

UNCHAINED MELODIES



LYRICS AND HISTORICAL MOMENTS

- This guide situates song lyrics from the *Bending the Bars* album in relation to historical and cultural events that have shaped the period from 2020-2025.
- We will provide readers with a timeline that connects the music to the social, political, and public health crises of recent years. By doing so, we hope to highlight how the album resonates with lived experiences and prompts reflection on how artists confront issues such as systemic injustice, community resilience, and the role of incarceration.
- As Gary Fields, an executive producer of the album and writer of “Tearing Down Walls and Building Bridges,” states, **“People inside are the canaries in the coal mine what is happening inside is the experiment for the outside.”** Therefore, it is important to understand how these album lyrics relate to recent historical moments.
- Footnotes: You may see a few numbers next to some words (Example: “1” next to “communities”). These lead to a list of footnotes, that shows where we got the information (last page).

TIMELINE (2013-2025)

2013

BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT (BLM)

The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 when Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrisse Cullors created a call for care and fairness for Black communities¹. They started this movement after several Black people died during encounters with police, which caused many people to speak out about unequal treatment. The movement encourages learning, action, and community support so that Black individuals are treated with respect and safety.

“Beyonce told you Black Lives Matter, y’all jumpin’ outta your chair/ You got the truth right in your faces, don’t act like it ain’t there.” (“Hands Up”)

In this line, the artist is expressing how audiences didn’t pay attention to Black Lives Matter until famous artists such as Beyoncé began speaking out. By telling individuals not to “act like it ain’t there,” the artist is urging people to see what is already in front of them and not ignore it.



Song Lyrics That Connect

“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” (“We Gotta Break It”)**

This song connects to the movement because the artist is calling for people to stand together and work for fairness and safety for Black communities. Instead of just talking about the movement, the artist is calling for action in order to break the “chains.” In this line, he is pointing to the long history of unfair treatment that Black people have faced and the need for change. The line about not sitting back expresses the importance of taking action regarding the unfair treatment of Black individuals in order to “make it better.”

“Black Lives Matter is the movement, and every movement got room for improvement/ Black Lives Matter only march when a White man or an officer done killed a Black brother or a sister/ If Black lives really mattered why are we steady killing each other /Blacks killing Blacks at an all time high/ And you know what that’s called/ That’s genocide/It’s being committed by us, not the other guy/ In the last four years I done lost eight friends/ And each one lost their life to eight other Black men” (“A Message From a King”)

This song discusses the Black Lives Matter movement and highlights a problem the artist identifies. The artist suggests that the movement only marches when a White person or officer kills a Black person, but less attention is given when Black people kill each other. The artist mentions several of his friends who lost their lives to Black men, and calls this a “genocide.” The song asks listeners to notice all the ways lives are being lost in the community.

2020

COVID 19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in the USA in January 2020, and during this time, individuals had to go into lockdown, practice social distancing, and had to deal with many challenges, including isolation.² Several of the artists on the album explored what this isolation felt like and the effects of the COVID pandemic on their daily lives.

Coronavirus, food’s sour, Black Power [...]/ Closed casket, the new flowers about 200,000, overcrowded but who’s counting, who announced it,/ they blame China.” (“ We Gotta Break It”)

In this lyric, the artist talks about COVID-19 as one of many issues facing incarcerated people, alongside poor living conditions and political conflicts. When the artist says “about 200,000, overcrowded,” it highlights how crowded prisons were and how dangerous the virus felt in that space. The line “who’s counting” uses sarcasm to point out that people were not paying attention to the problem. By saying “they blame China,” the artist critiques how some people try to blame others instead of addressing issues at home.



“i move like the black liberation/ Dangerush/ see how we came from nothin” (“dangeRUSH”)

This song talks about moving like “Black liberation,” which connects to the ideas behind the Black Lives Matter movement. It expresses pride in how Black people have created a liberatory movement out of the experience of oppression. The lines highlight strength, resilience, and the journey toward freedom.



