerated guys on the first tier were in control of that part of the Adjustment Center for about 30 minutes.

**John:** I hear somebody banging on the glass.

[glass banging sounds]

**John:** Clack-clack-clack-clack-clack.

[banging continues]

[tense music builds up]

**John:** And then, it just got real quiet because we know somebody outside. And next thing I know, the door bangs open. I don't know if somebody opened it from the outside or somebody opened it from the inside, but I think I stepped back in my cell. The door bangs open.

[footsteps]

**John:** George goes out the building. That was it.

[suspense music]

**Nigel:** Nobody knows why George Jackson left the Adjustment Center. Nobody knows what he was thinking when he ran across the yard. Officials say he was trying to escape.

**Earlonne:** He made it about 30 yards before he was shot and killed by a guard. He was 29 years old.

**Nigel:** Dick Nelson, a guard at San Quentin, was off duty that day. But he lived nearby, and he rushed down when he heard something was happening at the Adjustment Center.

**Earlonne:** He grabbed a submachine gun from the armory, went to the yard right outside the AC, and started firing into it.

**John:** Next thing I know, they come in there with a machine gun, a .45 caliber machine gun, and got to shooting up the building. Somebody told me them holes is still in there. They left all them holes still in the walls and stuff.

**Nigel:** Nelson didn’t hit anyone, but the show of force did bring an end to the AC rebellion. It was the most violent incident in the long history of San Quentin State Prison.

**Earlonne:** Today, the gun Dick Nelson used is in a little museum just inside the San Quentin gate.

[recording of a reporter]

**Female Reporter:** A gun battle occurred in the yard of San Quentin Prison in Marin County today. Three guards and three prisoners were killed in the disturbances, including George Jackson.

[recording of a reporter]

**Male Reporter:** There's a general lockup throughout the institution. Prisoners have been fed in their cells. Tomorrow, there'll be no visitors at San Quentin. The institution is described as quiet, but tense.

**Nigel:** So much about this story is strange. If Jackson was making an escape attempt, it was pretty ill-thought out. It’s impossible to escape. I mean, there are those 30-foot walls; and he’d have to run for a while out in the complete open.

**Earlonne:** Right. And the bigger question is how did the gun get in there? I know they said he brought it in in a wig, but I’m not quite sure about it.

**Nigel:** Yeah, to this day, there is no definitive proof of a lot of things. We just don’t know what happened in there. And there are a lot of theories.

**Earlonne:** There are definitely Jackson supporters who think he was set up, eliminated. CDCR folks say no way. And people who knew Jackson have long speculated about what really happened that day, and what led him to leave the AC.

**John:** Some people say he ran out because he knew if he didn't go out there, they was going to come in and kill all of us. It was a combination of a lot of things probably going on in his head. I can only guess. I saw such a dramatic change in his personality after Jonathan got killed.

**Nigel:** Remember, Jonathan was George Jackson’s younger brother.

**John:** I don't know if he could call it guilt or whatever. He didn't hardly talk anymore, whereas he used to sit up and lecture and stuff for hours and hours. He didn't do that anymore. He just became kind of sullen. I don't want to say he was trying to commit suicide, which I guess all of us was trying to commit suicide when you're in the devil's house and fighting with his children. So, I don't know, man.

[somber music]

**Earlonne:** After Dick Nelson shot up the AC with the machine gun, the guards quickly took back control.

**Nigel:** And then, there were consequences.

**John:** They made all of us get naked, one by one, and back out. Everybody was backing out; they were beating us with guns, rifles, and shit. Beating us with gun butts and stuff, handcuffing and shackling. They got us like that and they pullin’ the chains up. We were like that for hours, until your body just went numb. You had to let your brain go numb because your body was hurting so bad.

**Watani:** August 21st, I remember that day, and I remember it clearly.

**Nigel:** It wasn’t just the guys in the Adjustment Center who felt the rage of the guards. Watani Stiner was in the general population that day.

