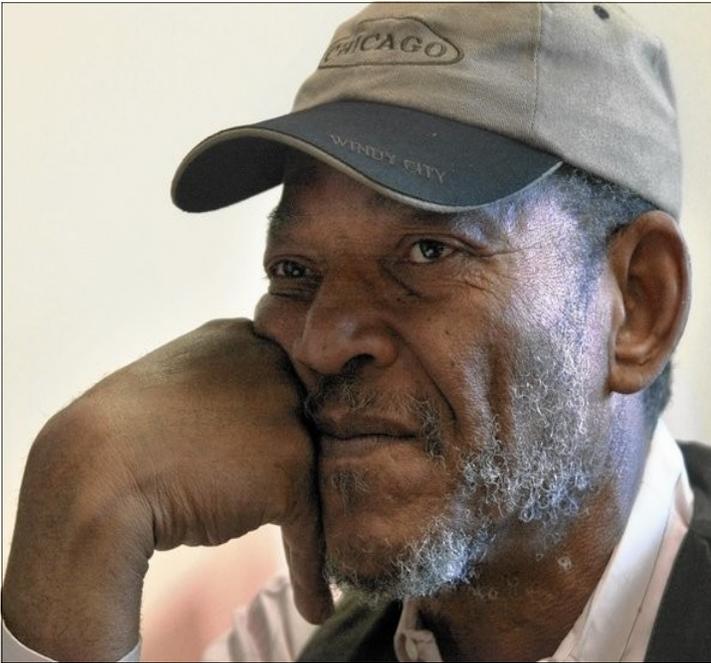


From the LA Times

Delbert Tibbs dies at 74; exonerated man's life defined by time on death row

After being wrongfully held on death row for two years, Delbert Tibbs became a peaceful advocate against the death penalty in the U.S.



Delbert Tibbs, who spent two years on Florida's death row before being exonerated, listens during an interview in Chicago in January 2002. (Charles Bennett, Associated Press)

By Bettina Boxall · December 12, 2013, 8:14pm

After Delbert Tibbs dropped out of a Chicago seminary in 1972, he went on the road, walking, hopping freight trains and taking odd jobs across the U.S.

One day in early 1974, police stopped him near Ocala, Fla., and questioned him about a crime 220 miles to the south. The officers took some Polaroid snapshots of Tibbs and then, satisfied he wasn't involved, sent him on his way.

About a month later, in Lee County, Miss., a highway patrolman stopped him again and arrested him for rape and murder. Tibbs was hauled off to jail in handcuffs. At first, he wasn't worried. He had an alibi and didn't match the description of the killer.

"I don't do anything 'cause I figure they're going to let me out of here, so I don't even bother my family," Tibbs told oral historian Studs Terkel in an interview published in the 2001 book, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken? Reflections on Death, Rebirth and Hunger for a Faith."

But less than a year after his arrest, an all-white jury convicted Tibbs, an African American, of raping a white teenage girl and murdering her white male hitchhiking companion. Tibbs was sentenced to death in Florida's electric chair for the murder and to life in prison for the rape.

The case was a cause celebre. During the trial, family and supporters packed the courtroom. Folk singer Pete Seeger wrote a song about Tibbs and activist Angela Davis raised money for his defense. The conviction was overturned on appeal and Tibbs walked out of prison in 1977.

But his time on death row shaped the rest of his life, helped inspire a star-studded play decades later and joined the annals of justice-gone-awry that have propelled the movement to abolish capital punishment.

"I can't imagine what my life would have been if I hadn't gone to death row. Because it's so much a part of my life now," Tibbs said in a video posted online by a group opposed to the death penalty.

Delbert Lee Tibbs died Nov. 23 at his home in Chicago, said David Love, executive director of Witness to Innocence, where Tibbs had worked since 2011 as assistant director of membership and training. Tibbs was 74 and had been battling cancer.

A poet and lifelong reader, Tibbs was a thoughtful and articulate spokesman who campaigned against the death penalty without bitterness or anger. "He managed to rise above that," Love said. "He was the most peaceful person I'd ever met. Despite all the turmoil he was able to remain calm."

