



Musician B.L. Shirelle's path from prison to power

How formerly incarcerated musician B.L. Shirelle became Deputy Director of a record label.

When B.L. Shirelle was serving her second prison sentence, a fellow inmate and friend Shotta Montgomery passed on to her a letter about a project called *Die Jim Crow*.

Die Jim Crow was a developing EP recorded in prisons all over America with currently and formerly incarcerated musicians. Exploring issues of race, discrimination and mass incarceration, the music was empowering. Shirelle was intrigued.

What began with her writing lyrics to a song called "*Headed to The Streets*" about the difficulties of reentry into the outside world, ended with Shirelle rapping on the track, and starring in the music video after her release, which went on to premiere in *Rolling Stone*.

Now, Shirelle has been named Deputy Director of *Die Jim Crow* as it expands into the first non-profit record label for currently and formerly incarnated artists in United States history.

Both Shirelle's upbringing on the streets of uptown Philadelphia, her youth with a crack addicted mother, eventually becoming a drug dealer and incarcerated herself, inform her music as well as her activism work.

Shirelle travels the country speaking to college classes about her experiences, is visiting artists in prison and producing her own music with them, as well as focusing on a solo career of her own.

We spoke with Shirelle about her youth and all the complicated life curves that led her to today, her experiences in prison, how communities of color and black women are disproportionately affected by harsh cannabis laws, what reparations need to be made, her music and how her past pain is now her strongest power through educating and helping other people.

YOUNG: Tell me your story. What was your personal path to becoming Deputy Director of Die Jim Crow?

SHIRELLE: I was born to an addict in the crack era. I had a grandmother who was super strong, however that didn't change the fact that my mother at the time was really into drugs. I had a strong mother figure in my grandma and my mom was like my sister. I have to give credit to my mom, which sounds a little crazy now, but she was very honest. She'd be like "Hey I'm going to go smoke some crack. I don't know how long I'll be gone. Are you going to be able to hold it down?" From a very young age, like 5, I was used to my mom being gone for days. A lot of the time the only thing in the refrigerator was apple sauce and baking soda. I would call my grandma and she would come get us, but I still didn't want to betray my mom.

When I was 11, my mom didn't venture off and go on binges as much, she did it inside of the house. She'd rather be around her children, at least trying to make sure nothing happened. I would watch people come in with nothing, get an ounce or two of coke and six months later they were like millionaires. This was in the early 2000s, when crack was so lucrative. People would come in walking and leave in a Benz. I told my mom, that money could be coming into our house, why don't you let me run the house? I was a very mature kid and I knew we could get rich, we were sitting on a goldmine.

YOUNG: No more applesauce [LAUGHS]

SHIRELLE: {LAUGHS} Exactly, we could have been eating steak. At that point, my grandma was well off. She would bring us food and clothes and help us with our homework. All I had to do was call her for help, but I refused to tell on my mom. I had a loyalty to her that wouldn't let me do that. So, when I asked her to take over with the drugs, she agreed.

It got to the point where it was full-on, we were business partners in a way. By the time I was 18, we were completely co-dependent. This goes to show you the kind of nature versus nurture that I was brought up in. I had plenty of potential writing, I was in poetry contests, everything I did at school, I was thriving. I was accepted to a high school that was in the 98th percentile in my city. But I had so much shit going on at home and I was experimenting with drugs like weed, syrup, and pills. My mom actually got clean, and the day she got clean was the same day I caught the case that I did, which was a shoot-out with the cops, where I got shot and beat.

YOUNG: Why do you think she got clean and do you actually feel like it affected you in a negative way, because it changed things between you?

SHIRELLE: It's interesting you ask that, because when she got clean, right before I caught my case she kept trying to turn me. Like get off this path, she was trying to warn me, and I told her, "You had the luxury for doing this for twenty years, I'm just getting started. Get out of my face."

YOUNG: Let's talk about being incarcerated and how that shaped you.

SHIRELLE: My first experience in jail was a lot like college. I went in from when I was 18 to 24. I met my wife there and a lot of my best friends. The first six years, I'm not gonna lie, was kind of easy. My grandmother made sure I had money, it wasn't as much of a hardship as it could be for some people. The second time was very different. I was grown, and I had a son. He suffered from my absence, he was put in psychiatric placement, I lost my house, my wife was on parole and just because she was engaged to me, she got arrested. She had to go back to jail for three years, just for being with me. In the course of that, her grandmother passed away. That's when I was like whoa, this is not it. All I wanted to do was make it home to my family. This is generational trauma and I couldn't put that on my kid.

