

All pictures: Lizzie Coombes

# Marking time

*Nicola Lisle reports on the work of the Irene Taylor Trust, which has been delivering music projects in prisons for 15 years*

Can the arts help with the rehabilitation of prison inmates? Does music have the power to restore a sense of self-worth and self-discipline into people who – often through tragic circumstances – have strayed from the straight and narrow? Ongoing research by various arts organisations has yet to provide a definitive answer, but a firm belief that music can make a difference lies at the heart of the Irene Taylor Trust 'Music in Prisons' scheme, which has taken its creative music projects into more than 60 prisons up and down the country.

At its helm is Sara Lee, whose music education work at Wormwood Scrubs resulted in a Prison Services Award from the Butler Trust, and an invitation to set up a trust in memory of Irene Taylor, wife of the former Lord Chief Justice Peter Taylor, in 1995. 'Irene Taylor was on the awarding panel for the Butler Trust, and was very keen on the work that I'd done,' Lee remembers. 'Unfortunately, she

was very ill and passed away that year. Her family asked me to start up the trust in her name, which I did.

'Since then, it's expanded a huge amount in terms of what it was to start with, which was just me working from my living room. Slowly, with the right support, the right staff on board and the right musicians, it's grown into something that's very highly respected throughout the sector and throughout the prison service as well.

'Three of Irene's children are part of the trustee board, so it still has a very nice family feel about it. We know whenever we make decisions about things that the family are keen on what we're doing because they're very closely involved.'

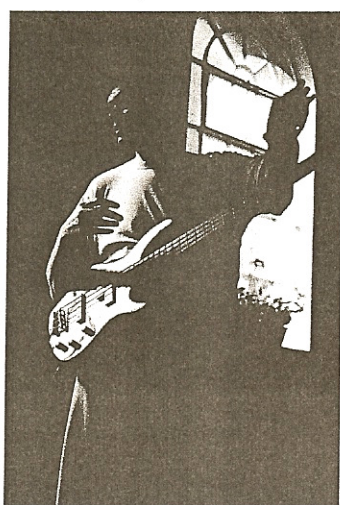
From those small beginnings, the trust now takes projects into prisons every other week. Each project consists of professional musicians working with a group of around 12, teaching them to sing, play instruments and write their own material. By the end of the week, the group has created an original

set of musical pieces, which are performed for other prisoners, prison staff and sometimes members of the public. The idea is that the project is both enjoyable and challenging for its participants.

'We start on a Monday morning and work with them morning and afternoon for a whole week, and by the end of it we've come up with original material,' says Lee. 'The people we work with, by and large, are non-musicians – they've just got a very keen love for music and they're brave enough to try something that is going to involve a lot of team work, a lot of difficult moments and a lot of learning new things.

'Learning new things is interesting for prisoners, because a lot of things are taken away from you in prison, and to give people the opportunity to take responsibility for things is quite challenging for some.'

Generally, Lee has found the response from the participants to be very positive. 'Some people are brave and very happy to jump into the unknown.



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Others are slightly more scared about it, and others are reluctant. It's down to the skills of the project team to bring all those different things together and make a coherent group.

'The first session is usually chaotic, understandably, in a room full of instruments that people can't play, and loads of people that don't know each other. And we just say, "Look guys, it is chaotic, but bear with it because things do come out of this chaos." Some people find it hard but they do stick with it and at the end they say "My God, I can't believe we've done this!" And they know that what they've done is quite incredible.

'We record and perform it at the end of the week, which is a very good thing, because that puts into context why we've been doing something – it gives it a sense of purpose, a sense of drive and a sense of finality. It's always nice to get dressed up and perform what you've done, and it's always very well received.

'When we record the CD we take it away and mix it a bit. We don't change it in any major way, but there are few rough edges because it's a live performance. They all get three copies of the CD to send out to their families and keep as a memento of their achievements.'

The idea of the participants making a journey from chaos to order is an appropriate one, because Music in Prisons is partly about restoring a sense of order into what have often been chaotic lives. There is a tendency for the public – perhaps understandably – to condemn rather than sympathise with those serving time, but many of the people Lee and her team work with come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, where opportunities that others take for granted are lacking. Many have had to deal with issues such as domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems and homelessness.

'The most important thing is not that people come out with brilliant musical skills, but that they come out feeling different about things, being proud and feeling as though they've been chal-



lenged and succeeded,' says Lee. 'Some people have a huge amount to gain from doing something like this, and they embrace it and really get a lot from it.

'You can see people's demeanours change – they dress differently, they speak differently and they're more open. These kinds of things happen over the week. So something must be clicking with them. And that's an enormously exciting thing to watch; it means we've really helped somebody's life here on some level. To see somebody coming in on day two, having ironed their shirt, or come and speak to you about something in a really intelligent, funny and kind way, is enormously satisfying.'

Another vital aspect of Music in Prisons is that the workshops are completely non-judgmental; whatever crime participants may have committed, Lee emphasises, is simply not relevant. 'It's never been an issue,' she says firmly. 'What people have done is not important to us. We'll work with people however long they're serving and whatever they might have done. We don't need to find these things out. Occasionally we're told, but we don't need to know in order to run a music project.

'It's good to meet someone as the person they are that week, and if they're respectful and kind and they work hard, then that's our knowledge of that person. If we start to take into account other things we're on dodgy ground, because to be judgmental is not a great way to hone a group for work within a group setting. We're just there to run a music project, and any information that comes our way just gets filed away in our heads.'

With the jury still out on the extent to which arts projects can turn people's lives around, Lee is understandably cautious about commenting on the lasting effects of the Music in Prisons projects. 'It's very difficult to keep in touch with people for any length of time to find out if the projects have a meaningful end, because there are so many other things that people have to deal with when they come out of prison,' she says. 'We do work with a couple of ex-prisoners, and we know they certainly found it an experience. They've both stayed out of prison – one's been out for four years, the other three years – and they've both been back to work with us on projects, which has proved really valuable.

'The arts organisations that work in the criminal justice sector are all gathering as much information as they can and looking at whether or not we can actually say that we reduce reoffending. It would be a foolish thing to say, because even the government, with its statistics and its information, can't say that kind of thing. All you have to do is hope that you've made some kind of impact on somebody's life, which affords them a few extra skills in order that they make more appropriate choices down the line.'

There can be little doubt, though, that the Music in Prisons is doing its bit to help the rehabilitation process, and Lee is quietly confident: 'A lot of the skills people leave the projects with are social skills and feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. These are often the things that are lacking and have contributed to why people find themselves inside in the first place. That's quite a simplistic view, obviously – there are many other things that contribute to somebody finding themselves in jail. But if we can help them come out with more than they went in with, that's a step in the right direction.'

*The next public performance will be on 5 March 2010 at HMP Frankland, Durham. Advance booking is essential.*

[www.musicinprisons.org.uk](http://www.musicinprisons.org.uk)