



## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

*They won't record and they certainly won't tour, but for this band, music is a lifeline in a grim world. Martin Hodgson reports on a pioneering scheme inside one of Britain's most notorious jails. Photographs by Richard Saker*

**BEYOND** the blackened brickwork and the coils of razor wire, past the barred gates, security cameras, and strip searches, the Victorian walls of Brixton prison resonate with a throbbing reggae bass line.

The source of the music is a windowless room just off the central courtyard, where an 11-piece band is rehearsing for its first and last-ever performance. Over the loping bass and clatter of percussion, a wiry Jamaican dressed in a grey prison-issue sweatshirt intones the words of a dub poem written by a group of inmates.

'Warning!' he declaims, gravel-voiced.

'The justice system is a fraud! It's keeping people from dem yard/ Lock up the prisons and throw away the key; liberate people like you and me...'

This is the Music in Prisons project, which over the past decade has brought music workshops to more than 40 British jails and young offenders institutes.

Some of the participants have never seen a musical instrument, let alone played one, but in the course of a week-long workshop they learn to write, play and sing.

With the help of professional musicians, the participants compose songs in all genres, from rock and reggae to soul and

hip-hop, before a final performance to an audience of families and fellow inmates.

'Music is something everyone has in their lives, and everybody wants to have a go,' says the group's founder, Sara Lee. 'We're giving people a positive creative experience, perhaps for the first time in their lives.'

There's more to the project than writing a few songs and putting on a show, however: Lee – along with many prison service employees – is convinced that music can play an important part in rehabilitation, helping prisoners to find the self-confidence and sense of purpose which, ultimately, may enable them to turn their backs on crime.

Lee's experience taking music to jail began at Wormwood Scrubs, where, for 11 years, she was the music education coordinator, before founding the Music in Prisons project in 1995.

Since then, the organisation – with a full-time staff of two and a network of regular musical collaborators – has run more than 60 projects in men's and women's prisons throughout the country. They have worked with all categories of prisoners, from pre-trial detainees to lifers, and in all kinds of jails, from high-security prisons to young offenders' institutes.

'Prisons are such dark and miserable ▶

places, when you bring live music in there, the whole place just lights up,' Lee says.

There are now more than 77,000 men and women behind bars in Britain, some 800 of whom currently reside in HMP Brixton in south London – a jail which for many years represented all that was wrong with the British prison system.

Throughout the Eighties and Nineties, the jail was plagued with reports of brutality and racism, and by 2001, even the director-general of the prison service called it a 'hell hole'.

'We were the ultimate failing jail,' admits John Podmore, Brixton's governor. Over the past two and a half years, Podmore has been widely credited with improving conditions for both staff and inmates, but he still faces immense challenges. Around 80 per cent of the prisoners are crack users when they arrive and three-quarters have a recent history of mental illness. Last year the prison sectioned more than 80 prisoners under the Mental Health Act.

It's perhaps not surprising that few inmates are miraculously transformed into model citizens: some 60 per cent of adult offenders are convicted of new crimes within two years of their release, and Podmore estimates that half of his inmates have already been to jail at least five times.

If the justice system is to be effective, says Podmore, prisons need to do more than simply lock people away. Basic education classes can make a huge difference – three-quarters of prisoners have reading, writing and numerical skills below those of the average 11-year-old – but not all are willing or able to return to the classroom.

'You've got to remember that many of them didn't go to school when they were young, so they surely won't do it now,' says Kate Quigley, Brixton's head of projects.

The arts – and music in particular – offer another approach. Creating something new as part of a group can be hugely empowering, says Podmore. 'This is about getting people to work together, to take account of others' needs, to communicate – things that don't normally happen in a prison where 800 people are locked up with strangers.'

**YOU HEAR THEM COMING BEFORE YOU** see them: every time a prisoner is moved through the jail, their progress is heralded by the rattling of keys and the slamming of gates.

On a cold Monday morning, nine men aged between 29 and 44 are led into the rehearsal room. Some are in baggy prison greys; others – the remand prisoners, or inmates who have earned the privilege – wear their own clothes. Most of them linger near the door, where they share roll-ups, and cast wary glances at the instruments – drum kit, congas, African drums, electronic keyboards, guitars and bass – set up in a horseshoe around the room.

