

Examining the Irish Live Entertainment Industry Network During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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In the summer of 2021, I began writing articles for the entertainment section of the *Irish Daily Star* (known as 'The Scene'). These articles consisted of me interviewing people in the Irish music industry and then moulding the information from those interviews into a concise and engaging narrative and writing it up as a 500-word report.

During the interviews that I conducted for the *Irish Daily Star*, with an array of Irish musicians such as rapper Nealo, swing singer and Sunshine 106.8 presenter Tom Cole Jnr, and country star George Murphy, as well as the CEO of Windmill Lane Studios and co-founder and CEO of Pulse College Naomi Moore (who had opened Windmill Lane up for public tours a month prior to the first lockdown in March 2020), all of them talked quite earnestly of how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected them on both a personal and monetary level; with all stating that it had affected their means of earning a living which, in turn, affected their mental health.

But it was a quote from my very first interview that left a big impact on me. The interview was with the rapper JyellowL and took place on August 20th, 2021. At that time, the Government had no announced plan for the then-dormant live entertainment sector's revival; instead putting their focus on the hospitality sector and leaving many imminent live events in a purgatorial state of being.

Back then, JyellowL had an upcoming tour of Ireland scheduled for that November and I asked him if he felt confident that it would go ahead? He responded, ‘Yeah, I think we’re seeing shows coming back with, albeit very restricted, limited capacities and all that. We’re seeing things open up a little bit more. I feel like the live music industry has been really...the entertainment industry has been failed this whole period, you know? Compared to some other industries...the music industry, especially...because if you look at sporting events that are happening, but then you can’t even have a gig with 500 people? It’s ridiculous.’

Due to the word count and array of topics discussed during that interview, only a very truncated segment of that exchange made it into the final *Daily Star* article, but it always stuck with me: the frank and impassioned indignance of the situation being expressed. Even as a relative outsider, just reporting on the music scene with no real skin in the game, I completely sympathised with the dissatisfaction of the situation that people in the industry must have felt; which made me want to expand upon it and conduct a report (which you are reading now) exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic and the Government’s response has truly affected people in the live entertainment industry.

A lot of these woes expressed are not exclusive to Ireland. I spoke with Charles Cave, the bassist for the British indie band White Lies. He felt that the situation in the UK, in contrast to the ‘stop-and-go’ situation experienced in Ireland, ‘...[D]idn’t really start, I felt, once it stopped. Not really...I think there were a few weeks, here and there, where we could go to the cinema and stuff like that, but, I mean, no, I don’t think...I’m almost certain that I didn’t go to a gig for more-or-less two years or whatever.’

He adds, '[The British lockdowns] just started to just disrupt things, and I think, perhaps because we naively thought, "this won't be much more than a year" or I think, at first, we thought, "this won't be much more than nine months" or something, and because it extended *so much*, it was getting to the point where I was like, "I really need to work. I really need to just earn my living and I can't do that without, you know, playing shows or releasing music." It did then get a bit tedious.'

An additional issue for Cave that was not presented by any of the Irish people that I had interviewed was Brexit. Speaking on the topic of White Lies' upcoming European tour, he said, 'We hope everything will just go off without a hitch, but with COVID and with Brexit, it's kind of like...there will be obstacles on a seven-week tour of Europe. I'm hoping nothing too major...Our crew and stuff have had to do a lot of prep of new paperwork and stuff like that.'

Live Free Tourbooking is an events management and concert promotion company that was founded in 2020 and which is co-directed by Jonny McKee of Shizznigh Promotions and Steven Donnelly of Rackus Rattus Promo Co.

I spoke with Donnelly, who was calling from the Voodoo Lounge in Belfast, ahead of the soundcheck for the Glaswegian band Mason Hill who were headlining that night; a concert, he tells me, that has been in the pipeline for two years now, which seems to take him back when he hears himself say it.

