

Presenting Our Own Narratives: Alan Greyeyes in Conversation with Melody McKiver

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Article abstract

Alan Greyeyes is Director of the sakihwe festival, which works to develop audiences for live music among Indigenous youth, and runs the artist and project management company Ogichidaa Arts. In this interview, he speaks with Anishinaabe musician/composer Melody McKiver about the impact of the pandemic on Indigenous musicians and music communities.

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Alan Greyeyes (AG): Hello, good morning.

Melody McKiver (MM): So, this interview [in Fall 2020] is for the *Critical Studies in Improvisation* journal, and we're especially interested in musicians' responses to COVID. Usually, the journal looks more at improvised and experimental music. But what I pitched to the journal is if we talk through how things [with COVID-19] might be impacting Indigenous musicians a bit more specifically, and how our various music communities are responding with creative life strategies.

AG: Yeah. I've been really fortunate, I think. [My wife,] Destiny and I both have a couple of different businesses or lines of work. And our festival doesn't have any operating grants. So, we're always in project funds. I'm always prepared for the year where our festival doesn't get any support from public sources and I have to go back to producing it as a volunteer. Luckily, this year we didn't have to do that since we did get a Canada Council grant. But in the management business that I run, I don't think I've commissioned anything since February. So, it's just super lucky that the festival was happening and we were able to convince our funding partners to let us move everything online. Because, like I said, management stuff is super important. There's always a lot of work out there, but there's no money coming in there [during the pandemic]. And the money that comes in, I don't feel comfortable taking it because the artists definitely need that money.

It's been tough. Like with [managing] Celeigh Cardinal. We did have a twenty-three-day tour confirmed for Germany and a couple of the surrounding countries in June, and then her summer was really busy, too. But everything was canceled. It was nice that she could have royalties coming in for Sirius XM and it didn't interfere with her CERB eligibility. I've never commissioned anything off of her Sound Exchange or Sirius XM. For the most part with Celeigh, I've been kind of a manager, but also more of a supporter—and helping her with grants and making decisions and stuff. But she's a really hard worker, and so she does handle a lot of the admin stuff and then I've been helping her with long term strategy. Then at the beginning of January, I just told her that I'm getting overwhelmed and I really need to help find her a manager with a team and more time. We've been trying to do that for the last, I guess, eight or nine months now. But like I said, these things are starting to pick up for her now with more online performances. Luckily, again, she does have quite a few grants. And she's got her album grant right now; this is to make a new album.

And then I've been also helping Caley Watts. Have you heard of her?

MM: No, I'm not familiar.

AG: She is in Bella Coola. She's a singer-songwriter. Her voice is like a Norah Jones kind of smokey vocal. So, we helped her with a couple of grants. Right now she's in a really great position. She just started working on the Canada Council grant, as well as the First Peoples Cultural Council. We put both of those in in March at the beginning of the pandemic. And so, when we did, we had no clue how long it was going to last. But the nice thing about those grants is that we included a subsistence fee for her. So, right now she's got subsistence money to live

on until the end of January. It's really fortunate for her, although I'm not too sure. We still have to keep things rolling and make sure that there's money coming in for January in the first quarter at least—if not the first and second quarter. [long pause]

I'm not too sure when we're going to be back to live music.

MM: Yeah, I definitely haven't had any live music offers come in either. I mean, it's a couple of livestreams here and there. But then it's just kind of moving a decimal point over on fees you would have been getting for live performances?

AG: Well, I think, and that's what I've been listening to on a lot of podcasts, and some of the ones on live music are just saying, now all of the fees have been reduced. Because the promoters of a lot of the festivals have also taken financial losses. And then we have to consider the audiences. And who knows what the audiences will be able to afford to pay, and how many people will be comfortable going back to live events in the summer, or the next spring. It's going to be tough. Tough all around.

I guess that's the importance of applying for grants. Although I did one Canada Council jury [during the pandemic], not in "Creating, Knowing and Sharing" [the Indigenous funding stream]. But I was surprised that there weren't that many applications. And so, I'm not too sure if people are submitting as much. For me personally, the workload has been exhausting since the pandemic started because we've had to learn new things, build new skills, build new teams, have new agreements, develop new strategies, submit project updates. It's just been crazy with the pace. And then with meetings, and the meetings are all on Zoom. I think I'm unrealistic with how much I can handle each day. It's just meetings on top of meetings on Zoom, and it gets to be overwhelming. And then my wife, her work has been just an incredible amount of work during the day. It just seems like, since we're all working from home, you feel like we can take on more and we can fit more into our days because we're not commuting or driving around.

