

# The Forum

Dedicated to the advancement of carceral interpretation for public benefit.

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## Featured Site

In a past life, the Oregon Film Museum in Astoria used to house inmates as the former Clatsop County Jail. Constructed shortly after the city's centennial celebration in 1911, the small county institution served as a



Photograph of the historic jail, located on Duane Street in Astoria, Oregon.

functioning jail from 1914 to 1976, and has since been listed on the U.S National Register of Historic Places. The building was featured in the opening chase sequence of *The Goonies* (1985), and later opened as The Oregon Film Museum in 2010. It is believed that the old Clatsop County Jail is the longest operating free-standing jailhouse in Oregon.

## Monthly Meet-Up

The ACSM hosts monthly meetings for practitioners, scholars, and others involved with or interested in historic prison museums, and/or carceral sites. Meetings take place via Zoom on the second Monday of each month at 3:00 PM EST and cover a wide range of topics, including interpretation, community engagement strategies, and collaborative practices. Contact us at [thecarceral@gmail.com](mailto:thecarceral@gmail.com) to sign-up in order to attend. We hope to see you there!

## Excerpt

### The History of Prison Breaks in the River City

[At] the end of the hill on South Cherry Street, two men lay under the cover of ivy and brush, hidden from view. Their prospects were good. They had managed the unthinkable: They had escaped the notorious Virginia State Penitentiary.

Their hope was lost, however, when the sounds of bays filled the air. The pair had not accounted for the bloodhounds.

After hours of freedom, convicted robber Ralph "Stony" Stonebreaker and convicted murderer Robert McDonald were drawn out of hiding and surrendered without incident.

Throughout its stay in the city, the Virginia State Penitentiary saw its fair share of prison breaks. While many tried, few were successful with most ending in recapture and some in tragedy. [A few] made it [their] mission to leave the prison by any means necessary.

Read the entire story by Em Holter in the [Richmond Times-Dispatch](#) (May 28, 2023).

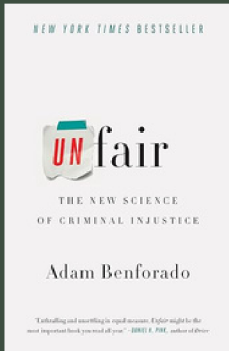
# Book Club!

## Unfair: The New Science of Criminal Injustice By Adam Benforado (Broadway Books, 2016)

The evidence is all around us: our system of justice is fundamentally broken. But it's not for the reasons we tend to think, as law professor Adam Benforado argues in this eye-opening, galvanizing book. Even if the system

operated exactly as it was designed to, we would still end up with wrongful convictions, trampled rights, and unequal treatment. This is because the roots of injustice lie within the minds of each and every one of us.

Weaving together historical examples, scientific studies, and compelling court cases, Benforado shows how our judicial processes fail to uphold our values and protect society's weakest members.



## Preservation Alert

### Historic Norristown Prison Under Imminent Threat of Demolition



Norristown's old Montgomery County/Airy Street Prison (Pennsylvania) is an imposing, head-turning historical relic, built in the mid-1800s. Norristown resident Peggy Dellisanti calls the castle-like structure right at the crest of the road, "The Queen on the Hill." But today it is a vacant, neglected building in the middle of town doomed by a date with the wrecking ball, save for an unlikely 11th-hour intervention.

After decades of the prison sitting idle and deteriorating, commissioners for Montgomery County, which owns the property, approved in July 2023 a contract to tear it down. And if Norristown, a municipality, follows through by issuing a demolition permit?

"I think you lose the only piece of historical beauty in the heart of town," Dellisanti said. "To me, it would be like tearing down a cathedral or burning a Picasso."

Montgomery County officials don't see it that way. After decades of disinvestment, development is finally catching on in the county seat of Norristown. Megan Alt, Montgomery County's communications director, said the prison is in a state of disrepair, and unlike other historic properties, the county doesn't believe this one is worth saving.

"We are not willing to ask taxpayers to spend millions of dollars to preserve a monument to a system of incarceration. Taking down this structure will not change the inequities in our criminal justice system, but we also refuse to invest in celebrating that legacy," said Alt.

Built in 1851, admirers of the Gothic Revival prison call it a "masterpiece." That was the word used in a 1984 nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for Norristown's Central Historic District, which includes the prison. The facility shuttered its doors in 1986.

Adapted from Kyle Bagenstose (August 21, 2023)

## Artifact Spotlight

Coverlet from the Auburn State Prison, New York (1842).  
Courtesy of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History.

This blue and white, Jacquard, double-woven coverlet is made of cotton and wool. It features the "Bird of Paradise" pattern with floral and geometric borders on all four sides. It is woven in two sections, each thirty-nine inches wide. The sections were sewn together by hand. The date "AD 1842" is woven into all four corners with a stylized floral or carpet design cornerblock now known to be associated with the Auburn Prison Loom House and coverlet weaver, James Van Ness.

