



*Michael Tenneson and Kevin Woodley
PHOTO COURTESY OF D.J.C. RECORDS*

Play That Again: Colorado Inmates Pour Heart, Hope & Faith Into 'Territorial' LP

How a group of Colorado inmates at Territorial Correctional Facility came together to defy their own prejudices and limits and record an album for the ages

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In 2014, Michael Tenneson, 60, confined to prison for multiple life sentences, played a blues progression on his Fender Stratocaster that wept through a low-wattage amplifier. The

progression would eventually become the backbone to "Mama's Cryin," a track on the soon-to-be released LP Territorial, the first album to be solely written by incarcerated individuals, but at the time it was a riff that, like other pursuits in prison, was more likely to be forgotten than salvaged. As the tune faded into yet another improbable fit and start, Tenneson heard a voice call out to him: "Hey man, play that again."

The voice belonged to Kevin Woodley, an overweight Black man confined to a wheelchair and whom Tenneson had seen before but never talked to. When Tenneson played it again, Woodley wailed an improvisational vocal that turned heads inside the small room. Tenneson didn't need to hear any more to convince himself that Woodley was a supremely talented singer with the right amount of soul and world-weariness. "I made him promise me that if we ever got a chance to play music again, we'd do it together," Tenneson said.

That opportunity came in 2018, nearly four years to the day when Fury Young, 31, an ardent activist with an easygoing exterior, wrote a letter to Tenneson, who was laid up in the infirmary due to an illness. Young, the founder of [Die Jim Crow](#) and the label DJC Records, was at the time focusing on Die Jim Crow being a one-off concept album and had heard about Tenneson through a mutual friend, Claudia Whitman. Whitman, the founder and CEO of the [National Capital Crime Assistance Network](#) and an advocate for the abolishment of death penalties, had told Young about Tenneson's musical range and abilities. "The only problem," she told him, "is that he's white."

Fury Young is white, too, and culturally identifies as Jewish. It was his 2013 reading of Michelle Alexander's breakout book [The New Jim Crow](#) that inspired him to do more—to do something—about racial injustice and inequality. Coming to terms with his somewhat privileged life in New York City and the fact that, unlike some of his friends, he hadn't been to prison, he decided to provide help—in the form of music—to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals.

That Tenneson is white wasn't a dead end for Young, but it did make him wonder whether his services could have been better utilized by minorities who had been unilaterally affected by a prison system mottled by systemic racism. But he also wondered if Tenneson, with his experience as a multi-instrumentalist, could provide a bridge to other musicians and walks of life.

Tenneson, reading Young's letter in the infirmary and trying to parse out the scribbled sentences and messy handwriting, recalled that day with Kevin Woodley, that diffident-turned-soaring voice from five years ago, and decided that he needed to stoke up the band that never was.



*Kevin Woodley (Left) and Michael Tennesen (Right)
Photo courtesy of DJC*

As its name suggests, Territorial Correctional Facility was created when Colorado was not yet a state but a territory, a lawless outcropping of land in the West that saw violent eruptions between Native American tribes and white settlers who were seeking land expansion. The original Territorial prison opened in 1871, five years before Colorado officially became a state, and grew in tandem with its municipality, Cañon City; by 1899, the penitentiary that originally held 50 cells had added two more buildings and had grown to 400 inmates. Today, Cañon City, among its popular Riverwalk and numerous recreation areas, claims Territorial as one of its primary income generators. It is one of seven prisons located in or around the city.

The history of Territorial's racism, displacement of native peoples from their lands, and public lynching—capital punishment wasn't abolished in Colorado until 2020—is not lost on Michael Tenneson, who has spent the last 40 years within the United States prison system and has witnessed the fractioned relationship between inmates and justice-seekers. Having grown up in foster homes in rural Wisconsin where he was molested and abused, Tenneson matured into burglarizing homes and a life of heavy drinking and drug use. During one night of drinking, a break-in to a drug dealer's home turned into a triple homicide. Then, on the run for that, and partying in Colorado, he killed two other people after a poker game turned contentious. He described himself back then as having a twisted worldview, particularly when it came to other races. His upbringing had made him narrow-minded and prejudiced, and he was frequently explosive and at odds with others and imperious when it came to his own self-worth. In his early 20s, he was saved by a Black Marine after getting beat up outside of a bar near Camp Pendleton.

His outlook began to take a turn then but, ironically, it was prison life that altered the paradigm, forcing him to confront his bigotries and bad choices in a space that provided no escape nor outlet for distraction.