MM: Yeah, I'm guilty of that, too. And I live six hundred metres from my office in Sioux Lookout. It wasn't that much of a commute to begin with!

AG: You're just taking on more and more, hey?

MM: Yeah, it's like: "Oh, well. I'm not in the office now. So, I can just take on all this extra music stuff and just kind of make it all fit," which has been good, music-wise, but then it's like: "remember sleep?"

AG: Yeah. I think that's it. Like Celeigh Cardinal, too, she's doing a lot more. Trying to fit more into every day is getting tiring. My wife has her own textile company. And she uses [Winnipeg-based Métis musician and tour manager] MJ Dandenau's sister's company to do some of her manufacturing. I guess MJ has been helping her sister during the pandemic because MJ is not touring. And so, my wife saw MJ yesterday—I guess I'm just commenting on how she's really tired. Because she's working with her sister every day and they've got so many orders to fulfill, to manufacture. And then she's going home at night and trying to do all the music stuff as well. So, she's getting really tired.

It's a different type of work, too. I think I also remember reading that when you don't have as much control over the work you're doing, it becomes even more stressful.

That's one thing that's been hard for me, too, is not having experience with online streams and

broadcasting and working with film crews. As I don't know what all the challenges are. That's what makes it so stressful for me is not being able to prepare in advance, or not knowing everything that I need to prepare in advance. It's tough.

MM: I was wondering if you could give an overview of what the sākīhiwē festival is for those reading that might not be as familiar.

AG: Yeah, so, the sākīhiwē festival. We launched it in 2009 as Aboriginal Music Week. And in 2018 we relaunched it. We were gifted the name sākīhiwē from the Sundance Chief, David Blacksmith. And the translation to love—like, it's an action to love another. And it's in Cree. And so, we relaunched again in 2018. We chose not to participate in the Canada 150 celebrations in 2017, so we didn't do any programming that year. And then we came back.

The original idea was to develop Indigenous youth as an audience for live music. The festival has slowly evolved since 2009, so we've learned a lot. I think that's the benefit of having a smaller nonprofit is that you can change course quickly. And so, we went from a model of having concert venues and nightclubs and asking Indigenous families and Indigenous audiences to come to us. And we learned that a lot of the kids weren't coming to the concerts because they were worried about their safety going into other neighbourhoods. Also, some of the families didn't have enough money for tickets or for childcare. And so, we built partnerships with community organizations—like Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, Spence Neighborhood Association, Central Neighborhoods Winnipeg, and Ka Ni Kanichihk—to take concerts into different neighborhoods so those families could participate without taking all those risks. And the kids could be in their own communities. I don't know what your experience was when you were younger, but I didn't see a lot of Indigenous people doing positive things, or incredible things. Think, like, all I saw was the politician, the protester, and the criminal. What I've always wanted to do is show Indigenous kids that they can do more, and the arts, and every stage gives us an opportunity to reach hundreds, if not thousands of people. So, that's really why we try to take music to Indigenous kids, is to show them that they can be more than what they see in the media.

Unlike film, unlike television—like literary arts, you know, our stages are pretty easy to set up compared to film sets. So, I think music is one of the most accessible art forms. And it's one of the art forms that we can definitely present our own narratives. And so that's what we do, is take music to these divested neighborhoods so that these families and these kids can see themselves reflected in the acts on stage and hopefully see that they can do more with their lives, and also see that they can share their stories and perspectives and experiences with the world through the arts.

The downside is that we can only afford to do this like once a year. We have outreached concerts that are smaller events, and we do them throughout the summer and fall. The other downside is that we are replicating classrooms with our presentation model. And so, we have our stage, the audience is sitting, and they're forced to listen. It's just like a classroom. And I don't think a lot of Indigenous kids do well in classrooms. Classrooms aren't for everyone, I should say. I think if we had more money, I would love to re-envision that model and follow more of our participatory presentation style, like the powwow. You know: audiences are free to participate in the intertribals; they're free to sit by the drum—any drum they want—during the competition or the performances; and they're free to walk around and participate in anything else. I think deconstructing the classroom is the next step for us when we're able to build a little bit more financial capacity. I guess, in a nutshell, that's about it.