Tibbs was born in Shelby, Miss., on June 19, 1939, the youngest of tenant farmer Lillie Bryant's dozen children. His father was Pete Johnson, a traveling salesman. Bryant raised Delbert with her husband, Frank Tibbs, and when Delbert was 12, brought him to Chicago.

As a young husband and father, Tibbs worked for a firm that printed magazines and catalogs (he told Terkel "it was one of the most racist places that ever existed") and then got a job as a claims adjuster for a cab company. In 1970, divorced and looking to further his education, he enrolled in the Chicago Theological Seminary.

But "there was an agitation within my spirit," Tibbs told Terkel. He dropped out of seminary and began his cross-country travels, winding up in Florida that fateful winter.

Tibbs' accuser initially told police that the man who raped her and fatally shot her 27-year-old companion was dark-skinned, about 5-foot-6 and sporting a large Afro. She identified Tibbs as the assailant even though he was light-skinned, had a short Afro and was 6-foot-3. A jailhouse informant who claimed Tibbs had confessed to the crime later recanted.

On appeal, the Florida Supreme Court concluded the evidence in the case didn't support a conviction but said Tibbs could be retried, a finding that the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed in 1982. But the prosecutor dropped all charges after deciding it was too risky to put the victim back on the witness stand given her history of drug and alcohol abuse.

Tibbs' tale of injustice was one of six accounts of inmates released from death row in "The Exonerated," a 2002 play that had a long run off-Broadway, was staged around the country with celebrity casts and was made into a film shown on Court TV.

Over the decades, Tibbs worked a variety of jobs, including car-wash manager, school security guard and youth counselor.

He is survived by a son, Delbert Jr., daughters Mahalia Abeo Tibbs and Afrika Rouselle and three grandchildren.

"Sometimes, I tell myself, 'Wow, if they hadn't done this, I could have been a best-selling author.... I could have traveled all over the world,' " Tibbs said in a 2002 interview published in the Dubuque (Iowa) Telegraph Herald. "But you know, in reality, life isn't like that. Who knows what might have happened to me? I'm not much of a what-if guy."

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From the Chicago Sun Times

Chicagoan freed from death row dies at his home

BY ART GOLAB Staff Reporter December 7, 2013 12:36AM

While Chicagoan Delbert Tibbs sat falsely convicted of murder on death row in Florida in the 1970s, folksinger Pete Seeger wrote a ballad about him and civil rights activist Angela Davis raised money for his legal appeals.

After the case against Tibbs fell apart and he was released, his experiences became part of a play, "The Exonerated," later turned into a TV movie.

And fellow Chicagoan Studs Terkel interviewed Tibbs for a chapter in his book, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken/Reflections on Death, Rebirth, and Hunger for a Faith."

Tibbs, who returned to Chicago and worked to help other exonerated former death row inmates, died Nov. 23 in his Chicago home of apparent natural causes, according to David A. Love, executive director of Witness to Innocence.

He lived alone and was found the day after he died by a concerned family member, Love said.

Tibbs, 74, was a poet and assistant director of membership and training for Witness to Innocence at the time of his death. "He was a poet and had a very strong sense of social justice," Love said. "Most of all people just loved him."

One of Tibbs' main tasks was to keep in touch with death row survivors. "It really made a difference in their lives to have him call them, check up on them and make sure that they're all right."

Tibbs was hitch-hiking in Florida in 1974 when he was arrested and charged with murder and rape, despite a solid alibi and a shaky witness identification. He was freed by the Florida Supreme court in 1977 after two years on death row.

"Despite all that he went through being wrongfully convicted, he still managed to have sense of calm about him," Love said.

A memorial service for Tibbs will be held on Dec. 16 from 2 p.m.-4 p.m. at the DePaul University Law School, 25 E. Jackson Boulevard, 5th Floor.

From UPI

Delbert Tibbs, exonerated while on Florida death row, dies

Dec 4, 2013 at 12:44am

CHICAGO, Dec. 4 (UPI) -- Delbert Tibbs, who was sentenced to death in Florida in the 1970s only to be cleared of murder a few years later, has died. He was 74.