**Watani:** We were on the upper yard. I don't know if I heard the shot first or the whistle, because there was a whistle that was blowing. Everybody had to, “Get down. Get down on the ground.” And it was just like guards running wild around. They were racing down there and then the rest of them were on the gun tower. And they making sure nobody get up, threatening to shoot people if they move and stuff. Everybody's trying to figure out what was going on the yard. Then, people started yelling, “Man, you know what happened?”

**New York:** What do you remember the day was like when George Jackson was killed?

**Gerard:** It was living hell. It was living hell.

**Nigel:** Gerard Trent, Jr. again.

**Gerard:** This was the month of August. And usually for August, it's usually pretty warm outside. But for some reason, that day, it was very, very cold. They had us buck naked and spread eagle on the upper yard for about four and a half hours. The police went into the gym and got duffle bags of baseball bats and passed them out. And if you raised your head up to look, you might have got hit, and some did. It was a very, very chilling day. It's the only time in my life I've ever asked God to let me die, to kill me, because I could hear people screaming. They were the people who decided maybe they were going to look up.

**Earlonne:** Robert Ayers, the young San Quentin guard, wasn’t scheduled to go in the day after the killings, but he did anyway.

**Robert:** I went in the next day, Sunday morning.

**Nigel:** Why did you feel compelled to go in?

**Robert:** [pauses] Because it had to be done. I was not the only one who took it upon themselves to come in. Nobody got called in. They just all came in. The institution needed help.

**Nigel:** What were the emotions you were going in with?

**Robert:** Anger, sadness, confusion. Violence towards staff, it wasn't like it was infrequent, but nothing to that magnitude. And I think there was a sense at the time, “What the hell is going on? What just happened? What have we experienced here?*”* [chuckles]

**Nigel:** But what doyou think you were experiencing? What *was* going on?

**Robert:** I thought we were experiencing a part of a revolution, I really do. I'm going to tell you something here, and I don't think many people want to talk about it. But in the probably the week after August 21st, the aftermath, we did some things I'm not really proud of. Okay? I'm not talking necessarily about beating people up, but we took out our anger and rage on everybody. Everybody. This is how bad it was, okay. I went in Sunday and I did some miscellaneous things, Sunday. Monday, we started searching the East Block and the word was “standardize it.”

**Earlonne:** This is when they go in cell to cell and bust you down to regulated property. Meaning, they basically take everything but your boxers and your state-issued stuff. Guys often end up losing a lot of personal stuff in the process.

**Robert:** And anybody that complained about being standardized was unceremoniously hauled over and thrown into ad seg. For what? We didn't have to have a reason. They were an inmate. They were at San Quentin, and staff died. And you're going to pay. One has a hard time coming to grips with the level of anger, frustration in the aftermath of something like that. It’s really, for me was an awakening experience.

**Nigel:** Hmm, what changed in you?

**Robert Ayers:** Well, my mentality came together that, we say we're the good guys and you're the bad guys. And if we're the good guys, why are we doing bad stuff to you? I mean, it doesn't compute when you really think about it.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** When we return, we take a trip back inside San Quentin, present day. Stay tuned.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment. My name is Glynn Washington, and you're listening to the Ear Hustle Spotlight, August 21st, 1971. And sensitive listeners should note, this story does contain graphic entry and explicit content. Discretion is advised. Last we left that Ear Hustle team dove into the events of the deadliest day inside San Quentin State Prison. And now, we're going to trip back the present day.

**Lieutenant Sam:** So, we are in the Peace Officers’ Memorial here at San Quentin that memorializes all the staff members who lost their life in the line of duty here at the prison. Just as you walk into the prison, when you look to the right, you see our chapel complex. When you look to the left, there's the Adjustment Center. And just before the Adjustment Center, a few steps in, is our Memorial Plaza. This is where we are.

