



Impact Report

2022–2025

Contents

Introduction	04-08
1. Building from the ground up	09-17
2. Creating a safe space	18-23
3. Creativity and Mental Health	24-29
4. Developing Creativity	30-38
5. What's Next for Come As You Are	39-44

Come As You Are (CAYA) is a free, weekly, youth-led creative space supporting 12-24 year olds with mental health, connection, and pathways into the creative industries, rooted in peer research and delivered at the Albany in Deptford.

CAYA was born from two youth peer led research projects, People Places Poetry and I’m not okay but... *, that addressed the youth mental health crises. The research found a direct correlation between the closure of youth spaces over the past decade, and a decline in youth mental health, as well as highlighting the positive impact that engaging in creative activities can have on wellbeing.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US

83%

of young people believe there aren’t enough spaces they can access easily and safely instead spending their time on the streets, at bus stops and in shopping centres.

92%

of young people, when asked what they needed in a space to support and improve their mental health, said positive relationships, support and care.

100%

Agreed that being creative directly supports their mental health

*Both research projects were delivered in partnership with SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS. I’m not okay but... was part of A Big Conversation, a project focusing on mental health and funded by the Mayor of London during London Borough of Culture 2022.



Rebecca Carter
SENIOR PRODUCER, ENGAGEMENT & PARTICIPATION

Come As You Are aims to fill this gap in creative youth spaces. We provide mentorship from trusted adults, creative activities which support wellbeing and nurture the next generation of creatives and provide a safe space for young people to simply hang out and unwind.

Thanks to anchor funding from the Mayor of London through the Propel collaboration, and further support from other funders and partners, we have been able to explore, test ideas, grow and ultimately build a beloved youth space that welcomes up to 50 young people every week.

Through this report we will hear directly from the young people we work with, and take a deep dive into what we have learnt over the past three years, in four key areas:

01

Building from the ground up

Where we started, the team that make it happen, and the role of our Co-Producers

02

Creating a safe space

How we turned research into practice to create a genuinely welcoming space for young people

03

Creativity and Mental Health

How taking part has impacted the wellbeing of our members

04

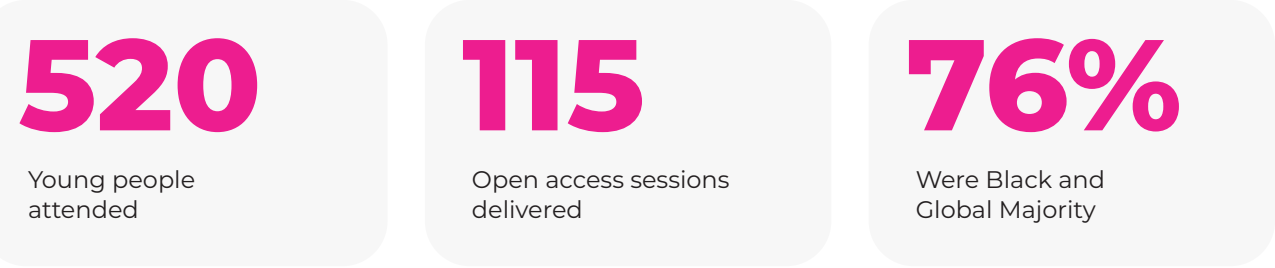
Developing Creativity

The opportunities we’ve provided to learn new skills, network and gain paid work in the creative industries

CAYA at a Glance

Over the past three years:

REACH AND ATTENDANCE



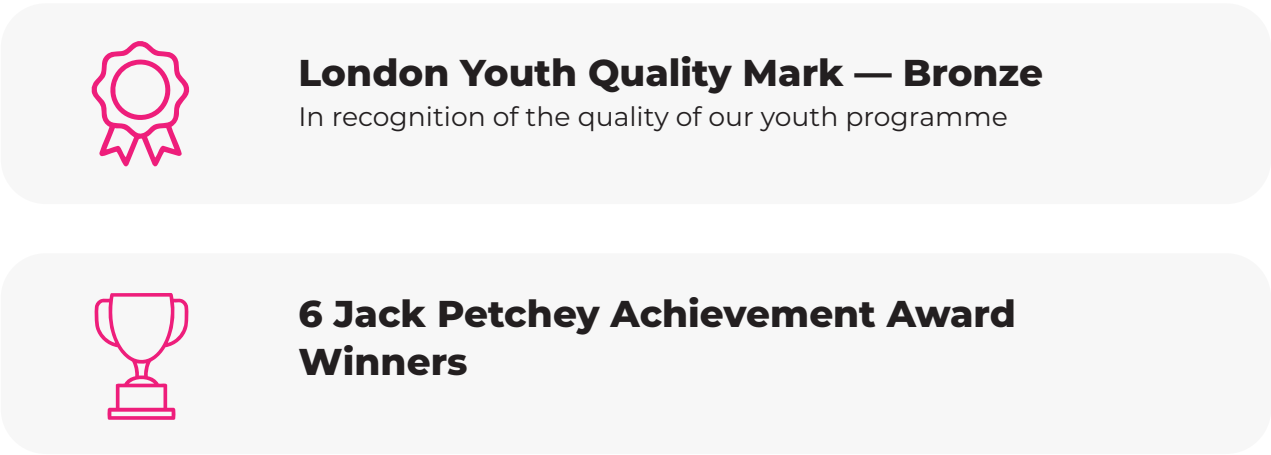
PROGRAMME AND EMPLOYMENT



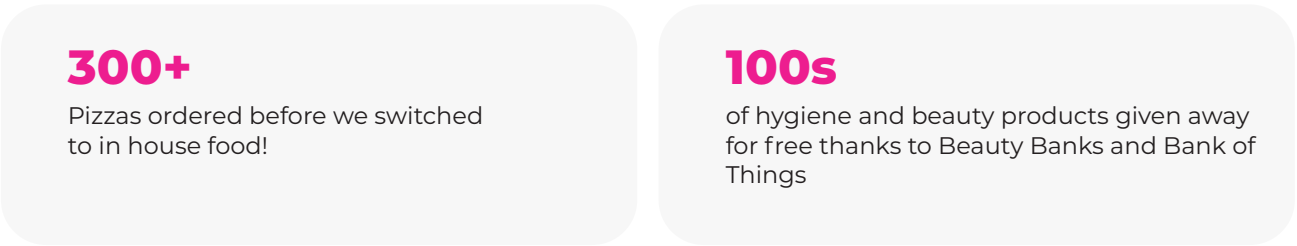
MEMBER WELLBEING AND IMPACT



AWARDS AND RECOGNITION



COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHTS



YOUTH TEAM TRAINING

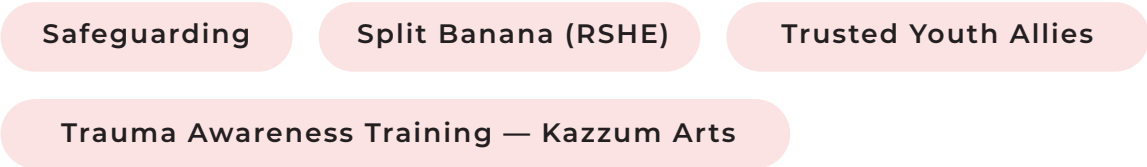




Photo credit - Agape's Angle



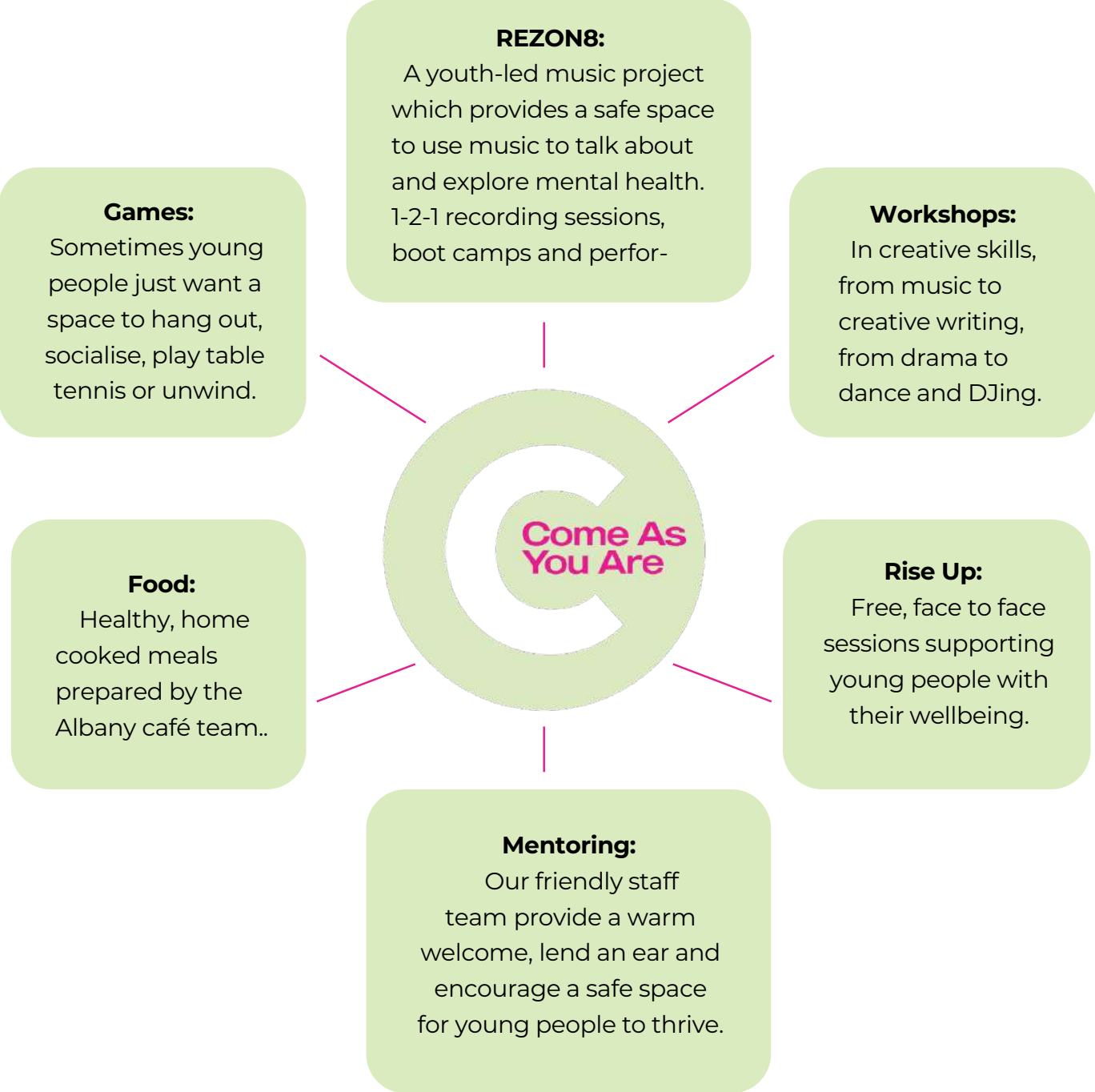
**I just feel like I can
call this place my
second home**

- CAYA member

1.

**Building from
the ground up**

Building from the ground up



Come As You Are was born out of two research projects which spoke directly to young people about their experiences and what they need from youth spaces. *I'm not okay but...* was a youth-led peer-research project about the intersection of creativity and mental health, conducted by researchers and creatives Marlo Savin, Phoebe Fairchild and Rofeda Bougaga on behalf of the Albany and our partners, SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS.

The aim of People, Places, Poetry was to understand where young people in South London go when they are not at home or school and how the spaces young people occupy impact their mental health. 200 young people took part in the research - 100 through an online survey and 100 through creative workshops, conversations and focus groups.

Following the outcomes of our youth-led research, we decided that a new youth space was needed urgently. From a small start, we have gradually grown through outreach to schools, a street team of young people spreading the word, Instagram, and word of mouth, to now have more than 50 young people attending each week.

The CAYA Team



from left to right, Aleksa, Donna, Rebecca, Seyi, Rofeda, Moziah, Sammy



Photo credit - Agape's Angle

65%

of young people surveyed [want] someone close to their own age - a peer mentor, youth worker or therapist - who they can confidently share their feelings with, and who will show them love, attention and care.

