

Making Light of Imprisonment: Humour, Connection and Resistance

International Journal of
Offender Therapy and
Comparative Criminology
1–22
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DOI: 10.1177/0306624X261455072
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Abstract

In previous papers, we have explored how songs written in prison, and the process of collaborative songwriting that produced them, served as devices for solving relational and personal problems that imprisonment poses. Here, drawing on data from the same project (Distant Voices: Coming Home), we explore and analyse how humour featured both in the songwriting process and in some of the songs, focussing on two songs written by women in prison. Our analysis reveals how humour worked in these contexts as a technology of community-building and as a mode of subtle subversion, insubordination and ‘soft resistance’ to penal power. However, we also note the importance of attending to humour’s temporariness, its deniability and its unpredictability. As such, prison humour occupies an unusual but important position in narrative terms, somewhere between the said and the unsaid; and that position allows it to do important personal, relational and political work.

Plain Language Summary

Humour, Connection and Resistance in Prisons

This paper discussed a project (Distant Voices: Coming Home) that used the unusual method of collaborative songwriting (undertaken in prison-based workshops in Scotland, UK) to explore how people experienced and made sense of their pathways

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into and time in prison; it also explored their plans and hopes for life after prison. In the workshops, professional musicians co-wrote songs with those in prison, with the additional support of skilled groupworkers and researchers.

Here, we focus specifically on the role that humour played in these workshops and in the songs that they produced. In particular, we discuss the views, experiences, thoughts and feelings of some of the imprisoned women who took part in the workshops, and of the teams that ran the workshops. We zone in on two quite different songs: 'The Queen's Hotel' very directly represents aspects and challenges of prison life, while 'Midnight Scampi' reflects with humour and warmth upon one woman's relationship with her (now deceased) mother.

The main argument in the paper is that humour played an important role in helping the women in prison to build connection and community not just with those involved in the workshops, but with other people in prison, and – more indirectly – with people outside. In some ways, this also helped them to resist and undermine aspects of the power to which they were subjected as prisoners; a kind of power that imposes an over-simplified, distorted and degrading version of who they are. Humour is one way that the women tried to resist these processes and reclaim some control over their own stories. In that sense, prison humour is both personal and political.

Keywords

imprisonment, songwriting, humour, resistance, narrative, women in prison

Introduction

This paper examines how and why humour appeared, and what it afforded and achieved, in the context of a project that used collaborative songwriting to explore experiences of state punishment and of reintegration. The origins of 'Distant Voices – Coming Home'¹ lay in precursor projects which had revealed both the importance and the complexities of reintegration, particularly within hostile social environments (Urie et al., 2019), and which had begun to explore whether and how creative processes might enable a more constructive dialogue about questions of crime, punishment and reintegration (McNeill & Urie, 2020).

In two previous papers, we have explored how songs and songwriting offered 'problem-solving devices' to people in prison. Firstly, we highlighted ways in which songwriting and song sharing helped to mediate relational problems associated with punishment and reintegration (Crockett Thomas et al., 2020). Secondly, we showed how these dialogues enabled participants to engage creatively, indeed sometimes playfully, with the power of dominant system narratives about them (Crockett Thomas et al., 2021). As we put it, 'the prison-based songwriters. . . engaged in re-writing their punishment or, perhaps more accurately, in exploring and sometimes challenging the relationships between their selves and their punishment' (Crockett Thomas et al., 2021, p. 8).

In discussing the implications of our analysis for narrative criminology, we argued that we need to attend to both narratives and selfhood in more diverse forms of stories and story-making, including more playful forms. We also urged more attention to the auditory and affective atmospheres of stories (which, in songs, are often conveyed more by music than words). With narrative criminology's more 'critical, normative edge' (Crockett Thomas et al., 2021, p. 14) in mind, we noted the importance of attending to the contexts and conditions in which narratives are produced, and to the ways in which they challenge or reinforce social and/or penal order. In this paper, we return to these themes of narrative play, affect and power.

Humour – the theme of this special issue – surfaced in these two previous papers, as well as in a third Distant Voices output in which we explored how songs and songwriting revealed the 'desynchrony' and 'enduring temporariness' associated with life after incarceration (McNeill et al., 2022). Here, however, we turn our attention more directly to humour, focussing on how, why and when it emerged both in songwriting workshops in prison and in the songs they produced. More specifically, we direct our focus to what humour offered, in narrative terms, for some of the (then) imprisoned women who took part in the workshops.

Only a small minority of prisoners managed by the Scottish Prison Service are women. While the total number of women imprisoned has been falling in recent years, Scotland still has one of the highest imprisonment rates for women in Northern Europe². Between 1995 and 2002, the high number of suicides at the women's prison His Majesty's Prison and Young Offenders Institution (HMPYOI) Cornton Vale led to public outrage and calls to rethink and limit the imprisonment of women in Scotland (Burman et al., 2015). Research commissioned in response showed that women in Scotland are often imprisoned for minor offences related to poverty and drug use, and have prior experiences of abuse and violence, limited opportunities for housing and employment, and a lack of support in the community (Loucks, 1997, p. 61; Burman et al., 2015). Yet despite numerous reports and policy and practice interventions in the early 2000s, the female prison population initially continued to rise as the result of more severe sentencing (McIvor & Burman, 2011).

A Government Commission on Women Offenders, established in 2011, found that imprisonment often impacts women differently from men. For example, it is more likely to lead to separation from children, and the loss of one's home (Commission on Women Offenders, 2012, p. 22). The report made a wide range of recommendations including alternatives to remand and short sentences, community justice centres, and smaller more specialised units for women (Commission on Women Offenders, 2012). Since then, the Scottish Prison Service has gradually sought to develop gender-responsive and 'trauma-informed' practices and institutions that consider the trauma, violence, and victimisation that many female prisoners have experienced before entering prison. Nonetheless, critical scholars have questioned whether trauma-informed practice is possible within penal institutions which could be argued to be inherently traumatising (Anderson, 2025; Carlen & Tombs, 2006; Vaswani & Paul, 2019). Given this profoundly serious context, it may seem odd to choose to focus on how humour surfaced in workshops with imprisoned women. However, we argue that the women's

engagement with and uses of humour, particularly in terms of community-building, merits special attention precisely because of their particularly dire circumstances.

