

Ex-con's late night visit gives insight to prison life

By MATT COOPER

It was 2:30 a.m.
I was sitting at my desk trying to memorize the entire history of Ancient Greece before an exam I was to take at 9:40 in the morning. Every once in a while I'd take a break and chase roaches around the room for fun. It was during one of these breaks that I had a couple of late-night visitors. One of the cats was Paul Leggett, a friend who lives in the suite next to mine. The other person was Jerry.
Anybody who knows Chapel Hill knows Jerry Rogers. He's black and 31 years old. He's a short dude, sports a beard and usually wears faded jeans, faded shirts and a bandana or two. As far as I know he lives on the street.
For the three years I've been here I've seen Jerry around town, usually at some free concert or asleep on a couch in the Union. I had never met him formally, though, until that morning.
When he came in with Paul I could see that he was mad about something so the first thing I did was offer him some Jack Daniels and a chair. We all sat around drinking and smoking cigarettes for a few minutes. Then Paul hooked up my old electric guitar and started strumming a few blues riffs. As if this was a cue for him, Jerry spoke up.
"I want you to tell my story," he said.
I had worked my way back to my history notes by this time and was trying to study a bit. Not feeling like playing journalist at the moment I tried to think of a way to stall him.
"What's your story about?" I asked. Before he could answer, Paul cut in.
"You see, man, I told you I knew a friend who could help you."
I felt like shoving my guitar down his throat, but Jerry started talking again.
"I'm an ex-con." (My antennae came out when I heard this.) "I spent seven years in prison, for something I didn't do."
I asked him to hold on for a second while I got some paper and a pen. Then, stretching out on the floor and getting comfortable, I asked him what he was convicted of.

"Crime against nature."
Well, I lost my sense of objectivity real fast, until Jerry explained to me that it was a brother who was first arrested, and how he admitted that he was the guilty person so that his brother wouldn't have to go to jail.
About the only clearcut truth to come out of this affair was the fact that Jerry spent a total of seven years of his life in prison.
Before he began to talk about prison he took a long drink of whiskey and lit a cigarette.
"Forget what they try to teach you in college about prison," he began. "You don't know what it's like 'til you've been there. The guards beat you. Some of them are pimps. They turn the inmates into whores. They take your clothes and mattress and make you sleep on steel springs. Sometimes they spray you down with a fifty pound water hose."
"I seen cats kill themselves there. Woke up one morning and found a cellmate hanging there, right next to me. And you can get killed, too, by contract — \$50, and you're a dead mother...."
"You might find 10 or 15 cats laying for you around a corner. They hit you on the head first and knock you out. When you wake up your butt is sore."
Jerry paused for a minute to kill his cigarette. Then he asked, "You don't believe me, do you?" He laughed when I didn't say anything — the kind of laugh someone laughs when they feel sorry for something. Paul filled the void with the blues.
After awhile he went on: "I been raped," he said. "I got raped while I was there. But I betcha a lot of those cats who done it are pushing up daisies by now."
"I got friends out here now who know I was raped and they tease me about it. Some cats kill themselves because they don't want to be raped, or because they can't face going back into the world afterward. Some go in men, and come out women. I got friends who know I was raped and they tease me about it. But I'm a man."
Another pause and more blues.
"That stuff about the penitentiary rehabilitating people is bullshit. A man can't change 'til he wants to change himself."

Jerry says he wants to change himself, but he can't. He said the cops wouldn't let him. Since 1975 he hasn't been able to get a job. He says that people don't like the thought of hiring an ex-con, and he feels the Chapel Hill Police Department isn't helping matters any.
"If anything happens around here," he said, "anybody gets mugged, anything gets broken into, they (CHPD) come for prison."
"I'm trying to change. I'm trying to be nice. But I feel like the cops are using me for a guinea pig."
"Seven years in the pen should be

enough. I've paid dues. But the cops won't let me forget. Can't they talk to me without pulling out their billysticks? I am a man."
At this point Jerry began to get worked up again. He leaned forward so he could make sure I heard his every word.
"People aren't animals. They're human beings. We all come from one man."
"And put this in, too," Jerry said. "If you dumb turkeys (cops) can't understand that then you need to be put in a cell and the key thrown away."
"As for me," he said, "I've had about enough. I'm sick of harrassment. I'm sick

of the cops trying to use me for a snitch. They try to get me to find out who had dope and all, and they offer me money for it. But if I snitched on people I'd classify myself as a rotten, lowdown, obnoxious mother. A snitch is the scum of the earth."
He stopped to light another cigarette. Paul had put an old T-Bone Walker album on my Sears-Roebuck special, and had made himself at home on my bed.
By this time Jerry was ready to say more and I was listening.

"My whole opinion of the CHPD, except for a few, (is that) they're all looking to make their sergeant or lieutenant stripes. They'll walk on anybody to get them."
"I try to love everyone. That's the only way we're going to make it. But there are a bunch of dummies that don't understand that. For instance, if I wanted to make love to a white woman, that's between me and her. If you don't like it, talk to me. Don't hurt me behind my back."
"Love is a bitch, though. Brings you sorrow and pain, but in the end it brings you peace. And another thing. Love comes from no colors. It comes from the heart. If you people from UNC can't understand that you need to drop out of college and see a shrink."
Jerry then showed me a couple of legal looking documents (arrest papers of some sort). One said that he was to appear the next morning in court. There was something about trespassing at the Happy Store. The other said the same kind of thing, only about public consumption.
Jerry swore that both of the cases were bum raps, and after Paul told me how a squad car had apparently followed them around an alley somewhere on Franklin Street, I was inclined to believe them. Still, a body is guilty until proven innocent — or is it the other way around?
After I'd finished reading the citations, or whatever they were, Jerry carefully put

them back into his wallet. After another drag on his cigarette he ground it out and looked at me.
"I'm not going back," he said. "They want to make a scapegoat of me. But I swear to my mamma's grave that before I go back to the pen, I'll kill myself."
Right about that time I could hear T-Bone's voice coming in loud and clear:

*It's a cold, cold feeling,
It's like ice around my heart,
I know I'm gonna quit somebody,
Everytime that feeling starts.

