



Viral Strain

The **COVID-19 pandemic** has put the jazz business on lockdown. Nobody knows when, how, or even if it will return to what it was before the coronavirus. In the face of high stress and total uncertainty, musicians, institutions, club owners, and festival organizers have little choice but to try and carry on in hope of a better future.

Here's what some of them are doing to get by.

BY MICHAEL J. WEST

PHOTOGRAPH BY CRAIG MORFITT

AS I WRITE THIS, THERE ARE FIVE CARS DRIVING IN NEW YORK'S COLUMBUS CIRCLE.

It is a warm, clear evening in mid-May—and it's rush hour. The very idea of such barrenness at this time, in one of the hotspots of midtown Manhattan, is absurd. Yet there it is, so quiet you can hear birds chirp, on my laptop screen. (I'm not in Columbus Circle either. I'm watching it from the safety of my living room, via the livecam that sits at the corner of Broadway and Eighth Avenue.)

This is New York in the COVID-19 pandemic: Quarantine is keeping eight million residents and uncountable would-be tourists at arm's length. Stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders, as well as mandated business closures, are the rule everywhere; however, with New York devastated by COVID, the policies are particularly strict.

Mercifully, the trees that line the circle hide from online watchers what some of us, at least, see as the pandemic's cruelest shuttering. Jazz at Lincoln Center, the world's most important institution for the music's performance, advocacy, and education, has been closed since March 12. Its three performance venues are dark; so are its lecture halls, offices, and public spaces. "Pausing those things was dramatic," says Aaron Bisman, JALC's director of brand, sales, and marketing. "We hated having to do it, but we had to."

They're not alone. Every jazz venue across the five boroughs, and across the rest of the country (if not the world), has shut down until further notice. This leaves the artists out of work.

"It's months and months of cancellations," says trumpeter Dave Douglas, taking stock of his calendar. "My bookings in October and November and December are still on the books as of now, but it's hard to imagine they will be happening. And I'm one of the lucky ones. It's so tragic for so many people."

Douglas has a new album (*Dizzy Atmosphere*) to promote, which has become much harder. The same is true for saxophonist Dayna Stephens, who was forced to cancel a European tour in support of his trio recording *Liberty*. "A lot of us have projects that were aimed for this time period, and what do you do?" he says. "You put all this work into it and it's hard to know what to do."

Every live music venue of every kind is closed, of course; coronavirus doesn't discriminate by genre. Jazz, however, while a worldwide music, is uniquely wedded to New York. It's also uniquely wedded to live performance. Improvisation is its *raison d'être*—fans seek it out precisely because it will sound different every set. Artists need opportunities to work out their ideas in a live atmosphere, finding new ways to approach and expound on the same material.

Just as important, they need *each other*: people who speak the language and who can respond, in real time, to what their fellow artists say and do. "When I first fell in love with jazz, the conversation and interaction between musicians is what attracted me to the music," says pianist Art Hirsch. "The first note that I play with a group of people after this is all over is going to be cathartic!"

"I do not think that things will be the way they were, where folks come and have dinner, and converse with people and musicians the way they did in the past."

—GIANNI VALENTI, BIRDLAND

There's hope and determination in Hirsch's words, and why not? Jazz is a survivor. It reached the peak of its popularity during some of the world's darkest days, and it has endured through all the ups and downs that have come and gone since. It adapts. Even while they're stuck at home, jazz musicians are exploring new ideas and resources for making music and reaching hungry audiences with it, just as they always have.

Still, there are also implied questions in the phrase "after this is all over." When will that be? How will we get there? And what will the landscape look like when we do?



IF IT'S A TOUGH TIME

for Jazz at Lincoln Center, with its endowment and deep-pocketed donors, then it's a disaster for New York's smaller venues. One in Greenwich Village that all but

embodies the small jazz club—it's even named Smalls—is on life support, along with its sister club Mezzrow.

"Expenses are mounting," says Spike Wilner, who owns both clubs. "I've been spending the last three, four weeks just trying to figure out what my options are. We're under contract, and contracts stay, as my landlord told me the other day."

