



Episode 64: Taxx Is Tripping
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Oliver Alfuranez: I'm Oliver Alferness, a 13-old Ear Hustle listener. The following episode of Ear Hustle contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

[ambient noise from the yard at San Quentin State Prison comes in]

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: What does the term "bonnaroo" mean to you?

Christopher Granman: Bonnaroo. I've never heard of that term before.

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: How long have you been incarcerated again?

Dion DeMerrill: 19 years.

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: Have you ever heard the term "bonnaroo?"

Dion DeMerrill: No.

Steve Brooks: But I remember that movie *Bonnaroo Bonsai*, something like that. It's a really silly comedy movie.

Darren Settlemyer: Bonnaroo means sharp, clean, on top of your game.

Lamavis Comundoiwilla: Yeah. Bonnaroo is when you hook your clothes up... you sew 'em... you one of the fly guys.

Steve Brooks: I know it's got to be something, you know, wonderful, but I can't remember right off hand.

[ambient noise fades out]

Richard "Bonaru" Richardson: It's the style, and the way that you dress.

Nigel Poor: So can you sit in a sentence?

[music comes in]

Richard "Bonaru" Richardson: Uh... "I'm always bonnaroo." "Every day I'm bonnaroo." [laughs]

Nigel Poor: What's your nickname?

Richard "Bonaru" Richardson: My nickname is Bonaru!

[to Earlonne]

Nigel Poor: Oh man, Earlonne, it was so great to see Bonaru.

Earlonne Woods: Of course it was! [Nigel affirms] And I gotta say, he was looking pretty bonnaroo'd the day we saw him. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel Poor: He definitely was. And of course, we had to talk to him 'cause getting bonnaroo'd, getting' all fancied up, *that's* what this episode is all about.

Earlonne Woods: And this was actually the idea of our producer John "Yahya" Johnson. [Nigel affirms] He's in the studio with us, though he's rarely bonnaroo'd. Look at him right now. [crosstalk]

Nigel Poor: [crosstalk] Oh! I take exception. [Yahya laughs in the background]

Earlonne Woods: Look at that dingy t-shirt!

John "Yahya" Johnson: Hey, man, hey.

Earlonne Woods: He done washed that t-shirt with colors.

John "Yahya" Johnson: It's comfortable though.

Earlonne Woods: Yahya, tell us about your inspiration for this episode.

John “Yahya” Johnson: I wanted to do an episode where we looked at how we explored our individuality inside, especially because prison works extremely hard to rob you of your individuality. [Nigel affirms] And so I think it's really interesting how guys work really hard to push back against that concept.

Nigel Poor: Like how?

John “Yahya” Johnson: It can be the way you dress, things you do to your cell. And it can be a lot bigger than that as well.

Richard “Bonaru” Richardson: And the definition of bonnaroo, is to elevate the evolution of everything in existence.

[to Earlonne and Yahya]

Nigel Poor: Elevate the evolution of everything in existence. I love that.

Earlonne Woods: The four E's

Nigel Poor: The four E's. I'm Nigel Poor.

John “Yahya” Johnson: I'm John “Yahya” Johnson.

Earlonne Woods: And I'm Earlonne Woods. Who's *always* bonnaroo'd up. This is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.

[theme song continues and fades out]

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Our friend Bonaru was released from prison a few months ago.

Earlonne Woods: Yeup. And you know I was there to meet him at the front gate.

Nigel Poor: Of course you were. When he was inside, Bonaru was part of the San Quentin News Team. And one thing I remember about seeing him is that he was always looking really sharp.

Earlonne Woods: Bonaru was one of them cats that every time you'd see him, he's gonna be sewing something or ironing something.

Nigel Poor: He was always creased up, right?

Earlonne Woods: Always.

Nigel Poor: And his shoes. OK, he always had on perfect shoes. No scuffs, nothing. It was like every day he put on a pair of boots.

Earlonne Woods: That was him. [Nigel laughs] Gotta look like glass if he's gon' put them on.

Nigel Poor: And apparently, he already had a bit of that style when he first got to prison.

Richard "Bonaru" Richardson: When I first entered prison back in 1991, you know, '92, OGs used to say, "Oh, he's bonnaroo." But I didn't know what the term meant. [Earlonne affirms] You see what I'm saying? I just liked to dress! So I used to hear 'em say, "Hey, he's Bonnaroo." And I was afraid, you know, I'm not gonna question nobody.

Earlonne Woods: [mockingly] *You don't wanna know*— [crosstalk]

Richard "Bonaru" Richardson: [crosstalk] —You know how it is when you first get to prison. [laughs]

Earlonne Woods: —*what bonnaroo means?*

Richard "Bonaru" Richardson: No. Right. [laughing] So, I actually started introducing myself as Bonaru.

Earlonne Woods: So when they saying "he bonnaroo", you— they think that's your name?

Richard "Bonaru" Richardson: Yeah, yeah. [laughs]

Nigel Poor: Oh my God, Earlonne. I feel for this guy. I mean, I can totally see him thinking, *I guess I got my prison name! And it's a really cool one!* But in fact, Bonaru really misunderstood the situation.

[to Bonaru]

Earlonne Woods: How long before you found out what it meant?

Richard "Bonaru" Richardson: Oh, man. [laughs] It was embarrassing. [continues laughing] It was embarrassing because it took a couple of years, you know.

Earlonne Woods: A cou—

Richard "Bonaru" Richardson: It took a couple of years...

[music comes in]

Richard “Bonaru” Richardson: So I was in Soledad, [Earlonne affirms] and I was on the bleachers, right. [Earlonne affirms] And I'm sitting down with my so-called little group, and I hear somebody behind me use the term “bonnaroo”, you know, and I turn around, I'm like, “What's up?” And they lookin' at me like, *Man, mind your business*, right? [laughs] [Earlonne affirms]
But I was like, “But you called me.”
So almost got into a confrontation behind the name... 'til one of the dudes I was with was like, “Hey man, you know, they talkin' about somebody else.”

You know what I'm saying? I said, “But they mentioned my name.” You know? “They mentioned my name. What they want?”

He's like, “Nah, nah.” And then he basically explained to me.

Nigel Poor: But how did you feel inside?

Richard “Bonaru” Richardson: Embarrassed. I was embarrassed. [laughs]

Nigel Poor: Did you tell anybody?

Richard “Bonaru” Richardson: This is the first time I actually spoke on it. I was ashamed. But at the same time, I had already taken on that persona. Strangely enough, it just merged into who I was, you know? I dressed the part. They utilized the name, so I'm going to go ahead and just take on this persona. And that's what I did.

[transition comes in – abstract industrial sounds]

Nigel Poor: What did you have for breakfast this morning?

Taxx: Um... I had a honeybun.

Nigel Poor: You start your day with that much sugar?

Taxx: Yeah, I work it off, but yeah.

Nigel Poor: How old are you?