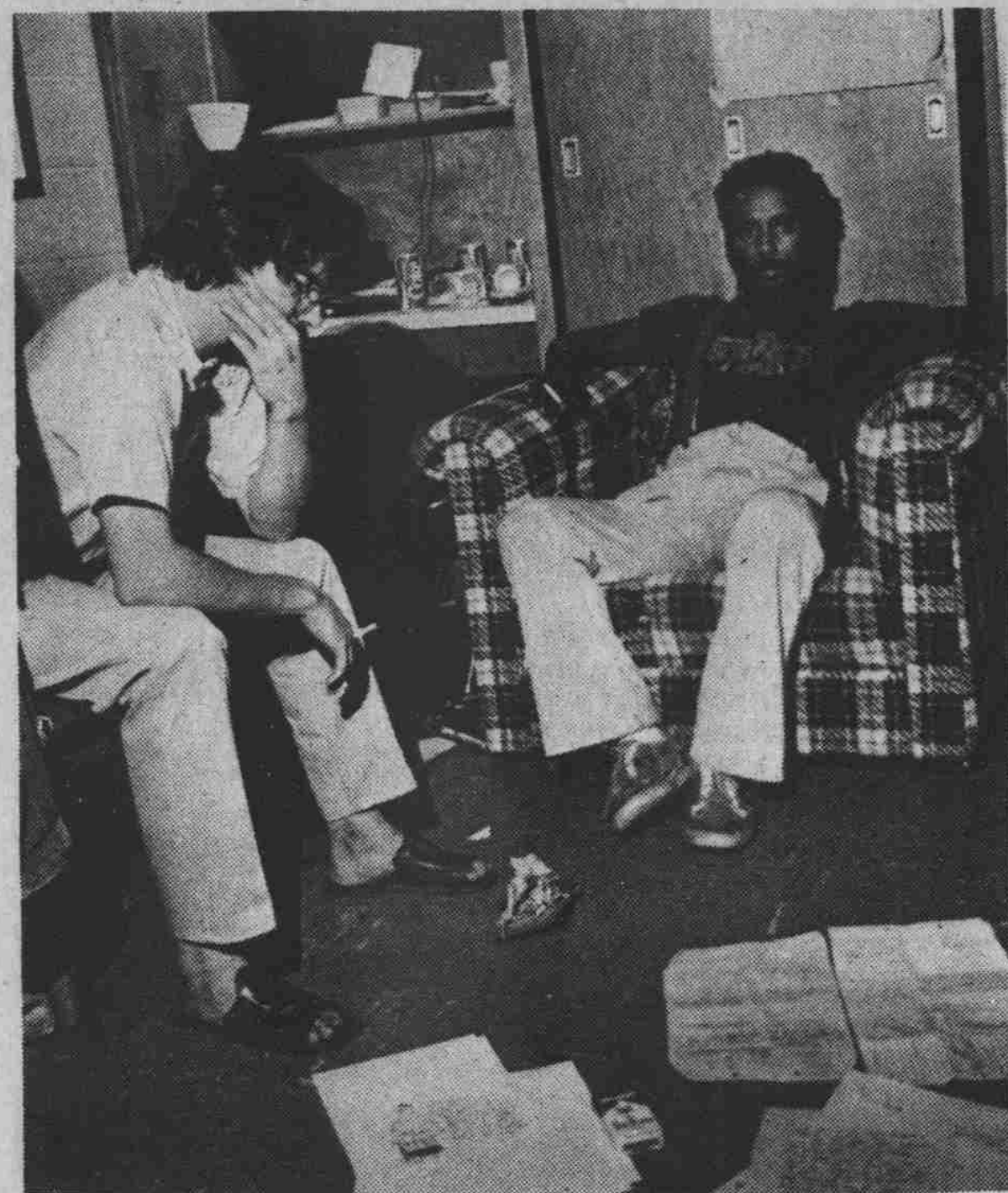
You treat me like a prisoner,
Because my hands are tied,
Everything you do to me,
Is stacking up inside.*

In a few minutes both Jerry and Paul were gone, leaving me to my books, my music and my roaches. I learned the next day that as far as Paul knew, Jerry missed his hearing. I don't know where he is now.

All he left me with was his story, and I felt almost obligated to write it. Almost. But there was something more to this story than Jerry's words. I felt as if there was some kind of message in it. I mean, it's not difficult to see that somewhere in the system that swallowed up Jerry something is wrong. Even if everything that Jerry said about cops following him and nobody wanting to give him a break isn't true (although I tend to believe most of it), there is still the paranoia that remains in him to be accounted for.

Yes, somewhere, something is wrong. It makes you wonder a little about the human condition. Doesn't it? I wonder how many Jerrys there are in this world, in this state, in Chapel Hill? I wonder if anybody cares?

Matt Cooper, a senior journalism major from Littleton, is a staff writer and photographer for The Daily Tar Heel.



Paul Leggett (left) and Jerry Rogers

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