



DAN LUNDBERG

# SINGING THROUGH THE BARS

Prison Songs as Identity Markers and as Cultural Heritage

SVENSKT VISARKIV / STATENS MUSIKVERK

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Dan Lundberg

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*Prison Songs as Identity Markers  
and as Cultural Heritage*

Translated from Swedish by Fred Lane

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# Contents

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FOREWORD ·	9
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THE MEETING ·	11
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PRISON SONGS BECOME CULTURAL HERITAGE ·	17
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Voices from Outside .....	17
Collecting Prison Songs .....	19
Anonymisation of Informants.....	22
Birdsong and Prison Songs.....	24
<i>A Society within Society, 26. A Few Words about the History of the Correctional Treatment System, 32. Music as an End and as a Means — a Theoretical Point of Departure, 33</i>	
What are Prison Songs?.....	34
<i>On the Term “Kåklåt”/clink tune, 40</i>	
The Material.....	42
<i>Sundin’s and Skarpe’s Collecting Project, 42. Ternhag’s Collecting Project, 44. Robert Robertsson’s Collection, 48. New Documentation, 51. Other Material at the SVA, 51. Jailbird Singers, 51. The LP Kåklåtar, 55</i>	
Men and Women.....	59
Prison Songs and Cultural Heritageing .....	60
<i>Identification, 64. Categorisation, 64. Standardisation, 65. Symbolisation, 65.</i>	
And Now to the Songs.....	66

VOICES OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COLLECTIVE ·	67
Analysis of the Songs.....	67
Categorising of the Material.....	70
The Voice of the Individual — the Older Category of Songs.....	72
<i>Form and Language, 73. Crime and its Causes, 75. The Prisoner's Predicament, 79. Regret, 85. Longing for Freedom, 86. The Future — Once the Sentence is Served, 89</i>	
The Voice of the Collective — the Newer Song Category .....	93
<i>The Crime, 96. Distancing from Society, 97. Group Identity and Language, 98. Criticism of the Criminal Treatment System and of Society, 101. Life after Prison, 104</i>	
Something about Other Song Genres .....	105
<i>Speed Songs, 107. Erotic Songs, 109</i>	
The Transmission of Prison Songs.....	115
<i>Scrawls on Walls, 118. From Waltz to Shuffle, 125</i>	
The Creative Process.....	127
<i>The Solitary Confinement Cell as a Writer's Cottage, 128. The Prison Revues, 131. Through the Bars — Peder Bläck, 131</i>	
“ONE O’ THEM BLOKES WHAT COULD PLAY” ·	137
Konvaljen .....	137
Interviews as a Primary Source.....	139
Childhood.....	143
Prisons and Music.....	146
Hall Prison .....	149
MNW and Kåklåtar.....	152
Konvaljen and Robert.....	156
Solo Album .....	160
Out of the Limelight .....	163
WHY DO PRISONERS SING? ·	169
Clink Tunes in Transition .....	169
Voice of the Individual and Voice of the Collective .....	169
Clink Tunes as a Genre.....	173

Interplay — Clink Tunes, Archives and Media.....	175
<i>The Interest Affects the Genre, 178. Identification of Clink Tunes, 179. Categorising the Tunes, 180. Standardisation and Archive Loops, 182. Symbolical Tunes, 184. Cultural Heritageing Creates Clink Tunes, 186</i>	
Patterns of Change.....	187
<i>Social Criticism and New Tunes, 188. Changed Meaning and New Forms of Expression, 190. Effects of the Changes, 193</i>	
Clink Songs Today .....	194
<i>Gangstarap, 195</i>	
Music as an End .....	200
<i>...and as a Means, 201</i>	
The Archives, the Music and People on the Margins.....	201
<i>Some Final Words, 204</i>	





# Foreword

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This book would not have been here but for a number of people — first and foremost Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson who has been, throughout his adult life, something of an official representative for prison culture and a figurehead of the genre of prison songs.<sup>1</sup> Konvaljen has gladly made himself available for interviews and recordings of songs for almost 50 years, from 1969 to 2018. His contribution has, as far as I am concerned, been decisive — many thanks!

Many thanks, also, to Robert Robertsson, Tohre Eliasson, Gunilla Thorgren and Gunnar Ternhag! All four were involved in documentation, making music, research and publications in the 1960’s and 1970’s. When I, whilst working on this book, contacted these pioneers they were all happy to talk and to let themselves be interviewed. Robert and Gunnar have also helped me to scrutinise text and transcriptions. The musician Rolf Alm has shared his knowledge of prison songs and also made important contributions to the overall picture via his documentation of Konvaljen and Tohre Eliasson. Rolf has also made important points when we have met to discuss my observations. The sociologist Gudmund Jannisa’s book on the music group “Jailbird Singers” has been an important source of inspiration. Gudmund has also been an intelligent conversation partner towards the end of the process. The author Thom Lundberg has shared his extensive knowledge of the language and culture of Swedish Travellers.

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<sup>1</sup> “Konvaljen” is Lennart Johansson’s nickname — or, rather, stage name — by which he became known in the 1970’s. The Swedish word “liljekonvalj” means “Lily of the Valley”. In everyday speech, Swedes simply say “konvaljen”.

Many more should also be thanked: Sofia Joons, Märta Ramsten, Margareta Jersild, Eva Danielsson, Cristina Viksten, Sussanne Lundberg, Dan Waldetoft at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, Ingrid Miljand and Katarina Kallings at the Prison Museum in Gävle, Patrik Sandgren at the Folklife Archives in Lund, the prison officer Peter Olsson at Hall Prison and of course those at Svenskt visarkiv who have helped with material and knowledgeable comments. I am also grateful to Fred Lane for his careful and dedicated translation of the text into English.

This project has also been discussed in the research project *Mixa eller maxa* [Pluralise or Polarise] in which Mats Nilsson, Karin Eriksson, Anders Hammarlund, Madeleine Modin and Mathias Boström have taken part. This study is a part of *Utanförskapets röster* [Voices from Outside] in which Stefan Bohman and Karin Strand have been my research colleagues and sources of inspiration. I wish to thank Karin in particular for being my most important sounding board as I wrote. Finally I would like to thank, posthumously, Bertil Sundin and Elisabeth Skarpe. Bertil was a predecessor in collecting songs in prisons in the 1960's, and Elisabeth's academic essay (1970) was an important pioneer work on Sweden's prison songs.

This study was made possible by financial support from the Swedish Art Council's research grants to national museums. The publication has been financed by grants from Sven och Dagmar Saléns stiftelse [Sven and Dagmar Salén's Foundation], Kungliga Patriotiska Sällskapet [The Royal Patriotic Society] and Gustaf VI Adolfs Fond för svensk folkkultur [Gustaf VI Adolf's Fund for Swedish Folk Culture].

# The Meeting

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Springtime, 2009. As I left the Underground at Medborgarplatsen in Stockholm on my way home from work, I heard a fiddler playing on the other side of the road. I looked and saw a man the worse for drink or something else who walked fast, leaning back and swaying backwards and forwards along the pavement as he played.

I almost never stop to listen to street musicians unless they play really, really well. It always feels a bit wrong to not give any money after listening — and almost as wrong to dutifully throw a few coins into the guitar case in spite of the quality being dubious. In this case the musician, though by no means sober, played very well...

I crossed the street, slowed down and listened. When the musician noticed that he had a listener he calmed down, leaned against a supermarket window and played with even more empathy.

- You play really well, I said when he had finished the tune.
- Thanks, said the musician. Do you like proper folk music?
- Yes.
- Do you want to hear a good polska?<sup>1</sup>

I realised that there was no way out, and felt in my pocket for suitable coins to donate. The musician leaned perilously against the shop window and played,

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<sup>1</sup> “Polska” is a term used for a number of different triple-time dances in the Nordic countries.

eyes closed, what sounded like a tune from Orsa.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime one of his friends came to say a few words to me.

- He plays good, doesn't he?
- Yes.
- But you should hear him sing. No run-of-the-mill songs!
- Really? What are they, then?
- Clink songs. Songs about prisons and that sort of shit. You should hear him singing with his dad.

I listened some more and thought that he played really, really well.

- Here comes his dad, said the friend. Hi, Konvaljen!
- Konvaljen?

A big, wrinkled older man tramped towards us with a broad smile on his lips and a bag from the liquor store in his hand. I stood and wondered, but recognised him nevertheless. He it was, “Konvaljen”, who was recorded by the SVA (Svenskt visarkiv — the Centre for Swedish Folk Music and Jazz Research) in the 1970's and became a celebrity with his “clink tunes” on two LP's on the MNW label. I had his LP's at home in my collection. I said hello, and asked if it really was him — the well-known jailbird and singer Konvaljen. He lit up when I told him I worked at Svenskt visarkiv.

- You have me there. You recorded me in 71, when I was doing time at Hall.
- That's right. So maybe you remember Gunnar Ternhag.
- Yes, he lived down by Blecktornsparken. A good guy. Is he still into music?
- Yes, he lives in Falun now and he still works with music.

We spoke for a while about the recordings and Konvaljen told me that music was still a big part of his life. We swapped phone numbers and decided that it would be fun to do a new interview, almost 40 years after the last one...

A week later I met Konvaljen again for an interview. It turned out that the fiddler was not really Konvaljen's son — it was just something they used to

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<sup>2</sup> Orsa is a district in Dalarna with a characteristic repertoire of fiddle tunes.

to joke about. The three of us met, anyway, in a park on the South island of Stockholm, documented nine songs and did a brief interview. (sva's collection. sva A 20090403KMO01)

That could have been the end of that particular tale. When the interview had been registered and archived, that little documentation project was to all intents and purposes done. The sva had no plans to begin collecting prison songs again. We put a report about the interview on our homepage to round things off. But my curiosity had been aroused!

I have always been drawn to music on the margins, and remembered listening as a teenager in the 1970's to MNW's two albums with prison songs.<sup>3</sup> There is something fascinating about crime and criminals — in some strange way, at one and the same time both scary and alluring. I started wondering how the recordings were made, who had been recorded and what music means to people in prison.

A few days later I told the music researcher Margareta Jersild about my meeting with Konvaljen. Margareta worked for many years at the sva — she started there in 1962. She recalled that there were more recordings in the archives, made in the 1960's by the music pedagogue Bertil Sundin. She also brought to mind an essay by Elisabeth Skarpe, one of Sundin's students. This was a final essay for Skarpe's bachelor degree in pedagogics. With Jersild's help I found the essay, in which I read that these recordings were stored at the sva. It proved to be a very interesting review of Sundin's recordings from 1965 to 1969. I eventually also found Sundin's recordings. Though a part of the sva's main series, which consists of the sva's own documentation, they were not registered in the database: recordings from prisons were classified as confidential. I was, however, able to find the recordings with the help of the tape records from the 1960's. Now there was no return — I was hooked!

I read Skarpe's essay and everything else I could find that enlightened me, all the while pondering on how I might turn this into a research project.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Musiknätet Waxholm (MNW) is a Swedish record company founded 1969.

<sup>4</sup> Further studies to complement the sva's documentation were a final essay in Folklife Research from 1972 (Berggren & Hardwick), an article by Gunnar Ternhag (1974) and an article by the ethnologist Birgitta Svensson (2001).

Time passed and nothing much happened, but in March 2012 Robert Robertsson — who had seen the report on the sva’s homepage about the interview with Konvaljen — visited the sva. Robertsson was involved in the recording of the LP *Kåklåtar* and toured with Konvaljen in the early 1970’s, and now he wanted to listen to this new interview. He was also prepared to donate his personal documentation from their tours to the sva. Robertsson handed over a comprehensive collection with recordings, press cuttings and photographs. This turned out to be something of a key to making something greater with these prison songs. To begin with, this material was incorporated as a case study in the project *Pluralise or Polarise*, which studied collection and ideology. I thought to try to determine which ideological deliberations had influenced the sva’s collecting of prison songs. Soon, however, a better opportunity came along. Together with Karin Strand, research archivist at the sva, I devised a research plan which involved a three-part study of the songs of people on the margins of society in the project *Voices from Outside*. We involved the ethnologist Stefan Bohman in the project, and applied to the Swedish Arts Council for funding for a three-year-long study of the role of music for marginalised groups. We focussed on three song traditions: “Songs of the Blind” (Karin Strand), “Songs of the Unemployed” (Stefan Bohman) and this, my study of prison songs; all three have in common their origins in social marginalisation.<sup>5</sup>

More complementary material — other than that provided by Robert Robertsson — emerged during my work with prison songs. I received copies of Rolf Alm’s interviews with the musicians Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson and Tohre “Masen” Eliasson from the Folklife Archive in Lund. Copies of the documentary radio programmes produced by Håkan Johansson in the early 1970’s were also donated to the sva. In addition, I have conducted complementary interviews with Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson, Tohre Eliasson, Robert Robertsson, Tom Paley and Gunnar Ternhag.

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<sup>5</sup> The results of this project have been presented in two other books: *Brott, tiggeri och brännvinets fördärv. Studier i socialt orienterade visor i skillingtryck*. (Strand 2016) and *Arbetslösas röster. Visor och låtar av och om arbetslösa 1888–2015* (Bohman 2017).

This book begins with a presentation of the theoretical approaches upon which I base my analysis of prison songs and changes in this genre in the 1960's and 1970's. A review of the documentation of prison songs upon which my work is based is also here. This is followed by a thematic analysis of lyrics and a categorisation of the material, plus a discussion of the dissemination of the songs and the creative process behind them. Then follows a further presentation of Lennart "Konvaljen" Johansson, who became a figurehead for this genre in the 1970's. This study is concluded with a summarising discussion of the development and translocation of the genre from an internal prison environment to a public matter and how the interest shown by archives and record companies influenced the meaning of the expression "prison song". Here there is also a discussion of the function of the songs as an identity marker on both individual and collective levels.

This book is about Swedish prison songs with texts in Swedish. This has of course put special demands on the translation. In the analytical section (chapter 3) the song texts have been literally translated with no attention paid to meter and rhyme. Some texts have however been translated more freely in order to reflect atmosphere and manner — as in "Vad sorg och vad smärta" [Such sorrow, such pain] (p. 92) and "Höstnattsridån" [Autumn's Dusk] (p. 106).

Quotes from Swedish sources have consistently been translated into English, seeking primarily to give the meaning of the contents according to the standard practice for academic literature.





# Prison Songs Become Cultural Heritage

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When the day comes, I will cut myself loose  
From this cell to what-the-heck.  
I'll say thanks for the care and place the noose,  
My only friend, round my neck.<sup>1</sup>

## Voices from Outside

This book derives from one of three case studies which comprise the research project *Voices from Outside*, conducted by the SVA from 2014 to 2016. Three researchers — the literary scholar Karin Strand, the ethnologist Stefan Bohman and the ethnomusicologist Dan Lundberg (author of this book) — have studied three different song repertoires or traditions which share the basic condition of emanating from social marginalisation.<sup>2</sup> It is typical of all three genres that their lyrics thematise the location of marginalisation. The songs also contribute to the creation of an image of the social categories “the blind”, “the unemployed” and “jailbirds”. The songs have, to varying degrees in the various groups, seen members of their own group and/or the rest of society as their intended target groups. In the first case, the songs have a coherence function, helping to create a common group identity; in the second case, the songs seek

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<sup>1</sup> “Snaran” [The Noose], recorded at the Hall prison in 1971. SVA BA1177.

<sup>2</sup> Karin Strand’s study of “songs of the blind” is presented in *Brott, tiggeri och brännvinets fördärv. Studier i socialt orienterade visor i skillingtryck* (2016). Stefan Bohman’s work on songs of the unemployed and workers on strike is presented in the book *Arbetslösas röster. Visor och låtar av och om arbetslösa 1888–2015* (2017). Stockholm: Carlsson.

to spread propaganda and/or make an appeal — an expression of collective or individual experiences or strivings. The marginalisation considered and analysed in the project should be understood in relation to the prevailing social structures and norms in what may be described as modern-day Sweden's emergence and consolidation (circa 1860–1975).

These songs belong to what is called — with a contemporary theoretical term — “subcultures” and have also as research material been in the shadows, outside society's established music traditions.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to prison songs, songs and begging verses of the blind and songs of the unemployed and workers on strike are studied. The use of songs as a means of reaching out and as a strategic tool in these and other social contexts has been important in these groupings. Songs and song sheets were for a considerable part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a relatively effective means of communication — sometimes the only means available to many disadvantaged groups — for social struggle and for communicating experiences, as an identity marker and as a bearer of ideological standpoints. When denied access to public media — newspapers, radio and eventually TV — songs were a unique medium with which to reach a larger circle or audience, particularly if new words were put to a familiar melody that many already knew and were able to sing. The three groups — the blind, the unemployed and prisoners — have in other words some structural similarities in their marginalisation and in their use of songs. Yet apart from these general similarities the groups distinguish themselves one from another in several interesting ways, making it meaningful both to study them separately and to make comparisons between them. One tangible difference is, as has been suggested, the target group at which the songs were aimed. The songs of the blind were — at least from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century — printed on broadsides to

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<sup>3</sup> The American ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin has defined “subcultural musics” as “small musics in big systems” (Slobin 1993). The relationship between subcultures and the superculture (dominant culture) explains the struggle which arises between aesthetic forms of expression in every society, every grouping. The representatives of subcultures lack access to the arenas which are dominated by the majority culture but can, on the other hand, seek alternative routes (cf. Lundberg 2014).

be sold in order to provide an income for a blind person; they were aimed at an “outer” audience — those who could see, who were more well off — with a plea for economic support.<sup>4</sup> The prisoners’ songs were, in contrast, to a great degree an internal repertoire shared between those in prison until the 1960’s. This began to change in the mid-1960’s, when some of the songs were spread in wider circles via record productions — in harmony with the cultural climate of the day. This expansion gave the songs to a certain extent a new meaning. The songs of the unemployed and workers on strike, particularly from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, show a number of variations. Here we find the complete range, from “beggars’ verses” to help an individual to survive to union pamphlets with a clear political message aimed towards society as a whole.

## Collecting Prison Songs

In the mid-1960’s and early 1970’s, the sva — within the framework of two separate documentation projects — recorded songs in Sweden’s prisons. The aim of the first project was to document the repertoire of prison songs which had been a tradition in prisons — a tradition which the collectors felt might be dying out. One of the sources of inspiration was a Danish song collection project among Copenhagen’s tramps and dossers, a project which led to the book *Prinser og vagabonder* [Princes and Vagabonds] by Anders Enevig in co-operation with Dansk folkemindesamling (Enevig 1963). There were a number of explanations as to why the prison song traditions were disappearing. The correctional treatment system was in a process of change: amongst other things, prisoners had greater opportunities to engage in leisure activities. New media — and access to them, even when serving time — also contributed to changes in the way of using music.

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<sup>4</sup> Here I use the term “broadside” in English for the Swedish print format “skillingtryck” and “broadside ballad” for a separate song, well aware that they are not perfect equivalents. Cf. Strand 2014:11p. and ARV, *Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 2018 (to be published) for discussions on the characteristics of Scandinavian song printing.

One main focus for this study is the ways that these songs function as identity markers at individual and group levels. But I also want to analyse the development of the prison song genre in the 1960's and 1970's. The study is based on material from the documentation projects of the sva and does not claim to be all-embracing with regard to the prison songs genre or to music and music-making as a whole in prisons.

The prison songs genre is, to say the least, varied. In addition, it might not even exist in today's prisons. On the other hand, there are lots of signs that rap music has today in many ways taken over the functions that prison songs had in the 1970's.<sup>5</sup>

The most natural thing to do is perhaps to regard songs about life as a prisoner as the core of the prison songs genre. It is, however, hard to draw a border between these songs and other kinds of songs which have been sung in prisons. Many of the informants who have been recorded for the archives have had rather a broad repertoire of older popular music, religious songs and folk songs. A central part of the genre nevertheless consists of songs with lyrics about prison life, and not least about longing: longing for love, for mother and father and, of course, for freedom. Often are to be found, as in the song documented in the Hall prison in 1971 and quoted to open this chapter, despair and resignation — and a sense that death might be a way out.

The Metronome record company released in 1964 the LP *Tjyvbballader och barnatro* [Thief Ballads and Childhood Faith] with the group Jailbird Singers. The LP became very popular, and two of the songs ended up in Sweden's Top 10.<sup>6</sup>

In this period, people became increasingly interested in prison songs, and the MNW record company released the LP *Kåklåtar* in 1972, followed by *Konvaljen* in 1975.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Stakset & Malmberg 2015 and Cederstedt 2012. This has also been confirmed by conversations and correspondence I have had with Peter Olsson 2016, who was in charge of music activities at the Hall prison.

<sup>6</sup> The career of the music group Jailbird Singers was portrayed in 2015 by the sociologist Gudmund Jannisa in the book *Jailbird Singers och det andra 60-talet* [Jailbird Singers and the Other 1960's].

The first MNW record featured a number of artists, whilst the second was a solo album with one of the singers on *Kåklåtar*: Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson. Konvaljen came to personify the prison songs genre and is given a more comprehensive presentation in this study. This new interest in prison songs was in part due to the political currents of the 1960’s and 70’s, and the sleeve of the *Kåklåtar* LP displays an unequivocal ideological message. Part of the album consists of new songs with a clear political view. These prison songs became part of the struggle for better conditions in Swedish prisons. Yet we also find an older category of songs with a different character. The recordings in the sva’s prison song collections are a mixture of older popular and folk songs, and also songs whose lyrics are about prisons and the everyday life of prisoners. In the latter category we find songs about what inmates miss, about longing and disillusion — but also jocular and erotic songs. This book is based upon the sva’s collections of prison songs and one important object of the study is to describe the genre and the function of the songs in the prison environment. Yet I also intend, with these prison songs as my example, to discuss the roles and importance of the archives and of research with regard to musical practices in general. To put it simply: how does collection and research affect the music collected and researched? In the case of these prison tunes, this occurs in an interaction with the increased interest for this genre on the part of record companies and the general public in the 1960’s and 70’s. I also hope that this study of prison songs might give insights into how music can function as an identity marker and symbol for various kinds of groupings in our society. In short, this study aims to elucidate:

- The function of the songs in the prison environment.  
*Who sung prison songs, for whom and in which contexts?*
- Analysis and description of the material.  
*Categorisation of songs with regard to text thematics and the relations of these songs to other similar genres.*
- The bearing on the formation and development of the genre exercised by collection work and the interest shown by record companies and the general public.

- The role of music and songs as identity markers for groupings on the margins of society in general.

The point of departure for this study is essentially the material (the songs) and their function as an identity marker and a part of a common prison culture. One interesting aspect is the fact that the songs in their original function did not target the majority society beyond the prison walls, differing in this respect from the songs of the blind and the unemployed. Many of the prison songs were sung only for members of the same group. The attention paid by the general public, particularly in the 1970's, led to a change in the function of the songs: some of them became symbols of criminal outsidership and the prison songs genre was politicised. The sva's collections of recordings, photographs and press cuttings show how the songs were used as personal accounts, but also as political tools. When the songs moved from the internal context into the public domain, their function changed. This study examines how this change is mirrored in the repertoire. Which songs were suitable, and could be a part of this move into the public arenas? How were they changed? How was this repertoire motivated? Who sang these prison songs?

The material analysed has a strong male dominance. In the sva's collections there is no female representation, apart from a recording of a song gathering at Hinseberg in 1975.<sup>7</sup>

The causes of this uneven distribution of the sexes will be discussed later in this work, but an obvious factor is of course the fact that 95% of those committed to prison sentences in Sweden are men.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> sva BA1891. There is however female representation in the radio programmes produced by Håkan Johansson in 1991, of which sva has a copy. One woman, Christina Calldén, contributes to the LP *Käklåtar*.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.kriminalvarden.se/fangelse-frivard-och-hakte/fangelse/> (2 December 2016).

## Anonymisation of Informants

The identities of informants are an important matter in studies of this kind. The sva has consistently been restrictive with regard to disclosing interview material containing personal discussions and views not related to recordings of music. Here we refer to chapter 7 in Sweden's law on confidentiality from 1980. The law was passed in 1980, but this very praxis was used by sva with regard to material collected in prisons in the 1960's. 24 § in that chapter states that confidentiality applies to statement in recording with dialectological or ethnological content and which has been made or obtained for scientific purposes, if it may be assumed that the person who has made the statement or whom the statement concerns, or someone related, might suffer harm if the statement is disclosed (*Svensk författningssamling* 1980:100).

sva helped to shape this paragraph, which has been used to protect informants and their relatives. This has, in practice, meant that parts of interviews have been removed before giving copies to the general public. Copies of recordings made in prison have never been shared with the general public at all. The law states that this right to confidentiality applies for 50 years after documentation took place. This means that the confidentiality period has passed for some of the material used here.

There are several reasons for having a strict policy when it comes to sharing sensitive material. One is, of course, to follow laws and regulations, but other considerations of a more moral nature should also apply. In research ethics the "requirement to protect the individual" is a norm — individuals should be protected from undue observation of their condition of life, not subjected to "mental or physical harm, humiliation or affront".<sup>9</sup> It must be ensured that the general public is able to trust a state-owned archive in the cultural heritage field — not least because people must feel confident that material entrusted to the archive will be used in a responsible manner. In ethnological studies, an-

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<sup>9</sup> *Forskningsetiska principer inom humanistisk samhällvetenskaplig forskning* [Principles of research ethics in humanistic social science research] Vetenskapsrådet [The Science Board] 2002.



onymisation is often used to protect informants. In this work, I have chosen to anonymise metadata concerning recordings, songs and interviews. I have however made exceptions regarding works in the public domain (phonorecords and radio transmissions) in which the contributors are named. I also name the names of certain key persons in this study who have themselves chosen to make their lives public. This applies to just a few musicians and informants; in general, I have chosen to name only the prison and the year of documentation as provenance, such as: “Recorded at Hall prison 1969”.

## Birdsong and Prison Songs

In a lecture on human ethology, the Swedish zoologist Sverre Sjölander answered his own rhetorical question on why birds sing.<sup>10</sup>

He suggested three explanations: the biological, the ethological and the bird’s own explanation. From a biological perspective, it is simply a matter of hormones. When spring arrives, with longer days and more light, one of the things that changes is the bird’s production of hormones. This affects the bird’s behaviour, and one of the effects is that it begins to sing more. The ethological perspective has to do with mating periods, sexuality and territory. The male, with his singing, can tell of where he is and attract females — and also mark out his territory, perhaps thus scaring off other males. What of the bird’s own explanation? According to Sjölander, it was not so theoretical or analytical. The bird simply feels a need to sing!

The answer to the question of why prisoners sing is, in many cases, not more complicated than that. But there are also other aspects of making music which have to do with identification and group membership. By making music together a group of people can feel a strong sense of affinity, without ever needing to try to find if they have in fact anything in common over and above this

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<sup>10</sup> Human ethology is a part of evolutionary psychology. In human ethology, humans are regarded as one of many varieties of animals and human behaviour is explained in biological terms.

feeling. An often-used example is a singing football crowd which in its exaltation feels togetherness, though most of those singing have never met except at football matches. Musicians and dancers find it easy to feel themselves part of a self-evident oneness, without a need to share values with regard to anything other than purely musical matters. Through music “imagined communities” can be established, to use the historian Benedict Anderson’s well-known concept (Anderson 2006). One of music’s characteristic qualities is its ability to have a representative, emblematic meaning and function as a kind of common denominator — as a symbol of togetherness. Song, language and other cultural forms of expression become, in prison culture, ways of expressing belonging. The British sociologist Simon Frith suggests that music should not be seen merely as representations of culture — values and identities — but also as creators of those values.

The issue here is not how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates and constructs an experience — a musical experience — that we can only make sense of by *taking on* both a subjective and a collective identity [...]. What I want to suggest [...] is not that social groups agree on values which are then expressed in their cultural activities (the assumption of the homology models) but that they only get to know themselves as a group (as a particular organisation of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) *through* cultural activity, through aesthetic judgement. Making music isn’t a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them. (Frith 1996:109p)

The answer to the question of why prisoners sing is, in other words, complex. Frith makes a significant point: that music is a way of living — or shaping — ideas. Yet we cannot deny the intrinsic value of music or music-making — the aesthetic dimension; people devote a great amount of time to aesthetic pursuits such as music, art, dance and writing because this has a value in itself. Sometimes we sing because we feel the need to sing — quite simply!

The American ethnomusicologist Alan P. Merriam distinguishes between the use and the function of music. His model has two levels of significance, where use is the first and most superficial. This can be exemplified by lullabies.

A lullaby is used to help a child fall asleep. Yet on a more overarching level, lullabies have other functions: through the songs, the child learns — among other things — language, values, cultural patterns and musical structures. The use of music is often apparent to the singer or musician. The function of music is however, something of which those who make music and those who listen are often — though not always — unaware. Prison songs — to return to the subject in hand — have been and are present in a number of different contexts. The use that is closest to hand is amusement — or expressing feelings, or conveying a message. The function can, however, be to create a “we” — an identity as a prison inmate, as part of a community that exists in the outsidership of prisoners in relation to the majority society. Songs can be sung without other listeners than the singer, yet still own a collective significance.

#### A SOCIETY WITHIN SOCIETY

The American sociologist Erving Goffman coined the phrase “total institutions” in his book *Asylums*, 1961. Goffman’s ideas had a great impact in socially-oriented studies of correctional treatment and other institutional care in Sweden and elsewhere (Sundin 1970, Ehn 1971, Berggren & Hardwick 1972). By total institutions, Goffman means various kinds of institutions in which a large number of individuals in the same situation live isolated from the rest of the world. This isolation can be manifested in many total institutions in the form of physical barriers such as locked doors, barbed wire, walls and geographical isolation — but also via social barriers in the form of bans and behavioural controls. Another important aspect is the aim of the institution, namely to effect changes in the behaviour and values of the inmates.

There is a clear distinction between the two main groups of individuals who spend time in an institution: inmates and personnel. Each group tends to generalise about the other group, viewing the other stereotypically and antagonistically. The personnel tend to see themselves as superior and just, whilst the inmates see themselves as inferior, weak, unjustly treated and often innocent. The social distance between the groups is great, and mostly regulated. There



The heavens seen from the old county jail on Långholmen island, Stockholm. The Nordic Museum's documentation of 1975, Photographer: Nils Blix.

is also an important difference in the information available to them: inmates often know little with regard to coming events, diagnoses and treatment plans. The personnel, however, control such structural processes — often without the participation of the inmates. This mastery of information manifests the uneven balance of power and increases the control that personnel exert over inmates.

The jailbird and singer Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson has described this in a song. Here he introduces this song in a radio programme from 1991:

Well, one day I was crossing that bridge of sighs. That's what it's called, that bridge in front of Långholmen, you know. I arrived in that filthy jail on Långholmen island. There I got a bath. They changed my name too. I wasn't Lennart Johansson any more. Now I was called 2869.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> SVA BB627706.

Countercultures tend to emerge in total institutions. A counterculture functions as a kind of shield for the inmates. In the 1940's the sociologist Donald Clemmer introduced the concept "prisonisation" to describe the community of values — an "inmate code" — that emerges in a prison environment (Clemmer 1940). Prisonisation involves the creation of traditions, habits, values and a system of norms which in various ways differ from those of prison personnel and the rest of society (cf. Mathiesen 2005). Prisonisation functions as a defence: by creating a collective group identity, inmates can protect themselves from the social exclusion that surrounds them. The prison culture thus created gives the individual prisoner security but also positions the individual as a social outsider, which has its advantages in prison but also means an increased stigmatisation in the eyes of the remainder of society. When the prisoner is released, time duly served, this can involve problems: suddenly the ex-inmate stands alone in the world, devoid of the shield of fellowship that the collective provided. Many prison songs also express fears about life after release.

Now I wait, restless that night will pass.  
I know that my freedom tomorrow is here.  
But alone with freedom I must live, alas!  
Down my cheek will shine and run a tear.  
("Ensam är jag" [Alone Am I], Långholmen 1967)<sup>12</sup>

Charles Källström relates the prisoner Jonas's tales from the prison world of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the book *Lifstidfången. Märkliga upplevelser inom svenska fängelser. Berättade av honom själv*. [The Prisoner for Life. Strange Stories in Swedish Prisons. Told By He Himself] (Källström 1907). Jonas's story is a moral tale, typical of free-church propaganda against drunkenness and immorality in the early 1900's. Jonas is a drunkard, and one day he gets into a fight and kills a man. He is sentenced to death for this crime, but his sentence is commuted to life imprisonment. After many adventures behind bars, Jonas finds God and repents his life of sin. He ends up in the Långholmen prison, and after 29 years

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<sup>12</sup> SVA BA100.

inside he is pardoned in 1906. This is of course a dream come true, but soon he finds that freedom for a once-sentenced jailbird is not the happy existence he imagined. The book ends with this painful statement:

Was the world so cruel, that it wanted not to know me? Was I perhaps, all things considered, wrong to ever leave prison? There I could, at least, evade searching looks and hurtful words. Perhaps it would, anyhow, have been best for me to stay where I was, behind those prison walls.

In the article “Fångnen på Bogesund” [The Prisoner in Bogesund] the ethnologist Billy Ehn describes the process of socialisation into prison culture as “resistance to degradation” (Ehn 1971:291pp). On the basis of Goffman’s theories, Ehn maintains that total institutions such as prisons and mental hospitals actively and deliberately destroy the social identities of inmates and “eliminate the individual’s civil means of expression” (Ehn 1971:291).

An example of this: when admitted and registered, the inmate’s identity documents, keys, money and clothes are taken. This constitutes a severe violation of the individual’s social and cultural identity and integrity. The connections of the individual to life outside the institution are hidden away. This is manifested when the prisoner is transformed from a person into a prison number. Prison numbers still exist, but since the early 1980’s they are not used when addressing inmates — a result of reforms which led to a humanisation in the correctional treatment system (Miljand 2017). Prison numbers were in universal use for those sentenced to detention. The detention sentence, which was revoked in Sweden in 1981, involved a minimum sentence which could be prolonged. The idea was to keep repeat offenders behind bars for an indefinite period. Having served the minimum sentence, the inmate could make an application for release and was in that case given a five-year probation period. A new offence during that period meant a direct return to prison. Those sentenced to detention retained their prison numbers “for future use”. The number was a sign of identity, and many prisoners had their numbers tattooed on their arm.

In Sweden’s cell prisons of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, prisoners were masked when outside their cells, for example when being escorted to the exercise area. One

reason for this practice was to anonymise the prisoners so that it would be harder for them to get to know one another and communicate. Another reason was the wish to break down and wipe out the criminal identity of the prisoner in order to fashion a new, honest person with stronger morals. Masks had previously been used in prisons — mainly to ridicule or sneer at the prisoner.<sup>13</sup>

Anonymisation can, of course, also be a way to protect the individual. When the SVA made recordings, it was often discussed whether or not the name of the informant should be given. In the protocol of the SVA BA 97 recording, the SVA's Bertil Sundin writes: "N.B.! All names confidential" and the person interviewed answers, when asked, that he would prefer not to be named in the documentation but that his prison number can be used:

BS: If you would tell us first a little about what your name is and what you have experienced previously.

*Yes, I don't want to give my name. Instead I will give my storage number, 3251 Eriks-son. That's my number.*<sup>14</sup>

In order to counteract the degradation of their social and cultural identities, the inmates thus create — if possible — new communities of values. Ehn indicates various arenas and strategies for such resistance, one of which he calls prisoner culture — common values and views.

The knowledge that prisoners gained via their interaction with one another constituted another important part of the prisoner culture. This applies in particular to knowledge of how the prison worked, of the traits of the prison guards, of privileges and rights. A certain prison lore [and] fragments of a widespread prison language [...] (Ehn 1971:294)

In this way prison inmates are similar to many other kinds of groupings in society. Various types of alienated and marginalised groups have always had their particular features such as language, signs, clothing, etc.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <http://sverigesfangelsemuseum.se/ansiktsmask/> (collected March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016).

<sup>14</sup> SVA BA97.

<sup>15</sup> In *Stockholms förbrytarspråk och lägre slang 1910–1912* (1912), Arthur Thesleff names — in addi-

The prison language, sometimes called “månsing” or “argot” in Swedish, was a way to create a fellowship and detach the group from the rest of society.<sup>16</sup>

In the same way, learning or knowing prison songs has been a route to socialisation. Some of the songs contain linguistic markers — certain words in the songs are prison lingo. The sociologist Ulla Bondesson has in a Swedish survey discussed the prisonisation process in Scandinavian prisons. She underlines the importance of language as a cultural marker. A test which charted “prison lingo” was used in the survey as a measure of the degree of prisonisation (Mathiesen 2005:39). A certain vocabulary, which can contain many or just a few words, is used to express a distinction. Language is used to demonstrate allegiance to prison culture and, at one and the same time, distance to the rest of society. The ethnologist Annica Lamroth listed in her book *Kåkfårare. Fängelselivet på Långholmen 1946–1975* [Jailbirds. Prison Life at Långholmen, 1946–1975] words and expressions used in interviews with inmates of Långholmen prison (Lamroth 1990). She emphasises that the language was a way to communicate without the guards being able to understand or a means to communicate quickly and effectively when under pressure. As one of those interviewed in her survey expresses it:

For us jailbirds and those who live their lives outside the law it is important that we have a vocabulary of our own so that we can say something to someone without people nearby understanding. (Lamroth 1990:56)

Lamroth states that prison lingo was widely known and in use in the prisons as late as the 1970's. This is also confirmed by the material upon which this book is based.

