



# PRISON SONGS

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A **STUDY GUIDE** BY CHRISTIE COOK



AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS OF MEDIA

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## LINKS TO THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

### » HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

#### Focus Areas

**Mental health promotion** (including developing skills to be resilient, coping strategies, early help-seeking, developing and navigating networks of support, supporting and advocating for others)

**Drug use** (including managing use of prescribed and over-the-counter drugs, links between drug use and other health behaviours, nature of drug/substance use and impacts on individuals and communities, assertive behaviours, managing risk-taking behaviours, drugs in sport)

### » CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

86. Students learn about the richness and variety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander modes of communication and ways of living. Students will explore the importance of family and kinship structures for maintaining and

promoting health, safety and wellbeing within their community and the wider community. Students will experience the richness of the contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities continue to make to the wider community through participation in traditional and contemporary games, physical activities and cultural practices. In doing so, students will develop an appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through valuing their contribution to the wider social and cultural community of Australia.

### » THE ARTS –MUSIC

Years 9–10

52. Students will develop a deepened understanding and use of music concepts and languages,





practices, technologies and techniques. Through their musical practice they will develop a distinctive personal voice and engage in music making in varying contexts. As composers, they will create, shape, and refine musical ideas in a range of forms and styles, with consideration of the musical needs and practices of performers. As performers, they will demonstrate skills and knowledge in their chosen instruments (including voice), both as soloists and ensemble members, with a command of repertoire relevant to their instrument. As audience members, students will respond to music, demonstrating a command of the language and concepts of music. Through research and critical study they will develop a rich knowledge of the contemporary and historical contexts of musical works and practices.

## » MEDIA ARTS

Years 9–10

45. Students will use media arts to express themselves as citizens, consumers, creators and community members. They will deepen their creative and critical knowledge and engagement with media. They will explore and control the language codes, conventions and processes of media practice and become responsive and ethical creators and users of media who can communicate stories in conventional and imaginative ways. Students will operate a range of technologies to produce media for specific purposes,

including for commercial, non-commercial, independent and artistic contexts and audiences. They will experiment with different communications forms and make informed choices about the technologies they use to produce, distribute and access media. Students will learn about specific media histories and contexts, including those in Australia. They will learn about some of the artistic, social, cultural, technological, economic and legal contexts in which media are produced.

## BEFORE VIEWING

- When you hear the words ‘prison documentary’, what do you expect to see?
- When you heard the documentary’s title, *Prison Songs*, what did you think? Does the concept of prisoners singing seem out of place to you?
- Have you ever seen a documentary about an Australian prison?
- When you hear the word ‘prisoner’, what type of person comes to mind?





## SYNOPSIS

The inmates of a Darwin prison are shown in a unique and completely new light in Australia's first ever documentary musical. Incarcerated in tropical Northern Territory, over 800 inmates squeeze into the overcrowded spaces of Berrimah Prison. In an Australian first, the inmates share their feelings, faults and experiences in the most extraordinary way – through song.

## AFTER VIEWING

- How does *Prison Songs* differ from other prison shows such as *America's Toughest Prisons*?
- How are prisons typically depicted in films and television?

## » QUESTIONS

- What did Wurdankardi mean when he said that Aboriginals were punished twice?
- What factors make a person susceptible to committing criminal acts?
- Whose story did you most enjoy and what made their story interesting to you?
- What did you learn about life behind bars?
- How is Berrimah prison different from other Australian prisons?

### Musical Styles

- Hip-hop      - Blues      - Gospel
- Reggae      - Country
- Are there any styles of music that you would have liked to see in *Prison Songs* that weren't included?
- Research the history behind each musical style. Why would jazz or classical music be less suitable for the documentary?



- Why did the filmmakers make this film into a musical?
- Is it right to treat real-life events and issues surrounding crime through a musical?
- Why do you think that the producers of the film decided to make a 'singing' documentary?
- If you were to make a similar style of documentary (musical) about a prison in Sydney, what type of music would you favour?
- How did the music involved in the documentary bias or steer your view of the subjects? Did the music make the inmates seem more relatable?

