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### Mediating Punishment? Prisoners' Songs as Relational 'Problem-Solving' Devices

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### Abstract

In this article we share some findings from the Distant Voices – Coming Home project. It is a partnership between the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh and the West of Scotland, and the Glasgow-based arts charity Vox Liminis. Distant Voices aims to explore and practice re/integration after punishment through creative collaborations (primarily songwriting) and action-research. The project is complex and interdisciplinary, blurring boundaries between creative practices, community-building, research, knowledge exchange and public engagement. As such, this article does not present a synthesis of project findings, but instead discusses original music created within the project, proposing that an analysis of the 'musical event' (DeNora 2003) of the songwriting can tell us about punishment and re/integration.

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# **Mediating Punishment? Prisoners' Songs as Relational 'Problem-Solving' Devices**

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## **Introduction**

In this article we share some findings from the Distant Voices – Coming Home project.<sup>2</sup> It is a partnership between the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh and the West of Scotland, and the Glasgow-based arts charity Vox Liminis. Distant Voices aims to explore and practice re/integration<sup>3</sup> after punishment through creative collaborations (primarily songwriting) and action-research. The project is complex and interdisciplinary, blurring boundaries between creative practices, community-building, research, knowledge exchange and public engagement. As such, this article does not present a synthesis of project findings, but instead discusses original music created within the project, proposing that an analysis of the 'musical event' (DeNora 2003) of the songwriting can tell us about punishment and re/integration. We argue that some of these songs have the capacity to act as 'problem-solving devices' when oriented to the problems that punishment creates through

social exclusion, separation and alienation. The songs discussed in the article are available via embedded links in the paper.

*Distant Voices* builds on Fergus McNeill's critique of the way that both criminological theory and criminal justice policy and practice tend to overlook the problems created or exacerbated by punishment in their focus on the individual 'coming home' (McNeill 2012; Kirkwood and McNeill 2015). We have previously discussed this as the creation of a 'hostile environment' for those leaving prison (Urie et al. 2019). It is crucial to note that we do not envisage the problem of re/integration after punishment as belonging to the person who has been punished but rather all of our responsibility. The question of 'coming home' after punishment could thus be reformulated as the timeless problem of how we can live together as a society in a way that allows us to all flourish, especially after people return from a period of enforced separation and state punishment.

Conceptualising songs as problem-solving devices is somewhat provocative, and as such we want to make it clear from the outset that we are not evoking problem-solving as automatic or inevitable. Instead, we are thinking about problem-solving as an affordance or capacity of some of the songs which may or may not be activated. It is important to stress that songs are foremost works of art and creative expression, that have inherent value irrespective of their social use. Further, in a project like *Distant Voices* which is invested in the idea of positive social change through the arts, calling a song a problem-solving device risks instrumentalising it. We by no means suggest that a song's primary function or value is in its problem-solving potential.

As we will discuss, we see songs as mutable, affording different things in different contexts (e.g. played on the radio or performed in an intimate 'house gig'), and in different forms (e.g. as a live acoustic performance or mastered track).<sup>4</sup> Songs might help to do other things than problem-solve, including sometimes creating or exacerbating problems. They have affects and emotional resonances that are not universal. Their effects are not always immediately apparent or anticipated. In this paper we focus on the songs themselves, and the

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kind of agency they have as social actors, asking: what could these songs affect or afford? This paper draws on social sciences scholarship – particularly actor-network theory – on the agency of non-human actors within social life. It also draws on poststructuralist theories of multiplicity and assemblage. Our understanding has further been enriched by music sociology and anthropology that attends to the ontology of music. So, after outlining the process of collaborative songwriting that is central to this research, we explore songs as problem-solving devices, and discuss some of the ways that the songs might do this work, using recorded tracks created within the project as examples.

### **Collaborative Songwriting within the Scottish Criminal Justice System**

The songs discussed in this paper were created and recorded as demo tracks during 21 two- or three-day songwriting workshops which took place between July 2017 and July 2019. Thirteen of these workshops took place in Scottish prisons (one open and three closed institutions, including a young offenders institution holding male and female prisoners). A further eight took place in community justice settings in Glasgow and in Inverness. In these workshops (called 'Vox Sessions' in reference to the charity, Vox Liminis, who developed the practice)<sup>5</sup>, we have used collaborative songwriting to support a range of differently situated people with experience of the criminal justice system in exploring questions of punishment and re/integration together. In total we worked with 153 people to produce 150 original songs. This paper focuses on songs created during the prison-based workshops.