— Extract from *I'm not okay but... report*

Our dedicated team are a huge part of the success of Come As You Are. The majority of our youth workers are in their early to mid-twenties, have grown up in the local area and share many of the same structural inequalities our young people experience. This enables them to build trust, lend an ear and facilitate open conversations without fear of judgement or repercussions. Their experiences, connections, knowledge and skills create a genuinely safe space for young people to thrive.

"CAYA isn't just about delivering sessions—it creates space for young people to grow, exist, be themselves, build confidence, and see tangible pathways into creative industries. Being part of something where you can see that shift in mindset and opportunity over time is what stands out most."

- Sammy Lizon, Creative and Engagement Programme Coordinator

"The staff are very supportive and have offered emotional help MANY times"

- CAYA member

"Conversations with the staff have given me great direction about the future (for example one of the staff members being a professional photographer has inspired me to study photography at GCSE)"

- CAYA member

“

As Co-Producers, we work with the CAYA team and other staff at the Albany. We help shape the whole process—from planning ideas to making them happen. We build trust, share responsibility, and support each other to lead in ways that work for young people

-The Co-Producers

”



*From left to right, Nyah, Wren, Olara, Eliana (Photo Credit: Agape's Angle)
Not pictured: Jabril, Ashley, Dylan*

Co-Producers

CAYA is led by the ideas and imagination of the young people involved. We want young people to be able to co-create a space that feels authentically their own, and to have a genuine say on what is programmed and how the sessions are run.

Our Co-Producers were appointed in 2025, thanks to funding from BBC Children in Need. They meet monthly to share updates, make decisions, and check in on how CAYA is running. This is a paid role, recognising the time, energy and creativity the Co-Producers bring.

SINCE INCEPTION THE CAYA CO-PRODUCERS HAVE:

- Explored decision making models and co-created a CAYA Co-Producers Tool Kit
- Created a CAYA code of conduct
- Agreed the requirements of a youth-led grants project and decided a shortlist of applicants
- Been a part of the Albany's Pizza and Pitches panel, shortlisting community-led projects
- Planned our 2025 Summer Party
- Fed into research around creative youth work.

LOOKING AHEAD, THE CO-PRODUCERS WILL:

- Continue to meet and grow, creating more transparency about the process and how new members can get involved
- Become trained Peer Evaluators, working to ensure CAYA is doing its best for the young people it serves
- Take even more ownership and deliver their own projects for young people
- Work cross-organisationally on major upcoming Albany projects, ensuring a youth voice is embedded in top-level decision making.

What we've learned:

1. Make sure young people's voices are embedded in your decision making - but consider the different levels of participation and be clear about how you are involving young people
2. Be patient - it may take time to grow and for young people to build up the confidence to attend
3. Curate your team carefully - our youth workers are essential to the success of CAYA.



2.

Creating a Safe Space



Photo credit - Agape's Angle

Our research showed us that young people want a comfortable space to be themselves without worries or stress. It also showed that there were a multitude of barriers that would prevent young people attending, including cost; fear of fitting in; feeling unsafe; not knowing what spaces and activities are available due to a lack of relevant advertising; and lack of time or travel options. CAYA provides a free, warm and welcoming space for young people to return to week by week. We've created a genuine community for people to socialise, make friends and feel a real sense of belonging.

91%

Said they made new friends at CAYA

100%

Said the Albany created "a safe place to express themselves and process things"

"Consistency and reliable support were a big deal for over half of the young people surveyed knowing that week by week there was a space for them to go"

— *Extract from I'm not okay but... report*

"Young people both wanted and needed spaces that were free or affordable, physically and mentally safe, warm and comfortable, and easily accessible. They wanted spaces that allowed them to freely express themselves and be seen and heard when they do."

— *Extract from People, Places, Poetry report*



**Aleksa Ame,
aged 22**

HOST AND YOUTH SUPPORT WORKER AT
COME AS YOU ARE.

CO-RESEARCHER OF PEOPLE, PLACES,
POETRY

“ Following the People, Places, Poetry Research Project, I have had the privilege of hosting Come As You Are (CAYA), working as a youth support worker, Social Media and Communications Manager, and Facilitator for our Co-Producers. Over the past three years, I’ve built meaningful connections and witnessed young people grow creatively, professionally, and personally.

