

Waiting for the doors to open

As government ministers launch a new scheme to help provide rehearsal spaces for young bands, a community music organisation in Gloucester has already set the pace. **MARK BICK** explains



It has been my conviction for many years that community music is about more than just running workshops. Most community music practice is about leading, inspiring and enabling – and if we are serious about empowering people to make their own music, rather than just being passive consumers, it is helpful to think more deeply about what this means. Once someone is inspired and has built confidence, what happens next? For the young people I work with, empowerment means access to some of the heavier and more expensive equipment (drums, amps, decks, computers) and somewhere to make noise without being told to shut up.

So I welcome Undertones singer Feargal Sharkey's new job (now that he's finished being chair of the Live Music Forum) of spearheading a drive to provide affordable rehearsal spaces for budding young musicians. Following recommendations from both the Live Music Forum and the *Music Manifesto report no 2*

Instruments at the ready: Josh, Jenny, James, and Grant wait for their new rehearsal studio to be rebuilt and opened

(see *Sounding Board* autumn 2006) culture secretary James Purnell and children's secretary Ed Balls have tasked Sharkey with setting up a network of rehearsal studios for young musicians across the UK.

Sharkey will work with key music industry figures, local and regional government, equipment suppliers, the Music Manifesto board and others to set up the network. Work will involve getting funding, finding suitable locations and premises and turning them into proper studios.

Ed Balls says he wants to give young people "an affordable and well-equipped place where they can practise and fulfil their potential," and Purnell says that he wants young musicians – however good they are – to have access to a professional studio: "This is about inspiring young people to take up music, giving them an outlet for their creativity and getting them off the streets." A recent report found that 43 per cent of young people who wanted to participate in musical activity didn't because of the lack of facilities or huge costs.

Thoughts on soundproofing

● It is important to be clear about what is needed with sound. Stopping noise to neighbours, getting the acoustics right for recording and limiting noise between rooms, all create different challenges with different solutions.

● Effective soundproofing is not cheap. Our environmental health officer was very helpful with general advice. They have to deal with complaints about people playing loud music and are more than happy to help avoid problems developing.

● Architects do not generally have much understanding of sound proofing. However getting them to collaborate effectively with a sound consultant is not straightforward.

● The sound spectrum curve that is used in assessing the performance of standard wall and floor constructions is designed to deal with speech and recorded sound from televisions etc. It tails off at the point where bass guitar and bass drums kick in!

● Glass to stop sound (particularly bass) needs to be heavy (we have used two layers of 17mm). This is more important than lots of layers, but is heavy and can be expensive to get fitted.

● In conventional buildings most of the sound escapes through the roof. Solid concrete ceilings can solve this and are not extortionately expensive: ours cost about £5,000 a room. (Right young people road testing the slab that will keep the sound in!)



● To stop sound escaping, windows and doors need to be kept shut. You then need a ventilation system in order to breathe! This is not cheap, and needs to have its own soundproofing system of attenuators (fortunately not so expensive).

● We have been told that the most cost effective system to stop reverberation in a room itself is 50mm of Rockwool with a 50mm air gap behind it, held in place by battens and covered with a metal mesh. This is going in as I write, so we are yet to discover how well it works, but being non standard construction makes it difficult to get contractors to do the work.

But it's more than just the need for spaces to practise: it's a desire for independence as borne out in recent research such as *How popular musicians learn*. AS Sharkey says, "it's simply about giving them somewhere to be creative." And, of course, it's not new: in 1987, when developing rehearsal and recording rooms at a youth project in Cardiff, I wrote probably the original music manifesto, *Music for all*, calling for provision of practice spaces for young musicians (and adults) along the lines of the leisure centres that had come out of the Sports for All campaign of that time.

While a pilot of the Sharkey scheme opened in January 2006 in Wrexham (and has already been a major success) we haven't waited for Feargal to give us a hand with funding or finding premises – this autumn Forest of Dean Music Makers will be opening a high quality specialist music rehearsal and recording space for out of school hours and holiday use by young people and adults.

Some young people learn best from listening, others benefit greatly from a bit of teaching and encouragement. But the common need is access to equipment and suitable space

Being in a band, being a DJ, vocalist or creating your own tracks on computer is a great motivator for young people. The first barrier to engaging in these activities is the confidence to start. After 23 years of working in community music I am totally convinced that peer example is the best way of overcoming this barrier. When young people see someone they know, close to their age, creating music then they gain far more conviction that they can do it themselves than can be gained from any "expert". (This is particularly true within a school context when they have seen the individual progress from unskilled to skilled.) The next stage depends on the young person. Some learn best from videos, listening, watching, others benefit greatly from a bit of teaching and encouragement, from peers or from an "expert". But in all cases, the common need is access to equipment and suitable space.