In prison-based sessions, workshops take place variously in arts and education rooms, libraries, chapels and occasionally in residential halls. Sessions are preceded by a gig for prisoners and staff, and an invitation to participate in the workshop. On average we work with groups of seven or eight participants. Each Vox Session team usually includes a workshop facilitator, up to three musician-songwriters and an academic researcher. The musicians are paired with between two

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and four participants, co-writing a song with each of them. Typically, therefore, by the end of a three-day process, every participant has co-written and recorded a new song. Early versions of these demo tracks are shared in an end-of-session ‘playback’ in which the group reflects on their individual and collective experience of the session. The tracks are then mixed and mastered onto CDs and two copies are given back to each participant at a follow-up sharing and debrief session. Participants are also invited to join ‘Unbound’, an ongoing creative community hosted and facilitated by Vox Liminis.<sup>6</sup>

The value of arts-based activities and interventions in carceral spaces is often framed in terms of their potential to help rehabilitate via the positive psychological or behavioural effects on prisoners (Johnson 2008). In this rehabilitative and individualising discourse, the problem that needs to be solved is the prisoner’s attitude or behaviour, and music making is primarily valued as a therapeutic process which can help an individual address their ‘offending’. Imprisoned participants in our project sometimes use this officially sanctioned discourse when they are interviewed at the end of the session, describing the experience as an opportunity for them to practice healthy self-expression, or as evidence that their teamwork skills are improving. Whilst not denying that participation in arts-based activities can have positive effects for those who participate, such as increased self-confidence and the development of new skills, we wish to stress that

‘arts-based activities and interventions are not intended or designed to directly address specific “criminogenic needs”. For prisoners, just as for everyone else, they are first and foremost an opportunity to engage with our own humanity and with our potential for growth and development’ (McNeill et al. 2011: 10).

Whilst we are keen to avoid individualising narratives around positive transformation of those in custody, we want to acknowledge that, in a more subtle sense, music ‘transforms those who take possession of it... resulting in the co-formation of a music and of those who make and listen to it’ (Hennion in Born 2011: 378). This is not only the case for participants. Vox Session teams are also transformed through the

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process of collaborative songwriting, acting on the songs (in the skills, ideas and energy that they bring to the music) and with the songs acting on and affecting them in turn. Team members are stimulated, politically excited or emotionally affected by specific co-writers and/or songs, and sometimes become advocates for them, sharing them with the 'core group' that steers our project and with our wider community, or proposing them for public performance, recording and release. Experiences of co-writing, or of being on the session in which a song was created, mean that one hears the song differently to someone coming to it without that context. For a session team, a song sometimes has a local meaning and significance that doesn't translate to others outside the workshop.

We consider songwriting with people in criminal and community justice settings to be a dialogic group activity, rather than an individualising therapeutic or 'civilising' process. During Vox Sessions we have found that assigned roles often blur in practice. Researchers also engage in songwriting, participants help each other with their songs or with the catering, and musicians help with facilitation. The sessions can create a convivial space in which new relations emerge, often based in mutual respect and regard. This is enabled by the workshop design. Participation in Vox Sessions is voluntary; those who see the process through want to participate and are held there by the sense that we are doing something worthwhile together. Sessions are usually unsupervised by prison staff, who can be present only if they commit to participating in the same way as everyone else. This is not to suggest naively that existing power relations and hierarchies are thereby nullified. However, as Urie et al. note, the sessions 'are not only about making songs related to re/integration: We are also attempting to enact it through the creative community that each session constitutes, albeit in a transitory and limited way' (Urie et al 2019: 84).

Prisons are unambiguously hierarchical and socially codified environments. As many have previously noted, even when it fails to alter the status quo, art can help us to imagine and practice different and better ways of being together in the world. Imprisonment is a

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punishment that is both temporal (in terms of the length of one's sentence) and spatial (confinement and social separation from those outside the institution). As such, music-making is especially apposite to temporarily remaking spaces through temporal manipulations, in its potential to effect a change in atmosphere through sound. Session musicians make a great effort to include participants in as much of the process of songwriting and recording as possible, even where they have no prior musical experience. Georgina Born argues that:

'it is the autonomy of the socialities of musical performance and practice that renders them potential vehicles for social experimentation or for the exercise of a musico-political imagination, in the sense that they may enact alternatives to or inversions of, and can be in contradiction with, wider forms of hierarchical and stratified social relations' (Born 2011: 381).

