

Is There Life After *Prison Life*?

Richard Stratton

It is over, at least for the present. Kim and I resigned as editors of *Prison Life* and we are now embroiled in an ugly dispute with the Texas partners. They reneged on their agreement to sell their stock back to us, thus killing any deals I had in the works to rescue the magazine. We managed to get three issues out after the brutal April downsizing, minus Chris Cozzone and Jennifer Wynn, doing the whole thing out of our home and using local talent. We had a fourth issue, our Christmas special with a cover shot of Santa in jail, at the printers ready to go when the Texas group sabotaged the deal we had agreed on and demanded \$350,000 in cash. Now the future of the magazine is most certainly dismal.

I do not know when I have ever been so discouraged or depressed by anything as I am by the failure of *Prison Life*. Since the first issue, published in June of 1994 with the legendary Herby Sperling on the cover, the magazine has met with unparalleled critical success. Subscriptions and newsstand sales grew with every issue. We became the authority the mainstream media turned to whenever they wanted the other side of the story on crime and punishment related stories. I was invited to colleges and universities to lecture on America's burgeoning prison industrial complex; I was asked to appear on TV and radio talk shows to express the prisoner's point of view. We provoked and angered a lot of people, but we kept these important issues in the forefront and the debate remained intense and vital. I felt alive in ways I have not since the early days of *High Times*. Now I fear the lid will clamp back down and the swing toward a more repressive and secretive prison system will continue unabated and unchallenged.

And the magazine got better with every issue. The quality of the writing and art we received from prisoners kept improving to the point where the most exciting part of any day was opening the mail. The Art Behind Bars contest for this year promised to be the best yet. We worked long hours and on weekends for no pay, yet nothing has ever given me as much satisfaction as I got with each new issue.

I think of the January 1995 issue, with our first woman on the cover, the photo of Karen White made by the world renowned fashion photographer Wayne Maser, who just loved the magazine and wanted to shoot a cover for us. That issue carried *Busted*, the explosive expose

on the feds' UNICOR scam, which, to my knowledge, remains the most exhaustive and detailed story ever done on our federal prison factories and how they operate. A year later we came out with our first HBO Special Issue on Prisoners of the War on Drugs, with a cover shot of a con shooting up in his prison cell. That issue, and the accompanying documentary film that appeared on HBO probably provoked more controversy than any other single issue. Perhaps my personal favourite was the October 1996 issue, our knock-off of *Time Magazine's* Man of the Year, with the cover photo of former Black Panther Eddie Ellis, made by Fionn Reilly, and the inspiring story of Eddie's 23 years in New York State prison written by Pam Widener. Or the Hollywood issue, published in April 1996, with Danny Trejo on the cover and stories on ex-cons who have made it in the entertainment business.

What upsets me most is the thought of how the prisoner readers and contributors will be let down when this magazine goes under, as it inevitably will. I think of my own years in prison and how much it would have meant to me to have such a publication to read and to submit my work to. Writing, doing anything creative in prison, is hard enough, but without a magazine like this giving its editorial content over to imprisoned writers and artists, prisoners will have even less to sustain their creative impulse. The Voice of the Convict has been muffled, and that is a tragedy for the prisoners and for the public as well.

I suppose it was a harebrained idea to begin with. To think that there are enough advertisers willing to spend money to reach this captured audience with so little disposable income was no doubt an exercise in self delusion. I wanted it to work so badly that I convinced myself the 1.5 million and growing prisoner population was an attractive niche market I could tap into at least to the point where I could sustain the cost of putting out the publication. And then we had the added income of the HBO deal and other potential spin-offs. In fact, we were almost at the point of breaking even when the Texas group started hallucinating and seeing dollar signs.

[Editor's Note: PrisonLife Magazine ceased publication in 1997.]