PERFORMING RECOVERY

ISSUE 16: NOV 26–JAN 27



MATT BACHMAN KICKED OUT OF THE SKY

SMALL SIGNS: MICHAEL MCALISTER'S UNCOMPROMISING ART

SPOTLIGHT: DONNA BOYD FROM GLASGOW'S FREED UP CIC

6 RECOVERY FILMS YOU SHOULD SEE BY **MADDIE KITCHEN**

FROM ADDICTION TO FILM SCHOOL BY **DAN HAYES**

DEBORAH WHIPP TALKS TO **URJA THAKORE** OF THE **PAGRAV DANCE COMPANY**

PLUS: POETRY, ART, NEWS AND THE DIRECTORY

NOV 26–JAN 27



Images:
Left: Freed Up, page
Cover: Matt Bachman, page 13
(credit: Christa Bachman/Let Go Media)

Bottom left: A still from Dan Hayes's Back page: *Untitled*
(credit : Pixmania)

PAGE 3

Editorial: We welcome you to the 16th issue.

PAGE 5

News & events: All the goings on from across the recovery arts sector.

PAGE 7

Spotlight on: Alex Mazonowicz speaks to Donna Boyd of the Glasgow-based arts recovery organisation Freed Up.

PAGE 12

Beyond the usual suspects: Founder of Sobriety Films Maddie Kitchen on her top 6 recovery-related films.

PAGE 16

Poetry: *Suzanne* by Kelly Nunnerley.



PAGE 16

From addiction to film school: Dan Heyes on the difficulties of following a dream in recovery.

PAGE 18

Small signs: Michael McAlister gives us a sneak peak at a personal art project.

PAGE 23

Freedom of movement: Deborah Whipp talks to Urja Thakore about classical Indian dance and her Detox project.

PAGE 26

Creative writing: *A New Earth* by Ameet Shah.

PAGE 28

Kicked out: Matt Bachman on recovery and the freedom of being an independent artist.

PAGE 28

The Directory: Recovery groups from across the UK and beyond.

Publisher
Cathy Sloan

Managing Editor
Alex Mazonowicz

Editorial Board
Molly Mathieson, Alex Mazonowicz, Bernadette Molton, Cathy Sloan, Deborah Whipp

Contributors
Matt Bachman, Dan Heyes, Michael McAlister, Kelly Nunnerley, Ameet Shah

Proofreader
Lu Etienne

Contact
editorial@recovery-arts.org

Performing Recovery is the official publication of Addiction Recovery Arts Network CIC

www.recovery-arts.org
facebook.com/performingrecovery/
instagram.com/performingrecovery

© Copyright 2026,
Addiction Recovery Arts Network CIC,
Company Number: 15056073

WELCOME TO



the *16th* issue of

Performing Recovery

Alex Mazonowicz
Managing Editor

I've been trying to make an album now for nearly 2 years. I've been recording music in one way or another for about half my life, but I always felt that I could do a better job of the mixing and production. With this in mind, I decided in February 2024 to start something that I'd take a bit of time over. Rather than setting myself a deadline, which is how I normally approach things, I'd take some time to get the right sounds, refine the arrangements and learn how to mix music properly. I was sure I'd be ready to release it in January 2025, but January 2025 came and went, and very quickly so did January 2026. Sometime in March of this year, I told myself that it'd be ready for January 2027 … it won't be.

I'm not a professional musician, so I'm not relying on this record for income, so it's not that important. As someone who works in publishing, my income is heavily dependent on a whole different set of deadlines. Though, as an editor, my instinct is to prioritise quality over expediency, without a final product, my work would be seen as essentially pointless. The output matters. The output shows that I'm productive.

I guess then you could call me a "productive member of society", a common term inside and outside of recovery circles. I've heard it stated as a goal in 12-step shares and as a quote from participants in recovery projects. It's also often used to describe desired outcomes for rehabilitation in criminal justice, or aimed at members of groups experiencing high unemployment. But what does it really mean?

There's the strict economic definition of productivity: that of creating monetary value. However, for most people, "productive member of society" means doing work, whether it's paid, volunteering, caregiving or parenting. But though these things are all positive, it's important to consider how much weight we put on them.

Just like GDP doesn't measure unpaid caregiving, volunteering or paid work, when we measure the worth of someone by how productive that person is, we can fall into a trap of valuing an outcome and ignoring a process. We even do it to ourselves. By ignoring the process, we ignore the reality of how difficult life can be.

For so many people, this world is full of barriers. It's harder to get

> *"WHEN WE MEASURE THE WORTH OF SOMEONE BY HOW PRODUCTIVE THAT PERSON IS, WE CAN FALL INTO A TRAP OF VALUING AN OUTCOME AND IGNORING A PROCESS."*

a job, or volunteer, if you're disabled. It's harder, also, if there are few opportunities, your skills don't match the ones on offer, or the barrier for entry is experience you don't have. People are discriminated against on the basis of race, sexuality, gender identity, and administrative status. The barriers to being productive can easily become a barrier to being valued as a human.

Recovery is not a product. For me, it's less about driving towards a goal or an output, and more about finding serenity in the process. I don't drink or use today to achieve some future goal, whether that's days, months or years away. I don't drink today because I'd like to experience today with serenity and love. **I find the most serenity when I let go of the expectations of myself, and of other people, to produce.**

Recovery is a process, not a destination, and the same can be said of art. Because it's the process of making art that makes anyone an artist. You don't become a painter when you sell a portrait, you become one when you brush your first colour onto a canvas. You become a writer when you find the words, an actor when you perform a feeling and a musician when you play a note. You're a dancer, not because you sell a ticket to a show, but because you dance.

With that in mind, it's important to remember that you're not a valuable member of society because you're productive. You're a valuable member of society because you're *you*.

"YOU ARE NOT A VALUABLE MEMBER OF SOCIETY BECAUSE YOU ARE PRODUCTIVE. YOU ARE VALUABLE BECAUSE YOU ARE YOU."

It's not easy, of course. Sometimes it feels like there's a constant voice in the back of my mind telling me off for all my unfinished projects. This album I wish I could have played to my friends in the winter of 2025 is still just sitting in badly named folders on my hard drive. The other week, I spent a day trying to get one snare drum to sound nice. Hours going through samples, putting on effects, then taking them off again. But you know what? I loved it – the process is the fun bit, and maybe I'd rather be happy than productive.

Anyway, there's always January 2028.

In this issue, we talk to Donna Boyd from the Glasgow-based recovery organisation **Freed Up**, and Deborah Whipp speaks to **Urja Thakore** about using traditional Indian dance to explore addiction and support people's health. Musician **Matt Bachman** talks about how recovery has impacted his music, and filmmaker **Dan Heyes** talks about the barriers of pursuing his dream as a filmmaker in recovery. The founder of Sobriety Films, **Maddie Kitchen**, shares her top recommendations for recovery films, and **Michael McAlister** gives us a taste of one of his recent art exhibitions.

Here at *Performing Recovery*, we'd like to thank **Zoe Zontou** for her incredible support of the publication and of the Addiction Recovery Arts Network. Zoe was not only a founder of the organisation, but she also continues to be a great supporter of the whole recovery arts movement through her work at Liverpool Hope University. Much of her research was foundational to what we're trying to do at *Performing Recovery*. We wish her luck with her continued projects and her new book, *Performing Recovery: Addiction, Vulnerability and the Ethics of Representation*. You can purchase the book at https://tinyurl.com/42bm2bzp

NEWS & EVENTS

Try Out Dance with Fallen Angels

Fallen Angels Dance Theatre is inviting adults in recovery from addiction to take part in Moving Stories, a new free creative project in Salford exploring recovery through movement, photography and storytelling.

The project will begin with free taster sessions, giving participants the opportunity to meet the creative team, try some gentle, accessible activities and find out more about the programme. No previous dance or artistic experience is needed.

Moving Stories aims to provide a safe, supportive space where people can connect with others in recovery, build confidence and well-being, and explore ways of expressing their experiences. Participants will also have the opportunity to contribute to a public exhibition and celebration at the end of the project, showcasing the creativity and resilience of people in recovery.

Based in Chester, Fallen Angels Dance Theatre is a pioneering dance company that works with people affected by addiction and recovery, using dance and movement to explore personal experiences, build confidence and create opportunities for artistic expression. The company brings together professional artists and people with lived experience, placing recovery and creativity at the heart of its work.

Moving Stories forms part of the company's wider work to develop new opportunities for people in recovery to participate in the arts. Earlier this year, Fallen Angels developed Holding Light, a dance work created over 6 months in collaboration with internationally celebrated choreographer Russell Maliphant, dance artist Alice Godfrey, and composer and sound artist Feri Gyemant. The production was part of its Perspectives 2026 programme, supported by Arts Council England and other funders and partners. It was performed at the Royal Opera House in London, Storyhouse in Chester and Liverpool Everyman.

Moving Stories is free and open to adults aged 18 and over in recovery from addiction. To find out more, register your interest or book a place, email hello@fallenangelsdt.org or visit https://fallenangelsdt.org





SUBSCRIBE TO PERFORMING RECOVERY AND SUPPORT OUR MISSION

Performing Recovery was created to connect recovery arts practitioners, support and promote the use of the arts in addiction recovery, and give a platform to artists in recovery. We've been doing this since our first issue in 2023 and have no plans to stop anytime soon.

We're currently funded by generous donations, magazine sales and our Patreon subscribers.

If you'd like to support our mission, you can subscribe to the Patreon channel for as little as £3 per month: https://www.patreon.com/c/PerformingRecovery or you can purchase print subscriptions and individual issues from our shop: https://performing-recovery.sumupstore.com/.

Digital editions remain FREE for anyone who needs or wants them, so you can also support us by sharing our magazine and newsletter across your social media channels and email.



A Mixed Bag Christmas

York-based theatre group, The Mixed Bag Players, will be bringing their own twist to the Dickens classic this December. *Tiny Tim's A Christmas Carol* will be performed on the 10th and 11th of December at 7 p.m. and on the 12th of December at 7:30 p.m. at Acomb Parish Church Hall in York.

The Mixed Bag Players is a theatre group for anyone affected by mental illness or addiction issues. Previous Mixed Bag productions include *Dreamer*, which explored themes of addiction and intergenerational trauma through a dream world, and *Nightingale's Game*, which was inspired by founder Tom Nightingale's experiences of schizophrenia.

You can book tickets for *Tiny Tim's A Christmas Carol* at https://tinyurl.com/4cdm7zxn. You can find more information about Mixed Bag Players at https://www.facebook.com/groups/835222381575024.

