



Above and opposite:
Emily Cooley visited Graterford Prison weekly
throughout the school year to work with residents
on their compositions. PHOTOS: HOLLI STEPHENS

Voices Heard

Musical Collaboration and Celebration at Graterford Prison

BY EMILY COOLEY

Having my music heard is something I take for granted. Throughout my life, there has always been someone to listen, whether it was my family, an encouraging teacher, or—as I’ve gotten older—whole audiences hearing my compositions in concert halls.

Not everyone is in a position to have their music and their voices heard—certainly not by large audiences, and maybe not by anyone. And yet they still make music. There is something about music, especially original song, that carries an inextinguishable power and light.

During my final year as a composition student at Curtis, I participated in the Community Artist Program (CAP), through which I partnered with the organization Songs in the Key of Free. I spent the year making music with 25 incarcerated men at the State Correctional Institution at Graterford, a maximum-security prison in Montgomery County outside Philadelphia. Although Songs in the Key of Free offered the first music program at Graterford in more than ten years, we didn’t introduce creativity, musical talent, and humanity to the prison. All of these were already present, provided in abundance by the men in our songwriting workshop.

Songs in the Key of Free, founded by Philadelphia community activists Miles Butler and August TARRIER, is a social-justice organization that challenges mass incarceration through collaborative arts practice, creating partnerships with inside artists through music. “Mass incarceration” is shorthand for two disturbing facts: Though the United States represents only five percent of the world’s population, it is home to 25% of the world’s prisoners¹; and the prison population has increased disproportionately over the past several decades, reaching some 2.3 million by early 2017.²

1 American Civil Liberties Union
2 Prison Policy Initiative



Racism, poverty, “tough on crime” politics, and numerous other forces have converged to fuel these numbers. I believe that all too often, being in prison is the result of much more than simply individual wrongdoing. Through my CAP project, I wanted to help develop and celebrate the musicianship—and the humanity—of a group of talented, incarcerated artists.

PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE

Starting in October 2016, a group of us from Songs in the Key of Free visited Graterford every Monday to lead a workshop in collaborative songwriting and musicianship. Nine months later, the men performed their own music for visiting family members and friends at a special concert in the prison. Finally, as the culmination of my involvement through CAP, we held a public concert on June 16 at Philadelphia’s Painted Bride Art Center. A band of Philadelphia musicians performed the songs written by the men of Graterford, and we showed documentary footage of our workshops taken by filmmakers Gabriela Bulisova and Mark Isaac. Throughout this process, I’ve gotten to know 25 unique, imaginative, and gifted individuals who compose and play music inside a vast prison complex enclosed by a 30-foot wall.

One thing that surprised me on my first visit was that most of the men who signed up for our workshop were lifelong musicians already. They keep their instruments in their cells, and practice and write songs on their own. Realizing that we weren’t working with beginners, we quickly adapted the structure of our workshop. Instead of teaching basic songwriting and composition, we grouped the men into several bands of five or six members each, pairing the most experienced musicians with those who needed more practice. The key element of this workshop model is collaboration; the bands write songs together and perform them in groups. Many genres are represented: rock, R&B, country, rap, and jazz, among others. Many of the men already have experience with music theory and reading notated music. For those who don’t, I teach an introductory-level music theory course every other week.

Curtis is a familiar name to the men in our workshop. Many have watched the broadcasts of student recitals on *WHYY’s On Stage at Curtis* for years. It was a big thrill for many participants to meet Curtis students they had previously seen on TV. Over the course of the school year, I brought organist Clara Gerdes, harpist H elo ise Carlean-Jones, and bassist Will Langlie-Miletich to Graterford to demonstrate their instruments and play alongside the men. I’ll never forget the day we brought H elo ise, because the sight of a full concert harp being wheeled down the main hallway of the prison attracted so much attention from inmates and correctional officers alike. Everyone was fascinated to see a harp up close.

FINDING FREEDOM

Bernard is one of the workshop participants I’ve gotten to know the best. He is 65, instantly recognizable by his sunny smile and neatly ironed prison uniform, and he is always one of the first guys to approach me at the beginning of each workshop to shake hands and catch up on the week we’ve spent apart. A bass player and a singer, he had only sung cover songs

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Emily performed with Graterford residents in a performance for their families in June. PHOTO: HOLLI STEPHENS



and was shy about his voice when we met. After seven months in our workshop, Bernard wrote his first original song.

At the end of each workshop we have “SongShare,” an opportunity for individuals or bands to perform the music they’ve been working on that week. That day in April, Bernard stepped up to the microphone to sing his new song, accompanied by an instrumental track that a fellow musician, Darrell, had programmed into a Yamaha keyboard. In his soulful tenor voice, Bernard sang.

*Trying to find my way to freedom—I’m running from the Devil, hey!
Trying to be a better man—forgetting all my troubles, hey hey!
Now I’ve done my time within—I’m looking for my freedom, I’m a better man
And when the weight of the world is coming down on me,
No longer sinking, I’m rising, to do what’s best for me,
It’s like I hear your voice, and now I really see—I’ve got to find my way to freedom.*

As he became more confident, he started stomping his foot to accentuate each “Hey!” When he finished performing, the other workshop participants cheered him with a standing ovation. Everyone united in celebrating Bernard’s accomplishment of writing a truly beautiful song.

FULL LIVES

Many of the men I work with are serving life sentences, and many have already been in prison for decades, having passed their entire adult lives behind bars. Music is not their only skill, of course. Our workshop participants include a published author, several visual artists, an expert plumber, a chef, and a playwright. They are full people: The fact that they are incarcerated does not limit the richness of their talents, abilities, and humanity.

It does limit their ability to be heard. Through my work with CAP, and now going forward as a Community Artist Fellow in the 2017–18 school year, I’ve committed to making music with the incarcerated people at Graterford. They continue to write new songs, and we will record an album this year. I plan to do similar work at other facilities in the Philadelphia area.

My goal is to help bring these voices back into the broader community, both through concerts and recordings and by connecting members of the Curtis community to inside artists like the men I’ve collaborated with over the past year. It’s been a privilege, and I know that the coming year holds even more possibility. ♦

Emily Cooley, a 2017 composition graduate, is a community artist fellow at Curtis.

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