The original owner was the donor's father. He lived in Ontario County, New York. Coverlets could be commissioned by a man or a woman for use in the home.

Not much work has been done on prison weaving in the 19th century. Ralph S. Herre wrote a dissertation entitled, "The History of Auburn Prison from the Beginning to about 1867." He confirmed that the prison did have a carpet weaving shop, sold to local customers, and even attempted to cultivate and manufacture silks.

At the very least, ornate "fancy" weave jacquard card sets were purchased by the prison with the express purpose of producing fancy weave coverlets for general consumption. This coverlet is a fascinating material glimpse into the culture and economics of prisons in the 19th century.

Source: Smithsonian National Museum of American History.





# Essay of Interest

## DEATH ROW'S FIRST EVER TALENT SHOW

COURTESY OF GEORGE T. WILKERSON, THE MARSHALL PROJECT (MARCH 22, 2018)

"Well, this ought to be interesting," I said to Big Lee, my tablemate at lunch. "They posted a talent show sign-up sheet in the hall."

"Yeah?" he smirked. "Well, I ain't signing up — but I know who will..."

I knew, too. Given that our population on North Carolina's death row consisted of about 140 men, and that most of us had been there for 15 or 25 years, we knew who was who. And "Jimmy Jam of the Morgan Fam" was a shameless attention-monger who would almost certainly be signing up for the talent show.

"Why're we even doing a talent show anyway?" I asked. "It's not like we'll get access to props. No radios or keyboards or..."

I couldn't think of anything else—I'd never actually seen a talent show.

"I've heard people begging Dr. Kuhns for one ever since he started these classes and stuff. Plus they always like to see a brotha tapdancin', bojanglin', and belittlin' hisself," said Big Lee, a short, power-lifting tank of a man who saw racism as the secret motivator for everything.

On my way out of the mess hall, I looked at the flyer to see who had signed up so far. Sure enough, 8 of the 10 names were ones I'd expected.

Most of the talents listed were verbal — singing, rapping, spoken-word. "Jerzy" said he would be performing as a "Renasaince Man" (his misspelling), and Jimmy Jam wrote, "I sing and dance and rap and juggle all at once." I rolled my eyes.

I checked again on the way back from dinner. A few more people had signed up, but several names had been savagely scratched out. I figured they didn't want to be associated with it, if Jerzy and Jimmy Jam were involved.

Over the two weeks leading up to the show, hardly anyone mentioned it. "Are you going to the talent —" I'd try to ask, before people cut me off with a silent but vehement head shake or a "Man, I ain't watching that bullshit."

Since death row effectively serves as a mental health unit — the majority of us are diagnosed with mental disorders — many of our activities are considered "therapy." But if Writing Therapy helps us express ourselves coherently, and Meditation Therapy helps us navigate prison's inherent stress, then what would a therapeutic Talent Show target? Validation? Our sense of self-worth?

I asked Dr. Kuhns, the head psychologist, what he was thinking. With characteristically cryptic conviction, he said, "It's a community-building activity."

I was openly skeptical. Here was a bad sign: The prison staff had posted an "invitation list" for the event, perhaps because they'd heard rumors of an empty audience.



# Death Row's First Ever Talent Show, Cont.

Normally, at any kind of special activity, it's standing-room only. When our Drama Therapy group staged "12 Angry Men," we had to perform five or six shows because so many inmates, officers, nurses, and even delegations from other prisons wanted to see it. The talent show, on the other hand, was beginning to look like a total disaster.

I groaned, knowing my name was on the invitation list. That's what I get for advocating therapeutic programs. I was one of the special ones who got to watch the talent show. Yay.

As I walked into the cavernous room where the show was being held, I saw 60 or 70 chairs. Dr. Kuhns had brought a handful of his colleagues and interns, who clumped together in the front row on the left side.

Us prisoners — who, counting the "talent," rolled perhaps 30 deep — took up the front three rows on the right side.

Let the show begin!

Dr. Kuhns, a lanky, middle-aged man wearing his usual khakis and sweater vest-over-button-down combo, walked to the front. "Greetings, greetings!" he said. "I'd like to welcome everyone to death row's FIRST EVER talent show! We have seven amazing performances for you."

"You'll notice," he went on, "that I distributed instruments: some plastic-egg maracas called 'noisemakers,' a few sets of mini-bongo drums, a tambourine. To welcome each performer, we will MAKE SOME NOISE, and afterward we'll thank them... with more noise!"

"But please, don't make any noise during the performances..."

"Okay! First up is Terrance!"

Dr. Kuhns's voice echoed in the half-filled space.

Nothing.

"I know I saw him earlier..." Dr. Kuhns said. "Terrance? Anyone seen Terrance?"

More silence. Everyone looked around uncomfortably.