Tibbs died Nov. 23 at his home in Chicago, Huffington Post reported.

After his release from prison, Tibbs became an anti-death-penalty advocate. He served as director of membership and training for Witness to Innocence, an organization of exonerated death row inmates founded by Sister Helen Prejean, author of "Dead Man Walking."

David Lowe, WTI's executive director, in a column in the Huffington Post called him "a sage, a poet, a leader and the nicest person you could ever meet, with an intellect, a spirit and a commitment that inspired all of us."

In 1974, Tibbs was charged in Fort Myers with raping Cynthia Nadeau, 16, and killing the man she was hitchhiking with, Terry Milroy, 27. He became a suspect after Nadeau changed the description of her attacker to match Tibbs.

Tibbs was convicted by an all-white jury after a two-day trial and given a death sentence. His case attracted the attention of folksingers [Pete Seeger](#) and [Joan Baez](#) and writer Studs Terkel before his conviction was overturned by the state [Supreme Court](#) in 1976 and he was released in 1977.

Prosecutors finally dropped the charges against him in 1982, calling the case "tainted from the beginning and the investigators knew it."

From the Huffington Post

Delbert Tibbs, Death Row Survivor, May You Rest In Peace

By David A Love, Executive Director of Witness to Innocence

A peacemaker is how people described [Delbert Tibbs](#).

On November 23, 2013, the death penalty abolition movement lost a beloved family member and friend when Delbert, 74, passed away in his home in Chicago.

Delbert Tibbs was many things. He was a sage, a poet, a leader and the nicest person you could ever meet, with an intellect, a spirit and a commitment that inspired all of us. It was an honor to know this peacemaker, and to learn from him.

A man of peace, Delbert was a death row survivor who had experienced a great deal of violence perpetrated against him. A former seminary student, Delbert was traveling around the country and was in [Florida in February 1974](#) when the state police stopped him. Police questioned him about the rape of Cynthia Nadeau, 16, and the murder of her hitchhiking companion, Terry Millroy, 27, in Fort Myers. According to Nadeau, the offender was 5-foot-6, dark skinned and with a large afro. Meanwhile, Delbert was 6-foot-3, light complexioned and with short-cropped hair. So, Delbert was released. Yet, after viewing some photos, Nadeau changed her description and said Delbert Tibbs was actually the killer and rapist. A warrant was issued, Delbert was arrested in Mississippi and was extradited to Florida.

An all-white jury found Delbert guilty in less than two days. That was Southern justice. The victims were white, the defendant black. Since Florida had a moratorium on the death penalty, the judge told Delbert "if the moratorium continues, you will serve consecutive life sentences. If it doesn't, you'll be sent to death row." And Delbert was sent to death row.

It turns out that the jailhouse informant who claimed Tibbs had admitted to the crime had provided his fraudulent testimony to the prosecution in the hopes of leniency for a rape charge, for which he was facing a life sentence. This came to light after trial. Meanwhile, Delbert received a broad base of community support, including celebrities such as Pete Seeger and Joan Baez. In 1976, the Florida Supreme Court threw out his conviction, and in 1977 Delbert Tibbs was a free man. The prosecutor's office finally [dropped the case against him](#) in 1982, declaring the case was "tainted from the beginning and the investigators knew it."

Since those days, Delbert has been fighting against the death penalty, against injustice, and for the rights of the poor and the oppressed, of victims of state-sanctioned violence. I've known him as a staff member of [Witness to Innocence](#), the national organization of death row survivors and their loved ones. How so much potency was contained in a man with such a pacifist soul is what made Delbert a standard bearer.

What struck me about Delbert is that he was not one to complain, even when he was visibly weak and in pain. After speaking with him, as I did two days before he left us, I always learned something. And his Zen-like calm never failed to inspire me to do better, to be better. Few people have a depth of knowledge, of spiritual maturity, or commitment to racial justice as this survivor. He [wrote in his poetry](#) about Shaka Sankofa (Gary Lee Graham), Trayvon Martin and Troy Davis, all innocent black men who were killed, taken from us before their time. In a poem to executed death row prisoner Troy Davis, this exonerated death row survivor said this to another wrongfully convicted black man who was killed by the state of Georgia amid a climate of racism:

I personally believe you were innocent as charged
I feel you were too real to have lied all these years
and even laying on that death gurney
yet you proclaimed your innocence and had friendly
Words to say to the family of the man that they took your life for.

