



**Update: Die Jim Crow's Kickstarter for funds to launch a record label was fully funded on October 28.*

Carl Dukes was incarcerated for 31 years in prisons throughout the state of New York. He works for the Fortune Society, which helps incarcerated individuals all over the United States that can help them re-enter society after their release from prison. He also is a vocalist featured on Die Jim Crow's 2016 EP.

Die Jim Crow is a project that aims to provide formerly and currently incarcerated musicians a high quality platform for their voices to be heard. They go through the extra effort to gain access to facilities and do not rely on contraband phones. They lay down instrumentals, record vocals, and mix tracks with professional equipment.

So far, the project has recorded over 50 musicians in five prisons in Colorado, Ohio, Mississippi, and South Carolina. They have dozens of unreleased tracks and launched a Kickstarter to turn Die Jim Crow into a non-profit record label.

As producer Fury Young describes, he was inspired by Michelle Alexander's seminal book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration In the Age Of Colorblindness*. He was an activist, who was involved in movements like Occupy Wall Street.

Young also is a fan of Pink Floyd's "The Wall" and that planted a seed: What if a concept album that featured musicians in prison could be created?

Die Jim Crow eventually obtained access to Warren Correctional Institution in Lebanon, Ohio. He brought dr. Israel to help him record what became the Die Jim Crow EP that was released on May 1, 2016.

The EP spanned multiple genres—blues, folk, hip hop, rap, rock, rhythm and blues, and soul—and featured artists testifying on the hardships and nightmares they endure in prison, as well as when they leave prison.

During 2018, Young said the project went through a period where they were struggling to gain access to facilities. He met a former corrections director in the state of Oklahoma who wanted to help the project. The former corrections director offered to write letters, and that helped Die Jim Crow gain access to prisons in states like Colorado, Mississippi, and South Carolina.

“We went to three prisons down south and recorded 25 new artists” in March 2019, Young recalled. It was beyond overwhelming because they had so much content from all the artists they met.

Young adds, “I was like, okay, I can either take the route of having all this content, all these new collaborators just totally wear me down. Be like, how is this going to fit on one album? How are we going to leave so many songs off of the final record? And then I took this other path.

“Let’s open this up. Let’s turn this into a record label and not have this all fit the agenda of this one album.”



Dane Newton (left) and Kevin Woodley (right) | Photo from Die Jim Crow

It is far from easy to gain access to prisons. To get their foot in the door, they granted the facilities, where they recorded, “final say on censorship.”

“That was the compromise we had to make to do this, but I thought being that the project is called Die Jim Crow, being that I was really up front about the content, and they heard about the other stuff we put out in Ohio, I didn’t think it would be so nitpicky,” Young said.

Die Jim Crow made certain to put in the contract that the project owns everything. A prison facility or government could never claim to own the music produced.

However, one correctional facility insisted that they change the lyrics in one of the tracks they recorded. Young is worried the facility may not budge on what they view as an unreasonable request for censorship.

“We don’t make music about shucking and jiving. We’re not going to make music that talks about prison as if it’s some great thing,” Young declared.

Beyond that, production inside the facilities typically goes well. “The energy is great. Folks are so excited to record with you.”

Young mentions there is such a lack of resources. They lack access to a band room and equipment. “And it’s really crazy because you could have people making such better use of their time.”

The project created a music video for “Headed To The Streets,” one of the songs on their 2016 EP. It incorporates bricks into the visuals and pays homage throughout to “The Wall,” which pairs well with the “Comfortably Numb”-style guitar solo at the end.

B.L. Shirelle, who was incarcerated at Pennsylvania’s Muncy State Correctional Institution, wrote the lyrics, which deal with the anxieties of rejoining society after several years in prison.

“Tell me what this liberty means. Now that I’m out, can I live and be free?” Shirelle raps. “Can I work for a company that pays more than minimally? Will I give up before I get to see what’s in it for me?”

Shirelle continues, “It’s all about looking in the mirror seein’ inferior. Society don’t trust you. They couldn’t get any learner. I’m tired from my struggle. I couldn’t get any wearier. I’m happy. I’m sad, anxious, angry, plain hysteria. Mixed with terror, new territory—always scarier.”

After the Die Jim Crow label officially launches, one of the releases will be an album from a women’s prison that Shirelle produced. “It’s really cool to have a formerly incarcerated woman go to a women’s prison and produce her own EP there,” Young said.

One of the chief goals of Die Jim Crow is to shift the narrative around prisons through music. It aims to lift up voices. Essentially, any genre of music could be released by the record label, as long as the creation is driven by current and formerly incarcerated individuals.

Dukes, who was released in 2008, chronicled the immediate days after prison for “[Plastic Bag](#).” The lyrics were inspired by entries in his diary. “They can throw me away, they can throw me away. Like a plastic bag”

It all centered on that bag that incarcerated individuals receive upon release that oftentimes holds everything they own. Dukes was told to go to a three-quarter house, which is like a halfway house with less supervision, but upon arrival, he found out he was apparently not in their system. He needed to find a bed in a homeless shelter, but he also had to worry about his physical state because he recently had neck surgery and was still recovering.

*Back in this city
Which way
What street
Train stop
Bus stop
I might be lost*

*But I'm homeless
Yes I'm homeless
I'm homeless...*

The Die Jim Crow label has the potential to grow empathy for what prisoners experience during and after incarceration. Yet, as important is the possibility that lovers of music will stumble across a track from these artists and come away feeling like they heard a great song. When they realize, as Young said, that the song was recorded in a prison, a switch may go off. “Holy shit! It was recorded in a prison.”

In that moment, the music will take on a whole other transcendent meaning.