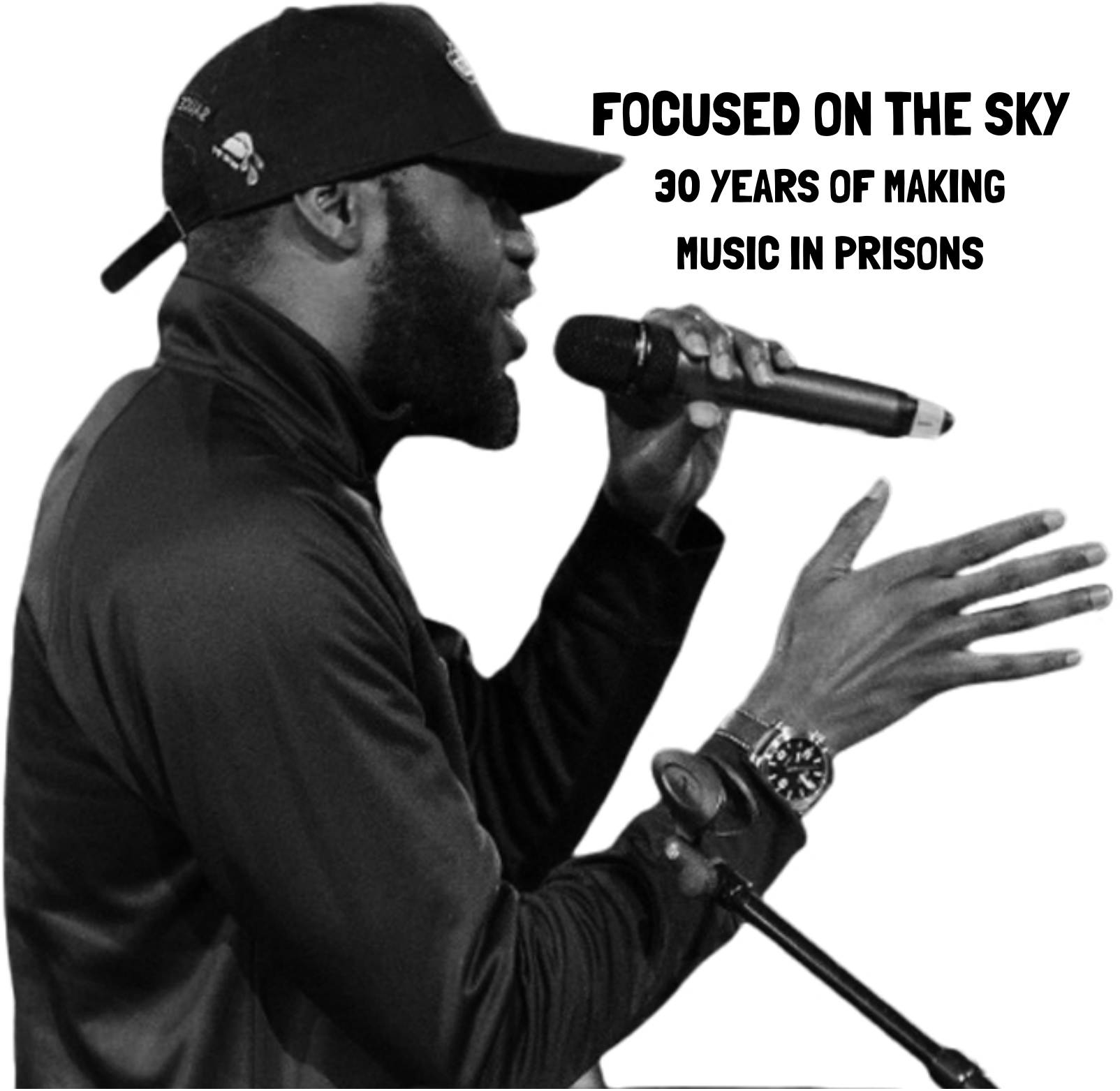
FOCUSED ON THE SKY

30 YEARS OF MAKING MUSIC IN PRISONS



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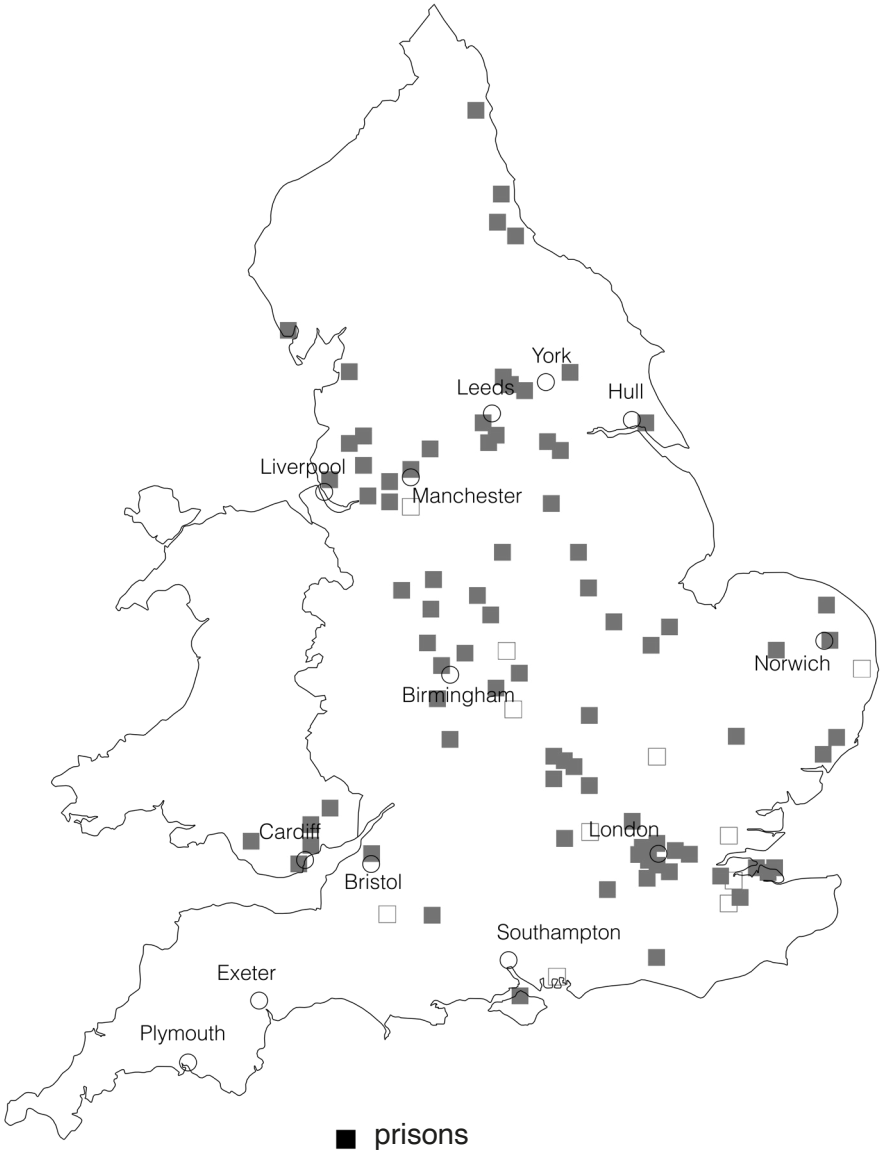
FOCUSED ON THE SKY

30 YEARS OF MAKING MUSIC IN PRISONS

THE IRENE TAYLOR TRUST

CREATING MUSIC. TRANSFORMING FUTURES.

PRISONS WE'VE MADE MUSIC IN



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COUNTING IN

The United Kingdom has the highest prison population in Europe, yet the people locked inside are too often overlooked and under-resourced. Operating out of a narrow office in East London that's filled with boxes of CDs, the Irene Taylor Trust (ITT) is a music charity delivering projects in prisons across the country. Founded in the mid-90s by Sara Lee, ITT has worked in 94 prisons, supporting over 7,000 people to create hundreds of songs.

This zine gathers together accounts from participants, facilitators and office staff who make-up a small part of ITT's community. Interspersed with scanned clippings from the archive, *Focused on the Sky* documents the impact of making music behind bars, and the challenges of navigating the prison system.

The title references a track of the same name, created during an ITT project in a youth prison in Rochester. Its score accompanies this journey through the archive, with a QR code at the end to listen in full. 'Focused on the Sky' was chosen not only because of its brilliant bass line, but because of the way the song's title gestures towards hope. When ITT began in 1995 there were 52,617 people held in cells across England and Wales. Today this figure is closer to 90,000. Prisons are, in many ways, much bleaker places than they were 30 years ago: they're dangerously overcrowded, there's high staff turnover and there's less support and opportunities for the people who need it most. In spite of this changed landscape, ITT continues to offer vibrant, collaborative projects which cut through the isolation of prison life. Songs can't shift walls or cell doors, but they can provide an outlet, and a feeling that you're not alone. As one person in HMP Buckley Hall told us recently: "[while on a music project] I felt creative and inspired. I didn't feel like I was in prison."

Following its namesake, this zine is structured into sections. The verses trace the chronology of ITT's history, beginning at Sara's living room table in 1995, and ending with a conversation in our East London office 30 years later. The choruses showcase a parallel, visual history of audio technology, from project cassette tapes, to mini-discs, to CDs. Each handwritten card or illustrated CD sleeve signals a whole album of original music, created in a particular prison at a particular moment in time. The people who played on those tracks might have moved on, but their creativity is still recorded and celebrated.

A note on language: sometimes the people we work with refer to themselves as *prisoners* or *inmates.* Academic reports, especially those written in the USA, use *incarcerated.* The media has its own lexicon, too. Throughout this zine, we've decided to keep our contributors' choices unedited. Language matters, but there is no one-size-fits-all approach for describing the experience of the criminal justice system. However, we do have a label that sticks: on all our projects, everyone is a musician, regardless of whether they've been playing for ten years or five days. **This zine, and this organisation, is overflowing with talented musicians inside and outside prison walls.**

Kitya
Creative Engagement & Progression Manager

OPENING: MID 90s – EARLY 2000s

Sara
Founder & Artistic Director

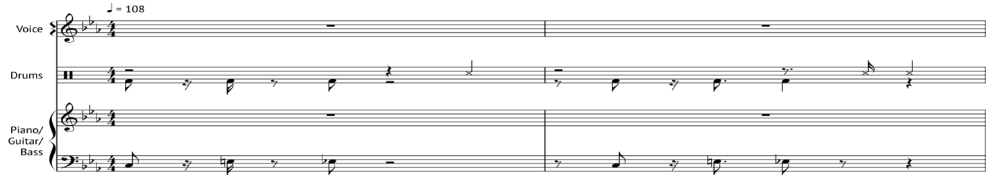
It seems strange that I'm writing this from my living room, the same place where the Irene Taylor Trust started 30 years ago. It was at the end of a brilliant eleven years I'd spent teaching music at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, when a new opportunity presented itself, one which I decided to take without knowing anything about what it might entail, and which sees me writing this now.

