

Detroit Justice Center Artist Residency Proposal

No More Heroes

I am proposing a performance-driven, music-centered work titled *No More Heroes*, set roughly 15–30 years after mass incarceration and policing has ended and society has reorganized toward peace, sustainability, and collective care.

However, this is not a fantasy utopia. It's a realistic, hard-won future—one where laws have changed, fruit trees line city streets, communities share resources without fear, therapy and healing practices are woven into daily life, and harm is addressed through repair instead of silence or punishment.

Yet the people who lived through the old world, especially formerly incarcerated people, the traditionally dispossessed, Black and Brown communities, and those shaped and constrained by racist, carceral, patriarchal, capitalist, and other oppressive systems, still carry that world of old wounds inside of their bodies. They were not only harmed by these structures; they were programmed by them. Survival required adaptation to violence, scarcity, hierarchy, and control. Even after the systems fall away, the reflexes remain.

The world may be safer on paper.

But the elders remain walking wounds.

At the center of the piece is a grandfather figure (drawn from my own lived experience of long-term incarceration beginning at seventeen) moving through this new society alongside his grandchildren. He is free—barefoot in gardens, teaching kids how to fish, walking beneath fruit-bearing trees that were once systematically kept out of certain neighborhoods. He hands an apple to his grandchild like contraband. His hands tremble—not from age, but memory.

He plants seeds and, every now and then when lost in memories of the past, he starts when a tool drops. He folds laundry, pauses, refolds it tighter, still needing to maximize space. He cooks and adds salt even when the recipe says no, because he can still taste the ghost of scarcity on his tongue. He locks doors at night even though everything is safe. Even though he doesn't want to. But, sometime, his body still remembers what his mind knows is over.

This work lives in the in-between space, the messy-middle of world building that we rarely talk about: the moment when the world has changed enough to be safe, but the people who survived the old violence are still learning—slowly, awkwardly, humanly—how to live inside freedom.

The youth in this post-carceral world do not live in blissful ignorance.

They have been taught the history of the “Time Before Now” as a solemn, almost sacred curriculum. They know the timeline of mass incarceration, racialized violence, environmental sabotage, and economic abandonment. They study it the way earlier generations studied slavery, the Holocaust, and colonial

genocides—not as distant mythology, but as recent, painful truth with one clear mandate: *this must never happen again*. They understand the smoke and flames.

But they know it as observers, not survivors. They have never felt the adrenaline of a raid, the shame of a strip search, the terror of a cell door locking, or the calculus of hoarding toilet paper. Their knowledge is intellectual, moral, and emotional—but secondhand. That gap creates both tenderness and tension.

In one moment, a granddaughter asks: “Pop-pop, the books say people used to hurt each other for money. Did you ever hurt someone for money?” He pauses, throat tight, eyes glistening through shame and sorrow and settling with a whisper, “I hurt people, yes. Not always with my hands. Sometimes just by staying quiet when I should’ve spoken.”

She nods seriously. “That’s why we have communities now. So nobody has to choose between quiet and starving.”

He cries with joy that she understands, and a silent grief that he never had that clarity at her age.

These young people do not condemn elders with disgust. They condemn the systems that shaped them while holding space for their full humanity. They correct adults gently but directly. They mediate playground disputes with calm he never learned. They say things like, “You don’t have to lie to keep someone. We have enough now.” They are not better people. They were given better soil.

This is not a sanitized paradise. People still lie. Jealousy still flares. Someone cheats on a partner. Someone hoards extra fruit even when the trees are heavy. What’s different is the cultural immune system: Harm is not allowed to metastasize through silence or denial. There are councils, mediators, truth circles—not perfect, but consistent. People are expected to own harm, repair it, and be forgiven—not erased. The youth have been raised inside that expectation.

The grandfather watches this with quiet pride and private ache. Relief that the cycle is broken. Loneliness that he still carries reflexes no one else shares. He still watches reflections in the windows for faces from the past. He still tastes the fear of scarcity when something is no longer available. That loneliness isn’t erased by the new world—it is held with compassion instead of being pathologized or ignored.

I will express this story through live performance blending spoken word, guitar, piano, layered vocals, and storytelling. My song “No More Heroes” will be reimaged within the piece. The tone is intimate and confessional—not polished utopia propaganda.

The structure follows a three-part arc:

Act I – Now: the urgent present—protests, locked courts, and what still must change.

Act II – The Flip: the unspoken tipping point—a collective rupture that finally forces real reform.

Act III – The Aftermath: 10–20 years later, where the grandfather–grandchild scenes live most fully and the real emotional labor unfolds.

I intend to collaborate with fellow formerly incarcerated artists for visual and performance support as available.

Ultimately, this piece centers intergenerational repair as the real work—not just healing individuals, but healing how generations relate to history, harm, and possibility. It refuses nostalgia for the old world while refusing to pretend the new world is flawless.

My goal is that no one leaves this work able to say they have no idea what tomorrow looks like. Not in a naïve or prescriptive way—but in a grounded, embodied way. I want audiences to feel a future that is tangible: imperfect, emotional, accountable, and alive. A tomorrow where safety exists alongside memory, where abundance does not erase trauma but holds it, and where young people carry history forward not as burden, but as responsibility.

During the residency, I want to develop *No More Heroes* as a sonic and performative meditation on healing that is incomplete, imperfect, and deeply human—and therefore, more possible than not.

Thank you.