

Time for an encore: exploring the symbiotic links between music, forming meaningful relationships and desistance

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Abstract

The importance of meaningful relationships both between offenders and workers and also with those significant others is widely acknowledged as an essential component of desistance. In order to change entrenched patterns of criminal behaviour, it is argued that the quality of these relationships serves to support and validate a pro-social sense of identity. In this paper I develop this thesis further. I explore the impact on participants' relationships where the process of a music prison project is continued outside prison. Drawing on evidence from the offender and ex-offender based charity Changing Tunes, I argue that the process of making music and performing provides a needed expressive and creative space. Participants discover that being part of this creative and mentoring team, both in and out of prison, enables them to develop an understanding of how to develop and maintain meaningful relationships, thus playing a substantial role in their progress towards permanent desistance.

Key words: desistance, relationships, music, through the gate, offender, ex-offender

Introduction

McNeill (2009) argued that desistance can only be understood in terms of relationships:

Desistance can only be understood within the context of human relationships; not just relationships between workers and offenders (though these matter a great deal) but also between offenders and those who matter to them (McNeill, 2009: 28)

The most important relationships to offenders and ex-offenders are usually those based within the family (see for example, Abrahams, Rowland, & Kohler, 2012; Dick, 2011; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation, & Ofsted, 2014). Halsey and Deegan (2015) argued that the way in which the term 'prisoner's family' is used suggested that the family surrounding the prisoner has an accepted support role. The idea of family support for offenders and ex-offenders can be paradoxical within an often dysfunctional family background (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, et al., 2014). The challenge is therefore to create whole regimes which enhance offenders' capacity to develop relationships (Anderson, 2014; Silber, 2005). This development needs to continue outside prison in order for desistance and successful rehabilitation to be achieved (Halsey & Deegan, 2015; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, et al., 2014; McNeill, et al., 2011). Individuals need to be supported both socially and culturally so that they can develop a propensity to improve their relationships. This can emerge by recognising and developing their potential through new cultural and social networks (Anderson, et al., 2011).

Evidence revealed that opportunities to work creatively through the arts supported offenders' social and cultural development (see for example, Cox & Gelsthorpe, 2008; Hughes, 2005; Sparks & Anderson, 2014). The creative process has similarities to the journey towards desistance. Both are challenging in that an individual can be in constant flux with the flare of hope from progress and also despair along with regression (Anderson, et al., 2011; Peters, 2009). Development in creative skills and the desistance journey involves individual reflection on success and learning from individual weaknesses (Anderson, et al., 2011; Cursley, 2012; Maruna, 2001; McKean, 2006). The validation that emerges from success and encouragement can help an individual to keep faith that life could improve (Anderson, et al., 2011; Baker & Homan, 2007; Bilby, Caulfield, & Ridley, 2013; Cursley, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Moller, 2003), the importance of fostering hope being a key component of the desistance journey (Cox & Gelsthorpe, 2008; Cursley, 2012; Maruna, 2011; McNeill, et al., 2011).

Music has been shown to cultivate the capacity to make relationships through teamwork (see for example, Abrahams, et al., 2012; Anderson, et al., 2011; Bilby, et al., 2013; Cox & Gelsthorpe, 2008; Silber, 2005; Wilson, Atherton, & Caulfield, 2009). Anderson (2014) argued that further work was needed to investigate the role that music can play in developing the capacity for significant relationships in offenders, so that individuals could more easily walk the road towards desistance. However, there are too often obstacles preventing continued progress from occurring, one being the short length of many arts projects. The positive impacts are recorded, but the participants are left feeling “gutted” when the project ends (Anderson, et al., 2011: 44). Further fragmentation is seen in the disjunction between the offers to prisoners and ex-offenders. Outside prison, it can be difficult to find any continuity with those arts tutors who have encouraged and validated their progress (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, et al., 2014). Yet, as Murray (2014) argued:

We know that the biggest protective factors in both preventing offending and reducing reoffending are in our own homes and neighbourhoods, schools and community centres, colleges and workplaces. This is where both ‘community justice’, and ‘community arts’, have their heart (Murray, 2014: 21)