By the time Fury Young was approved to record a full LP at Territorial in December 2017, Tenneson and Woodley's relationship had blossomed into a friendship, to the extent that Young now refers to Woodley as the [John Lennon](#) to Tenneson's [Paul McCartney](#): where Tenneson is affable and often boastful, Woodley is pensive and shy. Woodley's body is wracked with cancer, diabetes and lupus, which have affected his mobility and respiratory health, but his hands remain calloused and strong, a reminder of the boxer that he once was. Like his hands, he uses his voice as a powerful tool, but as recording time approached, Woodley had second thoughts about the project. He doubted his voice's range, that his tone was not what it used to be. "You have a better voice than any of these guys will ever have," Tenneson told him. "You have a story to tell. That's a powerful thing." In the past, Tenneson might've bristled at Woodley, but now he had found a reason to defend his new friend from the same insecurity that had once consumed him. Tenneson and Woodley's vision was to tell a narrative about the sometimes-mournful and sometimes-redemptive tale of self-discovery in prison. Indeed, Territorial, the album, just like Territorial the prison, features contributions from multiple prisoners of varying ages, races, religions and musicianship. As a hybrid of musical genre and perspective, it is the collective story of universal struggle and search for meaning amid the personal recollections of its contributors.



*Kevin Woodley
Photo courtesy of DJC*

Over the four consecutive days that Fury Young had recorded the album inside the makeshift band room—where he brought in all of the recording equipment including light stands, PVC pipes and moving blankets to dull sounds—the coterie of newfound bandmates—led by Tenneson, Woodley and another singer Dane Newton—found themselves attempting to make the music feel organic while also being held to a tight deadline. The group had had only practiced once a week for a few weeks prior to Young's arrival and had to contend not just with the egos inside the band room (as they might have expected) but with those outside the door. Young recalled numerous times in which other prisoners would pop their head in to inspect what was occurring within the 17 x 15 room, some of them envious that this group had received such a creative opportunity. Young reported that even the guards, though initially straight-faced and "on duty," eventually got into the spirit. By the last day, Young recalled, one of the guards helped provide a supplemental sound effect for one of the tracks by controlling the gate that let prisoners in and out of one of the areas.

The first track recorded was "Mama's Cryin," the rueful blues song that Tenneson and Woodley had concocted five years earlier but that now had the backing of a full band. In the song, Woodley croons "Children dying / Mama's cryin' / cuz daddy's lying on the floor / bullets flying," over vibrato, reggae-tuned guitar tones. Tenneson, speaking to me from within a phone station in Arkansas Valley in Colorado (he has since been transferred), choked up when recalling the profundity of the message and its commentary on current events. As a white man who has killed a person of color, Tenneson harbors guilt about his past; when he hears about police brutality or white-on-black crime he feels "torn up inside." The only redemption he could find—he'd considered suicide—was in religion. Though he prefers the word spirituality to religion, he was baptized in prison several years back. "Religion and spirituality was at the core of our project," he said.



Dane Newton
Photo courtesy of Fury Young

Before the recording sessions began, one of the project's contributors, Philip Archuleta, who goes by Archie, performed a traditional Native American ceremony with eagle feathers in which he "asked malicious spirits to leave." He and another Native American, "Lefty," brushed each performer with the feather and uttered a prayer. "I felt some energy there," Tenneson said of the experience.

Archuleta grew up in Colorado among Dakota and Shoshone tribes and has served 22 years of a 40-year sentence. "The problem is," he said, "I keep getting into trouble." Although the Territorial sessions were recorded before COVID-19 swept through the world and caused widespread panic within prison populations, Archuleta told me that the recent safety measures have affected his mental wellbeing. He and other Native Americans have not been able to go to the sweat lodge or allowed to partake in peace pipe-smoking ceremonies. The medical facility has become inaccessible save for the treatment of life-threatening injuries, he said. In the meantime, the lack of stress-relieving procedures that his spirituality granted him has contributed to confrontations with other prisoners. "But this has been a struggle all my life," Archuleta said of his heritage. "It's like we're a novelty at first, we're told that we're interesting. Then we get treated worse." If the recording of Territorial gave him an opportunity, though a limited one, it was the chance to feel that Christianity versus spirituality versus agnosticism wasn't as important as the fight between free and not free.



Before the band room was reopened at Territorial Correctional Facility, before even Tenneson had received the letter from Fury Young, concerts at Territorial were hosted in the gym once a month. Like a bare-bones "Battle of the Bands," in which the performers were barely distinguishable from their audience members, Tenneson had performed with different iterations of bands and musicians, the entire time realizing that neither the group nor the venue itself was permanent. In prison—especially in prison—places and their functions are often abandoned or

swapped out for projects that will beget more money. In his time within the system, Tenneson has seen a hobby shop at Arkansas Valley (where he was before Territorial and would later return to) closed down when the budget could no longer be supported; he has seen art and beautification projects lose momentum and stall; and he witnessed the closing of the band room after a Labor Day escape in 2018 tightened security and precautions around the facility. But during those days in the gymnasium—where tunes were recalled and imparted, where lineups were tested, where grace was a guitar and microphone—possibilities felt endless.

