

Indie sisters recall their captive audience

Two Edinburgh sisters who fronted one of Scotland's trailblazing "girl groups" in the 1980s have revealed their scariest gig – for 400 lifers in a tough Scots prison.

Gaye and Rachel Bell fronted indie band The Twinsets, who had a captive audience when they performed at Saughton Prison.

The siblings have now revealed how they felt like Johnny Cash – whose gigs at Folsom State Prison and San Quentin State Prison in California became famous.

And how just weeks later, they received a chilling warning that one of their new fans was on the loose.

Rachel, 62, said the unlikely request came from former gangster turned sculptor, Jimmy Boyle, who had heard about them.

She said: "He was out of prison by that point and got a message to us to ask us if we would play Saughton.

"The prisoners had not had any entertainment for 18 months and we thought sure, why not?"

Gaye, 64, who organised the gig with the governor, recalls: "I got to the prison gates and I remember I was so nervous – I'd never been in a prison before. I remember walking down corridors with steel door after steel door slamming shut behind me.

"A nice, mild-mannered wee guy gave us a cup of tea before we went on. We later heard he was an axe murderer.

"We felt like Johnny Cash walking out but for us it was utterly terrifying.

"We walked on stage and about 400 lifers stood up and roared in unison. Our knees were knocking and we could hardly dance."

She added: "When we were singing there was one guy who was standing up shouting 'you in the blue dress, I love you'.

"About four weeks after the gig I got a phone call from Saughton saying 'I feel you should know that one of the audience, who was particularly interested in you, has just escaped.

"So that was a bit nerve racking too. Fortunately I didn't bump into him."

Amazingly, the Twinsets agreed to play the same prison a second time just a few months later.

Rachel said: "Not everyone in there was a danger to society. They were so grateful for any entertainment at all."

Gaye said: "I remember how guilty we felt afterwards. We were chatting to the trusted prisoners who gave us cups of tea afterwards and they were saying 'thank you so much for doing this, we're off back to our cells now'.

"We drove out and went to the pub and we felt so glad to be free. I had a lot of sympathy for many of them."

There were other terrifying gigs, including a room full of East Coast Hell's Angels at Cuinzie Neuk, in Kinghorn, Fife.

Gaye credits Frank Sinatra for saving them from the "hairy bikers".

She recalled: "Our manager said it would be a mixed audience

but when we got there it was full of Hell's Angels.

"They didn't like us at all and by the time we were half way through the gig they were flinging bottles and the band were whispering 'they're going to kill us'.

"As the atmosphere was getting uglier we remembered we'd been playing around with Frank Sinatra in the practice room so we started to do New York, New York.

"Rachel started doing the high kicks and the atmosphere changed. The next thing all these hairy bikers were linking arms and doing high kicks too.

"Suddenly they came around to us and by the time we got off stage they were pressing pints into our hands.

"We thought 'wow, we got away with that one'. Frank saved our lives that night."

Rachel added: "We stayed friends with some of them."

The Twinsets released a cover of the Shangri-Las' Sophisticated Boom-Boom, and toured extensively as well as recording three influential Peel Sessions for the BBC.

But when record company execs wanted them to leave their band and "create the new Bananarama" they refused.

Despite building a loyal following of fans, The Twinsets split up in 1984.

They blame their short lived and moderate success on "a combination of poor management, a chaotic band and sexism".

Nevertheless, their role in helping to inspire other female musicians is recognised in the feature-length documentary Since Yesterday: The Untold Story of Scotland's Girl Bands.

The film, which closed this year's Edinburgh International Film Festival and is now available on BBC iPlayer, highlights

the trailblazing women who challenged a male-dominated industry.

Rachel said: "Role models are so important but most of our role models at the time were male.

"If there are no girl bands, how can they inspire other girls?

"It's still the case that women's voices are much less heard."

Rachel is now an artist, while Gaye became a lecturer. But the sisters continued to perform and have never stopped singing together.

They are currently working on new Twinsets material, which could be released in 2025.

Gaye said: "We're working on a song just now and we'll see where it takes us. If it works out we will release it as a single next year."

* Since Yesterday: The Untold Story of Scotland's Girl Bands, is available on BBC iPlayer.



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The Twinsets. Sisters Rachel and Gaye Bell, who played two
gigs at Saughton Prison in 1892 and 1983. The Twinsets'
trailblazing part in the history of Scottish girl bands is
recognised in the feature length documentary Since Yesterday:
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