

COVID-19 rampant among musicians despite “end of the pandemic”

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A remarkable number of musicians—from Ringo Starr to Harry Styles—have canceled concerts and other appearances in the past year due to acknowledged cases of COVID-19 or, more frequently, due to undisclosed illnesses. While governments have averted their eyes from the COVID pandemic, halting its reporting of cases and other crucial data, observable phenomena such as an epidemic of canceled shows demonstrate that the deadly, highly contagious disease is still very much with us.

Starr admitted he had COVID last October and canceled his remaining fall dates with his All-Star Band. Styles canceled shows last November when band members had an undisclosed illness and Styles himself became sick with what he called “the flu.”

Singer Adele announced last week that she would no longer be posing for pictures with fans at her shows, saying she is “hanging on by thread [sic] trying not to get COVID.” She added, “Everyone that I know that I work with has f*cking COVID, so it’s a miracle that I haven’t had it yet.” Her fans of course are also at risk. Bruce Springsteen and his wife Patti Scialfa performed with the E Street Band in Newark, New Jersey last April while sick with COVID, testing positive hours after the show.

Rock band Guns N’ Roses pulled out of a September 10 show “due to illness.” Billy Joel canceled a Madison Square Garden date last December due to a “viral infection” that he now acknowledges was COVID. Stevie Nicks canceled shows in April, disclosing that there was COVID among her band members. Paul Simon revealed in May that he had recently recovered from a severe case of COVID. The singer-songwriter now suffers from hearing loss that may be attributable to the disease and claims that his performing days are over. And James Hetfield of the band Metallica has revealed he has COVID. On Friday, Travis Barker, 47, the drummer for the rock band Blink-182, shared his diagnosis on Instagram, holding up a positive COVID test.

More commonly, performers remain vague about health issues that result in their canceling shows. Here are just a few such examples in recent months:

- Lizzo canceled performances last spring when she was sick for weeks with what she described as “flu-like symptoms,” claiming she had not tested positive for COVID but for strep throat.
- Singer Lorde has battled undisclosed health issues throughout 2023.
- John Mellencamp canceled shows in April “due to illness.”
- Country group the Chicks canceled shows throughout the summer due to “ongoing illness.”

- Ryan Adams canceled the remainder of his tour in August “due to illness.”

- The band Paramore canceled tour dates in August because of frontwoman Hayley Williams’s struggle with what she has only referred to as a “lung infection.”

- Skid Row canceled a show last week due to “a band member’s illness.” Members of the band missed performances last October and in April of this year because they had COVID.

- Sufjan Stevens has developed Guillain-Barre syndrome, a neuromuscular condition often found to be consequential to COVID.

- Pearl Jam postponed a concert on September 10 “due to illness.”

- Stromae, the Belgian singer-songwriter, canceled several tour dates last April due to “health issues.”

- Louis Tomlinson, formerly of One Direction, canceled the Asian leg of his recent tour on April 11, claiming “unforeseen circumstances” as the reason.

It is unlikely that all such cancellations are the result of COVID infections, but it is equally unlikely that none are due to the virus. Thanks to the virtual abandonment of public health measures to counter, let alone eliminate the disease, a plethora of variants and strains of the novel coronavirus now threaten the public. The current diversity of the virus’s mutations is suggested when we consider that the most common strain, EG.5—nicknamed Eris—accounts for only 21.5 percent of all COVID cases.

Two of the leading anti-COVID advocates active on Twitter/X, @MeetJess and @LauraMiers, have highlighted the spread of COVID-19 among musicians and at concerts in numerous tweets, many of which have gone viral.

Jess told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “More and more we are seeing concerts being cancelled due to ‘illness.’ These venues are creating a perfect storm for onward transmission. We are constantly seeing people posting on social media their positive COVID tests after attending a concert. We are talking about thousands of people crammed into spaces with zero mitigations put into place to keep anyone safe.”

Commenting on the pressures placed upon artists, Jess added, “We are also watching artists potentially putting their careers as musicians and performers on the line to join this ‘urgency of normal.’ Some even posting about performing while sick. ‘Pushing through illness’ for the sake of the ‘show must go on’ is dangerous for the artists’ own health and for whoever they may be

infecting while doing so. We know how to keep safe, we know how to protect each other by using simple measures like respirators and clean air. Why not offer safer venues?”