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tion to “förbrytarspråket” [Offenders’ language] and the language used by young ruffians — the slang used by various occupations such as carters, coachmen, masons, carriers, firewood vendors, smiths, tin-smiths, carpenters, tram workers, bakers, washerwomen, telephone workers, stone cutters, dockers, chimney sweeps, conscripts and seamen.

<sup>16</sup> *Månsing* is also the name of a language used by travelling vendors. *Argot* is a originally a French word, meaning both “offenders’ language” and slang in general. In Swedish slang the word has been used mainly in the former meaning.



A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE HISTORY  
OF THE CORRECTIONAL TREATMENT SYSTEM

Detention aiming at rehabilitation is a relatively recent phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> Up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century the normal penalties for crimes were the death sentence, corporal punishment, public shaming or forced labour. People were jailed while waiting for another sentence. Prison sentences became more and more common, but as late as 1734 more than 60 different crimes merited the death penalty in Sweden. More human approaches regarding penal sentences grew forth in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. More and more people reacted against the way in which various categories such as destitute people, orphans and the mentally ill were previously shooved together with hardened criminals in houses of correction and spinning-houses. Vagrancy and unemployment could also lead to incarceration, and for many in these categories this could be the gateway to a life of crime. This new approach to the role of prisons emanated from the liberal trend of the age. In 1825 *The Committee for the Prisons and Workhouses of the Realm* was established — a predecessor to today's *The Swedish Prison and Probation Service*. According to the new liberal ideas developed by — among others — the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the soul should be cured: the prisoner should be able to repent his crime and be morally rebuilt in order to get “well”. One feature of this new attitude was the cell system. In order to attain insight regarding his guilt the criminal should be isolated — which necessitated a new type of prison in which each prisoner had a personal cell. In 1844, Sweden's parliament decided that every county should have a cell prison. Thus cell sentences emanated from humanitarian ideas — but turned out to be a cruel form of punishment. Being completely isolated was destructive and often led to both physical and mental impoverishment. Various modifications were subsequently effected, but the cell sentence remained until a new law came into force in 1945. The cell prisons were nevertheless still used though the prisoners were no longer isolated to the same extent, but allowed to mix for certain periods.

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<sup>17</sup> This passage is based on Sundin 1970.

MUSIC AS AN END AND AS A MEANS  
— A THEORETICAL POINT OF DEPARTURE

Music's double functions as an end and as a means in social contexts have been discussed in a number of studies, for example Lundberg et al 2000 and Liljestam 2006. To describe it briefly, music (and music texts) can be given two functions, on different levels — music is both that what is clarified and that which clarifies. The musical activities can be seen as the activity's end — aesthetically, emotionally or socially. At the same time the same songs can have an instrumental meaning as a means to create and communicate various kinds of messages, both internally in a group and externally. Another aspect of the different levels of significance in music has also previously been discussed by the American ethnomusicologist Alan Merriam with the terms "use and function" (cf. p. 25). When we discuss music as a means in relation to marginalised groupings there is an important distinction between its function within the grouping and its outward function — towards the majority society that surrounds it. The American ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino distinguishes in his book *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* between participatory and presentational music-making — a distinction that can shed light upon this matter (Turino 2008). The internal (participatory) use of music is an important factor in the creation of a "we" — music-making and other aesthetic activities increase the sense of fellowship of the participants. The collective identity emerges and is strengthened by aesthetic practices. There is at the same time a need to portray the grouping as cohesive and united vis-a-vis others. The same music can be used in concerts and such in which the music has a presentational role.

In an article from 1990, the Swedish ethnomusicologist Anders Hammarlund used the terms "catalytic" and "emblematic" in a similar way (Hammarlund 1990:92pp). The most important difference, compared with Turino, is that Hammarlund speaks of the function of music and not of music-making as such. To put it simply, music's emblematic function may be described as symbolic and representative — music creates a sense of belonging, at the same time demarcating one's own group from others. The catalytic function is to be

found in the everyday use of music — for mixing with other people and creating a social context.

## What are Prison Songs?

I have called the material upon which this study is based “prison songs” [Swedish: *kåklåtar* or *kåkvisor*]. But what are, in fact, prison songs? As often, when it comes to folk and popular music, the terminology can be diffuse and vague. Many different names occur in the interviews. Two of the studies in this field attempt to define the genre. In the essay *Om innehållet i kåkvisor* [On the Contents of Clink Songs], Rita Berggren and Sylvia Hardwick write that they study:

...songs written by prisoners and passed down within the walls. We feel unable to impose limits based on contents — that they must, for example, be about prison. In our opinion, clink songs can in general be about anything at all — though they will naturally be confined to certain spheres of interest. The prisoner writes about what is relevant to him in his situation. (Berggren & Hardwick 1972:3)

The music researcher Gunnar Ternhag defines prison songs as “... Songs written and sung in prisons, about prison or crime environments” (Ternhag 1974:168). In other words, Berggren and Hardwick impose no limitations on the contents of the songs, but ask that they should be written by prisoners and passed down in prisons. Ternhag, on the other hand, demands in addition that the contents of the songs should concern prison and/or crime environments.

Another feasible criterion of genre might be practice: that the songs are sung by prisoners, which might well be more decisive than that they were written by prisoners. The fact is that we are often, as with many song genres in which songs are passed down, unable to say who wrote either words or music. We can assume that they were written in a prison environment by prisoners, but the people who wrote them are for the most part unknown.

When it comes to genres associated with particular groupings it is common to critically reflect on affiliation by discussing the senders, receivers and

themes of the songs. Who sings, for whom and about what? The text researcher Bengt R. Jonsson reasons in a similar way regarding emigrant songs.

The question may in part be formulated thus: are emigrant songs about, by or for emigrants? This same question arises with regard to, for example, songs of sailors and soldiers. And as with these other categories we find different answers from case to case. (Jonsson 1981)

Prison songs resemble other kinds of trade songs or work songs (if crime is to be regarded as a “trade”?!). One of the more well-publicised sub-groups within the work songs category is the songs of the railway navvies. The Swedish musicologist Margareta Jersild and text researcher Bengt R. Jonsson suggest that the songs of railway navvies comprise both songs directly connected to work activities when building railways — used to synchronise collective efforts — and songs directly concerning railway navvies and their work (Jonsson & Jersild 1963). The songs used to synchronise collective efforts have of course no counterparts in the prison songs genre, whilst the other category certainly has.<sup>18</sup> Jonsson and Jersild suggest, in other words, that the railway navvy songs in the latter category are songs about “railway navvies and their work in general” (Jonsson & Jersild 1963:20). Such a definition does not demand that these songs must be sung by railway navvies or written by them. If we apply the same argumentation to prison songs, this would imply that a prison song might be written and performed by someone who had never set foot in a prison. Cornelis Vreeswijk’s song “Mördar-Anders” [Anders the Murderer], written for the group Jailbird Singers’ LP *Tjyvbballader och barnatro* [Thief Ballads and Childhood Faith] (1964) is a thorny case. The group consisted of three prisoners from Stockholm’s Långholmen prison. After the group’s LP had been released, Cornelis sung the song himself when he, together with Ann-Louise Hansson and Fred Åkerström, released the LP *Visor och oförskämdheter* [Songs and Insolences] a year later. Since Cornelis (then, at least) had not served time,

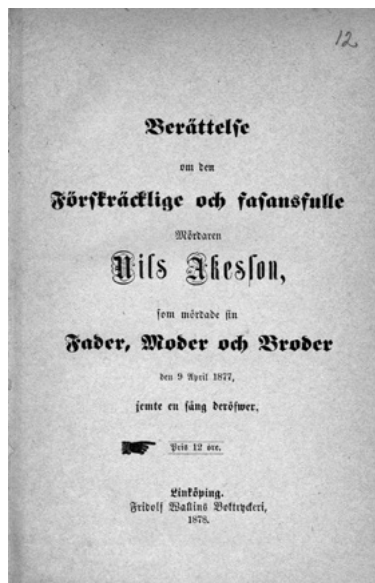
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<sup>18</sup> Songs belonging to the first category — songs used to synchronise collective efforts — were however recorded by John and Alan Lomax and sung by black prisoners doing forced labour in the Southern States of the USA in the 1930’s. Lomax 1947:134pp.

it is feasible to say that Mördar-Anders was not a prison song when Cornelis sung it, but that it was when performed by Jailbird Singers. If we adopt Jersild and Jonsson's argumentation, we avoid the need to split such hairs. I choose instead to look upon prison songs as a system of song categories with various senders and receivers. At the centre of the system is a solid core, and its genre is indubitable — we can easily agree that these are prison songs. In this work I adhere to all intents and purposes to Bengt R. Johnson's reasoning regarding emigrant songs (see above quote) and conclude that the core of the concept "prison songs" is songs about prisons, life in prisons, crime and criminal environments. The songs have in most cases been composed by prisoners, but to insist on this as an absolute condition for including a song in this genre would be to complicate demarcation to an unnecessary extent. On the diffuse periphery of this concept we find songs which are sometimes regarded as prison songs, sometimes not. Here we find, for example, songs from the popular music repertoire that romanticise prison life — songs like "Tjuvarnas konung" [King of the Thieves] or Sven Olof Sandberg's hit song "Sonja", the latter being a sentimental portrayal of the last night in the cell for a prisoner sentenced to death. Here are also to be found erotic songs sung in prisons, but also sung in other contexts — an important part of the material recorded. Another category on the periphery consists of songs that have been sung in prisons and which romanticise narcotics and their use.

A category of songs close to prison songs are the so-called "evil-doer songs" or "malefactor songs" (Swedish: "missdådarvisor/malificantvisor) — spread as broadside ballads, particularly during the nineteenth century (cf. Strand 2016). Many of these songs are about crime, and the action often takes place in prisons.

Malefactor songs often first tell of a crime, then of what happens later: capture, sentencing and finally the punishment — often death. It is usually the malefactor who gives a first-person account. The words were, though, often written directly for the broadside medium by writers who had never had anything to do with prisons or prisoners. Whether or not these songs have ever been sung in prisons is not clear — what is clear, however, is that they are to-



“Sonja”, with Swedish lyrics by Sven-Olof Sandberg. “Sonja” was released by the Odeon record company in 1928 with Sandberg as vocalist. To the right, a broadside from 1878 from SVA’s collection: “The tale of the dreadful and gruesome murderer Nils Åkesson, who murdered his father, mother and brother on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, 1877, and another song in addition”.

tally absent from the recordings at SVA. When this project began I thought that discussions about definitions would not be necessary, since this study is almost completely limited to one of SVA’s documentation projects in the 1960’s and 70’s. The matter turned out, however, to be not entirely without complications. There are, for example, hit songs and jazz standards in the material which have been recorded in prisons but have not been included in this study. The musical aspect of prison songs is also of interest. There are a number of prison songs with melodies of their own, but most — like broadside ballads, occasional songs and drinking songs — recycle well-known melodies. The use of familiar melodies was surely also of great importance for the survival chances of the songs. If the songs are to be spread, they must be able to be orally trans-

ferred from one person to another — and this is impeded if the tune is hard to remember. The tunes to, first and foremost, the older category of songs stick to convention, using tunes familiar to a large part of the general public. Well-known tunes like “Alpens ros” [Rose of the Alp], “Lejonbruden” [The Lion’s Bride], “Apladalsvisan” [The Apladal Song], “Nicolina”, “Lili Marlene” and “När som sädesfälten böja sig för vinden” [On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away] are used for a number of songs. Melodically, these tunes bear the stamp of the musical conventions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: many are waltzes with distinct major melodics, often based on triads (Edström 1989:76). It is also worthy of mention that the style of singing is in most cases typical of popular song rather than traditional folk song. Studies of traditional styles of singing show that a traditional song ideal differs in many ways from both art music and the ways of singing popular songs. The researchers Margareta Jersild and Ingrid Åkesson characterise the traditional manner of singing in the following way:

The clearest common traits are a pitch close to the speaking voice, tonal placement far forward, a crisp approach to tones, individual variations of pulse and tempo, turns at the beginnings and ends of trills and melismas, distinct consonants and other speech sounds and a delivery in which every phrase is a unit. (Jersild & Åkesson 2000:138p)

Using that perspective, we are able to observe that prison songs belong stylistically more to the domains of popular song rather than to traditional song. Singers of prison songs more or less generally use a greater range, often in a relatively high pitch, and clearly strive for a “handsome” sound — their goal is a sonorous, cultivated way of singing. They often glide into tones and use vibrato, which almost never occurs in traditional singing.

Karin Strand writes that in the earlier broadside repertoire there were often couplings between the melody and original text and the new text, but that this connection ebbed away during the 1800’s (Strand 2016:15). In prison songs there is, however, often a connection between the text and the atmosphere created by the melodic language.

The use of melodies in a minor key is however not as common as might be anticipated, considering the fact that the songs often tell of sorrowful destinies. The melodies are by contrast often of the popular-music variety, often in a major mould in keeping with the conventions of the early 1900's. Strand also points out that "the associations of the original text can lie beneath as a meaningful pattern" (Strand 2016:15). Some prison songs also refer to parts of the original text, not least by making parodies, as when Povel Ramel's "Naturbarn" [Nature Children] contributed its melody to "Problembarn" [Problem Children], with the refrain:

Problem children, not be good.  
 Everything but problem children not worth having.  
 ("Problembarn" [Problem Children], Hall prison, 1972)<sup>19</sup>

"Hejsan gojting" borrowed both melody and text structure from Cornelis Vreeswijk's "Brev från kolonien" [A Letter from Camp].<sup>20</sup>

Hi, good looker, my only one.  
 Here's a letter from your well-known  
 Post robber known as Jompis.  
 I'm sitting here and waiting for a crony.  
 ("Hejsan gojting [Hi, Good Looker], Hall prison, 1972)<sup>21</sup>

The ethnomusicologist Märta Ramsten has described how the re-use of melodies in broadside ballads can be meaningful (Ramsten 2015:121pp). This means that text and music interplay and their contents reinforce one another.

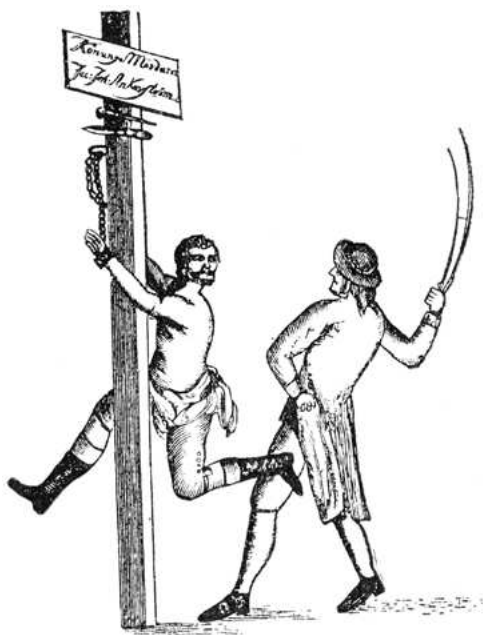
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<sup>19</sup> SVA BA1410

<sup>20</sup> "Brev från kolonien" from 1965 is a translation of Allan Sherman's parody "Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh". The melody is from Amilcare Ponchielli's "Dance of the Hours" from the opera *La Gioconda*. *Gojting* is prison slang for "good looking".

<sup>21</sup> SVA BA1410





“Kåkstrykningen” [The pole-lashing] of Jacob Johan Ankarström (contemporary drawing). Before being executed for the murder of King Gustav III, Ankarström was lashed for three days on three of Stockholm’s squares. The term “kåkstrykning” meant “lashing at the shame pole”.

#### ON THE TERM “KÅKLÅT” / CLINK TUNE

A search in the *Dagens Nyheter* database shows that the Swedish term “kåklåtar” (clink songs) is used for the first time in 1972, when the LP *Kåklåtar* was launched. The Swedish word “kåklåt” is interesting as a compound of the slang word “kåk” (prison) and “låt”, a popular term for melody or song. In English this might be rendered as “clink tune”.<sup>22</sup>

The term “kåkvisor” [clink songs] was used as early as 1956 by “Bang” (the journalist Barbro Alving) in the article “Alltid en krogsväng först för flickorna

<sup>22</sup> Since “kåk” has been used by inmates of Swedish prisons since the 1600’s (at least), it would seem more reasonable to describe it not as a slang word but as part of a sociolect.

på lösen” [Always a pub crawl first for the light-footed girls] where she, in a series of articles entitled “Bang on Långholmen” portrays life in the women’s section of Långholmen prison.

The tone changes when ladies from Växjö sing clink songs that aren’t fit to print in a newspaper, stub out their cigarettes as though taking part in a house-wrecking injury party and leave a court trial bawling desperate threats.

Barbro Alving’s use of “kåkvisor” in 1956 is the only example in *Dagens Nyheter’s* archive from before 1970. Alving’s articles contain a number of examples of a vocabulary which signals “insiderness” and she made deliberate use of prison lingo in order to increase the authenticity of her reports.

It is clear that the prefix “kåk” has, in the internal prison lingo, long been used for phenomena connected with life in prisons. The term “kåklåt” spread beyond the walls after 1972. The great amount of attention given to the LP *Kåklåtar* helped, of course, to establish the term. Yet none of these terms are used on the Jailbird Singers LP from 1964. The title of the LP uses “tjyvballeder” [“thief ballads”]. Cornelis Vreeswijk, who wrote some of the lyrics and also the sleeve notes, discusses genre affiliations:

Listen to the first side of this record, and you will hear something called “Mördar-Anders”. It’s a song based on an English ballad from the 1700’s — “Sam Hall” — about a man who is about to be executed, and says in fairly coarse terms what he thinks about it. This song is not suitable for children. This is how JAILBIRD SINGERS sound when they are in their acridly dramatic mood. Yet if you listen to “Där björkarna susa” [Where Birches Murmur], you will hear sweet voices with a delicate lyrical sound. And how about “Jungman Jansson” [Deckhand Jansson] in a modern, bold package? Most of the songs the lads sing are in Swedish. The presence of a few old Christian salvation songs might confuse you. But this is nothing other than gospels in Swedish. Tony Granqvist learned these songs — “Pärleporten, Ovan där, Barnatro” — when he was a little lad, since his mum was a deeply religious woman. The part of the record which is in English also contains some religious music. Tony Granqvist sings “Precious Lord, take my hand” solo, and accompanies himself on piano and organ (with the organ added afterwards).

It was the pleasure of the undersigned to write the words to four of the songs, which Tony arranged. Three of the four are old Anglo-Saxon folk melodies and one is a genuine black blues, “En öl till” [One More Beer], with a New Orleans pedigree. Working with Jailbirds has been immensely stimulating. My friend Tom Paley has been kind enough to help with the recording of these four numbers. He is an American ballad singer, and the banjo and blues guitar you hear are played by him.

This is the first LP with JAILBIRD SINGERS and it is definitely what is called “something else”. You could call their music HOOTENANNY, but note that it has a sound of its own and is aimed at the Swedish listener. And if you have an ear for such, there is even a hint of some sort of a tendency. Just listen closely and enjoy! (Vreeswijk 1964)

Cornelis Vreeswijk underlines the great breadth of the repertoire, and that the presence of religious songs on the record might surprise. He points out that Tony Granqvist had learned these songs at home. Religious songs were, in fact, frequently to be heard in prisons — due, not least, to visits by non-conformist choirs. The three members of Jailbird Singers also sung in the Ebeneser church choir which regularly visited the prison.

The term “kåklåtar” has, then, been popularised as a result of the attention paid to the LP with the same name. It is also reasonable to assume that SVA’s collection activities have influenced both language usage and the genre’s contents.

## The Material

### SUNDIN’S AND SKARPE’S COLLECTING PROJECT

Bertil Sundin (1924–2010) was contacted by Ulf Peder Olrog and the SVA in the early 1960’s and asked if he could help the archive to collect prison songs. Olrog was inspired by the Danish book *Prinser og vagabonder* [Princes and Vagabonds] which was published by the author Anders Enevig in collabora-

tion with Dansk folkemindesamling in Copenhagen. (Enevig 1963) In the late 1950's Enevig had recorded and documented dossiers, tramps, travellers and others in the Copenhagen area. The SVA was interested in carrying out a similar project, and chose to document song traditions in Swedish prisons. Bertil Sundin, who later became a professor of music pedagogy at Lund University, worked in those days in Sweden's correctional treatment system whilst at the same time working as a PhD student in pedagogy.<sup>23</sup>

Sundin began his work on the project by asking personnel and inmates in various prisons about prison songs. This led in time to him coming into contact with people who knew of and sung prison songs. Between 1965 and 1967 Sundin recorded five reel-to-reel tapes with prison songs and interviews with transmitters of the tradition. He complemented this work in 1969 when he and one of his students, Elisabeth Skarpe (1947–1992), made three more documentations at the Hall prison outside Södertälje and at the Norrköping institution.<sup>24</sup> Sundin and Skarpe recorded in total 46 songs with eight male singers. Sundin himself did not process or analyse this material, but Elisabeth Skarpe's final essay for her bachelor's degree in pedagogics, *Kåksånger. En analys av en fängelsetradition* [Prison Songs. An analysis of a Prison Tradition] was based on these recordings.

Skarpe relates that searching for informants was like being a detective. Sundin asked the prison staff at an early stage, but they were as a rule unaware of the existence of the tradition. This lends weight to Goffman's portrayal of total institutions — two distinct social and cultural worlds develop in parallel, with little mutual cultural contact and comprehension (cf. Sundin 1970:34). Every informant sang as a rule just a few songs when recorded, but could on the other hand inform of other transmitters of the tradition.

In 1970, Sundin published a noted social-psychological study of the correctional treatment sector: *Individ — Institution — Ideologi* [Individual — Institution — Ideology]. In the early 1990's he was invited to be professor of music

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<sup>23</sup> In 1964, Bertil Sundin defended his thesis *Barns musikaliska skapande* [Children's Musical Creativity].

<sup>24</sup> SVA BA97-100, SVA BA722-723 and SVA BA758.

pedagogy at the Malmö Academy of Music. Besides his academic career, Sundin wrote about jazz for the Swedish magazine *Orkesterjournalen* and produced jazz programmes for The Swedish Broadcasting Company for 40 years (1958–98). Skarpe continued to work with music in prisons — amongst other things, she started a song group at the Hall prison in which students and inmates met regularly. She later studied to be a psychologist at Stockholm University.

Ulf Peder Olrog at the sVA was clearly inspired by Enevig's *Prinser og vagabonder*, but it is also reasonable to assume that he was inspired by the Jailbird Singers LP *Tjyvbballader och barnatro* from 1964. Two of the songs from the LP, “Jungman Jansson” and “Där björkarna susa” reached “Svensktoppen” — Sweden's version of the Top Ten. Olrog worked for Sveriges Radio [The Swedish Broadcasting Company] and was one of those who started Svensktoppen in 1962. The attention paid to Jailbird Singers on the radio can hardly have passed him by. Earlier sources of inspiration might well have been John and Alan Lomax and their collection projects in the USA. The Library of Congress recordings of black convicts which were made by John Lomax at the Angola prison in the early 1930's gained a lot of attention internationally thanks to the recordings of Huddie William Ledbetter — better known as “Leadbelly”. His recording of “Let the Midnight Special” in 1934 was of great importance in popularising prison songs.<sup>25</sup>

#### TERNHAG'S COLLECTING PROJECT

In 1971 and 1972 Gunnar Ternhag (born in 1948) made recordings in prisons for sVA. Since 1970, Ternhag had taken part in the documentation activities of the archive, working with a number of different projects. In the spring of 1971 he was appointed to an extended temporary position at sVA.

Ternhag did four recording operations, in total around 50 songs plus interviews. In 1973 he recorded community singing in the assembly hall of the Hinseberg women's prison.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John Lomax's collecting work is described well in his *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*. Lomax 1947.

<sup>26</sup> sVA BA1891.

Ternhag states in an interview that there was a certain amount of interest in prison songs at the sva.<sup>27</sup> Bertil Sundin's recordings were there — and not least Elisabeth Skarpe's work — and both helped to keep alive an interest in prison songs. But there was also a will to document genres other than those that the sva traditionally paid attention to.

GT: I can only say that, generally speaking, my ambition at the time was to broaden what was regarded as folk music. We should remember that this was a period when we had to fight for folk music and its status. So I thought that we must have a much broader definition of what belonged there. And so it was a question of children's things and buskers. So we should view it in that context.

DL: Yes, I know that you recorded a lot of things that were not a part of the staple fare.

GT: Yes, that's the way it was. And it was a vision I had. I was out recording at children's summer camps. Schoolyards and such.

Ternhag's ambition was in other words to broaden sva's field, and perhaps in a way to challenge the whole way that folk music was looked upon. In the early 1970's there were heated debates concerning Sweden's correctional treatment system. Organisations like KRUM [The National League for the Humanising of the Correctional Treatment System] and FFCO [The Central Organisation of the Union of Prisoners] strove for the interests of prisoners and a humanising of the correctional treatment system. In the autumn of 1970, a hunger strike began at the Österåker prison, north of Stockholm. The strike spread to other prisons, and soon over 2000 prisoners were on hunger strike to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the system. In 1971 an enquiry, *Kriminalvårdsberedningen* [The Correctional Treatment Commission] was launched to devise a plan for reform of the system. This enquiry led to a new law on correctional treatment in 1974. This was an important factor behind the second of the sva's recording projects. Many people within the correctional treatment system advocated more liberal methods. One was the director of the Hall prison, Gun-

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<sup>27</sup> SVA 20160311GT001.

nar Engström, who had assumed his position in 1970. Thanks to him, Ternhag was able to come into contact with inmates who made music.

At Hall, Ternhag and Bo Rehnberg from the Swedish Broadcasting Company met two main informants, one of whom was Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson. These two were responsible for the main body of songs recorded by Ternhag. Ternhag later used Konvaljen to help him find contacts when he visited Hinseberg women’s prison in 1973. This method — using informants as “go-betweens” — was not uncommon in the sva’s recording projects. When making her recording trips the collector Märta Ramsten often asked, for example, members of folk musicians’ organisations to help her to get in touch with local traditional musicians in various parts of the country. (Boström 2016:28p) When Konvaljen was with Ternhag for recording sessions, his presence helped Ternhag to make contact with inmates more quickly and gave them greater confidence in the collectors. Prisons imply, of course, a particularly special recording situation and many inmates felt uncomfortable about being recorded. One might also, bearing in mind the sometimes virulent debate about correctional treatment in those days, assume a degree of suspicion on the part of inmates with regard to a state-owned institution like the sva.<sup>28</sup>

This method — using inmates as “go-betweens” — was used by the above-named John and Alan Lomax when recording prison songs in the Southern states of the USA.

Iron Head’s major duty while traveling with Lomax was to perform Leadbelly’s original function — acting as a go-between with black musicians and demonstrating the kind of songs Lomax was looking for. Lomax apparently had no illusions about making him a “star” in the Leadbelly fashion, for while Iron Head was an able musician with a large repertoire, he lacked Leadbelly’s flair for performance as well as Leadbelly’s ambition. Moreover, Iron Head’s publicity value as a mere burglar could scarcely match that of a convicted murderer. (Porterfield 1996:375)

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<sup>28</sup> Svenskt visarkiv was nationalised on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, 1970, and merged with the Swedish dialect and folklife archives in the government body DOVA. Prior to that date, Svenskt visarkiv was run as a trust. (Jansson 2001).

Two convicts — James “Iron Head” Baker and Huddie William Ledbetter (Leadbelly) — helped John and Alan Lomax as assistants and drivers on their collection trips in the 1930’s.

Iron Head and Leadbelly were transmitters of the tradition and became known as singers beyond the walls via the Lomax recordings. Their insider status in the prison culture made it possible to attain contact with prisoners who would otherwise have been very difficult to reach.

After his period at the SVA, Ternhag was employed by Dalarnas museum (The Dalarna Museum) in Falun and completed his PhD in 1992 with a thesis on the traditional fiddler Hjort Anders Olsson (Ternhag 1992). Ternhag continued his academic career in the field of musicology and related subjects. He was guest professor in musicology at Örebro University (2007 — 2011) and at Stockholm University (2011 — 2017).

In connection with his collecting, Ternhag wrote of his observations in the article “Säg har du skådat kåkens dystra murar. Några anteckningar om fångelseintagnas vistraditioner” [Say, have you beheld the dismal prison walls. Some



The trumpeter Bunk Johnson and Leadbelly at the Stuyvesant Casino, New York, 1946.

Retrieved from the Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.04541/>).

Photographer: William P. Gottlieb.



notes on the song traditions of prison inmates] in the Finnish periodical *Visa och visforskning* [Song and song research]. (Ternhag 1974)

#### ROBERT ROBERTSSON'S COLLECTION

In 2012 SVA obtained more material directly connected with prison songs thanks to a donation from Robert Robertsson who worked as a musician with Lennart "Konvaljen" Johansson in the early 1970's.<sup>29</sup> Robertsson had learned of SVA's research project via information on the web site of Musikverket [Swedish Performing Arts Agency].

Robert Robertsson's collection consists of two books of press cuttings with articles from 1972 to 1974, a number of photographs and posters, and ten sound tapes. It also includes the scores for three of Robertsson's musical settings to poems from Peder Bläck's collection *Genom ett galler* [Through The Bars].<sup>30</sup>

In connection with this donation, Robertsson was interviewed by SVA. This interview complements the collection.

Robertsson came into contact with Lennart "Konvaljen" Johansson in the autumn of 1970 via a song circle at the Hall prison. Robertsson studied pedagogy at Stockholm University and was asked to help with the music activities at Hall prison which had been initiated by Elisabeth Skarpe. Robertsson and Konvaljen started to correspond — first and foremost they sent sound tapes to each other, exchanging songs and discussing arrangements. When Konvaljen had been released in 1972, Robertsson took part in the recording of the LP *Kåklåtar* for the MNW RECORD COMPANY. Robertsson played guitar and bass on the record, and after the record had been released he toured with Konvaljen for two years. During this period, Robertsson collected cuttings and other documents related to their activities.

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Robertsson is named as Mats Robertsson in articles and LP-sleeves from the 1970's. He later changed his name to Robert. I consistently use Robert in this text.

<sup>30</sup> The book *Genom ett galler. Fängelseverser* [Through the Bars. Prison Verse] was published in 1944 by the pseudonym Peder Bläck and consists of poems connected with prison life. The poems are used in many prison songs, not least in the repertoire of Lennart "Konvaljen" Johansson. The man behind the pseudonym was the author Ernst C:son Bredberg (1897–1963).



Lennart "Konvaljen" Johansson and Robert Robertsson on tour in Luleå. Photo from Robert Robertsson's collection, s.v.a.

Not least the sound tapes in Robertsson's collection are of interest. They contain a kind of musical correspondence, with songs and long personal conversations. Robertsson and Konvaljen used the tapes to swap songs and ideas for arrangements. Here we also find a "recorded letter" to MNW's producer Gunilla Thorgren, who was a moving force in the production of the LP *Kåklåtar*. The material also contains recordings of rehearsals for concerts. The period with Konvaljen was the beginning of Robert Robertsson's musical career. The first contacts came via his studies in pedagogy at Stockholm University, where there was already a certain interest in prison tunes thanks to the work of Bertil Sundin and Elisabeth Skarpe (Skarpe 1970). The song circle at the Hall prison consisted of a mixture of inmates and interested university students. When the LP *Kåklåtar* was recorded Konvaljen had been released from Hall prison, and after that an intensive period of tours began. Robertsson tells of how he was the one who organised concerts and produced tours. From 1972 to 1974 they played all over Sweden, with almost a hundred appearances at youth centres in the Stockholm area alone. The programmes were well-devised, with music and information on the situation of inmates in the prisons. Pelle Hellberg later joined the duo.

When Konvaljen moved to Växjö in 1974 he stopped working with Robertsson and Hellberg, but continued his career as a musician with the solo album *Konvaljen* (1975). Robertsson studied as a musician at Stockholms musikpedagogiska institut [The University College of Music Education in Stockholm] and at Musikhögskolan [The Royal College of Music] in Stockholm. He has had a career of his own as a guitarist, singer, choir leader and composer. After he stopped working with Konvaljen in 1974 they have had no further contact.

## NEW DOCUMENTATION

During this project, new material has been added. Two lengthy interviews with Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson were made in 2009 and 2016.<sup>31</sup> Robert Robertsson was interviewed in 2012 and Gunnar Ternhag in 2016.<sup>32</sup> These interviews took as their starting point the pre-existing material, and aimed to garner deeper information with regard to earlier documentation. In 2015 the American guitarist and banjoist Tom Paley, who played on the LP *Tjyvbballader och barnatro* [Thief Ballads and Childhood Faith] was interviewed, and in 2017 Tohre Eliasson from Jailbird Singers.

## OTHER MATERIAL AT THE SVA

SVA also has copies of material from the Folklife Archive in Lund. This collection consists of 14 recorded interviews and radio programmes. The radio programmes were produced in 1991 by Håkan Johansson as a series entitled “Kåklåtar” for Utbildningsradion [The Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company]. This material also includes lengthy interviews with Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson and Tohre “Masen” Eliasson made by Rolf Alm in 1996. Alm also donated a copy of a diary kept by Konvaljen at Malmö prison in 1977.<sup>33</sup> Håkan Johansson’s radio programme is also present in SVA as a separate collection.

## JAILBIRD SINGERS

The *Jailbird Singers* group was started at the Långholmen prison in Stockholm by three inmates: Börje “Tony” Granqvist, Åke “Korpen” Johnson and Tohre “Masen” Eliasson. A prison chaplain noted their musical ability and got them to join the prison choir. Anders Burman, managing director of the Metronome record company, heard of their lovely harmony singing and offered the trio a recording contract.

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<sup>31</sup> SVA A 20090403 and SVA A 20160831LJ001-004.

<sup>32</sup> SVA A 20120402RR001 and SVA A 20160311GT001.

<sup>33</sup> The SVA’s collection of copies. Johansson, Lennart: *Dagbok från fängelset* [Prison diary] 1977.



The sleeve of the LP *Tjyvbballader och barnatro* [Thief Ballads and Childhood Faith] from 1964.

The sociologist Gudmund Jannisa has told the story of the group in his book *Jailbird Singers och det andra 60-talet* [Jailbird Singers and the Other 1960's], Jannisa's study is built mostly upon interviews with Tohre Eliasson. In the book, Jannisa tells of when Tohre Eliasson and Tony Granqvist met at the Roxtuna borstal outside Linköping — a meeting that led to Jailbird Singers.

There was a soundproof music room and it was possible to rent musical instruments, even if many had their own. During one period, some of the pupils made their own instruments, recalls Tore Wredenmark, who worked as a warder at the time. This was under the short-lived skiffle era, and it was skiffle that gave Tony Granqvist and Tohre Eliasson a chance to work together as Tony's skiffle group. Tony and Tohre both played guitar and sang; the bassist played an instrument that consisted of a tub, a broomstick and a piece of string and the rhythm was provided by a lad who used thimbles to play on a washboard. (Jannisa 2015:41)

Granqvist and Eliasson met again at Långholmen prison and continued to play music together. They modelled themselves on the American group Kingston trio, with their way of performing “folk ballads”. To create a sound similar to them, Tony and Tohre needed a third voice. At Långholmen they found Åke “Korpen” Johnson, who became the trio’s tenor. Johnson was also delegated to learn to play bass in order to complement Granqvist’s and Eliasson’s guitars (Jannisa 2015:43).

The LP *Tjyvbballader och Barnatro* [Thief Ballads and Childhood Faith] was recorded in Metronome’s studio and released in 1964. Anders Burman brought in Cornelis Vreeswijk — a famous Swedish singer — to produce the record, and Vreeswijk also wrote the words to four of the songs. Cornelis got in touch with



Jailbird Singers in Malmö, July 1964. From the left: “Masen”, “Korpen” and “Tony”. The newspaper *Sydsvenskan*’s photo archive.

the USA musician Tom Paley, who was in Sweden for political reasons, and he played banjo and guitar on the record. Cornelis's songs on the record were "En öl till" [One More Beer], which praises idleness; "Laredo", a translation of "The Streets of Laredo" and about a dying cowboy; "Rulla på, rulla på" [Roll on, Roll on], about a car thief fleeing from the police and "Mördar-Anders" [Anders the Murderer], an interpretation of the English ballad Sam Hall which is about a man on his way to his execution.

*Tjyvbballader och Barnatro* was a success. The background of the members of the band helped, of course, to make people sit up and take notice. The repertoire was, in keeping with the title of the LP, a mixture of prison songs and religious songs. The majority of the songs were religious, and Cornelis's newly-written contributions were in fact the only "thief ballads". The repertoire, apart from Cornelis's songs, was: "Där björkarna susa" [Where Birches Murmur], "Only if you praise the Lord", "Han har öppnat pärlporten" [He Has Opened the Pearly Gates], "Jungman Jansson" [Deckhand Jansson], "Ovan där" [By and by], "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" and "Barnatro" [Childhood Faith].

