The Roanoke Times

March 21, 2020

Musicians look for way forward in wake of canceled shows

By Tad Dickens

This is the first in an ongoing series about the effects on the Southwest Virginia music scene of self-isolating in the wake of COVID-19.

For singer and songwriter Erin Lunsford, the news was devastating.

As the COVID-19 virus spread through a country unprotected by vaccine or herd immunity, concert promoters and venue managers began canceling events. People were encouraged to avoid large gatherings.

Lunsford, a Botetourt County native living in Richmond, had scheduled an April 5 CD release party for her solo project, “The Damsel,” at 5 Points Music Sanctuary, in Roanoke. Beginning last week, 5 Points and venues across the country postponed countless shows. At 5 Points, the closure continues until at least April 24.

The moves, however necessary, put countless performers around the world — including many from Virginia — out of work. Lunsford, a regular at FloydFest and at Southwest Virginia nightspots, could easily understand why. That didn’t make the hit feel better.

“I’ve been planning this for six months, just the tour part, aside from the album and the buildup and all the other promotional work that I’ve done,” Lunsford said of her DIY project. “This particular tour, I spent a lot of time and money on, and it’s a really big deal for me. It’s the first time I’ve really paid this much attention to my solo project.

“On Friday, it sounds kind of dramatic, but I felt like I had experienced a trauma, a loss,” Lunsford said. “I was just spiraling.”

She went to Plan B: a streaming concert that went live on Tuesday from her Facebook page, facebook.com/erinlunsfordmusic. The suggested donation was $10. Lunsford said that part of each donation will go to the Richmond Public Schools Education Fund, earmarked for children who rely on school lunch and breakfast, and other resources as they home-school.

Lunsford, who debuted a merchandise page last week at her website, said she is likely to do at least one show per week until normal life resumes.

It’s a route that a lot of performers are taking. Another Roanoke Valley native, Allen Thompson, is at the center of VirtualFestival, a brand-new venture that aims to get some revenue to musicians, venues and production staff.

Thompson, based in Nashville, Tennessee, said that his friend and fellow musician Rodney McCarthy approached him with the idea and asked him to reach out to bands.

“Then I started thinking about all the venues that were having to close, and the production companies and stuff like that,” Thompson said. “I was like, my band is a 12-piece jam band. Getting 12 of us in a living room and having somebody’s girlfriend hold the iPhone sounds like a not very good way for us to earn any money.”

He began reaching out to more contacts, and heard an increasingly familiar refrain.

“It was pretty apparent that everyone was really freaking out and everyone was having the same idea, but with no one really knowing what to do,” he said.

The page, at facebook.com/VirtualFestival2020, had hosted 17 concerts as of Friday, including Staying Alive-Stream: A Corona Distraction. That show, on Tuesday in Los Angeles, featured members of such acts as Turkuaz, Dumpstaphunk, Andy Frasco & The U.N., Orgone, Aloe Blacc and DJ Williams’ Shots Fired. The $10 charge via Paypal and Venmo went to the performers, all of whom have lost work of late.

Thompson was working to set up shows in Denver; New York City; Austin, Texas; Asheville, North Carolina; and Richmond, among others.

“If I could get people to do shows everywhere, we can stream it, or they can stream it on their own Facebook Live and post it to ours and help spread the word, and hopefully help folks get a little extra money,” he said.

Some of the proceeds of upcoming shows will go toward disaster relief in post-tornado Nashville. Deadly twisters struck middle Tennessee on March 3. Thompson had just done a set at The Basement East venue, and left about a half-hour before the storm destroyed the building.

“And then a week later, [COVID-19] became a thing,” he said. “We couldn’t really have a tornado benefit that week, which was the beginning of the busy season, because everything closed.”

National touring act Marie Miller was one of the first to cancel a show. She was scheduled for a Friday gig at The Spot on Kirk, in Roanoke, to promote her new album, “Little Dreams.” The record is scheduled to drop on Friday.

“I have a dad that just went through radiation and chemo, and I really wanted to be careful,” singer/songwriter and mandolinist Miller said from her home base, near Front Royal.

