

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS

2013 **D.J.C. RECORDS** 2023
DIE JIM CROW!



2023 ANNUAL REPORT

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Die Jim Crow Records (2013-2023), now FREER Records (2024-), is the first record label in America for currently and formerly incarcerated musicians. We work to build the careers of prison-impacted musicians so their work is widely heard, uncensored, and upholding of their humanity. We strive for a world where walls cannot confine art.

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Fury on

*Now...
What a journey
It has been!*

A DECADE.

Six months ago, on a cold night in mid-December, hundreds gathered from all over the country, some from as far as Europe, to celebrate ten years of a project I started in 2013 with a paper and pen and a letter addressed to prison. Over the years, I'd seen that idea grow from an idea to a Single, an EP, and then a record label. From one penpal to several, to choirs, to bands, to a board of directors, to a staff of eight and counting. It had been a slow burn over the years, full of blood, sweat and tears; countless rejections from prisons, press, and grants; long meticulous nights of editing songs and videos, spending weekends working when I should have been out with friends; driving hundreds of miles around the country visiting prisons and when lucky enough, recording in them. Over ten long years, I'd formed a strong community of collaborators and supporters, and on this December night last year, it would all be coming together for one very epic evening.

The stakes were high - the film I'd been working on for months, **DJCX: How We Got FREER**, was set to premiere that night. I'd spent countless long nights compiling the last ten years into less than an hour of documentary, and the weeks leading up to the premiere had me zombielike in the editing room chained to my computer. Meanwhile, my Co-Director **BL Shirelle** had assembled a Musical Medley featuring seven formerly incarcerated musicians, six artists in prison, and a band of majority system-impacted instrumentalists to play a 13-song set accompanied with background visuals.

Collaborators had flown in from across the country, including a couple people I hadn't seen since recording them in prison - **Ja'darius Kelly (Glock-boy JD)** and **Phillip McCreary Jr. (Two)**. The RSVP list was packed. There were even two full 15-passenger vans coming in from Philly! To top it all off, we were set to announce that after ten years of Die Jim Crow (later Die Jim Crow Records), we would be changing our name to FREER Records as of 2024.

The doors opened at 7pm and people began flooding in. We started with the film screening, and judging from the audience reactions throughout of laughter and applause, I could tell it was hitting. I took the stage following the screening and gave a speech, mostly giving copious thank yous to the endless people who'd gotten Die Jim Crow to the place it had come. This part stands out to me in hindsight:

"I'm truly humbled, grateful, and in disbelief to be here. Being the founder of something big is a challenging, rewarding, often perplexing thing. Especially for me, as someone who's an outsider in a lot of ways to this. The only jail cell I've been in was a night in central booking where my roommate who picked up my belongings was given the two things found in my pocket during my arrest - a rhinestone yarmulke and a vintage foot fetish newspaper that I'd found on the street and was planning to turn into a collage.



My Co-Director likes to say we're both outsiders in society, and maybe that's why this all works. I don't know. But I do know that the biggest accomplishment of Die Jim Crow, now FREER Records, is the community we've built."

Indeed, the community that forms this label is our bedrock. It hasn't come quickly or easily. It's come through communication - at times miscommunication, trial and error, long, lonely days and nights, and most of all, a lot of showing up and being consistent where possible.

On the stage and in the audience that night, there were many people who I'd met hundreds of miles away from this classy Brooklyn venue, many in prisons where they'd spent years of their lives. Leading the Musical Medley was BL Shirelle, one of those early penpals, who at the time of our connecting was months away from coming home from her second bid in state prison. As for me, I was a long hair rocker, a carpenter by day and record producer by night and weekend; an early twenties rebel with far too many ideas and a growing number of prison penpals. Eight years later, I'd seen BL grow from an artistic collaborator to a founding board member, then Deputy Director and executive producer of albums, and finally my Co-Director. She'd seen me grow from a boundaryless scrapper to a reluctant board founder and eventual record label executive, learning leadership and professionalism along the way. (Though my hair is gone I am still scrappy and a rocker!)

On the bill was also **Leon Benson**, who I'd spent nine years writing to on the inside while he was fighting his innocence case, and only nine months prior had been exonerated after 25 years in prison. During those months out, we'd released his debut mixtape as **EL BENTLY 448 - Innocent Born Guilty** - to significant media attention and two headline shows in NYC and Philly, in addition to a short documentary film called **The First (4)48**.

The list goes on. There was **Simply Naomi**, who was BL's mentor while serving a life sentence; who I was denied recording while she was still inside and so she stopped writing me; who then got a commutation after 37 years and had been making music with us since and touring universities around the country with BL. There was **Maxwell Melvins**, who was nominated for a Grammy in 1992 while in prison as the leader of **Lifers Group**; who I connected with in 2017 and had done a three-part interview/docuseries with; who became a founding board member and is now our Senior Advisor; who was featured on last year's **Lifers Groove** project with Ms. Naomi and three other former lifers.

Sharing the stage that night with BL, EL BENTLY, Ms. Naomi, and Maxwell were **Ja'darius Kelly (Glockboy JD)**, **Cedric Johnson (YNG V)**, and **Phillip McCreary Jr. (Two)**. JD and Two I'd met and recorded while they were incarcerated, and V cut our first Single in 2015, **"I'm Home,"** only a week after getting

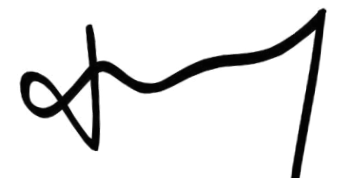
out after seven years inside. There were also those who couldn't be with us that night due to incarceration, but contributed via pre-recorded audio and video: **Mark Springer, Big Ant McKinney, B. Alexis, Zealot, Uno, and Tenneson** - all of whom had been a part of DJC since at least 2019, with Springer and Ant going back to 2014.

As I concluded my thank yous with an overwhelming sense of gratitude, the performers huddled together for a final prayer before taking the stage for the Medley. From JD's first line of "Shackles" to the improv ending of YNG V and Simply Naomi's "I'm Home," the performance was electric. I saw an audience full of supporters - many of whom had been incarcerated but the majority who'd never stepped foot inside a prison - get to share an experience that was truly unique; a community of different walks of life coming together. I heard music recorded in prisons and with formerly incarcerated musicians that connected with everyone and held special personal memories for me. By the last song, the packed house was on their feet clapping and singing along like a Black baptist church on a Sunday in July.

We'd come a long way, and we of course have a long way to go - hopefully decades. I hope we can add a zero to the ten in 90 years. We don't know what prisons will look like in 2113 - will they exist? Will they be on other planets? - but as long as people exist who believe in justice and the arts - we hope that we are a household name within those communities.

We're in a new era now as FREER Records, more universally accessible but just as mission-focused in building the careers of our artists so their work is widely heard, uncensored, and upholding of their humanity. We got into solid habits in 2023, finally starting to be more consistent, realistic, and strategic with scheduling releases. Most of all, we're inspired to do more community events. That cold December night left us feeling something big, along the lines of "Wow - we have the power to make pure musical magic that connects with a wide audience. We have stories to tell, people to move, and we're gonna do it."

