# A conversation with musician, producer Fabrizio Grossi about the pandemic and its impact: “Short of a global revolution, I don’t see a solution”

**Marc Wells, David Walsh**
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Fabrizio Grossi is a veteran bassist, producer and music consultant, sometimes referred to in the media as “legendary.” Born in Milan, Grossi moved to New York in 1990 and Los Angeles in 1996, where he still resides.

Upon moving to Los Angeles, Grossi performed on Nina Hagen’s album *BeeHappy* and soon after collaborated with Grammy-winning guitarist-composer Steve Vai on *Fire Garden*. Over the following years, Fabrizio produced several recordings (both studio and live) that featured Vai’s performances.

Grossi has played with far too many well-known artists and performers to list. Additional significant production collaborations have included those with Billy F. Gibbons (of ZZ Top fame), Leslie West (Mountain), Vai , Eric Gales, Steve Lukather (Toto), Glenn Hughes (Deep Purple), Alice Cooper and George Clinton & Parliament Funkadelic. He has shared the stage with many others.

Grossi’s website explains: “Soul-rock producer, and bass player at heart, he [Grossi] re-directed his interest towards American rootsy music, and even more so towards blues, soul and R ‘n’ B.” It continues that “his passion for the great black performers of the 60’s and 70’s” led him to mix those sounds with more contemporary rock and blues elements and found Supersonic Blues Machine, with the active membership of Kenny Aronoff and UK singer-guitarist Kris Barras.

Grossi was also co-executive producer (and music composer) of the 2017 critically acclaimed, award-winning documentary *Sidemen: Long Road to Glory* devoted to the lives and work of guitarist Hubert Sumlin, keyboardist Pinetop Perkins and drummer Willie “Big Eyes” Smith, who played as “sidemen” with blues greats Howlin’ Wolf and Muddy Waters.

Grossi was generous enough to speak with us recently from Los Angeles.

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WSWS: Could you tell us something about your work and how it has been impacted by the pandemic?

Fabrizio Grossi: I work in the entertainment industry, as a musician and producer. Even before COVID, we’ve been going through a period in which the corporations have been killing us, especially with streaming and the slashing of royalties.

Anyway, I applied for a Small Business Administration loan in April. I never got anything, just a notice that it’s being considered. Plus, those are not forgivable. Corporations can get free money. It’s like in a movie, a fiction. There’s no point in putting pressure on politicians, they’re all in the pockets of the rich, no exception. Short of a global revolution, I don’t see a solution.

Billions are created in my industry by all the workers who contribute, and I’m not talking about Beyoncé or Coldplay. I’m talking about the tens of thousands working behind the scenes, men and women. I wonder what the pandemic would have been like without streaming. We are deemed non-essential workers, but during these testing times the product of our work provided enormous, in fact, essential relief. Yet, where is our share?

WSWS: Were you able to collect benefits?

FG: I did receive unemployment and that was helpful. I got unemployment from the middle of May to mid-July. That was from the federal unemployment. I’m still getting a hundred something dollars a week from the state, at this point even that helps, although it’s not even enough to keep the lights on. But I cannot even understand the logic of terminating unemployment benefits in the middle of a pandemic crisis.

The $600 a week, thank God it was there. But even that was taxable. That’s like making fun of people’s misery. Big corporations are represented by government and through it they are making enormous amounts of money. Look at Jeff Bezos, the billions he made in the last five months while people were dying. And then there are all the other big CEOs and other corporations, taking in money like there’s no tomorrow.

WSWS: We call the pandemic a trigger event that is accelerating the crisis of the capitalist system. What do you think about that?

FG: The mainstream media talks about how great the economy was before the pandemic. But Wall Street is not OUR economy, the economy of the working people. They hailed full employment, but what kind of jobs were they considering? They are called full-time, but then some people have to take two or three jobs. Until not long ago, the wages of one person in a family were sufficient. Now people cannot make it to the end of the month.

WSWS: What would you say about the response of the government to the pandemic?

FG: They gave more money to the banks than it would have cost to create decent infrastructure, even what was needed to prevent the pandemic. We all pay for things, but money is used as a giveaway to corporations, like the CARES Act. It’s like a rigged lottery for the benefit of big corporations that already make a killing through their predatory strategies. It’s like Mafia bosses discussing how much money they will be making by taking out people.

