

Sounding Out at Stoke Mandeville Spinal Injury Unit by Aaron Meli of Slappingskins

Slappingskins is my business. Slappingskins is my passion! When I was booked to lead a day of drumming, percussion and sound relaxation at the UK's primary spinal injuries unit in Stoke Mandeville I was excited yet daunted at the same time. Thoughts of uncertainty over my ability to engage every member of the group were present but outweighed by feelings of excitement at being given the privilege to lead these music sessions for some of the bravest people in our land.

I've had the pleasure of working in several different hospitals during my eight years of running 'Slappingskins Drumming and Percussion'. It was not until I began working with Chrys Blanchard of Abergavenny on her Soundscape project in 2009 that my eyes were fully opened to the possibility of using sound to assist in the healing process. Subsequent study under Simon Heather of the College of Sound Healing has given me the impetus to further my own study, develop my own sound and take my work out into the community.

Brave and resilient souls they are! The patients who attend the spinal injury unit are a mixed bag. Some old, some young, some severely handicapped by poor movement in their limbs and some so strong and confident that it would make the most sure of us wonder about our own competence.

My remit was to run a morning of workshops lasting one hour long to two groups of patients of between 8-12 participants. This was followed by a lunchtime performance/showcase and an afternoon of textural percussion and softer, relaxing sounds that would be appropriate on the wards for patients that were bed bound. The day was to finish off with an open drop-in session for anyone who had not had an opportunity to attend any of the day's sessions.

More than half of the patients would make their own way to my morning workshop space. Others were assisted and wheeled into the makeshift drumming and percussion parlour for the length of the session. Most patients were able to play a djembe drum and so were encouraged to choose from a selection of West African hand drums and they were attached to the backs of their chairs. One or two patients had bells and shakers attached to their wrists so that they could join in the session and enjoy the lighthearted fun and games along with some therapeutic drumming and grooving.

Tibetan singing bowls and a selection of my favourite gongs were also played during the session as too was my beloved balafon (west African wood and gourd xylophone) and a selection of percussion including the lovely pentatonic vibratones which produce a beautiful wah wah effect. Our lunchtime performance went down a treat as one young patient joined us, playing the balafon and djun djuns (west African base drums).

He strapped on his favourite drum sticks and began playing some lovely melodies and rhythms which I played over backed up by some of the onlookers on shakers and other assorted percussion. A surgeon on his lunch break joined in as did another few members of staff and the sounds of the drums, gongs and other percussion was again drifting through the corridors and attracting curious onlookers and participants.

The morning sessions were really well attended and it was lovely to be able to facilitate the music sessions for those who were able to come. The hospital chaplain, David Elliott, who was instrumental in booking Slappingskins was with me for the whole day. He really came into his own in the afternoon as the both of us moved from bed to bed playing sansulas (thumb piano) for patients who were bed bound and unable to leave their wards.

David is a gifted musician in his own right and he played the sansula with a lovely touch as we drifted through the corridors from bed to bed and ward to ward. Some patients were able to join in

with gongs and vibratones, especially on the children's ward where we met with some enthusiastic participants.

Our day drew to a close with a final drop-in session where people could come and go as they pleased. It was pretty quiet at that time on the Friday afternoon but we played a few improvised pieces and were able to draw an interested crowd for a good deal of the session. My experiences that day were truly humbling and I'm really looking forward to my next visit to Stoke Mandeville and my next opportunity to liven up a hospital ward!

Later this year I'll have the privilege to take part in my fourth annual Soundscape project which will take place at Neville Hall hospital, Abergavenny.

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