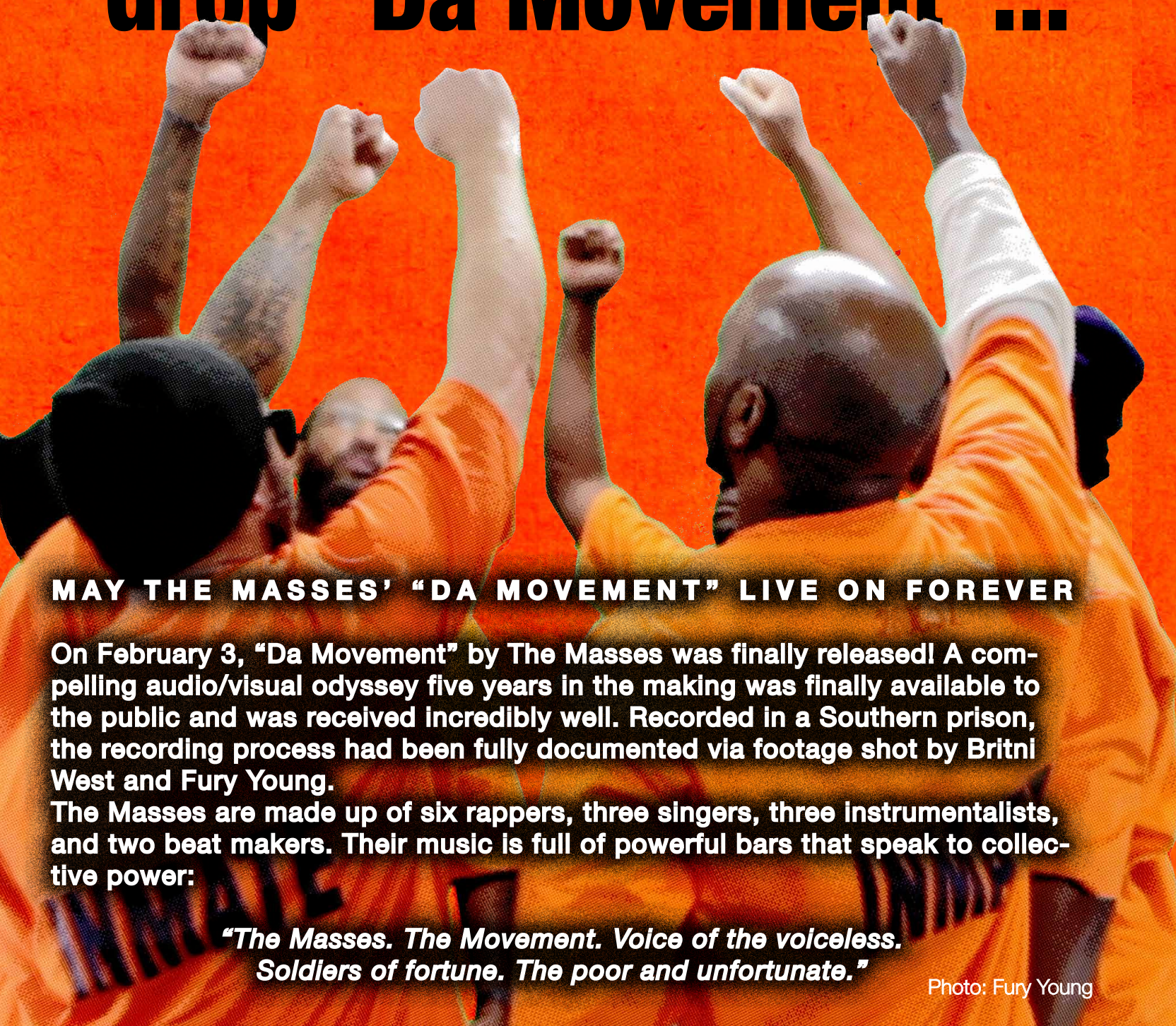
I look forward to building the FREER community to be stronger across this next decade - on its way to a town near you. I bid adieu to Die Jim Crow Records and the incredible foundation which it built. Now let's get FREER!!



Fury Young
Co-Executive Director & Founder
May 2024

THE MASSES

drop "Da Movement"...



MAY THE MASSES' "DA MOVEMENT" LIVE ON FOREVER

On February 3, "Da Movement" by The Masses was finally released! A compelling audio/visual odyssey five years in the making was finally available to the public and was received incredibly well. Recorded in a Southern prison, the recording process had been fully documented via footage shot by Britni West and Fury Young.

The Masses are made up of six rappers, three singers, three instrumentalists, and two beat makers. Their music is full of powerful bars that speak to collective power:

*"The Masses. The Movement. Voice of the voiceless.
Soldiers of fortune. The poor and unfortunate."*

Photo: Fury Young

In order to gain us access to this particular DOC, Fury had signed an agreement that granted the agency final approval of all the art coming out of their institutions. It was the only way to get in the door, and relationships with those inside had already been established. It turned out that as material got completed, the DOC were not fans of the content to say the least. Every image we put out had to get approval, and they would usually respond with something like: "The blur isn't strong enough on their faces," or "There's a visible tattoo you need to blur." It got to the point where we realized we couldn't get our artists' messages out in its purest form. We couldn't uphold our values of **Free Expression** or **Artistic Excellence** due to the nature of our relationship with the DOC. So what were we to do? We leaned in on one of our values...



...and get
disbanded.

...ACTIVISM.

We were going to have to fight censorship. Our artists' messages were too important and honest. We had to let the world hear from those whom they haven't heard from in decades. We were only aligning ourselves with the DOC for the sake of their voices, but if they were still silenced anyway, weren't we a part of the problem? So we decided to move forward with The Masses debut single, "Da Movement." The lyrics were greenlit, the song had no profanity, we got approved to shoot the video with some willing participants in an undisclosed institution, and Fury went into grind mode; putting over 200 hours into creating a post-apocalyptic world in which The Masses are fighting for the future of humanity as we know it. The video turned out to be EPIC. Even though their faces were blurred, it was empowering, action packed, and reflected the message of the song... **"MANY A TONGUE ONE SOUND!"**

The guys were so proud of the video, and it was gaining traction in its few weeks of being out. Until the heavy hand of corrections came hammering down.

The DOC had our guys in the holding tank, trying to put them in the hole for a video we technically had permission to shoot. They were accusing them of throwing up gang signs and thought the music was gang related. How did they skew a message of unification and empowerment into that? When we spoke to the DOC, they alerted us that since we did not give them the final cut of the video, our contract with them would be terminated. All imagery of the video had to be wiped clean from the face of the earth and they were sorting out who needed to go to the hole for their participation. Luckily no one went, but since we didn't want any of our artists to be retaliated against, we adhered to all demands made by the DOC. **If you saw the video "Da Movement" by The Masses, you were a witness to history.**



KEY OUTPUT: ACTIVISM.

The Masses' "Da Movement" is now banned. This represents the lengths the penal system are willing to go to in an effort to make us feel powerless. God forbid our folks actually feel strength in numbers; the thought of that is too much of a threat. While we were deflated by this outcome, we also understand the risk that comes with our work. If we don't have that we have nothing. The video for "Da Movement" is still around on the underground railroad if you choose to stand in solidarity with the mission. Hit us up. It's important to note our artists' still have all rights to said song.

While we lost this battle, this isn't the end of the war. We will continue to fight for our artists' freedom of expression.



IMPACT.

Since "Da Movement" has been banned, The Masses' work has been featured in quite a few exhibitions and articles about prison censorship including in **PEN America, Haverford University, and The New York Times.**



EL BENTLY 448 is FINALLY EXONERATED.

In 1999, Benson was convicted of a murder which he maintained absolute innocence of since his arrest. On March 9th, 2023, 47-year-old Leon Benson was exonerated after serving 25 years - ten years in solitary confinement - of a 60 year sentence.

Leon, who performs as EL BENTLY 448, is one of the first FREER artists. Fury Young began writing and advocating for him in May 2014 and he sent us many lyrics and some striking visual art. Though we never gained access to record Leon inside the Indiana prison system, he was able to record *INNOCENT BORN GUILTY* on his own, which we released upon his exoneration.

Leon fought vigorously through all mediums for his freedom. His refusal to give up, mobilizing of supporters, and use of creativity will go down in history for activists all over the world.



"Each one of you, one time or another, through big or small effort, helped contribute to my FREEDOM. You are angels to me in many ways. I can't explain how much I appreciate the contributions you have made to me. You have left a deep impression upon my heart for all the humanity you've shown me in the past, and for those of you who are still sharing such love with me today. My gratitude is endless."

- Leon Benson aka EL BENTLY 448



INNOCENT BORN GUILTY HITS THE STREETS

As his rap alter ego, **EL BENTLY 448** embodies the power and struggle of the wrongfully convicted prisoner who will stop at nothing to find truth and one day be emancipated — bringing a righteous, fiery energy that embodies the power, grace, and struggle of the innocent prisoner. **INNOCENT BORN GUILTY** (released June 26) is not only a fight for freedom, but a WIN. A win for truth, a victory of a resilient spirit who had the will to fight injustice. Equipped with a never-wavering faith of the truth, EL BENTLY 448 is a shining example of his motto, **THE TRUTH NEVER DIES!**

A seven-song explosive Hip Hop mixtape full of poetry, philosophy, world history, and inspiration from Black-led social justice movements, *IBG*'s uplifting yet gritty sound inspires all of us to seek justice and freedom in our own lives. Accompanied by soulful beats from **Trvp Lvne**, this project is a heartfelt, honest look into the life of a wrongfully convicted Black man in America, exposing his truths through song in a desperate attempt at gaining what is rightfully his: FREEDOM. In 2021 we completed the mixing and mastering of *INNOCENT BORN GUILTY*, but its **release was on hold while his lawyers continued to work on his exoneration.**

CONSISTENCY.

We've been working with Leon Benson for **nine years**, and despite prison barriers, we've stayed in close touch and finally have something tactile to show for it: a hard hitting mixtape with a powerful story.

ACTIVISM.