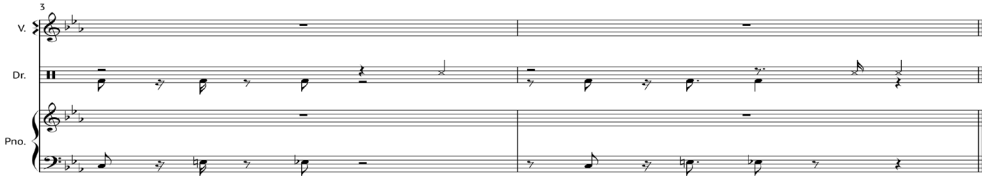
In 1995, I was given a Butler Trust Travel Award after being nominated by staff and prisoners at Scrubs for music work I'd done in the prison. This led to being asked by Irene Taylor's family to set up a new charity in her memory and as there was no base, the wooden table in my living room became the place where everything happened.

The first months were scarily new; from the safety and familiarity of working in one place, I was trying to find out what was going on musically in jails across the country, whilst simultaneously writing funding applications to kickstart a series of short projects, from which I hoped we'd get support and testimonials. Letters to prisons and funding applications were written without any real knowledge of formal process, but with loads of enthusiasm about why what we were offering mattered, and why funders should consider supporting it. This was knowledge gained first-hand from witnessing the impact creating music had on people who found themselves locked in prisons, and in need of a positive outlet.

I managed to raise some funding, mostly off the back of funders knowing Irene's family and supporting my wish to embed music more widely in prisons, and the first three projects saw Nick and I travel to HMP Bristol, Kingston and Ashwell (two of those prisons no longer exist). It was a pretty radical thing at the time: 'roving musicians' turning up and spending sessions in prison classrooms, rooms on the wing and social areas, writing music and lyrics with groups of men for recording and performance. Nonetheless, it worked, and I remember how exciting it felt to be doing it. The prisoners were overjoyed, and so were the staff, all of which was reflected in the feedback they wrote. That feedback was crucial in supporting my exuberant shouting to whoever would listen about why this work was so necessary.

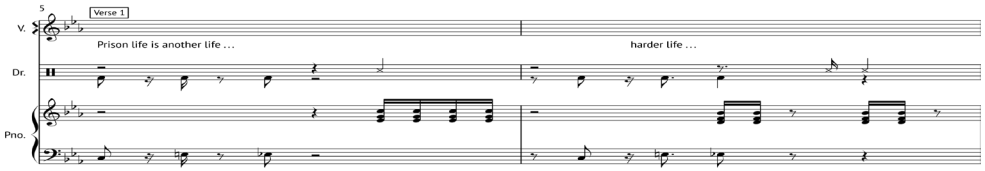
This was also the time when I utilised the Butler Trust award and travelled all over the country to meet education managers in different prisons, to see what might be possible in their jails. It wasn't long before we had a whole load of new prisons on board, and so we decided to make a bit of a public splash. We organised a launch recital at the Old Guildhall in London, and a few hundred people showed up in Irene's memory. It was a wonderful (if nerve-racking) evening and translated into all kinds of offers of support, both practical and financial, which helped the Trust through the next little while and allowed us to bed in a bit, travelling across the country in hired estate cars rammed with musical equipment, having the best time writing music with people before travelling on somewhere else.





It wasn't long before the prisons we worked in grew in number. Over the first few years we went to HMP Maghaberry in Northern Ireland, HMYOI Moorland, HMPs Frankland, Wayland, Coldingley, Askham Grange and several others. Special projects included 7 weeks at HMP Bullingdon, where prisoners wrote and performed a new musical score to accompany a full scale production of Julius Caesar. Prison staff started talking to each other, and getting in touch with us, and slowly the roster grew. In 1998/99, so did the staff team (by one!) and we found ourselves a small office. From that point things really started moving; more musicians came on board, and the projects increased. In a DIY, joyfully determined way, the Irene Taylor Trust had begun.

Above: *Newspaper clipping of Julius Caesar rehearsals in HMP Bullingdon,1999*

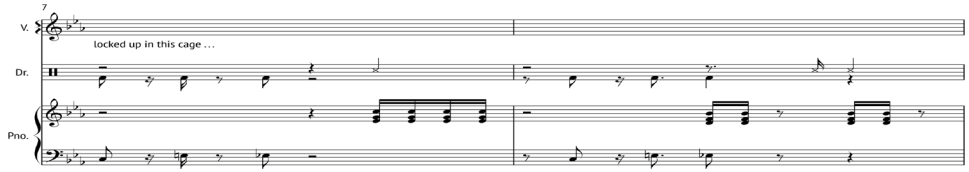


Nick
Musician and Project Leader

I've been part of Irene Taylor Trust since their very first project, and it took me a few years to understand how best to lead the sessions. Initially it was nerve racking – everything was new, and I had thirteen or fourteen people in a group all looking to me for answers. I was running on adrenalin most of the time, everything was instinctive. Gradually we moved away from a directive approach to something more facilitated, and that's how it's stayed. I've learnt a lot about gently stretching people's boundaries: not so far as to make them want to leave a project, but enough to make them feel good about achieving new musical skills.

We used to record on a Walkman in the early days, then DAT, then mini-disc before getting an eight-track recorder which meant we could record individual instruments as opposed to one mic recording everything. All we really did at the beginning was make sure the levels were okay and that we could hear something through the headphones. It seems pretty unsophisticated looking back, but that's just how it was. We would copy the cassettes one by one and handwrite everything onto each label.

We also used to perform gigs at the end of projects for big audiences in the prison chapel: hundreds of prisoners, staff and family members. I miss those Friday concerts; it was always a wonderful moment of sharing. There was so much energy and animated vocal support, with lots of joking throughout the show. It was loud and raucous but very supportive. It was brilliant.



Below: *Ticket for Julius Caesar Production in HMP Bullingdon, 1999*

Julius Caesar

Venue HM Prison Bullingdon
Arncott Bicester Oxon.
Performances 7pm, May 5th-8th 1999 inc.
Tickets £10 and £5 (concessions)

Tickets are limited and must be booked before Tuesday 27th April 1999
Under 18s must be accompanied by an adult

Please send completed order form to:
The Irene Taylor Trust
Unit 114 Bon Marche Centre
444 Brixton Road
London SW9 8EJ

Telephone: 0171 733 3222
Fax: 0171 733 3310

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ORDER FORM

It is essential for security clearance that names of all attendees are listed on your ticket application. Group bookings should attach a separate sheet.

Number of tickets required.....
Date of performance.....
I enclose remittance of..... **(full price tickets)**
..... **(concessions)**
TOTAL.....

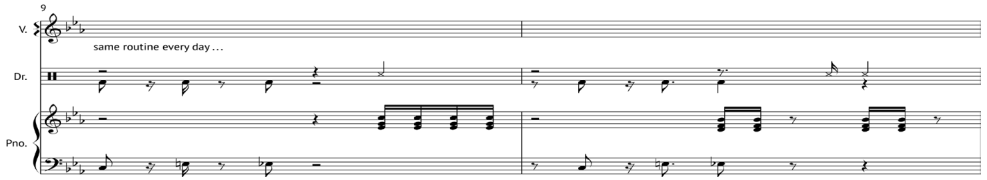
I am unable to attend but would like to support the work of the Trust
I enclose a cheque for..... **(amount)**
(please make cheques payable to the Irene Taylor Trust)

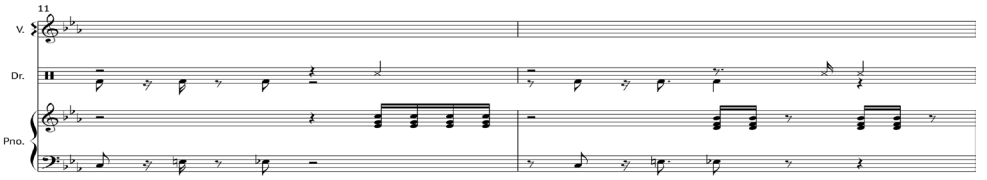
Names of attendees

1.....**2**.....**3**.....
4.....**5**.....**6**.....

Contact name and address for tickets.....
.....**Telephone**.....

We will send you travel information and a map with your tickets





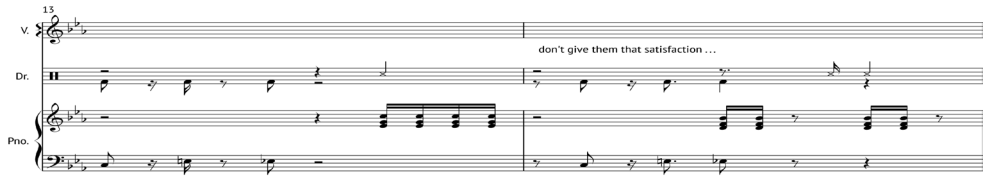
Patricia
Participant

Do you remember your first project with ITT? What was it like?

My first encounter with the Irene Taylor Trust was in late 2001. I had a severe mental breakdown dealing with the pressure of prison life and not being able to see my daughter. I came out of the hospital after spending two months there and started attending education in prison, trying to 'reintegrate'. While in education, I was told that a team were coming in and they would like me to take part. I had lost my drive and all hope. My enthusiasm was no longer there and I was at a point where I didn't care anymore. I stopped socialising - so to tell me to go in a room and mingle was definitely a no no for me. Days passed and the conversation was ongoing trying to get me involved. I was sick of people from the outside coming in and looking down their noses at us and I was determined not to put myself in that position again, so I was not interested. In addition I felt I was way too vulnerable to expose myself like that. Obviously the education team was very keen for me to be involved as they felt with my past career and my state at the time that this would be good for me. Reluctantly I agreed to go and see what it was about, but in my head I was going in to show my face then leave.

What were your first impressions?