Miller put on a livestreaming event on March 13, with her band, from Arlington. The hastily organized affair raised $1,000, she said. She said she is likely to do more, but solo, because her band members headed back to their respective places in Nashville. On CD release day, she hopes to do something special online.

“I’m trying to focus on the bigger picture that people are getting sick and that a lot of us are suffering,” Miller said. “So just hoping that this music brings healing. Music has always been that for me, so that’s what I’m hoping for in the next couple of weeks or months.”

Web extras

Jared Stout, from Blacksburg, is one of many Southwest Virginia performers to turn the streaming route. He and his Jared Stout Band are teaming up with Salem’s Parkway Brewing Co. for a live stream at 7 p.m. Saturday. The no-audience show begins at 7 p.m., and online tips to the band will be accepted during the show. It’s part of Parkway’s Virtual Couch Tour, and the venue will be serving curbside beers to go. Drive them to your place where “you and yours sitting at home” can start “dancing in your sweatpants,” the event invite reads.

The entertainment world is not simply about musicians. Shilo Parker has near single-handedly built a burlesque scene in Roanoke. She had planned a move to the Raleigh-Durham area and was scheduled for a farewell performance in April at 5 Points. That was, of course, canceled. Parker, whose stage name is Franki Boom-Boom, said in an e-mail exchange that the loss of work here and beyond has scuttled her plans to move. Her gig economy work includes website design and digital marketing for a small Roanoke-area company. In an Instagram story post, she asked followers their suggestions for how she offset the gig losses. Merch promotion, or starting a Patreon or Onlyfans page to post routines and classes, were among the replies.

“Unfortunately, I haven’t received much interest from people in actually purchasing those things right now, as other lines of work are starting to see the effects,” she wrote. “So as of now, I’ll be building up content for those pages and continue to post what I do have available in hopes that I will get a few hits,” she wrote.

Todd Herrington, a bassist from Richmond who has played Timesland with D.J. Williams Projekt, Cris Jacobs Band and Modern Groove Syndicate, is on the road a lot. When he is home, he is part of Mekong XPress, a Monday night project at Mekong Restaurant. The restaurant is closed for the time being, but the band is going to work on an album with a live stream of the studio progress, Herrington said in a message exchange. Jacobs plans to stream his band from his hometown venue, Baltimore, Maryland’s The 8x10, with no audience, at 7 p.m.

"All of course barring any regulations put into place regarding the outbreak," wrote Herrington, who added the he is applying to teach English as a second language online to Asian children.

Roanoke native Alex Bingham these days is living in indie music hotspot Hillborough, North Carolina, and has been touring a good bit with Hiss Golden Messenger, among other acts. He said in response to our crowdsourcing post on Facebook that he has lost at least a month of touring with “a few different bands and a few other local shows.” That adds up to significant lost income for the bassist. “Just taking as much remote studio work as possible and laying low.”

Toni Blackman, who for a few years had a regular residency at Jefferson Center, teaching girls about hip-hop music and performance, wrote in response to that post that she had a mini-residency in Atlanta and is now looking to host her Cypher Workshop online. “I’m so ready to go digital!” she wrote. “It’ll be women artists. Not sure how we’re going to do the performance part yet but planning it out.”

Martinsville natives Doug and Telisha Williams, who perform as Wild Ponies, were planning to tour as the opening act for Caleb Caudle, for the latter’s CD release tour. Instead, they did a live stream on Thursday, and they are planning more, Doug Williams wrote in reply to the crowdsourcing post.

The Roanoke Times

March 25, 2020

Music venues deal with coronavirus-related cancellations

By Tad Dickens

Berglund Center general manager Robyn Schon has stories to tell, having worked at the facility for 22 years, the past nine as general manager. Schon has seen epic weather, broken-down equipment trucks and performers’ skullduggery.

What is happening right now, as the spread of COVID-19 put a stop to all large gatherings for at least the foreseeable future, is something else, she said.

“This is probably the most unique situation we’ve ever had to deal with,” said Schon, who has been in the arena business for 34 years.

How unique? She had to announce a show that she already knew wouldn’t happen.