This was a tremendous opportunity to amplify EL BENTLY 448's story of injustice and false conviction and is becoming a **soundtrack of representation for wrongfully convicted people** across the country. This project is an inspiration to those still fighting for their freedom, as well as a support for families who are continuing to fight on their loved one's behalf. There are thousands of innocent people in US prisons. Exact data is unknown, but we do know that **since 1989, 3,164 Americans have been exonerated** after spending over 27,000 years in prison. Leon's story of not only being wrongfully convicted but accomplishing so much while incarcerated is remarkable, and as a trained public speaker and rapper, his message will only continue to multiply. excellent



EL BE

**shuts down
PHILLY X NYC!!!**

Immediately following *IBG's* release, **EL BENTLY 448** hit the road and came to **NYC & Philly** to perform the whole mixtape for his supporters. Thank you to everyone who attended - we seldom have opportunities to display pure joy in this fight, but those events were filled with love, support and electric energy!

KEY OUTPUT: PARTNERSHIPS.

We had the opportunity to collaborate with one of our favorite partners again - **Eastern State Penitentiary** - who hosted the Philly show. ESP, the world's first "penitentiary," was once the most famous and expensive prisons in the world, but stands today in ruin, a haunting world of crumbling cell blocks and empty guard towers; no doubt a symbolic and intentionally fitting venue to amplify EL BENTLY 448'S journey.

EL BENTLY 448 w/ philly artist SHOTTA MONTGOMERY

INNOCENT BORN GUILTY

JUNE 30 8:30PM

LIVE AT EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY

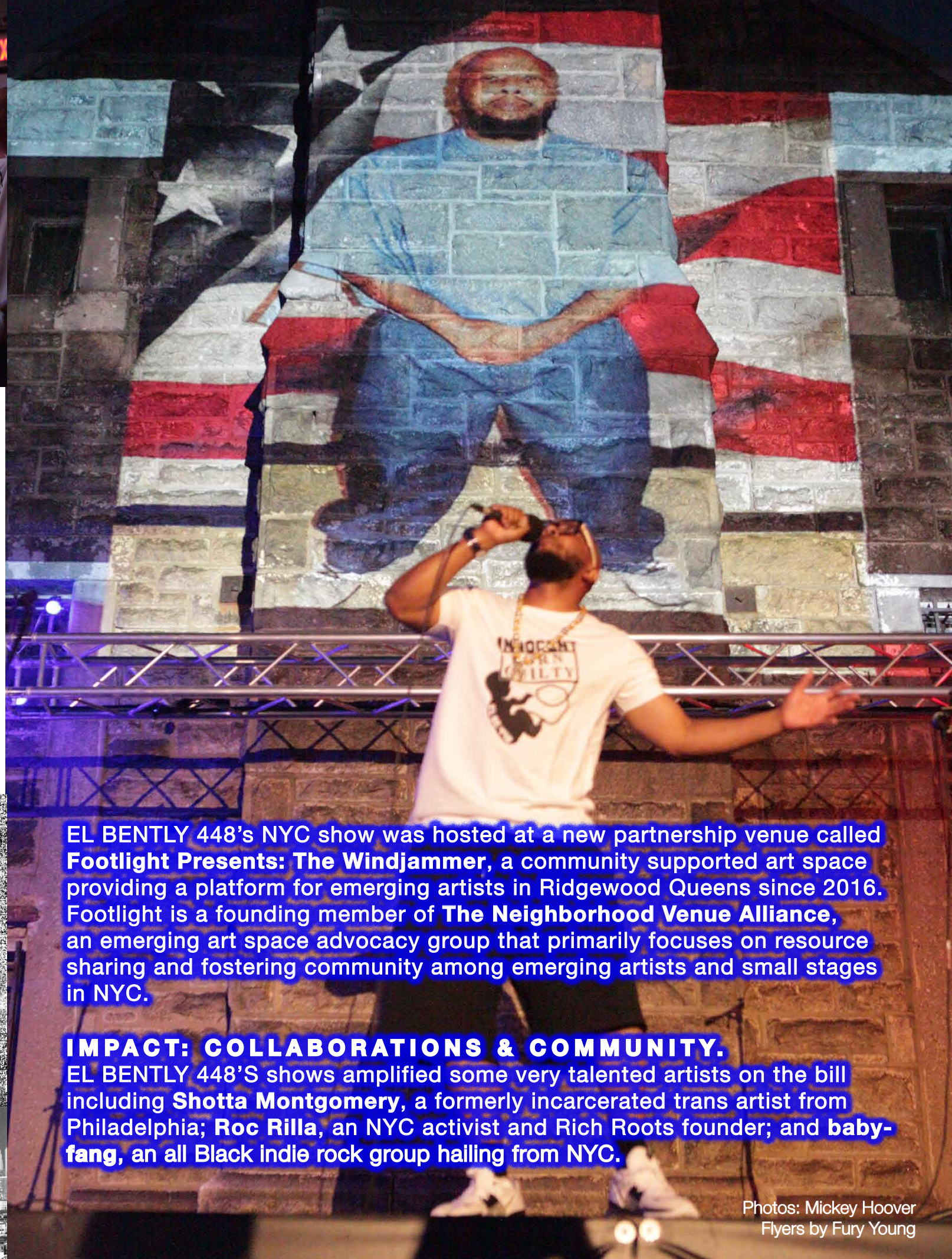
EL BENTLY 448

BABYFANG ROC RILLA

D.J.C. RECORDS PRESENTS

7.1.23

8:30 Doors / 8:45 Show @ FOOTLIGHT PRESENTS
552 Grandview Ave / Ridgewood Queens
\$10 Advance / \$12 Door / Ages 21+



EL BENTLY 448's NYC show was hosted at a new partnership venue called **Footlight Presents: The Windjammer**, a community supported art space providing a platform for emerging artists in Ridgewood Queens since 2016. Footlight is a founding member of **The Neighborhood Venue Alliance**, an emerging art space advocacy group that primarily focuses on resource sharing and fostering community among emerging artists and small stages in NYC.

IMPACT: COLLABORATIONS & COMMUNITY.

EL BENTLY 448'S shows amplified some very talented artists on the bill including **Shotta Montgomery**, a formerly incarcerated trans artist from Philadelphia; **Roc Rilla**, an NYC activist and Rich Roots founder; and **babyfang**, an all Black indie rock group hailing from NYC.

STATE OF INDIANA)

IN THE MARION SUPERIOR COURT
CRIMINAL DIVISION, ROOM _____

COUNTY OF MARION)

25 YEARS IN PRISON

INNOCENT

48 HOURS FREE

THE FIRST (4)48

DJC RECORDS PRESENTS THE FIRST (4)48 A FILM BY NATE KATZ
STARRING LEON BENSON AKA EL BENTLY 448 PRODUCED BY FURY YOUNG
SOUND DESIGN BY ALEJANDRO VAN ZANDT-ESCOBAR COLORIST RAY LEVE
SHOT BY BRITNI WEST ADDITIONAL FOOTAGE BY FURY YOUNG
EDITED BY NATE KATZ & NATALIA DEJESUS DIRECTED BY NATE KATZ

WE DROP THE FIRST (4)48 - A MINI DOC OF 448'S FIRST 48 HOURS OF FREEDOM!!

"It's a full circle. I'm back where it all started. But now I have the chance to change how it all turns out. It's only been 48 hours that I've been out of prison, and I've seen so much change already..."

- EL BENTLY 448

Upon EL BENTLY 448's release, FREER Founder **Fury Young** flew to Indiana to capture his first 48 hours of freedom following exoneration. Shot by Young and **Britni West** and edited by **Nate Katz & Natalia DeJesus** - this mini-doc is a glimpse into his most victorious moment yet: his reunification with family and adjusting to newfound liberation.



