



‘SHE WHO STRUGGLES IS A WARRIOR’

How Germantown’s BL Shirelle went from inmate to record executive

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Germantown’s BL Shirelle spent 10 years in Pennsylvania’s penal system. Now she’s a record executive who gives artists behind bars another shot at a recording career. | Image courtesy: DJC Records

In 2015, a group of seven inmates at Kershaw Correctional Institution in South Carolina was sentenced to 7,150 days, or close to 20 years in solitary confinement, for shooting and releasing a rap video from a locked-down cell the year prior.

The production was shot on a smuggled smartphone (which can be obtained easily by the incarcerated for the right price) and uploaded to the hip-hop culture's premier content-aggregating video blog, [WorldStarHipHop](#). Titled "South Carolina Inmates Film 1st Ever Music Video In Prison," the video has garnered over 1.2 million views on WorldStar and gone viral, exposure a lot of free artists would pay good money for. Nevertheless, years in the hole looms larger than temporary Internet stardom.

Today, thanks to the efforts of a local emcee and her record label, inmates have an outlet and don't have to risk further restriction to have their voices and talents consumed by the masses. The rapper is Germantown's BL Shirelle, and her label is Die Jim Crow (DJC), the very first nonprofit record label for currently and formerly incarcerated artists. BL Shirelle ("BL" stands for "bearded lady") is one of the latter, having served 10 years in Pennsylvania's penal system since a teen. A market research company supervisor by day, she serves as an artist and deputy director of DJC whose status at the label should serve as a blueprint to those who follow her.

BL Shirelle dropped her debut album, "Assata Troi," on Juneteenth (June 19) and has been making her rounds for performances – virtual and in-person. Under her direction, DJC sends artists and producers to prisons nationwide to record inmate artists for later releases.

"They're masters. They're professionals. They're great," BL Shirelle shared in her sit-down with Philadelphia Weekly. "We want to help society mirror themselves and understand that we're just regular people, and we want to change the narrative around people who are incarcerated or people who are formerly incarcerated for society. It's not all about helping the person inside. The people out here need help, so accept us back so the cycle can stop."

BL Shirelle hails from Germantown. She lived Uptown in what she described as a crack house headed by a drug-addicted mother. Her grandmother, who lived 10 minutes away from their home off Chelton Avenue on West Oak Lane, was her saving grace as a youth.

“[My grandmother] would buy us a house and my mom would tear that up and have all kinds of traffic, but she would come three times a day,” she remembered. “My grandma would come in the morning and get us ready for school, and she would leave and she would come in the afternoon, bring groceries and things like that. Then she would leave to come in at night to either do laundry or pop-ups where she would come and kick all the addicts out of the house.”

An affinity for writing struck BL Shirelle around the age of 5. She would go on to enter poetry contests, and one of her teachers actually published her first poetry book at 8. However, by the time she was 12, due to her at-home circumstances, she dove into the world of drug dealing.

According to her, her house was one of the top drug spots in the area and she watched a few hustlers come in and make millions selling crack in there. She decided to take over the operation to take control of the “gold mine” and shield her family from the perils of any potential beefs that outside dealers could bring to their doorstep.



Page 6: Caption: BL Shirelle’s record label, DJC Records, signs incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists. | Image courtesy: DJC Records

“I told my mom, ‘You made a lot of people rich; you bring in a lot of danger. Let me just take this whole situation over and we can keep the money in-house and it can decrease us being exposed to so much danger.’”

Being so young, BL Shirelle made some mistakes in the drug game. She would take product from anyone and sometimes not pay back her suppliers. It was because of threats that she’d received as a result that she was carrying a gun by the time she was 18.

The gun led to her first brush with the law. One night, outside of her new crack spot, a friend got into an argument over a cellphone he was trying to sell. Unbeknownst to her, the friend had been on a robbing spree and stole the phone. The man he argued with was an undercover cop posing as the phone’s owner to buy it back. BL Shirelle went outside to try to calm things down when she noticed the plainclothes stranger reaching for something. She didn’t hesitate to send shots his way. Before she knew it, she was in a full-on shootout, getting hit twice in the back and leg. She was beaten, kicked and spat upon as she laid on the front handcuffed on a ground covered by shattered glass.

For this incident, BL Shirelle was sentenced to 6½ to 12 years at SCI Cambridge Springs for aggravated assault. She served six and a half years, returned home, then found herself back behind the wall 18 months later, this time at Muncy State Prison on drug charges. She lived completely different experiences during her two bids.

