

# PERFORMING RECOVERY



**ISSUE 12:** OCT 25 – FEB 26

**INSTRUMENTS  
OF CHANGE:**  
10 YEARS OF  
NEW NOTE  
PROJECTS

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MAZONOWICZ  
SPEAKS TO **FALLEN  
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**PLUS:** POETRY, ART, NEWS AND THE DIRECTORY

# OCT 25–FEB 26



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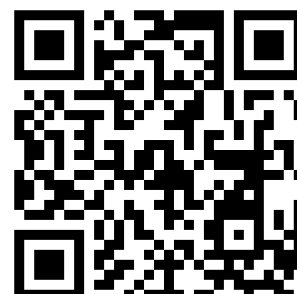
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# WELCOME

to the **12th** issue of

## Performing Recovery

The groups and individuals covered in *Performing Recovery* are not necessarily connected to 12-step groups. This is partly down to the traditions of anonymity and non-affiliation in groups like AA and partly because there are many different routes to recovery. However, there are ideas and principles from 12-step groups that pop up throughout the work, activities and outputs of the recovery arts movement. Even people who might never attend a single 12-step meeting, yet still enjoy a healthy sobriety, will often relate to the ideas of unity, life experience-led recovery and self-sufficiency.

I did, and continue to, find my recovery through 12-step ideas, meetings and community. And it is with this, the 12th issue of *Performing Recovery*, that I think about the goal of the 12th step – to spread the message and support others in the recovery community. I was told that turning up to a meeting is in fact both the first and the 12th step at once. You accept your addiction, but you are also there for others. This is a symmetry I've always appreciated.

Turning up to my own recovery arts practice, the New Note Orchestra, every week reflects this idea. I'm there because I accept I am an addict and this is my community. In participating, I make my own small contribution to the viability of the group. But it can go deeper than that. Playing music is also a personal pursuit. It is my meditation – a moment of disconnecting from the stresses of society and the limitations of being human, to engage in the sublime. And yet, as I play, I create an accompaniment for other musicians, giving the harmonic and rhythmic backing to the soloist or creating shape and melody while others back me.

Art at its best can be a moment of connection. As we create, we are given the opportunity to discover our thoughts and emotions. Yet when this art is in front of an audience, our thoughts become a message, and our emotions can become a way to relate to it. It is at the same time deeply personal and a communal experience. We accept ourselves, and we spread the message.

Whether through design or circumstance, issue 12 features two groups also featured in issue 1 – New Note Orchestra and Fallen Angels Dance Theatre. It was a collaboration between these two groups that first brought me into the world of recovery arts and to collaborate on the creation of this magazine, so featuring them here again creates a nice symmetry.

Elsewhere in this issue, Jem Tovey has added to the range of arts covered with his wonderful story of recovery told through his tattoos. Leon Clowes interviews the founder of Sober is Fun, a recovery-friendly stand-up comedy night, and Dr Cathy Sloan talks to the creators of (UP)BEAT – a modern recovery theatre experience based around the world of EDM and clubs. Dr David Patton reports on the progress of a new publishing house that centres the voices of people with lived experience. We also have an amazing poem by Ameet Shah and a beautiful back cover painting by Daniel Leyten.

Last month I was lucky enough to attend the Recovery Street Film Festival awards ceremony, after having my own film shortlisted. Following the main event, I got talking to a woman who had a good number of years' sobriety under her belt and had come to the event on a whim. We talked about the films, what they meant, art and our own recoveries. I don't always find big events easy, in all honesty. I'm not one for introducing myself to strangers, but through shared experience and shared background, we were able to have a genuine moment of connection. No networking, no promoting, no hard or soft sells – just a conversation about the meaning of life.

For very real, practical reasons, many of us have to think about the success of events, numbers, reporting for grant applications and making the right connections to keep the lights on for our projects. It's refreshing to be able to step back from that and enjoy the moments of pure connection. In those moments, we both accept who we are and also pass on the message – two sides of the same coin.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

**The Editorial Board:** Cathy Sloan, Leon Clowes, Bernadette Molton, Zoe Zontou, Molly Mathieson and Alex Mazonowicz



# NEWS & EVENTS

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PERFORMING RECOVERY

## RECOVERY STREET FILM FESTIVAL 2025 WINNERS

On 27th of September, filmmakers from across the UK gathered at the London Screen Academy for the finale of the 2025 Recovery Street Film Festival. The event – an award ceremony followed by an alcohol-free after-party – was the culmination of months of hard work from recovery groups, individuals and the festival's dedicated team.

The evening was hosted by actor Jason Flemyng and featured live music from The Detox Factor, stand-up comedy from James Redmond and DJ sets from [Sober Events](#).

The 15 shortlisted films were screened before the winners were announced. This year marked a first for the festival, with joint first place awarded to *Sons of Jericho* by Laura Roberts and Alex Black, and *The Light Side* by Lucy Rocca and David McCollom. Second place went to the animation *Reach* by Kayleigh Gibbons. A closing address was given by the festival's new creative director, Maddie Kitchen.

"RSFF 2025 was incredible – a beautiful gathering of the recovery community, celebrating creative healing through film. I had a lump in my throat watching those films on the big screen – so empowering and affirming! Huge respect and gratitude to everyone who submitted this year – we got such an amazing mix of styles and stories. Next year I can't wait to hit the road with the RSFF Film Workshops Roadshow and discover more family-and-friends film teams. If you'd like to get involved with RSFF, we'd love to hear from you – we're the only film festival that champions addiction recovery. This is your festival – be part of it!" Maddie told *Performing Recovery*.

You can learn more about the festival at <https://rsff.co.uk/>. The full 2025 shortlist can be viewed here: <https://tinyurl.com/rsff2025>



## REDRAFTING FOR THE STAGE WORKSHOP

**Aspiring and established playwrights are invited to join Editing and Redrafting Your Play** – a hands-on session dedicated to exploring the redrafting process and developing scripts beyond the first draft. The event, led by Merseyside-based theatre writer, performer, director and creative facilitator Helen Jeffery, offers participants practical insight into rewriting and refining their work.

Jeffery, a graduate of the Liverpool Everyman's Playwrights Programme, has had several plays produced, including *The Brink* and *Gun Metal Blue* – the latter winning the Blink Theatre Award for New Writing in 2017. Her most recent play, *Buckled*, which toured the Northwest in March 2025, explores what it means to be four years sober in a world that definitely isn't.

In addition to her writing, Jeffery works freelance for organisations such as Writing on the Wall and the Liverpool Everyman, running creative workshops that empower specific communities through writing and drama.

For more information, visit: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/editing-and-redrafting-your-play-tickets-1794815835479>

## BACK COVER ART

This issue's back cover art is a painting by US-based artist Daniel Leyten called *Isis Dreaming of Sunflowers*. Daniel said of the artwork: "I feel a connection with some paintings that I don't feel with the rest. I do some meditation before working and just let out what or who wants to come out. During this experience, I had a vision of a field of sunflowers blowing with the breeze as if projected onto a woman wearing a veil from head to toe. This painting fills me with a blend of vision and wonder. Wonder at it all, and how it all works, and how I feel like I get a small piece of the puzzle with each painting and vision. The visions that I have while I paint make me feel a connection to another realm in a way that I don't get to feel in any other way, except maybe while playing music."

You can see more of Daniel's artwork at <https://danielleyten.com/>

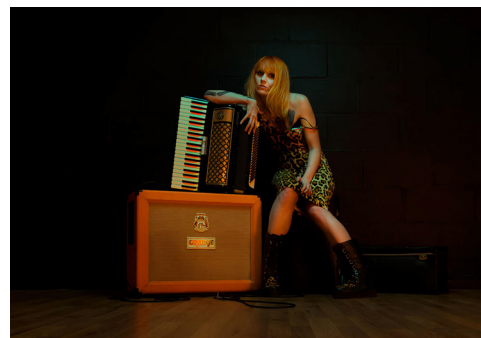


# CREATIVE RECOVERY MUSIC WORKSHOPS 1-DAY TASTER SESSION

**Not Saints, the world's only charity record label exclusively supporting musicians in recovery**, has launched Musical Futures: Creative Recovery Workshops – a new six-session programme designed to help people in addiction recovery build confidence, connection and self-expression through songwriting and music production. Founded in 2018 by music industry veteran Chris De Banks, Not Saints bridges creativity and recovery, providing sober musicians with a space to thrive outside mainstream music culture.

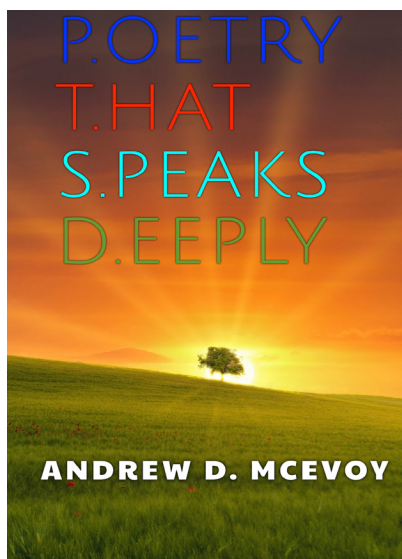
Led by professional musicians with lived experience of addiction, including Mishkin Fitzgerald (pictured), the workshops cover songwriting, arrangement, melody, lyrics and demo recording while encouraging collaboration, peer support and emotional exploration. Using the CHIME framework – Connectedness, Hope, Identity, Meaning and Empowerment – the programme measures its impact on personal recovery and well-being. Open to all skill levels, Musical Futures offers a supportive environment where participants can grow musically and personally. Not Saints is also inviting recovery groups to a free taster session, giving people the chance to experience the workshops before signing up.

For more information, visit: <https://www.otsaints.co.uk/copy-of-recovery>



## RECOVERY BOOKS FOR ALL INTERESTS

**Performing Recovery** is proud to present two very different books centred around recovery.

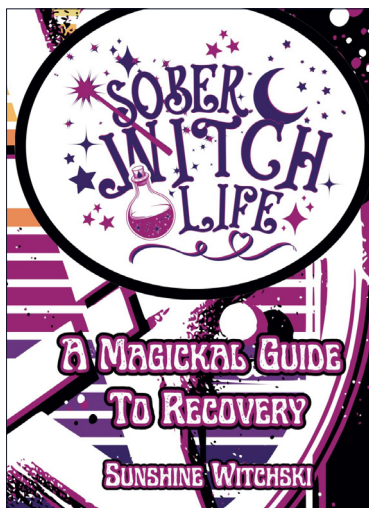


*Poetry That Speaks Deeply* is a collection of heartfelt works by Andrew D. McEvoy, a UK Royal Navy veteran. The book is a tool in the author's ongoing recovery from a diagnosis of PTSD. It contains 26 poems covering ideas like remembrance, family and mirth.

