

# LOVE PERIOD.

WITH REV. DR.  
JACQUI LEWIS

**Shaka Senghor**

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Jackie Lewis: Hey everybody. This is Jackie Lewis, and this is a special miniseries of Love Period in which we're focusing on black history month. Of course, you and I know that black history is American history, but my guests are going to bring special perspectives about what it means to be black in America in these days. And I hope you enjoy these conversations. Shaka Senghor, thank you so much for joining me today on Love Period. How are you today?

Shaka Senghor: I'm great. Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to be here and to be back in discussion with you. I feel good about that.

Jackie Lewis: It was so good to talk with you the other day. It felt like it was the other day, who knows when it was or when people will hear it, but your new book is out. I said to you in the kind of style of James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates, this book, this Letters to Your Sons, Jay and Sekou. Do I have that right?

Shaka Senghor: Yeah, absolutely. And thank you. That's such high praise to be mentioned amongst those literary titans, especially during black history month. So thank you so much for that.

Jackie Lewis: Shaka, I've been thinking a lot about black history and black future and the particularities that shape us. And I wonder if you would tell my audience a bit about your story that puts you in the place to have this book in the world and why it was so important to write letters to your sons. I'm so deeply moved by the book. I just wonder if you could talk about that a bit.

Shaka Senghor: Yeah. Well you so much. I have sons, my oldest son, Jay is 30 years old. Jay was born six months after I was arrested and he grew up for the 19 years I was incarcerated. And when I was released, I had another son, Sekou, who's now 10 years old, who lives here with me in LA and who I have the wonderful opportunity to raise in real time. And the way that they inspired the book really just came from the mentoring work I've done over the years where I'm reaching out to different young people throughout the country and just thinking about the narratives around black boys and black men and dads in general and sons in general. And I believe that this book afforded me the opportunity to really expand the narrative about what it means to be a father during these perilous times.

Jackie Lewis: My father was born in Meridian, Mississippi. He's 87 years old and, I'll see him next week as we are speaking, I'll see him next week. And I didn't get to travel for Christmas because of COVID. And my dad left his Christmas tree up, Shaka. So that when I see him in February, we'll have Christmas.

Shaka Senghor: Oh, I love it.

Jackie Lewis: He's a Mississippi raised black man. He would say I'm black black, you know? Who's, over my life, shown such humanity, warmth, gentleness, tenderness, vulnerability, but also sometimes his teeth, right? Just sometimes, I'm mad and I'm mad at the world and I'm a lion type dad, really wanting to raise you, protect you. How did your dad shape you? What's the dad in you, Shaka, shaping your boys?

Shaka Senghor: That's a great question. My dad is a really interesting man. My dad went to the air force when he was 17 years old. And when he got out of air force, he met my mother who had three children at the time. And my dad took on a responsibility of raising those three children. And then they had three children, which was myself, my two younger sisters. And once their marriage dissolved, my dad remarried to my bonus mom. And that came with three more siblings. So my dad has been instrumental in raising a total of nine siblings. And the way that looks is my dad is a really thoughtful man. He's really thoughtful. He's the type of man that takes accountability and responsibility serious. And one of the things that I love and respect is that in his less than stellar moments, he was always willing to stand in the truth of those moments and to apologize when necessary and to lean in when needed.

Shaka Senghor: And I think those things definitely have played an impact in my life. I consider myself pretty thoughtful. I'm a caretaker of many and a lot of that, even my mentoring work, is inspired by my dad. My dad is that black man in the neighborhood who talks to everybody. All my homies that I grew up with, my siblings grew up with, they all have my father's phone number. So, he's reliable. I think that characteristic is something that's really important to me as a father. And as I think about how I'm shaping and influencing my son's lives, I think it's just really about standing in my truth, being and honest about who I am, about what life is, but also being intentional about nurturing. A lot of times we don't think of that as anything more than protectors and providers, but the reality is we're also we're guides, we're life coaches, we're nurturers. So I do all the things that a parent of any gender would do.

