

Don't Mess With Texas

Day 15: After two weeks in A-Tank on the third floor of the county jail, they moved me in the middle of the night to T-Wing, an old Quonset hut by the railroad tracks. Handcuffed, escorted by two guards, we walked the two blocks south, my first time outdoors. At the Quonset hut, the jailer gives me a blanket and pillow and leads me to a lower bunk bed. It's almost 4 a.m. Breakfast in jail is at 4.

A-Tank was maximum security, automated, doors within sliding doors, jailers in glass cages pushing buttons, talking over loud speakers, fluorescent lights 24/7. A-Tank housed one or two prisoners in an 8 by 10 cell with a stainless steel no-seat toilet, a round ten-inch sink and a couple of narrow bunks. There were 40 steel doors in the cellblock, twenty upstairs, twenty down, each with a six-inch square window that required tip toeing to peer out.

My first time in jail, I was busted for growing marijuana. I had a cell to myself. Some cells had three prisoners, one sleeping on the floor. I guess pot growers were considered bad ass in this county. A photo of my nine plants, twelve-inches tall in white five-gallon buckets, made the front page of The Waxahachie Daily Light. "Dope Growers Beware," it said, estimating my "crop" at \$35,000. Exaggeration is part of the conviction game.

Day 18: T-Wing was minimum security, an outdated jailhouse, used only when the main jail was full. The jailer sits in a chain-link fenced cage with a light bulb hanging from the ceiling. It reminded me of the jail in "Cool Hand Luke." I call T-Wing the Jungle Hut; forty jailbirds in one big room, upper and lower bunk beds. Twenty-five prisoners were black, most under 25.

Weeknights after Lights Out, cellmates talk quietly, tell their stories, and trade legal advice. "Don't take parole," my bunk mate says. "Parole is a trick on niggers. Do your time and be done."

There seems to be only one TV channel in this county jail. The toughest guys control the TV in the cellblocks. No news, no PBS, sitcoms, soaps, primetime dramas. The only channel was Rap City TV, a reason, in itself, to stay out of jail: booty shaking hot tunas and stomach rippled rockets. Bejeweled stud daddies and tinsel town wardrobe vamps. Spoon coons in backward caps and baggy pants, ebony femme fatales and baton twirl white girls bumping and grinding, doing the dog to amphetamine metronomes or kicked back click tracks, rapping down, rapping down, rapping down the bones. Rap City is the new "Desire of Ages," Blackman's Valhalla, "Someday My Prince Will Come." But this time it's not Miles Davis. It's Snoop Dog., Snoop Doggy Dog. It's Snoop Dog.

Day 19: Saturday night live behind bars. With the right jailer, Jungle Hut pulled all-nighters on Saturday. Everybody gets coffee-ed up, coffee and chocolate. The early jailer had to turn off the lights twice to calm down all the wound-tight energy. The favorite jailer arrived at 11. Anything goes with him. RAP CITY plays on, 70,000 jump-cut images an hour, human beings infatuated with screens.

Busted in May, I'm not arrested until two months later, just when I'm starting to think this county is cool. Maybe they're going to let the whole thing slide. Then at 5 p.m. on July 3, the cops show up at my farm and take me to jail, food on the stove, dog unfed, me about to leave town for the holiday. Like Monopoly: Go To Jail. Do Not Pass Goal. Life Put On-Hold. And it's going to take a great deal of time and money, with lots of baggage, to get it going again.

The buzz in Jungle Hut is that a "Tough on Crime" campaign had been launched to re-elect Governor George W. Bush by filling jails with drug offenders for the 4th of July weekend. The Interstate-35 corridor is targeted from Austin to Dallas. Law enforcement put signs up on the

highway, “Drug Search. Two Miles. Prepare to Stop” Cars start bailing off the freeway at the next exit where the cops are ready and waiting. Insurance, inspection, registration issues are ticketed. Search and seizures go to jail, the cars impounded. One student told me they had him on video throwing a bag of pot out his car window at 70 mph.