## EXTENDED SYNOPSIS

**Aboriginal citizens make up 30 per cent of the Northern Territory's population, but in its largest prison over 80 per cent of the inmates are Indigenous.**

The inmates of Darwin's Berrimah Prison are shown in a unique and completely new light in Australia's first ever documentary musical. In an Australian first, the inmates share their feelings, faults and experiences in the most extraordinary way – through song.

Berrimah Prison has been described as Dickensian with its dirt, rats, mosquitoes and unbearable heat. If nothing else, it is an old, overcrowded, tropical jail facing closure. When it first opened in 1979 it was designed to hold 115 prisoners. In 2014 it strains to hold more than 800.

The inmates are varied, both men and women, some from good homes, others from dysfunctional families. Many come from remote communities where English is the second or third language spoken and the traditional law of their society is in conflict with European laws. This thoughtful and unique documentary gives voice to these normally overlooked Australian citizens.

As distinct from a concert-based documentary, singing pervades *Prison Songs*, with prisoners breaking into



hip-hop, blues, country, reggae or gospel as they talk about the reasons they find themselves locked up. The personal, often intimate stories mesh together to create a portrait of life in a society with one of the highest incarceration rates in the world.

Max still can't fathom why anger embedded itself in him and he went off the rails while working in his father's law firm: 'Anyone can end up in a place like this'. Anyone can end up, as his song says, 'Waking up in Berrimah'. And the women's chorus seems to agree.

Phil first took heroin in his 30s on the day his dad died. Since then his life has been a living hell: 'The only place that saved me was the Berrimah Hilton ... This is my home. When I'm in here I'm straight, I get my health back, I feel alive.'

Wurdankardi and his ancestors have operated under their Indigenous law for thousands of years. But this is not the law recognised in wider Australia. He feels the pain of being locked away from the bush where he belongs: 'All I think about is the mother country. I'm not doin' nothin' but the white man's time.'

Both Malcolm and Molly know the pitfalls of having a drink but also the joys – it helps them act on their attraction to the opposite sex. Says Malcolm with a grin: 'I get more courage when I'm drunk ... I'd love to have five or six wives.' Alcohol and drugs drive a lot of crime, and 90 per cent of inmates have experienced domestic violence. Molly had both arms broken by her partner. Dale saw his father beat his mother 'to within an inch of her life' when he was seven years old.

All the inmates of Berrimah have their own story to tell. Life in a contemporary Australian prison has never been filmed in this much detail, this much depth or with this much seriousness and humour. It is a snapshot of Berrimah Prison, just prior to it being decommissioned as an adult prison in late 2014.

## THEMES

- Aboriginal incarceration
- Alcohol and drugs
- Race
- Domestic violence
- Justice and injustice

## LANGUAGE AND TECHNICAL DEVICES

Define the following terms and provide examples from the documentary. If any of the devices are unfamiliar, try the following website for assistance: <http://literarydevices.net/>

- |            |         |
|------------|---------|
| • Irony    | • Dance |
| • Sarcasm  | • Mood  |
| • Re-count | • Theme |
| • Song     |         |



## CHARACTER PROFILES

*Max still can't fathom why anger embedded itself in him and he went off the rails while working in his father's law firm: 'Anyone can end up in a place like this'. Anyone can end up, as his song says, 'Waking up in Berrimah'. And the women's chorus seems to agree.*

- What does Max mean when he says that 'anyone can end up in a place like this'?
- Explain what his mother meant when she said 'you hurt everyone'.
- Do you think Max fits the usual profile for a prisoner? Explain your response.



*Phil first took heroin in his 30s on the day his dad died. Since then his life has been a living hell: 'The only place that saved me was the Berrimah Hilton ... This is my home. When I'm in here I'm straight, I get my health back, I feel alive.'*

- How did life behind bars 'save' Phil?
- What factors lead to Phil's imprisonment?

