



Territorial – Tlaxihuiqui (2021)



by David Wilikofsky

Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility, more commonly referred to as Territorial, is the oldest prison in the state of Colorado. Constructed in 1871 as settlers expanded west, it rests today within the city limits of Cañon City, Colorado and houses just under one thousand inmates. No recorded music has ever made it from within its walls into the free world until this week, when Tlaxihuiqui, the latest album from [Die Jim Crow Records](#), is released.

Started by Fury Young in 2013 as a recording project to give voice to the experiences of formerly and presently incarcerated black musicians, Die Jim Crow has since morphed into many

other things: a full-fledged record label, a concert series that helped raise money to send over 30,000 pieces of PPE into prisons, and more. Tlaxihuiqui may be the most fully realized set of music from the label to date, an expansive prog Americana album that tells the stories of its creators, seven inmates housed at Territorial.

Even though I've referred to the album as "prog Americana", that feels insufficient to describe the wide-ranging musical vision here; the true set of styles and voices on display is much larger than that phrase would imply. The album opens with a traditional Indigenous Nahuatl chant, but soon moves on to folk, country, blues rock, spoken word and more. This boundary-less approach to genre makes sense; at its core, the album is about the life experiences of the musicians, and each one is given the opportunity to use their own musical language to best tell their stories. It helps that a shared musical language begins to develop and draw connections between tracks, such as when the instrumentals from "America the Merciful" get reprised during "Sailer". These throughlines help to tie all the different musical strands of the album together into a cohesive whole.

The real power of this music comes from the musicians behind it, who tell us their life stories in and out of prison. Of all the musicians who play on the album, Michael Tenneson's crimes may be the most shocking. We first hear his voice on the spoken word interlude "Remorse", where he begins by talking about his five murder convictions. It's a horrific crime on paper, and Tenneson would be the first to admit that: "I've got thirty years of remorse for every single tear I've made a victim's family cry" he says on "8788", a spoken word piece that also details the history of abuse and mental illness that led up to his crimes. "V", a muscular blues rocker, is about his regret for his actions; on the song's chorus, his distorted voice sounds like it's going to split in two as he sings "The pain and loss I've caused so many is tearing me apart". The songs aren't pleas for forgiveness, but they do render a very human portrait of someone who once made some bad choices and is still grappling with them.

Tenneson's story is far from the only one told on the album, and this is what makes Tlaxihuiqui (and quite frankly everything that Die Jim Crow does) important; it's giving voice to a segment of the population that otherwise wouldn't be heard. Even if the songs on this album weren't particularly good, the stories that it powerfully tells deserve to be out in the wild, but luckily this album is also filled to the brim with really fucking good songs. "America the Merciful" could easily be a lost Neil Young track, complete with a pitch perfect rap interlude. Kevin Woodley, who sings lead vocals on multiple tracks, has a powerful voice that could easily fill concert halls. The auto tuned soul of closer "Holy Rain" sways with a majestic energy. The list goes on and on; even a brief track like "Damn Fool", a short story of taking a walk in the prison yard, is full of an unexpected warmth and humor.

Towards the end of the album, we hear the musicians thanking us for taking the time to listen to their music and stories. But it's really us who should be thanking them; they've opened up their worlds to us, and in the process have given us one of the most powerful listening experiences of the year.