KEY OUTPUT:

Leon Benson unjustly lost 25 years of his life to the system. A system that prevents its inhabitants from being seen and heard. It was important to begin reversing that as soon as possible for a man who had spent a quarter century screaming for help. Fortunately for him, the right people heard his cries. Documenting the aftermath in an **intimate and compelling** visual helped further awaken a shared understanding needed to create change in society as a whole, as well as **provide inspiration and hope for families still fighting against wrongful convictions.**

Leon Benson AKA Benson

Photos: Britni West
Poster by Fury Young

LIFERS GROOVE

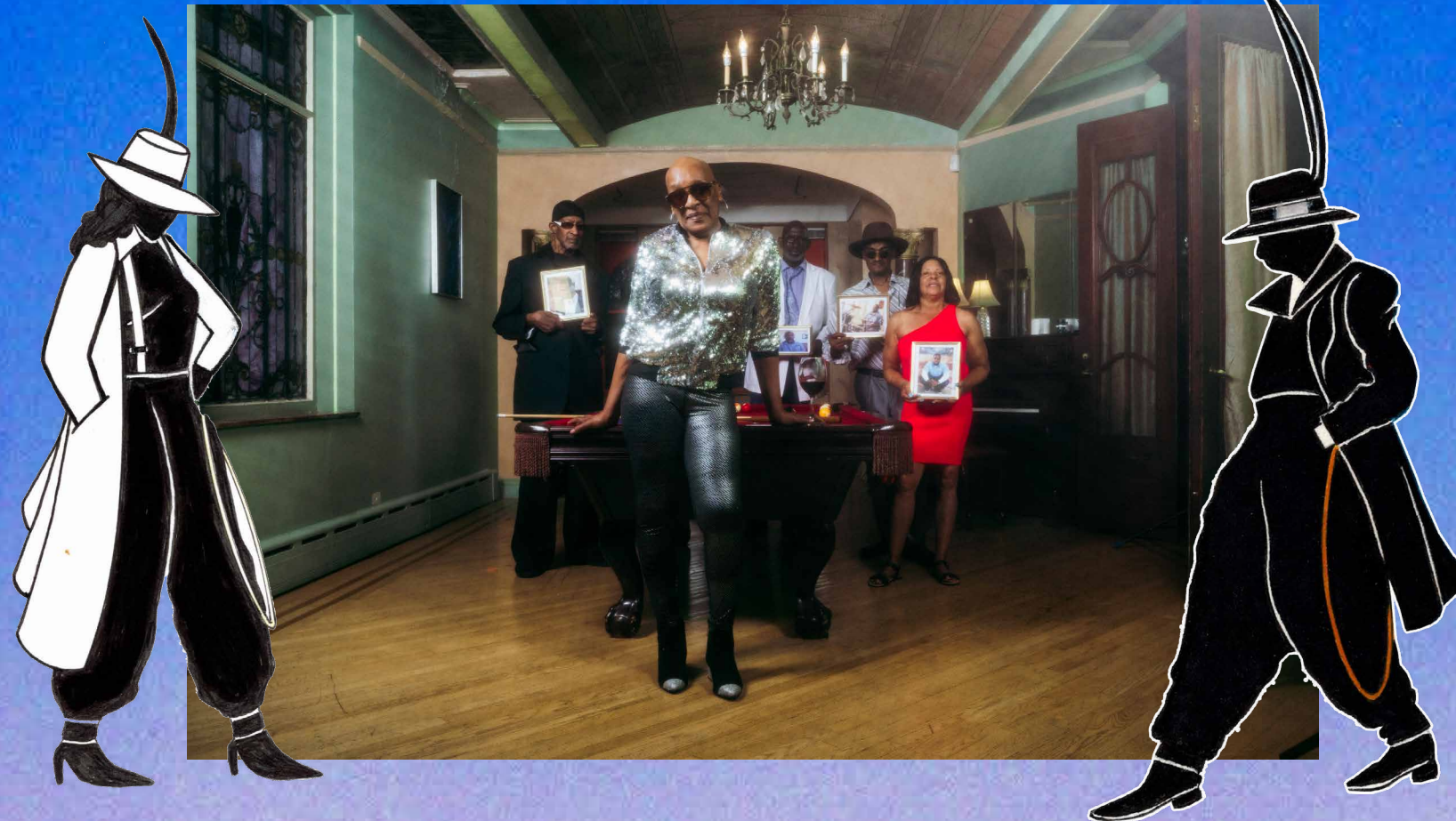
drop Groove Therapy

On November 17, **Lifers Groove** dropped their long awaited EP **Groove Therapy**. Lifers Groove, a super-collective of Black elder musicians and poets, offered their incredible stories to the world. Often overlooked in our society, elders hold wisdom, inspiration and vital lived experiences. *Groove Therapy* is a record which boldly celebrates age and timeless beauty. Let's get to know them a little bit.

The members of Lifers Groove are: FREER Records Senior Advisor **Maxwell Melvins**, founder of **Grammy-nominated** Hip-Hop ensemble **Lifers Group**. **Simply Naomi**, who recorded her first songs as a teenager on the Philly label **Swan Records**. While serving a life sentence in Pennsylvania, she led **The Lady Lifers**, a group of women serving life sentences at Muncy Prison. As their composer, she wrote the which re-

ceived over 130K views as part of **TedX**, and spearheaded womens' commutation in the state.

Ms. Seeley, a domestic violence survivor who spent her teens at the **Apollo Theater** as a Harlem "It Girl" partying with Stevie Wonder. Later in life, she would be sentenced to 19 to life in New York State for a domestic abuse involved murder; before being commuted by Governor Cuomo after serving 18 years.



Michael Austin, an exoneree from Baltimore, spent 27 years in Maryland state prisons for a crime he did not commit. It was during his decades inside that he discovered his love for songwriting, which kept his hope alive.

Carl Dukes, who served 31 years, and after being released in New York at the age of 71 began working at **The Fortune Society**. Here he shares an office with their founder, prison reform legend **David Rothenberg**. His track "**Plastic Bag**" was featured on the **Die Jim Crow EP** to critical acclaim.

Between them, these artists represent 150 years of time spent in the American prison system. The release of *Groove Therapy* is the culmination of years of struggles and triumphs, an astounding musical love letter full of oral history and humanity.

This is a therapeutic message of hope from our elders – a groove we can all dance to, a journey we can all grow from. Produced by multi-instrumentalist maestro **Brian Lawlor**, a system-impacted artist himself, the songs on *Groove Therapy* take you on a healing session of many genres. A vibrant musical message, full of nostalgic passion, the Lifers Groove sound recalls Rock n' Roll roots in Black music, such as iconic guitarist **Sister Rosetta Tharpe**, as well as the sharp punchy spoken word funk of 1960s and 70s liberation music like **Gil Scott Heron**. The soothing sounds of Soul and R&B are also reflected.

CHECK IT OUT NOW!!



Photos: Britni West
Drawings: E. Brokencoyote
Cover: Fury Young

KEY OUTPUT:

Groove Therapy released two singles; “Mello-D” by Simply Naomi & “Drapetomania” by Maxwell Melvins. Both singles had accompanying music videos, but only one was released in 2023, and that’s the latter, so let’s get into it!

MAXWELL MELVINS

make his return with “DRAPETOMANIA.”

In 1851, Dr. Samuel Cartwright invented the pseudo-scientific term “drapetomania” to describe the “psychological disorder” that caused a phenomenon of enslaved Blacks to run away from bondage. There were already many terms for this phenomenon: the desire for liberation.

The song “Drapetomania” depicts the longing to break away from institutionalized behavior while the long arm of Corrections instill fear and an inferiority complex within its residents. The video depicts the history of protest in the US by Black Americans and their allies, fighting for full autonomy and freedom as citizens of the land of the free.

Recorded with Mark Springer and the UMOJA choir from Warren Correctional Institution and Simply Naomi, “Drapetomania” is a funk, rock, soul fusion where Melvins bares his soul in an attempt to keep his head above troubled waters.

“The song describes how prison is a strict environment meant to keep us in our place. I also wanted to make a statement to Madonna to give me that Grammy in a playful way because I thought we deserved it - though I didn’t believe we would ever even get there. It’s very serious but there’s also some humor to it.”

- Maxwell Melvins

Aside from being the Founder of the Grammy-nominated Lifers Group, Melvins also started one of the first phone hotlines from prison for at-risk youth struggling with mental health. His goals are to change how Black men are represented visually in American art and media, as well as break down barriers to creativity in prison and uplift artists. It has been a pleasure having him back active in the game!

IMPACT: REPRESENTATION.

According to **The Sentencing Project**, more than 200,000 Americans are serving life sentences – one out of every seven in prison. **30% of lifers are 55 years old or more. Two-thirds are people of color.** This is a population routinely denied access to health care, and often left vulnerable and ignored by the outside world. However, on the inside these are the same people who mentor the youth and save lives, are typically most trusted in the institutions, and are one of the least likely groups to reoffend. It’s extremely important that they are represented in the capacity they occupy, as well as in the arts where ageism is prevalent.

WE OUTSIDE

Here are some events, panels, and shows we were part of in 2023!