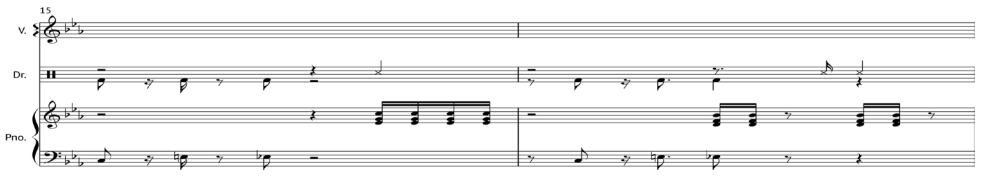
As soon as I walked through that door I was acknowledged with a hello and introduction and most of all I felt like I was the star of a show, like I was a celebrity, and they were pleased to meet me. I wasn't



the only one. Everyone was made to feel like they were the only one in the room! That's a gift. Sara, Graham and Nick were very welcoming and very respectful. I was so shocked. People from the outside were being respectful to us and literally treating us like human beings. I was used to anyone from the 'outside world' hiding their stuff and asking for officers to oversee the visit. This was the complete opposite with ITT. I stood back watching other prisoners coming in and immediately picking up instruments, playing, making noise and not once were they told not to touch them or to put them down. I didn't see the team counting [the instruments] and my heart melted. I immediately thought "I'm staying". That day was the best day I had had in prison so far. I was being exposed to the life I was used to: someone listening to me, treating me with respect. Showing an interest in me and the others. No one felt left out yet everyone felt like they were the only ones in the room because they made us feel so special.

What did you feel about the music that you made on that project?

Oh I was so proud and I am still very proud of that song that I did. I feel that was one of the best songs on the ITT project. I might be wrong, but I fell in love with the song, the memories, the journey, the feedback, the visuals. Everything about that songbook was iconic. The project opened so many doors for me in and out of prison and has really given me a sense of pride and helped to rebuild my confidence.



Did being part of the project allow you to achieve something you didn't expect?

Yes, most definitely. I've tried so many times to write a song, and it comes so naturally when I'm with the project and I feel that's because of how non-judgemental they all are. How they embrace our talents and make us all feel special. No one was treated more special than the others. Equality at its best!

What's changed since then, for you?

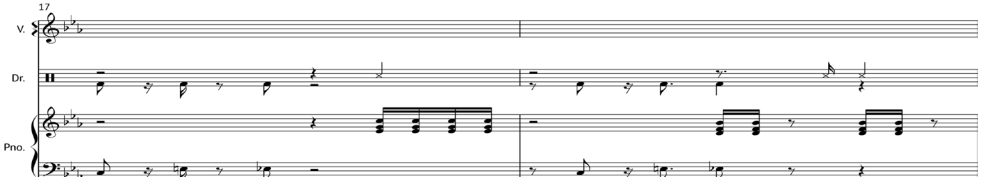
Since then, I have grown with the Trust. I have been a part of their projects, I've sat on the board, and my voice has been heard. My points have always been very well received, and I was always made to feel like I play an integral role at every meeting.

You've been a part of ITT for so many years: what does the community mean for you now?

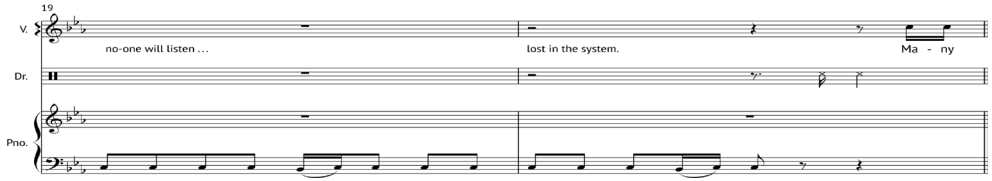
They're my world. I am super proud of being associated with the Trust and I'm always proud to represent the Trust.

Any other highlights that spring to mind?

One of my biggest experiences was when I was chosen to represent ITT at a music convention in Colombia. I am still pinching myself I felt so honoured so proud and so appreciated. The Trust brings out the best in me and others, and I cannot imagine life without them. I will live the rest of my life being a part of the Trust. Love you ITT NOW AND ALWAYS 🖤



***Above:** Project in HMP Bullingdon, 2002 photographer unkown*



VERSE 1: THE NOUGHTIES

Sara
Founder & Artistic Director

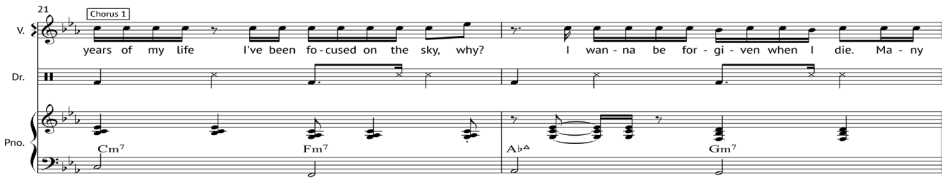
As demand for music in prisons grew, we found ourselves travelling all over the country to deliver our projects. A typical project (which we learnt prison timetables could more easily accommodate) consisted of five days from Monday to Friday. Each day we wrote any number of original songs, which we recorded on the Thursday and then performed to an audience on the Friday. We designed invitations which we sent out with RSVPs in order to gather an audience. The visitors sat with the prisoners, sharing stories and getting a real sense of what life inside was like. At HMP Highpoint, so many people wanted to come and see the show, we had completed three performances by eleven am.

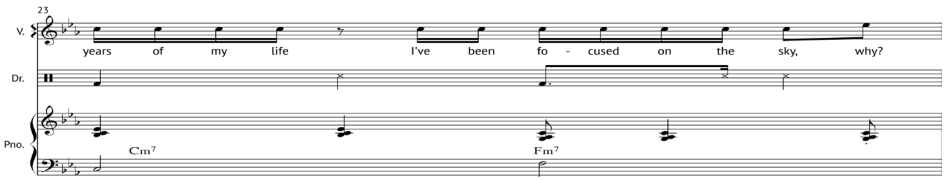
We facilitated projects and performances in all manner of spaces: prison chapels; warehouses; a disused shower block; a horticulture room; gyms; classrooms so small the audience had to congregate in the corridors and peer in through the window to see what was happening. One of the wildest performances was in front of what must have been about one-hundred-and-fifty prisoners in a chapel, and after a particularly confident performance, the guy singing decided he would take the plaudits (and some), and he went round high fiving a good 50% of the crowd whilst the next guy was desperately trying to get his lyrics to cut through the euphoria.

The more prisons we worked in, the more equipment we needed to take, to make sure the experience was the best we could offer. We had to upgrade the hired estate car for a rental transit van, and only a few years after that we raised the funding to buy our own van, which was a game-changer. Another way we had to adapt was by upskilling the team on how to record bands as effectively as possible. The recorded music was precious as the participants used it to keep links with their families, and we used it to keep funders in touch with what we were doing. We also had to become (if we weren't already) multi-instrumentalists to ensure we could support anyone in the group who needed guidance. For me this was one of the most exciting things as it meant I had the opportunity to learn bass and drums to make sure I had the basics to teach others.

There were several extraordinary projects at HMP Brixton, which was our so-called 'local' for a decade or more. We created a songbook written by men which was given to their children, and in 2005, BBC Radio 3 came into the prison to record content for a Christmas series they were creating. We had to quickly teach the group to sing in German, before they were accompanied by thirty classical musicians in a gig which filled the chapel.

Some of the more unusual projects included a music and photography exhibition in (what was) The Sage, Gateshead in 2007, which followed creative projects at HMPs Frankland and Low Newton, and soon after, an exhibition called 'Inside Out' in London, which documented projects at HMPs



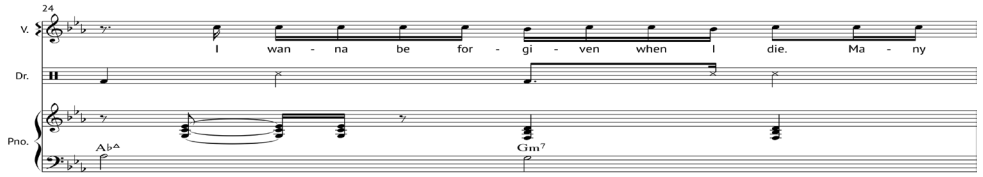


Wandsworth and Holloway. The projects became more ambitious too. In 2010 as part of a European collaboration, we ran our first overseas project. We'd been invited to a Danish prison which was memorable in several ways, not least the 15-hour drive via Brussels and being given a beer (0%) and a massive piece of cake by prisoners who met us when we arrived on the Sunday evening.

We also shaped a new musical at HMP Askham Grange which went on tour (complete with the full cast in a minibus driven by the Education Manager) to other women's prisons, and an ambitious three-header, where we created and passed material written around three London prisons, and each prison wrote songs and spoken word pieces from the responses.

Over the years there was a lot of interest in what we did, we had a number of really positive articles in the press and at one point the Government's Prisons Minister turned up unannounced to a show in HMP The Mount and spoke about how important he felt these kinds of opportunities were.

It's interesting to think back to those times when the arts were championed, and those who spoke and wrote about it focused on the benefits rather than anything else. The shift feels so far the other way now, it'll be interesting to see if it ever returns to what it was. There's a lot to do to ensure an incredible legacy of brilliant work, creativity and imagination across the sector isn't lost.



***Below:** Sara in The Times newspaper, 2005*

ons 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

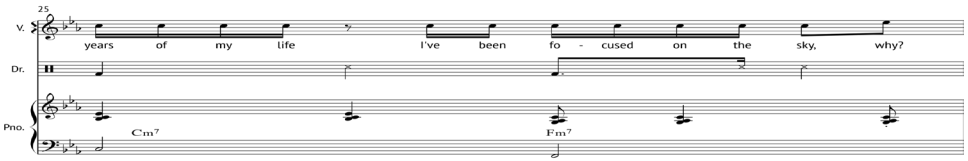
"Many people in prison have had a bad education experience and music is a way back for them"

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'

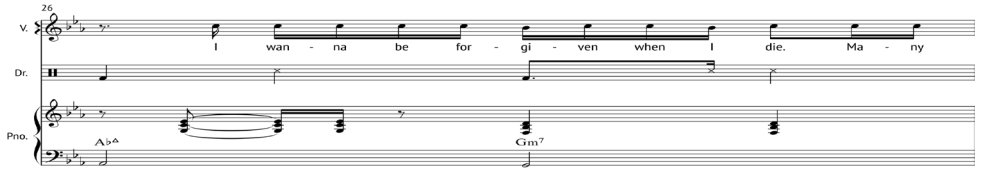
Born: March 20, 1962
Education: Castle Manor Upper School, Haverhill, Suffolk; Guildhall School of Music and Drama, 1981-84.
Career: Teacher, Wormwood Scrubs prison, 1984-95; project director for the Irene Taylor Trust since 1995.
She says: "I use music to aid education and rehabilitation in prisons."
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.