Contrary to what Jailbird Singers and others expected, neither the religious songs nor Cornelis's thief ballads were the greatest hits. Dan Andersson's "Jungman Jansson" and "Där björkarna susa", a love song which waxes lyrical about nature, ended up in Svensktoppen — Sweden's Top Ten.<sup>34</sup>

The latter song reached second place and stayed on the list for 21 weeks in 1965. Jailbird Singers enjoyed an intense — but short — career. In the summer of 1964 they had all been released. A comprehensive tour was planned, not least in the "folk parks" — Sweden's open-air entertainment venues. But they only managed a few shows, since Tony Granqvist suffered from cancer and his health steadily deteriorated. He died on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February, 1965. Åke Johnson died in 1998. Tohre Eliasson has continued singing. Towards the end of the 1960's he started a new group — Jailbirds.

The repertoire of Jailbird Singers is in the vicinity of some sort of Swedish popular music canon for that period — and outside the prison songs reper-

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<sup>34</sup> "Där björkarna susa" is a Finno-Swedish song from 1915 with words by Viktor Sund and music by Oskar Merikanto.

toire which is the subject of this work. Cornelis Vreeswijks's contributions to the record can at the same time be seen as a harbinger of the politicisation of prison songs which took place during the years following the short period of popularity enjoyed by the group. The group certainly knew other songs. Tony Granqvist is mentioned in interviews made with many informants as one of the prime transmitters of the older category of prison songs. Sad to say, there are no recordings of him singing these songs.

#### THE LP *KÅKLÅTAR*

*Kåklåtar* was released in 1972 and was the MNW record company's 31<sup>st</sup> production. Today, the record is seen as part of the core of what came to be called "progg" — the political music movement which began at the end of the 1960's. The record is in many ways a political manifestation. The sleeve is a work by the artist Bosse Kärne entitled "Jag har fastnat i straffmaskinen" [I got stuck in the punishment machine] which illustrates the powerlessness of prisoners in the correctional treatment system. The sleeve notes by Gunilla Thorgren and Lasse Strömstedt have a very clear political message: "The goal of the intense political struggle in the prisons is to bury our unjust prison system, which is based upon class laws".<sup>35</sup>

MNW was established in 1969 with the name MusicNetWork by Sverre Sundman and the brothers Lorne and Lynn De Wolfe. The musician Tore Berger, then a member of the group Gunder Hägg, joined the record company and invested some capital — and the company changed its name to Musiknätet Waxholm. In 1971, MNW had recorded four albums which the music journalist Håkan Lahger saw as a "solid and artistic base for the company" (Lahger 1999:117p). These albums were Contact's *Hon kom över Mon*, Gunder Hägg's *Glassfabriken*, Södra Bergens Balalaikor's record (with the same name as the orchestra) and Hoola Bandoola Band's *Garanterat individuell*. MNW became one of the "progg" music movement's most important record companies,

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<sup>35</sup> A quote from Lasse Strömstedt's text on the sleeve of the LP *Kåklåtar* (MNW 31P).



with its emphasis on Swedish musicians with Swedish texts — and where political considerations often decided which records were released. When the music movement began to fade away in the late 1970's the company's catalogue was, however, broadened. "MNW Records Group" was formed in 1993 when Amalthea, another "progg" record company, was bought.

The moving force in the production of *Kåklåtar* was Gunilla Thorgren who was at the time living with Tore Berger: he financed the production to a great extent. Thorgren had studied journalism and worked for a while as a social assistant at Österåker prison. There she met inmates who made music, and the idea of making a record was born. The LP became a part of the struggle for better conditions in the correctional treatment system. Gunilla Thorgren is quoted in the book *Proggen. Musikrörelsens uppgång och fall* [Progg. The Rise and Fall of the Music Movement]:

We saw music and culture as part of the struggle. So I threw myself into this crazy project, which almost sunk me. In those days there was an ambition to humanise the correctional treatment system, so people could get leave to come out with me. And they didn't escape. They recorded an album instead. (Gunilla Thorgren quoted in Lahger 1999:121)

One of the factors which "almost sunk" Thorgren was the problem of keeping order during the recording period. Thorgren and Berger's home functioned as a collective where inmates on leave, musicians and many others mixed together and made music, and sometimes there was a little too much partying.<sup>36</sup>

The political message of the LP *Kåklåtar* is impossible to miss, and Thorgren's sleeve notes problematise and challenge both the care function of prisons and society's values.

#### WHO IS DANGEROUS?

When I walked into a prison for the first time, to work as a temporary social assistant, I felt fear at the thought of learning to know and to mix with these "dangerous" individuals. Now my rage knows no borders — I have been duped through

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<sup>36</sup> Thorgren 2003, and in a telephone conversation in the spring of 2016.

and through while growing up, throughout all my earlier life. What I met was NORMAL PEOPLE with AN ABNORMAL NUMBER OF PROBLEMS. What I met was children of the underclass with economic difficulties, with drug problems, without education, without accomodation, without social contacts — victims of ruthless oppression.

No, the term “dangerous” is a political term. “Dangerous” is a word used to scare the wits out of people, to get citizens to demand law and order and more policemen. BUT TO PROTECT WHAT?

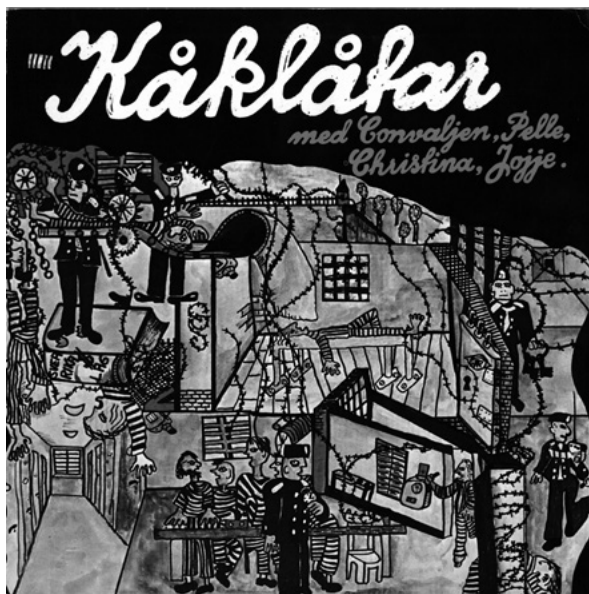
Yes, of course there are people who are a danger to themselves and those around them. But these are few — very few. And anyone has seen a prison from the inside can immediately understand that they won’t become less dangerous by sitting there. In a prison there is no care for people who, for certain mental and psychological reasons, sometimes act violently. And when the sentence has been served — well, the person deemed as dangerous is released, as lost and broken as when he/she was admitted. No, those who are labelled as dangerous to society are DANGEROUS TO PROPERTY — and that is political dynamite. Among those interned — sentenced to hard, long deprival of freedom — are they who steal money from our banks and other capitalist organisations. They are often bright lads who do not accept our society’s norms regarding “mine and yours”. They are not dangerous to you and me — no, they must be punished because they break the class laws of the established order of society. And the only one who gains from the established order of society is the capitalist — the owner of capital. We who work and slave for our daily wage, with long journeys, piece-rate stress, living in crowded dwellings, being moved from our homes to suburban ghettos, etc., etc. — we have nothing to fear from these so-called “dangerous” lads.

But imagine if we were to do the same as them — but do it collectively. Take things into our own hands. Take back the property which rightfully belongs to us all. Yes — to the rich man, the person guilty of the theft of property is DANGEROUS. He is an example — a person who has reacted by taking things into his own hands. Which is not to say that he has done right. No — on your own, you’re weak. TOGETHER WE ARE STRONG!

Gunilla Thorgren/ex-temporary assistant<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The *Kåklåtar* LP: sleeve notes.



The front sleeve of the LP *Kåklåtar* from 1972. A work by the artist Bosse Kärne entitled “Jag har fastnat i straffmaskinen” [I got stuck in the punishment machine].

Thorgren’s sleeve notes contain an arsenal of arguments typical of the criticism levelled against the correctional treatment system in the early 1970’s by, amongst others, KRUM (The National League for the Humanising of the Correctional Treatment System) and FFCO (The Central Organisation of the Union of Prisoners). When the sleeve text is analysed, three main arguments are found.

1. Our fear of “criminals” is based upon ignorance. When we learn to know the individuals, we understand that they are normal people with difficulties. These people need help, not punishment.
2. Most prisoners are from the underclass. Society’s problems are in fact a matter of economic injustice and class repression.

3. The ones with something to fear from the criminal world are not ordinary people, “we who work and slave for our daily wage”, but banks and capitalists.

Thorgren's line of reasoning is that the inmates of prisons can be seen as a kind of representatives of class struggle — the ones who have dared rise against economic and social repression. She concludes that this does not justify individual crimes, but that we should see the criminal as a rebel or a prototype for a collective revolutionary struggle. She ends with a call to arms: “But imagine if we were to do the same as them — but do it collectively. Take things into our own hands. Take back the property which rightfully belongs to us all”. When it comes to the crunch, we see that the LP *Kåklåtar* is as much a political contribution to the debate on the correctional treatment system as it is a musical product.

## Men and Women

Very few women are present in sVA's documentation of prison songs. In recordings made by Sundin and Ternhag they are completely absent — apart from documentation by Ternhag of community singing at a gathering at the Hinseberg women's prison in 1975.<sup>38</sup>

One woman singer was, however, recorded by Håkan Johansson in 1991 — and Christina Calldén is on the LP *Kåklåtar*. Of course women make music in prisons, but in spite of this they are poorly represented in the material. There are several reasons for this. Bertil Sundin found singers by asking. During every interview he asked if the interviewee knew of other singers. Since contact between male and female inmates was almost non-existent, it

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<sup>38</sup> The purpose of the Hinseberg visit was to record women prisoners. But no-one was willing to be interviewed. Thus the prison's song gathering was recorded instead. sVA BA1891.

is not surprising that he didn't get any tips about female singers. Perhaps the stigmatising involved in a prison sentence was also harder to bear for women, and women as a result were less willing to be interviewed. Finally, far fewer women than men are sentenced to prison in Sweden — which of course means fewer singers. According to the home page of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, just over 5% of those serving time are women.<sup>39</sup> This figure is from 2015, but it is reasonable to assume that the proportion of women in prison was much the same in the 1960's and 1970's.

The woman interviewed by Håkan Johansson in 1991 learned prison songs when serving time at Hinseberg. She relates:

That meant that I got into the good books of these — how should I put it? — I don't want to say “queens” straight out, but they had been inside a long time and a lot. They favoured me and they taught me songs and I played for them, like.  
(Håkan Johansson B713b)

Just like many male singers, she shows that the ability to play and to sing prison songs led to higher status among inmates.

## Prison Songs and Cultural Heritageing

It is reasonable to assume that the attention paid in the 1960's and 1970's to prison songs by collectors and record companies affected, in fact, not only the surrounding world's understanding of the term “prison songs” but also the genre itself. In the article “Theorizing Heritage”, the American folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has discussed cultural heritage as a value-adding process:

Heritage adds value to existing assets that have either ceased to be viable (subsistence lifestyles, obsolete technologies, abandoned mines, the evidence of past disasters) or that never were economically productive because an area is too hot, too cold, too wet or too remote. Heritage organizations ensure that places and

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.kriminalvarden.se> (2 december 2016).

practices in danger of disappearing because they are no longer occupied or functioning or valued will survive. It does this by adding value of pastness, exhibition, difference, and where possible indigeneity. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995:370)

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points to the fact that attention paid to a cultural phenomenon — judging it to be important or worth collecting — creates added value. In the case of prison songs, the attention paid meant that the genre was clarified and presented as something different — exotic, even. The Swedish ethnologist Stefan Bohman has developed ideas concerning the shaping of cultural heritage in a model he calls “the cultural heritage process”: the process through which phenomena are chosen and given a special status as symbols of a culture. Bohman’s model is concerned with museums and the conscious or unconscious choices which result in museum collections. This model is able to show which consequences these choices have in our understanding of the collections and their cultural value. The cultural heritage process changes not only the status of the collected objects, but also our understanding of them. In *Historia, museer och nationalism* [History, Museums and Nationalism] Bohman presents a version of his model, which has also been explained and further developed by the Finnish folklorist Johanna Björkholm in her dissertation *Immateriella kulturarv som begrepp och process* [Intangible Cultural Heritages as a Concept and a Process] (Bohman 2010 and Björkholm 2011). Bohman’s model assumes that cultural heritage is dependent upon an active staging, which involves objects and phenomena being identified and recreated in a museum context. The staging is reinterpreted in accordance with changes in contemporary culture. The ethnologist Owe Ronström reasons in a similar manner when discussing Visby’s evolution from peripheral small town to official “World Heritage “.

One of the clearest signs of cultural heritage production is the transformation of “everyday” objects into exhibition pieces. Exhibiting objects which were not designed to be exhibited places particular demands on the ability of the objects to sustain the right kind of visual interest. That which is not visual enough, not sufficiently representative, or leads the gaze in the wrong direction, might need to be replaced. (Ronström 2008:196)

The picture illustrates the cultural heritage loop — how collected material is categorised and has repercussions on the living culture that is collected. The phases of cultural heritageing — identification–categorisation–standardisation–symbolisation — imply a series of selection processes through which the genre prison songs is clarified, which in time influences the repertoire used in prisons. Many of the singers recorded in prisons in SVA’s collection projects had extensive repertoires including well-known Swedish popular songs, folk ballads and jazz standards. As a result of the collection work and the selection processes performed by the archives, the part of the repertoire which consisted of songs about prison environments and criminal activities was categorised and defined as “kåklåtar”. Via the publication of research reports and the release of gramophone records a music canon was created, and spread during the 1970’s to the general public and to the executors themselves. Illustration: Cristina Viksten.

Ronström describes the selection process involved in the transformation of everyday objects into cultural heritage. Objects which do not fit into the intended image of the cultural heritage will not be included and can even be replaced.

Departing from the works of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Bohman and Ronström I have developed a model of what might be termed cultural heritageing to describe how the collecting and archiving of music has repercussions on our understanding of the material collected and, in extension, upon the living music tradition.<sup>40</sup>

There are differences between studies of such cultural artefacts as those which are the focus of Bohman’s and Ronström’s reasonings and intangible forms of culture like the music traditions studied here, but the similarities in the effects of the cultural heritage process are more weighty. One important difference is, however, the fact that the collections of cultural heritage archives more often interplay directly with living practice — that is to say, the collections are intended for use in the traditions that they represent.

In my model, cultural heritageing consists of four phases: *identification — categorisation — standardisation — symbolisation*.

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<sup>40</sup> This passage is based on Lundberg 2015a and Lundberg 2015b. The concept “kulturarva” [cultural heritageing] is used by Qaisar Mahmood (2012) to describe the active choice that individuals and institutions make in the use of history to shape values and identities.





## IDENTIFICATION

Each systematic collection begins with this first phase, identification: in our case, the music genre of prison songs and its representative practitioners. This perhaps sounds simple, but is often more complicated than it first appears. Matters of origins, etymology, performance contexts and characteristics of style are often relevant in the identification phase. These lead to characterisation of and border-setting for the genre, and to “deviations” and sub-repertoires on the periphery of the genre being sifted out.

Key questions:

- What belongs to the music genre — how great are the permissible variations?
- Which characteristic features does the music genre have — in relation to others?

## CATEGORISATION

Categorisation is the organising of the material when collected, and almost always involves some degree of hierarchisation. Main versions are separated from variants — often on the basis of age. Authenticity, a term that is often criticised, is often an unstated component in discussions concerning this part of the process.

Key questions:

- Are there main versions and variants — in which way do these hinge together?
- Is there a hierarchy (more valuable/appreciated/hard-to-master as opposed to less-valued versions)?

## STANDARDISATION

One result of identification and categorisation is that the genre becomes easier to grasp, but also that it becomes more homogenous. Typical of the standardisation phase are descriptions and definitions — and the publishing of collections, archive notes, phonorecords, theoretical studies, etc. This, together with the clarification of the genre's borders, can often feed back into the tradition itself. Something which might be termed “archive loops” emerges: the archives collect and publish material, and this in turn influences the living tradition and its transmitters. There are many examples of Swedish traditional musicians documented by the SVA whose repertoire is derived primarily from publications of earlier collections. One effect of this can be that the living repertoire can change and be adjusted to fit the template set by research.

Key questions:

- Does the repertoire become refined and homogenised? In order to survive within the genre, repertoires and performance forms might be adjusted.
- Is a canon created? Certain forms are given greater value/influence upon the development of a repertoire.

## SYMBOLISATION

The participation of archives and archive-builders in the shaping of cultural heritage is always an important discussion subject. The archives, collectors and researchers contribute via their authority and access to public media to the shaping of cultural values. The question “What is cultural heritage?” should perhaps be rephrased “When is cultural heritage?”, and the answer is in that case that the collections themselves are cultural heritage whilst the living tradition is simply culture. “Heritage adds value...” — in the words of Kirshenblatt-Gimble above. But not just that — cultural heritageing changes the meaning of the collected material. From my perspective it is reasonable to view archives, media and other manifestations of cultural expression not only as passive mirrorings or documentations but also as participants in the

shaping of the tradition. Culture and cultural heritage can, then, be seen as different denominations or status indications of the same phenomenon, based upon ideology and values.

The symbolic meaning of a music genre is often representative — of a nation, a people, a culture. The most important function of a collection is, in this final phase of the cultural heritage process, not the documentation of a tradition but its role as a symbol of a culture or subculture.

Key questions:

- Is the music genre used in new situations? Does it assume an emblematic or representative function?
- Has the music genre attained a new meaning — from an individual aesthetic means of expression to a collective symbol?

## And Now to the Songs

In this chapter, the sva's documentation project and the other sources upon which this study is based have been used to delineate and define the genre “prison songs”. We have also discussed two important processes — prisonisation and cultural heritageing — which have influenced the development and significance of prison songs, and seen how ethnomusicological concepts can be used to understand the functions and usage of the songs. With that as a background, it is now time to take a closer look at the songs themselves.

# Voices of the Individual and the Collective

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## Analysis of the Songs

A brief look at the material upon which this study is based shows that it can be divided into an older and a newer repertoire. This was also observed by Rita Berggren and Sylvia Hardwick in their 1972 essay *Om innehållet i kåkvisor* [On the Contents of Prison Songs]. Berggren & Hardwick divide the texts into three categories: older songs, middle group and newer songs. The middle group is a transitory phase in which important changes in the genre begin to occur. Gunnar Ternhag, in his article from 1974, also sees that a change occurred — first and foremost the emergence during the 1960's and 1970's of a repertoire romanticising the use of drugs.

In this study I see the same type of distinction as Berggren & Hardwick, but the basis of my division is only partially built on the same foundations. To me, it is more the purpose of the songs which is distinctive. I am led by questions of why they were written and what they express. As a background to this I also ask questions as to who is the sender of a message and who are its intended recipients. The sender can be the culprit, the lone prisoner, but also a “spokesperson” for the group “prisoners” or, more neutrally, a kind of archetype: a “representative” of the group. The target group is also of interest — which audience existed for the songs? Were they sung in the internal context, for other inmates — or even without an audience other than the singer? They were perhaps a way of letting off steam and expressing feelings and opinions in a lone-

some cell. At the same time we know that prison songs found a large audience and a wholly new target group as a result of the interest shown the songs in the 1960's and 70's. In many ways this coincides, however, with the division into an older and a newer repertoire. To put it simply, in the older repertoire it is often the prisoner as an individual who speaks. The prisoner is the "I" of the song, speaking in the first person singular via the song's text and expressing suffering, longing and regret. This individual manner of expression is present to a high degree in the older songs — and by older I mean, in this case, those originating from before the end of the 1950's. This individual form of address is found, however, also in prison songs from the 1970's and this implies that a purely chronological division is unreliable.

In the latter-day repertoire, which emerged in the 1960's, there is often (though with many exceptions) a political message and criticism of society. To generalise slightly, one might say that the text and the song speak for the collective "prisoners". Yes — many of the songs are written by an "I", but the message often portrays a situation which is applicable to prison environments in general. This part of the repertoire fits well into the ethnologist Alf Arvidsson's (see below) song text category "the misfit", a person who deliberately takes up an outsider position in order to use it to criticise society. A palpable example of this is Lennart "Konvaljen" Johanssons "Tack för vården" [Thanks for the care]:

Thanks! Thanks for care and rest,  
Correctional treatment authority.  
Thanks for teaching us to shoot  
And contributing to our brokenness.

Thanks for empty days.  
While we atone for our crimes.  
Thanks for all the isolation cells.  
Isolation cells where we build our castles.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Tack för vården" [Thanks For the Care] is on the LP *Konvaljen* from 1975 (MNV 51P).

Konvaljen speaks for the collective of prisoners when he ironically thanks the correctional treatment authority for the care given — and accuses it of breaking prisoners rather than healing them. An interesting observation is, in addition, that the language in the newer repertoire contains more examples of prison lingo. One might expect the opposite: that addressing the general public beyond the prison walls would involve an adjustment of the language, leaving out prison lingo that would be difficult for outsiders to understand, but this is not the case. I interpret that, too, as an expression of a stronger feeling of “we”. One speaks via the language for the collective, and the language creates identification and authenticity. An example of this is another song by Konvaljen: “Tji kvarten för natten” [Nix pad for the night].

Now I take my eight P to whip up the rapids,  
And if I'm in luck I'll coax up a cod.  
I sit here on the steps of our Stockholm's Place Pigalle.  
But I have nix pad for the night.

In “Tji kvarten för natten”, a newly-released jailbird tells of how he sits on the steps of Stockholm's Concert Hall with nowhere to go and nowhere to sleep.<sup>2</sup> He has drugs (eight P = preludine) to console himself with, and hopes he can rob a passer-by. In the final verse of the song the police arrest him, which he sees as something positive — a chance of shelter for the night. The text has several words typical of prison lingo — “torsk” [literally, “cod” — but also someone who loses on a deal or in a match, or a prostitute's customer] “kvart” [pad] and “tji” [nix] — and through these the singer signals his outsidership in relation to society and his insidership in relation to the group “jailbirds”.

In this work I have chosen to divide the genre into two sub-groups mostly on the basis of the positioning and intention of the song's sender. I have chosen to use descriptive titles: “the Voice of the Individual” and “the Voice of the Collective”. The first group is based on the older kind of repertoire in which the prisoner speaks in the song as an individual. There are many examples of songs

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<sup>2</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ004.

in this category even among the newer songs, and it is therefore reasonable to refer to this as an “older song or repertoire category” rather than an older repertoire. The same applies to the Voice of the Collective. Typical of this category of songs is that they speak for prisoners as a collective and most of the songs that belong here are written from the middle of the 1960’s onwards. But there are — as in the first category — plenty of exceptions to this.

## Categorising of the Material

In general, songs are categorised on the basis of the contents of their texts. The music researchers Per-Erik Brolinson and Holger Larsen point out that the genre of “visa” [songs in which the emphasis is on the text] is chequered and broad, and that it even reaches beyond the musical context. The term “visa” has even at times been used for “songs which have not been sung, or have not been intended to be sung” (Brolinson & Larsen 2004:89). In Karin Strand’s study of broadside ballads, she observes that we can in fact not be sure if these songs were intended to be sung — or if they were first and foremost a way of spreading the text: “we must be content with the observation that the borders between song and verse are fluent in these sheets” (Strand 2016:15). That the majority of the prison songs in this study have been sung is beyond all doubt, since most of the source material consists of recordings. There are in any case good reasons to categorise the songs according to the contents of their texts. Alf Arvidsson, who has written of the Swedish “progg” movement in his book *Musik och politik hör ihop* [Music and Politics Belong Together], uses song texts to distinguish sub-categories in the progressive music of the 1960’s and 70’s. An interesting point of entry presented by Arvidsson is to start from the positions of subjects:

An important idea in the movement was in fact that you should sing songs that you could stand for — a standpoint which was to a great extent aimed at the commercial music branch’s song texts and artists. (Arvidsson 2008:318)

On the basis of this line of reasoning Arvidsson defines a number of positions or roles, of which “the misfit” is one (Arvidsson 2008:321). In the position of the misfit, social outsidership — criminality, drug dependency or mental problems — is central. The role portrays a divergent lifestyle which in itself expresses a protest against society and its mechanisms of marginalisation. Arvidsson’s line of reasoning is close to the eternal discussion concerning authenticity and music-making. The musicologist Lars Liliestam notes that it was seen as self-evident in the music movement of the 1970’s that song texts should have a political message and that the artists looked upon themselves as voices for their own experiences or thoughts and/or an ideological standpoint (Liliestam 2009:241).

The reasoning concerning authentic music mirrors a vision and a longing for the genuine and the true and something that is not manipulated in a world with blazing marketing and mirages. (Liliestam 2009:143)

The idea that the singer is the subject of the song’s text dovetails neatly with Arvidsson’s subject positions and implies that song categories which express outsidership in relation to the majority society place particularly high demands on the singer’s experience of the life to which the songs relate. In the case of prison songs, this line of reasoning is in a way driven to an extreme. Prison songs are often seen as personal tales of tragic destinies, but the songs were orally transmitted and it is often hard to know who originally wrote them. Authenticity is however present as an important parameter of quality — on the basis that the person who sings has committed a crime and served time. It appears that the authenticity requirement is particularly strong when it comes to songs about outsidership. A singer who sings a prison song or a blind person’s song is definitely more credible if he or she has personal experience of a prison sentence or of visual impairment.

An interesting example of this occurred during the work process which led to this study. In 2015 the project *Voices from Outside* was presented in three radio programmes from Sweden’s public service company: one hour each on songs of the blind, songs of the unemployed and prison songs. Singers and



musicians were engaged to perform songs which exemplified the three genres. One of the singers engaged to perform prison songs was the well-known artist Stefan Sundström. We thought that his somewhat rough way of singing would suit this genre well, and we thought that he did very convincing interpretations of two songs. Sundström himself said that he did “geezers”: he did not merely interpret the song, but also portrayed the jailbird — a worn-out person singing passionately about his life — behind the song. When the programme had been aired, its editorial staff received a number of comments. In a letter to the programme’s presenter Kathinka Lindhe a listener wrote:

It was enthralling listening, with interesting reflections from all of you present in the studio. The music was however, to my mind, woeful. In particular, I reacted to Stefan Sundström’s bleating. He is otherwise an excellent artist with his own material. But the song — En yngling från Söders höjder [A Youth from the Hights of Söder] wasn’t a patch on Konvaljen’s version.<sup>3</sup>

The listener regarded Sundström’s “geezer” as an exaggerated caricature, and his reaction might also have had something to do with a lack of authenticity. Sundström was regarded as simply not sufficiently “genuine” to have the right to interpret the song as wildly as he did.

## The Voice of the Individual — the Older Category of Songs

In order to portray the Voice of the Individual and the older category of songs I have chosen to describe and discuss a number of themes which are, in various ways, touched upon in the texts. Under the headings *Crime and its Causes*, *The Prisoner’s Predicament*, *Regret*, *Longing for Freedom* and *The Future* I will exemplify the ideas set forth by the individuals who speak with us in this category of prison songs.

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<sup>3</sup> Letter in the sva’s collections.

Prison songs are with regard to form, structure and language usage similar to other popular narrative songs — stanzaic and almost always rhyming verse. Karin Strand points out that in spite of us knowing that the term “skillingtryck” [broadside] in fact refers to the printed medium used to spread popular songs from various genres since the 1500’s, the term has come to be applied to a certain kind of songs with a particular style as regards both text themes and choice of melodies.

In spite of its heterogenous repertoire, and in spite of the broadside being in fact a printed publication, the term is associated with a particular kind of songs. It is generally used regarding songs which tell of “sorrowful” things and dreadful crimes. Some songs typical of the ideal are “Lejonbruden” [The Lion’s Bride], “Älvsborgsvisan” [The Älvsborg Song], “Drinkarflickans död” [The Drunkard’s Girl’s Death] and “Elvira Madigan”: sentimental songs from the latter days of broadside publishing, which have been recorded by artists even in our days. (Strand 2016:4)

Strand introduces the term “the broadside-ish” to identify this modern meaning of the term “broadside ballad”. Songs in the broadside ballad style have greatly influenced the older category of prison songs in both their choice of melodies and their narrative technique. Prison songs are to a great extent broadside-ish, using Strand’s terminology. In prison songs we often find formulaic beginning and ending stanzas of the kind to be found in many similar narrative song genres. Many of the songs start with a short, often humble presentation of the songsmith/singer:

I am a poor prisoner round thirty years old,  
Sat behind bars and a sentence so hard.  
    (“Fången” [The Prisoner], Hall Prison 1972)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> SVA BA1410.

I am a youth from the heights of Söder<sup>5</sup>,  
Intoxicated by the pleasures of life.  
("Jag är en yngling från Söders höjder" [I am a youth  
from the heights of Söder], Hall Prison 1971)<sup>6</sup>

Take these lines that a youth has written.  
It might be good if you hear of my path.  
("Centralfångens visa" [The Central Prisoner's Song])<sup>7</sup>

In a similar way, formulaic final stanzas with the gist of "and would you now like to know who this song did write" are used:

Would you like to know who the writer is?  
Sure — two lads it is, who have written this,  
Who were once put in Forsarne.  
("Ungdomslåt från Fagared" [Youth Tune  
from Fagered], Långholmen Prison 1967)<sup>8</sup>

And would you like to know who the song did write?  
It is a prisoner, coerced by the law.  
("Härlandavisan" [The Härlanda Song], Hall Prison 1972)<sup>9</sup>

And would you like to know who the song written has,  
It is but a traveller, in Härnösand was he.  
("År 1917, en ljus och vacker kväll" [In the Year 1917,  
One Bright and Bonny Evening], Långholmen Prison 1967)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A once-unfashionable part of central Stockholm.

<sup>6</sup> SVA BA1177.

<sup>7</sup> Songbook from Valbo in the sva.

<sup>8</sup> SVA BA100.

<sup>9</sup> SVA BA1409.

<sup>10</sup> SVA BA100.

He who these simple lines has printed  
Was a prisoner, his name was Stig.  
("Härlandasången" [The Härlanda Song], Långholmen Prison 1967)<sup>11</sup>

Many of the older category of songs are long and narratorial, and tell of loneliness and suffering in the cell. The tone is often sentimental and bitter, but it is worth noting that the bitterness is often directed at the prisoner's own shortcomings, dreary fate or the dark forces that have led the prisoner into a life of crime. Many songs express regret or a guilty conscience — not least towards near and dear ones. If any criticism of society is found in these songs, it points out that the sentence was hard — "I never thought the law could judge me so harshly".

#### CRIME AND ITS CAUSES

The reason for serving time — the crime itself — is often very sparingly, if ever, described in prison songs. Thom Lundberg sees "Vad sorg och vad smärta" [Such sorrow, such pain], as a key song in the culture of Sweden's Travellers — it tells a tale of a harsh destiny, and the "I" of the song asks God to help him live an honest life.<sup>12</sup>

SVA has several versions of the song. In Thom Lundberg's version, he has himself added two stanzas which clearly indicate that the song's narrator belongs to the travelling people.

Yes, I am a child of the forgotten tribe,  
From land by strand like a sheep that has strayed.  
I was hated and lashed, beaten on my journey,  
For I was a poor Romani child.

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<sup>11</sup> SVA BA100.

<sup>12</sup> A variant of the song is used as the title of Thom Lundberg's fictional depiction of a Swedish family of travellers in the 1950's. "There are different versions of the Romani people's song 'För vad sorg och smärta'. In some families it is called 'Av sorg och smärta'. I have chosen to use the version we have traditionally sung in my family, with the words I have often heard since I was a child". (Lundberg 2016)

To prison I come and days pass by.  
Long nights, a time without end.  
I must awaken and keep vigil, and avoid wardens.  
And also, finally, weaken in full.

In the first stanza, the “I” of the song says that he is “a child of the forgotten tribe”, a circumlocution often used by Swedish travellers to tell of their origin. The second stanza begins with the use of Romani words — “stillot” [prison] and “avar” [come] — to indicate a Romani identity.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from this, Lundberg’s version corresponds with the versions in SVA’s collections. It is reasonable to say that this kind of variance between various versions of the same song, with stanzas sometimes added and sometimes absent, is normal in this material — and for orally-transmitted songs in general.

The crime committed in “Vad sorg och vad smärta” appears to have been caused by a number of interacting exterior factors. The narrator has been more or less unable to influence these factors. From this perspective, the song expresses a kind of fatalism — or perhaps that the crime happened by chance.

I drank from the goblet to sorrows forget.  
I followed the throng on the path to downfall.  
I thought not the law could judge so harshly.  
Bliss I sought, but mere falseness found.  
    (“Vad sorg och vad smärta” [Such Sorrow,  
    Such Pain], Gävle Prison, 1965)<sup>14</sup>

The main character in this song appears to be a victim of peer pressure when he “followed the throng” which led him onto the pathway to crime. The song offers an explanation as to why he was so easily led: having left his wife and children for a “temptress”, he was himself betrayed. Upon this, he turned to liquor — which led to his downfall. A moralising stanza in the song informs us

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<sup>13</sup> “Till stillot jag avar”, can be translated to “Jag kommer till fängelset” [I come to prison].

<sup>14</sup> SVA BA98.

that to error is human, and reminds us that this can happen to all of us — so “thank your God that it didn’t happen to you”. Such texts display a fatalistic attitude towards criminal activities. The songs say that it is the fate of some of us to become criminals — something that some of us just can’t avoid. The woman/temptress appears, however, to share the guilt — perhaps even be the main cause of the songsmith’s downfall. Somewhat strange logic!

Another trait is to avoid naming the crime directly, referring instead to which one of the Ten Commandments was broken. The Commandment is only mentioned by its ordinal, for example: “the Fourth Commandment”, “the Fifth Commandment”.<sup>15</sup> The exact wording of the Commandment is never written in the song. This suggests that the contents of the Commandments were more extensively known than they are today. In “Jag, en fattig fånge” [I, a poor prisoner] we are informed that the prisoner broke the Seventh Commandment: “Thou shalt not steal”. But a mitigating circumstance was poverty or other incapacity: “I could not feed myself in any other way”.

First I broke against my King and then against my oath.  
And then against the Seventh Commandment, which made my God so angry.  
I could not feed myself in any other way,  
Than by thieving my neighbour’s goods, and taking unrightfully.  
 (“Jag är en fattig fånge” [I Am a Poor Prisoner], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>16</sup>

In “Inom mörka cellen” [Within the Dark Cell], the main character of the song has instead broken the Fourth Commandment: “Honour thy father and thy mother”. This is presumably not the actual crime, rather that the prisoner by committing a crime has brought disgrace upon his parents.

How easy it is to, in this world,  
Miss your way while young.

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to notice that the order of the ten Commandments differs between European countries.

<sup>16</sup> SVA BA1410.

I have found that I forgot God  
And broke His Fourth Commandment.  
("Inom mörka cellen" [Within the Dark Cell])<sup>17</sup>

Even in this case the reader understands that it is easy to end up on the pathway to crime. The Fifth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" is mentioned too — in "Centralfångens visa" [The Central Prisoner's Song], when the prisoner says "And would you wish to know what crime I have done/so read the Fifth Commandment, which I broke".

And would you wish to know what crime I have done  
so read the Fifth Commandment, which I broke.  
'twas in the month of August, yes, before the century ended,  
since after twenty weeks 1900 broke forth.  
("Centralfångens visa" [The Central Prisoner's Song])<sup>18</sup>

The crime committed is seldom named directly. One exception is "När vinden sveper fram" [When the Wind Blows Forth], where we learn that the prisoner is doing time for "begging, thieving and murder". In "Säg har du skådat Härlandas gråa murar?" [Say, Have you Viewed the Grey Walls of Härlanda?] we find descriptions of various criminals — the fellow-prisoners, but not the song's narrator.

I'm imprisoned for begging, for thieving and for murder.  
But of my betting and gambling they say not a single word.  
("När vinden sveper fram" [When the Wind  
Blows Forth], Hall Prison, 1971)<sup>19</sup>

Here sit prisoners who have robbed and murdered  
And safes blown up with dynamite.

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<sup>17</sup> Songbook from Valbo in the SVA.

<sup>18</sup> Songbook from Valbo in the SVA.

<sup>19</sup> SVA BA1177.

Now they have reaped the rewards of their trouble,  
For their crimes they have come here.  
("Säg har du skådat Härlandas gråa murar?" [Say, Have you  
Viewed the Grey Walls of Härlanda?], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>20</sup>

"Internens klagan" [The Inmate's Complaint] also gives a background to the life of crime. But here we also find a strain of fatalism and a supposition that evil forces make us sin. In this song, Satan has taken control of the main character.

