

"The Inside Singers" by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman
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I presented a "How To" Blues In The Schools program for future teachers in Iowa City, for the Univ. of IA School of Education in 2013, and I also gave a performance/songwriting workshop for the Oakdale Prison Choir in nearby Coralville, IA. All thanks to Prof. Mary Cohen for facilitating both of the activities.

In [recent correspondence Prof. Cohen] references the new, more lenient and progressive warden at the Oakdale prison. The previous warden strictly enforced all rules, including time scheduling and the dress code for visitors.

I was not informed in advance as to the prison visitors' dress code aspect.

It was a very hot and humid, in the high 90s, late July, afternoon in Iowa. I showed up at the prison for my 6pm to 7pm program at 5:30pm, with guitar, and, suitable for the very hot weather, wearing a tank top, 'cargo'-style shorts, socks, & running shoes. At 5:40pm I was called to go through security. I was refused entry due my wearing shorts and a tank top. Visitor dress code rules.

Apparently this is not the first time this has happened, and I was told by the security guard that I had about 20 minutes, until 6pm, to acquire proper pants and a shirt, and that there is a Goodwill five minutes away, and a WalMart a bit further. I jumped in the pick-up truck of one of the civilian community choir members (non-inmate) who was waiting with me to get into the prison, his being there to attend the performance/workshop. He overheard everything I was told by the guard, and told me to follow him out the door. He knew where the Goodwill was located, I certainly didn't, and he got me there in about 4 minutes.

As we ran in I asked him to find me any kind of decent "proper" shirt in size XL, while I would locate/run to the pants area/racks, as pants were harder to fit than a shirt. As I quickly tried on a couple of pair of pants, in very short order, from across the store, my compatriot held up high in the air a deep red Hawaiian shirt with broad white flowers, size XL, and yelled "How's this for a bluesman?"

"XL?" I yelled back.

"Yes!" he responded. Seconds later I found a pair of pants that fit, and putting them on, then my socks/shoes, we ran to the check-out counter. What a break, as it was "senior discount day", and I paid \$7, total. Out the Goodwill store door we ran and we jump into the truck. We sped back to the prison, with me putting on the shirt; it fit fine, not into 'reds', but it was a good and fast find under the high stress and circumstances.

We made it back to the prison at 5:57pm. Went through security successfully. I got the program started at 6:10pm. Sweaty, but ready. Choir members all present and waiting for the program to begin. I apologized to them for the late start, and explained the circumstances. No problem. They found my tardiness 'alibi' amusing. I must still finish my program no later than 7pm, strict prison scheduling rules.

Fun, engaged, and responsive group of inmates/choir members. All went extremely well. I bid them a fond farewell, and my hope to return in the future, and "I hope that I would see none of them still there in prison if and when I return."

Some time later, Prof. Cohen sent me a package full of original songs, blues and otherwise, written by the choir members while serving their time. A very interesting and heartfelt variety of poetic styles and subject matter. One guy wrote a very humorous blues song about how "All the Oakdale Prison inmates are wanting and trying to figure out how to get out of prison ... while bluesman Hawkeye Herman can't manage/figure out how to get in!"

And by the way, good investment that it was, I wore that deep red and white flowered Hawaiian shirt (Goodwill purchased) to a friend's Hawaiian-style wedding this past summer, for the first time since the Oakdale Prison 'adventure' in 2015.

I'm very happy to know that the prison choir continues to be successful on so many levels, and that a video documentary about them is soon to be released:

"The Inside Singers" / preview: (it's only 3 minutes long):
<https://vimeo.com/169192145>

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