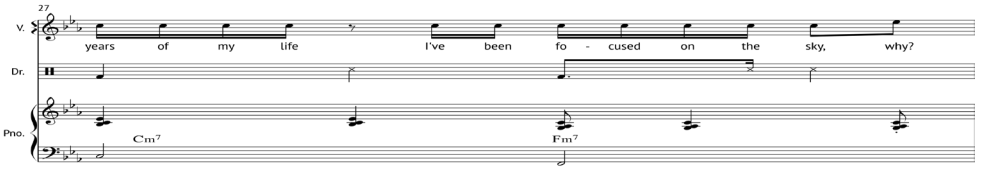
Rex
Musician and Project Leader

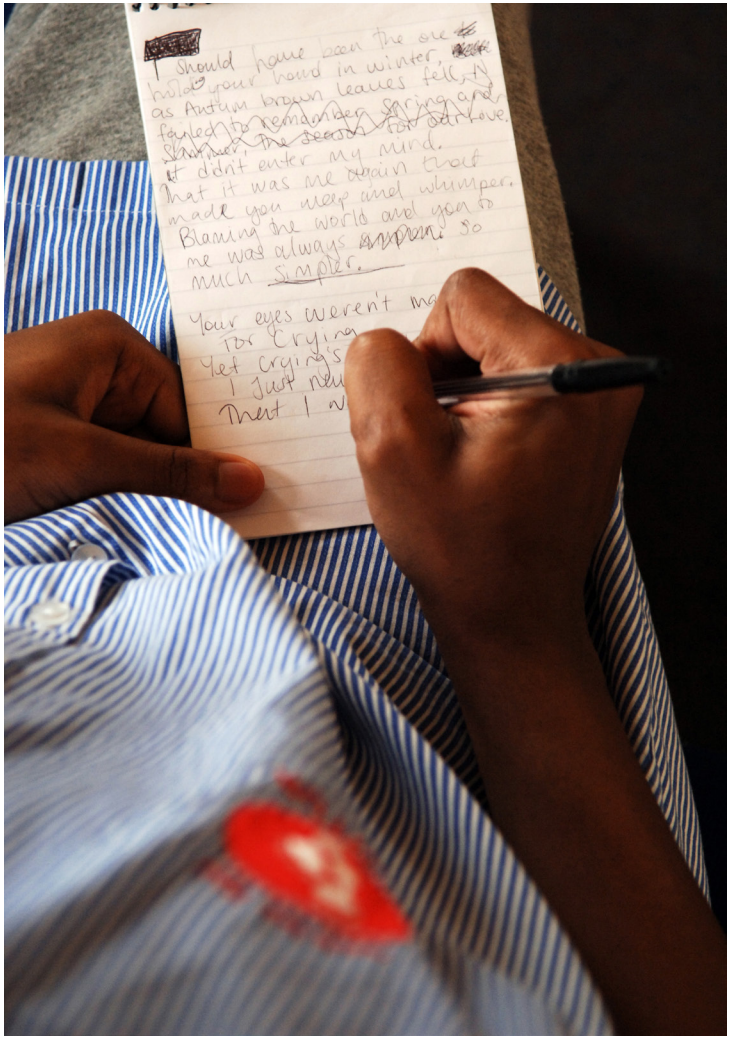
How would you describe the process of making music collaboratively inside a prison?

It's like herding sound into the corral of song:
there's dialogue, disagreement, determination, and diversion
conversation, confusion, concurrence and compromise
stimulation, dissemination, integration and celebration
it's predictably surprising and normally peculiar
we remain dogmatically flexible, jaywalking in single file
it's subtly radical, quietly subversive -
under the radar and above expectation.



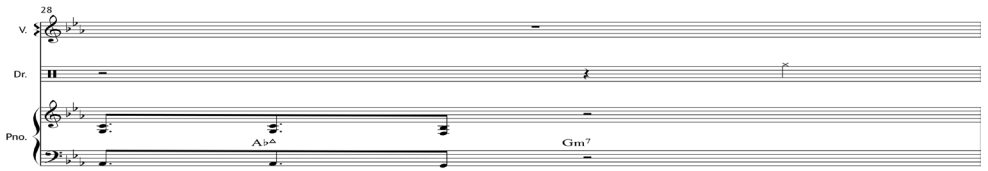
Below: *Rex facilitating in HMP Brixton; The Observer Newspaper, 2005*

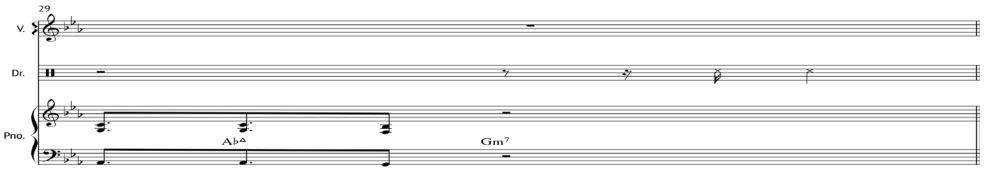




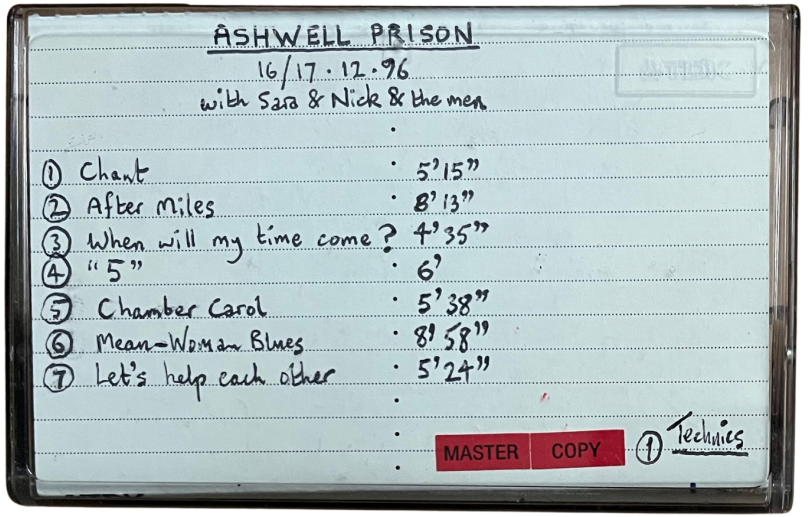
Left: *Project in HMP Holloway, 2008*
photographed for the 'Inside Out' exhibition

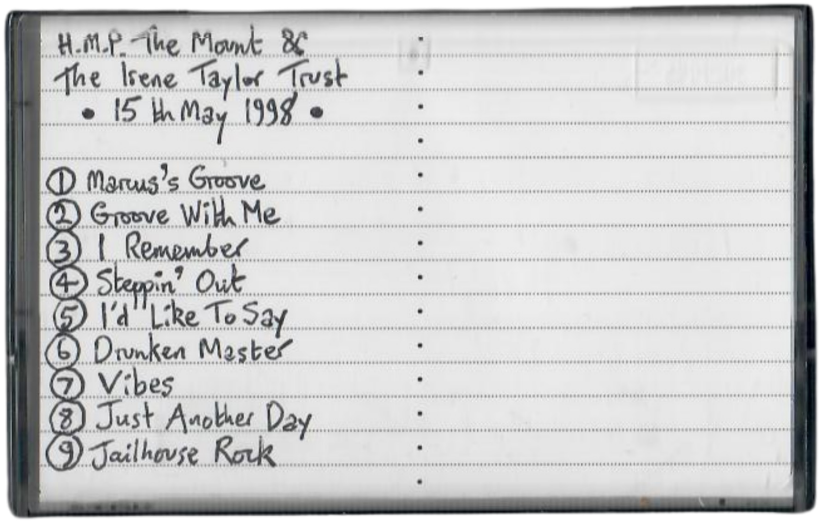
Right: *Project in HMP Wandsworth, 2008*
photographed for the 'Inside Out' exhibition

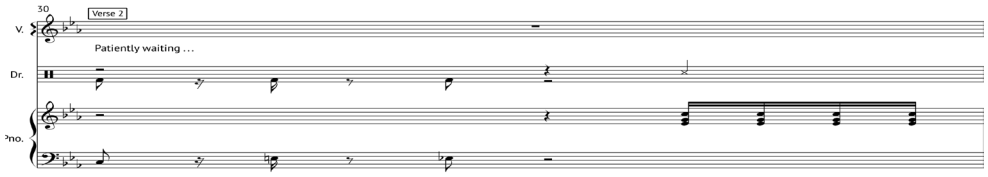


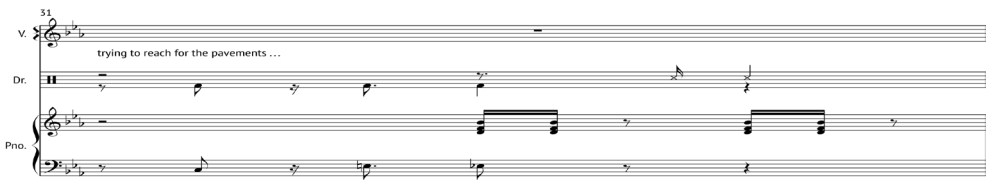


CHORUS: CASSETTE TAPES









VERSE 2: 2010s–2020s

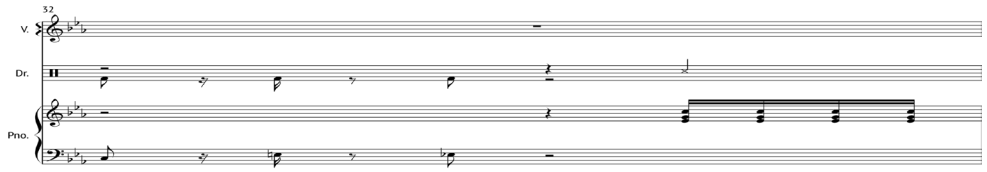
Emma
Musician in Residence

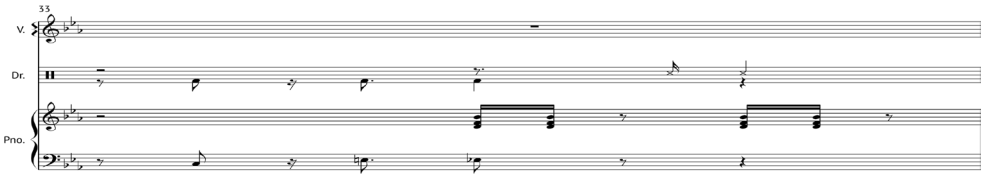
I've been recording Irene Taylor Trust projects for the past twelve or so years. Whether we're in a prison classroom, a chapel or a portacabin, the process for setting-up the recording is the same. I always start with drums and then mic-up the kick, snare and two overheads. If we're using electronic drum pads, then I'll feed that in via a DI box. Then there are two bass guitars to add, which are DI-boxed in and a guitar amp which is mic'd up playing out two electric guitars and an electro-acoustic guitar. Next come the three keyboards which are also brought in via DI boxes, and then any extra percussion like congas and shakers which are mic'd up. And finally, the vocals, which are sometimes up to four or five microphones. It's a challenge finding enough input space as the max I can get in is 16 channels so, I sometimes have to get a bit creative with doubling sounds up and mic'ing up keyboard amps instead of separating out the channels. I love setting up the recording equipment. There's something about the promise of recording lovely new music with a bunch of excited, nervous band members, and there's a real buzz in the air.

