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DIE JIM CROW RECORDS RELEASES NEW MUSIC FROM HIP-HOP ARTIST WRONGFULLY CONVICTED AND IMPRISONED FOR 25 YEARS

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Die Jim Crow Records, the first record company to work exclusively with musicians impacted by the United States prison system, has collaborated with another formerly incarcerated artist named EL BENTLY 448.

Wrongfully convicted, EL BENTLY 448, who is also known as Leon Benson, spent 25 years in an Indiana prison. Ten of those years were spent in solitary confinement. He was released on March 8, 2023, after he was exonerated.

Shadowproof is honored to debut “Innocent,” a hip-hop track from Leon’s [forthcoming EP](#) that will be available on June 26. (Another track, “Mugabe,” was [shared](#) on April 26.)

Leon told Shadowproof, “I was innocent, but I wasn’t an innocent person.” He recorded the track to explore this idea of being innocent, but born guilty.

“You’re innocent born guilty if you’re born a different gender than somebody, if you’re born to a particular racial group, if you’re born in a particular time, in a particular location, in a particular economic status, or under a particular religion or culture,” Leon described.

Leon added, “If you look at it, nobody had a choice of coming to the world. So when you come into the world, we are already made guilty by the powers that be in our life.”

The lyrics for the track are autobiographical in the first verse. The second verse questions those who may believe that they are somehow more innocent than anyone who has been incarcerated.

Leon wrote the track in 2012 while he was in solitary confinement. He hoped the track would help him bring awareness to his case so that he could be exonerated.

As Leon recalled, he took that solitary cell that was meant for sensory deprivation, a “torture chamber,” and he transformed it into “a university, a place that I had to heal, learn, [and] grow.”

“That’s where I got over a lot of anger because it was a place that I knew was meant for me to smother in, and even go crazy,” Leon shared.

Fury Young founded [Die Jim Crow](#) in 2013. In 2014, Fury connected with Leon after an activist named Zulay Velasquez shared an announcement on the Facebook group for the Innocence Network that indicated Die Jim Crow was looking for artists.

“I’d never heard from someone in prison directly before (via cell phone) so we had a long uninterrupted conversation a couple hours later,” Fury shared. “We instantly hit it off, bonding about certain philosophy shit and world history. Then we continued to build!”

The Indiana Department of Corrections denied Die Jim Crow access to record music with Leon at least twice. So Leon found a way that he could record without them while he was in prison.

For incarcerated musicians like Leon, making music is a form of “healing justice.” It is “music therapy.” Leon contended that allowing prisoners to “voice their particular experience” while locked up is a very powerful way of dealing with trauma. It can be a means of seeking rehabilitation before returning to society.

Leon grew up primarily in the area around Flint, Michigan. He was inspired by local music like the Dayton Family, Top Authority, and MC Breed. “They made the dream look really big. This is what made me try to put my voice on tracks” when he was about 13 years-old.

“I used two radios,” Leon recalled. “One radio to record, one with the beat playing, and that’s how I used to make my first mixtapes.”

The name EL BENTLY 448 is an amalgamation of El, bent, and -ly. Together, to Leon, they mean “becoming God in the nature of determination and talent.” What 448 refers to is numerology. Leon said it means “completion.” The number can represent the trust that one should have in their instincts and abilities to survive.

“I’m a person who grew up in urban America. I used to be in the drug trade so it’s a lot of stuff that comes with LB 448,” Leon also shared

According to Die Jim Crow, Leon’s song reflects the record label’s goal of dismantling stereotypes around race and prison. His lyrics deal with the injustice of wrongful conviction as well as the “emotional trauma that comes along with it.”

“But even more so EL BENTLY 448 himself is an incredibly unique person,” the label added. “He spearheaded the fight for his freedom relentlessly until his dream of being a free man was achieved. It is an honor for us to provide our platform to him.”

Listen to EL BENTLY 448’s “Innocent” from [Die Jim Crow Records](#):