

“Any return to ‘normality’ is a long way off”: Musicians and technicians speak to the WSWS

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Several British artists and performance technicians spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the impact of the pandemic on them and their work.

Ed Lay, drummer of the band Editors, had been on tour in February as the pandemic was unfolding. He was monitoring the situation initially “to see if it would affect our schedule. I think most people were doing the same at that point really, looking at it fairly distantly and wondering if it would have a slight effect on their own immediate travel or work commitments.”

This continued until “it suddenly became obvious that whole countries were shutting down public life.”

Even then, with a full diary, the band hoped it would be “just a little bit of a longer break than normal, nothing to panic about.”

When “a realisation crept up on me that this may be it for our campaign,” Ed said, “Then I did panic. I started to have quiet thoughts that it may be the beginning of the end for my career even.”

He “started questioning everything about the industry, if there was hope of returning to where we are, how much energy as a band have we got to rebuild after this, how much of an appetite will our audience have for us to come back to us if and when this blows over?”

“I felt fairly hopeless for a short time when the lockdown really kicked in... I didn’t want to even listen to music anymore.”

Despite these worries, Ed was aware that he was in a relatively comfortable position. “I had not had to worry about food or bills. So, then I had the horrible feeling of guilt that I was so caught up in my own bubble of worries and stresses, I hadn’t really been thinking of my friends in our industry. Their work lives had jolted to a stop, with most believing that live music would be among the very last things to return to our lives.”

Ed was scathing of the government’s demand that artists and workers in the industry “retrain”, saying the people he worked with “have been undervalued massively.” They should not “just be expected to retrain in a completely separate field when

they have put so much into an industry which is not just profitable, but essential to a lot of people’s social lives.”

He shared widespread concerns for the future when it is possible to resume performances. “When people eventually want to go out and enjoy live music again there has to be the crew there to make it happen, and I’m seriously worried that may not be the case without the support the industry deserves.”

Liz Rossi studied violin from the age of seven, and then at the Yehudi Menuhin School and the Junior Royal Academy. In 1993, she won an exhibition scholarship to study at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester where she studied for 5 years with Professor Wen Zhou Li. In 1998, she joined Manchester’s renowned Hallé symphony orchestra as number five 1st violin where she worked for 12 years before going freelance in 2009. Since then, she has performed with the Oldham Symphony Orchestra, with various duos and quartets, teaches, and coaches with the Halle Youth Orchestra.

Liz described the “complete collapse of the freelance scene,” as a result of which she had lost more than 80 percent of her work. “I have worked four full days as a player since March 17.”

The situation is slightly different for resident orchestras, which “have battened down the hatches as their residency venues have mothballed—they can’t justify opening, employing Front of House staff, unless venue operates at full capacity.”

In this way they have managed to avoid collapse, so far, but it has been a close-run thing. Liz said the Royal Northern Sinfonia, at the Sage in Gateshead “nearly went under.” Its collapse was only averted by axing 118 other jobs at the venue, which is currently closed.

She said “hopefully” venue workers can be rehired, but “if you disband a contract orchestra, you’ll never get it back.”

“The big orchestras have some reserves for crises,” she explained, and are coping by scaling back their output. “They’re all pretty much on a reduced schedule of streaming shows for smaller orchestra strengths and are on a reduced furlough. No freelancers are being employed as they have more musos on the books than can fit on a socially distanced stage.”

“Their reserves for big future projects are being depleted, so

there's no work for freelancers in the future really either," Liz explained.

"We, as freelancers, feel we have to wait it out. There will be less work in the future, so it's just a case of whether you can afford to or not."

Liz had benefitted from the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS), "even though I only get less than half of it." But the Musicians' Union (MU) say many "have fallen through the gaps who don't qualify."

Liz talked of the reality for those who cannot afford to continue. "Many of my mates have had to 'retrain' as they have kids to feed. The government is saying they should do so—well, it's not directly their fault there's a global pandemic on. It is rubbing salt on the wounds, whilst they're alright, Jack."

The end of live performance has been devastating across all forms of music.

Major has worked as a stagehand, production runner and driver for artists and their equipment for 40 years. He said, "There's no prospect of coming out of this like some industries, because of the nature of the business being dependent on large audiences at concerts and festivals.

"It's an industry that for many years has cut corners, being staffed by freelance, self-employed workers on seasonal and short-term contracts." One company he knew of employed just 12 people directly but, "At a concert for a band like U2 you could have 180 people working on the gig, and if it is outside there will be a lot more."

The result has been a static wage and uncertain work. "I have been on £10 an hour for the past 12 years, although this went up last year to £11. This work is not full-time or permanent, and I often have to claim state benefits when the work isn't coming in.

"I've had no work since March when the pandemic started. Most of the people I know in the industry have not had any work just like me. I did receive two payments of £1,000 and £1,400 from the furlough scheme since March, but that's it.

"In terms of the prospects for the future, these are bleak. Record companies are booking gigs in advance to be ahead of the game, if and when things get better. They are selling tickets for events as far ahead as Christmas next year, but there's no guarantee of anything."

Phil Murphy, who has worked as a tour, production and stage manager, and stage technician said, "The effect COVID-19 has had on my life is huge. Having worked on tour with bands around the world for many years, the impact of the travel restriction and the restrictions on live events have had a devastating effect on my career.

"All the work I had booked in this year has been cancelled or postponed/rescheduled—this now goes for work I've had rescheduled or booked in for 2021."

Phil was "hopeful that in the next few months things will begin to open back up and that in turn could lead to some sort

of festival season, which would be a real boost to the music industry. It's going to be a very strange Christmas, that's for sure.

"Relying on government handouts is not the way I live my life, but when life as we knew it ground to a halt, what other choices do we have?"

Simon Crompton is a sound engineer, producer, programmer, tour manager, production manager, stage manager and audio and equipment technician, who has worked in the music industry internationally for 40 years. Among the bands he has worked with are Editors, Doves and The Stone Roses. He said, "Studio work is at an all-time low, and I'm currently off the road indefinitely, with festivals cancelled, venues closed, and travel restrictions due to COVID-19."

He had been looking forward to a busy year working with several major artists, but "I have lost my jobs, my income and all sense of direction, as I was totally dedicated to my work."

This had taken a personal toll. "I worked on stages in front of thousands and thousands of people, and now I get panic attacks just going to the corner shop. I'm feeling somewhat disconnected and disempowered with the ongoing situation and I know from talking to colleagues I'm not alone in thinking this.

"For many of us in music and events, any return to 'normality' is a long way off."

Others interviewed spoke of this coming on top of the effect Brexit will have on touring performers, vastly increasing the paperwork requirements for haulage and instrument insurance. One technician the WSWS spoke to cited comments that composer, broadcaster and writer Howard Goodall made earlier this month: "Everything we do as creative artists—everything—is about removing the barriers between people. We do collaboration, reducing conflict, bringing people closer, unity, friendship, enjoyment and shared experience."



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