

## MUSIC IN PRISONS

WORDS: I FIRMLY BELIEVE IN THE RESTORATIVE ASPECTS OF MUSIC – THAT MUSIC CAN help to calm, inspire, excite and generally be a great way to express emotions, whether you're a musician or just a listener.

CLAIRE DUPREE

So, when I was approached to do an article on Music In Prisons, I jumped at the chance. I was originally invited to attend a special performance given by inmates at Durham men's high security prison, HMP Frankland, in the middle of June, but due to unforeseen circumstances the prison decided to cancel the press event. I must admit that I was partly relieved, the more I had been thinking about my prison visit, the more I was concerned about my feelings towards the prisoners – I was concerned that I may have uncharitable thoughts about whether inmates deserved to find pleasure in music – surely if you've done something wrong, you should be punished?

However, the more I discussed this with friends and particularly after speaking to one of the local musicians involved, Nev Clay, the more I began to appreciate the project.

The Music In Prisons initiative is run by the Irene Taylor Trust, they have encouraged a group of inmates at Frankland, and at women's prison Low Newton, in County Durham to work together to form a band as part of a project that aims to use music to inspire and involve them in potential opportunities that will lead them away from crime.

Their overall achievements will be displayed at an installation called Where I'm Coming From at The Sage Gateshead from 23rd July to 3rd August.

Working with the inmates will be two apprentices from The Sage Gateshead, Charlotte Strawbridge and Ed Aldcroft, who will be working alongside musician Nev Clay who has been doing music/songwriting classes at Frankland since April 2004. Nev explains how the sessions work: "The prisoners are encouraged to experiment with all of the available instruments, the facilitators pick up on emerging riffs and patterns, isolate these and encourage the other participants to find matching beats and riffs.

Chord structures, beats and riffs are distilled into verses, choruses and tags (bridges), and these are played by the whole group with the facilitators using hand signals to guide changes. While this is going on, one or two prisoners will usually volunteer lyrics they've written... and hey presto, you've got a song! It's an amazing (and incredibly noisy) process, I've seen it happen twice and still can't believe it works... but it does, with lots of laughter and, dare I say it, joy."

Nev doesn't let the 'moral' implications of bettering the prisoners life get in the way of trying to teach them something valuable, "I don't usually know what people have done and they don't usually tell me, but on the few occasions where I've found out the details of someone's offence, after a brief period of readjustment I find I'm able to work with them in the 'here and now' without any problems. Often, the offence was long ago,

and committed when the individual was drunk or on drugs, without wanting to trot out a cliché or sound indifferent to the feelings of victims (which I'm not), we've all made mistakes – these guys have just made worse ones than the people I know. Of course, some of the prisoners have been damaged by childhood experiences, and some are simply ill. Let's put it this way, I don't believe in 'evil'."

For Ed, the experience of working in a prison has changed the way he looks at making music, "It's amazing to work in an environment where people have been written off by the outside. But we're giving them a voice. The enthusiasm they all have and the lyrics they have written have been very powerful."

Some of the inmates were interviewed about their feelings towards the project and, for the most part, it seems to have been a challenging and, above all, rewarding project. Inmate Paul explains his feelings, "I have always been interested in music and here at the prison I have been taking keyboard lessons. This project really opened my eyes to what's involved in creating music. It has been very educational and I have really enjoyed just taking part and working in a group. Often here, people are isolated and look out for themselves, but this week we have all had to work together and learn to support each other."

Paul also mentioned that the experience was a great way to escape the routine of prison life, and hopefully, with all going well at the exhibition at The Sage, this can become a regular part of prison life at Frankland and Low Newton.

When it comes to rehabilitation and the benefit the project has had on the inmates Nev, as always, sums it up perfectly: "I believe that being creative is healing in itself. I believe that being treated like a human, being valued for what you are and not judged for what you've done is, by definition, a humanising process, and counters how a lot of these people have been treated for most of their lives. And I believe in music, whatever that is. For some of the prisoners it was an enjoyable (though challenging) week, for some it was a way to spend time out of their cells, but for others it's something more, perhaps a way for them to see themselves and their potential in a new light. I think music, and creative activity in general, gives people new, non-destructive ways of communicating with others and with themselves. Hopefully that's something they'll bring with them when they're back 'on the out.'"

My initial reservations of being involved in the performances themselves at the prisons have been quashed and I now long to have the opportunity to see the performances first hand. I, like everyone else, will have to settle with the exhibition at The Sage, which will certainly be an insightful and thought provoking installation.

www.musicinprisons.org.uk

30

NARC.



"For some of the prisoners it was perhaps a way for them to see themselves and their potential in a new light"