

Maine musicians find ways to get by but worry about winter

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Singer-songwriter Pete Kilpatrick has been organizing concerts in his Brunswick backyard this year, with his 8-year-old son, Sawyer, hand-painting the advertisements. He's also hired himself out to play in other people's backyards.

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No strangers to their industry changing, musicians quickly take gigs online

Toby McAllister, a guitarist and singer from Mechanic Falls, has been surprised with the money he's made from tips while doing virtual concerts, including a private show on Zoom for a group in New Zealand. But with a baby on the way in November, he's worried about the future. Old Orchard Beach-based singer-songwriter Anni Clark recently released her first album in 18 years, with songs inspired by a traumatic pandemic experience.

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More than six months after COVID-19 hit Maine, the music scene is still shut down. Will it ever return, and what will it be like? The Press Herald's Newsroom Live series will explore those questions during a virtual panel discussion called at 7 p.m. Wednesday. Panelists include arts reporter Bob Keyes, music writer Aimsel Ponti, singer-songwriter Samuel James and State Theatre manager Lauren Wayne. Subscribers can register for the event by logging into their account, going to [pressherald.com/events](https://www.pressherald.com/events) and clicking on Rocked Music Scene.

Maine musicians have had to be resourceful and creative in adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has rendered the live music scene mostly dormant around the country since mid-March. Some are using savings, others rely on a spouse with a steady job to keep the household financially afloat. Some have taken the time off to write and release new music. Others have had to find day jobs outside of music.

The near future continues to look bleak, as winter will largely wipe out the chance of doing outdoor shows, which has helped sustain many musicians. Most of the area's major music venues – including the State Theatre and Portland House of Music – remain closed for performances and are struggling financially. Some, like Port City Music Hall in Portland, have closed for good. While indoor restaurants and bars will be open this winter,

conditions for their operation and expanded capacity released by the state Oct. 6 specifically prohibit singing, to prevent the spread of COVID-19 through respiratory droplets. Live music is allowed, but without singing.



Anni Clark released her first album in 18 years, inspired by the pandemic and her experiences during it.
Photo by Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer [Buy this Photo](#)

“It certainly doesn’t come as any surprise, and we were expecting it. It looks like I’ll have time to work on the album.” said Pittston-based musician Jenny Lou Drew. “I understand it, I really do. I’m just left wondering where to go from here.”

The dim music scene outlook has musicians resigned to waiting out the pandemic, doing whatever it takes to get by on unemployment benefits and incomes that are much smaller and less steady. Many hope to draw on the new things they’ve done and learned so far, to keep their musical dreams alive.

HOUSE WORK

Kilpatrick, 37, has been a professional musician for nearly two decades, touring the country regularly and playing big gigs like the Sundance Film Festival in Utah.

When most of his upcoming gigs got canceled in March, he adapted by streaming solo performances every Saturday night from his home, for tips. He called it “Live from the Green Room,” which is a nod to the name given to performance venue spaces where artists wait to go on, as well as to the fact that his music room at home has green walls.

He’s gotten audiences of 200 or so for some livestreams, and averages more than 1,500 views a week. He says the virtual tips have been “really good” and some fans, missing live music and knowing musicians need help, tip generously. He’s done so many weekly livestreams – more than 30 – that he decided to print “Live from the Green Room” tour T-shirts. He sold more than 250, at \$20 a piece, in three days. He’s also put out an album during the pandemic called “Songs from the Green Room,” which he recorded at home.



Musician Pete Kilpatrick has been streaming a live performance from his Brunswick home on Saturday nights since March 14. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

When the weather got nicer Kilpatrick began organizing shows in his backyard, for 40 people, spaced out, at \$20 a ticket. He had seven shows, the last Oct. 3, and all were sell-outs. Donna Boudreau of South Portland went to two of the shows and enjoyed the fact they were “small, safe and personable.” As a music fan, she desperately misses going to live shows and said Kilpatrick’s home shows were “a blessing.” In a lot of respects, she found it a better experience than a lot of concerts.

“I did not get a beer spilled on me, I didn’t miss half of the show while waiting in line for

the bathroom, found parking immediately, and could holler out any request and have it played,” said Boudreau, 47. “I cannot thank Pete enough for sharing his passion with us all. It has made a huge difference for me, a very social person, during a time when it’s hard to be social.”

Kilpatrick has also booked himself to play other people’s backyards and is still booking dates into late October. In August, he played a party at the Kennebunk home of Dave Guthro, 42, a longtime fan. Guthro’s wife, Alicia, had booked the show as a birthday present for Guthro, and paid \$500. About 25 people came and families were kept away from each other.

“We would definitely have him back,” said Guthro.

For the winter, Kilpatrick says he’s not sure what he’ll do, besides continuing to do virtual shows, including some private online shows for colleges. His wife is a teacher and her steady income helps sustain the family, which includes two children, ages 8 and 5.

