

# UNCHAINED MELODIES



## A HISTORY OF MUSIC MADE BY INCARCERATED ARTISTS

When people think of the history of music in prisons, popular names like Elvis Presley or Johnny Cash usually pop up in their heads. But music made by incarcerated artists has an even richer history. From the blues in the early 1900s to today's rap scene, incarcerated artists have created music in different ways, and with different tools. Each story in this timeline tells how these artists wrote and recorded songs even when they had few tools or chances to create, sometimes with chance encounters leading to their music being shared with the public. The goal of this timeline is to show a history of albums and incarcerated artists that made an impact on the music world, and how these albums were created in spite of the difficult circumstances the artists faced.

Before you read through the timeline, here are some notes about the timeline below:

- Footnotes: You may see a few numbers next to some names of prisons or people in each story (Example: "1" next to "Angola Prison"). These lead to a list of footnotes (second to last page) and connect to sources where we got the information (last page).
- Images: The pictures in this project, you will see, are album covers only. Under the Fair Use clause of the US copyright act, we can reproduce these copyrighted images for this educational purpose. However, we were unable to include other images of the artists or bands.

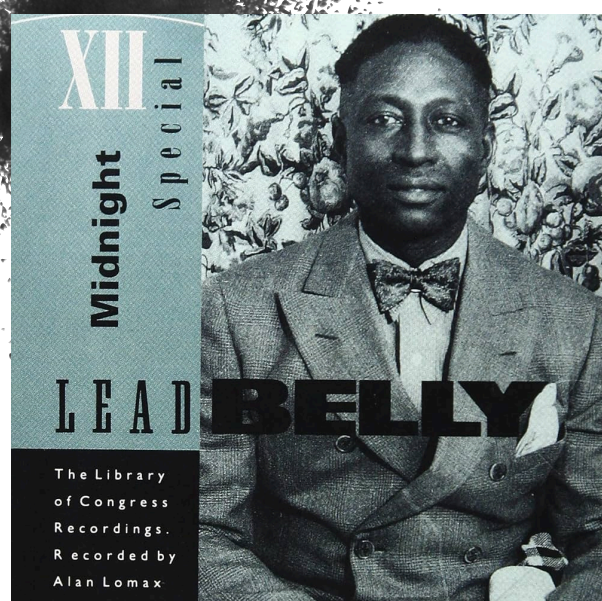
## TIMELINE (1930S - 2023)

### 1934

#### The Midnight Special by Lead Belly

Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly) was a folk and blues singer who learned and performed songs while serving time at the Louisiana State Penitentiary (AKA Angola Prison<sup>1</sup>). This song, recorded by many artists before and after Lead Belly, tells about a train whose light gives hope to people behind bars, wishing for freedom.

Folk music researchers John and Alan Lomax<sup>3</sup> recorded him singing inside the prison for documentation in the Library of Congress. After Lead Belly's release, he toured the South with the Lomaxes, helping them record the music of other Black prisoners.



### 1939

#### Poor Boy Long Ways From Home ("Po' Boy") and Shake' Em On Down by Bukka White

Bukka White recorded this song while serving time at the Mississippi State Penitentiary (AKA Parchman Farm). This bluesy song is about being a "poor boy" and facing hardship. Similar to Lead Belly, he recorded it and another song, called "Shake' Em On Down", with folk music researcher John Lomax. He was released later that year and would go on to continue a career in music, gaining recognition in the 1960s.



# 1953

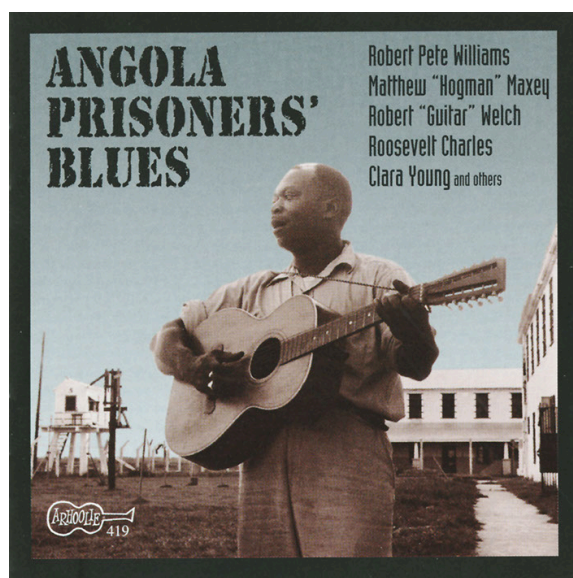
## Just Walkin' in the Rain by The Prisonaires

