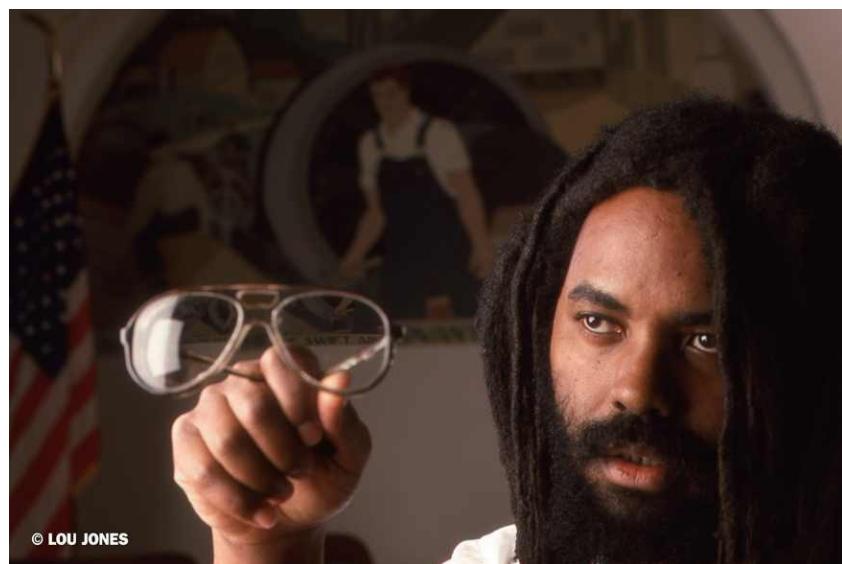


## Mumia, the long distance revolutionary: an interview with documentary producers Stephen Vittoria and Noelle Hanrahan

September 28, 2012

**Don't miss the world premiere of 'Long Distance Revolutionary' at the Mill Valley Film Festival on Saturday, Oct. 6, 12 noon, at the Rafael Film Center in San Rafael; get your tickets before they sell out, at [www.mvff.com/buy-tickets](http://www.mvff.com/buy-tickets) or (877) 874-6833**

*by People's Minister of Information JR*



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This photo was taken at the State Correctional Institution at Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, in 1991 by Lou Jones. It is featured in Lou's book, "Final Exposure: Portraits from Death Row," and in the new documentary, "Long Distance Revolutionary." – Photo: ©Lou Jones

"Long Distance Revolutionary," the new documentary about political prisoner and prolific writer Mumia Abu Jamal, will have its international premiere in the Bay Area on Oct. 6 and 8 at the Mill Valley Film Festival. There have been a number of documentaries done about the case of Mumia Abu Jamal, but this one puts his life at the center of the discussion.

Dick Gregory, Ramona Africa, Linn Washington, Johanna Fernandez, Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, M1 of dead prez, KPFA's Greg Bridges and Michael Parenti are just a few of the many people who critique the often controversial commentaries and writings of former Black Panther and human rights activist Mumia Abu Jamal in this monumental cinematic feat. This is a film that you must see if you are trying to understand the political science that governs 21st century Amerikkka the ugly. Check out the words of producers Stephen Vittoria and Noelle Hanrahan ..."

**M.O.I. JR:** Can you tell us a little bit about your documentary on the life of political prisoner Mumia Abu Jamal? What is the name of it and what makes it different from all of the other Mumia documentaries?

**SV:** Unlike any other film, book or article produced about Mumia's struggle, "Long Distance Revolutionary" focuses on his dramatic life as a writer, journalist and, above all, as a revolutionary from Pennsylvania's Death Row. In the film, Rubin Hurricane Carter states that "Mumia is one of the lost souls of the revolution" – and I think that encapsulates Mumia best.

While almost every soul of that historic revolution has sold out, compromised, thrown in the towel or became a ratfink, Mumia – under harsh and inhuman conditions – has continued the battle for freedom, justice and the un-American way. In fact, there's no doubt in our minds, and in Mumia's mind, that this film is the definitive look at his life.

