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IL FATTO SOCIALE TOTALE

Voci dalla pandemia tra capitale e vita

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ALESSANDRO MAZZOLA E MARCO MARTINIELLO
COVID-19 AND THE LIVE MUSIC SECTOR
Coping Strategies and Forgotten Professions

Abstract:

The social and economic consequences of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic will only be assessable in the long term. The cultural sector and the live entertainment sector, in particular, suffered a dramatic downturn. Concerts, theatre shows and all other forms of public artistic gatherings were among the first activities to be stopped. This caused, on one hand, the rarefaction of new cultural products and experiences in our lives and, on the other hand, massive losses to art organizations, companies, venues and all workers involved including technicians, logistics and artists.

Drawing on documentary and ethnographic research in the music sector, this paper presents and discusses, on one hand, the strategies that have emerged to cope with restrictions and keep on providing cultural goods to the community. On the other hands, it shows the many gaps and problems affecting a largely deregulated, economically polarized and precarious professional sector.

1. *Introduction*

The COVID-19 pandemic marked an unprecedented crisis in the music sector and, more generally, in the live entertainment sector which suffered an enormous downturn. Concerts, theatre shows and all other venue-based and in-person activities were completely stopped, causing massive losses. Arts and cultural organizations, companies, venues and firms experienced a huge drop in revenues and investments, affecting not only the production of cultural goods and events, but also causing a radical downsizing of the whole sector, an effect that is potentially long-lasting in the years to come. The impact on individual workers was even more dramatic, involving all levels and professional roles, from artists to technicians, artistic production, logistics and communication. The pandemic made visible the structural fragility of a sector that is characterized by non-traditional busi-

ness models and professional profiles, as well as extremely precarious contractual conditions for many individual workers. These, we will see, have often been forgotten, and excluded from support measures and mitigation strategies designed by governments.

Throughout the pandemic, artists continued to create and share cultural goods, and to provide services to help combat isolation and raise spirits and morale during the crisis. These forms of art-based solidarity reminded us of the role that culture and the arts have in the society, of their great value to relieve stress and anxiety in a profoundly critical moment. Significantly, these practices did not shape just as forms of emotional support or moral coping, but rather as new forms of socio-artistic engagement, of structural and economic organization to cope with the crisis and the measures taken to control the pandemic.

In this paper we will start from the identification of our specific context of research, by pointing out that the live entertainment sector is a hardly defined and a particularly precarious professional sector for many individual workers, and it was by consequence dramatically hit by the COVID-19 crisis. Subsequently, we will discuss some of the new, creative and hybrid strategies emerged in the music sector as a response to the crisis, thoughts and adopted by artists and cultural workers to keep on providing services and forms of moral support to the community, and to create professional opportunities for themselves to gain revenue. To describe these practices, we will present cases emerged during and after the first global wave of the virus, and shaped to cope with hard confinement measures¹. In the second part of the article, we will focus on the critical condition in which many cultural workers in the music sector found themselves. We will use data from interviews conducted between March and November 2020 in Italy. Participants are artists, practitioners, workers and operators of the music and live entertainment sectors, many of whom in vulnerable contractual/professional positions.

2. The live entertainment sector and the COVID-19 crisis

The live entertainment sector is part of the cultural sector, which is an umbrella term that covers a broad set of individuals, groups and activities

1 The cases described are informed by both secondary and primary data collected from online documents including press articles and specialist publications, and from the qualitative dataset of a research project conducted in Brussels. You can find more information and findings at: https://perspective.brussels/sites/default/files/documents/rapport_ethnographie_def_septembre_2020.pdf.