YOUNG: How did you get involved with Die Jim Crow and how did that help you get where you're at now?

SHIRELLE: My second time in I had never been so ashamed, so disgusted, so hurt with myself. I was in a deep, dark depression when Fury came to me with the Die Jim Crow project, I thought it seemed pretty cool. He was influenced by Pink Floyd's "The Wall" and he had included the origin of Jim Crow, minstrel music and the Reagan era war on drugs. He wanted a song about reentry and that automatically reached me. I wrote it in like five minutes and sent it out. It was an instant inspiration. They composed music to it and by the time I came home, I was cutting lyrics for "Headed to The Streets."

YOUNG: It sounds like you were so smart and so driven but dealing with all this adversity and trauma. But at the same time growing from it, not because of it, but from it.

SHIRELLE: Yes, that pain I experienced even when it was self-inflicted what it taught me was, people who have been incarcerated, yes, we need resources. But what we really need is to not be ostracized by the community. We are super capable. For example, my mom is 13 years clean now, and she's doing great. She's a motivational speaker with NA, she's working and she's a home owner. There's a level of strength that is development, specifically amongst black women they go through some shit.

YOUNG: Communities of color and black women are so disproportionately affected by laws and mass incarceration. Even now that cannabis is losing its stigma that plays a huge part in this. Can you speak to that?

SHIRELLE: Yeah, it's hard for me to have a conversation with people that don't think systemic racism, marijuana and mass incarceration are a thing. These are facts. There is clearly a bias. Luckily in Philadelphia right now, we have a good mayor and good DA who is making sure cops aren't knocking down people's doors for small amounts of weed. But that isn't true in a lot of

different places. These changes are starting on a Federal level, they change from state to state. So, there are places where if you get bagged with a nick of weed they will still lock you right up.

YOUNG: Exactly. Right now, in America, attitudes and laws around cannabis are changing, but who does that benefit the most?

SHIRELLE: They will always look for reasons to lock black people up. I'm curious to see statistics about when Prohibition ended and how many white Americans actually profited and benefitted and how many black people were actually allowed to capitalize off that. Let's make sure that doesn't happen again. These should be like reparations, giving us back years of our lives that were taken off something that now they are trying to make money off of.

YOUNG: Absolutely. What is the plan to see communities that were the most harmed by the war on drugs benefit the most from its reversal?

SHIRELLE: Right. Decriminalizing marijuana is cool, but can we talk about what is the plan for black Americans, who suffered the most from being incarcerated for it, to now have businesses doing it.

YOUNG: How did or didn't cannabis help you get through a lot of the hard life experiences that you've dealt with?

SHIRELLE: I started smoking weed when I was 11 or 12 years-old. At that time, I was definitely using it as a coping mechanism. I think I happen to have the addict gene. My mom was an addict and that happened to be a gateway for me. I do think weed can be a gateway for some people. Not everybody and not the majority of people. It just depends on historic and generational trauma and something to spark and boom there it is. When you're young and your brain is still developing that is a bad thing.

But now that I'm older, I experience a lot of anxiety and it helps me calm down. That's completely healthy to me at this point. I have a son who has attachment disorder and ADHD and they diagnose him with all kinds of things and were giving him heavy medication from a very young age. By the time he was four, my wife and I were locked up, so we didn't have control. They were given him medication that when we got him back he was seven years-old and 200 pounds, barely talking. We took him off those meds and now we have a team for him of counselors and everything he needs to be successful.

YOUNG: Do you feel like there's a connection between weed and music?

SHIRELLE: Sometimes. The weed and the music can take me into that creative moment. But it can't be forced. Like you can't just smoke and play the guitar and think you're going to make some fire music. It has to be natural.

YOUNG: What kind of positive things do you want to see in the future with Die Jim Crow becoming a record label? How do you channel all this pain you've been through into educating and helping people?

SHIRELLE: I have experience with family, I have experience with high-risk youth, as I was the most high-risk youth that I knew. I have the experience of incarceration and recidivism. I have the experience of doing all that while being an LGBTQ black woman. There's so many different things I've lived through and I do this all for the memory of my grandma, my wife and my family. That is the reason I work with Die Jim Crow going back into prisons and trying to make a difference. Because I know the impact. All the negative things I've been through, I am now using in a positive manner and it's like a force that is literally, unstoppable.