Chill Out With New Note Orchestra

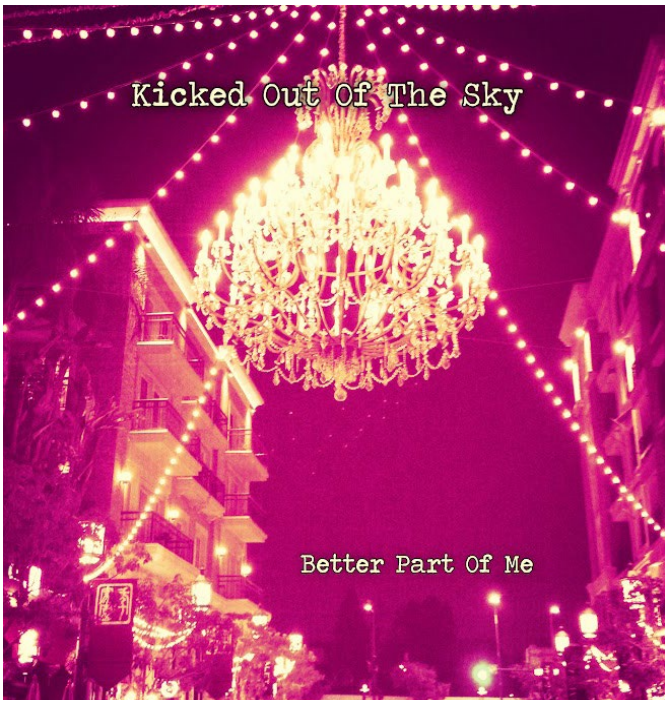


Brighton's New Note Orchestra will be joined by Brighton Guitar Group for a special *Winter Chill* concert at St Luke's, Prestonville, Brighton on Tuesday the 1st of December.

The evening will feature a mix of the orchestra's original compositions, much-loved Christmas classics and atmospheric music from the guest performers. There will also be homemade cakes, refreshments and a raffle featuring more than £700 worth of prizes donated by local businesses.

The concert will also support New Note Orchestra's fundraising for the Big Give Christmas Challenge. Thanks to match funding, every £8 ticket sold will raise £16 for the orchestra, helping it continue to support people affected by addiction through music. The concert starts at 7:30 p.m. To book, visit: https://brightonwhatson.app/events/97671.

Last September, the New Note Orchestra released a new album, *Bloom*, in collaboration with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. You can listen at: https://tinyurl.com/4n7wcpyk



Rock'n'Roll Recovery

Kicked Out Of The Sky released new single *Better Part of Me* on the 13th of November. The band is the pop punk/alt rock project of L.A.-born Matt Bachman.

The song is about finding a new self in recovery, according to Matt, who told *Performing Recovery*: "It took me a long time to see that the worst version of me wasn't the only version. This song is about breaking free from him."

The single opens a five-song run: four singles released one by one across 5 months, ending with the *Happiness Is Overrated* EP in spring 2027. Bachman started Kicked Out Of The Sky in 2020 and now lives in Lisbon, releasing music through the independent label Let Go Media.

You can listen to the song at: https://listen.kickedoutofthesky.com/betterpartofme

To find out more about Matt, his music and his recovery, you can read his story on page 28.

Spotlight On...

DONNA BOYD FREED UP



Above: Donna Boyd (credit: Freed Up)

Donna Boyd *is the founder and project manager of* **Freed Up**, *a recovery organisation based in Glasgow that runs creative workshops and sober events. Freed Up registered as a CIC in 2023 and began operating independently in March 2024. Donna spoke to Alex about how it started, what people get from taking part and what she hopes to do next.*

Alex: How did Freed Up start?

Donna: There used to be a programme called Affit, which is Scottish slang for being "off drink/drugs". It was part of the volunteer-led North West Recovery Communities and was funded by the Glasgow Alcohol and Drugs Partnership (ADP). I got involved with Affit in my first year of recovery, taking pictures, and progressed to leading on events.

The programme later moved from North West Recovery Communities to the Scottish Recovery Consortium (SRC) and took on a more citywide focus. The SRC advertised for a recovery entertainment events coordinator. At the time, I was photographing gigs and putting on the odd gig myself. All that had stopped because of COVID, so when the job came up with the SRC, I went for it.

I worked for the SRC for 3 years. We consulted with the recovery community, and Freed Up was the name they chose. I hated it at first and now couldn't imagine it being called anything else. During my time at the SRC, I realised I didn't really like working for somebody else and wanted to do things my way. I spoke to the SRC and the ADP about going independent and about the ins and outs of applying for contracts. Everybody supported the idea, and SRC agreed on us keeping the Freed Up name.

In 2019, I had started a radio show called Making Recovery Visible on Sunny Govan Community Radio. I interviewed all sorts of people, including musicians, authors and actors. When Freed Up started, we put on comedy nights, open mics and raves, and many of those creatives got involved, as well as others from outside the recovery community.

> "WE'VE STRUGGLED TO FIND OTHER VENUES SINCE. MANY NEED TO CHARGE MORE FOR HIRE TO MAKE UP FOR THE INCOME THEY'D USUALLY MAKE FROM SELLING ALCOHOL AT THE BAR."

We'd always struggled to find venues. Then I was introduced to Dawn, who ran Time Event Space. She really got what we were doing, and we ran monthly comedy nights and raves there for about 18 months. It was great. People knew where to find us and when we'd be there, and having that consistency helped us grow. Unfortunately, Time closed, and we've struggled to find other venues since. Many need to charge more for hire to make up for the income they'd usually make from selling alcohol at the bar. That made it hard to keep the comedy nights going.

Alex: What is your artistic background?

Donna: I was a creative child, but when my using and addiction started, all that fell away. During active addiction, I dipped my toe into different things, but I never kept anything going. I started getting creative again in recovery. After I left residential rehab, I was living in supported accommodation and attending a day programme with Turning Point Scotland. They had a fund called Make It Happen, so I applied for a grant and bought a camera. I taught myself photography by going out to gigs and taking pictures, mostly of local Scottish hip-hop artists.

I took those photos under the name Homegrownalwaysbest, a name I'd already been using before I got into recovery. "Homegrown" meant something different to me back then. Over time it took on a new meaning – it became about the homegrown, grassroots artists I was photographing and helping to promote.

Alex: Are you still doing photography now?

Donna: I've found I don't really have the time anymore. Now we have Stephen, also known as Pixmania*. He'd already been taking photography classes and coming along to Freed Up to take pictures when he joined a series of therapeutic photography workshops we ran. Last year he completed his HNC, and this year he's gone on to study for a degree in photography. He's now our official photographer, capturing our events and building his portfolio through other events and shoots, too.

I was drawn to photography because of its accessibility. I used to be really into art. I was decent at drawing, but obviously, after not doing it



Above: Freed Up DJ Workshop (credit: Freed Up)

for years, picking up pens, pencils or paints again would have meant a longer process to get good at it.

When I got sober, I was also promoting Scottish hip-hop artists who aren't very well-known. It's the music I was listening to during active addiction. It gave me a sort of connection, and I still don't understand why more people don't listen to it, because there are some amazing artists with really deep lyrics.

Alex: How have some of the more musical elements of Freed Up come about?

Donna: The station manager at Sunny Govan is Steg G, a hip-hop producer and DJ. He and the station really introduced me to local hip-hop. Steg became a sort of mentor and a friend, and I've become friends with many of the artists, too.

Sunny Govan was running a DJ workshop and was short of participants, so Steg talked me into taking part. I told friends at meetings that I'd been going to DJ classes, and a lot of them said they'd always wanted to do something like that. So I asked Steg if we could run a workshop for Freed Up. He agreed, and now DJ workshops are a huge part of Freed Up.

The first group of DJs actually performed at the Recovery Connects music festival, which was just amazing. We kept running the workshops and people would come back.

A local community orchestra and charity called The Glasgow Barons invited us to be part of the Govan Music Festival, which takes place every March. We collaborated with the Barons' artistic director, Paul MacAlindin, on a project called Recovery Raps, where classical musicians worked with rappers to create original pieces. The pieces were recorded and performed at Freed Up Friday at the Govan Music Festival.

We're also working with The Glasgow Barons on free guitar classes. A few people have already signed up, including people who are further on in their recovery and who I'd never have expected to get in touch.

Alex: Why do you think people who have been in recovery longer want to get involved?

Donna: I think people are more comfortable being around other people in recovery. No matter how far into sobriety you are, some people are just more comfortable in recovery environments than in wider society. Especially when they're learning something new, they want to be around people who'll support them and give them room to try things without feeling judged.

Also, some people might never have thought about doing something creative until they see the Freed Up social media pages or a WhatsApp story.

Alex: I came to recovery arts later in sobriety. I'd never considered it, but when I joined New Note Orchestra, I realised that in a recovery environment, it's okay to be vulnerable or to find things difficult.

Donna: It also helps that you can perform in a sober environment. The music scene revolves a lot around drink and drugs, so it's good to have sober events.

Creativity has been a massive part of my recovery, and I think there are loads of people who really want to do something creative. Up here, a lot of people get sober and go on to work in addiction and recovery services. I think seeing what we do at Freed Up has helped more people imagine exploring their own creativity in recovery.

Alex: What else does Freed Up offer at the moment?

Donna: We're contracted by Glasgow ADP to put on two events a month. One is Music n' Munchies, which started as an open mic and has become more of a Tuesday karaoke afternoon with food. The other is a sober rave, which is our most popular event. We have to think about how to reach the most people.

We want to do more workshops. We've got a waiting list for DJ and photography workshops, so it comes down to money and capacity. I've been the only paid member of staff for the past 2.5 years. When we have six new DJs, I'm supporting them, but I'm also still supporting the previous six and the ones before that.

We've secured some funding that'll give us a bit more room to grow and build on what we're already doing. The dream is to offer a weekly programme of sober social events, with things like quiz nights, karaoke, live music and raves alongside creative workshops. We want to complement what's already on offer for people in recovery across Glasgow by giving them another place to meet up, socialise and have fun sober.

> "NO MATTER HOW FAR INTO SOBRIETY YOU ARE, SOME PEOPLE ARE JUST MORE COMFORTABLE IN RECOVERY ENVIRONMENTS THAN IN WIDER SOCIETY."

We've had a lot of knockbacks with funding over the past couple of years, so it feels really good to see what we do finally being recognised as something worth investing in.

About 10 years ago, I was getting ready to go into a crisis centre for 3 weeks, followed by a stay in residential rehab. I was homeless, and my family weren't talking to me. Now I've got my dad and my son staying with me full-time, and we've secured funding that'll make a big difference to what we can do at Freed Up. It's mad, isn't it?

Alex: How popular are events like the raves?

Donna: It depends on the DJs. Recently, we've been getting a good 60 or 70 people regularly, although it's gone up to about 200 people at times. That's on a Sunday night.

The DJs are a mix of well-known local DJs and at least one of our own Freed Up DJs. We've got a partnership with the local Pirate Studios, who give us some free off-peak studio time. So, once people have done the beginners' and intermediate DJ workshops, they can go into Pirate Studios and practise. When they're ready, they get the chance to support our community events and play a set at a Freed Up rave.

Something I always tell people, as they get good at something like performing, is that they need to be careful. You get this good feeling of being validated, and then you can start chasing it too much. Even with the DJs, when they perform, they get this high, and then there's a low. We've seen people relapse, but they know what they need to do to get back.

Alex: What's the impact of crossing over with people who aren't in the recovery community?

Donna: Volunteering with Sunny Govan and hosting Making Recovery Visible helped me feel part of the wider community again while I was in recovery. At the same time, it helped people in the wider community understand addiction a bit better. It breaks down stigma and barriers.

Some of the DJs who play for us also play at massive events with thousands of people, but they'll say they enjoy doing Freed Up more because of the vibe. Everybody's sober and enjoying the music. One of the DJs even made a track for us.

A lot of people think "once an addict, always an addict". Seeing that people can and do recover might change how they see someone they pass on the street, or a friend or family member caught up in active addiction.

Alex: What do you think people get from the events?

Donna: For me, even though using wasn't any fun towards the end, the thought that I'd never be able to use again meant I thought I was never going to have any fun again. We see that with people coming in. They've got their backs right up against the wall and are all self-obsessed, but then they see other people dancing and having fun. Over the months, you start to see them coming onto the dance floor.