and involves socio-economic components such as employment and production, as well as notions of artistic quality, identity and cultural value. It has traditionally different understandings in different contexts (Feist 2000), and it is mainly regarded by governments and institutions as being organization-based. In the European context, this is reflected for example in the difficulty to bring together meaningful and exhaustive information (e.g. statistics and trends) about employment in the sector, given the variety and non-conventional forms of many jobs and work relations. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult for institutions to recognize the fragmented and informal nature of many forms of activity and employ, and the lack of professionalization that affects the sector (Svennson 2015). Such difficulty is particularly evident when the definition of the different components of the cultural sector takes on a more economic and production-oriented meaning as “industries” e.g. cultural industries, creative industries, etc. (Hesmondhalgh 2018). In addition, states can be more or less generous in setting the criteria to include or exclude component parts, and therefore the cultural sector can refer to a broad array of different activities that can include, for example, communication, IT and software, education, gambling, and so on.

As a result, many individual professional roles, operators and workers are often seldom considered in both traditional policy and sector research. To avoid this, and although the COVID-19 crisis affected the whole cultural sector, in this paper we therefore adopt a restricted but also large perspective about the context of our study. Restricted, on one hand, as we center our gaze on those actors and activities concerned with the production of cultural goods, but also on the contextual presentation or reproduction of such goods in the society – what might be named the “live entertainment sector”. On the other hand, we take an inclusive definition that is tied to a principle of division of labor. Such definition affects both an artistic and a socio-economic dimension, as it concerns the forms, contents and meanings of cultural goods and experiences, as well as the structure and components, the kind of work and the working conditions that are necessary to the preparation, production and distribution of such cultural goods and experiences.

Concerning the artistic dimension, our definition is rooted in Becker’s idea of *art worlds* (1982), which are particular contexts of social organization that determine the characteristics of culture and the relations among all individuals involved in those contexts. Even a single musical concert involves a series of complex tasks to be performed, and a number of individuals must be involved at all levels:

[...] instruments must have been invented, manufactured, and maintained, a notation must have been devised and music composed using that notation, people must have learned to play the notated notes on the instruments, times and places for rehearsal must have been provided, ads for the concert must have been placed, publicity must have been arranged and tickets sold, and an audience capable of listening to and in some way understanding and responding to the performance must have been recruited (Becker 1982, 2).

Such division of labor, and the role that people play in it, are key factors in the effects and meanings that cultural goods can have (Roy 2010). This brings us to the socio-economic dimension of our approach. We thus adopt a large definition by including work that has little impact on the forms and contents of cultural goods, but has yet strong relevance. We include all individuals and activities, including but not limited to cultural producers and performers, who are necessary for the cultural output to exist and circulate in the society. As highlighted by Pratt (2005), this approach has the potential to make visible a range of works, professions and economic structures that are invisible in traditional policy and are, we argue, the reflection of a largely deregulated, economically polarized and precarious professional sector.

In 2020, US NGO *Americans for the Arts* launched a major survey involving over 19,000 participants ranging from established businesses to non-profit small-size organizations to assess the economic impact of Covid-19 in the arts and culture sector. Responses show dramatic figures with an estimated total economic impact of 14.6 billion dollars as of January 2021. 96% of survey participants cancelled events with an impressive number of lost attendance at 110 million spectators². Trends have not gone better in Europe, although specific information on events is not available, partially due to the problems in defining sectors highlighted above. In general, the arts-and-leisure and the hotel-restaurants sectors proved the hardest hit by confinement and social distancing measures (Barrot *et al.* 2020). As stated by the Brussels-based NGO *Performing Arts Employers Associations League Europe* (PEARLE), live entertainment is “[...] a sector on the verge to collapse without genuine support and for which a comprehensive recovery package is needed”³. The US survey results also give an estimate in terms of job loss and consequences on individual workers, despite its focus on organizations. On the general level, over 300,000 jobs are no longer being supported by federal, state

2 The survey is accessible at: <https://www.americansforthearts.org>.

3 See: <https://www.pearle.eu/positionpaper/give-live-performance-a-future>.

and local governments. Among the actions taken directly as a result of the coronavirus, significant proportions of the organizations state that they laid off or furloughed artists or creative workforce (33%), staff/employees (30%), they reduced salaries (35%), and freed hiring (16%).

