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PEOPLE

## A CONVERSATION WITH JA RULE

The hip-hop star talks about prison life, the infamous Fyre Festival, how to make a comeback, and the jet he'd most like to own.

**MARGIE GOLDSMITH** | JANUARY 2021

Hip-hop artist Jeffrey Bruce Atkins, better known as Ja Rule, arrives for our interview looking like the success that he is. Dressed in an impeccable gray silk Versace suit, with a neatly folded pocket square and buttery leather grey Oxfords, he wears a Rolex on one wrist and three gold Cartier bracelets on the other. Inked on his chest, though, are tattoos that suggest he hasn't always lived on Easy Street.

"I got 'Pain Is Love' tattooed over my heart, because I mean it from the bottom of my heart," he says. "It's about the sacrifice that you go through for your loved ones."



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This 44-year-old singer, songwriter, author, and entrepreneur, who was born and raised in Queens, New York, knows plenty about pain and sacrifice. His father left when he was very young, and he began selling drugs at the age of 12. At 18, he started his career with a three-man hip-hop group and took the stage name Ja Rule, with Ja standing for Jeffrey Atkins and Rule suggested by a friend. The group disbanded shortly afterward because one of its members went to jail. Ja Rule himself had done prison time at age 16, for drugs and gun possession; he also spent two years in jail starting in 2011 for attempted possession of a weapon and tax evasion.

By then, however, he had long since found success in the music world. When he was 23, his first solo album, *Venni Vetti Vecci*, sold two million copies worldwide and earned platinum certification. Since then, he has had many top 20 hits, sold over 30 million records, produced seven more studio albums, and published his autobiography, *Unruly: The Highs and Lows of Becoming a Man*.

Ja Rule—who is married and has three children—met us at New Jersey's Teterboro Airport after a trip to Indiana to see one of his mentee rappers.



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### **As a kid, what did you want to do when you grew up?**

Entertaining was in my blood. I had visions of acting, dancing, and singing. When I was five, my grandma would say, "Get Jeffrey in here. He dances like Michael Jackson." I'd do my Michael Jackson impersonation and they'd say, "He's so talented."

### **But before you started a music career, you turned to drugs.**

When you come from the 'hood, there aren't many ways out. The drug dealers had fancy cars, women, and money, and these are things you see as success. I did what every other kid out there did: I dropped out of school. I thought making \$500 to \$1,000 a week was good money. At 13 years old, this was great, but I knew what came with this: trouble. I got arrested at an early age, but through all the pain, I didn't quite learn the lesson. I just chalked it up to, "I'm young, and this is what young kids do." The real lessons and change came from love. They came when I had my daughter.

### **What did you realize then?**

You can't be this guy. You've got to be better for your family now that you have a daughter. Me and Aisha [Ja Rule's wife] had Brittney when we were 19, 20 years old. I didn't have a plan other than I had started making music. In high school, I beat on tables at lunch and came up with raps. One thing led to another and I formed a group.



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Of course, I was still selling drugs to feed myself. I was 16 when I went to prison for drugs and a gun. Thank the Lord they gave me a youthful offender charge and a second chance. Me and my group, Cash Money Click, were on our way to doing something positive with our lives until my friend [in the group], Chris Black, went to prison and my whole world was shattered. I thought we were going to be big, but there are bumps in the road. And that led to my solo career.

**What do you want black kids to take away from your story?**

Kids my color feel the world on their shoulders at very young ages, and it's hard for them to see themselves as anything other than what society has put on them. That's why very few make it out. I want kids to take away that they *can* make it out.

**When you were in prison [the last time], you put on 40 pounds of muscle. Why was working out so important?**

There's not much to do in prison; it's like Groundhog Day. Working out gives you this feeling of euphoria. People take drugs for this, and they don't know you can go to your local gym and get that feeling every day just by a couple of squats and some cardio. I really believe in fitness, and now that I'm getting a little older, it's part of my cycle because I want to stay healthy.

**Let's talk about hip-hop. How does it differ from rap?**

Hip-hop is a culture. Hip hop is break dancing; it's graffiti; it's the language of slang; it's art. My son raps, but I've got to make him a hip-hop artist. I used to breakdance; I was Kid Fresh back in the day. I had a mean hand spin and back spin, and I used to write graffiti. It's all part of the hip-hop culture.



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**Isn't being a rapper similar to being a poet, except that you have to do much more than rhyme words? You've got to tell a whole story?**

Yeah. I like to say that RAP stands for Real Advanced Poetry because in rap you set a story to music in a time frame. It's an art form to be able to condense a story into a two- or three-minute song. We've been able to do that very tellingly over the last 50 years that hip hop's been in existence.

**If someone asked, “Are you hip-hop or rap”—**

I'm a hip-hop artist. The act of it is the same. Rappers rap; hip-hop artists rap, but the difference is the culture.

**You've had highly publicized feuds with rapper 50 Cent. You've insulted each other's songs. Is deprecating a rival in a song the best revenge?**

It's the competitive nature, and it's very relevant in hip-hop. You have a macho alpha bravado about the music, about who we are and what we represent, and that causes little tiffs. But at the end of the day, it's entertainment, it's music.

