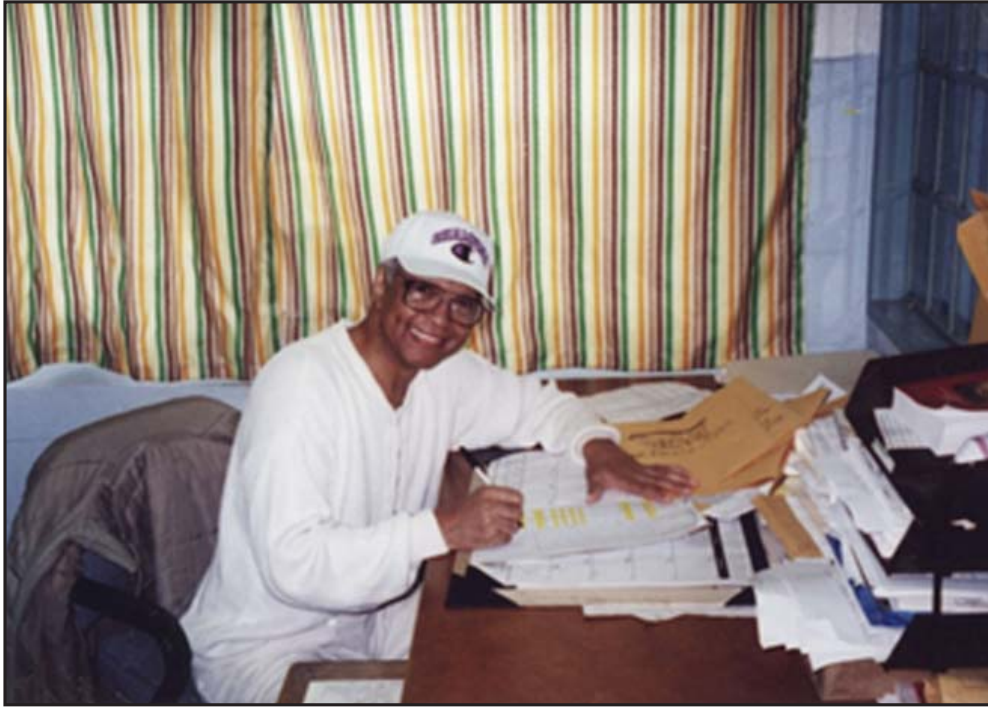


PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

The Remarkable Life of Tiyo Attallah Salah-El

Lois Ahrens



Tiyo Attallah Salah-El
(13 September 1932 – 8 June 2018)

On 8 June 2018, my good friend Tiyo Attallah Salah-El passed away while still incarcerated at State Correctional Institution (SCI) Dallas in Pennsylvania. Tiyo led a life filled with accomplishments. He had a great spirit, a zest for life, along with a love of people, ideas and music. He was a prolific letter writer, a jazz musician and composer, an organizer advocating for the abolition of prisons, a teacher, and a published writer of political and scholarly work. At the time of his death, he was writing an application for his commutation. Although he was almost 86 years old and in failing health, “compassionate release” was not an option in Pennsylvania.

Tiyo and I “met” in 2005, when at the suggestion of Peter Wagner of the Prison Policy Initiative I sent him a set of Real Cost of Prisons Project comic books I had just published. Tiyo wrote back immediately and our friendship began. Over the course of thirteen years we exchanged hundreds of letters.

Our letters are a part of a huge archive of letters, photos, essays, and articles exchanged by Tiyo and his friends, as well as music he composed. His archive is housed at the Special Collections and the University Archives (SCUA) at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Despite spending more than 50 years in prisons and jails in Pennsylvania, including 40 years at Dallas, Tiyo led a remarkable life, which is summarized in the description of the SCUA archive dedicated to him:

While serving a life sentence in a Pennsylvania prison, Tiyo Attallah Salah-El transformed himself into an activist, scholar, and advocate for the abolition of prisons. An accomplished jazz musician, Salah-El has distinguished himself for educational and scholarly work, his musical career, his close relationship with activists and educators, and for the non-profit organization he founded, The Coalition for the Abolition of Prisons (CAP).

In 1978, Tiyo began work on a self-directed bachelor's degree in African American history through the Prisoner Education Project hosted by Beacon College and run by Monty Neill. Although Tiyo's work and materials were often destroyed by guards, he completed his degree and immediately began studying for a master's in political science while working as a Beacon College program advisor, helping bachelor's students determine their self-directed course of study. After he earned his master's in 1983, he was promoted to Director of the Prisoner Education Project. Through Beacon College, Tiyo became a student and then life-long friend of historian Howard Zinn and his wife Roslyn. His friendship with Monty Neil continued until Tiyo's death. A month later, on 8 July 2018, Monty received Tiyo's ashes.

In 2006, I asked Rob Cox, Head of SCUA at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, if he would house Tiyo's papers there. Rob agreed. In a stroke of good fortune, just as Tiyo's papers arrived, including four boxes of letters and photos from Tiyo's friend Howard Zinn, Aaron Rubinstein began his internship and took on what became a year-long project of writing the finding aide and creating a webpage for Tiyo on the SCUA website. I believe it is one of (or perhaps the only) complete archive of the life's work of a politicized prisoner. In 2014, Caroline White, an archivist at SCUA, curated an exhibit at the library where Tiyo was featured and at which I spoke about his dedication to prison abolition and ending the cruelty of the sentence of life without the possibility of parole. Caroline

and student interns are now sorting through hundreds of letters and other materials donated to the archive since 2006, including two boxes of letters which were in Tiyo's cell when he died.