Again, I feel that your life that was sacrificed
Will be a loud call to all who stand for fairness and justice.
I know that your death will move millions more to say No!
as they did for you.

You showed the world how a man could die with dignity and calmness
at the hands of people who seem to know neither.
you were brave and beautiful, My Brother, and you gave us the courage to fight on until that better day.

During times of strife, conflict and violence, we turn to the Delbert Tibbses of our world to lead us down a path towards justice and righteousness. They know that winning the war we are fighting will not come through guns or drones, but rather with the forcefulness of our ideas, and the strength of our convictions. And when the Delberts are no longer with us physically, remaining with us only in spirit, we must learn from the example they set for us and continue as they would have us do it. Brother

Delbert, we miss you.

Delbert Tibbs, death-row survivor, died on November 23rd, aged 74



WHEN the state police stopped him in Florida that day in February 1974, Delbert Tibbs didn't have a very straight story. He was on this spiritual thing. There was an agitation in him, and he was in search of something. He had dropped out of the Chicago Baptist seminary, left his five-year-old son and the woman he was already separated from, and taken off to wander round the country. (After all, it was his country.) He'd walked miles, hopped freight trains, slept under bridges, making just enough to get by. His mama worried about him, her baby, the last and most headstrong of her 12 children. Friends said he was behaving dangerously: he couldn't simply roam round freely in those just-past-the Civil-Rights-Act years, a braggadocious young black man (as he called himself) who

dared to look white people in the eye. But his byword was, "Nourish what Philistines call impractical."

There was a writer thing going on, too. His head was stuffed with books and beautiful polysyllabic words which, later, he would enunciate very slowly, as if chewing some favourite candy. Blacks like him, sharecroppers' children in the South, were not meant to have an education. But he had become a bookworm once he and his mother moved up to Chicago, reading all day at school and in his first job at the old Lakeview Press, until his mind was "sharp as a Toledo sword". When he set off solitary and wandering, he also had Thoreau and Kerouac in mind.

What had happened just before the police stopped him was that a young white woman called Cynthia Nadeau had been raped and left bleeding by the roadside, and her boyfriend shot dead. That was in Fort Myers, Florida; he, Mr Tibbs, was in Ocala, 200 miles away, and had a Salvation Army ticket to prove it. The man who did it—Miss Nadeau said—was about five feet six, with a very dark skin and a huge Afro. He, Mr Tibbs, was much taller, light-complexioned, and with considerably less hair. But when the victim was shown Polaroids the police had taken when they stopped him, she said: "That's the fucker."

An all-white jury and a white judge sentenced him to death. His alibi counted for nothing, and his black lawyer was so scared that he failed to defend him properly. A cellmate also gave false testimony that he had confessed to the crime. But the paramount thing that condemned him was that swaggering Delbert was just not behaving, quote, "the way a nigger ought to behave". So he was sent to death row, otherwise known as the Death House, right beside where the electric chair was. He was there for almost three years.

No date was set for his appointment with the executioner. He was waiting for "a train/or a bus that may never come". In the meantime he watched a lot of TV, ate meals—oddly, the food was good—and tried to get on terms with death. It was hard to focus. Sometimes, like Socrates, he thought he would just drink the hemlock, "ain't no big thing". But it bothered him exceedingly that execution just "jumped people off into the universe", with their souls hurt and angry and afraid. He could never bring himself to believe it was his fate to die that way, at some man's behest, a victim of the "machinations and manipulations" of the state of Florida. God, or the Supreme Power, whatever it was, would surely intervene. Or a poem would: an "easy but invincible poem" to "break those iron bars/A poem to make the stars weep".

He was lucky that, outside jail, his then girlfriend had set up a defence committee to campaign for his release, and that radical sisters and brothers—Angela Davis, Joan Baez, Pete Seeger—joined in to help. In 1976 a judge reviewed his case and found "not a shred of evidence" against him. The next year, he was out.