Above: Freed Up DJ Workshop (credit: Freed Up)

Alex: How was the experience of entering the Recovery Street Film Festival?

Donna: Yeah, it was great watching people enjoy making films. Zoe, one of the people who comes to Freed Up, told me she was really interested in filmmaking. She helped find locations and got involved in the process when we made the video for *Insecure*, a track by Jam Harvie from the Homegrownalwaysbest EP. Scoosh Productions filmed the video, which reflects my own recovery journey. It was a great experience for everyone involved, and the video went on to win four awards, which was brilliant! Scoosh also helped out with a workshop for our Recovery Street Film Festival filmmakers.

After a couple of workshops, Zoe made her own film for the festival. It was shortlisted alongside Tribal John's music video. We all went down to Leicester to see them on the big screen, which was great. Now Zoe is volunteering at the Glasgow Film Theatre!

We'd like to bring the Recovery Street Film Festival up here, probably in a couple of years. It would be too ambitious to try to bring it up here next year, but hopefully soon. We should move it a bit further north each year until it's over the border.

Alex: What advice would you give to somebody who's thinking about starting their own sober events programme in a town or city that maybe has nothing?

Donna: Just do it, and don't lose heart if it doesn't quite work out at first. We've had events where we're lucky if 10 people turn up. But those 10 people are there enjoying themselves and staying clean.

At our comedy nights especially, we found a lot of students coming along who weren't necessarily in recovery. They just wanted a night out somewhere where people weren't drinking.

For us, it's about giving people a choice. You can go out, have a dance, have a laugh and have a brilliant night without drink or drugs. Whatever your reason for choosing a sober night out, you're welcome at Freed Up.

Find what gives you that wee spark and enjoy the journey. Keep doing the things that support your recovery along the way. For me, that means still going to 12-step meetings and doing service in my fellowship. I try to bring those same principles and traditions into the way I run Freed Up.

For more information on Freed Up, visit: freedup.org.uk.

For more information on North West Recovery Communities, visit NWRC Glasgow on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/NWRCGlasgow/.

Watch the music video for Insecure *by Jam Harvie, filmed by Scoosh Productions, at* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xN3LjeWkg_A

Stephen/Pixmania kindly supplied the art work for the back cover of this issue. You can follow him on Instagram at: https://www.instagram.com/pixmania_events/.

YOU CAN NOW ORDER PRINT EDITIONS OF **PERFORMING RECOVERY** AT



PERFORMING-RECOVERY.SUMUPSTORE.COM



Performing Recovery Issue 9 - suggested donation
£4.50

Performing Recovery Issue 9 - solidarity price
£7.00

Performing Recovery Issue 8 - suggestion donation
£4.50

Performing Recovery - solidarity price
£7.00

SUPPORT US ON OUR PATREON FROM £3 PER MONTH OR JOIN FOR FREE.



www.patreon.com/performingrecovery

- PODCASTS
- VIDEO INTERVIEWS
- EXCLUSIVE CONTENT



BEYOND THE USUAL SUSPECTS

MY TOP 6 RECOVERY FILMS

BY MADDIE KITCHEN



"I wonder why it is not called feelback, because we want feelings to go through [the film] and be shared."

– Agnès Varda, filmmaker

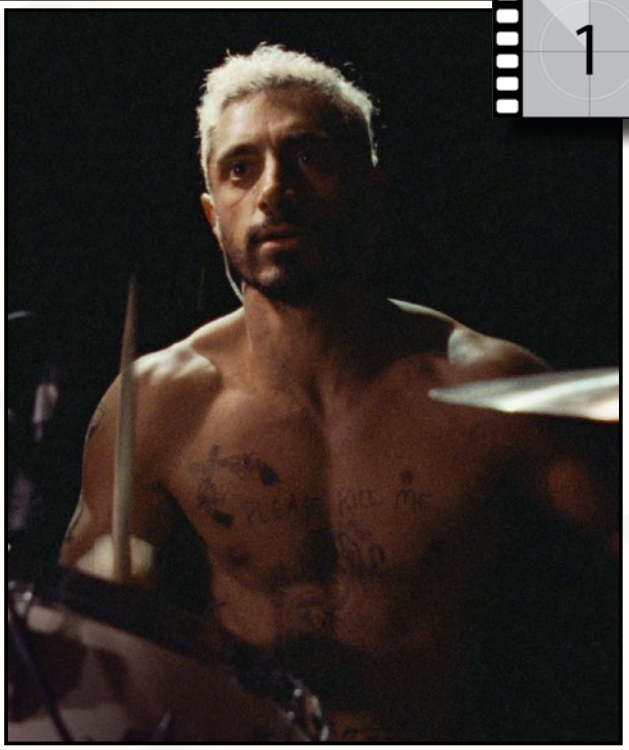
I love this quote from the great French filmmaker Agnès Varda. For me, it captures something of the magic of cinema, that is, its extraordinary ability to communicate truth, evoke empathy and take us into another person's world. A great film doesn't simply tell us something. It makes us feel something. And sometimes it changes the way we see the world.

Through my work with Sobriety Films UK and as creative director of Recovery Street Film Festival, I've spent years watching, making and championing films about addiction, recovery and the human condition. One thing I've noticed is that whenever people recommend recovery films, the same commercial titles tend to crop up. There are some excellent films among them, of course, but I wanted to take the opportunity to dig a little deeper.

The six films I've chosen here are very different. Some are deeply personal, others political, some artistically daring. But they all have something important to say about recovery, our shared humanity and the possibility of transformation.

Sound of Metal (2019)

Written and directed by Darius Marder



Above: *Sound of Metal* (credit: Amazon Studios)

This is my number 1. It's an extraordinary piece of cinema and one of the most profound explorations of recovery I've ever seen.

Riz Ahmed gives a remarkable performance as Ruben, a heavy metal drummer and recovering heroin addict whose world collapses when he suddenly begins to lose his hearing. Music is his identity, his livelihood and his connection to his girlfriend and bandmate, Lou. Without it, who is he?

Director Darius Marder brings a deep understanding of addiction and recovery to the film. In preparing for the role, Ahmed immersed himself in Deaf culture and learned American Sign Language. He also learned how to drum and attended Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

What makes *Sound of Metal* so extraordinary is that it isn't really a film about deafness or even addiction. It's about acceptance, identity, codependency and the desperate human desire to control the uncontrollable.

Ruben wants to fix everything. His hearing, his relationship, his future. He cannot imagine a life different from the one he has lost. But recovery asks something far more difficult of him – to stop fighting reality and learn to live within it.

The film's astonishing sound design places us inside Ruben's experience, while its quieter moments explore the possibility of finding peace in stillness.

For anyone familiar with the principles of recovery, there is something deeply moving about Ruben's struggle to surrender. The film understands that acceptance is not defeat, and sometimes the very thing we are fighting against can become the doorway to a different life.

And that final scene. I won't spoil it, but it's one of the most beautiful endings I've seen in cinema.



Above: *Shuffle* (credit: Abramorama)

Shuffle (2025)

Directed by Benjamin Flaherty

If *Sound of Metal* explores the internal journey of recovery, *Shuffle* exposes the external forces that can make that journey so much harder.

This shocking, heartbreaking US film won the Documentary Feature Grand Jury Award at SXSW in 2025. I interviewed director Benjamin Flaherty following its release, and what struck me most was the extraordinary courage and authenticity behind the filmmaking.

Shuffle investigates the corruption and commercialisation of the darker parts of the US addiction treatment industry, where vulnerable people can become commodities, valued more for their insurance policies than their well-being.

Through the stories of people caught in this system, the film exposes a disturbing cycle of exploitation, insurance fraud and repeated treatment that can keep people trapped rather than help them recover.

But what makes *Shuffle* exceptional is Ben himself. The director isn't simply an investigative filmmaker standing on the outside, documenting someone else's suffering, he is a person in recovery, using his own experiences to navigate the story. His recovery journey becomes part of the film's emotional and moral landscape.

You sense that he is making this film not only to expose an injustice, but also as part of his own process of healing, and this gives *Shuffle* a rawness and honesty that is impossible to manufacture.

There is something profoundly powerful about a person who has experienced addiction taking ownership of the narrative and turning the camera on a system that has failed so many. The film also raises uncomfortable questions for those working in the recovery sector: Who benefits from treatment? Who holds power? And what happens when financial interests take precedence over human lives?

Shuffle is devastating, infuriating and essential viewing. It is also a testament to the extraordinary power of lived-experience filmmaking.



Above: *A Want in Her* (credit: Abramorama)

3

A Want in Her (2024)

Directed by Myrid Carten

This beautiful, artistically daring documentary explores addiction from another perspective – that of the person who loves someone struggling with it.

Irish filmmaker and visual artist Myrid Carten turns her camera on her own family, particularly her mother Nuala, whose experiences of mental ill health and alcohol dependence have profoundly shaped Myrid's childhood, identity and adult life.

I interviewed Myrid in 2024, and we spoke about the complicated experience of loving someone whose drinking and mental health difficulties have such an enormous impact on family life. Those issues are also very much part of my story.

What I find so extraordinary about *A Want in Her* is its honesty and artistic ambition. Myrid uses family archives, intimate conversations, striking imagery and experimental storytelling to explore memory, love, anger, responsibility and the often-blurred boundaries between caring for someone and losing yourself. It is a deeply personal film, but it never feels self-indulgent. Importantly, her mother is not simply the subject of the documentary. Nuala is present within its very fabric, with her own voice, personality, contradictions and humanity.

That matters enormously. So often, people experiencing addiction or mental illness are reduced to a diagnosis or portrayed entirely through the suffering of those around them. Myrid allows her mother to exist as a complex human being.

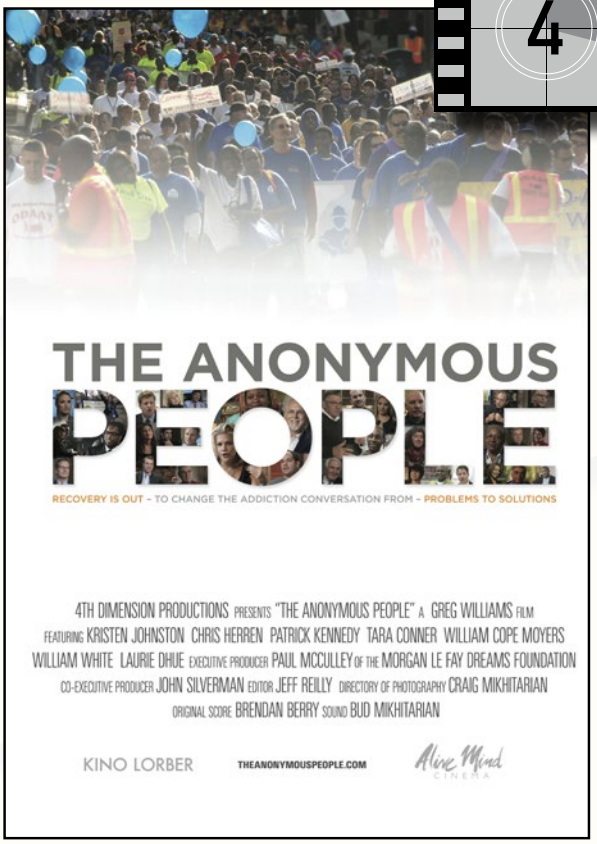
The film doesn't offer easy answers or a neat resolution. Instead, it asks difficult questions about unconditional love, family loyalty and the limits of what we can do for the people we love.

