

# UNCHAINED MELODIES



## BENDING THE BARS TRACK 13 & 14: “We Gotta Break It” & “Hard Conversations”

### ABOUT THIS GUIDE

- We will look at two songs from the album Bending the Bars
- First, we will explore the artist of the songs and the song lyrics
- Then, we will take a moment to understand the songs' meanings
- Finally, we will take a moment to pause and reflect on the songs

## MEET THE ARTIST

### J4

An artist, a reader, and a person committed to individual and collective liberation, J4 is always learning and growing. Currently in solitary confinement because he stuck up for a friend, J4 wasn't able to share his life story in detail for this biography. However, according to his friend and album producer Nikki Morse, J4 is a “truly unique human being” who demonstrates the power of an open mind, critical thinking, and good communication skills. “I've learned so much from our dialogues,” Nikki says, “and I'm so glad that this track is going to be out in the world.” We're counting down the days until J4 himself can tell his story, helping others understand how he became the brave, dedicated, and thoughtful person we know.



## THE SONG

### WE GOTTA BREAK IT

We gotta break it, the chains, the chains, the chains  
I can't sit back no more

Coronavirus, food's sour, Black Power, who's shouting\*\*\*\* twin towers, America's  
saying manpower

Closed casket, the new flowers about 200,000, overcrowded but who's counting, who  
announced it,  
they blame China.

I just caught a bid with no roof, yeah  
I just dropped my mama off a coo, yeah  
I'm tired of all this s\*\*\* they put us through, yeah

They say you're black you probably won't make it through school, yeah  
You sell crack cuz that's what everybody do, yeah  
You ... pills and you're just tryna be cool, yeah  
Don't know what they is you're just tryna get wooed, yeah  
You OD's now your mama can't move, yeah  
She can't breathe for all the s\*\*\* you put her through, yeah  
How you say you a lover, you a house man  
You never shower, smelling like a f\*\*\*\*\* garbage can  
She sell her p\*\*\*\* I can never f\*\*\* with her again  
Can sell her p\*\*\*\* cuz her nigga get under my skin

Black Lives Matter, F\*\*\* the Chit-chatter, we gotta make it better, we gotta stick together

We gotta break it, the chains, the chains, the chains  
I can't sit back no more

Your pockets getting fatter, but it don't matter  
Your kids don't see you cuz you're at work forever  
I donate cheddar, I don't rape women  
Got no gold medals but I can save millions  
I'm the f\*\*\*\*\* cure for the coronavirus  
I just put my benz on autopilot  
I just had the same dream as Dr. Martin  
Excuse what I'm saying like I f\*\*\*\*\* farted  
Ku Klux Klan don't worry anybody  
In 2023 we got too many problems  
You wanna kill yourself really think about it  
You got too much to live for, go have a drink about it  
All I do is act like Winnie Pooh, yeah  
I just dropped my son off a coo, yeah  
I don't know how I dropped out of school, yeah  
I gang-bang just to be like other dudes, yeah  
How you say you a woman, you a slutbucket  
And you only got one man and you know you f\*\*\*\*\*  
And how you say you clean and you f\*\*\*\*\* musky  
And if you really was a woman you wouldn't be f\*\*\*\*\* nothing

Black Lives Matter, F\*\*\* the Chit-chatter, we gotta make it better, we gotta stick together

We gotta break it, the chains, the chains, the chains  
I can't sit back no more

## WHAT'S THE SONG ABOUT?

"I can't sit back no more," J4 raps, detailing the tensions, contradictions, and injustices that keep him and his community locked up in chains – metaphorically and literally. Refusing to keep quiet about what he sees going on around him, J4 breaks down the conventions and habits that he sees shaping the world and the people around him. Unafraid of self-critique, he turns his laser focus toward himself as well, describing how he ended up pushed out of school by a racist system ("they say you're black you probably won't make it through school") and how peer pressure influenced him ("I gang-bang just to be like other dudes"). Since everyone is impacted by these chains, J4's call to action is for folks to "stick together" and break free collectively.

