

The IASJ Journal of Applied Jazz Research

Volume 1
Issue 1 2022 *IASJ Journal of Applied Jazz
Research*

Article 8

2022

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Recommended Citation

Justyna, Wojtek (2022) "Five Tips for (re)entering the Professional World after the Pandemic," *The IASJ Journal of Applied Jazz Research*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iasj_journal/vol1/iss1/8

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Five Tips for (re)entering the Professional World after the Pandemic

Cover Page Footnote

Five tips for the jazz performance practice.

5 TIPS FOR (RE) ENTERING THE PROFESSIONAL MUSIC WORLD AFTER THE PANDEMIC

by Wojtek Justyna

Yes, Corona has affected us all, each of us has their own story and experience of the past three years and there is no need to get into the obvious effects it had on the livelihood of musicians. As we walk the streets today and get on with our daily lives, the pandemic seems to be a thing of the past. The need to check the news for new regulations, making sure that you have a mask, your test results and vaccination pass has evaporated which gives us all a sense of normality. Nevertheless, if we dive deeper into the reality of the musician's life after this peculiar time, the hope that things will be as they were is becoming a delusion.

I cannot speak for everyone, but here is what I have been faced with: A lot of venues in which I've regularly performed throughout the years, if still existent, have changed their profile and limited their programming if not stopped with live music in general. Festivals and larger venues are backed up with bookings from the past two years, and it is difficult to get a date in the coming season that interferes with making touring plans. Budgets have become smaller (this is especially noticeable in Eastern Europe also due to the war in Ukraine) making longer tours even more challenging. Audiences have gotten more used to online entertainment, and it is more difficult to get even the committed fans to the shows. The market seems even more crowded due to the fact that many musicians, like myself, have recorded albums, made new music and are all bringing it out and picking up their touring schedules all at the same time. This is also true for the Internet environment, since many creators have used the necessity to utilize online platforms to expand their careers into the digital realm.

Building and sustaining a career, as a performing artist, has always been a path filled with challenges and roadblocks of many sorts, and the current climate has definitely made the hill we have to climb steeper. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that understanding the oppositions at hand, adequately preparing for them, combined with careful planning and structured execution will lead to the ability to comfortably navigate this new realm. Just as we did in the good ol' days.

Here are 5 points, which in my mind, we all need to take into consideration and work on developing to keep growing our careers and even more importantly developing as artists and creators in the post pandemic world.

1. SOCIAL MEDIA

Pandemic or no pandemic, this is the most important one, and it seems the most challenging topic for most of the musicians I speak to. Yes, it takes a lot of time and can be daunting, but it's the number one way to progress your career these days. I understand the defiance of overcoming your insecurity and the notion of promoting yourself and pushing your music down everyone else's throat. This is not how I see it, though. Social media is a creative outlet for so many and to me is more about creativity, self-expression and building a relationship with your audience than shameless self-promotion. It's one of today's leading artistic mediums just as making singles in the 50s was, just like recording an album or

staging a live performance – it's a way to express your musical individuality. It's a gateway drug to your music and the artist behind it. This is the way I want you to look at it.

What do you want to put out into the World? Let the answer be your guiding light. If you are an improviser, post clips of your practice sessions, get a little camera recorder (or just use your phone) and share the hottest moments of your gigs. If you are a singer, post intimate performances of your tunes right from the comfort of your living room. Are you an educator? Post short, comprehensive lessons with your ideas, exercises, and practice routines. We all think our lives are nothing special, but others wonder about what a life of a jazz musician looks like. Take the time to post backstage footage, conversations with your bandmates or share your experiences and feelings right into Instagram stories or as TikToks and see what happens. Who would be interested in that?! Think about this: would you like to see footage of Charlie Parker practicing? How about a reel of Nina Simone preparing for a performance backstage? Have you seen the video of Jacob Collier explaining the resolutions of the diminished chord? I found it very informative and used some of his ideas in one of my tunes. Realize that you can do the same for others. Building a community online around your music and notions surrounding it will be beneficial in so many ways, you'll gain followers, listeners, concert goers and friends around the world who's common interest is music. Many artists have used the pandemic to build their online presence, and I'm sure they are reaping the benefit now that the World is beginning to open up.

