

**Not Coming
Music in Pandemic Times**
Stewart Hendrickson
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“NOT coming to West Coast in May” was the subject line of an email I recently received from my good friends Curtis and Loretta, a folk-singer/songwriter duo from Minneapolis. I produced several concerts for them in the past at Couth Buzzard Books. They planned this tour a year ago thinking that surely a year from then the pandemic would be over and it would be safe to perform live concerts again. They are now rescheduling it for Spring, 2022. I am also anxious to see Claudia Schmidt again after we canceled her concert last June.

The big question is when will it be safe to have live music in the presence of a live audience again. It will certainly take a while for me to feel safe and comfortable in a standing-room-only concert at the Couth. Then there is the question of how many concert venues will have survived. The Couth has hung in there, barely, but others may have not. And how many performers have survived or gone into other lines of work?

For myself, I neglected my music for much of last year – no more house jams or practice sessions with music friends. I was not motivated to practice alone and learn new songs or fiddle tunes. It took me a while, but then I discovered Zoom sessions – one person playing with mike unmuted while others, listening with their mics muted, can play along if they wish. I now practice and learn new music for the next Zoom session. It is also good for social interactions – I meet musicians from distant places like Boston, Denver, California, Oregon, as well as Seattle, of course – even, occasionally, in one Zoom session, someone from Scotland enters in. In these pandemic times, we need more social interactions.

Still, for a musician, this is not the real thing. In pre-pandemic times we had house jams with our music friends, each playing something new or old, from different genres, while others listened or joined in accordingly. It was a chance to try out something new, dredge up an old song or tune, or improvise without the fear of making mistakes or forgetting lyrics – we were all good friends. It was not planned, but organic. When we “got in the groove” it was like magic. I treasure those sessions. It was also a time for food, drink, and fellowship. This is hard to replicate on Zoom.

Then there were Wednesday morning practice sessions with my guitar-playing friend. I played fiddle while he worked out the chords on his guitar. Pretty soon we had a large repertoire of tunes we could play together. I always tried to play by ear. After a while, he would call out a tune and I would try to play by memory – I didn't always succeed, but it was good practice. He would suggest a different tempo or tell me if a note was off-pitch. Playing solo without accompaniment, I tend to short change the length of notes to hold or the length of rests in between. His playing helped keep me on track. Sometimes we talked more than we played

– that was good. Just before the pandemic lock-down, we added a new fiddle-playing friend from near-by Ballard. It was fun, but we decided to quit when we realized it was not safe. This is something that can't be replicated by Zoom. I sorely miss it.

Now as the pandemic winds down, this is the time to polish up old songs and tunes in anticipation of getting together with other musicians. This is also a time to expand repertoire.

As more people are vaccinated it should be safe for fully vaccinated musicians to get together in real-time, face-to-face again, unmasked. This can be outdoors or indoors with just a few people if everyone is vaccinated. I am about to get together with a new guitar-playing friend indoors in his home. It is going to feel strange and uneasy because we have spent a whole year avoiding such interactions.

I still see a place for Zoom sessions. It is a chance to meet and play with musicians we would not encounter locally. We can keep connections with more distant friends we have met during this pandemic through Zoom. One thing the pandemic has done is to advance technology for sharing and streaming music.

Now, as the weather improves and the threat of COVID fades, I feel like a fiddler in Spring, ready to hit the road again.

*There's a piercing wintry breeze
Blowing through the budding trees
And I button up my coat to keep me warm
But the days are on the mend
And I'm on the road again
With my fiddle snuggled close beneath my arm*

From “The Rambles of Spring” by Tommy Makem (1977)

Things are looking up, my spirits are rising.

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