



BYT INTERVIEWS: BL SHIRELLE



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“I don’t think there was ever a time when I thought I’d have to be my own scientist. But here we are.”

It’s a Friday afternoon in June when [BL Shirelle](#) and I connect over the phone. The previous week, on Juneteenth, she released her debut full-length, *ASSATA TROI*. Under normal circumstances she’d have been gearing up to tour it around, but we’re in the midst of a pandemic, as well as a revolution; one asks us to stay put, the other requires us to charge forward. When it comes to risk assessment in a sea of information and misinformation, the tug of war is palpable.

“We have more than one issue at hand. Yes we’re protesting, yes we’re fighting, yes we’re trying to change laws, trying to change policy, but we also have to protect ourselves and be safe. And one is not more important than the other. And I can argue that Covid is actually more important, because we can’t fight if we’re dead.”

Whatever fears we may be feeling in the outside world are compounded for incarcerated individuals. Formerly incarcerated herself, Shirelle (Deputy Director and Producer at **Die Jim Crow Records**) has been working with her colleagues to ensure that PPE makes its way inside prison walls around the country. “We’ve put over 11,000 masks (last time I checked) into five states all across America, because we like to put our energy back.”

The label works with formerly and currently incarcerated individuals to make sure their voices are heard, but Shirelle is quick to distinguish Die Jim Crow’s work from that of other organizations who, on the surface, might appear to be doing similar things.

“A lot of people go in there as if there’s a charity thing that they’re doing. When we go in, we go in understanding that these are masters of their craft, and they’re super professional. We go in understanding their level of competence when it comes to what they’re doing. They’re able to come in feeling very confident, and not come in feeling like a charity case. They’re coming in with their best effort, because they know that we acknowledge their best effort. And so that’s the difference.”

Shirelle herself is a master of her craft; she recalls writing “Til I Go”, the closing track on *ASSATA TROI*, back when she was just fourteen or fifteen years old. In fact, about half the record was written during her teenage years. “I revamped the flow and changed a few words and stuff, but yeah, the lyrics were written a long time ago.”

She didn’t always intend to make a career out of music, citing her earliest writing as being more of a therapeutic release. “It was just for me; I never wanted to share it with other people. I had to get peer pressured into battling and all that. So when it was time to share things, I’d share what I wrote, which happened to be very personal because of the motivation of my writing. Pretty much all of my music is like a journal that happens to rhyme. I have a hard time writing things I haven’t experienced personally.”

And this record is as personal as it gets. Touching on everything from incarceration to queerness to spirituality, the LP worked out to be a tight ten tracks; certain songs didn’t make the cut, not because they weren’t good, but because even the *slightest inkling* of a flaw wasn’t going to fly. “Anything that felt like it had a chink in the armor felt like I needed to take it off, no matter how much I might have loved the song personally.”

The resulting body of work takes the listener on a journey of human connection in flux, a sonic narrative undulating between hardness and tenderness. “It’s about confronting relationships; throughout the album there’s this constant focus on relationships – society, lovers, friends, god, whoever. I’m establishing a boundary between different relationships that I’m forced to deal with throughout my life.”

Much like the aforementioned push and pull between responding to Covid and the revolution, as humans, we're given daily choices to stay put or charge forward on our own personal journey through life; on the one hand, it can be tempting to live in the past, no matter how painful, because it's familiar and safe. On the other, some of us want to move full speed ahead, leaving behind the ugly parts for good, never to look back.

For everyone, this navigation process looks different. But much in the same way we maneuver a pandemic and a rising, a careful balance is usually necessary for personal growth and reconciliation; to move forward often requires taking a hard look back, not *forgetting* one's past, but *owning* it.

And that is what Shirelle achieves here. She *owns* her story, and is now sharing it with the world.

ASSATA TROI translates to *she who struggles is a warrior*. And a warrior is *exactly* who BL Shirelle is.