



JANUARY 4, 2022, 11:42 AM ET

'Helped Me Learn To Like Myself,' Inmates Find Comfort In Making Music

On one of the songs, Michael Tenneson expresses remorse for the five people he murdered.

BY [GINA TRON](#)



Michael Tenneson Photo: Fury Young Courtesy of D.J.C. Records

At a prison in Cañon City, Colorado, inmates with life sentences are proud of the work and creativity they've put into the music on an album recently released to the public.

[Die Jim Crow Records](#), the first non-profit record label for current and former incarcerated artists in the United States, facilitated the making of the album, titled TLAXIHUIQUI. The project began in 2018 and was released earlier this year. It features music created by seven incarcerated musicians at Territorial Correctional Facility in Colorado. The genres include country, blues, hip hop, and Native chant.

“Including several lifers, Native American and Black artists, a queer Jewish man, and a musician convicted for five counts of murder, these artists share their path from remorse to redemption,” Die Jim Crow told **Oxygen.com** via email earlier. “Through this musical journey, we discover there is much more than meets the eye behind a conviction and a prison ID number.”

The man incarcerated for five murders, Michael Tenneson, dives into his crimes as well as his past traumas on his songs. In “8788,” he reflects on being sexually abused as a child.

He told **Oxygen.com** via letter that he “was beaten” and “molested repeatedly” in a state-run foster home growing up.

He said that his trauma is “not an excuse but certainly an affect that tainted my perspective on people, life and authorities.”

Tenneson wrote that his work on the album allowed him to heal from some of his past traumas, and he noted in his letter that nearly all inmates he’s come across have “long histories of physical, emotional and psychological abuse.”

“This album project has been incredibly cleansing - cathartic, a deeply healing psalm that has touched the care of some early life traumas and unlocked them,” he stated.

In the song “Remorse,” Tenneson proclaims, “once upon a time I was held up by newspapers as a cold-blooded animal who had no regard for human life.”

He killed three people during a Wisconsin break-in in 1987 before killing more during a poker game in Colorado: crimes he says he now feels remorse for.

“‘Remorse’ is simply and deeply an unrehearsed uncontrived expression of my deepest gut-wrenching cry of sorrow for the actions I committed that took the lives of five innocent human beings,” he wrote to **Oxygen.com**. “There are no words or paintings or songs or apologetic cascades of tears, no matter how sincere, that can ever give back what I have taken from my victims and their families.”



While Tenneson says he forgave himself years ago, he credits his work with Die Jim Crow Records for learning to like himself. He called it “the most potent healing outlet of anything I've ever experienced personally. [...] This project has really helped me learn to like myself and smile when I look in the mirror.”

The label released its first EP in 2016, featuring six songs recorded by inmates in Ohio. On Juneteenth of last year, it put out a full-length album by former inmate [BL Shirelle](#).

“I want to change the narrative of how incarcerated people are thought of through music,” Shirelle told **Oxygen.com** last year. “When people hear it, I want them to hear me as a musician and appreciate the arrangements and word play and realize, yes this person made hella mistakes and spent 10 years in a penitentiary but wow, she's friggin' dope. I look forward to crossing those cultural lines and being humanized in that way.”

TLAXIHUIQUI is available to listen to on all streaming [platforms](#).