



Music in Prisons

Tom Greenhalgh, Projects and Fundraising Assistant at the Irene Taylor Trust, talks about the power of positive engagement in the Trust's creative music projects.

Why should anyone study music? It's a question many of us in music education have been asked. Visit a project run by The Irene Taylor Trust however and you'll find your answer immediately. Those taking part are gradually (and not-at-all-quietly) taking the necessary steps to change their lives for the better. Much, much better. Since every single participant is serving a sentence in one of Her Majesty's Prisons.

As one project leader put it, it's 'the power of positive engagement that really makes a difference'.

A typical project will work closely and intensely with up to 12 participants as they write, rehearse and record their own music. They learn to express themselves through creative writing and music, play instruments, work together as a group and communicate their ideas.

As the week progresses, excitement levels start to rise as the inmates work towards a performance of all they have achieved in front of an audience of other prisoners, staff and invited guests including, where possible, the prisoners' families.

This is fundamental to the process of the project, as

prisoners learn they are capable of doing something that by even a professional musician's reckoning is nothing short of amazing. On completion of the performance the inmates have not only learnt to express themselves in a positive way, but have learnt to work together for a production that massively boosts their self-esteem.

When writing about such a performance at HMP Elmley, a project leader said: 'Nerves

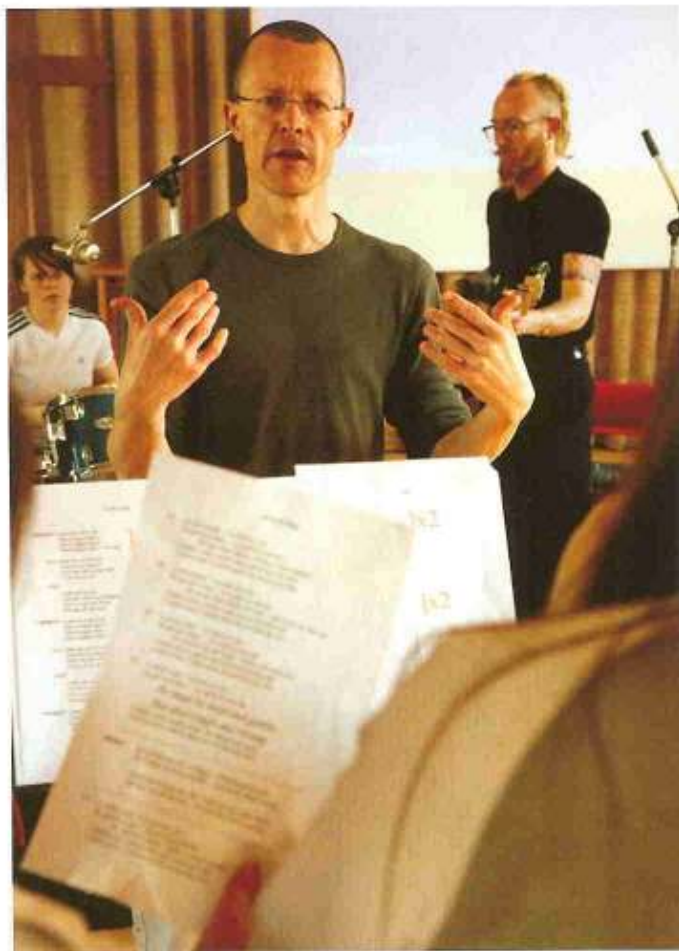
were obvious but so was the excitement and the audience was hugely supportive of all that had been achieved. There were some great individual performances and as the set went on, people visibly relaxed. So much had been achieved by a group who we felt sure had no idea where it was all going at the start of the project, but nevertheless stuck with it no matter how difficult it got.'

The final performance is

recorded, mixed and mastered and a CD cover is designed so that soon after the project has finished, each participant has a professional quality CD: literally a record of their achievements to remind them that they are capable of achieving more than they imagined. At the end of one project a participant said, 'I am learning so much you know. This has been completely amazing for me, I never knew I could do it.' Precisely why music education in prison is so vital.

More often than not, the principal reasons for someone being in prison go far beyond the crime they have committed. Prison populations have an alarmingly high proportion of people that have come from broken homes, grown up in poverty, suffered physical and sexual abuse and been excluded from school. While this may not excuse someone from committing a crime, it does offer an insight into why crimes are committed and how we can go about preventing them in the first place.