You can purchase the book at the following link: [www.thet-rainerexplainer.co.uk/downloads/poetry-that-speaks-deeply/](http://www.thet-rainerexplainer.co.uk/downloads/poetry-that-speaks-deeply/)

*Sober Witch Life: A Magickal Guide to Recovery* is an alternative guide to recovery, blending Magick, rituals, journaling prompts, non-alcoholic elixir recipes and witchcraft interpretations of more traditional recovery tools, such as a 13-step programme and The Witch's Serenity Prayer. Written by Sunshine Witchski, the book is rooted in ancient wisdom and modern witchcraft. <https://soberwitch.life/>

The website also includes details of a free recovery group for anyone interested in addiction recovery and witchcraft.



## LRN LAUNCH

**The London Recovery Network (LRN) officially launched on 23 September at Conway Hall**, bringing together hundreds of people from across the city's recovery community to celebrate connection, collaboration and hope.

The new, city-wide initiative aims to link individuals, peer groups and organisations working in addiction recovery, offering shared learning, events and a soon-to-be-launched map of London's recovery services.

The launch featured presentations from speakers including Dr Cathy Sloan, who highlighted the importance of community-led recovery. Live music from Not Saints, a label made up of artists in recovery, set an inspiring tone.

Find out more or get involved at [londonrecoverynetwork.org.uk](http://londonrecoverynetwork.org.uk).



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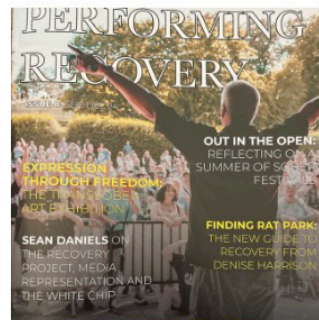
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# SPOTLIGHT On... FALLEN ANGELS DANCE THEATRE



Above: Fallen Angels rehearsing the Wolverhampton Recovery Walk (credit: Canteen Create)

*Fallen Angels Dance Theatre is a Northwest-based theatre company that provides dance and movement experiences to support people in addiction recovery. In August 2025, the group spent two days with multi-award-winning choreographer Russell Maliphant to explore different ideas relating to movement in preparation for a performance at the UK Recovery Walk, which took place in Wolverhampton on Saturday, 13th of September.*

*For the past two years, Fallen Angels have worked with other recovery groups across the Liverpool City Region in a project supported by the Liverpool Everyman & Playhouse to give a home to creative recovery in the area. Members of Fallen Angels are on the steering committee.*

*Alex met up with Creative and Strategic Director Claire, along with participants Tom, Deb and Gus to discuss inspiration, performances and projects.*

**Alex:** What is the Liverpool Everyman & Playhouse's vision, and how are Fallen Angels involved?

**Claire:** The vision is for recovery arts organisations in the Liverpool region to come together and use the Everyman as a base. So far, Fallen Angels Dance Theatre has taken part in two annual events. The first was a long-table discussion and sharing of creativity. This year, the second year of the project, there has been a steering group for an event with the theme of "ebb and flow." The steering group includes members of Fallen Angels and other key people in recovery from other groups in the area.

Members of Fallen Angels have taken this theme, as well as some writings by the author Alan Watts, to create a movement piece inspired by their lived experiences.

**Alex:** In his writing, Alan Watts talks about "flowing with the river." How has this inspired you?

“WHEN I FIRST CAME INTO RECOVERY, I REALLY TRIED TO FIGHT IT. WHEN I FOUND SOMETHING ELSE TO FOCUS ON [...] THINGS STARTED BECOMING EASIER.”

**Deb:** As well as Watts's writing, our movement piece is also based on artwork from one of the other angels. The idea was that when you're in recovery, you can either try and fight against the flow and struggle, or you can go with it and be carried along and hopefully survive a bit better. We all connected to that idea.

When I first came into recovery, I really tried to fight it, and the more I tried to fight it, the harder it was. But when I found something else to focus on or just tried to relax and think, "This is the way I have to be now," all of a sudden, things started becoming easier.

**Alex:** Obviously with the metaphor of water comes the idea of movement.

**Deb:** You've seen how Fallen Angels move a lot of the time, so you've seen

how the idea of flow is very present in the way we go about our work.

**Tom:** The ebb and flow of water is something that resonates with me. It also relates to the Tao Te Ching, and I try to incorporate these ideas into my life anyway. This really fits in with what Fallen Angels do.

With these inspirations, we create our own works by improvising movement. Paul [the creative director of Fallen Angels] will then pick up some ideas from each person and that way we slowly build up a performance. This is how we created the performance at the Everyman.

I was talking to somebody today that has been having a bad few weeks after a nice period of sobriety. He had said to me that he couldn't understand people who had shitty days, but now something has happened, and he does understand it. We can all follow a programme, but sometimes, shit happens, and we react in totally different ways. That encapsulates the ebb and flow of recovery for me.

**Alex:** When I speak to people in early recovery, it's interesting to hear about when they go through those bad days after a period. It gives me a chance to reflect on my own journey. It's not all plain sailing, there are ups and downs, but with the right support you can get through it.

**Tom:** This is something we put across in the most recent performance. One person who is in the Chester Fallen Angels group came up to me afterwards and said it really reflected the experience of being cared for within Fallen Angels.





Above: Fallen Angels rehearsing for the Wolverhampton Recovery Walk (credit: Canteen Create)

**Alex:** How does it feel to be working on the development side of the project rather than simply being a participant?

**Deb:** It challenges me. And that's exactly what I need, because it's a big part that keeps me going. Projects can be difficult, but it's worth it when you finally pull it all together and you've produced a piece. I love sitting down and starting to generate something new with people in a safe environment. Being able to learn from other people is also an important part of my recovery.

I've learned not to try to put myself in a box. I had all these assumptions about my abilities – that I couldn't do certain things. I've learned I just need to allow myself to try to do more challenging things.

**Claire:** For our current project, we've just spent two days with the international choreographer Russell Maliphant. We created a space for our recovery artists to just drop in and be creative without an end goal. It was just two days of being with an artist and people can take what he had to share on their own journey.

We then developed those ideas and performed them in September at the UK Recovery Walk in Wolverhampton.

**Gus:** Working with Russell was very interesting. We learnt about how movement can be a more internal

than an external thing. We learned about the fascia, which is this big web system going throughout the body that connects everything and we saw how parts of the body are connected to each other, like how the arm is connected to the bottom of the foot. Russell is very mechanical. It's interesting.

**Deb:** I found muscles that I never knew I had, quite frankly! There wasn't a single part of our body that wasn't put through a workout over those two days. But it was absolutely fascinating.

**Tom:** Since the session, I've incorporated some of the movements I learnt from Russell into my practice. I'm getting a bit older, and although I have hip problems, I want to maintain mobility for as long as I can. Understanding the body and the physiology helps me. Russell explained every single joint and how it moved. He has a very fluid movement style and watching him go from one position to next is fascinating.

**Alex:** How did it feel having that kind of creative freedom rather than working to the end goal? I expect that's quite different.

**Tom:** It is. I like improvisation because it's about being able to move my body how it wants to at the time. But working with Russell has made me aware of what the other parts of my body are doing, mainly the arms, and this has improved my overall movement.

**Gus:** I've got quite a lot of experience with dance, and I prefer to create stuff. I like to have a structure – to have something I can work on, build up and improve. Just having a session of improvisation is a bit out of my comfort zone. I enjoyed it, though, because it wasn't just, "Oh, you can go do whatever you want." It was improvisation within the bounds of this specific set of movements that we were being asked to do. It was both a bit of comfort and discomfort, if that makes sense.

“RUSSELL HAS MADE ME AWARE OF WHAT THE OTHER PARTS OF MY BODY ARE DOING, MAINLY THE ARMS, AND THIS HAS IMPROVED MY OVERALL MOVEMENT.”

**Alex:** It does. I sometimes find improvising music frustrating because I want to be working on something towards an end goal. But at the same time, interesting things can come out of improvisation.

**Gus:** I like that side of improvisation, where I can mess around and feel, "Oh, I like this bit of movement, maybe I can insert it into something much bigger later on." But I'm also a very structured person.



**Deb:** The piece for the Wolverhampton Recovery Walk included some structured choreography as well as bringing the best parts of Russell's sessions.

**Claire:** There were some strong ideas and concepts born out of the work with Russell. After his session, we had to look at what emerged from the session – what came out top? As we were exploring that idea that the body is interconnected, we started to look at the body like a moving sculpture.

We did a lot of duet and trio work about trust and pressure. Trust is a big concept in recovery, especially the collective experience of trust, so we have been doing some activities around that. Gus and George developed these trust activities quite quickly because they have a close friendship and enjoy risk. It has been a really interesting process. We could see the journey people had taken since the sessions with Russell.

**Tom:** The performance for Wolverhampton was based on the performance at the Everyman. Five of us had learned the performance, but then we had to work with some extra performers from the Chester branch of Fallen Angels. I knew the routine from muscle memory, but I had to unlearn some parts because of a few changes. It's a bit like recovery – you take some different paths and come across some dead ends, but then you know what you have to work on. We have a lot of support on these routines. I get my cues from other people in the group – I've cocked up in the past and I know I'll cock up in the future – but it doesn't matter. I'm part of a group and we all help each other.

**Gus:** I've known George for about 10 years now. He started dance at the same time as me, so he's been on my journey throughout my addiction, and he's been there while I've been trying to recover as well. Recovery itself is a risk – you don't know what's going to happen, if you'll relapse and go back into old habits. But I've always enjoyed risk, especially in dance, because it makes it more fun and compelling.

There's a routine where George and I interlock our feet and then lean away from each other. We're doing a counterbalance, but instead of it being with our hands, it's our feet interlocked. We're wrapped around each other's ankles, and we're trying to use that to see how far we can go before we have to fall away from each other.

**Alex:** That kind of collaboration and risk is exciting not just in recovery arts

but in any sphere of the arts. There's a perception that recovery or sobriety is boring, so it's important that groups like Fallen Angels show that quality and exciting things can happen.

**Deb:** To be honest, I have never felt as fulfilled as when we're putting something together like this. Then you get to the end of a production and it's time to move on to the next thing. It never stops. There's always something new around the corner and you don't know what it's going to be.