**Nigel:** A little while back, New York and I met Lieutenant Sam Robinson at the Officer’s Memorial.

**Earlonne:** 14 correctional officers who died in the line of duty are memorialized here, including the three that were killed when the Adjustment Center was overtaken back in 1971.

**Lieutenant Sam:** We have Sergeant J.P. Graham, who was murdered on August 21st, 1971. Correctional Officer P.W. Krasenes, who was murdered on August 21st, 1971. Correctional Officer F.P. DeLeon, who was also murdered on August 21st, 1971.

**Nigel:** Nearby, there are other reminders of how that day changed San Quentin. Sam pointed to the Adjustment Center just a few feet away.

**Lieutenant Sam:** When I began here, there would be windowpanes that were missing. And the idea was as they were strategically placed all throughout the building. You’re trained early on that if something bad took place on the tier, if someone got out of their restraints and were attempting to take over the facility, that your first responsibility was to take your keys and drop them out the window. And so you would be on the tier with no way to exit the tier that you're on, but it also compartmentalize the area. And ultimately the idea was to prevent what happened in 1971 from happening on the day that you were there. You may have given up your life, your partner may have given up their lives; but you were isolating the incident right there.

**Nigel:** So, basically you are locking yourself in there with no way to get out.

**Lieutenant Sam:** Exactly. Yeah. There was people whose blood was spilled on these tiers. Guys who we memorialized here in memorial today, their blood was shed on those tiers. And so, there's a— I want to find the right word for it. There's a lorethat's in that building. that’s in that place that we have respect for.

**Nigel:** Sam, why do you think that 50 years later this story still brings up so much emotion for people? I mean, it's a half a century ago.

**Lieutenant Sam:** From the peace officer's side, I don't think that we feel that justice was served.

**Nigel:** In the aftermath of the Adjustment Center incident, six of the incarcerated men who’d been on the first tier were charged with assault and the murder of those three COs, and also of Frank Lynn and Ronald Kane, the two incarcerated men who were killed that day.

**Earlonne:** When the trial ended five years later, only one person was found guilty of murder. Two others were found guilty of the lesser charges, and three were acquitted.

**Nigel:** The lawyer who was supposed to have brought the gun in to George Jackson was charged too. He fled the country and didn’t face trial until 1986. He was also acquitted.

**Lieutenant Sam:** And so, I think 50 years later, 25 years later, right after the trial, people who worked here at the place, who ate with these people, who walked the line with these people, who developed friendships with these people, who grieve with their families, who tried to take care of their children afterward, justice wasn't served for them.

**New York:** I feel like you're still carrying a lot of the weight from it. Almost as if you were there.

**Lieutenant Sam:** I'll tell you this, man. When you work in a place that has a history, and then you have this shared experience with the people; you walk those tiers that you have people who are assaulting you, and you have people who are threatening your life, there's a weight that goes along with that. When you look out the building and you see the memorial, and you see the names of people who gave their life in the line of duty, and here in that same place where the same potential is there, there's a weight that goes along with that.

**Nigel:** I understand what Lieutenant Robinson is saying, and I sympathize with it. I actually sympathize with all sides of this, totally messed up situation. I mean, what do you think, E?

**Earlonne:** I understand his point as a peace officer. But I’ve talked to people that were incarcerated in the 60s and they said the atmosphere was as racist as it was in society. Officers could kill Black people with impunity, which was basically what happened back at Soledad Prison that set all these events in motion. So Black people in prison felt that basically they were at war with white prison guards. I’m not justifying it, but that’s probably how they felt.

**Nigel:** Yeah, I hear you.

**Lieutenant Sam:** So, as you make a slight right turn.

**Nigel:** We asked Sam to point out another spot, just about 60 yards away from the memorial, around the corner of the chapel.

**Lieutenant Sam:** Just before the road starts to decline in elevation, George Jackson was gunned down right about this area here.

**Nigel:** This is where we walk every time we come into the prison to go down to the yard. So, I can't even count many times I've walked by here.