This time has been about translating theory - our research findings - into practice. While we understood what young people needed, it took time and space to explore what that looks like in reality. CAYA has become a hub for creativity, connection, and lasting memories, as well as a safe space for mentorship, support, and mental wellbeing.

What stands out most is the flexibility of the space. Free from rigid structures, young people have real autonomy, shaping each session in their own way. As staff, we act not as leaders, but as “mitigators of chaos”, holding a safe space while allowing young people to define it.

Looking ahead, I hope to see CAYA grow in resources and deepen its impact for young people. “



**Rofeda Bougaga,
aged 21**

CREATIVE FACILITATOR
YOUTH PROGRAMME

CASE STUDY

Rofeda Bougaga is a young person who has been attending the Albany for seven years since she first joined SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS drama sessions. Rofeda is now a Creative Facilitator who works within our Youth Programme in many different roles.

“In 2017 I would describe myself as chaotic. Being part of the Albany gave me somewhere to calm down. If I wanted to do things like take my shoes off, sit on the floor instead of a chair, or lay on a beanbag – I wouldn’t be able to do that in school or college because everyone would think I’m weird. But here, we do things a little different. I can do all those things and use fidget toys and not feel unusual. I feel like it’s a very safe place – I feel safe here.

When I bring new people like my friends or my partner to the Albany, they said they felt very welcomed by everyone. It just feels authentic and genuine.”

Food, Glorious Food!

Food has so much value in bringing people together and is a major pull for our young people attending. At 4pm every Tuesday, we eat together and have a moment of unity before everyone returns to their activities. In 2025, we switched from ordering takeaway pizzas to freshly made, healthy vegetarian food cooked by Senior Café Supervisor Rhian Parker, and the response has been amazing.

“I love cooking for CAYA because it gives young people a chance to gather, feel cared for, and enjoy a healthy meal. Good food helps power their brains, supporting them with homework and important social decisions.”

— **Rhian Parker, Senior Café Supervisor**

What do you enjoy about Come As You Are?

“How open the space is and how it’s very welcoming to everyone, so everyone has a voice to express their creativity”

“The community and general feel/atmosphere”

“The opportunity of getting free products and free food for those who don’t have a good income”

What we’ve learned:

1. Consistency is key - ensure sessions are in the same location, at the same day and time each week.
2. Communicate clearly how young people can travel to the venue and how you are keeping them safe.
3. Give young people choices and options to be flexible with their levels of participation.
4. Food can be a real hook to draw young people in and bring everyone together.



3.

Creativity and Mental Health



Photo: Indie Max performs at REZON8 event - Agape's Angle

I wouldn't want to repress the stress that the youth face at present,
I mean over half my friends have met face to face with depression,
And that's just my friends not even the whole population,
It's an invasion.
We need air raid sirens sounding for a whole generation.
We are failing the youths of this nation.
So that inspired this investigation.
The correlation between the lack of spaces and the youth's tribulations.
I say this with cadence.
So, take this with contemplation.
It's an invasion.
We need air raid sirens sounding for a whole generation.
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Extract from Corner Shop by Shireesha (Alana Sun) - written in response to our People, Places, Poetry research

We have witnessed first-hand the profound impact that creativity can have on young people’s mental health.

From drop-in recording sessions to hip-hop dance lessons, lyric writing boot camps, and arts and crafts activities, CAYA is a hub for creative activity with a focus on improving the wellbeing and mental health of young people.

Alongside creative activities, our in-house wellbeing service, Rise Up, offers free face-to-face sessions focusing on managing feelings and emotions; maintaining positive relationships; resilience and self-esteem.

Young people have told us how taking part has improved their wellbeing in a myriad of different ways:

- As a positive distraction from personal issues
- A way to open up a conversation with a supportive member of staff
- A way to express themselves and explore topics that matter to them
- A way to relax and feel calm.

