

The Life of a Jazz Festival During a Pandemic

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Volume 14, Number 1, 2021

Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076313ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v14i1.6481>

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Publisher(s)

University of Guelph College of Arts

ISSN

1712-0624 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Cancura, P. (2021). The Life of a Jazz Festival During a Pandemic. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 14(1), 1–3.
<https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v14i1.6481>

Article abstract

Programming Manager Petr Cancura describes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Ottawa Jazz Festival.

The Life of a Jazz Festival during a Pandemic

Petr Cancura

Music, as all art, reflects the state of the human condition and the times we live in. At its best music is an expression of the human imagination. It uplifts us, gets us dancing, laughing, and brings joy to our lives. What I love most about music is the way it connects us to each other, whether through a sweet lullaby sung to a baby or the height of an improvised jazz solo that brings its audience into an altered state of reality. Music heals. It reminds us to be compassionate and leads social movements to create change in our societies.

February and March are usually a very busy time as we get ready for the Ottawa Jazz Festival, which has been running every summer for forty years . . . until this year! As a musician, artist, teacher, and the Programming Manager at the Ottawa Jazz Festival, I have found a flow living in Ottawa and leading a creative life that balances music-making, family life, and work with the Jazz Festival. These three elements take up most of my time. When the pandemic hit, all three were turned upside down: I became a homeschool parent while all my gigs and the 40th edition of the festival were cancelled. So, although I would like to talk mostly about the festival's response to the pandemic, I need to stress that the core elements of my life required a massive amount of energy to restructure quickly and all at once. This of course happened for everyone, and establishing a new balance when no one is on strong footing is challenging at best.

When in late April we finally announced the cancellation of the festival, it was heartbreaking for the whole team as months of meticulous planning went down the drain. We sometimes book performances as far as two years in advance in order to line up artists' schedules and/or fulfill curatorial goals and initiatives. When we do not have to deal with obstacles (like the pandemic), the curation of the festival is a process of creating a big international community, bringing together artists from all over the world. It is an intricate balance of presenting artists on tour with new projects and collaborations of all sorts. These musical collaborations are different with every case, but generally entail asking musicians to work together, sometimes with very little preparation, to create a unique and interesting experience for both the artists and the audience. To sum it up: in a normal year, we work steadily with different venues, presenters, managers, agents, and artists to curate an artistically engaging festival while working within the framework of a delicate and ever-evolving financial model.

The dust had not yet settled from our cancellation announcement when planning was already under way to stage an event of sorts in place of our summer festival. As an organization, we exist to present art, to give a voice to artists, and to connect people. With no live in-person performances in sight we had no choice but to present music online. Many organizations were quick to put together programming online, and a big shout out to them all! By April, we had seen enough of these that we knew we wanted to present something more than just a series of livestreams from artists' homes. In a way, that was all that was available to us. All that any musician could do was to play from their living room.

We decided to present a ten-day series of live events. Each event would be some kind of musical performance accompanied by a live interview to give the audience context for the performance and give the artists a voice as well. Our goal was to make each performance a unique experience, as malleable as the music itself. This approach takes much more focus and effort than sticking to a working formula. Although mass audiences tend to gravitate towards formulas, treating each performance as having its own life-force results in much more depth. In the end, each segment tells a unique story, the sum of which was a virtual festival we called

Tenacity.

At the risk of being overly detailed about this series, I feel it is important to share some of what we did. Here are a few highlights from Tenacity:

Some of the performances were simply pre-recorded songs where each band member contributed an audio part supported by a video file and we edited them together along with video animation. For some of these, we asked a special guest to join local artists to create one-of-a-kind recordings, like Seamus Blake guesting on a Kellylee Evans song or Joel Frahm with the Prime Rib Big Band. One performance included a graphic score by Joe Morris, who led a group of musicians in a live simultaneous performance from Connecticut, Montreal, Toronto, and Berlin. We presented a songwriter-circle-style set of solo performances by local jazz musicians. An improvisation experiment led by pianist Kris Davis had her record a solo piece which she then sent to trumpeter Lina Allemano with instructions to set up her recording gear and only listen to it as she recorded an improvised part. The sum of those two were then sent to saxophonist Anna Weber who was asked to do the same. Dan Tepfer played along with software he wrote for a Yamaha Disklavier that reacts to his playing, and Hayden Chisholm produced a short film—an incredible snapshot of life and music in Serbia during the pandemic.

Tenacity took a lot of energy as the whole team had to shift to accommodate this new format and accomplish all the tasks that came along with it. In the end we were able to put together a diverse program with artistic integrity which helped bring different musical communities together.

Looking Forward

The art of arts presentation depends not just on our choice of performers, but also on the platform through which artists express their art and how we deliver that experience to the audience. As an organization, we strive to present the best in contemporary jazz and related idioms in a bold and meaningful way that reflects the integrity of our creative vision.

Nobody knows what the future holds. At the time of this writing (Fall 2020), I see a movement by artists to create shows that can be licenced for paying audiences and to accompany them with a live appearance at the time of streaming. Through such performances (or variations thereof) artists are able to say what they need to say, connect with people, and hopefully make a living. I also see a deep need for human connection. My own feeling is that, no matter what kind of virtual content we create, the human yearning for connection can only be satisfied in person.

However, the virtual world does offer some opportunities and advantages:

- 1) Virtual performances break down geographical boundaries.
- 2) Production is more in the hands of the artist.
- 3) Many more people have access through the internet.
- 4) Society has become quicker to mobilize and share information, as evident in our response to the pandemic or the Black Lives Matter movement.
- 5) The use of technology in music is thriving; musicians are finding ways of making those human connections through technology.

- 6) Physical infrastructure (i.e. staging) is not necessary for digital presentation of music.
- 7) As a result of all of the above, one could say hopefully that the artist is more in control of their vision.

Of course, we are all facing big challenges. As arts presenters, our challenge is to create the best possible scenario for both artist and audience, and to find creative ways to make that human connection between them. As we eye the future, we are looking at a combination of live and streamed performances, and rethinking venues (outdoor vs. indoor), while keeping everyone's health and safety in mind, maintaining a sustainable financial model, staying relevant by responding to important movements such as Black Lives Matter, addressing Canada's own struggles with social injustice, and holding on to that fundamental idea of music's place in this world. Music, like all art, reminds us of who we are and what is important. It offers us perspective, it heals, and it allows for compassion—all so that each and every one of us can lead a big and full life.