We're talking about risk-taking. You don't know what the next work is going to be. You don't know if it's going to work, but it's always worth it in the long run. That's pretty much the same for recovery. There's always a reason to keep going.

“WE'VE HAD QUITE A FEW DIFFERENT REACTIONS. PEOPLE MIGHT RELATE IF THEY'VE HAD SIMILAR EXPERIENCES TO US, OR KNOW SOMEONE WHO HAS.”

**Alex:** What kind of reactions do people have after seeing you perform?

**Gus:** I usually kind of get shocked reactions. I'm pretty much covered head to toe in tattoos. My face is completely covered. Most people are usually shocked that I dance. We also get a mixture of people reacting like, “Oh, wow, that was so impactful.” We've had people cry at our performances.

My kids come and see us as much as they can. They used to come see me in college whenever we used to perform, but I took a bit of a break from dance for a few years. Now they can come see me dancing again, and they really enjoy it. They're quite young, and they're trying to get into dance as well. It's good for them to have a bit of inspiration from me.

We've had quite a few different reactions from people. People might relate if they've had similar experiences to us or know someone who has.

**Deb:** Sometimes people relate to a performance, even though they're not quite sure why. They can't put their finger on it. When we played at the Royal Opera House in London, people were really moved by the performance, but they weren't quite sure what it was that they were personally relating to. But it did get them on an emotional level.

**Tom:** With the Everyman project we've been going to universities and talking to different groups of people, then they see the performances.

We're trying to remove that stigma of recovery and get people to understand that there is life after addiction. Everybody “knows” what a drunk or a heroin addict looks like, but they don't know what a recovered person looks like. That is more important.

We're increasing the audience. Not just having people in recovery, but also people that deal with people in recovery. I think that is more important. That's what I like being part of.

Fallen Angels is self-care for me. I keep the old man out by performing and learning new techniques. Like Gus said, people have come up to me at performances and said, “I didn't think you'd be dancing, because you don't look like dancers.”

**Alex:** What does a dancer look like?

**Tom:** This is it. They look like us.

**Alex:** Exactly!

**Claire:** It's rewarding to share our creativity with anyone open to experiencing it and to gain insight from different artistic practices as we evolve. The Water Project, for example, was shaped by lived experience, and our Chester group chose to explore Shelley's perspective of being partially sighted.

Our aim is to keep sharing our work and lived experiences authentically and collectively, taking audiences on a journey with us. Their feedback feels like a powerful validation of what we create.

At its core, our work is about human connection – people expressing their humanity through movement. Our choreography reflects the bonds within the group, and those connections extend to the audience. Through movement, emotion and presence, we remind everyone that we're all simply human, sharing a common experience. ♦

For more details, visit: <https://fallenangelsdt.org/>



Right: Working with Russell Maliphant (credit: Fallen Angels)



# DON'T JUDGE A BOOK...

*Dr David Patton on New Central Media's vital publishing mission.*

## LIVED EXPERIENCE RECOVERY ORGANISATIONS

PEER GENERATED EPICENTRES OF PERSONAL  
CHANGE AND COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATION



**Recovery is more than a personal journey of change;** it is a cultural force, a way of remaking lives, communities and even knowledge itself. Too often, however, the voices of those who live recovery every day are absent from the spaces where ideas are shaped and futures imagined. Publishing, with all its gatekeeping traditions, has not always welcomed people with lived experience of addiction, prison or marginalisation. That is precisely why New Central Media (NCM) exists: to create a publishing platform where recovery voices are not just included, but are recognised as experts, knowledge-makers and world-builders.

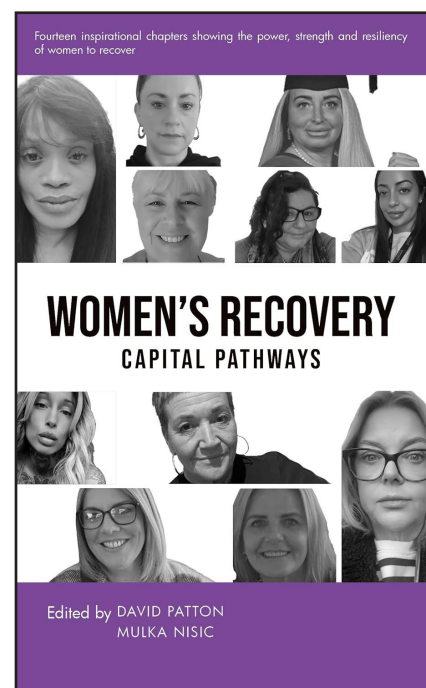
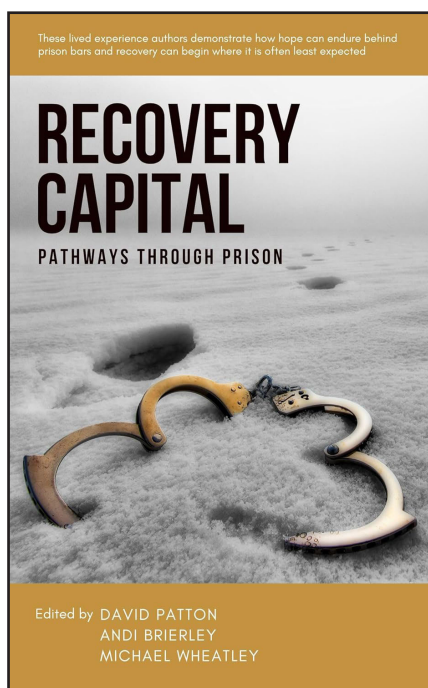
### WHAT IS NCM?

NCM was born from the conviction that stories from the margins deserve to be at the centre. On our website, we describe it as a “switchboard for the generation of new knowledge.” Like a switchboard, we connect voices that would otherwise remain disconnected, routing power between people, places and perspectives. Knowledge becomes a live current that flows across divides, between lived experience and academia, between community and policy, which then sparks new conversations and possibilities. Our ethos is rooted in decolonial thinking: we don't just want to publish books, we want to disrupt the power dynamics of knowledge production. Publishing becomes not a commercial



All three Recovery Pathways books, *Women's Recovery, Pathways Through Prison*, and *Lived Experience Recovery Organisations* are available to purchase from NCM.

To purchase, visit: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/BOFSF1RXMD>



transaction but a generative act and a way of making space for new narratives to take root and flourish.

Since its creation, NCM has published three edited volumes centring lived experience of addiction, recovery and prison. We have published *Women's Recovery: Capital Pathways*, *Recovery Capital: Pathways Through Prison* and *Lived Experience Recovery Organisations*. These three books have created 41 published authors, and 100% of the profits go to the authors. The books brought together diverse contributors, many writing for the first time, to challenge dominant stories about addiction, crime and recovery. Dame Carol Black wrote the foreword to the prison book and the authors' recommendations have been accepted as evidence by the Justice Committee Parliamentary Review of Drugs in Prisons

### A NEW CHAPTER: THE LERO BOOK

Our newest project marks a bold step forward. For the first time, a book is being authored collectively by 14 lived experience recovery organisations (LEROs) across the UK. These grassroots organisations, built and led by people in recovery, have become a vital part of the UK's recovery landscape. Yet their knowledge, vision and creativity are rarely captured in published form.

This book changes that. It is written by LEROs, for communities and with an audience that stretches beyond policy or academia. It is co-edited by Dr Ed Day, the national recovery champion, and myself. Through the chapters, LEROs chart their journeys from humble beginnings to showcasing a new model of leadership, healing and transformation. The chapters reflect on how recovery is nurtured in community spaces often overlooked by mainstream systems. The stories speak of resilience, liberation and transformation, not just for individuals, but for whole neighbourhoods and communities.

What makes this book distinctive is not just its content but its process. Instead of a traditional top-down editorial model, NCM worked alongside LERO authors who in turn worked with people in their recovery community to author the material, ensuring the book stayed rooted in lived experience. This is publishing as co-creation: a shared labour of voice and vision. At its heart, the LERO book reframes what counts as expertise. It insists that the people building recovery on the ground are not service-users or beneficiaries. They are knowledge producers. Their insights matter not just to recovery communities but to wider debates about health, justice and social change.

### RECOVERY THROUGH PUBLISHING

The theme of this magazine, performing recovery, resonates deeply with our work. Publishing is itself a performance: a public act that makes recovery visible, credible and cultural. When someone with lived experience writes and publishes their experiences or analysis, they are doing more than recording it. They are performing recovery in the sense of bringing it into the world, embodying it in a form that others can encounter, be challenged by and learn from.

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EXPERIENCE.”

The LERO book is an example of recovery as collective performance. It doesn't just describe recovery; it enacts it. The writing process built community, the editing process fostered dialogue, and the final publication will circulate as a living testimony to the creativity and resilience of LEROs. In this way, publishing becomes part of the recovery journey. Not an afterthought but a practice of healing, connection and transformation.

### LOOKING FORWARD

As NCM continues to grow, our vision is clear: to keep creating spaces where recovery voices lead the way. Future projects will expand internationally, connecting recovery movements across borders and traditions. We want to build a publishing culture that is not extractive but generative, one that honours lived experience, challenges injustice, and opens new pathways for collective flourishing.

The new LERO book is one step in that journey. It is dedicated to those who refuse to be defined by their past and instead carve out new pathways of liberation and resilience. In sharing their stories, LEROs invite us to imagine recovery not just as individual change, but as cultural transformation and a force that remakes the world we all inhabit. ♦





# ***DISTRACTIONS, DISASSOCIATIONS AND DENIALS***

**DR CATHY SLOAN ON (UP)BEAT'S  
PULSATING RHYTHM OF ADDICTION**

*The vibrations of sound reach me before I enter the performance space. At first glance, I see a DJ working her magic behind a MIDI controller. She's engrossed in the music, while two other women bounce around to the throbbing techno beats in wild abandon. The lights are dim, except for a spotlight on the DJ podium. Am I at a club? After all, Ministry of Sound's iconic venue is just around the corner ... but I'm not. I shuffle past the dancing trio and choose a seat in the front row of a theatre because I am at Southwark Playhouse to see a new play exploring lived experience of addiction from a feminine perspective. For the next hour, I'm taken on a sonic journey depicting the excesses, messes and visceral struggle of a woman's battle with alcohol and substance addiction. However, this is not a linear story; the first scene presents us with the rock bottom extremity of her using, before we travel back through episodic flashbacks of moments leading up to this point.*



A month later, I met with the writer, Sarah Huckin, and director, Ella Zgorska, to discuss the ideas influencing the creative process and performance of (UP)BEAT.

