

Simply Naomi



BL Shirelle



Die Jim Crow

MoMA PS1, New York, US/moma.org
Last month, MoMA PS1 invited representatives of Die Jim Crow Records – the first record label dedicated to the music of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists – for a discussion and performance showcase. The event was held in conjunction with the exhibition *Marking Time: Art In The Age Of Mass Incarceration*, which takes as its inspiration the publication of a book of the same name by Nicole Fleetwood, a Rutgers University professor of American Studies and Art History.

Fleetwood introduced the participants – label founder Fury Young, rapper and deputy director BL Shirelle, singer Naomi Blount Wilson and visual artist Tameca Cole – but did not linger. The discussion to follow would not be an academic one. The participants were all close collaborators, not to say confidantes: Young, the only panellist or performer who had never spent time in the American penal system, first met each of these artists by mail, starting

in 2013 when – inspired by another book, Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* – he began his outreach. What talk there was of incarceration’s political dimension – 70 per cent of the 7000 people serving life sentences in Pennsylvania, for instance, are Black – was couched in broader affirmations of gratitude for survival, of strength and consolation derived from the practice of art, and the love they share for one another. It was halting stuff, at once bittersweet and a chilling reminder of the suffering of the millions in the carceral system or at its edges who have no such recourse.

The music, then, of Die Jim Crow Records, functions discursively as well as aesthetically. The unpredictable mixture of skill, determination and luck that may bring an artist to MoMA PS1 in other circumstances is, for the incarcerated individual, a mixture necessary merely to survive, let alone have a voice of one’s own. “To do anything in prison,” Shirelle says, “you have to be creative. If you want to eat, you have to be creative.”

The songs brought back from the prison system (where many are composed) are the remainder of long, indefinite and ongoing encounters with institutional brutality. Like others on the label, Wilson (who performs as Simply Naomi) draws on gospel and soul, but in her song simply titled “Incarcerated”, her confrontation with spiritual night goes far beyond the handy metaphors of Christian redemption.

The band Territorial – whose album was previewed in a short film during the event – is a cross-genre collaboration by artists serving time together at the Colorado prison of the same name. A hybrid of country, soul, hip-hop and traditional Native American songs, Territorial offer a glimpse (frequently through patchy, facility-provided videophone screens) of a multiracial underclass, the root of whose solidarity is admiration won through the mutual restoration of dignity.

Of all the performances, Shirelle’s was the most recognisably mainstream and the one most eager to bring a structural vocabulary to her own expression. Her flow

is both deeply personal and rigorously analytical, weaving with lightning speed from love life to life on parole, from the penal system to systemic racism, as well as the points at which they seem to collapse into one another. “A vicious cycle where the/System’s my rival but I’m/My biggest enemy.../They’re closing libraries/Building more penitentiaries”. The carceral state is not an accident, it is a programme.

This was the night’s only brush (and faint at that) with the ever renewing scandal of MoMA’s board member Larry Fink. As CEO of BlackRock, Fink oversees substantial holdings in GEO Group and CoreCivic, two of America’s largest private prison corporations. If and how Die Jim Crow can strike a blow against mass incarceration remains, for the moment, a promising question. But as Shirelle and a growing number of young people seem to understand, human bondage takes many forms – and the reform of a single institution is not enough.

Ryan Meehan

Ava Mendoza + Luke Stewart + Ches Smith + Keegan Monaghan

Arts For Art Online Salon, New York, US/
artsforart.org

Masked and socially distanced in a bare and nearly empty hardwood-floored room, guitarist Ava Mendoza, bassist Luke Stewart and drummer Ches Smith overcame these inauspicious circumstances to burn the quarantined house down during this live stream.

From the get-go, Mendoza – who has played with John Zorn, Malcolm Mooney, Matana Roberts, Hamid Drake and Fred Frith, among others – ratchets up the tension and puts you on high alert with OCD strums that produce intense tintinnabulation. Imagine a sadistic alarm clock, or the extended build-up to the climax of a Sonic Youth song. The sound winds tighter and tighter until you feel as if your blood vessels will burst from the cyclotronic power of it all.

Smith delivers robust clatter that bounces around the maelstrom with

pugilistic bravado. Stewart subliminally adds ballast with a whirling and moaning low-end thrum. His lines dart stealthily, but struggle to be heard over Mendoza’s astringent riffing, which is at once fluid and staccato. The performance is a relentless terror-ride over craggy terrain, a storm and stress test for the headstrong.

Throughout this stretch, Mendoza’s tone skews tart and serrated, springing from the Sonny Sharrock and James Blood Ulmer school of mercurial jaggedness, but without tapping into soulful veins the way those two artists occasionally did. In the piece’s final 90 seconds, the snarly onslaught subsides, as Mendoza gets off a gorgeous “Little Wing”-like motif and Smith brandishes brushes. It’s a wonderful feint and a welcome respite.

Adding visual interest, Keegan Monaghan’s stroboscopic Super 8 film overlays the musicians and sometimes obscures them. Rothko-esque shapes resemble flurries of debris, flickering and streaming to match the music’s high wire

chaos. These images convey the effect of furious microscopic activity.

At the start of the second and final longer piece, Smith bows a cymbal as Mendoza and Stewart generate ominous, low-lying clouds of feedback and rumble, creating a sense of vague menace. Smith then brings out mallets as Mendoza wrings crystalline spangles, slaloming down the fretboard and evoking the eerie mystique and icewater in veins beauty of early-1970s Terje Rypdal or Sir Richard Bishop at his most contemplative. Smith proves himself to be a Chico Hamilton-like athlete on the kit, flitting around it with phenomenal dexterity, with the occasional rubbing of a drumstick on a cymbal. Mendoza and Stewart play circular riffs that never intersect. At one point, Smith and Stewart engage in a minute of articulate, squabbling interplay before Mendoza rejoins and things get convulsive and abrasive.

From this point, the track continues to ascend with each passing minute.

The trio engage in frenetic crosstalk, each musician seemingly trying to overpower the others, as in The Velvet Underground’s “Sister Ray”, but within an improv context. Exhilarating battle-royale vibes flow. When Smith plays a relatively straight, rock-ish rhythm and Stewart locks in with him in what sounds like an unintentional allusion to The Birthday Party’s “King Ink”, it’s shocking, in the best way possible.

Soon after, another peak is achieved, as things get infernally turbulent. After a spell of Eddie Van Halen/Marnie Stern-like fretboard tapping, Mendoza achieves her most mind-bending riff near the end, a whammy bar freakout and ominous ostinato that would give Robert Fripp the vapours.

I’ve not seen enough of Ava Mendoza’s live exploits to say with authority, but this one sounded like some kind of zenith, a magnificent conglomeration of her greatest tricks.

Dave Segal

Ryan Muir courtesy of MoMA PS1