This doo-wop group was formed inside the Tennessee State Penitentiary, where lead singer Johnny Bragg and several other prisoners began performing together. Their mix of blues, gospel, and pop impressed the prison administration, which showcased them at public events as an example of prison rehabilitation through music. A visit by talent scouts from Sun Records led the group to Memphis, where they recorded "Just Walkin' in the Rain", a major hit. As some members were paroled, Bragg reorganized the group under new names (such as the Sunbeams), still centering hope and faith. After his final release, he stuck to singing in church only.

# 1959

## Angola Prisoners' Blues by Various Artists

This album is a collection of blues songs sung by men and women prisoners inside one of the U.S.'s largest prisons, Angola Prison. The music was recorded in the prison yard by Harry Oster<sup>4</sup>, a member of the Louisiana Folklore Society, and the singers used guitars and homemade instruments to create one of the first albums made by incarcerated artists released to the public. The album was digitized by the Arhoolie Foundation in 2021 for popular platform streaming.



# 1960

## Those Prisoner Blues by Robert Pete Williams

Robert Pete Williams, one of the artists recorded by Harry Oster for "Angola Prisoners' Blues", went on to make more music after he was released from prison. While in prison though, he recorded several of his own songs with Oster, and Oster would later plead for his release because of his talents. His songs were stories about pain, hard work, and dreams of release from prison.

# 1973

## All We Need Is Another Chance by The Escorts

This soul/R&B album was made by a vocal group about hope and second chances. The members were incarcerated at Rahway State Prison in New Jersey, and they were performing at their prison talent show when producer George Kerr saw them. Kerr wanted to bring their music to the public and was allowed to record them inside the prison. Their smooth harmonies are about love and redemption, and this album received a lot of public attention for its album cover, which depicts the group behind bars, with the producers reaching to them from outside.

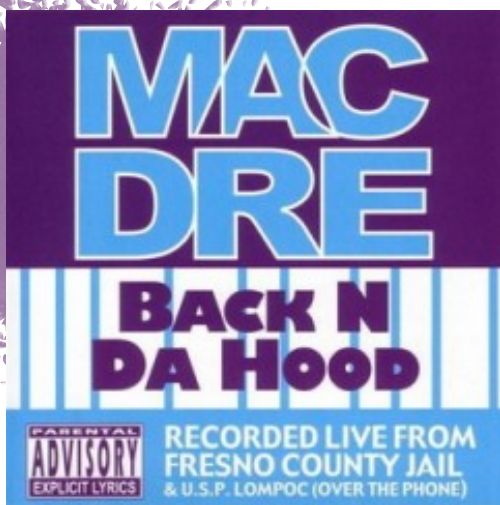




## 1980

### Lucifer Rising by Bobby Beausoleil and the Freedom Orchestra

Bobby Beausoleil composed and recorded this experimental rock soundtrack while imprisoned in California. He formed a group with other prisoners, called The Freedom Orchestra. Using donated instruments and homemade studio equipment, they recorded inside the prison chapel with approval from the warden. The album became a soundtrack for a short film called Lucifer Rising.



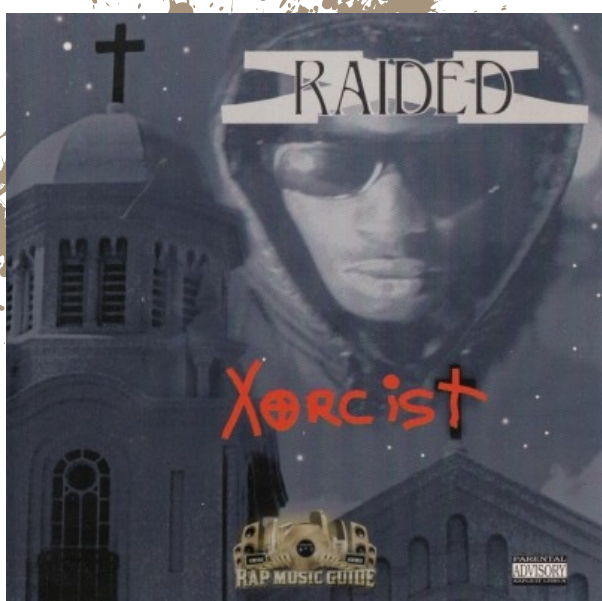
## 1993

### Living Proof by Lifers Group

A hip-hop album made by a group of men sentenced to 25+ years at Rahway State Prison in New Jersey. Lifers Group was originally an attempt to teach young people about the realities of incarceration.

