

Live Music Is Back, but the Musicians Are Out of Practice

The new rush of gigs has performers nursing sore vocal cords and sometimes forgetting the tip jar

Matty Metcalfe recently had seven gigs in seven days, playing four instruments in five different lineups. RICH TARBELL

By [Joe Barrett](#)

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After a long, quiet stretch, Matty Metcalfe suddenly found himself planning the most frenetic week of his 20-year career as a professional musician.



Back in business

It was a welcome change for the 46-year-old in Charlottesville, Va., who had so much time on his hands during pandemic restrictions that he decided to record and produce an album of French accordion music. His busy week included seven gigs in seven days, playing four instruments in five different lineups and in multiple genres—plus a five-hour round trip to rehearse with his '80s tribute band called the Legwarmers.

One problem came up the second night of the run: All three of the sidemen in his New Orleans-inspired band Crewe d'Bayou were too busy with their own projects to make the three-hour show. So he had to make six calls to find three other guys to fill in, and then squeeze in extra rehearsal time to get them all ready.

"It has the feeling of something being a little bit out of control," Mr. Metcalfe said of the rush of gigs.



Live music is [making a comeback](#). That's good news for everyday working musicians after a year of mask mandates and crowd limits—but the shift to feast from famine has turned into a mad scramble. [Behind the scenes](#), they are feverishly practicing, brushing up on lyrics and searching for equipment that's been hiding in the back of a closet.

"You have to have your remedies ready to go—hot throat coat tea, lemon, honey, ibuprofen," said Nate Sacks, a singer-songwriter in Norfolk, Va., who has been waking up with a froggy voice and sore, swollen vocal cords from singing and playing out almost every night, either solo, with a band or accompanying two different female singers.



"It's hard to keep up with the demand," said Nate Sacks.

PHOTO: KRISTINA ROULO

Before the pandemic, he would normally play three or four nights a week. This summer, he has had stretches with seven shows a week, including two on some days. His phone has started beeping regularly with offers of new jobs.

"Sometimes it's too much. It's hard to keep up with the demand," he said.

Dan Navarro, a Los Angeles singer-songwriter who was part of the duo Lowen & Navarro, which toured heavily in the 1990s, was doing two-hour live streams six days a week to keep himself in shape and find new followers for much of the past year.

Now, he's racing across the country for five or six weeks at a time in a nearly new camper playing shows for fans old and new. This week, he's back in Los Angeles doing 12-hour, in-person studio sessions with up to eight other people for a new album—something that couldn't be done before vaccinations—and planning his next cross-country road trip.

"It hurts so good," he said of the busy pace of recent months. "I got to see the country open back up."



Dan Navarro is racing across the country for five or six weeks at a time.

PHOTO: CAROL HIGHSMITH

He said the reopening has given him another present: The '80s Pat Benatar hit "We Belong," which Mr. Navarro co-wrote with his late partner, David Lowen, is having its best extended run of royalties since it first came out. Singers including Miley Cyrus, Brandi Carlile and "Mare of Easttown" actress Angourie Rice have adopted it as a kind of post-pandemic anthem, he said.

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What live music are you hoping to see this summer? Join the conversation below.

Jason Narducy found himself digging through numbered screen prints of posters from their various bands and selling them online to earn mortgage money when Covid hit. His gigs as a bassist for Bob Mould and Superchunk had dried up and he couldn't even get work for his small house-painting business.

The Evanston, Ill., musician eventually found his footing playing a series of small, paid shows in people's backyards or driveways and recording an album for his solo project Split Single, which includes Mike Mills of R.E.M.

Some of the early shows have been strange, including playing to about 20 people on May 1 in a venue that normally holds 900, he said. "I have to say, 20 people in that room is almost comical," he said.

He recently played to about 300 people for the Split Single record release party and has other solo shows booked. In September, he's going back on tour with Mr. Mould, so he's practicing his bass and doing a lot of cardio, core and upper bodywork. "It's an 80-minute punk rock show, which is physically demanding," he said. "I don't want to get two shows in and think, 'Wow, I'm gonna get destroyed.'"



Jason Narducy performed with Mike Mills of R.E.M. on bass and Gerald Dowd on drums at his July 10 record release party.

PHOTO: PHILLIP SOLOMONSON/PHILAMONJARO STUDIO

After spending most of the past year in her 1947 Spartan trailer recording an album, Jana Pochop, a folk singer-songwriter in Austin, booked a two-hour gig at a hotel for the end of May. While she normally plays in halls that have their own sound system, she had to buy herself a little PA system because the venue didn't have one. She spent two weeks locked in her trailer getting herself back into form.

"I hadn't sung into a microphone in a year—that was the kind of overwhelmed moment," she said, as she had to relearn some of her own songs. When the show rolled around, rain started coming down in sheets. She and her friends grabbed her equipment and she ended up playing in the lobby instead of on the patio.

"I am now reminded about all the schlepping and gear setting up and gigging and weather. All that stuff that came right back," she said.



Jana Pochop in a wood-paneled show in Los Angeles.

PHOTO: KULAK'S WOODSHEM

Mr. Metcalfe, who plays accordion, electric guitar, piano, banjo and mandolin, among other instruments, is honing his act as he darts around Virginia for his various gigs and rehearsals. He has one closet in his house dedicated to guitar gear and another to the accordion. He still occasionally forgets something.

One mistake at a couple of recent shows at wineries stands out. He forgot to bring a tip jar, at a time when music fans especially appreciate hearing live performers once again.

"I could've really cleaned up," he said.

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