

Musicians speak out on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

“A devastating blow financially and emotionally”

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At the outset of the coronavirus pandemic in March, musicians and DJs in the United States who rely on live performances for a living saw their shows and tours cancelled overnight for the foreseeable future. Most of these artists already make considerable sacrifices to make ends meet, often living paycheck to paycheck and without health insurance. The pandemic has left them—along with all artists and workers in the gig economy—reeling.

The recently passed federal “stimulus” package provides a one-time check of \$1,200 to most taxpayers and expanded unemployment benefits to workers in the gig economy, but it is unclear how many performing musicians will qualify for those benefits, and how much they will receive if they do.

With their income abruptly cut off, many musical artists have turned to social media, making appeals for fans to help keep them afloat by buying their music and merchandise. Bandcamp, a popular online music platform where artists can upload, stream and sell music, recently waived its normal 15 percent sales fee for one day, which raised \$4.3 million for artists around the globe. Artists are also fundraising by streaming online musical performances from their homes and asking for donations.

These efforts, however, are a drop in the bucket compared to what is required. Many musicians will now see their careers damaged, perhaps irreparably. They face the real prospect of long-term unemployment. There is also the matter of what impact the present calamitous crisis will have on their thinking and their music.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to a number of musicians affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

Maria, a 27-year-old singer-songwriter and bandleader living in Chicago, told us, “All the money I make from music goes toward expenses related to music. So, in order to keep playing or recording music, I have to be performing and selling merch.

“This is all in the hopes of one day being able to support myself on music alone.” Maria worked two part-time jobs

before she was forced to shelter in place, and has health insurance through the marketplace, but hasn’t “really been able to afford [it] since employment changes left me with lower income than I’ve had in years past.” She is also behind on student loan payments.

Two of Maria’s tours were cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic, one two-week tour for the SXSW (South by Southwest) Festival in Austin, Texas, and one month-long European tour in May. “That adds up to about 35 shows cancelled, which has been a devastating blow financially and emotionally.” She said she had invested a significant amount of money for merchandise and plane tickets for the tours.

When asked about the so-called stimulus package, she said that she thought it was not sustainable. Maria filed for unemployment but doesn’t know how much she will get. She said that the process was confusing and that the government website was not working.

She discussed the way in which the music community has reacted to the crisis. “We have all certainly banded together emotionally and over social media to support one another during this time. For a few weeks after the cancellations, many venues and organizations were making GoFundMe’s for donations for bands and industry workers that were put out by the closures of venues, etc.”

When Bandcamp waived fees, she noted that “These were morale boosts, and a bit of money, but ultimately not sustainable, and the burden should not fall on these institutions or on fans to provide livable wages to artists.”

Maria brought up the fact that the US government doesn’t support artists’ lives. “I think the government should absolutely take on this responsibility,” she continued. “My income provides very little wiggle room in the face of a crisis such as this. For the past four years, I have had to work two to three jobs that are somehow flexible enough to allow for touring, recording and writing time, and pay enough to support both living and business expenses like music gear,

transportation and recording fees.”

In response to Trump’s desire to get the workforce back to work in a few weeks, Maria said, “It is absurd that we would put a higher premium on the maintenance of the economy when it puts thousands more Americans at a higher risk of getting sick or dying. It shows where the government’s priorities lie.”

Isaac, a 24-year-old Brooklyn-based DJ and electronic producer who supports himself entirely through music, told the WSWS, “Performing is essential—most of my income is from DJ gigs and freelance studio work.” Isaac, who does not have health insurance, said that the coronavirus pandemic has had a severe financial impact on him.

Asked if the federal assistance package was enough to support him, Isaac said it wouldn’t be. “The \$1,200 would definitely help a lot right now since I can’t file for unemployment, but I definitely wouldn’t be able to survive on that alone.” Although he felt that the music community had been a major support during this crisis, he added, “I think government support is crucial, but musicians should have a hand in it.”

Kenny, a 27-year-old musician based in Kingston, New York, was in Houston, Texas, in the middle of a tour with his rock band last month when the rest of its shows got cancelled, including ones at SXSW, due to the coronavirus.

Kenny, who has a full-time job, said his band was looking forward to playing SXSW, one of the largest music festivals in the world, in order to connect to a wider audience. “A lot of us hope for that big break, and SXSW can be that for a lot of people. This was the first time we were going down, so we were just really hopeful in general, but that whole week sort of came crashing down.”

Kenny’s bandmate lives in New York City, and they don’t currently have plans to stream an online performance. “We specifically rely on our live performances to get ‘the punch’ and that’s sort of hard to do with live streaming.”

Speaking about the financial impact this crisis is having on musicians, Kenny said, “You know, a band is a business...and your business gets hurt when you’re losing all those sales you normally would have made at shows.”

He said that he has seen widespread support in the music community recently and believed that musicians had to support each other because the government wouldn’t. “They give us a measly \$1,200 each and corporations get however much they’re getting, which is most of the stimulus package, it seems like, and people are still dying in hospitals.”

Kenny, who has asthma, said, “I have autoimmune diseases that make me really susceptible to this virus. Luckily, I have health insurance, but it’s not top grade. If I did end up in the hospital, I would lose a ton of work and

I’m sure I would have medical debt.” He is already paying off medical debt from earlier treatment.

“I’m sure you’re going to still see a lot of people struggling,” Kenny said, “A lot of people dying, lots of people scared and not knowing what the hell is going to come next. I think we’re going to see more movements pop up to help support people.”

“We live in a capitalist society, so most of the rich don’t have any problems staying home with three pools and endless entertainment. It’s different for the day-to-day person who’s got to figure out what their landlord decides to do, what their job decides to do. If they get sick—there’s just so many questions that don’t have answers.”

Alex, a 35-year-old Brooklyn-based musician and freelance filmmaker, is part of Pleasure Jam, an organization that has been putting on a weekly series of virtual dance parties benefiting different New York City nightclubs and their staffs. He told the WSWS that the impetus for these virtual parties was seeing that New York City DJs, clubs and staff were suffering, and no one was providing them relief.

Of the various self-help groups that had been formed to help workers in need, Alex said, “All that stuff is really beautiful, but it’s also, personally, infuriating that it’s on individuals to make financial sacrifices to support small businesses and workers when that is 100 percent something the government should be doing with our tax money. It’s not happening. It’s going to the wrong people.”

Commenting on the trillions of dollars given to the financial aristocracy, Alex said he read that the same amount of money could supply \$10,000 to every single American and supply billions to health care. “Why isn’t that the norm,” he said, “and giving it to the corporations the crazy thing? It’s so upside down.”

Alex said that it was necessary to transform society to address social need. “Hopefully, we can all take that logical step and change the paradigm in this country of what social safety looks like because right now it’s broken and it’s minimal, and it should be so much more robust so that when things like this happen, we’re ready.”



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