I grew, became a child of the street.  
With a fate of the awfulest kind.  
In my breast ruled Satan,  
There were sins and crimes every day.  
("Internens klagan" [The Intern's Complaint], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>21</sup>

In conclusion we are able to state that the crime itself is seldom described in the category Voice of the Individual. This is partly a question of the songs mostly depicting the plight of the inmate in prison — and to a lesser extent the reasons for ending up there. The circumlocution in portraying the crime as a breach of one of the Commandments suggests a lack of willingness to mention the crime itself. Yet this can also be seen as a more poetic manner of expression in keeping with this genre — it is hard to imagine that inmates never talked about what they served time for.

#### THE PRISONER'S PREDICAMENT

The age discussed in this study is one of a number of transitional periods in the correctional treatment system. The cell system was scrapped in 1945, and this radically changed conditions in Sweden's prisons. Earlier, each inmate spent the first years of a sentence in a cell for one; after 1945 the norm was that

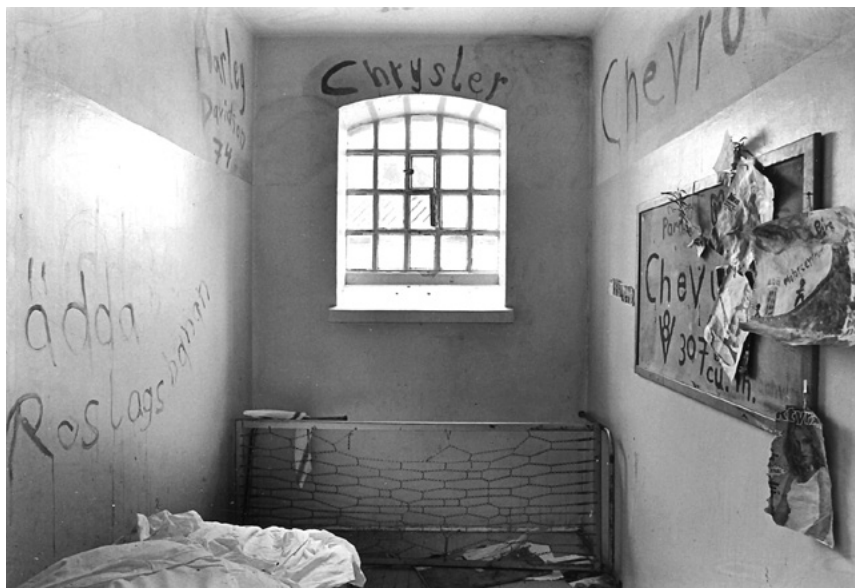
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<sup>20</sup> SVA BA1409.

<sup>21</sup> SVA BA1409.



prisoners spent their time together with one another in the daytime in open or closed prisons. Spending time in a single cell became to a great extent an exception. Changes in the directives and humanising of the laws which govern the correctional treatment system have continued since. The perennial debate regarding the correctional treatment system is how to combine the two basic functions of prisons — treatment and punishment. Sweden's law on prisons (2010) states that an inmate may be held isolated from other inmates if this is deemed necessary with regard to: national security, danger to the life of the inmate or others, risk of escape or liberation, and also other particularly grave matters of order. Such a decision should also, according to the law, be reviewed at least every ten days (*Svensk författningssamling* 2010:610, *Fängelselag* 2010:610). The background of many of these changes in the correctional treatment system is to be found in the debate of which the prison songs of the 1970's were a part.



A cell in the Central Prison “Western 2” on the Långholmen island, Stockholm.  
From the Nordic Museum's documentation, 1975. Photographer: Nils Blix.

In some of the interviews upon which this study is based, a striking point of view appeared: that the scrapping of the cell system led to a decline in creative, aesthetic activities such as the writing of song texts. Alone in a cell, very few pursuits were possible — other than reading books and writing. Yet the more open system also meant that inmates could, apart from other activities, have access to public debate — which has perhaps been of at least equally-great importance in bringing about changes in the tradition. It was impossible to deny inmates access to the information found both in mass media and in the debate waged in the 1970's on correctional treatment. The songs discussed under the title “The Voice of the Individual” tell of loneliness and boredom, and portray a prison environment teeming with routine comfortless waiting. The picture is presumably tinged by the old cell system, though many of the songs were written after the cell system was scrapped.

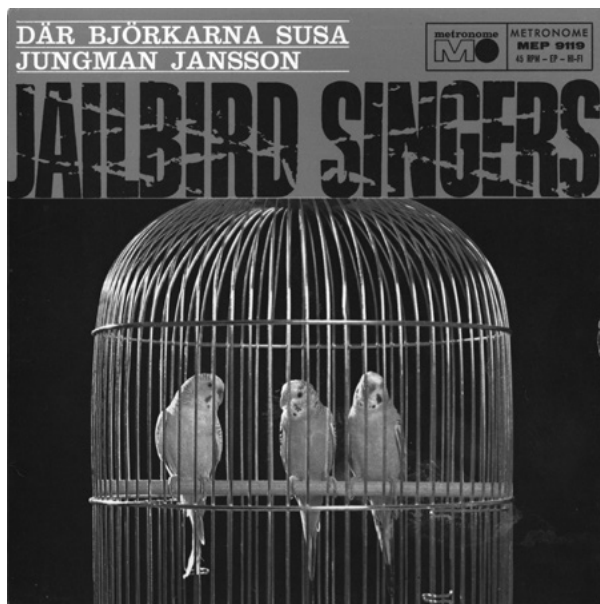
Must I sit here now in my lonesome cage,  
With my wounded heart on fire.  
Like a bird in a cage, like a brute animal  
Behind bolted doors, and bound.]  
    (“Fångens klagan” [The Prisoner’s Complaint],  
    Långholmen Prison, 1967)<sup>22</sup>

In “Fångens klagan” [The Prisoner’s Complaint] the time in prison is likened to the situation of a caged bird — locked in and sad. The metaphor with a bird in its cage has been used in many songs and was also used on the sleeve of a Jailbird Singers EP.

The cage metaphor is one of the stereotypes used most often to portray the prisoner’s situation, and is found in a number of songs. In “Jag är en fattig fånge” [I Am a Poor Prisoner], the feeling of powerlessness is boosted by the words “I get my food from others”. The powerlessness is thus increased by the inmate being unable to pay his way and support himself.

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<sup>22</sup> SVA BA100.



The sleeve of an EP with material from the LP “*Tjyvbballader och Barnatro*” [Thief Ballads and Childhood Faith] by Jailbird Singers (MEP91919). The — to say the least — symbolic sleeve photo was taken by the record company Metronome’s photographer Bengt H. Malmqvist. An interesting detail is the naming of the provenance of the birds: “Budgerigars and cage from Axel Cohns Eftr.”

I am a poor prisoner, round about thirty years,  
 Who sits behind bars and a sentence so harsh.  
 I sit contained behind the cramped wall.  
 I get my food from others like the bird in its cage.

(“Jag är en fattig fånge” [I Am a Poor Prisoner], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>23</sup>

Many texts tell of the routine nature of prison life, as in “Fagaredsvisan” [The Fagared Song] which tells us that work in prison consists here of “carry wood, clip hedge, make food, carry sack — yes, that’s all that belongs to imprison-

<sup>23</sup> SVA BA1410.

ment”. The song in its entirety portrays life in Fagered’s penal institution at the turn of the century.

To a penal institution I came,  
Got T.K. overalls  
And thus my slavery began.  
Carry wood, clip hedge, make food, carry sack  
– yes, that’s all that belongs to imprisonment.  
 (“Fagaredsvisan” [The Fagered Song], Långholmen Prison, 1965)<sup>24</sup>

Loneliness itself is in focus in “Vad sorg och vad smärta” [Such Sorrow, Such Pain]. The feeling of being “cheated out of everything” is of course increased by the fact that the inmate doesn’t think that the punishment is in any way his own fault.

Oh, such sorrow, such pain there is in this life  
When one has been cheated out of everything.  
Here is no sunshine, neither any joy,  
Alone, lonesome, and forgotten and poor.  
 (“Vad sorg och vad smärta” [Such Sorrow,  
Such Pain], Gävle Prison, 1965)<sup>25</sup>

The same hopelessness is found in “Uti Gävleborgs län” [In Gävleborg County]. Here too a life in prison is a matter of fate, which increases the feeling of powerlessness.

In Gävleborg County, among stones and gravel,  
Fate has brought me to a terrible house.  
Here works in shackles a mixed bunch,  
So poor in joy, but so rich in sorrows.  
 (“Uti Gävleborgs län” [In Gävleborg County], Västervik Prison, 1966)<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> SVA BA97.

<sup>25</sup> SVA BA98.

<sup>26</sup> SVA BA99.

In “Centralfångens visa” [The Central Prisoner’s Song] the task is described as pleasing, but this should perhaps be understood as irony. This is however contradicted by the fact that the song is mostly positive about life in prison. The narrator tells us that he can go to school each day and learn the three R’s. The food is humdrum but is doled out twice a day, and he can buy as much bread and milk as he likes. The only thing he lacks is liquor.

Now I also wish to mention the work I got  
When on the first Monday morning I to the major went.  
I got the pleasing promise to here make shoes  
And this job have I in the cell where I live.  
 (“Centralfångens visa” [The Central Prisoner’s Song])<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps a certain hidden criticism might be discerned behind the irony in songs that end with a smile, where the singer shrugs his shoulders at life’s ups and downs. “Visst känns det bittert” [Yes, it Feels Bitter] tells of bitterness and disappointment with the girl who deserted the inmate when he was sentenced, and whom he also blames for putting him in prison. Some of the stanzas take an ironic, emotional turn in the final words: “but I smile all the same”.

Yes, I’m tired of prison; yes, I’m rejected.  
Yes I’m sentenced as I go here in custody.  
I could once own you.  
You were my woman.  
You gave me lifetime,  
But I smile all the same.  
 (“Visst känns det bittert” [Yes, it Feels Bitter],  
Långholmen Prison, 1967)<sup>28</sup>

It is even worse for the prisoner in “Min släkt den har ju så fina anor” [My Family Has Such a Fine Lineage]. The text tells us that the father and his father

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<sup>27</sup> Songbook from Valbo in the SVA.

<sup>28</sup> SVA BA100.

were hanged, that the mother drunk herself to death, and that the brother and sister are doing time for theft and prostitution. But here, too, the point of the song is irony: “But all the same I sing, tralalalalala”.

My family has such a fine lineage.

It is compromised in every way.

My grandfather hung from the gallows.

My father likewise.

Refr. / But all the same I sing, tralalalalala./

(“Min släkt den har ju så fina anor” [My Family  
Has Such a Fine Lineage], Västervik Prison, 1966)<sup>29</sup>

The prisoner’s predicament is largely characterised by the tedium of prison life and the powerlessness felt by the prisoner. The prisoner is in many ways shut out of his previous life with family and friends, and now completely subject to the rules of the correctional treatment system. One way of tackling the situation appears to be to use humour, as in a number of these songs.

#### REGRET

The songs often have a dramaturgical structure consisting of three steps: (a) the time before prison, often a happy childhood spent with good-hearted and caring parents; (b) episode which changed the person’s life; (c) the hard time in prison.<sup>30</sup>

Once in prison, the perpetrator is often beset with regret and the feeling that betraying his parents was the most morally reprehensible aspect — often worse than the crime itself.

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<sup>29</sup> SVA BA99.

<sup>30</sup> The same narrative technique is described in her analysis of such songs of the blind as are concerned with accidents. The dramaturgical climax of the tale is often the accident which led to blindness. There is a before, when the narrator could still see, and an after which tells of the main character’s tragic situation when blind. (Strand 2016:63pp).

And this I got to write down, to mother so dear to me.  
The priest now quietly prays for me, and anxiety wracks me.  
("När vinden sveper fram" [When the Wind Blows Forth],  
Hall Prison, 1971)<sup>31</sup>

And one day — let it dawn, O God,  
When I walk to my freedom once more.  
Dear mother, shall my every breathing moment  
Be dedicated to making my life whole.  
("Oh, dit ut till frihet jag längtar" [Oh, Out There  
to Freedom I Long], Långholmen Prison, 1967)<sup>32</sup>

An interesting aspect is the fact that the songs do not usually mention the victim of the crime — the one who was robbed, beaten, etc. The regret mirrored in the text has a more moral nature. The criminal has brought shame and dishonour upon his family, and that is what he regrets.

#### LONGING FOR FREEDOM

A great many songs express a powerful longing for freedom — often back to the bright image of home, the girl and the love which will hopefully still be there after the sentence is served. Nature is often used as an important symbol of freedom. It might be a little glimpse of verdant trees, a child at play or the clear starry sky seen through the barred window of the cell.

I look so slowly at the window.  
I hear the small birds' song.  
From my brow I stroke my fringe.  
I see freedom and life without coercion.  
("Jag vandrar så rastlöst i cellen" [I Wander so  
Restlessly in the Cell], Gävle Prison, 1965)<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> SVA BA1177.

<sup>32</sup> SVA BA100.

<sup>33</sup> SVA BA98.



The window hole of the cell is a symbol of light and freedom in “Jag vandrar så rastlöst i cellen” [I Wander so Restlessly in the Cell]. The photo is from one of the cells in the Prison Museum on Långholmen island, Stockholm. Photographer: Lukas Lundberg.

But I now no more through the bars see  
A little glimpse of the sky blue.  
A star that smiles, however, in my thoughts I see  
That it sends a kind look down to me.  
    (“Fångens klagan” [The Prisoner’s Complaint],  
    Långholmen Prison, 1967)<sup>34</sup>

Routines are typical of prison life. The days largely look the same — food, work, rest, etc. In many songs we find stanzas about counting time — the countdown towards release. In the same way, but with a more positive connotation, the

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<sup>34</sup> Songbook from Valbo in the sva.





What would you not do in order to get out? In the doctor's room at the Body Hospital of Långholmen Prison, objects were saved which had been swallowed by inmates so that they would be moved from isolation to the hospital. Photo from the Nordic Museum's documentation of Långholmen Prison, 1975. Photographer: Nils Blix.

cyclical rotation of the sun and the stars and the seasons are seen as symbols of life beyond the walls — of freedom.

Dead south is the sun now once a day,  
To the west she sets if God pleases.  
And I see her shine on the window over me,  
I was not worth her for a full month's time.  
("Jag en fattig fånge" [I, a Poor Prisoner], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>35</sup>

Winter draws in,  
But a spring will come.

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<sup>35</sup> SVA BA1409.

Girls with their hair hanging free  
Pass by my window.  
("Kedjor" [Chains], Hall Prison, 1971)<sup>36</sup>

A longing for freedom is naturally a central theme in prison songs. Freedom symbolises happiness, and what is for many a utopian dream existence — yet freedom is not seen as being free from guilt after a sentence has been served. This theme is present in other song genres, such as Evert Taube's "Jag är fri jag har sonat" [I am free, I have redeemed]. Yet something of this mood is found in "Brev" [Letters], written by the pseudonym Peder Bläck (see p. 131pp). There the dream of freedom is portrayed as: "then shall we wander, you and I, one timelessly lovely and blessed day"<sup>37</sup>.

#### THE FUTURE — ONCE THE SENTENCE IS SERVED

What, then, awaited the prisoner once the sentence was served? The dream of freedom was not only bright. Feelings prior to release were contradictory and complex: emerging into a world in which one is stamped as a criminal is not exclusively positive. A number of songs display this duplicity — which often results in anxiety and fear as release draws near.

But people yell: it is only  
Some prisoner now released — so what?  
They come out after serving time  
To start to thief again.  
("En klocka slår åtta" [A Clock Strikes Eight]) (Bläck, 1944)

Apart from this fear of attitudes towards an ex-prisoner we find anxiety prior to meeting family and friends. Will they be able to forgive the shame and dishonour the prisoner caused them? And what about the girlfriend/wife or boyfriend/husband? Has she/he waited or is there someone else?

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<sup>36</sup> SVA B A1177.

<sup>37</sup> Peder Bläck (a pseudonym for the author Ernst C:son Bredberg), 1944.

For many prisoners, freedom was in fact a worse alternative than prison. Sometimes even death felt like a safer option — or so the songs say.

Weep not, stranger, by my grave.  
It was that which peace me gave.  
Cry not — no, your tears save!  
For I found my way home.  
(“Fredlös” [Outlaw], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps it was even preferable to take one’s own life, as expressed here by an inmate of the Hall prison.

When the day comes, I will cut myself loose  
From this cell to what-the-heck.  
I’ll say thanks for the care and place the noose,  
My only friend, round my neck.  
(“Kamrat efter genvägen” [Comrade upon the Shortcut],  
Hall Prison, 1969)<sup>39</sup>

The dream about freedom is nevertheless usually depicted in positive terms. Often the dream is painted with metaphors and contrasted with imprisonment: light, instead of hopeless darkness; in other cases as literally freer, looser and unbound as against caged and shackled.

But the day I hope will come  
When into the light I step forth.]  
(“Gatans son”, [Son of the Street], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>40</sup>

Out to a life without bars and locks  
Out from cramped, small stalls,

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<sup>38</sup> SVA BA1409

<sup>39</sup> SVA BA722

<sup>40</sup> SVA BA1410

Wholly free and loose  
To wander around with my lass, beloved lass.  
("Om jag ändå var fri" [If Only I Were Free], Hall 1972)<sup>41</sup>

The freedom dream was, however, very often bitter-sweet. In "Ensam är jag" [Alone Am I], the thoughts of the inmate on the last night of his imprisonment are described. Earlier in the text he has stated that his woman has already left him: "I long so much for the days of freedom, though I know that you no longer remain". Nevertheless he hopes in the final stanza that she will be waiting for him back home.

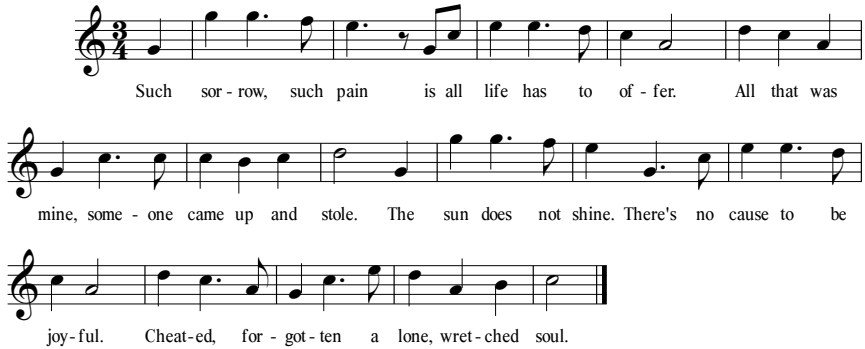
Now I wait, restless that night will pass.  
I know that my freedom tomorrow is here.  
But alone with freedom I must live, alas!  
Down my cheek will shine and run a tear.  
Thus ends my saga here, dear friend.  
I hope you'll be there when I come home again.  
So lonesome I wander in the cell this night.  
I long and I yearn so for you my treasure.  
("Ensam jag är" [Alone Am I], Långholmen Prison, 1967)<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> SVA BA1410.

<sup>42</sup> SVA BA100.

## Such Sorrow, Such Pain



Such sor - row, such pain is all life has to of - fer. All that was  
mine, some - one came up and stole. The sun does not shine. There's no cause to be  
joy - ful. Cheat - ed, for - got - ten a lone, wret - ched soul.

“Vad sorg och vad smärta” [Such Sorrow, Such Pain] is one of the most widespread songs in the category Voice of the Individual. Four versions of the song are found in the recordings made between 1965 and 1971 by the SVA in Swedish prisons. Thus it tops the list, together with “Jag vandrar så rastlöst i cellen” [I Wander so Restlessly in the Cell]. The versions differ a little from one another, with small variations in the words and in the number of verses — as is usual in the folk song tradition. One of the informants called it a “true” clink song, and it is clear that it was generally regarded as common and old. The melody is of a type typical of the older clink songs — triple time, major melodies and descending melody. This translation is not word-for-word, but a free interpretation — an attempt to capture the meaning and atmosphere of the original.

Such sorrow, such pain is all life has to offer.  
All that was mine, someone came up and stole.  
The sun doesn't shine, there's no cause to be joyful.  
Cheated, forgotten — a lone, wretched soul.

I'll never forget when in life I got started -  
Favoured by fortune, we built our own home.  
My wife and my children — the whole, wide world — loved me.  
I had no cause for to grieve or to moan.

My happiness lived but a few fleeting moments -  
A temptress appeared, but she left me again.

That life could be so grim I never imagined.  
I happiness sought; falseness found me right then.

I sit in this cell here — so bare, dark and gloomy.  
My heart wants to cry out: God — help this poor son!  
Please help me to live a good life in your honour,  
When my sentence — so long! — in this prison is done.

Dear friend out there, living a fine life in freedom -  
Pray for a brother who lapsed into crime.  
To fail is but human, if fortune deserts us.  
Just thank thy dear God that good fortune is thine.

We need to be two if our lives are to prosper,  
Two to build something stable and true.  
Yes, two who can make a home bonny and pleasant.  
Our daily bread is best when shared by two.

To drown all my sorrows I drank from the chalice;  
I followed debauchery's path with the throng.  
I thought not the land's law could judge me so harshly.  
I sought joy — but falseness, it did me much wrong.

## The Voice of the Collective — the Newer Song Category

In the essay *Kåksånger. En analys av en fängelsetradition från 1970* [Prison Songs. An analysis of a Prison Tradition] Elisabeth Skarpe writes that it is clear that the traditional prison songs are dying out.

The first information we received suggested that the songs which existed were but the remains of an old tradition. The older singers maintain that they learned most of their songs when they were young, the younger singers that they have learned from their comrades. (Skarpe 1970:8)

Skarpe forwards similar reasons for the decline of the genre to those that have earlier been discussed here: amongst others, modern developments in the criminal treatment system, access to radio and TV in prison and the spread

of pop music. Skarpe senses, at the same time, tendencies towards a new development of the genre. There is a nascent interest, she writes: “several singers were youths who enjoyed singing, and amongst other songs they had begun to show an interest in collecting prison songs” (Skarpe 1970:9). What she sees is the beginning of a political awakening which also comprises a view of prison culture as one of many of society’s subcultures of which it is important to take note. In a way she was herself a part of the creation of the genre that she studied. sva’s interest in prison songs, starting with Bertil Sundin’s collection project in the 1960’s, was a part of the new way of looking at folk culture in those days. Gunnar Ternhag has said in an interview that an important reason for him to set out to record prison songs was his wish to broaden the folk music concept.<sup>43</sup> The interest shown by collectors — and, in time, a broader public — helped to create new openings for prison songs, even outside the prisons.

The type of prison songs that I call here the Voice of the Collective differs in several ways from the older category of songs. We see, as mentioned earlier, an increased use of “prison lingo” where the language denotes group affiliation — but is also a part of what I regard as a deliberate *exoticising process*, using language to paint prison culture as exciting and different. Many songs are written in an openly offhand, defiant tone — in stark contrast to the older category of “sweet” songs, in which subservience and regret were more typical. The subject of the song often speaks directly of his/her life and crimes, in many cases not without a measure of pride.

In the Voice of the Collective we do not find euphemisms which portray a crime as a breach of one of God’s Commandments. This might, of course, be a question of religion no longer having such a prominent role in society — which in turn meant that people in general were less certain of what the various Commandments stood for. Feelings of regret — so typical of the older category of songs — are hard to find here. Themes of loneliness and suffering are also hard to find. Perhaps the most prominent difference is that the songs express more social and political consciousness. Some songs directly criticise the prisons,

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<sup>43</sup> SVAA20160311GT001.

the idea of punishment and also to a certain extent the society which has created and maintained the legal and punishment systems. This change in the repertoire was of course manifest to the singers themselves. In a 1971 interview, Gunnar Ternhag asks the informant if he thinks that there is any difference between the repertoire he learned in the early 1960's and the one they sang in prisons in the early 1970's.

GT: Do you think that the songs you heard and learned to sing in 1963 differ from the ones you have perhaps heard in recent years?

*Oh, yes. They do.*

GT: What's the difference? How would you characterise it?

*The ones that are sung now, they have become much more conscious. They are about... they have a far more — how should I put it? — concrete content. The ones which were sung then were a little more like “poor me” and that. Or “poor us”. Of course, they must have tried in their own way to tell it like it was. But they had no points of reference... it was so tough that next to nobody knew how things were for the inmates in those days. Like it is now — eh? They had to try to do something a little more romanticised. Now it is more straight talking.<sup>44</sup>*

The informant is clearly conscious of how the repertoire has changed. He makes several observations which directly concern the messages of the songs. He sees a clear change in the perspective of texts — from an exposition filled with complaints and appeals for pity to a more concrete description of mal-administration.

Another important difference between the older category of songs and the newer is that many of the newer songs have their own melodies, whilst the older songs were often sung to a “well-known melody”. This means that the structure of texts becomes freer — but also that it is harder to transmit and spread the songs, since someone who wants to learn a song must also learn its melody. Song texts set to music according to the recipe “to a well-known melody” have a greater chance to survive and to be spread to wider circles as long as the melody continues to be well-known.

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<sup>44</sup> SVA BA1177.



In this section, texts in *The Voice of the Collective* — the newer song category are discussed and presented on the basis of the description of *The Crime* and thoughts concerning *Life after Prison* — and also of how the texts of the songs convey *Distancing from Society* and *Critique of the Correctional Treatment System and Society*. We will also take a closer look at how the prisonisation process is mirrored in the texts in a section concerning *Group Identity and Language*.

#### THE CRIME

The texts in the newer category of songs show in many cases that the criminal identity has partially gained a positive significance. Many of the prison songs of the 1970's have texts which signal pride in standing above society's morals and norms. This entails that a crime is no longer blamed on fate or other circumstances over which the criminal lacks control. The crime is instead described openly in many songs.

I have thieved and supped and fought.  
I have cheated and lied my way forward.  
I have raged and sinned and hurt.  
Without consideration have I fought my way forward.  
("Gatans son" [Son of the Street], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>45</sup>

We stole and we blasted in many towns,  
From smokes and beer to food and clothes.  
We hunted were by the country's police,  
Against us there was of course no evidence.  
("Ifrån Skåne i söder till Dorotea" [From Skåne  
in the South to Dorotea], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>46</sup>

Many of the texts in the older category of songs have a lyrical tone and describe a feeling or a mood. The newer songs often have a more epic, narrational

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<sup>45</sup> SVA BA1410.

<sup>46</sup> SVA BA1409.

style, with more concrete contents and a more direct manner of address. This also applies very much to the way in which crimes are described. In the distinct descriptions of crimes in “Gatans son” [Son of the Street] above, there is no doubt about who is responsible for the deed — it is the subject of the song, rather than fate or coincidence as in the older songs.

#### DISTANCING FROM SOCIETY

In many of the texts, the main character of the song positions him/herself as an outsider. This is what Alf Arvidsson means by “the misfit” when he discusses the subject positions in music texts of the progressive music movement (Arvidsson 2008:321). Perhaps the most interesting aspect is the fact that many of the songs even express pride in being an outsider.

I shrug at warm and I shrug at cold.  
I shrug at gods and devils and all.  
I shrug, like I say, at distress, moreover  
life and death.  
    (“Kamrat efter genvägen” [Comrade upon the Shortcut],  
    Hall Prison, 1971)<sup>47</sup>

When others looked for work like hell,  
I thought of how to blow up the bank.  
It has always been my firm belief,  
That you earn more by being a thief.  
    (“Jag är en yngling från Söders höjder” [I Am a Youth  
    from the Heights of Söder], Hall Prison, 1971)<sup>48</sup>

Here in prison, there are germs,  
But there are pills too

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<sup>47</sup> SVA BA1177.

<sup>48</sup> SVA BA1177.

And you know what happens  
When you eat them, it's like you ignite.  
("Brev från mig" [Letter from Me], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>49</sup>

One of the main features displayed by Arvidsson's subject position "the misfit" is this acclaim for outsidership. By showing indifference towards the law and the norms of society, the texts in the category the Voice of the Collective place the subject of the song in this position. The manner of address is often purposely arrogant and provocative.

One way to distance oneself from the norm system of society is to express, as in "Kamrat efter genvägen" (above), that you ignore everything — "moreover life and death".

#### GROUP IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE

The need to create a feeling of "we" in vulnerable groups was discussed in relation to Clemmer's term "prisonisation" (cf. p. 28pp). Swedish ethnomusicologists have described a similar process as *culturalisation*, in which various groups use marked forms of expression (music, dance, clothes and food) in order to consciously differentiate themselves from others (Lundberg et al 2000:419pp). Culturalisation can be seen as a superior concept which comprises several different processes — one of which is prisonisation. The song "Kriminal psalm" [Criminal Psalm] (below) touches upon the conscious part of the process: "how to steal a little better".

We are born to sit inside.  
There is no good inside us.  
Since, when we sit in prison,  
we snatch the smallest little crime  
to learn how to steal a little better  
when we get out in a few years.

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<sup>49</sup> SVA BA1410.

To show our gangster friends  
what we learned in this rotten hole.]  
("Kriminal psalm" [Criminal Psalm], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>50</sup>

There are many indicators in "Criminal Psalm" of this very culturalisation process — an affiliation which is seen as almost a matter of genetics ("we are born to sit inside"), prison as an institution which conveys behavioural patterns such as "to learn how to steal a little better when we get out" and a collective repudiation of the correctional treatment system ("this rotten hole").

Another angle of approach to the songs in the category Voice of the Collective is that many of them have titles. The older songs lack titles; they are instead identified by their first line — that is to say that a song is named according to the beginning of its text, and has no actual "title". This is typical of the folk song tradition in general. In the newer category of prison songs, on the other hand, we often find songs with independent titles. Examples of this are "Kriminal psalm" [Criminal Psalm], "Gatans son" [Son of the Street] and "Fredlös" [Outlaw]. It is possible to see the use of distinct titles as a sign of the genre's translocation from the traditional sphere to a professionalised pop music mould.

Many texts in the category Voice of the Collective use prison lingo, this too being a way to denote otherness: terms such as "snut" [cop], "plit" [jailer], "stillo" [pen], "gojting" [babe] are found to a greater extent than in the older songs.

A particular category consists of songs in the Swedish Romani language. These songs have older origins and are found among the earlier recordings. In his book *För vad sorg och smärta* [Such Sorrow, Such Pain], Thom Lundberg tells of how prisons and prison environments were a part of life for many travellers: many of them were forced, on account of exclusion and stigmatisation, to live on the margins of society whether they liked it or not. Many were sentenced for vagrancy and petty thefts — and ended up in a vicious circle of recurrent prison stretches.

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<sup>50</sup> SVA BA1410.

During the period in Swedish history when fortress labour was a sentence for everything from vagrancy to recurrent minor thefts, Varberg's fortress had its fair share of travellers in its rolls of prisoners. When released, it was often easier to stay in the vicinity rather than take to "drommen" [Romani: the road] again. Many were they who "mulade" [Romani: died] in the fortress, since the sentence was hard but the cold and the damp were harder.<sup>51</sup>

One of the most widespread songs of the travellers in Romani is "Sjun pre miro tjavoar" [Listen to me lads], found in a number of versions in sVA's recordings.

Oh sjun pre miro tjavoar, jag gia vill en sång  
om hur livet har förfarit med mig engång.  
Så att ni inte tradrar uti samma spår och drom  
för då skolen ni få ångra det en gång.

[Oh, listen to me lads, I sing will a song  
Of how life once treated me.  
So that you do not travel the same tracks and road  
For then you would come to regret it.]  
("Sjun pre miro tjavoar", Gävle Prison, 1965)<sup>52</sup>

It is of interest to note that sVA's collector Bertil Sundin did not focus upon the ethnic dimension of prison songs. When the informant had sung "Sjun pre miro tjavoar" for Sundin, a short discussion arose on the song's language.

BS: Ah... I didn't understand much of that.

No, I understand that.

BS: Part of it...

No — it's hard, that is.

BS: Yes...

It's useful to know it at times.

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<sup>51</sup> Lundberg 2016. Thom Lundberg repeatedly uses Romani words in his book.

<sup>52</sup> sVA BA98.

BS: What might it be in translation?

*Though I never use it outside, like. It doesn't suit.*

BS: When are these songs in Romani sung?

*Well, mostly by... It's the lads inside.*

BS: Are they sung in any context whatsoever inside?

*No, I've never heard them. But yes, sometimes I've heard them. But not so much inside. But I have sung these before.*

A key comment by the informant is “It’s useful to know it at times”. He presumably wishes to point out that Romani could be used as a “secret” language which could be used without the prison staff being able to understand. But Sundin’s focus as a collector was on recording songs, and the discussion on language usage was ended. It could of course have been fascinating to learn more — for example of whether the informant was a traveller or something about how he learned the song.

#### CRITICISM OF THE CRIMINAL TREATMENT SYSTEM AND OF SOCIETY

One of the most characteristic facets of the category Voice of the Individual is the pronounced criticism of society in general and the criminal treatment system in particular. The songs complain of wrongs in the immediate environment, such as poor sanitation and incompetent or corrupt prison personnel — but also incompetence at higher levels in the power hierarchies, where doctors and psychologists are often identified as ignorant or corrupt representatives of society’s approach to the treatment of criminals.

I suffer hellish torment in a prison institution.

Its name is Härlanda, and it’s well-known.

It’s a rathole from floor to ceiling

And all of us here think the same.

(“Kval” [Torment], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> SVA BA1410.

But one day when I am free.  
Then I will try to be  
honest and conscientious so perhaps I  
can be a warder in clink one day.  
A uniform like the warder has  
with brass buttons here and there.  
And when he walks there, on his watch,  
a key as a symbol of his power.  
("Tjuvarnas dag är slut" [The Day of the Thieves is Done],  
Långholmen Prison, 1965)<sup>54</sup>

To a workshop I came — it was filthy, like.  
They dressed me in a blue overall.  
Then I had to struggle and strive by the sweat of my brow,  
while the wardens stood and looked on.  
("Sista voltan" [The Last Stretch], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>55</sup>

Then before sentencing you're tested, seven-eight months at best.  
Before test, me so clever, now, me almost complete idiot.  
Not either like psychologist. Psychologist be just humbug.  
Not either like psychopath, psychopath be just lazy.  
("Problembarn" [Problem Child], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>56</sup>

But the board of the Swedish criminal treatment system.  
Yes, they prefer to take folk from rustic northern farm.  
And merits he had Ben, yes, he had guarded hens.  
And count he could to thirty-seven.  
("Konstapel Jöns" [Constable Ben])<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> SVA BA97.

<sup>55</sup> SVA BA1410.

<sup>56</sup> SVA BA1410.

<sup>57</sup> *Kåklåtar* MNW 31P, 1972.

For the prisoner gets.  
These awful garments.  
Degradation's pantaloons.  
He must be quashed in Mother Svea's briefs.  
("Klädbytet" [The Change of Clothes])<sup>58</sup>

No, free all prisoners and knock down all the clinks.  
For no-one turns out better by sitting in a cage.  
They think that we, this riffraff that cause trouble,  
Should be deprived of our freedom and treated like animals.  
("Riv alla kåkar" [Knock Down All the Clinks])<sup>59</sup>

What do I care if they lock my door?  
If society gets its revenge?  
I have borne manifold burdens before,  
in life's darkest branch.  
("Snaran" [The Noose], Hall Prison, 1971)<sup>60</sup>

No, rather a corpse in the cell,  
Than a prisoner less by evening.  
Shall be printed on the correctional treatment medallion.  
("Kita" [Kita])<sup>61</sup>

Criticism of the correctional treatment system and of society is perhaps the strongest feature in the category Voice of the Collective. This is also clarified by the songs being aimed at an audience outside the prisons. The songs were a part of the public debate concerning Sweden's correctional treatment system.

The organised struggle led by KRUM (Riksförbundet för kriminalvårdens humanisering) [The National League for the Humanising of the Correctional Treatment System] and FFCO (Fångarnas fackliga centralorganisation) [The

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<sup>58</sup> *Kåklåtar* MNW 31P, 1972.

<sup>59</sup> *Kåklåtar* MNW 31P, 1972.

<sup>60</sup> SVA BA1177.

<sup>61</sup> *Kåklåtar* MNW 31P, 1972.



Central Organisation of the Union of Prisoners] used prison songs at meetings and manifestations. The work of the criminal treatment drafting committee of 1971 resulted in a new law on correctional treatment in 1974.

#### LIFE AFTER PRISON

The future — life after release — is an important part of the text thematic here, just as it is in the older category of songs. Here, however, freedom is — not surprisingly — portrayed not as an idyll, but instead as a return to crime and wretchedness.

One sunny summer's day I was finally demobbed  
and thought to catch up on the days I'd lost.  
I roistered and I revelled for eight short days,  
but ended up in clink where once I'd been before.

(“Snälle kostapeln” [Please, Kind Warder], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>62</sup>

Hooray, now I walked out through the gate,  
as I'd done so many times before.  
I went straight down to the liquor store,  
to buy a little drop.  
Then I sat myself on the train,  
to travel home to Stockholm's swamp,  
like we always do when someone is demobbed.

(“Kriminal psalm” [Criminal Psalm], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>63</sup>

In “En yngling från Söders höjder” [A Youth from the Heights of Söder], the perspective is altered in order to present the time in prison as a “holiday”.

Sometimes you get caught, for sure,  
and the cops are always after me.

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<sup>62</sup> SVA BA1410.

