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IN-DEPTH

Prisoners Laud New Program Easing Access to Music

How a prison supply company, Universal Music Group and sympathetic rappers teamed up to provide music for New York's inmates

[Jason Newman \(/contributors/jason-newman\)](#) / September 19, 2013

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One hundred miles north of New York City, Robert Maffei—Inmate 08A3027—and John Ramsey—inmate 83A3747—are sitting in a featureless conference room in Sullivan Correctional Facility. Both are serving long sentences for murder, with Maffei beginning his sentence in 2008 and Ramsey entering his 31st year incarcerated.

Like many inmates, Maffei and Ramsey turn to music as a form of therapy and distraction while they serve their sentences. "I lock in my cell and put on a good tape and it helps me escape from the madness that's going on around me," says Maffei. "I can't do without music," adds Ramsey. "You'll never catch me in my cell without it."

There are more than 1.5 million inmates nationwide, and getting supplies to them is oftentimes a clandestine and byzantine process. In 2009, New York entrepreneur Chris Barrett started [Send a Package](http://www.sendapackage.com/) (<http://www.sendapackage.com/>), a prison supply distribution company founded so friends and family can more easily send supplies to their incarcerated loved ones.

"My little brother got sentenced to 25 to life and I had to send him a package," says Barrett, referencing his brother Robert Maffei. "I had to take off the next day from work and go shopping around store to store. I carried this 35-pound box to the post office and standing on line, I thought, 'There has to be a better way to do this.'"

But it was only in February of this year that the company added music to its supply list, inking a deal with Universal Records to officially distribute select artists to prisoners, including Kanye West, Jadakiss and Prodigy. "I would get letters from inmates all the time telling me what to add, and one constant thing was music," says Barrett.

The entrepreneur linked with Shawn Costner, an EVP at Def Jam, who was coincidentally looking for a way to distribute the label's hip hop artists to the prison population amid a sea of stringent rules. One of many examples: The average cassette was made with screws, a verboten object in prisons. Send a Package sends custom-made, screwless tapes to pass prison regulations.

"For us, it was about how could we find a creative way for somebody to manufacture these cassettes, get our music to inmates and where we can still profit from it?," says Costner. Costner says that Jadakiss and 2 Chainz were both adamant about the label making cassettes of their albums available for prisoners, but until linking with Send a Package, there was no viable distribution outlet.

"When you get hit with that kind of time, you need the music to keep yourself sane," says Jadakiss. "I have to do this bid, keep my sanity and be able to stay strong. You need music to help you through that because that's all you really got."

Prodigy, who was released from prison in 2011 after serving a three-year sentence for weapons possession, saw the vitality of music in jail firsthand. "Music was the most important thing when I was locked up. It kept me occupied and my mind at ease."

Barrett, who was incarcerated himself from age 18 to 24, already has secured the exclusive rights to distribute Universal's catalog within the U.S. prison system, but his long-term goals are to negotiate through each state prison system's different rules and processes.

For inmates like John Ramsey, Send a Package has allowed him to maintain a semblance of a normal life while being incarcerated. "It's huge. Most companies aren't catering to this particular market," says Ramsey. "I always try to remain current, relevant and resourceful, no matter what. Some people give up. Some people get locked into this. I'm not locked into prison at all."

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