Singer-songwriter Aly Spaltro, who performs as Lady Lamb, has also turned her home into a concert venue. If the pandemic had come any earlier, she might not have had that home. Spaltro had been living in New York City for the past decade, performing around the country. But she had recently decided to move back to her native Maine and just a few days before the pandemic shut down everything in mid-March, she closed on a house in Edgecomb.

The pandemic forced the cancellation of her upcoming tour with a string quartet, which she had been counting on to help make buying the house “viable.” She worried that without gigs, she’d have to live on, and drain, her savings. After a couple months of doing home projects and trying to not stress over the dormant music scene, she got the idea of having shows at her large, wooded property, inspired by a portable marquee for sale outside on Route 1 in Wiscasset, which she bought.

She christened her outdoor space “The Hive” and installed outdoor lighting. The trees that ring her property have provided great acoustics for her voice and guitar. Since summer, she’s done 11 shows there, with audiences of about 50 paying \$25 a ticket. She’s got one



Aly Spaltro stands in front of the mural announcing her home performance venue, created this year. *Photo by Aimsel Ponti*

more show scheduled Oct. 17. Tickets to that are already sold out, but she will stream it on Oct. 29, with tickets to that available on her [Facebook page](#).

“I’d say these shows have been the difference between me feeling safe and not being able to pay my mortgage or buy oil through the winter,” said Spaltro, 31. Her winter plans includes recording a new album at home, something she was planning to do anyway, and hope for the return of the music scene soon. “It’s definitely a waiting game.”

CAREERS IN PERIL

McAllister, 33, of Mechanic Falls, has been making money mostly from music since he was just out of high school, with the popular Maine band Sparks the Rescue. As band members got older, they stopped touring and settled down to families. McAllister has been playing as a solo act in Maine and around New England, and in the summer often had seven to 10 gigs a week at restaurants and outdoor venues.

In late February, he found out that his wife was expecting the couple’s first child, then a few weeks later he was unemployed. All his gigs, including several weddings he was going to play with a band, were canceled. His wife kept working, remotely, in digital marketing.



Toby McAllister, left, in his backyard performing a live stream concert with Nate Spencer in June
Photo courtesy of Toby McAllister

McAllister started playing songs online just to keep busy. He'd let people request a song, then learn it, and post it online. Then he started performing on Facebook, which he found was harder than he thought, and that at first he "sounded terrible." So he spent a lot of time researching how to record online, including the best software to use. He then started doing live shows, including playing old country music, and taking tips virtually. He started to get 2,000 or 3,000 views for his streams and, in the first few months of the pandemic, made "excellent" money. He did one streaming show for a group in New Zealand, on Zoom, and got about \$100 from them.

"People were very generous, I think people were trying to help musicians out," said McAllister. "It took a lot of the stress out of it, and it was enough so we could buy groceries that week."

In the summer, he began doing some outdoor gigs. He's worried about the winter, with few or no chances to play outdoors and state rules prohibiting singing at indoor bars and restaurants. With a baby coming in November, he's not eager to do indoor shows anyway.

But he's not sure how much longer he can hold out and stay in music. He's hoping he doesn't have to take a "call center job" and knows a pandemic is not the ideal time for a career change.

"I am so nervous about this winter season. I've worked my entire life to become a self-employed musician," said McAllister. "And it's falling apart before my eyes."

PAIN LEADS TO MUSIC

For Clark, 67, a singer-songwriter based in Old Orchard Beach, adapting to the pandemic has meant harnessing pain for her art. On Sept. 25, she released her eighth album, but her first in 18 years, called "Will It Ever Be the Same?"

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The album deals with the pandemic, and the questions of how things will change, or have changed. The album was a personal journey for Clark, beginning when she suffered a traumatic episode at Moosehead Lake in May. After feeling isolated and alone during the early weeks of the pandemic, she had gone to Moosehead to spend time with her longtime partner, with whom she has a long-distance relationship. When he left, she found herself at the lake house alone, sitting on a dock.

She began "blubbering" and "crying violently," overwhelmed with emotion and hyperventilating. She got up to go back to the house, lost her balance and fell into the cold lake. She doesn't remember climbing out of the lake, but badly cut her leg and had to be taken by ambulance to a Bangor hospital. She got 20 stitches.

While recuperating, she picked up her guitar and within a few minutes was pondering the line "will it ever be the same?" and thought about all that she had gone through and all the world was going through. When she finished the song "Will It Ever Be the Same?" she thought "everybody needs to hear this right now."

Clark said she felt compelled to make this album, and hire musicians to play on it, even though so many of her gigs have been canceled. Besides playing performance venues, she had made part of her living by playing senior living facilities, which she can't do now.

"I don't know what will happen going forward," said Clark. "But the time to do this album was now."

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