For me, this is what great documentary filmmaking can achieve. It can take an intensely personal experience and make it universal. *A Want in Her* is heartbreaking, sometimes funny, visually beautiful and utterly fearless.

4

The Anonymous People (2013) & Generation Found (2016)

Directed by Greg Williams; Generation Found co-directed with Jeff Reilly



Above: *The Anonymous People* (credit: 4th Dimension Prod.)

I'm cheating slightly here by including two films, but they belong together.

I first saw *The Anonymous People* many years ago, and it had a profound impact on me. Until then, so much of the public conversation around addiction seemed to focus on the devastation – the deaths, the crime, the broken families, the chaos. But here was a documentary telling an entirely different story.

The Anonymous People introduced audiences to a growing movement of people living in long-term recovery who were stepping forward, challenging stigma and demanding to be seen and heard.

What struck me was the sheer scale and power of this community: people from every background, connected by experiences of suffering, survival and transformation, becoming a collective force for good. It brought home to me that recovery is not simply an individual achievement. It is a social movement, with the potential to change communities, public attitudes and policy. There is something deeply humanist about that message. People who have experienced some of life's darkest moments can emerge with extraordinary compassion, purpose and a desire to help others.

Greg Williams followed this with *Generation Found*, which focuses on a community in Houston, Texas, coming together to transform the prospects of young people affected by addiction. The documentary explores an innovative network of recovery high schools, peer support groups, treatment services and community organisations working together to give young people a genuine chance of recovery. Its central message is one we urgently need to hear – young people deserve more than crisis intervention. They deserve community, belonging, opportunity and hope.

Both films remain enormously relevant today, particularly as stigma continues to shape how substance use is discussed and how services are delivered. They remind us that recovery is not just about surviving. It's about building something better, together.

The Wisdom of Trauma (2021)

Featuring Dr Gabor Maté; directed by Zaya and Maurizio Benazzo



Above: *The Wisdom of Trauma,* (credit: thewisdomoftrauma.com)

This film holds a particularly special place in my heart. In 2021, Sobriety Films UK helped promote *The Wisdom of Trauma* in the UK, and it remains one of the proudest moments of our work.

Featuring the renowned physician and trauma specialist Dr Gabor Maté, the documentary explores how trauma shapes our lives, relationships, behaviours and, ultimately, our societies.

At the heart of the film is a deceptively simple but radical shift in perspective: instead of asking what is wrong with someone, we begin to ask what happened to them.

For those of us working in addiction and recovery, this was an enormously important message. Too often, addiction is viewed as a moral failure, a lack of willpower or simply a series of bad choices. *The Wisdom of Trauma* invites us to look beneath the behaviour and consider the pain, disconnection and unmet emotional needs that may lie underneath.

The film explores the connections between childhood adversity, emotional suffering, addiction and the ways we learn to survive experiences that overwhelm us.

What I particularly value is its compassion. It encourages us to recognise that behaviours which may appear destructive can sometimes begin as attempts to cope with unbearable feelings. That doesn't remove personal responsibility, but it fundamentally changes the conversation. And the film's message reaches far beyond addiction. It asks us to consider the wider impact of trauma on families, communities and society, and what a more compassionate, trauma-informed world might look like.

For me, *The Wisdom of Trauma* helped articulate something that many people in recovery have understood through lived experience: healing is not simply about stopping a behaviour. It is about understanding ourselves, reconnecting with others and finding a different way to live.

Looking back at these films, what connects them isn't simply addiction or recovery. It's the courage to tell the truth. Whether through fiction, investigative documentary, intimate family portraiture or collective activism, each filmmaker has found a different way to explore what it means to be human. And that, for me, is the magic of cinema.

Through my work, I've been privileged to witness the extraordinary creativity that exists within the recovery community. I believe those of us with lived experience have a unique contribution to make to the cultural conversation. Not because our experiences define us, but because they can give us perspectives, insights and ways of seeing the world.

I've promised myself that 2027 will be the year I finally dedicate some proper time to writing screenplays. I rarely seem to find the time to develop my own stories. But there are so many stories I want to tell. And I suspect there are many more waiting to be told by people in our community.

Whether it's filmmaking, writing, photography, music, theatre or any other creative medium, we all have something valuable to contribute.

Keep creating. Keep telling stories. You never know whose life you might change.

Maddie Kitchen FRSA, founder of Sobriety Films UK and creative director of Recovery Street Film Festival.

www.sobrietyfilms.com
www.rsff.co.uk

WHERE TO WATCH IN THE UK:

Sound of Metal is available to stream in UK on Prime Video.

A Want in Her is available on BBC iPlayer at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0033719/storyville-a-want-in-her

You can watch *The Wisdom of Trauma* by making a donation at: https://thewisdomoftrauma.com/

Shuffle has been made available to watch in the UK from the 23rd of November until the 7th of December at https://kinema.com/films/shuffle-jfzl0o

The Anonymous People and *Generation Found* are unfortunately not available for streaming in the UK.

Suzanne by
Kelly Nunnerley

Tonight I say a prayer for the poor tormented soul,
whose demons won the final battle,
fought along a jagged rocky road.

Heart of gold, give her last penny,
Wolves ripped her to shreds,
Another of many.

Easy target for the parasites and roaches,
stripped of wealth by the hunters,
dignity-the poachers.

Happy little girl until that day.
Block it out, breathe it in, make it go away.

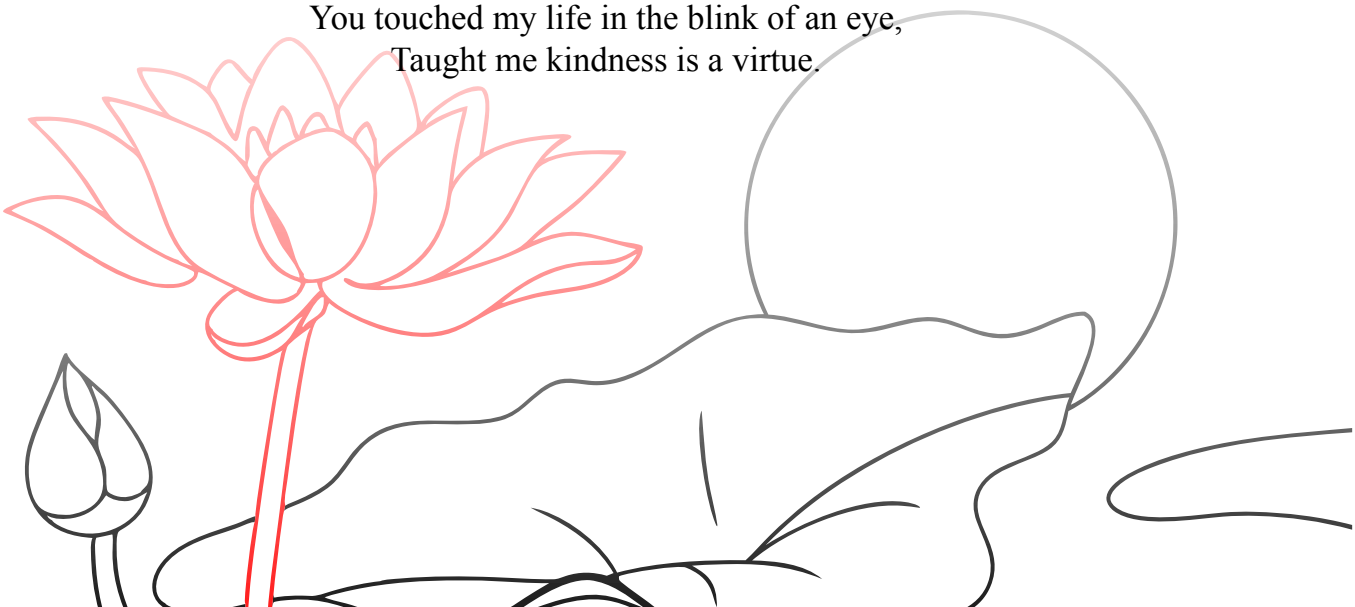
Her talent was railroaded to the dark underground.
Used and abused, shook-down for every pound.

Little Miss Midas, a real lucky charm.
Only she took all the risks, running from the store alarm.

I saw what those men were and how they bled her dry.
Poisoned into lunacy
As they grinned and waved goodbye.

She had class, she had worth. She had value and compassion,
When did the game change and the pin become the fashion?

Precious lovely lady, rest now,
No one can hurt you,
You touched my life in the blink of an eye,
Taught me kindness is a virtue.





Above: *Glass Jaw* (credit: Dan Heyes)

FROM ADDICTION TO FILM SCHOOL

Dan Heyes is a Bristol-based filmmaker, hoping to start film school in January 2027. Here, he speaks about his background as a full-time carer, his experiences finding creativity in recovery, and the difficulties of following a creative career when funding is tight.

Three years ago, if I was trying to scrape some money together, it would probably be a desperate attempt to pick up or buy more booze. Today I'm clean and sober, but the more things change, the more things stay the same, as I'm still searching for cash. Luckily, this time it's for a healthier reason. But first, I should probably explain myself a bit.

I grew up as a young carer for my dad, watching multiple sclerosis slowly strip away his independence throughout my teen years – it was pretty intense. After my dad died, I lost the part of myself I thought was worth caring for and spiralled into addiction. I passed through the doors of hospitals and institutions a few times. By my second stint in rehab, I had finally gotten sick and tired of being sick and tired. After learning about the option of dry houses from a counsellor, I moved to Bristol to live in one.

Once the reality of living with strangers in the armpit of Bristol hit, I started to think I was above it all, despite being at rock bottom. I obsessed over the past and getting back to the person I had been before addiction. Over time, I realised that the dry house was giving me more than just a roof and a dirty mattress – it was giving me the stability to start figuring my shit out. I started wondering why I was so desperate to get back to a lifestyle that hadn't even made me happy in the first place.

Most of that first year was spent getting to know the massive recovery community of Bristol, while most of my energy went into not using, getting to meetings and the gym, and not going insane. Picking up my 1-year chip was bittersweet. I couldn't believe I'd made it that long – time had passed quickly and painfully slowly at the same time. On my way home after the meeting, I started considering something I hadn't done for a long time: the possibility of a future. If I wasn't going to die any time soon – assuming I was careful crossing roads – what was I actually going to do? Life, and all the stuff that comes with it, was something that I'd already failed at, and the idea of it freaked me out enough to start second-guessing not just myself but sobriety as well. If I wasn't trying to reconstruct my old life, I would have to make a new one.

I started deliberately doing things that scared me. I joined the community theatre group Oi Polloi at Bristol Old Vic and a writing group at Tobacco Factory Theatres. For the first time in years, I wasn't using creativity

to escape my life, but to engage with it. Writing gave me somewhere to put experiences I didn't know what else to do with. More importantly, it got me participating in my own life again. I made a 3-minute film about boxing and recovery with one of my housemates for the Recovery Street Film Festival. All you needed to enter was an idea and something to film it on. *Glass Jaw* ended up being shortlisted, and for the first time, I had some evidence that the confidence I was building wasn't entirely delusional.