It's so important to keep recording the music bands make inside prisons. If we didn't, these gems would be lost and so many musical stories would go unheard. From time to time, I find myself humming songs from Irene Taylor Trust projects from years ago. A lot of the music we make is strong and very memorable. I also remember the people that wrote the tracks. Music-making is such a special journey, and you have to trust in the process and open yourself up to sharing stories and emotions. There was one particular challenge that I remember very clearly and was completely my own doing. About a week before the project, I'd absent-mindedly updated my computer operating system and thought nothing of it. We spent Monday to Wednesday of the project week in a prison writing the songs, and then I brought my computer inside on Thursday ready to record. We'd set everything up and were ready to go. I started up my laptop, opened Logic and suddenly realised that I hadn't updated the driver for the audio interfaces when I updated my laptop. There was no internet available in the jail. Very luckily, I remembered there was a Sainsbury's nearby that had WIFI as we'd used it for meal ingredients earlier in the week. So, I was escorted out of the prison, jumped in our van, drove to Sainsbury's and installed the updates there, hoping that would solve the problem. Thankfully it did! That was a bit of a hairy moment, and it was only by luck that there were enough staff members to stay with the group and escort me out.

Another challenge that all of us face when recording is when band members want to listen back to the recording just after they've been recorded. The recordings at this point sound raw and unedited. It can feel a bit disheartening so we have to reassure them that it will sound great and professional once mixed.

The mixing process is what can really help bring the musical stories to life. There's lots that can be done in the mix that

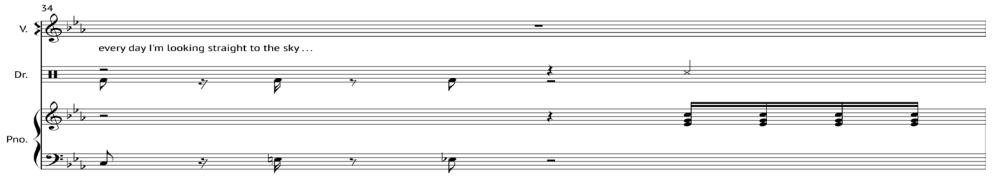


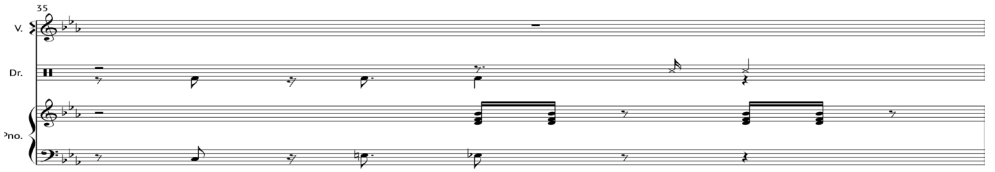


will give space to the vocal lines and can also help to boost them. It's fun adding fx and even the occasional extra part or backing vocal to lift the music. The recording also gives a voice to people who may not have had their voice heard before. It can be so exciting to hear your voice recorded for the first time. There's also the chance for other people to hear your story, as we send CDs to friends and families on the outside, and we also upload the tracks to Soundcloud.

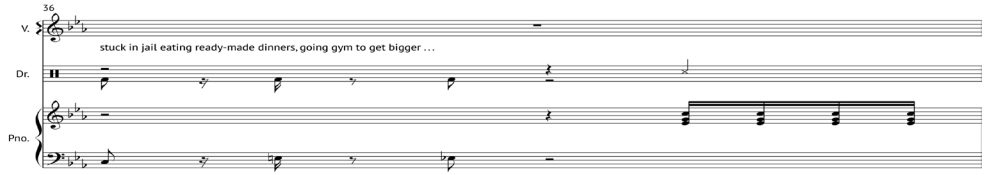
The recording process enhances me as a musician as I have to think quickly and creatively. On the flip side the mixing process lets me spend time on creative choices and it makes me take care of the sound that I'm shaping.

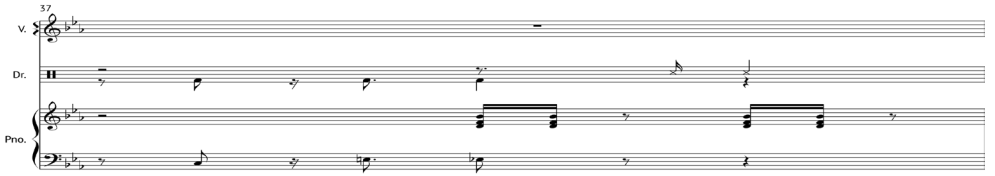
Right: *Project in HMP Lowdham Grange, 2011*



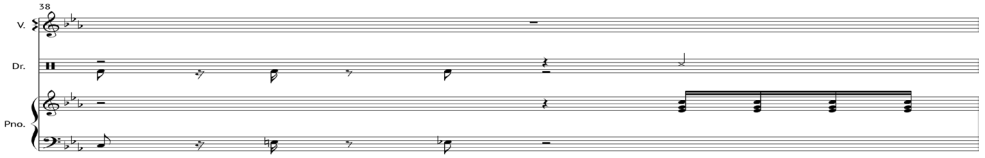


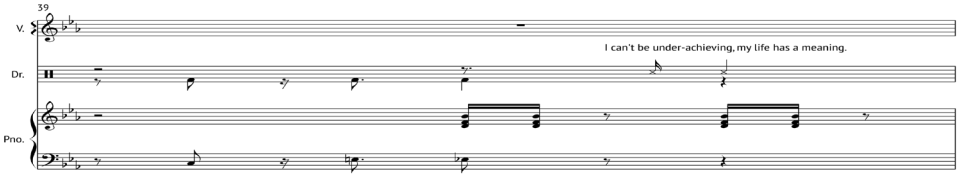
Left and Right: *Project in HMP Lowdham Grange, 2011*





Left and Right: *Project in HMP Thameside, 2016*



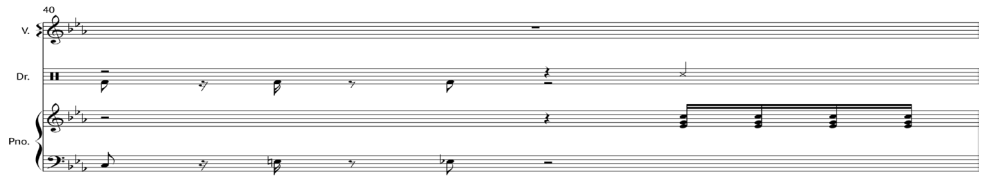


Jake
Creative Programmes Director

In 2009, six years before I would eventually join Irene Taylor Trust, I walked into the chapel in HMP Brixton to see Fallout, a collaborative production between ITT and Synergy Theatre Project featuring a live original score. The performance was part of my research as I prepared to deliver my own prison theatre project, as part of my degree. I was there to observe and learn from two organisations leading the way.

I arrived with assumptions about the limitations of prison-based music and theatre projects. However, I was blown away by the professionalism of the performance. From the staging, set and lighting (that wouldn't have looked out of place in a Westend show), to the talent of the actors and musicians on stage. The presence of a live band completely transformed the play, bringing it to life and creating an electric atmosphere. Whilst standalone theatre or music performance can still be impressive to watch, bringing them together truly enhanced the experience. I left feeling inspired and excited, not only by what could be achieved, but also by the potential of cross-arts collaboration.

Since working at ITT, I've seen first-hand their commitment and passion for collaborative working. Each partner brings a unique set of skills, knowledge, and experience, which in turn has allowed us to enhance and expand our offer. We've delivered an annual Winter Show with Kestrel Theatre Company at HMP Spring Hill since 2018. Over the course of four weeks, we collaborate with a group of musicians to compose original songs for the performance, while Kestrel leads a team of actors to develop the show. Their children

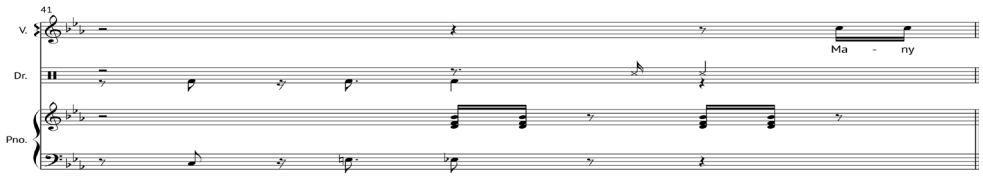


then get to come in and watch their dads perform the piece. Donkeys wearing reindeer antlers lead the children through the prison to the association room, which has been transformed into a festive grotto.

Christmas can be a particularly tough time for many people in prison, especially those separated from their families. Having an afternoon where children can see their dads in a positive light and see them achieve something meaningful is incredibly powerful. It fosters connection, encourages motivation to rebuild relationships, and offers a rare moment of shared joy. For some, it may be one of the few positive experiences they've had together as a family.