Therein lies the problem. New York's sky-high rental prices mean that merely maintaining the same address during the closures is a herculean task. Emergency loans and grants, like the Small Business Association's Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), are not as helpful as they seem.

"We have to spend 75 percent of our loan on payroll. The remaining money can be used toward rent and utilities," explains Gianni Valenti, who owns the legendary Birdland Jazz Club (which last year celebrated its 70th birthday). "So while we're closed, I have my entire staff on payroll, with no money coming in to use for rent, utilities, etc."

Like Smalls, Birdland has a sister venue: Birdland Theater, a smaller room in the basement of the main club. Valenti is hoping to have better luck than Wilner in making a deal with his landlord. His concern, though, is that even after he's able to reopen, audiences will be nervous. "I do not think that things will be the way they were, where folks come and have dinner, and converse with people and musicians the way they did in the past," he says. "We're gonna be quite restricted in the beginning, and it will loosen up as the months go on."

It's not only audiences who will be skittish about public gatherings. Stephens, who has a rare kidney disease, is immunocompromised as a result; even if some of his bookings survive, he won't be rushing to fulfill them. "I personally won't feel comfortable," he says. "I'm very guarded about wanting to do anything in public at this point."

"Can we survive? It's tough to say," Valenti says. "If people aren't comfortable coming back in, how do I support a \$50,000-a-week payroll between two clubs? I'll have to lay them off again, or let some go and keep a skeleton staff. I've owned jazz clubs for 35 years, and I wonder what's going to happen to me in six months."

Wilner runs a nonprofit, the

The Village Vanguard closed its doors due to the pandemic on March 16. Months later, they're still closed.



SmallsLIVE Foundation, part of whose mission is to subsidize Smalls and Mezzrow. It's funded by tax-deductible donations; in April, none other than singer/songwriter Billy Joel donated \$25,000 through his own foundation. Generous as he was, though, the realities of the market are that his gift only went so far. "There's no free lunch," Wilner says. "We're in wait-and-see mode. I don't know how long I can go before it becomes untenable for me to continue, and at that point I have to consider bankruptcy and just moving on. That might happen; I hope it won't."

These are only two venues out of hundreds in New York, which have varying degrees of stability and support. Yet Wilner's and Valenti's fears speak to a truth that few want to admit: Some of these clubs will surely be COVID casualties in their own right.



FACED WITH THIS

grim present and future reality, artists are fighting tooth and nail. Not just to survive (though that's no small part of it), but to make meaningful music and connect with people. Even, if circumstances permit, to keep doing so professionally.

Some are better positioned for this

than others. Douglas, for example, still has some composing commissions on his docket. So does pianist Ethan Iverson, who's developing a classical portfolio along with his jazz work.

Saxophonist Alexa Tarantino (whose tour with Cécile McLorin Salvant ended mid-soundcheck in Oakland) and pianist Steven Feifke, are able to do some freelance sideperson work from home. "We have a home recording setup," Feifke explains. "Not ideal, but it does the trick, and everybody's making do with the situation."

"Steven will record an accompaniment for a vocalist, and I'll do things like horn parts," Tarantino adds. "So it's definitely on the lighter end, but it's work, and both of us have been able to stay pretty productive."

Pianist Dan Tepfer even managed, to his own happy surprise, to hold on to some gigs: "I had three solo concerts that I was supposed to [play], and they actually decided to still pay me for the gigs and have me livestream them from home. These were big institutions that have the means to do this, but even they were under no obligation, so I really appreciate that they did that. Even though I've lost a lot of work, so far those have really helped."

Tepfer's concerts are indicative of the

major COVID-era trend: Jazz, like so much of life, has moved to the internet. Livestream concerts, prerecorded performances, interviews, and panel groups have exploded. Some are free and open to the public. Vocalist Melissa Walker is president of the Montclair, New Jersey-based educational organization Jazz House Kids, and has initiated (with her husband, bassist Christian McBride) a weekly listening session on social media that they film at their home—an extension of their well-known "listening parties" series, which is aimed at broader community outreach rather than at students.