I kept going. I started writing a TV script inspired by life in a dry house, and it was accepted onto the Channel 4 New Writers Scheme. Then, this August, I was offered a place on the Screenwriting MFA at the National Film and Television School. It was surreal that the major detour of my life turned out to be inspiring the work that might help me build a new one.

For me, writing isn't therapy. I also don't think that it saved my life – there were a lot of people and difficult decisions behind that. However, I do believe writing has been a driving force in keeping me sober. I feel like people are often quick to say that they aren't creative, because they don't paint landscapes or want to write stuff down. Although addiction makes your world really small, within that confined space, we can get endlessly inventive: inventing excuses, manipulating circumstances, finding money, finding drugs, all of which involve creativity. Plus, recovery is as much about storytelling as it is about getting sober. We tell ourselves and others stories to lessen the load of shame, we write down our history and share our stories with a sponsor to find relief. Writing and storytelling has connected me with people and got me to engage with life again.

> *"RECOVERY IS AS MUCH ABOUT STORYTELLING AS IT IS GETTING SOBER. WE TELL OURSELVES AND OTHERS STORIES TO LESSEN THE LOAD OF SHAME, WE WRITE DOWN OUR HISTORY AND SHARE OUR STORIES WITH A SPONSOR TO FIND RELIEF."*

There's an irony to where all of this has left me. The opportunities that allowed me to discover creativity were accessible precisely because money wasn't a prerequisite. Oi Polloi was a community programme. Tobacco Factory Theatres offer bursary places for the Writers Lab, and Recovery Street Film Festival is free and open to all. Those spaces allowed someone without much money, confidence or industry access to discover the possibilities of creativity. However, now I've been offered a place at one of the country's leading film schools, money has become one of the biggest obstacles to saying yes. My postgraduate loan is split over the 2-year course, so it'll leave me around £9,000 short of the fees. Also, taking up my place means leaving Bristol and the low costs of supported housing.

Growing up as a young carer made me fiercely independent and reluctant to ask for help, while addiction left me feeling like I didn't deserve it. Recovery has involved slowly unlearning both. So, 3 years on from looking for money to fuel my addiction, I'm raising funds to take the next step in a life I couldn't have imagined back then, and it's built through all the creativity, hardship and unexpected beauty of recovery.

SUPPORT MY JOURNEY TO NFTS

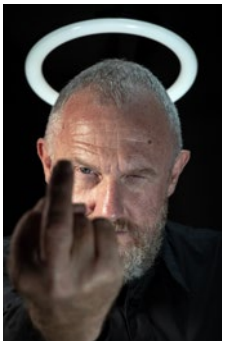
I've set up a GoFundMe to help bridge the gap between my postgraduate loan and the cost of studying at the National Film and Television School. If you'd like to support me, any donation or simply sharing the fundraiser would mean a huge amount.

Donate to Dan's GoFundMe at: https://www.gofundme.com/f/from-addiction-to-film-school-my-next-chapter

Below: *Glass Jaw* (credit: Dan Heyes)



Small Signs
(of a Drug and Alcohol Issue)



Michael McAlister is an artist based in Newport-on-Tay in Fife, Scotland. His art is done primarily using a camera. The following images are from a larger set of 14 images called Small Signs (of a Drug and Alcohol Issue). The words on the images are taken from his diaries.
You can find his work online at thewarmroom.co.uk.

I have always kept a diary, writing down as best I can my thoughts and ponderings, along with my various escapades, the reasons being to help make sense of what is going on between my ears, and in that mad world out there.

It helps me to remember, too.

In 2018 I was kindly invited by Independent Photographers in the South East of England (IPSE) to produce a set of images with the (given by them) title: Small Signs.

I had a think.

For a while I had battled a 'drug and alcohol issue', and for a while after that I battled some 'midlife crisis issues'.

I'm prone to battling.

I wasn't sure which issue to focus on, so I produced two sets of images to present to IPSE. Small Signs (of a Drug and Alcohol Issue) was deemed a bit too grim, but I was chuffed when they selected Small Signs (of a Midlife Crisis) for printing.

Since then, however, I have exhibited Small Signs (of a Drug and Alcohol Issue), as part of Antonia Rolls' The Brighter the Light exhibition in 2019 and as part of her Addicts and Those Who Love Them exhibition in 2021 and 2022.

I was chuffed she invited me.

On the 14th of October 2026, I turned 16 years clean and sober.

It's quite unbelievable.

Not so much as a wine gum.

I still wake with gratitude.

I still thank whatever the hell is was that finally enabled me to let go.

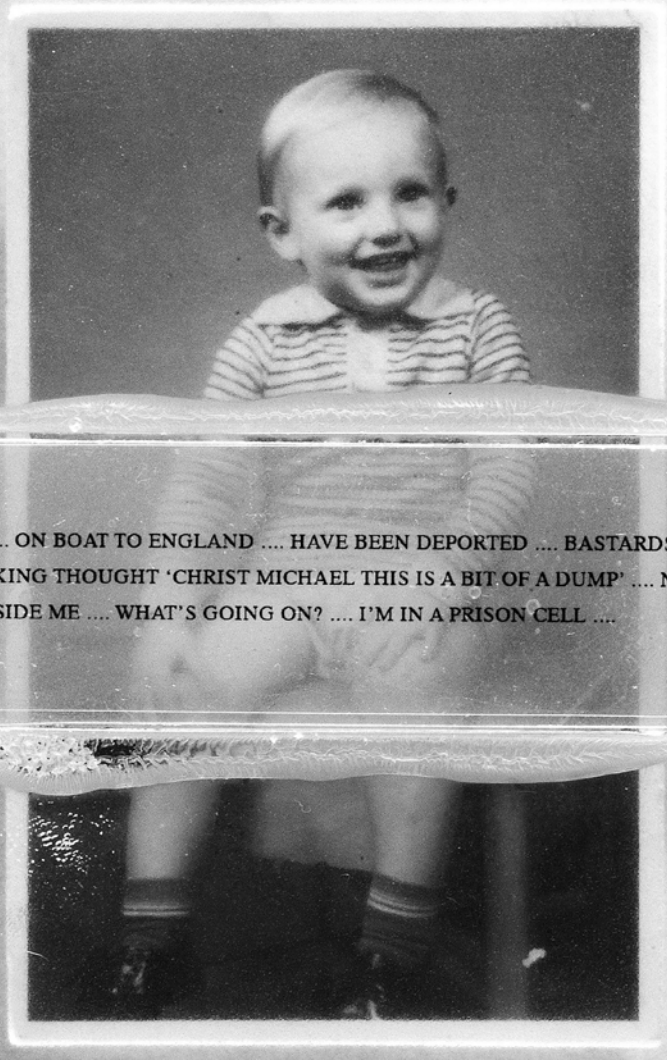
And I am beholden to all those who carried me.



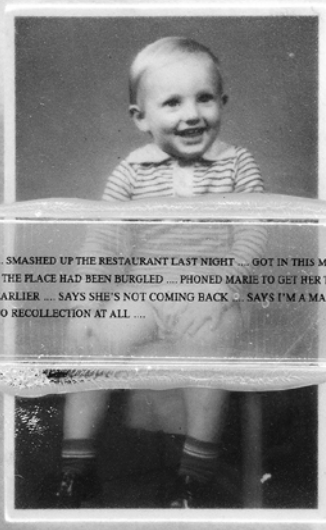
"The work was put together to be exhibited on walls – primarily – with the idea being that from a distance they all looked the same: I liked the idea of someone coming in and complaining, 'They all look the bloody same' – but then being drawn in close to read the words.

There's a big part of me likes to be difficult."

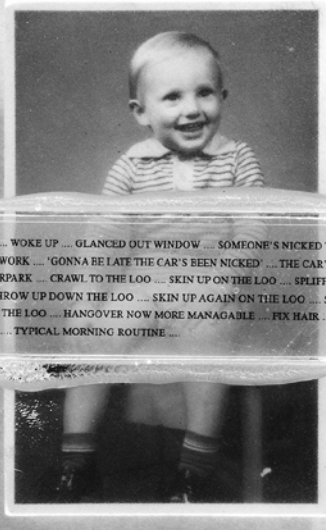
- Michael McAlister



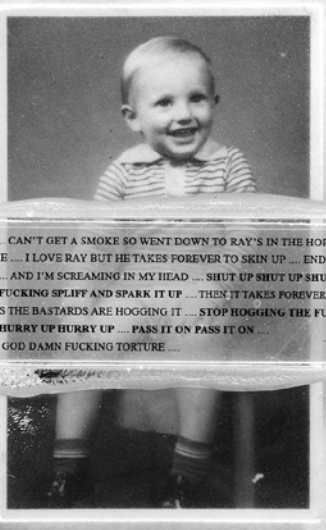
06FEB86 .... ON BOAT TO ENGLAND .... HAVE BEEN DEPORTED .... BASTARDS .... ON FIRST WAKING THOUGHT 'CHRIST MICHAEL THIS IS A BIT OF A DUMP' .... NO ONE LYING BESIDE ME .... WHAT'S GOING ON? .... I'M IN A PRISON CELL ....



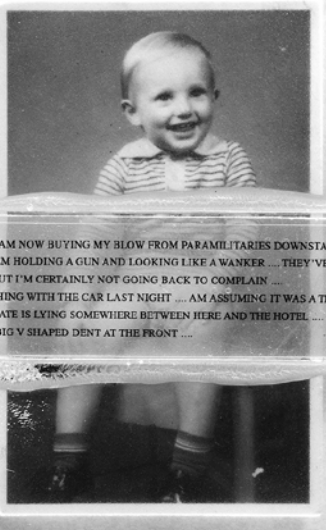
02JUL86 .... SMASHED UP THE RESTAURANT LAST NIGHT .... GOT IN THIS MORNING THINKING THE PLACE HAD BEEN BURGLED .... PHONED MARIE TO GET HER TO COME IN A BIT EARLIER .... SAYS SHE'S NOT COMING BACK .... SAYS I'M A MANIAC .... HAVE NO RECOLLECTION AT ALL ....



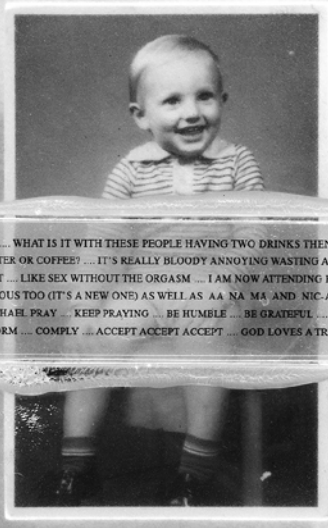
10NOV93 .... WOKE UP .... GLANCED OUT WINDOW .... SOMEONE'S NICKED THE CAR .... PHONE WORK .... 'GONNA BE LATE THE CAR'S BEEN NICKED' .... THE CAR'S IN THE HOTEL CARPARK .... CRAWL TO THE LOO .... SKIN UP ON THE LOO .... SPLIFF ON THE LOO .... THROW UP DOWN THE LOO .... SKIN UP AGAIN ON THE LOO .... SECOND SPLIFF ON THE LOO .... HANGOVER NOW MORE MANAGABLE .... FIX HAIR .... APPLY BRONZER .... TYPICAL MORNING ROUTINE ....



