**Building Back Better?   
Post-Pandemic Oppportunities for   
New Practices in the Live Music Industry**

Corinna Woolmer & Dr. Kevin Milburn

Spring 2021 saw the start of a new LSBU doctoral project, which will examine the shape the live UK music industry might and, even more pertinently should, take, as it re-opens post-pandemic. This School of Law and Social Sciences based project is led by PhD candidate, Corinna Woolmer, with support from Director of Studies, Dr Kevin Milburn, and second supervisors, Dr Phil Pinch (LSS) and Dr Sara Manulsuren (School of Business).

As COVID-19 took hold in the UK, venues were closed and large gatherings of people were banned on 21st March 2020 as part of the government’s lockdown response. This created an immediate [crisis](https://www.nme.com/features/coronavirus-music-scene-festival-season-sxsw-glastonbury-2623587) for the creative industries, a key sector within the UK economy, and particularly for those branches reliant on audiences and ‘in-person experience’, such as the live music industry. Although parts of society began to re-open in late [summer 2020](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53355001), further restrictions and national lockdowns have meant the vast majority of the UK live music sector has remained closed for more than 16 months, at [great cost](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/may/12/bouncing-back-unsettling-truth-big-reopening) to the industry and those working within it.

Since 19th July 2021 (delayed from 21st June 2021), pandemic related restrictions on socializing and most leisure related activities in the UK have been lifted. However, the [uncertainty](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/may/29/mps-urge-action-save-uk-music-festivals-another-lost-summer) about the evolution of the virus’ progress and a lack of clarity concerning time-lines for the removal of restrictions and what extra insurance provision may be available to venues and promoters mean many events scheduled for the summer of 2021 have already had to be postponed or cancelled. Indeed, it is likely that live music performances, particularly indoor ones, will be among the last public events allowed to re-open largely as before, due to both logistical complexities and audience behaviours which make physical distancing and thorough sanitation difficult to achieve in live music environments.

Professor Hendrik Streeck, from the University of Bonn, who carried out the first “COVID-19 case cluster study” ([Oltermann et al, 2020](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/09/the-cluster-effect-how-social-gatherings-were-rocket-fuel-for-coronavirus)), has asserted that “one pattern we are seeing across the globe is that whenever there was singing and dancing, the virus spread more rapidly” (Ibid). However, research undertaken by the University of Liverpool and funded by the UK Government, as part of its [Event Research Programme](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-about-the-events-research-programme-erp-paving-the-way-for-larger-audiences-to-attend-sport-theatre-and-gigs-safely-this-summer/guidance-on-the-events-research-programme) (GOV.UK, 2021) has shown, via the hosting of a series of live experimental test events, that such events – provided the participants at them have tested negative for Covid prior to attending – hold no more risk concerning the likelihood of catching Covid than would be encountered by going shopping ([Reilly, 2021](https://www.nme.com/news/music/mass-events-without-covid-restrictions-are-as-risky-as-going-shopping-data-reveals-2943896)). Whilst this is encouraging news for the industry, it is widely assumed that this period of pronounced turbulence will have lasting aftershocks which will likely affect multiple aspects of live music in Britain long after the pandemic recedes. It is an examination of these varied aspects: structural, economic, and social, that this LSS doctoral project is orientated around. In particular, the focus is on what the potential social – and especially gendered – ramifications may be for the live music industry, resulting either directly or indirectly from the pandemic, as it looks to ‘build back’ over the coming years.

Whilst much has been written about what COVID-19 has meant for the music industry financially and in terms of losing skills, suppliers and creative talent ([Sweney, 2020](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/nov/18/uk-music-industry-will-halve-in-size-due-to-covid-says-report); [Barrett, 2020](https://accessaa.co.uk/uk-live-music-industry-to-take-three-years-to-recover-from-covid-crisis/)), much less attention has been devoted to the opportunities that exist to build back better. And, in particular, to build back a more socially just and globally responsible live music industry.

Pre-pandemic, problems existed in the music industry that cannot be ignored, and which, to some extent, the pandemic and the immediate effects generated by it, has served to highlight. For example, the music industry has certainly not been immune to the highly gendered division of labour practices identified within other creative practice arenas (Conor et al, 2015; Reimer, 2016); a pronounced inequality of opportunity and progression surrounding gender, as well as ethnic diversity, exists in live music both in relation to artists on stage ([Houston, 2021](https://www.gigwise.com/features/3399148/rip-it-up---start-again--why-male-heavy-festivals-should-be-left-to-get-scrap-among-themselves)) and to those working backstage ([Malt, 2021](https://completemusicupdate.com/article/moving-the-needle-aims-to-support-women-to-rise-up-to-senior-roles-in-the-music-industry/)). Meanwhile, the anger at the toxic sexist culture long prevalent within the worldwide music industry ([Scenestr, 2021](https://scenestr.com.au/music/women-call-for-an-end-to-toxic-culture-in-the-australian-music-industry-20210518)), including the UK live performance sector, is now being voiced (and belatedly heard) like never before. Additionally, there are other pressing ethical and social issues present within live music that many feel the sector has been slow to respond to, these include: the environmental sustainability of festivals and the events industry more generally ([Powerful Thinking, 2015](http://www.powerful-thinking.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/TheShowMustGoOnReport18..3.16.pdf)); the pay and conditions of those working within the industry ([Bradshaw, 2019](https://www.rhinegold.co.uk/classical_music/classical-musics-industry-survey-reveals-serious-shortcomings-in-mental-health-provision/)), and other matters of welfare within those working in live music, including the relative neglect shown toward the high levels of mental health illness experienced by staff ([Awbi, 2017](https://www.prsformusic.com/m-magazine/features/not-alone-help-musicians-suffering-mental-health-issues/)).