"Uh, well, okay then. Our next performer iiiiiisss...Cerron! Cerron, please come on up."

A short man who I knew to be around 40 years old but who looked 15 popped out of his chair and crept to the front, holding an 11-by-14-inch canvas.

"Let's welcome Cerron!" Dr. Kuhns shouted again, with obvious relief.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose. It sounded like a tribal war party celebrating a victory. The maracas became a pit of pissed-off rattlesnakes, and the bongo drums shoved thunder around the room. The prison's concrete, steel and plexiglass created perfect echo chamber acoustics.



# Death Row's First Ever Talent Show, Cont.

Dr. Kuhns scanned the audience as if trying to impose order through sheer force of will; after a minute or so, he thrust up his hands and hollered. It took another minute for the noise to trickle to a stop.

That was fun, I thought, as we quieted.

Cerron cringed and hugged his drawing to his chest. Looking apologetic, he said, "Uh, I actually didn't sign up for this, but Ms. Jordan told me I had to be here because not enough people signed up." He pointed accusingly at a woman sitting next to Dr. Kuhns.

"Anyway, I brought this drawing. Here," he said, and handed it to someone in the front row. "Pass it around." He started toward his seat.

Ms. Jordan was gesticulating wildly for him to come back. "Cerron! Tell them what it is!"

"They can tell what it is!"

"Tell them what it means! You've got 10 minutes!"

"10 minutes?! You only said I had to —"

"Cerron. Tell. Them. What. It. Means... Now."

Cerron paused. "Uh, well... It's the Black Lives Matter movement," he spat out like one big word, then took his seat defiantly.

Without further ado, Dr. Kuhns sprang back to the front. "Let's thank Cerron — with only 30 seconds of noise — for sharing his AMAZING drawing!"

The clamoring again. When our time was up, Dr. Kuhns raised his hands. "Okay, please just clap to welcome Jerzy, our next performer."

Maybe four people clapped.

Jerzy calls himself many things: a genius autodidact polymath, a 500-pound legal gorilla, a virtuoso, a ladies' man. He's maybe 60 years old, his shoulders stooped and his skin dusty; a pair of coke bottle-glasses ride his half-nose, the other half of which was bitten off in a fight years ago.

In a jazz-lounge voice, he said, "I'm an impresario, so I'll be doing impressions of historical figures, as well as quotes and soundbites of songs..." (I thought an impresario was someone who organizes events and had nothing to do with impressions. But I could be wrong.)

Jerzy began singing a line or two from Frank Sinatra and Fats Domino, and "imitating" Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King, Jr., by stating one of their famous quotes. All the voices were his own, undeviatingly raspy and off-key; at least he got the words right, as far as we could tell.

After the first snippet, he shot us a grin and stood there, silent and expectant.

# Death Row's First Ever Talent Show, Cont.

Snakes and thunder washed our pain away. Dr. Kuhns gave us a couple minutes. Then Jimmy Jam's name was called.

Also over 60, Jimmy Jam was wearing a raggedy green jacket over his faded red jumpsuit, and a green hat to match, making him look like a clown without makeup. "I'm Jimmy Jam of the Morgan Fam and I rap and sing and dance," he said, gyrating his hips obscenely. "And JUGGLE!"

From out of nowhere, he produced three partially rotten oranges that he'd likely smuggled out of the mess hall and, from their dented appearance, had been practicing with.

While clumsily juggling and swiveling, he rapped, "I once met James Brown/when he came to town/because my cousin Juanita/and him slept around."

"Sit yo ass down!" someone in the audience added to the rhyme.

"Hey you clown/don't tell me to sit down/I got ten minutes/I'm gonna use 'em.../If you don't like Jimmy Jam/you kiss Jimmy Jam's ass!" he rapped back, never missing a beat or a hip-thrust, though he did drop an orange.

Unfazed, he took off his hat, put it on his shoe, kicked it up in the air, and ducked under it to catch it on his head, all the while gyrating with his mouth wide open and clapping his hands.

By now we were all laughing hysterically. This was his MOMENT.

My god, I thought, we're gonna have to hear him brag about this for years.

The noise-making time had by that point grown to three or four minutes, and the snakes and thunder burst to life again.

But something happened. The bongo drums had synchronized, the beat bobbing up and down in tandem, while the maracas and hand-claps wove together to support them. We had become one.

For the next half-hour, we made real music; we throbbed and pulsed with it, everyone swaying in unison. We'd found a sort of sacred fire to gather around, dancing and grinning. There was no need for words.

When I glanced over at Dr. Kuhns, he was looking at me and nodding, as if to confirm that this had all been part of his plan.



George T. Wilkerson, 36, is on death row at Central Prison in Raleigh, North Carolina after a 2006 conviction. He is a contributing writer for The Marshall Project. Illustration courtesy of Calum Heath, the Marshall Project.