Sara introduces the musicians, Nick, Graham and Rex, and tells the men that they have four days to pull a set together. 'If you don't know anything at all, that's fine – it's a good place to start.'

One of the prisoners, a tall, fair-haired man with a two-day beard, sits at the

electronic piano and picks out a set of chords. He smiles to himself and suddenly launches into a jazz vamp. Nick and Rex take up the rhythm on drums and bass, and a couple of the men fall in on the congas. Sara and Graham help two others pick out simple harmonies on the keyboards. With no prompting, another inmate picks up the microphone and starts to sing, improvising lyrics about spending another Christmas in jail. After a couple of verses, the song collapses into chaos, but nobody minds. 'That's nice, man,' says one of the percussionists. 'Just made up – out of nowhere.'

The pianist's name is Tom, and he tells me that he was a professional musician with his own record label. He was convicted on drugs charges, and is serving his sentence at Swaleside, on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent, but he's been brought to Brixton for a confiscation hearing in Southwark court. 'They're after £2 million, but I haven't got a pot to piss in,' he says.

After the hearing, Tom was due to return to Swaleside immediately, but asked to stay on just so he could join the workshop. 'I'm desperate to play the piano. I've played since I was four and I miss it terribly,' he says. He has been trying to persuade Swaleside's governor to allow him a keyboard in his cell, but in the meantime he has to make do, practising on a tabletop.

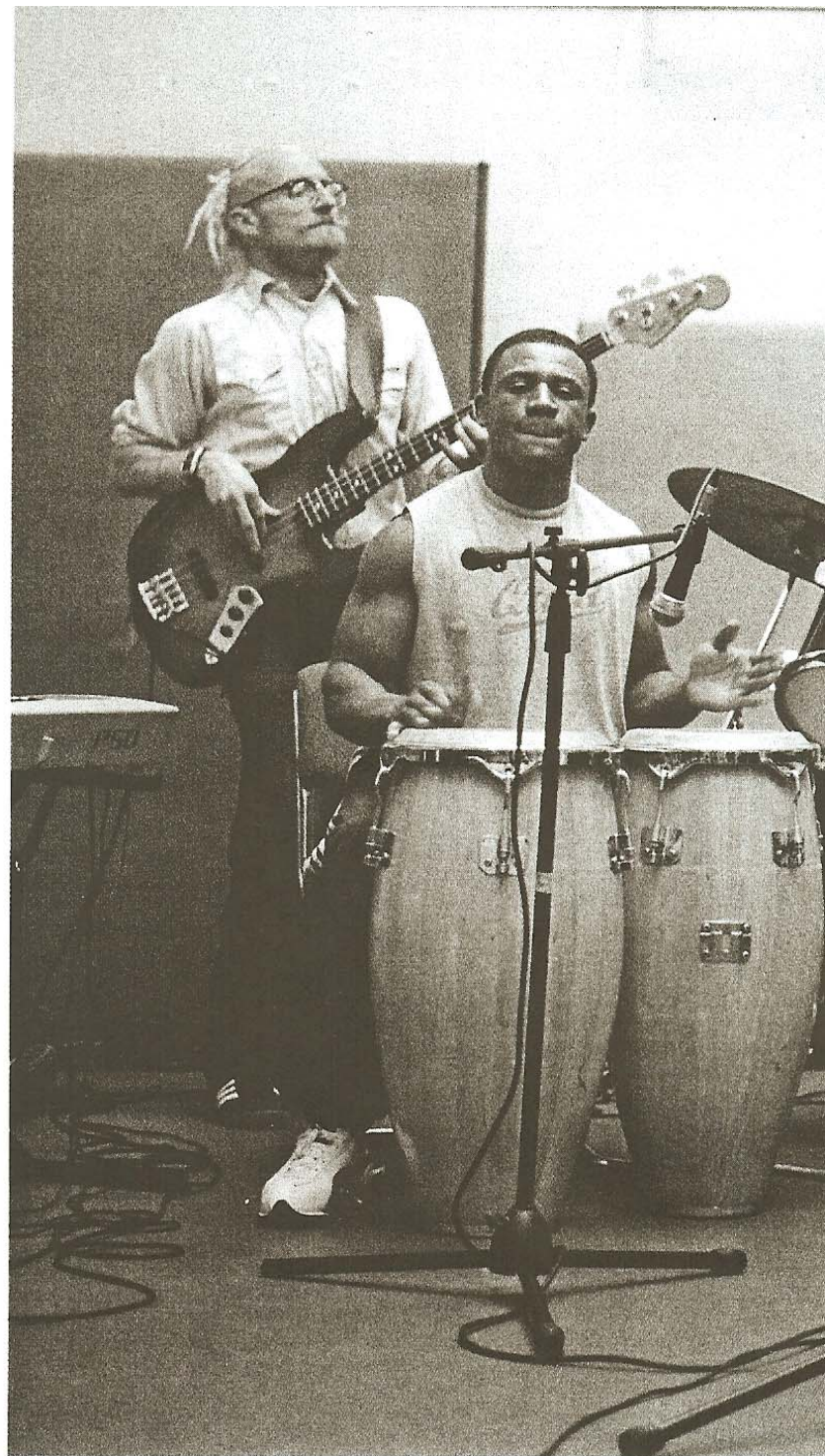
'I have to practise: if I'm going to get back to my profession, I need to be at a high level,' he says. 'And it's important that my time here isn't dead. If I waste my time inside, I'm wasting my life.'

