

Musicians and performers speak with WSWS about COVID-19

Our reporters

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Two Sydney musicians, an actor, and a staging worker from Queensland, recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the impact of the pandemic on them and their work.

Michael Coggins, a guitarist, became a professional musician after completing his studies at the Jazz Department of the Australian National University, in 2004. Since then he has played as a sideman with a diverse range of artists, including many Sydney-based African musicians. Coggins is also a member of jazz/rock groups—The Subterraneans and Sonic Mayhem Orchestra—and has played in support acts for visiting international artists, such as Hugh Masekela and Jah Prayzah.

“In early March I was doing four or five gigs a week then, virtually overnight, every phone or text message was a cancellation. My gig calendar was empty within a day, and I didn’t perform for six weeks before eventually doing a livestream gig.

“I teach guitar two days a week and so, fortunately, I was able to keep doing that with online lessons, but a lot of other music teachers couldn’t, and of course you can’t do band rehearsals over Zoom. A lot of musicians, who were supplementing their performing income through tutoring, lost both sources of income at the same time.

Asked about the impact on his income, he replied, “It’s been very tough, but I was able to get JobKeeper, even though there was some initial uncertainty about whether self-employed musicians could receive it. JobKeeper, which has now been reduced, is due to end next year. The government has made clear that there won’t be anything after March, so this is going to force people to take risks.

“Performing artists were already struggling before last March and most wouldn’t have had much in the way of savings to begin with anyway. That means that, if there’s an opportunity to perform, artists will seize it and so there’s a lot of pressure to take risks. We have to travel a lot—different venues every night, going interstate—and so there’s a heightened risk.

“Lots of political leaders keep saying that we’re not going back to a lockdown; that there’s going to be infections and deaths, that this is a fact of life which has to be accepted.

“Internationally COVID-19 is the worst it has ever been, and although Australia mostly escaped the worst of the infections there’s now a flare up in Sydney’s Northern Beaches and prior to that a cluster in Adelaide. It doesn’t take much for another outbreak. There’s not going to be any return to normal next March.

“There should be the closure of non-essential business, along with the provision of a living income so that it’s not the workers who are paying the price. This is absolutely necessary. Whether it’s appropriate for complete closures right now in Australia, these demands have to be there on the table and acted upon swiftly to isolate and contain outbreaks.

“The health of workers and the majority of society must take precedence over big-business profits. But the only way this is going to come about is if it’s fought for by the working class.”

Linda, an actor and a visual artist, said, “Most of those working in the creative industries relied on jobs in the hospitality industry, as waiters, kitchen hands or retail. They’ve been hit with a double whammy because these jobs have dried up.”

“Actors, musicians and other performing artists are dependent on their audiences—without audiences they cannot work—and so they’ve been crushed, and the worst thing is that there’s no sign of a changed future.

“Performers keep at it because there’s always the hope of a breakthrough. You’re always looking to the next big job, or that you can get on a plane to LA and something will open up there. These options are now closed because of COVID-19. Imagine that you’re a young actor and just graduated from NIDA [National Institute of Dramatic Arts]. All your hopes and dreams will have been shattered.

“Actors, performers and others in the creative arts have had little or no government assistance surviving in this pandemic world, but all sorts of special exceptions are made for major sporting events and sports stars. Governments pretend that mass sporting events attended by thousands of people are somehow not a problem. It’s ridiculous.

“COVID-19 has laid bare many things, including constant government claims that there’s no money. Suddenly there’s millions made available, but not for regular people or for the arts, culture, education and health. The money goes to those companies and people who are already rich.”

Michael Smith, 28, has worked in staging on a casual basis at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC) in Brisbane for the past eight years. He has also worked on several film and television productions, including *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Mako Mermaids*. The coronavirus had an immediate and ongoing impact on his employment.

“QPAC closed on March 23, as soon as all indoor events were limited to 200 people. It wasn’t viable for it to continue and so all

the casuals—about 150 people—lost their jobs. It reopened again to full capacity in November, but none of the casuals, apart from ushers and people in catering, have been rehired.

