

Somebody To Lean On

*An Ohio men's prison choir
rehearses "Lean On Me" and
shows how hope and
harmony can be built by
voices coming together.*

(documentary short)



Synopsis

SOMEBODY TO LEAN ON is a short documentary film about the Harmony Project prison choir in rural Ohio, exploring the power of music to build community.

The film follows the choir as they work together to create an arrangement of the Bill Withers' song "Lean On Me," and in the process diving into the resonant themes of the song.

Centering the voices of those involved in the prison choir, the film gives insight into the incarceration system, counters stereotypical images common on TV, and shows how rehabilitation programs can strongly impact not only individuals, but also our communities inside and outside the walls.

FIFTY YEARS AGO,
WHEN BILL WITHERS
WROTE LEAN ON ME,
THERE WERE FEWER
THAN 300,000 PEOPLE
INCARCERATED IN THE
UNITED STATES.

TODAY, THERE
ARE OVER 2
MILLION
PEOPLE IN
OUR PRISONS.

IN THE MIDDLE OF OHIO,
ONE GROUP IS COMING
TOGETHER WITH MUSIC
TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

SOMEBODY TO LEAN ON

a documentary film



Somebody To Lean On

*“Where you are
doesn’t define
who you are.”*

Film Stills:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1tCLfqkquWs3qB8j4Y53nlw4c1cl3FPgD?usp=sharing>

*Music creates harmony that transcends
beyond the walls of this Ohio men’s prison*



Why it matters

Since 1972, the year “Lean On Me” was written, the incarceration rate in the US has nearly **quadrupled**.

In a time of increasing division, this film shows how people from different backgrounds and experiences can find common ground and, together, build a stronger community.



As the prison population has ballooned, rehabilitation and re-entry programs have been slashed, raising ethical issues and economic questions about the most effective way to spend tax dollars.

SOMEBODY TO LEAN ON highlights a powerful new initiative of Harmony Project (www.harmonyproject.com), a public service organization in Columbus, Ohio, which engages thousands of citizens in its transformational work.

A creative vision for impact

Using entirely music and sound from within the space of incarceration and people involved in the program, *SOMEBODY TO LEAN ON* amplifies voices that often are not heard.

Underscoring Harmony Project's commitment to the idea that "where you are does not define who you are," the film is crafted without title cards and other descriptors, as these would emphasize hierarchical structure or define individuals by their relationship to the prison system.



Somebody To Lean On

Directors' Statement



We were drawn to the Harmony Project because it offered a rare form of access—not just into a prison, but into a space of mutual effort and vulnerability within a male space, and in a wider view, a glimpse of support, creativity, and community inside a system defined by separation. For us, filmmaking is about creating space for voices often unheard, and this choir is an example: individuals coming together to make music, and—in the process—transforming their environment profoundly. The song they , “Lean On Me” (fifty years after Bill Withers wrote it), captures the theme of the film: we all need somebody to lean on. And in leaning on each other, we make a stronger whole community.

Our goal was to present this story through the voices of those involved, without narration or lower thirds, which evoke a sense of hierarchical authority. Rather than focusing on individual crimes or sentences, SOMEBODY TO LEAN ON centers on what happens when people are invited to participate in something collective, creative, demanding, and centering their humanity.

(continued)

Directors' Statement

(continued)

The choir rehearsals are a place where differences that often define prison life—race, politics, religion, background—fall temporarily into the background. The Harmony Project's sessions (which also involved sharing stories or digging into personal exploration in group discussions) require listening, patience, and trust, allowing the inmates, guards, wardens, and HP volunteers from the outside to encounter one another outside of roles imposed on them by society or the culture within incarceration.

By not using voiceover or outside commentary, and by identifying people through the storytelling process, the film prioritizes their perspective and lived experience, allowing us to see the opportunities of what this program and all those involved show us is possible. It took years to get to make this film, and we're honored to have gained the trust of the people in the film and the prison system and to have the chance to share this powerful story of hope.

SOMEBODY TO LEAN ON is about the power of the small but meaningful ways people connect, and how hope and art can build bridges beyond walls. This film is not an argument for a particular policy, but an observation of how dignity, accountability, and connection can take root even in the most restrictive environments—and how music can open a space for people to listen, to hear one another, and to be heard.