The death penalty had no more fervent opponent in the years that followed. Mr Tibbs at last saw America by working for "Witness to Innocence", an organisation of death-row survivors, speaking across the land and reading his poems in his rich, tobacco-burnished baritone. He helped to get the penalty abolished in Illinois by going to see the governor himself. In 2002 a play, "The Exonerated", was made of his story and those of five other death-row survivors. It began and ended with his words, "It is not easy to be a poet here."

A box of chicken

It was not easy afterwards, either. He could not settle when he got out, and was not easily employable after his stint in the Death House. His non-campaigning days were spent writing alone in his one-room apartment in a public-housing project in Chicago. The world was hard to fit into, but it always had been. "Never constrained by arcane conundrums", that was him.

He was not bitter. The revelation of his early travels in America had been that, despite the racial hatreds of the time, some people just treated him as a human being, like the little white boy who had seen him sitting hungry in a freight car and had brought him a box of fried chicken to eat. And the moral he drew from his time in jail was that he had been supposed, for whatever reason, to look hard at death and disabuse himself of the fear of it. "Without sounding vainglorious", he had done so. For, after all, wasn't everyone on death row? And as he had also found, mysteriously, "We can't talk about death without talking about life."

From The New York Times

Delbert Tibbs, Who Left Death Row and Fought Against It, Dies at 74

By Bruce Weber • December 7, 2013

It is not easy:

you stand waiting for a train

or a bus that may never come

no friend drives by to catch a ride

cold, tired:

call yourself a poet

but work all day mopping floors and looking out for thieves.

Those lines, describing the experience of an innocent man on death row, are from a poem by Delbert Tibbs, who in 1974 was convicted in Florida of a rape and a murder that he had nothing to do with, it was later found. He spent nearly three years in prison before the State Supreme Court reversed his convictions, vacated his death sentence and freed him.

Mr. Tibbs then campaigned for the abolishment of capital punishment and became one of six people whose stories of wrongful conviction and near execution were told in "[The Exonerated](#)," a play by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, who assembled their script from court documents, testimony, depositions and letters.

First presented in 2002 in Los Angeles and New York with celebrity-studded casts, the play went on to help reshape the national debate about the death penalty, reaching audiences in productions across the country and then on television in a filmed adaptation starring Susan Sarandon, Brian Dennehy, Aidan Quinn, Danny Glover and, as Mr. Tibbs, Delroy Lindo.

"People who once argued about the morality of executing the guilty now discuss whether the capital justice system can be trusted to separate those deserving death from the wholly innocent," Adam Liptak [wrote in The New York Times](#) in 2005 in assessing the play's impact.

Mr. Tibbs, whose poetic bent led Ms. Blank and Mr. Jensen to use his character as a kind of Greek chorus, introducing and closing the play and appearing intermittently throughout as a sagelike figure, died on Nov. 23 at his home in Chicago. He was 74.

His death was confirmed by Andrea Lyon, a law professor at DePaul University who is godmother to Mr. Tibbs's daughter Mahalia. Professor Lyon said that the cause was uncertain but that Mr. Tibbs had had cancer.

The crimes for which he was arrested occurred in Fort Myers, on Florida's southwest coast, on Feb. 3, 1974. A teenager, Cynthia Nadeau, was raped, and her boyfriend, Terry Milroy, who was in his 20s, was shot to death. Ms. Nadeau's story was that while hitchhiking, they were attacked by a black man who had picked them up in a green truck. The couple were both white.

Mr. Tibbs was rootless at the time, though not a drifter so much as a seeker. A former seminary student in Chicago, he had himself been hitchhiking around the country and had made his way to Florida. The case against him had holes. Evidence showed that he was in Daytona Beach on the day of the killing, 250 miles from Fort Myers, and Ms. Nadeau's initial description of her assailant was at odds with Mr. Tibbs's appearance. (She identified him from a photograph several days later.)

An all-white jury nevertheless found him guilty on the basis of Ms. Nadeau's uncorroborated testimony and a cellmate's claim that Mr. Tibbs had confessed to the killing in jail.