During the production process over the past three years, Mumia's help with regard to research, recording or re-recording interviews and commentaries was invaluable. Ultimately, the film is about one man's courageous fight against state repression as well as overt and systemic racism. It is a story of redemption.

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**NH:** "Long Distance Revolutionary: A Journey with Mumia Abu-Jamal" tells the story behind the question: Why is Mumia Abu-Jamal the most famous political prisoner in the world? The film explores the genesis of his creative and legendary journalistic skills, as well as his dynamic intellect.

The film treats the incident at 13th and Locust in Philadelphia on Dec. 9, 1981, and his subsequent murder conviction as a detail that altered his life, but not as a defining moment. The film digs much deeper. It traces his inspirations and reveals his lifelong dedication to the practice of reporting truth to power.



Ramona Africa, spokesperson for the MOVE organization, which Mumia strongly supports, appears in the new documentary, "Long Distance Revolutionary."

We see Mumia's growth and evolution from reporter to world-renowned public intellectual in

the tradition of Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn and Arundhati Roy. As Cornel West states in the film, "Mumia shines a penetrating light on the myths of American history."

**M.O.I. JR:** Can you name some of the prominent people in the film and state why you thought that their commentary was relevant to the film?

**SV:** When I created the bible of questions for this film, I wanted to identify folks who truly intersected with Mumia's life both before and after incarceration – people like Reggie Schell, who was Mumia's captain in the Black Panther Party and remembers Mumia as an extraordinary mind and committed revolutionary even at the age of 15. And then there's Barbara Cox Easley, also a Panther with Mumia, and who was uniquely qualified to discuss the important roles women played in the party. Barbara offers a great first hand memory when she recalls: "When you ask the question about Mumia talking about women, he was never a chauvinist ... From the day he entered the party he was never a chauvinist."

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I also wanted to include folks who intersected the same history as Mumia – the Black Liberation Movement, the antiwar movement and so on, people like Dick Gregory, Tariq Ali, Angela Davis and Cornel West. The arc of Mumia's narrative is the same arc as the struggle against war, against America's historic and ongoing imperialism, and ultimately the scourge of racism here and throughout the world. It was important to have these folks and others contextualize the history and Mumia's place in that history.

**NH:** Dick Gregory just nails it. He says "the technology was there, and his voice was carried around the world.... One day we will find out that he was the voice of America – the voice of America is a fraud." My goal as a radio producer has been to amplify voices that need to be heard. Dick's insights are remarkable and deeply moved me.

Michelle Alexander's historical accuracy also hit the mark. She cites without apology the origins and political motivations of mass incarceration. She exposes Richard Nixon's naked and stated goal to incarcerate and disenfranchise African American for political gain. This is one of the defining social issues of our day, the culture of incarceration. We have the most prisoners in the world and one in 46 Americans will do prison time. In fact, one in 99 are currently in prison.

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**M.O.I. JR:** What was the creative process like? How did you edit all of the film that you collected to get to this story?

**SV:** As a director and filmmaker, I've always adhered to the exhaustive approach. The only way to get beneath the surface of a story and uncover the tangible texture of characters and events is to go beyond the norm. Push the interview process into parts forgotten or even obscure, because that's where the gold nuggets are – beyond the sound bites, beyond the lines that public people have down pat. Tell us something new, something different, something provocative.



Rubin Hurricane Carter, the famous boxer who spent many years in prison for murders he did not commit, appears in the film.

I then edited each interview, and there were 40 or so, as if each interview is its own film, polishing and massaging until thoughts were cohesive and strong. And then all of the interviews are transcribed so I can begin doing a "paper" edit in order to work on the narrative structure. I want the interviews to resemble a seamless conversation about a certain subject or storyline. For me, the editing process is finally where the film is made. All other elements are incredibly important but the editing is where the story actually comes together.

**NH:** Honestly, the coming together of the production elements was magical. The content and the story are deeply compelling and frankly never before told. This is a feature length documentary that moves like a fast paced big screen Hollywood thriller.