C.R.E.A.M. CAREER FAIR

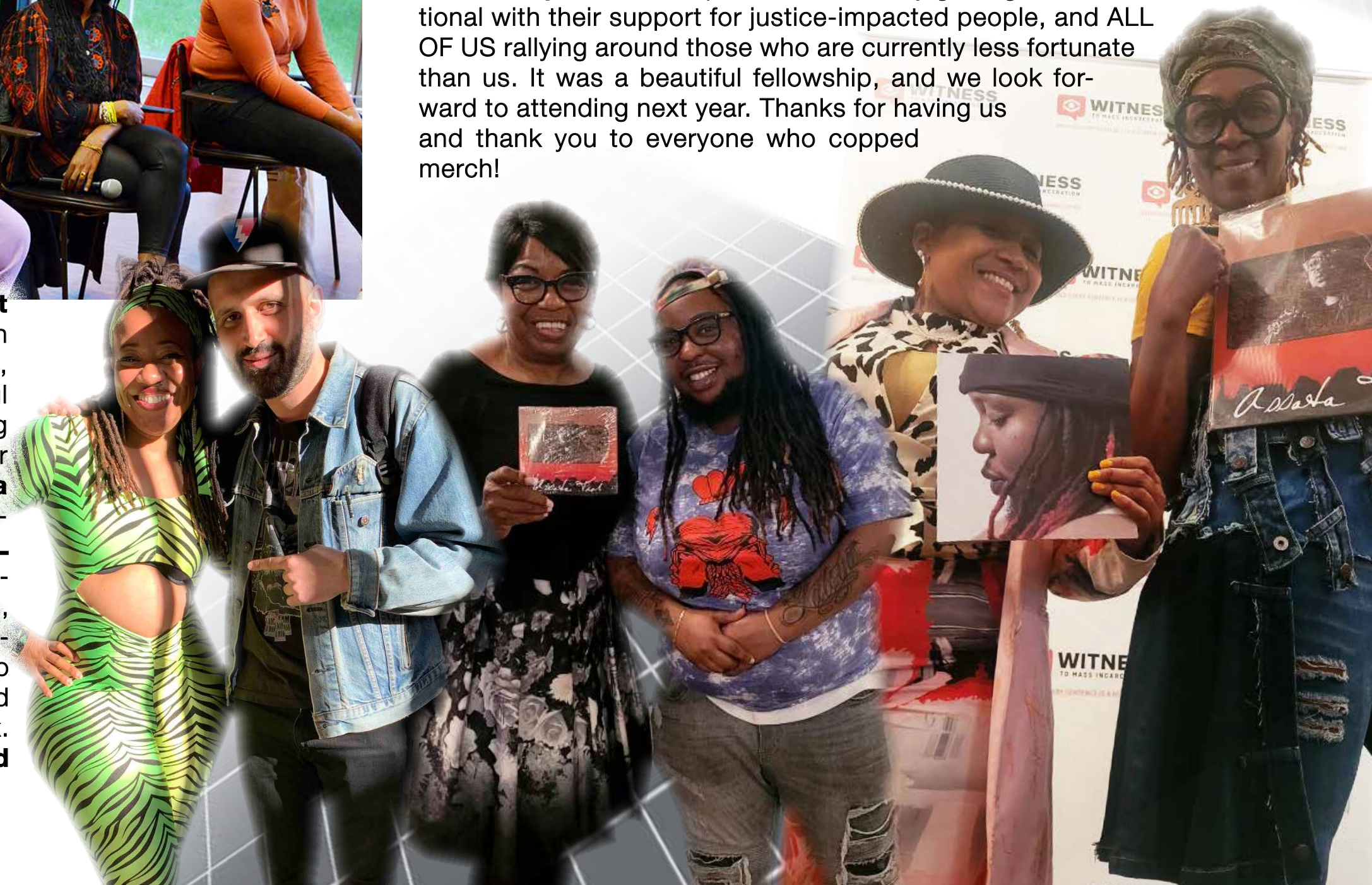
C.R.E.A.M: **(A Career Fair For More Than Just Survival)** was an extraordinary space filled with community, professional resources, self help tools, and overall good vibes. A live DJ set the tone, soul food graced palettes and a dress code banning suits cemented C.R.E.A.M. as the waviest career fair EVER. Shout out to our board member **Ayana Evans & Weeksville Heritage Center** for creating the motion. Our Co-Executive Directors **BL Shirelle & Fury Young** spoke on panels on separate days about accessibility to jobs in the arts, our personal journeys, art vs. activism, professional boundaries, and more. We were witness to so many other extraordinary creators, artists and organizations all doing hard but necessary work. Thank you for having us and **we hope it inspired someone to CREATE.**

Photo (above): Bob Krasner

SUITCASE SUNDAY

FREER Records had the honor of being a part of **Suitcase Sunday** presented by **Witness To Mass Incarceration** for the second year in a row! Witness sponsored **80 homeless youth** from the **Ali Forney Center** and **20 trans women** from **G.L.I.T.S. Inc** and supplied them with suitcases filled with a computer, a phone, and gift certificates for food, transportation, clothing and toiletries.

Simultaneously, formerly incarcerated businesses were highlighted, offering their goods and services to the public. Our Co-Executive Director **BL Shirelle** opened up the event by speaking about FREER and the challenges and triumphs of assimilating as a productive member of society. This event was an active form of restorative justice. **Us as a community lifting one another up**, the non-impacted community getting a chance to be intentional with their support for justice-impacted people, and ALL OF US rallying around those who are currently less fortunate than us. It was a beautiful fellowship, and we look forward to attending next year. Thanks for having us and thank you to everyone who copped merch!





HAVERFORD UNIVERSITY'S IMAGINING ABOLITIONIST FUTURES SYMPOSIUM

BL Shirelle kicked off the **Imagining Abolitionist Futures Symposium** at **Haverford University** with a powerful medley of some of her favorites from her discography, as well as some unreleased vibes, followed by an honest, thoughtful conversation surrounding her stance on prison abolition.

Imagining Abolitionist Futures was a year-long **Hurford Center initiative** exploring the role of the arts and humanities in the struggle to dismantle the carceral state and build reparative practices and institutions in the place of a system driven by racism, retribution, and violence. The series included talks and panel discussions with scholars, activists, and artists, performances, film screenings, a reading group, a major art exhibition, and a two-day symposium.

OUR INCARCERATED ARTISTS SHINE AT PEN AMERICA'S CENSORSHIP REPORT RELEASE EVENT!!

“Reading Between the Bars: An In-Depth Look at Prison Censorship” was heartbreaking yet stunning, beautiful and informative. Coming off of **The Masses** being disbanded we wouldn't have missed this event for the world. Carceral censorship is the most pervasive form of information suppression in the US. **Just one State Dept. of Corrections agency prohibits more books than the entire rest of the country's schools and libraries' banned books list COMBINED.** This report broke down the severity of this issue visually as well as sonically. **BL Shirelle** discussed the censorship FREER artists face and **Moira Marquis**, senior manager of **The Freewrite Project** and co-author of the report, discussed the significant findings. Attendees also had a chance to engage in the exhibit **Return to Sender** which featured a mock prison mailroom, a censored authors gallery, and many other installations that reveal the extent of prison censorship.

FREER artists **B. Alexis**, **The Masses**, **Zealot**, and **Spoon Jackson** were played to an engaged audience. It felt great to get their message out to their intended target: The Free World.

Special shout out to Moira Marquis and **Robbie Pollock** for all their assistance in putting together a wonderful lineup. FREER Records wants to find more and more opportunities for our incarcerated artists to thrive.

Photo (above): Aslan Chalom

HONORABLE MENTIONS... We also got to show up and show out at some amazing events including the Art 4 Justice Closing Celebration (where we met Michlle Alexander and Agnes Gund!), Marking Time's Schomburg Center Opening, the Innocent Network Conference, and Pop Con NYU.



FREE. MARK. SPRINGER.

Mark Springer is a longtime FREER artist, composer, and visual artist. Last Summer we launched a **Change.org** petition for him to be released from prison after serving over 35 years. Aside from being extremely talented, Mark Springer has been a **mentor** to our Co-Executive Director BL Shirelle; he's a great leader, and an empathetic, intelligent man who, though guilty of his crime, was sentenced unjustly and has been fully rehabilitated over the span of almost four decades. Here's a testimonial from BL about Mark's impact in her life:

*"Slowly and organically over the past eight years I've started to get to know Mark better and he has been such an asset to my life. He is incredibly positive, humble, honest, and wise... so many adjectives I could use to describe his energy, but if I had to sum it up with one word... **GENUINE**. I have never been in his physical presence, but from afar his tutelage has been vital in me maturing as a woman and becoming a productive member of society. I have been able to trust him and learn from his experiences. I have never heard him complain. He gives and naturally gets respect based on having integrity and high moral character."*

- BL Shirelle

Mark Springer is so much more than a musician. He's made the most of his time while incarcerated. Here are some of his ac-



complishments since 1988: "I am a certified peer mentor in **Substance Abuse Education**; a graduate of Grassroots Violence Prevention Program and Victim Awareness Program; a Charter Member of Toastmasters International; I have over 100 hours of Stephen Ministry training. In 2015, I received a **Humanitarian Award** for my 18+ years of service in the Resident Treatment Unit as a Program Aide. I've completed the Ohio Mental Health and Addictive Services in-person Peer Support Training with a scope of practice in Co-Occurring Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders. And finally, I am currently employed as a **Psychiatric Aide in the Mental Health Department** at London Correctional Institution."