Mr. Tibbs received a life sentence for the rape and the death sentence for the murder.

But in the summer of 1976, citing the weakness of the evidence against him, the Florida Supreme Court reversed the verdict on appeal and ordered a new trial, saying it did not want to "risk the very real possibility that Tibbs had nothing to do with these crimes."

He was released from prison in January 1977, and after further legal wrangling — Mr. Tibbs's lawyers argued that a retrial would amount to double jeopardy — the state dropped its charges against him in 1982. (In 2002, state prosecutors nonetheless said they held to their belief in Mr. Tibbs's guilt. No one else has been charged with the crimes.)

"I'm a Southern boy," Mr. Tibbs said in an interview with the oral historian Studs Terkel for his book "Will the Circle Be Unbroken? Reflections on Death, Rebirth, and Hunger for a Faith," published in 2001. "My rationale to them for being in the state was just that I wanted to roam across the country, which is typical of writers and artists and so forth, but it's not typical of black people. It's all right for Jack Kerouac, but not for Delbert Tibbs."

Delbert Lee Tibbs was born in Shelby, Miss., on June 19, 1939. His father, Pete Johnson, was a traveling salesman. He was reared by his mother, Lillie Bryant, and her husband, Frank Tibbs, who were sharecroppers.

He moved to Chicago with family members when he was about 12 and, before he was 20, had married and had a son, Delbert Jr. The marriage ended in divorce. Mr. Tibbs is survived by his son; two daughters, Mahalia Abeo Tibbs and Afrika Rouselle; and three grandchildren.

Mr. Tibbs attended colleges in Chicago, including Chicago Theological Seminary, though he never finished a degree, and worked as an insurance claims adjuster. In the early 1970s, he left school and hit the road for the adventure that landed him on death row.

"I'd dropped out of the seminary and now I don't know what to do with myself," he told Mr. Terkel. "There was an agitation within my spirit, so I said, 'Well, I'll take off. I've never been anyplace except Mississippi, Michigan, Illinois and Indiana.' I thought, you might not live that long anyway, so I took off and I took off walking."

In recent years, Mr. Tibbs did volunteer work tutoring at-risk young black men. He also worked with anti-death penalty groups like Witness to Innocence, founded by the activist nun Helen Prejean and Ray Krone, a former death row inmate in Arizona who was exonerated in 2002, and the Illinois Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, which succeeded in its aim when Gov. Pat Quinn signed a bill repealing the state's death penalty law in 2011 and commuted the sentences of 15 death row inmates. (The organization is now known as the Illinois Coalition Against the Death Penalty.)

"Delbert was not only articulate, which many exonorees seem to be, but he had this air of genteel thoughtfulness about him that greatly distinguished him," Robert Warden, a founder of the Center on Wrongful Convictions at the Northwestern University Law School in Evanston, Ill., said in an interview.

As time passed, Mr. Tibbs grew more philosophical.

"When I meet people now," he said more than 25 years after his release, "if they try to make a big deal about me having been on death row, I sometimes gently remind them that we're all on death row."

The Uncommon Life and Natural Death of Delbert Tibbs

Wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death in Florida 40 years ago, this remarkable man of faith was exonerated—and then dedicated the remaining decades of his life to the poetic advocacy of racial justice in America.

By Andrew Cohen, December 3, 2013, 10:15am ET

Pete Seeger [once sang](#) about him. Studs Terkel [once wrote](#) about him. He counted Joan Baez among his advocates. He was the subject of a wonderful play, "[The Exonerated](#)," which was turned into a [made-for-television movie](#). But when Delbert Tibbs, one of America's most famous and beloved death row exonerees, [died in Chicago on November 23](#), the nation took little note of his passing. Not a single national news organization produced an obituary for him. Not a single politician called out his name.

That's a shame, for Tibbs personified the tragedy of so many capital cases in the United States in the last quarter of the last century. He was 74 when he died, in his bed, in his home. But in 1974, nearly 40 years ago, he was wrongfully arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to death in Florida. He spent two years on death row before [the case against him fell apart](#). In that respect, he was lucky. Most exonerees spend far more time on death row before justice comes to them.

