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How the Record Label Die Jim Crow Is Giving a Platform to Incarcerated Musicians

“This is not a charity case,” says rapper and deputy label director BL Shirelle. “We’re working with people who are masters at what they do.”

By Cat Zhang

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In 2013, the artist and activist Fury Young read Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, and it changed his life. The watershed book illuminates how mass incarceration in 21st century America functions similarly to bygone Jim Crow laws, solidifying a "racial caste system" that keeps Black and brown people trapped in a permanent underclass. "I got fiery and passionate every time she talked about actual examples of people she'd met who'd been in prison," Young explains over the phone. "And I wanted to hear from the horse's mouth."

Incensed by the injustices documented in *The New Jim Crow*, the then-23-year-old community college student jotted down the idea for a concept album written and recorded entirely by artists in prison. He'd been listening to Pink Floyd's rock opera *The Wall*, which helped him conceptualize a narrative structure, and sought to supplement Alexander's expansive historical analysis with direct, first-person accounts of incarceration. A white, Jewish man from Manhattan's Lower East Side, Young considered passing the project on to someone closer to the issue. But once he began reading more books on criminal justice, attending community events, and corresponding with incarcerated people through a website called Write a Prisoner, he realized he should try to do it himself. Seven years later, his idea has culminated in Die Jim Crow, the first American record label for formerly and currently incarcerated musicians.

Since 2015, Die Jim Crow has recorded almost 60 musicians across five facilities. Through the Justice Arts Coalition's directory of prison arts programs, Young found early supporters like Catherine Roma, one of the founders of the women's choral movement and the director of the men's choir at Warren Correctional Institute in Lebanon, Ohio. After an arduous year-long proposal process, Young and his engineer, dr. Israel, finally gained access to Warren, where they recorded with artists like Mark B. Springer and Anthony "Big Ant" McKinney on two occasions. In the 10-month gap

between the recording sessions, they regularly traded lyrics and notes with the artists over the phone, and Young sent them CDs by the Cure, Tupac, and more as references. The sessions generated an abundance of material, which was distilled down to 2016's six-track *Die Jim Crow EP*.

Confronted with an excess of talent, the team has expanded significantly since then. Rapper BL Shirelle, whose recent album *Assata Troi* is Die Jim Crow's first full-length release, is the label's deputy director; also on the board of directors is Springer himself, who's serving a lifetime sentence, and senior advisor Maxwell Melvins, whose hip-hop collective Lifers Group was nominated for a Grammy in 1992, while he was serving a life sentence for murder. (Melvins was released in 2011.)

Still, it wasn't until March of last year that the team concluded that Die Jim Crow should be a record label. That's when Young and dr. Israel drove to New Orleans to record Albert Woodfox—one of the “Angola 3” who, at 43 years, served the longest term in solitary confinement in U.S. history—in addition to four rappers at juvenile prison in central Mississippi and 22 artists in two prisons in South Carolina. At that point, Young was working as a carpenter building film sets; whenever he'd run out of money for Die Jim Crow, he'd return back to the fabrication shop. “I'm still living with my parents, by the way,” Young admits. “That's how I'm able to do this shit.”

From recruiting artists to recording the music, there's no formula for how a Die Jim Crow song is put together. In Colorado, the team recorded in a gym; in Ohio, a visiting room; in Mississippi, a prison barber shop. “The only consistency about prison is the inconsistency,” Young quips.

The team is currently in talks to establish royalty trusts for artists who are still incarcerated; artists who've been released are given a per-song advance, gross

royalties, and 50-50 split ownership of their masters. Looking ahead, Die Jim Crow's goal is to be able to compete with every other label. "This is not a charity case," BL Shirelle tells me. "We're working with people who are masters at what they do."

Here are eight highlights from the Die Jim Crow catalog thus far.

The Debut: Cedric Johnson's "I'm Home" (2015)

The label's first release was composed in Cedric Johnson's motel room a few days after he finished a multi-year sentence at Kansas' Lansing Correctional Facility. While Fury Young fooled around with basic chords on a classic guitar, Johnson—the lead tenor in the prison's classical choir—improvised the refrain. Within 10 minutes, they finished the song. The next day, they recorded it at a studio in Wichita.

The golden soul of "I'm Home" expresses the joyful relief of starting a new chapter, reflecting the sweet days immediately following Johnson's release. "We were hanging out with his friends, driving around Wichita, drinking Hennesey at like 1 o'clock in the afternoon," Young says with a laugh. "All his clothes were like K-Ci & JoJo, and yet he thought they were the coolest thing ever." On the song, Johnson sings of feeling out of time—"So much has changed, all those machines"—and yet lands on a note of optimism: "These are my brighter days."

