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"One Musician at a Time" Music, Philanthropy, and Public Policy in the Age of Coronavirus

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Article abstract

Dale Chapman discusses the important work that the Jazz Foundation of America is doing during the pandemic, assisting jazz musicians with housing costs, medical expenses, and emergency financial support, and argues for the pandemic as an opportune moment to organize on behalf of policies that ensure the universal reach of economic and social security.

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“One Musician at a Time”: Music, Philanthropy, and Public Policy in the Age of Coronavirus

Dale Chapman

Among the most alarming aspects of the initial spread of the novel coronavirus, which seemed to reveal in real-time the unfolding of its devastation, were the deaths and hospitalizations of notable public figures. In the US jazz community, a two-day period saw the passing of Wallace Roney, Ellis Marsalis, and Bucky Pizzarelli in rapid succession.¹ This brought home the immense capacity of the pandemic to impact not only individuals, families, and institutions, but also their legacies.

The sudden loss of these beloved musicians is a damning indictment of structural inequities that reside below the surface of the pandemic, where jazz musicians are particularly vulnerable to systemic marginalization in the US polity. For example, artists without steady employment are counted among the 27.5 million people in the United States without health insurance (Chevigny 17–20; Berchick et al. 1). The employer-based private health care system in the US classifies freelance musicians as independent contractors, and thereby excludes them from accessing affordable health coverage. Furthermore, institutionalized racism has ensured that Black people are particularly likely to face the prospect of poverty or food insecurity, eviction, discrimination in the health care system, heightened viral exposure as “essential workers,” and intergenerational trauma levied by epigenetic inheritance (Alkon 94–95; Desmond 250–252; Frakt; Sullivan). We cannot ignore that systemic white supremacy has obstructed access in jazz and improvisation communities, where Black musicians (primary contributors to these communities) are made doubly vulnerable, excluded because of their race and because of their employment status as gig workers.

Philanthropic organizations have sought to address these gaps in health care access for musicians, which is a testament to the sense of the communitarian responsibility of stakeholders. One such organization, the Jazz Foundation of America (JFA), is a US-based non-profit devoted to “provid[ing] housing assistance, pro bono medical care, and emergency financial support to musicians in crisis” (“The Mission”). The JFA took its present form in 1990, when Jamil Nassar, Jimmy Owens, Bob Cranshaw, and Vishnu Wood approached the existing leadership about the prospect of developing an emergency fund that could address the financial precariousness of working jazz artists by helping to cover rent and to pay for health care. As they did in the provision of disaster relief during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the organization has now taken on an especially visible role during the COVID-19 pandemic, intervening on behalf of a community doubly marginalized by risks to public health and financial security. The Jazz Foundation of America’s Musicians’ Emergency Fund has been supported through a series of high-profile annual fundraisers in Manhattan (“The Jazz Foundation Story”). Their remote livestream fundraiser, *The New Gig*, showcased artists ranging from Buddy Guy to Elvis Costello, in support of a dedicated COVID-19 fund (“Jazz Foundation’s #TheNewGig”).

Even as they pursue this vital work, the very existence of the JFA highlights glaring failures of state and federal policymaking in the US. This ranges from failures to protect gig economy workers, to exposing musicians to the prospect of eviction or medical bankruptcy. At the same time, the targeted reach of philanthropy—as promised in the JFA’s promotional materials to “sav[e] jazz one musician at a time”—raises questions about the displacement of collective solidarities by private charities.

Former JFA Executive Director Wendy Oxenhorn highlights the degree to which philanthropy is asked to intervene when labour protections for creative workers are denied. She notes: “I have to remind [JFA beneficiaries] that this isn’t charity; I have to remind them that this is the pension plan they should have had, the savings plan they should have had, had they been paid properly all these years for their work” (“Jazz Foundation”). It is worth noting that the founding of the JFA was initiated in part by three figures who were involved in the labour struggles of jazz artists in New York and who were active in the leadership of Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians: Owens, Nasser, and Cranshaw. Their dual positions as advocates for both union mobilization and philanthropic intervention invites us to think about the relation between these two approaches in addressing the precarious livelihoods of working musicians. For instance, Justice for Jazz Artists, a recent Local 802 initiative, put pressure on New York’s leading for-profit jazz venues to contribute to the pension funds of AFM members. Justice for Jazz Artists frames the financial security of musicians as a matter of right, that flows from a universal imperative of economic justice (Weeks). In contrast, philanthropy operates by standing in when a structural commitment to social amelioration is absent: through selectively bestowing compassion at local and individual levels and distributing benevolence in a piecemeal fashion (Berlant 1-4; Moschen 6).

What does the limited scope of jazz philanthropy teach us about the need for universal responses to economic and health insecurity? The US federal government’s response to COVID-19 reveals what postmillennial conservatives have called “compassionate conservatism,” which devolves responsibility for pandemic responses to state and local levels. Within this context, philanthropic organizations such as the JFA work to address this resulting vacuum of care (Berlant, 1-4; Shear et al.). Compassionate conservatism reproduces itself by asserting that social inequality only exists in exceptional and isolated cases, and thus can be remedied only through the largesse of benevolent philanthropic organizations.

As a philanthropic organization, the JFA by no means aligns itself with this conservative worldview. As the work of figures such as Jimmy Owens and Bob Cranshaw would suggest, the JFA Musicians’ Emergency Fund operates alongside the labour mobilization efforts of the AFM, working to provide different avenues for mitigating the precarious conditions of jazz artists. Nevertheless, the present pandemic highlights the degree to which the aim of the JFA—to “save jazz one musician at a time”—must itself work in tandem with broader solidarities. Freelance musicians share a lineage with the contingent workers of the gig economy, and this reveals the broad-based appeal to universal economic justice that could take place. In the face of a music industry hit hard by the curtailment of live performance venues during COVID-19, and with gig economy workers seeing legal success in pushing back against the casualization of corporate labour, we live in an especially opportune moment for jazz artists and analogous communities to shift narratives away from localized and targeted solutions to precarious work, and toward organizing on behalf of policies that ensure the universal reach of economic and social security.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Russonello and Levenson; Keepnews, “Wallace Roney”; Keepnews, “Bucky Pizzarelli.”

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