

STILL ANGRY -

AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

By Robert Dannin and Jolie Stahl

Donald Cox, DC, lives in a quaint mountain village nestled on the route between two European countries. To get there you have to follow a winding road that mimics the course of a once-powerful glacier that has carved dramatic scenery into the surrounding limestone cliffs. St. Anthony built a cloister nearby. Fall off the narrow steps leading down to his hermitage and the only tangible evidence of your existence will be the strain of your vocal chords echoing off the sunbaked, almost-white rock.

Cox is not quite a hermit or a monk, but seclusion has been the basis of his life since 1970.

As a field marshal of the Black Panther Party, Cox spent frantic weeks flying coast to coast trying to heal political rifts that erupted inside the party. At the height of power, the Panthers were besieged by bitter, government-instigated in-fighting. Eventually, the organization broke apart, but not before some of its members evaded arrest, prosecution, jail and death by going into exile.

DC led the Algiers section of the party then went underground in Paris. Except for a brief trip when he entered and exited the United States incognito, DC has been in France ever since.

After various odd jobs, DC established himself as a professional house painter. In the often-insurrectionary atmosphere of Paris, he had to remain very cautious, never traveling on public transportation and staying indoors after dark. Except for a few close friends and occasional contact with home, anonymity was his adopted life style. There were years of back-breaking labor that earned him the cash to buy and renovate his small mountain redoubt.

DC now works with a group of social-science researchers who are gathering data about women's rights throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East. At home he is putting together a computer data base about the history of African American revolutionary movements.

Despite age, he has changed little since the writer, Tom Wolfe, described his "hard-rock look."

DC speaks French as if it were his native language. Our English conversation - the first interview he has given in 20 years - was often punctuated with franglais when he wanted to emphasize a point. He still harbors the same rage over the injustices that led him to the Panthers more than 20 years ago.

DC: My name is Donald Cox. To people in New York, where I spent a year from April of 1969 until May of 1970, I'm known as DC. I was the field marshal of the Black Panther Party and was based at the

Harlem office. I've been in exile since May of 1970.

Question: What have you been doing in exile, first in Algeria and then in Paris?

DC: In Algeria, I participated in the creation of the International Section of the BPP and was one of its representatives at our embassy in Algiers. After the split in the BPP and its demise, I resigned from all political associations and left Algeria in 1972. I returned to Algeria as an individual political refugee in 1974 and worked as an industrial photographer and was responsible for the photographic laboratory of the National Steel Society until 1977. I came to Paris, France, in 1977 and worked as a free-lance photographer, then I began remodeling apartments. I now earn my living creating a data base at the documentation center of an association of women living under Muslim laws. So far, the association cover 21 countries.

In terms of my political activities, I have recently created an association called Black America Database, BAD. I'm putting all the data I've gathered from my research through the years into a computerized data base in order to gain efficiency in its manipulation. I am primarily interested in African (of the continent and of the diaspora) resistance to European domination from the middle of the 15th century, when the Portuguese arrived in West Africa, up until today.

The first official project since BAD's creation is the compilation of a list of all political prisoners in the United States. I am particularly concerned with the way Black political prisoners seem to be neglected, ignored, forgotten or unknown. In most countries freedom fighters are considered as heroes by the general population, but in the U.S. they are ignored. So, I want to compile a list, and hopefully, it can be used to draw attention to their cases.

Q: Although we don't have any statistics for political prisoners in the United States, one thing that can be said about most of them is the motivation in a struggle for social values and ideals during the 1960s and 1970s. Do you think the time has come to declare an amnesty for these people?

DC: Of course! Using standards from other countries, there should have been amnesty by now. In France, for example, since I'm here, the Algerian War ended in 1962 and they extended a general amnesty six years later in 1968. When we look at the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees the right to struggle when one is a victim of bad treatment, the people shouldn't have gone to prison in the first place. Furthermore, whenever people like Nixon and other national so-called leaders are discovered engaging in criminal activities, they get amnesties or pardons. Therefore, everyone that is incarcerated for political reasons in the United States should be given a general amnesty immediately - or at least benefit from the same kind of pardon that Nixon got - for whatever they did or might have done.

Q: In the spirit of such an amnesty and the reintegration of these individuals of ideals and lessons into the society, what kind of an effect would this have?

DC: The main reason these people are still in prison is to prevent them from educating people or from developing struggle to improve the quality of life for everyone. We must push for their release so that these people can return to their communities and give the kind of leadership that is needed. Because, right now there is a void that is being filled by crack and misplaced aggression. If we examine statistics of the last 30 years, we see that things improved when this leadership was not in prison and active, supplying the kind of information and education that the people needed. Well, these same people are needed out in the streets today. It's urgent. For the good and the survival of the country.

Q: From the perspective of 20 years, how do you see the Black liberation movement in the United States?

DC: To respond on the Black liberation movement is a little difficult, my being in exile for 18 years; I only get headlines out here. However, I try to keep myself informed enough to have an overall, general view of the situation. I will respond by reading from a list of statistics that I've managed to put together: In 1984, the average Black family had 56 cents to spend while whites had a dollar. For Blacks, 56 cents was 2% less than in 1980, and 6% less than in 1970. That alone shows the pauperization process among Black people. The situation is economically worse today than when we were politically active 20 years ago. So, if there is a Black liberation movement, it's not very effective.

Government statistics for 1986 say 16% of all white children were poor, while 43% of all Black children were poor. That is a terrible indictment, not only of the society, but also of any movement that possibly exists.