It soon becomes clear that several of the men are natural musicians. Cliff is a barrel-chested man whose muscular arms attest to long hours in the prison gym.

**'YOU'VE GOT TIME ON YOUR HANDS. MUSIC BECOMES IMPORTANT. IT MAKES YOU NOSTALGIC'**

He's never touched the congas before, but with a little help from Rex, he's pounding out intricate polyrhythms against Nick's backbeat. ('I was a bit surprised to find I could play,' he says later. 'Must be the Ghanaian blood.')

Others are less confident, but Sara, Nick, Graham and Rex find a way to include everyone in the session. All four are classically-trained, although they've come a long way from their roots: Graham was once a member of the Mike Flowers Pops, but now plays with avant-garde keyboard sextet Piano Circus. Rex is a viola player turned bassist who just a week before was recording with Motörhead guitarist Fast Eddie. 'It's all still chamber music,' he shrugs.



Tuesday starts with bad news: one of the participants has dropped out to concentrate on his appeal, and, overnight, Tom has been transferred back to Swaleside.

Most of Brixton's inmates are on remand or short-term sentences, and the average stay is less than three months. Despite the turnover, however, life on the wings is one of grinding monotony. On the hexagonal administration block at the heart of the jail, the clock has stopped at five past eight. The symbolism couldn't be more appropriate: this is a place where time stands still.

'Music becomes more important when you're inside. You've got a lot of time on your hands. You don't see your family every day. Music relaxes you,' says Paul,

one of the workshop participants, when I visit his cell later in the week. 'What's that word when you look back on things when you've had good times?' he asks. 'Nostalgia? Music makes you nostalgic.'

Paul's cell is on C wing, which is considered the best of Brixton's four cellblocks. It's quieter than the other wings, but it still echoes with a constant barrage of noise: slamming doors, shouting, and a dozen radios tuned to different stations.

It's lunchtime, and most prisoners have already taken their food back to their cells. One or two are still on the gloomy landings, however, and as I climb the stairs a young Asian prisoner buttonholes me.

'What are you writing about?' he asks.



Rehearsals with teacher Rex on bass, Cliff on congas, Nick on drums and Paul on guitar.

money I'd go buy crack. And if a problem came up I'd take more drugs to escape it.'

During his first weeks inside, Gary was severely depressed, and after finishing the prison's drug rehabilitation course, he signed up for the music workshop as a way to keep his mind off his problems.