Our contribution here rests in revealing two main connections between humour, song and imprisonment. Firstly, building on our earlier papers' exploration of song-writing as a problem-solving 'technology of the self' (Crockett Thomas et al., 2021; DeNora, 1999), we show how, for the women, humour, like music, also served as a technology for community-building; one that perhaps made imprisonment more survivable. As Cathcart Frödén and Mangaoang (2026) note, the wider hostile environment of the prison can heighten the significance of experiences of community inside. In our analysis, we will show how humour worked to express and assert individual and group identities, sometimes in opposition to the penal identities that imprisonment imposed. Secondly, we will illustrate how, in narrative terms, humour created a (sometimes) subversive and insubordinate space between the said and the unsaid (Presser, 2022) or, perhaps more accurately, between what could and could not be said seriously. To develop these arguments, we focus on three key qualities of (prison) humour: temporariness, deniability and unpredictability.

Humour, Power and Imprisonment

In his ethnographic work on the 'texture of imprisonment', both alone and with others, Ben Crewe (2011, 2015; see also Crewe et al., 2023) has drawn attention to different dimensions of the pains of contemporary imprisonment. Drawing on earlier work by Downes (1988) and by King and McDermott (1995), Crewe (2011) initially distinguished between the depth, weight and tightness of imprisonment. Depth refers to the degree of physical security to which one is subject and to the distance from release and from the outside world that this creates. Weight refers to the psychological burdens of imprisonment. To these two dimensions, Crewe (2011) first added 'tightness' in reference to pains and pressures associated with new forms of 'soft power' that arose from the indeterminacy of sentence lengths, and the need to persuade psychologists and others of readiness to progress towards and beyond release. Warr (2020a, 2020b, 2023) has provided important analyses of the 'narrative labour' required of prisoners subject to such 'soft power'. Later, Crewe (2015) also added a fourth dimension – the 'breadth' of imprisonment – referring to the reach and impact of imprisonment *beyond* the prison; for example, via stigmatisation, traumatising or institutionalisation.

In the Distant Voices project, we encountered and observed all four dimensions, both in our dialogue with prison-based song co-writers, and via their songs. With reference to the weight of imprisonment in particular, when songs written in prisons were shared in a wide variety of public performances (from intimate 'house gigs' to music festivals), audience members frequently commented on their emotional weight. To give just one example, a song called 'Never Got to Say Goodbye', co-written by 'Shuggie' with Donna Maciocia, Rollo Strickland and Lisa Howe, powerfully conveys Shuggie's experience of grieving for her father whilst isolated from her family by imprisonment³. Those hearing this song often remark that they had never thought

about how the suffering associated with bereavement might be exacerbated by imprisonment.

However, for those of us in the Distant Voices research team, this weightiness was juxtaposed with frequent experiences of laughter and lightness before, during and after the song-writing workshops (or ‘Vox sessions’, as we called them). We also noted that many of the songs, including – as we will see below – some of those that dealt with the heaviest subject matter – were, nonetheless, seasoned with humour. As we discuss below, we also used humour to build relationships (and reduce anxieties) both within our own session teams and with our session participations. It is mainly for these reasons that we settled on ‘Making Light’ as the title of this paper; as well as its literal meaning (reducing weight), making light can also refer (metaphorically) to refusing to take something seriously. ‘Light’ is also one of those confusing English words that has multiple meanings: it can serve as an antonym for darkness as well as for heaviness, and both of those meanings are apposite here. Prison humour then, might reduce prisoners’ burdens, it might contest the seriousness of their predicament, and it might reveal things that are usually hidden in the darkness of carceral spaces.

Although both Goffman (1961) and Mathiesen (1965) paid some attention to the role and functions of humour in total institutions, surprisingly few scholars have focussed directly and in any depth on humour in prisons. Those that have studied prison humour have tended to examine staff uses of humour in coping with difficult work (Crawley, 2004; Greer, 2002; Nylander et al., 2011). In this vein, Nielsen (2011) drew on her ethnographic study of a Danish prison to explore how officers used humour to manage their relationships both with prisoners and with one another. In relation to staff-prisoner ‘joking relationships’, she noted how humour offered a way to soften power dynamics, avoid conflict and smooth interactions, even if this simultaneously tested or strained staff loyalty and solidarity. In staff-staff ‘joking relationships’ by contrast, humour was used to exercise or claim power and to articulate hostility amongst staff, even where staff solidarity was valued and required. These two sets of joking relationships highlight respectively the ‘conjunctive’ and ‘disjunctive’ potentials of joking relationships (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). Interestingly, just as we have done, Nielsen (2011) also drew on DeNora’s work (1999) on music, suggesting that, like music, humour is a tool with dynamic and transformative potential to help us produce and reproduce our ‘selves’, but also to connect or disconnect people and groups. Whether and how humour works in relational terms depends, like music, on the ways in which individuals are oriented and disposed towards it.

Re-framing this in terms of narrative identities, prison humour is part of how people identify with (and are identified as belonging within) intra-prison social groups – not just as ‘officers’ and ‘prisoners’, but also as, for example, ‘decent officers’ or ‘trustworthy prisoners’. In certain circumstances, as we ourselves observed in some sessions, participation in both songwriting and in humorous exchanges enabled staff and prisoners to meet and connect more as *who they were* as people, and less as *what they were* in their formal institutional roles (Nielsen, 2011, p. 505); at least for a moment. Crucially though, while the use of humour may ‘pave the way for amicable communication’, it also ‘provide[s] the possibility of denying the implied content of

such exchanges, if need be' (Nielsen, 2011, p. 206). This deniability is an important feature of humour's temporariness, a theme to which we return below.

