

A Lovely Day (at last)

RM: Michael Eaton

Photo: Peter Dawson

Afeni Shakur was:

A leader in the Black Panther party.

A prisoner facing over 300 years.

Pardoned after pleading her own case.

Addicted to crack cocaine.

Angry.

Afeni Shakur is:

In recovery.

A healer.

An educator.

Mother and mentor to the greatest rap star in history.

A believer.

A caregiver.

Forgiven and forgiving.

*Afeni Shakur articulates well with her mouth and with her fists—
rapid firing punches in the air as she speaks, shouting with the joy
and anguish of a Southern Baptist preacher set afire. In reality she
is a preacher and a teacher. Her words and motions push out,
power to the people, breaking down walls.*

To counter the pushing, there's a pulling, inviting you into her heart where she sometimes rests a hand, that hand that fed and nourished and turned the pages of infancy, changing diapers for the world's most famous, and his sister, setting a young Tupac in the corner to read and report on an entire issue of The New York Times as a time-out "punishment." The hand that fought for freedom, the hand that refused to turn the handle on that 50s drinking fountain filled with the waste and hatred of bigots, that hand that writes and plants and tears down and builds up again, aiding eyes that see a new world where living as one is a birthright and healing extends right down to the good earth. Both hands lifted now to the Creator. Offering a hand of thanks and of help, and looking for a hand, not a handout. And, oh the tears from those eyes that have seen a movement born, a child taken, a savior in a world that needs a smack with one hand and a loving touch from the other. True to her calling, Afeni shakur is not silent.

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Interviewed exclusively for Risen Magazine in Sausalito, CA.

Risen Magazine: What's so important to you about land ownership?

Afeni Shakur: Wow. My mother was a domestic worker and a factory worker. Her mom was a domestic worker and a sharecropper. Her mother's mother was a sharecropper, and her mother's grandmother was a slave. My great grandmother actually got a little piece of land one time—she had a house on it and that's the house I remember as a child. But there was a fire, she had no insurance and she lost it. We didn't have nothin' and when I say nothin'... The fact that we didn't have any land for all those years, it meant that myself, my mom and my sister never did get stability. When I saw you all outside, I said, "Why are y'all standin' out here like you're homeless? [Laughs] You notice that I would make that particular reference because we were always exactly three minutes away from homelessness. As far as I know, my mom must

have been evicted 20 to 25 times during our childhood. When I grew up, I also got evicted.

The only way you can have consistency with shelter is to have the land. We're not independent if we don't have the ability to feed our families if everything goes wrong. If they take everything from my son and from me, as long as I have those 56 acres, I can figure out how to feed my family. As I was runnin' around talkin' about freedom—what is that exactly without the ability to eat what you want? If you have enough land to care for your family, you will never be poor.

Working on the land has been the most healing thing in my life. It slowed me down; what could slow you down better than the seasons of the crops? There are so many lessons in it. We want children to grow up and not think of farming as a dirty thing. We want to make farmin' sexy again, to till that land. [Laughs]

RM: What's the farm called?

AS: Sunset Ranch. We have a peace garden there where my son's ashes are. It's so peaceful there. I love stone so there're a lot of stone sculptures there. There's this huge piece of pink jade and it looks like a sunset. It's so happy bein' out there in the sun and the rain. Pac is under an arch with a weeping willow tree and an angel sitting, reading a book.

RM: When did you first become aware of the revolution?

AS: I was about 7 when Emit Till was lynched. The way that we in the South found out about that was through *Jet Magazine*. *Jet* and *Ebony* at that time was our Bible. They got passed around throughout the community.