Taxx: I'll be 34 this September.

Nigel Poor: OK. That's why he can do that. After 40 you can't start your day like that.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: Nah, it stays with you for the rest of your life.

Taxx: Nobody should start the day like that, [Nigel laughs] but I mean.... I'm in prison, so I've earned that.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: This is Taxx. New York and I talked to him a while back in San Quentin.

Nigel Poor: How many honey buns do you eat a week?

Taxx: I did probably somewhere along thirteen a week. That's twice a day-ish.

Nigel Poor: By the time you get out of prison, how many honey buns do you think you will have eaten? [laughs]

Taxx: Let's see... four years... and [calculating]... we'll go... over a thousand for sure. Let's just say that over a thousand. [New York and Nigel laugh] Is this is gonna be a honeybun interview? Or...

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: Nah, nah. I wanna ask you about... [crosstalk]

Taxx: [crosstalk] I mean, we can make it one! [Nigel laughs] I've got some honey buns stories.

[music comes in]

Earlonne Woods: I was gonna ask, Nyge — [Nigel affirms] Is this actually an episode about honey buns and I didn't get the memo?! [Nigel laughs]

Nigel Poor: Don't you wish it were?

Earlonne Woods: Yeah! 'Cause I would have been like, “We finna put that Antwan song up in here.” [Nigel laughs]

Nigel Poor: So the breakfast thing is just the standard question we ask people when we're setting their mic levels. We actually asked Taxx down to the studio to talk about clothing. And about a particular piece of clothing he saw when he first got to San Quentin.

[music fades out]

Taxx: I came to this prison January 2019, and one of the first things I saw when I got off the bus was somebody in a bomber jacket. And if anybody knows what a bomber jacket is... they're pretty stylish.

Nigel Poor: Describe it.

Taxx: Almost letterman jacket type. They're fitted, they're tailored around the bottom... also around the sleeves and on the collar. And... I thought they were prison issue.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Uh, yeah... I've seen the actual prison issue jackets and they are nothing like what he's describing.

Taxx: If anybody knows what these CDCR blue jackets look like, they're pretty crappy. They look like a mix between trash and a raincoat. Um... [snickering in the background]

[to Taxx]

Nigel Poor: They snap up the front... they're just like wearing a shapeless blue thing. [people in the background chime in and say "Windbreaker"] Windbreaker!

Taxx: Yeah. I wouldn't say shapeless. It's like a rectangle feeling going on. [New York and Nigel laugh] Almost like you're wearing a stiff dress.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, it's not flattering.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: Those bomber jackets on the other hand though, they fit *right*.

Taxx: I was like, "Well, how do I get one of those? 'Cause that's what I want." And uh... you couldn't find it. Nobody would tell you anything. It's kind of pretty hush hush. It took me almost a year to figure out where I could get this jacket.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: We should tell them why this is so hush hush, Nyge.

Nigel Poor: Yes. Well, what we're talking about is... upgrades?

Earlonne Woods: Pretty much.

Nigel Poor: Upgrades to a standard set of clothing the state gives you when you get to prison. And that includes stuff like t-shirts, boxers, pants and shoes.

Earlonne Woods: Right. That's state property. [Nigel affirms] And the state doesn't want you messing with it. And they definitely don't want you altering it so much that you can blend in with civilians and walk out the gate. [Nigel laughs] That's what's called "escape paraphernalia."

Nigel Poor: Yes. But this bomber jacket — I don't want to say it's escape paraphernalia per se, but Earlonne, it's a pretty big alteration.

Earlonne Woods: It's nice. Definitely.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, it is nice.

Earlonne Woods: And this is what they'll do. They'll take the elastic collar, the cuffs, the waistband from a state-issued sweatshirt and sew those onto a state-issued windbreaker. [Nigel affirms] And you will end up with this cool looking giddy-up that looked kind of like a bomber jacket, *Top Gun...*

Nigel Poor: Nice. Or something.

Earlonne Woods: What was it? Goose and them? [Earlonne and Nigel laugh]

Nigel Poor: Believe it or not, I've never seen that movie. And Taxx really wanted one, so he kept asking around.

Earlonne Woods: And finally, a year after he saw that first one, Taxx sees a *second* bomber jacket. He knew that he was about to go to Visiting, and he wanted to be stylin' for the pictures he'd take.

Nigel Poor: So, he talked to the guy with the jacket.

Taxx: I was like, "Hey... can I wear your jacket?" [laughs] [New York laughs]

[to Taxx]

Nigel Poor: Oh, for the picture you want...

Taxx: Before the picture, uh, yeah. Took the picture in it. I liked the picture. I sent it home.

My family was like, "Oh, I like your little jacket."

I'm like, "Yeah, me too."

Nigel Poor: Putting that jacket on, did it bring back any memories? [music comes in]

Taxx: It just made me feel like I was not so much in prison. On the streets um... I dress a certain way. My clothes are fitted, tailored. I don't wear anything that's oversized or undersized. I'm not a baggy clothes wearer. You kinda get that nostalgic feeling, like, *You know what? I miss how I look.* And that's one thing about prison, it made me feel like I'm bummed out. I'm not me. I don't look like me. You kinda want some semblance of normality. So as much as you can escape this place, that's what I was feeling. Like,

“All right, hey, I'm looking good. All right. I like this. So what do I gotta do to get this jacket, man?” Yeah. “Do I gotta sell my soul or anything like that?” [New York laughs]

He says, “You know what? You like that one?”

I'm like. “I do.” [music fades out]

He said, “Just take it.”

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: In return, Taxx gives this guy the materials he needs to make himself a new bomber jacket.

Earlonne Woods: So Taxx has this jacket. He *loves* it. And he makes a vow to never part with it.

Taxx: You couldn't grab this jacket without me noticing. I will absolutely not let this jacket go. It's gonna stay with me until I leave here... at which point I will probably choose very carefully who I give it to.

Jesse: So one day I'm asleep. It's early in the morning I hear, “*qqqh, wahwahahwahwah*”, [imitating sound of staticky walky-talky] and I'm going, *What the fuck is that?*

[music comes in]

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: This is Jesse. He was Taxx's bunkie at the time.

Jesse: And I look up, and there's two cops. He goes, “Which locker is yours?”

And I went, “*Oh no.*” And I'm thinking I'm going to the hole. My stomach sinks, I'm like, “*Ohhh*”. I go, “This one.”

And he goes, “Well, good, 'cause we're looking for your bunkie.”

And I said, “*Oh no.*”

And he goes, “Well, look, you can pack his shit up or we can do it.”

And I said, “*Fuuuuck.*” So I just got up and said, “Lemme get it. I'll take care of it.” [music fades out]

Earlonne Woods: Taxx was headed to the hole.

Nigel Poor: And when you get sent to the hole, all your stuff gets packed up, and then the officers decide what they're gonna let you have.