They didn’t go into the lockdown to take care of us, they were just concerned that the system was collapsing. If they had listened to the experts, and prevented the pandemic, we wouldn’t be in this situation. Why should we be worried about this? “We only have 10 hospital beds”—why do you only have 10 hospital beds? It costs money. This is the principle of capitalism. I don’t support it at all. If we lived in a society

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that really cared about its citizens and their health …

To create infrastructure would have taken money out of the pockets of the rich. Halving the military budget could already provide enormous funds for social infrastructure. It's not a conspiracy, it's just a case of redistributing wealth from the bottom to the top. Look at 9/11: nothing was done to avoid that and whatever happened was used to create the Patriot Act and all the other measures that followed, including endless war. People were killed to justify wealth redistribution.

The same can be said about the pandemic: they use the situation to erode the last few benefits workers still have. And we haven't even talked about the seriousness of the medical situation! They tell us that Americans prefer to get medical insurance through their employer. But now with tens of millions unemployed the situation is dire.

Now look at what they are doing with the schools. They tell us they will be safe? What does that mean? With all the deficiencies of the system, starting right from the medical field where doctors and nurses are protesting on deaf ears. No, they want to keep things open. Next is what? A world war?

They reopened the schools so that parents can go back to work. Very simple. And people cannot pay for a baby-sitter. They are not concerned about the students losing one year of education, as they claim. If they really wanted that, then they would make education more affordable and they would make it top quality in every zip code!

WSWS: What is the live music situation, and how are people surviving, or not surviving?

FG: Actually, they're not. First of all, there's so much confusion, and people do not have proper information or guidelines. It's very difficult to just to get a handle on everything. At the Ventura County Fairgrounds they did a few shows during the summer, with a drive-in technique. A couple of friends of mine participated in that, in Vintage Trouble and Tower of Power. But basically, it was because they really wanted to get their rocks off, just play music, more than anything. Because they really lost money on the show.

For each artist on stage, each performer, you have at least five or six people behind him or her. You have a lighting director, a sound engineer, a monitor engineer, then you have the techs, a driver. These people, their voices are even less heard than ours because they're not known, they're not exposed. They're the unsung heroes, because nobody knows their names. When you go see an artist, you say, oh, man, what a show! "The artist was fantastic"—but how about the rest of the band, the rest of the crew, all the people who made that show so freaking good?

We're not doctors, not lawyers, we can't bill hours, but nonetheless it's hard work, which feeds a lot of people, and I'm sorry, but we pay a ton of taxes. And with that money, they never take care of the things they need to take care of, they inflate the military apparatus and all the rest of the garbage they like to take care of in Washington.

WSWS: What about the techs, crew members and so on? What are they doing now?

FG: They're doing what they can, they're hustling. Some people are trying to get part-time gigs, which is very, very difficult at this point, because nowhere is safe.

Most of them have been doing what they're doing throughout their lives. I'm not saying they cannot evolve, but it's very difficult when you've been a guitar tech for 20 years of your life to completely change industry. Sure, you can go and work at McDonald's, you don't need extra training for that. But if you go to McDonald's, you need to have a job as well at Jack in the Box and another at Carl's Jr., and maybe you'll manage to pay the rent.

WSWS: What about venues, clubs? Are some of them closing for good?

FG: A lot of those guys have already been muscled out, by giants like Live Nation, AEG. They start signing all the artists, because they have the money to pay everybody advances that nobody else can. They do the same things with the venues. They go in and make deals with a particular venue. Smaller venue owners are not necessarily the promoters of a given night. You see, a show at a theater or a big club is not necessarily promoted by the club or theater owner. The promoter is somebody who hires the talent, hires the venue, tries to sell tickets. After everything is paid, they have a profit. Some are good, some are bad.

Promoters like that are being muscled out by Live Nation, because Live Nation goes into a market, let's say, Los Angeles or Detroit, or Cologne or London, and they buy out pretty much a venue availability for six months at a time. They may be paying less than what the venue would get for a given night, but, obviously, if someone is paying for six or seven months, where you have all your nights booked, like four or five nights a week, it's a deal that's very difficult to turn down.

So, they might be giving work to the venue, but they're putting independent promoters in serious trouble. The smaller promoters don't have the banking credit lines of the likes of Live Nation and the other giants.

But when you have a situation like the COVID pandemic, an independent promoter normally would be held responsible if you're missing a night, or you're cancelling a show—he would have to pay penalties and that kind of thing. But it's very difficult for the venue to go after Live Nation if it decides to cancel three months of bookings because of something like COVID.