I should also say, we are not like Indigenous Day Live. We don't have a big budget where we're presenting A Tribe Called Red or Buffy Sainte Marie every couple of years. It's really more of a launchpad. And, like, you [Melody McKiver virtually performed at the 2020 festival] would be an exception. But there's a lot of other artists that come through our stages and don't have stage plots, don't have tech riders, don't know how to sign contracts digitally, don't know what an invoice is. I spend a lot of time through the advancing process, helping them build those tools as well and get ready for those bigger stages like the Calgary Folk Fest or National Arts Centre performances. That's another part of what we do, is support the newer acts, build the skills and the understanding and strategies needed to get those performances and then be booked a second and third time. Because I think it's easy to get a performance once. But if you're not able to take care of that presenter, it's hard to get booked a second and third time. You really need those second and third opportunities to develop audiences and make the transitions from festivals to ticketed concerts in each of those cities. That's another role we play.

MM: Yes, great. And it's good to expand a bit on your previous email. You mentioned that a lot of the Indigenous families in the inner city that you've been trying to reach have really been left behind in this move from bringing the music to them to moving into these online spaces. Could you elaborate on that?

AG: Yeah, so I really feel like we let down the Indigenous families during the pandemic. I feel like we weren't really able to support our community partners. We were able to get money out to Indigenous artists. But again, it's those families where having access to a good Internet connection, having access to a laptop and the technology needed to participate in online performances is another barrier. We just didn't have the money or the means to put laptops and Internet service into each of those homes. And so, I really feel like we let them down. But I've got to realize that we're a small organization, that if we did have more money—maybe if we were like a larger presenter who posts a million-dollar surplus every year—we could have made those investments. But again, we're generations behind organizations like the Winnipeg Folk Festival or the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. So, you know, we weren't able to really support in the way that I would have wanted us to. And the same goes with our community partners like Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, Ka Ni Kanichihk, Spence Neighborhood Association, Central Neighbourhoods Winnipeg—they all had a lot of pressure put on them to apply for additional money to deliver additional programming to the families that they serve. And so, I think all of them were able to do that but there was still a need for more financial donations. But yeah, they were stretched really thin just trying to also change course, also build new skills, and also deliver more services. And so, it was just a tough year overall.

MM: I'm also interested in how much outreach you've been doing with the powwow community through the festival this year. Could you expand for readers who might not be familiar with these divides between different genres of Indigenous performing arts, like how powwow artists would have been affected?

AG: So, the main reason that we don't have a powwow is because competition prize money is not an eligible expense with the Department of Canadian Heritage; we get support from the Canadian Arts Presentation Fund at Canadian Heritage. And so, we're only eligible if we pay for performance fees. And with performance fees it would be asking our groups—our singers and dancers—to change the way that they participate in the arts and [how they] perform and how they expect to be paid. It's just not realistic. Indigenous families or powwow families shouldn't have to change the way that they participate. It should be the Department of Canadian Heritage that changes the eligibility criteria. So, we don't do a lot of work with the powwow community.

We [at sākihiwē] work more with Indigenous artists who are performing, or creating and performing, contemporary music. And Indigenous artists who are used to or have experience performing in a classroom setting. So, the stage, the audience, you know: you've got a forty-five or sixty minutes set and then you're done. With the drum groups, they're definitely used to setting up before grand entry and being there until the very end. [Often twelve-hour days from Friday through Sunday]. And so that's a bigger investment than the sixty minutes performance. It's also a different way, like they're not performing for sixty minutes straight. Those drum groups are doing one song every round or two songs every round [there may be dozens of drum groups in rotation]. So, they're definitely not putting as much strain on their vocals, they're not required to have the banter in between songs, or the introductions. But, that being said, it is probably way more engaging when you're right beside the drum group and they're performing or you're participating in intertribals. And so, we don't present a lot of powwow groups or hand drum groups and we don't present a lot of dancers. We did have Eastern Owl on the live broadcast this year, and they're a women's hand drum group from Newfoundland and Labrador. And then I helped out with the Two-Spirit Powwow committee this summer.

