



SIMPLY NAOMI PERFORMING AT EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY, 2022 PHOTO BY FURY YOUNG  
COURTESY OF FREER RECORDS.

# *JAILHOUSE* **ROCK**

The music of prison-impacted people shows the world their  
humanity and helps put them and keep them on the right track.  
We all benefit.

*By* SUSAN WOLFERT



B.ALEXIS RECORDING IN PRISON PHOTO BY FURY YOUNG  
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Leon Benson, BL Shirelle, and Naomi Blount Wilson are diverse and accomplished musicians with records produced, podcasts made, and TED talks given that speak to the universal emotions of love, longing, kinship, hope, regret, and acceptance. They are also former state prison inmates who served long sentences following violent crime convictions. Their music is a big part of their redemption and recovery journeys.

The music of Benson, Shirelle, and Wilson has been produced by Die Jim Crow Records (DJCR), a New York-based nonprofit that, according to its mission statement, seeks to “dismantle stereotypes around race and prison in America by amplifying the voices of our artists.” While there are many organizations that provide instruments, equipment, educational programs, and performance opportunities to currently and formerly incarcerated people, DJCR is the nation’s first record label to produce their music and pay them for it.

Fury Young developed the idea for Die Jim Crow after learning about both the racial inequities in the country’s prison system and the overwhelming isolation experienced by inmates. Growing up in the 1980s on New York’s Lower East Side, Fury had a front-row seat to drug addiction, lawlessness, and incarceration in the neighborhood. His parents, artists and social workers, were engaged with many prison-impacted people and brought them into their children’s lives. Fury was convinced music could be a conduit for both societal and individual change and began setting up recording studios in prisons that would allow him to. Those studios were often in janitors’ closets.

Incarceration is staggering in the United States. According to data from the Department of Health and Human Services, there are nearly seven million people either on probation, in jail, in prison, or on parole. Systemic racism is staggering as well, with the imprisonment rate among Black people over five times that of whites. And while every year over 600,000 people are released from state and federal prisons, more than two-thirds of them will be rearrested within three years; half will be reincarcerated. Because ex-convicts often leave prison without money, training, jobs, or a place to live, they are vulnerable to repeating criminal behaviors. And the cost of recidivism is high: more crimes, more victims, strain on public budgets, family distress, and community unrest.

In 2018 the First Step Act was signed into law to promote rehabilitation, lower recidivism, and reduce excessive sentences in the federal prison system. According to the Sentencing Project, the act enjoyed broad bipartisan support as both lawmakers and advocates saw it “as a necessary step to address some of the punitive excesses of the 1980s and 1990s.” The act seeks to expand rehabilitative and education programming for prisoners who may earn the opportunity for earlier release.

Die Jim Crow looks for those very prisoners who own their mistakes and are ready to work hard to turn their lives around. The work DJCR produces gives “musicians the chance to show their humanity

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and listeners the chance to see their humanity,” says Royal Young, Fury’s sibling and the label’s publicist. They don’t deny the gravity of prisoners’ crimes or the obligation of society to incarcerate but argues that prisoners are not solely defined by their crimes. Punishment should not include being silenced, and there is societal value when prisoners speak about their experience. “It’s about gaining some healing, bringing something of beauty and good into the universe,” says Royal.

To find prisoners who are good candidates for the label, Fury says, “we like the hard workers. We like people who will put in the effort to make something great. We don’t just record people like some charity. That’s very much not what we’re about. It’s about do you have the chops?” Often he hears about talented prisoners through his networks, or word of his work spreads and prisoners reach out to him. Trust is slowly established through the shared language of music.

Assessing who is open to turning things around through music is a tricky business. And many artists struggle in ways that make the recording process difficult and the outcome uncertain. “It’s about their well-being, not their career. It’s about their quality of life and the amount of damage that may have already been done to them from such extended periods of time incarcerated. That’s not easy to bounce back from,” says Fury.

Leon Benson, now 47, served 25 years in Indiana state prisons following a murder conviction in 1998. Originally sentenced to 61 years, Benson was exonerated and released earlier this year after his lawyers demonstrated that his conviction relied on false eyewitness testimony. His album, *Innocent, Born Guilty*, was released by Die Jim Crow 90 days after Benson himself was released. Benson recorded the lyrics of the title track on a contraband cellphone while serving almost 10 years in solitary confinement. The first time he heard his song mixed and produced was upon his release.