Tiyo's accomplishments are too many to name here. The SCUA collection dedicated to him notes:

Salah-El's experience as a prisoner and his education and political awareness forced him to a deep reflection on the state of the prison system in the United States. Through the study of African American history and political philosophy, Salah-El determined that the foundational philosophy on which the criminal justice system is based is inherently flawed, and rather than deterring crime actually fosters a cycle of crime and incarceration. According to his analysis, the most effective recourse is the abolition of prisons. Salah-El joined an international movement calling for prison abolition and began an unprecedented mission to advocate for prison abolition from within the walls of a prison itself. To that end, Salah-El founded the Coalition for the Abolition of Prisons (CAP) in 1995.

CAP connected Tiyo to the world-wide network of prison abolitionists. His essays on prison abolition have been published in numerous scholarly journals. Through CAP, Tiyo met his long-time friend, activist philosopher and Professor Mecke Nagel, who has read his essays at International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA) conferences.

In 2006, with the assistance of Howard Zinn, along with his friend and agent Paul Alan Smith, *The Autobiography of Tiyo Attallah Salah-El* was published. Due to the repressive and Kafkaesque rules of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, Tiyo was never able to receive a copy of his own autobiography.

In 2008, Tiyo's commitment to education for prisoners led him to create an underground pre-GED training course for Dallas prisoners and especially for prisoners who needed to pass the GED to be considered for parole. His courses grew from 20 students per year to over 100 as many of his graduates took their place teaching other prisoners.

At the core of Tiyo's life were his friendships, including those with activists and organizers in the United States and around the world. His letters detail his battles with the prison bureaucracy, the daily indignities faced by every prisoner at the hands of guards, his love of music – most

especially jazz, his exuberance for life and learning, and his love of his friends. We, his friends, want to thank the late Phillip Africa and Delbert Africa for the many, many acts of kindness to Tiyo, most especially in his later years when he was mostly confined to his “cage” as he always called it.

On 5 October 2018, I organized a “Celebration of the Life of Tiyo Attallah Salah-El”, co-sponsored by SCUA and the W.E.B. Du Bois Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Tiyo was a great admirer of DuBois, so when Whitney Battle-Baptiste, the Center’s Director agreed to host the celebration, I knew Tiyo would be pleased to have his accomplishments celebrated in the home of DuBois’ papers. Mecke Nagel, Monty Neill, Erika Arthur and myself, along with Rob Cox and Whitney Battle-Baptiste each spoke. Caroline White produced a slide show featuring photos of Tiyo, documents in the SCUA collection and sheet music from some of his jazz compositions. The entire event was videotaped by Amherst Media. Afterward, Tiyo’s many friends celebrated his life with a dinner.

The celebration marked the launch of two new fundraising campaigns. In partnership with SCUA, I have launched a campaign to digitize a representative sample of some of Tiyo’s materials so organizers, historians, and students around the world can read his letters and political writing to gain some insight into the daily life of control, racism, and the attempts to dehumanize him and so many others. Tiyo overcame the system designed to crush him through his perseverance, wit, intelligence and grace. Tiyo was exceptional, although in one way he was not. He was one of 53,290 people serving a sentence of Life Without the Possibility of Parole. According to The Sentencing Project, more than 10 percent of the prison population in Delaware, Louisiana, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania are serving a life sentence with no chance for parole – “slow death row” as Tiyo called it.

In addition to being a wonderful writer, Tiyo was a jazz musician and composer. SCUA has at least 50 of Tiyo’s tunes. Many more have been lost and others destroyed by guards during his long incarceration. None have been played or heard outside of the prison walls. I am now working with Felipe Salles, an internationally recognized saxophonist and composer, who will choose which of Tiyo’s songs will be recorded. The recording will feature Felipe, a pianist, drummer and bass player, and will be made into a CD and will also be available online. The Garner-Glaser Foundation has donated \$5,000 toward realizing this project. We hope to produce at least one concert in the fall of 2019.

My goals for the digitization of Tiyo's writing, as well as the recording and concert of his music, are many. Firstly, to preserve and make available online the extensive body of Tiyo's intellectual and artistic work. Secondly, I hope the archive will inspire historians, archivists, and loved ones of incarcerated thinkers and artists to preserve and make public this important work. Thirdly, through Tiyo's example, I wish to demonstrate what it means to live with the sentence of life without the possibility of parole and for the public to experience the talent, creativity, and intellect kept locked behind prison walls. Finally, I am hopeful that in honoring Tiyo Attallah Salah-El each of us will commit ourselves to ending this vengeful sentence.



CONTRIBUTE TO TIYO'S LEGACY

Visit his webpage: <http://scua.library.umass.edu/ead/mums590>.

Donations to the digitization of Tiyo's materials can be made via bit.ly/givescua with a notation to *SCUA-Tiyo Digitization* in the Special Gift Instructions/Comments Field.

Monetary gifts can be made via checks payable to the University of Massachusetts-Amherst with a memo notation to *SCUA-Tiyo Digitization* mailed to the following address:

UMass Amherst Libraries
W. E. B. Du Bois Library
Room 415
154 Hicks Way
Amherst, MA 01003-9275
USA

LINKS

5 October 2018 Video of The Celebration of Tiyo Attallah Salah-El: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUqsmUpFld4&>

The Coalition For The Abolition of Prisons Newsletters: 1999-2001 (edited and coordinated by Tiyo): <https://web.archive.org/web/20010520160512/http://www.noprison.org:80/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lois Ahrens is the Founding Director of The Real Cost of Prisons Project. Lois believes we can only authentically and fundamentally change the costly and damaging systems of mass incarceration and mass criminalization through being guided by the insight and leadership of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and their loved ones.