**Do you plan to write another book?**

I do. People need to hear stories of resilience, triumph, getting knocked down, and getting back up. I had a good conversation with Mark Cuban, who said that what I'm doing is what a lot of people don't have the courage to do: get back up on the horse and ride again. I've been fearless throughout my life.

**What do you think is the future of hip-hop?**

Right now, it's the biggest of all the genres of music, and that is a big accomplishment because they said hip-hop wouldn't last. But where it goes from here is up to where these young kids take it.

The music business has changed so much, but I love where it's going. Sometimes you don't know if you're listening to R&B or rap or whatever, but it just feels good. That's what I'm into making now—feel-good music.

**A recent report said that 78 percent of people buying rap records are white. Why is that?**

It's the culture. White people love hip hop, Asian people love hip hop. Black people love hip hop. We all love hip hop. When I do concerts, I let everybody know that hip hop is the power of love.

**You collaborated with Billy McFarland to launch the Fyre Fest, which was billed as a luxury event but turned into a disaster. You and he faced a \$100 million class-action suit, and he's now in jail. Wasn't the idea of the festival yours?**

Yes. I'm a visionary. The first idea was the platform that we were building to automate the booking industry. The next progression was the festival. I felt it would be an amazing marketing tool for our [booking] platform. But the festival turned out to be such a disaster.

It hurt me to see people get hurt from something I wanted to be amazing. The thing that heartbreaks me the most about Fyre is people saying I scammed them. That's not the case. Did things of that nature go on? Yes, and Billy did it, which is why Billy's in prison and Ja Rule is sitting here doing an interview about it.

**Why do you fly privately?**

I want to get to certain places really quickly and back really quickly. Or, if it's a private family getaway, I don't want to be bothered going through the airport. Especially now with COVID, private's more of an option. Flying with people I know is more comfortable.

**How often would you say you've flown by private jet?**

About 40 percent of the time. I used to embed it into all my travel until I realized it was eating into my show money.

**Do you have any memorable private jet stories?**

Oh, man, I almost died on a jet. Pilot says, "Guys, we have a storm coming. I think I can get out in front of it, but we got to leave now." I'm like, "Let's go." We got out in front of the storm, but the turbulence had us rolling around. There's nothing you can do at that moment. If God says it's time, it's time. That's how I live.

Another flight I remember is the first time I had my kids on a [private] jet. I couldn't keep them still. You've got to buckle up on a commercial plane, but on the [private] jet, there are no rules. The little Rules are running all around the plane and acting crazy.

### **If you could buy any jet you wanted, what would you buy?**

Well, I'm going to get me an airliner in the future sometime. I want a big jumbo 747. Just gut it out, make it my little home in the sky, and we'll go everywhere in that.



### **Why do you want it so big?**

I've got a really big team.

### **Are you involved with Black Lives Matter?**

Of course. It's a really uphill battle. We've been fighting this fight for many, many years, and we will keep fighting. I think you're going to see the power of love and how people come together to push out hate, and that's the beauty of America. Hip hop is a big part of that and we're going to see real change from the hip-hop community.

### **What is Iconn?**

I'm automating the booking industry. Everything else in the music industry is automated except for the booking process. I want to make it transparent and seamless for both buyers and artists. Through the Iconnapp, you can book concerts, appearances, speaking engagements, and also services such as from famous hairstylists and photographers. We've essentially become the Amazon for entertainment.

### **What is Iconn Live?**

It's a way for entertainers to create, collaborate, chat with each other, and connect with fans. I will use this platform to create my Vibes Concerts, a body of work from an iconic artist with a live performance. I'm planning to do my entire first album, *Venni Vetti Vecci* with a live band. The goal is to let the people into the artist's world and give the artist the chance to tell the stories behind the music. It's interactive and casual. it's not just a concert—it's a vibe.

## **You bought a women's football team. Why?**

This is an amazing moment for women in sports, but even more amazing for women in football. I saw a great opportunity to be on the right side of women's athletics. The New York Stars is my team. I can't wait for us to show the world what these women have got. They're amazing athletes.

## **What do you want your legacy to be?**

God put me here to create. Music was my first introduction, writing songs the world loves. I don't know where life is going to take me, but I know it will be something involving creativity, and hopefully it'll be something amazing that helps change the world.



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*This interview has been edited and condensed. Our thanks to Kirk Stephen and the staff at Meridian Teterboro for their assistance with this article.*

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## **FAST FACTS**

**NAME:** Jeffrey Bruce Atkins, aka Ja Rule

**BORN:** Feb. 29, 1976, in Queens, New York

**CAREER:** Hip-hop songwriter and singer, actor, writer, and businessman

**EDUCATION:** GED earned in prison, 2012; Certificate on Entrepreneurship Essentials, Harvard University, 2020



**HONORS:** Nominated for two American Music Awards, four Grammy Awards. Has sold over 30 million records.

**PERSONAL:** Lives in Saddle River, New Jersey. Married to Aisha Murray Atkins, with whom he has three children: Brittney, Jeffrey Jr., and Jordan, born, respectively, in 1995, 2000, and 2005. Hobbies include golf, sports, and collecting music and art memorabilia.

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