In another illuminating Danish penal ethnography, Laursen (2016) revealed how prisoners employed humour to defuse and dispute the soft power discussed above, specifically in the context of their participation in cognitive behavioural programmes aimed at their 'rehabilitation'. Laursen (2016) notes Rubin's (2015, p. 1341) insight that prisoners can express agency not only through direct resistance but also via 'friction'; meaning any 'actions that render power incomplete' (cf. Scott, 1989, on 'everyday resistance'). Such actions can be directed less at undermining regimes of penal power and more at making them psychologically and socially survivable. As Laursen (2016, p. 1341) puts it,

"participants' jocular disruptions of the [cognitive behavioural] lessons are not necessarily politically inspired but, rather, they are small acts of creativity and subversion enacted as a response to being in a highly controlled environment while wishing to continue to live one's life as one sees fit."

Humour in this context is about asserting personal autonomy; indeed, it expresses a kind of insubordination to the (soft) penal order. At the same time, like Nielsen (2011, p. 1341), Laursen (2016) also recognises the usefulness in this context of humour's deniability; it is this distinctive quality that makes it a form of insubordination that can be enjoyed (usually) 'without getting into serious trouble'. Although the effects of such humour may be only fleeting or transitory, Laursen (2016) ultimately labels them as 'soft resistance' (contra Rubin's argument about mere 'friction') because power *is* being contested in these exchanges, however subtly. As she notes, frictional humour works as soft resistance because, just like the new types of penal power it targets, the subjects of the humour (in this case the cognitive behavioural programme facilitators) struggle to manage its 'ambiguous, non-coercive and multi-faceted' forms (Laursen, 2016, p. 1342). Others have noted similar dynamics in relation to the role of humour in community development and in social movements (Branagan, 2007; see also Alinsky, 1971).

While Nielsen (2011) and Laursen (2016) revealed, respectively, how staff used humour in their relationships with prisoners and with each other, and how prisoners used humour to resist penal power, a more recent paper based on research in prisons in England and Ireland focuses on the role of humour in *prisoner-to-prisoner* relationships (Stark, 2025). While the wider project on which she draws explored imprisoned men's perspectives on citizenship, Stark's (2025) paper focuses on how humour featured in the men's discussions of the nature of community within prisons. She shows that humour acts as a resource for individual adaptation to prison life but also as a way to mediate relationships. Humour, Stark (2025, p. 16) notes, helps to 'cultivate a sense of community in an otherwise atomised environment, and to maintain a sense of 'normality' in seeking to find similarity to life outside'. However, she also stresses the risks and dangers that arise for people engaged in or subjected to humorous exchanges (see also Bjerke & Roness, 2017). For example, Stark (2025) shows how ridicule can

victimise and exclude, as well as reinforcing hierarchies. Staff reactions to and interpretations of humour (as we will also show below) can carry serious, adverse and punitive consequences, especially when staff dispositions towards prisoner humour switch suddenly. Thus Stark (2025, p. 16) concludes that:

‘rather than creating (even momentary) equal exchanges, as others have posited (Nielsen, 2011), humour provides a temporary veil for the power disparity underpinning interaction, enabling sharing of frustrations in a way that is palatable to authority. However, the ‘freedom’ to pull back this veil without warning is not equal.’

There is, of course, a large and interdisciplinary body of scholarship about humour more generally, some of which attends critically to precisely these kinds of dynamics. Billig’s (2005) overview draws attention to three main theories of humour. These speak in turn to how humour elevates some and degrades others within a given social order, to how it exposes the incongruities and absurdities of social life, and to how it provides for release and relief from social pressures. For those familiar with that literature, the brief discussion of prison humour above may have invoked Bakhtin’s (1981) analysis of the carnival as a site where social rules (and hierarchies) are *temporarily* mocked and suspended. Yet, as both Bergson (1911) and Bourdieu (1984) argued, these humorous ruptures and suspensions act only as a *temporary* release of the tensions of a social order that they ultimately uphold.

What strikes us from reading these sources in the light of our own experiences and data is the *temporariness* of humour’s work and effects and its *deniability*. Humour seems to offer us a way to say what we would not or could not otherwise say, precisely because we can claim that what we said should not be taken seriously. Evidently, these two qualities make humour both a very slippery and a very interesting subject for narrative criminological enquiry, not least because, when combined, they situate humour between the said and the unsaid aspects of narratives (Presser, 2022). But the third quality, revealed by Stark’s (2025) analysis, is humour’s *unpredictability*. As every failed joker knows, we can never be sure how humour will be received, particularly where there is social or cultural distance and/or significant power differences between the joker and their audience. So, as a narrative resource, while humour seems to offer us a great deal, particularly (as we will see below) when we find ourselves subordinated, there is always the risk that it will slip our attempts to harness it and perhaps drag us into deeper trouble. We hope that in what follows we can reveal how much people surviving in and moving through carceral spaces have to teach us about when and how humour liberates and when and how it reinforces our confinement.

Methods

Between 2017 and 21, ‘Distant Voices – Coming Home’ was a partnership between the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh and the West of Scotland, and the arts organisation Vox Liminis⁴, which hosted and developed both the practice and the community in and through which we learned. In disciplinary terms, the project spanned community

development, criminology, music, politics and public policy, deliberately blurring boundaries between creative practice, research, knowledge exchange and public engagement.

The project's fieldwork included 21 two- or three-day workshops which took place between July 2017 and July 2019⁵. Thirteen of these took place in Scottish prisons (one open and three closed institutions which, between them, hold men and women and adults and young people) and eight in community settings in Glasgow and in Inverness. In these workshops (called 'Vox sessions'), we used collaborative songwriting to support a range of differently situated people (all with experience of the criminal legal system) to creatively explore questions of punishment and reintegration together. In total, we worked with 153 people to produce 150 original songs.