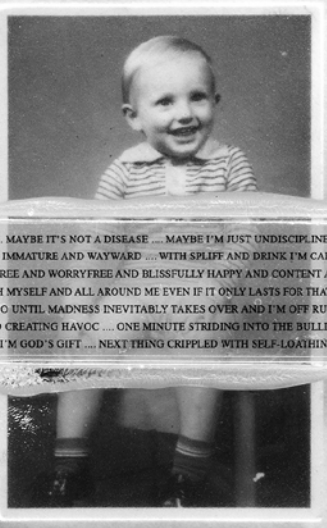
03APR93 .... CAN'T GET A SMOKE SO WENT DOWN TO RAY'S IN THE HOPE HE'D HAVE SOME .... I LOVE RAY BUT HE TAKES FOREVER TO SKIN UP .... ENDLESSLY TALKING .... AND I'M SCREAMING IN MY HEAD .... **SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP .... ROLL THE FUCKING SPLIFF AND SPARK IT UP** .... THEN IT TAKES FOREVER TO GET TO ME 'COS THE BASTARDS ARE HOGGING IT .... **STOP HOGGING THE FUCKING SPLIFF** .... **HURRY UP HURRY UP** .... **PASS IT ON PASS IT ON** .... ABSOLUTE GOD DAMN FUCKING TORTURE ....



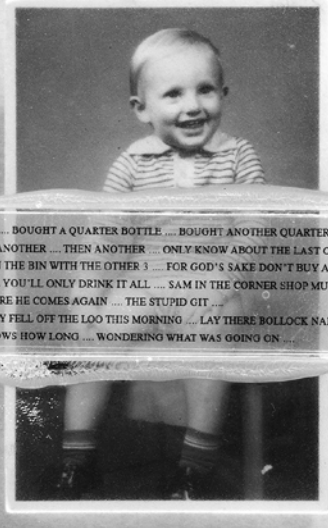
15JAN94 .... AM NOW BUYING MY BLOW FROM PARAMILITARIES DOWNSTAIRS .... ONE OF THEM HOLDING A GUN AND LOOKING LIKE A WANKER .... THEY'VE SOLD ME GACK BUT I'M CERTAINLY NOT GOING BACK TO COMPLAIN .... HIT SOMETHING WITH THE CAR LAST NIGHT .... AM ASSUMING IT WAS A TREE .... NUMBER PLATE IS LYING SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HERE AND THE HOTEL .... CAN'T FIND IT .... BIG V SHAPED DENT AT THE FRONT ....



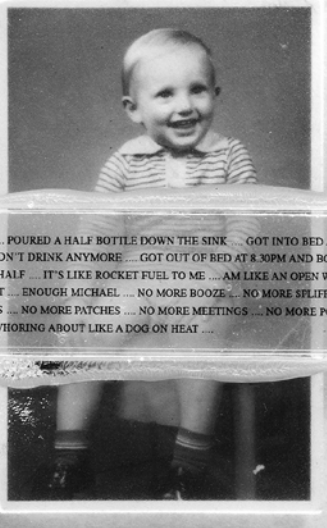
03APR97 .... WHAT IS IT WITH THESE PEOPLE HAVING TWO DRINKS THEN GOING ONTO WATER OR COFFEE? .... IT'S REALLY BLOODY ANNOYING WASTING ALCOHOL LIKE THAT .... LIKE SEX WITHOUT THE ORGASM .... I AM NOW ATTENDING HUMANS ANONYMOUS TOO (IT'S A NEW ONE) AS WELL AS AA NA MA AND NIC-ANON .... PRAY MICHAEL PRAY .... KEEP PRAYING .... BE HUMBLE .... BE GRATEFUL .... BEHAVE .... CONFORM .... COMPLY .... ACCEPT ACCEPT ACCEPT .... GOD LOVES A TRIER ....



07MAY01 .... MAYBE IT'S NOT A DISEASE .... MAYBE I'M JUST UNDISCIPLINED AND GREEDY .... IMMATURE AND WAYWARD .... WITH SPLIFF AND DRINK I'M CAREFREE AND PAINFREE AND WORRYFREE AND BLISSFULLY HAPPY AND CONTENT AND AT PEACE WITH MYSELF AND ALL AROUND ME EVEN IF IT ONLY LASTS FOR THAT FIRST HOUR OR SO UNTIL MADNESS INEVITABLY TAKES OVER AND I'M OFF RUNNING AMOK AND CREATING HAVOC .... ONE MINUTE STRIDING INTO THE BULLDOG .... THINKING I'M GOD'S GIFT .... NEXT THING CRIPPLED WITH SELF-LOATHING ....



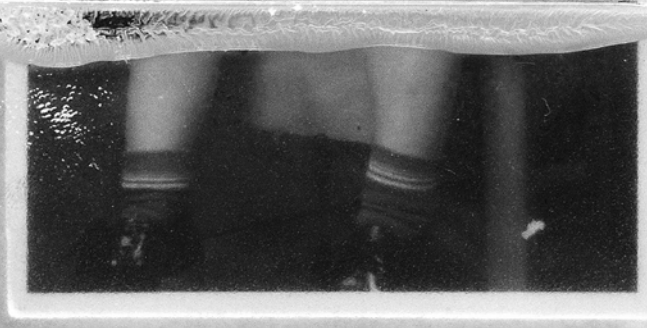
21APR09 .... BOUGHT A QUARTER BOTTLE .... BOUGHT ANOTHER QUARTER BOTTLE .... THEN ANOTHER .... THEN ANOTHER .... ONLY KNOW ABOUT THE LAST ONE 'COS IT WAS IN THE BIN WITH THE OTHER 3 .... FOR GOD'S SAKE DON'T BUY A BOTTLE MICHAEL YOU'LL ONLY DRINK IT ALL .... SAM IN THE CORNER SHOP MUST LOVE ME .... HERE HE COMES AGAIN .... THE STUPID GIT .... ACTUALLY FELL OFF THE LOO THIS MORNING .... LAY THERE BOLLOCK NAKED FOR GOD KNOWS HOW LONG .... WONDERING WHAT WAS GOING ON ....



05MAY09 .... POURED A HALF BOTTLE DOWN THE SINK .... GOT INTO BED AT 8PM SO I WOULDN'T DRINK ANYMORE .... GOT OUT OF BED AT 8.30PM AND BOUGHT ANOTHER HALF .... IT'S LIKE ROCKET FUEL TO ME .... AM LIKE AN OPEN WOUND WITHOUT IT .... ENOUGH MICHAEL .... NO MORE BOOZE .... NO MORE SPLIFF .... NO MORE FAGS .... NO MORE PATCHES .... NO MORE MEETINGS .... NO MORE PORN .... NO MORE WHORING ABOUT LIKE A DOG ON HEAT ....



15JUN11 .... WATCHING AB FAB .... I *WAS* FUNNY STONED AND SOMETHING VERY DIFFERENT WHEN ON THE VODKA BUT I NEEDED MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND IT STILL WASN'T ENOUGH .... AND WHEN IT STOPS WORKING AND YOU'RE STILL DOING IT .... AND THEN YOU'RE BLUBBING IN THE CORNER AND YOU DON'T KNOW WHY .... AND YOU CAN'T EVEN ORGASM ANYMORE AND YOU DON'T KNOW WHY .... AND YOU'RE NOT EVEN FEELING ANYTHING ANYMORE .... AND YOU'RE STILL DOING IT .... AND STILL DOING IT .... AND **STILL** DOING IT ....




Freedom
of

Urja Desai Thakore is the founder, artistic director and CEO of Pagrav Dance Company, which is based in Milton Keynes. The company was originally founded in India in 1983 by Urja's mother and sisters to establish more equitable relationships between artists, promoters and event organisers. The UK company was set up in 2005 and became a registered charity in 2022. Since then, it has put on productions across the country at many venues, including the Royal Albert Hall.

Deborah Whipp is a board member of Performing Recovery *and a dancer with Fallen Angels Dance Theatre. Here, she speaks to Urja about her background in dance, Pagrav's 2013 production* Detox*, which focused on addiction, and how the art of dance can help with recovery and identity.*

Debs: What is your background as a dancer?

Urja: I started dancing when I was 4 years old. My mother was learning Bharatanatyam, which is a type of Indian classical dance. I was also learning this dance, but I was apparently very naughty – though I don't know what she was expecting at the age of 4. She didn't know whether I should continue the class.

One day, my mother took me to watch Indian dance legend Sitara Devi, who performed another kind of Indian dance called Kathak. My mother would always take me backstage to seek the performers' blessings, and this time was no different. Sitara Devi blessed me and said I would make a name for myself through Kathak and do good work. So my mother thought, "Well, perhaps we should try Kathak!" And that's how it all began.

Debs: What are the three strands of Pagrav Dance Company?

Urja: Pagrav means "the sound of feet", and our work has three main strands: New Feet, New Paths and New Grounds.

New Feet is where it all starts with our classes and grassroots teaching. It's for children and adults beginning their journey in Kathak. We teach from the age of 4 upwards, and my eldest student is 60!

New Paths is about supporting dancers as they develop, and that happens through three programmes: Arohi, Naad and Oxygen 2.0. Arohi, which means a progression, is a youth company for those aged 11–18. Naad is a pre-professional performance group for adults aged 18+. It's for people who want to take dance seriously but haven't been able to do it professionally. Through Oxygen 2.0, we support professional artists with development. We provide resources and co-produce performances.

The third strand is New Grounds, which is where we create work with professional artists, like any other performing arts company. As a touring company, we create work and tour it nationally and internationally.

Debs: Can you tell us about your arts in health programme?

Urja: We're also running Kathak Elixir, a programme that brings Kathak into hospice settings. We're currently working with Willen Hospice in Milton Keynes, offering movement workshops for people living with and beyond cancer, as well as people with other terminal illnesses. It's a chance to explore Kathak through movement, rhythm and expression, with space for each person to take part in their own way. For us, it's about opening up the art form and creating moments of connection, enjoyment and freedom through movement.

Debs: How do people get involved in that?

Urja: For Kathak Elixir, we originally had sessions in which patients came to us – but we realised these patients are going through such difficult times and, despite a lot of interest, many of them could not make it. So that's why we started working with Willen Hospice.

We are also exploring bringing Kathak Elixir to people with Parkinson's, because there are studies suggesting that movement can have a great impact on the confidence and well-being of Parkinson's patients.

Debs: On a similar theme, back in 2013, you had a project called *Detox*, which focused on addiction recovery. Can you tell us more about that particular project and the impact it had on participants?

Urja: *Detox* was inspired by a quote from the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu: "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be."

When I started the research for this work, I talked to my friends and family about addictions and habits like smoking. I was asking them how they felt about leaving these habits behind.

> "DURING THE CREATION PERIOD, WE TALKED NOT ONLY ABOUT DETOXING FROM BAD THINGS AROUND US, BUT ALSO ASKED: 'HOW DOES ONE GET RID OF TOXICITY OF MIND?'"

During the creation period, we talked not only about detoxing from bad things around us, but also asked: How does one get rid of toxicity of mind? Is toxicity something which you can get rid of 100%? Or do you come to a phase in your being where you have to find a balance?

Detox turned out to be one of the darkest pieces I've ever created. One of my friends saw the piece and commented on how weird it was coming from me.

I've never enjoyed alcohol – I first tasted it when I was 28 but didn't like it. However, when I was creating Detox, I actually found myself drawn towards the experience to better translate the experience onto the dancers.

Debs: What was the impact on the dancers?

Urja: For the dancers, there was one section where they had to really give themselves over to the piece. The first time they did it in rehearsal, it was quite intense. It was very emotionally and physically draining for them because it was about the frustration of not being able to let go of an addiction. They requested that they practise it with less intensity until the day of the performance.

