

Together Apart
Bitches Set Traps During Lockdown

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Article abstract

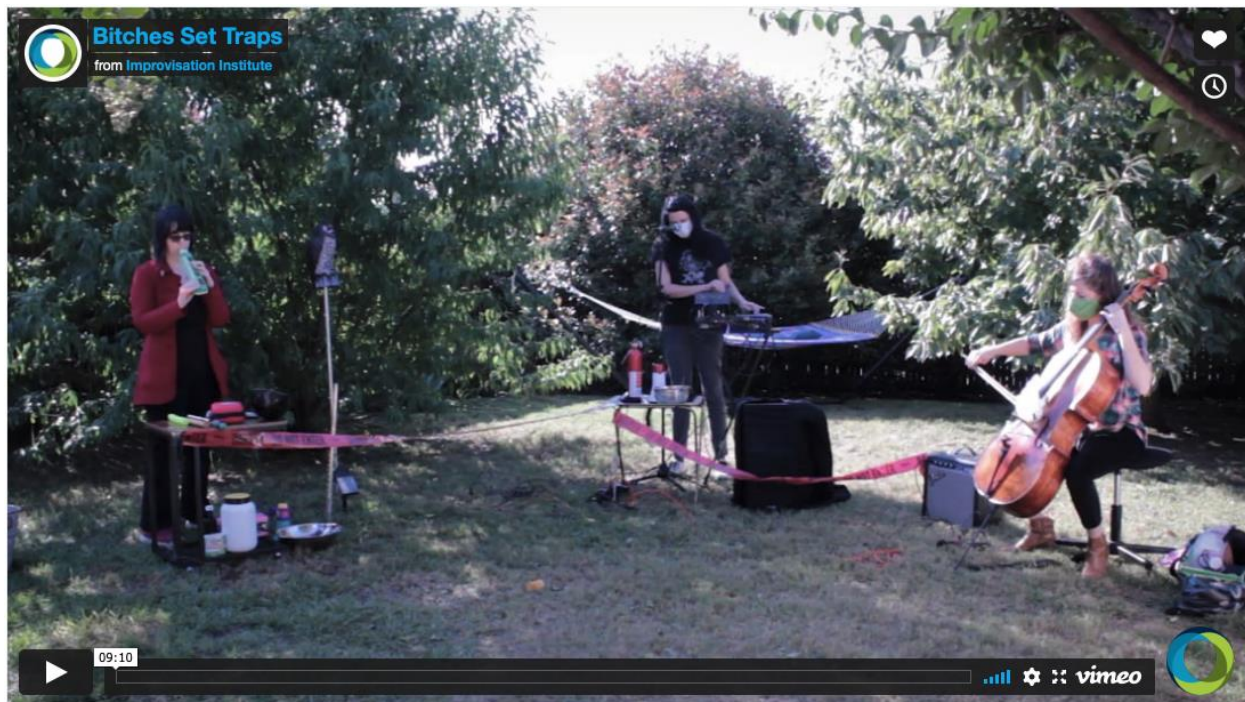
In this piece, Elizabeth McNutt discusses the creative responses of the Texas-based group Bitches Set Traps to the pandemic. Building on the legacy of the pioneering Feminist Improvising Group (which similarly blended the political, personal, and musical), Bitches Set Traps combines musical improvisation with theatrical and comedic elements to challenge gender stereotypes and to comment on current events. In the early months of the pandemic, the group staged a series of collaborative performances over Zoom, addressing pandemic-related themes including the household division of labor, the importance of self-care, beauty standards during quarantine, and social distancing.

Together Apart: Bitches Set Traps During Lockdown

Elizabeth McNutt

At the time of this writing in fall 2020, the pandemic has put a stop to virtually all live performances in the United States. Musicians are suffering financially and emotionally. The politicization of the pandemic is frightening and emotionally draining, especially in the more conservative parts of the country such as Texas (where we live). By continuing to play together as a group, Bitches Set Traps finds solace and inspiration during this difficult time.

With all our public performances cancelled due to the pandemic, we initially commiserated online. We were sad and scared. Luckily, a few days before the shutdown, we had recorded an album in the studio, and we agreed that getting this ready for release would be our first project. What then? How would we promote the release without playing shows? Could we keep performing somehow? With the scorching summer heat of Texas fast approaching, we had two socially-distanced outdoor improvisation sessions (morning and evening; it was already too hot for daytime), which we filmed. How would we continue playing together safely?



