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Redemption songs

Taking musical instruments into prisons has proved a hit with inmates, and helped reduce reoffending rates. Singer Billy Bragg, who started the Jail Guitar Doors scheme, tells Mark Gould why music is a great healer

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When Billy Bragg received a letter from Malcolm Dudley, a drugs and alcohol worker at Guys Marsh prison, in Dorset, telling him he wanted to start guitar classes but didn't have any guitars the men could practise with between classes, the singer-songwriter wanted to help. Bragg was looking for a way to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Joe Strummer, the lead singer of the Clash, who died on December 22, 2002. "Every now and then something comes along that you can clearly see will make a difference," Bragg says. "I looked at this, and thought: 'Yeah.'"

Two years on, Jail Guitar Doors (JGD), the project he set up and which takes its name from the B-side of a Clash single, has delivered 70 acoustic guitars and other instruments and recording equipment to 21 prisons and young offender institutions, with funding from trade unions, well-wishers and benefit gigs by other musicians.

Bragg persuaded London guitar store Hank's to sell him six basic guitars and accessories for £300. He had them sprayed with agit-prop slogans such as "Stay Free", "Clash City Rockers", and "This Machine Kills Time" - in homage to protest song pioneer Woody Guthrie, whose guitar declared "This Machine Kills Fascists". Bragg says: "One thing playing guitars can do is take you out of the place you are in - and that's crucial in prison."

Half a dozen prisons are in a queue for guitars, and prisoners, families and prison governors say the scheme is making life behind bars that bit less soul destroying.

I met Bragg just before he went on stage to host a film and mini-concert in London last month to highlight the work of JGD and to announce its new prestige sponsor, Gibson guitars. "As a taxpayer, I expect the prison system to rehabilitate, so I would like to think that JGD is making a contribution to ensuring fewer victims," Bragg says. "There is a bit too much of that 'lock 'em up and throw away the key' attitude around, believe me."

He stresses that JGD relies on the Malcolms of the world - the volunteers, be they staff, chaplains, or charities in prisons. "The point is to find people who are using musical instruments to intervene and effect rehabilitation in a system that's overcrowded and understaffed, where they are struggling to stop inmates reoffending. It's giving them the tools to do the job."

Before deciding to donate, Bragg wants to know when the classes will be run, who will be running them, and what access there will be to the instruments. "Ideally, I want the men to be able to take the guitars back to their pads and sit and play. It's only recently that they have been allowed to have stringed instruments in prisons, and some still don't want it at all."

Because of the high levels of self-harm in women's prisons, steel-strung instruments are banned, but Bragg can supply keyboards and other instruments.

Accepting a challenge

Each new group starts with a Bragg handover session. "I nail them by saying, 'These guitars are not a gift. You are accepting a challenge to get on the ladder of rehabilitation. People outside have given me money in order to do this. They have a faith in you and your ability to do that.' And I have this song, I Keep Faith, which I play them."

Bragg admits that most young prisoners have no idea who he is, or who Strummer was. "I play a few songs when I take the guitars in. We find a little Bob Marley goes a long way - Redemption Song is good on acoustic. The Drugs Don't Work [by The Verve] is also very popular."

The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health is researching therapeutic "diversions" to help prisoners cope in a system where it estimates that 70% of prisoners have two or more mental health conditions. Sean Duggan, director of the centre's prisons and criminal justice programme, says that although JGD is not a music therapy treatment, it will benefit prisoners with mental illness. "This is a very respected musician running a very credible scheme and we are very supportive," he says. "In future, we may be doing work with it in more detail."

A small study by Guys Marsh prison suggests that music therapy is responsible for astounding reductions in reoffending rates - down to around 15% compared to the national average of 60%. However, Bragg warns that the project is not about hitting targets but doing what it can for prisoners while they are inside.

At the concert, Paul McDowell, the governor of Brixton prison, says the scheme has been "amazingly successful". For the last year, a member of his staff has given up Saturdays to run morning and afternoon guitar classes. "Those who are struggling to come to terms with their drug addiction, who self-harm, you see them flourishing," McDowell says. "It's not a solution to all those complex embedded problems, but you see, there and then, that it makes a difference. We have had a constant demand from prisoners, and we keep nagging Billy for more instruments."

While JGD has no great aim of turning out reformed characters, McDowell says it builds confidence in people who are at their lowest ebb. "If that leads them to thinking about other motivations, which in turn might lead to reducing reoffending, then great."

Dudley, the catalyst for the whole project, stresses the benefits for prisoners on release. He says: "One guy we worked with had been in and out of prison for the last 25 years. We got him writing his own songs. When he got out, he had a new identity as a musician and applied to music college. Now he is pursuing a musical career. Without [JGD] he would have gone back to his old mistakes."

Another Guys Marsh success story, John Neesom, 25, plays one of his own songs - a

stunning picture of life in prison. Neesom, who is forming a band, says every prison should have a JGD, but that it will only work for a few. "Say it was 30 prisoners out of a jail of 500 - they could have been the people that might rob your house. They might not rob it now. They have found a different way of life."

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