As well as cross-arts partnerships, collaborating with other music organisations, such as orchestras, offers significant benefits. It's a way to introduce people in prison to styles of music they might not have engaged with previously. The Lullaby Project was originally devised by Carnegie Hall's Weill Music

Institute in the US and brought to the UK in 2017 by Irene Taylor Trust and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. The project gives parents the opportunity to write a personal song for their children, which is then recorded and performed by members of the orchestra. Working with the best orchestral musicians in the country boosts participants' sense of self-worth and confidence. It reinforces the belief that they are worthy of meaningful opportunities and capable of achieving something extraordinary. It's transformative.



Shane
Participant

It's not easy passing the time in your sentence when there's nothing to do. HMP Spring Hill was the first prison I'd been in which offered music, and that changed everything for me. Music is a beautiful thing.

I've loved the bass guitar since I first picked it up at age fourteen, but life stopped me from playing. At Spring Hill, musicians from ITT helped me fall back in love with the bass. There was a facilitator called Emily who led 'Musician in Residence' sessions. Each week we jammed together. Emily was the first person who got me back into playing.

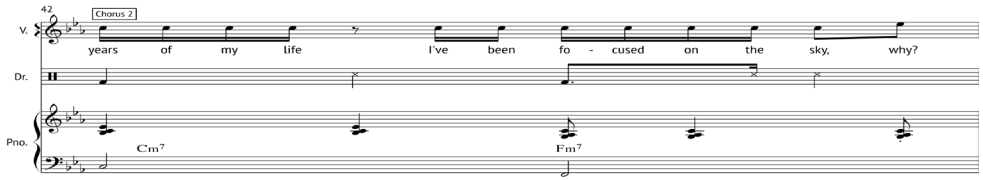
Sometimes the jamming groups were small and sometimes they were quite big, as people were always getting moved into our prison or getting released, but that was alright. Music is special because you can always learn from other people; everyone connects to songs differently.

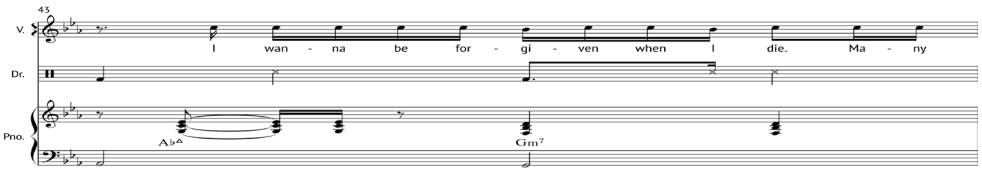
It was because of those weekly sessions that I asked my dad if he could send in my guitar. It took months to get it through security and everything, but as soon as I had it I started playing riffs in my cell most days. I tried out different ideas, which began sounding really good.

My best moment of my whole sentence was when we did the winter show to an audience. It was a Christmas play, and we wrote all the music in only two weeks. On the first day I felt a bit nervous in the rehearsal room, I only recognised the faces of a few others in the group, but during the following days we got to know each other a lot more and we began chatting and laughing about certain things. You could feel that camaraderie in the music – when you're playing in a band unit you start to come in quite tight. We were practicing and getting tighter and tighter, and getting to know each other better in the process. We kept up that familiarity even after the show had finished. We were actually quite friendly in those months after when we'd bump-into each other on the wings.

We performed the winter show three times, but really the initial performance was like a dress rehearsal. It was the first time we had actually run through the set list all together! But as soon as we started playing it was brilliant, and one of the guys got so good at counting us in and conducting us. All the staff came along to watch, and lots of our families were allowed in too. During one of the shows, someone's child ran up on the stage saying 'hello daddy' and he picked her up and carried on acting with her in his arms. It was great! We all loved having the kids in the audience because they were so good at interaction and joining in.

Afterwards, ITT gave us our winter show album which they'd recorded onto CDs, and I gave one to my dad. He was really happy to listen to it. He was chatting to my brother and he said, 'oh Shane's been getting into music again and playing really well and getting on with things'. I felt really proud. It's been a long time between when I put down my bass guitar and then picked it back up again. But I'm enjoying music now. I may not know many songs, but I've realised that I know how to jam. You shout me the key, and I'll be able to play it.

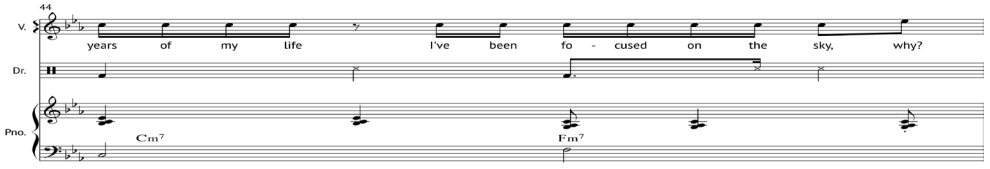


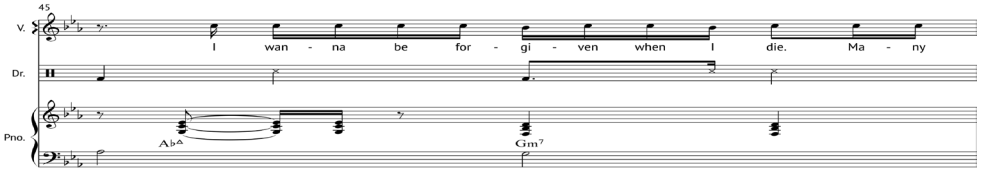


One last thing I want to say is that the equipment ITT had in Spring Hill was really good. I played a Yamaha four string bass, and they even had a bloody five string bass in there! Having good quality instruments, and good quality facilitators in a place like that meant a lot to me. It made me feel like a professional. It was a proper novelty.

Right: *Artwork from Shane's Winter Show album at HMP Spring Hill, 2023*

Artwork design by Keir Cooper





James
Musician in Residence

I facilitate in a Category A prison, so the highest level of security. It's got huge fences, razor wires, dogs, cameras – everything. The building is Victorian, so there's this central space with massive wings going off into different directions. As an introduction to visiting prisons, it really felt like the real deal.

I ran my first music workshop there sixteen years ago. The prison chaplains had emailed me back, to offer their chapel space for the sessions. They had a big main room where I used to organize performances and weekly open mic nights, and then there was a little side room for lessons. Because it's Cat A, there's airport style security and we couldn't bring instruments in or out. I was relying on what was already in there. I remember we had a few guitars and a keyboard that lived in the chapel, and it took years to accumulate more equipment.

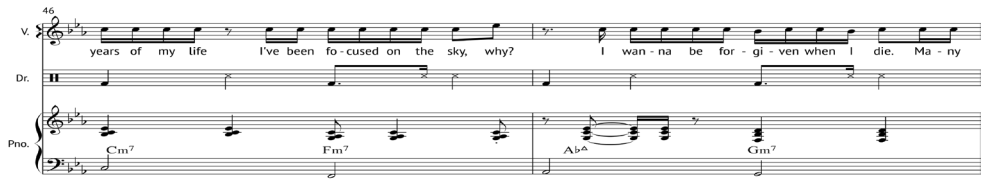
The weekly musician in residence sessions established a strong sense of community, where people would meet-up and collaborate musically. The participants were all on quite long sentences, and we built-up a relationship over a period of time. Sometimes I'd go away on paternity leave for a while and then come back, and so to a certain extent they were all aware of what was going on for me, too. What that continuous relationship allowed for, I suppose, was gradually supporting people to move towards writing their own songs or performing in front of other people. The weekly open mic night was a nice, gentle way to get into performing – a room full of lots of supportive people, with lots of clapping.

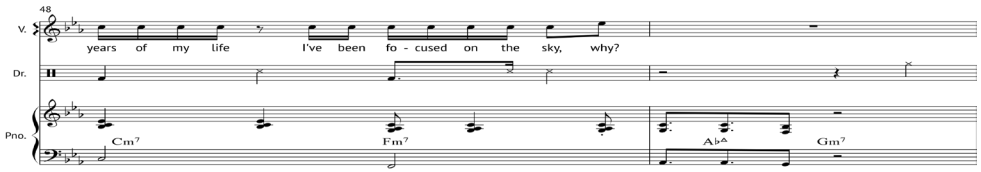
I remember there was a guy who hadn't played at all when he joined the group. After learning guitar with us, he started playing at the open mic nights and writing his own stuff. We used to do a winter and summer concert, and at one of those concerts he performed one of his songs with a band of people he'd put together. It was really lovely to see that change for him, and to see how proud he felt.

Another special moment was a rock opera that we put on, where we wrote, recorded and performed loads of great music from scratch. Our finale song was called Coming Home, and it was one of those really powerful tracks that I can totally still remember the chorus of, even now.

The pandemic changed so much, unfortunately. Visitors weren't allowed into prison for three years, and now that I am back, we no longer have access to the chapel. Instead we're in a small classroom in the education corridor, which is meant as a day centre for the older prisoners as it's quieter and calmer. There's a whiteboard on one wall, a couple of nice comfy chairs, and a store-room (which in typical prison style is full of all sorts of odds and ends, along with my equipment!). The classroom functions fine, but there's no space for the bigger band sessions, and open mics can't happen anymore.

The participants are mostly new post-covid. Sometimes I still see familiar people on the education corridor walking between classes, but many of them have moved on. I suppose that community of people who met every week has

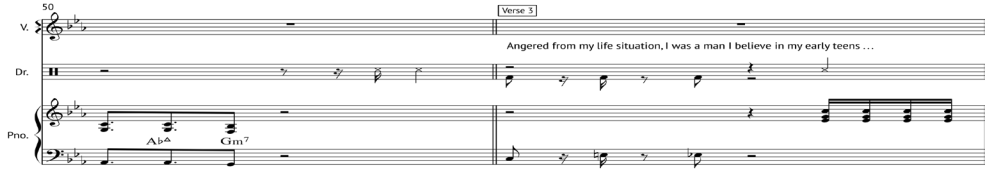


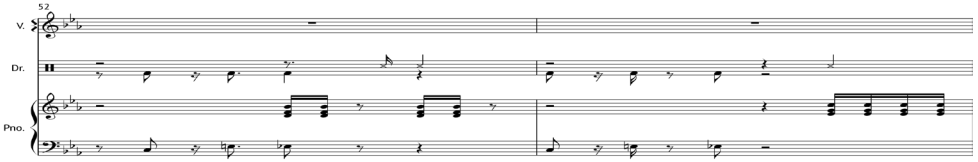


been lost for now. Today's task is getting the prison to see that performances are something that could happen again. The culture has changed, so prisoners and staff don't expect that such events can happen here, but they're invaluable.

