



## *BL Shirelle: ‘My career started on my top bunk’*

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*BL Shirelle on the mic – Photo: Die Jim Crow Records*

### **by BL Shirelle**

I remember it very clearly. The year was 2014. I had just come in from yard, hopped on my top bunk, and started playing chess with a girl I shared the wall with in our dorm.

“Mo! They’re having auditions for some show they’re throwing. Let’s start a band, dude,” my roommate said. She was white, pretty hot in a very goofy way – but she had, like, six swastikas tattooed all over her body.

Nevertheless, we got along. We had actually become friends. We played guitar together, we watched Jeopardy together every night and I whipped her ass in it each time to remind her she wasn’t as superior as she originally thought prior to coming to prison.

“What is it for?” I asked, halfway distracted because I was getting my ass whipped in chess by someone who would eventually become the first formerly incarcerated bail negotiator in my home city of Philadelphia, my comrade-in-justice Latonya Myers.

“TEDx,” she said, jumping up and down, not able to contain her excitement.

Now, I was out the loop, but not that far out. I knew Ted Talks were a huge platform. Up until that point, I hadn’t written a song in two years. I was a parole violator in my eighth year of incarceration with no inspiration: only shame, guilt and fear.

But in that moment, I wrote two of my cheesiest songs to date so we could get a slot in TEDx. I got a couple of my friends together and we worked our asses off to make the cut. We named ourselves BL Shirelle. Shirelle is my middle name and BL was for “Bearded Lady,” as that’s what my friends sometimes called me, endearingly.

I happen to grow a natural beard, not a puberty beard either. More like a Rick Ross beard! Although it’s strange, I gotta say – it’s pretty bad ass! Before I was BL Shirelle, I was OL-8182 Monique Mull from Philadelphia, Penn., with a face you’d be hard pressed to forget.

We practiced in yard every evening. Fought, kicked group members out, got distracted by our other friends and lovers, quit and got back together. It was all super dramatic, but, when all was said and done, we made the cut! We performed on the TEDx stage.

In our group’s dramatic fashion: our lead rapper broke her ankle the night before the show and my guitar pick flew out of my hand in the middle of our set. I don’t remember much about the performance aside from the crowd erupting at the end. When I re-watch it, though, I look incredibly nervous and incredibly shiny!

Footage of the show was uploaded onto YouTube and got a few thousand views. Little did I know, one of those views was from a Jewish kid named Fury Young from the Lower East Side in New York who had great ideas and a creative spirit. The idea that would thrust us into an unknown future was, unbeknownst to either of us, still in its infancy.

Fury wrote our band a letter – a letter that was the catalyst to a partnership that would not only change our lives, but the lives of many others who crossed our path. In it, he explained a conceptual album he was working on called “Die Jim Crow.” This album was a musical exploration that started with the Jim Crow era and ventured into our country’s war on drugs and

mass incarceration, featuring a character who is on this journey of being a young Black person in America in the '80s.

Each song details the steps of getting caught up in the grips of mass incarceration in the crack era, through juvenile delinquency, prison, prison rules, food, solitary confinement, relationships and bonds with lifers, re-entry and many more areas. Some songs are instrumental, some full compositions. Every single genre was covered, from gospel, rap, rock and soul to Native chanting.

I was immediately inspired and blown away by the idea. I began writing ferociously to each specified topic. I couldn't remember the last time I was super inspired to actually write music. In that moment, I was able to partially get away from everything I was going through. Most of my issues were not about me – thinking of all the people my decisions were destructively impacting is what ate me up.

I began selling and doing drugs at age 12, and I began doing all this stuff with my mother, who was an addict. I literally knew nothing else. By the time I was 17, I was co-defendants with my mother on three separate occasions. By 18, I was sitting in a cell with multiple bullet wounds and cracked ribs due to a shootout with undercover police.

But this time with writing music again – instead of feeling trapped by my creativity – I started digging deep through my past transgressions, welcoming my trauma to an open dialogue with my mind, a truce with my heart and a solace with my soul.

One would think after that I would bow out gracefully and count my lucky stars. It wasn't that easy for me. At 25 years old with no work history and a violent rap sheet, I lost self-esteem and patience, and ran out of resources. I was a good enough electrician in prison for six years, but only good enough for a McDonald's gig upon release. I reverted back to what I thought I was best at: the streets.

My girlfriend became my co-defendant just from being in my car at the time of my next arrest. My son, who was nine years old, was put into a mental institution due to severe abandonment issues from me and my girl going back to prison. My girlfriend lost her grandmother, who raised her, while we were locked up. My grandmother who raised me was very sick and only had six months to live by the time my release date came.

