A *the last* REVOLUTIONARY

After 27 years of unjust imprisonment, Geronimo ji Jaga Pratt is finally free and speaking up for all the Black men and women behind bars By Pamela Johnson

There are hundreds of thousands of lost Black men who won't be heard from anytime soon. They're not dead—but close enough. Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt, who long ago changed his last name to Ji Jaga, used to be one of them. Locked away on a questionable murder charge in 1970, he was released from a California prison this past June after a judge overturned his conviction. Up until the moment he exited those formidable gates—and even beyond—some people in the "free" world still hoped we'd seen the last of him. He was perceived as so many brothers are: too Black, too strong, so dangerous.

When you meet him in person, rumors of Ji Jaga's ferocity seem greatly exaggerated. He is maybe five feet nine and has a gentle manner. If 27 years on lockdown have thickened his body and thinned his hair, his soft and husky voice retains a natural buoyancy. But his conversation is packed with sixties rhetoric: He still believes, for starters, that Black America can break away from the United States and become a nation on its own, and phrases like "power to the people" and "the ballot or the bullet" flow freely from his lips.

undaunted courageous honorable steadfast

The slogans take you back to that moment in history when Black men were "kings," Black women were "queens," and we all had a more glorious sense of our own possibilities. A time well before the eighties. And the nineties.

These days Ji Jaga is raising his voice as an advocate for incarcerated brothers and sisters—all of them, in his mind, political prisoners—who themselves are unavailable for comment. And as he gets acclimated to a world that changed considerably during his absence—automated teller machines and car alarms being just two of the advances he's adjusting to—he also steps, for the first time, into the role of full-time husband and father. Hard as it may be to believe, Ji Jaga married in 1976 while in solitary confinement. Accorded two "family" visits a year, he and his wife, Ashaki, now have a grown daughter and a high-school–age son. Recently their daughter gave birth to a daughter of her own. Funny how the time flies when you're not around to see your children grow up.

It was 1968 when he came home from Vietnam at age 21, a decorated war hero after two tours of duty. Some of his people in his home state, Louisiana—the birthplace both of late Black Panther Party cofounder Huey Newton and of Ji Jaga's celebrated lawyer Johnnie Cochran—had actually encouraged him to join the army and go to war so that he could take his place on the front lines at home.

That same year he joined a chapter of the Black Panther Party in southern California, rose to become its deputy minister of defense and then its leader. The Panthers, who viewed the price of nonviolent change in America as too steep and the pace too slow, harnessed the strength, reckless enthusiasm and naïveté of a band of revolutionaries barely out of their teens in cities across the country. Sometimes the Panthers tripped over their own feet as they waged "armed struggle" against the system. But more often than not they were felled by deadly confrontations with law-enforcement authorities.

It was during this period that the FBI mounted its infamous counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) to discredit, disarm or destroy certain Black leaders, including the man known as Geronimo Pratt.

In 1968 a White couple was robbed and the wife killed. Two years later Ji Jaga was charged with the crime and convicted on the strength of testimony given by an alleged FBI informant. It turned out that critical pieces of information were withheld during Ji Jaga's trial, including the fact that the victim in the case had earlier accused another man. Over the years, Amnesty International, CBS-TV's *60 Minutes*, a former FBI agent and even several of the jurors who heard the case contended that dis- [CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

closure of such information could have resulted in another verdict. On June 10 of this year, these voices were finally heeded, and a Superior Court judge overturned Ji Jaga's 25-year-to-life sentence.

It's been a long time coming, but Ji Jaga, now 50, is finally free. He reflects here on finding justice, the fate of other political prisoners and what it feels like to be a revolutionary in the nineties:

ESSENCE: *Why do you think it's taken so long for you to be released?*

Ji Jaga: Because I refused to go before the parole board.

ESSENCE: *Why?*

Ji Jaga: Well, we had quite a few brothers who thought they could rely on that parole board. But not too many anymore. More prisoners have become politicized nowadays, especially with my release. They watched me for years, saying, "Geronimo, you're crazy, you've got to go to the board." I said, "Man, thank you, I ain't going to no board." So as a result, you have a lot more brothers who are taking a stronger stand. Like I refused a cellmate, because those conditions were too dehumanizing.