Prison-based participants were recruited by a variety of methods. To build awareness of the workshops, we advertised in the four prisons involved and also sometimes arranged gigs a few days ahead of the workshops. These gigs served as an introduction to the project and an invitation to participate. Wherever possible, we built relationships with prison staff who spread the word and also helped to identify people they thought would be interested and might benefit from participation. As the wider project became better known in the prisons, prisoners themselves recommended the workshops to others. While we employed no exclusion criteria ourselves, prison staff doubtless considered security issues in helping us assemble groups. We did so largely on a first-come-first-served basis until session capacity (of around 10) was reached.

The analysis in this paper draws on data that illustrates how humour and laughter recurred throughout the project, building on a systematic open coding of data undertaken by Phil Crockett Thomas using NVivo software. Hence, we draw on a range of data; not just song recordings, song lyrics, and song introductions developed with the co-writers, but also interviews with participants, notes from the session team's 'debriefs' (in which all those involved in running the session [the lead groupworker, the musicians and the researcher] discussed, at the end of each day, how the session was going and, a few weeks later, they reflected on how it had gone), and the session researcher's ethnographic fieldnotes. We focus on two songs that emerged in different songwriting sessions undertaken with women in a dedicated wing of an institution in Scotland that holds both adult women and female 'young offenders'. We chose these examples both to allow us to focus on women's experiences and because they are particularly well-suited for exploring and understanding the multidimensionality and performativity of humour. We are not seeking to make any claims about statistical generalisability across our data set: our focus here is on depth not breadth of analysis.

Ethical approval for the research was sought and obtained both from the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow and from the Research Ethics Committee of the Scottish Prison Service. At the time of the relevant songwriting workshops, we secured informed consent for the use of data from all of those who are mentioned (or whose work is discussed) in this paper. They also chose their own pseudonyms. More recently, a chance meeting with one of the song co-writers during an un-related prison visit created an opportunity to reconnect and to share and refine our analysis through dialogue with her.

Humour and Collaborative Songwriting

The two songs around which we focus much of the discussion below – *Midnight Scampi* and *The Queen's Hotel* – were written in two different Vox sessions that took place in the same Scottish institution in 2018. The 3-day songwriting workshops were facilitated by a small team including three musicians, a group facilitator and researcher. In the sessions, teams worked with groups of 5 to 10 participants who came with varied levels of musical ability and/or creative writing experience. Each workshop had a pre-determined theme intended to stimulate songwriting but without being too prescriptive or constraining. The two themes for these workshops were ‘The Silver Screen’ and ‘You are Here’. In most sessions, an individual participant collaborated with an individual musician, though often with the support and participation of other team members. Thus, *Midnight Scampi* was written by Margaret (participant) with Lucy Cathcart Frödén (in her role in this session as a musician), and with help from Liam (also a musician) and Phil Crockett Thomas (researcher). *The Queen's Hotel* was co-written by Ashleigh and Emma (participants) with help from Phil (researcher) and from Louis (musician).

In the sessions, humour often played a key role in disrupting hierarchies, alleviating anxieties and establishing camaraderie, helping to build temporary communities within each session. Here, Fergus describes how these processes sometimes began in the van on the long drives to distant prisons:

‘I sat in the back [of the van] on the road up. As usual, the journey set the tone and formed the team. Donna and Ross [musicians] (also in the back) were in fine voice – leading us in Christmas songs on the ukelele, and sparking the good humour (or rather hilarity) that would typify the next few days. An ear for music, it seems, is also an ear for accents. . . the distant voices included New York Italian, Glasgow Asian, East European and everywhere in between.’

‘Thankfully, Dave [facilitator] concentrated on driving – not easy in a bus with frozen screen-wash and one headlight out. . . Emma [musician] also sat upfront, drifting in and out of the singing and the comedy.’ [Fergus’s fieldnotes, December 2017]

According to Phil’s fieldnotes, early in the session in which *The Queen's Hotel* was written, ‘[j]ust before Claire plays a song, the group consent to a deputy governor visiting briefly with some guests. Ashleigh whispers “they’ve come to stare at us. . . I just smile at them”’. A little later, Phil notes:

‘Lisa compliments Louis: “we need cunts like you to keep our spirits up!” I work with Emma and Ashleigh who have decided to write a song together. They are in high spirits after having a session with the self-tan last night and are amused by having overdone the colour a little!’

These three exchanges, in turn, reveal firstly how humour eased the session team’s nervousness, how it softened the awkwardness of being subjected to the gaze of those in authority and their guests, and how it enabled bonds to form quickly between musicians and participants (for clarity, the term ‘cunts’ here is being used affectionately, as is sometimes the case in Scotland); and thirdly in reinforcing friendships between prisoners.

More broadly, in Vox sessions, humour also played a role in creating ‘in-group’ identity and affiliation between prisoners; engaging with external groups, including session teams, generated the possibility of stronger in-group connections built on shared experiences and knowledge. In these processes, one of the hierarchies that was temporarily subverted was epistemic. As researchers, facilitators and musicians, we were trying to learn from and with participants, and that entailed valuing them as knowledgeable people with unique – and frequently unheard – vantage points and perspectives (Fricker, 2007). In similar vein, the willingness of session teams to risk the unpredictability of humour – either by having their jokes fall flat or by becoming the butt of the joke – was crucial to the establishment of trust and to the possibility of vulnerability, on which collaborative songwriting depends (Urie et al., 2019).

Humour in *The Queen’s Hotel*

To hear *The Queen’s Hotel* as originally recorded in the prison-based session (including vocal contributions from the co-writers, Emma and Ashley), we encourage readers to follow this link: <https://www.voxliminis.co.uk/media/the-queens-hotel/> (accessed 5th November, 2025). Alternatively, a filmed recording of a live performance of the song (including some discussion of its writing) can be accessed here (at 26:15): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MJSRVwjXLo&list=RD8MJSRVwjXLo&start_radio=1 (accessed 5th November, 2025). There is also an interesting discussion of the song in episode 2 of our project’s podcast, *The Art of Bridging*, which can be accessed on all the usual platforms and here: <https://www.voxliminis.co.uk/the-art-of-bridging/> (accessed 9th January 2026).