I could barely stomach looking in the mirror. But this time with writing music again – instead of feeling trapped by my creativity – I started digging deep through my past transgressions, welcoming my trauma to an open dialogue with my mind, a truce with my heart and a solace with my soul.



*BL Shirelle, framed! – Photo: Die Jim Crow Records*

I wrote two songs for the “Die Jim Crow” EP. “First Impressions” is a song about how it feels when you first enter prison. “They’re telling me to strip off my clothes / Cough while I squat / Girl next to me menstrual on / Out drops a clot.” I was so far away from my first impressions that these were normal activities for me at that point. Ten years for me was nothing – that’s how devalued my life and the sense of time had become.

The second song I wrote was called “Headed to the Streets,” a song about being freshly released from prison. I was very close to this reality and I already knew what being released felt like. “I killed my old habits, drug ‘em to a wooded area / But couldn’t seem to bury ‘em / Bag of bones I carry them / Sick as fuck I cherish them.”

See, I was simply terrified of fucking up again. It was so ingrained in the fabric of my being that I couldn’t see my life any other way. I wanted out, but couldn’t see a path. And, before times get too hard for me, I always have a backup plan. That backup plan always had me trying to fake cry in front of the parole board.

. . . because of that letter Fury sent me – the Die Jim Crow EP turned into something so much bigger.

Once I started writing lyrics and making music again, it seemed like there was a plan that had always been a part of me. The truth was, I had been writing literally since I was five years old, and it was really bizarre that I had never really seen how much of a phenom I was in regards to lyricism, poetry and songwriting. My words have always been pure emotion on paper. I can’t promise how you’ll feel hearing them, but I can promise you’ll feel something.

Six years later, it’s 2020 and 6 a.m. in Columbia, S.C. The sun is just peeking through with very light rain. My stomach is queasy as I turn around and watch the gates close behind me. I’m

slightly shaking, my heart is racing. I can't believe I have somehow made it back through the gates of a state penitentiary. This time, though, it's as deputy director of Die Jim Crow Records. I'm in this state prison to record B. Alexis, a supremely talented artist serving a 30-year sentence who has been incarcerated since she was 17. The feeling is surreal. We lock in for seven days straight, 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., heads down creating magic until we all forget where we are.

The reason I'm there is because of that letter Fury sent me – the Die Jim Crow EP turned into something so much bigger. After my release and with my involvement every step of the way, we have grown from being a conceptual album to working on the criminal cases of some of our artists, becoming the first non-profit record label exclusively for currently and formerly incarcerated people in United States history.

On Juneteenth 2020, I released my official debut album, "Assata Troi," to rave reviews. It's been covered by some of the biggest publications in the world! NPR, BBC, the Los Angeles Times, Pitchfork and many more. The album is a sonic trip through many facets of hip-hop, with storytelling, lyrical exercises, melodic romance all woven with R&B and rock elements, whispers of gospel and dramatic guitar and saxophone solos. It's pretty epic!

My son, who is 15 now, asks everyone he meets do they know me. That makes me feel like I must still be cool! My then girlfriend is now my wife. That makes me feel like I must be loved. I found my voice, strength and vulnerability; I spoke my truth, had intimate conversations with society, my lover, friends and family – even with God, as I understand him – all against the backdrop of beautifully complex music. That accomplishment has granted me freedom. Freedom of creation and thought. Freedom from fear and doubt.

And, as I walk through these prison gates, here to record other artists and bring their voices to light, I couldn't be prouder to be back.

I send you all love, light and positive energy! The ingenuity and creativity inside of prisons are unmatched – my career started on my top bunk.

I encourage you all to never give up! Learn every day, challenge yourselves every day. Make sure your mind is free at all times! Lifers changed my life with their guidance.

Don't ever underestimate your power. You may be the mind that sparks the mind that changes the world! Bless 'em!

*Philadelphia native BL Shirelle is an accomplished musician, producer and songwriter. Shirelle serves as deputy director of Die Jim Crow Records, the first non-profit record label in United States history for currently and formerly incarcerated artists. After serving 10 years in prison herself, Shirelle is dedicated to social change and activism through her music and work with DJC Records. Her debut solo album "Assata Troi" was released with DJC Records June 19, 2020. Find her on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) or email her at [b.shirelle@diejimcrow.com](mailto:b.shirelle@diejimcrow.com). For more information visit [www.diejimcrow.com](http://www.diejimcrow.com).*