



Die Jim Crow: Meet the Inmates Fighting Back Against Mass Incarceration With Music

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Die Jim Crow, a full-length multimedia album set to be released in 2020, will take aim at the injustices of mass incarceration via 28 tracks composed entirely by previously and currently incarcerated musicians. Some of the voices from that album are now going multi-format as part of the *Die Jim Crow EP Book* [out today](#), which features writing, photography and artwork inspired by the recordings.

B.L. Shirelle is one of those voices. In the song “Headed to the Streets,” which she wrote at the end of her incarceration at the Muncy State Correctional Institution in Pennsylvania, Shirelle opens up about her anxiety returning to public life after having spent nearly a decade behind bars.

Die Jim Crow co-producer Fury Young began the project after reading Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, which calls out the second-class status that faces Black men and women after incarceration. “I have had personal experiences throughout my life with people who have been incarcerated, and the book influenced me heavily,” Young told *Ms.* “[It] sprang up a lightbulb in my head, and I decided I wanted to take on this project that blended those two things I was interested in, that was activism and music.”

Alexander’s observations, in large part, have shaped the collective’s mission: “After leaving prison,” reads the *Die Jim Crow* website, “the ‘felon’ label leaves folks stripped of basic rights, such as housing, employment, voting and education.” Young’s goal is for the album’s audience to “step inside the shoes of someone that grew up in a community infested with discriminatory policing and a high incarceration rate.”

Shirelle's story tragically fits that narrative: the prison-industrial complex and the era of mass incarceration shaped and, in many ways, have constrained her life, and she isn't alone. "I've been in the system practically since I was 12 years old," she told *Ms.* "I'm 30 at this point and I'm still under supervision, so this has been a long process. I was raised in a drug-riddled home and I was pretty much born into the gang from my family. My morals were different from the common person because I was exposed to this lifestyle at a very young age."



B.L. Shirelle. (Die Jim Crow)

Women are the fastest-growing prison population, and although the gap between incarcerated women of color and their white peers is shrinking—previously, it was six to one; currently, it is reported to be two to one—women like Shirelle face racialized and gendered obstacles to justice.

On the inside, women of color face harsher sentencing and treatment than their white peers. Shirelle saw this play out firsthand: "There's a lot of white girls there," Shirelle told *Ms.* of her time inside. "The difference is, I was there on a drug case the second time, and I did 39 months for that drug case. I had a [white] roommate who killed her child—and she had 16 months." On the outside, inadequate community resources, neglect from city services and poor public school systems present massive obstacles to young adults seeking social mobility—and especially for girls of color, who are falling into a school-to-prison pipeline in increasing numbers.

“I grew up in the penitentiary, from 17 to 24. When I came home I wasn’t prepared for the lack of resources or for the patience it would take for me to come out of that situation,” Shirelle said. “I was very optimistic; I did all the programs and all the trade schools they [the penitentiary] had to offer. I thought I was going to come out of there, get a job and live my life. But because of my record, it was a whole different ballgame. I didn’t have the patience and didn’t know of resources to get myself out of my situation—so I wound up going back.”

The anxiety and inequity Shirelle faces on the outside is a persistent theme in *Die Jim Crow*: much of the material released by the collective of former and current inmates illuminates the challenges of finding employment and community after serving time. In the music video for her *Die Jim Crow* track, she narrates the horrible conditions she experienced under incarceration while behind bars in a prison uniform; another scene shows an American flag burning behind her.

“Tell me, what does this ‘liberty’ mean?” she asks. “Now that I’m out, can I live and be free? Can I work for a company that pays more than minimally?” Then comes a powerful declaration. “This isn’t about material,” Shirelle asserts. “It’s about looking in the mirror [and] seeming inferior.”