The "Living Proof" music project started when Maxwell Melvins was transferred to the prison in 1987. With the help of an outside producer and a correctional officer, Melvins and other members of the Lifers Group worked to record the album.

Shortly after though, Melvins was transferred out of Rahway State Prison, and this prevented him from continuing to work on the music with the group. Despite this, their music stands out as both art and education.



## 1979

### Eyes of Love by The Edge of Daybreak

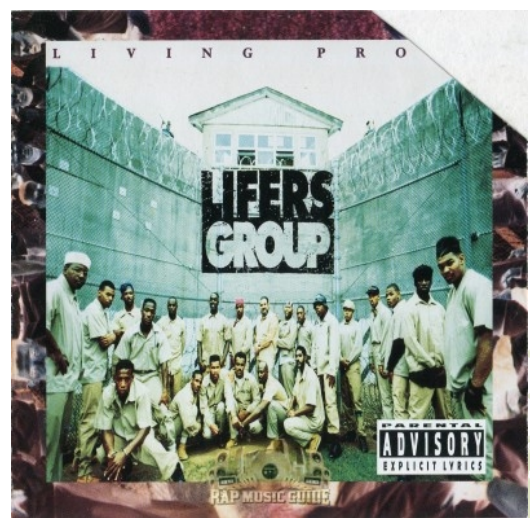
The Edge of Daybreak was a funk and soul group made up of men imprisoned at Powhatan Correctional Center in Virginia. This album was recorded in one single five-hour session inside the prison, using borrowed instruments and a small recording setup. Even with limited time and equipment, their music glows with teamwork, spirit, and hope.



## 1992

### Back n Da Hood by Mac Dre

Mac Dre, a rapper from the Bay Area, continued making music after being sent to federal prison in the early 1990s. He recorded songs for this album by rapping through the prison phone, sending his verses to producers on the outside who added beats and finished the tracks. The result was a gritty and honest look at his life behind bars, and the album made a big impact, as people saw how rap music was being used against artists in trials.



## 1996

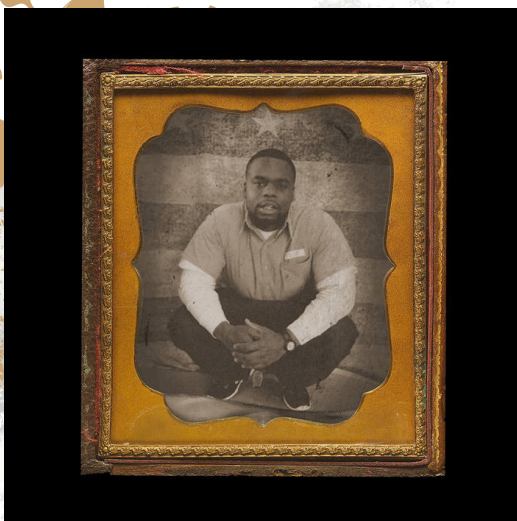
### Xorcist by X-Raided

X-raided was a young rapper from Sacramento, California. After being locked up in the 1990s, he would record using either a small tape recorder or rapping into the phone, sometimes timing his calls around prison noise. A producer on the outside would receive his vocals or recordings, and those rough, echoing verses were later turned into the album *Xorcist* (and another album later titled *The Unforgiven, Vol. 1*).

# 2004

## Free Inside by The Indictments

Robert Cassard, a producer and guitarist, found himself in a penitentiary for a short 25 days. During that time, he and other inmates composed 13 songs under the name "The Indictments". The album was a combo of rock and soul, and it spoke about change, regret, and freedom through a blend of English and Spanish lyrics. With a bit of outside help, they mixed and mastered their songs using limited equipment. It was later released as a CD to go to the families of the prisoners during the winter holiday season.