Since 1973, weekly wages have declined 14.5%; hourly wages 10%. Half of the total national wealth is possessed by 0.5% of the population. Since 1980, there are 145% more millionaires in the United States. The gap between upper- and lower-income families is now wider than at any time since the Census Bureau began collecting such data. To me, that doesn't indicate that progress is being made. Actually, when looking at the statistics, things have been going backward. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

In 1984, the infant-mortality rate for Blacks in the United States was 21 per thousand; for whites, 10.5 per thousand. The rate for Blacks is on the same level found in many Third World countries. In 1983, life expectancy in the United States for white females was 78.8 years, for Black females 73.6; for white males 71.7 and for Black males 65.4. Thus, it appears to be a struggle for survival.

The national prison population is 50% Black, and the New York state prison population is 75% Black. So, from my perspective the situation looks terrible. It cries for the need of a liberation movement on a national scale.

Q: Can you describe your personal growth and transformation over the past 20 years, specifically in relation to some of the values you have that were also embraced by the BPP and some white radicals during the '60s?

DC: For the past 20 years, I haven't stopped trying to inform and educate myself. I've studied history - from today all the way back to the Big Bang - in order to better understand this mess that we now find ourselves in. Because, in looking around on a day-to-day basis, it looks like a desperate situation with no way out. Managing to acquire a long view of history - I'm not just talking about last week - gives a clearer perspective. Things are not as hopeless. It's possible to see how yesterday led to today, and it arms us to better develop methods of struggle that will successfully lead to a brighter tomorrow.

I'm much more angry today than I was 20 years ago. Then, I simply recognized the necessity that something had to be done and was not as mad and violent as now. Now when I hear of injustices, particularly in the United States, I have mad and violent reactions. When I'm a personal witness to injustice, particularly racist incidents, I react before I think, which I don't like at all. That's very dangerous. I'm trying to work on controlling that.

In terms of revolutionary violence, we made the mistake of placing tactics before strategy. Since we wanted to distinguish ourselves from those people that didn't want to do anything, therefore maintaining the status quo, we went to the other extreme in our zeal to demonstrate our revolutionary fervor and got hung up dealing with tactics, period. With no overall strategy at all!

When we look at other movements — Baadr-Meinhoff in Germany, Direct Action in France, Tupamaros in Uruguay — with their politics being disconnected from mass movements, violence turned out to be personal wars. Historically, the successful uses of violence have been those connected with mass struggles to gain a better life. Violence was used to give the final push to obtain the freedom that peoples struggled for. In Nicaragua against Somoza, for example. The same thing is happening in South Africa today. The masses started moving, much as Blacks in the United States in the '60s, before the violent actions of the African National Congress began. That's a mass movement that's not going to stop until final victory.

I'm now in the process of trying to make a synthesis of our experiences and trying to understand things that we did wrong, in order to use the lessons learned to develop methods of struggle that will be more efficient in the future.

Q: It would seem that the United States is collaborating with

the government of South Africa to suppress the visibility of this movement. Do you think that our government is afraid that a really open discussion about the process in South Africa would reignite the struggle here by fostering comparisons to American history?

DC: That's one of the tricks they've always used. Of all the liberation struggles in the world, the one with the closest parallel to Black liberation in the United States is the struggle in South Africa. It is a highly urbanized society with a large working class. Furthermore, South Africa imported apartheid from the United States. Take the pass laws, for example. There is a photograph in our family of my father with a colleague at a garage where they both worked. The colleague is holding up a pass. I forget which state from the South he was from, but they had passes. Apartheid is an American product. And, since many problems still exist on that level in the USA, if the government gave free reign to open discussion it would really be condemning itself and exposing itself to problems they don't want to deal with.

Q: Some of the chief problems within the vanguard organizations of the '60s had to do with individuals and the issue of individualism. Although history shows that many of these organizations were neutralized by police infiltration, you have a different view concerning the breakup of the movement. Can you explain?

DC: I'm convinced of one thing. It was not the government repression that destroyed the BPP. Obviously, many members were victims of that repression. Nevertheless, at the time I was there, the greater the repression, the more support we received, not only from Blacks, but also from other segments of the society. I'm convinced that, on the whole, the organization was destroyed by the megalomania of men.

There is a tendency expressed by the males of the human species, which is, they always engage in the struggle to see who's going to be king of the hill. To see who's the baddest. When we look at the history of the world, conflicts are based on some males's desire to dominate others. Struggle between men is always at the root of conflicts in mankind.

I consider this to be a biological evolutionary phenomenon from the early existence of the human species when it was still on the savanna in Africa, hunting and being hunted. For the survival of the group, it was necessary to choose the most intelligent and the strongest as leaders. Establishing the hierarchy was done by competition and aggressiveness, much as in other species of animals. For example, the pecking order in the chicken yard, or a troop of baboons or chimpanzees.

Leaving the savanna, developing civilization, and the technology capable of destroying all that lives, these tendencies that were developed for the survival of the group over millions of years of evolution, now have perverse effects. All we have to do is look around the world to see the results. Most organizations are destroyed

because of this tendency of men wanting to dominate and control. So, in developing methods of struggle, we must create the means of keeping these perverse, destrucitve, biological, evolutionary tendencies in check.

Personally, I'm convinced that since women were not engaged directly in these millions of years of evolutionary struggles, having been assigned maternity by nature, our chance of survival would be greatly enhanced if men were just completely eliminated from any decision-making process and all decisions were put in the hands of women.