

Music Programs in Prisons

Music programs are used in **prisons** as part of the rehabilitation process. Advocates point to the therapeutic nature of **music**, the positive outlet of energy, and the stimulation of the creative processes as reasons to support the continuation and proliferation of **music** programs. **Music** programs emphasize cooperation and provide a skill that can be used outside of **prison**—if not as a source of income, then as a productive hobby.

PROGRAM CONTENT

Music programs have traditionally been offered in all kinds of facilities, from lower-security to maximum-security places like Angola and San Quentin. **Prison music** includes **music** lessons, playing and performing in groups or bands, and the opportunity to make recordings and/or perform live on radio and television. Historically, **prison** bands existed in many states in the early 1900s. Today, **prison** groups and bands sometimes travel outside the **prison** to perform in parades and at local festivals; others are limited to performing inside the institution for their convict peers only. They have played at rodeos in Texas and still perform at Louisiana's Angola Rodeo. Instruction varies from hiring professional **music** instructors to volunteers to prisoner teachers. At Angola, Louisiana, in the 1970s, Charles Neville of the Neville Brothers had full-time work duty in the **music** room as a convict **music** teacher.

Music programs can be part of larger overall arts programs that include theater, dancing, and painting, while sometimes they are part of other self-help groups organized by the prisoners themselves. They also can be free-standing **music** programs and/or part of the **prisons'** recreational program.

SUPPORT FOR PROGRAMS

Art and **music** program advocates believe that such classes restore a sense of humanity and safety that is vital to rehabilitation. The sense of completion and of contribution to the creation of something that society values can help inmates increase their self-esteem and recapture a sense of pride and satisfaction in themselves and their work. Other benefits can include relearning responsibility and discipline through individual and group practice and performance. As part of an all-around rehabilitation program, Superintendent Fred Jones appointed Wendell Cannon as Parchman's first director of **music** in 1960, although **prison** bands had existed at Parchman, Mississippi, since the 1940s. Cannon was empowered to exempt his choice of convict musicians from the field and thus lured the black convicts into the **music** program; only white convicts had participated in the **prison** bands to date.

Music and art programs also have been shown to reduce recidivism rates. They provide an alternative to traditional education programs, to which inmates who have had negative experience with schooling in the past may be averse. The open structure of these programs also helps them bring together diverse groups of individuals from different racial, ethnic, geographical, and class backgrounds into a harmonious cooperative atmosphere. As part of a multifaceted program to promote tolerance and mutual respect among its inmates, Ohio's Marion Correctional Institution created "**Music** in the Air." One successful participant of a **music** program observed, "I traded a pistol for a trumpet!" **Music** programs have even been used as a form of psychotherapy to develop the relationship between the therapist and the client. Therapists believe that **music** can help individuals who would otherwise have a difficult time expressing themselves. Evaluation of a **music** therapy program implemented in a female correctional facility concluded that **music** therapy reduced tension and anxiety while

also increasing motivations and ties with reality for the women convicts. Art and **music** programs have also been used in the treatment of sexual offenders against children.

Examples

Goals other than rehabilitation prompt **prison** systems to create **music** programs. In the late 1930s, the Texas radio program, *Thirty Minutes Behind the Walls* was created to gain favorable publicity for the **prison** system and to offset the negative publicity surrounding a recent rash of escapes, beatings, and gun fights within the **prison**. Not only male **prison** systems initiate **music** programs. Women prisoners at the Goree, Texas, **prison** farm for women created a band in the early 1940s because they believed that they might get the attention of then-Governor O'Daniel and be able to play their way out of **prison**. The women not only performed at rodeos and on the **prison** radio program; the "Goree Girls" also traveled extensively around the state. None of the women were paroled out of **prison** because of their singing abilities, but the notoriety of the **prison** radio show certainly declined when the last and most popular member of the band was paroled in 1943. By 1944, the **prison** radio show was no more.

Some states provide funding for **prison music** programs; in others, funding may be left to private foundations that support the arts and have an interest in correctional facilities. Prominent foundations and groups include "Art Behind Bars" in Florida and "Irene Taylor Trust" in England. Inmates have even requested to be transferred to **prisons** with well-known **music** programs, including the State Correctional Institution Graterford in Pennsylvania. At this **prison**, inmates are graded and must receive at least a C in order to get credit as a student in the **music** program.

Drawbacks

One drawback to **music** programs is the potential they may provide for smuggling contraband into the **prison**. In the past, for example, SCI Graterford experienced increased violence and drug overdoses that led to a temporary suspension of the program. Another current stumbling block has to do with negative publicity over such programs, which are viewed by many critics as being "soft" on criminals. A recent VH1 television series that highlighted various states' **music** programs, *Music Behind Bars*, brought such negative publicity from victims' family members and Bill O'Reilly of *The O'Reilly Factor* that Pennsylvania's Governor Schweiker canceled all **prison music** programs for murderers in Pennsylvania.

Less controversially, there can be a problem of consistency. Since prisoners are frequently moved from one institution to another during their confinement, they may find that they are unable to continue studying or playing **music** if they are moved to an institution that does not provide the necessary equipment. Accordingly, **music** may become yet another source of **prison** frustration rather than rehabilitation. Even with such positive support for **prison** programs, musical instruments are expensive and are often difficult to obtain and maintain. Access to them can become a problem for security. Finally, by definition, **prison music** programs operate as part of the overall system of social control that conflicts with goals of rehabilitation. Prisoners' ability to participate in such programs is not based simply on talents but on one's "good" **prison** behavior, and in Pennsylvania, the nature of one's crime. "Dark Mischief," one of the current bands at Graterford, must perform regularly. If the convicts do not like the show, the men lose their playing privileges.

CONCLUSION

Music programs, at least in the form of bands, have existed in **prisons** throughout the country since the early 1900s. **Music** programs offer a constructive and creative rehabilitation method for the correctional industry. While some may view these types of programs as a luxury that prisoners do not deserve, research supports their positive effects. As long as funding is available, either through the government or private foundations, **music** programs will continue to offer a piece to the rehabilitation puzzle. However, correctional budgets are being cut in many states across the nation, and **prison music** programs are suffering. Many bands do not travel anymore, instruments are not repaired, and **music** rooms are closed in an effort to cut costs.

Further Reading

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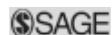
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Entry Citation:

Lobo-Jost, Gregory. "Music Programs in Prisons." *Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2004. 615-18. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.



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