

# Breaking through walls

*Surrounded by your fence of steel,  
All I see is walls  
I keep on walking but there are endless dead-ends...*  
(Participant's lyrics, HMP Edmunds Hill)



Lizzie Combes

I recently set my alarm for half-four in the morning in order to stand shivering outside HMYOI Aylesbury as the sun came up. I'm not a morning person, but I knew that it would be worth it as I was waiting to see a performance that was the culmination of an intensive five-day creative music project run by the Irene Taylor Trust 'Music in Prisons'.

The Trust was set up in memory of Irene Taylor, wife of the late Lord Chief Justice Peter Taylor, and has been working in prisons throughout England and Wales for thirteen years to address the lack of arts opportunities for prisoners. Led since its inception by Sara Lee, the Trust's projects are tailored to developing team-working and communication skills, improving concentration and self-esteem, reducing adjudications and acting as a positive reintroduction to education. Equally importantly, they also result in some wonderfully entertaining and emotional performances of original music by prisoners.

I'm in awe of the lads brave enough to stand up in front of an audience consisting predominantly of their peers and sing self-written songs, some of which contain extremely personal lyrics. This takes real guts and the effect can be very moving, both for the audience and the performers themselves. As a

## Luke Bowyer explores how Music in Prisons' projects give prisoners the chance to escape their previous lives

participant from HMP Wealstun recently wrote:

*'I have never been able to handle emotion and have always bottled everything up until I explode and beat someone up or hurt them in other ways, but I know that music is my calling ... it is a perfect way for me to be able to express my emotions and stop getting into trouble.'*

### BUILDING A PERFORMANCE

The five-day projects introduce a group of about ten prisoners to a band set-up of instruments. The musical abilities of the group vary from skilled to complete novices. The Trust's project leaders teach the participants how to play the instruments, help them to write their own songs and form a band to perform them to an audience of other prisoners, prison staff and invited outside guests. The performance is recorded and participants receive CDs of it as a permanent reminder of what they can achieve. This can be a turning point in participants' relationships, reminding loved ones that they are capable of wonderful, positive things. One participant's mum recently commented:

*'I just wanted to tell you how proud I am of him ... I think you do a marvellous job, not only in music, but also in bringing people together. That's what you've done for me and him.'*

Participants are often very nervous before the performance, but the exhilaration they experience afterwards is overwhelming. Some discover aptitudes they never knew they possessed; some find themselves able to express through music feelings that have been locked within them for years; all will be proud to have been involved and surprised at what they are capable of. The applause of the audience verifies the phenomenal extent of what they have achieved in such a short timescale. The resulting boost to self-confidence and self-esteem can be the catalyst to developing musical skills and further achievements in education departments.

Re-engagement with education is a vital aspect of the Trust's work: 49% of male prisoners were excluded from school compared to 2% of the general population. In October 2008 the Trust published an evaluation of their work with men in prison, carried out by the Institute of Criminology, Cambridge. This looked at the effect of projects on prisoners'

engagement with education, self-esteem and well-being and offending behaviour in prison. Research was conducted with 71 participants and found that after taking part in a project 88% felt that the programme had given them 'more confidence to participate in other educational programmes'.

Evaluation is essential for the Trust in the ongoing battle to challenge public and media perceptions of prisons and prisoners. Gathering numerical and empirical evidence of the effectiveness of projects is key both to this end and to securing funding for projects, and the Trust plans to further increase its evidence base. This will be made available publicly and to other arts organisations working in prisons to share best practice, with the hope of championing the role of the arts in prisons as a valuable tool to aid rehabilitation.

### SHOWING THE CREATIVE PROCESS

With the intention of challenging public perceptions, in autumn 2008 the Trust collaborated with the Southbank Centre to produce the exhibition *Inside Out* for the Royal Festival Hall. Artist Lizzie Coombes chronicled the highs and lows of the creative process with a series of photographs of participants and the project team from projects at HMPs Wandsworth and Holloway. Listening benches played the music made on the projects, connecting the listener/viewer to the people who had created the music.

The response to the exhibition was overwhelmingly positive and supportive, belying the tabloid media's portrayal of the general public's attitudes. One comment read:

*'The music, hearing your voices, immediately took me to a raw place. I burst into tears! Thank you, you have all done and achieved a truly remarkable thing and I hope your lives grow into the beauty and strength you all deserve so much.'*

The Trust promotes music as a means for prisoners to rebuild their lives. Music not only involves them in something positive and beautiful, but also helps develop the skills that can increase employability and reduce reoffending. This extends beyond the prison walls. At the end of projects, participants are offered a signposting service to music courses and opportunities available on their release; the talents of promising ex-participants are further honed as trainee project leaders, going back into prisons to inspire current inmates; and the Trust's board of trustees is advised by a previous participant. Dialogue with ex-participants is vital for the Trust to understand the needs of prisoners, as one of the Trust's ex-prisoner trainee project leaders puts it:

*'I was released in 2006 and at first found it hard to settle back into a society that had moved on in the 18 years that I was inside. I was invited to take part in projects at Brixton and Holloway Prison in my new capacity as an ex-offender. I was then able to utilise my experiences to act as a mentor and give hope to prisoners who could identify with me. From this new perspective I could see the true benefit of what Music in Prisons does for serving inmates who often have nothing else in their lives.'*

For more information about supporting the Trust's work and attending prison performances: [www.musicinprisons.org.uk](http://www.musicinprisons.org.uk)

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