He says that he hasn't even considered using again, but it can be hard to stay clean in prison: according to prison employees the cellblocks are awash with drugs, mostly marijuana and heroin 'It's a naughty place,' says Gary. 'People are angry, and it only takes a little thing to set them off.' And even surrounded by hundreds of other men, inmates often feel isolated and alone.

'On the wing you don't trust no one. You can't even have a normal conversation – everyone's banging on about their cases all the time.' He gestures at the scene in the music room, where an easy sense of camaraderie has built up. 'Here, though, you've got people talking together; there are no nasty looks.'

Mostly, Gary keeps himself to himself, sharing cigarettes with the other men, but few words. He spends the rehearsals hunched in concentration over a synthesiser, picking out his melody line on keys marked with coloured stickers. But he's quietly chuffed. 'You try something you've never done before and you succeed,' he says. 'It might only be a small thing, but you've achieved something.'

**WATCHING FROM THE CORNER OF THE** room is prison officer Frances Smith. She runs one of the jail's drug rehabilitation courses, and firmly subscribes to governor Podmore's ideas on education. 'After six years as a landing screw, I believe that just locking people up isn't working – you get the same faces coming back again and again.'

Some of her colleagues would disagree, she admits. 'The old dinosaurs say that the inmates should just be locked up behind their doors, but they get so bored on the wing – and that's when they're naughty.'

Trevor is what the landing officers call a 'control problem'. At 29, he's had several spells in the jail, where he has a reputation for breaking rules and defying the officers – but none of that is evident in the rehearsal. He listens attentively to advice from the musicians or other inmates, and helps Christian – a German prisoner of Nigerian descent – work on his lyrics. He also writes a song of his own, which blends Old Testament sermonising with abstract rapid-fire toasting. Trevor compensates in enthusiasm for what he lacks in skill, and the song never fails to reduce his audience to laughter.

'I wish I could do it every day, 'cause when I'm here it's like I'm not in prison,' he says later. On Thursday, he misses a rehearsal for a family visit from his girlfriend and their son, Kyrel. It's the first time he has ever seen the boy, who was born on the day Trevor was arrested. ▶

'Music? What are you doing that for? There are much more serious problems in here: there aren't enough staff, we're not getting enough exercise, we spend all day banged up.' A prison officer with Dickensian sideburns walks past us, nodding his head. 'I agree with him completely,' he says.

Staff shortages are a constant grievance for both prisoners and officers: working on the blocks is intensely stressful, and there are high rates of sick leave among the staff. Without enough officers on the wing, inmates can spend more than 22 hours a day banged up in their eight-foot by 12-foot cells. Which helps explain why courses and activities are always oversub-

scribed: more than 70 prisoners applied to join this week's workshop.

For Paul, who plays guitar, bass and drums, the music course is not just an excuse to leave the wing. 'It's a chance to use your imagination freely from beginning to end,' he says. 'Here, everything is done for you, which leaves you with a very small leeway to express creativity – and to feel normal. At the end of the day, we are normal people.'

Paul's cellmate, Lee, is not impressed. 'It's not learning anything useful, is it? It's just entertainment,' he says. 'It's got to be censored – you can't really express your views. And if you've never played anything before, what can you learn in a week?'

At the start of the week, several of the workshop participants expressed similar doubts, but as the days pass, it becomes clear that the workshop is as much about the prisoners as it is about music.

At 44, Gary is the oldest member of the group. He has not had a job since he left school – just 'things on the other side of the road' – but despite a long career in organised crime, he has not done serious time in prison for more than a decade. He's not proud to be back, especially as he has been convicted of burglary – an offence usually associated with teenagers.

During a break from rehearsals, Gary describes how he robbed houses to fund an addiction to crack cocaine. 'Once I had

The next morning, he is clearly still brooding about his family. He says that he spent the evening listening to pirate radio, just to keep his mind clear. 'When I'm down music is the only thing that can bring you up again. Music keeps me free. But it could be worse. Since I've been here three of my best friends have died.'

One, he explains, was shot on a visit to Jamaica; another died in a car crash; the third of cancer. Perhaps it is only natural that Trevor's thoughts should turn towards mortality – on average, there are two suicides a week in British jails. 'In prison people try to end themselves. They slit their wrist, they swallow a razor,' he says. 'But you got to stay positive. This is our world, and you have to live in it the best you can.'