As a promoter that books concerts for both Northern Ireland and the Republic, Live Free seemed to have formed at an unenviable time: after the finalisation of Brexit and before the lockdowns.¹ But, unlike Cave, Brexit seems to not be much of an issue for Donnelly. ‘You need the rights to work...So, any European or international bands coming here have to get a CoS, which is a Certificate of Sponsorship, that allows them to be here,’ he tells me. ‘It’s not that expensive, but again, it’s an additional expense that needs to be incurred if you want to be able to make money in other countries.’

He adds, ‘There’s a dynamic, especially when it comes to the international bands, where some costs do not affect the promoter, which should be reflected in the guarantees of these bands picking up. We don’t pay for visas, we don’t pay for travel. In some cases, we do. In some cases, we pay for visas too. It’s all coordinated in the deal that’s struck between the promoter and the agent, and, in turn, that falls into the budget that allows the bands to tour.’ From his perspective, the biggest issue from Brexit is the carnet that is required for the importation of goods when bringing shows to the Republic.

‘The impact for my sake,’ he adds, ‘is availability, rescheduling and attaining particular guarantees and footfall which enable profits to be made. That would be the three main things that would affect us.’

¹ The United Kingdom left the European Union on 31 January 2020. COVID-19 was considered a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, triggering international lockdowns. Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street and The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, ‘PM address to the nation: 31 January 2020,’ gov.uk, 31 January 2020 <<https://www.gov.uk/Government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-31-january-2020>> [accessed 30 March 2020]; World Health Organisation, ‘WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020,’ 11 March 2020 <<https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>> [accessed 30 March 2020].

When asked about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected his fledgling new promotional company which is trying to establish a unique identity and instil faith in their brand, Donnelly calls the experience ‘soul-destroying,’ but explains how they intend to build their reputation: ‘The key to this here is communication. If you don’t communicate to your ticket buyers that such-and-such is happening, that’s going to piss people off. One: what builds a solid reputation is communication. Two: how you brand yourself and good advertising assets, clear advertising assets. Three: the calibre of acts. You have to, at some point if you’re looking to attain success in this business, is to go away from the local and reach the international and make the show happen. Make your reputation not only to the community of ticket buyers in Ireland, but to the people who are running these gigs. Because if you’re reliable, you’re trustworthy, you pay your guarantees on time, you pay your deposits, you treat the band with respect: they’re going to send acts your way. That band is going to work with you again.’

I spoke with Fergal Holmes, the promoter and founder of Dublin Metal Events (DME). Unlike Live Free, DME have been around since 1999 and have a solid foundation of both loyal and established fans and a history with various artists. Compared to major Irish promoters, like MCD Productions or Aiken Promotions, which seem to tailor to no specific form of live entertainment, DME specialise in bringing touring metal acts to Ireland, from small clubs throughout the country to bigger venues, like the National Stadium, Vicar Street and 3Olympia Theatre in Dublin.

When asked how many of DME’s events have been postponed or cancelled since the pandemic, Holmes says, ‘Christ. I couldn’t tell ya. A lot...I don’t know, probably 30 or 40? It’s difficult to quantify; I’ve lost track a long time ago. A lot.’

Despite this, he seems very accepting of the situation: ‘It was a pandemic, you know? What are you going to do?’ he says. ‘It’s easy to complain and it’s easy to give out, and, sure, I had my days during it where I’m sure I was ranting and raving, but, at the end of the day, it was the same everywhere – well, not everywhere, but most countries with sense, at least. I mean, what were they [the Government] supposed to do, you know? Unfortunately...it’s not their fault that I chose to work in an industry that’s one of - if not *the* worst one - to try and work in if a global pandemic happens to hit. I don’t really have all that many complaints, to be honest with you. I mean, I don’t know what they were supposed to do.’

Holmes also adds, ‘One thing as well is the Government were pretty damn good with supports. Financial supports for businesses and obviously pubs and all that stuff. I know people in other countries, and there wasn’t a fraction of the support.’

On December 8th, 2021, the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Catherine Martin TD announced a €50 million support package for the Live Performance Sector, with €20 million being given to cover events that may have needed to have been cancelled in December 2021 and January 2022 and €14 million to support events between February to June 2022.² But there are issues with the implementation of these supports.

² Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, ‘Minister Martin announces supports package of €50m for the Live Performance Sector,’ gov.ie, 9 December 2021 <<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/6df6e-minister-martin-announces-supports-package-of-50m-for-the-live-performance-sector/#>> [accessed 30 March 2022]

Dave Allen, the booker and promoter for the music venues Whelan's and the Opium Rooms on Dublin's Wexford Street, told me, 'We're still working around funding from last December [2021] and January [2022] and talking to the Government, and it's supposed to be funding that helps venues, but it helps the venues very little. We've had huge losses in turnover in December and January. Colossal losses compared to a normal December or January. Huge, huge losses. The mechanism the Government has... there's a certain amount of support, but there's no way you can ever recover those losses.'

He continues, 'A lot of it was geared towards trying to create employment, as opposed to trying to compensate for gigs that had to be cancelled, you know? We had so many...we had 60 or 70 shows, between December and January at least, that we had to cancel in Whelan's alone, and it was just very tough to try and get any funding for it. That has been a difficulty. But, at the same time, we're just happy to be back and operating as normal.'

John O'Neill, the CEO of Ireland's largest independent ticket outlet Tickets.ie, told me, 'The initial supports that went into place were incorrectly constructed. In our particular case, they excluded ticket agents. They came in at a level too low; they came in at a promoter level, which meant that we were completely excluded, and then, on top of that, we had a double whammy then, when the supports went in place: there was no incentive for anybody to sell tickets, because of the way the support structure worked. So, not only were we losing out on support, we were then losing out on the ticket sales for the events that we used from the support. So, we had this kind of crazy situation where we were actually adversely impacted financially by the supports that went in place. But, in fairness to the Department of Arts, we

have since engaged with them and they have recognised that issue and have started to address that issue.’

O’Neill explains the importance of ticketing in the industry, which has often been overlooked during this time, ‘Ticketing is kind of at the top of the chain...An artist is going to perform at a venue, that venue is booked by a promoter, that promoter comes to the ticket agent, the ticket agent sells the ticket directly to the fans...so we’re the glue between the industry and the fans themselves. So, we’re right at the top of the chain. So, once we can’t sell a ticket, it affects everyone down the chain, itself.’

O’Neill distils the turbulence of the ticket agencies during this time: ‘[On] Friday, the 13th of March 2020, we sold 25 tickets. That was the day after the lockdown was announced. That Friday, in 2019, we would have sold over 6,500 tickets. So, it just shows you how rapidly and how quickly the tap was turned off, in terms of ticket sales, and that would have a knock-on consequence then into revenue, and that revenue of course would have trickled down to promoters, artists and venues, as well.’

O’Neill and Allen seem to share a sentiment: ‘The intention was very good, but I just don’t think they [the Government] understand the way the music industry works, and it was a blunt instrument, really: the funding,’ says Allen. O’Neill: ‘In fairness to them [the Government], it was a big scramble for them, and they hit a number of different bumps along the way.’

Speaking to anyone that I know within the Department of Arts, they didn’t have a really good understanding of the live events industry. They would have of the arts industry and theatre

and dance and that kind of stuff, but not on the more commercial side of things, so when COVID hit, it was a steep learning curve for everybody.’

In relation to this misunderstanding of the industry, in a September 2021 reopening report, the Government announced that they would allow certain indoor venues to operate at 60% capacity with proper protective measures for indoor events and 75% capacity with proper protective measures for outdoor events.³

Holmes explains why this was not viable, ‘There was the option at one point to do reduced capacity and stuff, but, you know, that just doesn’t make sense, especially for touring acts, because they can’t tour when all their touring costs are the same, but the income is way less because they’re doing reduced capacity shows. That doesn’t, obviously, add up. So, that was only really useful for maybe local acts who wanted to get out and do something.’ Allen adds, ‘There’s no point in putting on gigs just for the sake of putting on gigs, you know? It’s best to keep the shows viable and only book bands if it’s going to make sense financially and for atmosphere, you know? There’s no point in having 50 people in a room that holds 400. It does no one any favours, you know?’

