

World Jazz Conference celebrates successful first online edition

The jazz ecosystem across the globe is imploding. Amersfoort Jazz Festival, celebrating its 42nd birthday in 2020, 15-year old partner JazzNL and IKS Cultural Consulting joined forces at the annual World Jazz Conference to assess this situation and explore ways to help the international jazz community survive.

On Friday, November 20, the Conference kicked off its first ever online edition, bringing Amersfoort and Johannesburg into the same room. With streaming studios built in both cities and attendants such as **Gail W. Boyd** and **Sylwester Ostrowski** checking in from all over the world, 10 laureates from several participating countries presented their music online. None other than **Wynton Marsalis** himself delivered the opening statements for this edition, voicing his understanding and support for the troubles our community faces. Over 250 jazz enthusiasts joined the livestream as spectators.

Almost every participant opted out of using a slideshow type of presentation during the conference, maintaining an open and interactive discussion and keeping our stories relatable for all attendees - delegates, jazz enthusiasts and musicians alike. Whether intentional or not, this aspect of our first online edition highlighted the organization behind Amersfoort Jazz as a musicians' festival: everyone is allowed their space to let their voice be heard.

In short: the organization behind WJC has proven to be ready for the future. And what a future it will be... with coronavirus ruining the 2020 festival summer and uncertainty still being widespread, how do we proceed? How do we make sure our community survives this crisis together and how can we make sure that we all emerge alive and kicking when it's over? Determining a vision for the future was key for this year's conference program. But that vision did not come from thin air. IKS conducted extensive research among festival organizers and promoters across the globe and compiled the World Jazz Festival Network Impact Survey Report, trying to pinpoint past, current and future scenarios for our community.

Seeking relief

Starting out with the thought that crossed pretty much every jazz cat across the world's mind over the last nine or so months, the first question was: 'What the %\$#^* just happened?!' followed by 'And what do we do now?!'. As jazz musicians and enthusiasts, we understand the power of improvisation - flexibility and resilience is in our nature. But we cannot brave this storm alone. We need help, but as it turns out, relief systems are as similar as they are different in every country.

Bradley Williams, of The Artivist in Johannesburg, SA stated that the COVID-19 crisis allowed his organization to engage with his government, where previously they were deemed too small to be a sparring partner. Now, they work together to seek relief and craft long-term solutions towards recovery, providing a potential positive takeaway for the future. **Alexander Beets**, our Amersfoort Jazz Festival director, explained that The Netherlands has made a whopping 780 million euros available so far, but that the government relies heavily on trickle-down economics for that money to actually make it into any musician's wallet. The

result of this approach is that only a very small percentage of that sum actually helps to make a difference in any musician's life.

Delegates from Australia and Thailand, for example, said that relief systems in their respective countries are still very much a work in progress. While the efforts of any government to protect their cultural sector is of course commendable, that provides for a very uncertain situation for musicians. In the US and India, most support comes from private and corporate sectors.

Taking matters into your own hands

Jazz musicians are generally not the type to wait around for something to happen. Why wait for someone to light your fire when you can initiate combustion? That attitude is very much alive among our delegates as well. Dutch saxophonist and educator **Ben van den Dungen** gathered a team around himself and presented the National Podium Plan, allowing Dutch jazz and world musicians to apply for funding when they have otherwise been deemed ineligible.

He has an enthusiastic ally in **Anita Verheggen** of Kunstenbond and Sena Performing Arts Fund, who is rallying with 42 organizations in the Dutch creative sector to advocate change and political support. "Everyone in the industry was always busy fighting for their own cause. Now, whether you're a sculptor or a jazz musician, you're on the same team, because we all need the same thing," she explains.

In India, **Mahesh Babu** of Banyan Tree managed to raise a substantial sum through crowdfunding, supporting 1000 families across the country. "We have shown the importance of a common cause," he explains. "We do not have a political support system for artists in India, but we have looked for and found ways to survive this together."

