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A shootout with an undercover Philly cop put her in prison at 18. Now she runs a record label for current and former inmates. | [We The People](#)

“I’m here to make people as uncomfortable as possible,” said BL Shirelle.



BL Shirelle is deputy director of Die Jim Crow Records, a nonprofit label for current and former inmates. She's also the label's first solo artist. JOSE F. MORENO / Staff Photographer

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*Meet **BL Shirelle**, a rapper, market research supervisor, and deputy director of Die Jim Crow Records.*

- **Philly fortitude:** *"The City of Brotherly Love is almost an oxymoron because we are so tough on our own. But it makes us stronger. And it works out."*

- **On her shootout with police:** *"The incident, no matter how I replay it in my mind, it always replays the same way. He didn't say he was a cop. I can't see it happening any other way unless I end up dead."*

Before everything else, came the poetry.

BL Shirelle was 5 when she began writing poems, stringing words together to try and make sense of her life in Philadelphia.

At the age of 12, she started selling crack and carrying a gun. And just weeks after turning 18, she got into a shootout with an undercover cop.

"That's when I thought my life was over, for sure," she said.

But this year, for the first time in her adult life, Shirelle, 32, of Northeast Philly, is free of the criminal justice system, after completing her parole in March. She's now a supervisor at a market research company and deputy director of [Die Jim Crow Records](#) — the first nonprofit record label for current and former inmates. She's also the label's first solo artist.

Shirelle's record, [ASSATA TROI](#), in which she passionately and poetically raps about her experiences as a gay black woman in Philly and in prison, was released on [Juneteenth](#).

"I wanted to release it on a day that represents freedom, because at this point, I'm free," she said.



BL Shirelle released her first full-length album, *ASSATA TROI*, on Juneteenth this year. JOSE F. MORENO / Staff Photographer

Shirelle, whose real name is Monique Mull, grew up in Germantown with her three siblings and her mother, who was addicted to crack. Sometimes her mom would disappear for days and Shirelle would have to walk to the nearby church to get food for her siblings.

When Shirelle began selling crack — sometimes with her mom and sometimes to her mom — she started carrying a gun for protection. She lived in a world where it felt normal. She lived in Philadelphia.

“My argument when I began selling was ‘Mom, there’s a lot of guys in and out of here selling drugs, I don’t feel safe. I don’t feel my siblings are safe. How about you let me sell the drugs so I can better protect my family and keep

the money at home?” Shirelle recalled. “It’s crazy, but it took us many years to realize all the things we were doing was not normal.”

In 2005, Shirelle’s mom (with whom she now has a “beautiful relationship”) got sober, but Shirelle wasn’t ready yet. That year, she was in a house in Germantown when she heard men arguing outside. Shirelle said she went to defuse the fight when one of the men — whom Shirelle later learned was an undercover cop — pulled out a weapon.

She pulled her gun and both began firing. Other men appeared and also began shooting at her, she said. The bullets seemed “never ending.” She thought it was a hit.

“When I saw the [police cruiser] lights I was happy the cops was there, that’s how bad it was,” she said. “I was like ‘Damn! Whoever these people was they are some killers!’”

Shirelle was shot in her back and her leg. No police officers were injured. She said she was cuffed, stomped, and beaten with nightsticks.

“When they lifted me up and put me on the stretcher, that’s when I saw the man I engaged in the fight with crying with a badge hanging around his neck,” she said.

Shirelle was sentenced to six years in prison.

While incarcerated in SCI Cambridge Springs, Shirelle met her wife, Latoya Ross, and studied fiber optics. But when Shirelle was released in 2011, the only job she could find was at McDonald’s.

Embarrassed and frustrated, Shirelle went back to selling drugs. Her wife, who had started a successful career as an optician, was in the car with her

when she was pulled over. Both were on parole. Both were sentenced to prison again for three years.

“I started to see how much destruction one act causes,” Shirelle said.

During her incarceration at SCI Muncy, Shirelle created a song for a TedX event at the prison with a band she called BL Shirelle (BL is short for “Bearded Lady,” a nickname Shirelle got in prison. Shirelle is her middle name). When she was released in 2015, Shirelle took the name as her own, since [the video](#) had more than 5,000 views on YouTube.

One of the people who saw the video was [Fury Young](#), a carpenter-turned-producer based in New York who was making an album with current and former inmates called [Die Jim Crow](#). Shirelle participated on the album, which was released in 2016. That album spurred the creation of the Die Jim Crow Records label, which was launched this year.

“My main goal is always, number one, deliver great music,” Shirelle said. “My second goal is to humanize people who are dehumanized for being incarcerated.”



BL Shirelle, pictured at her Northeast Philly home, said to record currently incarcerated musicians, the staff of Die Jim Crow Records first must obtain permission through the Department of Corrections. If approved, they are given a set amount of time and a small room in the prison in which they build their own recording studio with PVC pipes, drop cloths, clamps, and duct tape. Everything is brought in and taken down each day, including cameras, monitors, mics, and computers. Read more JOSE F. MORENO / Staff Photographer

Releasing her own album this year was tough, Shirelle said. First, she was paralyzed by fear of the coronavirus. Then, she was struck by guilt that she survived her encounter with police when George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others have not.

“Every time that stuff happens I just be like ‘Why am I still here? I literally shot back. These people were sleeping or selling loosies,’” Shirelle said. “It makes no sense.”

But Shirelle turned her pain into productivity. Die Jim Crow Records has [raised more than \\$16,000](#) to distribute PPE materials to prisoners across the country and Shirelle has participated in several Black Lives Matter protests. She also speaks about her experiences at colleges and conferences, typically to people who can't relate to her.

"I'm here to make people as uncomfortable as possible," she said. "And I am not an angry black woman. That's a narrative going around. We are warriors and warriors fight."