Schon is among dozens of managers at Southwest Virginia venues small, medium and large, whose schedules were torpedoed when the highly communicable virus showed its propensity to spread. They’ve been working constantly since then to manage the results. Schon said that she has had to cancel about 60 dates, including a hip-hop performance, a volleyball tournament, dance recitals, church services and school events, as Virginia moved to quell gatherings with crowds larger than 10.

“It’s hit us hard,” she said. “Every day is moving puzzle pieces around and trying to make them fit on a different part of the calendar.”

Among them was a triple-bill of 1990s rock acts — Collective Soul, Better Than Ezra and Tonic — announced last week. Tickets went on sale Friday for the June 28 show, which Schon knew was unlikely to go off on that date. The headliner’s management was planning the on-sale announcement for a national tour, and insisted all the venues release the information, too.

“I wish they had given us a little bit more time through this week to figure out this coronavirus issue,” Schon said last week. “We would not have announced Collective Soul on our own, but … that was a mandate. The last two days I’ve been on the phone with their agent. We are looking at rescheduling that for the fall.

“My apologies to the community. We would not have put that out if we had a little bit more time to work with the agent and the tour on that. But I think they’re kind of feeling their way through all this, too. They’ve had this date scheduled for a couple of months.”

Jefferson Center had to scrap the remainder of its 2019-20 season. A non-series performance from Tanya Tucker remains on the schedule, pending further notice. A set of Roanoke-area schools’ workshops with Roanoke native Rayshon Cobbs Jr., aka hip-hop beatmaker 808-Ray, was set for March 13, but with schools closing down, it was off. The workshops and performance will be rescheduled.

Bela Fleck and the Flecktones were to play last Sunday, and that act of high-powered instrumentalists was to spend a significant part of its itinerary with area students, as well. That show is off, too.

“This is a loss for kids,” as well as adult audiences, Jefferson Center executive director Cyrus Pace said. “We’re going to try to make all this up. … We’re going to continue to do the great work that we do, so we’re thinking of this as a temporary stop, but not a future reality.”

In Rocky Mount, Harvester Performance Center was experiencing what was shaping up to be its best-ever quarter, town assistant manager and venue CEO Matt Hankins said. The town-owned business had sold more than 10,000 tickets for the quarter, which figured into a projection of 40,000 patrons, about 10,000 more than last year.

Postponements included Graham Nash and Sara Evans, both of which would have been full houses. Capacity in the main hall is about 500, depending on the setup. Combined with smaller shows, the venue lost about 1,500 customers.

“So we finished the quarter with 8,511 coming through, which … set a record for us, but certainly not what it could have been,” Hankins said.

The Harvester, managed and booked by Gary Jackson, has three other full-time employees and a contract employee, all of whom remain busy, Hankins said. Jackson rescheduled most of the dates already, while adding new ones farther down the calendar. Hankins said he has talked with Jackson about booking more nights with an act performing on each of the venue’s two floors.

“We do that some already, but we can certainly help touring musicians out by giving them the opportunity of having somewhere to play, and if that means we’re doubling up every night, I’m good to do that till we have some sense of recovery.”

In the interim, they are looking at booking online-streaming shows in the upstairs main hall, which has full production capability built in.

“Pay local artists to come in and play for an hour and continue that sense of community that the Harvester has,” Hankins said. “That would let us give our [part-time employees] a few more hours and help support some of the local artists as well.”

Nonprofit 5 Points Music Sanctuary, in Roanoke, has been turning the corner in audience attendance and finances, the venue’s chief organizer, Tyler Godsey, said. Canceling shows through April hurt a lot, but Godsey reckons that it’s an opportunity to refocus. For instance, many people don’t realize that the 5 Points Music Foundation’s work centers on music therapy and advocating for those with hearing loss.

“I can’t predict what the broader economic impact is,” Godsey said. “But I’ve been telling the staff that it’s not a whole lot different from how it’s been for me over the past three years.”

Godsey sees the stoppage as an opportunity to get the bigger message across. At the same time, the venue has put on sale its “power pass” tickets — $50 for any two shows in the future — with a target of raising $8,000 to split among the venue’s eight independent contractors doing such jobs as sound and lights.

