

VIP musicians

From Ray Charles to Andrea Bocelli, blind or partially-sighted artists can succeed. But are the UK's stages welcoming to the visually impaired?

Report by
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Download *The Musician* in MP3 format from theMU.org

Musician and campaigner Jackie Clifton MBE: 'We are determined to get our message across.'



Fourteen blind and visually impaired musicians under the moniker Inner Visions Orchestra recently toured London to great success. Led by blind sitar player Baluji Shrivastav, the musicians dovetailed influences from India, Iran, Afghanistan and Nigeria to perform a set of soulful, uplifting compositions. At the end of each night a questionnaire was sent around the audience asking how many blind or visually impaired British performers they could name...

'The response was 100% "none",' reflects Baluji, who has worked with the world's most famous blind musician, Stevie Wonder, and played in 46 countries around the globe. There are, of course, blind and visually impaired musicians working in every genre from classical to folk, but the lack of prominent role models suggests this group of musicians are not being heard.

Battling prejudice

The low numbers of visually impaired working musicians is reflective of a broader situation. According to the RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People), 75% of blind and partially sighted people of working age are unemployed. The numbers within the ranks of the MU are also low, with around 30 members registered as visually impaired. Note that *The Musician* is available in audio format for visually impaired players (theMU.org).

Jackie Clifton MBE is a blind organist and founder of Musicians In Focus, a charity offering advice and seminars for blind and visually impaired musicians. Clifton believes there are many more visually impaired Union members than have requested an audio version of *Musician*. The low number may be due to members

having sighted assistance with reading material; it could also point to a darker truth indicative of deeply-rooted prejudice in the industry.

'There's been brainwashing with "you don't let on if you've got anything wrong with you" if you're a musician,' Clifton argues. 'There is an ingrained fear that if you admit to any problem there's going to be 50 other people who will jump in and take your job.'

The deficit of visually impaired musicians in the public eye is having a negative impact on both current and future musicians. Alongside Baluji Shrivastav, Linda Shanovitch co-founded the Baluji Music Foundation, an organisation that supports musicians with all disabilities. Shanovitch says that a big obstacle facing visually impaired musicians is the struggle to get the gig. 'We wrote a report called *Blind To The Fact*, which researched the needs of visually impaired UK musicians. We set up Inner Visions Orchestra because the research showed that one of the main obstacles was the lack of performing opportunities.'

Visually impaired folk musician Elena Piras fought her first battle at home when she said she wanted to be a musician. 'I wasn't asking my parents to do anything difficult. I wanted to be a musician and I wanted to speak lots of languages. I wasn't asking to fly a plane!' Through her intelligence and determination Elena now speaks five languages and has performed at the Edinburgh Fringe, on BBC radio and more.

The next generation

Since being diagnosed with a rare eye disease that led to blindness, Jackie Clifton has worked hard to turn the fortunes of



Baluji and the Inner Vision Orchestra perform in London

'Attitudes are changing,' Jackie Clifton MBE of campaign group Musicians In Focus

young visually impaired musicians. Part of her effort to inspire the next generation was the formation of a scheme for young visually impaired students at the Royal College of Music junior department.

'One of the first youngsters on that scheme graduated from the Birmingham Conservatoire with a 2:1,' she reports. 'There's no reason why every area of the music profession can't be accessed by a blind musician — other than perhaps playing in a full-time orchestra where you are required to sight read.'

The success of visually impaired students coming through the scheme is helping to drive a change amongst music teachers across the country.

'We are determined to get the message out,' says Clifton. Part of the shift from traditional teaching methods in classical tuition is to move the emphasis from the ability to sight read. 'Not that you shouldn't be able to read music or understand notation,' she adds, 'but it isn't necessary to be able to do it instantly.'

Feeling the music

Get Your Hands On An Orchestra was a Musicians In Focus project, part funded by the European EQUAL fund, that brought visually impaired musicians together with sighted musicians at the London Symphony Orchestra. While the sighted musicians read from the score, the visually impaired musicians memorised it phrase-by-phrase from Braille music. The effect of the experience on the LSO musicians was profound, prompting its musical director to enthuse: 'It has drawn me further into worlds of music that I think every musician wants to find — worlds that rely on listening and imagination first, rather than being driven by written scores and prescribed modes of performance.'

The apparent ability of the visually impaired musician to listen more closely than the sighted one has been reported both anecdotally as well as in research. The 2010 *Focus On Music 2* study by Roehampton University Professor Adam Ockelford revealed that premature children born blind are 4,000 times more likely to develop musicality, such as perfect pitch, than their fully-sighted peers.

'You have to go with what you feel rather than what you see,' explains Piras, who has been visually impaired since birth. 'I have a little bit of sight but I know how things need to sound and how they should sound so you're always striving to get it perfect. →

Who's who

Ever wondered who could be in the British blind musicians' Hall of Fame? Here are some candidates...

The Welsh bard

Welsh harpist John Parry (Parri Ddall, 'Blind Parry') was a master high baroque, credited with writing *Deck The Halls With Boughs of Holly*. He was admitted to the elite circle of the Royal Society of Musicians in 1763.