**Earlonne:** So, the location where George was killed, incarcerated people can't walk that way because it's out of bounds. But every now and again, I’d be escorted that way going up to the chapel or something. I used to always think this is the spot where George was killed because I remember seeing the picture of him laid out with his hand up.

**Nigel:** And there’s nothing there marking that spot. But guys inside have their own way of keeping the memory of that day alive.

**Earlonne:** Black August.

**Nigel:** Black August. I’ve been hearing about this for years, but Earlonne, I don't really know much about it.

**Earlonne:** Well, Black August is a time when a certain number of Black guys inside fast, they study, they exercise, and they have discussion groups about politics and things like that. And sometimes, if they can get away with it, they wear black armbands.

**Paul:** And for them 31 days, it was all about education.

**Nigel:** This is Paul Redd. He did 45 years in prison.

**Paul:** You have a book, a journal, and you make entries on what you’re doing. So, the next day, you take it a little farther. So, you stretchin’ yourself. Say you may read five pages a day; the next day you might jack it up to ten. You always try to push yourself. It was about us making ourselves better when you come out of August than what you was when you went into it. That was the whole thing.

**Ken:** There was usually schedules, like written schedules. Like, this is what we do. We'd have our exercise routine wrote down. We’d have study periods wrote down.

**Earlonne:** This is Ken Oliver again, the guy we heard from at the beginning of the episode who was sent to the hole because guards found George Jackson books in his cell.

**Ken:** We would have spread time, or breakfast. There was a whole like protocol so to speak. And, I mean, it wasn't extremely strict, but it was guidelines, basically, that would dictate what we were going to do from August 1st all the way through the end of the month. We would do political readings, we would fast all day, we would exercise and do burpees in the heat, a hundred burpees. [chuckles] And you'd be ready to pass out, and then everybody would get together at night when it was available to it or at the end of the day, and cook, and break bread with each other. To me, that was life changing. To me, that was always magical.

**Nigel:** Guys started observing Black August in the late ‘70s. But over time, Prison officials started seeing it as a threat. So, they started to clamp down on it, and punished anyone obviously participating.

**Paul:** Now when you wear a black armband, they want to lock you up in a hole. When you go to the chow house, all these officers in there, they lookin’ to see if you eatin’. They lookin’ to see if you observing Black August. And people realize you don't need to prove to them that you doing Black August, because Black August is not for them, it's for you. So, I can go into a chow house, and grab that tray. That don't mean that I'm going to eat that tray. And I'd go over there and dump it. A lot of people did do that.

**Nigel:** Lieutenant Robinson says, at least when he was working in the Adjustment Center at San Quentin, COs had to be extra vigilant when August rolled around.

**Lieutenant Sam:** 25 years after the incident, all the way up until recent times, Black August was something that staff had to be aware of here at the prison, because there were people who in the name of George Jackson, in the name of the cause, would attempt to harm people here in this building. I spent three or four summers in there myself. With my staff on alert, with my staff getting assaulted, years removed from that day because people were still honoring George Jackson, I guess, or the cause with violence. I don't know what type of cause that is. I don't know what you get from that.

**Earlonne:** For Paul Redd though, Black August was never about violence towards officers.

**Paul:** It was a bogus myth that correction officers was to get killed during August. And it wasn't about that. It was about us internalizing, educating ourselves, making ourselves better when you come out of August better than what you was when you went into it. That was the whole thing.

**Nigel:** So, Earlonne, George Jackson led to Black August, and CDCR does not have a lot of tolerance for either one of them. Any sign of either could be seen as gang activity. So, this was why guys ended up in the hole for having Jackson books.

**Earlonne:** But CDCR has had to bend a little. Paul Redd did over 30 years in the SHU. Jackson material was part of what kept him in for so long. But he eventually got out, partly because of a hunger strike and lawsuit he was party to.

**Nigel:** And Ken Oliver, show who was sent to the hole for having George Jackson material, he also sued and got some money.

