

Concrete Mama, Prison Profiles from Walla Walla, Second Edition

By Ethan Hoffman and John A. McCoy with an introduction by Dan Berger

University of Washington Press

A Review, By Ed Mead

*Concrete Mama* is a great book for viewing a slice in time at the Washington State Penitentiary during the late 1970s, but the limitations of the authors to track this process over an extended period limits its usefulness as the history lesson it could have been. What makes up for this limitation of the book is Dan Berger's outstanding introduction. It was drafted from the comfortable perspective of viewing *Concrete Mama*, and imprisonment in general, during the forty years since the book was initially written. He fills in the gaps left by Messrs. McCoy and Hoffman. The book is worth the price just for Dan's informative introduction. Dan is a part of the Prison History Project and his introduction to *Concrete Mama* is something every prisoner should read. They will learn their history as a community. As for outside people, Dan quotes Therese Coupez, an incarcerated George Jackson Brigade member as saying we should not be "viewing prisons and prisoners as somehow a different, exclusive, unrelated issue from the rest of society." Or as Dan quoted McCoy in his original introduction, prisoners are an "uncommon Community" rather than a "mass of anonymous men." With that said, let me give you some background information.

In the mid-1980s, while a prisoner in a Washington state prison, I wrote a computer program called "[The Warden Game](#)." In 2018 a University of Washington student, Maggy Donea, compiled what parts of the game's programming code survived and put the results on the Web. Soon thereafter a progressive (I assume) reporter interviewed me, and during that interview he asked why I had written this game. I told him that I see myself as a propaganda officer in a revolution I won't live to see, and that the game was a piece of propaganda. The reporter chided me for using such a loaded term as "propaganda." I replied that people are bombarded by propaganda every time they turn on their televisions or pick up a newspaper. They are being subjected to bourgeois propaganda, that is information telling only the ruling classes' version of reality—telling only one side of the story. Oh yes, for the appearance of objectivity they sometimes give you both the liberal and conservative views of CIA (ruling class) thought. While this gives people the illusion of being informed, they never get the other side of the story. I don't give the viewpoint of the bourgeoisie as that's what everyone gets 24/7 *ad nauseum*. I told the reporter we need to call things as they are, and not cower in fear of alienating the masses by using terminology that accurately describes reality. I produce propaganda. And in the early 1970s my efforts in this area (armed propaganda) landed me in the Washington State Penitentiary at Walla Walla—at the time the state's only maximum-security prison.

Because I had been a member of Seattle's George Jackson Brigade, a group that had bombed the headquarters of the Department of Corrections in Olympia, I was immediately locked up in Big Red, or what would today be called the Intensive Management Unit or IMU. While so

confined reporter John McCoy and photographer Ethan Hoffman were granted permission to enter the prison and to conduct interviews with convicts and to take photographs inside the prison. The result of their efforts was a book titled *Concrete Mama, Prison Profiles from Walla Walla*. I was one of the prisoners featured in the book (Chapter 9, Ed: Revolutionary in Big Red, page 173). The second edition of this book was just published by the University of Washington Press, and, probably because I am one of the few surviving of those interviewed, I was asked to write a review of this new edition. So, let's begin.

When John and Ethan entered the prison, as Dan Berger notes in his introduction "the Walla Walla penitentiary was in a moment of transition." On the one hand there was "the ill-fated half-attempt at prisoner-shared governance of the institution" and on the other "a still-unfolding cruelty of warehousing large masses of people in bleak environs." My criticism of their book has always been the failure to document this dialectical process of change. In other words, they took a slice of time in the penitentiary's unfolding process—a static, frozen picture of what in fact was a very dynamic period. And given the medium they used they had no ability to address the political dynamics taking place within the population over time. Fortunately, Dan Berger's Introduction fills that bill quite nicely, if not completely.

There were two significant prisoner factions during that time. There were the racist Nazis and dope dealing element, what I called the toughgeoisie (tough-wa-zee, as in bourgeoisie), and then the more progressive elements of the population, who sought to bring about constructive change by means of empowering convicts to play a role in shaping this destructive environment for the better. At one point the progressives were able to shut down the prison in what became the longest prisoner work strike in Washington's history—47 days!

The work strike was widely reported in the news—daily in the press, nightly on the news, etc. Prison guards, the warden, prisoncrats in Olympia were all repeatedly interviewed in the coverage of this major story. Finally, on about day 43 or 44 this historic strike, the George Jackson Brigade (GJB) bombed two Rainer banks in Seattle. The group issued a communique pointing out the interlocking directorship between the *Seattle Times* newspaper and the Rainer Banks, and also noted that during the entirety of this long struggle not once had a prisoner ever been interviewed or any hint given that prisoners may have had a point of view. Well, reporters don't like to be caught pumping out blatant propaganda for the state, so they interviewed a couple of minimum-security prisoners housed outside the Walls. Wham! Over night the consciousness of Washington's citizens was transformed. The warden was removed, the associate warden of custody was transferred to the then kids joint a Shelton, and the director of corrections, Harold Bradly, was fired. We, who called ourselves the Walla Walla Brothers, were released from Big Red and went on to form Men Against Sexism, a group of gay and anti-sexist men who stopped the prevalent practice of prisoner-on-prisoner rape and the buying and selling of weaker and more vulnerable prisoners by predators.

There were two prongs to the state's response to this situation: First, they transferred 52 of the more progressive prisoners to out-of-state facilities, I wound up in the federal prison in Marion,

Illinois—the federal government’s answer to the closure of Alcatraz. Secondly, prisoncrats traveled to California to meet with their counterparts there. The result of this meeting was to import a similar number of racist gang leaders into the Washington State Penitentiary. This of course changed the headset of prisoners. All notions of progress were lost as the influence of the racists quickly grew. And that process is what the static *Concrete Mama* was unable to capture. Today the racist drug heads rule the prison for the administration. Any efforts to organize resistance is quickly shunted, as to do so would hinder the special privileges they garner from their captors or disrupt their various hustles. They are the prison administration’s first line of defense. It’s like this in prisons across America. I know, I’ve been in a lot of them.

In August of 2017 prisoners in 12 states went on work strike to oppose their status as slaves of the state. The Thirteenth Amendment says: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime* (emphasis added) whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” Additionally, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which the US is a signatory, explicitly states in Article 4: "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms." In August of 2018 there were 17 states that went on strike over their slavery status. The shame is that not a single Washington State Prison joined in this growing movement—hopefully that will change by next August. Today the reactionaries, and they are not all white, continue to hold power within the state’s prison population. The proud history of righteous struggle has all but been forgotten. What we have instead is violence on the inside and a recidivism rate of between 67 and 83 percent, depending upon whose statistics you read. This could all change for the better if only slavery were to be abolished in America once and for all.

*Concrete Mama* is a shocking view of the reality of imprisonment at the Washington State Penitentiary in that era, a view that should be read by everyone. The photographs are incredibly vivid, and their content is like no other before or since. Do yourself a favor and buy this book. At the very least it’s something you’ll be proud to have on your coffee table. Also, please take a firm stand against slavery in America. The demand to end slavery is a bourgeois democratic demand, not a revolutionary one, but it’s still the right thing to do.

Thank you for reading this. I hope you will excuse my extraneous rambling (my propaganda).

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