But since competition prize money isn't eligible for Canadian Heritage support, I'm guessing that a lot of those powwows didn't receive the same relief funds that our organization or the regional Folk Festival or the Jazz Festival would have received. And so, when that happens, then it's the [powwow] singers and dancers who don't get the same level of support as their contemporary counterparts in Canada.

MM: That segues right into my next question. My interest is with the conference component to sākihiwē this year. You invited a lot of presenters from Aotearoa [New Zealand] and Australia. Were there any recurring themes you've seen coming up with how Indigenous arts communities have been impacted overseas by COVID-19 responses as well?

AG: We didn't really talk a lot about the COVID-19 responses or the support the relief funds in Aotearoa or Australia. I wanted to talk about release strategies. But what was really interesting was to see that it got into like an overall conversation, especially Aotearoa's overall conversation about culture and cultural practices, and the idea of giving back as much as you receive when you work in Aotearoa. And I've never been there. I think the interest for us, and some of the artists that had registered, was how colonization and the destruction of our families are kind of the ties that bind us, and we overcome those challenges, along with racism in music and the music industry. And I think that's what that common ground gives us: it lets us talk about issues from a higher level. Because oftentimes, I find, in my experience at least, when you're talking to Canadians, and not Indigenous people, we're asked to educate them about the Indigenous experience. And so instead of starting our conversation at a higher level, we're starting from the beginning again and bringing them up to speed, and then we can talk about music for a small amount of time.

And so, I think working with Indigenous industry folks and artists overseas with the conference was an opportunity to share some cultural discussions and find more common ground, but also for us to figure out how we can continue to build bridges and continue to support each other financially—along with culturally—during the pandemic and afterwards. I think that's the common theme. I think the main thing that I learned during those conversations was that I always have this idea that we use the festivals in Canada to build audiences. And then we can transition out of the festivals into ticketed concerts. There's more financial stability there. And to get to those summer festivals is about starting to talk to the artistic directors in Canada and the US in September and October with the hopes of getting a good offer by November. And then you can get a tour grant submitted in December. And that's the cycle every year. But overseas,

it seems that, with their climate, their festivals aren't limited to the summer months; they can have outdoor events year-round. And so, they don't have the same kind of album cycle or performance cycle or transitions as in North America. That was a big thing that I learned. And I just assumed, like, that's always the questions I asked was: "When are your summer festivals? When can we get over there and have, like, ten gigs lined up in two months or twelve gigs in two months?" It just doesn't work the same over there.

MM: Yeah, I did a very ad hoc tour of Aotearoa about four summers ago now because I was brought over with the Asinabka Film Festival. So, it was more like we were just getting the Canada Council backend to get our flights covered. But then they were amazing hosts once we got there. We reached out to Ora Barlow-Tukaki because we were in a rural area close to where she lives in the Eastern Bay of Plenty. So yeah, I was traveling with Craig Commanda for that part. Ora brought us to a couple of the different Māori full immersion schools and we did some workshops with some high school students. It was a career highlight.

AG: What I also learned is that it's a good idea for us, instead of going to a conference and focusing on business outcomes there. As an Indigenous community from Canada, it'd be nice to just go there and spend three or four weeks building rapport. Just the idea of reciprocity seemed super important over there. And so, it was really good to learn and then I think the thing is that the money just isn't there. It's not like a market where you would go to make money. It's more of a market where you would go and share your knowledge and experience in your art, and then receive a lot of that back. And so, it's more of an investment in your personal wealth or your spiritual wealth.

MM: Yeah, for sure.

AG: If you go over to Germany or the UK it is more about making money and having a performance every day that pays a good performance fee, and you're able to sell merch. [In Aotearoa], the opportunities are spread out farther and there's less money and you're going to gain a lot spiritually and personally.

MM: Yeah, I was traveling, I brought my regalia with me too. I'm a pretty middle-of-the-road powwow dancer, but just to be able to visit those full immersion schools and suddenly the kids get very interested; like, the viola can be a bit "Ah, whatever." But come out in full regalia and suddenly you've got their attention.