The first sense of indignation came right then. I think that all of us had been destroyed in a place that hadn't been touched before. Emit Till was lynched for whistling at a white woman. The woman had the guts then, in the 50s, to insist on leaving the coffin open. She wanted people to see what they had done to her child and it's a good thing she did. That picture of him before and

the picture of him after changed us all. Nothing, nothing [emphatically] could be more powerful than that. That was the first thing, and right after that was when the sit-ins started. I was a young teenager and impatient with these people who weren't doin' a damn thing where I lived. Finally, in 1958, I went up to New York. That's when it became crystallized. We were allowed to talk about it. We could talk to white people about it, how 'bout that? [Laughs]

Where I grew up in the South, there was a water fountain. Even if there was water in it, the fountain was filled with feces. I don't care how thirsty I was, that water was... It hurt everybody. White people, Black people, Indian people, we were all retarded by that experience.

RM: How do you forgive?

AS: My God, is it easy when you know how. I was a crackhead. I started smokin' crack over there [motions to upper class neighborhood across the street.] I walked this wonderful walk

every day to get smoked up. That girl right there [to her friend, Nichole] used to bang on the door and say, “Come out of there.”

You want to be there before you talk about me forgiving. How could you possibly understand if you don't know this? If you don't know that I was 13 floors underneath the metal garbage can which is corroded at the bottom with maggots in it. I was 13 stories underneath that and God took a pair of tweezers and mercifully just tweezed me out of there. And I was kick'n' and scream'n'.

No, I didn't wake up that morning and say, *My Lord, I need to be clean*. Literally, God had to go and get me with tweezers and I was not helpful. That's why I know about God's grace; I know about it because I'm the grace child... *He-ey!* What exactly is it that I'm forgiving? I'm breathin'. I used up every card He gave me, used it twice. Didn't miss no drug but XTC, cuz it wasn't out yet. And I have no AIDS, no hepatitis, no nothing, except high blood pressure and something with my thyroid, but they seem to be fading. Do I have a right to not forgive whoever did whatever? God forgave them; what did I put up for mine?

I am a recovering addict, grateful for the first time that I smoked that crack. You can see how arrogant I must have been in my former life, can't you? You think anybody could tell me anything? Not a damn thing! I might have stopped using, but I wouldn't change my personality. For who?

RM: What were you like as a Black Panther?

AS: I would tell young people to go smack their mamas. Nobody was smarter than me, until the crack. Now I look upon the Panthers as a necessary part of my development just the same way I look at dope. I look upon all of those things that caused me great pain as necessary for me to be who I am today. If I had not been, not only in the Black Panther party, but in leadership and an arrogant arrogant... they just called me a bull dyke, that's what they did when they couldn't tell you nothing.

RM: Why do you think all these things happened to you?

AS: It was about nine months after he [Tupac] was gone that I realized why I had been in the Black Panther party. I would someday need everything that I had learned at that time and I would not have learned to question the law, not to take anyone's no for an answer without that. But I needed it with prayer, which I have by now learned.

RM: Was the movement similar to the Old Testament eye for an eye?

AS: Actually not. When people ask *What is the biggest mistake made in the Black Panther Party?* I can tell them very clearly that what we did wrong was to take God out of the movement. We decisively did that in the year, I think it was 1969 or 1970. Before that we had a minister of culture and a minister of religion, and we embraced many concepts of religion, we embraced God. If you want to know my opinion, the day we put God out is the day that we started on a really fast road to hell. Trust me on this, cuz I was there. I wrote poems about Jesus and the revolution when I was a

revolutionary, and the next day I'm thinking God didn't save nobody and if He comes down here and he's against the revolution, we're just gonna have to shoot Him too. We didn't know what we were doin' but it would have all worked itself out if we had not asked God to remove Himself.

Every young person thinks of the Black Panther party as this magical place in *The Wizard of Oz*. What I tell them is racism is not the priority today. Here's how you make a decision like that. You look at it and you say, "What's causing the most damage?" Well, guess what? Our young people are dying today at a rate higher than ever before in history. They are dying from everything you can name. We are killing each other, we are watching each other die, quietly. If we don't stop them from dying, they will not be around to fight racism and the racists will win any damn way.

I'm scared because they think it's normal. This is *not* normal. Twenty more people died today in one city. I'm mad about it. I'm real mad cuz I want to know why it ain't on the agenda. Why is

the gun that's in my neighborhood less terroristic than the gun that's in Iraq?