The Spot on Kirk, also a nonprofit, has added an option for patrons to donate in order to help the venue’s employees. Find more information at 5pointsmusic.com and thespotonkirk.org.

“In our darkest corners, we find the keys to some of life’s hidden doors that we didn’t even know were there, and behind that door we find a world that we didn’t even know existed,” Godsey said. “We believe that our story here is one of inspiration and hope, and a time like this is perfectly suited to help us inspire our community around that.”

Web extras

See https://bit.ly/2wCCXpp, from Tuesday, to read about the rash of cancellations at Salem Civic Center.

Martin’s Downtown has led Roanoke in performance quantity. The restaurant and venue’s general manager, Jason Martin, has put on more than 3,500 shows in 15 years. He said he remembers no more than a handful of cancellations, typically due to weather. Even when a band cancels on show day, he is quick to reach out for another Roanoke-area band to fill the slot.

The St. Patrick’s Day block party that has become a tradition at his spot was the last live performance for the time being. About 1,000 came through the gate that day, about one-third of his usual crowd, he said.

Five shows per week has been the norm there, and Martin said he is waiting until early each week before he makes the call on whether to cancel those sets. Still, he expects to cancel them, as his restaurant adheres to the 10-person gathering limit and slings pick-up orders that now include basic groceries (excluding toilet paper).

Sales were down at least 60-percent last weekend, but it was enough to keep a skeleton crew going, Martin said. Without live music to spark a party, alcohol sales are down significantly, even as the Virginia ABC is allowing sales of to-go beer and wine.

Gov. Ralph Northam on Monday announced restaurants closed to public dining, though they can continue carryout, curbside and delivery.

“I’m basically spending every waking hour thinking about this stuff, so we’ll make the decisions when we have the information to make the decisions with,” Martin said last week.

Parkway Brewing Co., in Salem, which has also developed an extensive live music schedule, has opted to close its tap room for now, but is scheduling live-streaming shows while offering carry-out beer, assistant tap room manager Jennifer McFayden said in a message exchange. The room has scheduled rock band Mark Nicholson & The Distance to play a live-streaming show, sans audience, at 7 p.m. today, tap room manager Kim Salyers said in a Facebook post.

Schon, the Berglund Center manager, said that while everyone scrambles to manage at the moment, they remain aware of what others are going through, as well.

“The more important thing to focus on is taking care of ourselves and each other. And then I hope that people bounce back the way they did after 9/11 and say we’ve gotta reinvest in the community. We’ve gotta support the arts and culture. We’ve gotta make sure these people working in restaurants and bars have a job.”

The Roanoke Times

March 28, 2020

Production companies, workers struggle to keep jobs going

By Tad Dickens

In the music world, performers are the stars, and the venues are their showcases. We hear their songs and see the lights shining. Yet we often take for granted the people at sound and light boards who make it look and sound good, much less the laborers who built the stages.

In the Roanoke Valley — Southwest Virginia’s performance production hub — the behind-the-scenes people took an immediate and drastic hit with the cancellation of public events due to the spread of COVID-19. While musicians streamed live content in hopes of picking up some donations, sound techs, light operators, gaffers and others had little to no related work.

About 250 people are out of a job, including members of the International Alliance of Theater Stage Employees local 55, production and rental houses, and venues, said union member and self-employed production manager Will Kesler. Nationwide, the IATSE union counts 120,000 out of work, not counting non-union contractors, said Kesler, whose jobs include management at FloydFest and Sprint Pavilion, in Charlottesville.

“This also affected a large number of film workers, truck drivers, bus drivers, etc.,” Kesler said in an email exchange. “Our industry is built on large crowds and as soon as they started setting limits on crowd sizes, it ground to a halt.”

The two largest production-related businesses in Roanoke, Lee Hartman & Sons and Stage Sound, have had to lay off multiple employees.

“Over the last week we have had almost 30 cancellations of concerts, conferences and other events,” Robert Wells, rental and events coordinator at Roanoke-based Lee Hartman & Sons, wrote in a message exchange two weeks ago.