About HARMONY PROJECT

Harmony Project is a non-profit service organization whose mission is to build a more connected community by breaking down social barriers, bridging community divides, and empowering the voices of the people through arts, education, and volunteer service.

- <https://harmonyproject.com/>
-



HARMONY PROJECT: a service organization & a community choir

PEOPLE

Harmony Project is people — different ethnicities, different backgrounds, different abilities, and different beliefs — practicing the powerful idea that the dissonance between us can be disrupted when people work together.

ART

Art is a catalyst for change — combating disinformation, shattering stereotypes, expanding cultural knowledge, and creating empathy for one another. Creativity fosters a shared space where people can embrace their differences and build social harmony.

COMMUNITY

HP's work inspires individuals to meet their own biases head-on. Members work together in public service work, forging a path toward a richer and more inclusive community. It takes more than one voice to live in harmony.



The Song

“SOMETIMES IN OUR LIVES WE ALL HAVE PAIN WE ALL HAVE SORROW
BUT IF WE ARE WISE WE KNOW THAT THERE’S ALWAYS TOMORROW”

- "Lean on Me" underscores the importance of supporting one another, highlighting how our connections can provide strength and hope in difficult times.
- The **Bill Withers** song released in 1972 remains a classic, reaching over 300 million listeners on Spotify to date.



A call to engagement in something that affects us all

- About finding hope and power in a time/place when that can seem hard to find, *SOMEBODY TO LEAN ON* captures the power individuals have to come together and make positive change bigger than the self.
- A small town story that reflects global themes & hits a zeitgeist.
- *SOMEBODY* has received the enthusiastic support of the Bill Withers' estate for the film. Withers played in prisons, and his family feels he would have loved the film and its message.



The Film Team

Directors



Gabrielle C. Burton's creative style weaves complex stories and voices together to capture truths about human nature and social change. With her sisters, Burton focuses on filmmaking that incorporates creative participation and underrepresented voices. After directing the award-winning doc on gender, *Kings, Queens, & In-Betweens*, she won a Wexner Center for the Arts artist's residency for her next project inspired by her [TEDx talk](#) about gender (selected by TEDx for their national playlist). Her second [TEDx talk](#) on complexity and our "spheres of personal perspective" was given in TEDx Tours in France.

Ursula Burton's work is currently being remastered and preserved in The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences archives, including *THE HAPPIEST DAY OF HIS LIFE* which she wrote and directed. The comedic short won a Viewer's Choice Award on MTV's LOGO Channel, and qualified for the Academy Awards. She has made numerous commercials, PSAs, and short films including the Faces of Ford campaign, and "Mamas for Obama" spots, as well as series such as *HALF THE HISTORY* and *OLD GUY*. Her films, *WE TREAT THEM THE SAME*, *EXPIRATION DATE*, and *A FUTURE WISH* continue to explore her interests in female experience.

Producers



Five Sisters Productions is an independent production company committed to making work that is entertaining and also contributes to a sense of hope on a personal and social level. Helmed by the five Burton sisters, FSP has made 6 feature films and numerous shorts, PSAs, and commercials, including the short form comedy series *OLD GUY* about ageism starring Roger Burton (*Baskets*) and Peri Gilpin (*Frasier*); the nationally released *Kings, Queens, & In-Betweens*; *Manna From Heaven* (MGM/Sony) with its all-star veteran cast; Ford's campaign *Faces of Ford*; CAST's campaign against human trafficking and slavery starring Julia Ormond; and a number of festival favorites. More at www.fivesisters.com.

Camera/Edit



Anita Kwan founded Reel Hoot Prods with a passion for embracing authenticity, connecting people, and helping businesses tell their stories. With more than 14 years experience, her mission is to hold a safe and inclusive space in production. Reel Hoot is LGBTQ owned, WBE, MBE and EDGE Certified.



Matt Hubbard is an Emmy Award winning director and editor (*We're the Shazbots*, *After*, *The Dinosauria*) whose technical expertise on films includes music, grading, effects, and title sequences.

Post Production Team



Mike Yearling is an award-winning editor, creative director, producer (commercials, PBS's "Alcatraz Is Not An Island).

