

# shondaland

## What Will Live Music Look Like Over the Next Year?

2021 has presented unprecedented challenges for the music industry

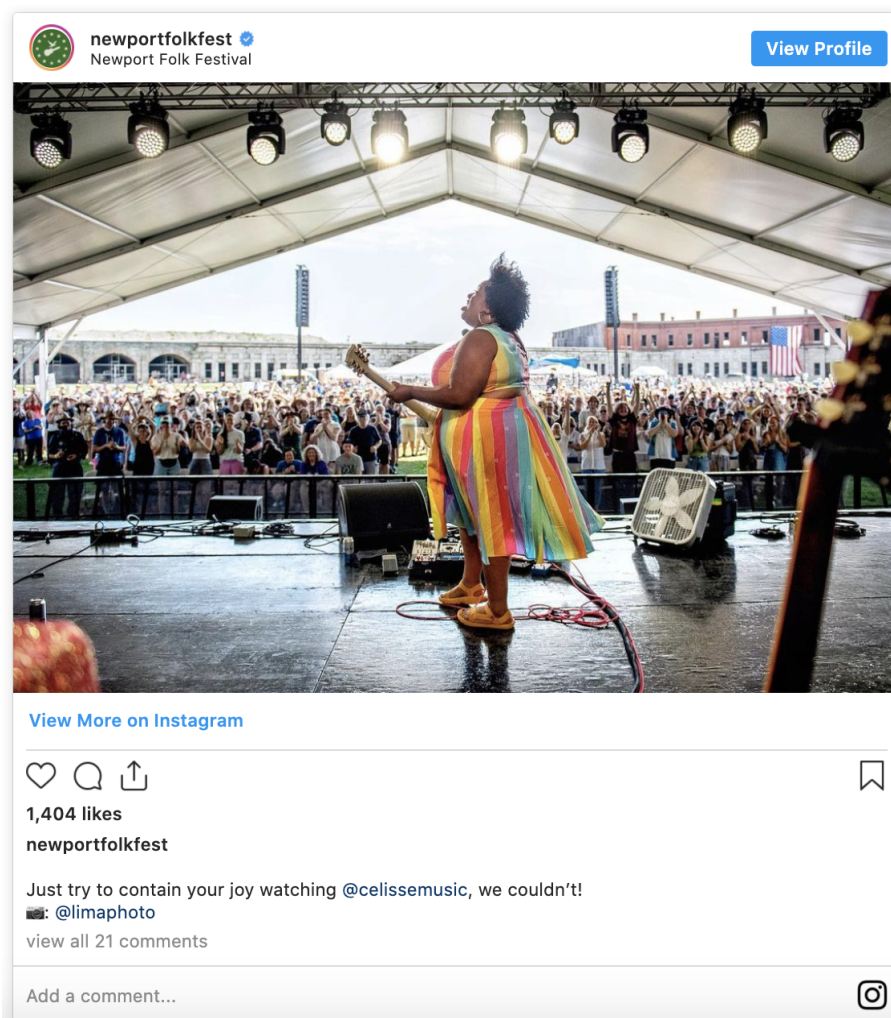
 By [Laura Studarus](#) AUG 31, 2021



Julien Baker is nervous. Despite extensive experience on the road, the Newport Folk Festival is her first show since Covid shut the world down, and she's feeling the pressure. "This is weird," she tells the audience before launching into a solo version of her 2014 song "Sprained Ankle."

"I haven't been in front of that many people in a long time," she says in an interview. "And I already was a person who's, like, *nervous* to get onstage before."

It's a relatable feeling. With vaccination rates rising, we're being given the unique opportunity to carefully resume activities that were largely off-limits for more than a year. With that transition, emotional amplification surrounding the "new normal" and how we're navigating it is to be expected. But while the restaurant industry moved to takeout, gym classes went online, and office workers went home, the music industry faced a much harder pivot. Although some musicians were able to make ends meet through streaming performances, selling merch, and even reaching out to fans for support, venues and festivals were forced to go dark for the last 18 months.