# THE SONG

## HARD CONVERSATIONS

**Automated Voice:** To accept this call, press zero. This call is from a corrections facility and is subject to monitoring and recording.

**J4:** Hello?

**Nikki:** Hi this is Nikki with the community hotline for incarcerated people, is this, uh, J4?

**J4:** How you doing? Yeah.

**Nikki:** I'm well. How are you?

**J4:** Yeah, just chilling man. I've been thinking 'bout what you been talking 'bout. You know this is gonna be kind of hard. Nikki, this not gonna be easy for me to explain to you why I'm saying that she's a s\*\*\*. But, how you say you a woman you a s\*\*\*? But, what I'm trying to get to is don't try to play with the, you know what I'm saying, with the with the mind of a - of a -man either or whatever you think you got going on to other women. Because you don't have one man. You really messing with different men. Which is alright too. Because you allowed to do your thing too. Because... men do the same thing, and we not here to judge nobody.

**Nikki:** As someone who, you know, is often seen as a woman and, you know, makes the choice to have as many partners as I want, that word s\*\*\* feels like its really stigmatizing but like the way that people mess with each other's minds and hurt each other by lying, you know, like, I, and things like that, like that is real. And I think that is so relatable.

**J4:** You know, after speaking with you it opened my mind up to, you know what I'm saying. As a female who done been in life, been degraded, called certain things, it was more about learning a woman. And understanding her.

**Nikki:** What kinds of answers could you imagine, like, women that you're addressing offering? Like, with, how do you think they might answer that?

**J4:** I see any other women answering me like, Hey man you know you know you know. I- I-, you know, I like to do what I like to do. That's what's unique about it. I got to speak my mind about it, my visions, my heart about it. And you got to speak what you thought about it. Being in prison, like when you said, I wanna know how incarcerated think, a powerful thing when you wrote me that the other day because there's a lot of people that do uh sex work that get incarcerated a lot. When I can feel myself, like damn okay, I'm feeling myself getting emotional feeling myself, feeling, missing my family, missing the world. The things that going on and I keep hearing it, and I gotta express it.

## WHAT'S THE SONG ABOUT?

WE GOTTA BREAK IT started out just as J4's way of processing his feelings and experiences in prison during the COVID-19 pandemic, but when his friend LX heard the track, LX knew that he needed to connect J4 with some people LX met during his time in Broward County's Main Jail.

In 2021, a scrappy group of activists were fighting unsafe conditions in Florida's jails when one of them noticed that people calling in to report safety violations kept sharing new music they were writing behind the walls. Organizer Noam Brown, of the Community Hotline for Incarcerated people, got inspired to create an album featuring some of this incredible, unrecognized talent. LX heard about the project as he was being transferred to prison.

The album project got supercharged when Noam and fellow activist Nikki Morse happened to connect with Gary Field, a brilliant networker incarcerated in the county jail. With Gary on board, and funding from Nikki’s work as a scholar researching media activism, Bending the Bars was born. Over two years, Gary recruited talent on the inside and Noam connected these artists with collaborators on the outside. LX kept an ear out for talent, and as soon as he heard WE GOTTA BREAK IT, he introduced J4 to Noam and Nikki.

Soon, J4 was partnered with Dane Myers and Courtney P, who found WE GOTTA BREAK IT to be a relatable account of the contradictions of 21st century life in the United States. For Nikki, the track was compelling but complicated, since it echoed some of the misogyny that is pervasive in the rap community. When Nikki reached out to J4 by email to ask for a conversation about the track’s gender politics, J4 jumped at the chance to be in dialogue. That discussion is sampled in HARD CONVERSATIONS AND GETTING FREE, and shows that once we start breaking through the chains, we can’t stop until we all get free.

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## TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

1. “We Gotta Break It” calls for unity and change. What “chains” do you think J4 is talking about, and what does he want people to do about them?
2. “Hard Conversations” shows how talking openly can lead to understanding. What makes hard conversations so important in real life?
3. What skills do artists need to work together and solve problems?