An individualising narrative also dominates discussions on re/integration after punishment. Acting on findings of the Desistance Knowledge Exchange project<sup>7</sup>, Distant Voices seeks to offer an alternative to the dominant discourse on re/integration which focuses on the readiness of the prisoner to leave custody, instead focusing on the public's readiness to receive him or her 'home' (McNeill 2012; Kirkwood and McNeill 2015). As such, an important part of our research approach is to share the songs publicly in order to generate dialogue around punishment and re/integration. We have so far had 22 gigs, in people's homes ('house gigs'), in prisons, in pubs and other public venues; and have released an album and two EPs. As Born has argued in her work on music, mediation and identity, shared music has the capacity to 'animate imagined communities...which may reproduce or memorialize extant identity formations, generate purely fantasized identifications, or prefigure emergent identity formations by forging novel social alliances' (Born 2000, 2011: 381).

### **Researching Collaborative Songwriting, Conceptualising Songs**

Across the project, songs act differently at different times, for example as artistic processes or outputs, as practice-research outputs, or – as



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in this paper – as data that can be analysed to help us understand our research questions. The ontological mutability of songs presents a challenge for anyone hoping to use songs as data. For example, there is a danger of analysis flattening out the differences between versions of a song, prioritising a specific version, or placing undue emphasis on the seemingly fixed lyrics over the seemingly fluid sonic aspects. Indeed, as Andrew Green and John Street have recently highlighted, the complexity of the varied ways in which music has agency in political and other contexts – such as enacting togetherness, embodying political actions, presenting ideal social relationships, claiming public spaces – works alongside what they identify as ‘a logocentric tendency within academic circles’ to lead to its sonic aspects being side-lined or ignored (Green and Street 2018: 172). They go on to argue that ‘studies connecting “music” and “politics” are often constructed around an alienation of lyrics from sound, allowing writers to analyse songs as, in effect, a literary category’ (Green and Street 2018: 172). Whilst we are unable to completely negate logocentrism in this paper, we will attempt to translate some of the sonic aspects of the songs into text, and furthermore invite the reader to listen to the playlist of tracks that accompanies the text.

In using songs as data that can be analysed to help us understand social research questions, it is important to be mindful that music is ‘not about, or caused by, the social; it is part of whatever we take to be the social writ large. Music is a constitutive ingredient of social life’ (DeNora 2003: 151). So, these songs are not *about* prison or re/integration, or to be interpreted solely through their context of production. They are instead part of the texture of the social spaces in which they operate, for example in prisons, academia, and the Scottish ‘indie’ music scene. This is a mutually constituting and affective relationship. For example, when the local music press has engaged with the project it has often ignored the facts of the project design and practice and re-presented it as a personal initiative of the project’s creative lead, as he is a well-known figure on the Scottish music scene. However, having well-known and admired professional artists involved in the project has helped attract workshop participants within prisons,

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and audiences for the work. In turn, participating in these workshops has affected the musicians, with some incorporating and sharing project songs at gigs outside the project. Aiding our discussion of songs as actors, Tia DeNora makes a helpful intervention in her analysis of situated ‘musical events’, these being:

‘a specific act of engagement with music... [It] consists of an actor or actors, composers, listeners, performers, music analysts, and others, who engage with or “do things with” music within specific environments and under local conditions... what is key here is how the music is, or comes to be meaningful to the actors who engage with it’ (DeNora 2003: 49).

Though Krogh (2018) has fraternally critiqued the limitations of DeNora’s model, including its sole consideration of human actors’ agency within the musical event, our approach to thinking about collaborative songwriting and use of ethnographic methods such as participant observation and the production of fieldnotes and interviews is indebted to her interdisciplinary approach to ‘music sociology’.

To explain how our conception of songs as social actors and potential problem-solving devices is not mechanistic or instrumentalist, we adopt DeNora’s use of the concept of ‘affordances’, which originated in the work of psychologist James Gibson (1966). An affordance can be ‘broadly described as possibilities for action – is the “multifaceted relational structure” (Faraj and Azad 2012: 254) between an object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioural outcomes in a particular context’ (Evans et al. 2017: 36). The flexibility and contingency of the affordance is crucial here. Thinking of a song as an ‘object’, what it affords or makes possible varies depending on the context and actor coming into contact with it. Affordances are not a fixed outcome or feature of the song. So, one listener’s earnest romantic power ballad is another listener’s ironic karaoke song of choice. Indeed, these may be the same listener’s attitudes decades apart. For DeNora,

‘[T]he concept of affordance [...] posits music as something acted with and acted upon. It is only through this appropriation that music comes to “afford” things, which is to say that music’s affordances, while they

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may be anticipated, cannot be pre-determined but rather depend upon how music's "users" connect music to other things; how they interact with and in turn act upon music as they have activated it' (DeNora 2003: 48; Krogh 2018: 533).