- Mark Springer

If you believe in second chances... PLEASE, we need your help in getting him free. It only takes 5 minutes to read his story and sign his petition if you feel moved. He has served 35 years and it's up to us as a society to decide when enough is enough.

KEY OUTPUTS

CONSISTENCY. We build strong and long-lasting relationships with lifers, long-termers, returning citizens and recidivists. There is an element of public service involved in our work, which allows us to form a stronger community of artists.

ACTIVISM. We were built on a D.I.Y. spirit of social justice which is not limited to the music and art we release. We engage in activist efforts which benefit our community, whether it be showing up to a parole hearing or supplying facilities with musical instruments.



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INSTRUMENTS INTO PRISONS



In 2023 the **Instruments Into Prisons (IIP)** initiative changed its pace and redirected its course. After several years of fierce commitment and output, donating over **\$18K worth of gear to over 12 facilities**, this volunteer-run effort experienced an understandable down-shift in momentum. We faced this head-on with a publicized push to fulfill as many outstanding gear requests from musicians inside as possible before winding down the effort, which we were able to accomplish minus a few exceptions. **Moving forward, our goal with IIP is a quality-over-quantity approach** emphasizing fewer, but more intentional, donations with the added goal of increased transparency and efforts to follow-up with and document their usage inside.

As we move into our FREER era in 2024, we see vast potential in the Instruments Into Prisons program. We believe it is a natural extension of FREER Records' mission to build the careers of the artists we work with, and even those we do not. Many of these instrument donations are available to most residents at the facilities, regardless of affiliation with our label. Moving forward, to help bolster this program, we are seeking funding via donation and/or grants to keep this effort going in a way that is **sustainable and effective well into the future.**

YEAR HIGHLIGHTS / TESTIMONY

In 2023 IIP was filled with a magnitude of meaningful stories. Below are some highlights.

SING SING CORRECTIONAL FACILITY MUSICAMBIA

In March of 2023, we donated a **Yamaha YPG235** electric keyboard to the musicians inside **Sing Sing Correctional Facility**. This donation was made possible by donor Cole C and our longtime partners at **Musicambia**, a non-profit organization that runs the music programming at Sing Sing and many other facilities across the country.

Elliot Cole, Program Director of Musicambia's presence at Sing Sing shared the following in regards to our donation:

*"Your keyboard is getting a lot of use. We have about six guys learning the instrument and yours ensures that there's always something available for their lessons and practice. We have a concert next week, and it will be on stage in front of a **100 person audience from the general population.** We have **25 students learning instruments and writing songs.** They've become a very accomplished, capable community over the years. They write and produce their own concerts. They study instruments and theory. They learn from us and they learn from each other. Some are writing compositions that are being played in the outside world. Having access to instruments like yours is critical for their skill development and creative work. Which, as you know, is a zone of freedom they deeply value."*





*“In general, the program at Bedford Hills is flourishing. It’s grown from about **7 participants at the start to 17** this semester. Our December concert featured **9 newly-written, original songs** performed for the first time. That night, I saw one of our participants stop the rehearsal to praise a colleague for how she was lifting up the group with her energy and positivity. I saw joy spread across a student’s face, as our Teaching Artist, Jan, took a guitar solo over chord changes that she had composed for her song, ‘24 Hours.’ I saw an audience of incarcerated people, corrections officers, and prison administrators cheering on a performer who stopped after a brief memory slip and wasn’t sure if she could finish her rap. I saw two beginning violinists go from nervous at the dress rehearsal to elated after the concert — **a glimmer of increased self-confidence and ambition in their eyes.**”*

Here are some comments from participants from anonymous surveys:
“My self respect has increased from not allowing prison to limit my talent.”
“I felt more than free. I needed this space for survival in the darkness.”
“I absolutely love, love, LOVE the energy when like-minded people gets together for one sole purpose.”
“I really appreciate this program and am privileged to be part of it.”

BEDFORD HILLS CORRECTIONAL NEWPORT FESTIVALS FOUNDATION

Later in May, we finalized the long awaited donation of both a **Revelle SWX Violin** and a **Yamaha C40 acoustic guitar** to Bedford Hills Correctional, another Musicambia affiliated facility located in New York - previously the residence of FREER recording artist **Ms. Seeley**. This donation was made possible with a generous \$500 grant from the **Newport Festivals Foundation** (NFF) on behalf of the band **The Beths**. We are immensely grateful for the continued support from NFF as well as the thoughtful consideration of The Beths to make this donation possible.

After about five long months of persistence through red tape, prison bureaucracy and out of stock instruments, we were able to get these donations inside the facility and into the hands of musicians under caring instruction from Musicambia staff.

Shawn Jaeger, Executive Director at Musicambia shared some words about our donation’s presence in the Bedford Hills program:



The Beths



musicambia
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BUENA VISTA CORRECTIONAL COMPLEX DANE "ZEALOT" NEWTON

Dane "Zealot" Newton is a singer/songwriter and guitarist whose musicianship can be heard on the FREER Records 2021 release *Tlaxihuiqui* from **Territorial**. His voice and guitar are featured in the single "**America the Merciful.**" After the release of the album, Zealot was moved from Territorial prison to Buena Vista Correctional Complex in Buena Vista, CO. There he has continued his songwriting efforts and musicianship. In July of 2023 we were able to send Zealot a new **Ibanez PF15ECE Dreadnought** acoustic-electric guitar. We are excited to hear what comes from him next!

"It is very difficult to put into measurable terms the value of music. Especially as it pertains to a song being trapped inside one's heart. A simple melody that evolves into emotional complexities that we as human beings must interpret. For me to create music is like the need to breathe - it's the whisper at night that awakens me, the muster of its rhythm that promises me if I stay just a little while longer, great things are there for us... It's the song hidden in seven notes drawn from heartbreak, love, loss, hope... It's the whisper that reminds me... If the world don't understand - then that's alright." - Zealot

JEFFERSON COUNTY YOUTH DETENTION CENTER RADICAL REVERSAL

In April of 2023, we received a message from New York musician and activist **Devin Brahja Waldman** who had been spending the year in partnership with poet and English professor **Randall Horton** in a project called **Radical Reversal**. In this project they installed music studios at three different prison facilities in the US: Birmingham, AL; Boston, MA; and Faribault, MN. Radical Reversal contacted us to seek equipment donations to help build out these studios and expand their access and capacity.

We had just received a generous donation of two high-quality acoustic guitars from **D'Angelico** and were looking for prisons in which to place them. After discussing with Waldman and Horton, we arranged for one of these guitars to the **Jefferson County Youth Detention Center** in Birmingham to supplement their studio there. We are always especially excited for donations to facilities with young musicians.

Randall Horton shared the following words about our guitar donation:

"We at Radical Reversal can't thank Ted Jamison and the folks at FREER for the guitar that we received for JCY. This was a great addition to our studio that we've installed there. The guitar is being used for performance and music lessons to our students. The Director of JCY, Monique Greir, was very thankful and impressed. It is indeed a very nice and much needed addition to our studio space in Alabama."

D'ANGELICO GUITARS

The second of the two D'Angelico acoustic guitars was donated to the folks inside **Howard McLeod Correctional Center** in Atoka, OK. D'Angelico Guitars has been a frequent donor of excellent quality instruments to IIP over the years and we were, once again, exceedingly grateful for their generosity and thoughtfulness. We look forward to further partnership with their company. D'Angelico and Bond Audio EVP of Product, **Ryan Kershaw**, shared the following in regards to their 2023 donations:

"D'Angelico is proud to support the Instruments into Prisons initiative. We believe music-making has healing powers and that all aspiring musicians should have access to quality instruments, both to hone their craft and as a means of expression."





ARKANSAS VALLEY CORRECTIONAL CENTER NATIVE GROUP TURTLE RATTLE

A while back IIP purchased two items specifically for the Native Group's ceremonial sweat lodge inside of Arkansas Valley Correctional in Colorado. FREER visual artist **E. Brokencoyote** referred us to two specific instruments needed for the ceremonies conducted by him and other Native Americans who frequent the sweat lodge: a drum and a Taos rattle, which were shipped to the facility and are made use of with frequency.

In 2023, E. requested another rattle for their ceremonies - this one a turtle shell rattle which has **different cultural meanings and properties**. With the help of donations we were able to fund this niche request. E. supplied us with the following testimony in reference to this donation:

"As to the experience with the rattle you sent. As I have mentioned before, we have an old one we've used for years at our sweat lodge. Your rattle is used at our drum group on Thursday evenings. Our sweat lodge ceremonies are on Saturdays.