During one of these sessions in 2018, Tenneson had put Jojo Martinez, 40, on the spot. Known as a rapper outside of prison and having rediscovered faith and rap inside of it, Martinez took the opportunity to rap to the expectant crowd. Tenneson was impressed, same as he had been when he heard Woodley first sing or Dane Newton play keyboards, even if he had come from the opposite pole of rap and hip-hop music ("I got corrupted," Tenneson said of his switch in interest from jazz, which he studied as a kid, to rock and blues when he first heard [Jimi Hendrix](#), and traded his savings in for a Stratocaster). Martinez, who goes by "Bizz," was brought into the fold to contribute his verbal talents. "I put my whole heart into it," Bizz said, whose experience with the others inspired him to continue to chase his musical passion. Bizz is set to be released to a halfway house in October and has used his time quarantining at Sterling Correctional Facility (he has since left Territorial) to work on music that is both spiritual and politically charged. Territorial blurs the line between faith-based messages and political ones, offering a reading, and for Bizz, a sign, that the two can be twined.

[The George Floyd protests](#) and subsequent reactions that have confounded governments have further incentivized Fury Young's mission. In addition to raising funds through [GoFundMe](#) (Die Jim Crow is a nonprofit that is incumbent upon private and public donations), Young has achieved momentum via the protests that have occurred around the world. In June, Die Jim Crow released [BL Shirelle](#)'s Assata Troi (Shirelle is also the Deputy Director of Die Jim Crow). Shirelle, 33, spent 10 years behind bars beginning at age 18. This year marks the first time since being a minor that she is free from prison and parole obligations. Assata Troi has received rave reviews and has affirmed Shirelle as a pseudo-elder statesman (she is still young, after all) for those who have seen both sides of the system. Today, she and Young keep up correspondence with incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people with whom they have several upcoming projects.



Bizz is conscious that a different world than the one he left awaits him when he gets out. He is also aware that his switch to faith-based rap has its challenges. Still, he is confident that his message will transcend this bifurcated moment, where FOX and CNN "are the biggest cons in the world." Though television is limited at Sterling, Bizz gets flashes of news media—both conservative and liberal channels—and uses these bits of charged impartiality for material for his lyrics. He also followed the coronavirus news with bated breath, especially once realizing Sterling hadn't reacted to the crisis in a way that was timely and responsible. He described an environment in which there were few masks and virtually no equipment to help aid recovery, where 100 or so guys were packed into a small day room at one time. "The largest outbreak was in this facility," he said. "They tested everyone and I tested negative, then, a couple days later I lost my sense of smell." Once diagnosed with COVID-19, Bizz was thrown into "the hole" rather than a recovery unit where he suffered for weeks. As of May 2018, 593 state inmates had tested positive for the virus and two Sterling inmates had died. There is currently a class action lawsuit pending, backed by the ACLU, claiming that Colorado's governor and his Department of Corrections aren't doing enough to prevent coronavirus outbreaks throughout the Colorado prison system (two of the plaintiffs are housed at Sterling).

Amid the urgent need for masks and other PPE at prisons, Die Jim Crow has organized a GoFundMe for incarcerated individuals (many prisons have denied donations or have not responded to Die Jim Crow's queries), and as of August has raised over \$21,000. This has amounted to over 23,000 masks.

In preparing for an early 2021 release of *Territorial*, Fury Young will also be publishing into a different world than the one he became aware of in 2013. The frequent instances of fatalities and injuries at the hands of police have received more widespread and immediate attention since the likes of Trayvon Martin in 2014 and Freddie Gray in 2015, though the coronavirus has slowed attempts of reconciliation in the form of large-scale events, peace talks, and—in the case of the power and vitality of the arts—live music.

For the musicians who recorded *Territorial*, for whom playing the album to a live audience will forever be a pipe dream—memories of the session persist. Tenneson has since lost touch with Woodley, whose illnesses have caused numerous complications, and Dane Newton, whose vocals on the final track "America the Merciful" offer an apologetic love letter to the country that has given and taken so much. "America the merciful will forgive my sins again," he bellows, "I don't want to die chasing the wind." Tenneson, in his own thematic companion piece, "Holy Rain," in which he implores to his savior in gravelly mysticism to "wash me clean lord / with your blessed holy rain" before his mournful humming is drowned out by careening saxophone, bass and electric guitar, is making an argument for the legacy of his bandmates, for their project: that whether or not their music is heard or whether it ever awards them acclaim or freedom, it will—finally, once and for all—wash them anew. "Music is one of the things I can give back," Tenneson said. "It's all I can give."