*Wurdankardi and his ancestors have operated under their Indigenous law for thousands of years. But this is not the law recognised in wider Australia. He feels the pain of being locked away from the bush where he belongs: 'All I think about is the mother country. I'm not doin' nothin' but the white man's time.'*

- What is 'the white man's time'?
- How would Wurdankardi have been traditionally punished?

*Both Malcolm and Molly know the pitfalls of having a drink but also the joys – it helps them act on their attraction to the opposite sex. Says Malcolm with a grin: 'I get more courage when I'm drunk ... I'd love to have five or six wives.' Alcohol and drugs drive a lot of crime, and 90 per cent of inmates have experienced domestic violence. Molly had both arms broken by her partner. Dale saw his father beat his mother 'to within an inch of her life' when he was seven years old.*

- How does excessive use of alcohol and drugs lead to crime?

## DEBATE/DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Prisoners aren't bad people but people who have done bad things.
- Australia should have stricter laws regarding the consumption of alcohol. Stricter laws would lead to less alcohol-related crime.
- Once a criminal, always a criminal.
- Indigenous Australians should receive 'punishment' in keeping with their cultural traditions and values.
- Australian prisons generally fail to reform their inmates. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
- Taxpayers should not pay for medical treatments resulting from a lifestyle of alcohol abuse.
- The drinking age in Australia should be raised to twenty-one.
- People who drink to get drunk have an underlying problem of depression, low self-esteem or a lack of purpose in life.





The following statistics were taken from the Prevention Research Quarterly

[http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/attachments/691\\_PRQ\\_CrimeandDisorder\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/attachments/691_PRQ_CrimeandDisorder_FINAL.pdf)

## » CRIME DATA

- Between 23 and 73 per cent of all assaults in Australia involve alcohol.
- The 2005 Personal Safety Survey classified 70 per cent of assaults as 'alcohol related'.
- Further, 86 per cent of male detainees and 14 per cent of female detainees report having consumed alcohol in the twenty-four hours before their arrest.
- Almost half (43 per cent) of detainees believed that drinking had contributed to the crime for which they had been arrested.

## » DRINK-DRIVING

- Drink-driving accounted for 30 per cent of deaths on Australian roads.

## » INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE

- In 2010, around 8.1 per cent of Australians aged fourteen years or older were the victim of physical abuse by someone who had consumed alcohol (increasing from 4.5 per cent in 2007).
- A further 15.8 per cent of Australians had been 'put in



fear' by someone who had consumed alcohol – an increase from 14.1 per cent in 2007. This figure climbed to almost one in four Australians when verbal abuse was examined.

## » FAMILY VIOLENCE

- It is estimated that more than one-third (38 per cent) of alcohol-related violence takes place at residential addresses.
- Over half (54 per cent) of all alcohol-related homicides occur in the home (21.6 per cent of all homicides).

## » CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

- There is a considerable body of research that suggests alcohol is an important risk factor for child abuse, maltreatment and neglect.
- Research has consistently shown that excessive alcohol consumption is associated with poor quality, or inconsistent parenting.

In addition to the crime statistics above, alcohol also contributes to social and physical problems such as:

- Rowdy physical behaviour
- Risky sexual behaviour
- Noise pollution
- Illnesses

[http://www.aic.gov.au/media\\_library/publications/proceedings/01/indermaur.pdf](http://www.aic.gov.au/media_library/publications/proceedings/01/indermaur.pdf)

[http://www.aic.gov.au/media\\_library/publications/tandi/ti18.pdf](http://www.aic.gov.au/media_library/publications/tandi/ti18.pdf)

There are many causes of Aboriginal alcohol abuse:

- Breakdown of traditional social controls.
- Lack of group identity. Traditionally, ceremonies established and ritually enacted tribal identity.