One thing that makes the film unique is the commitment to digging up every available piece of footage and often information the state would rather have buried. That level of detail and the historical research gave the story traction. It was this material that runs as a counterpoint to the lie, which is the popular narrative that the state sponsored media tells every night.

In addition, we knew we had to honor the project by embracing quality every step of the way. This is a story that needed to be told with the most exacting production standards in order to reach beyond the censorship.

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**M.O.I. JR:** In your opinion what makes Mumia Abu Jamal important as a journalist and writer?

**SV:** Pain, suffering and brutal honesty ... and because Mumia comes from the same courageous school of journalism and history that was so well defined by the iconic personas like Howard Zinn, I.F. Stone, Frederick Douglass and all the others who wrote from the point of view of the victims, the people who don't possess the wealth and own the guns, the people who struggle from the night side of the American Empire.

Also, Mumia's importance as a journalist and writer stems from his innate ability to clearly understand the myth and reality of American history. Mumia understands that this is a nation founded in genocide, nurtured through slavery, and ultimately sustained by imperial wars for power and profit. And he knows that the motivations of Manifest Destiny and white supremacy have existed since Columbus set foot on Hispaniola, and he knows that those motivations exist to this very day, right to Obama's murder spree, courtesy of predator drones and the American war machine.



Journalist Linn Washington, who has covered Mumia's case from the beginning, is featured in the new documentary.

And Mumia doesn't compromise. In the film, Michael Parenti says it best: "There's quite a number of eminent people on the left – I won't mention names, some of them very, very prominent, maybe the very top people too – that go so far about certain things, and they've got to flash their anti-communism to maintain their bona fides. Mumia doesn't do all that crap." More than one person defined Mumia's importance as a journalist in this spirit, although this answer by his biographer Terry Bisson was the most colorful statement: "Mumia has a built-in bullshit detector."

**NH:** I can't say it any better than Dick Gregory: "Mumia is the voice of America"; or Angela Davis: "Mumia is the Frederick Douglass of the 21st Century"; or historian Manning Marable: "The voice of Black political journalism in the struggle for the liberation of African American people has always proved to be decisive throughout Black history. When you listen to Mumia you hear the echoes of David Walker, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, and the sisters and brothers who kept the faith with struggle, who kept the faith with resistance."

**M.O.I. JR:** What has the pre-premiere response been like?

**SV:** I love to share the film with people who care – that's why I made the movie. You wake up in a nation that's run by mass murderers, economic rapists and general run-of-the-mill racist sociopaths, so you start to search for some sanity as an answer, a rebuttal to the ravings and actions coming from inside the asylum, and as a storyteller and filmmaker I found that sanity writing and broadcasting from a dark, dank hole in America's prison gulag. His name was Mumia Abu-Jamal and his words were his weapon against the tyranny surrounding all of us.

And then you realize that Mumia's words are not a rebuttal to the insanity but rather his words completely eviscerate the insanity that passes for the status quo, the establishment, the spinmeisters who make the unthinkable normal. Ultimately, they philosophize disgrace.

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So the response so far from people who we've shared Mumia's story with has been extraordinary – and it's not because of the film; it's because Mumia takes us to the heart of struggle. Greg Ruggiero, editor and publisher at City Lights Books, sums it up in the film this way: "I think Mumia would agree with what Che said: `At the risk of sounding ridiculous, a revolutionary is guided by feelings of love and for love of the people.'" I think the overwhelming response so far is also guided by love.

**NH:** Well, JR, you gave the film an A-! And I know you are a serious guy when it comes to revolutionary journalism. The response has been very strong from the market and the people. We realize that this film will be seen as controversial and certainly dangerous to those who want to protect the status quo.



Black liberation theologian James Cone appears in the new film, "Long Distance Revolutionary."

There will be an intense reaction from all quarters – a lot of love and a lot of hate. The story arc of this movie will make some people uncomfortable. This film gives voice to Mumia. It pulls no punches when it comes to exposing the chilling reality of imperialism and the necessity and beauty of resistance.

