

by Paul Plamper

It should concern us that an ever-increasing number of people live in ever more crowded prisons yet it seems to have become an accepted part of our system. So why shouldn't existence behind bars gain public and cultural recognition? RELEASE means publication but it also means liberation, deliverance, redemption. We want a radio play and songs to demonstrate what music and radio could potentially be: soundwaves, which create public awareness for something that happens behind closed walls.

2002. I have an idea for a documentary-style musical: Prisoners and musicians would work together on a song, which is created under, and so reflects, the situation of incarceration. With a radio play in mind I want - as a first step - only to document the process and then rely on the possibility of editing.

2003. Isabel Platthaus, editor at WDR/ 1- Live (a Cologne-based radio station), indeed has the courage to get involved in a project of which it is uncertain whether usable material will emerge. I prepare the project with my friend and colleague Julian Kamphausen. RELEASE takes one and a half years to get started, simply because we cannot find 'our' musician.

2004. Marion Czogalla, with whom I have already collaborated on HENRY SILBER, joins the project as a production manager and brings the musician Schneider TM to our attention. A first meeting with Schneider, who actually has a very busy schedule, but who immediately says: I simply have to do it. We find we are instantly on the same wavelength:

We don't want sensationalist „social porn“. Instead we want to concentrate on musical collaboration with the prisoners. The focus is not on the music itself, more important is the content the songs are to convey. To get a song finished is the motto, because in the beginning we had the idea to do just one song. We don't know what to expect in prison, but are prepared to record everything for the radio play, including possible crises and breakdowns. If need be the radio play will tell the story of a failure.

May 2004. The administrations of the JVA Tegel (Tegel Prison), the Jugendstrafanstalt (Juvenile Detention Centre) JSA Berlin-Plötzensee and the JVA Lichtenberg (Women's Prison Lichtenberg) give their Okay, despite a shortage of staff. One problem is that this project takes away personnel from the day-to-day operation. For us and for the prisoners many doors will have to be locked and unlocked to get to the workspace. These and other last minute hurdles - such as certificates of our good conduct - are overcome thanks to helpful colleagues from the socio-therapeutic departments. One member of staff from the JSA for example tells us: „We depend on people from outside to initiate projects, to bring in fresh energy.“

We are allowed to spread a flyer in the prisons to announce that we are looking for prisoners for our project: Dear Inmates! Who wants to work with us on a song? We are looking for someone who is interested in music or enjoys making music, who likes writing lyrics or who wants to learn how to write lyrics, and who would like to

develop a melody for the lyrics, and also has an interest in singing. Musical skills such as reading notes or hitting the right tone are no basic requirement. It is simply about finding an expression, through music and lyrics, for the issues that concern you and you want to tell about or perhaps the things that burn in your soul that you want to give vent to. The musician and music producer Schneider TM will be working with you. His musical background stretches from rock to electronic music and he is known for the fusion of various styles. (...). If you are interested in participating or simply want to find out if this project has something to offer you, meet us for an initial talk!“

July 2004. We meet inmates of three prisons, introduce them to the idea and have talks to ascertain whether it seems plausible to work together. After our talks, Schneider wants to work with as many prisoners as possible and also produce a couple of songs. We come to the decision to work with four inmates in two prisons, because the logistical organisation would get too big if we had to deal with three prisons. Ingo and Rados from House 8 in the Juvenile Prison Berlin Plötzensee and Mogli and Sabrina from the JVA Lichtenberg are supposed to be working together on one song - without ever being in the same room.

August 2004. From now on we are messengers who commute between two prisons with digital data carriers. At each entrance we have to deposit our mobiles and ID cards, then we and our equipment are searched - since at each meeting we record a radio play and install a music studio and are therefore laden with technological equipment.

Except for this routine we barely get a glimpse into what the everyday routine of imprisonment consists of, because our project is well shut off from the routine operations. The insular situation that we - for a few hours - are allowed to create in the conference and rehearsal space at each meeting, soon makes clear to us that the radio play cannot justify the claim to tell about the prison routine in a comprehensive way - if only, because we cannot live through the dimension of time. The three or four hours we have on every occasion, from afternoon to evening, when no more visitors are allowed inside, always seem to be short, the good-bye is always hectic. Sometimes communication has to continue via fax, for example, in order to ask that a certain section be to be rehearsed at the next meeting.

September 2004. I assure all people involved of their right to have a say in the rough edit. Everybody forgets, ever the more often, to have put on the clip-on microphones and even during one of our last meetings the inmates ask: „Is it running, are you recording this?“ During all meetings everything is being recorded.