**Sarah:** I started writing the play about five years ago. I had been about a year sober. It was completely stemmed from my own experience of ... why that internal dialogue for me was so loud ... it was just like that voice internally is so loud for me. So, I wanted to try and create a character who also had that experience of the internal dialogue being so loud and I made that internal dialogue into a whole person.

*Sarah's internal dialogue, however, became more than just a character in (UP)BEAT. It invades every scene as a persistent noise. Sound is key to the performance in how it conveys the identity of the lead character, A, who is grappling with a tentative career as a female DJ in a male-dominated club scene whilst descending into active addiction. It also does more than this, providing a metanarrative of her life. Ella refers to this as A's "sound cacophony."*

“THAT VOICE INTERNALLY IS SO LOUD FOR ME. SO, I WANTED TO TRY AND CREATE A CHARACTER WHO ALSO HAD THAT EXPERIENCE OF THE INTERNAL DIALOGUE BEING SO LOUD.”

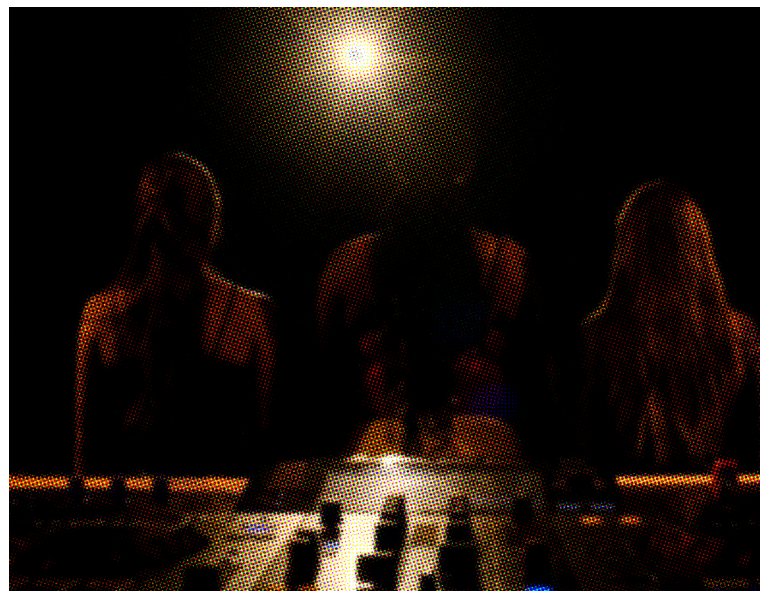
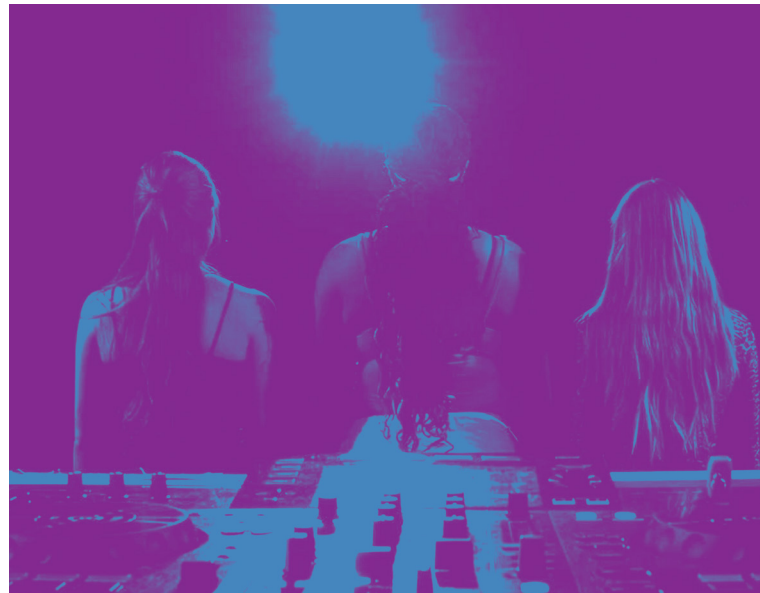
**Ella:** The obvious thing that comes to mind is, what can sound do that words can't? Especially, I think, linking this to a woman – or a female-identifying experience – and a human experience, when we don't have the words. Those moments where we don't know how to say no. What does that do internally, as an internal noise? Or what is our relationship to the sound around us when there's something that we, that our gut wants and needs to say, but we can't find the language to articulate it? What if that becomes a persistent experience, how does that then become like a drum in the head? So, we wanted to explore: how does the noise or sound then become a narrative voice within the play?

*(UP)BEAT goes beyond a mere soundtrack of A's life. The audience are not only immersed in the electronic dance music genre of her world as a DJ, but also experience a sonic soundscape of her internal dialogue in the form of looped sounds played through a MIDI controller on stage.*

**Sarah:** If her world is sound, which is an aspect of her existence as an artist, if that is her most prominent sense, then each key experience in her life is associated with a particular sound. So, the clinking of glasses reminds her of the job interview in the pub, the clicking of the lighter and a cigarette being lit represents the moment she first met an ex-boyfriend, the ethereal moon sound – her first blackout.



All production images courtesy of UP(BEAT)







I WANTED TO INCLUDE THE  
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As Sarah lists the various sampled sounds that form the digital montage played throughout the play, the power of sound as a narrative in place of words becomes clear, especially its capacity to convey the felt sensation of intrusive thoughts, snapshots of memory, the internal noise of addiction and ultimately the healing sounds of recovery. By the end of the play, A plays a new composition of beats and sounds woven from the past and transformed into an alternative sonic experience, reminiscent of the shift towards recovery – her internal noise has changed.

Along with innovation in the use of sound as a theatrical narrative, (UP)BEAT provides a poignant insight into the lived experience of women affected by addiction. While the play currently represents the experience of a cisgendered woman, there are plans to extend the ensemble – currently performed by three women – to a five-person representation of intersectional female-identifying characters.

**Ella:** The dream is to have an ensemble of five. Those would be five women from different intersections, with different protected characteristics, in the sense that addiction is indiscriminate and it's not one person's experience that matters, it's a multitude of different experiences.

Nonetheless, in its current form, the play shares insights into themes resonant with female experience often shared in recovery circles. On the surface, the distraction, disassociative moments and denials of active addiction were palpable. However, beneath the personification of A's internal

dialogue, something more insidious is revealed: codependent behaviour patterns that are recognisable to anyone who understands the impact of gender-specific social expectations on women. While A's internal noise demonstrates difficulty setting healthy boundaries with others, difficulty in recognising personal needs or acknowledging reality, the visceral sonic narrative of (UP)BEAT unveils the messy – or sticky – reality that compounds these situations from a feminine perspective. Sarah refers to these tricky moments as "stretching."

**Sarah:** I think "stretching" is a female-identifying experience in life for a lot of people, in addiction or not. How you feel, how you're behaving and then how you think you ought to behave – whether that's put on you by a partner or patriarchy or culture or whatever. When how you are feeling, how you are behaving and how you think you ought to behave are far apart, it's painful. As an addict, you fill the space created by the stretching of boundaries with substances or people or things, whatever is the distraction.

In (UP)BEAT, I've chosen moments in the character's story that show where there's real stretching of boundaries. For example, there's the end of the first scene where she's at a festival, she's played her music and then she encounters a man called James who she ends up having sex with. If that's what we can call it. He is her "best friend's" ex-boyfriend. She's not particularly interested in James. But she engages with him in a way which doesn't align with that. Her behaviour, how she ought to behave and how she is feeling don't match. In this sex scene between her and James, she's also in and





out of blackout because of drinking and drugs. In that moment, her internal dialogue is saying words like, "Oh, just enjoy it," even though it's not really what she wants.

**Cathy:** It seems that the stretching you mention is also like an out of body experience, which happens potentially, or a disassociation, particularly whenever you go through experiences that breach your boundaries or are against your inner soul. I suppose there is also the issue, in that scene, around consent in female experiences such as this.

**Ella:** I think it's also that someone in that moment is stretching so far that disassociation becomes the survival strategy. Immediately after that scene, we then see the character turn the music on full and party hard.

*The slipperiness of consent – or lack of it – accompanies key moments of stretching boundaries. All involve encounters with men, revealing the undercurrent of abusive encounters that are unfortunately a common feature of A's story and those of countless other women in recovery.*

**Cathy:** So, there's other moments in the play where there is disassociation or distraction or maybe even denial. It even begins in the pub with the dodgy landlord who is her boss. Talk me through that, because clearly the lead character has a gut feeling that something isn't quite right, but she ignores it.

**Sarah:** Yeah, I definitely wanted to put that in because speaking to women in recovery, I've had so many say to me that it takes years to know what you want or even know how to connect with that gut feeling. I spent so many years ignoring it. And I do think that's a specific experience to a woman that's struggled with addiction or substance misuse because being raised as a woman in society, you are encouraged to ignore what you need in order to please someone else. So, during the pub scene with the landlord, the lead character has a sense that she doesn't want to stay there, that something's not quite right, but she ignores it and drinks.

**Ella:** Yeah, even in the initial scene, when she is interviewed by the landlord for a job at the pub, we can see her behaving as a people-pleaser or needing to be liked and affirmed.

*From depicting non-consensual sexual encounters, (UP)BEAT also journeys through the highs and lows of A's toxic relationship with her boyfriend.*

**Cathy:** And the relationship with her boyfriend, that had a particular intensity to it. What are you trying to show there in terms of her approach to relationships or this person?

**Sarah:** Yeah, I wanted to include the unhealthy boundaries in romantic relationships, the people-pleasing, losing yourself completely to someone as well as a substance. When I first wrote the play, I focused on the conflict, the drunken argu-

ments, but when I edited it more recently, I decided I wanted to include the intensity of her feeling for someone, of what she thinks love is.

**Ella:** Yeah, A says [to her boyfriend], "to the grave, all of me to the grave."

**Cathy:** Throughout the play, A continually puts other people's needs before her own. Does A know how to meet her own needs?

**Sarah:** The Internal Dialogue character does try to help, so on some level knows what's wrong, but sometimes her way of doing that still might be using substances to get out of something that feels uncomfortable. Sometimes her only way to cope might be to use substances or to just shut down in silence.

*There is, of course, so much more to A's story than codependent behaviour, and (UP)BEAT reveals how tricky it is to move beyond patterns that are acquired – and gendered – since childhood. Importantly, like many of the artistic creations discussed in Performing Recovery, it contributes insights from lived experience that deepen the conversation about addiction and recovery.* ♦

*Sarah and Ella have plans to develop the play further and aim to stage another run of the show at Soho Theatre, London, next year. For updates on the dates of the next performances, further information can be found on their social pages here: @[speakbeatcollective](https://www.instagram.com/speakbeatcollective).*



...sober comedy?