3. What good is music in a global pandemic? Moral coping, resilience and resistance

During the COVID-19 crisis, music clearly emerged as a moral coping strategy. Indeed, playing or consuming music can first of all be a way of keeping busy when life is slowing down day after day between four days. Although there has been a strong increase in teleworking due to confinement, many people find themselves forced to stay at home without being able to work. They sometimes had to imagine solutions to the boredom that sets in on a daily basis. Some engaged in DIY, others in reading. Others preferred music, either by starting or resuming the practice of an instrument or, more simply, by listening to more music than usual. In this way, music became a remedy for the boredom caused by professional inactivity imposed by the measures to combat the spread of the virus.

In general terms, the practice and consumption of music throughout the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a response to the anxiety caused by the exceptional circumstances. Music is, indeed, can play an important role in achieving goals of mental health and wellbeing, as it is a powerful experience that can shape our emotional condition, can stimulate complex feelings and change our mood, by either exciting or calming us (Juslin, Sloboda 2010). The serious global health crisis we experienced was as new as it was unexpected for the vast majority of the population. It created uncertainty, anxiety and fears for the future. Recent research has shown a correlation between social distancing/confinement and a significant rise in depression, loneliness and domestic violence in many countries, as well as a reduced possibility for vulnerable people to find adequate support (Banerjee, Rai 2020; Usher *et al.* 2020). In addition to social distancing/confinement, the multiplication and sometimes contradictory nature of media information and fake news to which we were subjected increased collective anxiety to the point of making it difficult to bear. In this context, listening to or playing music represented a way of escaping, of momentarily forgetting the situation and the difficulties of social isolation, and therefore of preserving a good mental balance.

Music has always been a means of expressing emotions in critical situations, such as anger and sorrow, sadness, bitterness or joy. The Blues is perhaps the most known example, as it is the fruit of the indescribable experience of the hundreds of thousands of Africans, forcibly uprooted from their homeland to be transported like cattle to the United States and sold into slavery (Uschan 2013). Without making a meaningless comparison, we also observed people expressing their experiences of the pandemic and their suffering through music that shaped as a means of emotional release. In the midst of the first COVID-19 wave in Italy, while the media reported the day-to-day dramatic death figures and hard confinement measures were implemented nationwide, videos of people singing and playing music on their balconies began to appear online. One of the firsts posted on Youtube showed a man from the town of Benevento, not far from Naples, singing the Neapolitan folk song *Vesuvio*, accompanied by his traditional tambourine. Three young women, from another balcony, accompanied the melody also on the tambourine⁴. In the following weeks, similar performances appeared on the web, starting a sort of movement that quickly spread to cities and other countries worldwide including Germany and Canada. In Spain, an old hit called *Resistiré* (“I will resist”) was mass-sung every evening and became the hymn of the fight against the virus⁵.

During the first lockdown, singers and musicians, some of whom well-known, broadcasted home-made concerts on their websites and web platforms. As noted by Frenneaux and Bennet (2021), indeed, the pandemic stimulated further innovations in terms of uses of technology as well as more intense modes of engagement and artistic expression among artists and cultural producers. In March 2020, for example, Canadian-American singer Neil Young, whose international tour was cancelled, started to broadcast a series of intimate acoustic concerts he called “fireplace sessions”, solo playing some of his hits in his backyard. Even an online music festival was launched on social media between 1 and 7 April, featuring over 80 international artists. Alongside these initiatives, other less-known music practitioners set up remote singing or music (guitar, saxophone, etc.) lessons, usually free of charge.

With time, artists engaged in an increasingly diverse set of activities in response to the forced interruption of their professional activity. We theoretically distinguish here activities of resilience and activities of re-

4 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7J-jR7ITZhY&t=48s>.