History has shown that a key consequence resulting from significant jolts to society wrought by once in a generation events, such as world wars and pandemics, is that gender and other social relations can re-align in profound, often unexpected ways. Could one outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shut down the global music industries, be that it becomes a mechanism for positive business and social changes within the live music realm, addressing at least some of the aforementioned concerns and building back better in a post-covid world? Over the next three years, this LSS PhD will be seeking answers to this central research question.

**References**

# Awbi, A. (2017) You are not alone: help for musicians suffering mental health issues. *M Magazine*, 24.10.2017. <https://www.prsformusic.com/m-magazine/features/not-alone-help-musicians-suffering-mental-health-issues/>. Accessed: 23.6.2021.

# Barrett, C. (2020) UK Live Music Industry to Take Three Years to Recover from Covid. *Access All Areas*, 14.9.2020. <https://accessaa.co.uk/uk-live-music-industry-to-take-three-years-to-recover-from-covid-crisis/> Accessed: 23.6.2021.

# Bradshaw, M. (2019) Classical Music’s industry survey reveals serious shortcomings in mental health provision. *Rhinegold*, 10.10.2019. <https://www.rhinegold.co.uk/classical_music/classical-musics-industry-survey-reveals-serious-shortcomings-in-mental-health-provision/>. Accessed: 23.6.2021.

# Conor, B., Gill, R., and Taylor, S. (2015) Gender and Creative Labour. *The Sociological Review*. 63(1), 1-22.

# GOV.UK (2021) Information on the Events Research Programme. *GOV.UK*, 9.6.2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-about-the-events-research-programme-erp-paving-the-way-for-larger-audiences-to-attend-sport-theatre-and-gigs-safely-this-summer/guidance-on-the-events-research-programme>. Accessed: 23.6.2021.

# Houston, C. (2021) Rip It Up + Start Again: Why Male-heavy Music Festivals Should be Left to Scrap Among Themselves. *Gigwise*, 18.5.2021. <https://www.gigwise.com/features/3399148/rip-it-up---start-again--why-male-heavy-festivals-should-be-left-to-get-scrap-among-themselves>. Accessed: 23.6.2021.

# Malt, A. (2021) Moving The Needle aims to support women to rise up to senior roles in the music industry. *CMU – Complete Music Update*, 24.2.2021. <https://completemusicupdate.com/article/moving-the-needle-aims-to-support-women-to-rise-up-to-senior-roles-in-the-music-industry/>. Accessed: 23.6.2021.

# Oltermann, P. et al (2020) The cluster effect: how social gatherings were rocket fuel for coronavirus. *The Guardian*, 9.4.2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/09/the-cluster-effect-how-social-gatherings-were-rocket-fuel-for-coronavirus>. Accessed: 23.6.2021.

# Powerful Thinking (2015) The Show Must Go On: Environmental Impact Report and Vision for the UK Festival Industry. *Powerful Thinking*, November 2015. <http://www.powerful-thinking.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/TheShowMustGoOnReport18..3.16.pdf>. Accessed: 23.6.2021.

Reilly, N. (2021) Mass events without Covid restrictions are “as risky as going shopping”, data reveals. *NME*, 19.5.2021. <https://www.nme.com/news/music/mass-events-without-covid-restrictions-are-as-risky-as-going-shopping-data-reveals-2943896>. Accessed: 23.6.2021.

Reimer, S. (2016) ‘It’s just a very male industry: gender and work in UK design agencies’. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 23(7), 1033-1046.

# Scenestr (2021) Women Call for an End to Toxic Culture in the Australian Music Industry. *Scenestr*, 18.5.2021. <https://scenestr.com.au/music/women-call-for-an-end-to-toxic-culture-in-the-australian-music-industry-20210518>). Accessed: 23.6.2021.

# Sweney, M. (2020) UK music industry will halve in size due to Covid, says report. *The Guardian*, 18.11.2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/nov/18/uk-music-industry-will-halve-in-size-due-to-covid-says-report>. Accessed: 23.6.2021.