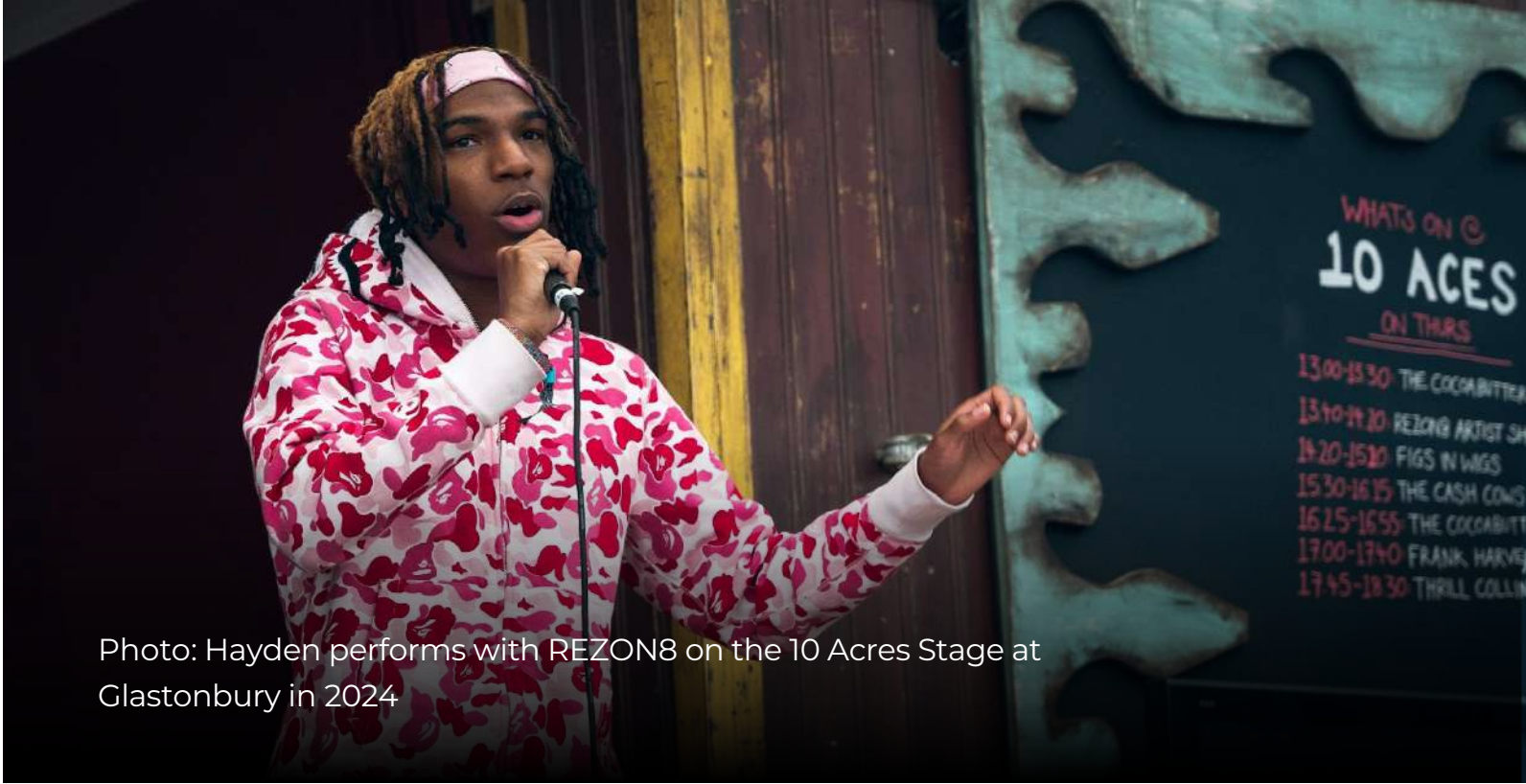


Photo: Hayden performs with REZON8 on the 10 Acres Stage at Glastonbury in 2024

CASE STUDY Hayden attends REZON8 and was one of four young musicians who performed at Glastonbury in 2024.

“I would say coming to the Albany, it’s given me a sense of freedom from my stammer. Because for some reason when I record or when I’m performing live, I don’t stammer. But normally I do, so I would say it’s a sense of freedom and opportunity.

