



MEET BOB AVAKIAN

Bob Avakian is the leader of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA. And he is more than that: he's an innovative and critical thinker who has taken Marxism to a new place; he's a provocative commentator on everything from basketball to religion, doo-wop music to science; and he's a pit-bull fighter against oppression who's kept both his solemn sense of purpose and his irrepressible sense of humor.

We invite you to meet this revolutionary leader through excerpts from two of his books: his memoir, *From Ike to Mao and Beyond: My Journey from Mainstream America to Revolutionary Communist*; and his collection of essays, *Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy*. And we urge you to go to bobavakian.net or revcom.us to hear an important recent series of talks which explore communist theory and apply it to a breathtaking range of questions, including political questions which are urgently and sharply posed in today's situation.

From the book

FROM IKE TO MAO

and beyond

MY JOURNEY FROM MAINSTREAM AMERICA TO REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST A MEMOIR BY BOB AVAKIAN

From Chapter Four

High School

Street Corner Symphonies

I had this friend Sam. Actually I knew him before high school, because I went to a church in Berkeley where his father worked as the custodian and he would come around and help his father sometimes. Then, when I went to high school, he was a little bit ahead of me but we became friends and then we became part of a singing group.

Sam had this one characteristic: when he was eating, he didn't want anybody to say anything to him. It was just leave him alone and let him eat. I don't care who it was or what the circumstances were. That was just Sam, you just knew you should stay away from him then, because he didn't want to talk, he wanted to eat. So one day, I had forgotten to bring my lunch money, and I was really hungry by lunch. I couldn't pay for anything in the cafeteria or the snack shack, or anything. I was walking all around looking for some friend to loan me some money. So first I went over to Sam and I knew that I was violating his big rule, but I couldn't help it. I went over and I said, "Sam." "Leave me alone, man, leave me alone." I said "Sam, I'm really hungry." "Leave me alone, I'm eating lunch." So I just finally gave up there, but I started walking all around looking for someone to loan me some money or give me something to eat or something.

Finally, I saw this guy who had a plateful of food. What particularly stuck out to me was that he had two pieces of cornbread on his tray. And that just seemed so unfair, because I was so hun-

gry and he had not one, but two pieces of cornbread! I just sat down at the table, across from him, and stared for a long time at his plate. He kept looking at me, like "what's this mother-fucker staring at me for?" I just kept staring at his tray. And finally I said, "Hey man, can I have one of your pieces of cornbread?" "No, man, get the fuck out of here." I said, "Please man, I'm really hungry, I forgot my lunch money. Can I please have a piece of cornbread?" "No man, get the fuck out of here." I don't know what came over me—maybe it was just the hunger—but without thinking, I reached over and grabbed one of the pieces of cornbread. He kicked his chair back, jumped up and got ready to fight. So I didn't have any choice, I jumped up too. He stared at me for a long time—a long time. And then he finally said, "Aw man, go ahead." So I took the piece of cornbread. Then after that, Sam, who had looked up from his eating long enough to see all this, came over to me—again it was one of these things—and he said, "Man, that was Leo Wofford, you don't know what you just got away with." But I was just so hungry, and I guess Leo figured, "oh this crazy white boy, he must really be hungry," so he just let it go.

Sam lived in East Oakland, but he went to school in Berkeley. A few times I went out to his house—he lived right where East Oakland abutted against San Leandro, and it was like in the south. There was this creek and a fence right outside of 98th Avenue in East Oakland, and if you were Black you did not go on the other side of the fence into San Leandro or these racist mobs would come after you. Sam lived right at the border there.

A few times Sam took me to places and events out in East Oakland. One time we went to this housing project which was kind of laid out in concentric circles, with a row of apartments, arranged in a circle, and then another circle inside that, and then another one. And at the very center was the playground, where there was a basketball court. When we got there, there were some guys getting ready to play ball—I recognized a couple of them who ran track for Castlemont High—so I went over and got in the game. Well, at a certain point, one of these track guys and I got into a face-off—we had been guarding each other, and sometimes bumping and pushing each other, and then it just about got to the point of a fight. Everybody else stood back and gave us room, but after we stared at each other for a while, it didn't go any further, and we just got back to the game. But, as this was happening, I noticed that Sam, who had been watch-

ing at the edge of the court, was turning and walking away.