Earlonne Woods: So Jesse was packing up all Taxx stuff, and he was trying to do a nice job with it.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, I mean, E, we've talked about this before on the show a lot: your bunkie or your cellie, that's an important relationship.

Earlonne Woods: Hell yeah. And Jesse says...Taxx was a good bunkie.

Jesse: I know his character. I know his program. Comfortable, that's a big thing in here. [music comes in]

My TV got Fox, which shows Friday night wrestling. So I'd come back from group on Friday night, he'd be sitting on my bed watching my TV with a bowl of Deli Bites and a little rice bowl with some sweet and sour, soy sauce and stuff, Hoisin, and a Pepsi for me going, and he'd just point at the TV! [laughs]

[to Jesse]

Nigel Poor: Oh wait, he'd have it ready for you?

Jesse: Yeah! And he had his bowl with his Pepsi, the splitter cable coming off for his headphones, he's watching TV, and he looks at me and he just pointed at wrestling, like, *It's on*. And I knew already. Like, all right, just sit down and eat and watch the wrestling show, you know what mean?

Nigel Poor: Can I just say, that's really sweet.

Jesse: Yeah. [Nigel affirms] So that's— you know what I mean? That's his character.

So all the important stuff — TV, watch, radio, fan, you know, all these important items, *boom, boom, boom, boom, boom*. I'm getting them in there, started packing his shit up. Nothing was in my mind except, *What the fuck happened? Where's he going? Goddamn. That sucks*. All that kind of shit. [music fades out]

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: It wasn't until later that day that Jesse realized the one thing he'd forgotten to pack.

Jesse: The whole bed was empty. Everything was gone, except that jacket was hanging on the end of the bed. And I remember looking at it, and I said, "Awww, his

jacket!" So I went to the officer who packed up his stuff and I said, "Hey, is he coming back?"

He goes, "I think so."

Earlonne Woods: So Jesse tucked that jacket away in the safest place he could.

Nigel Poor: But days went by. Taxx didn't come back. A month passed. Two...

Earlonne Woods: COVID happened, and things started to look pretty bad.

Jesse: It hit the six-month mark and somebody was like, "Hey man, what's up with Taxx? Is he coming back?"

And I said, "I don't know, let me go check."

So I went to the only officer I know that I have a good rapport with—like that anyway—and I said, "Hey, is he coming back?"

And he goes, "I don't think so, man. Think it's been too long. I think they're going to ship him out."

And when he said that I walked back and I... I took the jacket, right, literally I put it on to just try. I was like, *I'm going to wear it. I'm going to wear this fuckin' coat...*

Nigel Poor: You hadn't worn in the whole six months?

Jesse: Not once. Not the whole time. It just sat there the whole time. Didn't wear it. It was underneath my jacket. I don't even wear a jacket to Chow; I'm Canadian, it ain't cold out here to me. I walk in the rain to Chow, I don't care. I put the jacket on, and he's taller than me, it don't look right. It don't look like a bomber. So the dude next to me, he saw me with it on, and he goes, "Hey, what's up with that jacket? Let me get it."

And I was like, "Ah, that's my bunkie's, man."

He was like, "Well, what's up with him? Is he coming back?"

I said, "Nah."

He goes, "Let me get it. Who cares?"

I say, "Well, if he does come back, I need the jacket back."

Nigel Poor: You didn't sell it? You just gave it... away?

Jesse: Nah, yeah. I just wanted to see somebody wear it, [Nigel affirms] and enjoy it.

[music comes in]

Nigel Poor: How long were you in the hole?

Taxx: Uh... six months.

Nigel Poor: Oh.

Taxx: Yeah. I was gone from my jacket for six months.

Nigel Poor: Earlonne, literally *three days* after Jesse finally gives it away...

Earlonne Woods: It was a temporary loan... [Nigel laughs]

Nigel Poor: OK, so, three days after he *temporarily* loaned Taxx's jacket out, Jesse sees Taxx on the yard, fresh out of the hole.

Jesse: I saw him on the yard, and the first thing that popped up— the only good news I could tell him was, "Hey, I still got your jacket!"

Taxx: "Hey! Your jacket's still here." When I heard it was still here, it was kind of like, "Ahhhhh!" [euphorically]

Jesse: [laughing] And he just snapped! [slaps hands once for emphasis] His facial expression went, *Go get it*.

Taxx: "Oh, you have the jacket?" Yeah. I don't care about anything else, but the jacket. I want the jacket.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: Only problem is, Jesse doesn't actually... technically... have the jacket.

Nigel Poor: Right. He'd given it to the other guy. And that guy had spent those three short days he had the jacket, washing it. I mean, kind of obsessively washing it and making it his own.

[music fades out]

Jesse: He washed the shit out of it, right? Used state soap the first time. Then he used laundry detergent the next time, Tide. Then he used Gain the third time to make it smell good. Hung it up and dried it. This was a Saturday, Sunday. He came back on a Monday; the jacket literally was just like fresh from the dry cleaners.

Taxx: Somebody else had the jacket, and he took care of it. He washed it and everything. I was like, "Wow. OK, cool. But... I want it back." [laughs] Like, just give me the jacket back.

Jesse: I said, "Well, I gotta get it from the neighbor 'cause he just washed."

And he goes, "Well, go get it."

And I said, "Well, he's asleep right now."

"Well, go get it."

Taxx: It was apparent that I wasn't going to get the jacket back for a while. And... at which point, I kind of flipped a switch.

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: Were there strong words used?

Taxx: There were *interesting* words, [snickering in the background] I'd say. I what I said along the words was, "I'll be in there later to get that jacket." [laughs] And I fully intended to go in there and get the jacket.

Jesse: Before I could get back to the building, I bent the corner, I heard, [imitating scuffle between Taxx and person with jacket] "Oh, I need that jacket, man! I'm in here to get my jacket! If I don't get that jacket back, I'm comin' up in there!"

And then I heard this little screeching voice go, "Jesse! Jesse! Jesse!" [in a high pitched voice] [laughs]

Quincy: I was trying to [laughing] calm Taxx down until he got the jacket back.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: This is Quincy.

Earlonne Woods: He was the screeching guy.

Nigel Poor: [laughing] Right. He was yelling at Jesse to hurry up and get that jacket, while he tried to keep Taxx calm.

Quincy: And he was *livid*. Oh my God. "Look, I'mma let you know this right now, pack up my stuff, if I'm going to the hole."

I'm like, "You just got here!"

[to Jesse]

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: Let me get this straight: You were ready to go back to the hole... where they would not even let you have the jacket, for the jacket? [soft laughter in the background, implying Taxx said yes] Yes.

Quincy: And so, me being the Christian man that I am, I was like, “Taxx let's just pray about this man.” [laughing] “Lord, we come to you and uh... Taxx is trippin’.” [laughing] “And we wanna calm him down, so, any way possible, if you can deescalate this and bring him back his jacket, send that jacket back in Jesus' name. Amen.” [music comes in]

Earlonne Woods: So Jesus got him his jacket back, right?