That results in an enormous amount of sound material. By December we will have accumulated 60 gigabytes, which we have to condense to a 53-minute radio play. Marion pre-sorts the material. We realise that it is impossible for the audience to get to know all seven people involved. Therefore the first and most time-consuming editing step is to make Marion and myself disappear from the radio play.

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Schneider creates the first beats according to the suggestions of the prisoners, makes a recording of the girls' instruments and Rados' human beat box. At this stage there are still a lot of lyrics in circulation, some are put onto tape, others discarded. It becomes clear that we want to produce four different songs, but the working process takes its time. A reason for that - among other things - is that Rados often gets locked in his cell as a result of squabbles with other prisoners and therefore can only rarely meet up with Ingo for writing and rehearsing.

October 2004. Schneider has to go on tour in Japan. In the meantime I record raps at the JSA Berlin to carry on our work. Mogli is released from Lichtenberg. That leads to Sabrina not showing up for the next couple of meetings. Rados and Ingo have an argument with one another. Since our objective is not to offer occupational therapy, but to get the songs finished, all the people involved struggle through. Schneider is back and prepares as much as he can at home. The fourth song „The Splint In My Foot“ from Lichtenberg we discard because the released Mogli is not allowed to visit Sabrina in prison with us: it is considered a risk to security. Sabrina starts showing up a meetings again and Schneider works with her to incorporate the „Anarchy Lyrics“ into „Lies vs. Truth“. The jointly conceived song still lacks a chorus. The singer and actress Julia Hummer listens to the half-finished song in Schneider's studio, gets enthusiastic about it and raps to it, just for fun. Almost by accident she comes up with our chorus.

November 2004. Schneider has produced rough versions of the three songs and now works on the first mixes while searching sound samples of weapons with Rados and Ingo. The work on editing the radio play gets intense. Over the last couple of months the material has been condensed to three hours: our essence of what has been happening. It becomes increasingly unclear whether or not something bearable to listen to will come out of it. The musician Beat Halberschmidt with whom I have already worked on the radio plays TOP HIT and H2ODH, joins us. We try out several beginnings. The desire to tell everything paralyses us. We question whether this project can be accomplished at all. A date for broadcasting is scheduled. After listening to the rough version the editors at the radio station seem concerned. They suggest telling the story based on the songs. Finally we manage to produce a version which tells the story of the development of the songs and also reflects what was going on besides - a succinct spontaneous representation that is understandable and personal enough. We stick with this version.

December 2004. Meeting with Mogli who by this time lives with her dog Motte, a couple of cats, many little puppies and some other punks in Neukölln. We record her as the narrator of RELEASE. The radio play is ready. All the prisoners except for Sabrina listen to it. Some make use of their right to ‚a say‘ and have things edited out. We cannot get hold of Sabrina who has been transferred to a „therapy-instead-of-punishment-institution“ and has run away from there. We are concerned because she cannot now give her okay for the final version. The play is successfully broadcasted at WDR-1Live.

January 2005. The radio play gets another broadcast at WDR3. Rados gets released and leaves the city. Our next step is to publish the songs and the play. Lieblingslied Records show an interest. George Lindt wants to further develop the project through the publication. He suggests producing it as a double CD with additional material and to add a visual dimension by producing a video for „Lies vs. Truth“.

February 2005. Sabrina is back in prison in Lichtenberg. We meet. She is happy about the play. More editing. The double CD offers the opportunity to publish important scenes that did not have a place in the play due to the time limits of a radio broadcast. We decide to leave the radio version as it is, but to add important fragments in the bonus material in an attempt to widen the horizons of RELEASE in various ways. Schneider produces a DUB-version of „Chicko“ and asks video artist and filmmaker Niklas Goldbach who has previously made video clips for Schneider, if he would like to film our clip.

For doing the filming with Niklas, Rados has to return from Munich. We install a blue box at the office of Lieblingslied Records, at the JVA Lichtenberg and in House 8 in Plötzensee. All people involved are filmed on separate location, because that is the only possible way of doing it. In the finished video, all stand next to each other, presenting their collaborative song. The video gives everybody the opportunity to finally see the others: „I thought he would look completely different!“ Up until now participants had only known each other by voice.

March 2005. Niklas Goldbach produces a second video, for the „Chicko“-DUB, with recordings from Plötzensee.

April 2005. Final check of the release by the prison administration. Unfortunately, we have to follow the legal requirement of the JSA Berlin: For the bonus material Ingo's face in the video and the voice of a prison guard have to be made unrecognisable.

May, 14th, 2005. RELEASE is the opening event of a monthly series called „DIE HÖRSPIELZENTRALE“, organised by Marion and me in the HAU-Theater in Berlin. This event is also the record release party. Enjoy!

Berlin, 16th of April 2005.