# YOU'VE GOTTA BE 'AVING A LAFF!



Leon Clowes speaks to Martyn Davies, founder of the UK's only regular alcohol-free comedy club, about laughter, recovery and making sober spaces fun and sustainable.

Below: The next Sober Comedy London will take place on Sunday 9th of November at the Backyard Comedy club

ACTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE

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www.forwardtrust.org.uk

**SOBER IS FUN**  
.GO.UK

**TAKING ACTION ADDICTION**  
LED BY THE FORWARD TRUST

**PRESENTS**

**SOBER COMEDY LONDON**

**SUNDAY 9<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 3.30PM**

**BACKYARD COMEDY CLUB**

231 CAMBRIDGE HEATH ROAD, BETHNAL GREEN, E2 0EL

**MIKE GUNN**  
LIVE AT THE APOLLO (BBC)

**NINIA BENJAMIN**  
CELEBRITY MASTER CHEF (BBC)

**EL BALDINIHO**  
BRITAINS GOT TALENT (ITV)

**SUSAN MURRAY**  
THE JOB LOT (ITV)

**TICKETS: FROM £20**  
**DOORS OPEN: 2PM**  
**FOOD AVAILABLE**  
**SHOW STARTS: 3.30PM**  
**BOOK TICKETS:**  
**SOBERISFUN.CO.UK**

**Leon:** What led you to set up Sober IS Fun?

**Martyn:** In my early days of recovery, after about 27 years in active addiction, I was really struck by how much fun I was actually having. I was about four months in, and I was buzzing, so I wanted to show that to others. I had over two decades of experience working in professional comedy, so it just made sense. I could really see the potential of an alcohol-free comedy club.

I had heard of alcohol support charities doing one-off comedy fundraisers, but nothing regular. So, I went back to a promoter I had worked with before I went into treatment and told him my idea. He said, "No one laughs without a drink." That response actually fired me up more. I thought, "Wow, you really do not get it." I realised I could not stay in that environment because it was too dangerous for my sobriety. So, I left and started working on Sober IS Fun properly.

In 2018, I found Abstinence, an alcohol-free bar in Chelmsford, Essex. I did my first show there that December. There were about 40–50 people, and I couldn't get any more chairs in. From the comedians' perspective, performing to a sober audience was unusual, but I asked them to just do their usual club set. As sober people, we love laughing at ourselves.

Sober IS Fun quickly outgrew Abstinence and moved to the County Hotel in Chelmsford. After that, I looked to London. The Fugitive Motel in Bethnal Green gave us space for three shows. That was just before the pandemic.

**Leon:** And then lockdown?

**Martyn:** Lockdown blew everything apart. But during it, I reached out to Backyard Comedy Club, a major venue just down the road from where we had been. They had already heard about us and supported the idea. The club's owner, Lee Hurst, does not drink anymore, and I think that helped. In September 2021, we did our





Above: Martyn Davies

“COMEDIANS SAY,  
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first show there. By January 2022, our dry January special, we had 150 people in.

That show made me realise I had to broaden the audience beyond recovery. People come for many reasons – lifestyle, faith or just curiosity. So Sober IS Fun morphed into The London Alcohol-free Comedy Club. I realised we needed to welcome the sober-curious, not just the sober. That diversity in the room is what keeps it going.

**Leon:** When I've attended, I've noticed that some comedians are also in recovery. Is that intentional?

**Martyn:** Sometimes. Some comedians in recovery reach out to me. Others I've known from before. It creates a powerful energy in the room. But it is not a requirement. I do get approached by lots of acts, even those who are not in recovery, because it is known as a good gig.

**Leon:** So, it's respected on the circuit?

**Martyn:** Very much so. At first, people took the piss. A sober comedy club? But now, word has got around in green rooms. Comedians say, "You have got to play this night." They love it because the audience is there for the comedy, not just to drink. At traditional comedy clubs, half the crowd might just be there for a stag do. Here, people are attentive. They are present. It makes for a much better experience for everyone.

**Leon:** And you have built up a loyal following.

**Martyn:** Yes, and I really need them. Since 2021, we have had nearly 1,000 people come through the doors. But the alcohol-free events market is hard. It is not the same as the booming alcohol-free drinks market. Some huge Instagram accounts struggle to get 20 people to their events. I have realised that I need to treat Sober IS Fun as a special event, not a regular one, to make it sustainable.

**Leon:** Do you have plans to take it elsewhere?

**Martyn:** There are future plans, as I have recently partnered with The Forward Trust to take the shows on the road and to help promote the Taking Action on Addiction Campaign. We have recently been to Liverpool and will be venturing to other parts of the UK soon.

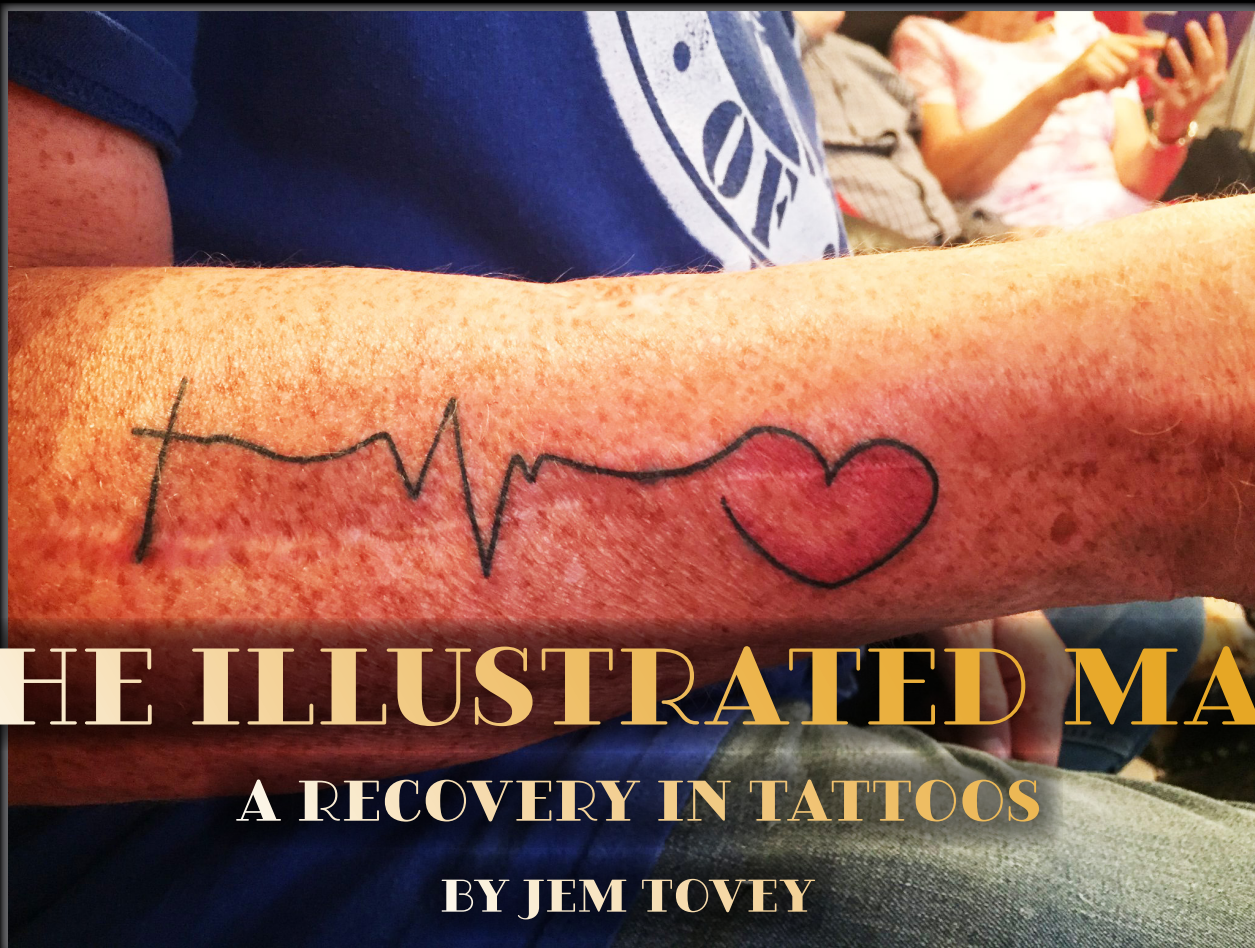
I would also love to do Edinburgh Fringe, just for the PR buzz. But the truth is, right now, Sober IS Fun is just me. My friend Ben, who co-ran it with me, sadly passed away a couple of years ago. I also work full-time for an addiction charity and run mental health comedy nights under my production company, Lost Sock Productions.

**Leon:** Finally, what would you say to someone thinking of coming to Sober IS Fun, whether they are in recovery or not?

**Martyn:** The energy in the room is unique. It is not something you get at a standard comedy night. It is pure belly laughter. The acts are all experienced professionals. There is no padding the line-up with open spots. There is also a huge range of alcohol-free drinks if that is your thing.

And for those in recovery, I would say come early. From 2 p.m. we have a lovely pre-show social. There is a buzz, people meeting and chatting. It is a beautiful vibe. If you are going through something, come and lose yourself for the afternoon. Comedy can be a real tonic. ♦

*Sober IS Fun presents Sober Comedy in partnership with The Forward Trust, supporting the Taking Action on Addiction Campaign at The London Alcohol-Free Comedy Club, Sunday, 9th of November and Sunday, 25th of January, 2026 at 3:30 p.m. The event takes place at the Backyard Comedy Club, Bethnal Green, London. For tickets and updates, visit: <https://www.soberisfun.co.uk/>*



# THE ILLUSTRATED MAN

## A RECOVERY IN TATTOOS

BY JEM TOVEY

Above: *Corinthians 13:13* (all images: Jem Tovey)

I had my first tattoo at the comparatively ripe old age of 25; it was, ironically, the result of a drinking session. I had hitched to London to see a girlfriend, and she said that her hairdresser had just got a tattoo and she also wanted to get one. Fast forward several gins, and we had both committed to an early morning visit to her local Parlour of Pain, a short walk away on the Finchley Road.

I didn't know it at the time, but this belonged to a certain Dennis Cockell – apparently a bit of a rock'n'roll tattoo artist – having illustrated members of The Sex Pistols, The Stray Cats and Paula Yates (later Geldof). We just had a couple of small roses on our bottoms from his stock of “flash” (pre-drawn transfers), and this remains my only non-unique tattoo (sorry, no pictures!).