ESSENCE: *To have a cellmate?*

Ji Jaga: Sure. In a cell space that small? You couldn't do this. See what I'm doing now? [He stretches his arms out.] And I'm not a tall guy. You could take four and a half steps back and forth. And they wanted to stuff two people in there. Our philosophy behind fighting them on that was that double-celling was too analogous to being on the slave ships when they packed our ancestors like sardines, only to make room for more.

ESSENCE: *You could demand to be alone in a cell?*

uncompromising fearless political liberated

Ji Jaga: You couldn't, but we fought double-celling for years and won in 1982. That's why I stayed in the hole for eight years, because I wouldn't go along with the program. Like getting naked and bending over and spreading your buttocks [to be checked for weapons or drugs]. I thought that was the most demeaning thing somebody would ever ask me to do, and I wouldn't do it. And they would have to fight me every time they opened [my cell] door. As a result, they began to make little allowances, and they respected me. It's war in prison.

ESSENCE: *Do you have any sense of how many Black men and women may be inside for political reasons?*

Ji Jaga: You may call me crazy [but I believe] that because of our socioeconomic conditions, every Black man and woman in prison is, in fact, a political prisoner. Every one, bar none. If you've got money, you're not going to prison.

ESSENCE: *What specifically should Black America be doing to liberate our* political *prisoners? Freeing* all *Black men and women may be too broad a battle to wage.*

Ji Jaga: But, see, everything is based on politics. But [in terms of political prisoners] we're calling for a congressional hearing into COINTELPRO.

ESSENCE: *How has your concept of freedom evolved during your time in prison?*

Ji Jaga: That's a very good question. [Laughs] Strangely enough, the closest I've come to what I would define as freedom was being deep in the hole [solitary confinement, aka "the soul breaker"] in San Quentin's Adjustment Center. I had been doing a lot of fasting—no meat, no nothing, just liquids. So it was during a deep, long fast and deep meditation that I found freedom that blew my mind. Right in the middle of the hole, the deepest hole—the hole in a hole. You didn't have a toilet, you didn't have a sink. You had a hole. You had a bed that was really a slab of concrete—like a gravestone. It was very, very oppressive. And here I am free. It was the greatest time in all my life. It was sweet; it was beautiful.

ESSENCE: *What did you discover about the nature of freedom?*

Ji Jaga: That it's within, and it can be flawless. But the prerequisite is you have to detach from everything.

ESSENCE: *You got married in 1976, six years—all of them spent in solitary confinement—after you'd been imprisoned. How did you meet your wife?*

Ji Jaga: One of my comrades came through prison while I was in the hole. He asked me what could he do for me. I asked him if he would stop by one of those colleges and get some of the students to come by and help me file some legal stuff. Ashaki was one of the students, and she ended up on my defense committee.

ESSENCE: *What were you trying to file?*

Ji Jaga: Civil litigation. There was a law I was ignorant of that showed I shouldn't have been put in the hole [with the most violent prisoners] straight from the streets, because everyone else is given a chance among the [CONTINUED ON PAGE 178]

Love on lock down: Geronimo ji Jaga Pratt met wife Ashaki while serving time.

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our heads. And wonder. ◆

Isabel Wilkerson, a senior writer at* The New York Times, *is on leave, working on a book about the great migration of African-Americans from the South to the North.

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general population. Eventually [filing suit against the San Quentin Prison and winning] helped effect my release from the hole in 1978.

ESSENCE: *Tell me more about you and Ashaki. What was it about you two that clicked? There are couples out here under ideal conditions who can't keep it together, and you two have been married more than 20 years.*

Ji Jaga: I figure it was this: She has this serenity within her. I was so erratic when I met her because I had started eating meat again, but I was also deep into Eastern discipline, from the Bhagavad Gita to the Koran and all the Buddhist teachings.

ESSENCE: *You got married in a prison waiting room. What was that like?*

Ji Jaga: When we got married, I had chains around my neck, my scrotum, my waist. My hands were cuffed, and there were chains around my ankles. I was led like a dog on a leash. She was on the other side of a big screen, and I wasn't allowed to touch her—this was a noncontact visit. But they were just beginning to hire Black guards then, and one of them opened the door and let us kiss.

We went two years before we were able to really touch each other [during a conjugal visit] and consummate our marriage. I hadn't been with a woman in eight years. Shortly thereafter, in 1979, she became pregnant with our first child, Shona. And our son, Hiroji, was born three years later.

