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Teenage kicks

Emma Findlow explores Youth Music's work with the 14–18 age group

Music is one of the most important influences in the lives of teenagers, tied up with issues of identity and freedom of expression. Young people can use music to interpret their own experiences and to gain a wider understanding of the world around them. It is a valuable and liberating tool. Yet there is still a disparity in the music-making opportunities offered to young people from different sections of society. In the light of this, the work of the National Foundation for Youth Music (YM) with the 14–18 age group is particularly thought-provoking, in terms of the nature of YM's provision and the ways in which it has reacted to the needs of our future musicians.

YM's guiding principle is that every young person has the right to make music, regardless of their background and ability, and their work as a charity facilitates this right. Since its inception in 1999 YM has made more than 1,700 funding awards, benefiting 1.4m young people, and has provided music-making opportunities in 98% of local authority areas, working alongside both formal and community-based sectors.

Work with 'At Risk' groups represents a large proportion of YM's work, and has been identified as a priority area for 2005–2010. The foundation has always targeted the hardest-to-reach young people, and was recently selected to deliver the government's Respect initiative, a national programme which aims to tackle antisocial behaviour and raise aspiration. The project aims to turn

perceived negatives about young people into positives, and to challenge stereotypes of 'hoodie youth'.

This £666,000 two-year programme involves one-to-one mentoring of young people by local adults, small-group tutoring sessions on specific topics such as careers, tuition of younger children by older teens, and specialist input by well-known musicians. Working in a positive way with music they really engage with allows young people 'to define and reclaim respect for themselves, other people and the environment in which they live,' according to Christina Coker, YM's CEO. Although the work is in its early stages, Coker is keen to create a legacy, in the form of a toolkit that will be based on direct feedback from the young people and their mentors.

One organisation that showcased its work at the Respect campaign launch was Pie Factory Music, part of the Thanet Youth Music Action Zone (YMAZ). There are now 22 YMAZs across England and two in Wales, which target young offenders, those excluded from school, the learning disabled, the mentally ill and those with special needs. They are funded by an annual £10m of lottery grants, and link organisations from the public, voluntary and private sectors. Pie Factory in particular has worked with over 21,500 participants and raised £275,971 in partnership funding. It is located on the outskirts of a deprived estate where social and economic barriers often lead to crime and disengagement from education. YM have witnessed a 'systematic failure to provide

appropriate care' in such areas, caught up with 'cycles of abuse, neglect and poor parenting'. Mike Fagg, operations manager at Pie Factory, comments that 'on some of the estates here, there are three generations within families who have never worked. Pie Factory is helping young people to see beyond their immediate surroundings, to broaden their horizons.' This taps in to a crucial part of YM's philosophy – to ensure young people have the right to choose, and to channel their energies into constructive and rewarding activities. As a recent participant said, 'It's not that I think I'm gonna be a musician, but I see now that I have choices'.

The current programme at Thanet includes everything from vocal workshops, a rock academy, samba and jam sessions to workshops on traditional instruments. Particularly popular is The Zone, an urban music workshop encompassing DJ-ing, MC-ing, live drums and computer technology. Recently participants produced their first album, *A Piece of the Pie*, which was showcased at the Respect launch, and received a favourable review in popular magazine *Hiphop Connection*.

Programme manager Steve Kreeger talks enthusiastically about the mutually beneficial working relationship that he and others involved with Pie Factory have developed with young people, getting to know their needs and musical aspirations and witnessing first hand the personal benefits that music-making can offer. 'We're very aware that running something just to have it on a flyer



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or website isn't what it's about,' he says. 'If young people can get access to music and develop personally as well as musically we've done our job.' Richard Stilgoe, who has recently taken over from Gavin Henderson as chair of YM, singles out Pie Factory as an example of good practice: 'The most fun bit of the job is going out to see young people making music. Pie Factory is great, mainly because it's not school – almost everything we do is outside school. These projects are sometimes the only times the young people involved work in an organised way and with adults.'

Another initiative that Pie Factory serves to highlight is Workforce Development, also a priority for the 2005–2010 period. This aims 'to improve the quality and quantity of music leadership in order to deliver better music-making opportunities for children and young people.' Pie Factory runs its own music business course, preparing those aged 16 and above to launch themselves into a career in the music industry. It also has its own Young Ambassadors, who promote youth music and represent young people in their local area. As Kreeger explains, their main objectives are 'to develop the YMAZ and be a voice for their peers in spheres that they may not usually get the chance to mix in, such as management meetings, youth forums and where applicable and relevant, local community meetings, potentially with high level council members.' By encouraging and supporting the development of young people as music leaders, and putting them centre stage, YM hopes to ensure that a new

generation is equipped to meet the demands of a changing music education landscape. The opportunity to influence local decision-making is particularly empowering, and underlines the importance of allowing young people to direct their own musical experiences. At Merseyside YMAZ, Young Promoters run their own events at a local bar, getting involved in everything from designing flyers to booking bands, general event organising and sound engineering. As Matthew, one of the young promoters, acknowledges, this caters for a wide range of interests: 'From the point of view of a young band, it's a no hassle gig with a guaranteed audience, no matter how experienced you are as a band. As an under 18 it's a great night out. As a promoter it's a glance into the inner workings of "the biz".'

