

Bragg gets inmates at Liverpool Prison rocking

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Billy Bragg

SINGER songwriter Billy Bragg yesterday picked up the mantle laid down by Johnny Cash by playing a set in front of inmates at HMP Liverpool.

When Johnny Cash played San Quentin in 1968 he cemented his reputation as one of the most powerful performers in rock history.

Half a century later Bragg took his own show to Walton Prison. But this time rather than playing to a volatile audience full of pent-up frustration, Bragg gave the prisoners the chance to get on stage and regale the visiting Prisons Minister David Hanson with their own tunes.

Cash's brooding machismo galvanised an audience, including men on death row, with ancient songs about prison life tapping into a rich seam of anger and heartache.

Echoing this, Bragg covered The Banks of the Royal Canal, a song written by old lag and actor Brendan Behan.

But yesterday Bragg took the concept one stage further. His Jail Guitar Doors tour encourages

inmates to tell their own tales in music.

After kicking off their set with a heartfelt number entitled, "P----d off Here in Jail", a band of about 10 convict musicians ran through eight songs penned during three days of workshops with Bragg.

Liverpool favourites The Farm joined the band to run through a raucous version of All Together Now and Bragg even played a couple of his old numbers.

After the set he told The Post: "Some of these guys when we first started were shy about performing but in the end they've sung their own songs in front of an audience.

"I'm aware that this year is the fifth anniversary of the passing of Joe Strummer, another icon and hero of mine.

"I was hoping to be involved in more than just another tribute gig. Hearing The Clash as a 19-year-old changed my life, so I guess I was looking for a project that underscored the transformative power of music. And I felt this is just the sort of thing he would do."

Jail Guitar Doors is a B-side of the Clash's 1978 single "Clash City Rockers".

The aim of the workshops and concert is to provide inmates with guitars and the skills and confidence to use them. Until yesterday the tour had never reached jails in the north.

But last November Delia Brady Jacobs, who runs the prison's arts programme Bighouseart, spotted the London-born singer in Liverpool.

She said: "Billy was playing at The Philharmonic Hall and had nipped out for a coffee and I said 'eh up Billy Bragg what do you think about coming to HMP Liverpool to do a bit of music' and he said 'OK'."

With the support of governor Allan Brown, Prisons Minister David Hanson MP, Garston MP Maria Eagle and even American guitar makers Gibson he set a date.

Mr Hanson said: "I wanted to come along today to show there is support from the Government.

"It's a very positive thing for prisoners. New confidence and skills mean that inmates have more chance of not reoffending."

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