Relationality and contingency are key to DeNora's account. Songs are only problem-solving devices to the extent that they are mobilised as such in specific circumstances; their affordances cannot be pre-determined. So, when we discuss songs as problem-solving devices, we consider problem-solving as an affordance or potential rather than an outcome. As such, we do not seek to *prove* how songs have been effective problem-solving devices. Indeed, as our example of the power ballad demonstrates, the same musical work can have very different affordances at different times. Songs do things in the world which it is not in the maker's power to control. Music 'forges identities and sensibilities; it does not obey them' (Hennion 2001: 294; Born and Barry 2018: 447).

The philosophical concept of the 'assemblage' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004) can further aid us in our discussion of the multiplicity and irreducibility of musical works. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose that things usually categorised as discrete subjects or objects, for example humans or musical works, can be conceptualised as assemblages: 'reasonably mobile configurations of acts, affects, emotions, utterances, things, practices and concepts that produce effects based on their shifting configurations and connections' (Crockett Thomas 2020: 70). If we think about a specific song as an assemblage, it takes different forms, for example a live performance, a lyric and guitar tab sheet, or a mastered track which have different properties and affordances. Although a particular version of a song may become a 'classic' or canonical, songs are neither fixed, nor finite. They are mobile and contingent: songs differ in different iterations, and while engaging different actors (e.g. a parent, a performer, a prison officer, a musician, a fan). There is often some repetition of features, after all – a particular song is often recognisable as such despite changes of performers, musical interpretation, or medium. However, this coherence should

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not be seen as pointing to the essential qualities of the song. Instead we note that ‘it takes effort, work, to maintain a stable configuration’ (Law and Mol, 2001: 611).

The complexities associated with studying songs are the subject of debate in popular music studies with, for example, Dan Burkett (2015) suggesting a ‘pluralist ontology of rock’, where songs, tracks and performances are all considered works where they are a focus of critical attention. This means that a writer creates a work when she writes a song, and she creates another when she performs it, another when she records it, another when she re-records it. According to Burkett these can (and should) be understood with relation to each other (Collinson Scott and Crockett Thomas 2018: 4). Describing music as ‘an assemblage of subjects and objects’ (Born 2005), Born argues that:

‘Music has no material essence but a plural and distributed materiality. Its multiple simultaneous forms of existence – as sonic trace, discursive exegesis, notated score, technological prosthesis, social and embodied performance – indicate the necessity of conceiving of the musical object as a constellation of mediations’ (Born 2011: 377).

Mediation is also an important concept in actor-network theory, where for Bruno Latour, ‘mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry’ (Latour 2005: 39). Here we can see that mediators, human or otherwise, have an active role in producing a musical assemblage as such. Mediation by embodied practices, material devices and interfaces, commodity forms, socialities and social relations, will be present to different degrees in different musical assemblages (Born and Barry 2018: 449).

In the context of our songwriting workshops, although participants collaborate principally with one musician-member of the team, most of the songs have been formed by far more actors than the credited co-writers, with participants, team members, and people outside of the workshop offering ideas and inspiration. There are non-human actors which similarly play a role, including the limited number and variety of musical instruments that we are able to bring in, and the specific acoustics of each prison environment in which we work. Each workshop

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has an abstract theme such as 'bridges', or 'the silver screen' which can provide inspiration. Group exercises at the start of a workshop generate a shared resource of images and phrases which are up on the walls during the workshop, often working their way into the songs. Even when songs are created by one person, they are not created in cultural or social isolation; the songs are rich in intertextual references, and expressive of shared social attitudes. You can see this, for example in the references to the music of Johnny Cash that feature in many of the songs (primarily sonically). Participants often mention him as a respected musician and someone whose style they wish to emulate. Although Cash had no personal experience of incarceration, his star is synonymous with the free prison concerts he undertook. His musical catalogue is filled with brusque and masculine songs of redemption, so it is understandable that his work would provide a model to prisoners aiming to express regret, love and hope in a way that is made legible and credible by its familiarity, without straying beyond the bounds of acceptable masculinity.

