



MUSIC

The rich history of music in prisons shows how damaged souls can be worth redemption

AUGUST 17, 2023 · 1:26 PM ET



HEARD ON [FRESH AIR](#)



Tonya Mosley



42-Minute Listen

+ PLAYLIST



Journalist Maurice Chammah says art and music programs help us understand "there's more to say about [a prisoner] than their crime." Chammah is the author of *Let the Lord Sort Them*.

MOSLEY: That was the doo-wop group The Prisonaires, who recorded with Sun Records in 1953 while incarcerated in the Tennessee State Penitentiary in Nashville. Maurice, I want to talk a little bit more about what we hear in the music. Former prisoner BL Shirelle is a Philadelphia native who served 10 years in prison. And in her music, she describes in great detail what it's like once released from prison, the obstacles that she faced. Let's listen to a little bit of her song. This one is called "Headed To The Streets."

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "HEADED TO THE STREETS")

B L SHIRELLE: (Singing) I wake up sweating, sweating. I be sweating in my sheets. Every time I go to sleep, I be headed to the streets. I be digging, finding, searching for whoever got it cheap. I be ripping, robbing, merking, trying to settle all my beef. I had a dream like Martin Luther. It was killed by Freddy Krueger. Got to live to find my purpose - not accepting this defeat. I wake up sweating in my sheets. Every time I go to sleep, I be heading to the streets.

(Rapping) Another day, another hope for a dollar. I hit the pavement. Been filling out 20 applications a day since I got out. I see my old [expletive], and they shout out. They like, what you need? I got you. They pull they knots out. We start reminiscing. The good times get my attention. Got to admit this s*** it is hard. I'm getting tempted. Like, f*** these lonely nights, these fried bologna nights. This s*** is a lonely life, lonely night, lonely night. Without a call back, I'll make a little wealth if I got to chop a tree down make the paper myself. As I chop a key down, I'm truly, truly hating myself. Sweating in my - then out of a nightmare, I awaken myself.

MOSLEY: That was musician and producer BL Shirelle, who served 10 years in prison. And in this song, they recount the anguish of living. This song covers a lot. It covers elements of depression, interacting with old friends, trying to find a job, dealing with family after getting out. And to me - I don't know if it's this way for you, Maurice, but it feels like a rawer version of early hip-hop and rap, when the music was about documenting real life. I'm wondering what have former prisoners like BL Shirelle told you about the ability to share the realities of prison life and kind of as a release through their music. Has it made integrating with the outside world easier?

CHAMMAH: Yeah. I mean, BL Shirelle is very brass tacks when she tells me, we're just looking for more working musicians. These are jobs. This is a job creation program for some people when they come out of prison. And she now works as a music producer. She runs a small record label called Die Jim Crow Records, which goes into prisons and records musicians - not just hip-hop but other genres, too - in prisons across the country.

And she made this argument to me that when you hear a really good song, you can connect with the emotions that the singer is trying to express to you even if you don't have a direct experience of what they're talking about. You may be listening and thinking, well, I've never been to prison and struggled with getting out. But the way that she sings and raps about her experience is so vulnerable and raw that you can't help but just feel a little bit of empathy for what she's going through in that moment. And you briefly forget about whatever it is that might have gotten her to prison in the first place, no matter how bad that thing is. And it allows you to really hold in your mind two different things - you know, anger about a crime and then separately, an understanding that this is a human being and there's more to say about them than their crime. There's more to their life than just their crime. And there's a before and an after to that crime.

MOSLEY: Maurice Chammah is a staff writer for The Marshall Project. His recent op-ed in the New York Times is titled "Listening To This Might Change You." Let's listen to one more song from Chammah's playlist of music by prisoners. This is called "America The Merciful" by Territorial.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "AMERICA THE MERCIFUL")

TERRITORIAL: (Singing) America the beautiful, forgive my sins again. I don't want to feel lost today. I don't want to die chasing the wind, chasing the wind.

(Rapping) It's time to rise, blinded by the lies, truth hidden in front of our eyes, perfectly disguised. They using confusion to brainwash. They remove them who refuse them just because. The real criminals are the ones who make the laws. Wake up. You working for a pay cut just to give it back to the people who paid you. Beep, beep, like a pager. I have your attention.

MOSLEY: If you'd like to catch up on FRESH AIR interviews you missed, check out our podcast. There you'll find some great listens like Christopher Nolan, director of the film "Oppenheimer," or humorist and essayist R. Eric Thomas. Find our podcast wherever you listen. And to keep up with what's going on on the show and to get highlights of our interviews, follow us on Instagram @nprfreshair.

MOSLEY: FRESH AIR's executive producer is Danny Miller. Our technical director and engineer is Audrey Bentham. Our interviews and reviews are produced and edited by Amy Salit, Phyllis Myers, Sam Briger, Lauren Krenzel, Heidi Saman, Ann Marie Baldonado, Therese Madden, Thea Chaloner, Seth Kelley and Susan Nyakundi. Our digital media producer is Molly Seavy-Nesper. Roberta Shorrock directs the show. For Terry Gross, I'm Tonya Mosley.