

Abu-Jamal, Mumia (b. 1954)

Hans Bennett

2009

Born Wesley Cook on April 24, 1954, and raised in the North Philadelphia housing projects, Mumia Abu-Jamal was a founding member of the Philadelphia chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP). The chapter's lieutenant of information at age 15, he also worked on the national BPP newspaper in Oakland, California. Abu-Jamal was later a prominent radio personality and president of the Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists; he was known as "The Voice of the Voiceless" for his radical journalism spotlighting the plight of the oppressed and covering the revolutionary MOVE organization's conflict with city authorities.

While moonlighting as a taxi driver, Abu-Jamal carried a legally registered .38 caliber Charter Arms revolver with him after being robbed several times on the job. In his taxi on December 9, 1981, he saw his brother, William Cook, in an altercation with police officer Daniel Faulkner, and approached the scene. Minutes later, Faulkner was shot dead, and Abu-Jamal was shot in the chest. The district attorney would later claim that (1) Abu-Jamal shot Faulkner in the back at close range; (2) while falling backwards, Faulkner responded by shooting Abu-Jamal; and (3) Abu-Jamal then shot down at Faulkner and killed him, while missing two to three times.

While the bullet in Abu-Jamal was officially from Faulkner's gun, police ballisticsian Anthony Paul testified that the bullet in Faulkner could only be tied to "multiples of millions" of .38 caliber guns, including those not made by Charter Arms. Suspiciously, police did not officially perform a routine "smell" test on his gun, or a "wipe" test checking for gunpowder residue on his hands.

Abu-Jamal has always maintained his innocence, and while neither he nor his brother testified at the 1982 trial, they both released sworn affidavits in 2001. Abu-Jamal says that he was shot while approaching the scene, blacked out, and awoke to a vicious police beating. William Cook pointed to his friend Kenneth Freeman, a passenger in his car, as the actual shooter. Recently, authors Michael Schiffmann and J. Patrick O'Connor have argued that Freeman shot and killed Faulkner after Abu-Jamal was shot, and ran away before other police arrived. Freeman was mysteriously found dead in a parking lot (reportedly naked, gagged, handcuffed, and with a drug needle in his arm) the day after the infamous May 13, 1985 police bombing of MOVE, which Schiffmann and O'Connor argue was likely an act of police vengeance against Faulkner's actual shooter.

Abu-Jamal was sentenced to death in 1982. Amnesty International concluded that the trial was unfair, criticizing the bias of Judge Albert Sabo, a likely fabricated "hospital confession" that was not reported for two months, altered testimony from key prosecution witnesses Cynthia

White and Robert Chobert, and more. Journalist Linn Washington, Jr. argues that appeals courts have repeatedly disregarded court precedent to deny him a new trial, what he calls the “Mumia Exception.”

In 2006, Michael Schiffmann discovered crime scene photos by freelancer Pedro Polakoff that showed (1) Faulkner’s hat moved for police photos; (2) the absence of Robert Chobert’s taxi cab; (3) officer James Forbes destroying potential fingerprint evidence by holding Abu-Jamal’s and Faulkner’s guns in one bare hand; and (4) an absence of large bullet divots, which Schiffmann argues should be visible in the pavement near Faulkner’s body, if the DA scenario was accurate. Polakoff says that he offered the photos to the DA in 1982 and 1995 but was ignored, meaning that the DA illegally suppressed this photo evidence.

Arguably the world’s most famous death-row prisoner, Abu-Jamal has written five books and records weekly radio essays. Supporters of a new trial have included Nelson Mandela, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the US Congressional Black Caucus, European Parliament, and Japanese Diet. In 2003 he was named an honorary citizen of Paris, France, and in 2006, Paris suburb St. Denis named a street after him.

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Retrieved on 21st November 2021 from onlinelibrary.wiley.com
Published in *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest.*

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