Shaka Senghor: I cook his meals, I fold his clothes. I tuck him in at night. And when I'm by his bedside in those moments when he is not feeling well, and I'm just a dad at the end of the day. I mean, I wear many titles in my public life and in my professional life, but at the end of the day when I come home or we're settled in for the day, I'm just dad. And that's what's really important to me is to create that space where my son can receive affection and be affectionate. And to just know that my presence is more than just protecting him, it's also to have fun. It's also to be a partner in whatever adventure he's on. And I think a lot of that is inspired by my dad.

Jackie Lewis: My dad was in the air force, too, Shaka. Where was your dad's stationed?

Shaka Senghor: His main air force base was in Michigan at Selfridge, a suburb outside of Detroit.

Jackie Lewis: We were in Kincheloe air force base. St. Marie

Shaka Senghor: Yeah, over the bridge. Yeah. My dad was up there as well before, with all that snow.

Jackie Lewis: Oh my God. With snow taller than your house.

Jackie Lewis: The way you describe your dad, thoughtful, reliable, present. I feel the story of black men in America, I'm going to call it a false story of black men in America. People would be startled. The people who construct the false story, who benefit from the false story, hypermasculine, hypersexualized, absent. Right? I know so many dads that sound like your dad, my dad. Why is there a fractured story about black masculinity in America? And how can we fix that?

Shaka Senghor: Yeah, I'm happy you actually asked that. I'm often asked how do we change the narrative around black men? And my push on it is that we don't have to change the narrative. We

really have to expand the narrative to include all of who we are. And I think the reason that the narrative is what it is because there's been a monetary interest in keeping us kind of locked into these spaces that doesn't threaten the idea of America from this historical standpoint. You can't talk about the impact and the story of black men without talking about the enslavement and the brutalization of black men during slavery, as it relates to this current narrative, whether it's prison, which was reintroduced as a new form of free labor through the 13th amendment, or whether it's the media outlets who push this kind of criminalization as the only story of who we are in into pop culture.

Shaka Senghor: And so when you get down to it, and I always ask people this, when they start talking about the problems in America and especially in black America, they're like, if there was more dads present and I'm like where does that narrative come from? And is it true in your own personal life? And most of the time when I talk to people and I say, do you know dads in your family, in your community? And they're like, yeah, but. And I'm like, there is no but. The reality is that we are present in every way possible. And oftentimes in ways that most people, or most other dads, aren't even remotely close to being present. And so what it really boils down to is we have to think more systemically about the problems that exist in our community.

Shaka Senghor: They're not a result of absent dads, they're a result of racist systems that have been put in place that keeps people locked out of opportunities. And when you think about what that does us to a family, we can see it mirrored in our community where there's so many different tips to disempower dads, to remove dads from the household, to weaponize children against dads. And so the other part of it is we're not often telling our own stories. And as long as other people are telling our stories, they'll filter it through whatever lens works for them.

Jackie Lewis: Yeah. You know, mic drop on that. What do Jay and Sekou read? How are they feeling about banned books?

Shaka Senghor: Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, Jay is an adult now he's 30 years old. It's rare that we are talking about books or things of that nature. We have a pretty complex, but very adult relationship. With Sekou, Sekou is reading everything. He's one of my biggest fans, which is great. I have to oftentimes kind of edit what he can read from my writing. Cause of times the content is pretty mature and he's only 10 years old. But he has a great library of African centered books, books that really speak to who he is as a young boy. He's in the fifth grade right now and this teacher has him reading Malcolm X. I mean, he is in the fourth grade, he's reading Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey.

Shaka Senghor: And when I think about banned books, it's interesting that you brought that up. Recently, I received a few messages. My books get banned in prison all the time. And so just this past week, I got rejections from different people for books of mine that were sent in. And it really flies in the face of the first amendment, this idea that we are pulling literature out of schools that really speaks to the history of America or speaks to things that makes, particularly white political America, uncomfortable is really sad. It's like you were trying to sanitize history and you just can't do it. This country

is so young in comparison to other countries. And even in this youthfulness, there's this desire to eradicate elements of the past that are true and that the world knows to be true. And so I really think it's a shame. And just especially as a writer, every time I get one of those rejections, I think about how sad it is that we're denying people incarcerated an opportunity to read literature that can potentially inspire them to transform their lives. And it just speaks to how backwards these systems are.