Nigel Poor: Well... actually it was Jesse.

Jesse: I gave this dude laundry soap for a month. I gave him like \$2 in food, like a dollar in a bar of soap... *Oh my*— and he'd never let me live it— [crosstalk]

Nigel Poor: [crosstalk] So if you gave it to the guy, why did you have to pay to get it back?

Jesse: ‘Cause it was like, I'd be stealing it if I didn't compensate him for his time and his effort.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: But what about the fact you made a contract, a stipulation that if your bunkie came back, you need the jacket back.

Jesse: He did not remember that in that moment.

Nigel Poor: But you had kept it for 5 months and 30—and 27 days, and then three days after you gave it away, Taxx comes back.

Jesse: Literally, like Jesus out of the tomb or something. [everyone laughs]

[music fades out]

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Quincy, the guy who prayed to the lord while Taxx was tripping, he and Taxx did become friends.

Earlonne Woods: And Quincy says, now, he never sees Taxx without that jacket.

[to Quincy]

Nigel Poor: If you had to speculate, why is this jacket so emotionally important to him?

Quincy: Seeing everybody in blues and a lot of people do wear 'em, you start looking like the other person. And then, all of a sudden, you know, everything is monochromatic. You know what I mean? It just look—everything looks the same. There's no standout. And I think this made him stand out. And it gave him a sense of... freedom. And he was gonna to get that freedom back.

[transition comes in – abstract industrial sounds]

[to Jayda]

Nigel Poor: Do you know the term “bonnaroo?” ... To get “bonnaroo'd?” To be “Bonnaroo”?

Jayda Raspberry: I don't.

Earlonne Woods: What!?

Jayda Raspberry: I don't!

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: This is Jayda Raspberry, I met her at a Criminal Justice function when I was just out.

Nigel Poor: Earlonne, Raspberry is a perfect name for her. [Earlonne affirms] She's kind of sparkly and fresh, like someone you just want to be around. And even if it's not the word she would use, I could tell, she's definitely bonnaroo'd.

Earlonne Woods: Stay fly.

Jayda was in prison for six years, mostly at Valley State Prison for Women in Chowchilla, California.

Jayda Raspberry: Yeah, you know, when you first get to prison, you don't really have anything, so you're just trying to figure it out. So I'm like, how do I get a chain? How do I get earrings? How do I, you know, make my hair look glamorous the way it always does? How do I get pretty in here? I'm used to being sexy; I'm used to being glamorous all the time. And then inside, it's just like bland ass blue.

[to Jayda]

Nigel Poor: What did it feel like to have being sexy and being glamorous taken away from you?

Jayda Raspberry: It was terrible. It made me feel sad. It made me feel like, *Damn, like I really fucked up.* Like, I guess in my mind, I was like, *Oh, I'm supposed to be ugly in here.*

Being beautiful for a woman. I mean, it's natural. Like, we're naturally supposed to be beautiful. We're beautiful beings. Everything about us — we give birth, we are mothers, we're sisters, we're providers of the household. So, like, why wouldn't you want to be beautiful doing all of that?

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: Jayda said the first person who helped her get some of that beauty back after she got to prison, was a roommate of hers.

Jayda Raspberry: So I had this roommate named Chocolate. She had been in for a while, you know, couple of times in and out. So she was used to how to get fine in prison. So she would be in the mirror, she would be curling her hair and she'd be putting on makeup. And she had these jeans from the box, and I'd be looking like, *Where are y'all going?*

And she was like, “Come on, baby. We finna go to the main yard.”

I was young; I was 18, like, *What is the main yard?*

Chocolate was like, “You're going outside with me.”

So she put this makeup on me, and she had my hair curled. And I had on this white tank top and these blue jeans, and I had on my state shoes that was fresh. And so, I get dressed and once I got dressed and looked in that mirror, I was like, “Oh, OK... she's *back.*” [laughs]

Earlonne Woods: Soon, Jayda was learning all the prison ingenuities: Tailoring shirts to make them more form fitting, using Koolaid to dye her socks and shoelaces pink.

Nigel Poor: Makeup too. She used to make blue eyeshadow using watercolor pencils.

Earlonne Woods: And that, like the bomber jacket, was *not* regulation.

[music fades out]

Jayda Raspberry: So, like with the blue watercolor, the officers would be like, “Where'd you get that?”

And I'm like, “Where I get what from?”

And they're like, “Where'd you get that blue on your eyes?”

'Cause we were only allowed to have earth-toned eyeshadows, and I'm like, "OK, well, blue is the part [of the earth], the sky is blue."

Nigel Poor: These women were getting seriously bonnaroo'd, like, all the way down to their dainties. Jayda told us they figured out how to modify a bra so it had more of a like pushup effect. And there was one more modification I wanted to ask her about.

[to Jayda]

I've also heard that women inside would modify their underwear. Is that true? Can you talk about that?

Jayda Raspberry: We made thongs! [laughs]

Earlonne Woods: Really?

Jayda Raspberry: Yes! You can make thongs. You can make G strings. So the first time I went to the main yard, it was my roommate sister's birthday. And so, they were out frying burritos, people had radios out there and music, and I'm watching people dance, but this one particular girl, she was dancing, and I seen that she had on a thong! And I was like, *How the hell does she have on a thong? How the hell did that happen?*

And so, then that's when my other roommate was like, "Girl, I make those."

And I was like, "What do you mean you make those?"

And so, they make them with the material, either with our muumuus — they take your measurements, and then they basically just sew them for you. People would cut the pants and use that elastic or from a hair type; and you have a really, really good pair of thongs, like, you bought them from Ross.

Earlonne Woods: I definitely appreciate this conversation [Jayda and Nigel laugh] because it's a *whooooole* new insight into what's going on in the women's prison.

Jayda Raspberry: Yes, [Nigel affirms] it goes down. It does. [Earlonne affirms]

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: Nyge. [Nigel affirms] I used to talk to my sister Tyra about this. And she told me that when she was incarcerated, hey used to have parties, like, hula parties, they used to have these fashion shows.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, and Jayda says that those parties were a big part of her time, too.

[music comes in]

Jesse: Everybody was just so beautiful. Like, we had outside people come in and help us. And we had music and we had the, the studs, they dressed up in like tank tops, they made pants. And the women, we made dresses and skirts and two piece outfits. It was just beautiful. And headbands! It was dope. It was dope. Yeah, we did that a lot.

There was some seamstresses in there. I'm like, "Bitch, you need to get out and have your own clothing line. Like, you makin' G strings and dresses and all this type of stuff." Like, this is, it was wild. [sniffles as she gets emotional]

Earlonne Woods: What's making you cry right now?

