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Prisons as Art Studios

FAITH LAPIDUS: Welcome to AMERICAN MOSAIC in VOA Special English.

(MUSIC)

I'm Faith Lapidus. Today on our show, we play music by blues artist Joe Louis Walker ...

We also read from some of your recent comments ...

But, first we take a look at artwork created by people held in American prisons.

(MUSIC)

Prison Art

FAITH LAPIDUS: Some prisoners in the United States create works of art. Prison art is sold in art galleries in the Washington, DC, area. The profits are split among the artists and the Prisons Foundation, a not-for-profit group in the nation's capital. The Prisons Foundation supports the arts in prisons and programs designed to help keep people out of jail. Christopher Cruise tells us more about the group and prison art.



[Watch a video about the prison art](#)

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Some prisoners create pictures filled with images of natural beauty. It helps them remember the world they left behind. Dennis Sobin served twelve years in prison. He created the Prisons Foundation while he was jailed.

DENNIS SOBIN: "Art is a very much of a redemptive, a rehabilitative, a therapeutic vehicle for people."

Mr. Sobin says prison art is often full of emotion.

DENNIS SOBIN: "Other people want to be with family. So they'll paint pictures of family gatherings, family scenes. And then there's some that are so angry about

the prison experience that they want to do protest type of painting, showing the harsh realities of prison life, the bars."

Dale Johnson owns the Watergate Gallery, which sells prisoner art.

DALE JOHNSON: "There's a lot of sensitivity in this art. You can see what people are thinking."

Brian Driggers was released from prison recently. He created a lot of art during his eight years in prison. Some of it is in the Crime and Punishment Museum in Washington. He used a pen or pastels in his art. Paint and brushes were not permitted in the prison because they could be used for body art.

Mr. Driggers spoke with VOA on Skype about what he used to create a picture of his wife.

BRIAN DRIGGERS: "I created the brush out of my own hair. I would cut a lock of my hair out, fold it up, tie it up with dental floss, and then use a pen. And then paint with instant coffee. You could mix it down with different levels of water to create different tones and use it as a watercolor medium."

Mister Driggers also created a picture of himself using pastel sticks.

BRIAN DRIGGERS: "And the shapes are broken apart, and what that alludes to is my life had completely fallen apart, and the meaning behind that is me kind of coming back together."

We have placed a link to the Prisons Foundation website on our website, voaspecialenglish.com.

Comments

FAITH LAPIDUS: And now it is time to take a look at your comments about some of our recent stories.

The report that got the most comments, about one hundred, was just last week. We wrote about the best movies and books and played a mix of songs from two thousand eleven. But that was not what most of you wrote about.

We got a huge number of comments about the retirement of Doug Johnson, who was an important part of this program for more than twenty years. There were touching wishes of good luck and thanks. Many people commented on the quality of Doug's voice. Obeid from Egypt said he likes English because of Doug's *pure*

accent. Sergey in Russia wrote that Doug's clear and appealing voice was leading me many years in learning and understanding English.

And JZ from China expressed surprise about the announcement of Doug's retirement *as your voice sounds young*, he wrote.

But Javier Robledo of Spain captured the emotion of all Doug's many fans. *I will miss you Doug. You are a member of my family.*

Listener Jean was interested in our story about plans to sell shares in a company that operates New York's Empire State Building. *If it only costs ten dollars a share, I want to buy some. Then I could say I am one of the owners of the Empire State Building.* She also commented on our story of how America bought the territory that is now Alaska from Russia. *It is really the best deal I've ever heard. Russia must regret selling it.*



Last month we wrote about the food provided to American soldiers in the field by the military. Saif in Iraq praised the story we called "Meals Ready to Eat." *I see the stuff of meal with the US troops here in Iraq. It is so easy to use and I think it contains a lot of calories. It energizes the troops.*

Kim in South Korea wrote that he learned from our story about the meaning of Black Friday. *Before reading and listening to this article, I had no idea of what Black Friday was and why it is called so. I thought it was a certain day bad things are likely to happen like Friday the Thirteenth.*

No. Just a big day for stores that includes lots of sales. But, to Americans who do not like crowded shopping malls or the traffic that results, Black Friday IS a bad day!

Thanks to all our website visitors for their comments. And please keep them coming. Maybe we will read one of your on a future show.

Joe Louis Walker

FAITH LAPIDUS: Blues musician Joe Louis Walker will release his twenty-third record album at the end of the month. However, "Hellfire" is Walker's first album with Alligator Records. The company's president calls Walker "everything a bluesman should be" with a commanding voice that "comes right out of church." June Simms has our story.

JUNE SIMMS: Joe Louis Walker was born sixty-two years ago on December twenty-fifth, the day when many people celebrate Christmas. So it was no surprise that he grew up on Christian music. His family also enjoyed blues music.



joelouiswalker.com

Joe Louis Walker was playing guitar by the age of fourteen. He was good at it early on. Before turning twenty, he started performing as the opening act for blues greats like B. B. King, John Lee Hooker and others.

But the new album shows that Walker also can play other kinds of music. "Ride All Night" is undeniably rock and roll.

(MUSIC)

"Hellfire" also contains some very traditional blues. "I'm On To You" is an example.

(MUSIC)

Listeners can always find the Christian influence in Joe Louis Walker's albums. "Hellfire" contains many such songs. One critic says the album seems to be mostly about the battle between good and evil. Here is "Soldier for Jesus."

(MUSIC)

Tom Hambridge was the man who produced "Hellfire." He was responsible for two recent Grammy-winning albums from Buddy Guy. Hambridge plays drums and wrote songs for "Hellfire." We leave you with Joe Louis Walker performing one of them. Here is "What's It Worth."

(MUSIC)

FAITH LAPIDUS: I'm Faith Lapidus. This program was written by Christopher Cruise and Caty Weaver, who was also our producer.

If you have a question about American life, please email us. The address is mosaic@voanews.com. We will try to answer your question on a future show.

Join us again next week for music and more on AMERICAN MOSAIC in VOA Special English.