Jackie Lewis: It's really true. I'm stunned at some of the books that are being banned. Not the ones I expect even, but I'm going to call them white bread books, like *Catcher in the Rye*. What's freakish about that? I feel like we're living kind of science fiction moments where there's such a powerful urge to squash truth and to curate a lie.

Shaka Senghor: Yeah. I mean, I think historically that speaks to what the history of this country has been. Our whole existence in America was based on the policy that we were somehow inferior and therefore our only value was being in servitude of white supremacy. And we still see that play out. We see it play out in corporate America. We see it play out in the media. We see it play out across so many different areas of interest. You think about the educational system and its failed structures. And typically those failed structures exist within black communities based on this idea that we're not worthy of anything better than the bare minimums. And so these bans on literature and this idea of recreating or reimagining the world that really just doesn't exist, it's really sad. But it's true to what we've known the system of America to be for many, many years.

Jackie Lewis: Not new, sad, tragic, but not new.

Shaka Senghor: Absolutely.

Jackie Lewis: Shaka, you are a writer and a mentor. If you are curating a list of books or authors that you think every family, I was going to say black family, but every family, should have access to to more fully understand black history, what are some of the writers or titles that come up for you?

Shaka Senghor: Thank you for asking that. So I would probably say Dr. Chancellor Williams *Destruction of Black Civilization*, Dr. Ben-Jochannan, *Black Man of the Nile*. Obviously Malcolm X's autobiography, the *Autobiography of Assata Shakur*, the writings of George Jackson, *Solidaire Brothers*, the letter he exchange with Angela Davis I think are brilliant. I think my latest book fits within the scope of high level informative about the realities of black people in America. And it's one that I really invite and welcome people from every culture to read, because I think it really speaks to the honest experience that we have and not just the idea of what we have. But these letters are through my lived experience. So, those are just some of the books. Anything that came out of the Harlem Renaissance, brilliant writers, Gloria Naylor, [inaudible 00:17:15], other writers, Maya Angelou, her work is just incredibly inspiring. So I would highly recommend that they read all those. And I think they just banned I know *Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which is ridiculous.

Jackie Lewis: Banned to that and *The Bluest Eye*.

Shaka Senghor: Oh, you can't. You ban Tony Morrison, that's insane.

Jackie Lewis: You can't ban Tony? Right. Where else are you finding resources? I mean, art, film, music? What other kinds of resources would you share to listeners who are thinking I need to know more, want to know more history? Have a stronger sense of the black story and the black experience in America?

Shaka Senghor: Yeah. One of my favorite films, 13th, I think is just great. Most of Ava DuVernay's work, in general, speaks to a lot of the issues we are faced with. But I would say 13th is a great film. I don't get a chance to watch as much TV. I'm more of a documentary person, but I think there's tons of great documentaries out there, tons of films. Obviously, as I mentioned, 13th is just an incredible film. And even though it focuses on the criminal justice system, I think it speaks more broadly to the history in America. So I think that's just a great film. And the four part doc series, I mean, mini series that she did on the Exonerated Five, I thought that show was so important and really speaks to all of the things that we're constantly confronted with. In terms of music, Nas is one of my favorite artists. I think he always has something relevant to add to the conversation and speaks upon things that really helps people understand historically how we got here.

Jackie Lewis: I love Nas. I love her movie When They See Us, right? When They See Us. Let us say the name Aunjanue Ellis.

Shaka Senghor: Yeah.

Jackie Lewis: In that movie, in King Richard, so many beautiful pieces. What are you hoping for, Shaka? Whereas your book finds its way into our consciousness in this year, 2022, on the way to midterms, what are you hoping our black stories can add to the American fabric, redeem the American fabric, change the American fabric?

