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Inmate 'Thriller' Video Is Web Hit

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Behind thick stone walls topped by electrified razor wire, one of cyberspace's most unlikely hits is already warming up as the rest of Cebu stirs from sleep.

Pockets of inmates stretch and practice their latest moves. Then the morning workout gets under way in earnest in the exercise yard of the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center.

In their identical orange prison uniforms, up to 1,500 march and clap in unison as they perform precision dance routines with the Village People's "In the Navy" and "YMCA" pounding from six well-worn black speakers.

And why not? Their version of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" had been watched nearly 4.4 million times on YouTube as of Thursday, uploaded by Byron Garcia, the Cebu provincial security consultant who came up with the idea of adding structure to poorly attended exercise sessions.

Inmates with arms covered in tattoos and baby-faced guys who might have been gang members on the outside gyrate next to one another. They all seem to be enjoying themselves or at least taking pride as their sandals and tennis shoes slap in unison on the gray concrete. They laugh when they screw up, applaud when they get a new sequence right.

Forty-four female inmates, held in a separate wing, join in for "I Will Follow Him" from the movies "Sister Act," which is among several other songs posted on YouTube. Ten have at least 100,000 hits each.

"If I was not in prison, I would not be famous," said Wenjiel Resane, the male inmate who plays the role of the girlfriend in "Thriller" and is a featured dancer in other songs.

The 35-year-old Resane, a ponytailed former pizza chef, shares Cell 47 with 11 other openly gay inmates. Already in prison three years awaiting trial on drug charges, he puts on lipstick and makeup for a TV interview.

"Before ... we just get our food and go back to our cell, and if we don't have anything to do we just talk," Resane told a reporter who visited Wednesday. "But it is different now. Every day we are very busy preparing to dance for our upcoming shows. We are very proud of what we have done."

The prison, mostly for inmates with sentences of under three years or those awaiting trial, sits atop a hill. More than 300 are facing murder charges.

High-tech security features include a fingerprint recognition system for guards and other employees.

Through a window covered with a metal grill, the ocean is visible in the distance. Sheets are drawn across the narrow, wood-planked bunk beds to provide a little privacy. Cardboard boxes, glued to the walls, serve as shelves.

Crisanto Nierre, who plays Michael Jackson's role in "Thriller," finds his new fame bittersweet. Relatives as far away as Sweden, Denmark and Dubai have excitedly watched him on YouTube. But he can't escape the fact that he's in prison, gently touching family photos hanging from the bed above him in sheets of protective plastic.

A fan of Jackson's music since he was in a dance troupe in high school — ironically, his favorites include "Bad" and "Smooth Criminal" — 36-year-old Nierre carefully lays out the orange-and-black outfit made for his performances, smoothing every wrinkle.

"I hope that all the people who see us will be happy in knowing that we, despite being prisoners, we were able to do this," said Nierre, in prison five years awaiting trial on drug charges.

"Before the dancing, our problems were really heavy to bear. Dancing takes our minds away from our problems. Our bodies became more healthy. As for the judges, they may be impressed with us, seeing that we are being rehabilitated and this could help our case. We are being rehabilitated in a good way."

With the court system overworked, officials have been trying to ease overcrowding and brutal conditions in prisons. President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo once said a life sentence in a Philippine prison was worse than death.

Inmates say that's how it used to be here, with a fight or other violent incident breaking out an average of once a week.

"I wanted a program where everyone would exercise an hour a day," Garcia said. "One day, I saw these waves of orange people (in the exercise yard). I thought it looked very nice."

The goal was something the inmates could consider an accomplishment and that would teach camaraderie and teamwork.

First came marching to the cadence of a drum 15 months ago. Then Garcia chose one of his favorite songs, Pink Floyd's "The Wall." Village People standards followed, with the guidance of a choreographer. It takes about a week to work out individual sections of a new song, another week to pull them together.

The first video that Garcia posted was of a challenging algorithm march. It generated only 400 hits in eight months on YouTube.

"Thriller" followed less than a month ago. It was an instant hit, averaging 300,000 views per day at its peak.

Garcia says it's been a year since the last fight. The cells, while cluttered with the meager possessions of up to 17 inmates in each one, are neat and clean. Shouts of "Good morning, sir" greet visitors.

Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez said officials will look to encourage replication of the program at other prisons.

"These people may have their lives enhanced by something which removes their minds from the conditions they're in," Gonzalez said. "It might help in their reformation. That's good."

From a wealthy family — his sister is the provincial governor — Garcia carries something of an imperial air. Smoking is banned in the prison, but Garcia puffs away, a guard thrusting out a coffee cup when he's ready to douse a butt.

Critics claim he forces the inmates to perform, an allegation the prisoners deny. He's generated so much devotion that about 20 inmates, including four women, have tattoos with his name.

About 100 mostly older or ill prisoners opt out of the exercises, staying in their cells. Garcia said those who participate get an extra afternoon snack and are sharing in recent income for their performances.

A \$35,000 donation followed a performance at the province's recent Founding Day celebrations. Each inmate received \$22 of the gift, deposited into a prison passbook account; the rest went to the province to defray the costs of incarceration.

A few local companies have found the video performances so inspiring that they want to send employees for special performances. The first is Saturday — for a donation. Garcia suggested a news crew should pay up to see "Thriller," too.

At 7:15 a.m. comes the call for inmates who have court hearings today. The departures take away six key dancers for "Thriller," so it won't be on today's itinerary anyway. Instead, practice focuses on a new song, Phil Oakey and Giorgio Moroder's "Together in Electric Dreams," a carefully chosen homage to the inmates' fans.

"Viewers are asking for more," Garcia says. "We may be worlds apart, worlds may separate us, but we still can be connected through electric dreams."

On the Net:

'Thriller' video on YouTube:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mnk7lh9M3o

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2007/08/09/international/i110137D76.DTL>