



Leon Benson – I'm Living Like I Died Before

Busy Being Black

Society & Culture

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At just 23 years old, Leon Benson was sentenced to 61 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. At 47 years old, Leon is a free man after his case was taken up by lawyers at the University of San Francisco Law School's Racial Justice Clinic. Over 25 years, Leon consumed as much knowledge as he could get access to, which helped him explain the complex dynamics of not only his physical form in relation to confined space, but also of how his mind made sense of the injustice of his experience and the experiences of those like him. We explore the parallel experiences of those confined within and beyond the walls of prison, the awakenings and reckonings that helped him build emotional and psychic resilience and the near impossible task of embodiment in a place that traffics in sensory deprivation. We discuss the moments and people in 2020 that would be instrumental in his release and how people born guilty in America maintain faith in the idea of justice, which he believes is a natural human impulse and, like hope, is also a spiritual practice.

About Leon Benson

Leon's case was championed by The Racial Justice Clinic at the University of San Francisco's School of Law and led by all-star attorney and author Lara Bazelon. The particulars of his case are the focus of season three of investigative podcast series Suspect. Leon performs as EL BENTLY 448 and shares his survivor's journey on Innocent Born Guilty, an explosive hip hop record full of poetry, philosophy and world history, inspired by Black-led social justice movements. Innocent Born Guilty is available now from Die Jim Crow Records.

Throughout his incarceration, Leon was supported by family, friends and strangers on the internet, like Shannon Coleman and Steve Willet. For those interested in supporting charities in the UK addressing miscarriages of justice and prison reform, please consider supporting the work of Appeal and the Prison Reform Trust.