By Friday, the inmates have written seven tunes – five songs, and two instrumentals – and at 9.30am they are shifting the equipment to the room where this afternoon's performances will take place. The room was once a mortuary and more recently a sweatshop, where prisoners disentangled the wires of aeroplane headsets for £18 a week. Now its main function is to house the jail's vocational drama project.

While the PA is assembled, Christian smokes a roll-up on the fire escape. At the start of the week he was scrupulously polite with everyone, but his awkward English had barely concealed his nervousness (as Gary put it: 'He hasn't got a prison face'). This morning, however, there is no mistaking his high spirits. 'This project is a brilliant thing,' he says. 'It has forced me to bring out something inside me. I will never forget this.'

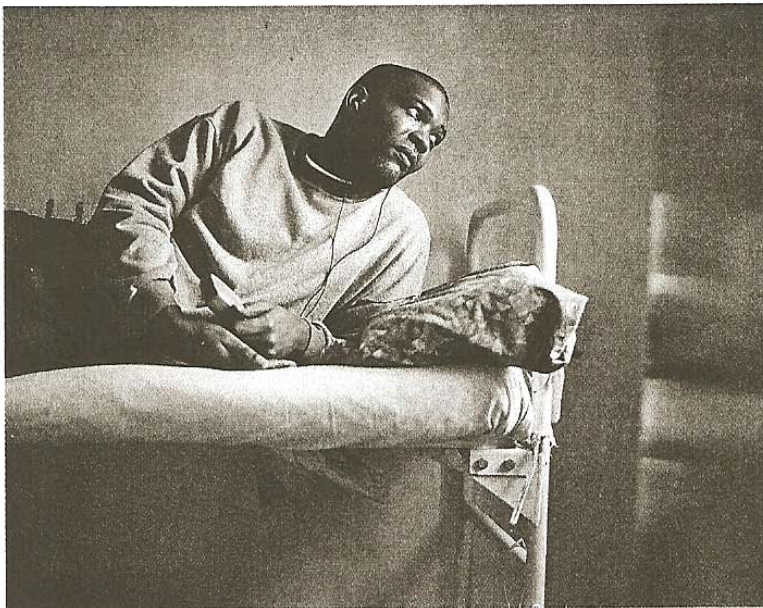
This is Christian's first brush with the law, and he is clearly traumatised by his month and a half on remand. 'I never was in prison before. When I came here I couldn't bear it. I wanted to give up,' he says.

Brixton houses inmates of 57 nationalities, and foreign prisoners can find themselves especially isolated by language problems and the lack of family visits. 'When I came here I decided to end my life and finish it all. I was thinking very seriously of this,' says Christian.

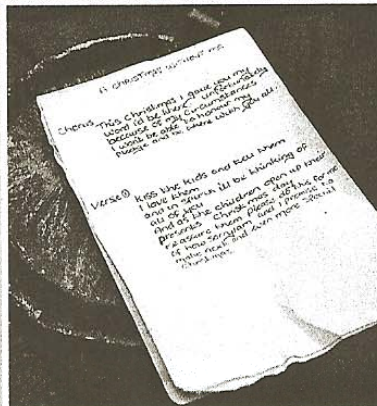
Early on, Christian was content merely to play the African drums, occasionally trading rhythms with Cliff. By the end of the week, he is dancing around the rehearsal room singing a reggae song of his own composition. It's called 'Don't Worry'.

'I think I will use everything I have learnt,' he says. 'I can make up a new beginning. I can never be in prison again. No matter what happens.'

Christian's good mood is shared by the rest of the group – even those who had at first appeared sceptical. Harlan is a 41-year-old remand prisoner with a wiry build and a bone-dry sense of humour, who does nothing to hide his bitterness with the criminal justice system. 'It's not about rehabilitation. It's about revenge,' he said early in the week. 'A project like this is for only one week, once a year. What benefit can it do for a prison population of 800?'



From top: Paul, the band's multi-instrumentalist, listens to music back in his cell on C wing; Brixton governor John Podmore watches the show; a final copy of lyrics for the Christmas song.