<sup>63</sup> SVA BA1410.

Then you get a short holiday,  
from eight months up to a year.

    ("En yngling från Söders höjder" [A Youth from the Heights of Söder],  
Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>64</sup>

This song is thoroughly parodical, based on praise of outsidersness, and the "I" of the song pours scorn on society and people's humdrum everyday life: "When everyone thought I'd turn out to be a dirty nine-to-five, they got it wrong". Yet there are also songs which view freedom in the usual way — happy days in a pub with "a girl on each knee".

But sometime the day will dawn  
when all the numbers answer, except mine.  
Then I'll be at the pub with a girl on each knee  
and thinking how great it is to be free.  
    ("Kval" [Torment], Hall Prison, 1972)<sup>65</sup>

## Something about Other Song Genres

The songs in the categories Voice of the Individual and Voice of the Collective are the core of the prison song genre. They tell of prison life and portray the situation of the imprisoned — but also longing and dreams of a better existence from both individual and collective perspectives. Yet prison songs are only some of the songs which were sung in prisons. Here I address two other genres which constitute substantial portions of sVA's collected material: "tjackvisor" [speed songs] and erotic songs.

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<sup>64</sup> sVA BA1410.

<sup>65</sup> sVA BA1410.

## Autumn's Dusk

Slow swing E E7 A7

As au-tum'n's dusk is quiet-ly sink - ing up-on our pe-ni-ten-tia-ry ho-tel.

A pri-so-ner lies the-re think-ing — and long-ing each night in his

cell. Think - ing of wo-men so wil-ling — so beau-ti-ful out-side those walls,

c#m A E7 D7 C#7

of sex slaves his sweets dreams ful - fil - ling. But his

F#7 B7 E7 D7 C#7 F#7 B7 E

gaze on por-no-gra-phy falls. — But his gaze on por-no-gra-phy falls. —

“Höstnattsridå” [Autumn’s Dusk] was written by Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson when he was an inmate of the Hall prison at the end of the 1960’s. The song was an ever-present in the concert programme with Konvaljen and Robert Robertsson in the early 1970’s with various titles: “Höstnattsridå” [Autumn Night’s Curtain], “Kvinnodrömmar” [Dreams of Women] and “Porrblaskan” [Porno Rag]. It was sung in conjunction with discussions of the distorted view of women, rape among male inmates. Melodically, the song is typical of the repertoire of the period — a bluesy melody with a chord progression redolent of swing music. This translation is not word-for-word, but a free interpretation — an attempt to capture the meaning and atmosphere of the original.

As autumn’s dusk is quietly sinking  
upon our penitentiary hotel,  
a prisoner lies there thinking  
and longing each night in his cell.  
Thinking of women so willing,  
So beautiful outside those walls,  
of sex slaves his sweet dreams fulfilling.  
But his gaze on pornography falls.

The porno rags show almost all that  
a man starved of sex needs to see.  
Paper dolls pinned to the wall, that  
can help him less lonely be.  
A woman is made by the inmate  
In his mind, to let him see  
a willing and red-hot playmate:  
a dream for a man who’s not free.

## SPEED SONGS

In his article “Säg har du skådat kåkens dystra murar” [Say, have you beheld the dismal prison walls], Gunnar Ternhag observes that songs about narcotics, “speed songs”, are developing into a new song category in the prison environment (Ternhag 1974:176pp). Speed songs is the term used in interviews, but these songs continue a long tradition of drug romanticism which has sung the praise of, not least, alcohol. Narcotics, too, are present in the older songs — for example in the material collected by Sundin. In “Jag har seglat omkring uti kärlekens lund” [I have sailed around in love’s grove] the “I” of the song is a pimp who tells of how he dampens his sorrow with the help of “en dunderare” [a thunderer] (meths) and “en meter” [a metre] (injected drug) when his woman had become old and ugly and no longer makes money for him.<sup>66</sup>

That songs romanticising drugs become part of the newer repertoire also has to do with it being possible to portray the life of an addict as an alternative and anarchistic lifestyle. We have earlier referred to Alf Arvidsson’s ideas on how “the misfit” was regarded as a feasible position in the texts of the progressive music movement of the 1970’s. From that perspective, criminality and drug addiction may be seen as two coactive factors which reinforce the image of the song’s subject as maladjusted and marginalised.

You there, with your broken gaze,  
can you fix a kick for me?  
Tired and jaded in the world’s sump  
I will take a one-metre pump.  
    (“Nyss när jag från snuten stack”, [When I Just  
    Ran from the Cops], Hall Prison, 1971)<sup>67</sup>

It is obvious that the singers are conscious of the fact that the songs will seem provocative for outside listeners — this is easily understood from the interview material. These songs also proffer a certain feeling of affiliation for the

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<sup>66</sup> SVA BA99.

<sup>67</sup> SVA BA1175.

extremely marginalised fellowship of drug addicts. Here, too, a knowledge of technical terminology concerning drugs is a marker of belonging. In “Kom in i kvarten” [Come into the Pad], recorded by Ternhag at the Hall prison in 1971, the singer sings proudly of life in the addict’s pad.<sup>68</sup>

Come into the pad,  
here we have drugs and water,  
shots and needles.  
The goo stands and glows in the fridge.  
We ladled drugs, yes great heaps of P.  
We ladled drugs, sometimes a rita too.  
Me and Alle, Jan and big Totte.  
We were kings, didn’t let a soul  
into our gang unless he had the hang  
of filtering, of filtering.

Here comes Roffe,  
He likes P and morpho.  
He’s brought Stina.  
She pecks ritalina and P.  
We filter drugs, at least a hundred metres a day.  
Shot a strong one into a vein at least once every fifteen minutes.  
Me and Alle, Jan and big Totte.  
We were the top junkies and didn’t let a soul  
into our gang unless he had the hang  
of filtering, of filtering.

(“Kom in i kvarten” [Come into the Pad], Hall Prison, 1971)<sup>69</sup>

Ternhag himself comments this song:

The song tradition is here, as of course it ever has been, a barometer which has faithfully registered social change. From that angle, the emergence of speed songs is a grave sign of ill-health. (Ternhag 1974:178)

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<sup>68</sup> SVA BA1175.

<sup>69</sup> SVA BA1175.

The 1960's saw a massive increase in drug abuse, both in Sweden and abroad. Trading and abuse were connected with the criminal world — not least with prisons.<sup>70</sup> Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson tells in an interview of how it was easier to get hold of cannabis and central nervous system stimulants in the Hall prison than it was on the outside in the early 1970's, so that lots of visitors came in order to buy drugs from the inmates.<sup>71</sup>

#### EROTIC SONGS

There are surprisingly few songs with erotic content in the material. Songs which are usually termed “dirty” or “lewd” were sung quite a lot in prisons. Many informants say that there are lots of dirty songs, but they are usually not prepared to sing them — in spite of the collectors specifically asking for them. In some cases, the singer stops singing when it dawns on him that a lewd stanza is about to come in the song he is singing:

*(sings) All on a Saturday evening, I am out on a spree, and then upon her door I go and hammer. She opens soon, but she said, you must have noticed... (breaks off) No, we can't have that, it's too dirty, you see.*

BS: No, but why not?

*We'll take something else.*<sup>72</sup>

When Bertil Sundin and Elisabeth Skarpe interview Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson, a discussion about lewd songs arises:

BS: Aren't there any of those that they call “dirty songs”?

KJ: Yes, of course there are.

BS: Don't you have any?

KJ: Yes, but they're so bloody dirty.

BS: Well, let's see if she blushes. (refers to ES)

KJ: No, but I don't want to.

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<sup>70</sup> Drogutvecklingen i Sverige 2012.

<sup>71</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ003.

<sup>72</sup> SVA BA97.



Konvaljen later donated his own copies of songs, among them three with erotic content.<sup>74</sup> There is a total of six songs with erotic content in sva's collections of prison songs.

It is interesting to see how Konvaljen contradicts Sundin's suggestion that lewd songs have nothing to do with life in prison. Many people have observed that closed male collectives are the foremost environment for the erotic song tradition. In her book *Kåkarare. Fängelselivet på Långholmen 1946–1975* [Jail-birds. Prison Life at Långholmen 1946–1975] the ethnologist Annika Lamroth discusses the place of sexuality in prison life (Lamroth 1990:93pp).

The lack of normal contacts with women was compensated by various substitutes. Pictures of naked women adorned many cells, but erotic tales were also popular with the inmates. In the interviews upon which Lamroth bases her study there are many erotic tales, but also testimony concerning masturbation and homosexuality. Obviously the erotic songs sometimes acted as a substitute. The folklorists Bengt af Klintberg and Christina Mattsson confirm the connection between erotic songs and same-sex environments:

It is clear that there is no other environment in which the songs have been so common as in closed male collectives: army barracks, ships, the quarters of farmhands, the barracks of lumberjacks. Once there was no equivalent of today's profuse pictorial pornography: songs and tales were the only erotic fare (Klintberg & Mattsson 1977:31).

It is perhaps not possible to compare the erotic songs with pornographic pictures — as af Klintberg and Mattsson do above. The songs often have a humorous tone, and their aim is in part to poke fun at the norms in force regarding sexuality and language usage. Erotic songs are often placed in the category “jocular songs” in archive collections.

Though there are but a few erotic songs in the prison songs material, they provide a wide range of means of expression.

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<sup>74</sup> The sva manuscript collection, sva acc. 263.



The song “Tre jungmän” [Three Deckhands] uses the melody of another Swedish jocular song: “När jag var liten så var jag elak det vet jag” [When I Was Little, I Was Naughty, I Know It].<sup>75</sup>

Three deckhands stood on the deck a-hoisting.  
And opposite sat a dirty whore a-pissing.  
We get to fuck though we have no money.  
Because we're deckhands, not common farmhands.

We have fucked both French and German models.  
We have fucked so the cunt flaps clap.  
We have pricks both long and thin  
That dive into fucking cunts like a swallow.

This text is consistently built on crude language and may be seen as a crudely burlesque part of the erotic repertoire. We find its converse in “Jag vet en sjö” [I Know a Lake], which doesn't use sexual words or other crude language whatsoever whilst metaphorically and lyrically portraying woman's sexual organs and the act of intercourse:

I know a lake, whose water never freezes,  
where waves wash a lush shore.  
Where neither sun nor moon shines,  
where slippery eels sometimes slide in.

And this lake is found in every woman.  
In this lake you can cool yourself.  
In this lake you may find bliss,  
if you know love, then it is yours too.

Be calm, be calm, and touch not its shores.  
no, let me splash in its waves.

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<sup>75</sup> The sva manuscript collection. sva acc. 263.

Oh woman, woman, take away your hands,  
I'll steer my rowboat myself joyfully.  
("Jag vet en sjö där vattnet aldrig fryser" [I Know a Lake,  
Whose Water Never Freezes], Gävle Prison, 1965)<sup>76</sup>

Another style is represented by the song "Oh, käre Alfred" [Oh, Dear Alfred], structured as a dialogue in which that which is humorous arises via the contrast between the woman's and the man's lines. The woman humbly asks for Alfred's love, but is brusquely rejected and insulted.

Oh, dear Alfred, come let us share life,  
Yes, life's destiny with a faithful little friend,  
And be faithful until death.  
Oh, dear Alfred, embrace me again.

Embrace who the hell you like,  
But you won't get me.  
For I couldn't give a fuck for your cunt.  
Between your fat thighs,  
ever since you were fourteen,  
thousands of pricks have wandered in eternity.  
("Oh, käre Alfred", [Oh, Dear Alfred], Hall Prison, 1969)<sup>77</sup>

A song which is widespread, not least in recent years on account of it being in *Fula visboken* [The Book of Dirty Songs], is "Rullan går" [Roll On, roll On]. This song was also recorded by Finn Zetterholm and Bengt Sändh on their LP *Folklår, våra allra fulaste visor* [Folk Thighs, Our Dirtiest Songs].<sup>78</sup> The song parodies the Annunciation, one of Christianity's most central sacraments, when the archangel Gabriel told Mary that she had been impregnated by the Holy Ghost. It is perhaps impossible to be more blasphemous than when suggesting that the Virgin Mary was "holy and horny".

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<sup>76</sup> SVA BA98.

<sup>77</sup> SVA BA758.

<sup>78</sup> Swedish "folklår" sounds much like "folklore", but "lår" means "thighs".

Jesus's Mary was holy and horny, holy and horny, holy and horny.  
Fucked she did when she got the chance, when she got the chance.  
First with one, then with the other.  
Then she got a child with the holy ghost.  
Roll on, Roll on.  
Come and look what roll on does.  
(“Jesus Maria var helig och kåt” [Jesus's Mary Was Holy and Horny])<sup>79</sup>

Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson's “Höstnattsridån stilla sig sänker” [As Autumn's Dusk Quietly is Sinking] was recorded on an LP with the title “Porrblaskan” [Porno Rag] and typifies the politicised prison song tradition.<sup>80</sup>

This song describes the prisoner's difficulties in finding an outlet for his sexuality in the prison's same-sex world, but also observes the twisted view of the woman which can result from a stretch in prison.

As autumn's dusk quietly is sinking upon our penitentiary hotel,  
a prisoner lies there thinking and longing each night in his cell.  
Thinking of women so willing, so beautiful outside those walls,  
of sex slaves his sweet dreams fulfilling. But his gaze on pornography falls.

The porno rags show almost all that a man starved of sex needs to see.  
Paper dolls pinned to the wall that can help him less lonely be.  
A woman is made by the inmate in his mind, to let him see  
a willing and red-hot playmate: a dream for a man who's not free.  
(“Höstnattsridån stilla sig sänker” [As Autumn's  
Dusk Quietly is Sinking], Hall Prison, 1971)<sup>81</sup>

Konvaljen's “Autumn's Dusk” is about eroticism but is perhaps not a truly erotic song — not, at, least in the jocular-song sense — but rather a political song. In the collection of prison songs there are also songs with streaks of eroticism, such as the speed song “Berta hon är bra i sängen” [Berta, she is good in bed].

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<sup>79</sup> The SVA manuscript collection. SVA acc. 263.

<sup>80</sup> SVA BA1177.

<sup>81</sup> SVA BA1177.

This song, a travesty of Cornelis Vreeswijk's "Brev från kolonien" [a Swedish version of "Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh"], portrays the life of the addict with sex and drugs.

Berta, she wants to camouflage,  
that she wants to filter up,  
a little rita for her boyfriend,  
so that he will get more strength in his willy.

Well, now I know no more.  
Because now I will masturbate.  
Berta couldn't take the pressure,  
because she has pumped far too much into herself.  
("Berta hon är bra i sängen" [Berta, She is Good in Bed],  
Hall Prison, 1969)<sup>82</sup>

The erotic songs sung in prisons did not differ, as far as can be judged from the scarce material collected, from the "dirty songs" sung in other contexts. These songs were not, however, part of the repertoire sung in public in the 1970's. One exception is Konvaljen's "Höstmattsridån stilla sig sänker", which was used in stage shows to tell of maladministration in prisons.

## The Transmission of Prison Songs

When Bertil Sundin embarked upon his documentation project in 1965, he found it hard to get in touch with jailbirds who knew the tradition. He began by speaking with prison personnel, who turned out to know very little about the very existence of prison songs. In time, he came into contact with an inmate of the Långholmen prison in Stockholm who knew of prison songs and could show him the way forward.

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<sup>82</sup> SVA BA722.

*There is one called [...]. He is from [...] Hälsingland. But I think he's out on the road now. He sang a lot. He had a good singing voice and he liked to sing. He sang tinker's songs, he wants to be a tinker but I don't think he is. Maybe he has some in his family, not so close. Apart from that, he's not a tinker.*

*Then we have [...] from Sundsvall. But he doesn't sing when he's sober. He wants to be drunk when he sings. But he sings a lot. And he has a lot written down, he does. And he's a bit strange — a real bohemian. So he gets sentimental when he's drunk, and then he gets out those books and sings. Then he sings lots of prison songs.*

BS: Could I visit him?

*I think he'll make himself available, as long as he's sober. Sometimes he has a whim — then he gets a job, and he goes out to the forest then. But when he's at home he drinks all the time. And sometimes he cries a little. He's sentimental. [...] Then there was a lad from Bollnäs I met in 1949. But it wasn't just prison songs he sang, but a lot of other tricky songs that you'd never heard before. Yes, things that prisoners wrote but not about prisons.*

In this way the work rolled on; each new interview often gave tips about other people it would be interesting to interview — a kind of domino effect which led Sundin on from informant to informant. Many of the singers knew of each other and knew to some extent the same songs, which shows that the prison song repertoire spread between inmates both inside and outside prisons. One might easily assume that the isolation while a sentence was served would mean that the songs were not spread far. But this was by no means the case — the internment punishment system for habitual offenders created a circle of criminals who often had long sentences. Ingrid Miljand, antiquarian at Sweden's Prison Museum in Gävle, has described the internment system:

Habitual criminals were sentenced to internment. The sentence did not have a limit. The sentence was for a minimum of between one and twelve years. When the minimum sentence had been served, it was possible for the internment board to assess discharge once a year. A person who had not relapsed into crime during the five years after being released from an institution could finally be discharged. A person who broke the law during the assessment period, which however the great majority did, was sent back to an institution. (Miljand 2017)

Internment prisoners often had many recurrent prison sentences, but were placed in new prisons depending upon where the crimes were committed. Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson, for example, relates that he sat in almost twenty Swedish prisons. Via — not least — the internment prisoners, the song repertoire spread within prison culture and a kind of canon consisting of well-known songs evolved.

In the interview quoted above, the informant mentions that when the singer gets drunk “then he gets out those books and sings”. The books he refers to are presumably hand-written songbooks. The use of such books has been an important factor in the transmission of more or less all folk-song genres (Ternhag 2008). When asked how they learned their songs, most people answer that they learned them orally when they met other singers and then wrote down the songs in order to remember them. Another kind of transmission named is copying one another’s songs between songbooks. Several prisoners also tell of how they learned to play in prison:

GT: You started singing and playing guitar in prison in 1963. Was it a common thing for blokes to start like that?

*Yes, quite a few played something or sang something. It was in fact by pure coincidence (laughs) I got a guitar when I swapped... You swap things there, like. You don't have any cash and that, so you swap things as it's called. I had a watch — a lady's watch it was in fact, too. And there was a bloke who wanted to give it as a present to his chick or his wife. He asked me if he could swap something for it and I had no direct use for it, so we swapped and I got a guitar in part-exchange and I thought: oh, I've got a guitar here and what should I do with it? I was forced to learn to play, otherwise I'd have had no benefit from it. So I started.*

GT: What kind of songs did you start with, then?

*Well... I remember that the first I learned was that “Sailor”, because I had the chords for it written down. So I sat and learned that, out and in and backwards and forwards there. Until my fingers started to hurt. Well, really until I thought that it sounded like something. And then I got interested in the songs sung there in prison, the so-called clink songs.*

GT: When did you start doing that, then?

*Well, I started with that in 63–64.*

GT: Straightaway?

*Well, more or less, you might say.*

GT: Did they just wander around in general, or was it only special persons who knew them?

*Er..., I suppose you could say that it was the ones who liked to sing and who could sing, they were the ones who had them. It might have been... you could say... a third of the blokes who had them. There were also those who didn't sing who had a little written down, but mostly it was those who sang themselves.*

GT: But those who sang, they knew prison songs too?

*Yes, they almost all knew some.*<sup>83</sup>

Many, then, sang songs — and not only prison songs. The interviews confirm for us that the personal repertoires of many prisoners consisted of songs generally known, and that the prison songs did not occupy an exceptional position for inmates.

#### SCRAWLS ON WALLS

A special variety of written transmission is mentioned in some of the interviews. The informants say that they learned songs from scrawlings on cell walls. In an interview made in the Långholmen prison in Stockholm, an inmate tells of how he learned the song “Fångens klagan” [The Prisoner’s Complaint]:

*To continue, then, we have something that we call the prisoner’s complaint. It’s written with a melody, like, called “Tjyvarnas konung” [King of the Thieves]. And the original text is in fact written down at Långholmen, down in the isolation cells which were in the cellar. And it’s written with, presumably, some sort of an old nail. So someone must have... amused themselves down there... as they put it. And printed it down on a wall, like, on... So it’s there, more or less up and down on those bars made of wood. And they weren’t next-to-nothing — they were two-and-a-half by two-and-a-half inches. And anyway, they had mild steel inside. And there you’ll*

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<sup>83</sup> SVA BA1410.

*find the prison song written down, and who wrote it no-one knows either. But it was written, anyway, like around the end of the 1800's. They reckon it was 97-98. And the tune "Tjyvarnas konung" is an old... from down in Austria that tune comes, actually. Then it was reworked, so it was a song that went in fact quite a lot with them wanderers. So for a start, I'll try to relate to you what he tried to say. (SVA BA97)*

According to the inscription, "Fångens klagan" was written down by an unknown prisoner in the isolation cell of Långholmen prison at the end of the 1800's. Judging by the contents of the text, it is however uncertain whether or not this dating is reliable.

#### The Prisoner's Complaint

I shall ask my destiny of the moon that grazes outside the cell.  
Yes, a prisoner here sings so softly, yes for bars and silent wall.

And if you would hear and know, yes, who the song now written has?  
Aye, a prisoner so lonely alone. He locked-in at Långholmen was.

I have had neither father nor mother, therefore left to the street I was.  
I therefore came into the gangs, on streets and squares we roamed.

I was thrown into the prison keep, where I cried many thousands of tears.  
I see different aspects of life behind bars and prison wall.

I restlessly wander in my cell, only the heart in my breast keeps the beat.  
I listen to steps in the corridor, I know it is the keeper of thieves.

My thoughts constantly go back, back to childhood days,  
when I, so little, played back at home and was caressed by a mother  
and a father.

I wait for a letter from a girl, who left me lonely alone.  
Behind bars I anxiously gaze upon days that have flown away.



But where shall I turn later, when I am released from here.  
From clinks and workhouses I will be demobbed, back to the house of  
freedom.

I see couples in love beyond the cage, arm in arm in splendid nature.  
But I will never forget the day that I am released from here.

Well, when will this hell end? When will I have calm in my breast?  
When will I be able to tune my lute and hear my love's voice?

I see the City Hall towers gleaming beyond the arch of Våsterbron in the east.  
Of freedom and love they gleam, of the joy that would be my comfort.

Yet the day of freedom will dawn, and the day of freedom will ring.  
I never more want to be stamped as Stockholm's criminal brigade.  
("Fångens klagan" [The Prisoner's Complaint],  
Långholmen Prison, 1967)<sup>84</sup>

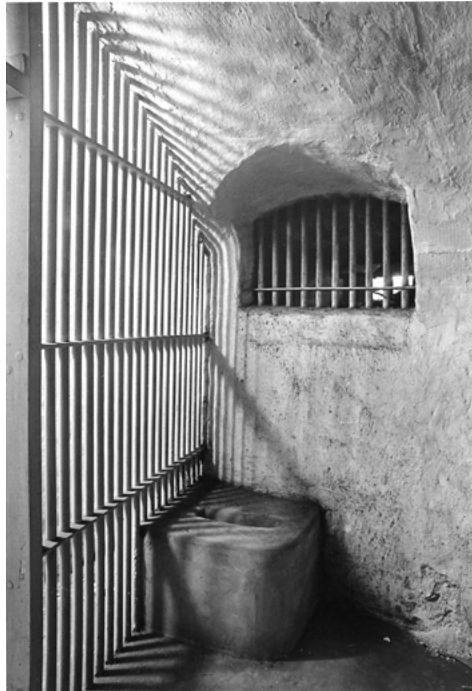
"The Prisoner's Complaint" uses the melody of "King of the Thieves" and loosely alludes to its text. Both tell of a criminal fate. In "King of the Thieves" the main character is plagued by his memory of a crime; what he did, we know not, but it was a crime of passion — perhaps jealousy. His anguish drives him to suicide in the closing stanza. The king's loved one is by his side, and tries in vain to make him change his mind. In "The Prisoner's Complaint" we find the same feeling of repentance concerning the crime committed. But his greatest anguish lies in his fear of being released. How will he get by when his sentence ends? He will emerge into a world where he is stamped as a criminal.

There are also direct allusions to the original text with regard to the form and the themes. In both songs, the second stanza tells of a parentless childhood, of begging and ending up in bad company. On the other hand he remembers, later in the song, his childhood as being bright: "when I, so little, played and was caressed by a mother and a father".

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<sup>84</sup> SVA BA97.

A photo from an isolation cell in the “punishment cellar” of Långholmen prison, Stockholm. Perhaps the song “Fångens klagan” [The Prisoner’s Complaint] was composed here. From the Nordic Museum’s documentation of Långholmen, 1975. Photographer: Nils Blix.



Both texts also mention “Stockholm’s criminal brigade”. In SVA’s catalogue there is a commentary card for “King of the Thieves” which says that this song too is based on an earlier song: “Balens drottning” [Queen of the Ball].

This song is found in many handwritten songbooks from around 1907. The sva’s commentary card for “Balens drottning” states that it probably dated from around the turn of the century, 1900. Thus the claim that “Fångens klagan” might have been written towards the end of the 1800’s is dubious for several reasons. It seems that some stanzas, at least, are from a later date. One example: the “City Hall towers” are named in the song, whilst we know that the architect Ragnar Östberg’s design wasn’t complete until 1913 and that the building was opened in 1923. The arch of the bridge — Västerbron — which is

also named in the text can hardly have been visible from Långholmen at the end of the 1890's: the bridge wasn't opened for traffic until 1935. Some stanzas appear to have been inspired by templates common in Swedish popular songs of the 1920's and 30's. The stanza "My thoughts constantly go back, back to childhood days when I, so little, played back at home and was caressed by a mother and a father" is a stereotype of the kind that Karin Strand has termed the childhood's timescape (Strand 2003:149pp). Similar turns of phrase are found in many sentimental popular songs of the early 1900's.

Thus it is clear that "Fångens klagan" was not — not, at least, in its entirety — composed at the end of the 1800's. Yet we can imagine that part of this song originated earlier, whilst certain stanzas came in the 1900's.

The author Bengt Dagrin has discussed writings on cell walls in the book *Världen är skiti! Leve graffiti!* [The World is Shitty! Long Live Graffiti!]:

What is debated on cell walls? The uninitiated has the answer ready: sex and filth! Because we know how prisoners are. At the scene of the crime, we find that we didn't know at all. The scrawls that I study in the Långholmen prison are seldom below the belt. Is it perhaps the fault of the pinups? In certain cells, these unclad apparitions cover every inch of the walls and ceilings. The bare legs, breasts and backsides of the girls can both figuratively and literally have taken the place of the sex scrawls. Instead of the scrawled beauties, the paper babes were the motif when it was time for a wank. (Dagrin 1980)

Annika Lamroth points out that a mixture of crude sexual scrawls and more poetic expressions is not a bit unusual (Lamroth 1990:140p) The photo, above, of a cell cupboard is from the Ystad prison, closed in the 1980's.

The poem "Steg" [Steps] on the inside of the cupboard door is from Peder Bläck's *Genom ett galler* [Through the Bars] (1944):

Steps, steps  
Four steps forth,  
four steps back...

Night and day  
Heavy as heartbeats  
On the outlaw's way

Steps, steps  
Which never arrive  
Never return

Steps in tears and shame  
Steps in anguish and vigil  
Four steps forth,  
four steps back...



The inside of a cabinet door, probably from a cell in the defunct Ystad institution. Peder Bläcks poem "Steps" is written on the door. Photograph: Sweden's Prison Museum.

A decisive factor in spreading prison songs appears to be the way that the song texts were often written to a “well-known tune”. This meant that it was easier to transmit the songs, since the person who learned a song had no need to learn a new tune. According to many informants it was very common to make music in prisons. Bertil Sundin asks in an interview concerning music-making in a borstal in Uppsala:

BS: Was this common? This was at the end of the 1940's.

Yes.

BS: And at that time you mixed with each other in borstal. You weren't shut up in cells, so to speak?

*No, like we sat in gangs where you sat and smoked and that. And you sat and talked to one person and another.*

BS: But is it your impression that there were many in Uppsala then? Many of those who used to do this?

*Yes, quite a few wrote and sang these songs.*

BS: How many were there in Uppsala then?

*Around forty maybe...*

BS: Forty inside.

*Forty inside, but twenty or so did this.*

BS: Do you mean that about half of them did this?

*Yes, there were lots of lads then. It was them that had guitars and accordions and that sort of thing. There were lots of them.*

BS: Did you have the radio then?

*They let us have the radio then. Not all of us, but some.*

Since most of the material upon which this study is based was collected between 1965 and 1971, the interviews are about the transmission of the prison song genre in the 1940's, 50's and 60's. The interest shown by record companies and an audience outside prisons meant, of course, that new ways of spreading songs such as records, radio and TV arose. The changes in the genre from the mid-1960's are not, however, mirrored in the interviews as regards the transmission of songs. Only one informant says that he learned a song from a record — the Jailbird Singers song “Rulla på, rulla på” from 1964.

An important result of the changes around 1970 is, however, that the prison song genre became professionalised. Some representatives of the genre did tours, were recorded by record companies and were followed by national media: newspapers, radio and tv. Another important change is the writing of new music — directly for the texts. New texts were previously written to well-known tunes. This change suggests that prison songs had become part of the popular culture of the day, and that the creative process now functioned in the same way as other contemporary popular music genres. Hand in hand with these changes, a medialisation of the repertoire takes place. One example of this is the LP *Konvaljen*, which was for the most part created in the studio. Many of the songs are compositions which utilise the possibilities that a recording studio brings: they function fully only via the phonorecord medium, and it is almost impossible to play them live. Other observations may be made regarding changes in the music. In order to adapt to a new audience, the melodies changed. During the 1800's and the first half of the 1900's Sweden's popular music boasted a large proportion of waltzes with distinct major melodic, often based on triads. The music researcher Olle Edström has described the hegemony of the waltz in Swedish popular music of that period:

A backflash shows us that the waltz had danced into the salons of the nobility by the end of the 1700's. It quickly became one of the most popular ballroom dances. [...] The popularity of waltzes is in any case maintained throughout the 1800's: waltzes are danced at parties and balls. [...] The newer melodies were often built around the three main triads of a key and consisted largely of pure triad tones. (Edström 1989:76p)

During the 1970's, prison songs changed: a greater proportion were based on minor melodies, and many were in common time. An interesting example is "En yngling från Söders höjder" [A Youth from the Heights of Söder], based on Värnamovisan — a typical melody from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

with distinct major melodics and triple time. The versions below were both recorded at the Hall prison in 1971.<sup>85</sup>



When the same song is sung by Lennart Konvaljen Johansson in 1971, he has retained the basis of Värnamovisan but changed the melody and rhythm, thus giving the song a more bluesy character — here we find a blue third, and the melody ends on the flattened seventh. He accompanies himself on the guitar with a driving “shuffle groove”. By extending the first crotchet in each bar, the rhythm of the melody is changed to 4/4.

Revised musical notation for "Jag är en yngling från Söders höjder" in 4/4 time. The melody is written on a treble clef staff with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). Chords are indicated above the staff: E7, B7, E7, A7, E7, B7, E7. The lyrics are: Jag är en yng - ling från Sö - ders höj - der som jämt har prö - vats i li - vets frö - öj - der. Jag har all - tid va - rit ett djäv - la frö, och det för - blir jag väl tills jag ska dö - ö.

Konvaljen's version of "Jag är en yngling från Söders höjder" is a telling example of a changed aesthetic ideal and the adaptations made in the genre in the 1960's and 70's.

<sup>85</sup> SVA BA1410 and SVA BA1177.

## The Creative Process

Scandinavian song researchers make a fundamental distinction between two main categories: *folk songs* and *literary songs*. To put it simply, this distinction is based on whether or not the creator is known. When it comes to literary songs, Swedes most often think of such songwriters as Carl Michael Bellman, Barbro Hörberg or Cornelis Vreeswijk. It can, of course, be anyone at all — as long as there is an identifiable creator. The creators of folk songs have not been identified. These songs have been sung as part of folk culture and transmitted from person to person — often for generations. Most agree that this distinction can at times appear to be contrived, since folk songs too must once have been created by a person. Prison songs seem to be somewhere in between. Most of the older prison songs do not have known creators — but not all. In many cases a writer of the text is indicated, often the perpetrator of the crime that the song portrays. This is a hallmark of the song's authenticity, an assurance that the song is a correct testimony. Sometimes a singer who is well-known in the prison environment is said to have created the song; this too appears to raise the status of songs. Karin Strand presents a similar discussion of “authenticity markers” in her analysis of songs of the blind:

On other occasions it was palpably not a matter of original creation — for example, in such cases where the same song with only small variations is found with different titles in songs published by different persons. The text is however individualised by changes in the names of persons and places and concrete circumstances — and even the melody named can vary. This phenomenon is best termed written creation of variants on the basis of a certain song or type of song, definitely for pragmatic or commercial reasons. [...] Since the true author's identity was seldom disclosed, the selfsame song could be attributed to different persons. (Strand 2016:36)

When it comes to prison songs we find a number of examples of how the names of persons and places are changed to create a sense of both timeliness and authenticity. One example is “Härlandavisan” [The Härlanda Song]



which is changed to “Långholmsvisan” [The Långholmen Song] by changing the name of the prison.

Literary songs have, as stated, a known creator, and another characteristic is that they are most often manifested in writing. This means that there is a written original. This is not normally the case with prison songs. Since they are most often found in a socially-based tradition without originals, different versions of songs are constantly created. This is, on the other hand, typical of folk songs in general. We have noted that prison songs are transmitted from inmate to inmate orally or in writing. They were spread in prisons when inmates had a chance to mix, and spread from prison to prison on account of many inmates serving sentences in many different institutions. Each individual put a personal stamp on a song and even though they were written down in songbooks, text variants arose — this is clear from SVA’s material.

This is in other words a song category between folk song and literary song. We are able to assume that the songs were created or used by individuals with a need to express themselves via songs or poetry. For many people in vulnerable groups the songs provided an opportunity to express themselves, communicate messages and share both experiences and feelings. In addition to songs being a suitable medium for expressing both feelings and opinions, they were often the only way that less well-off groups on the margins of society could publicly express themselves.

#### THE SOLITARY CONFINEMENT CELL AS A WRITER’S COTTAGE

A number of studies show that isolated collective communities can stimulate creative processes. In the anthology *Samlade visor. Perspektiv på handskrivna visböcker* [Collected songs. Perspectives on handwritten songbooks], ten Swedish ethnomusicologists, historians and text researchers present various perspectives on handwritten songbooks (Ternhag 2008). These songbooks were broadly used by Sweden’s general public from the second half of the 1800’s. Around the turn of the century, 1900, they were most frequently in use — almost every young person had one. The typical songbook is a notebook

Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson tells of how he was prepared to go to almost any lengths to avoid the isolation cell. One ruse was to harm yourself so that you ended up in the prison hospital. Here he shows his forearm, with long scars from when he cut himself to get a transfer. Cf. photo on p. 88. Photographer: Dan Lundberg.



with black oilcloth covers in which well-known songs were written down. They were used by both women and men, particularly young people. Certain patterns are discernible: women wrote in their teens and before marriage. Men wrote first and foremost in periods when they found themselves in collective homosocial communities. Examples of this are handwritten songbooks once owned by recruits, seamen, railway navvies and firemen. In SVA's collections there are around a thousand handwritten songbooks — originals or copies — but only a handful consist of prison songs. My intention here is not, however, to discuss the songbooks as such, but the time in prison as a premise for the creation of music.

It has been pointed out that living in solitary confinement could in fact have a positive effect on a prisoner's creative activities. This could — for those not broken down by tedium and loneliness — give time for afterthought and for writing, for example, songs or poetry. But even after 1945, when the isolation of inmates decreased, there was plenty of time to read and write. The increased possibility of mixing with others also meant that many inmates learned songs from one another.



Jailbird Singers in a Långholmen revue in 1964, directed by a fellow inmate who was a theatre celebrity. The revue was based on Ruben Nilsson's song "Trubaduren" [The Troubadour]. This scene: medieval jealousy with a lord (Tohre Eliasson), a lady (Åke Johnsson) and a troubadour (Tony Granqvist). The photo is from Tohre Eliasson's private collection.

## THE PRISON REVUES

New Year revues were staged at the Långholmen prison in Stockholm as early as the end of the 1940's. The prison revues displayed a similar spirit to popular revues in general. They gave inmates a chance to comment, criticise and mock their superiors — warders, police, psychologists etc.

But one day when I am free  
Then I will try to be  
Honest and conscientious so perhaps I  
Can be a warder in clink one day.  
A uniform like the warder has  
With brass buttons here and there.  
And when he walks there on his watch,  
A key as a symbol of his power.  
(Tjuvarnas dag är slut [The Day of the Thieves is Done]),  
Långholmen Prison, 1965)<sup>86</sup>

“Tjuvarnas dag är slut” was written by Tony Granqvist for a revue at the Tidaholm prison in 1964.