Shaka Senghor: Yeah, I think the thing that I'm most hopeful for is the expansion of the narrative around who black men are and how we've contributed to this country, oftentimes without being rewarded for our great contributions. And I just think that's so important. I think the expanding of the narrative around our emotional commitment to parenting, to fatherhood, to community building, to upliftment, I really want to see a more asset oriented framing of our stories. There's an incredible organization that I've worked with over the years called Be Me Community and it's leader, Tragan Shorters, who's a dear friend of mine, he always talks about you can't uplift for people if you are identifying them only by their limitations, as opposed to their contributions. And that work is so profound and so important. And my hopes is that my book will continue to contribute to that conversation that helps people see the fullness of our humanity, helps people really understand who we are as dads, who we are as community members, as leaders, and even just our everyday mundane existence.

Shaka Senghor: I think it's important for the narrative around us just wanting to be. And having that honored in a real way. And I mean, we're seeing it right now in sports with NFL and what's going on with the coaches. And it's really tragic. It's tragic to think that, in this day and age and in a sport that we dominate and we are the most present in, that the leadership roles are vacuous when it comes to black men. So what my hopes are is that we expand the narrative to the point of recognizing that our value has been proven long before these conversations took place and that, when given the opportunity, we'll continue to contribute in meaningful ways, but we definitely want to ensure that we are in control of our narratives and our

stories. Because it's that important to the existence of our people. And ultimately, this country.

Jackie Lewis: I've got three brothers, four brothers. Count those brothers, four brothers and a dad, all black men in America. And I look across, my brothers are younger than me, three of them, three of the four. And I feel like in some ways I'm like another mother or compadre to them. And I watch them navigate these, once again, tragedies of black male death, derision, scapegoating, caricatures of black malehood. And I think, not for nothing, but all these black men are somebody's baby, Shaka, right? Somebody's mama raised them. Somebody's daddy protected them, nurtured them, nurtured them. Cool hand on the forehead when there's a fever, is as the picture I had in my mind with you and your sons. What do we want to say to younger black men, younger than me, younger than you, maybe, about finding their footing, finding their way? What do you want to say to encourage them?

Shaka Senghor: Yeah. My words of encouragement always starts with be great. Be unapologetically great, never settled for mediocrity when greatness is available and that greatness is already embedded in your DNA. In 2019, I went to Ghana, took a trip to Ghana where I spent 13 days. And I remember being in one of the slave dungeons and standing there on this calcified DNA, which was the fluids from our ancestors who were forced to relieve themselves in that environment, who shed tears in that environment, who lost blood in that environment. And it's calcified into the floor. And I remember how powerful it was to bend down and touch that floor and know that that DNA coursed through my veins. And I remember on my way back home thinking about the resiliency of our ancestors and their ability to survive such a horrendous trip to this foreign land.

Shaka Senghor: But within that, there's the beauty of resilience. There's the beauty of fortitude. There's the beauty of strength and power and magic and all the things that make up who we are. And so what I would say is don't let the world tell you that you're incapable of accessing your magic, that you're in of assessing greatness, that you are somehow America's problem to solve or women's problem to solve. And in reality, you are a solution. You've been that for a long time. And so I would just say, continue standing in your purpose, continue to show up in your greatness, continue to rock your crown unapologetically, continue to wear your swagger because the DNA of our ancestors gave birth to that. And don't apologize for taking up space in the world.

Shaka Senghor: I know we've been in this space for a long time where we've had to remain silent, we are seeing the spectacle of our black bodies annihilated, whether it's through police brutality or whether it's through interpersonal gun violence and that's traumatizing. And so what I would say is ensure that you're checking in with yourself, that you have men in your life that can check in with you. Definitely if there's an opportunity to explore mental health treatment, I highly encourage that. This world will beat up on you if you don't check in. And understand that these narratives that have been created have not been created to empower us, they've been created to limit us and keep us locked into the idea that our only value is in our ability to financially provide when the reality is we can contribute so much more. And most of what we can contribute that has infinite power and value really comes from within. And there's no price you can put on that.