ESSENCE: *And there you were up against a life sentence. What kept you together?*

Ji Jaga: I never tried to put restraints on her, like a lot of guys do in prison. I always wanted her to have her freedom, so she wouldn't have that pressure, that strain. I mean, I was doing life. So I wasn't even looking to get out of the hole, let alone come home.

ESSENCE: *Prison is not the first place most women think of when they're looking for a man.*

Ji Jaga: Well, Ashaki's father—she's the product of a Japanese–Black relationship from the Korean War—came back from the military and ended up in prison. So as a child she was going with her Japanese mother visiting her father on Saturday at Folsom and San Quentin prisons. She has a strong mother. Women go through a lot of sacrifices out here.

ESSENCE: *You had something of an extended family who visited you.*

Ji Jaga: The children always came with Ashaki. And when Tupac [Shakur] came with Afeni [his mother], they stayed with Ashaki, and then they would all come to visit. I mean, there's just a big family of people who have supported me throughout the years. My strength came from that, you know?

[The late Tupac Shakur mentioned ji Jaga in songs, and ji Jaga calls him "my son—not biologically—but it doesn't matter." In 1996, Shakur died on ji Jaga's forty-ninth birthday of injuries sustained during a drive-by shooting .]

ESSENCE: *Are you in touch with former Black Panthers like Assata Shakur [exiled in Cuba] or Mumia Abu-Jamal [in a Pennsylvania prison on death row]?*

Ji Jaga: Well, we're all like family, so Mumia is our little brother. Assata used to be my little sister. I hope to see her and Mumia and everyone else I can. But they know me. They know I walk with them, and they know I never made no promises other than that we're going to liberate our people.

Mumia started out with the Party when we were first putting the chapters together.

ESSENCE: *How old was he?*

Ji Jaga: Oh, shoot, about 13, 14. No more than 14. But you wouldn't know it, because he was so precocious and always so sharp. He would stand up, almost like another little brother—Fred Hampton [slain at age 21 by Chicago police during a raid in 1969]. You could look at these young brothers and tell they were soldiers. And so when he got convicted and sentenced to death, I told everyone who was supporting me that they could not support me anymore unless they first supported Mumia. And I've been very insistent about that.

ESSENCE: *What have you said to him to help him be strong?*

Ji Jaga: One day I told him, "Boy, you know I was on death row for 18 months," and we started laughing. But he understands this [CONTINUED ON PAGE 180]

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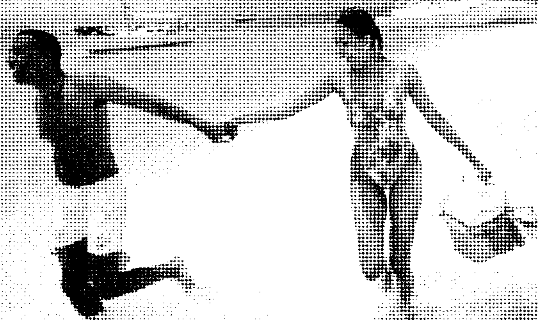

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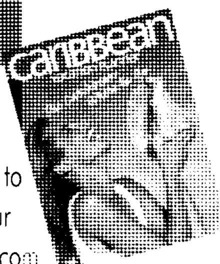

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ain't no fool jive—you join to die. You join to win or die—that's the way I look at it. Che Guevara [the Argentinean revolutionary who helped Fidel Castro rise to power in Cuba] said it beautifully: "In revolution one wins or dies. To a revolutionary, death is reality, but victory is but a dream." Mumia understands that, and it's hard. He knows they're going to try to kill him, and he knows we're going to try to stop it.

ESSENCE: *Have you been in touch with Assata at all?*

Ji Jaga: Yeah.

ESSENCE: *And what did you all say to each other?*

Ji Jaga: Come here. [Laughs] That's my girl, that's my girl. The last time I saw her was in 1976 when she subpoenaed me. I was in the hole in San Quentin and they flew me all the way to New York [to testify on her behalf]. And that's the last time I saw her. We've been in touch throughout the years, though. And I want to work it so that Assata can come home. She's no criminal. She's a freedom fighter, she's a queen.

ESSENCE: *What is important to remember about the Black Panther Party and other Black organizations that have fought for the rights of Black people?*

Ji Jaga: That we were soldiers—some of us died for this country—and we should be treated with the dignity we deserve. We have a long history of struggle in the tradition of Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey and the United Negro Improvement Association. There's a continuum of Black struggle in this country.