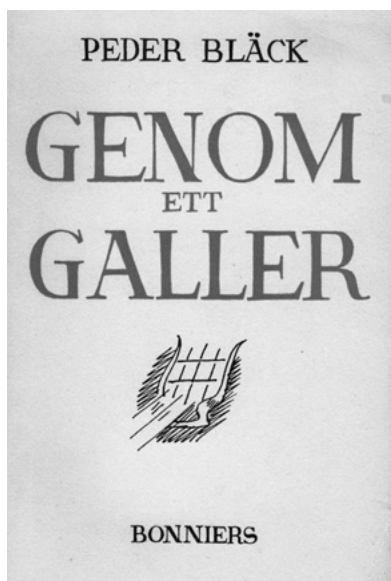
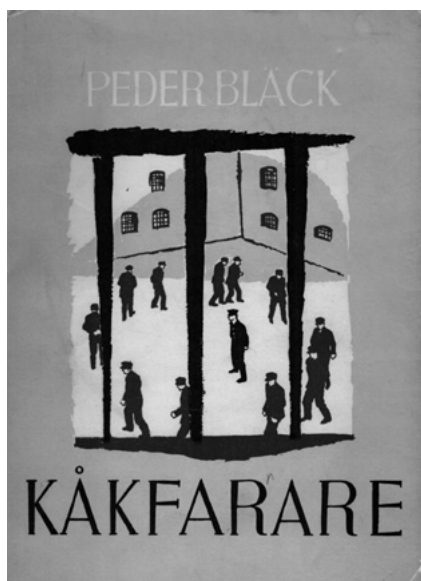
This mocking of the warders is fairly mild, and it is easy to imagine that the inmates did not have much leeway — not least because the inmates and personnel watched the revues together. Gudmund Janissa tells in the book *Jailbird Singers och det andra 60-talet* of a revue with Jailbird Singers at the Långholmen prison: Tohre “Masen” Eliasson delivered the most poisonous lines about the warders, since he was due to be released after the premiere and would thus have the best chance of evading reprisals.

## THROUGH THE BARS — PEDER BLÄCK

The politicising of the prison song genre at the end of the 1960's meant that new songs were written with the aim of telling of wrongs and influencing deci-

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<sup>86</sup> SVA BA97.



Peder Bläck's (Ernest C:son Bredberg) two books about prison life: *Genom ett galler* (Through the Bars) from 1944 and the fictitious autobiography *Kåkfarare* (Jailbirds) from 1957. Photographer: Dan Lundberg.

sion makers. New technique had also changed the preconditions for the creation of music in prisons. The preparations for the LP *Kåklåtar* were for the most part made by Lennart "Konvaljen" Johansson during his time as an inmate at the Hall prison. Konvaljen was allowed to have a tape recorder and guitar in his cell for two hours each evening after incarceration. He used the tape recorder to write new songs and he was able to correspond with the musician Robert Robertsson in Stockholm: they sent recordings to each other. Robertsson and Konvaljen also spent a certain amount of time writing music to poems from the poetry collection *Genom ett galler* [Through the Bars]. This is an example of a new approach. We have lots of earlier examples of writing new words to a "well-known melody"; now new melodies were written to well-known or pre-existing texts. Robertsson says in an interview that the older prisoners knew



Ernst C:son Bredberg in a portrait from 1918 by the artist Einar Jolin. *Porträtt av en ung författare* (Portrait of a Young Author) is from the collections of Norrköpings konstmuseum (Norrköping's Museum of Art). Printed with the permission of Norrköpings konstmuseum. Photographer: Per Myrehed. © Einar Jolin / Bildupphovsrätt 2018.

*Genom ett galler* and it was spread throughout the country's prisons.<sup>87</sup> This collection of poetry was published in 1944 with the sub-title *Fängelsevers av Peder Bläck* [Prison Verse by Peder Bläck ].

Behind the pseudonym “Peder Bläck” we find the author Ernst C:son Bredberg (1897–1963). C:son Bredberg wrote adventure novels and song texts, using several pseudonyms: *Dr Matson*, *Ernest McGeorge* and *Ernesto*. On the back cover of *Genom ett galler* it says that Peder Bläck (“bläck” means “ink”) is a pseudonym for “a once happy and to some extent successful person, who on

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<sup>87</sup> Peder Bläck's (pseudonym of Bredberg, Ernst C:son 1944) *Genom ett galler* is named as an ideal by Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson and Robert Robertsson. SVAA20120402RR001 and SVAA20160831LJ003.

account of tragic circumstances was sentenced to a somewhat long prison sentence". It is uncertain whether or not Ernst C:son Bredberg has actually been a prisoner; the famous Swedish critic Olof Lagercrantz does, however, appear to have thought so when he reviewed Bläck's collection of poetry in the *BLM* magazine in the year of its publication:

Our young poets less frequently sing to Nature. PEDER BLÄCK (a signature) has good reasons not to. His collection of poetry "Genom ett galler" bears witness to some years that he suffered in a Swedish prison. The poet writes an elegant but somewhat mediocre verse. (Lagercrantz, 1944)

In 1957 Ernst C:son Bredberg published another book using the pseudonym Peder Bläck. This time it was a fictitious autobiography entitled *Kåkfarare* [Jail-birds]. Here we follow the prisoner Jonas Jonasson from the moment when he surprisingly (for he himself) is removed from his home by a detective chief inspector and taken to the Långholmen prison and detained. He is sentenced to one year and ten months for embezzlement. In Långholmen we are able to follow his "career". He learns the prison lingo and observes many a sorrowful fate and meets odd "curlicues", as he calls them. He has the good fortune to be given the task of prison librarian, which is regarded as an enviable pursuit. After his release, he is subjected to even more suffering: being a convicted criminal, he is unable to find a job. One day he finds his way down to the harbour and manages to get a job on the dubious freighter *Urania*.

– Wanna job, mate? The chief ain't got 'ands enough, and we sail in a couple of hours. It ain't easy to find 'ands for an old coffin like this, when the brainy ones on the waves can't fill the foc's'le with anything more than blunderers and old jailbirds. (Bläck 1957:212)

The two books *Genom ett galler* and *Kåkfarare* are bound together by a common pseudonym. Ernst C:son Bredberg also uses stanzas from *Genom ett galler* as introductions to each chapter in *Kåkfarare*. In the hunt for a new repertoire in the early 1970's he was perceived as a convincing "jailbird". His poems were, moreover, thought to be on a higher literary level than other prison

song texts. The question of who was behind the pseudonym was never raised, but it was considered reasonable to assume that Bläck had experienced that which he related.

In order to become more intimate with the creative process behind the songs, we take a closer look in the next chapter at one of those who was most active in taking prison songs to the general public in the 1970's—Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson.





# “One o’ Them Blokes what Could Play”

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## Konvaljen

A number of key persons and organisations influenced the dissemination of songs and evolution of the genre “prison songs” during the 1960’s and 1970’s. The interest shown by record companies, with Metronome’s release of Jailbird Singers’ LP in 1964 — and later two LP’s from MNW — was of course of importance. Those tradition bearers who were interviewed point out a number of persons as being particularly important. In a number of interviews, the interviewees refer to special paragons — other singers with good reputations and large repertoires. Bertil Sundin and Gunnar Ternhag devoted part of the interviews in their recording projects to asking about other potential informants. They ask who the informant learned the songs from and which other suitable persons the sva ought to visit and record. A number of names are mentioned time and again: members of the Wigart family, Tony Granqvist from Jailbird Singers, a well-known jailbird and musician known as “Knutte-gitarr” and last but not least Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson.<sup>1</sup>

Konvaljen made a strong medial breakthrough with the LP *Kåklåtar* and became a name beyond the internal prison environment. Newspaper articles, TV and radio programmes and a large number of concerts turned him into some-

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<sup>1</sup> The Wigarts are a well-known family of Swedish Travellers who are listed in a version of the song “*Ja, nu ska mirom gia*” with its list of families: “Brandins, Lindgrens and many hundreds. Karl-Johan-folks and Wigarts of all the thousand kinds”.



Konvaljen playing with the fiddler Peter Meijer in connection with an sVA interview in 2009. sVA-bild 4754. Photographer: Torbjörn Ivarsson.

thing of a forerunner in the genre. This is mirrored in the collected material. He was given his nickname “Konvaljen” in a newspaper, *Vänersborgs tidning*, in connection with an escape from the county jail.

My name is Stig Björn Lennart Connvair. With i-j at the end. Then there was a misprint when we escaped, like: Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson. Well, then... That was early. It was in 53, the first time we escaped from the Vänersborg clink. The next time we escaped it said “Konvaljen free and foot-loose again”, in that there Vänersborg paper. (Intervju 1996, Rolf Alm)

In this section, Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson’s life and career are portrayed on the basis of the interviews recorded — primarily for archive purposes — with him. Bertil Sundin and Elisabeth Skarpe (in 1969) and Gunnar Ternhag (in 1971) recorded short interviews in connection with their collect-

ing activities at the Hall prison. These interviews focussed on the songs, and they concern in the main the music and the texts. Håkan Johansson's radio programme from 1991 has a few lengthy stories from Konvaljen's life, some of which are from the LP *Konvaljen*. Five years later, in 1996, the musician Rolf Alm did in-depth interviews with Konvaljen and the former member of Jailbird Singers Tohre Eliasson.<sup>2</sup>

The most recent interviews were recorded in connection with the research projects *Pluralise or Polarise* and *Voices from Outside*.<sup>3</sup>

The first of these interviews was recorded in 2009 in Tjurbergsparken on the South Island, Stockholm, and this was followed up by a longer interview at Konvaljen's home outside Delsbo in Hälsingland in the autumn of 2016. One of the reasons for recording the latter interview was to clarify a number of ambiguities and contradictory statements in the earlier interview material.

## Interviews as a Primary Source

Between the first and the last interviews upon which this portrait is based, 47 years passed. Taking that into consideration, it is not surprising that some of the information from the interviews might at times be somewhat contradictory. This is not an uncommon problem when it comes to oral sources and the documentation of life stories. The interview — as a method and as, in many cases, the sole source — is a difficult but nonetheless challenging kind of research material. Interviews are, at the same time, often the only way of gleaning knowledge regarding oral cultures and other contexts in which there is an absence of written sources. In the anthology *Etnologiskt fältarbete* [Ethnological fieldwork], the editors Lars Kaijser and Magnus Öhlander describe the difficulties — but also the necessity of striking a balance between a systematic ap-

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<sup>2</sup> Rolf Alm made the interviews on behalf of the ethnologist Birgitta Svensson, employed at the time by Lund's university. The interview material was donated to the Folklife Archives in Lund. Svensson later published an article based on Alm's interviews (Svensson 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Interview by Dan Lundberg. SVA A 20090403KMO01 and SVA A 20160831LJO01-4.

proach and an ear for what happens when at work in the field. They describe this with the use of the term “pragmatic systematics”. This pragmatism should also in my view set its stamp on the interview situation. It is largely a case of having an open approach to the story and doing one’s best to create a good atmosphere and gain the confidence of the informant. One important skill is the ability to avoid disputing statements as far as possible. A prime exponent of this approach was the music researcher Jan Ling, who collected for SVA in the early 1960’s. “If the informant thinks that the waltz is ancient — then the waltz is ancient!” writes Ling in the title of the memorandum “Inspelning av kvarlevande folkmusiktraditioner” [Recording of surviving folk music traditions] which was the basis of a discussion in a symposium in 1965. The ethnomusicologist Mathias Boström has described Ling’s approach to conducting interviews and to the relation between collector and informant. He observes that Ling prefers a method which consists of building trust, where the informants are encouraged to see themselves as experts whilst being recorded. Otherwise it easily ends up with the researcher in the role of the more knowledgeable party, the one with the “real answer”.

The recordings made by Ling in which you can follow the interaction on the tape typically show a will to establish a casual and pleasant atmosphere and a restrained, curious manner of questioning — they are far from an “inquisitorial” interrogation. (Boström 2015:117)

Many later ethnologists have a similar approach to interviewing. Eva Fägerborg views the ethnological interview as a personal meeting between two individuals, and emphasises that they should be more of an informal conversation than a questioning (Fägerborg 1999). Ling’s and Fägerborg’s attitude to informants is appealing, but naturally creates problems in evaluating facts. My starting point when portraying Konvaljen’s life and career as a musician is largely his own narrative in conversations with his interviewers. I have selected facts and checked them as much as possible when putting together the story. One important piece of the puzzle is Konvaljen’s artistic position. During substantial periods in his career he has been a public spokesman for the category of

“jailbirds”. At one and the same time he has pursued a professional career as a musician — which has exerted a certain influence. Some parts of the stories belong to what might be termed an *artistic strategy*. The ethnologist Marika Nordström, on the basis of interviews with musicians in the *Sonic magazine*, has studied how musicians strategically and consciously cultivate a certain image:

Artists appear in many cases to have a more or less constructed strategy for their artistry and their future, and are often aware of their position in the field of popular music. It is often a matter of where they stand politically: what kind of artist a person wants to be, and why. In the narratives of more well-known or established artists it is often perceptible how the arguments have become more fine-honed as their lives and careers have changed. (Nordström 2014:133)

For many years, in many interviews and situations, Konvaljen has created a picture of his childhood which has become well-established in, for instance, Wikipedia.<sup>4</sup> This narrative was also advanced in Håkan Johansson’s radio programme in 1991.<sup>5</sup> When I interviewed him in 2009, this was also the version I heard:

Yes, I was born in Karlstad me. I was born in the prison there. My ma was in for illegal sales of intoxicants and moonshining. And when she’s done breastfeeding me, they took me to one o’ the state’s correction institutions for kids — Kristinehamn’s children’s home. I was at that children’s home till I was seven. I remember that when we started at school they gave us school uniforms. Green jackets and blue trousers. And that bloody uniform — you know, it meant that I had to run like a fool sometimes, like. And I had to fight nearly every break. And it was dangerous to be alone at the school when all the other kids from the children’s home had gone there. There was bullying in those days too. Well, I went into a shop one day and stole some sweets. And then I stood in that schoolyard and shared the sweets out and tried to buy friends and got caught. Well, the next day I was summoned to the school’s headmaster. And there was a child welfare man there too called Kalle Jonsson. And this Kalle Jonsson, he started talking about a

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<sup>4</sup> <https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konvaljen> (2016-12-13).

<sup>5</sup> SVA BB6277.

farm that we would go to the day after — him and me. And he spoke so warmly about this farm, and I thought: — bloody hell, won't it be great, like, to get away from here? So we went there the day after. We went to Gnesta.

According to this story, Konvaljen was born in prison in Karlstad. In the 2009 interview he also says that his mother was deported after her release since she was an Icelandic Traveller. Yet in the parish register and in the book of births of Kristinehamn's parish, we can read that Stig Björn Lennart Connvair Johansson was born on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June, 1936 in Kristinehamn.<sup>6</sup> Both his father Östen and his mother Gunhild worked at Marieberg's mental hospital.<sup>7</sup>

Konvaljen has also in later interviews admitted that the story of his birth in a prison in Karlstad is fictional, but that it has a certain background in reality.<sup>8</sup> It all began when he was interviewed on TV in connection with the release of the LP *Kåklåtar*. Konvaljen says that he was asked to take part in a direct transmission and that he wondered on his way to the studio how to describe his growing up. His childhood and early schooldays had been messy — not least his relationship with his father. His upbringing was violent, and he had run away a number of times. Now he sat there on a ferry in Stockholm on his way to a TV interview and thought about the fact that he would surely be asked questions about a childhood of which he would prefer not to speak. He got the idea of “borrowing” the life story of a former fellow inmate: a story which would make his own childhood more interesting and not as exposed.

[...] no, it's not imaginary, I have a mate who is an Icelandic who I sat in clink with. Yes, we've had a lot to do with one another through the years. I took his childhood! His mother is Icelandic, she sat in clink in Karlstad and he was born there. Hang on, I'll tell you. When I come ashore I used it all the way until I myself ended up in Lövsta (borstal). From then on it's like my life story. When I come ashore I phone home to my ma. And then I say: “Listen to me now, ma.”

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<sup>6</sup> The register of births in Kristinehamn parish.

<sup>7</sup> In 1958 the name was changed to Mariebergs sinnessjukhus to Mariebergs mentalsjukhus [mental hospital]. The hospital was phased out in the 1990's.

<sup>8</sup> Interviews made by Rolf Alm (1996) and Dan Lundberg (2016).

Then I tell her the whole bloody thing. “I don’t disavow you. I will never disavow you. You are my ma, but make sure that old swine watches TV tonight.” (Interview by Rolf Alm 1996)

His friend’s story fitted the picture of himself as a “genuine jailbird” that Konvaljen wanted to give, and in addition he avoided telling of his hard childhood.

## Childhood

Stig Björn Lennart Connvaih was in other words born in Kristinehamn in June, 1936. His father Östen was head nurse and his mother Gunhild cook at Marieberg’s mental hospital. Gunhild’s maiden name was Wester and she came, according to Konvaljen, from a family of Travellers.<sup>9</sup> His parents had married in May of the same year, and three years after Konvaljen’s birth they had a daughter. The name Connvaih, which later turned into his stage name “Konvaljen”, was from his mother’s side. Konvaljen is himself uncertain of the origin of the name, but Thom Lundberg — who has investigated name traditions among Swedish Travellers — states that it was not unusual to give children Eastern European names that sounded exotic as middle names.<sup>10</sup> This might well be the case: Connvaih is a common surname in Ukrainia.

The Johansson’s were a musical family.

LJ: Ha — yes! There was lots of music. My dad had eight brothers and four sisters. There were twelve of them and they all played. There was a hell of a lot of music up at grandad’s you know.

DL: What kind of music?

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<sup>9</sup> SVAA 20160831LJ001-4.

<sup>10</sup> The author Thom Lundberg has studied, amongst other things, naming customs among Travellers and gives the following explanation: “Apropos Connvaih, I think it is one of a number of names brought in from abroad. Many had, at one time, Russian names which might have come from our relatives in Finland (the ones who are called Finnish Roma today). They took names from Tegnér’s Frithiofs saga, too. And still do. My brother’s third name is Angantyr. Mine is Leonard. Older people in my family are called things like Fritjof, Fingal, Beland, Chang, Arnold, Lander, Gregor, Bodvig, etc.” (Mail conversation with Lundberg on the 5<sup>th</sup> of September 2016.)



LJ: All sorts. Dance tunes and — yes, accordion tunes, waltzes. Yes, a lot of that.

DL: Your dad, did he play too?

LJ: No... Yes, he played the mouth organ a bit. But he wasn't a music bloke.

Konvaljen's mother played the guitar a little and sang. She taught him a few chords on the guitar, but he says that it isn't really the case that his music came from his home. His childhood instead bore the stamp of his poor relationship with his father and problems at school. In conversations about his childhood he often returns to talking about his father's ill-treatment of his mother and himself.

But always, as soon as he got the least bit angry with me, he called me the tinker kid. [...] He was completely crazy, you know, when it came to tinkers. So I'm not sure whether or not my mother, before I was born, was together with some tinker bloke. I assume it must have been something of the sort. He was a swine. (Rolf Alm's interview 1996)

At the age of twelve he was taken from school in Kristinehamn and placed in the reformatory in Lövsta, about 100 km south of Stockholm. In spite of his tender years, he had by then been arrested by the police in Kristinehamn for drunkenness, burglary and car theft. Lövsta was one of the best-known reformatories in Sweden: young people who were thought unable to attend normal schools were placed there. The reasons for placements could vary, but it was often a question of extreme truancy, abuse or deficient conditions at home. Previously, young people could end up in such institutions also on account of poverty or because the parents for some reason were unable to take care of a large family. Some of the reformatories began as compulsory care institutions, privately-owned or run by the county. Konvaljen came to Lövsta in 1948 and was there until 1952. He describes his time there as hard, with a lot of bullying and an environment that in fact reared future criminals. According to Konvaljen it was "a school for a future life behind walls [...] everybody who was there at the Lövsta school I have met later in clink."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> SVAA20160831LJ002.



Lövsta skolhem (school home) near Vagnhärad is still in use as a home for young people who are placed there in accordance with the law on care of the young. Photographer: Dan Lundberg.

His stay at Lövsta meant that that Konvaljen's contact with his family was more or less severed. He tells of his first Christmas leave, when he wasn't allowed to enter the family home in Kristinehamn. His father drove him away, and he fled to a "gypsy camp" outside Kristinehamn where he was allowed to stay until Christmas day — then the police came and took him back to Lövsta. During his time at Lövsta his criminal activities rose steeply. Escapes were common, and being on the run made burglaries and car thefts a necessity in order to get hold of food and cash.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ002.

What about music, then?

LJ: Oh, there was music. What the hell, we had an outdoor dance floor there, in the forest. It was a reformatory — an approved school. But just a mile or so away there was a home for older lads who had left school, but also left the straight and narrow. Everybody did. So it was an approved school — work house. The work was farming — big farms — and joinery. What more was there? Well, that's what it was. [...] I joined in at the dance floor. There was a lad who played the accordion. He looked like a Frenchman. His name was Rolf Florin and he played bloody good!

DL: Florin — is that a family of Travellers?

LJ: Yes, and he sat there. And he was a real charmer. I accompanied him and he taught me. It was fun! Every Friday it was, I think — or was it Saturday?

Considering all his escapes and other problems, Konvaljen left Lövsta with unexpectedly good grades. He had high grades in all subjects with the exception of “song”, where he had the next-highest grade.<sup>13</sup>

## Prisons and Music

When done with Lövsta, Konvaljen was fifteen years old — which meant that he had reached the age of criminal responsibility. His first “real” prison sentence came right after he left school, and began with a mental examination at Västervik prison. From there he was sent to the Vänersborg prison to serve a sentence of ten months. After a number of escapes and attempted escapes he was sent back to Västervik prison, which was regarded as escape-proof. From then until 1972, Konvaljen served a number of sentences punctuated by escapes. During that period, he managed to spend time in around twenty different prisons.

During all these stays in prisons, music was there as a way of helping time pass — but also as a way for a prisoner to attain status among his fellow-in-

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<sup>13</sup> A copy of Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson’s school-leaving certificate from the school in Lövsta is in the sva’s copies collection.

mates. Many inmates played, Konvaljen says, and the good musicians were appreciated and in some cases well-known in prison culture. A female jailbird says in an interview with med Håkan Johansson:

The first time in Hinseberg, I had just turned 18. And instead of sitting down and knitting, I picked up a guitar and started to learn to play. I could play four chords, I think. That meant that I got into the good books of these — how should I put it? — I don't want to say “queens” straight out, but they had been inside a long time and a lot. They favoured me and they taught me songs and I played for them, like. (Interview by Håkan Johansson B713b)

Konvaljen says that there were prison songs at Lövsta and that he already tried to write songs then. But he indicates a meeting with one of the better-known prison musicians as a decisive episode. At the Västervik prison, where Konvaljen was mentally examined in 1951, was a man they called “Knutte-gitarr” [Guitar-Knutte]. Knutte was known for his large repertoire and his guitar-playing.

Hell, he was good on the guitar! He was one o' them blokes what could play. He could ... “stringle” is what they call it. Not “single”. When you single, you just play the melody, like. When you stringle, you play chords together with the melody. He was bloody good at it! He was excellent. He taught me a lot. He taught me a lot by just letting me watch him. Then I tried myself... more or less like he sat there. (Rolf Alm's interview 1996)

Konvaljen explains that when he met Knutte, he understood that it was possible to do more with a guitar than simply play the chords. “He taught me accompaniment down in Västervik. So we played a hell of a lot down in Västervik. Every time we took a walk we sat down and played.”

Yes, he played far too bloody good! Jesus, he was good! And he could sing good, too! I was at Mosebacke once and Knutte was there, you know. And when I had played, he rose from his chair: “I'm the one who taught that bloke to play the guitar”, says he (laughs). And then he played at Mosebacke.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ002.



Ruben Karlsson entertaining on a local bus in Hudiksvall in the 1970's. Photographer: Lars Sundin.

Yet it is also clear that Konvaljen didn't see the prison song repertoire as isolated from other music-making. During the early years, up to the end of the 60's, he doesn't distinguish prison songs from other songs. This shows up when he talks about his playing, in which he sees dance accompaniment as an important part. One of the most important episodes in Konvaljen's career as a musician came in the sixties, when he stayed away from crime for eighteen months:

LJ: We had it good there in Hudiksvall. I played with a dance band. This accordionist used to visit our prison and play for us. And I accompanied him. It was like three-four years. And he came, and I could play all of his tunes. So the day after, I was due for release after those four years. And he comes up, Ruben Karlsson was his name. Ruben Karlsson's Orchestra. And he says: my guitarist is ill. And you're to be released tomorrow, and we'll play then in Delsbo at Österbacks loge, it was called. And it's still there. If you want, you can borrow his gear. You can borrow

his guitar and amp. You can join us and play with us. Yes, sure, I said. That was bloody great! And I stayed in that orchestra for a year and a half.

DL: So you played dance band music for a year and a half?

LJ: Yes, I did. All around Hälsingland.

DL: When was this?

LJ: It was in '66.

DL: When you were released from Hudiksvall?

LJ: Yes, I'd been released from Hudiksvall prison. I played with him for a year and a half, then they got me again. Then I was inside till '72.<sup>15</sup>

Ruben was a well-known name in the Hudiksvall area. He came from a musical family — his brother Alvar Karlsson was nationally recognised as an accordionist and composer with the stage name Jack Gill.<sup>16</sup>

When Konvaljen plays the guitar it is evident that his days with Rolf Florin, Knutte-gitarr, Ruben Karlsson and other dance-band musicians have made their mark. He usually plays with a distinct shuffle style, focussed on rhythm and swing.

## Hall Prison

After just over a year in Ruben Karlsson's orchestra Konvaljen was again given a prison sentence for various "thievery crimes", as he puts it. In 1968 he ended up in the Hall prison, outside Södertälje. Hall was — and is — a closed prison with the highest security classification, which means that it is extremely hard to escape from or be liberated from. People who had committed serious crimes of violence were placed there — but also inmates who were thought to be particularly intent on escape. Inmates were housed in small sections and had special restrictions regarding visits and leave. But Hall was in those days a special, somewhat progressive institution. Gunner Ternhag tells of how his collecting

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<sup>15</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ002.

<sup>16</sup> The SVA has a great amount of material from the accordionist Jack Gill.

work there in the early 1970's was facilitated by the then director of the prison, Gunnar Engström, with his liberal ideas and view of the important role of culture in rehabilitation. A certain amount of cultural activities had taken place there even before Engström took up his post in 1970, but it is reasonable to say that his appointment led to a radical improvement in the prerequisites for cultural activities. Konvaljen states that there were several bands and many skilful musicians there, and that they were in fact given reasonably good opportunities to sing and play. In the article "En livstid på Hall" [A Lifetime at Hall], the journalist Johanna Werder interviews the former warder Ulf Gustafsson who tells of changes in correctional care in the 1970's: "Then our role was mainly to make sure that they received food, didn't fight and that they didn't do too much drugs". With time, it came to be a question of offering inmates meaningful activities (Werder 2007).

The song group initiated by Elisabeth Skarpe — after she had completed her academic essay in pedagogy about prison songs — was of great importance (Skarpe 1970). This group started in 1970, and the year after Robert Robertsson was brought in, which was of crucial importance for his relationship with Konvaljen. Robertsson studied pedagogy at Stockholm University, and one of his fellow-students was a friend of Skarpe's.

Elisabeth Skarpe, it was. She had written an essay on prison songs. And her best friend and I studied together. Elisabeth had started a song group at Hall. A gang of us came from outside and there was a gang from inside. We could have a coffee and make music and talk. A friend of mine was asked to join in, but he backed out. [...] But I suppose I was too naive or too stupid to back out. And the second time I was there, I met Konvaljen. We hit it off right away — it just said "Bang!" — both as musicians and as persons.<sup>17</sup>

Robertsson started with the song group in the autumn of 1971 and immediately got on well with Konvaljen. They started exchanging letters and sent tapes with songs and arrangements to each other. This led to the recording of the LP

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<sup>17</sup> SVAA 20120402R ROOL.

*Kåklåtar* in 1972. Through the song group the inmates had the opportunity to learn songs from the Swedish literary song tradition: Ferlin, Taube, Bellman, etc. Konvaljen recalls:

They had tunes. They brought tunes. And so we played those tunes, like. Bloody good fun! Bloody great!<sup>18</sup>

Inmates and students with common interests in music and politics met in the song group. Making music gave new impulses, and several members of the song group started writing songs of their own. In 1971 the EP *Hall-ååå!! Nya kåkvisor med Pelle Lindberg* [Hell-ooo!! New Clink Songs with Pelle Lindberg] was released on the “Record” label (Record R 45-7101). The record comprised five newly-written songs and those who participated were part of the collective which recorded *Kåklåtar* with MNW a year later. *Hall-ååå!!* Has a distinct political message, and the back sleeve consists of an open letter to The Correctional Treatment Board:

*Dear Royal Correctional Treatment Board*

You who implement the harshest orders the faceless ones in the justice apparatus give you. You are dazed right now. Your minions are disobedient and — what’s worse! — disobedient in a constructive manner. We no longer allow ourselves to be provoked by the power you command. We protest against the mistreatment you serve us with — it serves only to destroy selfhood. We do not wish to be served with anything at all, but to learn how to function as human beings rather than as prisoners.

We scold you, but it is actually your masters and the law of the land we are after. And with our actions we wish to wake up the man in the street — in other words, public opinion.

The letter is signed “your devoted adversary Anders Evert”. Evert is also the author of the song texts on the record with the exception of the first track,

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<sup>18</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ002.



“Usch och fy” [Ugh and Oh] which was written by the well-known author Lasse Strömstedt.

The possibilities of making music in Hall prison were, then, rather good. On a normal day the cell door was unlocked at seven for breakfast, and after that it was time to work until lunch in the workshop or the laundry.

Yes, that was till lunch, and then we had a walk. We were to get fresh air into us. And after the walk it was back to work till half four or five. No — half four. And so food at six. And at quarter to eight we were locked in. That was a day.<sup>19</sup>

Being locked in meant that Konvaljen had the time and the opportunity to play and compose. He was allowed to have his guitar and a tape recorder. The tape recorder was used to a certain extent as a musical sketchpad. Konvaljen recorded ideas and fragments for new songs, but also used it to document his personal repertoire. With the help of the tape recorder he was able to communicate his ideas with Robert Robertsson. They realised that this could lead to a musical partnership when Konvaljen was released in 1972.

## MNW and Kåklåtar

In an article published in *Hallbladet* (the prison newspaper), Konvaljen tells of the background to the recording of the LP *Kåklåtar*. Before he came to Hall he was imprisoned in Kalmar, and there he learned from a visiting theatre group that Gunilla Thorgren was trying to find clink tunes in order to make a record.

A theatre group came there one night and performed a play called *Sherlock Holmes*, a play about criminal care. One of the group's members told me when we had a chat afterwards that a girl called Gunilla who worked at MNW in Vaxholm was looking for someone who could sing clink tunes. Since I knew loads of tunes and had also written some myself I wrote a letter to Gunilla. Then time passed, I went off the tracks and ended up in the psychiatric clinic at Hall. One day I got

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<sup>19</sup> SVAA 20160831LJ002.

a letter from Gunilla. She wrote that she was interested in meeting me to talk about an idea she had about making a record with clink tunes. One Sunday after that letter came, she came to visit. (*Hallbladet* nr 1–2, 1976)

At Hall the record *Hall-ååå!!* had been recorded, and this also inspired Konvaljen. He recorded a tape with material which was passed on to Thorgren.

And she worked in correctional treatment system then. She was some bloody kind of assistant. At Österåker, I think.<sup>20</sup>

After the song group broke up, Robert Robertsson and Konvaljen kept in touch and the plans of producing a record could be concretised.

Then that circle was disbanded, but I visited him a few times in Hall too. As a normal visitor. Then he was released, and others were released. So there were four inmates and some other characters around. And so we recorded it at MNW.<sup>21</sup>

In SVA's collection there is a copy of a tape that Konvaljen sent to Gunilla Thorgren with his suggestions of tunes that they might record.<sup>22</sup> The tape is more than 96 minutes long, recorded in mono on two channels, and contains around 35 tunes. Interestingly enough, only just over a third belong to the category "prison songs", 13 tunes, to be exact. Apart from those, there are popular hits and songs by Ruben Nilsson, Ulf Peder Olrog, Cornelis Vreeswijk and others. This selection suggests that Konvaljen intended to make a record with a more conventional content than it turned out to be. It is also clear that Konvaljen's prison song repertoire was at this stage somewhat limited. On the tape he sent, he mentions that he is sitting and reading Elisabeth Skarpe's essay in order to find more tunes — and regrets not knowing many of the songs.

Konvaljen, then, took the initiative to make the record — but Gunilla Thorgren decided what was to be on it. Robert Robertsson states that Thorgren was clearly the producer of the record: "I was there on account of my contact with

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<sup>20</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ002.

<sup>21</sup> SVA A 20120402RR001.

<sup>22</sup> SVA BC1279.

Konvaljen. She completely ran that process”.<sup>23</sup> Of the songs that Konvaljen sent to Thorgren, only one — “Har du skådat kåkens dystra murar” [Have You Beheld the Dismal Prison Walls] — ended up on the record. It is however used as the first song on the A-side, which shows that it was felt to be important.

*Kåklåtar* was recorded in MNW’s studio in Vaxholm in 1972. The recording has a clear stamp of the documentary. The arrangements are simple, and the impression given is that the entire production was the inspired fruits of the moment. This is consciously reinforced in the end product. Several tracks begin with small talk among the musicians, and they are heard to finger their instruments a little. A particularly clear example of this spontaneous atmosphere is “Konstapel Jöns” [Constable Jöns] in which the singer Jojje Olsson starts to sing “I natt jag drömde” [Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream] and the ensemble spontaneously join in one after another. Olsson plays around with the words, singing for example “there are no more inmates” instead of “there are no more soldiers” and the ensemble all laugh. After that, Konvaljen breaks in and takes command: “Constable Jöns! Let’s go!”. In the final mix it would of course been easy to cut that, but the small talk and unprompted digressions serve to strengthen the idea that the production was made in a playful manner and that the record is more of a documentation with spontaneous music-making than a studio product. This is a conscious choice on Thorgren’s part, well in line with MNW’s ideological stand against the increasingly professionalised and commercialised making of music. Instead of recording one singer or instrument at a time, the tunes were recorded “live” by the ensemble — and several takes were made of each tune so that the group of producers could choose the best ones. In this way, things went quickly and the whole album was recorded in three days.

During the recording, a number of the musicians stayed with Gunilla Thorgren and Tore Berger in their house on the island of Rindö outside Vaxholm. In the book *Ljud från Waxholm* [Sound from Waxholm] Thorgren is quoted:

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<sup>23</sup> SVAA20120402RR001.

In those days there was an ambition to humanise the correctional treatment system, so I could take people out on leave. They didn't escape. They recorded an album instead. (Lahger and Eriksson 2009)

The main artists on the album were four inmates: Christina Calldén, Pelle Lindberg, Jøje Olsson and Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson. Konvaljen is also named, together with Gunilla Thorgren and Anders Larsson, as producer of the record — and has a central role as soloist on six of the LP's 15 tunes. In the collective of musicians there are also 14 more members.<sup>24</sup>

Thorgren chose as far as possible tunes with a direct political message. This meant that many of the songs with a more lyrical content lost out to tunes that had texts with social criticism.

The record was released in the autumn of 1972 and received a fair amount of attention from the press. The reviewers consistently underline three aspects of the album:

1. that it is an important documentation of an unknown song genre
2. that the album bears witness to bad conditions in Swedish prisons
3. that the singers have themselves sat in prison and thus know what they are talking about

On November 7<sup>th</sup> the record is reviewed in *Dagens Nyheter* by Rune Johansson. The heading is “Kåklåtar som alla borde lyssna på” [Clink tunes that everyone should listen to], and Johansson encourages the general public and those in power to listen to the record:

“Kåklåtar” will certainly be a tool for the prisoners in their efforts to open new ways to influence their own situation. Listen politicians, Correctional Treatment Board, prison personnel and Sweden's general public!

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<sup>24</sup> Guest musicians on *Kåklåtar* are, in addition to the four main participants named above: Evert Anders, Stikkan Andersson, Kenneth Arnström, Tord Bengtsson, Tore Berger, Sam Ellison, Torbjörn Falk, Gregory FitzPatrick, Tomas Forsell, George Olsson, Mats (Robert) Robertsson, Lasse Sjöstedt, Hans Victorsson and Anders B. Andersson.

The record gets many similar reviews. “They know what they are talking about, and the song is associated with a part of their lives”, writes Lennart Angkär in *Hallands Nyheter*.<sup>25</sup> The signature ML in Stockholm university’s student union newspaper *Gaudeamus* writes: “The texts are comprehensive and the amateurishness (not an insult!) only serves to underline the content all the more, and that is what counts” (*Gaudeamus* nr 16, december 1972).