5 See: <https://elpais.com/videos/2020-03-18/asi-se-canta-resistir-en-los-balcones-de-toda-espana.html>.

sistance and protest, even though empirically, these dimensions can overlap. We are going to discuss those activities and to illustrate them in the following sections.

Activities of resilience refer to all the activities, initiatives and projects that artists and cultural producers launched with the objective of coping with the restrictions taken to control the pandemics. Many of them have decided to reinvent themselves, their strategies of engagement and their artistic work by displaying all their imagination to pursue their career in different ways in a brand new context. Many of them moved online or tried to transform and develop new activities online. The practice of home streamed concerts that started during the first lockdown became widespread, and some musicians do it now on a regular basis, charging a ticket or accepting donations. For example, independent American singer-songwriter Malcolm Holcombe has launched regular home gigs entitled “backyard shed series”. Approximately every month, he plays solo one of his albums from home. The gigs are streamed and then uploaded on YouTube. “Tips (by Paypal) are appreciated but not necessary”, as he mentions⁶.

For the numerous independent artists like Malcolm Holcombe, who normally make a living by playing several gigs per week in small venues across the USA and in other parts of the world, the current crisis means drastic cuts in their revenues that can hardly be compensated for by any form of support and institutional mitigation strategy. The home concerts that appeal mainly to loyal fans are truly part of a survival strategy that demonstrates their resilience in very hard times.

Other artists and cultural producers may have been a little less unlucky, as they could find space in the line up of musical events organized totally online. In Belgium for example, the 7th edition of the Flagey Brussels Jazz Festival was online streamed in January 2021. The number of concerts was reduced compared to previous editions but at least five concerts were organized and broadcasted for a 10 Euros charge. The New York City jazz club Smalls adopted a similarly resilient strategy by organizing, as soon as it was allowed by the authorities, streamed concerts almost every day from its small venue in the Greenwich Village. Significantly, after the first events with no public at all, it started to involve a small number of listeners in the room⁷. Smalls also set up a sponsorship system through which users can contribute with a minimum donation of 600 USD to sponsorise a full

6 See: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=backyard+shed+series.

7 17 listeners attend concerts in the NYC venue as to mid-February 2021. See: <https://www.smallslive.com>.

one-night concert. The entire donation goes to the musicians and the gig is streamed. The club that was created in 1994, and its owner Spike Wilner, are now fully committed to support the jazz scene and its numerous musicians in New York throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Besides these pure acts of resilience, other initiatives have a more protest and resistance dimension. Many artists have expressed in the press or on social media their concern about the incoherence of the sanitary measures forcing cultural institutions to shut down while for example, shopping malls could remain open. Throughout Europe, artists have demonstrated to claim for a reopening of the artistic activities under a strict sanitary protocole and for a public support to compensate for the lack of revenues. A striking and original example of artists mobilisation comes from the Greek city of Tessaloniki with a flash mob shot on the 12th of October 2020 entitled Give Art a Chance base of the famous Give Peace a Chance music by John Lennon⁸. More recently, a Beglain jazz guitarist, Quentin Dujardin expressed his intention to play a concert in a church for an audience limited to 15 people. Actually, in Belgium, offices in churches for 15 people are authorized. As expected by the musician, the concert, a political act of resistance and protest, was interrupted by the police, which shows the inconsistencies of some anti-covid measures: 15 people can pray together in a church, but they are not authorized to listen to music in the same place. The musician and the priest could get a 4.000 Euros. Immediately, a crowdfunding was launched to financially support them if necessary⁹. Finally, a similar action has been organized by the music association Muzikpublique in Brussels on Saturday 20th a February 2021. That day hundreds of cultural actions were organized throughout the country under the title *Still Standing for Culture* in order to denounce the Covid measures affecting the artistic world. In that framework, Muzikpublique has decided to transform for the day its theatre into a *Living Museum of Dying Music*. A strictly limited number of visitors have had the opportunity to see an exhibition of real musicians, which represent the live music performances that have almost disappeared during the crisis. Again, museums are open to the public in Belgium and organizing small concerts in a venue transformed into a museum is also a way to show the incoherence of the sanitary measures. Clearly this period of crisis is marked by resilience and resistance of the cultural sector and also by creativity in the ways to express both.

