

# THE SUN

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## Becoming attuned to a new life

**Free:** Friends and a love of music help Michael Austin adjust after 27 years in prison.

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In the dead of night, long before the sun rises, Michael Austin's eyes flip open and he is suddenly awake, no noise to blame. This has been happening for weeks, two times, three times, more times a night, since the end of December, ever since he was released from prison after doing more than two decades of time.

Nightmares are not to blame for waking him. After all, he could sleep when he was in prison. He does not awaken because he is too warm or too cold or too anything else, really.

"It's like I wake up to tell myself, 'This is not a dream,' " he says, then repeats himself with a pause between each word, as if saying it more slowly makes it more true: "This ... is ... not ... a ... dream."

He is really free.

"It's like a new birth," says Austin, 26 when he was put away and now 53. "It's like a

whole different life, like I just came into the world."

In many ways, he did. He was freed from the Maryland House of Correction on Dec. 28 after serving 27 years on a murder conviction that was reversed not on technicalities but because there was no evidence that survived scrutiny to indicate he had anything to do with the crime.

The judge who ruled in favor of Austin, John Carroll Byrnes, says in the written opinion that freed him that justice has finally prevailed, which might be true in the context of law. But the judge, understandably, has no words about Austin's permanent loss, the 27 years. After all that time, what could he possibly say?

Nothing that would do any good, says Austin, and that is fine. No bitterness. None.

Put away in 1975, the year Saigon fell to North Vietnam, Austin looks at the world with the curiosity of a child plopped on the moon.

Look at this Baltimore "Inner Harbor Thing," twinkling with lights, people traveling from other states to see it.

"When I went in, it was grease and dirt and nobody," he says. "A bunch of stuff is like that, all these changes — it's almost like things aren't real." [See Austin, 6a]



**Tears of joy:** Yvonne Rahman and Jim McCloskey comfort Michael Austin at a party in his honor.

# Looking for harmony in new life

(Austin, from Page 1A)

People recognize him in a supermarket, yell to him wishes of good luck. He has been checking out different churches. At one, the Ark on East North Avenue in East Baltimore, Pastor J.L. Carter passed around the collection plate and gave him more than \$600 to help him on his way.

Austin plans to begin work next month. He is waiting for the results of his job interview with a group that helps troubled boys. If that falls through, he might work construction. A friend of his from prison is also trying to land him a job. The friend is Leslie Vass, released in 1984 after 10 years in prison for a robbery he did not commit. Strange how things work out, Austin says.

He has not been compensated a dime for all those years. Could happen. Might not.

### Not a bitter word

He refuses, still, to be angry about his imprisonment. He will not offer a bitter word about anybody involved or even about "the system" as a whole. He considers the prosecutor who convicted him a friend, the state's only eyewitness, now dead of a drug overdose, a tragic case.

He does not understand why Patricia C. Jessamy, the Baltimore state's attorney, worked so hard to keep him behind bars last year even as the original case against him unraveled in the courthouse, but he will not concede a shred of animosity toward her.

"I don't have time for that," Austin explains. "I'm human and part of me wants to know why this happened, but I can't let that in my life. Everybody wants to know why I'm not angry. It's because, if I let those thoughts come in, what good is that going to do me? Why do I want to be free and waste the time I have left with that kind of stuff?"

Philosophical stuff, no problem. He can answer with certainty how his heart feels. Smaller parts of his new life, the mundane, that is what leaves him with questions.

He stoops his 6-foot-5 frame, closely examines a parking meter, a stinging one, the type put in front of banks and that grant cars only 15 minutes of space. He assumes all the meters in the city are like that.

"Fifteen minutes to park?" he asks. "How are you supposed to do your business in 15 minutes? What if you're shopping or something?"

### Dreams of freedom

Michael Austin has had dreams about being on the streets.

One of the dreams he remembers especially vividly. Ended badly. In it, he is fresh out of prison, surrounded by old friends, family. Everybody smiles, laughs. So happy to see him.

In his sleep, he could practically feel the arms hugging him. "Mike! How you been?" Could almost feel the hands slapping on his back. "Mike! How you been?"

The end, reality. A guard woke him up. Mall. The dream was so real, but his freedom was not. On his bunk, he looked at the ceiling and tears fell out of the corners of his eyes.

"I know this is real," he says now, sitting in a home in Northwest Baltimore, picking up a trumpet that he rarely lets rest. "It feels different than that dream did, but it's still kind of like a dream. That's the best I can describe it."

