

## INTERVIEW

## Prisoners do time on the beat

Sara Lee uses music to help to educate and rehabilitate the inmates of jails in England and Wales. But that's not all, she tells **Richard Ford**, "We challenge them too"

SARA LEE is part of an army. An army of largely unnoticed and unsung charity workers who work with the 77,820 inmates of jails in England and Wales.

Their causes aren't going to win widespread public support and without discreet financial support from charitable trusts with long-standing commitments to penal work, many would cease to exist.

Funding is always a struggle for Lee, who runs Music in Prisons, an organisation that takes creative music projects into jails. "It is quite tricky because we are working with people who a vast proportion of the population think should be left in there doing nothing", says Lee, a former music teacher at Wormwood Scrubs jail in West London. "If someone was standing on a street corner with Music in Prisons on the collecting box and there was someone with Cancer Relief on a box, we know where most people would put their money."

The organisation, also known as the Irene Taylor Trust, has undoubtedly been helped because it was set up in memory of the wife of Peter Taylor, the late Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales.

With a name like that doors are sure to open among the great and the good — of whom there are many — in the penal and charities lobby.

Lee, 43, joined the trust when she was advised that music teaching in prisons would be squeezed as the emphasis moved to ensuring that offenders are taught basic skills.

"Arts got sidelined; but the position now is that people are slowly realising that the arts can help towards ticking the boxes that prisoners need to tick for basic skills as well as art for art's sake," Lee says.

The trust was set up to

raise awareness of music and to use music as a tool in prisons to help with education and rehabilitation.

Ten years ago when it was founded, the trust's annual budget was £25,000 a year and it operated with one person in a living room. But since then the pendulum has swung back towards recognition of arts as important in jails and today its annual budget is £220,000 and Lee and an enthusiastic band of supporters, including session musicians, undertake 16 to 18 projects a year in prisons.

Writing music with prisoners can involve projects as large as providing the incidental music for a production of *Julius Caesar* to performing songs written by offenders.

"We are not saying we are going to teach somebody to play Handel or Beethoven, but

"Many people in prison have had a bad education experience and music is a way back for them"

we are going to challenge them," she says.

Lee has also found that when she and her fellow musicians play classical music, prisoners often ask for something like it to be included in their own productions.

She has watched with joy the transformation creative music can make to prisoners' self-esteem. A prisoner who had written a song but was too shy to sing it was after five days standing in front of 100 people belting it out. "We couldn't get him off the stage. It was marvellous to see."

Lee also believes that music can help prisoners back into education. "People use it as a tool to go back into education. Many people in prison

ALEX BENWELL



**Born:** March 20, 1962

**Education:** Castle Manor Upper School, Haverhill, Suffolk; Guildhall School of Music and Drama, 1981-84.

**Career:** Teacher, Wormwood Scrubs prison, 1984-95; project director for the Irene Taylor Trust since 1995.

**She says:** "I use music to aid education and rehabilitation in prisons."

**Little-known fact:** Has the distinction of having managed a 100 per cent attendance for Arsenal's home, away and foreign games in a season in which the club won nothing.

have had a bad education experience and music is a way back for them," she says.

She cites as an example a prisoner who had suffered from dyslexia and had done badly at school. A slow learner, he began playing the clarinet and then started to learn music theory, which helped him to write English.

Lee also praises the Prison Service for its approach to the voluntary sector.

"There are lots of people on the fringes of the Prison Service all trying to help with education and rehabilitation. We are knocking at the door and are being let in."

*Richard Ford is The Times home correspondent*