8 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_66h8CHTfHk.

9 See: <https://www.rtl.be/info/regions/namur/le-concert-a-l-eglise-de-quentin-arte-par-la-police-un-vaste-elan-de-solidarite-s-est-mis-en-place-pour-soutenir-l-artiste-1280279.aspx>.

4. *Those forgotten by institutional responses. Testifies from Italy*

In line with what we said so far in relation to the value of music in a time of global crisis, scholars have recently brought forward a new paradigm to understand the role of government in supporting the cultural sector. This new paradigm promotes the concept of “public value” to re-shape the idea of public goods to be supported and inform the role of policy maker (Meyrick, Barnett 2020). In general, as Banks highlighted (2020), COVID-19 not only transformed cultural consumption, production and work, but it also opened opportunities to re-consider the public investment in culture in new directions than those shaped by the last 40 years of neoliberalism. In spite of these calls to a renewed approach to the public support to cultural production, it is still not clear if the institutional responses emerged so far have been able to really integrate the sector and all its gaps. Soon after that the first dramatic figures began to appear, stakeholders urged European and national policy makers to develop support measures. The response of EU, national and local governments was quite prompt in providing support to organizations, and yet not completely adapted to the sector, particularly in terms of support to individual workers. EU Parliament members called for tailored support for workers, but not much has been done but reinforcing pre-existent instruments such as prize-based programme *Creative Europe*¹⁰. Similarly, most of the instruments adopted by national governments took the form of recovery funds allocated to organizations in need (e.g. concert venues), which made it very difficult for many individual workers to qualify for support. In such countries as Italy characterized by weak employment protection and low social benefits, support policies shaped an unbalanced relationship between the organizations active in the sector and the individual workers.

In August 2020, within the recovery plan, Italian Minister of Cultural Heritage and Activities (MiBACT) Dario Franceschini established a 10 million euro fund to meet: [...] the needs expressed by the artists, performers and executors from the many organizations that have been listened to by [the Ministry] in recent months”. The fund represents the sole instrument to support the cultural sector, and it is exemplary of the unequal distribution of resources not only between organizations and individual workers, but also among different categories of individual

10 See the relevant EP News at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/eu-response-to-coronavirus/20200423STO77704/supporting-the-eu-s-cultural-sector-through-covid-19>.

workers. The focus of this action seems to be all kinds of non- and for-profit organizations that are eligible to apply, although there is also the possibility to apply for some specific freelance professionals with a VAT number. Eligibility is indeed limited to specific activity fields including: «[...] concert organisation, promotion or booking; concert brokerage, artist management and consultancy; management of live clubs, whether owned or not»¹¹. As we will see below, many individual workers, within both traditional and non-traditional professional categories, are completely excluded from these criteria. The fund was refinanced with an additional 10 million in October 2020, but the eligibility criteria were not modified with regards to the typology of activity¹².

As anticipated, in this article we focus on testimonies and experiences of vulnerable professional profiles in the live music sector. Luigi has pluridecennial experience as a self-employed professional at the highest level, working as a tour manager for million-selling artists in Italy. A meaningful example of those hybrid and somehow barely visible professions in the sector, he describes his job as: «[...] the interface between the artists including the musicians, not just the main star, and all the components of a live event, except for the artistic performance itself». Such particular job, Luigi explains, is in itself the reason for his occupational profile to be atypical and somehow vulnerable:

Q: how come you have never set up a company or been employed by an agency?