**Earlonne:** Ken Oliver and Paul Redd are both out of prison now.

**Nigel:** We wanted to know how people in San Quentin do or don’t, remember George Jackson today.

**Earlonne:** So, we sent our inside guys, NY and Rhashiyd, out to the yard**.**

**Rhashiyd:** Who's George Jackson?

**Speaker:** [laughing] I was a brother, man. I was one of the comrades, man. Old school Soledad Brothers and all the business, man, who was locked up in San Quentin State Prison. And he knocked him down, man, 1971, Black August, man.

**Rhashiyd:** Do you know who George Jackson is?

**Speaker:** Oh, for sure, Big George. I understand what those brothers fought for and what they did.

**New York:** Who was George Jackson?

**Speaker::** I don’t know, matter of fact, I want to say a president.

**New York:** Who was George Jackson?

**Speaker:** The Jeffersons, I don't know. You know what I'm saying?

[laughter]

**Speaker:** Didn’t George Jackson smuggle in a firearm and shoot some people? Yeah, he had it sittin’ on the top of his head.

**Rhashiyd:** What does the name, George Jackson, mean to you?

**Speaker**: George Jackson stands up for Black people's rights. Survival in the community, getting people together to do other things than crime.

**Speaker:** He's eloquent to be so young. I never read a book where I had to go pick up a dictionary to understand some of the stuff he was saying.

**Rhashiyd:** I’m going to throw a name out: George Jackson.

**Speaker:** George Jackson. [pauses] A fighter.

**Speaker**: He is Judas in the Black.

**New York:** Who we talkin’ about is Judas, bruh?

**Speaker**: No, no, that's the movie that was portrayed on George Jackson.

**New York:** I thought that was Fred Hampton.

**Speaker**: Oh yeah, well, you see I'm wrong. Oh, my God.

[laughter]

**Nigel:** Well, Earlonne, it’s a mixed bag. Some guys knew about him, and obviously, some guys didn’t.

**Earlonne:** Yeah, it's a trip because in my time, I didn't know too many people that didn't know about George Jackson. You know what I'm saying? He was prison lore. But if Jackson’s memory is going to survive inside, it’s going to be because of guys like this:

**Prince:** My name is Prince. I've been incarcerated for four years now. At San Quentin for two years.

**New York:** How old are you, man?

**Prince:** I’m 21.

**New York:** 21 years old? You’re 21 years old?

**Prince:** Yeah.

**New York**: Okay, you probably not going to know the answer to this then. Who was George Jackson?

**Prince:** George Jackson was incarcerated at San Quentin in 1970. And he died in 1971.

**New York:** [laughs] 1971 was before you was born. How do you know about George Jackson?

**Prince:** I mean, because I grew up in a pro-Black house, and George Jackson is somebody like for history, Black history. When we mention Black history, you’ve got to mention George Jackson.

**Nigel:** Prince told them about a conversation he had with some COs up near the Adjustment Center.

**Prince:** And I was just playing around with the police. I'm like, “Yeah, man.” I'm like, “You got to know your history about San Quentin.” I'm like, “If you ask me, San Quentin is cursed.” I'm like, “You know George Jackson died up here.” And CO's like, “Who's George Jackson?” And then the older sergeant guy was downstairs, and he was probably about in his mid-60s, and he's like, “Yeah, George Jackson was in here on the first tier.” And then my heart dropped to my stomach.

From that time on, I wanted to go to the cell that he was in. And just look around and just sit down and feel the vibe like, God. It’s like, me, if you asked me, that's like a museum type. I really feel from my point of view, that that cell no one should be able to move in there. It should be murals of him painting in there.

**Speaker:** Man, how you know all this stuff?

**Prince:** I mean, I know my history.

**Speaker:** That’s what’s up.

**Prince:** You’ve got to know your history.

**Prince:** Well, if you look from 50 years ago to right now, so if you go from 1971 to 2021, and you peep and understand that like Tupac said, “Some things will never change;” that's just the way it is, man.

