

UNCHAINED MELODIES



BENDING THE BARS TRACK 15 & 16: “Better Days” & “Tearing Down Walls and Building Bridges”

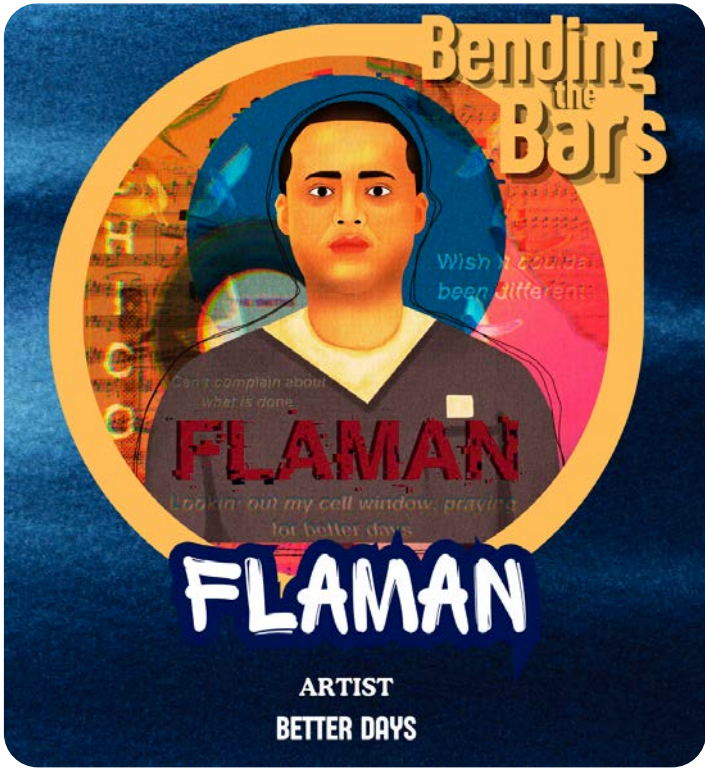
ABOUT THIS GUIDE

- We will look at two songs from the album Bending the Bars
- First, we will explore the artists 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

FLAMAN

Known to his family as “Chico,” FLAMAN is a young man from Florida who has faced a lot of adversity in his life. Growing up in the hood without a father, FLAMAN grieved his brother’s death at a young age, and after that loss, nothing was the same. After getting caught up in the drug trade, he found himself swept up by the system and turned into a number. In prison, FLAMAN was confined to a unit where phone calls are extremely limited and for some time he also had no access to email. Even though he couldn’t get in touch with us to help flesh out this artist description, we hope that FLAMAN’s voice reaches people through his track BETTER DAYS.



THE SONG

BETTER DAYS

Wrote this song for all my niggaz locked up in the system
Layin in the graves
for the ones that want to see my momma cry
Put her through pain

I lost my brother to these streets
Ever since ain't been the same
Lookin' out my cell window, praying for better days.
I been prayin' for better days, prayin' for better daaayyyys
I been prayin' for better days, remember being in the hood
With all my niggaz had no father figure

30 hangin' out my waist just in case we got a victim
For my nigga D at just 15
We lost him to the system
And my nigga Prii, heard he comin' home
I swear I miss him
Couple fallen soldiers
Got my youngins on a mission
R.I.P. my nigga Nick
Used to cook dope in my momma kitchen
Old school advise 'bout these streets
But I ain't wanna listen
Miss my nigga Matt
Wish it coulda been different
Can't complain about what is done
But I gotta stay on my pevic
Collect calls to my momma
I ain't mean to hurt your feelings
Understand that I'm in too deep and this is how I'm living yeah
And this is how I'm living.

I wrote this song for all my niggaz locked up in the system
Layin in the graves
for the ones that want to see my momma cry
Put her through pain
I lost my brother to these streets
Ever since ain't been the same
Lookin' out my cell window, praying for better days.

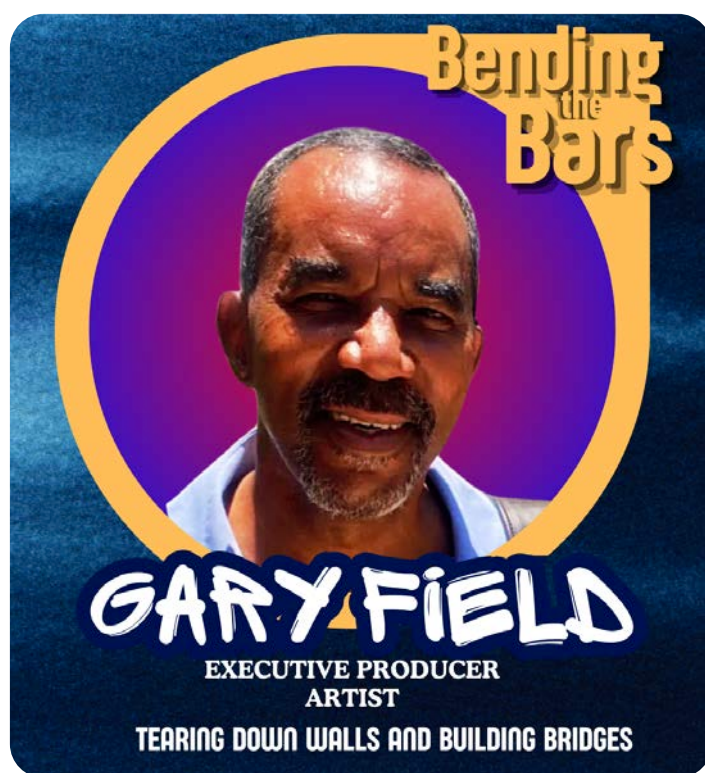
I been prayin' for better days, prayin' for better days.