Even as he wrote, he was receiving commencement cancellations, and by Tuesday, Lee Hartman & Sons, which Wells said does the majority of the region’s high school and college graduations, had seen all of its May business canceled.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Wells wrote. “Roanoke is not that big of a place. Everyone works everywhere. If one company doesn’t have the work another does. If none of the companies have the work, there is the problem.”

The only busy segment at Stage Sound is the design and installation department, where the work includes putting sound systems into such venues as Jefferson Center, Harvester Performance Center and churches. Susan Gibson, a sound technician who works in that department, said that the company recently installed a P.A. in a church that had planned its grand opening on Sunday. Instead, the service will be streamed, she said.

Recent work in that department has been hampered by related supply chain troubles, she said.

“We don’t have anything new on the books,” said Gibson, whose last live show was March 4, when she was house sound tech at Jefferson Center, for the Squirrel Nut Zippers and Dirty Dozen Brass Band concert.

In Rocky Mount, the town-owned venue Harvester Performance Center has a full-time and contract staff that continues working daily, but a crew of at least 18 men and women who help load in and load out the shows. Since the Harvester had to postpone or cancel multiple shows, venue CEO and assistant town manager Matt Hankins looked for ways to help them.

“It’s obviously a pretty big cut for them, from what they’re used to working,” Hankins said.

The Harvester found opportunities in closing, though. Painting, floor cleaning and repairs are among the tasks that require some extra help.

“It’s hard to get some things done when you know you’re going to have a crowd, like some spots on the floor that require a concrete finisher that takes 7 days to cure,” he said. “We’re going to try to have it looking even better when we have it open up, but we certainly hate that we’re having to do it this way.”

There is some help available elsewhere. Variety magazine online reported that the federal stimulus bill passed last week included grants and loans available to gig economy workers of all sorts, including the music business’s self-employed workers, “from producers to roadies.” Earlier versions of the relief package offered little to those who work for themselves.

Meanwhile, production companies are moving to get work for their crews and create income streams for themselves. Wells said that Lee Hartman geared up streaming services, only to find out that FM transmitter rentals were in demand for the first time in more than a decade.

Kesler, the indie production manager, said that he quit counting his lost gigs after 100. Now, he’s spending his days working to persuade federal, state and local agencies that the entertainment industry is geared to help solve problems outside its usual purview. He said he has had a better reception from state and local authorities.

“My entire job is built on finding solutions to problems,” he wrote. “This experience has been infuriating, humbling and surreal.”

The Roanoke Times

April 4, 2020

Music lessons go remote with pandemic

By Tad Dickens

Music lessons are typically best face-to-face, between student and teacher. Recent video conference technology has made distance learning possible, but most any student would want to be right there, with the master, for lessons.

The emergence and worldwide spread of COVID-19 has made that scenario impossible at private studios and music stores around the country, including in Southwest Virginia. Streaming technology has improved to make the experience better than it used to be, but that hasn’t stopped a crash in the number of aspiring musicians currently spending time with instrument instructors.

Randy Walker, a folk-rock musician, music director at a Roanoke church and multi-instrumental player and teacher, is among dozens affected in the valleys. Walker said that he had six students per day, six days a week, in individual and group classes, before the novel coronavirus struck. He taught at his home studio in Old Southwest and led ensemble classes at the Brambleton Center and at his part-time employer, St. Elizabeth’s Episcopal Church.

Now he’s down to one or two private students per day, and only one band per week.

“I’ve lost about 60% of my income,” Walker said.

Fortunately, today’s remote meeting software is booming. Walker said he is using the Zoom audio and visual app to conduct classes.

“A few of my private students have been willing to switch to Zoom, and it is not as good as a face-to-face lesson, but we still get a lot done, and it’s still better than no lesson at all,” he said.

A range of Roanoke-area music teachers have experienced the same issues.

Dave McDonald teaches guitar, bass and drums at Kelley’s Music. He said he had 40 students per week before social distancing became the new normal. Now he has about seven who remain interested in the lessons.

“Some students are still like, I want to learn … The Claypool Lennon Delirium” record, he said. “I’ve got a student who’s just diving head-first into that, and I’m like, let me count [to] one first.”