Giving prisoners an education means that they can acquire the tools to support a life away from re-offending. In so many cases, a negative experience of education and an extreme lack of self-belief mean that prisoners do not



take the opportunities that education can afford them.

Thankfully, The Irene Taylor Trust (or 'Music in Prisons' to give it its working name) is providing a positive experience of education, devoid of the formal and instructive environment common in most classes. In this environment prisoners can realise their potential and even go on to enter into further training. As a result, every one of the 110 projects run to date has been proven to significantly increase the self-confidence of those taking part.

As one prison governor put it: 'I think that the idea of introducing music and creative writing to prisoners

confidence to tackle other issues in their lives.'

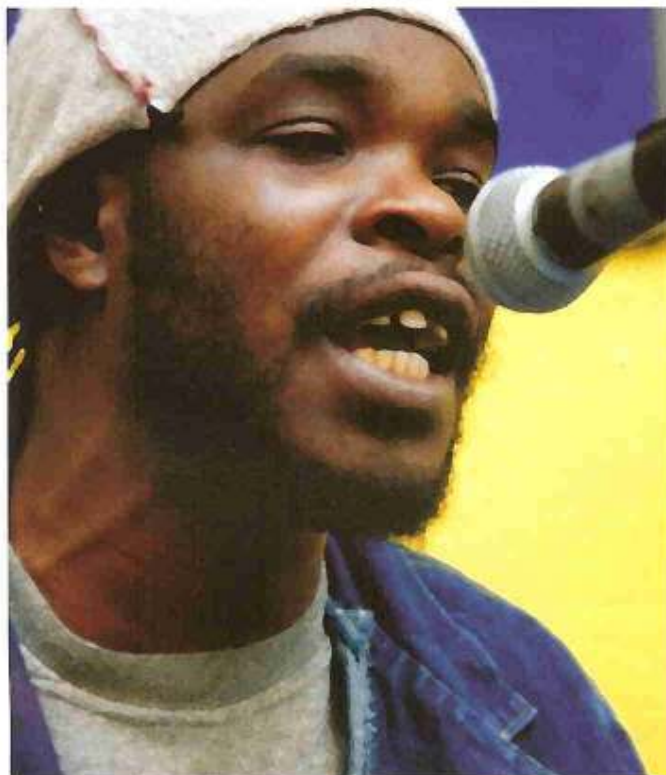
It is of course important not to forget the fact that already in today's prisons, there is a wealth of talent and expertise that has remained relatively untapped. For this reason Music in Prisons doesn't just work to provide a positive experience for all of those involved, but also to develop and nurture the talents of the gifted individuals that currently pervade our secure facilities.

Take for example a participant at Askham Grange who said: 'I was a professional singer until my misfortune, but I had lost my confidence and hope of ever pursuing my dreams. After being a part of the group

me, believed in me and saw me for who I really was. They saw my talent and treated me with the utmost respect.' Since her release from prison, she has returned to professional singing and has even returned to prisons with

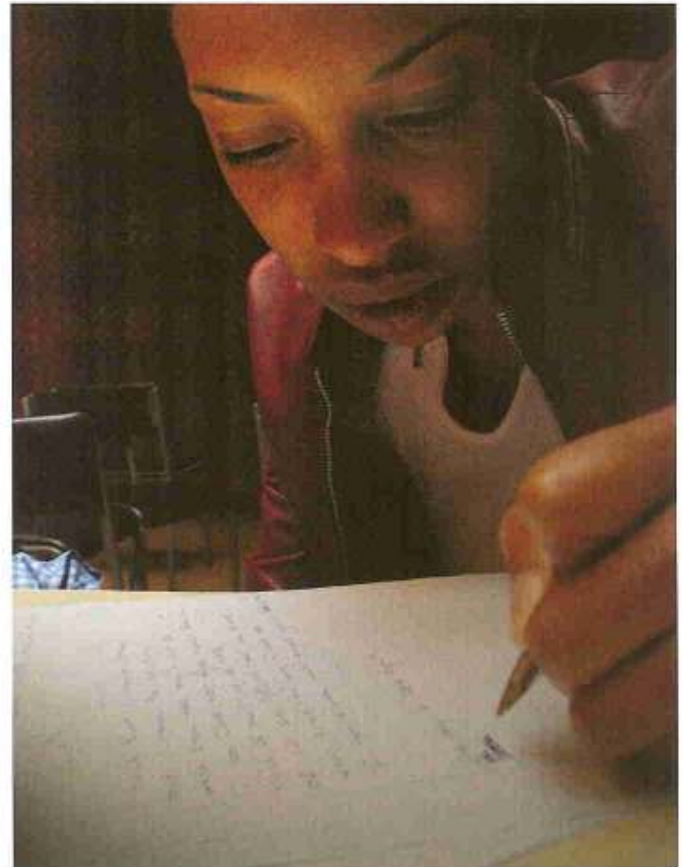
to take their music making to the next level.