Using music to journey towards desistance: a case study

The work of Changing Tunes provided an excellent opportunity for a case study revealing a continuity of approach from within to outside prison. A detailed examination of the impact of involvement in music-making on the participants can be found in the report of that research (Cursley & Maruna, 2015) and data for this paper stem from that collected for that report. Data was collected from observation of sessions, concerts, and analysis of 33 lyrics written by Changing Tunes participants and interviews with 15 participants, ex-offenders, Chaplains, Prison Officers, Managers, Changing Tunes staff and three focus groups of 30 participants across three prisons. This paper is focused on the way the involvement in Changing Tunes played its part in developing participants’ capacity to form meaningful relationships and the importance this played in their journey towards desistance.

Research context and approach

Changing Tunes is a registered charity which not only runs long term projects through music in prisons throughout the whole year, but gives former offender participants the opportunity to continue their music sessions with Changing Tunes outside prison and also to receive mentoring and support.

Changing Tunes leaders had clear ideas about their aims and rationale for working with participants:

...my aim is to see the person I am working with differently from how others have seen them... to see something that I believe is true about them. Regardless of what they have done, each is a worthwhile person.
(A Changing Tunes leader)

Another Changing Tunes leader, argued that the official purpose was to rehabilitate offenders, 'to modify behaviour'.

But it is the relationships formed through Changing Tunes which are important in helping to transform people's lives and which are integral to the success of their work.

At the heart of the work of Changing Tunes is the use of music to reach out to participants both during and after prison. Changing Tunes uses music teaching, rehearsing, recording, performance, improvisation and composition to create a sense of family which supports desistance from crime. Based for a decade and a half in more than a dozen prisons in the South West of England, there are now plans to expand across the UK more widely with the South East franchise already up and running since 2014.

Sessions in prisons were tailored to the needs of the offender participants and the prisons and as such varied accordingly, but usually the sessions were organised weekly, with a duration of between two and two and a half hours. Out of prison the sessions were held regionally about once a month, supplemented by one to one sessions and rehearsals for concerts where many of the groups came together.

Selection into Changing Tunes sessions

The rationale for membership of a Changing Tunes group was determined by each prison. Groups were kept at a maximum of 12, except in an Open Prison, where posters on the wings enabled anyone to join the flexible Changing Tunes leader in the group each week. Regular attendees took up specific roles and were the mainstay of the group. In a local prison, responses to posters in the wings were analysed by the Chaplain and Security in consideration of applicants' motivation, attitude and security risk. In a Women's Prison, the Chaplain and the Governor suggested attendance to the most vulnerable prisoners. Outside prison, ex-offenders who had previously attended Changing Tunes sessions could join the group nearest to their home.

Difficulties in forming relationships

Our interview process gave us a snapshot of the participants' challenges in making and maintaining meaningful relationships. This was a difficult but rewarding journey of discovery for many, which often started from a base of poor experiences. These fell into several groups: isolation as a child; chaotic, sometimes abusive parenting; parents splitting up; difficulties at school; drink and drugs. This often was continued into adulthood with dysfunctional relationships with their partners and children.

'Isolation' was a term used by five interviewees to describe how they felt as a child. One described having just one friend which was the only kind relationship amongst 'negative adult influences'. Chaotic parenting, involving parental separation and difficulties with a parental relationship, were common. Jack¹ explained the relief when his abusive father went to prison for 11 years as "luckily for me I didn't have to spend that time with him". However, often there was pain in any physical or emotional dislocation from their parents. Tom described the upset to his mother when he would escape from his "residential school" and

¹ All offenders and ex-offenders' names are pseudonyms

return home. He felt he was trying to escape a situation and at the same time attempting to gain a measure of power, but was not sure how to succeed, or exactly what he was trying to escape from.