Another time, Sam and I went to a basketball game between Castlemont and Berkeley High. The game was at Castlemont, but I didn't have any sense, so I kept yelling shit at the Castlemont players. Their star player was a guy named Fred "Sweetie" Davis, and at one point he got knocked to the floor by a guy on our team. So, I stood up and yelled, "How does it feel to be the one on the floor, Sweetie?" Sam had been trying to get me to stop acting the fool and shut up, and when this happened, he just got up and walked away, like "I don't know this crazy white boy." So, sometimes, without meaning to, I put Sam in some very difficult situations.

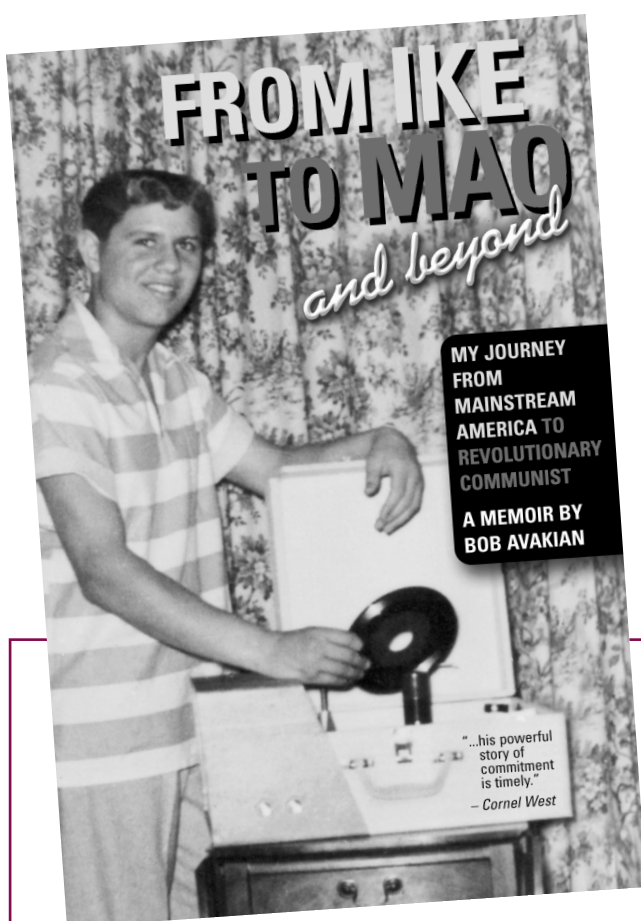
Sam was a really good singer. So one day I went to him and I asked: "Hey, Sam, you want to start a group?" He thought about it for a while, and then he got back to me and said, "Yeah, let's do it." Sam had a cousin named George who played piano, and George could also sing. So Sam said, "Let's get George in the group." And there was this other guy, Felton, who was one of the few Black kids who had gone to junior high school where I did. So I went and asked him if he wanted to be part of it, and Felton said "Yeah." And then I asked Randy, this white kid who'd been part of this impromptu singing group with John and me in our last year in junior high school.

So the five of us—three Black, two white—formed a group. We figured out pretty quickly that Sam should sing lead, at least on most of the songs, and then the others of us took our parts. You have to have a bass, and that was Felton. We had to have a baritone, and that was Randy. Then you had to have a second tenor, which was the lower-range tenor, and that was George. And the first tenor was me. We had this whole thing worked out. Sometimes we practiced at George's house, because he had a piano in his house, and sometimes we'd go to my house, because we also had a piano. We'd spend three or four hours a lot of days just practicing, working on our music. And we'd sing anywhere we could get together to sing—this was part of a whole thing where people would get together, sometimes in formal groups and sometimes just with whoever was around at the time, and sing everywhere: in the locker rooms before and after gym class, in the hallways and stairways at school, and out on the street corners.

Eventually, Randy left the group and then Odell—Odell who claimed I'd "stepped on his dogs" way back on our first day of school—replaced him. When Odell replaced Randy I reminded him of that run-in we had, and he didn't even remember it. But he did get a big laugh out of my telling the story. Odell used to write songs—I'd see him out in the hallway: "Hey, Odell, what are you doing, how come you're not in class?" "I'm writing some songs, man." We'd practice and we'd try to get gigs, wanting to get paid and get known a little bit.

