

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/02/27/johnny-cash-solitary-man/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | February 27, 2010



Yesterday would have been Johnny Cash's 78th birthday. [Prison Law Blog](#) dug out this [NPR story from 2005](#) on Cash's famous visit to Folsom Prison in 1968, which includes a recording of him singing Folsom Prison Blues for an audience of inmates. [Listen to it here.](#)

Since that recording was made, the U.S. prison population has increased seven-fold, and the brutal conditions inside prisons and jails from solitary confinement to dismal health care and widespread rape are a national disgrace. But, as [Nicholas Kristof acknowledged](#) recently in the *New York Times*, the horrors that go on in American prisons remain a blind spot for most of its citizens.

Which brings us back to one of the verses of Cash's Folsom Prison Blues, which is about an inmate who listens from his cell to a train rolling past:

I bet there's rich folks eating
In a fancy dining car,
They're probably drinking coffee,
And smoking big cigars.
Well, I know I had it coming,
I know I can't be free,
But those people keep a-moving,
And that's what tortures me.

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James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the *Village Voice* and *Mother Jones*, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for *The New Republic* and *Ramparts*, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, and *Mother Jones*, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets [@solitarywatch](#).

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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For still more Johnny Cash, NPR Fresh Air re-played a 1997 interview with Cash the other day for his birthday. In the interview Cash discusses the Folsom concert. Audio and transcript at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124074975>

i did jonny cash for grads one year love his songs i ben told i sing just like him not jokeing i can realy master his voice i think it cos we feel much a like i like his song san quinnen lol you know san quinton you ben liveing hell to me lol grate song if you take out sanquinton and replaces it with well for me it go more like oakhill was liveing hell to me lol as for are rate we going with are prisons let me say as he sang and then i see a darknes and then i see a darkness oh no i see a darknes do you know how much i love you is hope that some how you can save me from this darknes lol dam right i going save as much as i can to agan quote his song this one is to the bop thare are drumms beyond the mountens and thare geting mitey clear ps you know what thare saying END SOLITARY NOW!lol realy

For those that have read my memoir on this site you already know why I find this article about the trains so very telling. I would like to share more of my experience now because I followed in the wake of Johnny Cashes visits to both San Quentin and Folsom Prisons.

In 1969 at the age of 17 I was loaded on a prison bus in Stockton California and driven down to Los Angeles for a court appearance as a witness. The bus stopped at every adult prison along the way to collect, and drop off other adult prisoners.

We arrived at the first gate of San Quentin outside of San Francisco around 8am where I noticed an art gallery to my right where inmates sold their art work. The sale of art made it possible for the inmates to buy the little extra things that make life on the inside a little more bearable. Many of these inmates are forgotten men whose families have long ago given up on them. The selling of their art work is a means of being self sufficient. I was impressed with what I could see through the window and wondered if they could have been able to make a living as an artist under different circumstances.

We pulled up to the main gate, then through it and were unloaded in front of two large doors under the watchful eyes of the guards on the cat walk above us. I noticed as we climbed the steps how everything around us was weather beaten and damp from the ocean. The paint on the two large iron doors was peeling and they appeared to be the original doors from the 1850s.

Trustees swept the street around us peering over to see if they knew any of us and most likely to size us up. We entered the doors and were lead though some locked iron gates. Once inside we were made to line up against the wall. Then a few names were called out, these were the inmates arriving here to do their time. The selected inmates then entered a separate area where they were made to run their fingers through their hair. Then they had to stick out their tongues, lift it up and side to side. The inmates were patted down to search for weapons and then made to strip down completely. Once naked the inmates were asked to raise their genitals to insure nothing was hidden behind them. After this humiliating inspection they were ordered to turn around, bend over and spread the cheeks of their buttocks. A guard with a rubber glove spread their cheeks even further one by one asking them to each cough in order to force any contraband to exit their rectum. Then as customary when an inmate arrives to a new institution even if they are coming from another the inmates were ordered to shower using a special shampoo to kill any body lice.

I always found these searches particularly humiliating even if I understood the security reasons behind them. The rest of us were processed the same way minus the shower. Afterwards we were taken down a hallway which connected two buildings necessitating the opening of gate after gate. I over heard that someone knew an inmate that was killed down one of the intersecting hallways coming back from visiting his family. Three guys using a mop ringer had beaten the inmate to death for a reason which the story teller didnt give but race was an issue.

The chow hall was very old and bore the scares of decades of abuse. The difference between this dining hall and the ones I had eaten in before was on that in this serving line you couldnt see who was serving you the food. Only the arms of the server were visible due to a partition separating us at eye level. We stuck our tray under the partition to get our food while saying nothing. I sat down to eat taking in the sight of the others coming in and getting their meals. We had limited time to eat and soon they came to collect the silverware which was counted in order to assure no one could use it to fashion a weapon later. I was separated from the rest and locked into a holding cell out of view of the others. The place seemed to tell a sad story of human misery and the dampness seemed to radiate off the cold concrete walls. I felt a chill and not having a jacket with me, like the trustees outside, I struggled to warm myself. I found myself rubbing my bare arms to warm them as I searched the room for rays of sunlight. However since my cell was under an overhang all sunlight was refracted sense there were no direct windows to the sun. I wondered where I was inside of the prison and the purposes of the buildings that I could see from my cell window.