There were a number of consistent factors among the people that I interviewed. One was that the constant rescheduling seemed to affect their memory of what events they have going on.

³ Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, *COVID 19 GUIDELINES FOR EVENT ORGANISERS AND VENUE MANAGEMENT FOR A RETURN TO PUBLIC EVENTS*, September 2021, p.9.

The other was that while all of them had optimism that things were getting better, there was still trepidation.

Donnelly says, ‘Consider the...individual and their willingness to come to a show in light of the threat of COVID-19. So, you’ve got the policy documents saying, “Yeah, we’re all good to go, guys. You’ve got your triple vaccination...blah, blah, blah,” but then you’ve also got to think about, well, if your demographic who you cater to with your events is made up of individual people of individual psychologies, go to the scale of the individual, and whether they are actually in the position themselves. So, not just policy restrictions, but also individual restrictions that influence people’s tendency to purchase [tickets] and attend events and feel safe.’

This is a warranted concern. In the summer of 2021, a survey by the events management website Eventbrite, which surveyed 8,000 event attendees across Great Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and the US, claimed that 71% of people surveyed in Ireland said they were excited to attend in-person events, while 55% said they feel anxious or nervous, and only 47% said they would spend money on in-person events.⁴ A survey from around the same time by the Dublin radio station Radio Nova found that only 35% of nearly 2,000 surveyed listeners claimed that they would be comfortable returning to live concerts.⁵

⁴ Eventbrite, ‘The Ultimate Reopening Report: How Attendees Really Feel,’ 13 July 2021 <<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/blog/asset/ultimate-reopening-report-attendees-really-feel/>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

⁵ Elaine Leonard, ‘Over 35% Of People Are Ready To Return To Gigs According To Radio Nova Survey,’ Radio Nova, 23 July 2021 <<https://www.nova.ie/over-35-of-people-are-ready-to-return-to-gigs-according-to-radio-nova-survey-208581/>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

As an actual example, Holmes tells me that the first concert that he promoted post-lockdown was for the band Alestorm at the National Stadium at the beginning of December 2021, which suffered badly as it coincided with the new omicron variant. So, while people had the freedom to choose to go to the concert, most decided not to risk it.

Additionally, as Holmes puts it, 'There's still a lot of concerns because the biggest problem is bands when they're on the road, if anybody catches it [COVID-19].' 'The artists can't get insurance against COVID,' says O'Neill. 'So, if any member of the band gets sick, that's it. That, in theory, could wipe out seven or eight dates for the artist. So, you're in a situation now where a tour would be in jeopardy, but if you wipe out seven or eight dates on a tour that's twenty or thirty dates long, that's all the profit gone, and it throws the tour immediately into a loss-making exercise that can't be recouped.'

Unfortunately, for the situation that Holmes and O'Neill propose, there does not seem to be much recourse. Looking up what you could potentially do in that situation, the closest to offering any kind of solution comes from the Irish Music Rights Organisation (IMRO), who state on their website, in response to the hypothetical question, 'I have spent money on a tour/gig that cannot now go ahead – what can I do?': 'This will depend on your situation. If you have insurance to cover cancelled performances, you may be able to make a claim. You should check with your insurer immediately. You should review your performance contracts as you may be entitled to recoup any amounts paid. If the payments were made for services that were not carried out/goods not delivered, you should seek the return of these payments (this may be dependent on your contract). Your bank may be able to assist you in having payments returned. International Touring updates and Advice from European Music

Exporters Exchange is available at <https://www.europeanmusic.eu/>.⁶ Despite attempting to offer reassurance, a sense of uncertainty can be read from that solution.

On a much smaller scale, I was working as a stage manager on an amateur theatre production of Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* with the Tallaght Theatre Group around this time and two of the actors came down with COVID-19: one on the day before the debut and another after the first two performances. This affected the small production, as a replacement actor was called in at the last moment and another actor was forced to play an additional role, affecting the modest budget of the play. Even with these small-scale affairs with fewer stakes and required resources, COVID-19 still has impact.

