

# Seleh Notes

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## Good Vibrations four years on

By Cathy Eastburn



**Gamelan group at HMP Cookham Wood**

The Good Vibrations Gamelan in Prisons project has been in existence for four years. We have worked with more than 1000 individuals in 17 different institutions (prisons, young offender institutions and secure hospitals) all around the UK. We are now recognised by officials in the Home Office, DIUS (Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills) and DCMS (Department for Culture, Media & Sport), and by many in the Prison Service, as one of the leading providers of arts activities in prisons.

With thorough evaluation of our work (by teams from Cambridge University and the University of Central England as well as by ourselves), we have persuaded policy

makers, prison governors and many others that our workshops have a significant impact on people. We have demonstrated that Good Vibrations participants improve their communication skills, listening skills, teamworking skills, and their ability to concentrate and apply themselves. The sound of the music makes them feel less stressed. They experience a sense of positive achievement in a group setting (often for the first time in their lives), they feel better about themselves and they are motivated to go on to engage in other constructive activities, such as mainstream prison education or offending behaviour programmes.

Good Vibrations projects are usually one or two weeks long, full-time and intensive. Participants not only learn traditional gamelan pieces, but also create compositions together as a group and take part in group free improvisations. Every project culminates in an informal performance in front of an audience consisting of their fellow-inmates, prison staff and sometimes outside guests. Often we work alongside prison education staff to enable participants to attain a recognised key skills qualification (e.g. Communications Skills or Group &

Teamwork) as part of the project, without them having to set foot in a classroom.

When I set up Good Vibrations, I had some ideas about why gamelan might be effective in a prison setting. In running the project over the last few years, I have been able to test and refine these ideas and I am now more convinced than ever that gamelan is uniquely effective at engaging and helping people.

I have identified several reasons for this. Firstly, gamelan is extremely accessible; you do not need to be able to read music, and it takes very little time to pick up the basics. A novice group can learn a traditional piece in a couple of hours and it will sound good.

Next, gamelan is very communal; there is no overall leader or conductor, everyone's part is equally important and the music only works if everyone listens to everyone else to fit their own part in. Playing gamelan demands that players use their teamworking and communication skills, and creates feelings of connection between the players. The Good Vibrations workshop leaders, all experienced group facilitators as well as accomplished gamelan musicians, reinforce this communal approach in their non-directive, participative approach to running the sessions. Participants are encouraged to a very great extent to decide for themselves as a group what they do and how they do it.

(This is in stark contrast to the extremely directive, rule-bound way in which prison life is controlled.)

Another reason for gamelan's effectiveness is that it is a quick and effective way of getting people into a state of flow. Identified by the Hungarian psychologist Csikszentmihalyi, this is the feeling of total immersion in a task which is challenging and which uses one's skills. When experiencing flow, one experiences flash after flash of satisfaction and positive feeling, one loses self-consciousness and hard work feels effortless. Studies show that the greater the amount of flow in one's life, the greater the level of happiness. Feedback from participants, along with our observations, seem to indicate that gamelan is an unusually, perhaps uniquely, quick and accessible entry into the state of flow.

The synchronised movements of gamelan also increase people's well-being. Studies of people undertaking military exercises, participating in religious rituals or in choreographed group dance, show that synchronised movements in a group increase people's well being. Playing gamelan is another example of group synchronised movement, and one that is quickly and easily accessed.

Gamelan has no off-putting connotations;



**Players at HMP Wandsworth (left) and HMP Cookham Wood (right)**

because the vast majority of Good Vibrations participants have never even heard of gamelan, there is no chance for people to form prejudices about it. Other forms of music, for example opera or hip hop, could have negative connotations for some, (e.g. “that’s not for people like me”).

And one final reason for gamelan’s effectiveness in prisons: our workshops give people meaningful insights into another culture. As well as playing traditional gamelan pieces, participants enjoy learning about other Javanese artforms (e.g. shadow puppets, dance, masks, batik) and about life in Java/Indonesia. As with the music, these insights help prison inmates feel connected to other people, as well as taking their minds off their immediate situation.

There is growing evidence that, above a surprisingly low level of income and material comfort, material and economic factors are irrelevant to people’s level of happiness. The psychologist Jonathan Haite argues that voluntary activities are far more significant in determining how happy we are. Voluntary activities are the things we choose to spend our time doing, whether voluntary in the traditional sense (unpaid work for the benefit of some cause), or as hobbies, or in the

course of our day-to-day paid work. Haite argues that those voluntary activities that a) connect us to other people and/or b) create flow, are particularly important contributors to our levels of happiness.

I am convinced that gamelan is a fantastically effective tool for generating a whole raft of feel-good factors, for everyone (not just prison inmates). Of course, in order to get us through the prison gates in the first place, I have to use the prisons’ and officials’ language of key performance targets, accredited qualifications and so on. But I am increasingly aware that the heart of Good Vibrations is about helping people feel happier. This is an important and constructive aim. Well-being is the springboard for the people we work with, who are often depressed, stressed and suffering from low self-esteem. Increasing their well-being is an essential step towards their being able to take control of their lives, to address their offending behaviour, to reduce levels of self-harm, to become more engaged with others, and to be less isolated.

I visited Peterborough Prison recently to talk one-to-one to some of the inmates who had previously done Good Vibrations projects. One of the women, T, had



**Workshop leader John Pawson teaching at HMP Wansworth**

participated in a Good Vibrations project in September run specifically for women who regularly self-harm. T told me “I’ve self-harmed since I was nine. I’ve never gone this long [without self-harming]. Now I think of the music... I’m fine, no self-harming since [the project].” T proudly showed me how her forearms were healing nicely, with no recent wounds. Before the project, she had been under observation three to four times an hour; now the prison had been able to reduce that to once every two hours. The Good Vibrations project was the first time she had ever done anything musical and the first time she had performed in front of an audience. She had been inspired by the experience to sign up for a drama programme at the prison and was looking forward to a performance in front of an outside audience. She had begun going to the gym regularly, and had maintained friendships forged during the

project. She was looking forward to making the most of her remaining time at the prison, filling her time with constructive activities. I was particularly struck by her description of how she now dealt with negative thoughts: “If I feel like self-harming, I tap the tune 3-6-3-6-3-6-3-2 [demonstrates on the side of her leg] and hear it in my head. It calms me right down”. In her description, T is demonstrating the power that gamelan has to increase well-being. ■

**Cathy Eastburn is the Founder and Director of Good Vibrations, which is part of the Firebird Trust, and funded by Arts Council England, the Linbury Trust, the Lankelly Chase Foundation, the Northmoor Trust, the Tudor Trust, the Worshipful Company of Musicians and Youth Music as well as by the host prisons themselves.**

**All photos: Camilla Panufnik**

