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‘I Will Be Heard For A Change’: Record Label Gives Inmates And Formerly Incarcerated Artists A Voice

After reading “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,” Fury Young was inspired to create a platform for those in the criminal justice system.

BY **GINA TRON**



Musicians recording music for the upcoming Die Jim Crow album "Territorial" at the Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility. Photo: courtesy Fury Young

A new record label is aiming to change the way the public views inmates and formerly incarcerated people by giving them an artistic platform to have their voices heard.

[Die Jim Crow](#) began as an album concept in 2013 after its executive director Fury Young read “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.” The [2010 book](#) argued that even though Jim Crow laws that institutionalized racial segregation had been abolished, the American criminal justice system still acted as a modern system of racial oppression.

Young told **Oxygen.com** that racial issues were the focus of the concept album [Die Jim Crow EP](#), which was released in 2016. The six-song record featured mostly incarcerated or formerly incarcerated black musicians. Young said he was so moved while creating the EP that he eventually decided to turn his concept album idea into a full-blown record label and nonprofit to improve similar musicians' quality of life and to give them tools to succeed as professional artists.

“We decided to turn it into a record label because there is so much content out there and so many artists,” he said.

Since the label's creation, Young and his team have been busy making music and have recorded in five prisons across the country. While several singles have been released, multiple full length albums are in the works. The first of which is BL Shirelle’s debut album "ASSATA TROI" which will be released on June 19. Its release coincides with the anniversary of Juneteenth, or Freedom Day, in 1865 when the abolition of slavery set forth in the Emancipation Proclamation finally reached African-Americans in Texas, the most remote former Confederate state. The record went on [presale Thursday](#).

Shirelle, who is also deputy director for Die Jim Crow, began working with Young in 2015 as a contributor on the first EP. At the time, she was

still behind bars serving a three-and-a-half year sentence for drug possession. The Philadelphia native told **Oxygen.com** that, despite being in love with writing since she was 6 years old, she had lost the will to write while in prison.

“I was just in this place of despair, shame and guilt,” she said. “I was not in a great place. I hadn’t been writing for about three years, which is the longest in my whole life. I thought that whole love affair was over.”

She said working on the EP gave her the courage to write again and find confidence within herself.

“I just got really excited about getting out and being able to do something I love,” she told **Oxygen.com**

Shirelle was actually dreading her release because she didn't want to feel like she had prove herself to people; she explains that it was her recent incarceration was the result of breaking parole following her first incarceration. At age 18, she was sent to prison for more than six years for assault. But, being able to have an artistic outlet helped her trust in herself.

“Just knowing people think i’m a master at something gave me the self esteem boost I needed to get out because I was so fearful of failing again,” she said.



BL Shirelle Photo: Fury Young

Shirelle, who cites artists like Brittany Howard, Prince, Tupac and Nirvana as musical inspirations, pulls from different genres and instrumentation in her album, which covers a wide range of topics. Shirelle notes that the only song on the album that concentrates on incarceration is “Conspiracy.” In that song, Shirelle — who is an LGBTQ woman — touches on the fact that women behind bars seemingly received less support than incarcerated men, an issue she told **Oxygen.com** she is passionate about. Themes regarding relationships and spiritual struggles, however, dominate the album. Her song “Generational Curse” speaks to the black experience and of being exposed to violence and crime at an early age.

“I want to change the narrative of how incarcerated people are thought of through music,” she told **Oxygen.com**. “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.”

Shirelle is currently executive-producing an album with artist B. Alexis, who is currently surviving a 30-year murder sentence in South Carolina. Young refers to Alexis as “Lauryn Hill meets rap legend Scarface.” The album, expected to be released next year, will be Die Jim Crow’s first solo album recorded from behind bars.

Alexis, who at this point has served 12 years after being incarcerated at age 17, told **Oxygen.com** over the phone that working on her upcoming record, which Young says will be an introspective look into her life, has been therapeutic.

“It really awakened a part of me that couldn't speak for a while,” she said. “I felt like I couldn't do anything with my music because of my sentence, so the creative side for a while really went out the window.”

She told **Oxygen.com** that she wants to connect with people on the outside through her music.

“There are a lot of people out there who need to hear my story because there are a lot of women out there who have been through the same things that I've been through,” she said. “And right now, we are just numbers so nobody knows what is the issue, the underlying causes that led us to be here.”

Just knowing that her lyrics can reach the outside world brings her joy.

“It’s life-altering for me because it means a lot to know that I will be heard for a change,” she said.



BL Shirelle, left, and B. Alexis. It is the policy of the South Carolina Department of Correction to blur out faces of inmates. Photo: courtesy Fury Young

Die Jim Crow is also working on "Territorial," an album recorded with seven incarcerated musicians at Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility. That record, expected to be released in the fall, will feature rock, blues, Native American chant, hip hop, and gospel music. Another record by hip hop group The Masses, comprised of six emcees and four musicians from Allendale Correctional Institution in South Carolina, will be released next year.

"I think people could have an open mind when listening to these albums and re-conceive what they assume somebody who is incarcerated or formerly incarcerated would want to make music about," Young told **Oxygen.com**.

As COVID-19 has been drastically [impacting prisons](#) across the country, Die Jim Crow has donated over 6,000 masks to inmates to help keep them safe as they continue to be a creative outlet for those behind bars.

More than supporting those affected by the prison system, Shirelle told **Oxygen.com**, the music is also well done.

"Our music is not something you have to suffer through," she said. "I put it up against anything in the marketplace at this point."