Iverson, on the other hand, posts short videos to Twitter of his homespun arrangements of TV theme songs. "It's absolutely a lark," Iverson says. "We all know how bad it is, and we don't need Ethan Iverson to tell us how serious things are out there. I think one of the purposes of jazz is to spread joy, raise a smile."

Others are monetizing their streams. Tarantino and Feifke currently perform a themed "Quarantine Concert" every Sunday evening through an online crowdfunding platform, CrowdCast. Access to each concert costs an affordable \$5, but they also offer a tiered sponsorship program that allows people to donate more (and receive added perks,

including a personalized video for gold sponsors); donations go to the Jazz Foundation of America, whose COVID-19 Musicians' Emergency Fund is helping players cover basic living expenses during the pandemic.

Pianist Fred Hersch at first gave daily "Tune of the Day" solo performances on Facebook Live. In May, however, he transitioned to recording weekly mini-concerts, which he made available through another online platform, Patreon, designed for paying members only. "Doing this gives me a reason to shower, gives me just a little bit of an anchor," Hersch says. "And the comments that I get are just worth the price of gold ... It's kind of a win-win, I think."

Saxophonist Brian Krock, who leads both the 18-piece Big Heart Machine and the quintet Liddle, is also building up a Patreon account, filling it with exclusive audio and video content. But where Hersch and Tarantino and Feifke still see their livestreams as short-term stopgaps, Krock is executing a longer-term strategy. He was inspired by drummer Dan Weiss, who already had a successful Patreon well before the novel coronavirus; the saxophonist sees a path to viability well after it.

"The thing that's a blessing and a curse about being a freelance musician is that you never feel very much security in your job," Krock says. "I could never say for certain that this time next year I'll have a source of income. You think, 'This could all go under at any moment, so I need to be prepared and work twice as hard as I would in a normal job.' And I'm very impressed with everybody's ingenuity at this time. So I hope this will turn into a long-term thing."

"But I also hope this will just go back to normal, and soon. It's been very hard for all of us."



THE ARTISTS AREN'T

the only ones taking jazz online. Academia's turn toward distance learning naturally includes school jazz programs. Stephens has online sessions for both William Paterson University and Manhattan School of Music. Douglas is juggling three classes at the New School; bassist Linda Oh is teaching at Berklee by way of her Harlem apartment. Pianist

Marcus Roberts is quarantining in Tallahassee, where he just finished his semester at Florida State University.

Melissa Walker and Jazz House Kids have a partnership to deliver the music program for a charter school in Montclair. They've kept on doing so under pandemic conditions, by way of Google Classroom. "We have an instructor in there each and every day of the week, delivering music to 80 students grades five through eight," Walker says. "We're really happy to see their commitment to delivering the arts."

Venues are getting in on the action too, where they can. In May the Blue Note Jazz Club began sponsoring Blue Note at Home, a series of livestream concerts—two or three a day. For those with a larger appetite, they also created a Patreon that allows funders to access the video archive from the club's 39-year history. The Jazz Gallery doesn't have quite as ambitious an online offering, but it does curate a

"The first note that I play with a group of people after this is all over is going to be cathartic!"

—ART HIRAHARA

weekly summit called "The Lockdown Sessions," in which four artists each pre-record a 15-minute session to be played back-to-back on Saturday evenings.

Jazz at Lincoln Center has long been ahead of the curve in creating web content—and they've managed to continue with both education and performance. Its Swing U classes have gone entirely online and are held three times a week, as are master classes with various members of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. They've also initiated a weekly program, *The Well-Rounded Musician*, hosted by Tarantino. Every Wednesday morning, a JALC performance from the institution's massive archive is posted to their YouTube page; every Thursday evening, JALC's Dizzy's Club sponsors a livestream performance by an artist from their home. Everything is free.