Phil’s fieldnotes describe how Emma and Ashleigh decided to work together in writing *The Queen’s Hotel*, and how they saw the role of humour within it:

‘So, their idea for our session is to write a song about issues in the prison, but to do it with enough humour and good grace that they don’t get into trouble and ensure that no one is seriously offended. Ashleigh is the scribe. They want to write about topics including prison labour (£11 per week) and the short length of prison visits. The chorus makes it clear “that for us its home and for some its hell”. The final verse spells out that listeners “shouldn’t take this too seriously”. The earlier misreading [in sharing early ideas within the session] of “sequins” as “penguins” inspires them to describe the officers using the metaphor of “penguins” due to their [black and white] uniforms. This experience is one of the most fun and genuinely collaborative co-writes I’ve been involved in – lots of encouraging each other, feeling comfortable to ignore suggestions and changing sentences. We write quickly together. I am excited by this song and call Louis over to read it.’

Emma was already a prolific writer of poetry before the songwriting session, and most of her writing was political in nature and focussed on prison life. Indeed, one of her poems had been published in a newspaper for prisoners. A prison officer, having read it there, had contacted a tabloid newspaper which, in turn, contacted the family of the victim of Emma’s offence. The paper subsequently published an article communicating outrage at the poem’s account of the luxuries of prison life. Though that was a wilful misreading of Emma’s satirical poem (which was aimed at tabloid

misrepresentation of prison conditions), it nonetheless caused all those involved, including Emma, considerable distress; a vivid example of humour's unpredictability. Emma wanted to return to similar themes and feelings in the song, but this time to manage that unpredictability more carefully by setting them in the lighter and seemingly more palatable context of song. *The Queen's Hotel* was also a wry reflection of the session theme – 'You Are Here'. While that theme was supposed to reference a pin on a map that could be placed anywhere, Emma and Ashleigh chose to focus on their current situation, rather than engaging with a remembered past or an imagined future.

In all songwriting sessions, we invited co-writers to craft written introductions for their songs, in case they might be shared subsequently in a public setting. This practice evolved to try to keep absent co-writers as close as possible to their future audiences, and to give them some small measure of control over their song's reception. As an introduction to *The Queen's Hotel*, Emma and Ashley wrote:

'This is a summary of what being in prison can be like for some of us but a bit of fun with the lyrics. We hope this can relate to other people in prison. Also people outside of prison [can get] an insight into what prison life can be like. Louis from VOX project helped us co-write and with a beat. We wanted our song Queen's Hotel to have an upbeat melody with a catchy fast chorus. Louis helped us achieve this. Thanks to everyone at VOX who helped us and we hope this song will bring a smile to everyone's faces.'

Louis added:

'The lyrics were fully finished by the time I was brought into the co-write, with Phil having helped pull them together with Emma and Ashley. They were keen that the song sounded musically upbeat and positive. We decided we'd use the same chords as 'Stand By Me' as it was a song Emma could already play on guitar. The idea of having two different tempos between verse and chorus came from them. It's an anthem!'

Emma and Ashley also told Phil that they wanted the song to be played on the prison radio (so that the men in the prison could hear it too) and to get everyone in the prison dancing. Phil recalls being struck, during the session, by this gesture of solidarity, and by Emma and Ashleigh's desire to connect with and give pleasure to people that they would probably never meet. Their hope, it seems, was that the song (and the humour within it) could help build community amongst all who heard it and could relate to it.

It was not common for prison-based co-writers to choose to sing on the recordings of their songs, often preferring to leave this aspect to the musicians from the team. There are complex reasons for such a decision, not least in relation to the heightened sense of vulnerability and exposure that comes with singing, particularly in an environment as hostile and unpredictable as a prison. Nonetheless, Emma and Ashley did perform vocals in the choruses, and in doing so effectively remind the listener of both the collective effort of songwriting and the collectively-experienced pains of imprisonment. Emma and Ashley's vocal presence on the recording allows them to be represented sonically; it also heightens the contrast between verses and choruses, adding to

the song's mildly chaotic and playful aesthetic, bringing to mind a folk session or fireside singalong.

The lyrics of the song are reproduced below.

The Queen's Hotel

Welcome to the Queen's Hotel
 Here's some rules to fit in well,
 Follow these to the book,
 Or watch out for that left-hand hook,
 Don't tell all your secrets at the start,
 Cause it could be used to rip you apart.

Chorus:

*If we are happy or sad you can never tell,
 Cause for us its home and for some its hell,
 Watch the penguins run for the riot bell,
 Cause we're living it up in the Queen's hotel.*

We work all week for 11 pound,
 But the SPS think that's sound,
 Feel like a slave till our lib day,
 They don't wanna hear what we've got to say,
 We work for less than minimum wage,
 Or we're locked like animals in a cage.

Chorus

They take our freedom but not our spirit,
 We really look forward to that family visit,
 45 minutes flies by too fast,
 All we want is for it to last,
 When the penguins shout that time is done,
 That's when we crumble and the tears come.

Chorus

Don't take this seriously and get really mad,
 Cause the Queen's hotel ain't that bad,
 Some days you wanna give up and get real wavey,
 But don't stress cause it's all gravy baby,
 So don't let the crown get you down,
 And turn that frown right around.