Others are typical, half-interested students, he said, yet the character of the lessons is changing online:

“It’s evolving in an interesting way into what for me feels like a more fundamental music lesson than a guitar or bass lesson. We’re not face to face, so we can’t sit here and chuckle about … whatever. We’ve got stuff to do.”

Cheryl Lunsford, of Fincastle, has had a home studio, Guitar Dojo, in Fincastle for 17 years. Like the other instructors, she teaches many instruments to people in multiple age groups. In recent years, she has had a satellite studio in Roanoke, most recently at 5 Points Music Sanctuary, for aspiring students from such areas as South Roanoke, Vinton and Smith Mountain Lake.

Her recent loss of students has forced her to give up the Roanoke space for now. That doesn’t mean people weren’t still interested, she said.

“I had to actually tell people, no, you can’t come,” Lunsford said. “People love their music lessons. Part of it is the social [aspect]. I make people sound good when they sit down with me.”

Lunsford tried Skype a few years ago, thinking it was the wave of the future. She marketed such lessons to home-schoolers, and she took on one student, for free, to be her distance learning experiment. At that point, though, the length of time between when a student struck a note and when Lunsford heard it, and vice versa, was far too long.

“I could not play with them,” she said. “They needed my rhythm, and it was not happening. It never caught on, and in two months, I was back doing it the old-fashioned way, so to speak.”

That lag time has shrunk considerably in the years since. Walker, who also accompanied his students during in-person sessions, said the difference is a couple hundred milliseconds.

“It’s enough that it’s going to just sound chaotic,” Walker said.

There are advantages, though.

“The value of the screen is I can see both hands,” Lunsford said. “I’m looking directly at the student, very closely, where I probably really wouldn’t get that close if they were right in the studio, especially for a vocal student. I can look straight into their mouth, straight into the guitar, see exactly what they’re doing.

The teachers remain concerned about keeping personal touches available. McDonald, who still teaches from Kelley’s, said that it is his comfort zone, and he believes it appeals to his students.

“It’s not just Dave McDonald’s paycheck out of order here,” he said. “It’s a whole lot of people’s daily routines that are just totally uprooted and upended. As much as we can keep it the same from the Point A that they’re used to, to their Point B, wherever that may be … that means a lot.”

Evelyn Danner, who with her husband, Dennis, has studied multiple instruments with Walker, said that she appreciates the lessons and plans to continue them, along with a rehearsal band that Walker teaches.

“Randy emailed, I want to thank you and Dennis for giving me the comforting feeling of normality,” said Danner, who takes drum lessons from Walker. “And I thought, that’s the perfect description for how using Zoom and Facetime and all these apps helps us during this time.”

She can’t wait, though, to get back to studio lessons, face to face.

“We really appreciate Randy, with his lessons and helping us through these times,” Danner, a retired teacher, said. “I love the feeling of being connected with people through music. It’s wonderful.”

The Roanoke Times

April 15, 2020

Studio, music creation processes hampered in COVID-19 era

By Tad Dickens

Roanoke-based creative and studio team PUSH.audio, after a run of song placements in TV shows, commercials and movies, put down its first stake on the West Coast.

Scott Dudley, creative director for a company that last year put music on Apple Watch, GoPro and Xfinity commercials — and had tunes on Netflix’s “Insatiable” and MTV’s “The Hills: New Beginnings” — took his family in November to Woodland Hills, California, just outside of Los Angeles. Dudley looked to network and create there while compatriots including brother Kirk Dudley, George Trent, Corey English and Joshua Kimbrough kept things going in their Star City basement studio.

About the same time, though, the COVID-19 pandemic was emerging from China, and from there to the world, putting a halt to much of the music business. Other PUSH.audio team members had planned to make the move West, too, but that is on hold for now, Scott Dudley said.

“We were out here really getting some tread, some momentum,” Scott Dudley said. “Then we got plucked into our homes, but we’re still moving.”

The novel coronavirus’s continued presence has changed multiple formulations in the music and studio businesses, which often rely on group collaborations.

“I live really close to a lot of talented musicians,” he said. “But right now it’s like, dude, stay away … don’t come close to my mic.”

