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Creating the Conditions to Create An Anti-Oppressive Lens on the Post-Pandemic Music Scene

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Article abstract

As a professional bassist who identifies as female and queer, I have my share of horror stories about experiences in the music industry. But I also have a solid peer group that is actively working to improve things, and with whom I have an ongoing dialogue. Specifically, in the last year, we started to observe the radical behavioural changes we've made as a society in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these protocols could be viewed with an anti-oppressive lens. I started to think about my values as an improvising musician, and how they provide an analogy and a framework for broader social interaction. I used the writing of this article as an opportunity to speak with some of my musical peers about their individual experiences and their ideas for creating safer spaces. We talked about the skills we had as improvisers, and how the pandemic could be a pivot point in creating a safer, more authentically inclusive music scene for women, trans, and gender queer people. This piece reflects those conversations and offers practical considerations and theoretical frameworks that are relevant to individual improvisers and ensembles, as well as promoters, curators, and venues.

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Creating the Conditions to Create: An Anti-Oppressive Lens on the Post-Pandemic Music Scene

Carlie Howell

Last year, I was backstage at a fundraising show chatting with the band: an ad-hoc ensemble of old schoolmates and new colleagues alike. The topic of sexism in the music industry came up, and a male trumpet player asked me point blank: “What can we do as men to improve the situation for women?” Admittedly, I was caught off guard. I had grown accustomed to being asked for proof, asked to recount personal examples of mistreatment. Sometimes this had been met with defensiveness, while other times it had snowballed into a pileup of similar tales. But on this particular night, I was met with a new brand of readiness presented by men who understood the why and were ready for the how.

While the question itself surprised me, the feeling of being caught off guard did not. As a professional femme-identified musician, I’ve had 20+ years of experience fielding sexist remarks, negotiating toxic environments, and facing double standards. I mistakenly believed for many years that unethical treatment would present itself clearly, and that the response would be equally obvious. However, across genres, venues, and platforms, misogyny and sexism persist. They present in insidious, hard to recognize places and from people (most often, but not exclusively, men) who are well-intentioned champions of the arts and active participants in the music industry. I have come to know that I am not alone in my experience. It can be minutes, days, or years later (after reconciling the fact that I was *not* to blame) that I come up with a concise reply that doesn’t skip a beat. The #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have validated my own lived experience and I have learned that addressing misogyny and gender-based inequity in the music industry is not only a critical part of my work, but vital in my ability to continue it. I’ve also learned that an effective response that creates a better situation for all isn’t something that just materializes—it takes individual effort and community practice.

In mid-March of this year, I was again confronted with a statement that caught me off guard in the best of ways. I was chatting with a friend in his kitchen, on the precipice of the pandemic in one of those face-to-face moments we didn’t know would be our last for months. In addition to being one of my best friends and chosen family members, Michael is my ally, my mentor, my student, and my teacher, as well as a conscientious bandleader, colleague, and accomplice. He suggested that this period would force our society as a whole to look at public spaces, public access, and public health policies with new awareness. We spoke about the potential for the pandemic to impact people’s capacity for empathy, to make them feel vulnerable in new ways that could inspire internal and external change. Indeed, as humans around the world have navigated the weeks and then months of the pandemic, I have been struck by how quickly our societies have been able to process new findings and radically shift our behaviours to adjust to changing protocols.

It’s made me wonder if, within the music industry, musicians can also shift behaviours to improve the situation for women and gender non-conforming folks for the benefit of *all* participants and audiences. Coronavirus has effectively shut down the music industry for an indefinite period of time, and many people are anxious to know when we might be able to resume. I’d like to ask what this pause affords us and how much progress we can make before we press play again. What opportunity does the shutdown and relaunch of the music industry pose for making it safer, more accessible, and more equitable? What behaviour protocols or pandemic practices could be reframed as anti-oppressive practices within the music industry?

What kind of critical self-awareness and empathy have we developed that could help us to foster more emotionally and physically safe working environments?

A common misconception about improvisation is that it is entirely free, without boundaries. As practicing improvisers, we know that it is the creative parameters placed on the improvisation that make it an intentional creation, an articulate communication between musicians. Likewise, I believe that we must create parameters, or protocols, to guide us in co-constructing a music industry that is more equitable, accessible, representative, and, above all, safe for more people in more ways. This includes addressing such issues as gender-based harassment, violence, and systemic disclusion of cis women, trans, and gender non-conforming people. This is something that, just like our instruments and our craft, we have to practice individually and rehearse together.

I often joke that, because I have a degree in improvisation, I'm good at going with the flow. In truth, my degree is in jazz performance, but if I consider what I truly learned there:

I learned how to listen.

I learned how to be responsive.

