

More Art: [Breaking Through Walls.](#) [Art about the Caste System of Mass](#) [Incarceration – By Fury Young](#)

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This week we have a special segment contributed by New York City based artist, activist, and producer Fury Young. Fury grew up in the Lower East Side and has been committed to community causes and activism throughout his life. He has been working on a concept album called [Die Jim Crow](#) with contributions from current and formerly incarcerated black Americans. The stories and themes on Die Jim Crow are universal and speak to the human condition in ways that transcend race and history. The foremost mission of the project is to give a prominent voice to those who are most affected by mass incarceration and to provide a powerful educational tool in young black communities. Fury is about to embark on a cross country road trip to prisons and impoverished neighborhoods throughout the USA.

Indefatigable Prisoners

“We lock ourselves up
not because of the bars and
steel that surround us
not because life doesn’t bend
to our every whim

But because of the projections
we place onto our worlds
The judgements, the i can’ts
The trying to please everyone
while not pleasing ourselves”

– excerpt from “Beauty in Cell Bars” by [Spoon Jackson](#) (Copyright Spoon Jackson)

I spoke to Spoon Jackson yesterday – an author, poet, and teacher doing a life without parole sentence in California – and he told me how the poetry class he teaches suffers from writers who refuse to bear their souls, but when they do, it really inspires him. It inspires him to write his own poetry.

Though poetry is not visual art (although Spoon does dabble in painting I’ve heard), the essence of what inspires others is that reaching in the soul – which all art should do.

There are over two million people trapped in America's prisons and jails. In a country which leads the world by far in incarceration – 5% of global population, 25% of global prisoner population – we cannot say “out of sight, out of mind” and leaves those on the inside alone to do their time. Since February 2013 I have been working on a passion project called Die Jim Crow. It is a concept album about prison and its effects on Black America. It almost goes without saying that the mass incarceration boom of the past forty years has most affected African Americans. The war on drugs, crack cocaine, “super predators”, Willie Horton, gangsta rap – all synonymous with this “New Jim Crow” era, where as of 2013, 1 in 3 black men can expect to spend time in a US prison. When folks on the sordid inside return to society, they are met with little to no opportunities in housing, employment, education, and voting rights. This reality has led to a modern day racial caste system which the author Michelle Alexander aptly calls “The New Jim Crow” in her 2010 book of the same name.

Die Jim Crow (named as a response and tribute to Alexander's title) is entirely written and performed by formerly and currently incarcerated black musicians. Some of the album's artists partook in the arts prior to incarceration, while some came to love making art while incarcerated, like Spoon. Either way, their being locked up does not stop them from becoming inspired – though their work is often kept out of sight, and therefore out of our minds on the outside. The prisoners I work with are eager to have their voices heard, like Tameca, who writes, “I view this opportunity as a blessing an outlet for my white-hot anger,” and Spoon, who writes “Die Jim Crow will break through walls. What we create will be groundbreaking and real.”

Sure enough, those on the inside write poetry and music that is groundbreaking and real. The songs that I have gathered over the past year and a half speak in loud testament for the indefatigability of the human spirit. A couple weeks ago I hosted a “prison cypher” event at the Brooklyn Base, where folks on the inside called in to read poetry and sing. In explaining the project to the audience, I said something spontaneously that stuck later: “It's not like this project is going to tear the walls down, but then, in a way – it will.” Of course the physical walls of prisons will ever be torn down via music, but the deep and powerful messages the prisoners bring will be heard loud and clear – ringing from the cell blocks to society – and what that message is exactly, well, you will have to wait and see.