So, what will happen going forward? Much as the live music industry is made up of a network of ticket agents, promoters, venues, musicians and among many, many others which affect each other, Ireland is one piece of an international network. O'Neill says, 'A lot of the international tours can't go ahead for a number of different reasons...All of the countries, first of all, are out of sync in relation to COVID and the restrictions that are imposed on people.' Holmes, 'There was countries throughout Europe with even worse restrictions or that went on a bit longer, even a country like Germany. If bands can't do their German shows, you can forget a tour happening, especially in metal, because Germany can be half of a European tour, you know?' Donnelly even found putting shows on with the difference in the Irish restrictions in the Republic and the British restrictions in the North difficult to traverse.

⁶ Irish Music Rights Organisation, 'Advice & Resources for Music Creators During Coronavirus Outbreak' <<https://imro.ie/music-creators/advice-resources-for-music-creators-during-coronavirus-outbreak/>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

O'Neill shares what he thinks the short-term live music industry in Ireland will look like, 'I think what's going to happen - there's a big shift happening anyway - I think there's going to be an emergence of a more local music scene...Local, regional, and perhaps UK artists, those shows are probably OK and will go ahead OK, but I think anywhere where there's a world tour or a European leg of an international tour, they would be a lot more in jeopardy, those events. So, I think the focus in the short term and probably for the next 12 months to 18 months – and it will be the same in all countries – is focusing more on local events and regional events, because they're the ones that can be cancelled at the last minute and they're also the ones that don't have a heavy financial burden, you know? You're not talking about putting a whole load of 40-foot containers onto a boat and onto the back of the truck to bring the stage and the like around. I think shorter hop artists will work OK, so UK artists coming over to play in Ireland and Irish artists going over to play in the UK. Those kind of shorter hop tour dates will work as well, but I think the bigger, international, global tours won't.'

Allen seems to share these views, 'There's always a worry with the international stuff, that it will, you know...something will happen somewhere that will cause a local lockdown which will cause a tour to be cancelled. There's always that worry. And it was definitely something with acts that were coming, that we're booking, "At least it's local." That was definitely a plus, for a while.' Donnelly doesn't seem to see it that way. While he concedes that it's easier for domestic acts to cancel shows, he states that there are still logistical and financial issues with cancelling shows, even for domestic acts.

To conclude, there seems both consensus and disagreement with those working within the live entertainment industry on the Government's response to the industry during the COVID-

19 lockdowns. There do seem to be other factors that come part and parcel with the entropy of working in this industry. While concerts are still going ahead in the meantime, concerts are still getting cancelled due to COVID-19, as well as other issues. Donnelly tells me, for example, that one of the concerts that he had to cancel recently was for the Russian band Motorama, due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The arbitrary events of the world can affect the live music industry, and everybody working within it that I spoke with seem to understand and accept that.

I should note two things. One is that this article had a very Dublin and Belfast-centric bent. I had reached out to venues and managers in other parts of the country, which are more sporadically toured by international acts, and which primarily see concerts from domestic acts, to see how this time has affected them, compared to cities like Dublin and Belfast, but only one manager from a Cork venue replied to my request and then ceased responding upon receiving my questions in a message response.

The other thing is that this article has focused on only four facets of the Irish live entertainment network: managers, musicians, ticket agencies and venues. There are a lot more people who were affected during the COVID-19 pandemic within this industry, such as stage crew, lighting and sound engineers, merchandise companies, bouncers, bar staff, transport companies for artists and equipment, stage and backline hiring companies and so on. The only way to even come close to fairly giving everybody affected within the live entertainment sector a fair say would be to write a book with a dedicated chapter to each occupation.

Recently, the Government announced a pilot scheme to give 2,000 artists and creative art workers a basic income of €325 per week.⁷ The success of this scheme is to be determined, but it will be interesting to see what criteria the eligible 2,000 meet for selection and the overall plus and minuses of the scheme. Regardless of the effectiveness, the scheme is a positive step forward.

⁷ Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, 'Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme launched by Government,' gov.ie, 5 April 2022< <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/27aed-irelands-basic-income-for-the-arts-pilot-scheme-launched-by-government/>> [accessed 5 April 2022].