Tibbs had every right to be bitter. At first, he was dismissed as a suspect because he had a solid alibi and there was no physical evidence linking him to the crimes. Under pressure, the police turned back to him anyway. Even though he looked nothing like the real murderer, he was falsely identified (from a Polaroid photo) by his accuser. Then he was condemned by a fellow prisoner, who bore false witness against him. Then prosecutors fiddled with Tibbs' constitutional rights. Then an all-white jury quickly convicted him. Then the judges of Florida rubber-stamped his conviction.

And even *after* the case against him came undone, even after his prosecutor acknowledged that the evidence against him was fatally flawed, earnest public servants like Samuel Alito, then a young Reagan-administration lawyer, [sought to have Tibbs retried](#). Not until 1982 did Florida finally give up the chase.* You can read about his case from a defense perspective [here](#) and from the state's perspective [here](#). In either account, the case against Tibbs was woefully weak—and, a prosecutor later said, "the investigators knew it."

But Tibbs did not live the last 30 years of his life in bitterness. He was not like some exonerees who withdraw into themselves upon their release. A walking, talking symbol for all that can and so often does go wrong in our criminal justice system, Tibbs also became an inspiration to generations of lawyers and advocates who seek to limit the worst excesses of capital punishment. A man of faith, he was a staff member of [Witness to Innocence](#), a national group of death row survivors and their families. In this role, he spoke around the country, at colleges, in churches, to members of community organizations, bearing witness.

He had been a man of spirit and substance before his conviction—just read what he told Terkel about the arc of his life—and was so again after his release. Some people are just irrepressible that way. I have covered a great many capital cases, and many exonerations over the past 15 years, and yet I have never seen the advocates who dedicate their lives to these cases and these causes be so [universally moved](#) by one man's tireless advocacy as they have been by Tibbs. Clearly, to so many, he was more than just a man who had endured the great challenge of his life.

"How so much potency was contained in a man with such a pacifist soul" is the way David A. Love, the executive director of Witness to Innocence, [put it in a tribute to his late friend](#). It is little surprise, then, that Tibbs' story anchored that wrenching play, [The Exonerated](#), which chronicled the lives of six exonerees. He is "a sort of Chorus," the playwrights explained in their introduction, "his personality is like an old soul song: smooth, mellow, but with a relentless underlying rhythm." It is Tibbs' voice that both opens and closes the play. "It is not easy to be a poet here," he says in the opening scene. He says the same thing before the curtain falls.

Here then is Tibbs' story—told in his own words, told because he was one of the lucky few black men wrongfully convicted in the 1970s who got justice from the nation's courts, told on his own behalf and on behalf of countless other men and women who have been falsely arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death in this country, despite the assurances of judges and lawmakers that adequate safeguards exist to ensure the accuracy of capital punishment:

And here is how Tibbs chose to end his [long conversation](#) with the great writer and social historian Studs Terkel, who many years ago coaxed out of his fellow Chicagoan the story of his life for a compilation titled *Will the Circle Be Unbroken/Reflections on Death, Rebirth, and Hunger for a Faith*, an [excerpt of which](#) was published in the October 2001 edition of *The Atlantic*:



I believe life is endless. We can't talk about life without talking about death, we can't talk about death without talking about life. I was listening to the Dalai Lama, I read his autobiography, and he says that Buddhists often meditate on death. That's total anathema to the western mind, right. I think it has something to do with Greek culture, with it's bifurcation of existence. This is life and this is death-- I learned to meditate before I went to death row. That's one of the things that helped get me through, but it was very difficult..

What I've discovered is: all of the holy books are marvelous, absolutely so, including the Bible. The Bible has the most beautiful language of any book I have ever read. Not to mention the fact that there's something there. God is there. But I really do believe he's hidden. I believe the Jewish mystics who went into the Kabala know that. I sometimes wish I spoke Hebrew because the words might not be the thing itself but they can lead to it.

The Bahagavadgita is the bible to three hundred million Indians and others who are not Indians. Thoreau and Emerson read it. Krishna says there never was a time when you and I did not exist, and there will never be a time when we cease to be. He said, "This body wears out, like garments, and when a garment wears out, you take it off and you lay it down, and you pick up another one and put it on."

