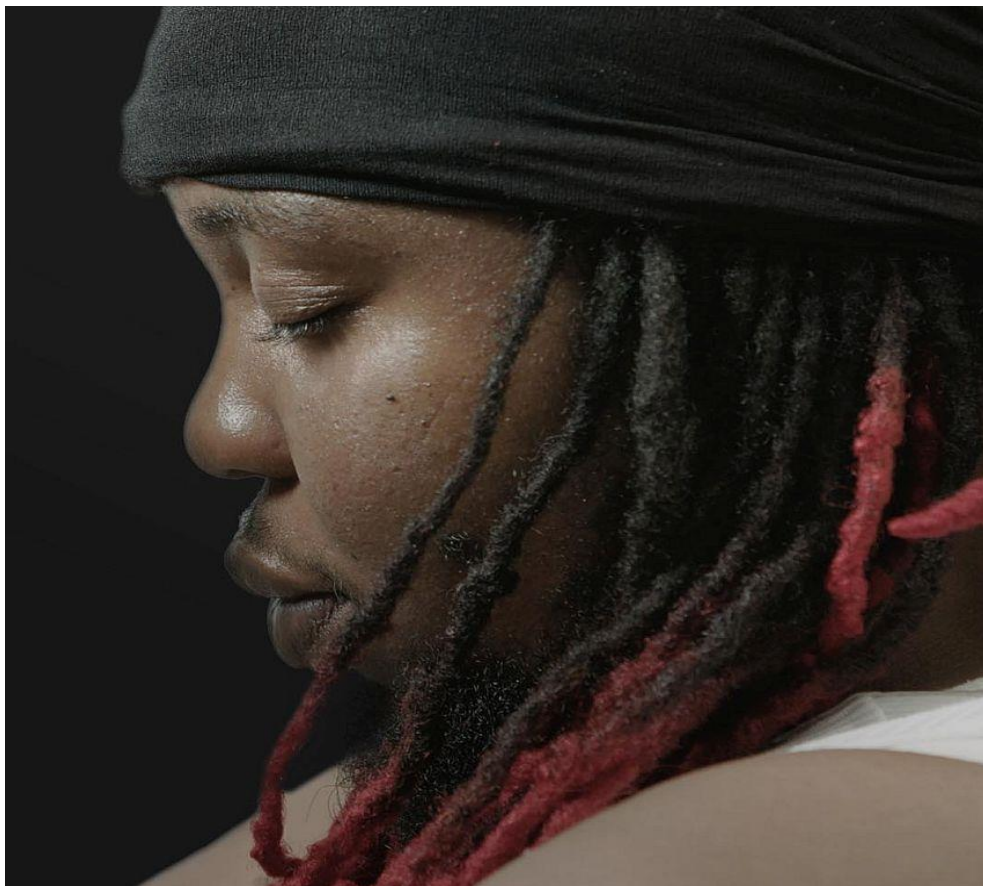




## [“A Part of Me is Used to Seeing Black Deaths at the Hands of Police:” An Interview With BL Shirelle](#)

Taylor Crumpton speaks to the artist, activist, and non-profit label founder about the Die Jim Crow label and getting a gun pulled on her by a law enforcement officer.

BY [TAYLOR CRUMPTON](#) AUGUST 10, 2020



In the second grade, students from Temple University knocked on the door of BL Shirelle's childhood home in Philadelphia and incentivized her with \$100 to complete a survey. Every year, the students arrived with an increased financial amount until her 18th birthday, where the accumulation of data about her likelihood of entering the school to prison pipeline stopped; she had reached the age of adult incarceration. Concealed from Shirelle was the intrinsic value placed upon her life by an educational institution that needed to contextualize their study of Black youth in urban areas through her interactions with the juvenile justice system (house arrests, probation, etc.)

After her 18th birthday, BL Shirelle witnessed an argument among a collective of men. When she went to resolve the fight, one of the men, unbeknownst to her, was an undercover cop who pulled a weapon out on her. In response, she fired back and engaged in a seemingly "never-ending" gunfight that resulted in wounds to her back and leg. The officer was unscathed. After law enforcement officials arrived on the scene, she was further assaulted by police officers. It was only while being transported to the hospital that she saw the undercover cop's badge. Because of this assault, Shirelle was sentenced to six years in prison.

The Temple University predictions of house arrests, probation and incarceration were proven true, but they neglected to properly weigh the institutional factors and hyper surveillance of Black youth that contributed to this reality. What they also failed to anticipate was a successful future for Shirelle, who has gone on to become the Deputy Director of Die Jim Crow Records – the first non-profit record label for current and formerly incarcerated artists in United States history — which exists as a testament to the failures of anti-Blackness and white supremacy. For 20 years, Shirelle was subjected to the horrors of mass incarceration. The criminal justice system was a panopticon haunting 20 years of her life through the functions of supervision, house arrests, and probation. Since age 12, she'd endured the horrors that exist in and out of the criminal justice system, yet her resilient spirit carried her through to this moment. I spoke with her about hip-hop's relationship with mass incarceration, her debut album, ASSATA TROI, and how society fails Black women. — [Taylor Crumpton](#)

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Visible in Tay K and 03 Greedo's legal proceedings, the criminal justice system weaponized their lyrics as evidence for their incarceration and signaled a shift in the historical relationship between hip-hop and mass incarceration. Hip-hop is one of the few professions where individuals with a criminal background can achieve economic and social mobility, however the criminal justice system has utilized societal and cultural stereotypes of rappers to aid them in unfair sentencing.