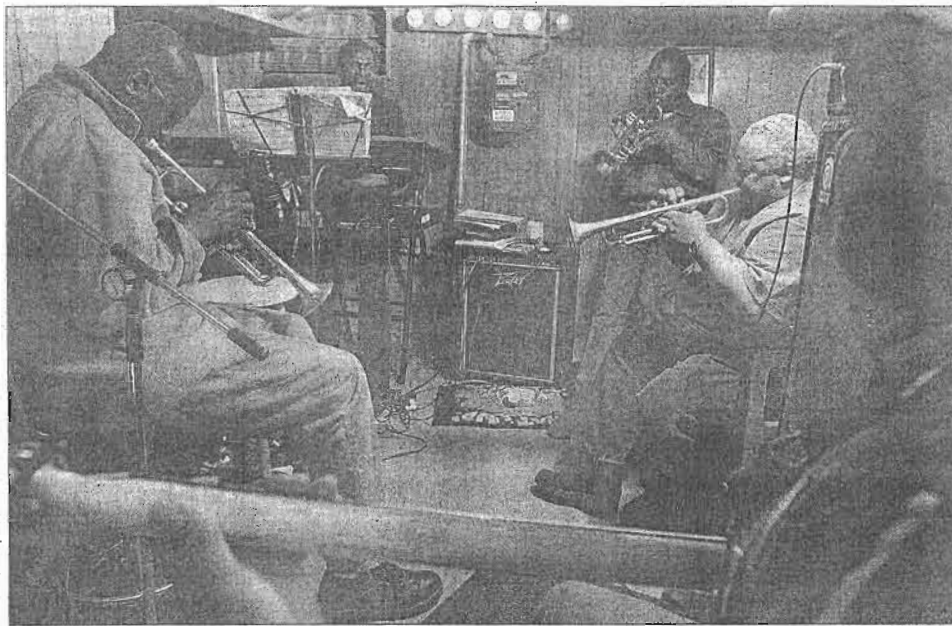
The home he is in belongs to Yvonne Rahman. They met more than 20 years ago, when she was an education volunteer at the Maryland House of Correction. They live together now.

Not long after his release, he was out dealing with reporters. Everyone was calling him. Newspeppers. *Good Morning America*. Radio. Discovery Channel.

Yvonne wanted him to come home.

"I don't need another warden," he told her and laughed loudly and deep. He will quote Plato's thoughts on music, given the chance, but he also can laugh, often.

He loves Yvonne dearly, he says, but there is a point behind his warden remark. He is adjusting to everything, including his relation-



**Rehearsal:** Michael Austin (left) performs with the band True Spirit. The other musicians are (from left rear) Glenn Grainger, Rodney Wilson, Wendall Shepherd and James Doles. The group's first date is to be Feb. 25 at Britton's Bar and Grill.



**Same side:** Michael Austin greets Joseph Wase (right), prosecuting attorney in Austin's case 27 years ago.

ship, working things out as he goes along.

"It's like I'm here, but I feel uneasy a lot," he says. "I can't explain it, but everything still feels so strange. Like it's just becoming more and more that I'm really starting to connect with people now."

Sometimes he flinches to almost a jump when Yvonne approaches him unexpectedly, maybe to put a hand on one of his elbows. But he is settling down.

He thinks that he is too assertive, but he is working on that. He still does not feel like he is in Maryland. Everything looks so different. He does not want to eat meatloaf or pizza and, please, no corned-beef hash. He had enough of all that in prison.

When Austin speaks of a "new birth," he can be taken almost literally. One of his first tasks after being freed is to get an identification card. That means dealing with the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The woman working behind the counter is, of course, not very understanding. Austin hands her his prison card. He needs more than that, she says, sends him home for an envelope addressed to him.

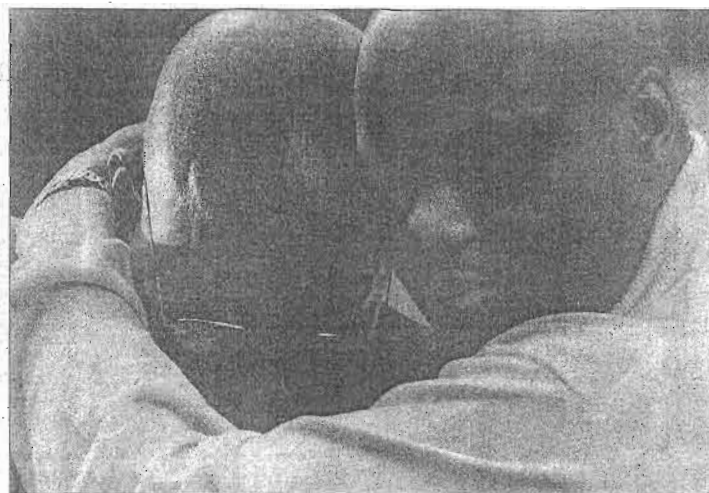
And she has to confiscate the prison card, she says.

If you want it, take it, I don't need it anymore, he tells her.

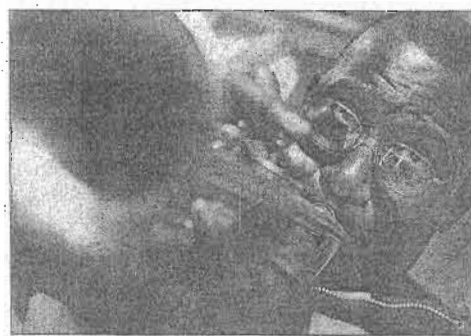
Satisfying enough to conquer the DMV, but what Austin truly takes joy in are the results from his trip to the Department of Vital Statistics at Reisterstown Plaza.

He studies the new birth certificate in his hands.

