

The chapel at HM Prison Liverpool is a large and lofty room at the top of the old Walton Gaol. It's a space that must hold some heartbreaking stories within its grim Victorian walls but charity Good Vibrations has brought it to life with an unusual music project that fills it with the joyful sound of the gamelan, an Indonesian percussion orchestra.

The atmosphere is happy, laid-back and noisy. Young children are running around, brimming over with excitement just to be with their dads. Some are playing with the shadow puppets that Good Vibrations workshop facilitator Laurence Rugg has brought along. Rugg is having trouble keeping others from tinkering with the instruments, which are set up for the performance.

"You can all have a go later," he promises. "We are about to start!"

It takes a while for everyone to settle but no one minds. This is precious family time, and most of the men have wives and children in attendance. Finally, 10 participants* of varying ages, in numbered blue hi-vis vests, lower themselves sheepishly to the floor or onto low cushions in front of their instruments and the small but expectant audience.

Drums, gongs, bells, chimes and xylophone-type instruments make up a gamelan ensemble.

"We are bringing back to life not just the orchestra but also its Indonesian heritage," says Katherine Haigh, executive director at Good Vibrations.

This particular gamelan is Sundanese, from the western part of the Indonesian island of Java. The instruments were found in a cupboard at HM Prison Styal, where they had languished since the 1990s when it was imported along with many others on the back of the world music trend. But because they were heavy and hard to carry, and besides which not many people knew how to play them, a lot ended up in cupboards.

"It's a set of percussion instruments that look and sound slightly strange to the western ear, or to those unfamiliar with eastern music," explains Haigh, a



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musician based in Cumbria. "It's not just the sound, but the vibrations, frequencies and harmonics that are different. They resonate and are felt through your body, so the sensation is very congruous. But you don't need any musical experience."

Good Vibrations takes a very particular approach. No one is told what to do or how to play, and participants are encouraged to work through obstacles, musical and emotional. Of the four or five tunes played, the men have composed them all except for one. At some performances, known as play-throughs, the participants make Indonesian snacks and do puppet shows.

Everyone is a bit jittery and nervous – some of the men giggle and the children are restless throughout the first tune, *Falling Rain*. No one knows quite what to expect from the strange, bright instruments that look more like highly-polished pots and pans, resplendent on red and gold painted stands decorated with scrolls and symbols.

But then something that can only be described as magical happens. The second tune, *Kotek*, is introduced and everyone is suddenly serious and focused as the jingly, slightly plaintive music starts to deepen and resonate around the room.

The children sit rapt and cross-legged in the space between the small audience and the orchestra. This is a rice-grinding song from Indonesia, and the only traditional tune in the performance. The children start to beat time with plastic spoons. As the play-through progresses, some edge silently forward towards their dads.

The next song is *Rainbow*, its trills and tinklings sounding like the patter of rain, then reverberating into the sonorous sound of a heavy downpour, slowly dying away and finally bursting back to reveal the rainbow. It's exactly how a rainbow would sound.

After *Rainbow* there's a bit of laughter and joking, and a palpable sense of relief



that it's going down well. The next song is *Lotus*, but introduced as *Lotus Biscuit* because, it's explained, these are the biscuits they get served alongside their tea and coffee. Rugg insists that they play this as an encore.

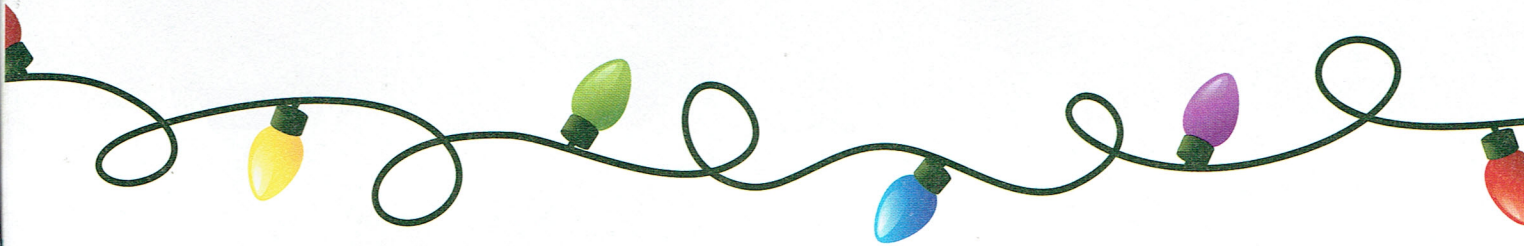
The smaller kids are in their dads' arms before the applause begins. There is a certificate ceremony and the wives and older children are encouraging and clearly bursting with pride.

This is the third gamelan course at HMP Liverpool. The course lasts five days, and up to 20 can participate. "You can make music simply in a short space of time," says Rugg. "But it's about working together as much as making music."