Jackie Lewis: That is beautiful, Shaka. Absolutely beautiful. Is there a passage from your book that feels to

you like a benediction or a blessing or a place to end today that you'd like to share a little bit with us? Because I think we'd like that. I know I'd like it.

Shaka Senghor: Let's see what I got. So this is actually from the last chapter, this is a letter spoke of my sons.

Shaka Senghor: This is what's up. This is what I want you never to know, this feeling that all you're doing is surviving. That your body is not your own, that you can't get love from the men your life. I want you to flower, to expand, to taste every last drop of what the world has to offer. Yes, you will see overreactions, brutality and the look on the face of white culture that may one day want to kill you because it's afraid of the imaginary ghosts of who you can be. But you will have my love, Sekou. And the love of other men around you. And we will honor you raise you up and let you be fully human. This is the best we can do. And we will do our very best every single day. Word about word in this book, which I wrote for you and for all the sons of society. In all these letters, I've tried to instill in you both a sense of wonder about the world, a hunger for love, not for violence and permission to go and seek out the very best of our planet.

Shaka Senghor: We spent along the planet for such a brief time. And I don't want you to ever feel the burdens I felt, never know the fear I felt. The sense of dislocation. Black boys and men must forge a new path. One in which tears are cheers, love is paramount and friendships are real and deep. Those in our community who struggle with addiction or abuse or neglect must be covered with healing hands, hands that you willingly reach out to all and any. I lost 20 years to a system that thought I was irredeemable, but somehow through literature and letters and words, I was able to find a way out of the darkness into the light of this past decade. I don't claim that it's been easy, not that every day is a dream. But my boys, my boys, when I think of your faces, hear your voices and see your strong and beautiful bodies walk across this earth, I am reminded of the elemental perfection of nature, the magnitude of my good fortune and the mere chance, one in billions, that I survived. That we came together for this fleeting span. Isn't that enough? Let us make it enough. Every second that we breathe let's share the magical air, Dad.

Jackie Lewis: Oh, beautiful. Oh my goodness. Thank you so much, Shaka.

Shaka Senghor: Thank you for inviting me and for having me. I'm truly honored to be here.

Jackie Lewis: Thank you so much. Let me ask you just two quick ending questions that we try to do. What do you know for sure about love? What do you know for sure about love?

Shaka Senghor: What I know for sure about love is it truly is the most incredible healing, nurturing and inspiring emotion we can have. It's truly our power. And in most cases, it's our superpower.

Jackie Lewis: Superpower. Yes. And when I say Fierce Love, what comes up? Fierce Love.

Shaka Senghor: When I think of fierce love, I think of passion. I think of the ability to lean in when things are difficult. I think of the ability to lift up to higher heights when things are promising. I think of the energy of just showing up every day. I think of the smiles and the hug and the laughter and the joy in which we exist, even in these very complex times. And I think the extending of our hand to reach out to our fellow human being, especially at times like this when everything in the world is challenging, just that willingness to reach out and say, hey, I got you. To me, that's what I think of when I think of fierce love

Jackie Lewis: Shaka Senghor, bless you.

Shaka Senghor: Oh, bless you.

Jackie Lewis: Fierce Love to you.

Shaka Senghor: You as well. Thank you so much.

Jackie Lewis: Thanks for listening to this episode of Love Period, a special series we put together for black history month. As an African American woman who grew up in this nation, I think about the poet, James Weldon Johnson, who says about my people, we have come over a way that with tears has been watered. I think about the tears of my ancestors watering the soil of America. Tears baptizing my hope, tears that are often tears of joy, because we've learned how to make a way out of no way. Black history, black heritage, it's everyone's history. These stories belong to all of us. And I hope because you've listened to these episodes, you feel connected and that you'll dig and do some research about black folks in America.