This conceptualisation of the musical assemblage has methodological implications for analysis, 'crucially, both the particular mediations and their interrelations cannot be specified in advance: they have to be traced empirically through the analysis of specific musical events and cultures' (Born and Barry 2018: 449). Thinking about songs as problem-solving devices encourages us to be attentive to the ways in which songs act in the world in consort or conflict with other social actors and settings. From this analytical angle, we discerned two ways that the songs do this work, which are by no means mutually exclusive: firstly, songs that problem-solve by affording the songwriter an opportunity to explore and rework memories, often shaping them into a narrative structure that is oriented towards a different (better) future. Secondly, songs that problem-solve by mediating relations both inside and outside of the prison, which might somehow help people craft a smoother transition home (Crockett Thomas 2019). Both these affordances can tell us much about punishment and re/integration. The remainder of this article comprises an analysis of some 'musical events' of song creation, focusing on songs that might afford the mediation of relationships with

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people outside the prison, or relationships with those inside. That is not to say that these songs do not also do other things, such as make sense of experience, demonstrate or develop new skills, or entertain. But we suggest that they are oriented towards an interaction with a key imagined audience and that this powerfully influences the song. Fergus McNeill, reflecting on our experience to date, commented in an internal project working paper written midway through the sessions:

‘it sometimes seems as if song-writing and sharing can express or fulfil or mediate aspects of the partner/parental role that imprisonment denies and/or that crime and/or punishment damages. Overall, it seems obvious that, for participants, these intimate relationships are fundamental to experiences of integration and disintegration and to hopes for relational re/integration’ (McNeill 2018: 4).

Most people who take part in our workshops want their songs to be shared with others, and so the songs made during these sessions become actors in new musical assemblages traveling beyond the prison walls and doing things in the world. A song might be received by a participant’s family through the post as a sonic love letter; be experienced through live performance in a private living-room ‘house gig’ or in an echoing public venue; be stumbled upon and danced to when listening to the radio; or be re-interpreted and re-recorded for albums and EPs. When recorded as a track the complexity of the musical event of the song’s making may be ‘black boxed’ (Latour 1999: 304) into a coherent form so that it can travel. Once the track is played it forms part of a new assemblage, where its complexities, contradictions and the constituents of a musical assemblage *may* again become apparent.

### **This Broken Heart (It Feels So New) – ‘Barry’ with Graeme (demo track)**

This Broken Heart (It Feels So New) - 'Barry' with Graeme (demo track) can be streamed online here: <https://soundcloud.com/voxlminis/this-broken-heart-it-feels-so/s-uxZA4gjerau?in=voxlminis/sets/psd-mediating-songs//s-wbTxs6AxGIV>

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This intensely personal, intimate song is oriented towards a specific listener: Barry's partner. This doesn't necessarily mean that Barry intends for her to hear it; there is a parallel here with letters that are penned but never sent, although this is complicated by a song's potential for sharing and public performance. *This Broken Heart* problem-solves in a number of ways. Firstly, for Barry it creates a narrative which helps him reason about a complex situation; secondly, within the prison community it enables him to affectively express his anguish to his fellow prisoners and elicit their empathy and support. Outside the prison the song might help him reunite with his partner, or it may act to console him. When the context of the song is shared, it might also afford a better understanding of the ambiguities of recovery and re/integration.

Barry was held in an open prison, nearing the end of his sentence and experiencing periods of home leave. As such, the question of what kind of relationship he might be coming home to or be able to make in the future was a key part of how his social re/integration was imagined, by Barry and by the parole board, which commissions a community-based social worker to assess prospective parolees' home circumstances. The remit of risk assessment necessary for progress through the penal system includes the nature of intimate relationships. Indeed, Barry's song could be seen to perform the function of a personal risk assessment, echoing the institutional form. He had experienced long-term drug addiction in the past, but was now in recovery. Barry had recently come to the painful realisation that he probably wasn't going to be able to reunite with his partner because she was still in active addiction and this presented a risk to his own recovery. The way that those returning home from punishment sometimes experience isolation and loneliness as part of their efforts to live in a way that will not bring them into further contact with the criminal justice system is one of the 'pains of desistance' identified by Brieger Nugent and Marguerite Schinkel (2016: 572) or Barry, returning home meant making a new life, probably without his partner – *the* person who represented home for him whilst he was in prison.

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Listening to this song played live during the workshop was electric and very affecting for the group. McNeill suggests that

‘there’s a connection between the sense of mutual sharing on a session and people’s ability to be vulnerable. People become willing to share parts of their own stories, and so they learn more about themselves and one another, further strengthening relationships’ (McNeill 2018: 3).