We had to come up with a name for the group. There was already the Cadillacs, and the Impalas,

Continued on page 10



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Cornel West
Class of 1943 University Professor of Religion, Princeton University

"A truly interesting account of Bob Avakian's life, a humanizing portrait of someone who is often seen only as a hard-line revolutionary. I can understand why Bob Avakian has drawn so many ardent supporters. He speaks to people's alienation from a warlike and capitalist society, and holds out the possibility for radical change."

Howard Zinn, historian (commenting on *From Ike to Mao and Beyond...*)

"At this dark time in the history of our country and of the world, we need some new conversations about Marx and the socialist tradition – conversations free of dogmatism, open to ideas from all sides, but oriented in a progressive direction and eager to learn from thinking critically within the Marxist tradition. This book provides us with one model of what those kinds of conversations can be like."

Allen Wood, author of *Karl Marx and Kant's Ethical Thought*
(commenting on *Marxism and the Call of the Future*, by Bob Avakian and Bill Martin)

"Just like a landmark art work or historically seminal music, Bob Avakian's delivery and timing is truly inspiring. The only thing more inspiring is the vision and message he presents to us. Avakian is a revolutionary leader whose voice must be heard far and wide today."

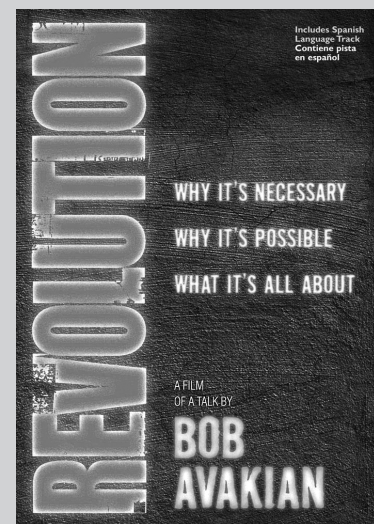
Wil-Dog, Jiro and Uli from Ozomatli
(commenting on *Revolution: Why It's Necessary, Why It's Possible, What It's All About*, video/DVD)

"This system makes people do what they want them to do. In the new society you might only work for four hours and then you do art, science, crafts, or whatever. The masses out here think they are in control of the drugs but the system puts the drugs out here to keep us from thinking and acting in a revolutionary way. People look at the new society like that is unbelievable. But we have the right person to lead us there. There is enough people around the world that if they got a hold of the Chairman and took him up it would be a cold revolution. People need to know that they have a person like the Chairman on their side and they need to stand up for him."

Willie "Mobile" Shaw,
RCP comrade from Watts, L.A., who died last year

"Avakian has in his understanding what is in the interests of humanity as a whole."

An immigrant from El Salvador, living in Chicago



REVOLUTION:

Why It's Necessary, Why It's Possible, What It's All About
A Film of a Talk by Bob Avakian

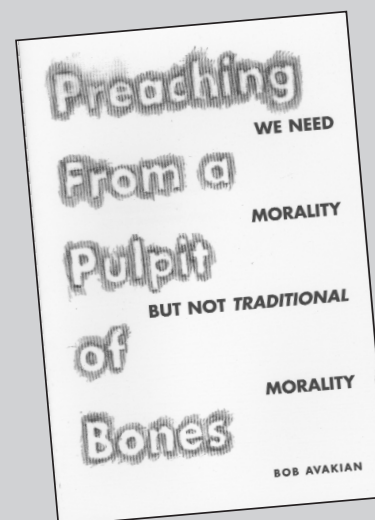
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Perseverance, and Inspiration

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ideological phenomena associated with these transformations, focusing particularly on the growing phenomenon of religious fundamentalism—not only Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and other areas, but also Christian fundamentalism in the U.S. itself—and the dangers and challenges this presents for the revolutionary struggle to transform society, to bring true liberation and light and break all chains of oppression—economic, social, political, ideological and cultural.

I have written extensively and wrestled deeply—and continue to wrestle—with questions having to do with the role of intellectuals and artists and the creative process in relation to the larger interests of society, and the relation between collective and cooperative principles and the interests of society as a whole, on the one hand, and the role and rights of individuals and individual initiative, on the other hand.