“When we were laid off we were paid an average of what we would have earned for the previous three months. Luckily, I had been averaging about 26 hours per month but that money soon ran out.

“I was able to get the JobKeeper allowance, but had to give up the flat I had and move back home with my parents. The only employment I got was a little bit of gardening work for my friends. In the last two months I’ve been working overnight, putting up Christmas decorations and lights in shopping centres for a contracting company.

“Casuals, permanent part-timers and those on one-year contracts, are all going through difficult times, but the government, which slashes funding for the arts every year, has completely abandoned us. Our industry was the first to close during COVID-19 restrictions, and it will be the last to recover. The government helps the construction industry because it’s so profitable, but our industry, and organisations like QPAC that fail to make profits, don’t count as far as it’s concerned.”

Michael said the pandemic and shutdown of theatres and other performing venues was having a “long-term impact on those involved in staging in drama and the performing arts. Our skills are not easily transferable, but we just can’t wait around in the hope that it will get better next year.”

Small theatres and performing groups, he continued, “will just go broke. Only the big mainstream companies and big entertainment corporations will survive. These companies are less artistic and thoughtful, because all they’re interested in is profit.

“What we’re going to see is more and more expensive and superficial theatrical productions like *Shrek* dominating. The lack of government support, of course, is not just going on in Australia—it’s a global process.

Lisandra is a professional drummer with 15 years’ experience, who has extensively toured in Europe, North and South America, and Asia.

“Everything was cancelled for me because of the coronavirus,” she told the WWS. “Most of my work is touring—a lot of theatres and stadiums recently—and before that nightclubs and smaller venues. I do have a base in Miami, but in saying that, I’m almost always on the road...”

“I was about to do a tour in Indonesia that was linked to a project to provide clean water to the slums, so I was really upset to miss it because it is a good cause. After that, we had planned a tour of Africa, which I was really excited about,” she explained.

“JobKeeper has helped a lot, but I’m worried about how the working class and the next generation will be forced to pay it back in the future. My colleagues overseas have not received the same sort of assistance, and a lot of them have had to give up their houses or sell their instruments. Some have had to cut down to one meal a day. Grown families have had to move in with grandparents because they can’t pay the rent.”

This economic pressure, she continued, had forced many in the music industry to attempt to return to work, even as COVID-19 infections in the US and Europe soar past the highest levels of the

first wave.

“I’ve had a lot of offers to go back to the US, mostly for recording rather than live performances, but it’s still scary because of the rates of the virus over there. Even if you’re isolated, there’s still a big risk of getting sick.

“People are saying it will be 2023 before things are 100 percent back, but I don’t know if anything will ever be the same as it was. Promoters take big risks in putting on shows without knowing if they will make the money back, so I think they’ll want to pick bigger-name artists that they know will sell out. This means that younger or less well-known artists won’t get as much opportunity to break into the music scene as before.”

Lisandra explained that new artists were increasingly expected to invest their own money into recording music, producing videos and building their social media presence before venues, promoters or record companies would offer any paid work. As a result, musicians are torn between their impulse to devote themselves entirely to furthering their craft, and the practical reality of having to do all their own marketing.

“Being a musician requires your undivided attention, but when you have to deal with the business side it takes away from that focus,” she said.

For those who are fortunate enough to have a constant stream of work on offer, earning a living wage often means working around the clock and spending a lot of time on the road.

“With the touring and the work in the US, I could earn enough to support a family, but probably not with just local gigs. Some of my colleagues travel with their kids on some of the tours, and it can be hard, but they don’t really have a choice, they make it work.”

Performers are only on stage for a couple of hours a night, but touring musicians have to maintain a gruelling schedule, she said.

“You’re 24 hours on the job really, because you’re travelling to the next place, doing the sound-check. With some of the dancehall acts I’ve played with, we’d start the show at 2 a.m., play until 4 or 5, then straight off the stage, jump on the bus and go straight to the airport. I broke my leg on tour because of that schedule, a stress fracture from repetitive use and not enough rest.”



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