Ben Crewe et al. (2014) have discussed the ‘emotional geography’ of prisons, arguing that ‘marginal spaces’ such as education workshops and family visits can be sites in which ‘many of the normal rules of the prisoner society were partially or temporarily suspended, permitting a broader emotional register than was possible in its main residential and most public areas’ (Crewe et al. 2014: 67). The arts are popularly associated with ‘self-expression’ and emotion, and session participants often choose to make songs that explore or express difficult or intense feelings, or try new things like singing, despite the potential vulnerabilities involved. In these sessions, when songs are first shared, that sharing has always been treated with reverence, respect and generosity by group members. Disclosures, for example about bereavement or family estrangement or fears and hopes for the future, elicit solidarity rather than censure. As Graeme later commented in a team debrief:

‘I found Barry’s song particularly hard to sing, and I was really nervous before it got played back. It felt like the most raw, not raw, but sparse, of the songs I suppose. It was quite there and obvious and in your face, so... I didn’t want it to be shit for a start, but also, I found that really emotional to sing... I sort of feel like for him to entrust his story to my shaky voice is quite a nice privilege. And he was chuffed to bits with it, and that was the only measure of success really...’

Graeme’s ‘shaky voice’ is the perfect conduit for the raw emotion of the song, and his emotion in performing it perhaps reassured Barry that he had been understood. Participant co-writers negotiate with the songwriting team to decide who will perform on the recording of the song, and oftentimes they want a musician to perform if they feel that the musician’s style or skill better fits the material than their own.



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Conversely there are many instances where the participant prefers to perform themselves. Participants often recognise that their songs will do things in the world independently of the co-creators. Here, Barry recognised that Graeme's voice would be the best mediator of the sense of his song, even though the experiences that these songs explore came primarily from Barry's experiences.

### Running Back – 'Joe' with Ross (demo track)

Running Back - 'Joe' with Ross (demo track) can be streamed online here: <https://soundcloud.com/voxliminis/running-back-joe-with-ross/scMojb6jSXzD?in=voxliminis/sets/psd-mediating-songs//s-whTxs6AxGIV>

*Running Back* problem-solves by reaching out to the daughter of 'Joe', the participant co-writer, and reassuring her of his presence via song. Receiving the demo track of the song on a CD, the technology affords repeated play, and a message of love in a more controlled medium than a phone call or visit. The song also helps a broader listening public understand how the dividing line between a home and a prison can become blurred for some. For some people in prison, an apology and a promise that things will be better in future might seem necessary for familial re/integration. Many of the songs act as problem-solving devices in being explicitly oriented towards loved ones as an imagined audience and in expressing and enacting apologies for their absence or for causing pain. Songs that act as apologies also implicitly ask family not to abandon or give up on them. Interestingly, although there are numerous project songs in which participants ask their family's forgiveness, there are none in which the co-writer explicitly states that this is an apology intended for a victim of their crime. In prison-based sessions, participants are generally looking to the future and coming home to the people they love, rather than addressing their songs to victims (where personal victims exist). This is not to suggest that the songs don't reflect on or take responsibility for past actions. This finding is consistent with evidence about desistance that demonstrates that prospective responsibility-taking seems to matter more (in terms of desistance) than taking responsibility retrospectively (Maruna 2001;

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Maruna and Mann 2005). This orientation also suggests that the people who take part in our project see these sessions neither as part of a formal process of apologising or atoning for their crime, nor as a site of personal rehabilitation (Burke et al 2018). Rather, they experience the workshops as liminal to the prison regime, allowing different ideas and relations to be creatively explored and enacted.

Many of the songs depict a hopeful future time after the participant co-writer's release from prison in which situations or they themselves will be changed for the better. These songs tend not to depict home and homecoming as the site of ambiguity or conflict that it is for many people; rather, they employ home as a metaphor for stability, love, community, and happiness. This is in keeping with the optimistic use of home as a metaphor both in popular song generally, and in many of the songs written by serving prisoners in our project, for whom (positive) 'home' is positioned as a binary opposition to (negative) 'prison'. On a first listen *Running Back* seems to fit this trend, as an upbeat song for Joe's daughter that apologises for leaving her again and promises that he will run back home to her '*as soon as these gates are open*'. We have found that most participants collaborate on making songs with several audiences in mind, for example, themselves, their families, fellow prisoners, penal authorities, the general public, or music fans and critics. We can see this here in Joe's decision to address *Running Back* to a 'princess' rather than 'daughter' or using her name. He explained that he wanted to do this to make the song more relatable for others.

*Running Back* has sonic qualities reminiscent of the band *The Beautiful South*: a jaunty melody, but with a slight edge and a bittersweet tone in musician co-writer Ross's singing voice. The track is a good example of how the acoustics of prison environments play a role in shaping our creative work. Prisons are characterised by sound bouncing off, and through, thin, bare walls. Sound bleed is experienced as a problem for the musicians, and finding a space in which to record that is free of noise but with 'damp' enough acoustics has led to some imaginative solutions, such as working in a broom cupboard. For the demo track of *Running Back*, Ross used a large amount of reverb on

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his vocals, a reaction to the acoustics of the recording space. The reverb presences the prison as an actor, through the efforts of the musician to drown out its sounds.

