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## Rock stars urge prisoners to escape through music

Bragg and ex-Clash member offer inmates guitars and a chance to change their lives

**Alexandra Topping**  
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Affixed to the red-brick exterior of Wormwood Scrubs prison is a small plaque. It reads: "Her Majesty's Prison Service serves the public by keeping in custody those committed by the courts. Our duty is to look after them with humanity and to help them lead law abiding and useful lives in custody and after release."

As Mick Jones, former lead guitarist of the Clash, walks through the clunking gates wearing a mismatched suit and carrying two guitars, the unwritten line below the plaque might read, "through the medium of rock and roll".

Yesterday Jones joined Billy Bragg at the west London prison to hand over five guitars as part of Bragg's Jail Guitar Doors campaign to provide instruments for inmates. "We all believe people have to be punished for their crimes," said Bragg. "I support punishment. But I also believe in rehabilitation. The question is, do we want to help people not to re-offend and to contribute to society? Getting them involved in music is one way we can try to do that."

Reforming hardened prisoners through the power of song may sound like the theme of a corny rock song. But Tim Snowdon, director of the charity Changing Tunes, which uses music to aid the rehabilitation of inmates in nine prisons, says the facts speak for themselves. "Sixty-one per cent of ex-prisoners re-convict within two years of release, but ex-prisoners who take part in a Changing Tunes programme have a re-conviction rate of between 10% and 15%," he said. "Most importantly that means there are fewer victims of crime, but it can also save people whose lives were in a spiral of destruction."

In one of the dingy education rooms at Wormwood rows of men dressed in grey tracksuits and pale blue T-shirts sit slouched in their chairs, their arms clamped like irons around their chests. But when Jones says "shall we see if this guitar works?" and launches into the Clash classic *Should I Stay or Should I Go?*, a few feet start to tap, one or two voices join in. When he finishes, applause fills the cramped room and Jones lets out an appreciative cackle. "Music is a way to get away from things, a way of expressing yourself," he tells the group. "And if you'll excuse the pun, it's a great way to escape."

The spine-tingling moment of the session comes not from Jones or during Bragg's rendition of *Redemption Song*, but when Michael, a young man with the swagger of a gangster and the voice of an angel, sings one of his own songs a capella. His voice soars above the noisy encouragement of his fellow inmates, as he sings: "I don't want to be that guy I was before / I don't want to go through that same door."

Afterwards Michael says: "Music means everything to me. Things would have been a lot worse for me in here if I couldn't write songs."

Another inmate said he had no idea who Bragg and Jones were before they turned up: "But when he sang that *Redemption Song*, that really touched me," he says. "I'd get involved, 100%. These things make people want to prosper."

The scheme is not without critics. When the band *My Luminarie* held a concert to raise money to buy instruments for prisoners in Reading, the local paper's letters page was filled with vitriol. A social worker in the youth justice system in Northamptonshire was told he should "condemn a little more and understand a little less" after he bought a guitar for a disruptive young man who had been charged with murder.

Bragg is optimistic about the impact of the scheme. "It's not a panacea and it's not going to work for everybody," he says. "But, as idealistic as it sounds, there are some people who can find redemption through music, and that's what Jail Guitar Doors is all about."

### **Jailhouse rock**

- When Pete Doherty was in an open prison he borrowed the chaplain's guitar. "I hadn't played for what seemed like years but it had only been a couple of weeks. And when I played it I cried my eyes out."
- Indie-rock band Hard-Fi, who wrote Feltham is Singing Out about friends who had ended up inside, played at a prison when they were students. "We were told we weren't allowed to play I Fought the Law or Bank Robber, said Richard Archer.
- Johnny Cash's classic album At Folsom Prison was recorded live at a jail in Sacramento, California. The final song on the album, Greystone Chapel, was written by an inmate serving a sentence for armed robbery.

[jailguitardoors.org.uk](http://jailguitardoors.org.uk)

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