AG: That's really cool. Yeah, learning that we have to be ready to share just as much as we received down there was a good lesson to learn. But honestly, that conference started off as just a mentors' conference where we were bringing in five Indigenous artists from Canada. They were just going to come to the festival and be available for one-on-ones so that the performers we had booked could just spend time and ask questions. Like, even with Caleigh Cardinal oftentimes, I can't answer her questions. The music industry is like, there's no one way to do things. It's always just about testing ideas and trying to put as much resources behind your ideas as possible. And so, I figured there's a need for more mentors and a need for newer artists to just be able to pick up the phone and text Don Amero [Métis singer-songwriter] or MJ Dandenau [Métis bassist and tour manager] and ask them for advice. And ask: "I've got this tour grant I'm working on, how many gigs do you usually have confirmed when you submit a tour grant?" And, you know, those kinds of quick questions are super important and can mean a world of difference in grant applications and album release plans and all those things. And so, it was more about helping, the conference was more about developing connections, relationships between some of the newer voices in our community and some of the more established folks.

When the pandemic hit, we knew we couldn't do it in person. We just went back to Canada Council with the project updates and the strategy of engaging people from overseas because the travel wasn't a barrier anymore. It's something that I think it would be great to continue next year—if we're able to gather in person—as to also have a couple of panels offered over Zoom so our participants have the opportunity to be in a room and see our relatives overseas on the screen and ask them lots of questions. It definitely cut down on the environmental impact of what we do and reduced a lot of the costs.

MM: Great. And so, as an artist manager, as we move through all these social media and video conferencing platforms, do you see anything beneficial for the artists that you're working with?

AG: The whole process of learning how to perform live online has been tough. To, first of all, figure out what equipment you need to purchase, and then to figure out what the advanced audio settings are with Zoom. That's a whole process. You performed for us [Melody McKiver performed at sākīhiwē in summer 2020]. It seemed like you knew—you were prepared, you already made that transition. But this summer we hired Greyson Gritt to be our technical consultant. And so, Greyson—when we had an artist contracted, we would connect them with Greyson, who would do one-on-ones with them over Zoom to talk about their interfaces there, the microphones that they're using, their mixing board, and the advanced audio settings. And if they needed to purchase more equipment the artist would have the opportunity and the time to do that. And then they'd be more comfortable already to perform with us. I think that was an important step.

And I definitely think . . . in the festival, I never present Celeigh Cardinal, or nêhiyawak, or any artists that I've managed in the past. It's just a conflict of interest. And for Celeigh, she was able to figure all of that stuff out on her own. She never actually asked me questions. The nice thing about this, the stuff that Celeigh's been doing recently has been with film crews. And so, I've seen more presenters take that step to hire film crews and have studios or live music venues for the performances, and so on. The broadcast looks way more professional. But there's a lot of artists who don't have that opportunity or that kind of profile to compete for those spots. And so that's another important role that our festival plays, is being a presenter that isn't presenting the same acts as the National Arts Center, or any of the online additions and music festivals across Canada.

I think we definitely need more Indigenous presenters because newer Indigenous acts need just as many opportunities as their folk counterparts—who have been able to put together, like, two or three online performances a month—so everyone can continue to make a living off of music. Look at how William Prince is a great example of somebody who's engaging presenters around the world during the pandemic. He does so many livestreams. It'd be nice if we had that kind of support system for artists who don't have Junos or management teams and record labels and publicists and lawyers and business managers. We need more Indigenous presenters, that's what is needed.

MM: Yeah, I see that the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance has been trying to build up a bit more of a network—and across Northern Ontario, which I think will be really beneficial. But it seems to be pretty early in development still.

AG: Well, like I said, it would be great if the powwows received government funding, or money that the powwows could access, because we would have more people working on the business side of the music industry full-time. And we'd have more opportunities for drum groups, hand drum groups, the dancers. They oftentimes do extend that to contemporary artists. And having a

nationwide network is extremely important.

MM: Do you know if traditional powwows qualify for more funding streams than competitions do?

AG: I don't know. I think if they're paying professional performance fees, then they would definitely qualify for Canadian Heritage. One of the next steps that has to come before more money on the programming side is probably money for admin talent. I don't think there's enough Indigenous folks across Canada that are ready to apply for grants, manage the programs, and then report on them. So, it's one thing that I think the Canada Council definitely needs to step up and put a program together that's specific to developing more admin talent in the Indigenous arts community.