I need to explain our musical instruments. First, many people are not aware that there are over 200 tribes in the continental US alone. That's not counting Canada, Mexico, and South America. Our tribes have different cultures, languages, lifestyles, terrains, and living situations. The point is we are not on the same page in many things.

However, there are some things we share in our cultures: drums, rattles, flutes, etc. Universally we believe our musical instruments are more for ceremonial purposes rather than entertainment. Along with the playing of instruments, we sing.

We believe that singing and praying are not separate. To us, they are one in the same.

The drums are our heartbeats. The rattles call attention and invite spirits to our songs and

prayers. I have a rattle which I use when I wake up for my morning prayers. The turtle is sacred to most tribes. To some it represents the slow steady journey of patience. Some believe earth mother is a giant turtle and we live upon her back. She is slowly taking us through the cosmos. In my tribe they wait for a turtle to die before they use the shell to make a rattle. I do not know how the one was done by [the manufacturer] Crazy Crow. But once we prayed with it, it is now sacred. Please know we are grateful.

These songs and prayers help us to humble ourselves and grow closer to our creator. Because someday we must stand before him and explain ourselves."

KEY OUTPUTS

There were a total of nine pieces of gear redistributed in 2023 amounting to a market value of over \$4,102. Gear was donated across eight different facilities including, Allendale Correctional Facility, Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility, Buena Vista Correctional Complex, Howard McLeod Correctional Facility, Madison Correctional Institution, Monique Grier Youth Detention Facility, Sing Sing Correctional Facility.

IMPACT

Through the Instruments Into Prisons initiative, FREER Records is working to fulfill its mission to build the careers and amplify the voices of prison-impacted musicians. We believe in the potential for each donated instrument to help restore a sense of personhood for incarcerated musicians that the prison system actively works to remove.

THE 10 YEAR DOCUMENTARY.

Ten years ago, **Die Jim Crow** began as an album channeling the experiences of Black Americans across the country who had been impacted by mass incarceration. The brainchild of our founder **Fury Young**, this record intended to transcend time, geography and gender, being a unifying voice for prison-impacted musicians.

However, the idea could not be bottled up into one project. **In 2019, after working with over 65 incarcerated artists, we became a record label.** Since then, we have built a community of prison-impacted musicians, artists and supporters from across the U.S. and the world, who all have a love of art and sound. We have been able to develop artists and amplify their stories while building unbreakable bonds that transform race, age, offense, and any other "ism" that attempts to divide us.

We documented the creation of this art and the evolution of this communitarian approach in the form of a documentary called **DJCX: How We Got FREER**. The film premiered at our 10 year anniversary at **Roulette** in Brooklyn on December 16th. Thank you to our founder, Fury Young, who worked extremely hard with laser focus in editing and directing the documentary. The film was so inspiring and did a wonderful job showcasing his passion and focus on our mission.

We will rejoice and look back over the last decade with humility, appreciation, and clarity, while also looking forward to the future with exhilaration and awe as we move forward... FREER.



ART FOR JUSTICE PRESENTS DJCX: HOW WE GOT FREER A FURY YOUNG FILM
WRITTEN BY FURY YOUNG AND BL SHIRELLE EDITED BY FURY YOUNG AND TONY WANG
INTERVIEWS SHOT BY CARLOS GARCIA DE DIOS SHOT BY BRITNI WEST, FURY YOUNG, AND MANY OTHERS
SOUND DESIGN BY TONY WANG, FURY YOUNG, AND ALEJANDRO VANZANDT-ESCOBAR
SOUND EDITING BY ALEJANDRO VANZANDT-ESCOBAR MUSIC FROM BL SHIRELLE, TERRITORIAL, SPOON JACKSON,
LIFERS GROOVE, THE DJC BAND, B. ALEXIS, TRVP LVNE, NICOLAS SNYDER, EL BENTLY 448, THE MASSES, AND MORE

DJC 10 YEAR ANNIVERSARY IS EPIC!!!



We had a TIME at the Die Jim Crow's Ten Year Anniversary! It was magical, empowering, entertaining, brilliant, thrilling, and absolutely BEAUTIFUL. Along with the screening of *DJCX: How We Got FREER*, we also performed a powerful medley performance embodying the Die Jim Crow era including six formerly incarcerated musicians, six currently incarcerated musicians and a majority system-impacted live band. These artists flew in from all over the world and PUT ON A SHOW FOR THE AGES!

We would like to thank everyone who attended from the depths of our hearts. Your love: TANGIBLE; your energy: PALPABLE; and our exchange of it was so intense that our hearts are still so full from all the support.

Thank you to our artists, (EL BENTLY 448, Glockboy JD, YNG V, Simply Naomi, Two, BL Shirelle) who rehearsed for hours and put their all into this performance. Our incarcerated artists (Mark Springer, Big Ant McKinney, B. Alexis, Zealot, Tenneson, Uno) who shared their most intimate, sacred parts of themselves through art. Our Co-Executive Director BL Shirelle, who created and directed this powerful, conceptual Musical Medley; and the DJC House Band (Brian Lawlor, Stix Bones, gHSTS n gUITARS) who played every note with passion and gave these songs new life.



Thank you to our staff: Ted Jamison, Royal Young, Lauren Vanzandt-Esco-bar, Leon Benson, James Gallagher and Ahmad Nichols. Special shout out to Britni West, PC, Isabel and Amelia, Raechal, Fresh Taste Bakery, Brian Goodwin, Grace Yun, Arjun Srivatsa, Tony Wang, Savannah, Brandon, and Roulette. Thank you to Batya Roth, our general counsel, and the DJC Board of Directors (Eddie Berg, Amy Holmes, Ayana Evans, Michael Lawrence, Eric Borsuk) for all your support. Special thanks to all the funders who made this possible: Art For Justice, The Rothschild Foundation, The Marigold Project, Mary Hamrick, and Forman Arts Initiative. Thank you to our beer sponsors Singlecut Brewsmiths and Bierwax.



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

FREE EXPRESSION & ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE

Recognizing the power of music, storytelling, and the arts to transform narratives and inspire change, we provide our artists with a platform to share their authentic voices and take risks. We don't shy away from difficult stories and we embrace radical forms of expression and artistry. We hold ourselves to the highest standards in every work of art we create. This extends beyond our albums to include album art, videos, literature, and performances. This was an opportunity to showcase that our artists have the chops - and they delivered flawlessly.



IMPACT

We're still hearing about the impact of our 10 Year Anniversary Event. Here's a quote from an attendee: *"All week I've been thinking back to the concert and anniversary event last Saturday. I had a great time and thought the vibe in the room, the music, and the visuals on screen all came together in a very powerful way, leaving an intense after image. The people I brought to the event felt the same way! Before too long had passed, I wanted to make sure I relayed this."* - Filmmaker Debra Granik

PRESS

In 2023, Co-Executive Directors of FREER Records, BL Shirelle and Fury Young concluded their **podcast interview tour** from the previous year, with guest spots on **Stories From Nowhere** with Andrew Rice in April, and **Race To Social Justice** with Keva White and John Kempner in May.

In May, after being fully exonerated and released from Indiana prison after 25 years, FREER artist **EL BENTLY 448**'s debut EP *Innocent Born Guilty* was released to national and international acclaim. EL BENTLY 448's story and music was featured in **Shadowproof, Detroit Metro Times, The Flint Courier, Deutschlandfunk Kultur Radio, Busy Being Black, The Progressive, By Little, Amnesty International Journal, Swiss Public Radio SRF, and NZZ am Sonntag**. These features spanned Spring through Autumn 2023.

In July, FREER Publicist **Royal Young** curated a playlist of FREER artists for **Dublabb Radio** in Los Angeles. This mix featured tracks from artists **BL Shirelle, B. Alexis, EL BENTLY 448, Lifers Groove, The Masses, Cedric Johnson**, and "Headed To The Streets" from the DJC EP, as well as personal recorded messages from artists **Simply Naomi, Silent Jungle, EL BENTLY 448** and BL Shirelle.

In August, FREER Records was featured by journalist **Maurice Chammah** in his article for **The New York Times** and **The Marshall Project**, on the positive impact of music in prisons. Chammah went on **NPR's Fresh Air** with **Tonya Mosley** to discuss his article, including the work of FREER Records, and airplay of "Headed To The Streets" and Territorial's "America The Merciful."

In November, FREER Records celebrated their 10 year anniversary, and debuted their name change with an in-depth profile in **Mission Magazine's** Ten Year Anniversary Music Issue. The article featured interviews with BL Shirelle, Fury Young, Royal Young, Leon Benson, and highlighted the work of Simply Naomi, member of Lifers Groove. This issue also featured SZA, Chika, Nile Rodgers, Towa Bird, Troye Sivan, Pharrell, and We Are Family Foundation.