Coker is keen to emphasise this concept of 'youth-inspired and youth-led'. Once given the initial opportunity, she says, it is amazing what young people can achieve without any adult intervention. A recent example of this was the Build-a-Band competition, which gave five young people the chance to compose a song together and perform it on Glastonbury's Leftfield stage. 'It went incredibly well,' says Coker. 'All five performers said that despite the mud, rain and the toilets, it was a terrific highpoint, and the crowds were very receptive.' The band met for the first time on the Thursday before the festival, where they were tasked with composing a 'modern day protest song', mentored by Glastonbury luminaries such as Billy Bragg. This ties in with another YM

campaign, Revolting Youth, which encourages young people to express their views about issues that affect them (backed by the band Dirty Pretty Things, also performing at Glastonbury). Singer Lizzie Massie, aged 14, describes her Glastonbury debut as 'amazing. All the guys in the band were great and I learnt so much. I really hope that I'll go back to Glastonbury when I'm older.' Although the band came from all across the country, and from different musical backgrounds, they really gelled as a group and with luck will go on to make more music together. Particularly inspiring, adds Coker, was their support of each other's achievements both within and outside the group. She feels this is indicative of the way in which young musicians work together. 'What happens naturally is not only do the young people get involved in making music together, different types of individual achievements start being supported. They are peer-supported in being extraordinary as well as being part of the crowd.' Also flying the flag for young musicians at Glastonbury were the National Youth Orchestra, which receives some YM funding. They trudged through the mud to perform on the Pyramid stage on the Sunday morning. 'We want the congregations in the village churches to hear something appropriate,' said Michael Eavis, the festival's organiser.

Looking at this diverse range of opportunities, it is easy to forget that it wasn't always like this. The ways in which young people are exposed to and consume music have changed dramatically, as Stilgoe



observes. 'Teenagers now have such a wide range of music on their iPods. In my day, there was very little music education and it was for a privileged collection of people. Now it's much less prejudiced.' Coker notes the freedom of musical choice that she sees reflected in her own children. 'They will move quite happily from one style to another – from R'n'B to classical and the shows – and they don't think anything of it. It's all part of what they love and enjoy. In terms of the activities we support and fund, exactly the same diversity and freedom is key to our work.'

Stilgoe's teenage experiences provide an interesting comparison. 'Growing up in Liverpool I was in a rock group and a church choir. I had to make sure one didn't find out about the other! It's different, now, but back then a lot of bits of music were not accepting of the others. I went to Liverpool Philharmonic concerts, and to the Cavern to hear the Beatles. My experience was very wide-ranging and always has been.' Stilgoe has been a trustee of Youth Music from the beginning, and brings a wealth of experience as a singer/songwriter, lyricist and broadcaster. In his new role as chair, he is keen to promote singing initiatives with the 14–18 age group, emphasising its role as a 'fantastically useful tool' which can bring together those of different ages, beliefs, and languages. 'It's very cheap, and you may hate the sound you make yourself but singing together is a different thing,' he adds. 'You learn to be loud and proud and when to shut up altogether. And singing is one of the very few times you get to tell a teenager

to be louder.' The tricky issue of getting teenage boys to sing is easily overcome, he says – just tell them it's a good way to meet girls.

Stilgoe's appointment has provided an opportunity for YM to look back on what it has achieved in the last eight years, and to look ahead to new achievements. Despite its innumerable successes, it is still the case that children from the most wealthy families are twice as likely to be playing an instrument than those from the poorest communities. Coker has drawn attention to this 'substantial disparity', but does she feel the gap can ever be completely closed? 'We have made a significant difference', she says. '1.4m young people have directly benefited from YM initiatives since 1999, and we hope to reach 3m by 2010. For the majority it's their first musical opportunity or the one in which they feel they are in the lead for the first time.' What has made the most difference, perhaps, is YM's distinct focus on equality and diversity. 'We have always had a very egalitarian approach – we've broken the elitist mould. Embracing different types of music is now the norm. This approach is made really clear when you speak to other organisations, and in the Music Manifesto. It hasn't always been like this.'

Widening opportunity and access is naturally a constant priority, and Coker hopes to mastermind improved links and coordination across regional areas. A good platform for raising awareness is Soundstation (www.soundstation.org.uk), which introduces teenagers to a host of new

musical possibilities and inspires them to try new things that may be outside their usual circle of experience. They can find out about initiatives in their area, get careers advice, and take part in online polls, plus there's a jukebox to showcase their work and listen to the work of others.

Coker reiterates that YM will never shy away from those young people who are hardest to reach, and this is clearly a long-term commitment. 'It is Youth Music's job to make sure this is dealt with,' she says resolutely. Another area for future investment is the Olympics. YM is committing £9m of its budget, subject to ongoing Arts Council funding, to encourage young musicians' involvement in the Cultural Olympiad. An appeal for delivery partners and co-investors has recently been announced. Coker's plan is to 'bring forward young people from all sorts of backgrounds, so that in 2012 we see a breadth of confident musicians who want to demonstrate their skills'. Activities will include worldwide singing and celebrations of community music.

I could go on – there are young people all over the country currently benefiting from YM initiatives, new partnerships being formed and future plans taking shape. This article deals only with a section of their target age group – they have achieved a vast amount with early years, for example. As Stilgoe aptly concludes: 'It's amazing that ten years ago it didn't exist – it's hard to think of British music without it.'

www.youthmusic.org.uk