A: the reason is strictly connected to the nature of my job. The artist, or better the artist's management, hires me because of my background, my contacts, the way I do my job. I'm the one who organizes the life of the artists when they are out on tour, going from where they eat, go buy a gift for their wife, these things. Sometimes, the one who comes out of the backstage with the star's mistress under his arm, you know, to fool photographers and the gossip. [...] You'll never get this service from a random guy from a booking agency. We are not so many in the industry doing this job, and I fear there will be fewer and fewer of us in the future.

Completely dependent on live events, Luigi saw his earnings drop to zero during the lockdown time. He was not included in the criteria to be eligible for the MiBACT fund. However, as a VAT registered self-employed,

11 See: <https://www.beniculturali.it/comunicato/musica-franceschini-10-milioni-di-euro-per-live-club-e-organizzatori-concerti>.

12 See: <https://www.beniculturali.it/comunicato/musica-franceschini-altri-10-milioni-di-euro-per-live-club-organizzatori-concerti>.

he could rely on the general fund disbursed in March 2020 by the Italian government within the so-called *Cura Italia* recovery plan. For Luigi, both funds turned out to be completely inadequate:

That's something that is not made, not even thought, for someone like me. I am considered as a VAT holder, ok good, but I don't do a commercial or service job. I haven't got my business stopped for a few weeks, I haven't worked at all for almost one year now!

Indeed, such an instrument was designed to integrate, rather than fully replace, self-employees over three months with a few hundred euros, in those sectors which were relatively less affected by the anti-pandemic measures and were forced to shut down for a shorter period. Concerning the MiBACT fund, Luigi expressed strong skepticism and pointed out a risk of unequal distribution of resources:

State funds, I'm sure, will only go to organizations, the bigger ones. The "usual suspects" you know, the strongest, which will be even stronger after the crisis.

Such feelings, very significantly, were shared with no exception and strongly remarked by all our participants in the Italian context.

Session musicians were also hardly hit by social distancing measures and the cancellation of all live events. Compared to Luigi's, these are more traditional and visible jobs in the sector, but yet they were barely recognized by the state-designed intervention and policy measures. Dino is a freelance pianist with twenty years of professional experience. He is a studio session man and a music teacher as well, but much of his earnings come from live activity. He plays with different ensembles and considers himself almost as a seasonal worker, since most of his engagements are concentrated in the spring-summer period:

Under normal circumstances we'd have started around April-May, and gone on up until September, depending on meteo conditions. Just to make you understand, that's the time of the year I earn 90% of my money, for the whole year, from the cachet we get as a band.

Similarly to Luigi, Dino could not rely on any specific subsidy to really integrate his jeopardized earnings. When speaking about the question of professional recognition, his frustration is clear:

There's no category for us, no place in the discourse of politicians. We got completely forgotten. I'm not saying that other jobs were doing better, that they were helped and us weren't. I'm not fixated on the help, I don't want to be helped, I just want to work! [...] Many people out there, the restaurants, the bars, I don't know, the barber shops, were hardly hit. But at least they got some fresh air, they could.

In the case of Dino, employment protection proved to be more than weak, rather completely absent. Institutional mitigation measures in Italy appeared inadequate and unable to include a relevant portion of the cultural workforce.

5. Conclusion

COVID-19 changed the way culture is produced and consumed. As the examples in this article illustrated, there have emerged creative ways for the sector to survive and even, perhaps, to get to a deeper engagement of artists and producers, and a parallel larger involvement of audiences through the further development of virtuality. However, we also tried to shed light on the dramatic impact on the lives of so many individuals, whose different professions, essential in normal times, are at risk of disappearing due to the lack of job opportunities, and the fact of being invisible to the system and hardly eligible to obtain institutional support. Although it is premature to say so, we can even speculate that the proliferation of online events and products poses a further risk to these professions, closely connected to the "in person". Much research and attention to these micro-realities, individual careers and forgotten professions are needed, before one can say that we are on the right track to really make a key sector for our societies socially fair and sustainable for the years to come.

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