

Rock and pop musicians cancel fall tours out of pandemic-related concerns

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Although the predicted fall surge of the pandemic is only beginning, many rock and pop musicians already have had to cancel concerts because of COVID-19 infections and related concerns. Because live performances represent a far bigger share of musicians' income than royalties from online music streaming do, these cancellations can be a source of financial hardship. The artists are coming face to face with the fact that the current political setup can neither safeguard human health nor promote a flourishing culture.

The most famous musician to be affected recently is Ringo Starr, the former Beatles drummer, who began a North American tour in September. On October 3, Starr announced that he had been diagnosed with COVID-19 and was canceling a week's worth of dates. On October 10, he announced that he had tested negative and would resume the tour. Three days later, however, Starr tested positive again and decided to cancel the remainder of his tour. At age 82, the drummer is at high risk for severe outcomes of the virus, but the tour cancellation presumably will not cause him financial difficulties.

Many musicians are far less fortunate. Animal Collective, an indie rock group whose music combines psychedelia and electronic influences, recently canceled their fall concert dates in the United Kingdom and Europe because of "touring obstacles related to COVID and the economy," according to their post on Instagram. The band already had canceled shows during the past year after three of its members became infected with the coronavirus. They thus "lost large amounts of the income that sustains us and our families."

With notable frankness, the band wrote that they faced "an economic reality that simply doesn't work and is not sustainable." Citing inflation, currency

devaluation and increased shipping and transportation costs, they concluded, "We simply could not make a budget for this tour that did not lose money even if everything went as well as it could. ... We are choosing not to take the risk to our mental and physical health with the economic reality of what that tour would have been." With evident chagrin, the band apologized to its fans and asked for their understanding.

Other musicians have been sidelined by Long COVID. Car Seat Headrest, a band known for its loose, introspective and moody style, recently canceled a West Coast tour and an appearance at When We Were Young Fest in Las Vegas because of singer-songwriter Will Toledo's persistent symptoms. After his coronavirus infection, Toledo developed histamine intolerance, which, in his words, entails "heavy nausea, fatigue, dizziness and a buzzing nervous system." This syndrome is a common presentation of Long COVID.

"After another month of struggling to regain my health, I am currently forced to face the fact that my body lacks the basic levels of functionality necessary to leave the house most days, let alone embark on a tour," Toledo tweeted.

Singer Santigold, whose music has incorporated elements of punk, dub reggae and new wave, has been particularly outspoken about the effects of the pandemic on artists. Like many others, she cited inflation as a major reason for her decision to cancel her upcoming tour.

In an open letter published on her website, Santigold added that many concert venues were not available for booking because of "a flooded market of artists." The "flood" began at the end of the Omicron wave when many musicians went back on the road. The entertainment companies and politicians of both parties were brushing aside concerns about the health risk

posed by holding concerts and music festivals during the ongoing pandemic, claiming that the world must “learn to live with the virus.” They continue to hold this callous disregard for public health.

“I am proud to be cancelling this tour when it means that I am proclaiming that I, the person who writes the songs, am as important to me as the songs,” Santigold wrote in her open letter. “I will not continue to sacrifice myself for an industry that has become unsustainable for, and uninterested in the welfare of, the artists it is built upon.”

This comment points to the fact that the pandemic has exacerbated the already punishing conditions that musicians (like workers in other industries) have been facing for years. In an interview with *Variety*, Santigold described “the relentless expectations of this industry.” She added, “You have to constantly put out music and content, making TikToks and engaging on social media and being always accessible—instead of making art! I didn’t sign up for that.”

These relentless expectations drove Santigold to begin touring again only four months after she had given birth to twins. She felt compelled to do so, she said, to avoid being out of the public eye and becoming irrelevant. Under these pressures, the singer not only lost crucial time with her children, but also developed anxiety, insomnia, fatigue, vertigo and chronic pain, as she wrote on her website.

But musicians’ health is at best an afterthought for the entertainment conglomerates and concert promoters, who are focused above all on profits. In the aforementioned *Variety* article, Michael Rapino, CEO of Live Nation, predicted that ticket sales would set a record this year. Corporate leaders such as Rapino are content to reap the rewards of the “return to normal,” while the artists take all the physical and financial risks.

Art is neither a luxury nor mere entertainment. It is essential to human and social life. Art helps “bring to light things that people haven’t been able to pinpoint or say exactly,” as Santigold aptly put it in a recent interview with *Rolling Stone*. “It helps people connect to what’s real.” Yet the policy of perpetual pandemic, which is necessitated by the capitalist drive for profit, is threatening artists and audiences alike.

“Without art in times like these, we’re devastated culturally,” Santigold remarked to *Rolling*

Stone. Through its inability to ensure most artists a steady income, and even a healthy life, capitalism is telling artists that they are not important, she observed. “It’s a cultural crisis.”

The cultural crisis and the ongoing pandemic are damning indictments of a social system that is organized to increase the wealth and maintain the political dominance of a tiny elite at the expense of the mass of society. Like the strikes and protests among workers on the freight railroads, in health care and in other industries, Santigold’s comments reflect the increasing resistance to this system. Such resistance is to be encouraged and provides significant grounds for optimism.



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