[upbeat music]

**Earlonne:** Okay, we’re almost at the end of the episode. This is where we give credit where credit is due, and then we usually hear Lieutenant Robinson’s approval at the end.

**Nigel:** But for this episode, we thought Lieutenant Robinson might have more to say than usual. And not just because he's in it; but because given the way that George Jackson still has inside San Quentin, he may have more to say. Also, we are just a little nervous that he might not like what we've done.

**Earlonne:** You were nervous, Nigel, not me.

**Nigel:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let’s be honest, I was nervous.

**Earlonne:** [chuckles] So, let's just get it over with and hear what he has to say now. [music fades away]

**Lieutenant Sam:** Yeah, this was a different episode. This is an episode where I can't necessarily say that I like it or not. I do give my approval to it, but I definitely can't say that I like it. This event still has relevance, still has weight 50 years later. I think the one thing that's missing from this episode is really the voices from the staff who worked in the facility, who were at San Quentin that day. Dick Nelson who passed prior to the development of this episode, he had agreed to lend his voice to it. Dick Nelson saved countless lives, and it's unfortunate that his voice wasn't there. It's unfortunate that the survivors of that event, that their voices weren’t included in this.

And it’s not because of you guys’ effort. 50 years is a long time, and those voices pass away, and others don't have the energy to lend that voice. So, I don't know how to conclude an episode when you deal with such a topic that's as weighty as people not returning to their loved ones. This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson. I am the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison. And, again, I approve this episode.

**Nigel:** This episode was produced by me, Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Rahsaan “New York” Thomas, John “Yahya” Johnson, Amy Standen, and Bruce Wallace.

**Earlonne:** It was sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams, with music by Antwan, David Jazzy, and Rhashiyd Zinnamon. Shabnam Sigman is our digital producer, and Julie Shapiro is the executive producer for Radiotopia.

**Nigel:** And you know what was cool about this one, Earlonne?

**Earlonne:** Tell me.

**Nigel:** We brought in our old editor and friend, Curtis Fox, to help with this episode.

**Earlonne:** Curtis “Scissor Hand” Fox.

**Nigel:** Yes. Thanks, Curtis. Thanks to Nathaniel and Claude at the Freedom Archives of San Francisco. They helped us throughout the project and provided the archival audio of George Jackson speaking.

**Earlonne:** They also put together a cool project for this 50th anniversary, focused on the books that George Jackson had in his cell. Find that at *freedomarchives.org.*

**Nigel:** Ear Hustle would like to thank Acting Warden Ron Broomfield, and. it feels strange not to be tossing to Sam here.

**Earlonne:** Want me to do Sam?

**Nigel:** [laughs] I think we got it earlier.

**Earlonne:** 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.

**Nigel:** Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Radiotopia is a collection of independent, listener-supported podcasts.

**Earlonne:** Some of the best podcasts around. Hear more at *radiotopia.fm*. I’m Earlonne Woods.

**Nigel:** I’m Nigel Poor.

**Nigel and Earlonne:** Thanks for listening.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Thank you, thank you, thank you. The whole Ear Hustle team, PRX’s Radiotopia. Snappers, in addition to the new season of Ear Hustle we've got big, big news. Drumroll, please. Because the Ear Hustle squad is dropping a brand-new book called *This Is Ear Hustle*. Unflinching stories of everyday prison life. It drops in just a few short weeks. I know it's going to be fire, featuring brand-new stories, never before heard on the show. If you preorder it right now at your preferred provider. That's what I did. The audiobook is on order, Nigel, Earlonne because I miss your voices, and because preorders count bigly. I'm getting the word out. Collectively, Snapnation. We're going to Snapify the publishing world. Are you with me? Are you with me? Of course, you are. And you can subscribe to all things Ear Hustle at *earhustlesq.com.* And you best believe, but even though this is not the news, this is PRX.

[upbeat music]

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*