Song Lyrics That Connect

“I’m stuck in prison, can’t even go outside/ Six feet apart in a 5 by 5” (“Locked Down”)

In this lyric, the artist talks about being stuck in prison and not being able to go outside. The line “six feet apart in a 5 by 5” uses wordplay to highlight how crowded prison cells are while also referring to the six-foot rule³ people were asked to follow during COVID. It highlights how social distancing was especially hard (even impossible) for people in prison.



“You with your family or quarantined all alone/ I’m stuck behind these bars wishing that I was home” (“Locked Down”)

In this lyric, the artist talks about being stuck in prison during COVID-19, when many people in the so-called “free world” were describing themselves as being in “lockdown.” The lines contrast that experience with how hard it was to be separated from loved ones and confined in prison during the pandemic.

2020

GEORGE FLOYD

George Floyd was a Black man who was murdered on May 25, 2020 during by a White male police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota.⁴ His death was recorded on video and shared widely, which led to protests and renewed attention to the unfair treatment of Black people by police. The injustice of Floyd’s death became a rallying cry for the Black Lives Matter movement and calls for justice and change.



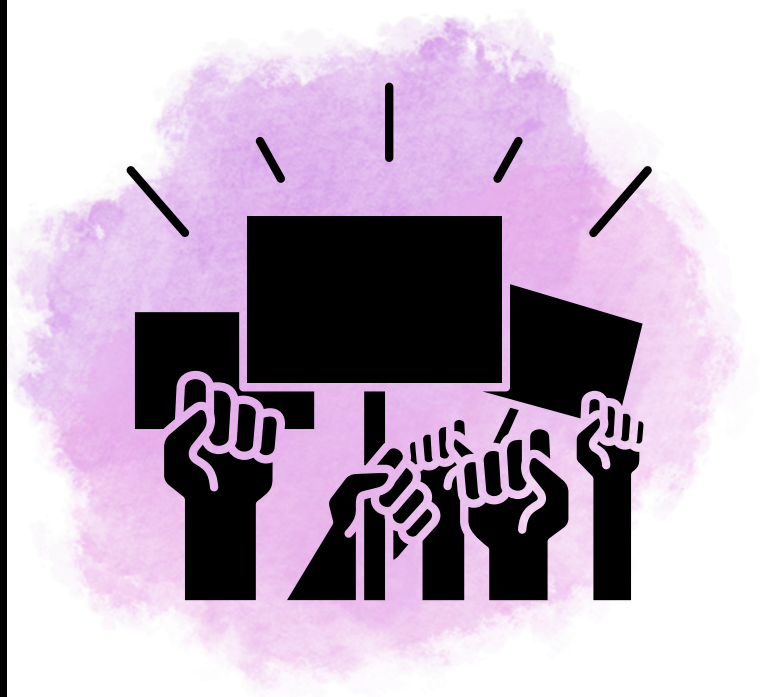
Song Lyrics That Connect

“Every day that you wake up you’re blessed/ Love every breath cuz you don’t know what’s next/ George Floyd left us with a knee on his neck/ Now his family is crying, we screaming “who’s next?”” (“Locked Down”)

The lyric uses the murder of George Floyd to do two things at once: appeal to listeners to appreciate life while simultaneously highlighting the communal impact of injustice.

“Rest in Power George Floyd and everyone who fell victim to the powers that be/ God get the glory, the truth will set you free/ Daniel Lewis, Rest in Power/ May the Lord give your family strength and comfort/ Brandon Roux, you coming home baby/ Free Dodo!” (“Locked Down”)

The lyric mentions George Floyd along with other people who experienced harm or injustice, demonstrating the power of uplifting the names of people who have faced state violence. By saying “Rest in Power George Floyd,” the artist honors his life and the impact his death had on his family, his community, and the country. The lyric also names Daniel Lewis⁵ and Brandon Roux, called Dodo, who is currently serving a life sentence in California.



ONGOING ECONOMIC, RACE, GENDER, CLASS CHALLENGES

These days, ongoing issues related to race, class, gender, and other factors are becoming intensified. This section will explore how several artists from the Bending the Bars album wrote lyrics to address these ongoing challenges. Told from the perspectives of several incarcerated individuals, these lyrics offer a unique perspective into how inequality impacts the artists on the album and their communities, as well as how art can comment on social and political reality.