Chorus x2

Musically, the song has a quirky, almost theatrical quality. The shift from the slower tempo of the verses to the accelerated, almost frantic choruses, provides its own comic effect to complement the lyrics. Sonically, this suggests some seriousness in the verses (reflecting their lyrical content), but it offers the incongruous, reassurance and relief of humour in the choruses, which have an almost chaotic, slapstick feel about them. The chorus seems to burst the bubble of tension created by certain lines in the verses. Thus, for example, the lyrics of verse 1 include a subtle, light-hearted threat to new prisoners to conform with the prisoner code: ‘Follow these [rules] to the book. . .or watch out for that left-hand hook’. Verse 2 includes a pointed protest about prison wages: ‘We work for less than minimum wage or we’re locked like animals in a cage’. Verse 3 turns to pathos to communicate the importance of family visits – and the suffering that attends them: ‘That’s when we crumble, and tears come’. Each time, though, the tempo shift into the chorus, alongside the imagery of the penguins waddling off hurriedly in response to the ‘riot bell’, signals that none of this is intended to be taken *too* seriously.

Even then, it is striking that Emma and Ashley felt the need, in the last verse, to underscore that point even more clearly. Those final verse lyrics (‘Don’t take this seriously. . .’) seem somehow to hold in tension both subordination to (and even fear of) the penal order (‘don’t get really mad’) and yet still retain some gentle, insubordinate mockery (‘don’t let the Crown get you down’). Like the song as a whole (and perhaps partly because of Emma’s negative experience with the poem), these lyrics reveal the perceived need to manage the song’s reception, mitigating the unpredictability of its humorous critique of prison life. They do this by playfully reinforcing the deniability of any serious criticism of the prison: The unsaid or unsung subtexts here are ‘we were only joking’ but also ‘can’t you take a joke?’

Humour in *Midnight Scampi*

In most respects, the forms and uses of humour in *Midnight Scampi* seem quite different. Following the session theme of ‘The Silver Screen’, in the relevant songwriting session the team used cinema-inspired images to generate ideas amongst the participants who collectively built up a word bank of phrases, ideas and stories. Their conversations touched on ideas of performance, being observed, relationships, and dramatic and comical life events.⁶

Within this context, Maggie’s first songwriting idea had been, like Emma and Ashley, to write about prison. She was serving her third custodial sentence, after 8 years of freedom, and Rosie (the session facilitator) noted that she was ‘processing her shock on being back inside’ (Phil’s fieldnotes, 22/03/2018). However, the team was keen to help Maggie explore other song ideas; to ‘help her see she has other things going on’ (Louis [musician], Team Debrief, 20/03/2018). Phil’s fieldnotes describe how the song took shape:

‘Rosie has been working with Maggie who has decided to write a song in honour of her deceased mother. She’s managed to scribe Maggie a lot of material but asks me to take over

as an outside eye. There's some lovely descriptions that Rosie's managed to get down about what Maggie's mum was like. Maggie is very funny and chatty, as I read through Rosie's notes she starts telling me stories about her drunken antics including setting fire to her mum's house whilst making late night scampi! I suggest we form each verse into a little vignette that shares a memory of their relationship, we start with their trip to the bingo hall. Again, I write for Maggie who isn't confident writing [or] forming it into rhymes, the stories are all hers though, and I include as much of the stuff Rosie got down as I can. Maggie seems pretty tickled with the lyrics. Author 2 [in her role in this session as a musician] and Liam start to collaboratively put music to Maggie's song. It's really cool to see musicians working together on a song from start to finish – rare in a Vox session. ABBA inspired!' (Phil's fieldnotes, 21/03/2018).

The introduction to the song that Maggie wrote says simply: 'This song is all about my mum and all the good things we have done together and the memories we've shared. She is someone that is always in my head and that's why I wanted to dedicate a song in her memory'. The final version of the lyrics is reproduced below:

Midnight Scampi

Verse 1

I'm the dancing queen of the bingo hall
 Mother's not impressed, no not at all!
 All I needed was a vodka cup
 I heard the tunes and I got up
 She's laughing at me but full of love
 She's the glistening bright eye

Chorus

She's the knowledge that everything's alright
 A shining star in the sky at night
 She's the knowledge that everything's alright
 A shining star in the sky at night

Verse 2

Making midnight scampi, cooking up a storm
 Flames are getting higher, glad mum's not home
 My escapades of cooking came to a soggy end
 When the firemen came to visit
 Mum was not my best friend

Verse 3

Sat on her hunkers, a fag out the back
 She's the machine on and the washing out
 House proud as always, in her overalls

She is a showhouse,
Bending over backwards for us all

Chorus x2

She's the knowledge that everything's alright (everything's alright)
A shining star in the sky at night (everything's alright)
She's the knowledge that everything's alright (everything's alright)
A shining star in the sky at night
A shining star in the sky at night
Everything's alright
Everything's alright
Everything's alright
Everything's alright

Rather than being a commentary on prison life then, Maggie's song ended up being firmly rooted in her life *outside* prison; as well as being a tribute to her late mother, the song was a vehicle for reminiscence, and above all, fun. As the oldest member of the group, she had many colourful memories to draw on. Phil observed in her fieldnotes that, 'Maggie turns round and grins at the rest of the room intermittently, otherwise just bopping away to the rhythm' (Phil's fieldnotes, 21/03/2018). Maggie seemed to enjoy when the other participants smiled or laughed back in her direction or nodded their heads.

The demo of the song captures some of the energy and light-heartedness of the process. It can be accessed here: https://soundcloud.com/voxlminis/4-midnight-scampi-maggie/s-5ooGNixdcMs?in=voxlminis/sets/echolocations-audio-archive/s-3y2YSKnCykW&si=766bf8ee89f34d369b1108ba8bb528eb&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing (accessed 13th November 2025). In its imperfect and raw state, it expresses humour, warmth and connection on two levels. Firstly, through the lyrics, listeners are invited into Maggie's nostalgic, tragicomical and moving memories of her mother. Maggie's representation of her mother's (highly feminised) domestic and caring labour recalls Skeggs's (1997) research on the way that working class women – as subject to both class, gender, and often racial prejudices (e.g., as sexualised, or out of control) – sometimes seek to be seen as socially 'respectable' through activities like maintaining a clean house and well-groomed body. Maggie represents herself as the opposite of this: with her drinking and dancing, she is the recipient of her mother's love but also her disapproval. The lyrics also hint at the symbolic importance of the home to her mother, which adds depth to Maggie's sense of regret about the fire. At once universal and particular, these stories invite and enable us to get to know Maggie better as a person; they offer very different points of connection (both with Maggie and with her mother) to those that might have arisen had Maggie stuck with her original idea of writing about her experience of prison. From the reference to 'a shining star in the sky at night', we understand that she has lost her mother, and the contrast of this knowledge with the upbeat sound of the song gives it a bitter-sweet tone.