“The first time I went, it was pretty much easy breezy because I was a kid. I didn’t lose anything. I didn’t have any responsibilities. Then, I was a lesbian who grew a natural beard, so I got a lot of attention up there. So my experience was completely different than a regular person’s experience, I’m sure, the first time,” she said. “But then, when I went back the second time, it was a stark difference because I was an adult now. I have a kid and now he’s displaced and I’m losing my house, my car, and my girlfriend at the time got locked up with me because she was just with me. People were dying while I was incarcerated. My grandma died six months after I was released. I lost so much the second time. I impacted so many different lives in a negative way the second time. Those three years were like 10 years to me, and the six was like two years to me.”

It was during this second stint that BL Shirelle rekindled her love of writing and got into making music. She appeared at a TEDx event performing with her group and was discovered by DJC’s founder, Fury Young, who was putting together a Die Jim Crow EP featuring incarcerated artists.

“I was super inspired by it, and I started writing for him for the project,” BL Shirelle said. “The first two records that I wrote, he said he loved those records, and that was the first time I was actually paid to do something as far as music went.”

After her release, BL Shirelle and Fury Young were inseparable. They spent long nights discussing how to turn Die Jim Crow from a one-off EP into a full label. According to the [LA Times](#), “Since 2015, they have recorded more than 55 collaborators in five prisons.”

BL Shirelle believes that the prison population brings creativity and ingenuity to the rap world based on the resourceful nature of prison life. “All you have [in prison] is your mind,” she explained. “You don’t have a lot of outside influences. You don’t have a lot of them listening to one rapper and then writing [their] raps sounding just like that rapper. That’s not how it works. You have to rely on your mind. So it’s a lot of creativity.”



BL Shirelle used her talents to not only become a known name in Philly’s hip-hop scene, but she also mentors people looking to get on, the right way. | Image courtesy: DJR Records

“There’s a certain amount of mental laziness that technology has done to people, and I see it every day because I think differently than them, just because I spent

so much time away from this shit. When I went to jail, Nokias was out. When I came home, iPhones was out. So I saw the mental decay of people that can't critically think as well as someone who's been in for a long time and still is of sound body and mind."

BL Shirelle's "Assata Troi," a follow-up to her 2019 tape, "Restricted Movement 2," is a 10-track offering that runs the gamut of vibes and subject matter. "I'm really bored with the crack rap, but I can't help it, I get flashbacks (I'm scarred)," she spits on "Generational Curse." On the album whose title translates to "she who struggles is a warrior," the barbate bar slinger takes listeners on a hustler's journey from selling crack to her mother as a child, to being a ruthless street figure, to getting locked up and serving time, to life after incarceration. Dispersed throughout are tunes exploring intimacy with a significant other, an unjust legal system and spirituality. On the album's lead single/video "SIGS," she introspectively raps, "I had a demon in my soul that sank his teeth and made a hole without a filling, but I won't talk about it. My heart got chalk around it. That's when I thought about it."

"I want people to relate to it. I think it's really relatable. I think there are a lot of records on the album that people can relate to. And that's in part of a way to humanize people who have been through what I've been through," she said of the album. "That helps humanize people who have been to prison, who have committed crimes, things of that nature. And in turn, if we can help humanize us, then it'd be better for all society. We'll be reintegrated better, we'll be able to get access to better jobs, we'll be able to get better chances on a human level.

"There's a certain amount of mental laziness that technology has done to people, and I see it every day. When I went to jail, Nokia's was out. When I came home, iPhones [were] out. So I saw the mental decay of people that can't critically think as well as someone who's been in for a long time and still is of sound body and mind."

– RECORD PRODUCER AND MENTOR FOR INCARCERATED ARTISTS, BL SHIRELLE

“This isn’t policy. This is touching human-to-human, energy-to-energy. And in turn, we can have less victims of violence, we can have less victims of certain things, because people will be more accepting of us when we come out and try it and be productive, instead of ostracizing us from society.”

She added, “To make great music is also one of my top goals. It’s also to display my versatility, my rap skills, my lyricism, my storytelling, different areas that I can go into.”

“Assata Troi” by BL Shirelle is available on all major streaming platforms and is available for purchase on [Bandcamp](#). Be on the lookout for the next project she is executive producing by B. Alexis, a South Carolina inmate who is serving a 30-year sentence. Die Jim Crow is also in the planning stages of shooting a virtual reality video. You can support DJC’s current PPE drive to get masks to prisons during the COVID-19 crisis by visiting its [GoFundMe page](#).

At the end of the day, BL Shirelle just wants to continue putting out quality music. “Number one, I want us to make great music. That’s what I want.”

BL Shirelle can be followed on [Instagram](#) at @blshirelle and [Twitter](#) at @blshirelle8. Die Jim Crow can be followed on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) at @diejimcrow. Keep up with the label on its website at [diejimcrow.com](#).