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## BL Shirelle speaks on Die Jim Crow records, post-pandemic plans, and the Philly scene

March 22nd, 2021 | 10:22AM | By [Sammi-Jo Wall](#)



BL Shirelle | courtesy of the artist

A little less than a year ago Philly-based rapper **BL Shirelle** released *Asata Troi*, marking not only her debut, but the debut of the Die Jim Crow record label.

The product of several years of contemplation and collaboration, Die Jim Crow is a nonprofit record label for formerly and currently incarcerated musicians that places awesome music and urgent activism on

equal planes. And though the mid-pandemic launch is not what Shirelle or anybody else involved had in mind, they worked through the obstacles and have a lot planned for the label's future.

When we first begin talking, she takes a minute to talk about what life has been like in the past twelve months: "It's kind of crazy that a year is approaching. Just in this time capsule we've been in. So I can't even really wrap my mind around that it's been a year."

Despite how oddly time passed in 2020, Shirelle has kept busy. Part of that busy schedule comes from Shirelle's work as the executive producer on an upcoming album from B. Alexis—one of Die Jim Crow's artists from South Carolina.

"She's a wonderful, beautiful person. She's serving thirty years, she's been incarcerated since she was seventeen, and she's such a phenomenal, honest, vulnerable writer. So it's been a privilege to add what I can to her work. And this is my first time actually kind of being in that type of control with someone else's work outside of mine, so it's teaching me a lot."

While B. Alexis' upcoming album is the first that Shirelle is executive producing, she reveals that she's working on another Die Jim Crow project in South Carolina. "We haven't gotten started on that but it's coming up."

But producing isn't the only thing Shirelle has been up to. As expected from such a prolific artist, she has continued to write throughout the pandemic and hopes to release more work sometime in the future. There have also been some less expected developments, such as her work assisting in a class called "Incarcerated Stories: Documenting In/Justice" at Wesleyan University.

"I presented at Yale on this exact course last semester and I just was a person who came on, presented, tied my life story as well as the *Divine Comedy* to my songs." From there, Wesleyan University reached out to her about helping out with a similar course. "We incorporate and perform hip-hop through Dante's "Inferno" and the *Divine Comedy* in general, and we tie it all together with the 50th anniversary of the Attica Uprising."

And it seems that the class is as interesting from Shirelle's view as it is for the students. "The professor — his name is Ronald Jenkins — he really appreciates my writing. He's an older white gentleman so it's funny seeing him — or it's beautiful, rather — seeing him figure out how important hip-hop can be. It's kind of amazing how it's still so tied to something that he considers to be timeless, so it's pretty cool."

Shirelle's life hasn't always been filled with executive production and lecturing at prestigious universities. As a child, she watched her mother struggle with addiction. From there, Shirelle found herself incarcerated twice as a teenager and eventually went on to serve six years in Pennsylvania's Cambridge Springs Correctional Institution. And yet, through all of that, she has always been a writer and musician. In fact, she expresses that her struggles were a big part of her relationship with music for a long time.

"That's where my love came from. Music was my only outlet, it was my only, aside from my grandmother, the only other person that I could talk to. And even sometimes, I couldn't talk to [my grandmother], so it was the only thing that I had." To Shirelle, rap was a way to escape, "I didn't write to be a professional or to be a rapper or anything like that. I just wrote because it was the only thing that made me feel good."

However, Shirelle is finding that as her life has changed, so has the way she views music. "That relationship is changing now because I'm not in that same place you know and that's an interesting development as well with my relationship with music." She elaborates on how exactly that relationship has shifted, "First I went through like a complete block for a while. I just wasn't even interested in

writing. And I was like, ‘This is strange,’ but it’s not the first time I’ve had a block, so I wasn’t worried. But then the time lasted a little bit and when I came back and wrote, I guess I was writing some uninspired things, stuff I wasn’t that inspired with and I wrote a record called ‘Troubled Waters’ about my take on water spirits and my take on why I think that sometimes black people have a healthy fear of bodies of water. It kind of got pretty deep and that’s when I realized that my relationship is changing. I want to talk about different things; I want to talk about things more on an esoterical level. I’ve always been a deep introspective writer, but it’s always kind of been about me or a situation that I can say I’ve 100% been through, and I prided myself on that for a long time; to be a writer that I’m saying some of the most bizarre stuff, but it’s really true...but now you know I’m more imaginative and I’m more willing to explore wandering thoughts and stuff like that versus everything being so literal.”

Part of Shirelle’s shifting journey with music occurred in 2014, when she participated in a TedX talk. A New York activist by the name of Fury Young stumbled across it, and thought it would be great for a concept album he was planning, entitled *Die Jim Crow*, that would feature music from incarcerated musicians telling their own stories.

When Young first reached out about *Die Jim Crow*, it wasn’t even directly addressed to Shirelle. “He actually wrote the person who rapped my words, who was one of my best friends. [Fury Young] wrote [Demetrius Patterson], and then he gave the letter to me like, ‘Hey some kid wrote this letter. He’s working on some project. I don’t know. I’m not interested.’”

Shirelle was interested, but had her reservations. “When I read it I was just like, ‘Wow! Cool idea, really dope, but I don’t know this kid.’ I thought that the idea was great, but people come up with great ideas every day, so I can’t say that I put that much stock in it initially,” she says, “but what I can say is that it was a spark in my creativity.”

Despite her initial hesitation, something about the project resonated with her. “When I actually got a format of how he wanted the album to go and it went through all different genres—blues, rock, moody instrumental, R&B, gospel, rap—I was just like ‘This is really playing out,’ and I just immediately started writing.”

Little did Shirelle or Young realize that the concept album was only the first step for Die Jim Crow.