MM: For sure.

AG: Those applications are tough. And building an organization is tough. Reporting is—it's not that hard, but it's just time consuming.

MM: Yeah, so I didn't start writing any grants until I had already finished my master's degree. So, I think I had to go through that grinder of doing a lot of writing before it seemed less intimidating. I don't think I could have seen myself doing it earlier.

AG: It's one thing to complete an application, but it's another thing to make it competitive. And to also just have enough luck, or enough profile, to convince juries that you're going to be able to do what you say you're going to do and that your project is worthwhile—because project grants are super competitive. And it's always nerve-racking for me being in this way of life. [laughs] I oftentimes take on too much work because I never know which job or which funding is going to come through. So I always plan for the worst.

MM: Yeah, I hate myself for doing it. But with the day job it's definitely been a little bit easier to weather COVID-19 this year since we just kept the salary, too, and then ended up getting most of the grants I applied for. And I was like: now I have to do the work. It's a good problem to have, but . . .

AG: Definitely. Like I said, it'd be nice if I was able to commission stuff off of the management and do the festival, but luckily one of them held up during the pandemic.

MM: Any final thoughts on how readers can be better at supporting Indigenous artists during this time?

Alan: I think we definitely need audiences on the livestreams. I love Jeremy Dutcher. And I tuned into his IG live and there was, like, thirty-six people on it. And so, I think supporting by watching the online streams would be super helpful. And purchasing merchandise, purchasing albums when you can, those types of things go a long way. Also, a big support for Indigenous artists in Canada is Sirius XM's channel 165—the Canadian Indigenous Peoples' Radio channel. So, tuning into that is another way that they can support because the more listeners they have on that channel, I think the more likely Sirius XM is to continue with it. And again, that translates into thousands of dollars, if not tens of thousands of dollars, for Indigenous artists every year. And so, I think if they want to support, I think that's the key is getting a Sirius XM membership or subscription and tuning into channel 165. The other ways they can support—other than livestreams—are purchasing merchandise and purchasing tickets when we do get

back to the live performance world, I guess.

Another thing that's important to educate both funding agencies and music industry associations about is the idea that a lot of Indigenous artists can't make the same financial investments in recording projects or developmental programs as their Canadian counterparts. Some of our families can do this, but most don't have the capacity to invest in their kids, or help them with music lessons or business loans, or even teach them how to manage credit. And so, requiring those participant investments creates a big barrier for a lot of Indigenous artists. It's been an uphill battle with some of our funding partners, but I feel like it's getting better.

And then, on the festival side, we would love to be able to pay flights and accommodations and stuff like that. But it's so hard to, oftentimes, with our project grants. We didn't get the results for, I think, thirty thousand dollars of our festival [funding] until July of this summer, and we moved the festival back to August. So that gives us less than a month to know how much money we have configured. It's always a big financial risk with project grants. Whereas, if we had operating grants, we could definitely make all those financial promises and also have better presentation conditions, because we always pay our performance fees. It's always in that uncertain world. It's tough, but it's still better than nothing.

MM: Do you think there is a structural issue of Indigenous organizations not getting access to the operating grants?

AG: Yep, yep, it is systemic. At the provincial and municipal level, you can only apply for operating grants if you get an invitation from the arts council. And I don't know how to earn an invitation from them. I think if you weren't in the initial round, when the operating grants were first introduced by that funding agency, you're waiting for an organization to go bankrupt or remove themselves before you can apply. And there's a number of other organizations that are also waiting for invitations. It's a way of maintaining the status quo. It's, again, a systemic barrier. And when we look at, like, Indigenous organizations—or actually we look at when Canadian festivals and arts organizations were being started, like, wow, there were still residential schools running. You know, it puts it into context. They have multiple generations of a head start on us in terms of accessing money, in terms of building capacity, and their advantage is supported and strengthened by the arts funding agencies who maintain those by-invitation-only policies. So, not only is it hard to compete for private sponsor contributions, we're not allowed to compete for operating grants.

Sometimes I get invited to meetings and I get to say these things in front of other people. But I really appreciate you reaching out and being able to say this for the readers. I think is really important. Awesome.

MM: Yeah. Thanks for your time.