- Lack of traditional rules. There are no longer traditional rules for behaviour around alcohol. Prior to invasion, strict rules governed consumption of alcohol-like beverages.
- Sharing ethos. A culturally infused sharing ethos lets Aboriginal people share resources most of the times (e.g. money, cars).
- Resistance to imposed controls. Control forced on Aboriginal society (e.g. the Northern Territory Intervention) is met with resistance.
- Unprocessed pain and rage. These require healing, but people use alcohol to 'deaden the pain and anger' that follows childhood abuse, violence or bullying. Losing inhibition is an aim when drinking, giving people an outlet for their poisonous rage in yelling, screaming and violence.
- Social tension. There is a lack of processes for reducing tensions and frustrations occurring as a result of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, racism, boredom or dislocation.

Taken from <<http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/health/aboriginal-alcohol-consumption#toc5>>.

Aboriginal men in particular suffer from the loss of their cultural status in the transition from a traditional to a welfare-based lifestyle. Many Aboriginal women, through their status as mothers, receive more welfare payments than Aboriginal men.

- Why are Indigenous people so over-represented in prison, and why do their numbers keep growing?
- Why are alcohol-related offences such a widespread issue amongst Indigenous people in the Northern Territory? Many reasons have been suggested above, but what accounts for such a high prison population of Aboriginal people?

- What are some of the reasons for non-Indigenous alcohol abuse? List as many as you can think of.

### Drinking Quiz

What is responsible drinking? Answer the questions below before checking your responses against the following website: [http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/attachments/072\\_FS\\_1.10\\_binge.pdf](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/attachments/072_FS_1.10_binge.pdf)

- What is the definition of binge drinking?
- How many drinks can a woman safely consume over the course of an evening?
- How many drinks can a man safely consume over the course of an evening?
- What can you do to avoid consuming too much alcohol on a night out?
- List some suggestions for responsible alcohol consumption

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Go to YouTube and search 'anti-drink-driving campaigns'. Watch a few commercials and choose one that you think would be effective amongst your own group of friends. What makes this commercial effective?

After conducting research on alcoholism, plan and design your own anti-drinking commercial.

Australian of the Year 2015  
Rosie Batty  
Domestic violence campaigner

When a grieving mother spoke out calmly just hours after her son's murder, she gave voice to many thousands of victims of domestic violence who had until then remained

unheard. Rosie Batty has risen above her personal tragedy and the great loss of her eleven-year-old son Luke, who was the victim of domestic violence at the hands of his father in a very public assault. Rosie's story jolted Australia into recognising that family violence can happen to anyone. Victorian Police Chief Commissioner Ken Lay, praising Rosie as the most 'remarkable victim' he has ever met, says Rosie has put domestic violence on the national agenda. Rosie now champions efforts to fight domestic violence, making many media and public speaking appearances to shine a spotlight on the issue and call for systemic changes. Rosie's incredible strength and selfless efforts are an inspiration to many other victims of domestic violence, and her courage and willingness to speak out will make Australia a far better place.

<http://www.australianoftheyear.org.au/honour-roll/?view=fullView&recipientID=1179>

Rosie's Story – Four Corners ABC

<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2014/07/14/4043135.htm>

- What is an intervention order?
- How did the 'system' fail Rosie at each significant point prior to Luke's murder?
- Why did Rosie try to nurture the relationship between Luke and his Dad?
- How does manipulation confuse and protract dealing with issues of domestic violence?
- How often do you think that mental illness impacts on domestic violence?
- What were some of the early warning symptoms that Luke and Rosie were in danger from Greg?
- How can victims safely escape their abusers? Who can help with finding a safe exit strategy from abuse?
- Why is clear communication on the part of authorities essential to the victims of domestic abuse?
- How did the lack of clear communication contribute to Luke's death?

<http://www.whiteribbon.org.au/>

<http://www.tuneinnotout.com/>

<http://www.domesticviolence.com.au/pages/domestic-violence-statistics.php>

<http://www.burstingthebubble.com/>



PURCHASE OF DVDS:

RONIN FILMS

P.O. Box 680

Mitchell, ACT 2911

AUSTRALIA

PH: 02 6248 0851

FAX: 02 6249 1640

WEB: <http://www.roninfilms.com.au>

EMAIL: [orders@roninfilms.com.au](mailto:orders@roninfilms.com.au)



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