## Konvaljen and Robert

Once the LP was launched, Konvaljen and Robert Robertsson began to work more closely together and started doing tours. They had a common repertoire from Konvaljen’s time in Hall prison. Their basic idea was to create a number of concert programmes in which music and speech would take turns in telling a tale. The text below is a transcript of a programme from 1973 with Konvaljen and Robertsson.<sup>26</sup> This programme — *Kåkens gråa murar* [The Prison’s Grey Walls] — was thoroughly prepared with written lines:

ROBERT: Now we thought we would tell you something about it all by playing some clink music for you here tonight. Clink music — that’s the kind of music that is found inside the prison walls. And it reflects and portrays in various ways prison society and the different kinds of life there. It also tells of what the boys and girls in there think and feel about it. We — that’s Konvaljen and me. My name is Robert. Our experiences of clink differ a little. I have never done a stretch, but I’ve spent a fair amount of time in the environment that we sing about by visiting prisons and taking part in conversation groups. I was part of a song group at Hall prison and I have performed in prisons. I even led a study circle in maths once at Långholmen prison back in the day. Lennart, here — or “Konvaljen” — he has seen it all from the inside for years. He has been inside far too long.

KONVALJEN: Yes, you might say that I have.

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Robertsson’s personal archive at the SVA.

<sup>26</sup> SVA BC128202.

ROBERT: Yes, I think so.

KONVALJEN: Many years. Yes, I've done sixteen years in clink.

ROBERT: Shame on you, Konvaljen!

KONVALJEN: Yes...

ROBERT: And there won't be any more either.

KONVALJEN: It's like this: the first time you're caught...

*[Guitar music in the background: a soft traditional melody]*

KONVALJEN: The first time you're caught. Or when you're jailed, I mean — you usually end up in a police jail if there's one in the town you're in right then. There in that police jail you're locked up all the time. And when they have locked the door you always think that ... You start to think about how you, to start with, can get off as lightly as possible for the crime you have committed. So maybe you knock on the wall and you're bloody glad if you get an answer. And there's a tune which is written about that called "Kan undra om grannen bredvid?" [I Wonder if the Next-door Neighbour?].

KONVALJEN: *[Sings]*

*I wonder if the next-door neighbour is counting too, day by day?*

*We got the same sentence, him and me, so they say.*

*I wonder if it's the first time he is stuck in here.*

*Stuck in here for ages, longing for freedom dear.*

*I wonder how he felt, the first time he saw this view.*

*As if our own woes weren't enough — prison's woes too.*

*I wonder if the next-door neighbour is counting too, day by day?*

*We got the same sentence, him and me, so they say.*

ROBERT: Then you arrive in prison, after being detained. And everything there inside... You can describe it in many different ways. But one way to describe it is as one big longing. Longing to get out, of course. Get away from clink. Get out into freedom. There's also longing for nature. Especially in spring, when things start to bud and it gets really lovely out there. And you start dancing inside, thanks to all the hormones that the season awakes. Longing for togetherness. Letters, visits are important. Contact with those inside, of course. But also longing for the opposite sex. Because clink is very much a same-sex society. You only meet people there with the same sex as you have.

KONVALJEN: That must be the greatest longing. That must be the greatest instinct for many people.

ROBERT: Yes — it's a big problem, this. Because the inmates are denied all these things. While they're being prepared to reintegrate into society. And they turn to all kinds of substitutes. Drugs have come in, and become a massive problem in prisons. Especially in the 60's and 70's.

KONVALJEN: That's right. I got onto drugs. I took my first fix — my first needle — at Hall. A hell of a long time back. I don't remember when, really. In 1969 I was in clink in Växjö. I'd had a fix then. It was a central stimulant called Fentmetralin [Preludine]. And this stimulant is very central... or, let's say, sexually stimulating. But what the hell, there's always porno mags. Take a fix and dive into a heap of filth, of course! And that's what I did then. But when I'd been lying there for a while, I thought... I thought that it was all so hopeless, that the most natural instinct of all is denied to the inmate. And I've made a tune about that, called "Kvinnodrömmar" [Dreams of Women] or something.

KONVALJEN: *[Sings]*

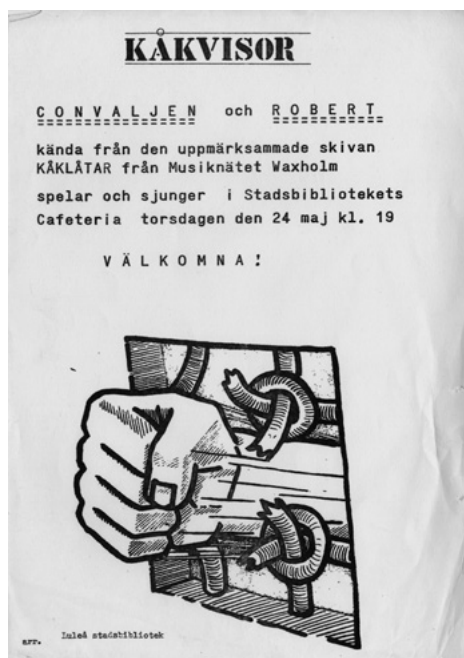
*As autumn's dusk quietly is sinking upon our penitentiary hotel,  
a prisoner lies there thinking and longing each night in his cell.  
Thinking of women so willing, so beautiful, outside those walls,  
of sex slaves his sweet dreams fulfilling. But his gaze on pornography falls.*

The various programmes that Konvaljen and Robert fashioned all had this kind of thorough pedagogical structure, with written dialogues mixed with songs. The concerts were followed by discussions with the audience — often lively discussions. Sometimes group studies were arranged on questions such as correctional treatment, culture and discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

The combination of these two musicians was perfect: Konvaljen had done time and was anchored in the prison song tradition, whilst Robertsson took on a more administrative role and knew how to behave towards organisations and arrangers of concerts. As regards music, they had already found their modus operandi whilst Konvaljen was in Hall prison. Their contact networks turned

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<sup>27</sup> SVAA 20160831LJ002.



A poster from Robert Robertsson's and Lennart "Konvaljen" Johansson's tour. Probably from 1973. From Robert Robertsson's sva collection.

out to complement one another well. Robertsson concentrated on libraries, folk clubs, political associations, youth clubs and schools.

Konvaljen quickly became a well-known name in folk song and progressive music circles and was hunted by newspapers, radio and tv — and he also had many contacts in the prison world, yet another target group for the duo's concerts. They also performed for courses organised by the Correctional Treatment Board. Konvaljen is careful to emphasise Robertsson's importance for his career, and says that without his industrious and systematic work the tours would never have taken place.<sup>28</sup> Robertsson says that there was a great deal of

<sup>28</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ002.



interest in them, and it was easy to get gigs. Between the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1973 and the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 1974, Konvaljen and Robert did 81 gigs merely at youth clubs in the Stockholm region. An important theme for programmes at youth clubs was to give information on drug abuse. Here too Konvaljen had a lot of experience to share. He had, like many others, come into contact with narcotics in prisons and he abused drugs — particularly those which stimulated the central nervous system and were common in prisons. When he was released in 1972, he quit using the heavy drugs which had previously been a part of his life. He continued, however, to use alcohol and cannabis. The ideas concerning a programme structure with information and songs came in part from Robertsson's studies in pedagogy, but Konvaljen has also pointed out in various contexts that the well-known Swedish singer and poet Alf Hambe was a source of inspiration:

When I was released, me and a mate — Mats [Robert] Robertsson — did this programme. We met Alf Hambe, who said: "You've got some good songs, but talk a little around them. Tell them about our prisons with words and music". That's what we did. And we got to play for the social services, for social workers, probation boards, probation courses, folk high schools and then we became part of the correctional treatment system's study programme. (*Musikens makt* nr 3–74)

Alf Hambe arranged for Konvaljen and Robert to perform for representatives of ABF (WEA) in western and southern Sweden, which opened the door to gigs for adult educational organisations (Rolf Alm's interview 1996). It is worthy of note that Konvaljen and Robert already had a programme of the type requested by Alf Hambe — so for them Hambe's words were more of a confirmation that they were on the right track.

## Solo Album

In the autumn of 1974, Konvaljen moved to Växjö and his partnership with Robert Robertsson came to an end. Konvaljen was asked by MNW to record a

solo album, and now he chose to work with other musicians. The LP *Konvaljen* was recorded in November 1974 and released in the spring of 1975. This is more of a studio production than *Kåklåtar* was. Instrumental parts are given much more room, and many of the tunes tend towards multicompositions and music theatre in which poetry and prose are read with instrumental backgrounds. Konvaljen explains that the recording was rather poorly prepared:

I didn't have any texts. I was forced to talk. With a hell of a lot of musicians. So we took some accompaniment, and I just talked. And texts just came, like. I thought it was such bloody good fun, because it was good music.<sup>29</sup>

The musicians came from MNW's network of contacts. On the first track, "Resocialiseringsblues" [Resocialisation blues], Konvaljen is accompanied by the progressive rock group Samla Mammas Manna. A prominent role is played by the blues pianist Per "Slim" Notini and the album has as a whole a "bluesy" character. Konvaljen states in an interview that many of the compositions came into being in the studio and that he himself was not as well-prepared as he had been when *Kåklåtar* was recorded. The recording process was more time-consuming, too, since half-baked ideas were tested directly in the studio.<sup>30</sup>

And the recording situation was even more messy:

LJ: When I came to that bloody studio, I didn't have a single bloody tune in my head. And we were coming down, like, both the producer and me. He was supposed to travel down and take care of me and take me up to the studio. I lived down in Malmö. But it turned out the other way round, he stayed there with me. And we had a hell of a trip!<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ003.

<sup>30</sup> The changes in the way of working in the studio during the 70's and the influence of the record medium on music have been discussed by a number of media researchers. An ever-increasing share of popular music was directly created in studios for the record medium. The ethnomusicologist Krister Malm has coupled this with the establishment of the LP format and speaks of the "mediating" [mediatisation] of music (Lundberg, Malm and Ronström 2000). The music researcher Toivo Burlin has used the term "hyperrealisering" [hyper-realisation] for the same phenomenon (Burlin 2016).

<sup>31</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ003.

Just as with *Kåklåtar*, the LP *Konvaljen* was extremely well-received. The texts were — if possible — even more political, and were directly critical of the correctional treatment system:

Thanks! Thanks for care and rest,  
Correctional treatment authority.  
Thanks for teaching us to shoot  
And contributing to our brokenness.  
(*Tack för vården* [Thanks For the Care])

After the release of the album, Konvaljen was engaged as a lecturer in many different contexts to bear witness to the abuses in Swedish prisons.

Yes, I got into a hell of a lot of debates about correctional treatment. Lots of that. Panel debates. Once with members of parliament. That was at a folk high school outside Söderköping.<sup>32</sup>

Konvaljens professional career as a musician came to an abrupt end in 1977 when he was sentenced by the district court in Lund to four months in prison. By then he had become something of a well-known artist, and he maintains that this had a negative influence on the way he was treated in Malmö, where he served the sentence:

Without asking to, I have become a “celebrity” — that’s the way it has turned out. I am Konvaljen. That means that some warders here, who don’t know the way I think and reason, are simply bloody awful. It’s gone so far that I want to move to the mental section. The straw that broke the camel’s back came today. I rung or flagged that I needed to go to the toilet. After thirty minutes I was forced to use the pot, which resulted in a bloody awful smell in the cell. Poor Luis! [Konvaljen’s cellmate]. After seventy (70) minutes the devil of a warder came — slow, like. He asked what I wanted. I told him — and a lot more besides about his way of doing his job. He answered that I wouldn’t get any special treatment just because I’d been on the TV. He didn’t get a thing. I’m tired of the special treatment I get — this warder isn’t the only one who thinks like this. That means that I really

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<sup>32</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ003.

get special treatment. I want to go down to the mental section, because things like this don't happen there, because you have the company of the other prisoners — which means that you have a completely different relationship with the warders. I hope I can move down to the mental section.<sup>33</sup>

## Out of the Limelight

Konvaljen had a short but intensive career as a professional artist and debater. When interviewed, he himself says that the period from 1972 to 1977 was unique and that it changed his life in many ways.<sup>34</sup> Two record albums, lots of appearances on the radio and TV and all the attention shown by the press had made Konvaljen a well-known person who was associated with the progressive music movement.

After his spell in prison in Malmö he got far fewer offers of engagements. Nor did he have someone to book and plan tours, as Robert Robertsson had previously done. He set out on a long journey in Africa, where he hitch-hiked for over a year around 1980. When back in Sweden he ended up in his old circles, with a lot of abuse of alcohol and cannabis. He maintains that smoking hash has kept him out of prison.

LJ: Let me tell you — what has kept me out of clink is hash. Since I started smoking hash, I've bloody well kept away from thieving.

DL: How does that come about?

LJ: Well, I don't know. But — yes, it's because smoking opens up a lot of bloody things. In your skull — which was bloody good for me.<sup>35</sup>

During the 1980's and 90's he had quite a lot of contact with the Skogsnäs collective outside Ramsele in Ångermanland in the north of Sweden. Having been offered a job there, he applied to study to be a music tutor in Härnösand and studied for less than a term there in the autumn of 1993.

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<sup>33</sup> Lennart "Konvaljen" Johansson's diary at Svenskt visarkiv.

<sup>34</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ003.

<sup>35</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ003.



The music tutor course in Härnösand, 1993. The photograph is privately owned by Sofia Joons.

However, it soon became clear that Konvaljen didn't fit in with the group particularly well. In the first place, he was more than thirty years older than the other students and in addition he had — to put it mildly — different life experiences. One of his fellow-students, Sofia Joons, tells: "I think he was with us, backwards and forwards, for two months. He simply didn't fit in. Broke both every written and unwritten rule".<sup>36</sup>

I was on the Music Tutor course in Härnösand with Konvaljen in the autumn of 1993. The course is based on students taking the helm — students not only influence the content of the course, but also take part in admitting new students. I was in my first year when Konvaljen applied for the course. I was 20 and thought well of everyone, and was convinced that we can all change if we really want to — that

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<sup>36</sup> E-mail conversation with Sofia Joons, who studied together with Konvaljen in Härnösand.

it isn't hard, but rather interesting. I remember thinking about how Konvaljen would fit in and what use he might have for the course. But as I say — everyone can change, and why should some dreary prejudices put a spoke in Konvaljen's wheel? When the autumn came, and the new admissions were greeted by us second-year students, Konvaljen was the person who made me realise how many written and unwritten rules a freely-structured course such as the Music Tutor course rests upon and needs. No-one else would, like, even think of lighting a cig in the school's minibus.

[...]

I'm not sure that I learned of exactly what it was that led to Konvaljen leaving the course. But I doubt that there was anyone who didn't understand why the course didn't suit Konvaljen and why Konvaljen didn't suit the course.<sup>37</sup>

Sofia Joons's tale illuminates the problems Konvaljen had in fitting in on the music course, but her description also gives a picture of the constant problems in readjusting to society that he has met in his life — as is also the case for many others who have served time in prison. He lived and was “brought up” in prisons for around 20 years, which of course leaves its mark.

Konvaljen's latest musician mate is the fiddler Peter Meijer. Konvaljen and Peter met at the Falun Folkmusik Festival in 1998 and have done gigs ever since with clink tunes now and then.

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I phone Konvaljen in the autumn of 2016 to ask if I we can do yet another interview, and he likes the idea. “You'll have to come here, then”, he says. “I don't visit Stockholm much these days, but you can sleep on my sofa”. I drive up to Hälsingland and find my way to the right address. Konvaljen comes out and meets me. He looks worn, yet nevertheless surprisingly alert in body and mind considering the life he has led with drugs and alcohol. In the summer of 2016 he was 80 years old.

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<sup>37</sup> E-mail from Sofia Joons, 17<sup>th</sup> of January, 2017.



In Konvaljen's home in connection with an interview in 2016. Photographer: Dan Lundberg.

I have brought some buns that I bought along the way and we have a coffee to start with. “Good thing you brought something”, Konvaljen says. “I’ve got nothing here. I’m so bloody poor, you know”. Apart from that short period in the 1970’s, Konvaljen hasn’t had any earnings that could boost his pension. Now, he says, his pension is just above 7 000 Swedish crowns a month before tax.

“It’s a good thing that you can fish in the summer, and get money on return cans...”

There is in any case a little instant coffee in a jar, and we boil some water and share the buns. I tell him about my work on prison songs, and that I have been in touch with lots of people that he mixed with in the 1970’s. He is curious. “How are things with Robert — does he still play?” He joyfully recalls meeting the collectors Elisabeth Skarpe, Bertil Sundin and Gunnar Ternhag, and asks lots of questions. Then we go to the living room to start the interview.

DL: But you still play?

LJ: Yes, we play like hell. I have a mate up here. He’s got a flat now. He’s from Stockholm. He lived here for a while. But then he got himself a woman.<sup>38</sup>

He seldom plays in public nowadays, but seizes the chance when someone comes by. Mostly it isn’t prison songs, however, but other songs by well-known Swedish artists as Cornelis Vreeswijk, Evert Taube, Nils Ferlin and such.

Konvaljen has his guitar during the interview, playing and singing when he wants to illustrate something. He is still very much interested in politics, and he sometimes lays down the law just like he did in the lecturing concerts he did with Robert Robertsson in the 1970’s.

I soon learned that those who are inside aren’t a bit more bloody dishonest than those on the outside. Not at all, if you just look around you.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ003.

<sup>39</sup> SVA A 20160831LJ003.



I get the impression that he often yearns for the five years that he spent in the limelight — when Konvaljen was something of a cult character in Sweden's progressive music movement.

DL: So how is life today, then?

LJ: Well, boring. Yes, in this village it's very lonely.

DL: So you don't mix with people.

LJ: Well, I have three or four girls who call by. Yes, one of them lives just round the corner. She almost always drops in.<sup>40</sup>



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<sup>40</sup> SVAA20160831LJ003.

# Why Do Prisoners Sing?

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## Clink Tunes in Transition

In this final chapter we turn back to the questions posed at the start. One starting point was the various functions of the tunes in the prison environment, not least how they changed in the 1960's and 1970's. I will also return to the importance of the interest shown for the genre by collectors and record companies; this interest exerted a great deal of influence upon the development and content of the genre. Finally I will discuss the general conclusions regarding music and the shaping of identity that can be drawn on the basis of this case study of the use of music in a marginalised group.

## Voice of the Individual and Voice of the Collective

Songs have through the ages been a way for people to express themselves — often to express things which perhaps cannot be said with words alone. Songs can be a way to communicate important messages, but also a way to “let off steam”, to release feelings or quite simply manifest or express a yearning, an event or an experience.

One of the points of departure for this study is a discussion of music as a means and as an end. The songs which are central to the analysis in this book have clearly, to various extents and in a variety of situations, had both of these

functions — not infrequently at one and the same time. Making music in prisons has often been purely a way of helping time pass, but also an opportunity to be creative — both as an individual and in groups. In the late 1960's, and into the 1970's, prison songs were increasingly used as a means in the struggle for the rights of prisoners. This process led to an upswing in creative musical activities in prisons, and many new songs were written which were directly connected to the political and ideological struggle being waged. But it also meant that older songs gained new meanings.

In my analysis of the material I have observed two categories of songs that I have called the *Voice of the Individual* and the *Voice of the Collective*. In the category Voice of the individual, the subject of the song directly addresses the listener. It is the “I” of the song who yearns, regrets, laments — or dreams of freedom and joy. Many of these prison songs originate from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though the prison song tradition itself is far older.

In the sva's interview material there is a lot of testimony to the fact that writing, in all its forms, and composing music have been and remain ways to survive a tough life in prison. Latter-day surveys such as The Nordic Museum's appeal “Write about your life!” in the 1990's show that this is still the case. Many inmates who answered the museum's appeal told that they devoted a fair amount of time to writing — both prose and poetry.<sup>1</sup> A contemporary example from the world of music is Leo Carmona, who led the Swedish hip hop group “Kartellen” [The Cartel]. Carmona wrote texts to the group's tunes from his isolation cell in Turku, Finland, where he was serving a life sentence for incitement to murder. In an interview with the *Dagens Nyheter* newspaper in 2016, after he had been transferred to the Skänninge institution in Sweden, he told of how music was a kind of relief valve for frustration and feelings: “To begin with, we were filled with hate. I felt bad about doing time and channelled it through the music” (Jones 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> The Nordic Museum's appeal: “Du som är fånge. Skriv om ditt liv!” [To you in prison. Write about your life!]

Like many other theatre groups, Fickteatern [The Pocket Theatre] toured prisons in the late 1960's. In 1968 they performed "Mellan två stolar" [Between Two Chairs], by Suzanne Osten and Leif Sundberg at the Långholmen, Asptuna, Wenngarn and Hall institutions in 1968. After visiting the Långholmen prison, they received this letter of thanks from the prisoners.



SVA's recording projects came at a time when the tradition was undergoing change. The inspiration for Bertil Sundin's and Elisabeth Skarpe's collection project in the mid-1960's came from Denmark. This documentation was regarded as even more important on account of signs that the tradition was on the wane (Skarpe 1970). This collection work coincided with significant changes in politics, society and culture. The sociologist Gudmund Jannisa has dubbed the latter part of the 1960's "the mythological 60's". By this he means that many things happened in this period which later became symbols of the entire epoch — for example rebellious youth, student revolts, Flower Power, Woodstock, sexual liberation and the birth of modern feminism. Examples of phenomena with a similarly symbolic status in Sweden include the occupation of the Stockholm University Students' Union building, the festivals at Gärdet (a large park in Stockholm), Group 8 (feminism) and Gröna vågen [The Green Wave]. The point made by Jannisa is that all of these attained an emblematic meaning as symbols of the 1960's, though they are in fact links in a chain of changes which started in the 1950's — a new way of observing social and cultural variances in society. The changes in the 60's are mirrored in cultural policies.

After a trial period the national concert agency, Concerts Sweden was launched in 1968.<sup>2</sup> The Culture Commission of 1972 paved the way for a new attitude to culture in the form of the Culture Proposition of 1974. Simply put, it is reasonable to say that the new cultural policies entailed a politicisation of state financing of the culture sector. The commission maintained that “the commercial production of culture and cultural activities seldom aims to create manifoldness and an even distribution” and that the state should provide forms of support to ensure this. One of the ways to achieve this was the establishment of the Swedish Arts Council in 1974.

The correctional treatment system was also influenced by new ideas concerning more humane care and, not least, meaningful activities characterised by humanism and ideals of learning. Cultural activities such as drama and study groups on literature and music were significant expressions of such aspirations. One of the conclusions arrived at in this study is that changes in the conditions in Swedish prisons greatly influenced changes in the content of the clink songs genre in the 1960's and 70's. We are able to observe not least a clear politicisation of the texts of the songs. The main reason for my calling the category of prison songs from this period “Voice of the Collective” is the character of the sender: the songs express views based in the grouping “prisoners”, and the singer fills the role of spokesperson for the collective. Yet here a new receiver group is present, a new audience: the general public outside prison. From the perspective of the public, international influences were also present — the American singer Johnny Cash, for example. His live recording *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* was released in 1968 and made a substantial impression in Sweden. Interestingly enough, Johnny Cash is not named by any of the singers interviewed in Swedish prisons — perhaps he was not an ideal for them. It is however reasonable to assume that Sweden's general public saw the LP *Kåklåtar* as a kind of Swedish equivalent to Johnny Cash's record.

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<sup>2</sup> Originally “Stiftelsen institutet för rikskonserter”, this was a state-owned organisation which promoted concerts at home and abroad.

## Clink Tunes as a Genre

The term “kåklåtar” [clink tunes] was established when MNW’s album with the same name was released in 1972. Various terms with the first element “kåk” [clink], meaning “prison” have been used in varying circumstances since, at the latest, the 1600’s.<sup>3</sup>

The terms “kåkvisor” and “kåksånger” [clink songs] are found in SVA’s recordings from the 1960’s and 70’s, but not “kåklåt” [clink tune]. Why, then, did the MNW record company use this term for its LP in 1972? There are several possible explanations for this, but the reason was most likely ideological. By using the term “kåk” rather than “prison”, the sender signals intimacy with prison culture, sympathy and insiderness. The songs in the category Voice of the Collective consistently display a clearer and richer use of prison lingo when compared with the older material. Through his usage, the singer confirms his extensive knowledge of and, to a certain extent, status within prison culture. It is also of interest that the second element “-låt” [tune] came into use in the 1970’s. It appears reasonable to couple this with popular culture — pop music and folk music use the term “låt” for both “tune” and “song”. The use of “kåklåtar” signals a sense of belonging to both prison culture, folk culture and popular culture. In the political and ideological currents of the day, the most important signal is perhaps that clink songs were sung in a subculture that places itself both outside and in opposition to society’s cultural hegemony.<sup>4</sup>

The term “kåklåtar”/“clink tunes” is one of many linguistic markers which make it clear that the songs belong to the social and cultural context of prisons and criminality. This may be seen as a conscious positioning in outsider-

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<sup>3</sup> *Svensk etymologisk ordbok* [Swedish Etymological Dictionary] indicates that the word “kåkmät” [clink food] was used as a term of abuse in the 1600’s, a metaphorical reference to a punishment for “loose-footed” women — to be “mat åt kåken” [food for the clink]. In a similar manner, “böfvelsmat” was used [food for the executioner]. (Hellquist 1922)

<sup>4</sup> A similar discussion on the positions of music genres in cultural life — based on the philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s term “cultural hegemony” — is found in Lundberg 2014.

ness. We have previously discussed the sociologist Donald Clemmer's term *prisonisation*, which describes the process or mechanism that ensues when people are placed in prison and are unwillingly severed from society. Prisonisation implies the creation of new common norm systems and identity markers which offer refuge from society's social rejection. Important components of this process include alignment to the group by adopting various kinds of sociocultural markers such as language (prison lingo, for example) and other features of behaviour common to the group. The ethnologist Billy Ehn uses the term "prison lore" to describe the common repertoire of language, tales, attitudes and behaviours found in prisons (Ehn 1971:294). In this cultural toolbox, knowledge of clink songs has also had a central role.

In the new category of songs which developed in the 1960's and 70's, one can also see a shift towards a more strategic function. Prisonisation, as defined by Clemmer, is a necessary — if not always voluntary — shield for the individual: a way to avoid social rejection by joining the group "prisoners". That which is mirrored in the songs written from the 1960's onwards is often a conscious, voluntary use of the positioning "criminal". We have used the ethnomusicologist Alf Arvidsson's line of reasoning concerning subject positions in his categorisation of texts from the progressive music movement — here "the misfit" is a position where social outsidership is central (Arvidsson 2008:321). The older songs were a part of the prisonisation process and indicated membership of one's own group, whilst the newer songs additionally have a representative function aimed at those outside the group. It is more reasonable to describe the function of the songs in the category *Voices of the Collective* as a form of *culturalisation* — consciously using, on a collective level, cultural forms of expression (language, music, clothes and other stylistic attributes) to distinguish oneself from others (Lundberg et al 2000:419pp).

An interesting observation is that the newer songs to a greater extent than the older ones use language markings in the form of prison lingo — words and expressions from prison lingo which fashion a feeling of authenticity whilst at the same time signalling a positioning in outsidership. We can in addition

sense a certain measure of exoticisation and romanticisation of prison life via the use of language.<sup>5</sup>

The move from the internal prison context into the public arenas placed new demands on the clink tune repertoire. We have observed this in other genres when forms of music have been transferred from the private to the public sphere.<sup>6</sup>

If this transfer is to succeed, it is necessary to have *distinctive* forms of expression which create greater visibility — and in the case of clink tunes the language, clink lingo, is such a characteristic and original form of expression.

## Interplay — Clink Tunes, Archives and Media

It would be easy to believe that the interest in crimes, criminality and criminals has risen in recent years, particularly in view of the fact that increasing numbers of TV programmes deal with this issue. The Swedish media researcher Ester Pollack describes crime and media as an “inseparable couple” and discusses the media’s influence on the system of justice: her starting point is the way that the trial of the star of sport and TV, Orenthal James Simpson, developed into something of a TV show for its duration of over a year (Pollack 2001:13p).

Yet interest in and fascination with criminal activities appears to have existed throughout the ages. Crimes have been reported in so-called broadside ballads, simple prints which were sold at markets places, since the 1600’s.<sup>7</sup>

We are aware that medieval district and provincial courts were something of a public spectacle. The courts were important events for those who lived in the districts, and large groups of spectators gathered when they were held (Lund-

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<sup>5</sup> In the same way, the author Thom Lundberg makes great use of Romani words in his portrayal of a family of Swedish Travellers in the book *För vad sorg och smärta* [Such Sorrow, Such Pain] (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Compare for example the ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino’s distinction between *participatory* and *presentational* music-making (Turino, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Strand 2016:119. Strand refers in her turn to Margareta Jersild’s study of broadside ballads from 1975.



Robert Robertsson and Konvaljen outside the Långholmen prison in 1973. The photo was taken for use on a poster and for press material. After they had been taking photographs for a while, a warden came and said that photography was forbidden there. “That was, of course, the photo we used!”, says Robert Robertsson. Photographer: Allan Larsson.



berg & Ternhag 2005:93pp). In her book *Bödlar. Liv, död och skam i svenskt 1600-tal* [Executioners. Life, Death and Shame in Sweden's 1600's], the Swedish historian Annika Sandén tells of the interest shown executions — which were well-drilled public shows (Sandén 2016:46pp). Public executions often drew large crowds — an important factor in helping the deterrent message reach the masses. Such spectacular and entertaining features of executions increased more and more in the 1700's, finally coming to be regarded as unseemly:

The person condemned could come to the execution dressed as though for a wedding or a birthday and with a hired choir, and be the recipient of prayers and cares from the priest and spectators to such an extent that the deterrent message of the death penalty was as nothing. (Sandén 2016:49)

Perhaps it was just such a spectacular execution that Cornelis Vreeswijk related to in his text on “Mördar-Anders” that he wrote for the Jailbird Singers LP *Tjyvbollader och Barnatro* in 1964.

You who await my cry, my cry.  
You who await my cry, my cry.

You who await my cry  
Will get to see a lovely corpse.  
I do everything for my audience, by hell!

How did it come about, then, that record companies, archives and the general public showed an interest in prison culture in the 1960's and 70's? As far as the archives are concerned, we have already observed that this was nothing new. Recordings of black convicts made by John Lomax in Louisiana's Angola prison in the early 1930's aroused a lot of international interest — not least via the record with "Midnight Special" in 1934, performed by Huddie William Ledbetter — better known as "Leadbelly" (Lomax 1947). When SVA's Ulf Peder Olrog initiated the archive's first recording project in prisons in 1965 he had been inspired by Danish collectors, yet there was also a wish to extend the field of operations of the archive to cover folk music in a broader sense. The music researcher Gunnar Ternhag has also discussed this matter.<sup>8</sup>

The Swedish sociologist Gudmund Jannisa sees the interest in various forms of music on the margins of society as part of the political currents of the day: a movement in opposition to the dominant commercial culture.

In their hunt for the "authentic", [John] Lomax and his son Alan set off for remote areas with as high a percentage of Afro-Americans as possible and — first and foremost — visited prisons. (Jannisa 2015:21)

As far as the archives are concerned, clink songs appear to represent an important and appealing part of folk culture which had not been present in the collections. As concerns the interest shown by record companies, there is an ideological dividing-line between Metronome, which released *Jailbird Singers* in 1964, and MNW which released *Kåklåtar* in 1972 and *Konvaljen* in 1975. Metronome underlines the surprisingly delicate and sensitive character of the repertoire in contrast to the criminal background of the members of the group. On the record's sleeve Cornelis Vreeswijk, producer of the record, describes

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<sup>8</sup> SVAA20160311GT001.

the group and its repertoire as at one and the same time both exotic and unexpectedly run-of-the-mill (Vreeswijk 1964). The producer Gunilla Thorgren has a different point of departure when she describes the musicians on the LP *Kåklåtar*.

Among those interned, sentenced to hard and long imprisonment, are the ones who steal money from our banks and other capitalistic organisations. They are often bright lads who do not accept our society's norms regarding "mine and yours". They are not of any danger to you and me — no, they must be punished because they break the class laws of the established order of society. And it is only the capitalist — the owner of capital — who profits from the established order of society.<sup>9</sup>

Thorgren sees the musicians as revolutionaries, some sort of anarchistic representatives of the lower classes with the courage to oppose and strike out against the order of society. To MNW the clink tunes were a weapon in the struggle against society's injustices on different levels — against class society and capitalism, and at the same time against abuses in prisons and inhumane correctional treatment in general.

#### THE INTEREST AFFECTS THE GENRE

An interest in prison songs was shown from a number of quarters in the 1960's and 70's, and this meant that knowledge of a genre that was previously almost unknown increased greatly. The attention paid by the daily press, radio, TV, record companies and archives also meant that the distinctive features of the genre were elucidated and accentuated in relation to other kinds of songs. Collecting, archiving, the publishing of learned articles and releasing gramophone records can all be regarded as parts of a process of cultural heritageing of the prison songs.

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<sup>9</sup> Text on the sleeve of the LP *Kåklåtar* 1972.

The term “kåklåtar” [clink tunes] was popularised in the 1970’s as a result of record releases, concerts and lectures. sva’s collection projects and the work of students and researchers further clarified the genre’s content.

It is common in many sciences to discuss the effect that the study of events and of contexts has on the phenomenon itself. Quantum physics poses the question of the “superposition” of an electron: that the question of the position of an electron has no answer before it is asked, i.e. the electron cannot be said to have previously been anywhere in particular. In a humanistic science such as ethnomusicology the idea that the observer both affects and is affected by that which is observed — within certain limits — is not as abstract. We have earlier discussed *cultural heritageing* (p. 6opp) as a process in which collection and documentation influence music in practice. In the case of prison songs the effects of collection work were increased by the attention of a number of other participants. We will now run through the various stages *identification* — *categorisation* — *standardisation* — *symbolisation* in the process that cultural heritageing implied for clink tunes as a term and a genre.

#### IDENTIFICATION OF CLINK TUNES

The collecting of clink songs was based on an idea that a specific category of songs existed in prison culture. The collector Bertil Sundin asks in his interviews from 1965 to 1967 specifically about songs to do with “clink”, and it is obvious that those interviewed know what he means. This is usually a question of older songs: a frequent question from the interviewer is “When was the first time you heard clink songs?” The answer is in most cases that it was long ago, and that the songs have become less common. Many of the singers have had an extensive repertoire of other kinds of songs — clink songs have been one of many genres. The LP *Tjyvbballader och barnatro* from 1964, probably the first Swedish sound documentation of songs originating from prison culture, has no clink songs in the sense of “songs written and sung in prison and about prison and/or criminal environments” (Ternhag 1974:168). The main body of songs consisted of religious songs and “everyday songs”. The songs which — as

far as the texts are concerned — could be defined as clink songs were all written by Cornelis Vreeswijk.

The collecting of clink songs implies that the genre becomes more fixed and that songs on the periphery are in many cases culled. We have previously seen that erotic songs and songs about drugs — so-called “speed songs” — are regarded as borderline cases in the collection projects.

In the interviews it transpires that there was lots of music-making in prisons in the 1960’s and 70’s, yet very little is documented other than clink songs. We must in other words be conscious of the fact that the repertoire in our collections is a limited part of the entirety of music played in prisons.

The selection addressed in this study is based on a definition of “clink tunes” as a song category in which *the core* consists of songs about prisons, life in prisons, crime and criminal environments. The songs have in most cases been performed and composed by prisoners. Outside this core are songs which may sometimes be regarded as part of the category “clink tunes”, sometimes not — for example the erotic songs and speed songs which were sung in prisons.

#### CATEGORISING THE TUNES

The songs in this book have been divided into two categories: *Voice of the Individual* and *Voice of the Collective*. This is a crude division which is based on the subject position of songs: in *Voice of the Individual* the individual prisoner speaks, and in *Voice of the Collective* the “I” of the song assumes the position of spokesman for the collective of prisoners. This division partially coincides with the division into older and younger songs observed in other studies (Skarpe 1970, Berggren & Hardwick 1972 and Ternhag 1974). This change is also observed in interviews with prisoners. It is particularly apparent in an interview made at the Hall prison in 1971:

The ones sung now, they have got far more conscious. They're about... They have much more, how to put it, concrete contents. The ones that were sung back then, they were more like: "pity me", and that, like.<sup>10</sup>

In her essay *Kåksånger. En analys av en fängelsetradition* [Clink Songs. An Analysis of a Prison Tradition], Skarpe couples a decrease in song-writing to the abolishment of the single cell system in 1945. She sees the isolation of inmates in single cells as an important driving force in the development of what she terms "the older songs" (Skarpe 1970:19). The assumption Skarpe makes is that living in a single cell meant that many prisoners — deprived of other pursuits — devoted more time to music and literature, which thus fostered the creative process. This would also explain why so many of the texts centre on the individual. Skarpe definitely has a point, but there are also many exceptions and it is more reasonable to see the coupling to internment as one of many factors which influenced the creation of songs. Skarpe also takes a different approach to the repertoire, apportioning songs on the basis of various factors such as text content, aim and gender. Thus she holds forth "lewd songs", "revue songs", "songs from the revivalist movement" and "songs with a female main character".