There are a couple of notable exceptions to the prevailing trends among artists getting sick and holding unsafe concerts. Indie rock group Deerhoof has been outspoken against the efforts to normalize the pandemic, and requests that their fans wear masks at all of their concerts. Contrary to the anti-masking propaganda, the overwhelming majority happily do so to safely see the artists perform. Similarly, indie rock artist The Anchoress has advocated for masking and clean air at her concerts, with strong support from her fans.

But the vast majority of artists, along with the population more generally, have not been able to withstand the ruling elites’ unrelenting propaganda campaign aimed at falsely portraying the pandemic as over and COVID-19 as no more harmful than the common cold or flu. This is understandable, as it has been driven from the highest levels of the state and involves the entire political establishment and corporate media.

On September 18, 2022, President Joe Biden proclaimed in a “60 Minutes” interview, “The pandemic is over.” That week, 2,543 Americans would lose their lives to COVID-19. On May 11 of this year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) declared the end of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE) in the United States. Two days later, the seven-day average for COVID deaths in the US was 829. Since then, the seven-day average has not fallen below four hundred.

With the end of the PHE, the CDC ceased its program of keeping track of cases by means of test results at county health departments and now only monitors hospitalizations and deaths. This means that any assessment of the occurrence of COVID in the population depends on analysis of wastewater (sewage), which counties conduct and report on a voluntary basis. Knowing the incidence of cases, however, is critical to any responsible public health regime regarding COVID.

It is the height of irresponsibility, amounting to criminality, not to have in place a complete testing and contact tracing program nationwide for so contagious, lethal and adaptable a disease. Further, the vast majority of cases do not result in either hospitalization or death, but every case, even those in which the patient remains asymptomatic, can result in severe aftereffects, including Long COVID. Finally, though no less importantly, the US is only one country. The spread of COVID here, which is now utterly unchecked, poses a dire threat to people in every other country in the world.

To grasp official US policy toward COVID, we need only recall that over one million Americans have needlessly died since the beginning of the pandemic. Or the sinister, eugenicist remark by Anthony Fauci earlier this month to the effect that, in the face of the new variants, the elderly and the infirm “will fall by the wayside.”

In line with this monstrous policy of malign neglect, the corporate media is persisting in its own policy of covering up and downplaying the reality of COVID and its consequences. From the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, the media has taken its cues from the government, filtering out critical and principled scientific

voices, parroting talking points such as “COVID will become endemic” and adopting the government’s resignation to “forever COVID.”

The result is a virtual blackout of COVID information in the corporate press, a blackout that earlier this month resulted in the ludicrous character of the media’s coverage of the US Open tennis tournament. As player after player suffered visibly with a respiratory illness, taking medical timeouts and dropping out of the tournament, network commentators lauded as “warriors” those athletes who carried on despite their distress. The press, unable not to comment on the wave of illness, attributed it to a “mystery virus.” To his credit, commentator and former tennis star John McEnroe admitted to having tested positive for COVID at the time. One may wonder why the tournament was allowed to continue, plagued as it was by an obviously serious and contagious disease.

As the WSWs wrote at the time:

With highly lucrative advertising and sports broadcasting revenues at stake, well over \$1 billion in total economic value, the event organizers could not care less. The health of the athletes, attendees and the wider population weighs little against the economic interests of the corporate bosses behind the sport.

Just as the media bent over backward not to mention “COVID” at the US Open, so it appears many musicians are hesitant to divulge their diagnoses. Some social media users have rekindled the suspicion, rife in 2021, that the music industry has issued a gag order on musicians, contractually forbidding them to acknowledge that they have COVID. In response a number of musicians have denied that such an order exists. While we will not engage in speculation, we must note that considering the enormous sums of money dependent on the public’s continuing to attend concerts, a pressure exists, on individual musicians and on promoters, to avoid associating such events with COVID.

But show business and sports are only a microcosm of the overall society and economy. The ruling class has a great deal to lose by acknowledging the persistence and severity of COVID, let alone the fact that with proper testing, contact tracing and other public health measures the virus could be eliminated globally. Only the mobilization of the working class, whose initial steps brought the economy to a halt in 2020, and a socialist perspective can bring about a rational response to the COVID-19 pandemic and a truly functional public health system.



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