In the verse, the prison doors are described as: 'Hard and soft just like at home, but without those that adore'. For Joe, despite the separation from loved ones, prison *is* home in many ways (he knows and appreciates the pleasures, pains and ambiguities of prison as well as of home). Joe is a middle-aged man with lifelong experiences of institutionalisation starting with his placement in a children's home. At the time of the session he was held at Glasgow's local prison; he explained:

'I've been coming into [this prison] since '79 ... and now pardon the expression but I'm the hairy-arsed con because I'm 54 now!... I know thousands of people that come in here because they've nothing out there, you get them in, [but] as soon as they get their health back [and are released] they'll pick up a brick and put it through the first shop window so they can come back in.'

Reflections like this trouble the 're' claim in re/integration, and its implication that 'there is a just order in which the "offender" was once habilitated, integrated and settled' (McNeill 2017; Urie et al. 2019: 3). It also highlights that, despite the mainstream framing of re/integration as individual endeavour, there is an undeniably collective dimension that is systematically rendered invisible in formal accounts and public/policy discourse. We have found that people can be well-integrated into the prison community, and that prison does become home for some, and not solely people serving long sentences. Joe demonstrated how well-integrated he was into the prison community via providing insider knowledge about the 'grapevine': an alleged network of old pipes that prisoners use to communicate, and by discussing with pride his trusted role within the prison mentoring younger men. Although Joe is an expert in prison release and re-entry, his current period of detention is especially painful as it followed devastating personal loss, prior to which he had managed a decade without any time spent in prison.

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The key imagined audience of *Running Back* is Joe's daughter, so his lyrical statement of intent to 'know himself better' is a promise to her. The song ends with repetition of the line: 'we need each other more than ever before'. Ross's confident and chipper delivery of the lyric sounds like a fact, but it could also be interpreted as a plea to his daughter not to desert him. Family and partners are often indicated or even named within the songs as the reason that the co-writer feels able to carry on living through or surviving imprisonment, or as being a key motivation for positive change or working towards liberation. Family and romantic partners are often under immense pressures to support their loved ones both whilst they are in prison (Jardine, 2017 2018; Foster 2019; Deacon 2019), and on their return. This pressure can be made more intense by social isolation and the psychological and socio-economic challenges facing those who have served a sentence (Nugent and Schinkel 2016: 577). As most participants express an intention to share their song with loved ones, we carefully consider the role that we play in facilitating the creation of songs that could be experienced as highly affecting, and possibly distressing or manipulative, by the intended listener. However, as previously stated, we cannot know what a song will afford in a specific encounter. One of the interesting features of songwriting sessions that include mixed groups is that staff, members of the research team, or people in community-based recovery programs sometimes make songs which are about the pressures involved in supporting others. As Jo Collinson Scott, the designated researcher for a mixed session in Inverness, observed:

It is interesting to have this mirroring between two songs written by those who rely on relatives for strength, courage, focus for recovery and two songs written by those who are/have been relied upon in this way and highlight the sadnesses and challenges of being placed in this role.

As Collinson Scott observed, there is some (perhaps unconscious) mirroring going on here in terms of relational experiences, which might help to build empathy between participants during the session, and subsequently with their own supporters or people they support.

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### Bars and Multi-Coloured Chairs – 'Kirsty' with Louis and Phil (demo track)

Bars and Multi-Coloured Chairs - 'Kirsty' with Louis and Phil (demo track) can be streamed online here: <https://soundcloud.com/voxlminis/bars-and-multi-coloured-chairs/s-f1ijQEXuEko?in=voxlminis/sets/psd-mediating-songs/s-whTxs6AxGIV>

There are only a small number of songs written by prisoner participants that explicitly protest against injustices within the criminal justice system. A greater number of the songs include fleeting references or remarks about prison, often using the metonym of a 'cage' or 'jangling keys' to stand in for their negative perception of imprisonment. Prisoners are often acutely aware of the risks to their progression through the penal system that might be posed by writing a song that might be interpreted as a complaint about or criticism of the prison if the song were to be brought into a disciplinary or institutional assemblage. Thus, songs by prisoners such as *Bars and Multi-coloured Chairs* draw attention to the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes 2007) but also try and balance or off-set these criticisms of the system with claims that they're 'only joking' and that 'it's not all bad' in prison. In sustaining this delicate balancing act, the song problem-solves by mediating relationships within the prison between staff and prisoners, but also seeks a wider public outside the prison for the issues it raises.