The jazz composer

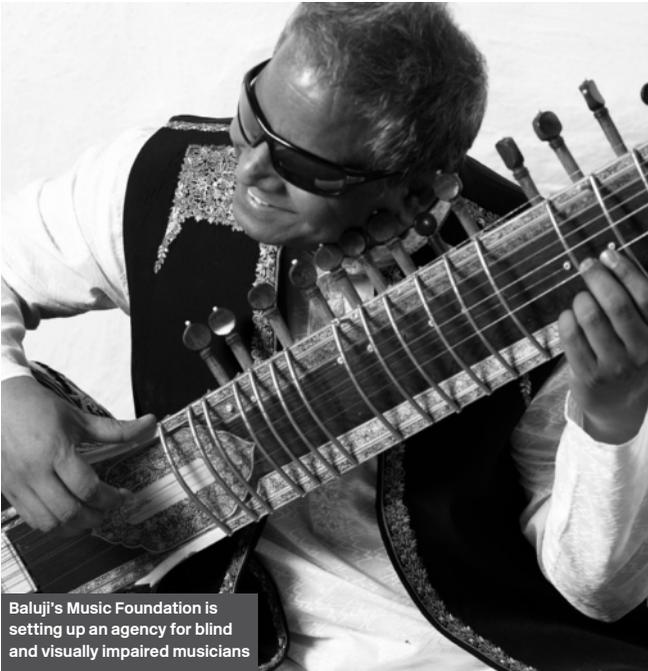
Blind from birth, jazz pianist George Shearing composed over 300 songs including jazz standard, *Lullaby Of Birdland*. He was a major recording artist and was knighted by the Queen in 2007.

The folk balladeer

Folk chanteuse Frankie Armstrong was once a member of Ewan MacColl's Critics Group and is known for her unique interpretation of ballads and powerful voice. She continues to perform, record and teach.

The genius pianist

Blind jazz and classical pianist and autistic savant Derek Paravicini plays entirely by ear. He has performed at the Barbican, Queen Elizabeth Hall and Ronnie Scott's and seems to be able to play any piece of music after hearing it just once.



Baluji's Music Foundation is setting up an agency for blind and visually impaired musicians

'Blind musicians can be superior because their hearing is so much better,' Baluji

You're very tuned in and looking at things from a different angle.'

Baluji agrees: 'Indian music is improvisation based, it still needs a certain framework. Blind musicians have to memorise everything, but can be superior because their hearing is so much better.'

Future technology

Alongside the drive to endow teachers with the right skills to teach visually impaired children, Jackie Clifton has also been running workshops on IT. 'Technology,' she says, 'saved my sanity' when she first lost her eyesight. Sequencing and recording programs such as Sonar are substantially accessible with JAWS, a screen reader widely used by the visually impaired. Notation software Sibelius has also made advances in becoming more user friendly with, they say, 'built-in support for screen-reading software on Microsoft Windows'.

Sibelius is a commonly used programme in schools and universities and Clifton is keen to emphasise the fact that visually impaired and sighted musicians are

working from the same song sheet. 'There are specialist programs for blind people to do MIDI sequencing,' says Jackie 'but they would give a sighted person a heart attack because the visual aspects on the screen don't give you a clue to what's going on. You need to have access to the same software that everyone else is using.'

Access to Braille music has also proved problematic. The National Library For The Blind offers a range of scores but Clifton says they are 'very limited'. Braille music translation software packages are also imperfect. 'It runs into problems because of the very nature of Braille being a linear form of information, whereas stave music notation is multi-directional in the way that it's laid out on the page.'

Elena Piras has adapted an ingenious approach to the access issue by translating it herself. 'I'm working with a singer on a lot of Gaelic songs. Gaelic doesn't exist in Braille. I think I'm the only blind person who reads Gaelic in Braille, so it's going to be an invaluable resource — to me anyway!'

Facing the unknown

The challenges facing the blind and visually impaired musician are numerous: getting home after a gig; getting on and off the stage; making your way around an unfamiliar building or squeezing a guide dog onto a tour bus.

Baluji says another disadvantage faced by the visually impaired musician is not

Access all areas

Blind and visually impaired musicians can register with a government scheme called Access To Work. Available to all qualifying musicians, the Access To Work scheme can provide help with travel costs, special aids, support workers and awareness training for your colleagues.

Baluji is registered with Access To Work and while the support and financial aid is valuable you do have to prove you earn a living from your work as a musician, which, says Baluji, is a 'catch 22 situation' for blind musicians struggling to find work.

For information on Access To Work visit direct.gov.uk

knowing who's at the post-gig schmooze: 'The music industry is essentially showbiz — you have to network.'

Baluji and Shanovitch say the existence of a co-ordinated support network for working musicians would be invaluable. The Baluji Music Foundation plans to set up an agency working with blind and visually impaired musicians by helping with promotion, recording and providing sighted escorts to help negotiate post-gig networking sessions. Baluji is also in the process of setting up Blind Spot sessions: lunchtime foyer gigs giving the blind and visually impaired a platform to perform.

Musicians In Focus, meanwhile, continues to act as a hub for visually impaired musicians. Clifton is also working on an online qualification in special needs teaching in music — 'an additional diploma for a peripatetic teacher who doesn't want to do a degree but would like a qualification in basic knowledge of Braille music or access to the technology.'

While the advantage is undoubtedly balanced in favour of the sighted musician, Jackie Clifton is optimistic that there has been progression towards equality, 'Attitudes are changing and there are some very high profile musicians who have got problems with hearing, sight loss or are in a wheelchair and have made it to the top of their profession. We've got to provide the bridge so that young kids do aspire to being Stevie Wonder or Evelyn Glennie.' ■■■■