

Rapper Turns Prison Sentence Into Impetus for Activism

Contributed by Imani Jackson -- Black College Wire
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"The prison system will help you be a monster."

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New Orleans native Walterr "Trifelon" Johnson's tale features chapters of familial crime, a fatherless household, prison and ultimately the desire to overcome trying circumstances with civic engagement and rap music.

The stage name "Trifelon" derives from the armed robbery conviction that earned him 10 years and four months of imprisonment. He was transferred three times. Legal run-ins were commonplace, he says.

"Everybody that I looked up to went through the same thing … It wasn't supposed to be like that."

He says he grew up without a childhood largely because of a dysfunctional relationship with his mother, a drug user, who birthed him as a teenager.

" People looked at me like her younger brother… [She] wasn't strong enough to overcome her condition." He went from catching animals as an adolescent to immersion in street culture to provide for his family.

"I tried to grab something easier," he says. "It was hard … I was one of the first grabbed by the streets … I went through every typical thing Black kids down here went through."

He was convicted at 17. While serving his sentence, he began to change. Because of life lessons he would not alter his past.

"I did what I did. I don't regret nothin' I ever did … I actually set out to be different," he says. With 1600 inmates nearby, consumption by corruption could have seemed natural.

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Trifelon discarded his former mask and developed a crisper reflection. Today he is a questioning conversationalist who peppers dialogue with profanity and profundity while giving God all glory.

"I heard God talk. I ain't on my own," he spits on his track "That Strong."

While in lockup he focused on performing raps and reading Angela Davis.

He also talks about taking LSU correspondence coursework in numerous areas including botany and horticulture. Obtaining knowledge is his preferred protocol.

"How far I go is measured by what I know, not by how I feel.

"My mind should be my heart."

Living by the mantra "Destroy and Rebuild," Trifelon hopes to use what could have been an opportunity for implosion, to inspire his post-Katrina hometown and community.

He plans to attack the school system, stand on his newfound convictions and counteract mainstream rap music, which he dubs "poison."

The reformed realist boasts an affinity for children and optimism, but doesn't let much time pass in conversation without referencing his family.

He has 20 brothers and cousins living in the city. He lives to motivate them.

While rap is his chosen medium, he believes knowledge is important and bigger than the individual.

The Egyptians built pyramids facing the heavens, he says. They emphasized knowing one's self and being in tune with life.

"That's how it was written."

A disbeliever in defeat, the 20 something rapper could have let a gritty life give him a grimy perception of the game, but being played is not his style.

"I didn't actually lose. I learned about this game."
Tracks to check out: "Moonwalk" and "That Strong."
Visit www.myspace.com/trife7

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Imani Jackson writes for The Gramblinite, the Grambling State University student newspaper, which originally published this article.