



# BILLY BRAGG

## JAIL GUITAR DOORS

By Ellen Thompson

**O**VER two million prisoners were held in federal, state, or municipal prisons or jails across the United States in 2006, according to the US Department of Justice. A large majority of those prisoners have since been released. But a percentage has found their way back behind the sliding metal bars.

The situation isn't much better across the pond in the United Kingdom's prison system, and English musician/grassroots political activist Billy Bragg has taken notice. In an effort to keep prisoners who up for parole from re-offending, and quite possibly even offering an alternative rehabilitation method to those he says are "so obviously failing," Bragg is placing acoustic guitars in the hands of prisoners from Liverpool, England to Los Angeles, California through an initiative called Jail Guitar Doors.

"As a taxpayer I want a prison system that turns out people who are rehabilitated rather than people who are further criminalized. There's perhaps too much retribution in our prison system here," explains Bragg of the UK's system, noting the situation is quite similar stateside.

"I believe in punishment, don't get me wrong. I think people should be punished and the punishment should fit the crime. But I would guess from the people I've been working with that probably only 25 percent of the people in our prison system should be locked up forever," he continues. "But the other 75 percent could probably be rehabilitated and that process needs encouragement. So what I'm trying to do is make a contribution to public safety."

And the mode of which to do that is to supply those who are already fostering rehabilitation work behind the prison's doors, such as prison wardens, chaplains, and social workers, with the tools to do the job, which is where Bragg's initiative comes in. Named in honor of Clash singer/guitarist Joe Strummer around the fifth anniversary of his death, Jail

Guitar Doors has worked with 16 prisons in the UK since its inception last year. And through the interest of a local Washington, DC musician it has come stateside, supplying guitars to half a dozen prisons in the form of Jail Guitar Doors DC.

After hearing about Bragg's initiative, DC musician Joe Shade began looking at the overcrowded prison system in what is considered to be one of the United State's most crime-ridden cities. Learning that resources to foster the arts in prisons were almost non-existent, Shade figured he'd throw a one-shot benefit concert to raise funds, purchase a handful of guitars, and then just drop them off with a local warden, like Bragg had been doing in the UK. But when the guitarist reached out Prison's Foundation, a DC-based not-for-profit dedicated to promoting the arts in prison, it became evident just how large the need for musical instruments was. Soon after Shade threw the first Jail Guitar Doors DC benefit show in Alexandria, Virginia in August of 2007, Bragg made a \$1,000 donation to the DC branch. With the newly found funds, and unable to shake his latest understanding of the prison system's need, Shades realized he got himself into something more than a one-shot benefit show.

"And now I'm sort of running the clearinghouse effort; and I look at each prison that reaches out to me and then look at the needs in that area. Because the hardest part is trying to get started. It's easy to pull a gig together and get people to come and raise money, but it's harder to figure out who to give it to, who needs it," explains Shades, "because a lot of prisons are kind of insulated from the community."

Dennis Sobin, a founding member and executive director of Prison's Foundation,

spent 10 years in the prison system and found himself insulated not only from the community while behind bars, but a range of effective rehabilitation options.

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"For the most part, there isn't a whole lot going on as far as rehabilitation. There is educational instruction given in prison, which is for people to complete their GED. There's a lot of religion in prison, which serves the purpose. But there's not a lot beyond that. The real problem with prison is that you are in an environment that is extremely defeating and depressing," explains Sobin, who—although he picked up a guitar behind the sliding metal bars before Bragg began carrying acoustic ones into prisons—is an example of what Jail Guitar Doors strives to accomplish.

"People who go into prison with problems already come out with even more problems or negative thinking, so there's not much that goes on by the way of rehabilitation," continues Sobin.

Sobin found himself and other prisoners were able to rise above their immediate situation, casting petty arguments and the glorification of a criminal lifestyle to the side while developing communication skills and the understanding of the importance of accountability.

"While working with prisoners in the UK during songwriting workshops, I found that you could get prisoners to write songs that spoke to their families and told their families, hopefully, how sorry they were for the position they put them in... and perhaps even ultimately reflect on why they are there," explains Bragg.

Through his work, Bragg also found he was able to put himself in the prisoner's position, reflecting on the emotional impact of being



deprived of one's freedom and family. Strumming his guitar alongside prisoners during workshops, he witnessed them channel their frustrations, fears, and loneliness into simple songs as they waited for their release dates to arrive.

It was also during these workshops that Bragg sat down with a man who, before being convicted, had been a musician on the outside. They wrote and practiced a handful of songs to be performed for the Prisons Minister of England and Wales during Liverpool's city of culture event. It was at the end of the performance the prisoner admitted to Bragg it was the first time he had played a guitar sober.

"But I think some of the most interesting places I have been are women's prisons. There's



a completely different atmosphere in women's prisons. I'm not absolutely convinced that women should really go to prison," explains Bragg. "Perhaps if they've committed murder or harmed anybody, but a lot of them are in prison because they have a drug problem, have received stolen goods, or it might have been something their partner has done."

According to Bragg, women who find themselves behind bars suffer much more greatly, partly because they are often the sole caregivers of their children and lose the children when they enter prison. Because of the loss of their children, combined with various other stresses that stem from being incarcerated, Bragg says he has seen many women fall victim to self-harm in UK prisons.

After running a workshop in the UK's Styal Prison, he called the woman who had organized the event to see how it had been received. The woman revealed to Bragg that after the show that night there had not been one single case of self-harm. Bragg asked if that was good, to which the woman responded it was absolutely exceptional.

"It just gives you some insight into the way prison affects women and raises the question whether or not it might be better to put the majority of women into custodial sentences rather than incarceration," says Bragg.

While there are few studies that highlight the effects of music therapy as a means of rehabilitation in prison systems, it's individuals like Sobin, who master the guitar and uncover various means to channel emotions, that convince Bragg his initiative is on the right path.

"The only evidence that I have is the letters people have sent to me. I have a very nice letter from a senior prison officer who works with a British jail in Lancaster Castle. He wrote to me and said in 18 years of working in the prison service, he's never had a bond with the men in a way that he now feels he has with those guys who are playing the guitar with him," says Bragg. "So I don't think it's about anything you can measure, like cause and effect. But certainly in those experiences that I have had going into the prisons and talking with the prisoner when giving them the guitars, I explain what we are trying to achieve and how they are accepting a challenge from me. That we are trying to help them to not re-offend when they get out, to make a go if it. So, you know, I hope when they take that guitar off me they take on that challenge."

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