



Music

These musicians use cardboard boxes, books and rocks to create music focusing on wrongfully convicted prisoners

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By [Tom Keogh](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

Recently, [The National Registry of Exonerations](#) released its annual report tracking U.S. state-by-state numbers of prisoners who won freedom in 2018 after their convictions were overturned.

The report says 151 people were found last year to have been wrongfully incarcerated. They spent an average of 10.9 years in prison before new DNA evidence or other information (including false confession, mistaken identity, official misconduct, etc.) led to their release.

The Registry's data can be stunning (21,290 lost years for 2,432 individuals since 1989). Reopening the cases of potential exonerees is often performed by so-called "innocence organizations" linked to law schools (such as the acclaimed [Innocence Project](#)), public defenders and various nonprofits.

But between the statistics and legalese, it can sometimes be hard to remember the human dimension in wrongful convictions. Enter The Innocents.

Founded in 2006 by Allen Otte, now a professor emeritus who taught classical and contemporary percussion at the University of Cincinnati beginning in 1977, and John

Lane, director of percussion studies at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, The Innocents is a performance-art and nontraditional music duo that attempts to bridge complex emotions of wrongful conviction to audience empathy.

Otte and Lane are bringing their performance piece, which has been known to draw tears even from longtime innocence advocates, to Seattle for two events in May. The first is a concert at 8 p.m. Tuesday, May 14, of their Innocents program at the Chapel Performance Space. The following Thursday, May 16, Otte and Lane will lead a lecture-performance and discussion at 2:30 p.m. in Brechemin Auditorium, University of Washington Music Building. The UW Percussion Ensemble will participate in both performances.

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“Music can get to the emotional and experiential part of an injustice in a way words alone can’t provide,” says Lane. “You can look at figures, but it’s hard to understand how someone innocent of a crime could serve 20, 30 years in prison. What we can do through music is try to get to compassion. Not just about the fact that someone was wrongfully imprisoned, but all of the things that go into the issue, such as, how does this happen?”

“We were deeply drawn into the real tragedy that has happened to so many lives,” says Otte.

“The entire performance is 50 or 60 minutes long, but it’s made up of short pieces,” he says. “We intend the whole concert to be a prism, looking at different facets of the problem, from misidentification to forced confessions to exoneration. Then, finally, seeing exonerees come out the other end of the ordeal as quite amazing people able to understand and forgive. They have every right to be angry and bitter, yet somehow they’ve figured out that this would only prolong their suffering.”

Over the years, Otte and Lane have met a number of exonerees who were legally

represented by the Innocence Project, a national organization that includes former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno and lawyer-author John Grisham on its board of directors. There are chapters of the Innocence Project, in each state, including one at the University of Washington Law School.

Despite drums being central to the expressive voice of a percussionist, Otte and Lane eschew them for *The Innocents*. They say the story they're telling is better understood through sounds made with found objects, especially when those sounds are paired with the musicians' spare, poignant drama.

Everyday objects used in the piece include cardboard boxes (evoking homelessness as a contributor to some wrongful incarcerations), books (the rapid flapping of pages suggesting a prisoner seeking legal options) and rocks (key to some of the concert's most powerful moments).

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Other soundscapes represent the internal world of prisons (warning buzzers, slamming gates), and inmates making their own percussion for entertainment.

Otte and Lane’s involvement with the issue of exoneration began 13 years ago when they performed together at a Cincinnati exhibition of photographs by Taryn Simon, images documenting stories of individuals who spent time in prison for violent crimes they did not commit. Until that event, the subject had not been on either man’s radar.

“We had such a strong feeling about the issue after that,” says Lane. “We had opportunities down the road, such as a residency in Georgia, to re-imagine what we could do with the piece, and we learned from many people who know that world of wrongful conviction and exoneration. From there, the piece has just grown and now stands on its own.”

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The Innocents and UW Percussion Ensemble, 8 p.m. Tuesday, May 14; Chapel Performance Space at the Good Shepherd Center, 4649 Sunnyside Ave N., Seattle; \$5-\$15 donation at the door; waywardmusic.org. Also: lecture-performance and discussion at 2:30 p.m. Thursday, May 16; Brechemin Auditorium, University of Washington Music Building; free; music.washington.edu.

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