ESSENCE: *What would you say is the core of our becoming a stronger Black force?*

Ji Jaga: The basis is the family, the ethics, the morals. The elders told *us* what to do, and we did it. At all times, you have to respect the elders. And you know, I have to thank my mother for waiting for me for all these years. She's 94.

ESSENCE: *Your mother waited, and also Johnnie Cochran, who was your attorney. He's been there, fighting alongside you, too. How would you describe your relationship with him?*

Ji Jaga: I'm his little brother. There's about six or seven years' difference between us. But we're like family.

ESSENCE: *How long have you known each other?*

Ji Jaga: Since 1968. The relationship goes back to Louisiana.

ESSENCE:: *So you guys have ties from back then?*

Ji Jaga: Our people have ties. We're kind of related through the elders. In fact, his father's church, Second Baptist, was one of the first to allow the Panthers to start the breakfast program for children in Los Angeles. But everybody loves Johnnie. He is one of the most loving people; he's got one of those hearts that you're not going to find too often. [Johnnie Cochran adds: "First Geronimo was my client, and then my friend. Now he is my brother. I love Geronimo, and he loves me."]

ESSENCE: *So much has changed since you've been away. Somebody told me that they heard you speaking and that you said you were taken aback by the sounds of car alarms. What else are you having to get used to?*

Ji Jaga: Sometimes I feel like a child, being taught how to use an ATM or how to put on a seatbelt. But there are new things that I like, like the whirlpool and the waterbed—I feel like I'm floating.

ESSENCE: *On a more serious note, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office is appealing the decision of the judge who freed you. But you've already been in prison for much longer than so many other people convicted of murder and, in many people's eyes, the prosecution has been discredited. What do you think is next for you legally?*

Ji Jaga: Some are saying that the state of California should give me money. Some are saying they'd like to see me go back to prison. But a trial would benefit us, because during the original trial we didn't know anything about COINTELPRO. [Johnnie Cochran explains: "Since the L.A. County District Attorney's office had decided to appeal Judge Dicky's order (overturning the conviction), ji Jaga had to resist the appeal. Pending actual dismissal of the charges, it was necessary that he be freed on bail. Since he had served 25 years after his conviction, I thought it appropriate that bail be set at $25,000." With ji Jaga having already served so much time, revelations about the FBI's controversial tactics and a key witness dead, it is unlikely that he will have to endure a second trial.]

ESSENCE: *I imagine that someone who had been incarcerated for as long as you have might feel cheated.*

Ji Jaga: [Shakes his head]

ESSENCE: *Not at all?*

Ji Jaga: There's a quote I like from Henry David Thoreau, who was a hell of a rebel on his own. I think it was *Civil Disobedience*, where he said, "In a society that imprisons unjustly, the only place for a just man is in prison." That makes all the sense in the world to me. ◆

Pamela Johnson is the senior editor of ESSENCE.

PUFFY: THE BAD BOY

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are numbered, in the same matter-of-fact tone one reserves for the weather. Others callously await his demise. For every fan who admires Combs's phoenixlike ability to come back better, harder and stronger, there is a detractor who despises his seemingly unnatural resiliency.

And Combs is by no means immune to the criticism; he takes it hard. Responding to the heat, he seems downright depressed. He sounds more like the hurt little middle-class "good boy" raised by his mother in Mount Vernon, New York, than the bad-boy, sunglasses-wearing, media-savvy rapper. "It hurts to do three and four years of busting your ass and have all your fame be about Biggie and Tupac's death. But that's a reality for me.

"I know what they say about me, that I'm just this guy who doesn't think about what he's doing, doesn't give a f—, is only on a mission. I can't take that people think that about me. What gets me through is that God knows the truth."

It's a Sunday afternoon in Astoria, Queens, and Puffy is not happy. The correct clothes weren't at the video shoot, and he's being asked too many questions. He needs his staff to take more initiative so he can free up some space in a head that's crowded with the monumental responsibilities of being both a CEO and pop star.

But being in charge also means coming down hard on some folks, a role Combs is not comfortable with: He likes being Mr. Nice Guy. On this day, his manager, Benny Medina (who also works with box-office honey Will Smith and with Babyface) is doing the dirty work. His job is to make sure that Combs does not allow Puff Daddy, the very lucrative, chart- [CONTINUED ON PAGE 182]