Musically, brands have shifted focus to heartwarming music over party content, Dudley said. That comes into play for PUSH, which focuses on getting its music into television commercials. For example, funky/breezy jam “Ba Dum Bum Bum,” the Dudley brothers’ collaboration with Atlanta-based singer/songwriter Kali J, has made a couple of different commercials, including a recent one for Ulta.

“It stopped airing,” Scott Dudley said. “For one thing, the commercial was for a mall sale, and malls are closing” for social distancing. “For another thing, it was a happy song.

“On television, all the brands and agencies are focusing on the people. What they’re asking for is like, I want stuff to really touch people’s heart. … It’s a crazy change, because before this, that was never in demand. You really don’t see that on commercials. But it just changes with the current state of things. So we just try to predict where it’s going.”

It requires a lot of musical flexibility, and it’s testing the PUSH crew’s skill sets. Dudley said he sees that as a positive.

“Most of us from Roanoke, we’re hip-hop based, and it’s wild because a lot of people have these talents that you don’t normally tap,” he said. “What we’ve been doing is, even though hip-hop can touch the heartwarming strings, we’re mixing it up as well.

“It’s just a whole new element where you might not have used this talent. But when it comes to songwriting, you’ve got to challenge yourself about bringing the world together and making the world a better place.”

Harold Thompson, who owns Blackwater Recording Inc., in Wirtz, comes at the studio work strictly from the engineering and production side. He typically records at least 15 bands a year at his Smith Mountain Lake-side studio, and does remote work for the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra and other classical ensembles.

“The phone lines are dead,” Thompson said. “The only calls I get are from telemarketers. I’ve got work lined up, but it keeps getting pushed further away.”

At Salem’s Flat 5 Studio, owner Tom Ohmsen said that recent projects that musicians are still working on require only one or two people to be around the studio at a time, so social distancing is not a problem.

 “[One] thing I’m having to do that I didn’t have to do in the past: Every day, I clean the microphone wind screens, the pop filters, the music stands, all the head phones,” Ohmsen said. “I have a little ritual. I just go through and wipe all that down, the console, whatever might get touched.”

As of last week, business had dropped to about 80% of its recent norm, but Ohmsen said it’s not clear what the future will hold.

“April might be down to 50%,” he said. “Like everybody else, we’re waiting to see what this curve is going to be like.”

Ohmsen’s part-time employee, Byron “Poe” Mack, is better known as a rapper, writer, producer, beat-maker and promoter in Roanoke and beyond. Mack, who also works part time for Wells Fargo, said he typically puts in 80 hours a week to support his family. That time has been slashed.

Like the PUSH.audio team, Mack makes a lot happen in his home studio. Recently, he was selling up to 10 beats per week. Since March, that number is down to about three per week.

“Things have slowed down considerably, because I deal with a lot of independent businesses and business owners,” he said. “People then hold on to their wallets” in tough economic times.

Medically, he is at high risk in the pandemic, he said, so the bank has put him on paid leave. With music having ground to a standstill, the workaholic has found an unusual amount of free time on his hands. That has revealed one important advantage, he said: family time.

Mack suffered serious leg and ankle injuries a couple of years back from a pre-gig fall in Marion. He had more time, then, but couldn’t fully interact with his girlfriend and their baby daughter as he recuperated.

“Now that I’m healthier than what I was, I’ve really gotten to enjoy my family,” he said. “So that’s been a cool personal part of it, and honestly, has mentally kept me away from the anguish of what’s been done to the business.”

The Roanoke Times

April 22, 2020

Booking agents, talent buyers maneuver through COVID-19 responses

By Tad Dickens

For most traveling musicians hitting a town, there is a booking agent who puts them there. For most spring and summer music festivals, there is a talent buyer putting together lineups.

When the live music business ended with the novel coronavirus’s growing encroachment, the changes affected booking agents and talent buyers, as well.

“It went to zero,” said Roanoke resident Bruce Houghton, founder of Skyline Artists Agency. “We canceled, really moved more than canceled, just under 500 dates” since mid-March.

Moving dates means there is still hope for maintaining a schedule, and keeping money coming in for bands and the professionals who book them. But so far, the virus is not following a schedule.