Jayda Raspberry: Just thinking about... those experiences, like, I think about it, but I don't really talk about it out loud. And so to talk about it out loud, it's just bringing back all of those emotions, like, just getting dressed and getting ready for the fashion shows. Just being in community with people that I'd never thought that I would love is really touching. 'Cause I miss a lot of those people.

I have a friend, her name is April Harris, and I love her so much. And sometimes I wish I could just go and lay on her bunk and just have her just rub my head and just tell me everything's going to be okay. Because that's what she would do. So just thinking about all of that and just the talks we had and just everything, it just making me emotional.

[music fades out]

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Jayda said she'd probably be in her feelings a little bit after this interview. And, you know, E, I find myself thinking about our conversation with her a lot too.

Earlonne Woods: Oh yeah, how?

Nigel Poor: Yeah, well, 'cause I was thinking about all these ideas of beauty and being a woman and all that stuff that she talked about, and I'm not really a girly girl, so I didn't quite relate to that need to be beautiful, but I just found it so interesting to think about all the different ways to be a woman. And then, I have to admit, what she was talking about sounded really fun. Like, just enjoying your physicality and not worrying about it. And I felt like I kind of missed out on something, like some kind of sisterhood.

Earlonne Woods: You know when I used to feel like that?

Nigel Poor: When?

Earlonne Woods: When I used to sit in prison and watch step shows in colleges.

Nigel Poor: Step shows?

Earlonne Woods: Yeah! Step shows. It's like college fraternities and they go in there and be like... [claps and stomps rhythmically]

Nigel Poor: Ah, love it. Yes, yes, yes.

Earlonne Woods: I'm telling you, I mean, that was a little off beat right there what I just did. [Nigel affirms] You know what I'm saying? And they used to be in there doing it and I used to feel like I just missed out on everything when I used to watch that on TV, you know, and they used to be in there doing it. And I used to just be sitting there watching it and feeling like, *Damn, I'm missing out on life.*

Nigel Poor: Mmm. Oh, yeah. Well, I feel like that kind of ties into what Jayda is saying she misses from those prison parties — that same kind of exuberance.

[music comes in]

Earlonne Woods: Right. On that note, we're gonna step out a little bit and I'mma [claps and stomps briefly]... I'mma show you somethin', Nyge.

Nigel Poor: All right, all right.

Earlonne Woods: And when we get back, we're gonna talk about bonnaroo-ing a prison cell.

Nigel Poor: Like it.

[music fades out]

[transition comes in – abstract industrial sounds]

John “Yahya” Johnson: Nyge and E.

Nigel Poor: Hey, Yahya!

Earlonne Woods: Whadup?

John “Yahya” Johnson: Wassup. I met this very artsy brother back when I was in Old Folsom back in 2014. So, imagine to my utter surprise a few months ago when I pulled up to the liquor store, right, and get out my car, and turn and see this guy!

Nigel Poor: What?! Out of context? He was just there?

John “Yahya” Johnson: Just out of context, he was just there. I thought I was looking at an apparition or something. [Nigel laughs] And I kinda went backwards, [Nigel affirms]

and he looked at me and he kind of went backwards, and then we embraced into a little tight embrace. [Nigel says, “Wow” in the background]

And so, I couldn’t wait to get him into the studio [Nigel affirms] so that he could tell everybody about this particular type of bonnaroo-ing he does. His name’s Rico...

Nigel Poor: Let me guess, he’s from Puerto Rico?

John “Yahya” Johnson: Absolutely. [Nigel laughs] That’s right, Nigel. He was born in Puerto Rico, and when he was 12-and-a-half he moved to New York with his mom and three siblings.

Nigel Poor: Right. And Rico told us how in their apartment in the Bronx, his mom tried to recreate a little bit of the home they’d just left.

[salsa music in Spanish comes in]

William “Rico” Rouse: She had a flag. She put the flag up, and... found a calendar with palm trees on it or something to remind us of all the palm trees we had down there on the islands. We speak in our language. We listen to our music and if we listen to the news, we listening to the news in Spanish. It was a safe haven. A little piece of the island in the house. Her emphasis was... in this house, you in Puerto Rico. When you leave here and go out, you in the United States.

[music fades out]

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: The home was a safe haven from what was happening outside.

Nigel Poor: Mmhm. And he said he was surprised, Earlonne, by how dirty the streets of the Bronx were, and the way Italian and Irish kids in the neighborhood would taunt him and his siblings.

William “Rico” Rouse: Every day, me and my brother used to say, “Why did my mom’s bring us to this, man?”

Nigel Poor: Rico ended up getting into drugs, and he started committing burglaries. When he was 45, he was sentenced to 40 years to life under California’s three strikes law.

[to Rico]

Earlonne Woods: Can you tell us about the first time you walked into a cell?

William “Rico” Rouse: I looked at it, and it was like a cage. A cement caged. With a door and a little window in the back. Little glass window to look out. I says, “Nah, I got to have certain things in here to make it look pleasing to me and comfortable.”

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: But it’s not like you can go to Target or Bed Bath and Beyond or some shit.

John “Yahya” Johnson: Definitely not. Luckily though Rico had a hookup in the laundry.

Nigel Poor: What does that do for him?

John “Yahya” Johnson: When new clothes get delivered to the laundry, they arrive on trucks in these huge cardboard boxes. [Nigel affirms] That cardboard piles up. So his friend starts tucking it away and passing it along to Rico. [Nigel affirms]

[music comes in]

William “Rico” Rouse: I had so much cardboard in my cell. [laughs softly] I snuck it in the building, and I started getting razors. I had to get straight razors to do that with. So I had to find out who had them, how to buy them.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: A razor? I mean, you can get those in prison.

Earlonne Woods: Yeah, you can get a regular razor...

Nigel Poor: Shaving!

Earlonne Woods: Yeah, but that’s not the kind he talkin’ ‘bout. He’s talkin’ ‘bout a boxcutter underworld type of razor, Nyge... [Nigel affirms]

[music fades out]

Nigel Poor: So he had his cardboard, his razors, he got glue, wax and paint. And he started making shelves for the cell walls.

Earlonne Woods: And he also made containers for condiments and CDs [Nigel affirms] and stuff like that.

Nigel Poor: All the stuff.

John “Yahya” Johnson: And not just that, Nyge. I remember walking up to Rico’s cell and thinking, *My God. This guy has a brick floor.*

Nigel Poor: What? What do you mean? [crosstalk]

John “Yahya” Johnson: [crosstalk] A brick floor in prison, Nigel.

Nigel Poor: How do you get a brick floor in prison?

John “Yahya” Johnson: Well, it wasn’t actually brick floor, Nigel. [Nigel affirms] What he did was take a huge sheet of brown paper and stained it red. [Nigel affirms] Then he drew a grid with black marker to make it look like the grout in between the brick. Then sealed the whole thing with wax.

Nigel Poor: Ingenious.

John “Yahya” Johnson: Ingenious.

Earlonne Woods: And he said he made covers for his lockers, and a cardboard lid for his toilet.