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BL Shirelle: Hip-hop started as a documentation of your life from an introductory perspective yet it's evolved into a collective of people who rap from their imagination and excitement to do [criminal] things. In the beginning, you wrote about the things you experienced so when you reached a moment of success, you can reflect like "wow, I made it. I can't believe it." Now, it's going in reverse, except for Kodak Black's situation which resembled mine.

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When you performed at TEDxMuncyStatePrison, you expressed the difficulty of being completely authentic because of the presence of law enforcement. In the structure of mass incarceration, their surveillance of Black people is integral to the continuation of oppression.

How do you advocate for Die Jim Crow artists to be authentic and truthful in an environment that exists off of the dehumanization of themselves?

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BL Shirelle: One day, we had a meeting with the Department of Corrections who read my lyrics and classified them as unacceptable, horrible, and informed us about the ramifications of this on their state. They went in on us. In response I said, “Do you guys know what hip-hop is about? Do you guys understand that these people are in prison? You guys have to understand that they have life experiences and stories. I educated them about the difference between cautionary tales and glorifying tales. Die Jim Crow is about introspective cautionary tales, for individuals to reflect on the past. We’re not glamorizing this lifestyle, but we’re not going to encourage people to hide themselves and their stories. On the back end, we fight our asses off to get their voices out, so they have an opportunity to speak their piece.

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Due to the uprisings, cultural conversations about the necessity of prisons have shifted towards the abolition of the existing power structures. Have you felt that those efforts have been performative, since it’s trendy to express alignment and solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter or #ShareTheMic to Black individuals and organizations focused on social justice efforts?

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BL Shirelle: Believe it or not, I’m glad you asked that question. You are the second Black publication to interview me, so it’s quite the opposite for me. The music I make is Black. I’m a Black woman. I fight for Black people. Everything I do in this space is Black. Yet, there is a deliberate gate-keeping in press coverage, I can get covered by Rolling Stone, Los Angeles Times, NPR but no Black publication. I never thought that was possible. In our community, most people for Black Power are not into gayness. For the LGBT community, they’re racist so there’s all these spaces that I fit in one category, but the other doesn’t. That’s what I’m facing but going to push forward. Now, I’m not afraid to speak on because I have enough skin in the game to say that Black people should support our cause because I represent our community.

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For clarification, this is not a Black-owned publication but I am a Black Queer woman who has experienced difficulty in attempts to cover Queerness in Black media. However, I hope that uprisings in Black media will rectify the wrongs of the past and uplift Black Queer artists, musicians, poets, and writers.

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BL Shirelle: Now, white publications have approached me for stories, even though they passed on me a year ago. I’m starting to understand how Black people’s emotions and trauma generates clicks for their publication and that’s all that they really care about. At this point, I’m accepting of publications who accept the entirety of me. I pay attention to the censoring, editing, and featured images in the article so I know who is genuine or a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

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In your current role of Die Jim Crow, the first record label for current and formerly incarcerated folks; I can’t help but contextualize it as FUBU in the predatory music industry that takes advantage of aspiring musicians with limited economic opportunities, because of their criminal background.

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BL Shirelle: We’re not exactly FUBU because Fury Young, our executive director is a white Jewish man who has never been incarcerated but dedicated his life to the cause. That’s my

brother. We've grown up together. We've grown together. I've had to explain aspects of race relations to him, because there's certain things that he'll never understand. What I love about Fury is that he understands that he's never had that experience. Which is why I'm in this position as the direct liaison and representative to hold everyone accountable, to ensure that my community of current and formerly incarcerated Black people are granted proper representation. When we started Die Jim Crow, he wanted it to be all Black, but the prison I was in was 60 – 70% white, so he started going to prisons and saw the trends that I spoke about. It wasn't about minimizing the Black experience, but we have to shape an authentic and honest narrative that addresses the truthful demographics of prison. Now that doesn't change the fact that Black people are given harder sentences at a disproportionate rate than their white women counterparts? That's still an effect but one doesn't overshadow the other. Regardless, it's a white supremacist country so let's shape our narrative to be as true as our reality. What I can say is that nothing is going to come out in regards to Black people at our label, without my green light.

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Have you established contact with prisons outside of Pennsylvania? Based on the access and resources given to incarcerated folks from your organization, I would assume the relationships with prisons would be hostile.