Meeting Fury was life-changing for Benson. “To have your art heard and received by many different people was something that made me feel a little more free,” Benson says. “It took a little more of the weight off.” He describes prison as “a whole bunch of hell” but added that making music made him human.

Music was not Benson’s sole source of recovery as he spent his time inside studying law, reading literature and philosophy, and achieving spiritual enlightenment. Throughout his interview with *Mission*, Benson quoted Shakespeare, Frederick Douglass, scripture, mythology, and Alfred Hitchcock. “My jail cell was a university,” he says, but it was “the music, the music, the music” that helped him not to wallow. “In the oceanic scheme of things, I am but [a] grain [on the] beach of the universe, but in that it motivates me to leave my little piece on the world, and music seems to be one of my biggest vehicles to do so. I just got to make sure [my] legacy is right before I leave.”

BL Shirelle, 36, had been in and out of punitive and rehabilitation institutions since she was 12 years old. At 17 she was involved in a shootout with an undercover police officer and served over six years, but she violated parole with a drug offense and was reincarcerated. By the time she was released for the second time, she felt ready to take on permanent change. “When I came home, I had already experienced going back. I really, genuinely didn’t want to do that again,” she told *Mission*.

Shirelle found her place and a way to move forward as a singer. “When I got out, the music part gave me a sense of leadership in my community... a sense of accountability, like people [were] watching me. Not watching me to judge, but just rooting for me,” she says. Having previously failed to reintegrate, the pressure Shirelle felt was profound. “I think I became an inspiration to the community and that pressure actually kind of got me on the right track.”

The songs on Shirelle’s album, *Assata Troi*, released in 2020, address the deprivation and desperation she experienced in prison and the desire to share those feelings. In “Conspiracy” she sings, “I got nowhere to go,” and calls prison the “only home I know.”

Establishing and maintaining trust with Fury was a challenge for Shirelle, but after learning to respect each other’s boundaries and communicate effectively, she says, “you start to know who somebody really is outside of a mistake that they made.” She knows well how it

feels to be defined by a mistake. Following some serious artistic and personal differences between the two, Shirelle became codirector of DJCR. Fury says finding their commonalities, being vulnerable, and being honest turned their relationship into “a perfect marriage.”

A singing group known as the Lady Lifers is just that: a chorus of women serving life sentences without the possibility of parole in a Pennsylvania state prison. Naomi Blount Wilson, at 71, is one of the lucky ones, as her life sentence was commuted in 1998 after 37 years. Simply Naomi, as she is known, sings of remorse as she tells her life story in the soulful ballad “Incarcerated.” Die Jim Crow produced her first song upon release, “Never Will Forget.” In that song, Simply Naomi speaks to the deep ties she created with fellow prisoners: “*Never will forget where I came from / Never will forget the ones I left behind / Never will forget the ones I cried with / We were so close just like family.*”

Music produced in and after prison offers meaning for the musicians and increases awareness for society as a whole but it is not always well received by the victims, their families, and other prisoners. Fury says that most prisoners are excited by the idea that music will be created, but “there probably is some shade, some low-key or not so low-key hate that people share with our artists who are inside.”

Kolleen Bunch, the sister of murder victim Kasey Schoen, fully believed Leon Benson was guilty of her brother’s death; there was police work, an eyewitness, and a convicting jury, after all. “I was furious when he was released, but now I know he did not do this beyond a shadow of a doubt,” Bunch tells *Mission*. Bunch says she could not and would not like Benson’s music if she believed he was guilty, but “I’m so thankful that he has music. This could have gone so differently for him.” Benson and Bunch know they are both victims and maintain a mutually restorative connection. The true killer, though known to police, is living freely.

Die Jim Crow is about to celebrate its 10th anniversary with a rebranding of its identity and a name change to Freer Records. The focus on racial inequity is a huge part of the organization’s origin story and growth, but going forward, “we want to be more accessible, more mainstream,” says Shirelle. She and Fury hope to grow DJCR to a multimedia company that produces music, art, and books to amplify the messages of a broad population of talented prisoners. Shirelle notes that the Black Lives Matter movement amplified the label’s work as “it was trendy to kind of care about Black issues for a period there,” but now the codirectors want to focus on musicians “just being free and being able to express whatever it is that you want to express.”

While there is no data about the specific recidivism rate among musicians, clearly music offers humanity to those who have been deprived of it and empathy to those who listen to them.

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