William “Rico” Rouse: Then I painted it.

Nigel Poor: What'd you paint it? What color?

William “Rico” Rouse: I put the Puerto Rican flag on it. [Nigel and Rico laugh]

[as narrator]

John “Yahya” Johnson: So he had his cell done up with those shelves, containers, that fancy-looking brick floor and Puerto Rican flags all over the place.

William “Rico” Rouse: Every time that I walked in my cell, [percussion heavy salsa music comes in] and I put on my music, I completely forget about the yard. This is my little world. Oh man, once I'm in my cell, I'm in my flavor. I put my salsa music on. That's my world. Every time I left there, every morning, now I'm back, vigilant, in a hostile environment. And it happened to all of us! [music fades out]

[music comes in]

[to Nigel and Earlonne]

John “Yahya” Johnson: I definitely can empathize with what he's saying. [Nigel affirms] My cell was my sanctuary too. And I couldn't wait 'til the end of the day when I can make it back to the cell where I can just relax. You know what I mean? [Nigel affirms] Decompress from the chaos of the day.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, I mean, Yahya, I can totally understand why people like Rico would want to make it his own space, and kinda own it.

Earlonne Woods: But not everybody in prison has Rico's interior decorating skills.

John "Yahya" Johnson: Exactly. And soon, word got out about those skills.

Nigel Poor: And he told us some of his earliest customers were guys from Southeast Asia, Cambodians and Laotians.

Earlonne Woods: So, I'm assuming no Puerto Rican flags for them.

Nigel Poor: Mmm.

John "Yahya" Johnson: Nope. They wanted pictures of the Buddha in their cells.

[music fades out]

William "Rico" Rouse: When he see what I did to his cell, he said, "You good, man." And then he said, "Man, I'm back in Cambodia." To me, it gave me gratification just to see his face. And when I did it, I did it with the same enthusiasm that I had when I did mine.

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: Rico had a friend in the print shop who could print out big decals he could stick on locker covers or toilet seat covers. He did lots of Raiders and 49ers logos, and he also did a bison for Native American guy.

Earlonne Woods: And that full, platinum plus detail job? Rico says ran \$300 in canteen.

Nigel Poor: Oof!

John "Yahya" Johnson: And Rico was doing a *lot* of these jobs.

William "Rico" Rouse: Baller. Building One in Old Folsom holds 1200 inmates. [Nigel affirms] 600 cells.

[to Rico]

Earlonne Woods: How many cells out of them 600 do you think you worked on?

William "Rico" Rouse: That's a good question. [pauses and then exhales loudly] Wow. [pauses contemplatively] About 300.

[music fades out]

[as narrator]

Nigel Poor: That's a lot of bonnaroo'd cells.

Earlonne Woods: Yep. Especially when you consider that this was not, you know, exactly... legal.

Nigel Poor: Mm.

John "Yahya" Johnson: Your prison cell, that's state property too. And so what Rico was doing definitely was against the rules.

Nigel Poor: But Rico did 300 cells, so obviously somebody is turning a blind eye.

John "Yahya" Johnson: Definitely, Nyge. Rico has some latitude because of his job as a housing clerk.

Nigel Poor: All right. You gotta explain that job.

John "Yahya" Johnson: So, consider this Nigel, [Nigel affirms] Rico lived in a building with over 600 cells times two, so that's 1200. On any given day a bunch of those people are gonna be having some kind of issue. [Nigel affirms] They want to change cells, maybe they have a conflict with their bunkie... so all of the hoopla comes to Rico first, instead of the COs.

[music fades out]

William "Rico" Rouse: So, I had a leeway that most people don't have. And I had that trust with the officers that I can tell them, [ambient noise from inside prison comes – voice chattering quietly] "Open up cell so-and-so. Leave it open 'cause I'mma work in it."

He said, "Whatchu gon' do?"

I said, "I'mma bonnaroo his cell."

Earlonne Woods: But even with all that leeway... sometimes COs are gonna do what COs gonna do.

John "Yahya" Johnson: Oh definitely. [ambient noise continues, banging and crashing] Sometimes those cells got busted up. I remember one time a cell was getting searched next to me, and then I started hearing these loud crashing sounds and I'm like, *What the hell is that?* It was a CO hitting Rico's shelves with their batons, and karate kicking them to get them off the walls.

Earlone Woods: That's that quality craftsmanship there. [Nigel affirms] Those shelves aren't giving up without a fight.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, and Earlone, you know what else? Every time the COs bust up one of Rico's designs, he's like "cha-ching!"

Earlone Woods: [laughs] 'Cause he's gonna get hired to do it *all over again*.

[music comes in]

Nigel Poor: Yup. And Rico told us about one group that was always getting hit by COs.

William "Rico" Rouse: That particular group were my best customers. They're controlled. On the third tier. They used to tear their cells up twice a week sometimes, looking for contrabands. And I used to— already had the pieces done and painted and ready. I did a lot of work for them. A lot.

John "Yahya" Johnson: Rico got released from prison in February 2020.

[to Yahya]

Nigel Poor: Yeah, and so how's he doing now? [music fades out]

John "Yahya" Johnson: Well, I called to check in on him a few days ago. [Nigel affirms] And you know, Nigel, he's doing really well. He's here in the Bay Area.

Nigel Poor: And has he decorated his new digs yet?

John "Yahya" Johnson: Nah, not yet. He's actually still in transitional housing. But he is working with his hands... as a brick mason.

Earlone Woods: I bet this time, it's with real bricks!

John "Yahya" Johnson: Definitely. And you know what else, E?

Earlone Woods: What's that?

John "Yahya" Johnson: He's still dreaming of Puerto Rico.

Earlone Woods: Indeed.

William "Rico" Rouse: I love where I came from... so much. [pauses, getting emotional] You have people that... I don't know how to express it, but that little bitty island... it's my life. And before I leave this planet, I got to go back. It's like a detachment took place. It still lingers in my heart.

[transition comes in – percussive Caribbean beat followed by abstract industrial sounds]

[in the distance, from inside a room]

Earlone Woods: Tell me what's your name and what you into.

Kesasi Hill: My name... you said tell me what's your name. Tell me what you're into. [laughs] [Earlone repeats "Tell me what's your name" and "Tell me what you're into" after speaker] My name is Kesasi Hill.

[as narrator]

Earlone Woods: Kesasi Hill. Nyge, we go back like four flats.

Nigel Poor: Really?

Earlone Woods: Juvenile hall.

Nigel Poor: Wow.

Earlone Woods: Yeah! And I wanted him in this episode, Nyge, because I think, sometimes, bonnaroo-ing is about survival.

Nigel Poor: Yeah, I totally get that. [crosstalk]

Earlone Woods: [crosstalk] Real talk. It's deep. I mean, like, there's time in prison when the system is trying to break you down. [Nigel affirms] Or that's how you feel. And you have to assert yourself. It's an act of resistance. Like, saying "I exist". [Nigel affirms]

Kesasi Hill: I went to prison at 16 years old! 3 days after my 16th birthday!