If we had listened to Martin Luther King in 1968 perhaps we would have done things differently. I listen to him now saying that violence is an invitation to surrender; that you have given up.

RM: How did your son deal with being homeless?

AS: On his 13th birthday he was homeless. The theater company gave him a birthday party. We celebrated it as if we were rich.

Rich in spirit, you know. They gave him his culture. No, we didn't have nowhere to live that day, but we had that.

RM: Did you speak a lot about death to Pac?

AS: In our house life and death is a yin and a yang issue. First of all I believe that life is everywhere. And I think the people who go around as if they're not going to die, they're nuts. There's only one thing that we know for sure: we're gonna' die. We don't know for sure, when.

If you look at the equation, you must know what's going to happen here. It's like when I was in the Black Panther party...you know where the train is headed. I think that my son was conscious of a great sacrifice, I really do. I believe that God had an arrangement with my son whereby he wanted him to do this, this and this, and that's what He gave him. He gave him 25 years to do it and he did every bit of it. And when he did it, He snatched his little self right up on out of here. God put this huge spirit in there that was weakening that frame. The frame was not equipped for the spirit. I think that Tupac came here with June 16th, and he also came here with September 13th. I believe that God gave it to him right in my womb, the first thing. He knew the end. And the miracle is that Tupac did his work in that time. He's got us all on the same schedule, when we're finished, we're outta' here.

RM: I kind of look at Pac as today's David Walker...

AS: In eight years nobody's brought up that name in relationship to my son. You know that Tupac studied all of those things. That's what was in the library. You could see how he mapped it out.

RM: Do you think that when some hip hop was banned, it was the same thing as when [the anti-slavery pamphlet] Appeal was being circulated?

AS: There is a movie called *Say Amen Somebody*. It's about Thomas Dorsey and the woman who worked with him. He wrote *Precious Lord, take my hand*, which was made famous by the death of Martin Luther King. Thomas Dorsey had just been married and his wife had a baby, and when he was on the road he got a telegram: "Baby and mamma dead." What he did was write that song, *Precious Lord*. He and Willie May Ford Smith. Those and a couple of other songs. When they went around to these churches singin' this new gospel they were put out the church. The correlation is that now in the gospel industry, Kirk Franklin, they hate 'im. The kids that sing rap, they tell them *it's the devil's*

music! Did you know that rock 'n' roll caused black men to rape white women? You have to know this, so you don't believe it when you hear that rap music made somebody go shoot somebody. No art is advanced by people who don't want change. An artist has to be willing to take a chance, push the envelope.

RM: Who was Tupac when nobody was watching?

AS: He was writin'. Tupac even sat on the toilet and wrote. If you popped in on him when he was writin', you found him with the music way loud, louder than your ears could take. He probably had half a plate of chicken wings. And it could be any music by the way, it could be Kate Bush.

RM: Did he have good rhythm as a kid?

AS: No, he didn't have no rhythm. He could not dance. He was a performer. He was good with words and language. [Makes chopping sound] But when they hired him as a roadie, that meant he had to dance on the stage. What happened is that whatever he

did become his style and people would imitate him. Tupac could not dance. [Emphatically. Laughs] He could do the Tupac steps. No, no. [Laughs]

RM: Did you ever see him cry?

AS: When he was about 10 years old, Tupac had been running to catch a ball and he ran square into one of the New York cement park benches. I took him to the hospital and when it was our turn they got straps and they're about to strap him in. I said, "Okay, have you spoken to him to explain what you're about to do? He's a human being, explain it to him what you're about to do and maybe you won't need those straps." Tupac could be brought to calmness by speaking to him in a rational way. One day he went to the dentist and it was the same thing. Tupac said, "Can you give me a mirror? I need to see what you're doing." As long as he could see what he was doin', he really was fine.

RM: Universities are teaching classes on your son now; do you think he'll be as big as say Shakespeare hundreds of years from now?