Song Lyrics That Connect



“I’m in the box can’t sleep/
They kick the door all night/
They got me eatin the slop”
 (“No Good Deeds”)

This lyric describes some of the harsh conditions in prison with vivid language choices. The artist uses powerful imagery to describe an experience of someone “kick[ing] the door all night,” while using imagery for food such as “eatin the slop,” the artist paints a picture of the poor quality food and negative living conditions.



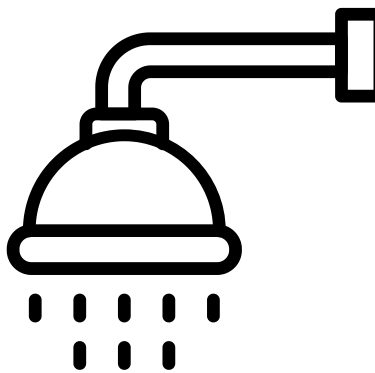
“Well it’s a felony conviction, it’s like a stain or an affliction/ That keeps folks down when their time is done/ That felony conviction can be seen as the new Jim Crow” (“Tearing Down Walls and Building Bridges”)

This lyric reflects on how having a criminal record leaves a negative impact on individuals' lives, affecting them long after they leave prison. By describing it as “the new Jim Crow,” the artist is drawing on Michelle Alexander’s book to point out that this system perpetuates the inequities of the past, such as the Jim Crow laws.⁷ The lyric highlights how the effects of incarceration and discrimination continue even after someone has served their time.

“Cuz that’s the stereotype the Black man be gettin/ You can’t be sad, a man can’t cry/ Oh ain’t no mental health, that’s just pride/ We have to learn to remove these stipulations from our mind/ For the sanity of our Black men to survive” (“A Message from a King”)

These lyrics challenge traditional gender roles about how Black men cannot show emotions. The artist says, “the stereotype [is...] a man can’t cry.” However, the artist also shows the listener that expressing emotions is important and that, as a society, we need to challenge and reconsider these stipulations, such as the notion that men should not cry because it’s essential for “Black men to survive.”





“I’m tired of cold food cold showers lock down 23 hours/ All a nigga eat is butter butter beans all days/ Open the doors and let me out” (County Time)

This lyric talks about being tired of “cold food” and “cold showers” while being in county jail awaiting trial. Through repetition, it shows how harsh and repetitive incarceration can be, punishing people before they’ve been convicted of a crime. By ending with “open the doors and let me out,” the artist offers freedom as a solution. This lyrical choice raises the question of whether the real solution is to decarcerate rather than merely push for better prison conditions.



“When you look at your skin and know you’re a target cuz your color black/ When you’re overqualified for a job but they play the race card to hold you back” (“A Message from a King”)

In this lyric, the artist references the concept of being both overqualified and having “the race card” used to hold them back. Often, the term “play the race card” is used to negatively describe a person of color using race as a way to get ahead; however, the artist is pointing out, on the contrary, that it is the racist system that plays the race card to hold someone back.

“To my beautiful Black queens you a beautiful sight/ Ain’t no need to be running around getting augmentations/ Turning your beautiful God given body to a mutation/ BPM breast lifts, 360 lipo, nippin and tuckin and securing the way life like it’s a typo” (“Message from a King”)

In this lyric, the artist is talking about plastic surgery and certain ways women change their bodies. The artist expresses a negative viewpoint of plastic surgery by saying these women are changing their “beautiful God given body to a mutation.” This lyric brings up important questions regarding gender and beauty standards, which include: Who gets to decide how women should treat their bodies? Who defines what beautiful is? Does a woman getting plastic surgery, applying makeup, or changing their appearance take away from their beauty?

“I been trying I been trying I been tryina do right/ Since I was 15/ But it’s so hard it’s so hard growing up in the hood” (“No Good Deeds”)

The lyrics talk about trying to “do right” while growing up “in the hood,” suggesting that our actions can be shaped by our backgrounds. It also raises questions about personal responsibility and whether “the hood” is meant literally as a neighborhood, metaphorically as a space that shapes people’s opportunities, or both.



WHERE WE FOUND THIS INFORMATION

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