I knew that this was where the death penalty was carried out and I couldnt help but wonder if any of the buildings in sight now contained condemned men. It felt ominous to think of all the lifes lost here both to legal and illegal executions. I wondered if the poor victims souls were still held captive here.

At that moment I could understand why Johnny Cash had written his song titled San Quentin and then sang it here shortly before my arrival. It contained these words, San Quentin I hate every inch of you, you bend my heart and mind and you warp my soul. What good do you think you do?

I was glad not to have time to find out if these words accurately portrayed the inmates true sentiments. I was eager to join the others on the bus for our next stop.

On the return trip we retraced the same route that we had taken down right back up the coast but the mood of the inmates was quite different. Now many of the inmates were noticeably depressed and agitated having lost their cases. This was in stark contrast to the

hopeful optimism they displayed on the way down as the realization of what lay ahead set in.

It was somewhere between Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo that we stopped at a KFC for lunch. The parking lot was filled with groups of young, middle to upper class kids around my age standing around their parked cars conversing. I was excited to view the beautiful young girls and I made a comment on how they were going to go to waste with those lame guys. I continued by saying that on the other hand I knew what to do with them.

I wanted to come across as a hip player in front of the older inmates but it was just false bravado for I had never been a true ladies man like my brother Mike. My comments didn't set right with one of the more hardened looking inmates returning to Folsom Prison and he responded that it was I, not these young boys that was lame for they were with the girls while I rode with cons.

I didn't answer as I felt my face warm with embarrassment. He was right of course at least they had a chance to get lucky well I had none whatsoever. I remained silent the rest of the way up to Folsom to drop this same inmate off.

The hardened inmate was seated behind me and as he passed me he paused and looked at me directly in my eyes and said I too thought I was so smart and tough that I could handle whatever the man threw my way. But look at me now man. Im on my way back to Folsom and Im not sure I can handle it no more. Its the hardest time Ive ever done man, real hard, dont be a fool like me and waste away in here. A tear rolled down this mans cheek and I felt a lump in my throat to see such a hardened man break down emotionally before my eyes. I watched as he entered the gate to the reception center his head bowed while dragging his feet seemingly in no hurry to return just like the first group that I witnessed on the trip to Los Angeles.

The inmate soon disappeared from my view as I imagined myself in his place facing tens of years of constant danger in the depressing surroundings of Folsom Prison. It had been as if he was reaching out to an image of himself years before to warn himself like the Ghost of Christmas future in Charles Dickens novel A Christmas Carol. Im sure he wished that someone would have strongly warned him before he ended up in Folsom Prison.

Flash forward to today and my current business is only a block away from two large jails and a halfway house. One of these institutions dominates the landscape of the area, a huge multi-level boxy grey concrete structure oddly shaped and with conspicuously few windows for its size. The windows are all blackened making it impossible to see the misery within.

Cameras are hung from this edifices many corners to capture the image of any prisoners that may be driven by self preservation to escape the horror found within its walls. On the roof a collection of antennas sprout up to communicate with the outside world for within those walls lays a world apart from society at large. On one side of this structure lies a collection of older style cinderblock barracks enclosed by dual fifteen foot fences topped with razor wire. One can look down on its courtyard as you drive over the adjacent bridge spanning the railroad yard. The yard is where new cars are parked until they can be picked up for delivery to the surrounding dealerships. I have grown to expect such railroad tracks to be adjacent to these institutions and the sound of a train still brings with it feelings of melancholy and abandonment to me.

I have worked practically in the shadows of these institutions since 1987 while attempting to ignore their purpose and the human misery inside. Like most people out of sight means out of mind but unlike most people I know first hand of the horrors that take place within such confines. My silence about these conditions eats away at my soul whenever I allow myself to ponder the purpose of these structures. Like ghosts wandering the hallways of a dwelling the faces of the many victims of institutional violence that I have witnessed, read about, or just heard of, over the years haunt the corridors of my mind.

There have been days over the years that I have felt unhappy with my life, but whenever I see that jail I cant help but reflect on what could have been and thus I come to the realization that my present life is but a fantastic dream come true. There is nothing as effective as this reality check to snap me out of my depression but in its place guilt often fills its void. Like many survivors of wars, accidents, or catastrophes I ask god why it was that I was spared physical harm when so many others around me were not. In the end I have to conclude that I may indeed be The Luckiest Man Alive.

The song No One Is Free contains these lyrics:

Well there are people in the darkness
And they just cant see the light
And if we dont say its wrong then that says its right
We got to feel for each other
Let our brothers know were here
Got to get the message and send it out loud and clear
That none of us are free
None of us are free
None of us are free if one of us is chained.

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