

Tiyo Attallah Salah-El

RIP

September 13, 1932—June 8, 2018

On June 8th, 2018, my good friend Tiyo Attallah Salah-El passed away while still incarcerated at SCI Dallas. At the time of his death, he was writing an application for his commutation. Despite being almost 86 and in failing health, it seemed “compassionate release” was not an option.

Tiyo and I “met” in 2005, when at the suggestion of a colleague; I sent him a set 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 and hundreds letters. Our letters are a small part of a huge archive of letters, photos, essays and articles written by Tiyo and his friends as well as songs he composed that are housed at the Special Collections archive at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

Despite spending more than 50 years in prisons and jails in Pennsylvania, including 40 years at Dallas, Tiyo led a life filled with accomplishments and the love of his friends. From the Special Collections archive: “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 masters 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 of a student and then life-long friend of historian Howard Zinn and Howard's wife, Roslyn. His friendship with Monty Neil continued until Tiyo's death. On July 8th, Monty received Tiyo's ashes.

All of Tiyo's accomplishments are too many to name here. From the Special Collections: “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

detering 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 delivered his papers at international conferences on prison abolition.

In 2006, with the assistance of Howard Zinn and Howard's friend and agent, Paul Alan Smith, *The Autobiography of Tiyo Attallah Salah-El* was published. Because of the repressive and Kafkaesque rules of the PA DOC, Tiyo was never able to receive a copy of his own autobiography.

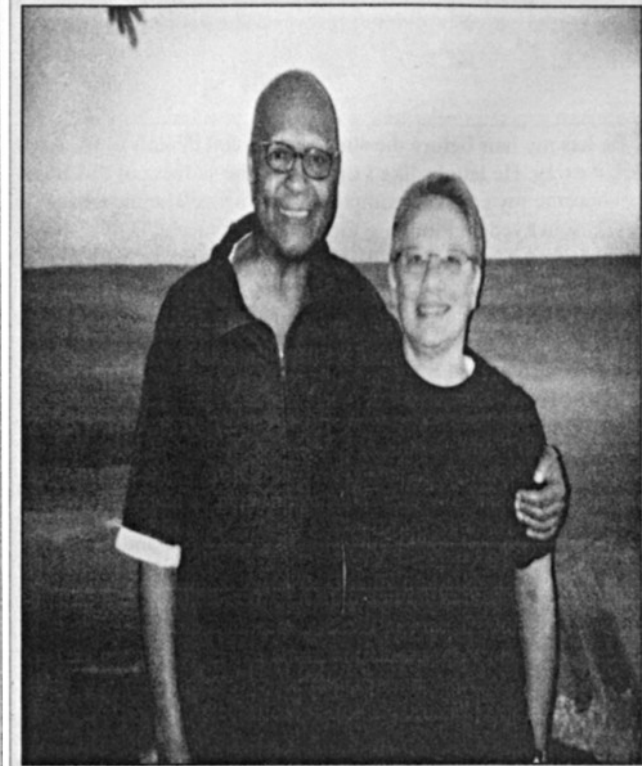
In 2008, his commitment to education for prisoners led him to an underground pre-GED training course for prisoners, many of whom depend on passing the GED to be considered for parole. His courses grew from twenty students per year to over 100 and many of his graduates took their place teaching other prisoners.

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Tiyo Attallah Salah-El playing the saxophone in high school.

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Dallas 8/27/2007, Tiyo & Me

At the core of Tiyo's life were his friendship which included activists and organizers in the United States and around the world. His letters detail his battles with the prison bureaucracy, the daily indignities faced at the hands of guards faced by every prisoner and 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 Tiyo always called it.

On October 5th, a Celebration of the Life of Tiyo Attallah Salah-El will take place at Special Collections, co-sponsored by W.E.B. Du Bois Center at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Tiyo's friends and others who want to join in celebrating our remarkable friend will gather and some of Tiyo's many songs for the saxophone will be played.

There is not a day that goes by, when I don't go to my mailbox and expect to find a letter from Tiyo. He is greatly missed.

By Lois Ahrens, the Founding Director of The Real Cost of Prisons Project. Northampton, MA.