The Punchback: Mark B. Springer's "My Name Be Jim Crow" (2016)

The *Die Jim Crow* EP follows a loose three-act arc: The first two songs transpire outside of the penitentiary, the next two in prison, and the final two back on the streets. "My Name Be Jim Crow," the EP's opener and most left-field track, occurs in a farcical, old-timey dreamworld. A collaboration between Young and Springer, it's a blistering satire of blackface minstrel songs of the mid 19th century, like Daddy Rice's "Jump Jim Crow." "Firs I kill de Indy's/An den I slave de blackies," Singer howls over wheezing harmonica, indicting America's shameful history with a wink and a fiddle.

The Protest Anthem: Anthony "Big Ant" McKinney's "Tired & Weary" (2016)

"I wanted to protest about being kidnapped by the state," Anthony "Big Ant" McKinney once said of this down-but-not-out R&B lament. Over atmospheric guitars, vocal harmonies, and light percussion, the singer-rapper growls about the devastation of being sentenced 28 years to life, for a murder he claims he didn't commit. "Dead man walking in those penitentiary shoes/I ain't kill no damn body," he cries, taking the listener through the circumstances of his case: hearing shots in his neighborhood, being accused without being properly identified, facing the courtroom alone. In the middle, the court judge, voiced by Young's grandfather, recites McKinney's charges verbatim over the wails of a saxophone. "It's really cool to have songs that feel like protesting without literally protesting," Young says.

The Sobering Look: Carl Dukes and Apostle Heloise's "Plastic Bag" (2016)

Young met Carl Dukes, who had served 31 years in the New York State prison system, at an open mic run by The Fortune Society in Queens. Dukes was promised housing upon his release but found himself being turned away from a string of homeless shelters. "Plastic Bag" tells this story, employing the image of the flimsy plastic bag as a metaphor for discarded lives. Apostle Heloise, who also served in the New York system and sings the outro, once explained, "In prison, when you pack up your property, there is no Louis Vuitton or Gucci luggage on wheels. There is only a white plastic bag [...] all you own is inside." Originally set to a standard blues melody, "Plastic Bag" developed into its crackly, jazzy version with the help of NYC songwriter Ben Pagano. A Rhodes synth adds a "real nice Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes-type sound," Young notes of the song, which also includes the ambient noises of trains rumbling and a man asking for spare change.

The Woeful Slow Jam: Mark B. Springer, Sedrick Franklin, and Alonzo Freeman Jr.'s "A215-162" (2016)

A215-162 is Mark Springer's inmate ID number. On this slow, soulful jam of the same name, alongside vocalists Sedrick Franklin and Alonzo Freeman, Springer, he illustrates

the dehumanization prisoners face. “Strip/You will wear what I tell you/Spread your legs/Squat,” barks Freeman, imitating the commands of correctional guards. A mournful saxophone passage floats in the background, as a chorus of voices sing a gentle reminder: “You’re a ward of the state.”

The Rock Nightmare: BL Shirelle and Ant McKinney’s “Headed to the Streets” (2016)

Written by BL Shirelle in 2015, a few months before she was released from her second stint in prison, this gritty rock anthem recounts her recurring nightmares about being left to fend for herself on the outside. Formerly incarcerated people are faced with only three options when re-entering society, she says: grinding at a minimum wage job, begging in the streets, or returning to drug dealing. Their social exclusion makes it difficult to live a clean, dignified life. When she was finished writing the song, Young sent “Headed to the Streets” to Springer and McKinney, who composed the music with references like the Cure in mind.

The Tender Love Song: BL Shirelle's "Ex Bitch" (2020)

Proving BL Shirelle's fluency in a wide range of hip-hop modes, "Ex Bitch" is rapped in a downtempo, melodic style over a rippling beat made by her longtime producer Trvp Lvne. On the track, she acknowledges an old relationship while comforting her wife, who she's been with for 13 years. "It's about assuring her that, even though I have a past with this other person, she's the one I want to spend my life with," she says.

When her wife was pregnant, Shirelle intended to name their daughter Assata Troi—"Assata" after Assata Shakur, the Black Panther activist, and "Troi" to symbolize a warrior. After they lost the baby, Shirelle decided to use the name for her album.

Released this year, *Assata Troi* finds her confronting her relationships as they are—with her partner, with God, with society.