“That’s really the long-term concern, is that we lose, and the artists lose, the entire summer and the festival season, which is financially important for everybody, and good for marketing and good for everything,” said Houghton, whose agency books acts including Enter the Haggis, Gangstagrass, Perpetual Groove and The Skatalites.

Another one of Skyline’s acts, Tom Rush, was diagnosed with coronavirus, but he has recovered, Houghton said.

In mid-March, there were still events scheduled for spring and summer, and maybe those would still happen, music fans thought. Organizers of the Charlotte, North Carolina-area festival, the North Carolina Brewers and Music Festival, pulled the plug early on their May 7-8 event, after the Centers for Disease Control discouraged large gatherings for that month.

Roanoke-native Micah Davidson, who moved to Charlotte years ago, is the festival’s talent buyer. In North Carolina, his life evolved from playing music to booking bands, and then to talent-buying. Davidson has been putting together the lineups for the Brewers Festival, just north of Charlotte, since it began. The event’s 10th running was rescheduled for May 2021.

For Davidson, whose Midwood Entertainment books bands and markets shows, too, it was the first of many concerts that have been canceled or postponed.

Not everything is off the books yet for the four-and-a-half-year-old agency, though. Other summer events in Charlotte and in Hickory, North Carolina, along with one of the Southeast region’s crown jewels — Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion, set for Sept. 19-21 at the Tennessee and Virginia state line’s twin cities — are still scheduled and selling tickets, with hopes of going off as planned.

“Some of the things that are sooner rather than later are more of a concern, but we are still waiting and seeing,” Davidson said.

Midwood has three agents, each of whom books 10 bands, a marketing person and two administrative employees. Davidson, the talent buyer, said he is taking a cut in pay to help his employees. His agents work off commission only.

On another track, he and his Midwood team are taking action. They kicked off the No Contact Concert Series, live-streaming shows that began with Acoustic Syndicate and Alonzo Wesley. The shows, in Hickory, North Carolina, require some travel, but with no more than a five-piece band and a small, in-house crew at Codex Sound, the performances are conducive to social distancing.

With online donations, the performers, their agents and crew members (who stay at home) have a chance to earn some money, Davidson said. The series will run weekly, at least through August.

“We’re not making any money off this,” said Davidson, who was awaiting government financial relief to help stay afloat. “This is something we’re trying to give back to the industry and help the industry stay alive as much as we can … during the shutdown of everything.”

Houghton already applied at Freedom First Credit Union and received funds for his business through the Payroll Protection Program.

“We were going to be OK for a while, but this will make it a while longer.”

He and his five agents, in offices across the country, handle at least 70 acts. The company has two administrative employees, including his wife, Katy Cates, who moved with him to Roanoke a decade ago.

Mindy Farley, who lives with her husband and their two young children in Floyd, is a one-woman agency. She has been at it for three years, starting her 8-Track Booking agency as an offshoot of a gig booking performers for Sinkland Farms in Christiansburg.

By the time that job ended, performers were asking her to book them elsewhere, so she dove full time into it. Now, she said, she is “mooching off her husband” and teaching her children at home, all the while keeping ties with her stable of 19 acts and the venues where she books them.

Some venue managers she has spoken with in the interim are concerned about their future.

“One guy said, I’m broke but I’m healthy. It’s definitely going to change a lot, some for the better and maybe some for the worst,” Farley said. “I feel bad for all of them.”

Houghton shared that concern.

“We’re very lucky to have a few but some very special music venues, and I hope that people find ways to support them, whether it’s to buy takeout lunch from Martin’s [Downtown] or donate to 5 Points [Music Sanctuary] or The Spot [on Kirk] or Jefferson Center,” said Houghton, a board member at The Spot. “I just want them to be there at the end of it all.”

The biggest problem is not knowing when things will return to whatever version of normal comes next.

“If we know that we’d be back in business in June, we could find a way to do it,” Houghton said of The Spot. “It’s not knowing what the target is, how do you run at it, how do you fix the problem when you don’t know where the end is? That’s the hardest part of this, I think, not just for musicians, but for business people, for everybody.”