

# Songwriting collaboration enlists help from inmates

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“Ask for help when you need it most, no matter what you’ve got, don’t boast.”

These lyrics from the original song “Grain of Sand” by deceased Oakdale Choir singer and songwriter, Perry Miller, encourage us to lean on one another’s wisdom from a place of humility. Perry’s words aptly describe the approach

and goals of our 2023 Summer Songwriting Collaboration as participants strive to establish social connections and caring spaces for musical creation.

In the summer months between 2010 and 2019, each Tuesday late afternoon, I packed my clear plastic backpack with songwriting materials and went through security into the Oakdale Prison (officially the Iowa Medical and Classification Center). For the first five years of our summer songwriting workshops, we gathered in the testing room after the incarcerated songwriters rearranged the tables and wheeled in a piano to create a makeshift workspace. In 2017 when the University of Iowa Liberal Arts Beyond Bars program developed, the testing room became a library, so our

summer songwriting workshops met in the prison gym. These weekly 90-minute summer meetings included between 10 and 20 incarcerated and three to seven non-incarcerated individuals. We sang, collaborated on original songs, and built community. We created 150 original songs, and the Oakdale Choir sang 75 of them at concerts between 2009-2019.

Because the prison leadership has not allowed the songwriting workshops (or the choir) to restart this summer, we’ve pivoted to create opportunities for more people outside of prison to build relationships with people in custody through pen pal collaborations. This Summer 2023 Collaborative Songwriting Workshop Project is designed to build relationships, learn about transformative justice, and create original songs.

Twenty-eight people are participating in this summer songwriting collaboration project: 14 songwriters incarcerated in Iowa prisons and 14 songwriters from outside of prison. Our outside songwriters include University of Iowa music education and music therapy students, music education alumni, and musicians from California, New York, Atlanta, and England. Several Oakdale Choir members are sponsoring outside

songwriters who requested financial support.

How do these partnerships work? Songwriting partners communicate through an electronic messaging system to share ideas about their favorite musical styles and artists, musical ideas, and lyrics. Hopefully, songwriting partners can also have phone conversations or video visits to share real-time musical ideas.

Partners’ correspondence includes sharing thoughts about the Nguni Bantu people’s concept of Ubuntu, signifying interconnectedness and the ability to recognize human dignity in all people while living with deep respect for nature. This concept informs the framework of transformative justice, which identifies oppression as the basis of abuse, assault, and harm. Practicing transformative justice, most effectively in collaboration, addresses oppression at multiple levels. Systemic, underlying injustices must be confronted to work toward individual and communal accountability and healing.

We plan for a culminating zoom performance of original songs on August 10 at 3:30 PM Central time. If you wish to receive a link to attend, contact me at [mary-cohen@uiowa.edu](mailto:mary-cohen@uiowa.edu). We plan to put a recording of the event on the Oakdale Choir website.