

Buy Some Convict Art So This Guy Can Take a Jail Cell On a Musical Prison Tour

AUGUST 1, 2014 BY [KIRSTEN O'REGAN](#)

Fury Young is planning a road trip—but not just any old cross-country joyride. He'll be traveling from New York to LA in a faux prison cell for starters, and the itinerary is unusual to say the least. "We're going to go, basically, to the hood," he says. "High incarceration rate neighborhoods. And prisons, as many prisons as we can get access to along the way."

Fury is not a glutton for punishment—in fact, he's an activist against it. Or rather, against the particular, aberrant form of punishment that is currently metered out by the United States government.

The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate per capita in the world. In 2008, approximately 1 in 100 adults were behind bars, according to Justice Department and Census Bureau [statistics](#).

In [2010](#), over 2.2 million of the U.S. population was in prison, with a further 4.8 million living under some type of correctional supervision. It is a well documented and sadly unsurprising reality that this legislature-fueled mass incarceration disproportionately affects the country's racial minorities—with black males the hardest hit demographic.

Despite the fact that the incarceration rate has been steeply [on the incline](#) since the 1980s (handily correlating with the beginning of Reagan's [war on drugs](#)), costing the state an untold amount of money and drastically exacerbating inequality, it's an issue that many Americans are perfectly happy to ignore (while politicians are only now, tentatively, [taking steps](#) to address it). Not Fury.

A self-proclaimed "Jewish white-boy," Fury grew up on the Lower East Side "when it was much more sketchy." His father was a social worker whose clients included drug addicts and formerly incarcerated persons. As Fury grew up and entered the workforce as a carpenter, he met, worked alongside, and befriended many ex-prisoners.

"Then when I read the book [The New Jim Crow](#), it expanded my understanding of the prison system outside my New York City bubble," he says. "It made me realize the whole history behind this phenomenon, and how national the problem was." Having already been active in Occupy and environmental campaigns, he shifted his attention to grappling with America's sordid love affair with mass incarceration.

The imminent prison-hopping cross-country road trip is a significant step in Fury's anti-incarceration project: it's a chance for him and several colleagues to properly begin production of a concept album gleefully entitled [Die Jim Crow](#), which will feature the talents of many currently and formerly incarcerated persons.

“I just thought it was a really cool idea to have people whose voices are never heard be able to create a concept album,” Fury recalls of the project’s inception over a year ago. “Because of course people whose voices are never heard all have really interesting stories, and stories that we could learn from.”

Inspired by Roger Waters and Pink Floyd, he hopes to make an interesting album with a powerful but discreet political message. Although he originally planned for a rap-dominated record, he quickly dropped that idea. “Instead the through-line is traditionally African-American music,” he says, “which is great because it’s a very broad category—you can do rock and roll, country, soul, rap, R&B of course, blues, jazz...”

The genres may be varied, but each song will focus on elements of the incarceration experience, using interviews with former and current prisoners as the source material.

“Die Jim Crow” by Fury Young (Photo courtesy of the artist)

Although production is underway, and some songs have been recorded, the real work lies ahead, on the road. As they wend their way across the country, Young and his team—which includes [Debra Dickerson](#) (a freelance journalist, author, and ex-*Mother Jones* blogger) and [Michael Ta’bon](#) (ex-con activist, performer, and the man [responsible](#) for the faux prison cell

the crew will be motoring around in)—will not only be raising awareness of their movement, but also meeting formerly incarcerated collaborators, and trying to get access to their currently incarcerated correspondents in order to record with them.

Fury is particularly excited to collaborate with one prisoner currently serving a life sentence in Louisiana, who according to several music ethnologists, is “the greatest guitar player” they’ve ever heard. Mind you, gaining access to prisons while carrying recording equipment is, says Fury, “extremely, ridiculously, disgustingly difficult.” One of the movement’s members is solely devoted to negotiating with correctional facilities.

Die Jim Crow is a fairly ambitious project, and like most fairly ambitious projects, it requires an infusion of cold hard cash. So this weekend, Fury and formerly and currently incarcerated associates are holding a fund-raising art exhibition in a hidden jungle on the Lower East Side.

“The Monster That Eats Galaxies” AKA The U.S. Prison System: Fury and friends prepare for the Die Jim Crow exhibition (Photo: Kirsten O’Regan)

The [M’Finda Kalunga](#) Community Garden was established in 1982, and named after a nearby burial ground for African-American former slaves. Begun as an initiative to rid the gritty area of drugs and crime, the LES sanctuary still encourages a spirit of activism, autonomy and

communalism among the neighbors. Fury used to plant seeds there and help clean up as a child. “I love that garden,” he says, fondly.

In preparation for the exhibition—which will showcase his own artwork alongside that of four currently and formerly incarcerated persons—Fury is constructing a set in the lush confines of the garden; transforming the green space into a gallery. Entry to the exhibition will be free, and all proceeds from sales will go towards funding the trip.

“You are Solitary Confinement” by Fury Young (Photo courtesy of the artist)

Despite the U.S.’s terrible record on the issue of mass incarceration, Fury believes norms are slowly shifting. “I actually do think that lots of people care and lately the movement has been growing,” he says. Indeed [Bureau of Justice statistics](#) from 2012 indicated that the prison population had declined for three straight years.

“It’s hard to get a lot of folks to care about really anything—it’s hard to get people to care about [climate change], even though that’s the kind of thing that will affect everyone. And you can always say, with prison, that it *doesn’t* affect everyone. But I think that in a lot of ways it does affect society at large—our culture of policing and militarization of police, and immigration and prisons. It’s all connected.”

[*Orange is the New Black*](#) has arguably had a sizeable impact on public awareness of prison-related issues, and although Fury hasn’t seen the show, he’s glad that it’s out there. It’s especially important, he says, that OITNB has brought attention to the plight of female

prisoners—given that this demographic (which he hopes will be represented on *Die Jim Crow* by at least three artists) is both frequently overlooked, and [rapidly increasing](#). The success of OITNB in bringing renewed interest to the plight of America’s incarcerated millions supports Fury’s central thesis. “I think the movement—the anti-prison movement—needs music and art,” he says, speculating that if his current project makes any money, he’d like to put it towards starting “a multi-disciplinary arts production company for returning folks, and people on the inside too, who could contribute in some way if possible.”

In the meantime, if all goes well, *Die Jim Crow* should be released by late 2015 or early 2016. But there’s an abundance of prisons to visit before then.

Die Jim Crow’s [Pop-up Art Gallery](#) will be holding an opening reception Friday, August 1st, from 5pm-8pm. The exhibition will be on show Saturday, 11am-8pm, and Sunday, 11am-7pm. M’Finda Kalunga Garden can be found at the Rivington St crossway in [Sara D. Roosevelt Park](#), between Chrystie and Forsyth St. FREE.