# 2020

## Thank You For Using GTL by Drakeo the Ruler

While jailed in Los Angeles, rapper Drakeo the Ruler recorded his entire album over the jail phone system, called GTL. He rapped his verses through long, expensive calls, and producers on the outside built beats and completed the album from these phone recordings. The album's title jokes about the "thank you" message played to end every call, turning a limit of prison life into a powerful symbol of resilience.

# 2016

## Die Jim Crow by The DJC Band

Die Jim Crow (now known as Freer Records) is the first U.S. record label for currently and formerly incarcerated musicians. This first EP includes songs recorded with musicians in an Ohio prison and formerly incarcerated musicians in Brooklyn and Philly. They recorded blends of blues, rock, and soul in the prison chapel with visiting sound engineers. The project's name (Die Jim Crow) speaks out against racism and mass incarceration.



# 2020

## Burning for Justice by Young Tali

While growing up in Virginia, rapper Young Tali (AKA Young Taliban) was selling his music on CDs in his high school cafeteria. After he was imprisoned, he recorded his song "Burning for Justice" using the prison's phone system for vocals and digital kiosk for sampling. Then, a producer outside of the prison helped turn it into a finished track, which speaks about struggle, loss, and a need for change.



# 2021

## TLAXIHUIQUI by Territorial

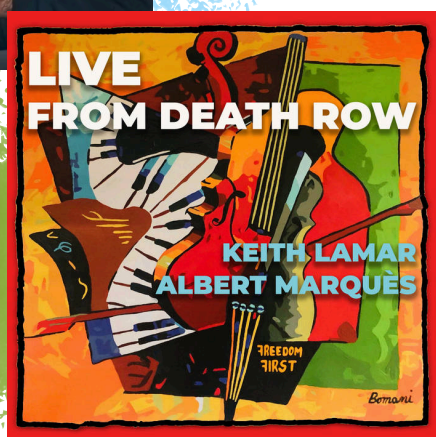
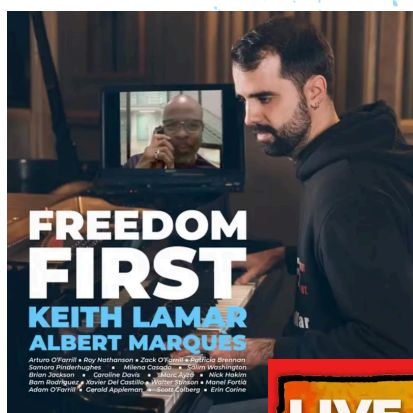
TLAXIHUIQUI (pronounced Tla-She-Wiki, means "the calling of the spirits") is an album created by incarcerated musicians in Colorado. It combines hip-hop, rock, blues, folk and traditional sounds, telling stories about hope and healing. The songs were recorded inside the Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility with help from visiting producers from Freer Records.



# 2022-23

## Freedom First (album) and Live from Death Row (album) by Keith LaMar and Albert Marquez

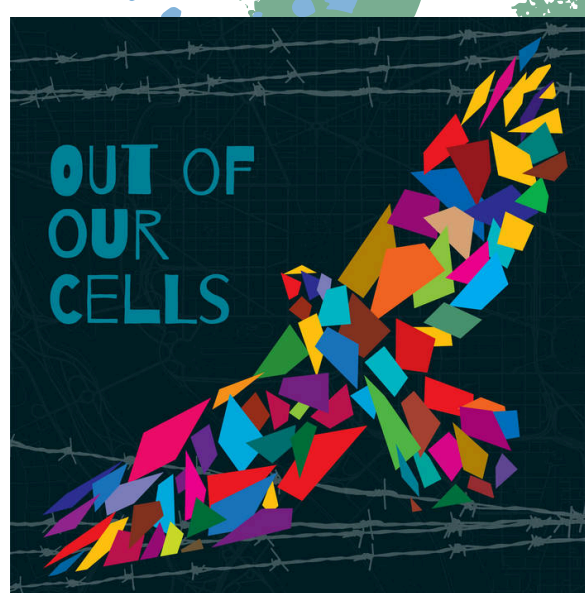
Keith LaMar, a writer and activist on death row in Ohio, teamed up with jazz pianist Albert Marquez for this album. LaMar spoke his poetry and reflections over the prison phone, while musicians recorded jazz music outside. The albums connects his words about justice and freedom with powerful live performances. Even from death row, his voice has reached the wider public.