There is a fairly long history of creating space for young bands

to practice, in youth centres, schools, youth arts centres, but they have tended to fall into two extremes, Either badly equipment, badly maintained and not very soundproof. Or highly expensive recording studios, with expensive equipment that only trained staff can use.

Then there is the problem of funding. Paradoxically, funding the capital setup of a rehearsal studio (at least for charitable organisations) is not too difficult, but sustained revenue funding is much more difficult. Making space sustainable means either being in a building where there is other general supervision already funded by someone else, or multiple rooms so that it is more cost effective to provide staff supervision. Probably the largest amount of space across the county is at secondary schools, but I do not know how music teachers cope with the aural abuse of listening to young bands practice for hours in badly soundproofed rooms! From what I can make out, many don't cope and retreat to the staff room, don't allow it to happen, or give up school teaching.

Great theory – what about the practice? It has taken me a long time to get there! From the start of Forest of Dean Music Makers in 2001 young people have been asking us for places to practise without getting complaints from neighbours. The Cinderford MusicSpace project started when Heywood secondary school offered out of hours use of an unused caretaker's bungalow on their site. (Cinderford is an old mining town in the centre of the Forest of Dean in west Gloucestershire. It has a population of 7,000 and includes two of the most deprived wards in the county.)

Involvement of young people is central to the way we work. Our participation group – over 40 young people – have been involved in the project throughout. It quickly emerged that they wanted enough soundproofing to play real rather than electronic drums and that it would not be a simple job to do this. They also needed somewhere they could get to independently and which their parents would see as safe. They wanted it open for long hours and affordable.

But the young people didn't just demand, they helped. More than 30 ran and played at fundraising gigs – one has become so good at e-marketing that we are attracting over 300 to gigs and are struggling to find big enough venues. They were involved in getting local public votes for one funding stream – and that enabled them to see the relevance of the regeneration programme to their needs and interests. Four young people were directly responsible for making two successful Youth Capital Fund applications, presenting the project and hosting a visit to the building. (They also made a presentation to councillors having been nomi-

nated as a possible entry for the National Youth Capital Competition – we came second!)

Over £300,000 has been raised. We have actually received nearly every grant applied for, but it has been very hard work. Architects seem to be incapable of accurately assessing costs at the beginning of a project, which makes fundraising very difficult as it is not generally possible to ask for more than the architect's estimates and practically impossible to increase the grant later. The only option is then to wait while more funds are raised and costs inevitably go up in the mean time. I tried asking the architects to overestimate and to include things that we could later cut, but this did not really work!

A 30 year licence agreement has been negotiated with the school, giving some security – just this process took four months! Relationships with the school have gone through some difficult patches, but are now very good. It has helped considerably that the school site manager is both a parent of two of the young people involved and also on the board of

Over 30 young people ran and played at fundraising gigs. They got local public votes for one funding stream. And four made successful Youth Capital Fund applications

directors of Music Makers.

By contrast the actual building work took only five months, despite inevitable delays and cost over-runs. There is now a second phase of decorating and fitting out, involving young people as volunteers. An opening event is being planned for early autumn 2007.

The building has four practice rooms and a control room. The largest two spaces will each take about 15 people. As well as rehearsal and recording, the building will also be used for training activities, after school clubs, holiday and weekend workshops, individual and small group lessons in vocals, guitars, drums and other instruments. We are liaising with the Drake Music Project to provide specialist equipment so that physically disabled people can join in on an equal basis.

What next? Even this space, at this cost, is not perfect as we have had to compromise to get it done. There is not enough storage space, we could do with one bigger room and some of the old walls are too thin. And it is only one space in one town. To meet the need in just our small area of one county, we need at least two or three more such spaces. Collaboration is going to be essential. Another of the secondary schools has quite a good space already and is some way away from any houses. That town already has a small commercial practice studio. In another town a new youth and community centre is planned and they want to incorporate one music practice space. In the smaller villages there may be village halls that can be used. All sorts of things are possible. All I know now is that I want a rest before starting on anything else.

Where the money's come from

| | £ | | £ |
|-----------------------------------|--------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| Regional Development Agency | 70,000 | Heywood school | 24,000 |
| County council Youth Capital Fund | 60,000 | District council | 15,000 |
| Grants for the Arts | 50,000 | Local charity | 15,000 |
| Landfill Credit Tax Scheme | 35,000 | Aggregates fund | 8,000 |
| Coalfields funding | 27,000 | Smaller grants and local fundraising | 8,700 |
| | | Total | 313,700 |

i nks

Forest of Dean Music Makers
 Mark Bick, project leader
 28 Woodside Street,
 Cinderford GL14 2NS
 T: 01594 825667 E:
 markbick@fdmm.org.uk