

'Music in Prisons' group to watch a musical performance put on by some of the inmates of Lewes Prison, in the prison chapel. I agreed to go. The group, otherwise known as the Irene Taylor Trust, have been doing music workshops in prisons since 1995, I'm told, in order to help with the eventual rehabilitation of the prisoners who participate. They are given four days' training, morning and afternoon, and the last day is given over to a dress rehearsal and the final performance.

I wake on the morning of this performance with a growing feeling of nervousness. I have never been inside a prison. In particular, though I must have passed it thousands of times, I have never been inside Lewes Prison. I don't know what to expect. There are no other journalists in the group of thirteen who have accepted the invitation. I am introduced to them outside the gates. Most of the other people seem to be lawyers and judges. My sense of apprehension grows.

We are thoroughly searched before going in. No mobile phones, or cameras. We are given neck tags, with the words 'Under Escort' written on them. A burly officer takes us through an inner gate, in file behind him. Clunk, click. There are prisoners, dressed in red sweatshirts and grey tracksuit trousers, walking around beside us. This I didn't expect, though I can't for the life of me, now, see why.

We sit down in the chapel. I take a front seat. The back seats fill up with other prisoners. There are a number of musical instruments - guitars, basses, drums, synths - placed in front of us, and about fifteen men and a woman milling around them. It is difficult to work out immediately who is an inmate and who is a tutor.

A Cockney-accented inmate called Jimmy is compere for the afternoon. "This might be the highlight of your day," he says. "You never know, it might be the highlight of your life." He introduces the first act: it's a rap by a guy who is missing his baby son. I'm surprised by the quality



Jailhouse rock: MIP brings music to prisons.
Picture (and on page 38) by Lizzie Coombes

of his voice and the backing music. The three tutors are playing a prominent role, and some of the inmates have not been given much to do. But others are clearly good musicians: in particular one bloke on a synthesiser, who at first I take for a tutor.

There are seven or eight songs sung by five or six inmates; the rest swap instruments between numbers. All the songs are originals: I'm later told that this is a policy of the Trust. Most of them, as you'd expect, are about the singers' misgivings about the direction their life has turned. Part of the rehabilitation process, I realise, is in the prisoners being given the chance to coherently express these misgivings in front of an audience. The best song is saved for last: a quartet of raps, led by a guy called 'Fingers' who sounds and looks like a young Barry White. Another, which stays in my head for days later, is a punky number called 'Green Light', sung by Jimmy the compere, with some gusto.

Afterwards they do three encores, repeating the songs which went down best: a hard choice, because each song is met with some applause. Then we are given half an hour to chat to who we want to. I choose Jimmy, who says he is more of a poet than a musician. He talks about how much he has enjoyed the experience. "You know," he adds, "in all the time I have been in this room, all through the week of training and today's performance, I haven't been aware that I have been in prison. It's really good for head-screw. It's the same for the other guys, too. They'll be buzzing about having done this for weeks."

My three hours in prison, then, passes quickly. I'm pleased, afterwards, to be out in the bright sunlight, free to wander the streets of Lewes, Jimmy's song, 'Green Light' ringing in my head. The highlight of my life? Hardly. But certainly of the week: a strangely uplifting and positive experience. *AL*



"In all the time I've been playing music in the room, I've forgotten I've been in prison. It's been really good for head screw"