

The Masthead

2021 was the year things were supposed to start getting back to normal, but we are learning that normal is not there any more. Gigs are planned as vaccines are rolling out across Europe, but as Jeroen van den Bogert of booking agent BLiP notes in his Global Ear piece, new virus variants are causing profound uncertainty, and any event might be subject to change at any moment. The Akamu organisation explain in their own piece how the narrow windows of opportunity forced by Covid-19 mean that visa bureaucracy for musicians entering or leaving the UK has to be sorted more quickly. If complex arrangements are being made in small timeframes, we might reasonably worry that opportunities and fair working relationships are undermined.

Meanwhile, livestreaming online gigs, one of the few bright spots in this dark time, remain under threat of levies from the UK's collection society PRS For Music if they make more than £500 (not so much for larger ensembles). There are also potential charges on the horizon for British artists moving their merchandise and equipment across borders, which might restrict one of the key revenue streams of independent artists (as anyone who's worked a merch table can tell you).

Here are some of the ideas and responses in the air with booking agents as they try to get their artists moving: limited tours taking place along travel corridors and in transnational bubbles; groups, especially outside the EU, focusing on gigging locally for the present time; musicians who make any kind of dance music changing direction so that they might be more suited to gigs in seated venues. As Fielding Hope, Stewart Smith and Mariam Rezaei stated in a co-written piece "Solidarity Beyond Borders" for *The Quietus*, it's more important than ever that local interests do not undermine the solidarity that has always been part of the ethos of the international music underground.

Me, I'm starting to miss and worry for those live music experiences of fortuitous encounters,

overheard snatches of conversation, and music unexpectedly forcing its way into your consciousness, that are so vividly remembered by Maggie Nicols in her discussion of the 1960s Soho entertainment scene of her childhood and youth. It makes me value all the more the brief chats I've had recently on doorsteps with our photographers when cycling envelopes of pictures to and fro while putting together this issue. As I said to them, as a listener and as a culture, I think we're missing those catalytic moments that live music can bring, where an artist has to come up with a new way of presenting their music or a fresh angle on their work. Those brainwaves, stunts, gambles and concepts give a way to mark time, to elicit responses, to feel dialogues emerging and measure cultural temperature. Live streams of gigs are becoming better by the moment – in this month's On Location, Robert Barry reviews an extraordinary Morton Feldman programme by Apartment House at London's Wigmore Hall that was almost better than being there – but a lack of shared context and a diffuse electronic footprint for online events make it hard for narratives and serendipitous encounters to emerge.

How do you manufacture those collisions and encounters at home, often alone, in online spaces that are segmented by our own personal timelines and search terms? Through trial and error, I've come up with my own ways. When faced with a virtual pile of music to listen to, I try and start with what I would usually choose last, to take my own tastes out of the equation. I find likeminded souls who share interests on social media or Bandcamp, and try and find out what they know that I don't. I gamble on a label and attempt to check out everything they do, so as to manufacture an unmediated encounter with the music and not just listen through a familiar lens. Deep in the middle of it all, you find a connection or a coincidence that seems to show you are on an interesting track. And meanwhile, I wait and hope for change.

Derek Walmsley

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