

Rolling Stone

Can an EP Recorded by Prisoners Spark Criminal Justice Reform Talk?

'Die Jim Crow' records inmates in an effort to "start conversations about how to recalibrate the prison industrial complex"

By Elias Light

UPDATE (6/19): The label has released the new album by Philadelphia singer-songwriter BL Shirelle, who uses the project *Assata Troi* to examines issues such as police violence and addiction.

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In May 2015, B.L. Shirelle was finishing up a prison term at Muncy State Correctional Institution in Pennsylvania. She felt apprehensive about her imminent return to civilian life, having spent most of her last decade behind bars, and this tension served as the basis for a track titled "Headed to the Streets." "It took me maybe 15 minutes to write that song," Shirelle tells *Rolling Stone*. "I had all that anxiety in real time."

Fury Young, an activist-musician-filmmaker and the founder of the multimedia project *Die Jim Crow*, took Shirelle's lyrics to Anthony McKinney and Mark B. Springer, who are both serving life sentences at Warren Correctional Institution in Ohio, and the two set the words to music. Young recorded McKinney, who contributed an urgent singing part to the track, in prison later that year. When Shirelle was released, she added her own vocals, rapping over a rugged amalgam of distorted guitar and staggered drums.

The video for "Headed to the Streets," the first single from the Die Jim Crow project to be available on third-party streaming services, is out today. "The song is showing how vulnerable a state it is to be in coming out of prison,"

Shirelle explains. “Be mindful. If you have a business, give somebody a shot.” She can be seen rapping in the agitated “Headed to the Streets” video, which merges modern prison images with old photos of black male prisoners doing forced labor. At one point, Shirelle takes an axe and starts chopping up a fake prison cot.

“Headed to the Streets” is part of the *Die Jim Crow* EP, which will be followed by a full-length in 2020; the goal, according to Young, is to encourage empathy and increased understanding – to get listeners to “step inside the shoes of someone that grew up in a community infested with discriminatory policing and a high incarceration rate.”

“[The music] was a way to bring people back into connection with community.”

Young became interested in criminal justice reform in 2013 when he read Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. “I felt a major responsibility to shed light on the issue,” he says. After directing documentaries, his creative interests turned to music, so he decided to merge the two projects, inspired in part by acts like the **Lifers Group**, a Grammy-nominated hip-hop ensemble made up of inmates, and **the Prisonaires**, an inmate singing-group that was signed to Sun Records before Elvis Presley. Young began to immerse himself in the prison-reform and prison-abolition communities.

In 2015, Young connected with Dr. Israel, known for his work in dub and collaborations with figures like Bill Laswell (Brian Eno, Public Image Ltd.) and the punk veterans Rancid; Israel was immediately intrigued by the idea of recording inmates. “[Young] didn’t have any technical knowledge [of recording], but he had access,” Israel explains. “Most of the music I’ve done has a political base to it, but this was taking it one step further: You’re giving a voice to people who don’t have a voice.”

The producer describes the *Die Jim Crow* EP and the upcoming album as a way of helping inmates hit back against the dehumanizing aspects of imprisonment. “Suddenly guys who are locked up are interacting the way people who are not locked up are interacting,” he says. “What people have shared with me is some of the toughest things [about imprisonment] like boredom and the removal of community. Initially people come and visit and write you letters. A year in, five years in, it feels like everybody’s forgotten about you. This was a way to bring people back into connection with community.”

Israel was adamant that if *Die Jim Crow* was to succeed in its goal of “starting conversations about how to recalibrate the prison industrial complex,” the music had to be able to “compete in the commercial marketplace.” When recording inmates, he was facing technical limitations – he could only use the technology he carried into the prison with him. He created a vocal booth with help from packing blankets. “It reminds me a lot of old Motown and reggae recordings – you have to make do with what you have,” Israel says. “You can’t, like, send anybody to get an extra microphone. You’re locked in to what you’re doing.” The EP mixes melancholy soul, torrid rock guitar solos and solemn hip-hop.

For many inmates, including McKinney, working with Young and Israel was their first time attempting professional recording. “It was exciting,” McKinney says, speaking over the phone from prison. “As a way to be heard, [recording] was my outlet – people could hear about my case and the experience of black men being incarcerated. It’s exciting to let the guys in the penitentiary know, I’m screamin’ for us.”

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As Young and his collaborators work on their full-length album, they are planning to expand their purview to include even more prisons; already, Young thinks the *Die Jim Crow* LP will be the first release to be recorded in more than one prison. He also hopes to translate the music and expand its audience in some way with live performance. “My goal as an activist is to take the project into communities that are most affected by mass incarceration and the broken criminal justice system that we have,” he says.

Shirelle will reappear on the album; she’s also working on her own solo material. “If we’re not integrated properly, it’s not good for anyone – nine times out of 10, what happens in places where there aren’t a lot of resources for people coming out of prison is they revert back to old behaviors,” she says. “You can blame it on the person; self-accountability is important. But if people could understand that we need their help also, that y’all can’t ostracize us, everybody benefits.”