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BL Shirelle: At first, they're welcoming until they realize that Die Jim Crow is not a typical music organization that comes in with a superiority complex that teaches folks how to play an instrument and write a song. We come in with an understanding that they're the master of their craft and treat them with respect as professionals. We respect their art and process towards music, thanks to our amazing band directors. When prisons hear that, then they're taken aback. We have to fight tooth and nail for access, but we've achieved success in the Southern states who are open to give us a try. Based off the narratives of the regions you would think it would be revered but we've yet to receive access to a New York prison. Pennsylvania who will not allow us to bring my program into the prison that I used to reside in. Numerous times, I've requested and been denied even though I'm an example in their reentry class. They play my videos and pictures in attempts to convey a success story of someone they corrected. Meanwhile, I'm behind the scenes, trying to provide services and being denied. However, we've done work in Colorado, Ohio, South Carolina, and Mississippi.

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In the midst of the COVID-19 epidemic, homeless shelters and prisons are clusters for high rates of infections. How have you maintained contact with those affiliated with Die Jim Crow?

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BL Shirelle: We haven't been able to go back in and have no idea when we will be able to. I miss my guys. I miss my girls so much. Everyone who writes to us gets a response back, it's in our bylaws. That's our open line of communication. We try to do everything within our power to gather whatever they need and provide when we can. Our band directors, people of great character with great discipline are in management control and facilitate as the liaison for incarcerated folks. People are super scared of COVID-19. The top three fears of being inside are family members dying, getting sick and dying because those are out of your control and if it happens there's nothing you can do about it. Even if you were jumped, you could try and fight that off might not be successful but you have control. For women, getting sick is really a top two fear because we have so many different needs. We're trying to be there emotionally and mentally so everybody is in the right headspace.

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On A Seat at the Table, Master P said “Black kids have to figure it out! We don’t have rehabs to go to. You gotta rehab yourself.” Since childhood, you’ve utilized writing as a rehabilitative process to understand the world around you. What was the therapeutic process behind ASSATA TROI, your most recent album?

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BL Shirelle: Typically, I rap about aspiring things that are important to me, so I can conjure positive energy. Yet, this phase of my life was about confrontation and to speak about what the fuck is going on. I’ve always had that in my music but this a direct confrontation about my relationship with society, God, lovers, and friends. “Bestie” is about my relationship with a closeted girl and my willingness to accept being a secret because of my longingness to be in relationship with a girl because of societal standards of Queerness. “Generational Curse” resembles Roc-A-Fella because that was a big part of my childhood, that’s what made me rap competitively and aggressive. I wanted to make a record that sounds like “I’m from Philadelphia,” and that’s what I was able to do. I came for everybody because I’m trying to change these relationships through addressing them. If I don’t get to the bottom of the issue, that’s fine. For years, I didn’t want to address these issues because I didn’t want to talk back about our people, but this is my truth and I’ll deal with the consequences. It’s a moment of truth for me in my life and this is what it is.

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In conversation with you, the feelings of responsibility, survivor’s remorse and mental trauma have occurred throughout our interview and I wanted to ask about your mental health and overall being. As a formerly homeless youth, I experienced similar thoughts about having to justify that it’s okay to have shelter when so many people are on the streets. So, I wanted to close on a human note with you.

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BL Shirelle: It’s a lot of pressure on me as someone who was shot because of engagement in gunfire with a police officer and lived but Breonna Taylor died. It’s hard because I’m here and she’s not so I have to do something great and live for a specific purpose. I don’t know what that means because I’m on that journey. It’s hard for me because I could have been a justifiable killing. They wouldn’t have questioned anything about my death. Nobody would be talking about me. I wouldn’t be a hashtag. I’m not really sure how survivor’s remorse works, maybe it’s pressure. I just know that every day I know I wake up with a supreme responsibility and I have to carry it.

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It’s hard to wrap my mind around someone sleeping in their bed getting killed. Compared to me being in a shootout with cops, but alive and off of parole. Maybe, that’s a part of brutality and corruption because I didn’t know the guy was a cop. He pulled the gun on me first and I defended myself. A part of me is normalized to seeing Black deaths at the hands of police. I can’t wrap my mind around my own survival but I realized that I serve a greater purpose. I’m working my way out of anxiety by talking about how these things make me feel, continuing to educate myself on these processes. I’m grateful to be here using that fight for people who aren’t. When I go to protests and people chant, “I can’t breathe!” I can’t bring myself to say that because I believe that words are power. So in the age of COVID-19, where our lungs are being destroyed and people are putting their knees on our necks, I chant, “I can breathe and I will for

those who can't." I cannot put their energy in myself, so there are certain parts where I have to take a fork in the road and be okay with that for my own sanity, beliefs, and energy process.

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I'm honored to write about you and uplift the efforts of your work that are beneficial to our societal good.

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BL Shirelle: Thank you. I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me. I appreciate anybody who takes the time, but I always appreciate speaking to a Black woman. Before we go, everyone has to do better for Black women. We step up. We fight for everyone else. A lot of times, we don't get the same in return so I challenge everyone to do better by black women. Do better.