**M.O.I. JR:** Where will it be screening? When?

**NH:** The world premiere of "Long Distance Revolutionary" will be at the 35th Annual Mill Valley Film Festival on Saturday, Oct. 6, at 12 o'clock noon at the Rafael Film Center in San Rafael. It will also be showing at the festival on Monday, Oct. 8, at 4:45 p.m. at the Sequoia Cinema in Mill Valley. You can get your tickets early, as these screenings could sell out. Here's the info: <http://www.mvff.com/buy-tickets>. Or by phone, toll free: [\(877\) 874-6833](tel:(877)874-6833).

**M.O.I. JR:** How can people see it if they don't make it to Mill Valley?

**SV:** We're excited because the film has garnered major theatrical distribution with First Run Features in New York City – a fiercely independent film distribution company. Not many feature documentaries make it into theatres – and that's a shame and a sign of the times – but First Run believes in this story.

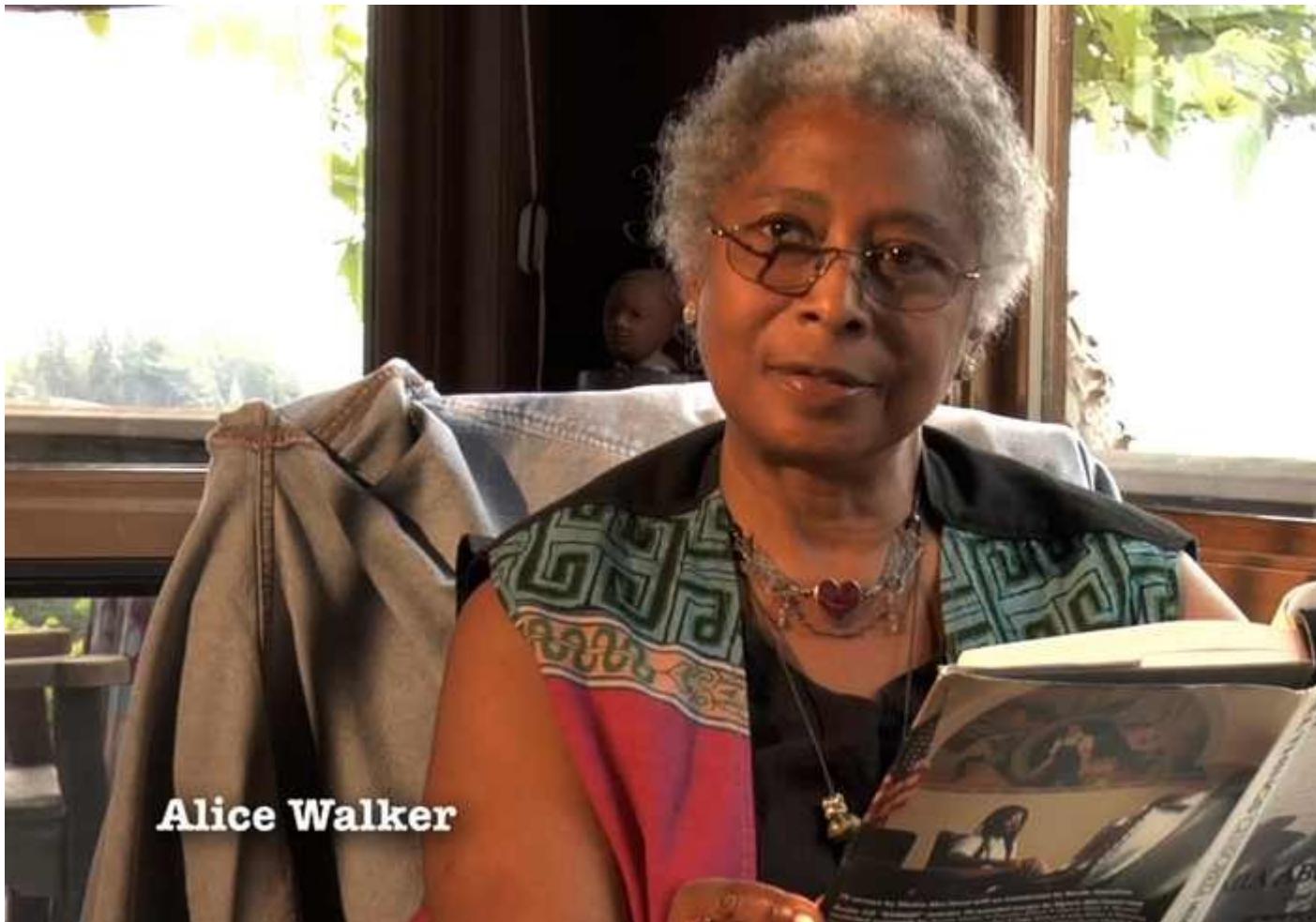
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We're in our fall festival run through the end of the year, beginning with Mill Valley and then traveling to the 35th Annual Starz/Denver festival and then the major European documentary festival in Copenhagen, CPH:DOX, followed by the great domestic doc festival, DOC NYC at the IFC Center in New York on Nov. 10.