I didn't go under the needle again for another 20 years, by which time I was one year sober. I wanted to have “One Day At A Time,” but didn't want to make it too obvious that I was in recovery – yeah, I was quite shy about it then. I was posting on a football forum at that time, so I asked a Chinese-Australian member I knew for a translation of the phrase. She asked if I wanted it word-for-word or an interpretation that would look better graphically. I opted for the latter, shown here. The more literal translation is “gently forward into the future.”



Above: *Gently Into The Future*



I decided that my next big soberversary would be five years, and I had one or two ideas for my next piece of body art. I Googled images of the mythical phoenix to represent my own rebirth and transformation. When I found a couple that I liked, I sent them to an artist I had met. I was managing the parts department of a motorcycle shop at the time, and Dave, a Kiwi Harley-Davidson rider, had already tattooed the owner and his partner. I asked him to design me a mash-up of those two illustrations for my left upper arm.

When I went for my appointment, and he applied the transfer, it was a bit bigger than I'd imagined, but I decided to go for it. This was my first major piece and it took three hours, plus a one-hour touch-up appointment. I couldn't have been happier with the results.

The next obvious big birthday would be 10 years, so, in the meantime, I decided to mark some important personal growth outside my actual sobriety, but also absolutely integral to it. The 12th Step of Alcoholics Anonymous speaks of a spiritual awakening but, despite returning as an active worshipper to my Methodist faith after two years in recovery, I didn't give this much



Above: Phoenix

thought. I wasn't in the fellowship – although I had attended half a dozen meetings – and I had previously dismissed this quite flippantly.

Just before my fifth anniversary, a thought occurred to me completely out of the blue: "You are not the centre of the Universe; you are only the centre of your own life."

For me, that simple, almost asinine thought represented the most profound shift in my life and how I live it – this was my spiritual awakening. I decided that, as per the 12th Step, I would now train to give service and "try to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all (my) affairs." I called the counselling manager for our local drugs and alcohol treatment charity and asked him to recommend a training path to become a counsellor and addiction therapist.

He told me that I should enrol with a local college to study counselling skills up to diploma level and also apply for volunteering posts in addiction treatment, hopefully leading to paid work in the future. I followed this roadmap assiduously and have since spent 15 years working for recovery



Above: Cross





Above: Ollie

charities and running a private counselling practice, which has been by far the most enjoyable period of my life.

After 10 years of sobriety, I wanted to signify my faith but also reference Eastern philosophy – which I think we achieved with my Cross tattoo, designed around my earlier “One Day At A time” work.

My next tattoo was comparatively unplanned. Just as I approached year five, my marriage fell apart and my father died in the same month. The good news was that, over the previous 18 months, I had reconciled with my dad, healing a 10-year estrangement and giving me some welcome peace. Also, in my marital breakdown, I was able to keep my home and also custody of three Yorkshire terriers.

One of these sweet dogs, Ollie, was my inseparable best mate throughout this time – never leaving my side and jumping on my lap whenever I sat down. Sadly, 18 months later, he was diagnosed with an aggressive type of throat cancer. After a last glorious summer and some cherished photos, we said goodbye, and I cried for weeks.

I thought about a nose or paw print, but settled on this heart/paw with his name overlapping. Dave surpassed my expectations again, and although he wasn't sure about the placement, this was exactly where Ollie would lay, with his nose in the crook of my arm. I still have pictures of him in my office, on my phone and most recently on a watch. Whenever people ask about this tattoo, I simply reply, “That's the dog who saved my life.”

The next tattoo was after 15 years. As I mentioned earlier, I had returned to active worship. I'm not a religious church-attender (pun intended!) – I believe that I should seek to make my life an act of worship, not just the occasional visit to a building. I tend to go every two to three weeks and try not to miss Communion. I'd attended a service in which the lesson was based on Corinthians 13:13, which I'm sure is familiar to some people by virtue of its near ubiquity in church marriages – it even featured in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

The passage itself reads: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love” I asked Dave to represent this graphically on my right forearm. Once again, he exceeded my expectations, and this has been by far the tattoo that people most admire or ask about; it's always interesting to hear their interpretations.

At the same time, I decided to celebrate 15 years of serenity by having the Roman numerals XV and a semicolon under where I wear my watch. In grammar, a semicolon means “I chose to continue

Below: Hands







Above: Bumblebee

the sentence.” As a metaphor, it has become a motif for those of us who have survived suicidal acts or ideation.

In between sobriety milestones, I decided to add a couple of chest pieces in 2022. It was the 60th anniversary of my baptism, arranged by my beloved Nana. *Hands* this is a sort of Sailor Jerry take on Albrecht Dürer’s *Folded Hands*, which appears on the spine of the *Book of Common Prayer* I received that day. *Bumblebee* marks the fifth anniversary of the Manchester Arena bombing and reminds me of my birth city’s response to that tragedy. The watercolour it is based on was painted by a talented artist and photographer friend.

One of my most recent tattoos is another Bible verse, to celebrate my 20th soberversary. I wanted to voice my faith and also to signify the importance of self-agency in addiction recovery. It’s not enough to just want to quit; you have to keep putting the work in. The script is from James 2:26: “Faith without works is dead.” I decided to have the Roman numerals for 20 (XX) bracketing the words, with the first X crumbling and the second representing new life with foliage and a butterfly.

Sometimes in our recovery, particularly when we might be feeling a bit “stuck,” it’s useful to reflect on how far we’ve come since we stopped listening to our addictions. Don’t focus on the last few hours or days; raise your eyes and remember where you were months or even years ago.

My tattooist – who was, of course, himself heavily inked – used to say that his tattoos weren’t decorations or adornments; he had them to make him feel more like himself. Now, whenever I remove my shirt or glance at my arm, I can’t help but remember who I am and where I came from. ♦

*Jem has been sober for just over 22 years and has worked and volunteered for several recovery charities over the last 15. Now retired from full-time work, he still practises as a counsellor, volunteers at a recovery academy and is a trustee for [Soberistas.com](http://Soberistas.com). He is also a published writer, poet and occasional Santa Claus.*



Above: XV

Below: Verse



*It's time to be me* by  
*Ameet Shah*

It's time for the wonderful and beautiful things to arrive and happen,

It's time for the miracles and magic to not be hidden,

It's time for the things I've always dreamt of to be given,

It's time for breaking away from all that holds me back and down,

It's time to be and do what most are afraid, in fear of, being in shame and guilt  
ridden,

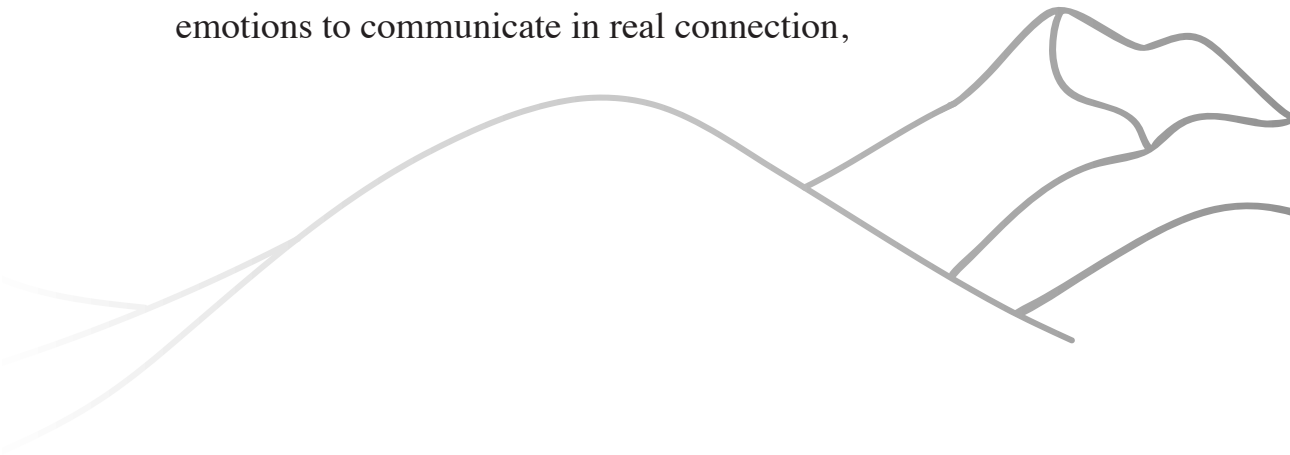
It's time to decide who and what are mine, letting go of the same that held me  
captive and barren,

It's time to cut those energy chords, finally clearing the slate of all that preferred me  
hidden,

It's time to break all curses and patterns, changing the story so life can transform  
from rotten to ripen,

It's time to be brave and leave the disbelievers, infidels and soulless, spiritless  
beings because holding onto their lip service, false promises and fake honour kept  
my heart broken,

It's time to reclaim every part of me that has been scattered, fragmented, broken,  
shamed, blamed, abandoned, rejected, given away, sacrificed, compromised,  
insulted, discriminated, judged, ignored, hurt, belittled and disrespected in  
committing to myself a big treason, It's time to share openly thoughts, feelings and  
emotions to communicate in real connection,





It's time to leave all constructs that are crumbling and dissolving through people,  
places, and things to embrace new beginnings, horizons, and potential if only they'd  
listen,

It's time to leave old Earth into new Earth, to be with those who wish to carry this  
baton,

It's time to share this frequency, wavelength and upgraded rebirthing vibration,

It's time to unite mind, body and spirit in perfect union,

It's time to stop rescuing, people pleasing or seeking validation for my salvation,  
From the darkest of times to the lightest of being, time to decide what is taken and  
what is left hereon,

