

With little or no safety net, jazz musicians watch their gigs disappear as coronavirus spreads

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No one will escape the coronavirus pandemic's effects, but jazz musicians appear especially vulnerable to its economic impact.

For even before Gov. J.B. Pritzker ordered restaurants, bars and concert halls closed, jazz artists in Chicago and across the country were seeing their gigs canceled, their tours dropped, their livelihoods vanish.

"My entire spring is shot," said [Orrin Evans](#), a top jazz pianist based in Philadelphia, before his first set Saturday night at the Green Mill Jazz Club.

"Tonight is probably the last day I'll do a gig" for a while, added Evans, an otherwise busily touring musician who swings through Chicago once or twice a year to play the Mill.

"I don't know if there's any way to plan for this. ... I've never seen anything like this. The only thing this reminds me of was 9/11," added Evans, referring to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. "But that didn't make people not come out. People were sad.

"Now fear is taking over. And it's a fear that we all should be conscious of, but it still is a fear."

On purely economic terms, few have more to fear than jazz musicians. Most are freelancers who live from one-nighter to one-nighter, ever at the whim of club owners, restaurateurs and concert bookers. Engagements promised months earlier can disappear overnight, and have.

"I never quite saw something like this, where in one 48-, 72-hour period all the gigs ended," said Chicago jazz guitarist [Andy Brown](#). "It's like somebody dropped an atom bomb on the town, or there was a solar flare, and all the power went out."

Said Chicago jazz singer [Petra van Nuis](#), his wife, "It all seemed to happen in a couple of days. On Thursday, the 12th (of March), all day long, call after call, cancellation after cancellation. ... I have basically nothing, because I work at clubs, restaurants and bars."

Like many other jazz musicians, Van Nuis also performs for seniors in assisted living centers and the like. But there, too, "events have been canceled," she said. "Retirement homes are now closed to nonessential people. I do several library concerts a month. Those are canceled."

Guitarist Brown said he wholeheartedly agreed with the decision to shut down these gathering places, where the virus can easily spread. But he now faces a calendar as blank as his wife's.

Yet even before the coronavirus onslaught, he experienced a foreboding about the jazz musician's life.

"For the last six months or so, I've felt like every gig that I do, pretty much every day, starts with musicians wringing their hands and looking nervous and thinking: Where is this going?" said Brown.

"This is pre-virus jazz. Every gig starts with this stomachache feeling."

Van Nuis, too, noticed a slowdown in engagements this year. When she communed with colleagues, she learned that “everyone’s schedule seemed lighter,” she said.

It’s important to remember that for an independent musician, the cancellation of a gig represents much more than the loss of a couple hours’ work. For far more time is spent seeking out and lining up performances than delivering them.

“The problem with jazz, especially if you’re the leader, is you need so much time just to do the booking,” said Van Nuis, who fronts her much-admired and aptly named Recession Seven ensemble. “I’m basically working all the time to keep my part-time career.”

And because jazz dates are not typically very lucrative, “We sometimes are driving home from the gig and depositing the check in the drive-through as we’re going home,” added Van Nuis. “We’ve been able to squeak by like that.”

What’s more, for jazz musicians and other gig workers, there’s virtually no safety net. Without a steady paycheck, paid sick days and vacation, employer-provided health insurance and other benefits of a conventional 9-5 job, the slightest interruption in work can be economically devastating. Wipe it all away in a single fell swoop, and artists have nowhere to go financially but down.

So though musicians such as Van Nuis and Brown consider themselves fortunate to have good health insurance through the Affordable Care Act, their limited funds will last only so long.

“If we live frugally, we can make it like two months,” said Van Nuis.

All of which inevitably leads them to compare their lot with classical musicians, such as the formidable artists who play in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Few, if any, jazz musicians enjoy the kind of support that the CSO artists have earned through their superlative skills and hard-won union negotiations.

During last year’s CSO strike, the terms of their employment and the benefits they sought were reported in the Tribune and elsewhere.

“Reading about the CSO strike, I felt agitated,” said Brown. “Because it felt like: Wow, there’s really no comparable situation for the equivalent musician on the Chicago jazz scene. CSO musicians, they have what they need to get in their contract. There’s nothing at all comparable for even the most celebrated and the most venerated and the most accomplished musicians here in jazz.”

The reasons for that are many, but perhaps they come down to how America views classical music versus jazz. Starting in the late 19th century, this country sought to emulate Europe by creating great symphony orchestras and venerating the historic masterpieces of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms and others. Jazz came later, emerging as a bona fide art form at the turn of the previous century in New Orleans brothels and clubs, migrating to saloons and dance halls in Chicago and beyond.

Never has jazz enjoyed anything close to the institutional support and philanthropy lavished on classical music in America, though Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York and SFJAZZ in San Francisco have been bucking the long-standing trend.

The disparities in funding between classical and jazz reflect the differences in lifestyle between musicians working in each arena.

“Basically, society has decided that classical is worthy of civic and cultural support,” said Brown, who points out that “there are a lot of sociological reasons, you can say racial reasons. We get it, the history of America. Jazz is historically African-American music.

"America, I feel, doesn't quite know how to value its own history, like Europe does. Europe is always looking to its past. The United States is always looking to its future – the latest pop music, the latest trend. It doesn't know how to celebrate itself.”

Not that Brown and Van Nuis believe that anyone owes them a living. They made the choice to pursue what was a tough life long before the current crisis and acknowledge that it's up to them to figure out how to make it work.

“We made our own bed,” said Van Nuis. “I understand there are people out there who are really suffering, who are in an absolutely dire situation, where one week can ruin them, not two months. I don't want it to come across as a complaint.

“I understand it's my adult responsibility to take care of myself.”

Along these lines, Van Nuis has applied for a job at Trader Joe's and has looked into becoming a census taker.

Brown, however, chooses to cling entirely to his art.

“I'm going to go to the gigs, I will follow them till they're gone, and when and if it stops, I'll reassess,” he said.