Today however, he pores over a lyric sheet, blackened with notes and reworkings. 'This is such a good day,' he says to nobody in particular. 'I spoke to my wife on the phone, and now we've got the concert. A good day.' It is rare enough for prisoners to have any news to tell their family, let alone good news.

That afternoon, after four and a half days of rehearsal, the band performs its first and last concert. There are two sets: the first for a rowdy audience of 70 prisoners – who shoot finger pistols of approval and wave their cigarette lighters during the slow numbers – and a later one for a more sedate mix of prisoners and guests from the outside. There are moments of stage fright – a few missed cues, a couple of fluffed lyrics – but none of this matters. By the end of the second set, the men are euphoric. Twenty minutes later, they're still on a high, laughing and backslapping as the prison officers lead them back to their cells.

**'IT WAS BRILLIANT. I WAS ON ADRENALINE** for days,' says Cliff, when I visit the prison a week later. 'The thing is, we've had the experience – what happens next?'

Prisons generally focus their meagre education budgets on basic skills – after all, you have little hope of integrating back into society if you can't read or write. There is little money for arts programmes – especially because the benefits are often so intangible, says Podmore. 'If you get someone off suicide watch that's not ticking a box, or meeting a performance target – but it has made a difference. Some of the outcomes are difficult to measure.'

Allan Phillips, 24, would agree. He had always known he could sing, but he was in and out of jails from the age of 15, and had never managed to achieve anything with his talent. Last year, as an inmate of Brixton, he joined a Music in Prisons workshop – and for the first time, performed his songs with a professional band.

He's been out for over a year now, and is determined to make a future in the music business. He's started to record a demo tape, and has worked as a mentor on a summer music school for troubled adolescents. With ex-prisoners like Allan in mind, Music in Prisons is currently developing a scheme with Guildhall College's music department which would allow inmates to study undergraduate music diplomas when they are released.

It's clear that Allan is still finding life on the outside tough: he's out of work, his phone has been cut off, but he radiates ambition. When he picks up the microphone, he looks like a star. 'A project like this does a lot for you,' he says. 'Knowing there are other options. It's only a little thing, but it can turn a life around.' **OMM** Some prisoners' names have been changed. More info: [www.musicinprisons.org.uk](http://www.musicinprisons.org.uk)

## WHAT'S REALLY ROCKING THE BLOCK

**One ex-prisoner who has made it in music and a DJ whose show is required listening inside explain why radio matters in jail**

**Riko, MC for grime collective Roll Deep**

I was in Brixton prison from 1999 to 2003. Most people have got their radios but I had the biggest on the wing. I used to tune into Bassline FM, Powerjam FM, Station FM. Black stations that play ragga and rap. I wouldn't say Brixton was overflowing with good rappers but there was a few that could've gone on to do something. It's not that think musical talent wasn't encouraged – they didn't care if you were into music.

To be honest, I didn't care about music that much because I was in prison. As a musician, listening to it could make it worse. As long as I had a radio for the news and what's

happening with the world I didn't really care.

**Tim Westwood, Radio 1 DJ and patron of HMP Feltz, Feltham Young Offender Institution's radio station**

I've done prison gigs and the atmosphere is always tremendous: there's so much talent in prisons. They want to hear the hard-edged stuff like D-Block and Dipset. And at Feltham, everybody wanted to hear 'Locked Up' by Akon. I've been involved with HMP Feltz for about four years for a couple of

reasons. I've always had tremendous support from the prisons throughout the UK on my radio show. There's times when I'll be at club or just on the street and people come up to me and just want to hug me and explain how they listened to me for the whole of the time they were inside. Those guys often have a very close relationship with me just through listening and understanding the show in a deeper and more intense way than somebody who's got their liberty.

I've been told on a Friday or Saturday on the landings, everybody's got a radio tuned into the show and turned up full so you've got it all echoing around these landings. It sounds crazy, it sounds almost like a party. I wanted to get involved with HMP Feltz because as someone who's done so well out of this hip-hop game there's a moral obligation to give back.