I learned how to understand my role.

I learned how to maintain and interpret frameworks, to operate inside and outside of them.

I learned how to have non-verbal conversations.

I learned how to shape behaviour through individual practice and collective rehearsal.

For me, this is what it means to *be* an improviser, not only on stage, but in life—to approach creativity as a way of being in the world. Those of us who are well-practiced in this way of communicating already have a great toolbox of skills. Readers of this journal will be familiar with its emphasis on “improvisation as a site for the analysis of social practice,” and this is certainly the way I have approached my art-making and my relationship with it for most of my professional life. And so, I practice my scales *and* my sentence structures. I transcribe the musical phrases as well as the poignant thoughts of others. I listen to both old records and new podcasts.

As an improviser, I know that my ideas are influenced, augmented, and supported by those with whom I converse; ultimately, our theory becomes practice when we interact with others. When it came to writing this article, I knew that I needed to explore these ideas by engaging with my peers, so I arranged “jam sessions” with some folks whom I deeply respect. In listening back to our recorded conversations, the words present as dynamic musical phrases; each dialogue had its own arc, timbre, pace.

I opened each of these conversations with the same two questions: “What does safe space mean to you?” followed by, “How does that definition of safe space intersect with your experiences as a working musician?” As a society, we are currently building a collective understanding of safe space as it relates to COVID-19. We have begun to realize that the person who uses the elevator after us might have an autoimmune disease, or that the person ahead of us in line at the grocery store could have an elderly parent at home. Since we cannot know for certain, we are “acting as if.” Bandmates can be our allies and accomplices in building

and maintaining safe space *if* they understand that we too may be carrying visible or invisible needs. In the pandemic, our individual health is protected by collective responsibility; similarly, in our ensembles, it is our responsibility to ensure the success of our bandmates. When we feel seen and appropriately supported by our collaborators, we can focus our emotional, physical, and mental energy on making music successfully and to the best of our ability.

In order to be successful, we must also feel represented and invited. One point of practice that was recommended in each of my conversations was this: diversify your roster. Opportunity begets opportunity, which in turn helps more players gain experience and exercise their unique voices. But remember that diversity isn't about wielding power or offering handouts; it's about an exchange. These players are sharing their musical skillsets and the life experiences that created them, to the benefit of you, your bandmates and your audience. So, check in to make sure that your ensemble is a safe place for new artists, and be prepared to be an ally and accomplice in maintaining that safe space when you're performing. It's unhelpful to invite a femme, trans or gender non-conforming musician into your group if they then feel singled out or tokenized. Furthermore, it's harmful for this musician to be led into a performance environment that is toxic or unsafe because your bandmates don't recognize what that looks like, don't know or don't care to respond, or, in the worst-case scenario, are perpetrators themselves, objectifying this "diversity hire" on stage and off. In response to the pandemic, we have collectively proven ourselves willing to be thoughtful about, and are becoming increasingly adept at, creating safe and equitable spaces. As musicians, it's time to apply those skills within our musical circles.

Venues and promoters also have a great deal of power in setting a tone and building a culture. How they book, promote, host, and introduce performers is critical to creating safer conditions. Right now, we're looking to them to understand and implement regulations around pandemic safety, as well as to be creative about how to make live performance possible. It's also time for them to get creative about how they make their spaces more accessible for femme, trans, and gender non-conforming patrons and performers. Training programs like Smart Serve teach employees to recognize the risks that alcohol intoxication poses to patrons both at an establishment and after they leave. Could we also train employees to recognize the risks of gender-based prejudice, aggression, and violence, and best practices to prevent it?

Public health professionals have noted that the clearer COVID-19 protocols are, the safer the situation feels to everyone. Clear advance communication about what precautions should be taken helps people know what is expected of them and what they can expect of others. Protocols such as maintaining a physical distance can also be viewed with an anti-oppressive lens: women, trans, and gender-non-conforming folx, as well as people on the autism spectrum or with PTSD, are just some of those who might appreciate physical distancing as a way of maintaining their own physical and emotional boundaries. What if we kept this standard of communication before we entered someone's physical sphere? It's the beginning of a conversation about consent, which is something else we're learning how to do during the pandemic: folks are chatting about what they feel comfortable with in terms of distancing, mask wearing, and the sharing of workspaces and tools, and checking in with others. We're learning to recognize our own comfort levels and boundaries, and to express them to those around us.

These are not conclusions but starting places. I hope you engage in conversations with your own community members in the same way you would approach a musical improvisation: as a testing ground for ideas, a jam session on how we might intentionally improvise our way to a better industry. Let us work together to refine and redefine our collective behaviour—not just as a reaction to the pandemic, but as a path to creating the ideal conditions within which to create.

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