

Findings From Inside – The Twofold Social Impact of Music-Making with Prisoners

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My research examines the value of participatory music projects in prisons. To do this, I've been using the work of the Irene Taylor Trust, whose projects involve group song-writing generally in popular genres. I spent over a year observing their ongoing work in a medium security, adult, male prison, and interviewing project participants. This paper considers the twofold social impact of making music with prisoners. I use stories from prisoner participants to discuss the potential of music firstly to transform the social environment of prison, and secondly to provide new social potentials upon release. I end with some thoughts worth further consideration.

Music-making and the prison environment

How could music affect the social environment of prison? It is generally acknowledged that the social environment of prison is complex and volatile. Relationships in prison can be friendly, but can also be characterised by power imbalances, fear and transience. Men in prison often dread their association time, the unstructured 'free' time at evenings and weekends which, in reality, tends to constitute empty and boring time, often resulting in violence, drug-use, or bullying.

What happens, then, when we put a music project into that social reality? Ian,¹ who took part in both a week-long intensive music project and weekly sessions with the Musician in Residence, was amazed to see people from different, often rival, social groups working together successfully during the Music in Prisons project, and enjoying the process. During interview, he said to me:

I thought, how's this going to work? But it did. I was surprised, more than surprised, shocked even. Music cuts through, cuts through the divisions of race, religion, what not. Working with people, different groups laughing – laughing, wow!

Many prisoners made similar assertions. The music projects were something of a sanctuary in prison, a space in which regular social rules did not necessarily apply.

What I found even more interesting, though, was that the relationships continued beyond the lifespan of the organised projects, and at times music began to transform evening and weekend association time. Some prisoners would buy their own guitars so they could continue practicing, and groups of participants started teaching one another, writing songs together or jamming on the landings during their spare time.

¹ All names have been changed.

One good example of this is a group of unlikely friends, Isaac, Arthur and Ollie, who shared a landing. They all signed up for the weekly music programme, eventually ending up together in the same regular session. I asked Isaac about his relationship with the other men. He replied:

I knew them on the wing, but we weren't friends. [...] We was pleasant, but we never sort of sat down and spoke. [But now] we've all got guitars, so we just go in Arthur's cell, make a cup of tea, we just start playing, talk about music. Everyone's talking about sort of maintaining it, building up together, staying together basically.

All three men said that this became their go-to activity during association time, calling themselves a band and no longer involving themselves as much or even at all with the 'madness' going on elsewhere. I wondered whether other people on the wing had noticed this. Christopher, who was on the same wing, without being asked said:

Sometimes you see Isaac in the little rasta guy's [Arthur's] cell. And he's sitting on his bed playing guitar, and, cos I think Isaac is a bit better so he's teaching him. Yeah, they go for it, and I can see how buzzing they are sometimes on Monday evenings when they come down the landing, they're all singing on the way down, they're getting hyped up. I see them nearly every day, I hear the guitar every day. Since they've started the course, they're always playing their guitars and singing and that.

Of course, for some this is not possible – a point to which I will return. But where it is possible, the creativity and openness that characterised organised projects began shaping the social environment of the landings into a place in which song-writing happens, a space in which prisoners were choosing to make music together, to share stories, laugh together, and even share pain and heartache. Prisoners frequently recognised this potential of music, saying that prison would be a calmer place if there was more access to musical activities.

Social possibilities upon release

So, music-making can shape the social environment of prison, in a way that is beneficial for safety and security as well as the social and psychological wellbeing of prisoners. But what about when they leave prison?

Firstly, there was agreement from many that the bridges built across different social groups could continue outside the prison walls: Malcolm, a prisoner in his late 40s, talked about the projects providing a 'permanent mentality shift' in how he saw people, which could have a 'ripple effect' into gang culture outside. Ian said quite simply, 'If we can do it in here, we can do it out there.'

Secondly, the relationships with the facilitators were also clearly very important in the long-term for some people. One example is Jake, a shy prisoner in his early 20s, getting close to release; he had taken part in an intensive course and regular music sessions. I asked him what he had learnt in the project other than how to play the keyboard, and he replied that he had learnt he could 'chill with different types of people'. When I asked whether he meant the other participants or the team of musicians who had come in, he replied:

Both. You lot, you're not criminals! I found it's not boring to do that, to do normal things with normal people.

It should be noted that his description of the facilitators as ‘normal people’, and therefore by distinction himself and others like him as somehow ‘not normal’, is not one that I support. But understood in the proper context his meaning is profound. This is a young man whose life thus far had been shaped by the criminal justice system. Most people he knew were either in and out of prison themselves, or else were social workers or prison staff. For him, the knowledge that he could do these kinds of activities with people who had very little to do with ‘the system’ was a complete revelation; it transformed his views about who he could relate to, and therefore the social possibilities he saw for his future. This is just one example; Jake was not alone in this.

Concluding thoughts

We have seen, albeit briefly, that music can both transform the social environment in prison and provide some prisoners with new social possibilities for life on release. In closing, I raise some important points and questions relating to how we articulate this kind of impact, or effectiveness, without resorting to hyperbole.

It is important to recognise that the examples I shared are the gold standard, and not the whole story. They show the potential of music, but they represent scenarios that are not always possible. Not every prisoner is able to buy their own guitar, for example. Although they are clearly helpful for prisoners who do get them, the current volatile state of prisons makes it understandable that many security departments see a guitar as nothing more than large hollow box in which to hide contraband. Beyond the institutional barriers, we must accept that not every prisoner wants to continue playing, and not all project participants become great friends. Arguments still occur, and, for many, the difficulties of prison social life remain. As researchers and writers, we must ensure we do not present only the most desirable data when discussing impact.

Secondly, we must remember that though music can be a great vehicle for social change, musicians themselves are not socially perfect people. Many musicians, whether famous performer or community practitioner, can still be uncooperative, uncommunicative or somewhat unsociable from time to time. How do we proudly and convincingly articulate the benefits of musical participation, of which there are many, with an appropriate level of nuance that avoids putting undue pressure on musicians to be perfect examples of social behaviour, and without risking our findings being undermined by the sometimes less-than-perfect social interactions of many musicians?