
Catherine Strong

Introduction:

Music history and the COVID-19 pandemic

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In late 2019 and early 2020 music scenes and industries around the world began to feel the first impacts of the rapidly spreading COVID-19 virus. Over time, as country after country went through lockdowns and the imposition of various types of restrictions on social gatherings, music was one of the areas hardest hit. Musicians found that overnight their ability to perform could disappear or be severely curtailed, with tours cancelled, venues closed, and spaces of music-making such as rehearsal and recording studios off-limits. The flow-on effects throughout entire live music ecosystems cannot be understated. Until vaccinations became widely available in 2021, even in places where the more restrictive limits had been removed live music was still surrounded by uncertainties, whether around the possibility of travel from place to place with borders far less open than previously, even within countries, or whether gigs would be viable in venues with density limits or in populations fearful of catching the virus. Innovative attempts to find ways to move the live experience online produced mixed results; the general consensus seemed to be that there was ‘something’ that could never be fully captured on a live stream, and that people yearned for.

In early 2021, *Popular Music History* put out a Call for Papers for work that dealt with any aspect of the relationship between popular music history or heritage and the COVID pandemic, with the current issue being the result of that call. Although the ‘COVID issue’ may have become somewhat of a cliché in journals across the academic spectrum over the course of the pandemic, it is undeniable that the rupture

caused by the crisis has made it necessary for all disciplines to examine what has changed. For a journal about the history of popular music, what this change might be is less obvious than for publications focused on the here-and-now—after all, COVID won't impact on what happened in the charts in 1975—and may be something that becomes more apparent over time. For example, will the impact that COVID has had on live music in particular mean that later histories of popular music will need to be framed in terms of before- and after-COVID? Or will we find that an industry already well used to dealing with constant crises of one sort or another simply takes the upheaval in its stride and uses our new familiarity with online engagement with music to open up new markets? Using historical approaches can start to unravel some of these questions, as well as pointing to ways in which the pandemic has reframed the past for us, enabling us to reflect differently on 'taken for granted' aspects of popular music's history. There were also more immediate impacts on the institutions and industries that have built up around popular music history and heritage, such as museums, archives and historical walks, whether commercial, state-run or community/DIY. While this issue of *PMH* touches on some of the strategies used in these areas to negotiate the restrictions faced, the full impact of the pandemic on how people can engage with popular music's past and its artefacts is yet to be determined. We therefore expect that although this journal issue presents some of the initial responses by scholars to the impacts of the crisis in this area, the full picture will take years to emerge.

In this volume, we cover an array of perspectives and geographic regions, giving a glimpse into the diverse impacts of the pandemic and the multitude of understandings of what it meant for popular music's past. The first article in the issue, by Giacomo Bottà, deals with the question of how the pandemic necessitated different approaches to how people encounter popular music's history and heritage. Using the example of *The Sound of Düsseldorf* tourist walk, Bottà compares and contrasts the way the walk was run prior to and during COVID. *Sound of Düsseldorf* had been a successful venture in the lead-up to the pandemic. The walk operators concentrated mainly on the music scene of the 1970s and 1980s, using the association with iconic performers such as David Bowie as a drawcard to bring in tourists who may have been less familiar with the scene. The tour visited key sites associated with the bands being discussed, meaning that when the pandemic hit the operators needed to find ways to move the experience online while still providing some sense of connection to the physical spaces central to the tour. Bottà provides an overview of the key features of the walk and how it changed when it was forced to move online, describing the impact of this as someone who had experienced both versions of the tour. Bottà's approach also gives us insight into what the pandemic meant for tourism more broadly, with the empty streets of the Old Town area that is the

focus of the tour acting as a reminder for the virtual tourist of the abnormality of the situation and of what they are missing. This connects to questions about place and authenticity, which are central to how people assess both touristic and musical experiences.

Moving to a different geographical location, and considering the national rather than the local, Grégoire Bienvenu examines how rappers in China have explored the pandemic in their music, and how this connects to an ongoing project of nation-building and nationalism in that country. Chinese rappers responded quickly to the outbreak of the virus and the lockdowns in Wuhan in early 2020, releasing songs that praised the front-line medical workers, encouraged the nation to stay optimistic, and framed the pandemic as a 'war' that China would win. Bienvenu uses examples from rappers Li Yijie, JR Fog and Baoshie GEM to show that there is a connection between nationalistic sentiment, or the 'main melody', expressed in earlier forms of Chinese music and that which was expressed in these rappers' pandemic-related work. The propagandistic work of the rappers, amplifying government messages about the pandemic, connects to a historic tradition in China of music that contains such messages being promoted and rewarded by the government, leading to benefit for the artists in terms of their careers. As such, the rappers' response to the pandemic reinforced historical trends in the relationship between music and the state in China.

The next article by Konrad Sierzputowski, examining the resonances between COVID and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, considers the change in how music was experienced during the pandemic. As collective experiences became individualized, nostalgic listening practices also became apparent, both in terms of people streaming old music that might offer comfort in uncertain times, and artists releasing new music that drew on sounds from the past. In focusing on disco as a particular source of nostalgia, Sierzputowski uses Rancière's theories about the connections between aesthetics and politics to argue that the lingering traces of trauma associated with the HIV/AIDS epidemic that infuse disco's sounds link these two health crises. At both times, the upbeat sounds of disco have provided a form of escapism, and can therefore be connected as much with hope as with trauma (particularly for queer audiences). At the same time, however, Sierzputowski notes the role that the way disco endures can play in reminding us that the HIV/AIDS epidemic is not only not over, but has not been fully processed, and the way that music can help bring this about.

The final article in the issue by Josh Barlow and Guy Morrow takes a very different approach, looking at how the COVID pandemic has created a break with the historical ways that musicians have earned income. Previously, the key ways in which musicians earned money were through capital income (primarily through

music sales and copyright) or labour income (through live performance). In the period immediately prior to the pandemic, labour income (gigs and tours) had become more important than ever as capital income declined because of streaming, and it was exactly this form of income that was affected the most by COVID as gigs were shut down and tours cancelled. Barlow and Morrow explore what the shift to livestreaming performances meant for how we think about 'live' performance, using the lens of design culture. While noting that the 'live' and the 'recorded' have never been completely separate, they argue that the move to online live performance in the pandemic brought them closer than before, combining labour and capital income in a new way. The live event becomes less ephemeral, and income can be derived from it in new ways and potentially over a longer time period of time. This became more marked as the pandemic progressed, with livestreamed events shifting from being morale-raising 'gifts' to, in some cases, highly professional 'ticketed' productions. The authors use examples from Australia to explore the complicated shifting aspects of copyright and income that emerged from these changes, arguing that ultimately livestreaming may offer artists more control over their rights than they have been able to claim in the past. However, the way this plays out post-pandemic, in a digital environment dominated by massive players, is yet to be seen.

We conclude the issue with book reviews from Asya Draganova, looking at Emily Abrams Ansari's *The Sound of a Superpower: Musical Americanism and the Cold War*; Jenny Cubin on Karen Tongson's *Why Karen Carpenter Matters*; Louise Barrière on *Psychobilly: Subcultural Survival* by Kimberly Kattari; and Wolf-Georg Zaddach reviewing *Sounds German: Popular Music in Postwar Germany at the Crossroads of the National and Transnational*, edited by Kirkland Fulk. This issue marks the departure of our reviews editor Sarah Raine, who has been part of the team working on the journal since we took the reins in 2018. We would like to thank Sarah for all her incredible hard work and wish her all the best for her new ventures.