

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

**D.J.C.
RECORDS**



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INTERVIEWS



Highlights - Fury Young - BL Shirelle - Co-Executive Directors of
DJC Records

INTERVIEWED BY MIA FUNK & NAOMI ZIDON

Fury Young and BL Shirelle are the powerhouse team behind Die Jim Crow Records, the first non-profit record label in United States history for currently and formerly incarcerated musicians. DJC Records' mission is to dismantle stereotypes around race and prison in America by amplifying the voices of our artists.

As a pair, Fury Young and BL Shirelle form a perhaps unlikely, but unstoppable duo. Young is a Jewish New Yorker who has not experienced incarceration. Shirelle is a queer, Black woman from Philadelphia who has been heavily impacted by police violence and incarceration. The two formed an inseparable bond. As friends, musical collaborators and now Co-Executive Directors of Die Jim Crow Records, their leadership and commitment to values of representation, fairness, passion for the cause, and a love for art, are at the core of DJC.



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The Creative Process Podcast - Arts, Culture and Society

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So, you're the first nonprofit record label in the U.S. for currently and formally incarcerated musicians. Just tell us how it came to be?

FURY YOUNG

Well, I'm the founder and I got the idea in 2013 when I was a wee young 23-year-old activist, and I had been studying history at Los Angeles City College, and I took this class on genocide that had a huge impact on me, and it also coincided, just the timing, with the Occupy Wall Street movement. So then two years later in 2013, I was reading *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, and the book is about how mass incarceration is like a modern-day racial caste system. And I just heavily related to the book. I grew up around some impacted people. I had a mentor who was formerly incarcerated named Alexander, who was actually Muhammad Ali's bodyguard.

And I just got the idea to do an album, because I was listening to a lot of concept albums like Pink Floyd, *The Wall*. And it started from there, just a little seed and a spark of just this idea for this one album. And then over time, it just evolved into an EP, and then a record label and a nonprofit. And here we are.

BL SHIRELLE

Just open mind, open heart, that's it. I think the music speaks for itself, right? So when you start to trauma shape it, and say *this is how I want you to listen...* And I think in the end, what our mission is, is to dismantle stereotypes around race and prison. Of course, but what that means is that means that if somebody's been listening to Territorial. Like this album is freaking amazing! And you know how when you listen to something amazing, then you start looking into the artist and stuff because now you want to know where's this person from? Or how did this person write the songs? So now you start watching interviews and stuff, and then you see that Michael Tenneson is serving five life sentences. And he's been incarcerated since 1987 for murdering five people.

And you're like, Wow, like, I never thought that I could even relate anything in my life to this person or to a person that could do something like that. So subconsciously what it does is it humanizes us, right? as people. And then maybe if you are a small business owner or something like that, and you may have never hired someone with a criminal record before you may see people with arrest and you're like, Nope, you just keep it pushing.

But maybe from listening to that album and you see this guy, he applied for your job, and he has a drug charge or something. Maybe you're not looking at it so crazy anymore. It's like, know what? I'll give him an interview. I'll see. And that interview may change, you know, your life and that person's life. So that's like the ideal scenario.

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So when you go into parole, like when you're on your way, your friends will tell you, the ones who have been there, "Don't let them like upset you. Don't let them get you out of your character." And I remember the first time I went up to parole, I survived a police-involved shooting. So I was shot multiple times. And it was my time to go down there and talk about this situation. And I was wondering if I wanted to tell the truth, or if I wanted to say what they want you to say because if you go in there with the truth, it's called "not taking responsibility". You have to say exactly whatever is on that police report. So that was gonna be hard for me because they was basically trying to make it seem like I knew that these guys were cops, and I just shot this guy because he was a cop. That wasn't true, but I remember putting on my wife's glasses. Then she was my girlfriend at the time, and she can't see it all. And I had perfect vision. So I remember stumbling down the walk trying to get there because I couldn't see, but I felt like I needed the glasses to make me look a little more, you know... I remember cutting my beard down a lot. I didn't cut it all the way off. I wasn't going that far, but I did wear my hair out in the ponytail. You know, I wanted to look kind of natural and stuff.

And I went in there and when I got to them asking me those questions, because they start tearing you down, they start saying, you're a horrible mom. Look what you did. Look, you left your kid. Now your kid is all f***ed up. They go in, they call you all kind of...despicable, worthless, bad mom, you know, horrible person, whatever you are and whatever your thing is, what they attack.

So I was just sitting there, and it came for me to tell the story, and I kind of balanced the two, you know, by saying, "Hey, it was a point in the time..." which was the truth. It was a point in time where I did hear him say Philadelphia Police, but it was like too late by then. It was already happening. So the shooting was already in progress.

And I remember them telling me that I was not taking responsibility. I still had come this far, and I still was choosing to lie and X, Y, and Z. And I remember my eyes started to well up, and I was like, I'm not going to let 'em do it because even crying to them is like manipulation. You can't cry while they're attacking you. Can't talk back, you just kind of have to take it. So I remember just kind of self-absorbing it. And when I walked out, and my eyes was like to the brim, the guard was like, "You did great." She was like, "You're, you're going to get parole. You did a wonderful job.

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That's how she was. Miss Naomi (Mello-D) was very, very positive. I don't know how. She would say God. She would say the Love of Jesus is what kept her positive, but I've just never seen her have a distasteful moment. She was able to get her freedom. She filed out for commutation. They denied her all five votes, and then her roommate just was like, you need to do it again, file paperwork again.

So she wrote the letter, and she said she put it in her Bible and just forgot about it. And she said, one day she came in her room and something... "God just said, send that letter." And she sent it in and the five nos turned into five yeses, in a matter of a year or so. And now she actually works for Lieutenant Governor Fetterman of Pennsylvania. She's the Commutation Specialist. So she assists other lifers in trying to get out and get their freedom. So her story is just amazing and really powerful and it's inspiring. And I'm just, I'm just glad to be along for the ride.

This interview was conducted by [Mia Funk](#) and Naomi Zidon with the participation of collaborating universities and students. Associate Interviews Producer on this podcast was Naomi Zidon. Digital Media Coordinators are Jacob A. Preisler and Megan Hegenbarth.