We decided to try improvising on the Zoom platform, accepting the inevitability of latency and glitches. None of us have a recording studio at home. We are fortunate to have decent computers but we don't have access to fancy microphones or cameras. My practice room doesn't even have doors! We accepted our low-tech status, and agreed to experiment and accept the outcome, however imperfect. We decided that periodically publishing short videos would help us promote the release of our studio recording. We also suspected that people watching online would prefer shorter videos, so we aimed for a three-minute duration. We improvised these videos on Zoom, and then uploaded them to our YouTube channel and other social media accounts.

Our group, Bitches Set Traps (BST), formed in 2018. Initially we called ourselves the North

Texas Feminist Improvisation Group, a name inspired by the original Feminist Improvising Group (FIG) of the 1970s. During that time, all-female improvisation groups were unheard of (and are still rare). The organizers of FIG's first performance accidentally called the group *feminist* instead of *female/women*. This word choice became a source of inspiration for the players. FIG broke performance taboos in a variety of ways: they were intentionally political, included domestic props in their performances, staged elaborate scenes, engaged in physical contact on stage, and interacted with the audience.

In our practice, we weave the political and sociological into our improvisations. In our rehearsals, we discuss current events, and personal and societal issues. Based on these conversations, we choose a theme for our next performance. Our pre-pandemic themes included domestic labor, menstruation, witchcraft (for Halloween shows), the beauty standard, weddings, female stereotypes in pop culture, and female sexual pleasure. Once we've chosen a theme, we (as a group and as individuals) consider song references, literature and poetry, costumes, instrument choices, and staging. The members of BST are experienced improvisers and performers of notated scores, but improvising comedy and drama provides new challenges for us as performers. Our work is thus multidisciplinary, and as such might be more accurately described as improvisational performance art.

Connecting our improvisations to current events was already a regular part of our work, so researching pandemic-related themes is consistent with our practice. When performing live, BST plays in a variety of venues including concert halls, art museums and galleries, clubs, coffee shops, and festivals. In our stage performances, we bring an ever-changing kit of household "instruments" to suit our themes: blenders, vacuum cleaners, hairdryers, make up, pasta boxes, vibrators, exercise equipment, cauldrons full of dry ice, among other items. In contemplating performing from within our homes, we decided to focus on the home environment as our stage, instead of bringing items from home to the stage. With this in mind, we discussed our experiences sheltering at home. We followed headlines, researched trends online, and continued to use a collective planning process to design these new works.

Each home location presented unique challenges and provocations. Too risky to take expensive instruments into a small bathroom? Choose other instruments. I never thought I'd play my child's bath toy, or a water pan flute, in public. Roommates and pets around? Make them a part of the story. Needing a change of scenery? Virtual backgrounds add another layer of drama and humor. As weeks of sheltering in place continued, different themes inspired us: redefined identity, household division of labor, fear, importance of self-care, personal safety, beauty standards during quarantine, supply chain problems, germs and cleanliness, social distancing and PPE, and magical thinking, among others.

Before the pandemic, all of our work engaged a live audience. Feeling the energy from our audience was an integral part of our practice, especially in improvising theatrical and comedic elements. We occasionally interacted with the audience as well. For example, in a wedding-themed performance, Sarah ran through the audience begging men to marry her; and in a show about body shaming, Kourtney circled the audience offering cookies from the legendary Texas convenience megastore Buc-ee's. On the one hand, we miss the energy and immediate responses we get in a live show; on the other hand, our online videos have had more views than we get in a typical performance. While the connection with our unseen audience goes one way, we are reaching a greater number of people.

Performing on Zoom has many limitations. The most troubling for us are: the inability to hear each other well, the technological glitches, and the impossibility of balancing our instruments.

Despite these challenges, and to my surprise, we discovered that we enjoyed improvising these vignettes. We continued throughout the summer, well past our album release, resulting in a COVID-19 playlist on our YouTube channel. As the pandemic progressed, we found new pandemic themes to explore. We are looking forward to fall, when cooler temperatures will permit us to play outside together again. Perhaps we'll invite a few people this time, masks required.

Bitches Set Traps is Sarah Ruth Alexander (voice, dulcimer, electronics, percussion), Elizabeth McNutt (flutes, theremin, voice, percussion), and Kourtney Newton (cello, musical saw, voice, percussion).

YouTube playlist of BST COVID-19 videos:

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtBcxnPjKdepyTNP8hsXmhzk4X-sPD4ES>

BST website: <https://www.bitchessettraps.com>