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Sharing music's "universal language" behind bars

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Inmates at Lieber Correctional Institution in Ridgeville were part of a historic event this month when their prison yard witnessed the sights and sounds of the first-ever "Jazz in the Joint" concert.

"It's a joy to be here to share our God-given talents with you," musician Steve Simon told a crowd of hundreds of men dressed in tan Department of Corrections uniforms.

"You guys are a part of history right now, and we're here to entertain you."

Simon is the founder of Jazz in the Joint, which he said he created earlier this year to bring music to those who have little opportunities to hear it, particularly people in prisons. His plan is to conduct concerts throughout the state and country through the program.

"We're changing feelings, and for a couple of hours we're bringing a touch of home to these men," Simon said.

"We want these men to realize there are people out there...who care."

Simon is also no stranger to men looking for a second chance in life. He serves on the board of the Turning Leaf Project, established to help men incarcerated and recently released from prison find a job and transition back into society. Simon is on the board for Jazz Artists of Charleston, a group that also includes Charleston Mayor John Tecklenburg, who rocked the keyboard for Lieber inmates during several songs throughout the concert.

"I believe music is the universal language that transcends barriers," Tecklenburg said. "At the root of it all...the universal message is about love."

Tecklenburg and his wife Sandy are also passionate about lawbreakers and finding ways to rehabilitate them. They even founded South Carolina STRONG based in Charleston to assist criminals and substance abusers in their life after prison. And that's the message the mayor hoped to relay to Lieber inmates.

"There are a number of very passionate and educated folks in our community who want to help you," Tecklenburg told the crowd.

"When you walk out that door, you need more than a bus ticket and a peanut butter sandwich."

For K.C., whose last name remains anonymous due to institution rules, his freedom comes in nine more years. He said he's already served eight years for armed robbery but has changed his life around behind bars.

"I love the Lord," K.C. said.

He's also a music fan, especially Gospel songs, and was excited to learn about the jazz performance.

K.C. said he listens to music all day because of how "it just gives me life."

He currently works as an extension of the chaplain officer and spends his days talking to other inmates and praying with them, if they choose. He also completed his associate degree in a Bible course from Columbia International University in December.

Inmate Charlie probably won't see life outside Lieber's barbed-wire fence since he said he's serving a life sentence for double murder.

But he's since repented of his crimes, he said, and has already spent more than three decades paying the consequences.

"I learned from my mistakes," Charlie said, "and I have sympathy for the victims and their families. ...and I realize what I put my family through."

In the meantime, he's thankful for the simple pleasures, like a live jazz concert, he can experience during life inside Lieber.

"As an inmate, not (usually) being able to enjoy this type of atmosphere," Charlie said, "it's a comfort to know the music takes your mind off of all types of things going on in here, so you can focus your mind on positivity."

Ridgeville Mayor James Williams was also on hand for the unique performance, though it wasn't his first time at the facility.

Williams said he served five years as a Lieber correctional officer and felt it "a pleasure to...come back."

In addition to musicians with the Kings of Jazz group, inmates took the stage during certain songs. One played drums; another sang lead on a classic tune.

"In every institution there are talented people," said Clark Newsom, internal communications director for the S.C. Department of Corrections. While watching the event's success this month, Newsom championed the Jazz in the Joint program because of its ability to help rehabilitate the men.

"This program is good for them because 95 percent of these people are going to get out, and you hope that you can give them every opportunity for rehabilitation," Newsom said. "We try to rehabilitate these guys not only through work skills but also personal skills."