"We have these 12 principles that Wynton [Marsalis, JALC's managing and artistic director] wrote almost a decade ago," says Todd Stoll, vice president for education. "One of them

is provide everything for everyone, all the time. Regardless of your level of sophistication, provide access. Providing access many times can generate goodwill, revenue, whatever you want down the road. Positive outcomes that you can't even imagine."



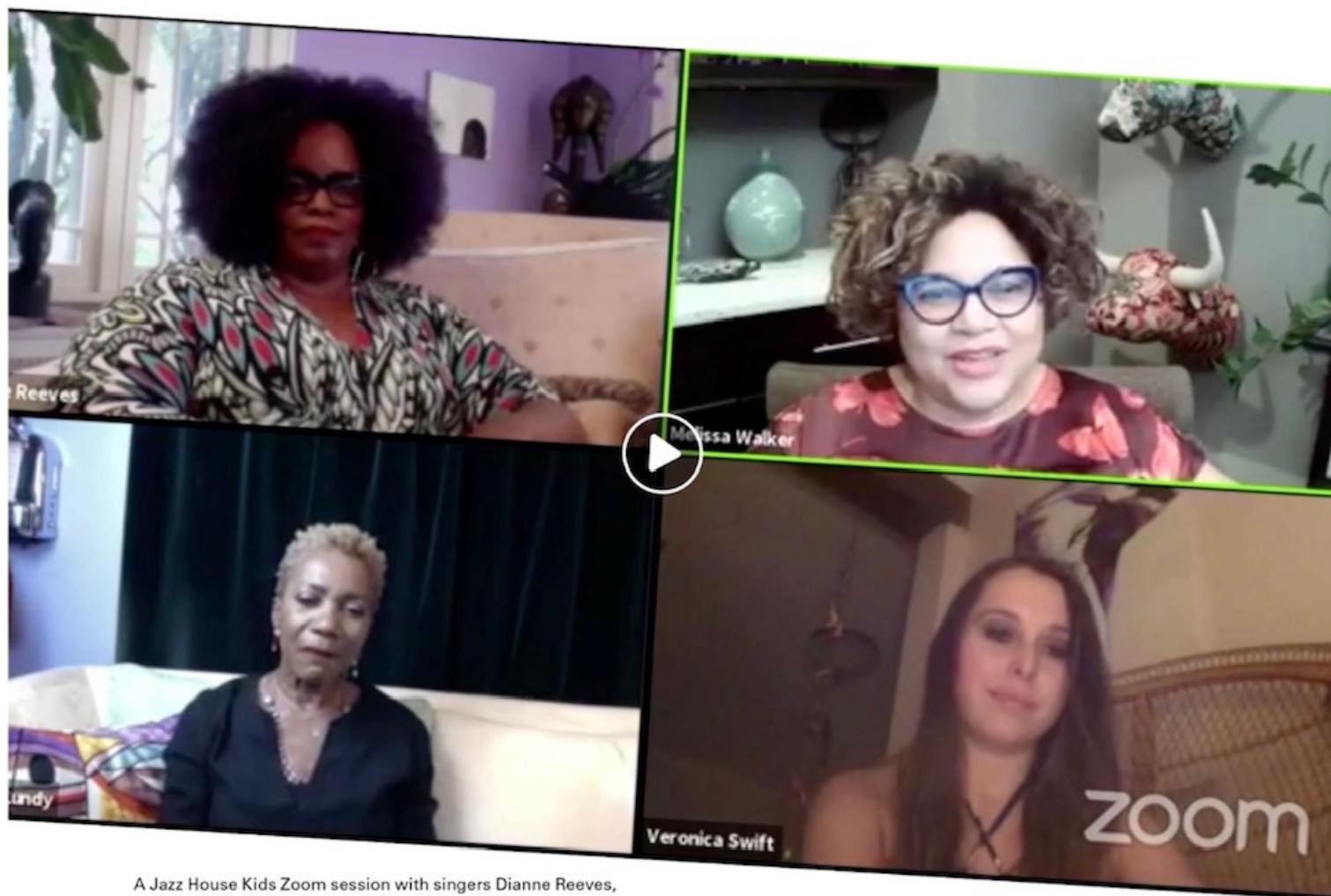
LOCKDOWN HAS ALSO

overlapped with jazz's worldwide festival season. Most of 2020's major fests have been canceled, but here too the web has been a kind of savior. The Montreux Jazz Festival digitized its massive archive of concert videos, streaming 50 of them online through the month of April. (The festival website promises to eventually host as many as 800 videos.) New Orleans radio station WWOZ created "Jazz Festing in Place," two four-day weekends' worth of live recordings from past editions of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. Several other festivals, including the DC Jazz Festival and Boscov's Berks Jazz Fest, have tailored a narrower selection of concerts to stream.

However, at least two jazz festivals have gone forward, entirely online. Pianist Fabian Almazan owns his own record company, Biophilia, and had planned to host a 14-day festival of the environmentally conscious label's artists at Jazz Gallery to coincide with Earth Day. Once that proved impossible, they moved to the web. Almazan figured out the technical component by "watching YouTube videos, having 10-year-olds explain to me how to do things."

The other web-based festival was also an ambitious fundraiser for the jazz community. Vocalists Sirintip and Thana Alexa teamed with saxophonist Owen Broder to produce *Live from Our Living Rooms*, a seven-day program of free events—though viewers were encouraged to donate to a GoFundMe that would be converted to need-based grants for artists in New York City. Each day featured a children's performance, a master class, and two prime-time performances by major artists, including the three organizers but also such names as Bill Frisell, Chick Corea, Joe Lovano and Judi Silvano, and Almazan and Oh.

"They all donated their time and talent. A hundred percent," Sirintip says. "We reached out to artists we knew



A Jazz House Kids Zoom session with singers Dianne Reeves, Melissa Walker, Carmen Lundy, and Veronica Swift

