

The Sounds of Silence

MUSICIANS ADJUST TO LIFE WITHOUT MUSIC IN THE MIDST OF CORONAVIRUS

By Will Kennedy

The news came slow, then fast. On March 12, in hopes of mitigating the spread of the coronavirus and amid calls for social distancing in all aspects of daily life, Gov. Kate Brown banned all gatherings of more than 250 people in Oregon for four weeks. The decree left local venue calendars in disarray as cancellations and postponements rolled through.

When the news hit, I had just talked with former Eugene singer-songwriter Dan Jones about returning to his hometown for a concert at Sam Bond's. That show was canceled, like others. Live music in Eugene, it seems, has gone out.

But not all. Before the current more-restrictive ban, the show might have gone on at some venues with a capacity under 250. I talked with artists scheduled to perform in this new reality, to get a sense of what concerned them — both for themselves and their crowd — and about the prospect of life without live music. For these musicians, music isn't just a livelihood; it's their entire life.

Betty Jaeger, vocalist with Baroque Betty and High Step Society, says she's concerned beyond words.

"I've also been grieving collectively with my bands," the singer says in an email, as well as fellow performers, producers, stagehands and service industry workers.

When I spoke with Jaeger, Baroque Betty was scheduled to perform with Matriarch at Spectrum on March 24. Whether that show will happen is now uncertain. "I have lost almost every booking I had for March, April and May," Jaeger says.

Robert Jacobs, singer and guitarist with Eugene-based '50s-style rock 'n' roll band Daddy Rabbit, planned to play March 21 at Mac's at the Vets Club. As of press time, the concert has not been canceled or postponed.

The band has mixed feelings about the ban. "We only play locally, so no worries about the touring aspect," Jacobs says. The band is concerned, though, about possible cancellations as well as the wisdom of playing out at this time. "At least until we see what we're dealing with on a local and national level," Jacobs says.

The ban especially affects touring musicians. Bay Area duo The Brankas were scheduled to play at Old Nick's March 24. When I contacted the band, the show was a go, but since then it's been scuttled — along with the band's entire tour.

"It just didn't seem like the right time to be on the road," Brankas singer/guitarist Theo Slavin says in an email. "We want everyone who participates in our shows to be as safe as possible."

To lower the risk of viral transmission by traveling to a new town every day, as well as compromising their own health, the band had no choice but to cancel, he adds. The musicians take a hit, both emotionally and financially.

"Artists are going to be facing financial uncertainty for the near future," Slavin continues. "If you have the extra bucks: Tip big, buy a record, check in and make sure that they're doing OK. It's hard enough out there without a global pandemic, and our country's sorry excuse for a safety net doesn't help."

During the pandemic, Jaeger plans to stay creative in this period without performance opportunities.

"One of the only things keeping me floating on a thin balloon of hope in this situation is coming up with a plan B to utilize my time efficiently," she says. Since she can't play shows or tour, Jaeger hopes to up the ante on rehearsal, composing, costume design and choreography

"My work is such a crucial piece to my own identity that I can't afford, nor do I desire, to lay it down just because the performance opportunities are gone," she says. ■

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— THEO SLAVIN

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