As well as expressing the love between Maggie and her mother (thereby doing relational work for Maggie, even after her mother's death (Crockett Thomas et al., 2020), the sound of the song also hints at the warmth, laughter and sense of connection present in the songwriting session, and in doing so it opens up potential for other listeners to connect with Maggie, her mother and her story. Thus, while this is a deeply personal song that says nothing directly about imprisonment, it nonetheless addresses the isolation and alienation of imprisonment, in part by using humour to invite connection. Indeed, many listeners may find the themes of family life, nostalgia and loss very relatable.

The humour of *Midnight Scampi* therefore plays a vital role in temporarily displacing the carceral context and its order, by taking us outside, introducing us to Maggie and her mother as people and, perhaps indirectly, by encouraging us to reflect on shared experiences with primary care-givers. At the same time, our awareness that *Midnight Scampi* was written inside prison adds an extra layer of emotional complexity to the song's reception, inviting a sense of shared resonance that transcends the walls but simultaneously reminds us that Maggie is (or was) behind those walls.

Discussion and Conclusion

That these two songs were written by women is important not least because we know that the gendered pains of imprisonment can be especially severe for women, often because of prior abuses they have experienced in the community and/or because of their 'emotional commitments and biographies' (Crewe et al., 2017). Given the nature of our methodological approach (and our close focus on just two songs), we are not able here to offer a more fully gendered analysis of humour's role in prisons. Indeed, reflecting back on the wider project in the light of this paper's analysis, we are struck by the extent to which the dynamics and processes discussed above recurred across different prison contexts and populations, in which very diverse forms of femininity and masculinity were experienced and enacted. Even at the individual level, over the course of a single 3-day workshop, some people's performances of their gender identities changed. Perhaps the argument we can offer is that if the weight of imprisonment often falls more heavily on women, and if we have shown that humour in songwriting and sharing helped the women we met both to 'make light' of and to shed light on their imprisonment, then this surely merits the close attention we have tried to give them as writers, and their uses of humour.

In quite different ways, and through their engagements with very different subject matters, the uses of humour in both *The Queen's Hotel* and *Midnight Scampi* invite listeners into a kind of temporary community with their prison-based writers. In the first case, Emma and Ashley clearly had in mind from the outset the expression of solidarity with other prisoners and the wider communication of a message about the conditions of their imprisonment and the suffering produced. In the second case, Maggie's exploration of personal memories set outside prison nonetheless invited a similar solidarity with others involved in the song-writing session. Whether or not she intended it, her song, largely by virtue of exploring a more universal human experience (of relationships with primary care-givers), also encourages connection with a wider

audience. In both cases then, perhaps more significantly than its role as a ‘technology of the self’, humour plays a key role as a ‘technology of community-building’ (something which musicologists have also noted: cf. Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Rosenthal & Flacks, 2011). Reflecting some of Nielsen’s (2011) findings (as discussed above), in these two examples humour is used to build ‘conjunctive joking relationships’ both between people in prison and between prisoners and those in the outside world. These song-generated relationships may be fleeting, like the temporariness of humour itself, but that does not undermine their importance.

Lucy, who was both Maggie’s co-writer and the PhD researcher associated with the wider project, reflected in her thesis on what she heard when she finally ‘tuned in’ to the laughter echoing through the audio recordings of various workshops which she had co-facilitated:

‘I have been struck again and again by how laughter is significant in mediating our relationships. . . In prison-based songwriting sessions, laughter played a whole host of complex roles. Clowning and self-deprecation helped us establish an inclusive, curious, non-judgemental and fun-filled creative environment that was in stark contrast to the derogatory and humiliating interactions commonly experienced in prison’ (Cathcart Frödén, 2022, p. 218).

Through the contrast between the laughter of the sessions and the contexts in which they happened, Lucy indirectly draws our attention to humour’s role as a form of insubordination to penal power and a mode of resistance to penal order that, precisely by virtue of its light-heartedness, temporariness and deniability, may be more possible to explore and express than a more direct challenge. Perhaps most fundamentally, humour re-asserts the humanity of the jokers themselves, inviting their audiences to hear and see them as funny, creative and complex people rather simply as prisoners.

But, very much in line with Laursen’s (2016) analysis, these uses of humour represent a ‘soft’ kind of subversion, insubordination or resistance. Indeed, in *Midnight Scampi*, the resistance is so ‘soft’ that it might easily be missed and may never have been intended. Nonetheless, the invitation to laugh with Maggie is subversive precisely because it encourages us to recognise her as a person and to feel something for and with her via her use of humour. In the case of *The Queen’s Hotel* (and given its pre-history in Emma’s poem), the resistance has a harder edge. Given the obvious risks involved in this more obvious form of insubordination, the writers feel compelled to underline that their song is not to be taken too seriously. They clearly understand the unpredictable effects of prison humour (to which Stark (2025) refers) and therefore seek to build deniability into their protest, precisely by naming it as humorous. But the subtlety of their last verse caveat – ‘Don’t take this seriously and get really mad’ – is that it places the responsibility for interpretation and reaction on the listener. By using humour to create a narrative space between that which is said, for the record and in all seriousness, and that which cannot be said (at least not for the record and with seriousness) and must therefore remain, in a certain sense, ‘unsaid’ (Presser, 2022). Of course, rather than undermining the seriousness of their complaints, the very

need for that caveat – and for the creation and exploitation of that liminal narrative space between the said and the unsaid – underscores precisely why their protest was so necessary and so justified, and why it *should* be taken seriously.