personally in our circuit, and we were just overwhelmed by the artists who said yes." Live from Our Living Rooms drew 22,000 unique accounts, logged over 140,000 views, and ultimately raised and awarded more than \$56,000 in grants. It also forged what might be a longer-term partnership for Sirintip, Alexa, and Broder.

"I've never worked in a team like this before. I don't think any of us have," Alexa says. "Just this connection between the three of us, the experience was so incredible, and it feels like a friendship that will last a lifetime. We can't wait to make music together."



IT'S UNSURPRISING

that so many of these workarounds feel like, and are discussed as, ad hoc solutions. Everyone is eager for the COVID quarantine to end, and for things to get back to normal. Online and

other endeavors don't generate the kind of revenue necessary to build a career, nor do they generate the same creative fulfillment that playing and improvising in groups does.

But the fact is that long-term plans are few right now. Nobody can prepare for a future that nobody can yet comprehend. "I have no guesses and no plans," Iverson says, "and I can't imagine how anyone could, really."

"Even if there is a vaccine that comes out, and we slow the spread of the virus, how long is it going to take before people are ready to gather to see music again?" Alexa wonders. "How long before musicians are comfortable leaving their families and traveling for work? It could change the landscape of what we do significantly, for a while."

If anything, projecting these anxieties and uncertainties onto the future is unfair. The present is just as anxious and uncertain. Douglas is keen to stress how far the crisis for jazz extends beyond

musicians and club owners. "The bartenders who worked at jazz clubs, the people who work the door, booking agents, road managers, and journalists, we're all affected by this," he says. "It's important to remember how huge it is."

As bleak as that picture is, though, neither Douglas nor anyone else is ready to surrender to despair. "We have to stay positive," Linda Oh says. "Our responsibility as artists is to help people cope. I think what I admire most about musicians is, I really don't know any who aren't resourceful and proactive—you have to be in order to survive! And I'm really proud of the people in this industry."

Marcus Roberts has perhaps the most idealistic outlook. "I'm thinking of this as an opportunity to figure out how we can all come together," he says. "Forget about categorizations, let's figure out how we can all rebuild this thing. We're the ones who are really going to have to; maybe we can do it in a way that will show people a little more sense of togetherness." **JT**