AS: I have no clue. I do believe that hundreds of years from now Tupac will be studied. He will be listened to. My job since 1996 has been to make his work available. Once that's done, there isn't anything to argue with. Very few people among his peers can measure up to where he is. Not to talk about his work is not to talk about him as an artist.

RM: When did you notice that he was going to be a star?

AS: When he was about 3. He was in daycare and when I came to pick him up one day he's in the center of the circle doin' the James Brown, and they're tellin' me that he is soooo good. [Laughter all around.] I said, "That's not why he's here," and I took him out of that school. I knew that he was good, but when you see that in a 3 year old, that's not the thing you want. [Laughs] Anytime you look

at a kid like that who's so talented, he ain't gettin' no discipline.

He did whatever he wanted to do; that's what I knew.

When he was 6 years he had a teacher that liked him and he said something she didn't like and his teacher called me up in tears, drunk. [Laughs] I know what had happened; he had cut her to the core cuz she had singled him out.

RM: What is betrayal to you?

AS: It's not the same as it was in 1971 when I was pregnant and my co-defendants betrayed me. Today betrayal is less hurtful, because I live a life in a way that... There is no way to betray me because I am honest about myself. Betrayal, I can't stop that and I don't take it personally. I'm very proud of the way our business is set up, and because of that, betrayal does not hurt like it did. But know this, I am betrayed about once a week.

RM: Have you ever felt powerless?

AS: Mm hmm. Powerless in different ways. Both times that my

son was hurt I felt completely powerless, but being in recovery I've got this new way. Before, in the Party, it was all power to the people, and guess where that took me?

RM: What scares you?

AS: Dishonesty, operating on a lie. What would frighten me would be to discover that one of the truths that I lived by wasn't true. If I discovered that Christ really didn't die for my sins, oh I'd be real frightened about that.

RM: Why do you think America's gone from producer to consumer?

AS: Capitalism doesn't play favorites. My son taught me a lot about that. Americans think that capitalism favors America, but capitalism only favors a new market.

RM: Are you more socialistic politically?

AS: Politically I've never changed. I don't even know how to survive here; Tupac taught me how to survive in this system.

RM: How would you change public education?

AS: The state of public education today is so different than when I knew something about it. I don't have a way to make it better, I just know that it ain't working. I don't think it has anything to do with the children; I blame everything on the grown people.

RM: What do you think of the current state of rap music?

AS: Sad, because they're afraid. Rap has infused our community with a new source of income that we never had. It has created an economic base.

Fear of learning is what I believe is rap's biggest problem. They want to put their heads, so bad, in a hole and pretend they don't see our biggest social problems. They're not doin' their job. Even the economic things that they have, they're afraid of that;

they're afraid to use it, they're afraid to organize it. They are in fear and don't even know it.

RM: Where do you see yourself in 10,000 years?

AS: I hope that my spirit and my energy infuses somebody who is stuck in a house where somebody is beatin' them, a little kid, to hang in there and to fight back. And step out of that garbage can, that's what I hope, ya know? I hope that my energy will always be something that makes someone who is in trouble say, "I'm outta here." That would be the most wonderful thing if that's how my energy ended up as this thing that pushed somebody. [Crying] That pushed somebody who was being abused, ya know?

The sun has pierced the Marin County fogbank, shining through the roof of the car on each of us independently, and then all together as we wind through the tall pines. Just look around, I

think we've found a lovely day, *sings Gil Scott Heron over a backpack CD player. And there in that car harmony takes one big leap for mankind. There are tears and laughter and we are all draped in the soft light that shows no discrimination and warms our little community to the core. The sunshine, the new friends, the music, all conducted with benevolence by an unseen force have shown us favor but it does not end at sunset. Nor will it cease the next day when we return home to San Diego and Afeni settles in her home. There she will carry on the work that has been passed down to her by forebears since the fall of humanity. She pronounces this a good day, a lovely day. That's a good start for now.*