

# SHADOWPROOF

BL Shirelle, musician, producer, and deputy director for Die Jim Crow (Screen shot from [music video](#) for BL Shirelle's "SIGS")

## **RECORD LABEL FOR CURRENT AND FORMERLY INCARCERATED MUSICIANS RELEASES FIRST ALBUM**



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Die Jim Crow is the first nonprofit record label for current and formerly incarcerated musicians, and on Juneteenth, the label released their first album, "Assata Troi" by BL Shirelle.

Shirelle, a deputy director for Die Jim Crow, told Shadowproof she is relieved to have the project out because she has a body of work that the label can stand on. "I can put it in the marketplace with anybody, with any hip-hop record that's been out."

The label [obtains](#) access to facilities, and they collaborate with prisoners. They lay down instrumentals, record vocals, and mix tracks with professional equipment.

Over 50 musicians in five prisons in Colorado, Ohio, Mississippi, and South Carolina have been recorded, and according to executive director Fury Young, they have a huge backlog of unreleased music.

In October 2019, Die Jim Crow raised \$50,000 through Kickstarter to launch the label. They also released an EP in 2016, which included two tracks that featured Shirelle.

Shirelle's mother was a crack addict, and Shirelle sold crack when she was 12. As she shared with [Interview Magazine](#), Shirelle was sentenced to 10 years in a prison in Philadelphia after she was shot by police "multiple times and beaten while in handcuffs." She was accused of assaulting a police officer.

The name of [the album](#) means "she who struggles is a warrior," and it is filled with hip-hop, electronic, and rhythm and blues as she confronts some aspects of her life after incarceration that she found difficult to accept, like questioning her faith.

"Conspiracy" is Shirelle's favorite record on the album. "It's huge, theatrical. It's cinematic," Shirelle said. There's the guitar solo at the end. "The beat is amazing."

Shirelle heard the beat for "Conspiracy," and immediately thought, "It needs a story, number one, and it needs a story of incarceration." She decided to tell a story about how one may be accused of conspiracy because in Pennsylvania the state has the most juveniles sentenced to life in prison. Many of those sentences stem from conspiracy charges.

"Most of them weren't exactly aware of what was happening or even if they were aware of a robbery or whatever, a murder ensued and they have to pay for the rest of their life," Shirelle said.

She made it a "very harsh record" so people could think about the company they keep and realize what could happen.

"If you're 14 and you get life, your parents and everyone else is going to be there for you for some time, but eventually they start to get used to you not being around," Shirelle suggested. "[It's] similar to a death, and you don't get the support that you think that you're necessarily going to get. Only those who are supremely blessed get support from their family during a complete life sentence."

"I wanted to make it very harsh so that people understand that people adapt, people adjust to you not being around," Shirelle added. "It's a very unfair scenario when people are [sentenced] to life for something they had no idea what was happening."

"I got the beat first from my producer. My main producer, his name is [Trvp Lvne](#). He produced eight of the ten records on there. We developed my sound together. There's no me without him-type thing."

For “Generational Curse,” Shirelle heard the beat and was reminded of the era of hip-hop that she remembers hearing when she grew up. It sounded like something from Jay-Z, like the era of Roc-A-Fella records or “The Blueprint” (2001).

It bears some similarity to the single released from the album, “SIGS,” in that she confronts her past while also showing her confidence in herself and her artistic abilities.

“At this point, regardless of how Die Jim Crow is, we are the first nonprofit record label for incarcerated musicians in history. That’s a fact,” Shirelle declared. “So I felt as though it was a time for me to express that I know who I am.”

“I know where I’m going, and I’m going to go there with or without whoever. It was a time for me to talk my shit and also express that I’m fully aware of my past. and I’m fully aware of how I want to kind of change the narrative or break the curse in my children, and I don’t want them to have to experience the same things I did.”

Shirelle would never recommend people sell drugs to their mother, like she did, however, she believes all that she’s survived has helped her become an adult, who would do well raising children.

“Til I Go,” which concludes the album, features a phenomenal song-stealing alto saxophone solo from John Heinrich.

The song is one of the most personal tracks on the album. Shirelle took the fact that many black people grow up as Christians and never question the word of God. As they take in more and more information about the world, they question their faith.

“You start to question tradition versus free thought. And you have that fork in the road, where you have to determine which way you’re going to go,” Shirelle shared. “For me, I didn’t give the answer. Because the answer is different for everyone. But I gave my answer in a very abstract way by singing the Lord’s prayer throughout the hook, and then at the end, it becomes [more] clear. You can hear what I am saying. You can hear that it’s the Lord’s prayer.”

Shirelle has never met Heinrich, though she hopes to meet him in the near future as they collaborate on future projects.

The joy of simply creating music comes through on the record. For example, “Phantom Cookie” features a toy piano in one section of the song.

Most of the songs, Shirelle was involved in making the beats. She said they are musically sophisticated beats. They aren’t 808s, a beat popularized by hip-hop artists in New Orleans.

When the coronavirus pandemic hit, Shirelle was traveling from Philadelphia, where she is based, to New York to work with Fury Young. They were finishing “Assata Troi” and had to

cancel a couple sessions as it became more dangerous to travel.

“I was going there every week at the time. We were paralyzed with fear for a couple weeks. I said we gotta do something. We got to get our hands dirty in the situation,” Shirelle recalled.

Shirelle and Young came up with an idea to host virtual benefits and weekly talent shows, where they raised funds to purchase personal protective equipment that could be sent to prisoners. So far, Die Jim Crow has sent over 13,000 masks. (Shirelle’s wife is an essential worker.)

While prisoners at facilities they visited already loved and respected Die Jim Crow, Shirelle believes this established a level of trust that demonstrates the label has their “best interests at heart.”

Over 500 prisoners have [died](#) from the coronavirus while incarcerated, and there have been anywhere from 2,000-4,000 new cases reported in prisons throughout the United States for the past two months.

Shirelle is understandably concerned about the way in which the pandemic is impacting incarcerated individuals.

“One of your biggest fears is getting sick, especially for women,” Shirelle stated. “A lot of times we’re not diagnosed with cancer until we’re in stage 4 or terminal inside of prison. No matter how many times we tell them there’s something wrong. Please check me out. Please help me. We’re losing weight, and we’re losing 100 pounds in nine months. They still won’t help until it’s too late.”

Shirelle continued, “Coupled with everything that’s going on as far as the protests and police brutality, being a victim of police brutality, doing six years for assault on a police officer for simply defending my own life, I see that I’m happy, and I’m hopeful that people are fighting and people are protesting and people are marching.

“People are doing the things that they need to do for change, however, I’m a little startled at how quickly we were able to flip the switch from the pandemic to this.”

“I just hope we can keep multiple things on our minds at the time. I hope that we can multitask, and I hope that throughout all this, as we’re fighting, we don’t forget about the deliberate indifference to health care inside of prisons and being exposed to COVID-19 inside of prisons.”

“If we have to be the torch to keep that going, we’ll be the torch. So, hopefully it doesn’t die out,” Shirelle concluded. “That’s also very serious, very important, very scary, and I just want to keep that in the forefront of everyone’s minds.”

Listen and support BL Shirelle’s “Assata Troi” at [Bandcamp](#).