"Look, look, I was born at 3:24



**Family support:** Michael Austin gets a hug from his nephew Tracy Austin (right) during the party in the former prisoner's honor at the Belvedere Hotel.



**Horn of plenty:** Michael Austin plays his trumpet during a session with friends. He says music turned his life around.

a.m." Austin says. "And look, this is who my mother was."

His mother, Rena Clark Bruton, died of cancer while he was in prison. His father, Willie Austin, was stabbed to death in the 1950s.

Michael Austin was headed for trouble himself before he was sent away. No model citizen. He is not unaware that the faulty conviction probably saved his life, commuted

the death sentence the streets and the drugs had handed to so many of his old friends.

He makes his way around his old East Baltimore neighborhood, the area around Federal Street and Broadway, where kids whose voices are still cracking are hustling dope on streets lined with boarded-up houses.

"It was never as bad as it is

now," Austin says later. "It's like, how do they even have a chance?"

He really wants the job trying to help out younger guys, the way people have tried to help him. He thinks he will be good at that. Good experience can come from bad mistakes. The younger guys in prison looked up to him. Guards liked him, too. Only a couple of years after Austin went to prison, the warden, George Collins, learned of his interest in music and put him in a cell with Glenn Grainger, a talented musician and a patient teacher.

For two years, before Grainger was paroled, they shared a cell 6 by 7 feet, cramped enough, but they kept a trumpet and a small keyboard locked up with them. Their address: A Block, 331, 3rd Tier, Yardside.

The two are fast friends, and a band they formed, True Spirit, is ready to hit the clubs. First date, Feb. 25, at Britton's Bar and Grill on Howard Street.

Music, Austin says, changed his life. It is no slogan, no bumper-sticker philosophy. His knowledge of music is why he is absolutely certain that his running days are over. No doubt.

From a stack of musical scores, he pulls out a yellowed piece of paper and reads a quote from Plato: "Musical training is a more potent

instrument than any other because rhythm and harmony find the inner places of the soul."

"That's what music does for me," Austin explains. "It's a system. Everything about it is logical, yet you can go inside of it and do what you want to do."

"That's like life — you can do what you want to do as long as you're inside the system. It teaches you discipline, and that somehow gets you to peace. When I'm doing music, I'm at peace."

He does not mind practicing. He loves it. He spends hours a day with the trumpet, long fingers wrapped around it like tentacles, releases it to work on his singing.

### A varied guest list

After a practice session in Yvonne's house, in a room she decorated for him with white curtains adorned with black musical notes, Austin is feeling good about his first gig, not with the full band, but something special: He is to play at a party thrown in his honor, to welcome him home.

Centurion Ministries, the New Jersey-based group that hired Baltimore attorneys Larry Nathans and Booth Ripke to free Austin, is throwing the party at the Belvedere Hotel, the ornate landmark on Chase Street that has seen guests ranging from Mark Twain to Desmond Tutu.

The party guests are a varied lot. To say the least.

Austin, dressed in a dark suit, greets each of them as they enter. Doug Colbert, a University of Maryland law professor who recommended the attorneys, Austin's family, nephews and nieces. He hugs them all. In comes Joseph Wase, the man who prosecuted Austin in 1975, and who later worked to free him. He and Austin hug.

Men in tuxedos serve drinks. Jim McCloskey, the founder of Centurion, is host of the party. He beams.

Yvonne Rahman is there, of course. She and Austin both greet John and Harry Robinson, siblings to Jackie Robinson, the state's only witness to testify at Austin's trial, dooming him to prison. They and Cheryl Valentine, their sister, helped free Austin. They testified that their brother died consumed with guilt over helping convict an innocent man.

Turkey is served. Roast beef, too. Crab dip and roasted vegetables. Lots of chatter. Lots of picture taking.

Quiet takes over, attention toward the stage.

### Ballad of a free man

Austin's friend Wendall Shepard sits on a chair ready to play trumpet. Another friend, Woody Covington, sits behind keyboards. Austin grabs a microphone. The keyboard tinkles slowly, the trumpet whines sweetly. Austin sings, low bass, a song by Quincy Jones:

*Everything must change  
Nothing stays the same  
Everyone will change  
No one stays the same  
The young become the old...*

The music continues. The keyboard does, anyway, and the trumpet does. But the voice cannot. Austin goes just as silent as the 75 people or so in the room. His chin clamps to his chest. His left hand covers his eyes. He cries.

Friends and family replace the missing lyrics with applause, and a few approach him, hug him. "Take your time."

"We love you, Mike," Austin wipes his eyes. He takes a deep breath. He finds his voice and floats it, strong.

*There are not many things in life you can be sure of except rain comes from the clouds sun lights up the sky and hummingbirds do fly...*

He has no doubts, he says later. He has not been dreaming. More clear now than ever. He knows it from every sense: the taste of fresh fish at dinner, the smell of flowers in his home, the very sight of the city he left so long ago, the sound of a woman whispering good night, and her laugh.

And he knows it because that night, after everything hit Michael Austin as square as only reality can, he slept clear through to the morning, never waking once.

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