Also in November, FREER group Lifers Groove was featured in The Marshall Project. Last but not least, FREER Records developed professional artist bios, and related press materials for EL BENTLY 448, Michael Austin, Carl Dukes, Maxwell Melvins, Simply Naomi, and Ms. Seeley.



Schweizer Radio



freerrecords.com/press

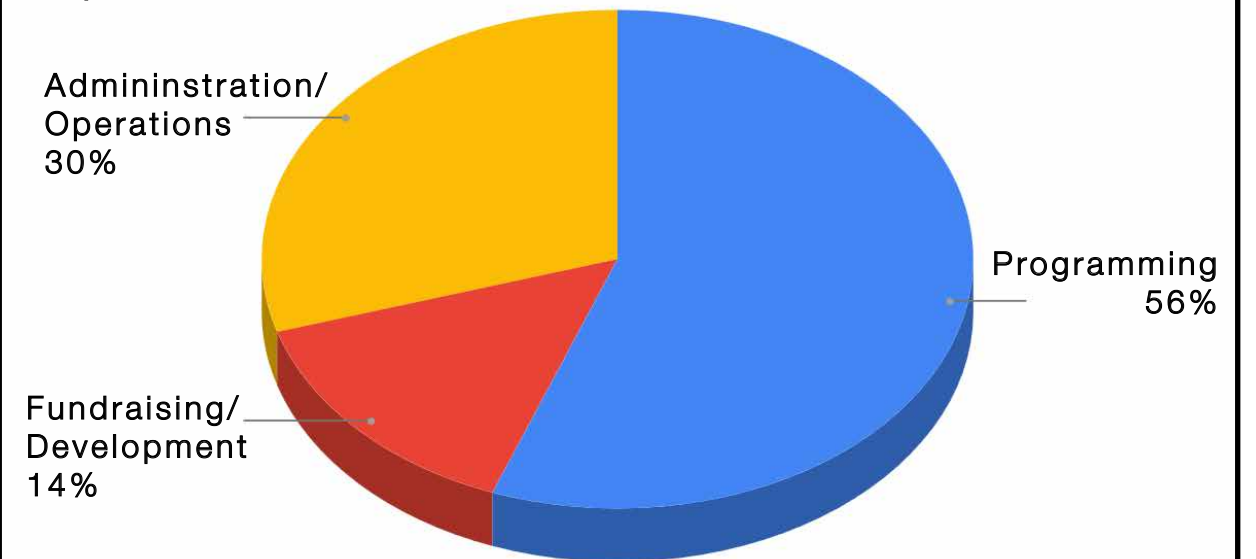
FINANCIALS

Statement of Activities		
For the year ending December 31,	2023	2022
Revenue		
Contributions, grants, and other income*	\$180,983	\$246,446
Government grants	\$0	\$0
Gifts in-kind and contributed services	\$4,102	\$0
Total Revenue	\$185,085	\$246,446
Expenses		
Program Services		\$45,120
Fundraising & Development		\$10,880
Administration & Operations		\$23,595
Total Expenses*	\$247,446	\$79,595
Revenue less expenses	-\$62,361	\$166,851
Net assets or fund balances at beginning of year	\$222,503	\$55,652
Net Assets at End of year	\$160,142	\$222,503

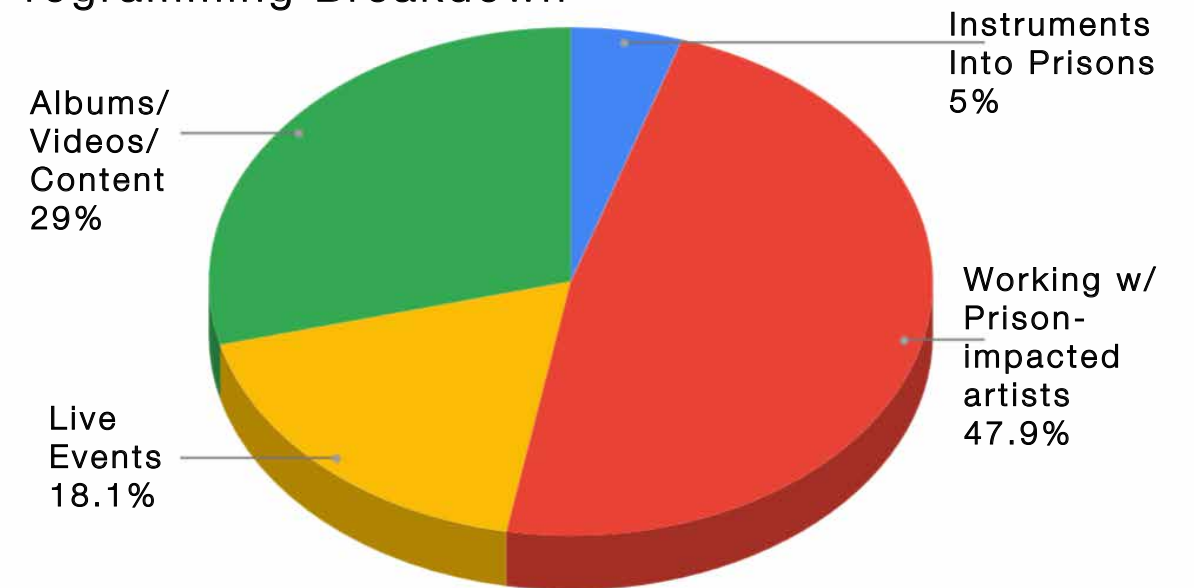
*Our Art 4 Justice grant of \$150K in 2022 brought up our revenue to above average proportions.
 **Our expenses increased significantly because for the first time both our Co-Directors were paid a full time salary.

Balance Sheet		
For the year ending December 31,	2023	2022
Assets		
Cash and cash equivalents	\$160,142	\$222,503
Grants and contributions receivable	0	0
Fixed assets	0	0
Total Assets	\$160,142	\$222,503
Liabilities and Net Assets		
Accounts payable and accrued expenses and line of credit	\$6,889	\$7,092
Deferred revenue	0	0
Total Liabilities	\$6,889	\$7,092
Net assets		
Unrestricted	\$137,142	\$175,503
Temporarily restricted	\$23,000	\$47,000
Total Net Assets	\$160,142	\$222,503
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$153,253	\$215,411

Expenses Breakdown



Programming Breakdown



- 2023 saw a downturn in revenue because in 2022 we received a \$150K grant. However, compared to our 2019 - 2021 average revenue, we more than doubled our revenue.
- Last year our Co-Directors, for the first time, took full-time salaries.
- Increases in programming expenses and decrease in operational costs, with more funding going to the mission.
- We received a \$50K grant from Art For Justice to hold our Ten Year Event and produce the DJCX: How We Got FREER film.

SUPPORTERS

Art For Justice
Bread & Roses Community Fund
Forman Arts Initiative
The Hyde & Watson Foundation
Leeway Foundation
Newport Festivals Foundation
NYC Women's Fund / NYFA
The Marigold Project
Robert & Maurine Rothschild Fund

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The Hyde and Watson
Foundation

Forman
Arts
Initiative

None of this work would be possible without the incredible support of the foundations and individuals who keep us going. We extend our heartfelt thanks to each and every one of you.

PENDING PROJECTS

B. ALEXIS - 9TH & GASOLINE

B. Alexis is a prolific, gifted songwriter and poet incarcerated in a southern prison. Her soulful sound and raw lyricism has culminated in one of the best hip hop projects in a long time, *9th & Gasoline*. Serving a 30-year sentence since the age of 17, B. Alexis' project is full of hard-earned wisdom, faith, resilience and pure grit. This project is brought to you by **The Bonnaroo Fund** and **Wyomissing Foundation** and is executive produced by **BL Shirelle**.

FREER VISUAL ART EXHIBITION

FREER Records will have a month-long art exhibit honoring the history of prison music while highlighting the present at the world renowned **PICTO NY** in November 2024. This project is brought to you by **Art For Justice**.

BLAK RAPP M.A.D.U.S.A x BL SHIRELLE - STEEL ROOTS

Steel Roots is a visual EP by **BL Shirelle** and Philly Artist **Blak Rapp M.A.D.U.S.A** about the passing of **The Dignity Act Bill** of Pennsylvania. This documentary provides oral history from justice-impacted women while also informing their community of their rights with the passing of this monumental bill. A soundtrack to the struggle of pushing legislation, this project is slated for release in the fourth quarter of 2024. It's brought to you by **The Leeway Foundation** and **Bread & Roses**.



Photo: Fury Young
Steel Roots art: Henry Fuller




2013

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IIP section written by Ted Jamison
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Edit, layout and design by Fury Young

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