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A new album by incarcerated musicians features songs of prison, trauma and hope



Michael Tenneson during the recording of "Tlaxihuiqui" at Colorado's Territorial Correctional Facility. The album was recorded over the course of four days and was released by Die Jim Crow Records in August. (Fury Young/Die Jim Crow Records)

By Michael Patrick F. Smith
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Michael Tenneson, an inmate at Colorado's Territorial Correctional Facility in Cañon City, says he spent two years lobbying the prison for a band room. Eventually, an interim warden agreed to his plan, and a room was created, but it was handed over to two other inmates to run — both white supremacists. Tenneson, who is White, had organized a group of musicians who were Black, Native American, Jewish and queer, so he had to make sure the white supremacists weren't there when it was time to use the room.

Tenneson and his fellow musicians didn't need the space just to blow off steam or jam guitar during rec hour. The group had been assembled to record an album — one produced by a record label that would ensure their music reached past the walls of the prison.

That album — called "Tlaxihuiqui" (pronounced tla-she-wiki), which means "the calling of the spirits" in the Uto-Aztecan language of Nahuatl — was recorded over four days and released by [Die Jim Crow Records](#) in August.

Die Jim Crow, based in New York and Philadelphia, says it is "the first record label in the United States for formerly and currently incarcerated musicians." The label released its first EP of original music in 2016, featuring six songs recorded by inmates in Warren Correctional Institution in Ohio. On Juneteenth of 2020, it put out a full-length album by BL Shirelle — who'd spent 10 years inside prison in Pennsylvania — called "Assata Troi," which means "she who struggles is a warrior."

The new album, featuring the group Tenneson assembled, begins with the startling sound of a traditional chant performed by two incarcerated Native Americans, Phillip Archuleta and Gilbert Pacheco. The record proceeds from there in a style its creators refer to as "prog-Americana," a dreamlike sound tapestry that, while it certainly holds together as an album, can also feel like a bracingly weird, electrifying and raw mix tape. Structurally, the songs are bold — mixtures of balladry, hip-hop, country, soul and blues reside, in some cases, within a single song — and are flavored with instruments as diverse as organ, flute and alto sax. Lyrically, these songs wrestle with the personal and systemic trauma of the marginalized — racism, crack addiction, sexual abuse and mass incarceration — yet consistently the words are buoyed by hope for redemption.

While some overdubs were completed by musicians in Nashville and at various home studios across the country, most of the singing and instrumentation were performed by the seven incarcerated individuals in Colorado. These include several serving life sentences; Tenneson, who is one of the album's vocal anchors, is serving multiple life sentences after being convicted in 1988 on five counts of murder.

On the phone, Tenneson exhibits a restless, probing intelligence compounded by a clearly pent-up need for self-expression. He was tongue-tied as a child, he tells me, thought to be mentally disabled, and it wasn't until the age of 10 that he had surgery that freed his tongue from the bottom of his mouth, allowing him to form words. "You couldn't shut me up afterwards," he jokes.

During our conversation, Tenneson relishes regaling me with an expansive list of his musical influences, which range from classic rock to Motown to jazz and blues, but it isn't long before he connects this thread to a discussion of his crimes. "Unfortunately, rather than channeling all of my being into perfecting my craft," he says, "I squandered my life on drugs, alcohol, stupidity, and destroyed the lives of lots of innocent people."

The conversation veers back and forth like that. Tenneson speaks of the joy of the creative process and the sense of community he found with other incarcerated players, specifically Kevin Woodley, a man who, on the outside, had for decades fronted blues and jazz bands around Chicago. Woodley ad-libbed the entirety of "Mama's Cryin'" — a true standout on the album — in one take over a riff Tenneson came up with on guitar. "I was crying while I was playing the guitar," Tenneson says. "Tears streaming out of my eyes." In the song, in a tender, passionate falsetto, Woodley sings:

*Children dyin'
Mama's cryin'
Cause daddy's lyin' on the floor
Bullets flyin'
The policemen lyin'
Said he had a gun in his hand
Can't you see I'm a man, too?*

Within minutes of recalling the bliss of that moment in the studio, Tenneson is wrestling again with his past. "I've not lived a moment of any one day since I committed my crimes against those innocent people that I'm not crushed with remorse, shame and regret," he says. "Music is the only way I have to even try to express it with more than just words."

The album bristles with this tension. The howling need for redemption at its core makes it less a mere musical experience and more a profound leap of faith. Phillip Archuleta, of the Southern Ute Tribe, sentenced to over 52 years on various assault charges, describes burning a sage stick and using an eagle feather to perform a ceremonial purifying ritual at the beginning of the recording sessions: "When I went in there I smudged everybody, and I said a prayer. It felt right. It was like the Creator told me, 'Okay, now is the time for you to give a little bit of this medicine back to whoever wants to listen to it.' Because that's what it is. It's medicine."

The songs soar and crawl, rage and plead, beg and proclaim, revealing the searching soul of an incarcerated melting pot within the borders of our own body politic. "It is supposed to make you ask yourself hard questions," Fury Young, executive director of Die Jim Crow and the album's producer, tells me. "Because prison is not easy. ... But what people are is more complex than the worst mistake that they made, right?" After listening to the album, "I would hope that people come out of it on the other side with some kind of evolution," he says. "It may not be positive. It may not be quite hope. But some sort of evolved way of thinking about prison and humanity ... and maybe also forgiveness of some kind."



Kevin Woodley works on the recording of "Tlaxihuiqui." (Fury Young/Die Jim Crow Records)

The word "forgiveness" repeatedly comes up in conversation with Tenneson. "I do not deserve it," he says. "What I have done is beyond even my own ability to ever forgive myself." Yet he also tells me about a card he received every Christmas for five years after he was first locked up, sent to him by the grandmother of one of the men he killed. Tenneson tells me that the card read: "Jesus loves you and forgives you and so do I. Hopefully one day you will learn to forgive yourself. God bless you." Overcome, he says, "That a woman could write something like that to the man who had so callously stolen the young life of her beautiful grandson ..."

As "Tlaxihuiqui" is a musical document, its reception will hinge to a great extent on the musical tastes of the listener, but its acceptance — certainly more than any record I've ever heard — will hinge on the listener's own relationship with the idea of forgiveness, who deserves it, who gets it and how much of it we have in our hearts.

Michael Patrick F. Smith is a musician and the author of "[The Good Hand: A Memoir of Work, Brotherhood, and Transformation in an American Boomtown](#)."