I said that I completely understood and that I was happy for them to do whatever they needed to do. Safeguards are very important, and I even suggested bringing someone in who could help with safeguarding, but they decided they didn't need it.

We didn't talk about personal addictions, but rather focused on the general sense of letting something go. To create the right movement, I told them to imagine that they had a piece of clothing they wanted to remove but were unable to. I was giving them those tools rather than asking them to dig deep emotionally, because I know how difficult it can get.

When he saw the show, another one of my friends told me he had gone through a series of stages of quit-

Previous page image: Urja Desai Thakore (credit: Saloni Saraf)

ting smoking, and that he recognised every stage of that process in Detox. He was surprised when I said I had never been addicted to anything. The inspiration came from my conversations with people – asking about their experiences of giving various things up, or even doing things like leaving toxic relationships.

The other thing which was very significant about this performance was the material we used. I wanted to do something special, but I didn't know what that could be. One day, the set designer, Mikhail, came in with the materials he was using for a set. There was one specific fabric that started off with a paper-like texture but became more like cloth as it was used. Even though it was meant for set design, I insisted on using it.

The material started off rigid and was a grey-black colour, but as the dancers moved with this fabric , it became softer. The threads of the material would start to appear, and the material would start to shed, and the colour would change. It was like a physical translation of the idea of "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be."

It was one of the most amazing, but most expensive, pieces of fabric I have ever seen in my life.

> "I TOLD THEM TO IMAGINE THAT THEY HAD A PIECE OF CLOTHING THEY WANTED TO REMOVE BUT WERE UNABLE TO. I WAS GIVING THEM THOSE TOOLS RATHER THAN ASKING THEM TO DIG DEEP EMOTIONALLY, BECAUSE I KNOW HOW DIFFICULT IT CAN GET."

Debs: The Kathak Elixir project and the *Detox* project both touch on forms of recovery and living through difficult circumstances. How does art, and dance in particular, help people in recovery?

Urja: I think art and dance help people to forget the difficulties they have gone through. It takes them to new places. It gives them the power of imagination. It gives them the power to be accepted in whatever form and shape they are in. It gives them the liberation of being who they are, what they are within the space.

Debs: What would you say are the most important things that you've learned while you've been running the company?

Urja: I think persistence and believing in what you are doing are important, but also empathy towards fellow artists. Inclusivity is something we've always focused on, both in





Above: Urja Desai Thakore (credit: Christa Holka)

India and here in the UK. We try to treat the organisation as a family rather than say, "We are the company and you are the employees."

The core of the company is being authentic to yourself but also working together rather than in isolation. I see all my students applying for the same funding and trying for the same opportunities, but they are always genuinely happy for each other when one of them gets something, even if, as an individual, they've lost out. I think that says a lot about what we do.

Debs: Where do you see the company going in the future?

Urja: In the future, I really hope that we will be able to offer the infrastructure required for Indian classical dance in this country. I really hope that we can bring more joy and happiness to a lot of people and that there are more dancers and more audiences enjoying the experience of Indian classical art forms. We want to give opportunities to people who have not experienced the art form of Kathak before and liberate them.

The next project we are doing is called *Khoj*, which is a collaboration between myself and Hetain Patel that looks at identity. We are trying to answer some questions: who am I, and what do people perceive when I say that I am an Indian classical dancer? What is the expectation of the audience? How do I challenge that?

A very beautiful thing happened a couple of days back. A young person close to us revealed publicly that she'd been diagnosed with cancer. It was a very powerful thing to say out loud: "This is what I'm going through", rather than being very hush-hush.

Recovery can be harder when we face others' assumptions about our experiences. Each of us should have the authority to dictate how we are seen, rather than giving that authority to other people.◆

For more details on Pragrav Dance Company, visit: https://www.pagravdance.com/

Left: *Detox* (credit: Simon Richardson)

A New Earth

by

Ameet Shah

Creativity is a lifeline and a lifesaver for those who are empaths, sensitives, intuitive, neurodiverse and survivors of trauma. Those who become spiritually awake from a young age with active minds that need channelling.

We are the inheritors of generational trauma, often becoming mature at a young age, being the family's emotional sponge, having to be mentally sharp and aware yet ignoring our own self-care and self-love. We are the transformers of this state into many expressions and pathways of returning to self.

At the same time, many of us become the scapegoats and black sheep of their family, community and society, punished for being their authentic self, experiencing severe rejection, abandonment and discrimination. We return as examples of hope, finally becoming a voice of many that it's okay to break the spell.

We ended up performing for others at our own expense, either living a miserable life, double life or finally exploding, breaking down and snapping after a life of depletion. But now we can perform for fun and pleasure in the arts, where there is no limit to what can be created: the skies and horizons of limitless expansion.

This is the gateway to their awakening to learn boundaries, self-embodiment of the wounded healer ... to bold, brave, unapologetic expression of all that was held back ... into explosions of colour in multifaceted, multisensory and multidimensional direction!

We can finally live for ourselves ... in our purposes that are many ... after much servitude to others ... to finally be able to serve from an overflowing cup.

We acquire wholeness and develop the skills, gifts and talents we originally used as creativity for survival, but now in a stronger manner, as if they have activated our superpowers. This is the reward we receive for the pain and suffering endured and the path of healing we've chosen for ourselves ... a never-ending ... exciting ... yet eventful journey. This has been my story ... one which continues in powerful shifts towards more evolution and embodiment of who I really am. To know myself, master myself and leave the drama of being a rescuer, martyr, people-pleaser and victim who then becomes a perpetrator through projection onto others because of their own hurt.

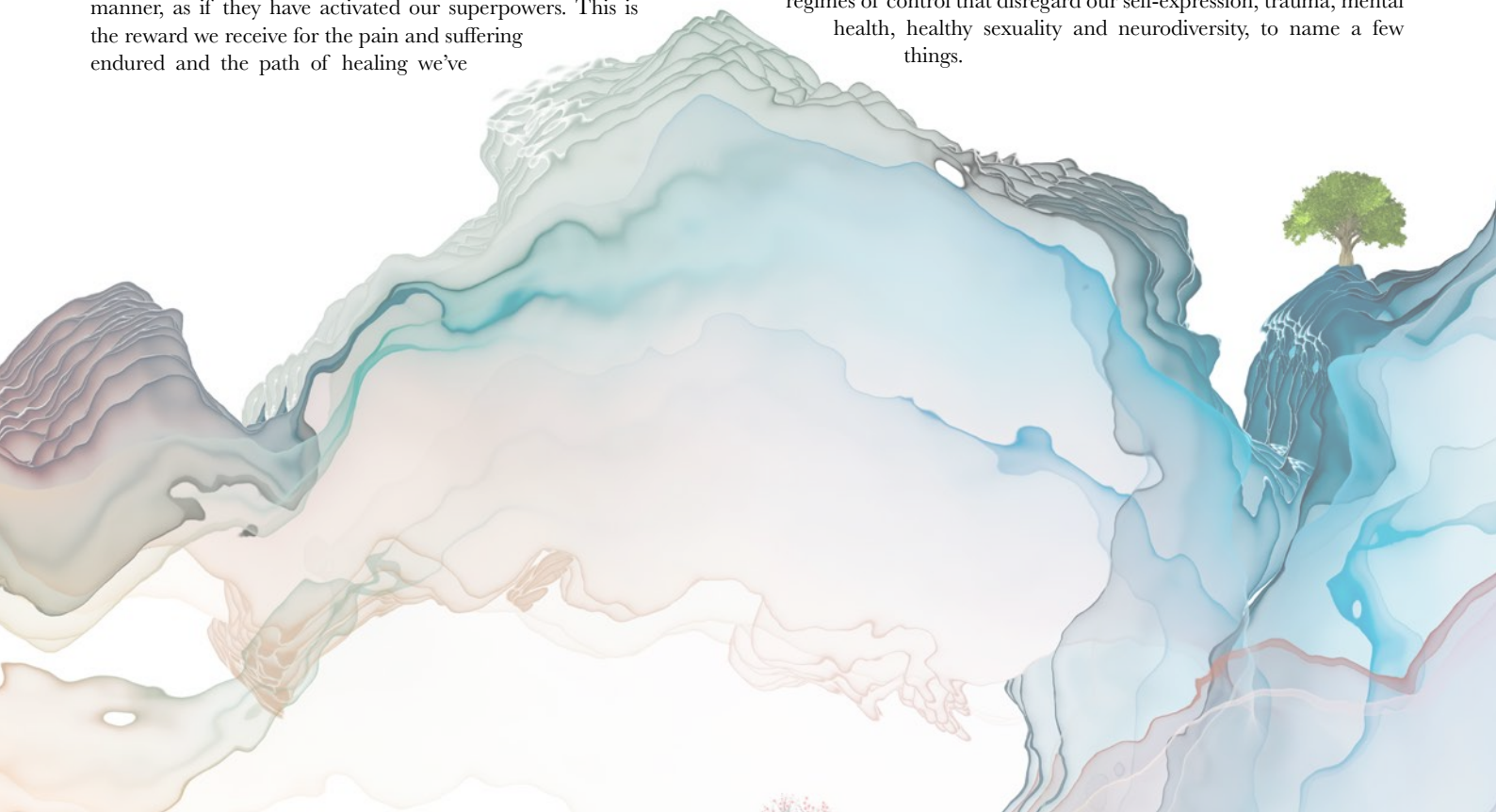
Abused people, families, communities, societies and lands only abuse others if they don't choose to heal. This is the cause of war in its many forms on this planet today ... the biggest one being the war on human consciousness, the mind and body which corrupt the spirit cutting it away from the soul into zombification and robotic operation with no heart connection. We see this every day now, as a common occurrence where many have lost their humanity.

My mum's suicide is a classic example of how society is still ashamed, guilty and fearful of its wounds that need healing. My mum had a painful life and suffered in silence due to backward, limiting cultural norms that are killing people well before they die. Norms that don't allow cries for help and support because it is against family traditions that base themselves on fake honour.

Enough is enough. It's 2026! What is worthy of preserving and what must go; surely this is an individually unique choice, decision and offering?

My mother didn't die in vain; she is a symbolic sacrifice to accelerate change in the world, in the breakdown of corrupt systems to bring justice to those silenced, suppressed, repressed, ignored, bypassed or escaped in neglect, marginalisation, abandonment, discrimination and rejection!

Each of us can welcome each breakdown ... to break through ... to break free from being powerless to powerful beyond all disempowering regimes of control that disregard our self-expression, trauma, mental health, healthy sexuality and neurodiversity, to name a few things.





To make space for all things fresh, new, rejuvenating and meaningful that can have a laugh, cry and shake, too.

Old cycles stop at me.

Without this opportunity of awakening and recovery, I would sink into further depression, addiction, codependency and servitude to abuse, finally destroying myself.

This is why my life has purpose and direction to be a change in this world. To be a lighthouse in the darkness. To shine in my original existence because each star shines its own light in the night sky to create a beautiful galaxy as a blanket of safety.

May we carry this light for ourselves, our young ones and the world, being aware of holistic healing to choose the path of awakening that serves our soul and spirit with those of others to become healthy, wholesome, resilient, strong and grounded in mind, body and energy. Taking the time for ourselves when needed without any guilt or shame in a world that has programmed and pressured us to do the opposite.