2. TAKE STOCK OF THE SITUATION

The pandemic has taken its toll on everyone. The musicians weren't the only ones left without work and perspective. I'm convinced that many people and businesses had it worst. We all have our networks and to really understand the impact of the World closing down. To adjust to the new reality, I strongly suggest to reach out to the people you've worked with in the past. Club owners, bookers, festival promoters, other musicians, school directors and anyone else who you have professional ties to and see how they are doing. Try to understand their situation and perspective. For a lot of them, the way they run their activities has changed, and they might be facing new challenges. Find out how the concerts are going, how long are they backed up with shows from the pandemic, what plans they have for the coming year(s) and how your music and audience can benefit their business. Ask them what advice they have for you, knowing the situation from a different perspective. They will be able to tell you how you can plan and adjust to thrive in the current environment. Ask them what they need from the part of the artists and see how you can be helpful to them to make the situation work best for both parties. Having this type of insight and approach will help you prepare and adapt to the new needs of the market, and if done well can yield more gains because you will be acting based on new knowledge and expertise. This will put you ahead of others stuck doing things as they used to and hoping for the best.

3. FOCUS ON WHAT REALLY MATTERS

If there is one thing the COVID-19 years have done for me is taking me out of the routines I've built up for almost 25 years of being a professional musician. All of a sudden, there was time which no longer was taken up by sending emails, calls trying to reach bookers all over the World in different time zones. No more grant applications, arranging hotels, bus rentals, countless reminder emails and all the other tasks linked to promotion, marketing, finances of

running a touring band. All at once, I snapped out of my regular life and could reevaluate my actions and see what I'm really spending my time on. Suddenly I had more time to be with my instrument, to practice, explore new ideas, transcribe solos and write music without deadlines, recording dates or any type of other pressure. This made me realize what I was missing pre-Corona – actually being a musician and doing the things that interest me and got me into doing “the music thing” in the first place. I saw I spent a lot of time chasing bookers and gigs that weren't necessarily giving back (be it financially or otherwise) the effort that I was putting in. Spending hours (sometimes up to four a day) on handling nonmusical tasks that yes lead to tours and concerts engagements. But they were also taking precious time away from doing the things I really love – playing music, spending time with my family or just taking some time to relax and reflect. These realizations lead me to restructure my life and put new routines into place and prioritizing keeping them now when things are starting to pick up the pace.

It all started with the question: what am I spending my time on and is it bringing the desired effects? As much as I believe in playing every gig and chasing every opportunity that might bring my career a step further at this point in my life, I'm thinking of being more selective. Here is where the Pareto Principle comes in. This is a principle of economics (also observed in nature) that states that 80% of outcome comes from 20% causes. In the music world this could mean that 80% of the “good gigs” (such as festival gigs or concerts in nice venues that treat you well, offer a good audience and pay reasonably) actually come from 20% of your booking efforts. This rule works to the opposite as well – perhaps you find yourself spending 80% of your time chasing something that only gives you 20% of your desired outcome. Take a moment to analyze your actions and see which are the ones that bring you the effect you want, and double down on those. Perhaps it is not worth filling your time with chasing every gig that you can find and end up barely being able to cover your gas and parking costs. Instead, boil down your time and focus your efforts on the gigs (or other professional endeavors) that you really enjoy doing and/or bring the financial gains that satisfy you. Nothing will happen if you don't play one more \$30 gig! We just went through 2 years of no concerts and “nothing” really happened... Perhaps it's wiser to dedicate the gained time to more meaningful aspects of our lives. Be it music or other things that we tend to miss out on running after something that might not be benefitting us all too well in the end.