[music comes in]

Their means of teaching me a lesson was to put me in solitary confinement for 98 days. And in that 98 days every dimension that I was as a person visited me in that space. The walls contracted and expanded. Daily, like I breathe. Sometime it felt like they were coming in on me, crashing in on me. And sometime I felt like, you know, I can knock them down. I had the strength to knock them down. The one thing that kept me sane throughout all of that, I would write poetry. And I would write poetry on every piece of paper that I can get my hands on. I would get... inmate requests forms. And I would write poetry on the back of inmate request forms. And it was a trip... [music fades out] because I used to send inmate request forms and 6-0-2's trying to get a hearing and trying to get out. But they wasn't going anywhere. So I started using them as paper for poetry. And then they stopped giving me inmate request forms and told me that I was destroying state property. Aight, so, now I ain't got no paper. [laughs] So I started

writing poetry on the walls. And I ended up covering all the walls in poetry, even the ceiling. And they sent a psych in to look at the ceiling to see if I was, you know, threatening or talking about suicide. And they wanted to know what I was putting on the walls, right. But it was just poetry. All of it was poetry. And to me, poetry was the magic I used to keep the walls in place. To keep the walls, so they wouldn't crash in on me.

[speaking in a spoken word pace and rhythm]

My habitats like iron woods, body tatted, a pup running with wolves, but I was searching for a part of me still good. The graffiti on the walls says no warning shots, and the will to survive now is all I got. Not to mention, I've been praying a lot. But the rage got my emotions in a knot, not like a burner in a place of a glock, or a best friend shot on a prison yard, smoking pot, listening to Pac. Hard lessons at knife point, I'm forced to learn while shot caller doing SHU terms. Politicians treat the subject like a germ. Meanwhile, breath is my only concern.

[music fades out]

Earlonne Woods: And Nyge, [Nigel affirms] you know we've been hearing about all the hustling or workarounds incarcerated people do to customize themselves and their surroundings.

Nigel Poor: Yes.

Earlonne Woods: But every now and again, *really rarely*, a bonnaroo kind of lands in your lap, you know? [Nigel affirms] Just a gift from... a Bonna-Clauz. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel Poor: A Bonna-Clauz!

Earlonne Woods: Bonna-Clauz. Bonnaroo Santa Claus.

Nigel Poor: I love that. [laughing] I know, I know.

And that is exactly what happened to one of our new inside colleagues, Tony.

[to Tony]

Tony Tafoya: My name is Tony Tafoya

Nigel Poor: And Tony, what did you say you had for breakfast today?

Tony Tafoya: So the cinnamon roll was absent of cinnamon. Um, it had like a Victorian icing on top, so it was really just powdered sugar, water, and they'd drizzled— by that I mean, they soaked this sweet bread in sugar. And it was about the size of an— it was actually probably 20% larger than a Cinnabon.

Nigel Poor: That's huge.

Tony Tafoya: It's huge. Oh, I was so excited. We get them once a month.

[as narrator]

Earlonne Woods: Nyge.

Nigel Poor: Yes?

Earlonne Woods: Again with this shit?!

Nigel Poor: [laughing] I'm sorry, forgive me. I know I got off track again. We actually didn't bring him in to talk about sweet pastries either.

[to Tony]

Nigel Poor: Can you tell us about your sheet situation?

Tony Tafoya: Oh, my sheets. OK, so I don't know what it was, but I got so lucky when I got off the bus. So when I got to this prison, in your normal bedroll, that they always give you, they give you two sheets, a pillowcase, a blanket and... that's it. That's really all they give you to walk up the stairs with. And when I got to my cell, I opened up my bedroll and there was this sheet. And it was the most amazing— I was like, *I've never felt...* Like, *what is this?* And it has the tag that says 100% cotton on it. And...

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: So, it's not a PIA sheet.

Tony Tafoya: No.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: It's not the sheet I have.

Tony Tafoya: No.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: It's not a prison sheet?

Tony Tafoya: It's not a prison sheet. This is probably the best sheet I've ever had in my entire life.

Nigel Poor: Wait, so how long have you had the sheet?

Tony Tafoya: I've had this sheet since the day I got off the bus, September 6th, 2019.

Nigel Poor: How do you take care of it and how do you hold onto it? 'Cause it's my understanding, most people take their sheets and bring it to laundry, and then they get new sheets.

Tony Tafoya: Yes.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: Yep. You trade ‘em in.

Tony Tafoya: Trade them in.

Nigel Poor: So what would happen if you did that with your sheet?

Tony Tafoya: I lose this sheet. I mean, this sheet means more to me than anything.

Nigel Poor: Tell us, how do you take care of this special sheet?

Tony Tafoya: So, this sheet, every Monday, I do laundry. So in the morning I take the sheets off my bed, and I soak them in the bucket, and in the packages we're allowed to buy detergent. [chuckles softly] And, you know, so for years it was Gain or Tide, which is wonderful, I mean, that's a luxury in itself. And then I just wanted to branch out. So I started getting different detergents to see what was what. And then out of nowhere in last quarter, they released the Gain with the essential oils in it. They are magnificent. And so, I get the lavender and chamomile one, and I just, I soak my sheets for like four or five hours in this. And then later on, I will wash them, and I will hang them up to dry before count. And by the time *The Bachelor* comes on, they're dry.

Nigel Poor: So how does it feel when you slide into those sheets?

Tony Tafoya: When you when you get into a bed with clean sheets, it makes you feel like you're sleeping on a cloud. [music comes in]

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: It's crazy, Nyge... [crosstalk]

Tony Tafoya: [crosstalk] It's the best feeling.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: ‘Cause I'm sitting here, I forgot that feeling of fresh sheets. [Nigel affirms sympathetically] Yeah, the PI sheets are like sandpaper.

Tony Tafoya: They are.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: And you don't get that fresh... like that, kind of like this funny... [crosstalk]

Tony Tafoya: [crosstalk] Yeah, you need to have two or three.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: Like this cold-ish but nice temperature.

Tony Tafoya: Mmhm.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: It's like I'm feeling it right now.

Nigel Poor: I could see his face when you were doing it. [Tony and New York affirm] I was like, he's having some revelry here.

Rahsaan “New York” Thomas: I gotta ask you a deeply, a personal favor actually... [Tony laughs softly] after the next laundry day, can I borrow your sheet for a week?

Tony Tafoya: No. [laughs] Sorry. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel Poor: Could he just come and touch it?

Tony Tafoya: You can come touch it, yeah.

Nigel Poor: Yahya, one last question...

John “Yahya” Johnson: Yup.

Nigel Poor: Where did the word “bonnaroo” come from in the first place?

John “Yahya” Johnson: So Nigel, I looked it up... [Nigel affirms] and it's a French Creole slang that means “best on the streets”.