Lyrics written by Changing Tunes participants often revealed an expression of pain from disintegrating relationships. Becky, a Changing Tunes participant, referred to lyrics written by a female prisoner who was sentenced for nine years:

There was one song on one of the CDs that I sung which was from a young girl who got nine years in prison for something that she did with her boyfriend. I can't remember what the charge was; it's irrelevant really. But, anyway, she was very frightened and scared and she'd fallen out with all of her family. [The lyrics] were fairly much about that, how ... she was feeling about that and there was reference to her family, her mother in particular and how frightened she was. (Becky)

Some interviewees reported that difficulties in relating to their peers began at school. One analysed that this was connected with his disengagement with the school syllabus:

But I wasn't kind of physically violent to people. I wasn't aggressive... much. But I just didn't engage and I think I got bored very quickly and just decided that I could entertain myself far more than the school could or the people that are trying to help me could at the time, you know. (Jay)

Early difficulties with forming relationships were often followed by problematic relationships as adults: men coping with young teenagers; individuals having to cope with aggression; a man having to cope with his girlfriend's infidelity. Harry explained how his children's mother did not want to marry him and entered into an abusive relationship with someone else which meant that not only he but also she lost custody of his child to her grandmother.

I wanted to stay because I loved her. I wanted to stay because I want to be there for my son to protect him, you know. So, I made

decisions based on good reasons but also bad reasons because emotionally, I allowed myself to be controlled. (Harry)

Interviewees were self-critical and unforgiving of their younger selves' inability to make stable relationships. Jim, analysing his nineteen-year-old self, reflected that his inability to form a proper relationship with either the girl or her family meant that he "never grew up". Sometimes the breakdown of relationships with partners led to the individual "kind of hating myself". Problems at a period of immaturity could sometimes escalate into aggressive behaviour through the complexities of their partners' extended family.

The influence of drink and drugs had negative effects on participants' relationships. Sometimes the addictions were the cause of the breakdown; sometimes as a result of it. Lee described his violence after drink creating fear in those around him. It also had an adverse effect on his health leading to blackouts. Mike reported how drink replaced his failure to have a relationship with a woman. His lack of a clear sense of identity inhibited him further and so he turned to prostitutes. Vince explained how drug dependency took "a higher priority than [his] relationship and [his] partner". The poor quality of the relationship with their children's mother determined the dysfunctional nature of his relationship with their children.

This then is a snapshot of the experience of participants' relationships when they came into their first Changing Tunes sessions in prison: dysfunctional relationships, a sense of failure, close relationships going wrong because formed at a state of immaturity, complex living arrangements and in some cases a use of drugs and drink. The lack of hope suggested by these states would seem to suggest a likelihood of reoffending on release, according to research (Green Paper, 2005; Hughes, 2005; McNeill, 2009; Williams et al., 2012). It seems therefore that a lack of hope can be engendered by lack of stability in close relationships which in turn can be a catalyst towards re-offending. The importance of supporting ex-offenders in their maintenance of meaningful and positive relationships seems therefore vital in the path towards desistance.

Discovering their musical potential

The correspondence between interviewees' accounts, and the passion, great sensitivity and musicality shown by them in the concerts we observed, gave us validation of their opinions of their relationships with Changing Tunes members of staff. It quickly became apparent that the music sessions and concerts encouraged a burgeoning potential in singing and playing.

The first recognition they had some musical talent had sometimes occurred as a child:

My first experience was singing in a cupboard that was quite small, in a children's home in Wilmslow. And I thought everybody's gone. And I locked myself in this cubicle because the Elvis echo made your voice deeper and wicked. I started to singing "Love Me Tender" ... And this kid goes "God, come and listen to Joe," and he is serious, "You sound just like Elvis". So that then, was when I was - one isolated moment and then nothing more. (Joe)

It was not then until Joe came into a Changing Tunes session that he reignited his enthusiasm and began to sing more seriously. On the other end of the scale an offender in one prison had been helping in the library and listening to Changing Tunes until one day he was invited to the session and invited to try with the drums. He discovered he had a natural rhythm which then gave him a whole new lease of life:

I'm walking around going 'Boom de boom de boom', doing the beats to myself. But I mean it's good because I can be sat in my cell feeling absolutely low whatever and I just put the music on and just get into a beat with my fingers on the table and it's a little escape from reality. But the reality is it's music so it is real. (Zak)

The poignancy of Joe's account revealed a lack of any support and recognition as a child to take his talent further. It seemed that the validation gained in these music sessions helped to ignite hope and gave some structure to their lives. Furthermore, with the initial attraction of engaging in music in prison, relationships within the group began to form and influence their attitudes.

