

You can still hear the headliner while wearing a mask

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OPINION

IT used to be that the best way to support your favourite bands was to actually pay for their music. Now, it might be to also wear a mask at their shows.

Over the past few months, artists have been cancelling tour dates all over the place because of positive COVID-19 cases, either among the artists themselves or the crew. Adele posted a tearful Instagram story in January postponing her Los Vegas residency. “Half my crew, half my team are down with COVID. They still are. And it’s been impossible to finish the show,” she said. Around the same time, Lauryn Hill announced the Fugees’ reunion tour was off owing to the unpredictable landscape of late-pandemic touring. Those are just two examples.

Can we really say live music is “back” if the industry is being forced into functional lockdowns?

Dates have been scheduled, only to be rescheduled — as was the case for Winnipeg indie-pop outfit Royal Canoe, which ended up having to reschedule two sold-out shows that were supposed to happen last weekend for May.

Weary and wary musicians who are still hitting the road have been taking to social media to plead with concertgoers to wear masks, despite the fact that most government restrictions have been lifted and many venues no longer require them. “Phoenix, please wear a mask tonight so we can stay on tour,” tweeted singer-songwriter Phoebe Bridgers before a gig in the Arizona city.

“Everyone is having to cancel dates because everyone is f—ing getting COVID,” tweeted Seattle rock band Dude York. “If artists ask you to do something to reduce their chances of losing \$10-20k in income, maybe you should?”

Amen to that. Touring is how most artists earn an income, especially in a cents-per-stream economy. For small to mid-sized touring acts especially, having a string of dates torpedoed by a positive case has the potential to be financially catastrophic, between the isolation expenses and lost income.

It’s also hard for the venues that host these concerts; how many beloved clubs and theatres will have to shut their doors forever if they can’t weather the instability and unsustainability for much longer?

I wrote last year that live music’s return largely hinged on the arrival of vaccines, but keeping those stage lights on will rely on all the other public health measures we’ve all but abandoned — including masking and proof of vaccination.

Some venues — such as Winnipeg’s West End Cultural Centre — have kept their own mandates in place; many others have not. Likewise, artists can insist on their own mandates, but that becomes an added logistical nightmare on top of the already-logistical nightmare that is late-pandemic touring.

Unfortunately, cancelled and postponed dates — and entirely scrapped tours — will be the new normal if this is how we continue to approach public health. Live music’s “return” has been tenuous at best. If concerts were so high on the leaderboard of things people missed, how come we’re not doing everything we possibly can to ensure these shows go on?

How can we say we need the singular kind of connection and community live music offers, but then do little to protect that experience?

It’s worth remembering that concerts are many people’s (albeit unconventional) workplaces. They have the right to be safe. Yes, masks are no longer mandated in many places, but that doesn’t make them useless or less of a courtesy.

Everyone understands that people are tired and it’s been a long two years. To that end, I wonder how many people are also attending concerts while symptomatic because they don’t want to eat the cost of the ticket, or it’s a show they really, really wanted to see after so long.

Everyone wants to let loose and have a concert experience that’s as “normal” as possible. But it can’t feel good, to a musician, to look out at a sea of people who adore you enough to buy a ticket, but not enough to wear a mask at your show. Save a tour. Wear a mask.