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A View Through the Hurricane's Eyes (Newsweek)

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A View Through the Hurricane's Eyes

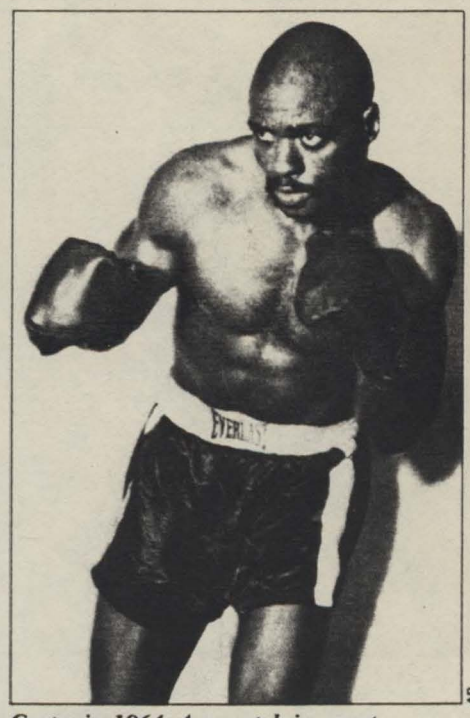
His celebrity supporters—Bob Dylan, Jesse Jackson, Norman Mailer—have long since moved on to new concerns. Reporters have found fresher stories. The man tried with him is out on parole. But **Rubin** (Hurricane) **Carter** is still where he was in 1967: in a New Jersey maximum-security state prison serving two consecutive life terms for crimes he says he didn't commit. Seventeen years ago Carter was convicted of killing three people in a Paterson gin mill, but his case is still in the courts: the paperwork now occupies an entire room in the Passaic County prosecutor's office. "People wish it would just *die* somewhere," says Carter, now 47. "And its protagonist right along with it. But I'm too *ornery* for that, you know what I mean? Just absolutely too ornery." He laughs. "Particularly when I feel put upon."

On June 17, 1966, Carter was 29, and hoping for a rematch with former world middleweight boxing champion Dick Tiger. He'd been drinking at the Nite Spot on East 18th Street in his hometown of Paterson; before closing time, someone entered the Lafayette Grill, five blocks away, and started shooting. The bartender and one patron died instantly, another lived for several weeks and one survived. A police call went out for two black men in a white car. Carter and an acquaintance named John Artis were stopped and brought to the murder scene and the hospital; neither of the survivors identified them, and they were released.

But four months later, they were charged with the murders: two small-time crooks, Alfred P. Bello and Arthur D. Bradley, who'd been breaking into a factory near the Lafayette, said they'd seen Carter and Artis with guns. Descriptions given by victims and witnesses didn't fit them; even Bello and Bradley, when confronted with them on the night of the murder, had failed to identify them. But the state had a bullet, taken from Carter's car, of the same caliber as those used in the shooting, and Bello's and Bradley's testimony. An all-white jury voted to convict.

Reporter: When the statute of limitations for perjury ran out, Bello and Bradley recanted, saying they'd lied in court because, they claimed, the cops had offered help with their own legal problems. But when a new trial began in 1976, Bello was back with the prosecution again: he'd been offered money to recant, he said, by an investigator and two journalists, one an award-winning reporter for The New York Times. (The three denied Bello's charges; Bradley never recanted his recantation.) Things became more confusing when four defense witnesses also changed their stories: they said they'd perjured themselves when alibiing for Carter. The prosecution also elaborated on the motive: the three white victims, they argued, were killed to avenge the murder of a black bartender earlier that night, and that the dead man's stepson had been seen with Carter. Again, Carter and Artis were convicted. Artis, a model inmate with no previous record, was paroled in 1982. Carter, who the judge said had made little attempt to "rehabilitate himself," will not be eligible until 1997.

Carter says he was targeted by police for a frame-up after a 1964 Saturday Evening Post profile quoted his bantering proposal to a friend during that year's Harlem riots that they take guns and "get us some of those cops." According to his 1974 autobiography, "The Sixteenth Round," Carter and the law had been at odds for years. At 11, he was sent to a reformatory for stabbing a man he claims was a homosexual who tried to assault him. At 16 he escaped, and soon managed to join the Army, where he learned to box. Back in Paterson after his hitch he was apprehended on the old escape charge and locked up again; upon his release, he committed a series of robberies and assaults for which he did four years in prison. "The Sixteenth Round" ends with an uneasy truce among its author's three selves: the energetic Rubin, studying law in his cell, the self-analytical Carter, and the Hurricane, the personification of "the destructive forces that rage within my soul."



Carter in 1964: A rematch in court

Rubin and Carter now seem to have the Hurricane under control. Visitors meet a warm, articulate man who never seems to lose track of the sentence structure of his long, cadenced speeches (he lost a painful stutter when he took a Dale Carnegie course during his Army service) and who is disarmingly aware of how people may react to

him. "After a man sits in a cell for all this time," he says, "after a man has been through brutalities that would stagger the human imagination, how would you perceive that person when you sit across the table from him? You might say, 'Well now, I got to take everything this guy says with a grain of salt. 'Cause this guy ain't *wrapped* too tight. You know he *can't* be after all this time'." Carter seems as trim and muscular now as he was in the ring. But with his neatly sculpted Afro—which hasn't a trace of gray—and without his beard, he looks almost nothing like the way he did in the 1970s, when his shaven head, goatee and granny glasses made him instantly recognizable. So recognizable, in fact, that nowadays he refuses to be photographed. "I could walk around here all day and people don't know who I am or what I was called," he says. "I've almost disappeared. And I think that's *fantastic*."

Since his second trial, Carter's case has meandered into complex proceedings involving allegations of suppressed evidence and prosecutorial misconduct. Recent appeals and applications have concentrated on some documents and interview notes compiled by a prosecution investigator in 1976. Carter's lawyers were granted access to them in 1982; last year, based on material they found there which, in their view, could impeach the testimony of Bello and other witnesses, they moved again for a new trial. The motion was denied. If the appeal now pending fails, the case will probably go to the state supreme court. If *that* fails, the case can at last be brought into the federal courts—where Carter thinks he has a better chance.

Alibi: This year the lawyers say they've stumbled on a witness who might provide an airtight alibi; meanwhile Carter continues to spend most of his waking moments examining the documents for anything that might help his cause. "I'd rather *work* my time to death than kill it any other kind of way," he says. His obsession is understandable, but what will he do with himself if he ever gets out? "My eyes," he answers, "are acclimated to looking at short distances. I'd like to sit down somewhere and look at a *long* distance. I'd like to be able to walk through a door. You've heard these things a thousand times before. I'd like to wake up in the morning where I don't wake up to bars, I don't wake up to paint-chipped corridors, I don't wake up to iron and steel. I may wake up to something *soft*. I may wake up to some nice music. I may wake up to the sunshine. I may wake up to the birds chirping. I may wake up to the crickets. You understand? Wake up to sounds that are not keys, sounds that are not mop-wringers, sounds that are not whistles blowing. These things change you. They *have* to change you."

Despite seventeen years of court battles, two verdicts and a roomful of paper, Rubin Carter still insists he doesn't belong in prison. But if the history of his case is any indication, he won't be walking through that door anytime soon.

DAVID GATES in Rahway, N.J.