Making music: forging relationships in Prison

It was when participants came into the Changing Tunes sessions that they began their journey of discovery both of their musical abilities and also their gradual sense of security and trust within the sessions. The relationship with Changing Tunes staff without exception was not only reported as being very positive, but also observed and validated by us during concert preparations and workshops. The network of contacts it gave participants acted as both a safety net and a support group which helped in a variety of ways, such as a network with their Church, AA group, mentor or sponsor.

Changing Tunes staff presence in prisons was welcomed by participants as providing a safe place to be during the sessions, the leaders seen to be talented, encouraging, reliable and caring. If a session was cancelled, Changing Tunes leaders either came to the rooms or sent participants a personal letter. Adrian explained how participating in Changing Tunes in prison “totally changed the prison experience”. David revealed the impact of being called by his name instead of a surname: “Suddenly you feel like a person again and that is really important”. Close relationships sometimes formed in prison as a result of their sessions:

You know the atmosphere was great and I think you see people’s confidence build as well and it’s nice to boost for my confidence. Also well I think it’s useful for guys to be able to look around more especially guys that have come from a very basic standard and come to be quite a decent standard in the amount of time available. ... And you got people coming up to you in the days afterwards saying, ‘That was really good. And you should keep doing stuff then’. So that kind of positive reinforcement really I think is really good. (Bill)

Out of prison

The lack of continuity in support networks when offenders come through the gate was softened for Changing Tunes participants:

I think the thing is, you are in prison and that is your life there and you come out of prison and that is your life there. It seems to be a big shutter that comes slamming down between the two of them and to actually find a bridge between that side actually felt really nice (Vance).

Members of Changing Tunes staff were sensitive in working out the appropriate opportunity to contact participants leaving prison. This was appreciated by one interviewee in particular:

If they had contacted us right away, I think that would have been too soon because you want to have time with your family. And I think they obviously considered that - that there's things you want to do and get sorted when you come out. If it had been too long, then I would have felt that maybe those ties would have broken down or I would have thought they had forgotten me. So I think a month or six weeks was quite a nice time. And it was a really pleasant surprise. (Chris)

There was skill shown in knowing the time to offer help and the time to withdraw, with the realisation by members of staff that participants “had to take the lessons ...and apply them in real life”. Another member of Changing Tunes staff explained how one member of his group had gone back on drugs:

I mean there's one chap who is a recovering addict and he's gone a bit AWOL at the moment. I'm not going to keep chasing him. He knows my number, he knows where I am. He knows that helps there, so it's not callous in a way.

Sometimes, one to one meetings were held over a long period until the other person was ready to move forward. Participants appreciated the care given to them when a leader may make “special trips just to work with me”.

The care the Changing Tunes mentors showed the participants also extended to their response to regression. A relapse could be apparent from non-attendance at a music session or through mentoring. Jack's admission to his mentor that he had started drinking again was indication that his life was in turmoil. Staying with a mentee when in crisis

required considerable patience and could cause a Changing Tunes staff mentor to wonder, “Am I wasting the money of the donators?” The reward for this mentor was final success. “But I stuck with him and gradually he managed to find his way out of the pit he was in”. Jack credited part of his motivation to become sober to “the pleasure, the change of music and the relationship I had with [my Changing Tunes mentor]”.

Another Changing Tunes leader argued that building up trust was considered essential to ensure that “barriers are all broken down to a large extent”. Interviewees also argued that the forming of ‘trust’ was fundamental to enable relationships to form and to encourage self-development. Dave’s analysis developed the argument further: “To achieve our potential in a group context, we’ve got to have trust, we’ve got...we’ve got to communicate. We’ve got to accept our limitations and we’ve got to accept critical analysis, self-awareness”.