Once the film opens in New York and Los Angeles early in 2013, it will then move to other cities and will enjoy numerous special screenings, limited engagements and a wide college tour. We're also excited that First Run plans an aggressive Video on Demand release concurrent with the theatrical release and followed of course by home video and broadcast.

**M.O.I. JR:** Can you tell people a little bit about your work with Prison Radio ([prisonradio.org](http://prisonradio.org))?

**SV:** I started working with Prison Radio and Noelle Hanrahan on a previous project with Mumia entitled "Murder Incorporated: Empire, Genocide and Manifest Destiny." The film is now on hold but not the project. Mumia and I have decided to write the book and we are now knee-deep in gore on this incendiary story about the genesis of the American Empire and its 500-year march across the planet.



**Alice Walker**

World renowned author Alice Walker is featured in the film.

But it all started because of Prison Radio's ability to connect the fledgling film idea with Mumia's brilliant take on the subject. In fact, that's the beauty and reality of Prison Radio: The hard work of this organization has almost single-handedly delivered Mumia's voice around the world. I contend that without Prison Radio, we would not know Mumia's work as intimately as we do.

Dick Gregory reflects on it this way: "He's struggling in there on Death Row for everybody else and there's somebody that saw this and said, man, you should do some writings." That was Noelle Hanrahan ... and the rest is history. Street Legal Cinema was proud to produce this film and become a part of that history.

**NH:** In 1990, I did a series of 13 one-hour radio shows called "You Can't Jail the Spirit," which focused on U.S. political prisoners. A key element of the series was the voices of prisoners themselves. We have brought hundreds of prisoner's voices to the airwaves, from Leonard Peltier to Lori Berenson. We believe in scaling and transcending the prison walls by amplifying prisoners' voices – that's our goal.

Twenty years ago, in July of 1992, Jennifer Beach and I traveled from California to the State Correctional Institution at Huntingdon in rural south-central Pennsylvania to record Mumia Abu-Jamal on death row. This recording session became Mumia's first Prison Radio broadcast.

We have worked on many of Mumia's books and produced more than 2,000 radio essays that air weekly on a worldwide basis. Prison Radio, a project of the Redwood Justice Fund, is a nonprofit media organization staffed by dedicated radio producers committed to bringing these voices to the airwaves.

*The People's Minister of Information JR is associate editor of the Bay View, author of "[Block Reportin'](#)" and filmmaker of "[Operation Small Axe](#)" and "[Block Reportin' 101](#)," available, along with many more interviews, at [www.blockreportradio.com](http://www.blockreportradio.com). He also hosts two weekly shows on KPFA 94.1 FM and [kpfa.org](http://kpfa.org): The Morning Mix every Wednesday, 8-9 a.m., and The Block Report every Friday night-Saturday morning, midnight-2 a.m. He can be reached at [blockreportradio@gmail.com](mailto:blockreportradio@gmail.com).*