WHAT'S THE SONG ABOUT?

Inspired by FLAMAN's experiences in Florida's prisons and jails, BETTER DAYS uses storytelling to show how systems of poverty, racism, and oppression feed the prison industrial complex. Dedicated to other prisoners, FLAMAN describes incarcerated people as the living dead but remains hopeful that change is possible: "I'm praying for better days," he says.

MEET THE ARTIST

A true connector of people, projects, and resources, Gary Field is a brilliant networker and mentor, talents that have been critical to his work as an Executive Producer of Bending the Bars. He's a prolific writer, composing poetry, essays, manifestos, and guides for abolitionist organizers. As a seventh grader in the inner city, Gary told a teacher that Shakespeare wasn't such a big deal – anyone could write a play. After being challenged to do just that, Gary wrote, produced, and directed a 3-act play, which garnered him a scholarship to an elite prep school. From there, he traveled through Europe and North Africa, studied at Columbia University, and was achieving professional success when he got caught up in the criminal punishment system. As Gary tells it, he went from a 2.5 acre ranch, to a 2-man cell “in a gated community of another kind.” Always learning, Gary has spent the last twenty years studying the criminal injustice system and organizing to transform it from the inside.



THE SONG

TEARING DOWN WALLS AND BUILDING BRIDGES

Start tearing down walls and building bridges
Finding a way to make things right
When a man falls he needs those bridges
Out of the darkness into light
Won't you lift your hands up
Won't you raise your voice
Help someone to stand up
Silence is a choice

Well injustice thrives on silence so it's time to make a choice
Folks need your help and guidance so it's time to raise your voice
How long will you look the other way with folks falling through the cracks?
Folks barely surviving day to day while you simply turn your backs
If we're the richest country in the world could someone please explain to me
why the homeless rate seems to escalate and there's no war on poverty?
Now for those who choose to have penthouse views, I don't begrudge them
or envy their plans
It's the other part that breaks my heart; the homeless eating out of garbage
cans.

Start tearing down walls and building bridges
Finding a way to make things right
When a man falls he needs those bridges
A brighter day to follow night
Won't you lift your hands up
Won't you raise your voice
Help someone to stand up
Silence is a choice

Well they've criminalized mental illness and treat addiction as a crime.
How long do you think this moves from the shadows to prime time?
You couldn't build prisons fast enough with those razor wire fences
Stop moral decline with a handcuff, it's time we all came to our senses.

Cuz all of us are better than the worst things that we have done
But there's a scarlet letter, a ball and chain that weighs a ton.

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.
It's a limiting restriction that strikes harder than a blow.
Now how can a man be expected to rise when he has to check that box?
Jobs taken? That's no surprise. Now go ahead and kick rocks.
Go ahead and kick rocks.

Start tearing down walls and building bridges
Finding a way to make things right
When a man falls he needs those bridges
Out of the darkness into light
Won't you lift your hands up
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Help someone to stand up
Silence is a choice

WHAT'S THE SONG ABOUT?

As Gary puts it, "Nobody wakes up one morning and says, 'I want to set in motion a chain of events that leads to a 10- or 20-year prison sentence.'" Given that truth, he says, we have to examine why the prison population has grown from 400,000 to 2 million in the past 50 years. The data show that poverty, addiction, mental illness, and the recidivism rate are fueling the rapid growth of the prison population, but Gary's lyrics are inspired by what he has personally seen over the 20 years that he has been caught up in the criminal injustice system. While there are no simple solutions to the complex societal problems that continue to fill our nation's prison, he says, "it's clear that the current approach is not working." Meanwhile, activists who focus only on dismantling unjust systems risk leaving communities without resources and support. That's why the call to action in the chorus urges people to "start tearing down walls and building bridges" simultaneously.

TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

1. In "Better Days," FLAMAN tells stories about loss, poverty, and prison life, but he also says, "I been prayin' for better days." Why do you think he doesn't directly describe the change he hopes for?
2. "Tearing Down Walls and Building Bridges" talks about helping others, ending silence, and raising your voice. Why is it important to both tear down walls and build bridges?
3. Looking back at this course, how have music and reflection helped you see your story or your future in a new way?