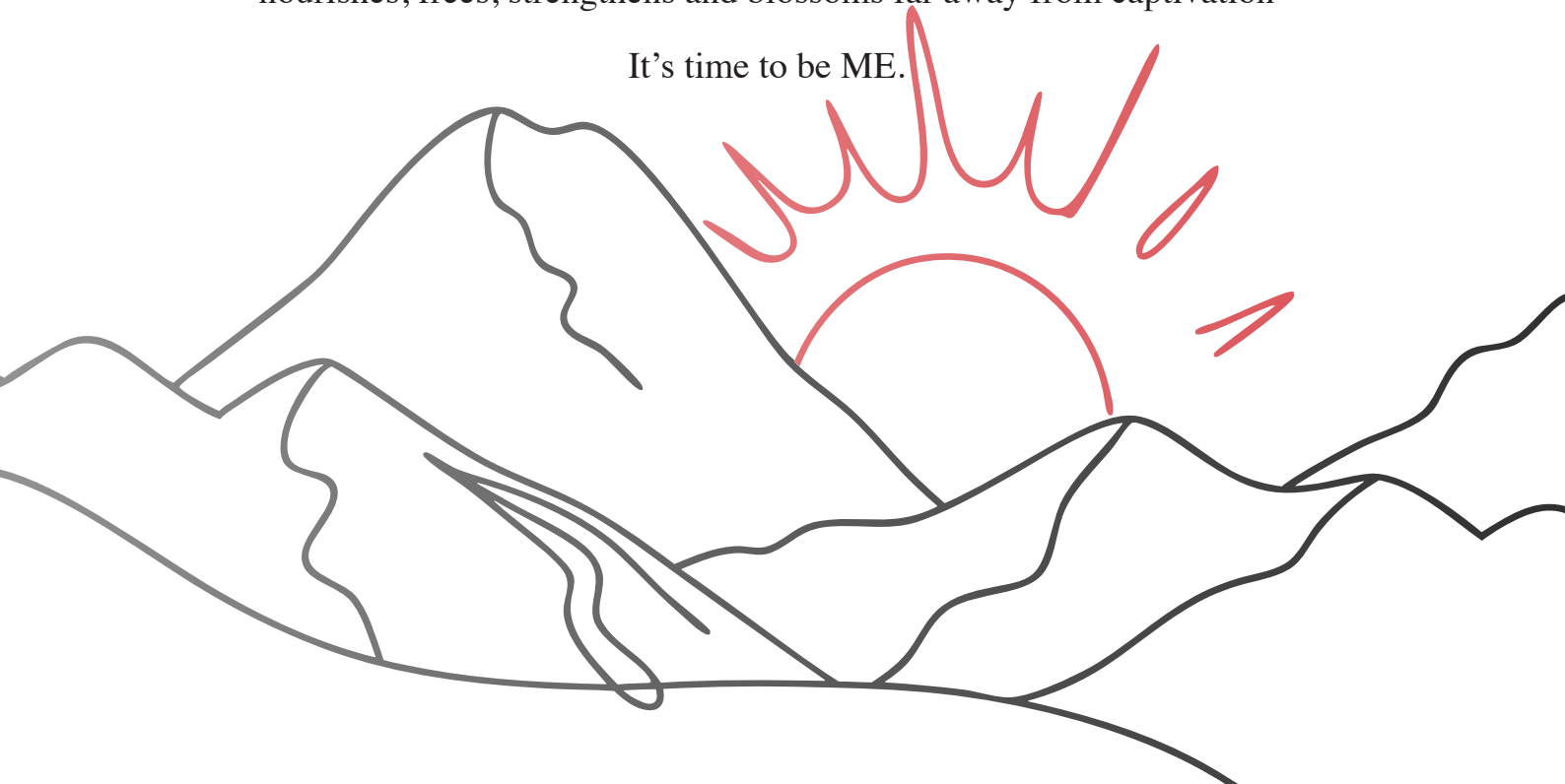
Choosing life's gifts, bounties and energetic anarchy from many an institutionalised  
prison,

From now, it's make or break, life or death, in all seriousness of this planetary  
oblivion,

Because I've known heaven, I've known hell, and I've known purgatory thereon,

So, it's time to do my thing, in creative expression and truth of freedom that  
nourishes, frees, strengthens and blossoms far away from captivity

It's time to be ME.



# Instruments of change

2025 marks the 10th anniversary of Brighton's New Note Orchestra. Founded in 2015 by Molly Mathieson, the New Note Orchestra is a musical project for people in addiction recovery. Rehearsing, recording and performing regularly, its 10-year history has seen it perform at world-class venues and collaborate with professional orchestras, local choirs and other recovery arts organisations. It has also been the catalyst for the creation of other organisations and projects – including this very magazine.

Through the following images, we look back on the remarkable first decade of New Note.



## It all started with *Addict's Symphony...*

When TV producer Molly Mathieson began work on the Channel 4 documentary *Addict's Symphony*, she had no idea how the unique experiences of its subject, musician James McConnell, would change the trajectory of her career.

The documentary followed James, a recovering alcoholic whose life took a terrible turn after his son Freddy was found dead from a heroin overdose at the age of 18. Having used music in his own recovery, James worked with 10 participants for two months, building towards a concert with the London Symphony Orchestra.

**“The night of the concert changed my life, and I was determined to take the success of the TV show and create the UK’s first recovery orchestra.”**

**– Molly, musician & founder of New Note Orchestra**







From the very first rehearsal, New Note Orchestra has maintained a policy of openness and accessibility. The group is made up of musicians of all abilities: some are experienced and able to read traditional notation; others are self-taught, having played more pop-oriented instruments such as guitar; and some had never played an instrument before joining the orchestra. All members are valued equally and encouraged to contribute.

**“I was a bit nervous because I can read chords, but I can’t really read music properly. I was worried that I wouldn’t be good enough to play in an orchestra, but after meeting the others, I settled into it.”**  
**– Roger Brophy, musician**



Top left: Early members of the group Nick Flowers and Roger Brophy, 2016  
 Above: Herbie Flowers (father of Nick), plays with Roger  
 Left: New Note Orchestra (NNO) meet then-Brighton Green Party MP Caroline Lucas, 2016  
 Below: NNO at St Lukes, 2017

Top opposite: Founder Molly Mathieson performing at the Old Market in 2022 (credit: Natasha Bidgood)  
 Opposite middle: *Addict's Symphony*, Channel 4, 2014 (credit: Channel 4)  
 Opposite bottom: NNO rehearsal 2016





In addition to supporting people in addiction recovery, New Note Orchestra also works to challenge the stigma associated with addiction and recovery. A large part of this is the orchestra's commitment to quality and excellence. From the earliest days, performances have been carefully planned, with material written with care, properly rehearsed and performed to a high standard.

Artistic and musical director Conall Gleeson joined the orchestra in 2016 and has been the musical director for the past nine years. Conall works with musicians of differing abilities through a combination of rhythmic and melodic techniques, improvisation and more formal composition.



**“We create music that connects with audiences. The orchestra needs to have high expectations of itself in order to overcome stigma. We always have to try even harder to make sure we score well above expectations.”**

**– Conall Gleeson, musician and artistic director of New Note Orchestra**



#### **LINKS:**

*Found*, a film by New Note Dance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFGxh3dhAjA>

*Kind Rebellion*, an album by New Note Orchestra: <https://newnoteorchestra.bandcamp.com/album/kind-rebellion>

The New Note Strummers album: <https://newnoteorchestra.bandcamp.com/album/new-note-strummers>

For more information, visit: <https://www.newnote.co.uk/>

Top and above: NNO performing at St Luke's Church, 2017  
Left: NNO rehearsing in 2018



One constant theme throughout the life of New Note has been collaboration. From gigs with local community choirs to performances with professional string sections, working with people outside the recovery community offers learning opportunities for all.

**“Music is about communication, and hearing the stories behind people in recovery creates more understanding about what addiction recovery really entails.”**

**Sophia Barlette, musician, regular collaborator with New Note Orchestra**



On 22 September, 2022, New Note Orchestra joined several other recovery arts organisations – including Fallen Angels, Portraits of Recovery and Geese – for a conference at the University of West London on addiction recovery arts.

At the event, the orchestra performed with Fallen Angels Dance Theatre – the first in a series of collaborations between the two groups. It culminated in two critically acclaimed performances at the Royal Opera House.

Another outcome of this conference was the formal creation of the Addiction Recovery Arts Network and this magazine, *Performing Recovery*.

**“New Note Orchestra introduced me to a recovery community that I had no idea existed. Sometimes you don’t even know what you’re looking for until you find it.”**

**Alex Mazonowicz, musician, editor and co-founder of *Performing Recovery***

Top: NNO during development for *Traces Through Time* at South East Dance, 2023 (credit: Natasha Bidgood)  
Middle: NNO backstage at Storyhouse Chester, 2023 (credit: Natasha Bidgood)  
Right: NNO at Storyhouse, Chester, 2023 (credit: Natasha Bidgood)





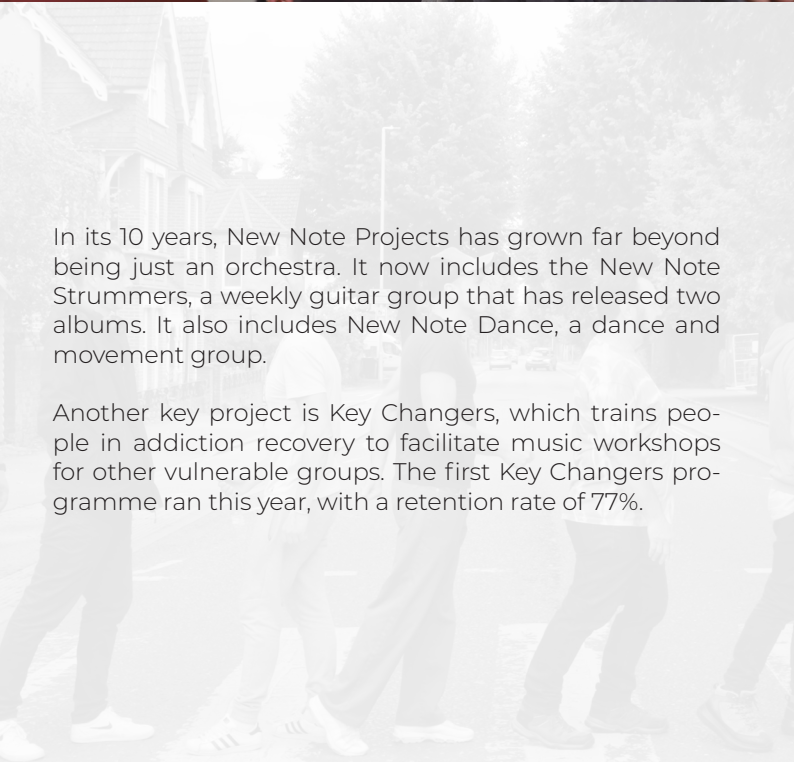


The orchestra has won numerous awards over the years, including the Nesta New Radicals Award and the BBC Community Arts Award. It was a Brighton Mayoral Charity of 2022–2023, and in 2024 it received the King's Award for Voluntary Service – the equivalent of an MBE for charities.

Left: New Note Dance, *Found*, directed by Angus Cameron

Below: New Note Strummers taking shots for the cover of their album *Shabby Road*

Bottom: New Note Orchestra recording during COVID restrictions in 2020



In its 10 years, New Note Projects has grown far beyond being just an orchestra. It now includes the New Note Strummers, a weekly guitar group that has released two albums. It also includes New Note Dance, a dance and movement group.