In order for trust to develop between participants they needed to feel safe, as a member of Changing Tunes staff explained:

From their point of view, the fact that there is somebody who they have developed a relationship with inside the prison that’s now continued to outside and this is somebody who actually cares about me and my life, and how I’m doing basically.

Another member of staff reflected:

I think it’s possibly not earth shattering what happens in that one hour but over the course of several one hour sessions and the fact that I am still around and I’m dependable and they know that they can trust me.

The sense of trust extended outside the sessions once participants had left prison:

Now she may not have her work phone on, but the moment she gets that message, she will send me a text back. (Becky)

This helped participants feel they could be open because, as Becky explained, “you can never have a disagreement with him. He will agree with everything that you want to know, talk about”.

Staff focus on individual development engendered a sense of self-worth. David, for example, reported that the experience in the session made him feel “human again”. The “sense of positive interaction” created a warm community where the focus was on music rather than their history and motivated participants to join sessions. Validation through praise developed changing senses of identity, as Julie revealed: “He says, ‘This is fine. Now you know you are a good singer’”.

It was, though, the sense of community through rehearsal and performance which drew everyone together, as Tony, previously an isolate, analysed, “it kind of brings the emotional contact”. Gill described how gathering with a few members of staff and other participants before the performance helped to provide them with a sense of identity and confidence:

And they're there it's you know, it's going to be a laugh, we're going to have a giggle, we're all there together, and we're all laughing.
(Gill)

Present Family relationships

Family connections were shown to be of primary importance to participants' sense of stability and self-esteem. One participant explained how she had had difficulties with various partners of her mother's. The responsibility of now being a parent had helped her to stay focussed even when she became depressed and wanted to quit. Becky explained how the love of her nephews helped her to keep suicidal tendencies away.

Freddy also analysed his improved family relationships: “This is a proper relationship now. We've got a proper family network going on now”. He described how they got together with neighbours for barbeques at the weekend and so he now felt part of a community. Darren considered how re-joining his childhood family had provided him with the stability he needed as opposed to a constant feeling of threat: “Yeah, this is home again. I'm with the people who say ‘Hi’ instead of, ‘Where's my money?’”.

A stabilising influence could be found if participants were lucky to have a relationship with someone who turned out to be very loyal even after conviction. Darren described how he always gave his partner the option of leaving him but she never took it. He explained how this solidified their relationship and now they were getting married.

Sometimes a new ability to form relationships had arrived out of changing self-perceptions. Adam defined the reasons for his change as being based on the fact he was no longer “ego driven”. Tony evaluated the impact of his changed self-perception. Seeing himself not as a victim but looking at himself honestly was very “liberating” and helped him to consider how he reacted with other people. Lee explained how he had begun to form a close relationship with a woman and spent a lot of time living with her, “and we’ve never had any major arguments”.

Changing Tunes sessions and its alliance to a pathway to desistance process

The desistance pathway from criminal to a positive member of society is fraught with difficulties and is a route which needs assistance and encouragement, because without this change in self-identity any possibility of change on leaving prison is blighted (McKendy, 2006). One of the ways of changing self-identity is by the appropriation of new roles unlinked to offending, a course strongly linked to desistance (Berson, 2008; Cursley, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Farrall, 2004; McLean, 2008). Before this can occur, however, a process needs to be in place which will enable the offenders and then ex-offenders to see themselves as having positive qualities, re-forming their self-perceptions so that they could see themselves as having a positive role in society (Maruna, 2001).

Many Changing Tunes participants eventually started to take on positive roles as exemplified through Changing Tunes leaders and became peer mentors. Some of the roles they adopted were paternalistic with their being the expert and the other participant being the student. Gaining a sense of self-respect by helping others themselves seemed to be transformational. Simon’s and Hugo’s comments showed their individual change journeys:

Instead of thinking about myself all the time I started thinking about others. So, I started extended myself out without reward just to

help other people in the same way that Changing Tunes had helped me. (Simon)

It made me better, made me a much more fully integrated individual. It gave me a choice and a way out of the cross of self-pity. (Hugo)

Reaching out to others prevented a sense of victimhood and presented opportunity for self-analysis. Vince analysed the impact of the self-reflection demanded by mentoring: “It was a pain at first but I quite like it now because you have presented opportunity for looking at yourself and how you react at work with colleagues and clients”. Simon mentioned seeking training with the Samaritans; Dave with working with a charity which helped drug addicts. One of the reasons given for this change was that Changing Tunes “gave me so much joy and pleasure that I’d be keen to... I’d feel guilty if I didn’t actually attempt to try and give something back right now”.