“It literally grew – it was like a baby. It was like we had an album, and then we had a lot of material that didn’t fit that structure where every song was formatted out perfectly. And with so much other stuff floating around it was like, ‘What do we do with this stuff? Do we just give it to their families or...’ and I was like, ‘No. We need to put it out.’”

From there, Die Jim Crow developed into a record label, and Shirelle came on board not only as one of their first featured artists, but as the deputy director. With all of the changes that it’s been through over the years, Shirelle doesn’t even see the record label as Die Jim Crow’s final form.

“I definitely see it growing in ways that hopefully we get to the point where we can train people on how to engineer, train people on how to edit videos, graphic design, you know, whatever they’re into. Just tons of stuff, so much creative content that we can work with – we have the bandwidth to do that. I feel like we’ll be able to get there with time, but we’re focusing on the music. We’re just trying to make sure that all our videos are great, stuff like that, but I definitely see us getting a lot bigger.”

The current record label iteration of Die Jim Crow got its start at an unfortunate time. They announced the label right on the verge of the pandemic, with Shirelle’s own album coming out only a few months after lockdown had started. There are some things that never happened as a result, namely live concerts.

“I want to go on tour. I have a show coming up at the Modern Museum of Art and I’ve been having shows all through the pandemic virtually, but I want a tour, I want a live band, I want to survive. I was banking on that prior to my release.” And Shirelle still plans to have that happen when she’s able, “I want to pick up right where I left off in that regard, but I definitely want to tour.”

After discussing touring plans and virtual concerts for a moment, we shift gears to talk for a moment about an upcoming project from Die Jim Crow by a band called Territorial. The first album from the band, *TLAXIHUIQUI*, is set to release this year and features several artists from Territorial Correction Facility in Cañon City, Colorado. It will draw from Americana, folk, groove, country, Native chant, and more, blending it all into one album. Shirelle cuts right to the chase, giving some background on the project.

“Imma just put it out there: Our band director, his name is Michael Tenneson, murdered five people. That’s why he’s in prison.” But Shirelle has more to say than just that. “I don’t know [who] he was before – I didn’t know that person. But the person he is now, he’s amazing, he’s so talented, he’s a beautiful person. And every person in that band, the way they expose like their most raw vulnerabilities and their emotions as men – it’s just something I haven’t experienced in a long time when it comes to music.”



BL Shirelle | courtesy of the artist

Like all of the other works from Die Jim Crow, the album does ultimately hope to reveal the humanity of incarcerated persons, but, more importantly, it is meant to show off great music. Shirelle often has to grapple with the common misconception that music is secondary to activism in Die Jim Crow's work.

"I want change, but what God put in me from the beginning is to be a writer. It's what I was born with. I didn't have to go through anything. I didn't have to learn anything. I was made to do that." And that isn't limited to just Shirelle. She expresses that every artist at DJC is held to the same standard. "The people we fuck with are just like me. They were born to do this and that's the difference of what DJC does versus a lot of these other art programs that work with incarcerated people. That's the difference. We do it with masters, professionals, who are just amazing."

Shirelle has lived in Philadelphia her whole life, but when I ask her about her relationship with the Philly music scene, she seemed a bit stumped for the first time during our chat. After thinking for a second, she explains her experience a bit.

"As far as a rap culture in general, it's kind of tough to crack because Philly is very tough already. And then there's a lot of self-conscious bias about whether it be how I look, whether it be my age demographic – I'm in my early 30s – so that's another thing." Shirelle explains that she hasn't really gotten much recognition here yet, despite the fact that Die Jim Crow is half-based in Philly and that she herself a life-long resident. "I think Philly is probably my sixth highest demographic. Which, it should be a lot higher, you'd think." Ultimately, she doesn't take the tough nature of the city's hip-hop scene too personally. "Philly can be a tough nut to crack, and I appreciate that sometimes. I appreciate that because there's always a constant challenge, so I don't look at it negatively."

Having covered the musical side of things, Shirelle gives some closing thoughts on the more political end of life in Philadelphia.

"What people don't understand about returning citizens — or, you know, people that are incarcerated — is that we are the most aware politically without even consciously knowing. We are the people who know the judges, we are the people who know the district attorneys, we know the attorney generals. We know that most people just go in there and check the boxes—they don't know anything about these people. And when you get incarcerated, as soon as you go to the county jail the first thing somebody will ask you is, 'Who's your judge?' You might say somebody that's notoriously hard, like Judge Means and then they'll say, 'Oh you're going to state, you might as well pack, save your bread, learn how to play pinochle, figure out everything they do upstate, because you're going there,' and they're usually right in their evaluation of your situation.

"And with that being said there's quite a few progressive judges or potential judges who want to run and they want to change things and they want to change how the justice system treats the people put before it. I really encourage everyone who isn't aware of or familiar with these judges to start looking at some of them. I'm not trying to make anybody pick or choose, but just picking one person who I think's worth looking at – Caroline Turner, check her out. She's definitely on the side of people who are trying to get their life together, trying to make a change, understanding the family dynamics of incarceration. There's more to incarceration than just a body being placed inside of a prison. There's a lot more."

Shirelle gives parting advice to those who don't have the time to learn more about judges in Philadelphia, or anywhere else. "If you have no idea what's going on in this criminal justice system in the city, when it comes to voting for the judges at least, just leave it and allow people who are familiar to try and change things. That's my humble advice."

You can watch Shirelle (and the mononymous [Naomi](#)) perform below, via the [MoMA Youtube](#). Be sure to follow [BL Shirelle](#) and [Die Jim Crow](#) to keep up on the release of *TLAXIHUIQUI* and other future projects.