May our connection to source/God, guides in spirit, elemental, etheric, cosmic, galactic and celestial realms assist us with universal life force energy flowing in full force through us with God's Grace. This is the real antidote, remedy, medicine and cure for all dis-ease in existence.

Our bodies ... miraculous vessels, mediums, channels and instruments of self-empowerment beyond what we are taught and told in brainwashing manipulation from a young age. Conditioning.

It is time to undo, untie, wipe, reboot and start again for many. To reclaim our own truths and return home to who we are in our greatness to be well.

We are amidst another powerful shift that is rocking the planet and humanity, shaking off what's not needed anymore. So, let's dance, celebrate and create, alone and together, as well as grieve, mourn, heal, change, grow and finally live!

The point of any spiritual or psychotherapeutic tool, practice, lineage of teachings or path is to take us through the process of awakening to authentic self. Any attachment to a name, label, category, identity or institution out of toxic pride, reputation, prestige, fear, mask or otherwise is due to clinging that exists due to ignoring something that needs healing in the depths of us. May we be able to pick and choose from where we like, however we want, without having to live in a box.

One size doesn't fit all, and neither does one key fit into every keyhole. Each of us has unique fingerprints, just as our soul and spirit have a unique blueprint.

Why steer away from feelings, emotions, unique self-expression and being? Are we fearful of what we may find out about ourselves and the power we hold, away from society's superficial constructs of guilt, shame, division, conquer, rule and fight?

These are attitudes that need healing before sound. Wholesome human habits and relationships can be created for another phase and another time. A new era.

Love and light are not always light and fluffy. The can be strong, resilient and boundaried through conflict resolution and confronting issues that need change. Love has many forms, including tough love when needed to achieve the empathy and compassion humanity needs through the dissolving of concepts, attitudes, systems, structures and institutions that need to go, in order to create new ones based on the energy of a bright, new future ...

... where we are the change on New Earth

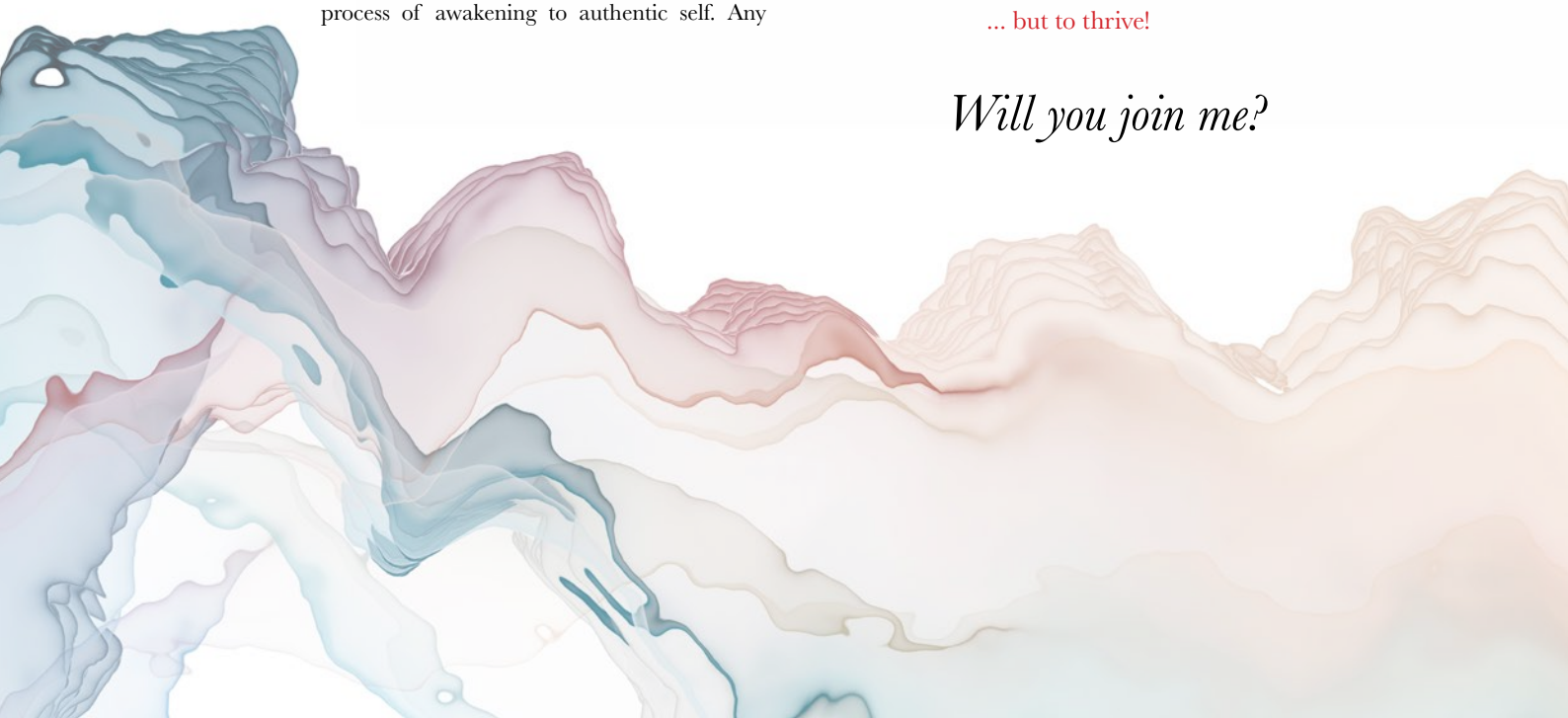
... with values, ethics and morals

...that can help each other

... to not just recover and survive,

... but to thrive!

Will you join me?





KICKED OUT

by

MATT BACHMAN

Above: Matt Bachman (credit: Christa Bachman/Let Go Media)

Matt Bachman is a Los Angeles-born pop punk songwriter living in Lisbon. His new single Better Part Of Me *is about breaking free from the worst version of yourself. In this personal story, he talks about his relationship with alcohol and other substances, his difficult relationship with himself, and the freedom of being an independent artist.*

I'm a songwriter. I've been writing songs since I was 14. Music has always been a big part of my life from a very early age. My mother and older family members all brought records and musical instruments into our house. I remember holding a broom in the mirror at a very young age and acting out performing on stage before I even picked up a guitar, so the need to be seen, loved and/or admired was there from the get-go.

At first, I was interested in playing the drums, but soon I became frustrated and lost interest. I was turned onto the guitar by my older brother, as he played guitar and was in a lot of bands. The guitar was challenging enough yet intriguing enough to hold my attention. Little did I know that the guitar would eventually allow me to express myself on a deeper level and take me places I never dreamed.

Music, alcohol and substances were all intermixed in my life. It was always around, and always available, from stealing one of my dad's beers from the fridge or nicking my brother's

> "I've harboured a love-hate relationship with myself throughout the years."

pot stash. I had an easy opportunity to take advantage of getting high or drunk. I started becoming interested in alcohol and drugs kinda for the same reason I got into music, in my early years, as I was the youngest of four siblings and their friends. I spent a lot of time around older kids and eventually started to partake in the ritual of getting high or drinking.

My household, unfortunately, was also fuelled by anger and alcohol, as my father drank nightly and released his drunken rage on the family. And/or one of my siblings would come home drunk. That was certainly a big component of my escapism and my need to check out and not face my own anger, loss of control or fears.

A DUI at 17 woke me the fuck up for a brief time and allowed me a moment of clarity and a conscious decision to become sober. Although there were forced or mandatory AA visits and community service, there was also a deeper connection, desire or need of wanting to be healthier and take responsibility for my actions.

This stint of sobriety lasted for a spell. Once back on the merry-go-round, I found myself drinking excessively through my 20s and 30s, and while I was still songwriting and now performing in bands around the L.A. scene, I was still heavily into substance and alcohol use. My second DUI at 39 was another wake-up call for a brief time.

I've harboured a love-hate relationship with myself throughout the years. I've worked on rewiring, self-introspection and gone through quite a bit of therapy to help me find that loving space for myself and allow myself to enjoy the fruits of my creative movements and life in general. I wish I could say that one would substitute the other, or that art, music or any kind of creative outlet can help me get and/or maintain my sobriety, but I feel that it has come from a deeper, more internalised source, which is what really made me decide to make a go of it and stay sober.

I'm 58 now, and I finally decided 3 years ago that I was done, and I couldn't keep doing this to myself anymore. I have written several songs about my trials and tribulations with my alcohol and substance use – not to glamorise or put substance or alcohol use in the spotlight, but rather to share my experiences through my art.

I write from my own feelings on my own experiences. I wrote the flagship song, *Kicked Out Of The Sky*, which launched my latest band, in my kitchen in Burbank during the pandemic in 2020. These new songs I've written for my latest EP, *Happiness Is Overrated*, are some of my best songwriting to date, and I'm really proud of them.

I guess all the introspection, rewiring and therapy over the years is actually paying off. Being an indie artist is important to me for several reasons. I like the freedom to create and release any songs I want, without a filter or a team of people scrutinizing the songs or subject matter. It is more challenging to self-promote, tour and make a successful go of it. But I'm happy doing what I love to do, and making music, performing and just sharing my art is the true payoff for being an indie artist. Sobriety for me is a huge plus and has been a helpful, necessary decision for me.

Better Part of Me *is out on Let Go Media. You can listen at*: https://listen.kickedoutofthesky.com/betterpartofme.

Below: Matt Bachman (Credit: Christa Bachman/Let Go Media)



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/

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

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

Eleanor Cowell
East London
A visual artist exploring mental health through arts and well-being classes.
Email: eleanorcowellart@gmail.com
Website: 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
Website: 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

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

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
Website: geese.co.uk

Horizon
Brighton

Supporting those in recovery from addiction through the medium of creative film, media and photography.
Email: annie@editsweet.rocks
Website: myhorizon.rocks

Lost Souls Poetry Night
Wandsworth, London



Sober-friendly open-mic nights for poets and other wordsmiths.
Website: instagram.com/lostsoulsevents

New Central Media

Publishing centred on the voices of those with lived experience.
Website: 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

Mindful Art Club
Plymouth

Offering art groups, meditation and other activities for people in recovery in the Plymouth area.
Website: mindfulartclub.co.uk

The Mixed Bag Players
York
York-based theatre group associated with York in Recovery.
Website: facebook.com/groups/835222381575024/

Head-on
Southeast
Facilitating, mentoring and coaching inclusive recovery arts and dance spaces.
Website: 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 *run*ning music training courses.
Website: notsaints.co.uk

The Outsiders Project
Boscombe

An organisation working with outsider artists in the community.
Website: 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.

Our Space (Theatre Royal Plymouth)

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

Portraits of Recovery
Manchester

Visual arts charity supporting people and communities in recovery.
Website: 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/recoverycollectivecic

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

Small Performance Adventures
Brighton

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

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/

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

Vita Nova
Boscombe

A creative arts organisation and recovery community, *run* by members and volunteers.
Website: vitanova.co.uk

Voodoo Monkeys
Devon

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

Passenger Recovery
Worldwide

Resources, 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

Recovered Arts Film & Theatre Collective
Vancouver, BC, Canada

The collective aims to create a community of artists to use filmmaking and theatre to support others in recovery.
Website: www.therecoveredartscollective.org

The Recovery Project
Florida, USA

Florida-based projects using arts to help reduce stigma and help people with addiction.
Website: https://www.floridastudiotheatre.org/support-us/therecoveryproject/