Sure, you can go after them legally and all that, but, you know, there's a difference between a corporation like Live Nation, which has several hundred lawyers on a retainer and a small promoter, who can only pay the retainer for one lawyer. You can't afford to pursue this for years, while the huge corporation can. It's capitalist Business 101 in the United States of America, just like any other industry.

WSWS: Are clubs and venues going out of business?

FG: Oh, plenty. A lot of clubs have closed down, and they're not going to be reopening. And not only in the States. I work in Europe a lot too. In Western Europe, it's a disaster.

People have a very distorted idea of what's going on in the music business. They see you on a stage, or see you as the owner of a club, and people imagine you're living the life of the rich and famous, and everybody's got the bank account of the Bee Gees. Absolutely nothing could be farther from the truth.

WSWS: I assume the majority of musicians struggle?

FG: Yes, indeed.

WSWS: Let's talk about the other side of it a little bit, the artistic or cultural side of the matter. If many smaller venues and clubs close down, if many musicians and all the people who go with them have to give up music, what is the cultural impact on the society?

FG: I cannot speak for everyone, and what music brings to them. However, music is part of our life, at least research, directly and indirectly, indicates that. Sure, with all the recorded music that we have, probably the world could go on for the next 50 years without blinking an eye, without having to repeat a song twice. Why are people so emotionally attached to art, to music, to songs? And I'm not just talking about the teenage girl or boy following the sensation of the moment. I'm talking about art in general.

Music is very powerful, it's a very powerful means of stimulating sensations and emotions.

To give you an example. I'm involved with Guitars for Vets, not because I'm pro-war or pro-Pentagon, far from it. So, you have veterans affected by PTSD. We all know what kind of damage that creates for people and those surrounding them, families, co-workers and so forth. Guitars for Vets provides instruments and guitar lessons to veterans. You have no idea of the power and the rate of success of these therapies.

The power of music is proven by science, it's very beneficial for people who have to take care of some very stressful mental issues.

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WSWS: Why do you play music?

FG: It's something I've wanted to do since I was 16 years old. I was in England then to learn the language. It's a common thing for Italians to do. I went to this huge concert near Nottingham, in Castle Donington. This was the time of the Monsters of Rock festivals. There were about 120,000 people there.

Whitesnake played a cover of Bobby "Blue" Bland's song, "Ain't No Love in the Heart of the City." Those shows in the UK in the 80s were famous because people would get into brawls like there was no tomorrow. But when Whitesnake played that song, the whole atmosphere changed, and the feeling was surreal. That really caught my attention, in terms of the reaction of the people.

I was a big fan of Bob Marley around that time. This is even earlier. I had the same experience when Bob Marley played at a stadium in Milan. There were about 100,000 people there. I was 10 or 11 years old. Later, after the English event, I saw Queen in Milan, and the way Freddie Mercury was dealing with the people, and the way they reacted to the music … This was just insane; this was what I wanted to do.

That feeling has always stayed with me, especially when you play live. I can be happy about a record, about compliments for it, I'm incredibly grateful that I've been able to play and work with most of my idols. But I think the biggest satisfaction, the biggest high you can get, is when you're up there and you play. I don't know how to describe it.

I've had a lot of memorable experiences. Without disrespecting anyone I've played with, one of the key moments, a year into my residence in Los Angeles, was recording with Steve Vai, a dear friend of mine now for 25 years. I ended up producing some of his work. Recording with him gave me some legitimacy. Suddenly I was a name on the map with the musicians in this town.

Also, there was the time when I produced Glenn Hughes, the singer and bass player from Deep Purple, on probably his biggest solo record. A few years later we did a tribute to Deep Purple, with a lot of other bands, Metallica, Iron Maiden. They all looked to me for arrangements, and these were people I grew up listening to. So that was beyond insane.

After 15 years of not touring, except for a couple of shows here and there, I put together a band on a suggestion from Billy F. Gibbons from ZZ Top. We wrote a song together. It became a single for my band, Supersonic Blues Machine. Anyway, the band ended up headlining one of the most important blues and rock festivals in Europe, the Notodden Blues Festival in Norway. There were about 7,000 people. We were playing our song, one that's important to me, and there are a couple of breaks in the song—well, the freaking audience was singing along with it. It was mind-blowing. I will take that to my grave.


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