Nigel Poor: No kidding!

John “Yahya” Johnson: Yes, definitely.

Earlonne Woods: So I know you've let your bonnaroo go now that you're on the outside, but since you suggested this episode in the first place, I guess you were always bonnaroo-ing back when you were inside?

John “Yahya” Johnson: Absolutely not.

Earlonne Woods: Oh.

John “Yahya” Johnson: Um, I never believed in tricking out a cell because I didn't believe in beautifying a place that I personally felt was inherently ugly. And so, I wanted to keep it just like it was. When I was in there the thing that I wanted to beautify most or bonnaroo most was myself. And so, I spent time in that ugly cell, bonnaroo-ing my mind, body and soul.

Nigel Poor: Wait, wait a minute. You are saying you didn't bonnaroo a single thing?

John “Yahya” Johnson: Uh... OK, Nigel, there were... [Nigel laughs] there was a pair of boots...

Earlonne Woods: Told you he was a fibber... [Nigel laughs]

John “Yahya” Johnson: So listen, I bought a pair of boots, old state boots from a youngster in Quentin [Nigel affirms] in 2019.

Nigel Poor: Right, right, right.

John “Yahya” Johnson: And so the youngster was just walking around in them. I'm like, “Hey dude, you wanna sell those boots?”

He's like, “No.”

And I'm like, “OK.”

A week later he gets at me and said, “Hey man, I'm going out to court. You still want to buy these boots?”

Charged me \$25 for some boots he paid \$15 for, [Nigel affirms] took ‘em down to Joe Joe, the military veteran who knew how to spit shine them things to perfection. [Nigel affirms] He put a few coats of brown on there, and I had a pair of visiting boots.

Nigel Poor: So when your family came to visit, you had something nice to show up in.

John “Yahya” Johnson: Yeah, but also, I think too, like when I put those shiny visiting boots on, [Nigel affirms] it was something about walking to the visiting room, [Nigel affirms] and those shiny shoes and the clicks that they make on the concrete... and people noticing ‘em [Nigel affirms] and nodding their head in approval, that did kind of make you walk with your head held high.

Nigel Poor: Nice.

John “Yahya” Johnson: But other than the boots, I didn't bonnaroo anything else in prison, even though I love the spirit of how other people decorated the prison, decorated themselves, in order to bring some sense of normalcy to that. But just for me, it was just, keep it the way it is. Understand the significant impact that it has on me negatively, build from that and wait to get and bonnaroo.

[music fades out]

Nigel Poor: Earlonne, we got some great news recently.

Earlonne Woods: Yes, we did. Remember when we first started this podcast, [Nigel affirms], one of our submissions was a story called “Misguided Loyalty”.

Nigel Poor: Yes.

Earlonne Woods: That was about Tommy Shakur Ross, [Nigel affirms] and it ended up being our second episode in our first season.

Nigel Poor: So, why don't we let Tommy tell us the good news.

Earlonne Woods: Definitely.

Tommy Shakur Ross: My name is Tommy Shakur Ross, and I've been incarcerated for a little over 36 years.

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: 36 years. What just happened?

Tommy Shakur Ross: Well, 8:30 this morning, October 8th, 19— Oh, I'm talkin' 'bout 19— 2021 I went to the board and I was found suitable for parole.

You know, I just came back less than 30 minutes ago, so it's still sinking in. Man, it's surreal, right? 'Cause I kind of felt that my time was coming to an end here. As I walked around, it was like a spiritual feeling. As I was coming down here, I saw Antwan Banks at the entrance. And he was actually the first person that I told that I was found suitable. And I'm looking at him right now, man, and that's a good look of freedom. Freedom look good on Antwan Banks. I'm going to be looking for a job too. [everyone bursts into laughter]

[to Tommy Shakur Ross]

Antwan Banks Williams: The realest advice a person can give you getting out is patience, time and stillness. 'Cause everything else gon' come. Everything else gon' come. It's like double dutch. [everyone laughs] You got to wait and you got to— you know what I'm saying? Find, look at rhythm, find it and hop in. They gonna expect you to know everything. Self-checkout is going to freak you out.

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: Self-checkout? What the fu—?

Antwan Banks Williams: Yep. Self-checkout, like all stores have self-checkouts. And that's basically where you just take your item, you go scan it and you pay. Pay yourself, *bop*, and you leave. Everything is like, go, go, go.

Tommy Shakur Ross: That definitely will freak me out.

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: Well, first of all, at what point are you going to start giving stuff away, and what can I have?

Tommy Shakur Ross: Check this out — I'm not gone until I'm gone. When I'm on the other side of the gate, and I can look at Antwan Banks with the Members Only, be like, "Hey man, let me borrow that coat." [laughs] "Let me borrow that coat." Then I'll know when I'm going home, but until then, man, I ain't giving up nothing!

But I do want to say this, man. I'm really grateful, and I'm humble. And I can't wait to be on the other side of these walls, man. One of the things I really want to do, that I look forward to doing, is climbing Mount Tam and looking back down at San Quentin. 'Cause I often stood on the yard and looked up at Mount Tam from the yard of San Quentin. And I can't wait to conquer Mount Tam. Hiking!

[music comes in]

Jayda Raspberry: This episode Ear Hustle was produced by John "Yahya" Johnson with Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, and Bruce Wallace, and Tony Tafoya.

It is sound designed and engineered by Antwan Williams, with music by Antwan, David Jazzy, and Rhashiyd Zinnamon.

Jayda Raspberry: Amy Standen edits the show.

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: Shabnam Sigman is our digital producer.

Jayda Raspberry: And Julie Shapiro is the executive producer for Radiotopia. Ear Hustle would also like to thank Warden Ron Broomfield.

Rahsaan "New York" Thomas: And as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this guy here.

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison. And for, man, probably about 12 years, I worked with Bonaru and I didn't have that story about how Bonaru got his name. All I heard was that "Hey, I'm always Bonaru. I've always dressed up. I've always dressed nice." I didn't hear that other backstory that he didn't even know what it was. He just went with it. So, that was a treat. That was amusing. I enjoyed that. I really did enjoy this episode. And so with that, I will say that I approve this episode.

[to Lieutenant Robinson]

Earlonne Woods: Hold up, hold up, hold up. Would you consider yourself one of the people that's bonnaroo'd, Lieutenant Robinson?

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: I would say that I am bonnaroo'd probably about 90% of the time. When I'm at home, I can lounge. I can put on some sweats. But definitely when I step out of the house, I am a bonnaroo'd. I'm the real bonnaroo.

Jayda Raspberry: 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.

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Nigel Poor: I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne Woods: I'm Earlonne Woods.

John "Yahya" Johnson: I'm John "Yahya" Johnson.

Earlonne, Nigel and Yahya: [simultaneously] Thanks for listening.

[music fades out]

END OF EPISODE.