In the context where our Party has undertaken the process of rewriting our basic Programme, in line with changes that have occurred in the world and important lessons we have been drawing in the more than twenty years since our Party Programme was last written, I have led the Party in breaking with serious errors, and a seriously flawed legacy of the international communist movement, with regard to the question of homosexuality. In the past, while we opposed discrimination against homosexuals, we regarded homosexuality as essentially a negative phenomenon which posed an obstacle to the ending of all oppression, and in particular we saw male homosexuality as something that contributed to the oppression of women. This is an erroneous and harmful position which we have not only changed but have set about deeply summing up and criticizing, not only within the Party but in published documents.*

Overall, I have continued to contribute whatever I can, and to lead the RCP in contributing the most it can, to the envisioning of, and the creation of, a whole new world, a communist world—a world of freely associating and cooperating human beings, a world in which the great majority of people, and

ultimately all of humanity, would want to live and in which they would thrive, in ways never before possible or even imagined.

Perseverance, and Inspiration

In recent years, just at the time when the rulers of the U.S. and other capitalists and imperialists were seizing on the reversal of the revolution in China and then the collapse of the Soviet Union to proclaim the ultimate triumph of the capitalist system, tremendous rebellions and protests have taken place, throughout the world and within the U.S. itself. In Los Angeles on a massive scale but also in Cincinnati and other cities, uprisings have taken place against outrageous acts of brutality and murder by the police. Through the work of our Party and others, a national coalition has been built against police brutality, and every year since 1996 there has been a National Day of Protest against police brutality, repression, and the criminalization of the youth, with thousands of people taking part in dozens of cities around the country. The battle around the right to abortion, as a key concentration of the fight against the oppression of women, has continued to rage, and is once again sharpening up. At the same time, the fight to eliminate discrimination against gays and lesbians in all spheres of society has taken new leaps. In recent years massive protests and battles have taken place against capitalist globalization and its devastating effects on people throughout the world, particularly in the Third World, and on the environment. Our Party and Maoists in many other parts of the world have been increasingly involved in these movements and struggles.

Seizing on the events of September 11, 2001, the ruling class of the U.S. and its leading core have unleashed a juggernaut of war and repression, declaring a worldwide war to expand their global domination and exploitation in the name of "fighting terrorism," and instituting new levels of repression within the U.S. which are dangerous in themselves and represent precedent and potential for much greater and perhaps even unprecedented repression. All this has been met with increasingly massive resistance, in the U.S. itself and throughout the world, with tens of millions of people protesting against the war the U.S. was determined to launch against Iraq. I have characterized the juggernaut

these imperialists have unleashed as "a cauldron of contradictions" and pointed to the fact that it holds the potential not only for great horrors and devastating setbacks for the resistance and revolutionary struggle of the masses of people throughout the world but at the same time the potential for great advances in this struggle—it holds the potential for these two extremes and everything in between.

This, of course, poses tremendous challenges for our Party and other Maoists throughout the world. One of the most important developments of the last twenty years is the fact that, in the aftermath of the tremendous loss in China, Maoists in different parts of the world, including the RCP in the U.S., have been able to regroup and unite together as an international movement, the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM). And in important parts of the world, Maoist parties, united in the RIM, are making crucial advances.

When I look at all this, I think again of my friend who decided to dedicate his life to ending cancer—and of the even greater need to put an end to the system of capitalism-imperialism and all the suffering and oppression this system embodies and enforces throughout the world. You see that there isn't anything more important that your life could be about, and whatever you end up contributing during the course of your lifetime is the most important and the most uplifting thing that you could possibly do. And yes, there are moments of great disappointment, but also moments of great joy as part of this. There is the joy that comes from seeing the ways in which people break free of constraints and rise up and begin to see the world as it really is and take up more consciously the struggle to change it. There is the joy of knowing that you are part of this whole process and contributing what you can to it. There is the joy of the camaraderie of being together with others in this struggle and knowing that it is something worthwhile, that it is not something petty and narrow that you are involved in but something uplifting. There is the joy of looking to the future and envisioning the goal that you are struggling for and seeing people come to even a beginning understanding of what that could mean, not just for themselves but for society, for humanity as a whole.

So this is what my life will continue to be devoted to, and this is what the ongoing story of my life will be about. □

* This is discussed, and gone into in much greater detail and depth, in the new Programme of the Party and in a position paper, "On the Position on Homosexuality," available from RCP Publications.