Eduardo Larez is head sound mixer at Visionear Studios specializing in audio production with over 23 years experience as an audio recording/mixing engineer.

Jill D'Agnew, ACE is a filmmaker and editor whose work include *Party of Five*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, and *Insatiable*.

Robert Curreri is Colorist with deep experience in color grading for advertisements, television, film, and broadcast media.



Five Sisters Productions

Real life sisters Gabrielle, Jennifer, Maria, Charity, and Ursula Burton founded Five Sisters Productions in 1999, creating six films that reflect their passion for social justice and storytelling. Their work, released by major companies like Ford, Sony, and MGM, spans from shorts to features to commercials. Raised in an artistic home in Buffalo New York—with a jazz musician father and a writer mother—the sisters grew up inspired by creativity and community building. Together, they channel this upbringing into their film company, exploring powerful themes of aging, sexuality, race, and gender to create thought-provoking, socially engaged films.

“FSP’s work has helped pave the way toward a new model of multi-voice cinema, where a tight-knit group of artists work together to create visions that both entertain and engage.”

Film Credits

Somebody To Lean On: Credit List

Five Sisters Productions (Production Company)

FILM END CREDITS:

DIRECTED BY
Gabrielle C. Burton
Ursula Burton

PRODUCED BY
Jennifer Burton
Ursula Burton
Maria Burton
Charity Burton
Gabrielle C. Burton

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
Anita Kwan - Reel Hoot Productions

CAMERA
Matthew Hubbard
Jennifer Burton
Maria Burton
Ursula Burton
Gabrielle C. Burton

ASSISTANT CAMERA / SOUND
Erika Chen

DRONE FOOTAGE BY
Ginson Speich

EDITORS
Gabrielle C. Burton
Anita Kwan
Jennifer Burton
Ursula Burton

ASSISTANT EDITOR
Erika Chen

FESTIVAL EDITING
Jill D'Agnewica, ACE

SOUND MIX
Eduardo Larez - VisionEar

COLOR GRADING
Robert Curreri

SFX
Mike Yearling - The Yearling Group

POST-PRODUCTION TEAM
Ella Fasciano

Thank you to the people of PCI and Harmony Project who were part of the making of this film including:

HARMONY PROJECT:

- David Brown - Founder, Creative Director
- Troy Fowler - Director of Operations
- Matthew Schott - Director of Development
- Reggie Jackson - Artistic and Musical Director
- Annette Dominguez - Director of Programs and Community Engagement
- Peggy Meckling-Baker - Director of Communications
- Justus Dominguez - Operations Manager
- Andre Barrett - Associate Director of Programs
- Kirk Fisher - Company Manager
- Jen Patterson - Grants
- Josh Schottenstein - Harmony Board Member
- The many partners and volunteers and supporters of Harmony

HARMONY BAND:

Reggie Jackson - Drums
David Swank - Piano
Dwight Bailey - Bass
Happy Chichester - Guitar
Chris Brown - Piano

PICKAWAY CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION
Warden Rochelle Moore
Deputy Warden Mike Fisher
Special Services Secretary Ethan Brooks
Sergeant Leslie Mavis

OHIO DEPARTMENT OF REGIONAL CORRECTION
Annette Chambers-Smith - ODRC Director
Roni Burkes-Trowsdell - ODRC Deputy Director of Reentry
JoEllen Smith - ODRC Chief Communications Officer

THE MEN OF THE PCI HARMONY CHOIR

"Lean On Me," written and performed by Bill Withers, 1972.
Courtesy of Universal Music.

News footage courtesy of NBC4 Columbus.
Additional footage courtesy of Harmony Project.

Special thanks to
Ohio Humanities and Rebecca Asmo
Ohio Arts Council
Greater Columbus Arts Council
(#artmakescbus)
PNC Bank
The Performing Arts Innovation Fund of The Columbus Foundation

A small community project spreading a big message of hope

The film celebrates a vibrant caring active community, highlighting a small volunteer non-profit organization.

Many people -- from the Directors of Corrections and Wardens, to the incarcerated men, to the community members of the Harmony Project - worked together to make this film possible.