In the categorisation phase of cultural heritageing, interesting discussions often arise concerning the drawing of borders in relation to other genres — but also almost always concerning some sort of hierarchisation of the material. Authenticity — a concept criticised in many contexts, often turns up in discussions of this part of the process. What is a "true" clink song? In such questions of evaluation, tensions often arise between old and new — where the old is often assigned a higher value. As mentioned earlier, the question of the age of songs crops up in almost every interview. From an archival perspective, the motto when collecting folk music "the older, the better" also appears to apply to clink songs — hardly surprising, considering the strong connection that the sva had to working with folk music. In Gunnar Ternhag's interviews from

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<sup>10</sup> SVA BA1177.

the early 1970's we find however, in comparison with the interviews from the 1960's, a more pronounced interest in the newly-written material.

When MNW released the LP *Kåklåtar* in 1972, an interesting shift of focus took place — from the older category of songs to the newly-written songs. When Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson sent a tape with song suggestions to Gunilla Thorgren at MNW, it comprised around 35 songs.<sup>11</sup> Of these 13 can be classified as clear examples of clink songs. Of these only one — “Har du skådat kåkens dystra murar” [Have You Beheld the Dismal Prison Walls] — ended up on the LP. Robert Robertsson, who participated in the making of the LP, states that Thorgren had explicit ideas and a distinct role as producer of the record. Instead of the old songs, new songs with a clear political message were chosen. The record strongly influenced the meaning of the term “kåklåtar” [clink tunes] and involved a transfer of the hub of the genre from old to new, and thus from individual to collective.

#### STANDARDISATION AND ARCHIVE LOOPS

One consequence of identification and categorisation is that the genre becomes easier to grasp — but it also becomes more homogenous. Typical features of the standardisation phase are the publishing of collections, archive registers, phonograms, theoretical studies, etc.

In this study I have identified two publications as having been particularly important for the development and homogenisation of the clink songs genre: Elisabeth Skarpe's final essay *Kåksånger. En analys av en fångelsetradition* [Clink Songs. An Analysis of a Prison Tradition] and the LP *Kåklåtar*. Skarpe took part in the work of collecting when she was one of Bertil Sundin's students at Stockholm University's pedagogical institution. She gave copies of her essay to a number of the informants she had met, not least when working with the song group she had started at Hall — one member of which was Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson. The record *Kåklåtar* was also widespread in

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<sup>11</sup> SVA BC 1279.

prisons, not least via the concerts with Robert Robertsson and Konvaljen from 1972 to 1975.

In discussions on the influence exerted by music archives on the music culture that they document, the ethnologist Owe Ronström and I have used the term “archive loops” (cf. Lundberg 2015b). One basic prerequisite is the view of cultural heritage archives as active parties in the tradition that they document. The British anthropologist Brian Durrans reasons in a similar way with regard to museums: “Museums not only collect and store fragments of culture: they themselves are part of culture” (Durrans 1993:125). Cultural heritage archives, particularly music archives, hold something of an exceptional position in that they often have a more direct relationship — in comparison with, for example, museums — to the tradition that they document. We can in other words differentiate between one approach in which the archive is a kind of “frozen” image of history at a particular moment and another approach in which the archive is a part of an ongoing living tradition. When archives publish their collections, and these are re-used by new transmitters of the tradition, these transmitters will be influenced by the changes that result from cultural heritageing. Later, new documentations can come — in which the influences exerted by archives on the material are integrated parts of the tradition. This process may be described as a kind of cycle or loop which we are able to understand by seeing archives as parts of the tradition rather than as passive documentation institutions.

The clearest example of a loop in this material is when Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson, whilst preparing for the recording of the LP *Kåklåtar*, informs Gunilla Thorgren that he is sitting and leafing through Elisabeth Skarpe’s essay in order to find more tunes for the recording (Skarpe 1970). He also expresses regret at not knowing many of the songs.<sup>12</sup> Konvaljen’s repertoire of clink songs of the older category was at that time limited, so to remedy that problem he learned songs from Skarpe’s essay — which was by then an available source.

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<sup>12</sup> SVA BC1279.



In the book *Music, Media, Multiculture*, visibility is pointed out as a precondition if marginalised groups are to be able to assume a place in society (Lundberg et al 2000). With the ideas of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman as a starting point, we describe how groups on the periphery of society can by the use of forms of cultural expression come closer to the hub — and, in so doing, acquire power (Bauman 1994). Making visible implies making conscious on a collective level. The markers indicate identity and belonging on the group level and thus clarify differences in relation to others — what one is *not* like. This process is captured in a similar manner in the concept of *cultural branding* by the American ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin (1989).

Making conscious results in the collective distinctiveness of the group becoming standardised, objectified, fixed and given symbolical attributes. *Cultural branding* creates well-fashioned, clearly delimited, group-specific cultural markers — brandnames. (Lundberg et al 2000:20)

The Swedish ethnomusicologist Anders Hammarlund has used the term *emblematic function* to describe how music can be given a representative significance as a symbol for cultures or other collective fellowships (Hammarlund 1990:65p).

Via SVA's collecting work and the publications which resulted from this — and not least via the release of the *Tjyvbballader och barnatro*, *Kåklåtar* and *Konvaljen* records — cultural expressions were created that came to be used as emblems or symbols for the group jailbirds/criminals.

In MNW's presentation of *Kåklåtar* the representative, symbolic significance was communicated clearly in sleeve texts and marketing. A number of the songs on the records were regularly used in concerts and lectures. Konvaljen set music to the poem "Vår" [Spring] by Peder Bläck, and this song and one of the tunes from the older repertoire category, "Har du skådat kåkens dystra murar?" [Have You Beheld the Dismal Prison Walls] became signature melodies for prison culture. The latter title was also used as the heading of Lennart

“Konvaljen” Johansson’s and Robert Robertsson’s concert programmes.<sup>13</sup> It was also the title of Gunnar Ternhag’s article on clink songs (1974). It is interesting to note that “Har du skådat kåkens dystra murar?” belongs to the older category of clink songs and is not part of the more politicised repertoire on the record. Emblematic validity is not the same as commercial potential. A comparison of statistics from the streaming site Spotify between “Har du skådat kåkens dystra murar?” and “Där björkarna susa” from the Jailbird Singers LP *Tjyvbballader och barnatro* reveals enormous differences.<sup>14</sup> Whilst “Har du skådat kåkens dystra murar?” has been streamed 3,108 times, “Där björkarna susa” has been streamed as many as 680,446 times.<sup>15</sup> The Jailbird Singers record from 1964 was a media success right from the start. Two tunes — Dan Andersson’s “Jungman Jansson” (about a sailor’s life) and “Där björkarna susa” (about the beauty of nature) reached Sweden’s equivalent of the Top Ten. Yet in spite of their commercial success neither of these songs had the attributes relevant to a symbolic function as a collective identity marker for the grouping “jailbirds”. To some extent this is a matter of qualities which might be termed “credible representation” — that the song in question is associated with the collective or grouping, has been created within it and is performed by credible representatives of it. In the case of “Där björkarna susa” with Jailbird Singers, the final criterion is met: the members of the group had a clear connection with criminality and prison culture. Yet the song itself is part of popular culture and does not have a prison background: it is a Finnish-Swedish song with a text by Viktor Sund and a melody by Oskar Merikanto from 1915. Another attribute necessary for symbolisation is *distinctive character*. In order to create aesthetic manifestations which function as emblems or symbols for social groupings, a certain measure of uniqueness is needed — in the sense that they differ from the manifestations typical of other groupings. The ethnologist Owe Ronström asks an important question regarding cultural identity centred upon distinctive character:

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<sup>13</sup> SVA A 20120402RRO01.

<sup>14</sup> No sales statistics for *Kåklåtar* are available from MNW. (According to Anne-Marie Beckman of MNW Music, now part of Universal Music, 2017-02-15.)

<sup>15</sup> Statistics from Spotify on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

If ‘cultural identity’ is “what sets us apart as a collective”, is it then “what we all have in common”, or “what we, but not others, have”? (Ronström 1995:3)

The answer to the question is a combination of both of Ronström’s alternatives — but it is, in the case of clink tunes, a matter of utilising one’s outsider-ness and displaying differences and distinctive character, that is to say “what we, but not others, have”.

#### CULTURAL HERITAGEING CREATES CLINK TUNES

By analysing how clink tunes are influenced by the cultural heritageing process we can see how the genre is elucidated and changed in interplay between performers, archives, research and media. The ethnologist Mats Nilsson describes the complex of problems connected with the archiving of living traditions, particularly dance — in the study *Dokument dansar inte* [Documents Don’t Dance].<sup>16</sup>

Nilsson sees a distinct border between cultural heritage and culture itself, manifested when archiving:

To put it strongly, dances “die” when they are stuck into archives and no longer danced. The archive material can, on the other hand, survive far longer as an artefact than the people whose dance was documented. And the dances can be revived. Yet the archive material does not contain the way the moves themselves felt bodily, merely descriptions of them. (Nilsson 2016:64p)

Nilsson speaks, however, of a special case — one in which the dances are no longer danced when archived. The collection projects he discusses had, too, a “last chance” character — often the last surviving dancers of a dying tradition were documented, and in many cases the dance was in fact already dead. In the case of clink songs, the tradition observed was not dead: it became, on the con-

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<sup>16</sup> Mats Nilsson’s study *Dokument dansar inte. Om dans, arkivering, traditioner och kulturarv* [Documents don’t dance. About dance, archiving, traditions and cultural heritage] (2016) is one of the final reports from SVA’s research project *Pluralise or Polarise*, concerning collecting and ideology.

trary, more lively whilst sva did its collecting work — in part, moreover, thanks to this work. Unlike Nilsson, I see archives, media and other manifestations of cultural expression as parts of the tradition. This in turn also means that there is no distinct border between culture and cultural heritage, rather that these are different designations or status indications — based on ideology and values — for the same phenomenon. Most people who work at a museum or an archive have probably at some time asked the question: “Do cultural heritage institutions collect cultural heritage or does that which is collected thus become cultural heritage?” Performers, collectors, researchers, archives and record companies have in the case of clink tunes not only co-operated in spreading the music — words and melodies — but also in establishing a general view of what clink tunes are.

## Patterns of Change

All in all, we have an older repertoire characterised by an individual form of expression. It is the “I” of the song who broods, regrets and yearns. The clink songs belong to a great extent to what the literary historian Karin Strand calls “the broadside-ish” (Strand 2016:4). Formulaic openings and endings are often used in clink songs — as in many genres within the folk tradition with narrative texts. When it comes to the choice of melodies, the older clink songs adhere to the same tradition. Most tunes are sung to “a well-known melody” — which coincides well with “the broadside-ish”.

Another characteristic feature of the older repertoire is a kind of fatalistic view of the criminal’s lot in life. The songs express the view that it is some people’s fate to become criminals — something that you yourself perhaps cannot do anything about. Yet another characteristic feature is that the text does not refer directly to the crime committed. In many songs we are instead able to learn which one of the Ten Commandments was broken by the subject of the song. A typical example is found in “Jag, en fattig fånge” [I, a Poor Prisoner], where the song’s main character appears to have been punished for theft: “then I broke the Seventh Commandment, which made my God so wrathful”. The

exact wordings of the Commandments were never given in the songs, a fact which suggests that the wordings of the Commandments were well-known to all in a different way than today.

#### SOCIAL CRITICISM AND NEW TUNES

A characteristic feature of the newer songs in the category *Voice of the Collective* is the politicisation of the texts. The texts often openly criticise the correctional treatment system and society in general. The tunes were part of a public discussion concerning Sweden's correctional treatment system, and were used by KRUM (The National League for the Humanising of the Correctional Treatment System) and FFCO (The Central Organisation of the Union of Prisoners) at meetings and manifestations.

As implied by the designation of the category — Voice of the Collective — the singer is perceived to be a representative of the group “prisoners”. We no longer hear a vulnerable person who uses the song as a safety valve when in a cruel plight, but an — often proud — spokesman for a disadvantaged and ill-treated group.

It was typical of the older repertoire that the songs were sung to well-known melodies. This was still to a certain extent the case also in the younger repertoire, though melodies from the popular music of the day are used for the newer texts. New melodies used for clink tunes in the 1960's and 70's include Cornelis Vreeswijk's “Brev från kolonien” [Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh] and “Trettifyran”, a Swedish version of Stuart Hamblen's “This Ol' House”.<sup>17</sup>

An important change in this period was that new melodies were written for the songs to a much greater extent than before. In Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson's repertoire we find in addition many newly-composed melodies which borrowed their texts from Peder Bläck's poetry collection *Genom ett galler* [Through the Bars] (1944).

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<sup>17</sup> The Swedish version was in Sweden's Top Ten for 39 weeks.



Fig. 1. Typical attributes of texts belonging to the older form of prison songs: the category "Voice of the Individual".



Fig. 2. Typical attributes of texts belonging to the newer form of prison songs: the category "Voice of the Collective".

The texts in the category Voice of the Collective have throughout a more direct manner of address in which a life of crime is at times portrayed in a positive light. Outsiderness is described as a possible — perhaps even desirable — situation. We saw earlier how the sleeve notes of the LP *Kåklåtar* portray jailbirds as a kind of revolutionaries and spokesmen for a downtrodden underclass (cf. p. 57p and 178).

#### CHANGED MEANING AND NEW FORMS OF EXPRESSION

The “clink songs” genre went through an extensive development during the 1960’s and 70’s, which had to do with a number of coactive factors. These can be grouped in sections:

- New conceivable social positions
- Interest shown by the general public and by researchers
- Professionalisation and mediatisation

There is no doubt that the political climate of the period was of great importance for the emergence and elucidation of the “clink tunes” genre. Perhaps the most important change was that outsiderness as a position in society, formerly a heavy encumbrance, now became a possibility.

Outsiderness is today often discussed politically from the perspective of the employment market, but here the term has of course a far broader meaning. The sociologist Gudmund Jannisa points to Colin Wilson’s launching of the term “outsiders”, 1956, as being decisive in understanding the mechanisms of outsiderness in modern-day society. The outsider in Wilson’s sense also implied an upgrading of people who for various reasons, whether or not of their own free will, ended up outside society.<sup>18</sup> Wilson’s discussion of outsiderness became of great importance to British and American youth. Outsiderness in Wilson’s sense became a way to defend and, in a way, make possible unconven-

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<sup>18</sup> Jannisa 2015:21p. Jannisa refers to Wilson’s book *The Outsider*, published in 1956.

tional ways of life. It is reasonable to say that outsidership became in the 1960's an alternative position in society — not least in the world of culture for those who were unable or even unwilling to enter the sphere of established culture.

In his book *Subcultural Sounds*, the American ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin discusses the relationship between the dominant culture in a society and the various alternative cultural forms which exist outside it (Slobin 1993). Slobin is inspired by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's (1891–1937) ideas of “cultural hegemony”. According to Gramsci, the aesthetic value systems of society are created and maintained via a kind of imagined “common sense”. Gramsci criticised capitalist society, maintaining that its cultural values were derived from a bourgeois view of culture that citizens regard as something so obvious that it is not even discussed. Mark Slobin uses the concept “superculture” to describe society's all-embracing musical values system, and this term also implies an aspect of power. A variety of music which does not belong to the superculture is given a lower value, and its practisers have a lower status and less access to arenas than practisers of the superculture. Yet this also implies access to other arenas and forms of expression which are not under the control of those in power, which makes it possible to understand the attraction of outsidership as Colin Wilson sees it.<sup>19</sup>

The concept “potential spaces” is discussed in a similar manner in the book *Music Media Multiculture*.<sup>20</sup>

... increased segregation between, for example, different ethnic groups has forced increasing numbers of people to replace well-known everyday realities with new and unknown ones. The loss of that which they previously took for granted can make them set out to win new interaction areas, which can if the conditions are favourable develop into potential spaces. (Lundberg et al 2000:407p)

During the 1960's and 70's these spaces were occupied by a number of different alternative genres of music. The outsidership of prison culture can be seen

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Slobin's term “superculture” is discussed in Lundberg 2014.

<sup>20</sup> The concept “potential spaces” is borrowed from Donald Woods Winnicott's ideas on how children, with the help of play, explore and conquer the world around them (Winnicott 1981).



as one of these potential spaces in which alternative forms of culture were developed.

We have spoken earlier of how the interest shown by archives, researchers and record companies entailed an elucidation and a standardisation of the genre. The interest shown by, in particular, MNW in the more politically-orientated part of the repertoire meant that the older category of songs ended up in the background. Seeing criminals as rebels who participated in the political struggle against society's injustices can be coupled to Wilson's image of the Outsider as an honest and prestige-free truth-teller:

The Outsider's case against society is very clear. All men and women have these dangerous, unnamable impulses, yet they keep up a pretense, to themselves, to others; their respectability, their philosophy, their religion, are all attempts to gloss over, to make civilized and rational something that is savage, unorganized, irrational. He is an Outsider because he stands for truth. (Wilson 1978:13)

Wilson hails the outsider's spontaneity and irrationality, and we find here too a critique of majority society which is described as forced — a place in which people resist their natural impulses and behaviours.

A professionalisation of the performers followed upon the interest shown by phonogram media. When MNW's two LP's *Kåklåtar* (1972) and *Konvaljen* (1975) are compared, we see significant differences in the musicians present and the production process. The 1975 album is more of a studio product. Instrumental passages are given more space and many of the songs are multi-art works in which poetry and prose are read above instrumental backgrounds. The musicians on the *Konvaljen* LP are for the most from the Swedish progressive music movement.

Professionalisation of the executors also means that the creative process increasingly comes to resemble that of the rest of popular music. Texts are not written to "a well-known melody" to the same extent as before — new melodies are instead composed to newly-written texts.

## EFFECTS OF THE CHANGES

Clink songs were, when the SVA started to collect them in the mid-1960's, a tradition with fewer and fewer executors. Thanks to the interest shown by archives and media — but also the fact that the songs acquired new functions — the genre has bloomed once more. In the early 1970's clink tunes became an important component of the political struggle against abuses in the criminal treatment system, but also part of the progressive music movement and Sweden's Left. The genre adapted to new arenas and an audience outside prisons — which affected the choice of songs and the manner of performing. Many of the older clink songs were not aimed at the general public outside prison culture and were not suitable for making record albums and for stage performances. Thus the repertoire had to be changed and adapted. We are also able to observe a clear professionalisation of the genre in which there is room only for a smaller circle of executors in the media; these executors be-

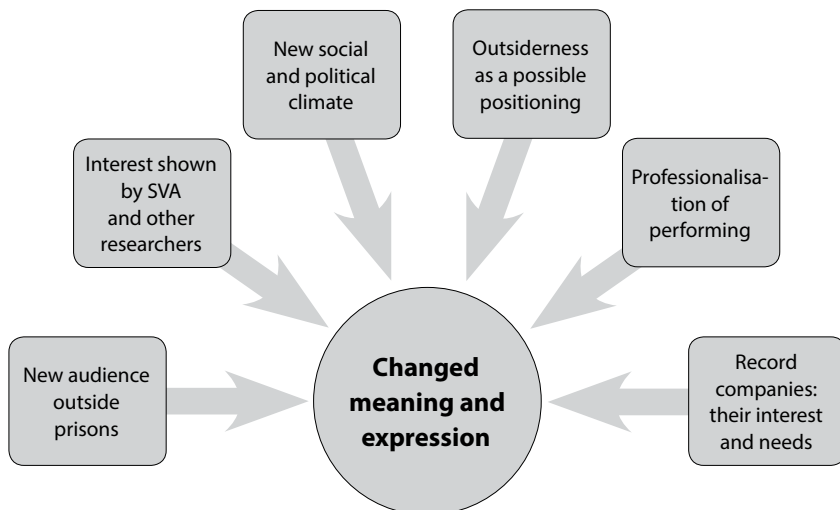


Fig. 3. Some of the causes of changes in the repertoire of prison songs. The political climate of the 1960's and 1970's gave new possibilities and the songs moved out of the prisons.

come a kind of official representatives for both clink tunes as a genre and for prison culture in general. One of these was Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson, who made his breakthrough with MNW’s LP *Kåklåtar* and later had a professional career as a musician for around five years from 1972.

The attention paid allowed the clink tunes genre to bloom, first and foremost, during the first half of the 1970’s. Professionalisation also meant adapting to the gramophone record medium, with more thorough arrangements and productions. The fact that new melodies were composed for the texts also changed the prospects of spreading the tunes. The genre thus developed artistically, but the oral transmission of songs became much more difficult. Someone who wanted to learn a new tune was obliged to learn not only a new text — but also a new melody. In the older category the melody was not usually a problem, since most people were familiar with the melodies used to clothe new texts. In a way, it is reasonable to say that the developments resulted in performing being limited to a smaller number of specialists — and finally to the genre more or less disappearing in its traditional environment.

## Clink Songs Today

This study is based upon material from the sVA’s documentation projects and does not purport to cover either the entire “prison song” genre or music and music-making in Swedish prisons in general. In spite of this, I have often wondered whilst working if — and in what form — the genre still lives on. Today’s inmates have, of course, a need to express themselves in songs and in writing. The Nordic Museum’s survey “Write about your life!” bears witness to creative activities in today’s prisons. A certain amount of poetry is found in the material. In one response, an inmate of the Vå institution near Kristianstad writes to the contact person at the museum:

I read that you asked us to write about life as a prisoner. That would be so much that I don’t think that I could manage it. But I have written some poems that you might like to look at. It’s mostly about love’s misery, sorrow, anxiety, pain and

being apart from those you love. Yet there is hope there too. Words come when you feel longing and pain. All written in prison. (Nordiska museets arkiv. Acc nr KU 14579)

Twelve poems were enclosed. They have a personal tone reminiscent of the category Voice of the Individual.

Placid, I sit in my cell.  
Lonely without you, evening after evening.

Longing, anxiety — will it never end?  
Time goes so slowly, minute by minute.

Sleep is my lover here:  
Sleep — come and kiss my yearning mind,  
and let night erase yesterday's memory.

Let me then wake up, with hope and pleasure,  
And I will endure being here for yet another day.

The texts which show the greatest similarity to those of the clink song category Voice of the Collective are found in rap music. Among the best-known artists in Swedish “gangstarap” are Ken Ring and the hip hop collective Kartellen [The Cartel].<sup>21</sup>

#### GANGSTARAP

The album *Ånger & kamp* [Regret & Struggle] was Kartellen's penultimate, with texts written by the group's leading artists: Leo “Kinesen” Carmona and Sebastian Stakset — “Sebbe Staxx”. The title track shows the frustration evident in many of the texts belonging to Voices of the Collective from the 1970's. Yet there also parallels to the older clink songs, with a belief in destiny and fear

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<sup>21</sup> The hip-hop collective Kartellen consisted of Leo “Kinesen” Carmona, Sebastian “Sebbe Staxx” Stakset, Kaka and Maskinisten. On the new album *Ånger & kamp* Thorsten Flinck, Myrna, Syster Sol, Dani M, Cribbe, Lani Mo and Chrippa also take part.

of having broken the one of the Commandments, “Honour thy father and thy mother”:

Hell, we knew no better, self-destructive life.  
Sinned like hell instinctively.  
Neutralised our conscience.  
I beg forgiveness of my mother, call my girls and my son.  
For murder overdoses which haunts the memory of  
All robberies, try to shake off my suburban devil.  
I followed the code of the street.

Kartellen was started in 2008 by Leo Carmona together with Janne Raninen — both were serving life sentences for incitement to murder in Finland. In his autobiography *Sebbe Staxx. Musiken, Brotten, Beroendet* [Sebbe Staxx. The Music, the Crimes, the Addiction], Sebastian Stakset tells of how he, when an inmate of the Svartsjö institution near Stockholm, was contacted by Carmona (Stakset and Malmberg 2015).

One day Chief [a fellow-inmate] handed me his phone. It was Leo.

“Hi, what’s up? You’re Sebbe, right?

The voice was calm, self-sure.

“Ah, hi ...”

“I heard your demos, they’re fine. I think you and me can work together. But you know, my idea is to hit a lot harder. More street — know what I mean?

“Hmm, okay.”

I had always been told that my texts were too hard for me to make it. This was something new.

“I think that we must depict the vulnerable areas like they are, straight off”, continued Leo. “With the stories and the language — you get me? The street’s highest level, like in the USA.”

That sounded interesting. It was hardly difficult to convince me to hit harder, whatever it was a question of.

“Listen, we’re not going to try to sound like Americans”, said Leo firmly. “We will do Swedish street all the way.” (Stakset and Malmberg 2015:63)

Leo Carmona had a dream, to create a hip hop group that would function as the voice of the struggle against society's injustices. At the time he had been interned in Finland since 2004. He was given a life sentence for incitement to murder, with a suspected connection to the Arlanda robbery in Sweden two years previously, the loot from which — 43 million Swedish crowns — disappeared (Cederstedt 2012.). Carmona was transferred to the Skänninge institution outside Mjölby, Sweden, in 2015. In Finland he was in the high-risk prison in Saramäki, outside Turku — on a closed section, locked in for 19 hours a day. With a smuggled mobile phone he was able to contact musicians in Sweden and start the hip-hop collective Kartellen.

Carmona had Chilean origins and moved to Sweden when 11 years old with his family. The family was from Valparaíso, and ended up in Jordbro in Sweden. His father was a political refugee, a trade union activist.

I come from a good family. Kind parents. All my relatives are academics, I sung in the church choir and had good grades in Chile, muy bueno in almost all subjects when I was ten. (Cederstedt 2012)

In Jordbro Carmona soon fell into crime: thefts, receiving and — with time — armed robbery and cash point blow-ups. Criminality was the norm in Jordbro, he says in an interview in the *Dagens Nyheter* newspaper in 2012.

It's the same wretchedness in Jordbro as it is in the favelas in South America — the same violence, the same narcissism, everyone tries to dampen their problems with drugs — just a little higher housing standard. (Cederstedt 2012)

Carmona's texts show clear social criticism, mirroring outsidership and criminality in suburbs of Stockholm with large immigrant populations. Yet here we find the same yearning — and fear of how one's children and family will fare — as we found in the older category of clink songs:

Sometimes it feels like the Devil holds my hand.  
I walk and walk, but never get anywhere.  
Been inside for 8 years, keep a distance.  
Look — all I fucking have here is regret and struggle,

so my hair will be grey before I get a chance.  
Snakes in the grass try to get me to dance.  
Oh, my son sits and wonders where his daddy is.  
Eyy, daddy behind walls — here there is regret and struggle.  
Little boy, be careful — weak souls break.  
Little boy — go to school, study and learn everything that I can't,  
because all I have on my plate is regret and struggle.

Sebastian Stakset tells in his autobiography of a power struggle concerning the contents of the texts. Carmona wanted the group to distance itself from criminality and drugs, whereas Stakset wanted to underline Kartellen's criminal connection: amongst other things, press photos were taken in which Kartellen's members posed with weapons and balaclavas.

Leo had been clear about what Kartellen wanted: to depict reality. When kids who were impressed wrote enthusiastic words about criminality on our Myspace page, he was quick to reply.



Kartellen [The Cartel] at Gröna Lund in Stockholm, August 2013.

Photographer: DJ Melika, duvetinte.se.

There's nothing cool about committing crimes nor, in particular, sitting in prison. Study and get a job!

But if we acted like that it didn't make for any headlines, and neither Leo nor I was in an ideal situation to speak for ourselves or rewrite the image of Kartellen that was created outside the walls. (Stakset and Malmborg 2015:285)

Though Kartellen's gangsta rap is far different from that which is heard in the clink songs of the 1960's and 70's, the two have much in common: the clink lingo has been replaced by suburban Swedish (with lots of words and phrases from the languages of immigrants), but here we find the same distancing from society and the same abandoned feeling.

Look, outsidership is not necessarily something you choose, it can be something you inherit. It isn't easy to be little and see everything and everyone around you fall down. How should you feel then? That it will never happen to you? Or? Hard to walk around and feel like a chosen one, the one who will break the mould, stand up strong when everything else is razed. So you embrace outsidership, rather than trying to flee from it. You make it your identity. You accept a place in that prison without bars. (Stakset and Malmborg 2015:285)

When Sebastian Stakset thus describes how he came to find his identity in outsidership, it could just as well have come from the sleeve notes of the 1970's LP *Kåklåtar*.

Peter Olsson, who worked at the Hall prison until recently — with, amongst other things, music teaching — says that rap is the most common form of musical expression and that between ten and fifteen percent of the inmates write rap texts. He feels that rapping functions to a great extent as therapy.

"All" inmates often feel that they can rap, which perhaps is not entirely true. Their social criticism is sometimes a little too single-track, but sometimes an inmate comes along who can really express himself well. Apart from that, they tend to glorify "gangster life" and explain/excuse their own choice of criminality.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> E-mail from the prison officer Peter Olsson, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017.



Some inmates still play the guitar and sing, but clink songs of the kind described here from the 1960's and 70's are — as far as Peter Olsson knows — no longer sung at all.

The singer and composer Sara Thuresson conducted a music project in the Hinseberg women's prison from 2015 to 2017. This project resulted in the album *Hinseberg* which was released in 2017. The texts are written by inmates, and tell of dreams and shortcomings. Thuresson developed the project into an exhibition together with Malmö Museums in 2018.

## Music as an End

In this study, the accent has been on the instrumental function of the songs. The texts have been a way of criticising irregularities and frustrations on individual and collective levels. Yet we should not neglect the aesthetic dimension of the music. The songs were written to satisfy purely aesthetic needs and the melodies have been sung because they were lovely. The interviews tell of particularly able musicians and singers. When Lennart “Konvaljen” Johansson describes one of his sources of inspiration, “Knutte-gitarr”, who he met in Västervik prison in 1951, he underlines his musical skill:

Yes, he played really bloody good! Jesus, he was good! And he could sing well, too!<sup>23</sup>

Since a large part of the clink song repertoire is based on the recycling of well-known melodies, the propagation and popularity of the songs were of course important — but the aesthetic qualities of the melodies must also have mattered. If a song was to become widely-known, these various values and attributes must combine. We have also been able to observe how melodies have (been) changed through the years in order to conform to the musical ideals of the day. When Konvaljen performs “Jag är en yngling från Söders höjder”

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<sup>23</sup> SVAA 20160831LJ001.

he alters, modernises the melody — from the original song in three-four time to a bluesy tune with a driving “shuffle groove” in even rhythm, totally in line with the musical ideals of the day (cf. 125p). Such examples of the aesthetic dimensions of clink songs are of importance.

#### ...AND AS A MEANS

Music is of central importance in many sectors of society. The ways in which music can be used appear boundless: aesthetic object, merchandise, identity marker, sales argument, bearer of well-being, etc. Music is clearly an important part of the global or transnational culture that has emerged in our modern communication society. Music has at the same time become an important symbol when marking distinctive character. This might appear contradictory, but it illustrates music’s manifold potential.

Clink songs had a double function as identity markers: inwards, towards the home group, and outwards towards the rest of society. In prisonisation clink songs are one of the attributes which help to establish a jailbird identity. The clink songs are a kind of life stories in micro format which link the singer to prison culture. Knowledge of the repertoire confirms affiliation and insider-ness. At the same time, the repertoire came to serve during the 1970’s as an outward-turned symbol for criminals on a collective level. Using Hammarlund’s terminology, clink songs attained an *emblematic function* which represented the subculture criminals or jailbirds vis-a-vis majority society.

## The Archives, the Music and People on the Margins

The collection and documentation of culture is not steered by democratic principles concerning everyone’s equal rights, but rather by the ideologies and visions of states, organisations and individuals. A lack of the cultural expressions and traditions of subcultures and minorities in Sweden’s national archives is most often not the result of ill-will or racism. It is instead the effect of the role

of cultural heritage institutions in creating official versions of our common history, and the national value scales which have determined what should be worth collecting and archiving and what should be left aside. All interpretations of the past are coloured by and filtered through ideologies from the days when they were created. It is of even greater importance that they are also influenced by the context in which they were intended to be used.<sup>24</sup>

The goal of the national projects of the 1800's was to create oneness — one aim was to show that the nation was culturally homogenous. Subcultures had therefore no — or, at least, little — place in the writing of a nation's history. This applies to original populations such as Sweden's Sami people, but also to other types of marginalised groupings in society. Since criminals — by definition — are outside majority society and to some extent also oppose its values, it is not surprising that prison songs have not had a place in Sweden's cultural heritage. Crime and criminals have, however, always been seen as fascinating by ordinary people, and news media and literature have told of them. This is one of the reasons why songs about crime comprised an important genre when it came to producing broadsides. In the broadside collection of the National Library of Sweden, "Songs of malefactors" is a category of its own.<sup>25</sup>

In the world of the broadside ballads, however, the criminal himself is seldom heard. The crimes are instead portrayed by — or, as was often the case, words were put into the mouth of the criminal by — some other author. SVA's collection projects during the 1960's and 70's were thus something new: a documentation of the music usage which was a part of the everyday culture in Swedish prisons. This collecting was done in a period when ideas regarding cultural values were in a process of change — even in cultural heritage institutions.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf the ethnologist Owe Ronström's description of the situation of the music of ethnic minorities in national archives (Ronström, Malm and Lundberg 1998).

<sup>25</sup> Visor om missdådare [Songs on Malefactors] is signum O i KB's broadside collection. More on KB's systematisation of the broadside collection in, for example, Jersild 1975, p. 28pp and Strand 2016.

sva broadened its focus with regard to recordings — in addition to clink songs, documentations of Tornedalen-Finnish and Finnish and Sami music took place in the early 1970's.<sup>26</sup>

The archive also collected street music, songs of Travellers and children's culture — clapping songs and rhymes from schoolyards (Boström 2016:80). All of this I see as indicators of a changed and broadened view of the preservation of folk culture. A contemporaneous discussion took place regarding the terms *folkmusik* [folk music] and *folklig musik* [popular/folksy music] — the latter term could embrace a broader spectrum of musical manifestations, whereas the former term was regarded by many as being bound to a romantic 19<sup>th</sup> century view of folk culture. Typically, Arkivet för folklig dans [The Popular Dance Archive] was founded in 1965 by Henry Sjöberg (Nilsson 2016:11pp). Similar changes in how culture is looked upon took place in many cultural heritage institutions.<sup>27</sup>

A large part of the documentation of minorities and subcultures focuses on that which is regarded as unusual. Attention is paid to that which differs from both majority society and other social groupings in some decisive, understandable and relevant manner. This implies that those parts of prison culture that did not deviate from the majority found no place in the collections. This is one of the reasons why sva's documentation of clink songs increased the distinctive character of the genre.

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<sup>26</sup> Arkivet för folklig dans [The Folk Dance Archive] was transferred to the Music Museum in Stockholm in 2011 and is now a part of sva.

<sup>27</sup> An event of symbolic importance was the transfer of Karl Tirén's collection of Sami joik from the Swedish Museum of Natural History to the Music Museum in 1966. Tirén's phonograph recordings of joik from 1913 to 1915 are among the earliest and most important sound documentations of joik. One of the reasons for the collection having been at the Swedish Museum of Natural History was that Tirén borrowed its recording equipment. The head of the museum's ethnographical department, Carl Wilhelm Hartman, advocated the use of the phonograph for documentation purposes and liked to have listening copies in his exhibitions. Yet placing Sami culture in an ethnographical cultural heritage context has also symbolical connotations. The ethnographical department's objects and exhibitions displayed other cultures — not Sweden's. Placing joik there can be interpreted as taking a standpoint with regard to that issue — not including Sami culture in Sweden's cultural heritage. The transfer of the collection to the Music Museum in 1968 can be seen as a marker and as a symbolic inclusion of the Sami in Sweden's national cultural heritage.

## SOME FINAL WORDS

The ability to function as a common denominator — as a symbol of affiliation — is one of music's remarkable characteristics. This capacity can be of particular importance in the case of those who are on or beyond the margins of society. Clink songs have had many different functions, and we can note that these have changed over time. Yet the music and songs have continually been present as a way to express feelings and views, to create opinion and voice discontent in order to shape fellowship and group identity. The songs are still an important means of expression, and we can be sure that inmates still sing in prisons — though in new forms.

I will let Peder Bläck have the last word with a subtle poem which I interpret as a belief in humankind's capacity for penance and recovery, concession and forgiveness.

Oh, brother from days past, if you meet  
a man

That you think might look like me  
Show compassion, my friend — and forget  
That it might be me you see.

(Peder Bläck, *Genom ett galler* [Through the Bars], 1944)

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SVA BA098  
SVA BA099  
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SVA BA722  
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### Ternhag's recordings

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**T**his is a book about Swedish prison songs. Yet it is also a study of how people in vulnerable situations can use music to fashion a context and a sense of belonging – and to express their feelings and convey a message.

In the 1960's and 1970's, Svenskt visarkiv (The Centre for Swedish Folk Music and Jazz Research) collected songs in Sweden's prisons via two separate projects. The aim was to document a song genre which was assumed to be dying out but which, in those very years, gained in popularity and assumed new functions when it became a part of the progressive music movement. Formerly a secluded genre, living in a prison environment, prison songs became a matter for the general public and part of the struggle for better conditions in correctional treatment institutions.

One of the book's chapters is devoted to Lennart "Konvaljen" Johansson, who became a figurehead of the prison song genre in the 1970's.

The songs and their function in the prison environment are the focus of this study by the ethnomusicologist Dan Lundberg. With the songs as examples he also describes the roles of archives, research and record companies and their significance in the development of genres of music.

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