New skills and technologies

To keep our industry afloat, both musicians and promoters have embraced technology to keep bringing music to their audiences. Every event professional has had to face the music and learn how to stream while venues were forced to close. Research by **Jazzfuel**, which was presented to delegates on the Friday of the conference, has shown that 49% of jazz musicians across the globe has done at least one live streaming gig and 37% was confident they would continue to do them after corona had left the building. Many survey participants also expressed that these strange times gave them the chance to up their admin- and funding application skills, which will hopefully provide them with new opportunities in the future.

The main issue with these online performances, of course, is monetizing them. "I really regret offering access to live streamed concerts for free," **Paul Pace**, of the famous London jazz club Ronnie Scott's sighs. "In a time where streaming music via Spotify is already the norm, we accidentally made it even harder for people to want to pay for music." At the same time, online performances have allowed for new ways of working together between artists and venues. **Raynel Frazier** of Lincoln Center in the US, for example, explained: "We have actively looked for ways to promote talent and raise awareness of live stream events. Hoping, of course, that this extra engagement would lead to higher donations for artists."

Lincoln Center colleague and Dizzy artistic director Georgina Javor weighed in about her experiences with streaming and revenue as well. “We offered Pay What You Wish tickets with a suggested price of 10\$. Of course we were worried about whether we would find an audience that would pay for what we had to offer,” she starts. Javor and her team turned that worry around and made sure that what they had to offer was a great online experience that exceeded the expectation of ‘just another live stream’. “We really approached it like we were making a movie, like a unique experience. And 200 to 500 people tuned in each time, and there is a donate button and a payment link on every single piece of content we share, so we did acquire some revenue.”

Of course, live stream events are not the end-all-be-all to the challenges we face. But it can be a part of the solution. In their closing statements on Saturday, November 21, **Alexander Beets** and **Andre Le Roux** stressed the importance of crafting an industry wide master plan to tackle our common issues in the future. “Musicians have power,” as Alexander Beets rightfully stated, “More so than they think. We need to raise budgets for social and cultural funds and we have to pressure whoever necessary to achieve that.” Over the course of only two days, we managed to connect professionals and musicians across the globe in a spirit of improvisation, resilience and reciprocity. We connected over a very real conversation about our common future, painting a realistic picture of our current situation, and provided a valid and comprehensible starting point to build towards a realistic and optimistic future together.

Taking action and responsibility

Connecting to other professionals and jazz enthusiasts from all over the world, albeit online, was invaluable to many of us. “This conference gives me access to what is happening elsewhere in the world, and we need to learn from that,” **Billy Domingo** of Cape Town International Jazz Festival said. “I think South Africa is going to come out ahead of the game. We will be able to survive.” Domingo leads by example as one of the most influential world jazz promoters on the African continent and told us about how his organization stays resilient. “We put people before profit. When we realized we had to move the festival, we decided not to cancel, but to postpone instead. We very clearly communicated this to our audience and artists and made sure we paid them all at least 50% of their agreed fees. In total, we came up with 53 events to keep our festival current, making use of our 21 years of experience. We stay hopeful.”

Beautiful, inspiring words - so how do we act upon these insights? “Are we just complaining, or are we actually addressing politicians? And the media? In Poland, for example, musicians are getting more TV airtime now. Jazz isn’t for free. It’s a profession,” **Alexander Beets** explained in conclusion. “So what if we build our own platform, collaborate and make the system smarter?” The Amersfoort Jazz director emphasized the need for jazz musicians across the world to acknowledge their value. “We have to capitalize the value we create within society. If we do everything for free, you get shitty quality streams. Pay more and get more, that’s how it works in the end.” So on the one hand, as he points out, we have to rethink our business model and shift towards a hybrid type of events where we perform live in front of an audience whilst also serving international viewers from the comfort of their homes. On the other, we shouldn’t be afraid to actively seek support: “Perhaps, we have to make it sexier for bigger corporations to invest in us. We have to make key players and stakeholders understand what we stand for. We expect them to take action, and we will continue to encourage and pressure and challenge them to do so.”

All in all, the World Jazz Conference of 2020 was a starting point to acknowledge exceptional talent and to spread the word about it, but also a call to arms for everyone involved in jazz across the world. Let's take our responsibility together.