

## **Rubin Carter**

<http://www.biography.com/people/rubin-carter-9542248>

### **Synopsis**

Rubin Carter was born May 6, 1937, in Clifton, New Jersey. In 1966, at the height of his boxing career, Carter was wrongly convicted twice of a triple murder and imprisoned for nearly two decades. During the mid-1970s, his case became a cause célèbre for a number of civil rights leaders, politicians, and entertainers. He was ultimately exonerated in 1985.

### **Early Life**

Athlete. Born May 6, 1937, in Clifton, New Jersey. In 1966, at the height of his boxing career, Carter was wrongly convicted—twice—of a triple murder and imprisoned for nearly two decades. During the mid-1970s, his case became a cause célèbre for a number of civil rights leaders, politicians, and entertainers. He was ultimately exonerated, in 1985, after a United States district court judge declared the convictions to be based on racial prejudice.

Carter, who grew up in Paterson, New Jersey, was arrested and sent to the Jamesburg State Home for Boys at age 12 after he attacked a man with a Boy Scout knife. He claimed the man was a pedophile who had been attempting to molest one of his friends. Carter escaped before his six-year term was up and in 1954 he joined the Army, where he served in a segregated corps and began training as a boxer. He won two European light-welterweight championships and in 1956 returned to Paterson with the intention of becoming a professional boxer. Almost immediately upon his return, police arrested Carter and forced him to serve the remaining 10 months of his sentence in a state reformatory.

### **Rise to Boxing Fame**

In 1957, Carter was again arrested, this time for purse snatching; he spent four years in Trenton State, a maximum-security prison, for that crime. After his release, he channeled his considerable anger, towards his situation and that of Paterson's African-American community, into his boxing—he turned pro in 1961 and began a startling four-fight winning streak, including two knockouts. For his lightning-fast fists, Carter soon earned the nickname "Hurricane" and became one of the top contenders for the

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world middleweight crown. In December 1963, in a non-title bout, he beat then-welterweight world champion Emile Griffith in a first round KO. Although he lost his one shot at the title, in a 15-round split decision to reigning champion Joey Giardello in December 1964, he was widely regarded as a good bet to win his next title bout.

As one of the most famous citizens of Paterson, Carter made no friends with the police, especially during the summer of 1964, when he was quoted in *The Saturday Evening Post* as expressing anger towards the occupations by police of black neighborhoods. His flamboyant lifestyle (Carter frequented the city's nightclubs and bars) and juvenile record rankled the police, as did the vehement statements he had allegedly made advocating violence in the pursuit of racial justice.

### Arrest for Triple Homicide

Carter was training for his next shot at the world middleweight title (against champion Dick Tiger) in October 1966 when he was arrested for the June 17th triple murder of three patrons at the Lafayette Bar & Grill in Paterson. Carter and John Artis had been arrested on the night of the crime because they fit an eyewitness description of the killers ("two Negroes in a white car"), but they had been cleared by a grand jury when the one surviving victim failed to identify them as the gunmen. Now, the state had produced two eyewitnesses, Alfred Bello and Arthur D. Bradley, who had made positive identifications. During the trial that followed, the prosecution produced little to no evidence linking Carter and Artis to the crime, a shaky motive (racially-motivated retaliation for the murder of a black tavern owner by a white man in Paterson hours before), and the only two eyewitnesses were petty criminals involved in a burglary (who were later revealed to have received money and reduced sentences in exchange for their testimony). Nevertheless, on June 29, 1967, Carter and Artis were convicted of triple murder and sentenced to three life prison terms.

While incarcerated at Trenton State and Rahway State prisons, Carter continued to maintain his innocence by defying the authority of the prison guards, refusing to wear an inmate's uniform, and becoming a recluse in his cell. He read and studied extensively, and in 1974 published his autobiography, *The 16th Round: From Number 1 Contender to Number 45472*, to widespread acclaim. The story of his plight attracted the attention and support of many luminaries, including [Bob Dylan](#), who

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visited Carter in prison, wrote the song "Hurricane" (included on his 1976 album, *Desire*), and played it at every stop of his Rolling Thunder Revue tour. Prizefighter [Muhammad Ali](#) also joined the fight to free Carter, along with leading figures in liberal politics, civil rights, and entertainment.

### Trial and Support

In late 1974, Bello and Bradley both separately recanted their testimony, revealing that they had lied in order to receive sympathetic treatment from the police. Two years later, after an incriminating tape of a police interview with Bello and Bradley surfaced and *The New York Times* ran an exposé about the case, the New Jersey State Supreme Court ruled 7-0 to overturn Carter's and Artis's convictions. The two men were released on bail, but remained free for only six months—they were convicted once more at a second trial in the fall of 1976, during which Bello again reversed his testimony.

Artis (who had refused a 1974 offer by police to release him if he fingered Carter as the gunman) was a model prisoner who was released on parole in 1981. Although lawyers for Carter continued the struggle, the New Jersey State Supreme Court rejected their appeal for a third trial in the fall of 1982, affirming the convictions by a 4-3 decision. Inside the prison walls, Carter had long since recognized his need to resign himself to the reality of his situation. He spent his time reading and studying, and had little contact with others. During his first 10 years in prison, his wife, Mae Thelma, stopped coming to see him at his own insistence; the couple, who had a son and a daughter, divorced in 1984.

Beginning in 1980, Carter developed a relationship with [Lesra Martin](#), a teenager from a Brooklyn ghetto who had read his autobiography and initiated a correspondence. Martin was living with a group of Canadians who had formed an entrepreneurial commune and had taken on the responsibilities for his education. Before long, Martin's benefactors, most notably Sam Chaiton, Terry Swinton, and Lisa Peters, developed a strong bond with Carter and began to work for his release. Their efforts intensified after the summer of 1983, when they began to work in New York with Carter's legal defense team, including lawyers Myron Beldock and Lewis

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Steel and constitutional scholar Leon Friedman, to seek a writ of habeas corpus from U.S. District Court Judge H. Lee Sarokin.

### Life After Prison

On November 7, 1985, Sarokin handed down his decision to free Carter, stating that "The extensive record clearly demonstrates that [the] petitioners' convictions were predicated upon an appeal to racism rather than reason, and concealment rather than disclosure." The state continued to appeal Sarokin's decision—all the way to the United States Supreme Court—until February 1988, when a Passaic County (NJ) state judge formally dismissed the 1966 indictments of Carter and Artis and finally ended the 22-year long saga.

Upon his release, Carter moved to Toronto, Ontario, Canada, into the home of the group that had worked to free him. He worked with Chaiton and Swinton on a book, *Lazarus and the Hurricane: The Untold Story of the Freeing of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter*, published in 1991. He and Peters were married, but the couple separated when Carter moved out of the commune. The former prizefighter, who was given an honorary championship title belt in 1993 by the World Boxing Council, now serves as director of the Association in Defense of the Wrongfully Convicted, headquartered in his house in Toronto. He also serves as a member of the board of directors of the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta and the Alliance for Prison Justice in Boston.

In 1999, widespread interest in the story of Rubin Carter was revived with a major motion picture, *The Hurricane*, directed by Norman Jewison and starring [Denzel Washington](#). The movie was largely based on Carter's 1974 autobiography and Chaiton and Swinton's 1991 book, which was re-released in late 1999. In 2000, James S. Hirsch published a new authorized biography, *Hurricane: The Miraculous Journey of Rubin Carter*.