*Bars and Multi-coloured Chairs* is a bittersweet, uplifting and hopeful song, which balances criticism of the criminal justice system and public attitudes about punishment and prisoners with solidarity, compassion and hope. The instrumentation created by musician co-writer Louis is an important conveyor of this hope, with its driving rhythm, Casio tones, and ascending chord progression which supports Louis and Kirsty's voices in duet. Louis also smuggled in a subtle sonic protest after he accidentally recorded a prison guard shouting at a prisoner. The shout is included in the track but modified to a ghostly trace, legible only to those 'in the know'.

The song is on the topic of Kirsty's view from the window of her top-floor prison cell. She explained: 'I don't see the wall, I see over it.'

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Her cell window looks into a neighbouring supermarket's carpark, and takes in the railway lines and mountains in the distance. Kirsty spent hours people-watching and wondering whether the shoppers thought about the existence of prisoners like herself just beyond the wall, or realised that she could see them. Lyrically then, the song references Johnny Cash's *Folsom Prison Blues*, which describes watching a train and thinking about all the free passengers. When Kirsty shared the topic of her song with the group, it prompted an interesting discussion between the prisoners about what they could see from their cells; one watched the G4S prisoner transport vans come and go every day, another could see nothing but a brick wall. This particular workshop was a rare opportunity for the adult female population to mix with the younger women and girls, and it allowed many instances of intergenerational advice and support. The chorus of the song makes an affecting use of the clichéd phrase 'don't count the days, make the days count' which is presumably advice that Kirsty had been given whilst in prison. There are many similar motivational slogans adorning the walls of the prison where she was held. These slogans became actors in a number of the project's songs.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have discussed some findings from songwriting workshops in criminal justice settings. We argued that arts interventions in criminal justice are often valued for their positive impact on incarcerated individuals' behaviour; against this model, we have found value in the way that practicing together enables a temporary creative community that prefigures a more convivial experience for those re/integrating after punishment. Discussing some issues around treating songs as data, and introducing a number of concepts to help our discussion of songs as problem-solving devices, we have demonstrated that scholarship of the 'ontological turn' can aid us in thinking about the complexity and nuance of songs made in criminal justice settings, in ways that don't reduce the songs to this context of production. Music has affordances which cannot be predicted, and powers to act in the world in ways not imagined by its creators. The songs embody personal

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sense-making processes but also enable different ways of making sense. They are meaning-making devices, and once shared, the meanings transcend the makers. 'Problem-solving' is rarely definitive. Finally, we discussed some examples of the songs, demonstrating how songs mediate punishment in affording connection, and the transmission of love and solidarity. These songs can help us better understand people's hopes for re/integration and the problems that punishment creates through exclusion, separation and alienation. We would argue that these songs are prefigurative – they encourage a hopeful version of relationships and homecoming into being, through modelling ideal social relations. This is not a form of future imagining focused on the self, but rather focused on producing or re-producing relations with others now and in the future.

### **Endnotes**

1. This article is based substantively on analytical and conceptual work undertaken by Phil Crockett Thomas who also wrote the first draft of this article (Crockett Thomas, 2019). Some of the text was initially developed for a conference paper (Collinson Scott and Crockett Thomas, 2018). Other authors read and commented on drafts of the paper. More broadly, the learning generated in the Distant Voices project is the product of a much wider collaborative effort that includes our core group and the community of enquiry from which it is drawn. Though the responsibility for this paper rests with the named authors, we wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to the core group and the community of enquiry.
2. Distant Voices began in 2017 with three years of funding from the UK Economic and Social Research Council [ES/P002536/1].
3. We use the form re/integration as a way of acknowledging that not all of those that criminal justice may seek to reintegrate have been meaningfully integrated before punishment (Carlen, 2012; Graham and McNeill, 2017: 433).
4. Throughout this paper we will use 'songs' to refer to both recorded tracks and live performances, however when discussing a song in detail we will endeavour to clarify which iteration of the song we refer to.

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5. 'Vox Sessions' were initially designed by Vox Liminis and developed through a Big Lottery Investing in Ideas grant in 2013.
6. For a summary of the project aims and design see <https://www.voxliminis.co.uk/projects/distant-voices/> For more extensive discussions see (McNeill and Urie, Forthcoming; Urie et al., 2019).
7. [RES-189-25-0258] also led by Fergus McNeill.

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