4. NEW OPPORTUNITIES

We often get fixated on our own ideas about our careers, musical paths, and the way we think things should be done. We get used to our routines, business associates, the gigs we play and people that we work with. Although it's completely understandable that once we create a comfort zone and begin to prosper within it, it's hard to look beyond it until we have no choice. As much as I long for things to be the way they were, I also realize this will never be the case. Instead of dwelling and worrying about it, I encourage myself and everyone else to diversify and look for new opportunities. As daunting as this may seem, it also opens up our little worlds to something new and exciting. A new birth, so to speak, a chance to start with fresh energy and excitement that we tend to lose after staying in a comfort zone for too long.

It's difficult for me to give you specific advice here because this is very personal. Sit down and think about the things you always wanted to do, think about things that spark your

interest, things that you've heard about but never had time to explore. Maybe you always felt an urge to further your education, plan a trip to India and explore the rich offerings of the music created there. Perhaps there is something outside of music that you always wanted to explore, but other obligations have kept you too busy. Perhaps you've made some realizations about your career and life these past years and there are things you'd like to change or improve. This is the time to peruse all this and start to work these different interests and patterns into your life. The Corona years have pushed me to evaluate my current livelihood and implement many changes that I already feel the benefit of. Taking care of my physical and mental health as well as daily musical practice have become my utmost priority. Using the 80/20 rule mentioned above, I managed to rearrange my teaching jobs so that I work less while maintaining a similar income, which in turn allowed me to have more time for myself and other aspects of my professional life. Writing this article is a great example of new opportunities that have come up. I've managed to develop lectures on creativity and music business. I found time to seek speaking engagements at different educational facilities. Furthermore, I am constantly looking for new work possibilities, finding the time to develop my ideas for social media which is something, although I am a great advocate of, I too struggle with. Above all, I am finding time to relax and be with friends and family. Although this too is difficult, as I love my work and it always encompasses me, I am striving to have a better balance in life. This has greatly influenced the way I experience my day-to-day, maintaining good energy and drive throughout all my obligations. Go for it! There are so many options. Start a podcast, write a blog, publish articles around your passion and interest, make an online video course about your ideas on improvisation, composing. Reach out to schools and offer your lectures, book 3 months off to go and study with someone you admire. If you are like me, you have a to-do list with things you have never gotten to, mine currently has 50 points dating back as far as 2017. This is the time to start ticking them off.

5. CONSTANT CREATION

This is what the pandemic has made me realize: I love music, and the thing that brings me the most joy apart from spending time with my instrument is the process of creation. Just sitting down and letting the ideas flow without a record date in mind, without a deadline, without hurry or pressure. These years have brought me closer to this process and the delight that it brings to me. I've managed to make the process of creating music a part of my everyday life, and I protect that with all my might. With the World around us moving so fast, combined with the current state of the Internet, has raised the bar and the amount of opportunities for all creators. This pace, if approached correctly, can push us to reach new heights of our creativity and realize our potential and even exceed it if we just stick to the process. This also coincides with the business side of music. We constantly need to be present, interacting with our fans, staying current with the educational and cultural developments; new trends and tendencies can lead to new inspiration and the flourishing of our work. Yes, some might say that it's all too much and too fast, that back in the day it was so-and-so, and now it's not the same, but I'm not on that boat. I am convinced that we have the most resources and opportunities to grow as musicians and people in the current day and age. It's all about where we put our focus and how much we allow distractions to seep into our lives. For me the COVID-19 years have been a time of reflection, finding balance and falling in love again with my muse and finding time to be with her everyday. The point is to find your own flow and let the current of the status quo take you where it wants you to go. As long as you are consistent with your work, you are on the right track. Everyone has their

own thing and I hope these years have brought you closer to your passion for music, to your families and made you realize what is really important in YOUR life. I personally like the fast pace and being productive as long as I manage to keep a cool head about it. Nevertheless, always remember: you don't have to do more; you don't have to go fast. The point is to invest your time into the things that give your (professional) life meaning and go at your own speed and keep sharing your life's work with the world, it needs it as much as you do.

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