It follows then that each



is an excellent way of helping them to learn new skills or develop existing skills which may help them on release. It builds confidence, teamwork, inter-personal skills, provides a medium for giving pleasure to themselves and others and transferable

that put the songbook 'Behind the Secret Door' together and learning that they had won an award it really boosted my confidence and made me feel very proud. But the most important thing was the way I was treated by the team from the Trust. They had faith in



the Music in Prisons team as a workshop leader.

In this case and in many others like it, the Music in Prisons team were able to use their formal training and wealth of experience in professional music making to offer specific help to those that actually seek a career in music. In doing so the individuals build their confidence and find a way out of the cycle of re-offending. This is done not just by the team providing expert tuition whilst in the prison, but by supporting individuals upon their release. By signposting them towards further training, Music in Prisons enables them

project is a massive undertaking, culminating in a showcase of achievements that exposes some remarkable skills and talented individuals. Were this to remain firmly behind prison walls, it would be a tragedy not just for the participants whose work deserves public recognition, but also for the public as a whole who would remain ignorant of the potential within our prisons and of the positive effects that such projects have.

Fortunately, anyone visiting The Sage Gateshead – the newest and largest cultural attraction in the North East – in recent weeks would find

that this new and exciting material doesn't have to go unnoticed.

'Where I'm Coming From' was an exhibition that combined the work of projects held in HMP Frankland and HMPYOI Low Newton earlier this year, creating a profusion of new songs, compositions, creative writing and photography. Visitors to The Sage Gateshead were treated to projections of professional photographs that documented the project's team-work, as barriers to communication were slowly but surely broken down. Hanging from the walls were collages that mixed photographs of the participants with the creative writing they had written, giving a human face to words and music produced by the project.

All the while, the recordings of the performances that concluded each project were

On the subject of educational experiences – the learning didn't stop at those taking part in the projects. One of the greatest barriers to ex-offenders in their endeavour to break out of the cycle of re-offending is the public perception of those serving or having recently served a sentence. Looking beyond the sensationalist headlines of crime rates and 'gang culture' to see the people that are actually involved can take a super-human leap of imagination.

'Where I'm Coming From' gave a rare opportunity for members of the public to see the faces of the people in prison, to see them being a part of a positive, creative experience and to have a glimpse into their life and hopes for the future. Through the exhibition's creative writing and music, visitors could gain an understanding of the participants' attitudes, beliefs and their experience of living in prison.

The product of all of this was



playing into the room, so that for two weeks there existed an installation displaying the talents, creativity and hard work of people that are very much in need of an opportunity for self-expression and positive learning experience.

perhaps best summed up by one visitor to the exhibition, who said: 'I enjoyed the music and display. It reminded me that prisoners are just like you and me.'

It's all too easy to think of prisoners being exactly as the



popular media portray them. The truth is of course removed from that and educating the public to see prisoners as the human beings they are is what The Sage Gateshead exhibition was all about.

Working with prisoners, educating them about writing and performing music forms the bulk of what Music in Prisons does. The effects of it however go far beyond that. Raising self-esteem, teaching team-working skills, providing an introduction to education that can lead to further constructive learning, these are just some of the effects each project can have. The effects that has on the prisoners, the prison staff and the wider community are even more important, with ex-offenders being able to break free of the cycle of re-offending and find a positive path in the outside world.

As one inmate put it: 'We walk back on the unit singing songs – it is very unusual to hear singing on Life unit. Being on the Life unit, the project provided an unusual relief to prison life where self-esteem and self-confidence is generally very low. Some time ago I lost all my confidence and self esteem and never imagined singing again and doing what I am doing now.'

Music in Prisons continues to engage and empower inmates across the country and a list of their future performances and samples of CDs and songbooks that are available can be seen on the Music in Prisons website.

Photographs: Lizzie Coombes

www.musicinprisons.org.uk