Four University of Texas students in Jungle Hut were caught in the dragnet. “It was a circus,” they said, “cars lined up in a motel parking lot waiting for tow trucks, vans taking victims by the dozen to a waiting Justice of the Peace for arraignment, a fire hose shower with insecticide and lock-up.

Jailbirds are profits for cities, precincts, counties, and the state. Tax dollars fund prisoners in addition to the pay-as-you-go monies prisoners pay to get through their ordeal. “\$45 a day is the taxpayer allotment to keep a prisoner,” says a cellmate who works part time in the county jail office. He’s seen the paperwork on prisoner transfers from overcrowded jails. He tells me the kitchen budget at this facility is \$1.80 a day for three meals.

My bunk mate had an article from Texas Monthly that claimed one of every three black males in Texas under the age of 30 is doing time, has done time, is on probation or on parole.

Most of us in Jungle Hut are awaiting our day in court. The dockets are backed up. With a court appointed attorney, forty-five days is average before you see a judge. I’m asked to write letters to a judge on behalf of two prisoners lost in the system. They’ve been in stir three months, one for half a joint of pot, the other for “residue,” a smoking pipe, the owner claimed, was only for tobacco. Both had their cars impounded.

The more jailbirds and jail time, the more profits for the penal system. A good slice of the state’s economy is dependent on marijuana prohibition paid for by taxes: employment and revenue for police, sheriff, highway patrol, tact squad, narcotics squad, border patrol, guards, jailers, lawyers, judges, court clerks, secretaries, probation officers, parole officers, bailiffs, bondsmen, piss test technicians, counselors, analysts, psychologists, psychiatrists, maintenance and housekeepers, mandatory rehab classes, half-way houses, piss-test labs, buildings, utilities, and increasingly more jails and prisons.

Texas will be the last state in the country to look at medical marijuana or legalizing and taxing sanctioned and certified American cannabis as a solution to state and federal budget deficits. Legalization would also put an end to the murdering Mexican drug cartels. But Texas is choosing to go the opposite way with new initiatives to build and expand prison real estate into the private sector. Pot prohibition in Texas is an institution and a total failure if the goal is to prevent people from smoking cannabis. That is not the goal. The goal is to sustain the cat and mouse game for hassle and revenue.

In Jungle Hut, I discovered crack cocaine is the black man’s drug of choice. Most of the blacks in here are county residents busted for coke. To these guys, an “eight ball” on the weekend is a treat well worth the hundred dollars paid for it. Five guys in this tank were popped for selling, twelve for possession. The dealers want to show me pictures of their cars.

The party is winding down in Jungle Hut. I ask the jailer to turn off Rap City and ditch the lights. Chit chat and small talk among my black brothers first paints a picture of cocaine as a good time party drug. Press the issue, however, and they admit cocaine is a menace to families, neighborhoods, and communities. Fathers spend the rent money on the stuff. Car stereos are ripped off and houses robbed to fuel addiction.

Day 20: Sunday. In Jungle Hut, most sign up for church. In chain gangs of ten, we are escorted under a blue sky to the main jail. Past the courthouse, the café, the movie theater, I notice a few

tiny daisies blooming in the crack of a sidewalk. Surreal. One street over, a hundred yards away, is the road to my home six miles west. My dog, Shango, must be waiting and watching, wondering what happened to his best pal.

Jungle Hut joined the rest of an assembly of prisoners singing, “Jesus Paid It All” and “When We All Get To Heaven,” the words on a screen. The sermon was about original sin. “The cost of disobedience,” the chaplain said, “was disobedience, condemned to wrong choices.” Two prisoners are baptized in a cattle trough. On our way back to Jungle Hut, behind me somebody says, “Anybody with a good car don’t need Jesus Christ.”

I went before the judge in 51 days, was sentenced to “intensive” probation for one year, piss tests twice a week, weekly rehab classes in another city, then regular probation for two more years with \$4000 fines, court costs and legal fees to be paid monthly.



Jungle Hut