



Kevin Woodley recording in a booth at the Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility in Cañon City. Photo courtesy of DJC Records

## Seven Colorado Inmates Seek Understanding Through Music

A debut album from inmates at a Cañon City correctional facility balances justice and redemption.

BY DAVE CANTOR

September 13, 2021

Striking a balance among justice, fairness, and redemption can seem almost impossible. But Fury Young, who runs New York-based record label Die Jim Crow, sees an opportunity to untangle that knot of ideas while also giving voice to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. With the summer release of *Tlaxihuiqui*, seven individuals recorded their stories from the Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility in Cañon City—each performer someone who might not have found a platform otherwise.

It wasn't Young's first attempt to record from prison. He flitted from Occupy Wall Street to ruminating on the climate crisis and eventually landed on advocating for the incarcerated after reading *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, a 2011 book by civil rights attorney and legal scholar Michelle Alexander. "I was working on this concept album called *Die Jim Crow*, and it was just this one album that was intended to be recorded with currently and formerly incarcerated, mostly Black, musicians across the country," Young says. "I tried to get access to as many prisons as I could and as many musicians as I could to get this sort of collage of songs and stories, and form them into this one epic, double album."

It didn't quite pan out. But while attending a conference in 2017, Young met the founder of National Capital Crime Assistance Network, who in turn helped him gain access to the Colorado facility. That's how Young met multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Michael Tenneson, an inmate serving multiple life sentences after being convicted of five murders. Described as "the project director inside," Tenneson helped organize recordings at Territorial.

The band's 13-track *Tlaxihuiqui* (which translates to "calling of the spirits" from the Nahuatl language) opens with the influence of Native American percussion and ritual, before skipping through caterwauling blues, Americana, gospel, and spoken word. It's overriding genre, though, is unflinching self-reflection.



The track “8788,” which prompted the label to include a trigger warning on the back of the album, is unlike anything listeners might have previously encountered. Tenneson, with minimal accompaniment, dolefully asks questions of himself, his past and future, as well as society as he traces his life, including his being raped as a child.

“It’s one of those rare moments when you actually get inside somebody’s head and can ask yourself some very difficult questions,” Young says about the song. “I think it aligns with our mission of dismantling stereotypes around prisons in America. If you hear that song, you can at least maybe give Mike a sliver of—I don’t know if ‘forgiveness’ is the right word ... understanding.”

Understanding is something Frankie Domenico, who contributed violin to “8788” while serving his sentence at the facility, is currently searching for. He began playing music in fifth grade and pursued the instrument for a few years in college.

Domenico’s pleased with how the album turned out, he said recently from his Denver apartment after being released on parole—and surprised by how

passionately some of his cohort, who are largely self-taught, performed. Freedom, though, has been tough for Domenico.

“It was somewhat difficult at first, navigating my way around, feeling comfortable around people,” says Domenico, who served more than 15 years for sexually assaulting a child. “Just feeling that I don’t fit in around other people, with my history and experiences. I don’t have much to connect with people, much to talk about, stories to share that would be relevant or understandable.”

If *Tlaxihuiqui* advocates for anything, it’s empathy for his perspective, if not full-bore forgiveness.

“I have my violin here,” says Domenico, who added that he’s a fan of classical players Isaac Stern and Jascha Heifetz. “I’m able to play a couple times a week—not as much as I’d like.”

While musicians are serving their sentences, the label’s set to hold any profits in a trust for them. If they’re never going to be released, Die Jim Crow honors the individual’s request—given applicable laws—about how money should be dispensed; all profits are split evenly between the imprint and performers.

Both Young and Domenico hope that recording a second volume of music by Territorial is possible. But with inmates’ fortunes dictated by a sometimes cruel penal system, that might entail laborious feats of orchestration.

Domenico, though, has resumed some semblance of a normal life: he works, takes regular drug tests, and attends mental health sessions as a part of his parole.

“I think redemption should be possible for everyone,” Domenico says. “I think everyone needs to be given a chance to live their life better than they did before. Whether that’s actually happening or not in America? I really don’t see it. I think too many people just look at a person and judge that person based on their mistakes from the past.”