

More than three-quarters of event workers have lost all of their income

Live music industry in the US faces “massive collapse” due to pandemic

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The indifference of the political establishment in the US—and everywhere else, for that matter—to popular economic hardship is hard to overestimate.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, millionaire politicians—representatives of the banks and large corporations—from both major parties demonstrate on a daily basis how impervious they are to the loss of jobs and income experienced by great numbers of people, along with the threat of evictions and foreclosures and the growth of hunger and homelessness.

The overall devastation has implications that go beyond even the immediately economic situation, as desperate as that is. The coronavirus crisis is presently threatening to wipe out a considerable portion of cultural life in the US.

The American ruling elite, pig-ignorant on the whole, would not blink an eye over such a prospect. In so far as it contributed to a further cultural regression and numbing of the population, the powers that be might consider it a positive good. In any event, fixated on short-term profits and the rising stock market, they only have interest in the portion of the music and film industries customarily generating large earnings.

We have reported in the WSWS on the circumstances facing musicians, popular and classical, along with visual artists and others. The news continues to be dire. The situation has no precedent, in wartime or any other period.

In regard to live concerts, for example, the life blood of the popular music world, an article on the website Live for Live Music notes that when the pandemic erupted in early March, “we started compiling a list of all the scheduled shows, tours, and festivals affected by the outbreak.” As the situation worsened, the article continues, “it became clear that documenting every canceled/postponed show was a fool’s errand. We

quickly pivoted to building a list of concerts that were still *not* canceled. That list, too, rapidly proved to be pointless. To borrow a concept from the sports world, there’s no need for a box score if the whole game is rained out.”

In August, NPR reported that the “independent live music industry sits ... on the brink of catastrophe.” Thousands of concert halls and clubs remained closed. As the pandemic dragged on, it was creating “an existential crisis for these venues and the critical role they play in music scenes and communities across the US. The Barracuda in Austin, The Satellite in Los Angeles and Portland’s Port City Music Hall are just a few of the venues that have closed for good in recent weeks, with many more at risk of going under.”

In September, the Live Events Industry of Oregon (LEIO) released the results of a survey to business owners that asked how much longer they could hold on. “Close to a thousand people responded. More than 20 percent expect to go out of business by the end of October. That number jumps to over 70 percent by January.”

To take a further concrete example, a recent report by Denver Arts & Venues reveals that the city’s “creative industries have taken a massive hit since the beginning of the pandemic.” The study shows that Denver “has lost an estimated 29,840 creative-industry jobs, as well as \$1.4 billion in sales revenue, between April 1 and July 31.” Colorado’s music industry as a whole lost an “estimated 8,327 jobs, which amounts to a 51 percent loss. The study showed that Denver alone accounted for 4,525 of those jobs, as well as \$213.7 million in lost sales revenue.”

The National Independent Venue Association (NIVA), a recently formed coalition, warns that its constituents, “small, independent businesses,” which “normally contribute billions of dollars to local economies, are on

the precipice of mass collapse” if government funding is not forthcoming. The \$10-billion “Save Our Stages” act, passed by the US House of Representatives, is currently in limbo as part of the political warfare in Washington. In addition, as the *New York Times* points out, the venues are jockeying for the federal government’s “attention alongside restaurants, movie theaters and the thousands of other businesses that have suffered.”

Even were Save Our Stages to be enacted, the measure would hardly remedy the problem or bring back to life those venues and concert halls that have closed or are on the verge of closing—or revive the careers of the countless artists who have already given up.

According to trade publication *Pollstar*, the concert industry could lose as much as \$9 billion in 2020 alone, and that figure, points out *Variety*, “doesn’t include the losses of income by musicians, technicians, dancers and others in its sprawling supply chain.”

A NIVA survey conducted in June found that 90 percent of the organization’s 2,000 member businesses might close permanently if they continued to lose revenue for another six months.

Another recent initiative, #SaveLiveEventsNow, formed by a combination of some 20 business groups and entertainment unions, argues that while Save Our Stages is a significant step, “it is only a first step: The vital workers across every sector of the live event industry are still at risk.”

Variety explains that #SaveLiveEventsNow seeks to broaden government support and assistance “to 90 percent of the 12 million industry workers employed by venues and businesses that don’t qualify for support under Save Our Stages.” The new initiative estimates that a staggering 77 percent of behind-the-scenes live event workers have lost 100 percent of their income. This grouping includes lighting technicians, arena concession workers, parking attendants and many others.

Along the same lines, *Newsy* reports the claim by Nancy Shaffer, the president of another group, the Live Events Coalition, that “approximately 66 percent of all those involved in our industry have either had a reduction in pay, or it’s been slightly reduced, or it’s gone altogether.” Half of the industry is unemployed, *Newsy* explains, and the Live Events Coalition indicates that “many companies have laid off or furloughed ninety to ninety-five percent of their teams.” In a survey of almost 2,500 industry workers, more than 80 percent said they had applied for unemployment insurance.

The numbers are astonishing: before the pandemic,

trade shows and conferences represented a \$17 billion industry, concerts a \$35 billion industry and weddings had a market size of \$74 billion.

Jazz clubs comprise one of the most fragile sectors of the arts and music world. The *New York Times* recently observed that after suffering nearly six months of lost business, jazz venues in New York “have begun sounding the alarm that without significant government relief, they might not last much longer. Even with support, some proprietors said, the virus may have rendered their business model extinct.”

Among NIVA’s 2,000 members is the Village Vanguard, a landmark on Manhattan’s Seventh Avenue South since 1935. Its owner, Deborah Gordon, told the *Times* that the club might not be able “to weather a year or more without business.” Gordon commented about the legendary venue, “History gives you a nice mantle ... But history doesn’t protect you.”

The newspaper reports that “jazz’s nationwide network has already begun to crumble. In Washington, a number of clubs have closed since the start of the pandemic, including Twins Jazz, which had been the last full-on jazz club on the city’s historic U Street corridor.”

The situation is disastrous, and neither big business party nor any other portion of the political and financial establishment will address it. This is the harsh reality of capitalism in 2020. The sooner this finds a response among musicians and other artists, the better.



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