Maybe like the third time that I performed, I was like, trying to get used to it. And I got more comfortable with it. I’ve been coming here for one to two years. Before joining, I was recording at home. I was stacking up shoeboxes for a mic stand, and I would put the microphone on top of that and record. And I think I was doing that for at least a year. I was like learning how to mix there, and then when I came to REZON8 at the Albany, I met Kieron [REZON8 Founder] and recorded in an actual studio for once. I saw how the quality was different as well.

Just being here makes you feel a certain way. There’s a lot of mentorship and the people are very kind. And the kids here that also make music, they inspire you too. But Kieron and Yasmin [Y.A. Poet, REZON8 Mentor], throughout the past year definitely helped me out.

...Once I come here, I know nobody’s going to judge me. No one’s going to look at me any type of way. There ain’t no like bad vibes ever here.”



Photo: REZON8 and Backstage and Technical Course at Glastonbury Festival
(photo credit - @LABLFOTO)

“This has supported my mental health as I felt lonely and I felt like I had no one outside of my family to talk to. By coming to the youth programme, I have been able to open up and feel more comfortable.”

-16-year-old Come As You Are member

“Writing beats and lyrics, especially in a group setting, has helped with my mental health. The social aspect and sharing what you have written make me feel alive, and I get to connect with other supportive and friendly people who also create music.”

- REZON8 Boot Camp attendee

What we’ve learned:

1. We need to advocate for the power of creativity in supporting mental health – it really can make a huge difference.
2. Training staff to be able to prioritise listening and facilitate open conversation, as well as understanding when a young person may need to be referred on for further support, is vital.

“

I’ve had my mind on a lot of things that I’ve had to experience in my life and when I’m at the Albany it’s a fun and welcoming community [...] I cherish spending time here with friends

- 14-year-old Come As You Are member

”

4.

Developing Creativity



Photo: Dance Groove session - Agape's Angle

95%

of young people have reported learning a new skill or developing an existing skill

60%

of young people have reported an increase in professional contacts

10

young people employed to deliver creative workshops or activities

400+

paid hours for young people to deliver workshops/activities over the past three years

1 in 6 jobs in London are in the creative industries and culture and creativity contribute over £50bn to the capital's economy every year*. A key pillar of CAYA is creating new, exciting and tangible opportunities to get creative, learn new skills, and discover new hobbies which could turn into potential career paths. Thanks to the generous funding from the Mayor of London through the Propel collaboration, we have been able to offer a huge variety of creative activities and employ young creatives to deliver them.

● *Mayor of London Creative Industries Report 2023.

Creative career development highlights:

Weekly Drop-in Recording Studio

Led by a young facilitator and youth support worker, members can learn how to produce, sound engineer, record and develop their own songs and tracks.

REZON8 Boot Camps

Our youth music project using music and lyricism as a tool to explore mental health.

Dance Groove

Weekly hip-hop/street dance sessions led by Shaney Bernard, teaching techniques and choreography and creating routines.

37&Co, Co-Create Workshops

We partnered with 37&Co led by Abisola Sogaolu to deliver six creative sessions exploring design, media, and storytelling.

Rhythmic Therapies

Youth support worker Rofeda Bougaga led these workshops supporting young people to address issues that affect them through creative outlets such as poetry, movement and drama.



Photo credit - Agape's Angle 32

Creative Coding Collective

We held beginner and advanced coding courses which included mentoring from industry professionals, building pathways into the tech and digital sector.

Technical Training Course

Alongside partners including Southbank Centre and Lewisham Music, we offered free training in lighting, sound design and stage management, which led to four sound engineers gaining paid work at Glastonbury Festival.

Young Company

We partnered with resident company SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS to run a weekly youth drama company, led by two alumni of the group. They performed their show, Hold On to Letting Go, in November 2024.

We Make - Graffiti Sessions

We worked with artist Joe Adams to deliver a six-week course in spray paint and graffiti skills that looked at the history of street art and murals.

DJ Workshops

DJ Malika Green gave our young people an opportunity to learn skills on the decks and spin some tunes.





Photo credit - Agape's Angle

I've improved my communication skills, gained work opportunities, developed friendships and found time to learn new hobbies

- Come As You Are member, aged 15

“

Trying graffiti at CAYA [...] taught me something new that was fun and interesting.