One of the terrible things about executions is to jump people off into the universe like that. I think for a soul to be wrenched from the body is for that soul to be in anger and in pain and in hatred. I believe it impacts negatively on our world, that probably a lot of the calamities that happen are a result of that sort of thing. I mourn for the whole world because it's such a horrible place so often.

Remembering Delbert Tibbs

After his release from death row for a crime he did not commit, Tibbs found a sense of purpose and community as an anti-death penalty activist.

By Mark Sloan

I met Delbert Tibbs at the Bowery Poetry Club in the spring of 2003. At the time I was studying journalism at NYU, which meant I had very little money but a lot of time to read and write and wander around the city looking for stories. Tibbs had flown in from Chicago to celebrate the 200th performance of *The Exonerated*, an off-Broadway play that threads together the stories of six former death row inmates, including his own. After the show he stopped by the club to recite a few poems from his latest self-published collection, *Song Singing Songs*. We spoke briefly at the bar and agreed to meet up again in Chicago a few weeks later, when I would be on break visiting my parents. On a sunny Saturday afternoon, we sat down on a patch of grass near his home in the South Side neighborhood of Hyde Park. I remember he carried a duffel bag and chain-smoked cigarettes and wore a scarf with a small green heart stitched into it, even though it wasn't all that cold.



Tibbs was incredibly generous with his time, and he presented his life's journey as a sort of spiritual parable. In his telling there are no religious denominations, no borderline between the sacred and the profane, and we are all guilty of being human. From a journalistic standpoint I knew I was late to the game: *The Exonerated* had been out for months and had gotten a lot of good press, and Studs Terkel had captured Tibbs's remarkable voice in his most recent oral history collection, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?* But still I peppered him with my questions, and he graciously answered them all. He told me about his early childhood on a cotton farm near Shelby, Mississippi, the new world he encountered at age twelve when his family moved to Chicago, the odd jobs he took as a young man, where submission to racism was all but written into the black employee handbook. He drank and smoked too much, he said, and struggled to provide for his wife and young son. In search of some soul-cleansing, he enrolled at the Chicago Theological Seminary, but after a year and a half, disillusioned by the racism he found even inside those walls, he dropped out.

That was when he started roaming the country. From 1972 to 1974, he covered forty-six states, hitchhiking, riding the rails, sleeping under bridges, walking his ass off, as he put it. He said he nearly froze to death during a snowstorm in Oklahoma and rode through the swamps of Louisiana on a freight train. I drank it all in, mesmerized, a parishioner at a pew.

In March 1974 Tibbs was arrested for the murder of a man named Terry Milroy and for the rape of Milroy's seventeen-year-old girlfriend, Cynthia Nadeau, along a Florida highway. No evidence was found linking Tibbs to the crimes, nor did Tibbs match Nadeau's original description of her assailant. Strong evidence suggests that Tibbs was hundreds of miles away at the time. In the case of *State of Florida v. Tibbs*, however, the defendant was sentenced to death by an all-white jury and sent to the maximum-security wing of Florida State Prison to await execution. A year later the Florida [Supreme Court](#) reversed the conviction, citing lack of evidence and calling into question Nadeau's credibility as the sole witness. Tibbs was released in 1977, and in 1982 all charges were dropped.

After he was released, Tibbs said, he felt that he had to learn how to be human again. He couldn't sleep for days at a time. He wouldn't let himself hold babies, and he was tentative about entering into new relationships. But he found a sense of purpose and community as an anti-death-penalty activist, and he fought hard for abolition. Over the years he spoke out regularly about his case and the many others like it that continue to pollute the US justice system. He countered this deep offense with perseverance and poetry, and he considered it a holy cause.

About two years ago, I moved to an apartment in Hyde Park three blocks from where Tibbs and I met that day. More than once I considered tracking him down, but I never did. And I never ran into him in the neighborhood either, although I always kept an eye out. I saw his face on Sunday, though, when I opened the *New York Times* and found his belated obituary. Delbert Tibbs died November 23 at age 74. The cause, according to the paper, was uncertain.