# 2023

## Out of Our Cells by Aram Sinnreich & Dunia Best with incarcerated songwriters

This project connects incarcerated songwriters in the D.C. jail with local musicians across the DMV. The project began with two musicians, Dunia and Aram, recording six incarcerated composers performing their own songs inside the jail. Local artists arranged and recorded these works in styles ranging from neo-soul to reggae to Congolese guitar, all within the jail.



# 2024

## No Moon by Spoon Jackson

Spoon Jackson created this album while serving in a California prison, where he has been incarcerated since 1977. He began working with artists Nicholas Snyder through outreach of FREER records, a label that supports people making music from inside. Even though Jackson could only record his poems through a prison phone, Snyder used the recordings to shape more than 20 poems into 14 tracks that comprise *No Moon*, gentle, poetic, and sometimes dream-like.



## SOME (FOOT)NOTES ON THE TIMELINE

- 1. About Angola State Prison:** In 1870, a man named Samuel L. James, who had once been an officer in the Confederate Army, made a deal with the state of Louisiana to allow him to use prisoners as workers. He had them do hard labor, often in very difficult conditions. About ten years later, James moved his operation to a former plantation called "Angola". The plantation got its name because many of the enslaved people who had been forced to work there were brought from the African country of Angola. In the beginning, prisoners in Angola State Prison lived in the old slave quarters and were made to work on farms, growing crops such as cotton. Over time, Angola became the Louisiana State Penitentiary, and it is still open today and is now the largest maximum-security prison in the U.S. By 2008, the prison spanned 18,000 acres, run by white "Freemen" overseeing mostly Black prisoners.
- 2. About Parchman Farm:** In the early 1900s, Mississippi decided to build a new state prison on land it bought in Sunflower County. The prison opened in 1901 and was called the Mississippi State Penitentiary, though most people just called it Parchman Farm. It became the center of the state's prison system. Parchman was set up like a huge working farm. People sent there had to work long hours, usually ten hours a day, six days a week. Many of them farmed cotton and other crops. Others worked in places like the sawmill, brickyard, cotton gin, or the prison hospital. Women who were imprisoned at Parchman made clothes and bedding for everyone who lived there.

Because Parchman covered such a large open area, the prison didn't have any walls or fences. Instead, some prisoners who were trusted by officials were given weapons and ordered to watch over others. These men were called "trusty guards" or "trusty shooters". Today, Parchman is remembered as a major part of Mississippi's history, showing how prisons relied on hard labor and potentially how these labor practices reflect into today's prison systems.

- 3. About the John and Alan Lomax:** In 1933, a man named John Lomax and his son, Alan Lomax, began working at the Library of Congress. They were in charge of a new project called the Archive of American Folk Song, which was meant to collect and protect songs from all across the United States. The Lomaxes worked on this project for almost ten years, until 1942. During that time, they traveled thousands of miles and visited farms, small towns, prisons, and churches, recording the music of ordinary people. The songs included work songs, blues, cowboy songs, and spirituals. One of the most famous people they recorded was the blues singer Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly. The Lomaxes kept careful notes, letters and reports about their travels and the people they met. Because of this collection, we can still hear and study the music that helped shape America during the 20th century.
- 4. About Harry Oster:** From the 1950s to the early 1960s, a college professor named Harry Oster from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge traveled across Louisiana looking for traditional music. He wanted to learn about the songs people sang in their everyday lives. At first, Dr. Oster studied old French and English Ballads, but he soon found that Louisiana's music was full of way more voices and styles. He recorded blues, Cajun dance music, Creole hymns called cantiques, fiddle tunes, New Orleans jazz, Mardi Gras Indian chants, church music, work music from prisons, and even street vendor calls. He also recorded people telling folktales and personal stories about their lives. Some of his recordings were released on his own record label (Folklyric Records), and later shared by another company called Arhoolie Records. But, most of his recordings were never released or even identified. Many stayed unheard for years. But, in 2006, the Arhoolie Foundation organized and saved many of Dr. Oster's recordings with help from his wife.

## WHERE WE FOUND THIS INFORMATION

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