A lot of the work is done through discussion, then during the performance through body language and eye contact, so participants have to be alert, he explains. "It uses a different scale so it's much harder to play familiar tunes and western pop songs. But that means

Beats and bars

Christmas spent behind bars is a bleak reality for many, but for a group of male prisoners playing in a traditional Indonesian orchestra is giving them an opportunity to spend quality time with their families. **Deborah Mulhearn** watches the performance at HMP Liverpool



that it's a level playing field because the gamelan is completely unfamiliar, so there's no one telling other people how to do it, or that they are wrong. Everyone is a beginner and you have to work as a team, sometimes in spite of themselves.

"They may leave it all behind when they finish the course but that doesn't mean it hasn't had a profound effect. It's not something you can measure, but being part of the project is a small window of forgetting where you are."

Being on a gamelan course can be a stepping stone into further education or more formal prison education. The men can be awarded a Level 1 teamworking certificate from the Open College Network, though this particular course at HM Prison Liverpool was unaccredited.

"It's small steps, but they may sign up to an English or maths class or even a radio DJ course," says Haigh. "In a general sense it helps them to be more confident, to socialise more, and there's a huge sense of achievement and family pride that a lot of people in prison have never experienced. They have often had disruptive childhoods, exclusion from school and never worked. We never could have predicted the feelings of hope that are generated."

The men are beaming now. Some break off to corners to huddle and talk in hushed tones with their wives and other family members. Others are racing round the room with their kids. In regular visits, physical contact is strictly monitored, so this is an exception and the men and their families are making the most of it. A line of prison officers stand guard, but not oppressively so.

All the men say that being in the gamelan was relaxing and helped them stay calm in stressful situations. Pete admits to doing more inside prison than he did outside. "Personally, I'm quite shy and I don't like being in the spotlight or with people I don't know, but this has brought everyone together," he says. "We have to work together otherwise the music doesn't work."

His wife Patti agrees. "He's gone outside his comfort zone to be in the gamelan orchestra. It's a real achievement for him, and it helps us make more of a connection at family visits. The music is the icing on the cake."

Joe has never learnt to play a musical instrument so this didn't come naturally. "It's a bit nerve-racking but doing the course has got rid of some bad vibes. I feel better. The rhythms stay in your head and have a sort of calming effect."

"It's a bit like meditating," agrees Paul. "The music is still playing in your head when you go back to your cell. I'll be thinking about this for weeks – in a good way!"

The course is voluntary but requires a big commitment. The men have different reasons for joining. The music allows the participants to express and channel their feelings into something they care about.

"I did it for my kids so I could bond with them more," says James. "It was easy to play but you have to concentrate. We had to change round and try the different instruments to find out who was best at which one, until it all came together and we got the right sound."

"It's brilliant to be able to hear it in this setting," says his wife Joan. "It's different and it gets them out of the day-to-day environment for a few hours."

Good Vibrations works with Novus, a social enterprise that has education contracts for over 50 prisons, young offender institutions and secure settings.

"Children of prisoners are the hidden victims and we are keen to use the gamelan as a platform for family engagement in particular," says Sarah Hartley, operational lead for families and

The gamelan project is partly funded by the National Lottery Reaching Communities Fund, and Good Vibrations follows up with its Keep in Touch programme, though it is difficult to measure the long-term effects of an intervention such as the gamelan project, and also to follow participants who may wish to put everything associated with prison behind them when they leave. Academic research to measure the impact these interventions have on family relationships and prisoners' journeys towards desistance from crime will start in next year. But Haigh points out that existing academic research shows that these interventions already have long-term benefits.

"We already know that participants experience sustained and positive emotional and psychological impacts after attending Good Vibrations projects," she says. "And it spurs on further positive behavioural change."

A report found that six months after completing a Good Vibrations course, participants experienced: greater levels of engagement; an increased openness to wider learning; improved listening and communication skills; improved social

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creative arts at Novus, which is based in Openshaw, Manchester.

"Perceptions of prison, often received from TV and film, make it all the more important to show the positive and rehabilitative side where people develop skills, learn tolerance and teamworking and the importance of not letting others down, as well as producing the end result of a performance. There are so many benefits," she says.

Each course and play-through is different. They are not always family events, but there are many men at HM Prison Liverpool with families and young children. One family travelled from Surrey for the performance.

"Quite often children of prisoners are protected but they are astute, and this gives them a positive experience," says Hartley. "The buzz around the event stirs up interest in the next programme and keep the conversations continuing beyond the day itself. That in itself encourages positive behaviours and makes the men see that they are accountable to their families. They can't mess around, and that quality of being part of something is not to be underestimated."

skills and increased social interaction; improved relationships with prison staff; decreased levels of self-reported anger; and a greater sense of calmness.

"We help make positive memories – for both the inmates and their families – of their day to take away, rather than the slightly awkward ones that they can experience on a formal visit where there's less privacy," says Haigh. CDs are made and photos of the event are printed off for the families.

"It depends on the setting and the individual participants and how they come together as a group. It can be an emotional release and very powerful because it's about changing your identity and overcoming fear," she adds. "It has great transformative potential to connect with disengaged people."

A lot of the men have poor relationships in the first place and this can have a big impact on family relationships, but it also helps them think about what they want to do when they are released. ■

** The names of the participants and their family members have been changed (good-vibrations.org.uk)*