Putting in place interventions both in and out of prison to enable the desistance journey is multi-faceted, the aim being to lead to the permanence of secondary desistance, rather than the shorter lived primary desistance (Maruna & Farrall, 2004). The often dysfunctional relationships of the participants prior to taking part in Changing Tunes meant that they were often beginning from an unstable state. Their experience in Changing Tunes showed that the symbiotic relationship between music and forming positive relationships helped participants to have a sense of belonging to the group, a group which put on successful concerts leading to their pro-social validation.

However, while good relationships are the foundation of desistance (McNeill, 2009), the practicalities of housing and employment are also essential components (Department for Education and Skills, 2005; Maruna, 2011; Pritchard & Williams, 2009). We did not have access to data from the whole Changing Tunes project so can only comment on the fifteen we interviewed. All of them were living either on their own or with partners. Besides an improved capacity to make positive relationships, there was evidence of pro-social occupations outside Changing Tunes sessions. Out of these 15 ex-offenders, seven were employed; three were in voluntary work, one was self-employed, one was retired and three were unemployed, two of these having mental health problems. All of these fifteen had been out of prison for up to three years.

Concluding remarks: Music was the hook but he was the guy (Darren)

The Changing Tunes community provided feelings of acceptance, belonging and with that a notion of responsibility (Cursley & Maruna, 2015). Bill encapsulated the views of many interviewees who had experienced troubled relationships at home: "Changing Tunes, that is your family, [CT leader] is your brother if you like". Their basic need to form family seemed to be a vital part of the relationship in the music making they engaged in. Becky articulated the resolution of this deep need for acceptance and recognition: "My relationship with my Changing Tunes mentor – it's like you find yourself to each other".

There were instances of progress towards the desistance pathway in developing social interaction in the home:

When I get back home and my partner said to me, 'You speak so differently when come home.... Why is it? You are not effing blinding and everything that you're polite. You're better [to] stay [there]'.
(Ella)

with officialdom:

My attitude to probation and my MAPP (multi agency public protection arrangements) officers has completely changed. In court they said my life has changed and how different I'm taking the approach towards the criminal justice system. (Julie)

in court:

I got to court and the barrister said, 'Look ... he's gone from someone that caused and looked for trouble. He used to drink every day, in and out of silly relationships with silly girls. And now he has found a woman, his own, homemade family if you like'. (John)

The positive contribution of Changing Tunes towards those attributes needed for desistance could be found in the commitment by individuals to make a positive contribution to their family or community and a seeking for a positive future (Maruna, 2001; McNeill,

2009). Cheliotis and Jordanoska (2015) argued that for the impact of arts programmes to make abstinence from crime more likely the provision needed to be sustained in the community. The capacity for Changing Tunes to engage town populations through ex-offenders' Changing Tunes concerts helped them gain acceptance and aided a re-building of their lives (Cursley & Maruna, 2015). The validation given through the Changing Tunes sessions, the pro-social activity and agency it demanded from the participants and the rituals provided by the concerts themselves are all building blocks of desistance (Anderson, et al., 2011; Cohen, 2012; Maruna, 2011).

The focus on the work of Changing Tunes revealed the participants' developing pro-social and meaningful relationships. More research is needed to widen the scope of this research into other music interventions which work both inside and outside prison, though these are scarce as in 2015. Building relationships through music participation in and outside prison through Changing Tunes enabled a slow journey towards self-respect and companionship, often a foundation towards participants' building of family relationships, and their continued journey in desistance. The concept of group loyalty and responsibility to Changing Tunes acted as a catalyst for participants to view social inclusion as increasingly important, as they sought voluntary and paid employment, desisting from crime.

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All offenders and ex-offenders' names are pseudonyms

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