In these examples and in our broader experience of the Distant Voices project therefore, humour and laughter were very commonly employed to lighten the weight of imprisonment and to subvert its seriousness; they also shine light on its darkness. This was not just evident in the many moments of levity that we enjoyed with prison-based participants, but also in the ways in which humour helped them share the load of imprisonment with one another, and with others beyond the walls (as others in our core group noted). Humour and laughter also sometimes resisted contemporary imprisonment's 'tightness' in ways similar to those revealed in Laursen's (2016) research, even if the examples on which we have focussed here are not so illustrative of this point. What both of these examples do show – as readers may have experienced themselves, particularly if they took time to listen to the two songs and perhaps found themselves smiling – is that the humour in these songs, for a few moments at least, reduces the depth of imprisonment: it brings people still trapped in those depths a little closer to those of us 'on the surface'. As Lucy puts it in her thesis:

'Like moments of shared singing, but more accessible, the peals of laughter bouncing around in our shared spaces are the quintessence of how we co-locate ourselves in community. The physical and embodied nature of the sound can be an invitation, a welcome to join in. Despite all the trauma, oppression and injustice we see in systems of state control and structural violence, through laughter we find ways to both identify and locate ourselves with others: to *be together* and to *become together*' (Cathcart Frödén, 2022, p. 219).

If, as seems obvious, narratives are such a critical part of how we produce and sustain ourselves as social animals and as communities, of our being and of our becoming both individually and collectively, then the role of humour in such narratives must surely be an important focus of future study. As we hope we have shown here, the kinds of narratives in focus need to extend far beyond (serious) 'life stories' or 'event stories' (Sandberg, 2016). Other more creative, humorous, fragmentary or partial narratives – like those found in songs or poems – may be just as important and just as revealing, both about what is wrong with how things are, and about what else might be possible.

The humour in these songs therefore illuminates a subtle form of political agency that can be easily overlooked: the micro-political work carried out through everyday resistances (De Certeau, 1988; Scott, 1989) relayed in myriad acts of connection, narration, disruption, insubordination and imagination viable within the relatively safe bounds temporarily generated in and through humour. If, with Arendt (1958), we believe that politics emerges wherever people appear to one another in speech and action – disclosing themselves, affirming plurality, initiating something new in concert with others – then humour constitutes a fragile but vital 'space of appearance', even behind walls designed to disappear people. Through laughter and playful subversion, people in prison temporarily reclaim the capacity to appear and be heard, enacting

small but meaningful contestations from which they are typically excluded. In this sense, humour becomes a medium through which people in prison can momentarily exercise agency, build a shared world, and generate fleeting forms of political life within an environment structured to deny precisely these capacities and possibilities. Humorous practices can thus open a small breach in the carceral order, allowing new relations, meanings and possibilities to surface, however briefly.

We hope that this paper at least makes the case that more work needs to be done to deepen our understanding of how humour (both in its eruptions and in its repression) plays a role in the reproduction, reformation or replacement of carceral systems and practices.

Author Note

The learning generated in the Distant Voices project was the product of a much wider collaborative effort than that of the authors listed here: that effort also included our 'core group' and the community of enquiry from which it was 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.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the presenters and participants at conferences of the American, Australia and New Zealand, and European societies of criminology where various earlier versions of this paper were presented, and through which it has been refined. We are also grateful to the many members of the Distant Voices community of enquiry without whose participation, experience and knowledge, nothing could have been achieved in the project – including the writing of this paper. We are also grateful to 'Emma' for making time to discuss the contents of the paper with Fergus.

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Ethical Considerations

The primary ethical issues that arose in this project related to the vulnerability of some participants (mainly as a result of their [then] situation as prisoners) and, relatedly, the complexities of informed consent and of confidentiality. We developed protocols to mitigate risks associated with participation in general and, in particular, with publication of their songs and stories in any context. To address these issues ethically required complex and, wherever possible, ongoing conversations with participants about how best to handle the tensions between ensuring confidentiality (e.g., through the use of pseudonyms and/or the alteration of information that might have risked identification) while also respecting their wishes to be acknowledged and attributed as co-writers of songs. This also raised complex questions about the management of copyright and IP in the songs (which, in the end, all participants agreed to attribute to the non-profit organisation which had facilitated the songwriting and which was involved as a project partner, Vox Liminis).

Consent to Participate

All project participants whose data is included in this paper offered informed consent to participation in the project.

Consent for Publication

All project participants whose data is included in this paper offered informed consent to the sharing of their songs and stories in project outputs, both creative (i.e., recorded and released and/or publicly performed songs, podcasts, etc.) and academic (i.e., published papers).

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The ‘Distant Voices: Coming Home’ project was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (and the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council) under project reference ES/P002536/1.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

For ethical reasons (related to preferences of and commitments made to the project participants), not all the project’s data could be archived and made available to other researchers. However, some data has been lodged with the UK Data Service and access requests can be made via their website: <https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/855595/>

Notes

1. The project was funded by the UK’s Economic and Research Council under grant ES/P002536/1.
2. See: https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_female_imprisonment_list_5th_edition.pdf, accessed 4th November 2025.
3. Interested readers can watch and listen to a live performance of this song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORLY519sI00>, accessed 22nd August 2025.
4. See: www.voxliminis.co.uk, accessed 9th January 2026.
5. For more extensive discussions of these workshops and of the overall project development and design see, Urie et al. (2019), McNeill and Urie (2020) and Crockett Thomas et al. (2020).
6. This section of the paper is an abridged and amended version of L’s discussion of this songwriting process in her PhD thesis (Cathcart Frödén, 2022).

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