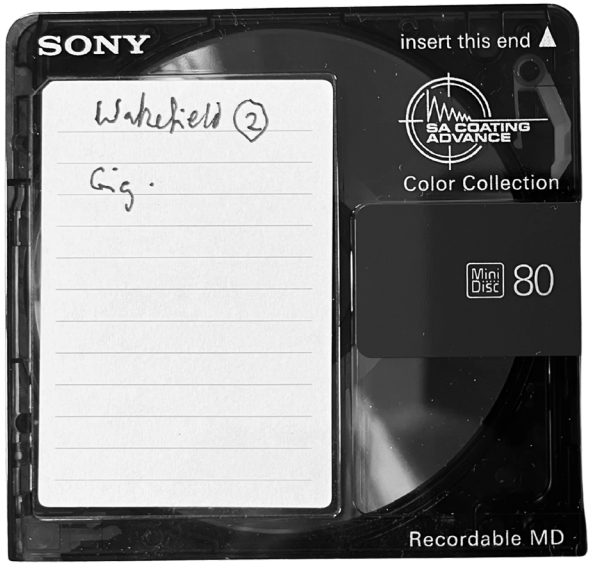
I've learnt so much from the participants over the years I've been working inside, they've inspired me in so many big and small ways. I was quite young when I went in, and I probably arrived with pre-conceptions about the kind of music people in prison might like, and what I thought I could offer them. Since then, my outlook has become much broader; now I try not to have any assumptions of what people are going to be interested in. We make all sorts of music from rock to jazz to funk to samba to bucket drumming. I'm also always being introduced to music I've not heard before – this week it was Billie Strings – some American bluegrass musician that I'll add to my playlist. There might be more logistical challenges today than there were sixteen years ago, but there are also fewer limits to what feels musically possible.

Right: *Participant's drawing for album artwork, HMP Littlehey, 2022*

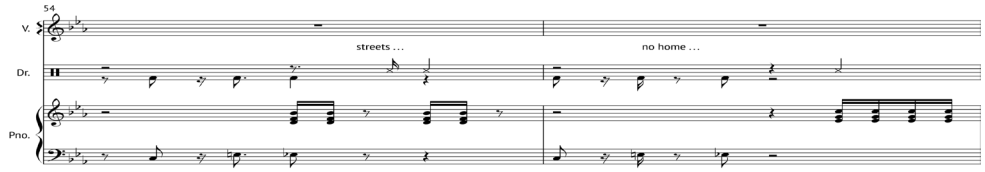


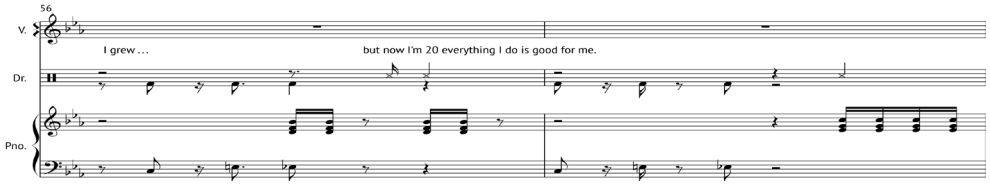


CHORUS: MINI-DISCS



Left and Right: *Mini-discs from the first project in HMP Wakefield*





VERSE 3: 2025

In Conversation with Sara and Jake
Artistic Director & Founder with Creative Programmes Director

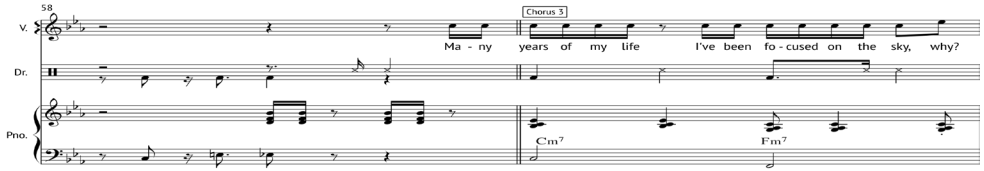
How would you describe a typical Music in Prisons project?

J: Three of our musicians and a vanload of instruments going into a prison and working with a group of about ten to twelve people over the course of a week. They'll form a band, write original songs together, and record those songs for a CD that gets posted to family and friends. The projects usually culminate in a performance to outside guests or other people in the prison, but that's more difficult these days.

Why do you think it works?

J: We're really ambitious as an organisation. On the first day of a project people always wonder how they'll make an album in such a short space of time, but by Friday 4-6 songs will have been created. We have high expectations about what can be achieved, and that's integral in making sure that peoples' self-esteem, confidence and self-worth improve during that period of time. You can see it happen in the changes in people's body language – there might be no eye contact on Monday morning but by Friday they'll be performing in front of fifty people.

S: I think what's important is that our musicians go in and they behave as they would on any other professional gig they do. Part of the role we play is to

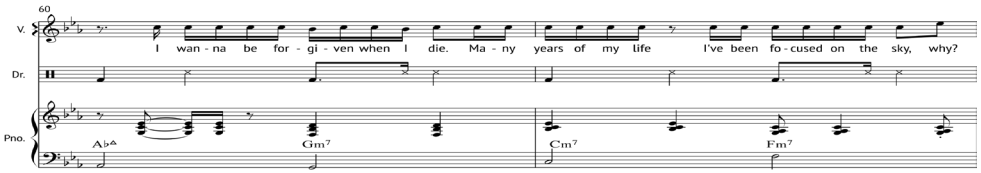


make the people we support feel like they're part of something great. Just because prisoners are where they are, doesn't mean they deserve any less of our time or skills, or that they are worth anything less. So, what you said [Jake] about aiming high all the time is I think absolutely key. Our musicians are all about getting the best out of people, whoever we're working with.

How have prisons changed since our first project thirty years ago?

S: There's twice as many people in jail now as there were when I began at Scrubs in 1984, and in many ways there's less opportunities for people inside than there used to be.There's less things happening that make people feel good about themselves.

The arts aren't valued in the way I would love to see them valued – that goes for arts inside prisons and out. There should be art for everyone, and that might mean events you pay lots of money to see, or things that are free for communities to take part in. Everyone should be offered the same kind of opportunities, and for a while we used to provide that in prisons. There was a golden period when the arts were so strong, but no one in jails knows anything about those projects now. Instead, all of us who have been in the sector for a while are left with this feeling that we used to be able to offer so much, but now we can't.

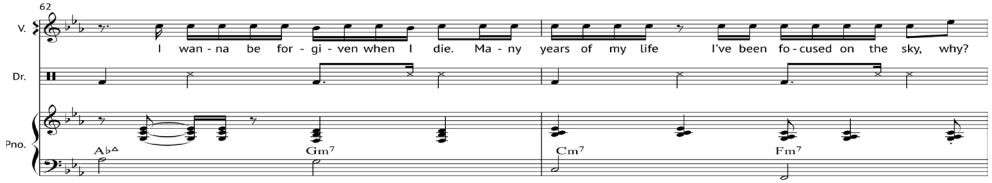


How did the pandemic curtail the ways we work in prisons?

S: Prisons went into lockdown, so we couldn't deliver our projects in-person anymore. People were kept in their cells 23 hours a day with nothing to do, and five years later many prisons still haven't fully relaxed their lockdown regime. Since then, there's greater pull-on space in prisons. Different courses are fighting to access the multi-faith room or the workshop space. Staff numbers are really down, and the turnover is high. The combination of that makes it pretty difficult to deliver in the way we're used to. We've had to learn to be immensely adaptable.

J: That's also impacted our ability to do performances. If we can't get a space like the multi-faith room (which is often the largest space available in a prison) and instead we're allocated a small portacabin that won't fit an audience, then we can't organise a performance. We've learnt to work around these barriers, like running projects which culminate in a recorded CD, but that doesn't have the same benefits for participants as performing their own music in front of an audience.

S: We lose so much when we lose performances. It takes away the opportunity to present your songs to a crowd who are responding to you live: you see their faces; you hear them clap; afterwards they tell you how amazing you are. The participants we work with really thrive on that; it gets them through difficult times. It's not the same having a project that ends with only a CD – of course it's infinitely better than not having the CD



at all – but for any creative artist sharing your work with an audience is what you do.

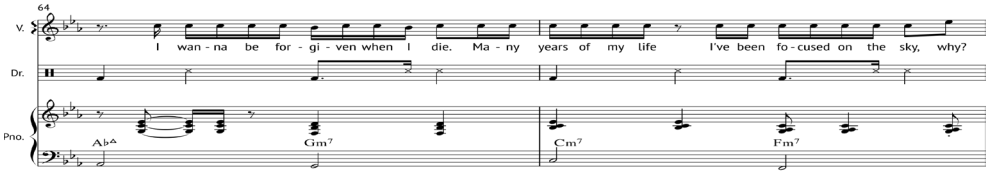
J: As Sara said before, one of our strengths as an organisation is our adaptability. We demonstrated that in Covid, not being able to get into prisons forced us to look at different ways people might access music. We created a range of remote projects, and I think that was a useful test for us. So when we're faced with new challenges, we're equipped to deal with them.

S: As a small team, we have to be fleet of foot and creative enough to work with the landscape we've been given. As creative people, it's good for us to think of different ways to communicate what we do, and to not stay stuck believing there's only one way of doing something.

What challenges are we coming up against, now?

J: Cuts to services in the community has meant prisons have had to take on people who in the past would have been supported outside. Whether that's people with mental health conditions or people experiencing homelessness, or people with drug and alcohol addictions. Prisons are overstretched at the moment, and it's difficult for them to properly support these needs.

S: Funding is a big challenge at the moment. I always feel why isn't there more funding for our projects, because they clearly work. They clearly give people a purpose and a bit of respite in a difficult environment.



Music helps to tap into something that is there in all of us, but sometimes because of life experiences it's been so crushed inside, it's hard to find.

