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Islington Tribune - by PETER GRUNER

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Billy Bragg with Pentonville inmates Zahid, left and Marcus during his visit to promote Jail Guitar Doors

Bragg unlocks inmates' musical talent

Musician who penned massive chart hit: visits jail in bid to inspire prisoners with guitars

PROTEST singer Billy Bragg managed a music miracle at Pentonville Prison yesterday (Thursday) when he got inmates, prison officer and a Justice Minister to all sing along together. Mr Bragg was promoting his new Jail Guitar Doors initiative, set up to provide musical equipment and therapy for cooped-up prisoners.

He gave an impromptu rendition of Bob Marley's famous Redemption Song with his guitar which received a particularly warm response from a small group of prisoners when he reached the line "These songs of freedom..."

Jail Guitar Doors has already resulted in the band The Enemy donating almost £1,000 for music equipment to the prison.

The band played last August with the Dirty Pretty Things at a concert at the prison to raise awareness about suicide in prison.

The prison's project manager Tendai Whingwiri said that a prison band was being formed with the possibility of eventually making an album: "Getting Billy Bragg along has really inspired the prisoners."

Asked if he had ever spent any time in prison himself, Mr Bragg revealed he had once spent a night in a British army cell for insubordination to an officer.

He added: "Playing guitar when I was young, for example, helped me escape the dead-end job my parents had in mind for me when we lived in Barking and Dagenham. They wanted me to go and work in Fords."

He said that music helps inmates deal with the prison experience.

"It allows you to connect with something inside you rather than holding it in all the time," Mr Bragg said.

"My own experience is that music is a wonderful outlet whatever kind of prison you are in."

One prisoner, Jermaine, who played keyboard, said there was no name for the band, but they had been practising together for sometime.

He added: "Music overrides any problems you have. When you are making music you can be happy for a while even in Pentonville."

Justice Minister David Hanson welcomed the initiative.

He said: "Billy Bragg is trying to bring music into the prison which is very beneficial for the prisoners."

"It gives the prisoners an opportunity to learn new skills and also to have a diversionary activity."

"We're looking now at how we can extend the scheme to other prisons."

Deputy Governor Paul Barker said: "When you put a guitar into people's hands you see a whole new side of them."

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