Another key project is Key Changers, which trains people in addiction recovery to facilitate music workshops for other vulnerable groups. The first Key Changers programme ran this year, with a retention rate of 77%.



**“The unconditional welcome and the variety of opportunities made it feel like entering a playground, and I’ve always tried to get to sessions if I can. When circumstances have stopped me going, I’ve noticed the difference in my well-being. New Note has allowed me to be adventurous with music and develop in a new way.”**

**Adele Davidson, musician**





# Participant Lifecycle

## RECOVERY COMMUNITY

Participants join sessions, build peer support & adjust to the group

1

## PERSONAL GROWTH

Improving communication, participation & personal skills

2

## SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Gaining confidence & self-esteem through learning

3

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Performing, advocating & volunteering beyond the group

4

## COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

Training some participants as workshop leaders, recruiting new members

5



www.newnote.co.uk

Beyond concerts, recordings and awards, the New Note Orchestra continues to have a profound effect on its participants. The participant lifecycle model helps track and guide people who join the orchestra and measures positive outcomes.

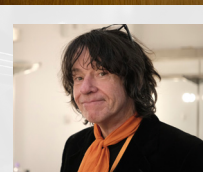
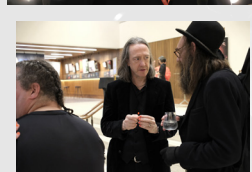
**Participants in New Note projects stay engaged for an average of 4.8 years, with retention rates between 67–70%.**

Top left: NNO recording a new album with members of the London Philharmonic Orchestra in September 2025

Top Right NNO at the Royal Opera House in 2023 (credit: Natasha Bidgood)

Below: NNO back stage at the Royal Opera House in 2023 (credit: Natasha Bidgood)

Bottom: The famous handchimes at the Old Market in 2022 (credit: Natasha Bidgood)



Like every other year (except maybe 2020!), New Note has been busy. The orchestra is preparing for three shows at the end of 2025; one at its rehearsal home of St Luke's on 28 October; one as part of the Forest Without Frontiers ecology project at the Brighton Dome on 20 November; and a Christmas show with Hulabaloo Quire.

In September 2025, New Note also partnered with the London Philharmonic Orchestra on the recording of a new album, due for release in the new year.

And then ... well, who knows? But you can be sure that the music will play on.

# THE DIRECTORY

## ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS WORKING IN RECOVERY ARTS

### UNITED KINGDOM

#### BDP Creative Communities

Bristol

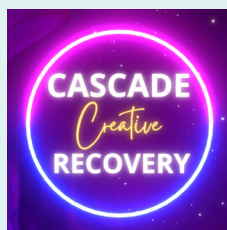


Part of the Bristol Drugs Project (BDP), the Creative Communities include Bristol Recovery Orchestra, Oi Polloi Theatre Group and Rising Voices Recovery Choir.

**Website:** [www.bdp.org.uk/creative-communities/](http://www.bdp.org.uk/creative-communities/)

#### Cascade Creative Recovery

Brighton



A community-based, peer-led charity. Projects include a community choir, open mic nights, drama and creative writing

**Website:** [cascadecreativerecovery.com](http://cascadecreativerecovery.com)

#### Cysylltu/Connecting

Bangor

A Bangor-based project seeking to address mental health and addiction issues with conversation through the arts

#### The Detox Factor

Staffordshire



A creative hub using music, theatre and other arts with the primary purpose of inspiring the still suffering addict.

**Website:** [www.facebook.com/thedetoxfactor](https://www.facebook.com/thedetoxfactor)

#### Eleanor Cowell

East London

A visual artist exploring mental health through arts and well-being classes.

**Email:** [eleanorcowellart@gmail.com](mailto:eleanorcowellart@gmail.com)

**Website:** [eleanorcowell.com](http://eleanorcowell.com)

#### Edinburgh Recovery Activities (ERA)

A project set up to provide fulfilling and enjoyable experiences for those in recovery. The activities include meet-ups and a creative writing group.

**Email:** [mickmccarron@cyrenians.scot](mailto:mickmccarron@cyrenians.scot)

**Website:** [www.facebook.com/EdinburghRecoveryActivities](https://www.facebook.com/EdinburghRecoveryActivities)

#### Essex Recovery Foundation



A visible recovery community that runs a number of arts-based recovery projects as well as the Essex Recovery Festival.

**Website:** [www.essexrecoveryfoundation.org](http://www.essexrecoveryfoundation.org)

#### Fallen Angels Dance Theatre

Chester, Liverpool, Greater Manchester



Fallen Angels Dance Theatre supports those in recovery from addiction or mental health adversity through dance, performance and creativity.

**Website:** [fallenangelsdt.org](http://fallenangelsdt.org)

#### Geese Theatre Company

Birmingham



A theatre company enabling people in criminal justice and social welfare settings to make positive changes through performances and training events.

**Email:** [info@geese.co.uk](mailto:info@geese.co.uk)

**Website:** [geese.co.uk](http://geese.co.uk)

#### Horizon

Brighton



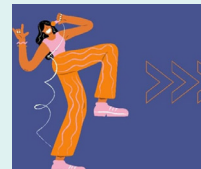
Supporting those in recovery from addiction through the medium of creative film, media and photography.

**Email:** [annie@editsweet.rocks](mailto:annie@editsweet.rocks)

**Website:** [myhorizon.rocks](http://myhorizon.rocks)

#### Lost Souls Poetry Night

Wandsworth, London



Sober-friendly open-mic nights for poets and other wordsmiths.

**Website:** [instagram.com/lostsoulsevents](https://www.instagram.com/lostsoulsevents)

#### New Central Media



Publishing centred on the voices of those with lived experience.

**Website:** [drdavidpatton.co.uk/new-central-media](http://drdavidpatton.co.uk/new-central-media)

#### New Note Projects

Brighton



The New Note Orchestra is made up of musicians in recovery from addiction. Also includes a weekly guitar group and New Note Dance.

**Website:** [newnote.co.uk](http://newnote.co.uk)

#### Mindful Art Club

Plymouth



Offering art groups, meditation and other activities for people in recovery in the Plymouth area.

**Website:** [mindfulartclub.co.uk](http://mindfulartclub.co.uk)

#### The Mixed Bag Players

York

York-based theatre group associated with York in Recovery.

**Website:** [facebook.com/groups/835222381575024/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/835222381575024/)

#### Head-on

Southeast

Facilitating, mentoring and coaching inclusive recovery arts and dance spaces.

**Website:** [www.head-on.co.uk/](http://www.head-on.co.uk/)



**Not Saints**  
Brighton



A record label and events company that releases music from bands in recovery, as well as setting up sober open-mic sessions and running music training courses.

**Website:** [notsaints.co.uk](http://notsaints.co.uk)

**The Outsiders Project**  
Boscombe



An organisation working with outsider artists in the community.

**Website:** [facebook.com/outsidersprojectboscombe](https://facebook.com/outsidersprojectboscombe)

**Outside Edge Theatre Company**  
London, E1

A theatre company and participatory arts charity supporting recovering addicts and those affected by addiction..

**Website:** [edgetc.org](http://edgetc.org)

**Our Space (Theatre Royal Plymouth)**



A creative programme for adults who face challenges, like homelessness, mental health and substance misuse.

**Website:** [theatreroyal.com](http://theatreroyal.com)

**Portraits of Recovery**  
Manchester



Visual arts charity supporting people and communities in recovery.

**Website:** [portraitsofrecovery.org.uk](http://portraitsofrecovery.org.uk)

**The Recovery Collective**  
Glasgow



A community interest company formed to use music to promote recovery from drug and alcohol addiction.

**Website:** [facebook.com/recoverycollectivevic](https://facebook.com/recoverycollectivevic)

**Recoverist Theatre Project**  
Islington, London



Part of Islington People's Theatre project. It uses applied theatre and creativity with vulnerable and marginalised groups, including adults in recovery.

**Website:** [islingtonpeoplestheatre.co.uk](http://islingtonpeoplestheatre.co.uk)

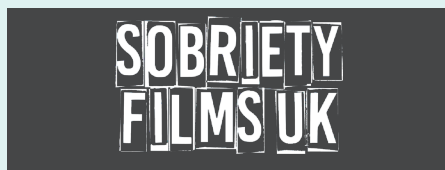
**Small Performance Adventures**  
Brighton



Workshops, performances and events in partnership with recovery, mental health, criminal justice, homelessness and education organisations.

**Website:** [smallperformanceadventures.com](http://smallperformanceadventures.com)

**Sobriety Films**



A social enterprise that uses film to raise awareness of recovery and champion recovery for those that need healing from addiction, mental ill health and trauma.

**Website:** [www.sobrietyfilms.com](http://www.sobrietyfilms.com)

**Status Creative CIC**  
Saxmundham



Carries out creative activities to benefit wellness and the community with people with adverse life experiences including addiction.

**Website:** [statuscreativecic.com/](http://statuscreativecic.com/)

**SUIT (Service User Involvement Team)**  
Wolverhampton



Service supporting vulnerable adults in welfare and addiction recovery with lived experience. SUIT's art collective meet every week for practical and applied work.

**Website:** [suitrecoverywolverhampton.com](http://suitrecoverywolverhampton.com)

**Vita Nova**  
Boscombe



A creative arts organisation and recovery community, run by members and volunteers.

**Website:** [vitanova.co.uk](http://vitanova.co.uk)

**Voodoo Monkeys**  
Devon

A theatre company based in Devon committed to working with and for marginalised communities.

**Website:** [facebook.com/voodoomonkys](https://facebook.com/voodoomonkys)

## INTERNATIONAL

**The Creative High**  
USA

A documentary film created by Adriana Marchione and Dianne Griffin focussing on nine artists in recovery from addiction.

**Website:** [thecreativehigh.com](http://thecreativehigh.com)

**Passenger Recovery**  
Worldwide



Resources, articles and support for sober musicians, including a tool kit for touring and travelling musicians who need help and support while sober on the road.

**Website:** [passengerrecovery.com](http://passengerrecovery.com)

**Turn Up For Recovery**



"Like Macmillan coffee mornings but for music and recovery," Turn Up For Recovery promotes fundraising gigs anyone around the world can put on.

**Website:** [turnupforrecovery.org](http://turnupforrecovery.org)

**The Recovery Project**  
Florida



Florida-based projects using arts to help reduce stigma and help people with addiction.

**Website:** <https://www.floridastudiotheatre.org/support-us/therecoveryproject/>