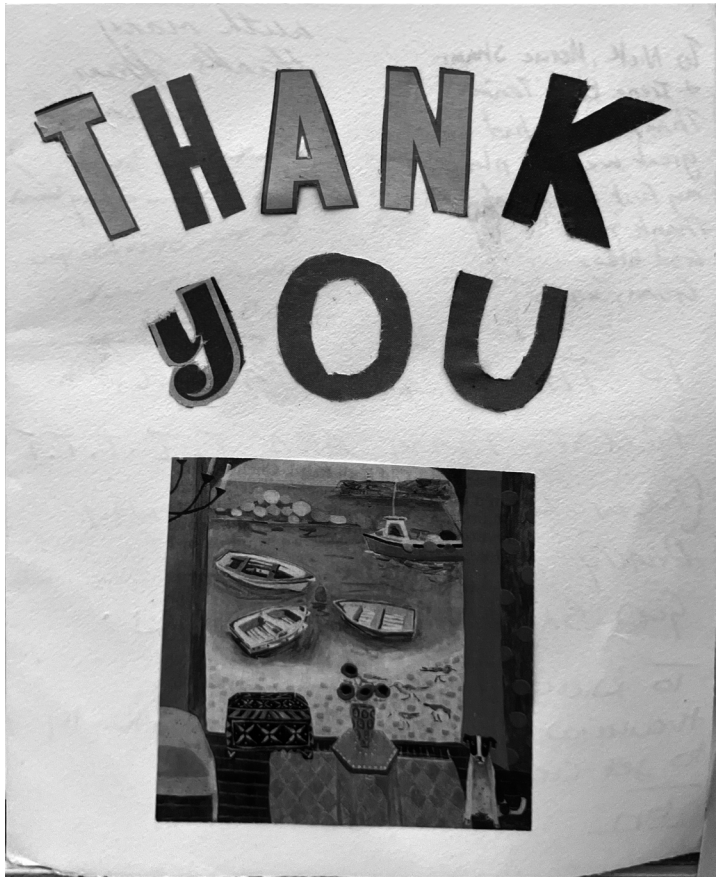
What feels hopeful?

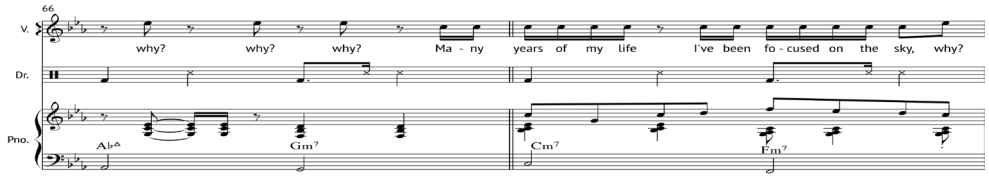
S: What keeps me hopeful is the responses to the projects we deliver, and that's not just the people we work with to create music, but sometimes we see the penny drop for prison staff too. The turnover of staff in prisons is such that many of them might never have seen an arts project inside before. They often tell me: 'I've been in the prison service for four years and I've never seen anything like this'. But it's the arts that makes places more vibrant, and colourful, and better to exist in – for prisoners and staff. We need to harness that feeling of possibility.

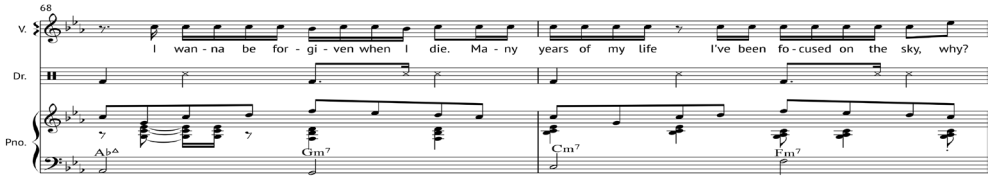
J: It can be hard to remain hopeful, but I'm thinking about the project we're delivering this week – which the number one Governor in the prison has heard about and is excited. The fact that someone at the highest level is supportive of this work is definitely a boost and makes me feel hopeful that if the right people are aware of what we do, then this work can continue.

S: It's a new world in 2025, that shows much less compassion to its populations inside and outside. What we must do as an organisation is to find pockets of places where we can try our absolute best to make a difference, and hope in a little while that begins to snowball. Because the work we do is absolutely brilliant.

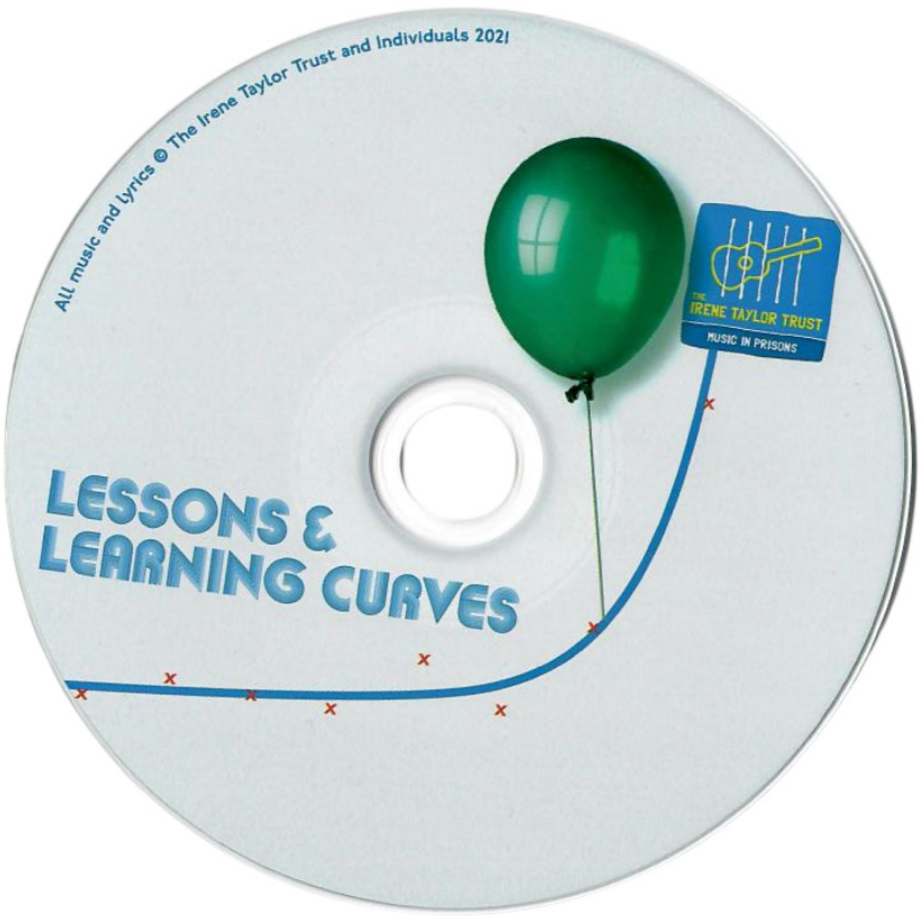
Below: *Handmade Thank You card from a project in HMP Bure, 2022*



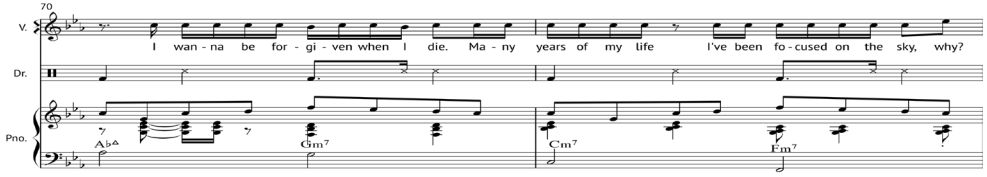


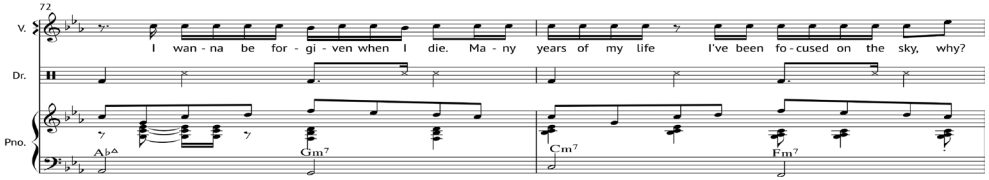


CHORUS: CDs



Left: *CD from project at HMP Gartree 2021*
Right: *CD from project at HMP Littlehey, 2020*
Artwork design by Keir Cooper





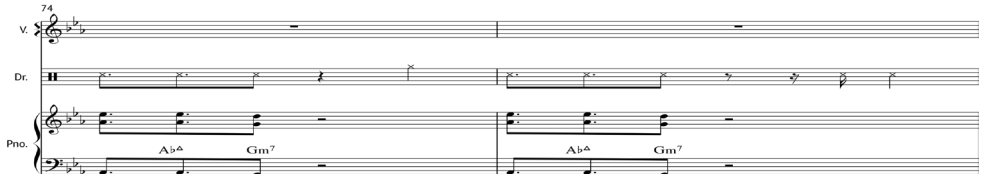
OUTRO

In 2012, ITT launched *Sounding Out*, a programme supporting former prison participants to rebuild their lives after release. We offer performance opportunities and paid training placements to become co-facilitators on our community projects. In the last decade, *Sounding Out* cohorts have played in gigs at Union Chapel, Southbank Centre, St Marylebone Church and Bush Hall, and every time the atmosphere on those nights has been electric.

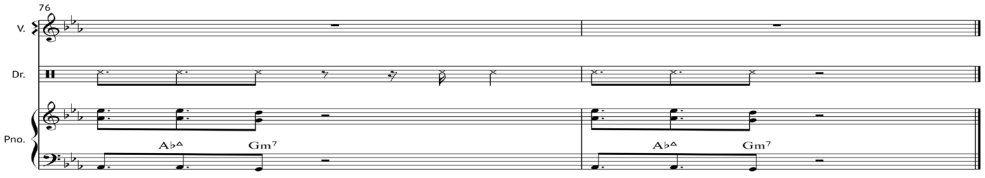
The author Donna Haraway writes about “staying with the trouble”. As she puts it, “staying” doesn’t mean ignoring the surrounding challenges, but understanding that in the midst of difficult times there are still unexpected opportunities for light. Glimpses of sky, perhaps. The *Sounding Out* program is just one example of the many ways ITT creates hopeful openings for the blue to shine through.

It’s impossible to hold thirty years of wildly wonderful music-making within a handful of pages, but this zine is a start. ITT is the legacy of Sara Lee and Irene Taylor, and everyone who has ever been part of our projects. Here’s to the decades to come.

Kitya
Creative Engagement & Progression Manager



Scan to listen to
‘Focused on the Sky’
HMP Rochester, 2009



Above: *First Sounding Out cohort performance at The Southbank Centre, 2012*