-Come As You Are member

”

“

**I feel more confident
when practicing
choreography as there
is not much opportunity
to practice dance with
teachers for free.**

- Come As You Are member

”



Photo credit - Agape's Angle

‘We’ve seen a lot of creatives come into the space, we’ve seen some young people develop into alumni and go off and create their own projects. [...] Seeing young people discover career options and career prospects, or achieve something they previously didn’t think they could do, grow in confidence, all these different examples - I think that is so rewarding.’

- Aleksa Asme, Host and Youth Support Worker

“In the dance sessions there were a few girls who would get very easily distracted or couldn’t express themselves as well as they wanted to because of lack of confidence. By the end of term some of them are so concentrated or so willing to perform in front of everyone that I’m taken back but in a good way of course. I love being there in the process of seeing that change happen and being able to give the right support that they need.”

- Sonia, Youth Support Worker and Dance Teacher

What's next for Come As You Are

What we've learned:

- 1.** Build in different ways for young people to participate in activities. Having a mixture of pre-subscribed and drop-in activities supports engagement and reaches different young people.
- 2.** Variety is key - giving young people the chance to try a range of activities until they land on something they love.
- 3.** Mentors are invaluable - access to those with creative careers can open up opportunities and pathways young people may not have realised existed.
- 4.** Alongside hard skills like choreography, creative writing or coding, our workshops have also increased young people's confidence and helped them grow their networks.

CAYA is continuing to thrive and grow. We are building on what we have learned during this incubation time, hoping to grow our reach and engage with even more young people.

With support from Maudsley Charity's Building Brighter Futures fund, we are aiming to improve mental health and wellbeing literacy for local young people. This will involve training the CAYA team to better understand Children and Young People's mental health support service routes, and building relationships with local mental health support teams to create direct pathways to care. In tandem, CAYA and REZON8 are continuing to focus on creativity as a tool for supporting better mental health and will keep programming a variety of free activities that make young people feel good and create spaces to talk.

Another focus is building on our creative careers strand with clearer pathways into work. We will soon launch a new project, Young Creatives Lewisham, supported by the Elizabeth Legacy Fund, an opportunity for local young artists to gain the skills, training and experience to be the next youth facilitators both for the CAYA programme and beyond.

Our Co-Producers will be feeding into all the above, including selecting the artists they want to see delivering workshops in Come As You Are. They will also gain more training become involved in wider organisational planning, including around our upcoming building development.

The work described is only made possible through the generosity and vision of our funders. We are actively seeking funders and partners to continue to deliver our vital work. With further support we could provide even more sessions, including provision throughout the holidays, reach even more local young people and increase the quality and choice of creative activities we offer.

If you'd like to find out more about our youth programme, visit a session, support our work or discuss setting up a similar project in your own venue, please reach out to Rebecca Carter, Senior Producer – Engagement and Participation: youth.projects@thealbany.org.uk

Thanks

The CAYA, REZON8 and Albany team:

Aleksa Asme
Daisy Sullivan
Donna Sampson
Ellen Casey
Hayley Murphy
Kieron Morris
Meg Hendrickse
Moziah DeRoche
Ndabane Makukula
Rebecca Carter
Rhian Parker
Rofeda Bougaga
Sammy Lizon
Seyi Keyamo
Shaney Bernard
Sonia O-Penza
Sophie Waddy
William
Vicki Amedume
Y.A Poet (Yas Ali)

Previous CAYA team members, supporters and Albany team:

Amaarah Roze
 Amy Van-Zyl
 Chiquita Delisser
 Christine Bramwell
 Ellie Whittle
 Gemma Rowan
 Kirsty Collander-Brown
 Roisin Feeny
 Toni-Ann Gurdon

Partners and Friends:

37&Co
 Addey and Stanhope School
 Alchemy
 Beauty Banks
 Deptford Green School
 Elena Hilgert
 Elevate 100
 Heart n Soul
 Lewisham Bank of Things
 Lewisham Council
 SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS
 Staying Out Collective

Our generous funders





Designed by Abisola Sogaolu