As Rev. Moose, the managing partner and a cofounder of the music marketing firm Marauder and executive director of the National Independent Venue Association (NIVA), says, early in the pandemic the outlook was bleak for many stages across the country. Although music is a unique business, tying emotions of both artists and listeners into a financial framework, the implications of losing performance venues ripple far past simply having a place to go and drink on a Friday night. Without smaller venues, musicians have no place to develop into internationally known acts. (Arlene's Grocery may not be a household name, but Lady Gaga sure is.) And studies show that for every dollar spent on live music, an additional \$12 is pumped into the surrounding community, which means the fates of nearby bars, restaurants, and businesses are also on the line. In a June 2020 survey conducted by NIVA, 90 percent of stages anticipated closing within six months from the date they took the survey — unless federal legislation passed to prevent this.

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“There's nothing that they can sell that can be delivered,” says Moose. “Their whole purpose is to have a lot of people in one small space, and that was the one thing that we knew we wouldn't be able to do for quite some time. ... When the pandemic started, we had helped unify the

independent live venues and promoters from across the country in a way that hadn't necessarily been needed before. And make people aware of the fact that they were the first to close and they would be the last to reopen. That meant that the existing programs from the government, specifically PPP, were not going to be appropriate for the longevity of the pandemic or this specific sector.”

The story has a hopeful ending — through the NIVA-launched #SaveOurStages initiative, 600 artists, including Billie Eilish, Dave Grohl, and Patti Smith, signed an open letter to Congress to call for venue funding. The Shuttered Venue Operators Grant was born out of these lobbying efforts, a fund that set aside \$16 billion to specifically address the venues' unique funding needs. (So far, more than 15,000 applications have been submitted, although many venues are still waiting to receive funding. The SVOG is no longer taking applications.)





The Lollapalooza music festival was held for four days in Chicago, Illinois.

MICHAEL HICKEY / GETTY IMAGES

But keeping the lights on is only the first step. As Jay Sweet, the executive producer of Newport Folk Festival, notes, even after getting the green light to hold an event, it isn't as easy as simply opening the doors to fans. While changes during a normal year of the iconic festival might involve rotating a stage a few degrees or tweaking sound specs, constantly changing rules on large gatherings meant that he was literally forced to make decisions in 18 minutes that normally would take 18 months of deliberation — a fact that he cites with a rueful laugh. Still, even with keeping the event at half capacity (a decision he made despite authorities giving the festival the green light to expand) and overlapping sets to avoid too many audience members in one place, he was elated to take on the extra work. Like Baker, his job has taken him to an unexpectedly emotional space.



“There’s a gentleman who [has been here] for the last six days, and he’s been [attending] this festival for five years,” he says. “I want to tell him, ‘You’re the reason I’m doing this.’ So, I told him! Because the only thing I want to do more than what I do is I want to be the guy in the front row of the concert. And he’s like, ‘Well, I want to be you.’ ... This guy is one of those guys at the gate every morning. He’s just young, knows every word to every song for every band I book. When I saw him in the front, I was like, ‘I kinda can’t believe that you’ve been here for six days.’ And he goes, ‘I figured you needed the juice.’”

It’s possible that seeing live music will remain hit or miss for a long time to come, particularly as we learn more about the Delta and Lambda variants. (Baker says for that reason she’s still cautious and wears masks when not onstage.) However, Moose emphatically believes that live music was always going to come back — even if varying vaccination rates across the U.S. mean that certain markets will remain closed longer, complicating touring for artists whose income depends on booking a full slate of dates.

“If the major cities aren’t open or they have different restrictions, you have to figure out how to navigate around or through [them],” he says. “I think people from the industry side and from the ticket-buyer side, ultimately we all want the same thing, which is we want to be in a room, we want to feel safe, we want to be able to celebrate together. And it’s not just the stress of everything that we’ve all been through this past year and a half or so; it’s also the stress of, like, we just want to move on. And part of that is to be able to do it in a way that is safe and mindful of the world.”



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Blues, Egypt, the Nile  
Delta used to conjure up...  
Now — vax denial 🤔

#haiku #GetVaccinated #worried #musician #mom of a kid under 12

Artists like @jasonisbell @brandicarlie @missmargoprice and festivals like @newportfolkfest are leading the way in running fully vaccinated operations and requiring attendees to show proof of vaccination or a negative covid test to physically enter their shows, and for the venues they play to follow suit in these requirements - and I am deeply grateful to them for doing so - but I'm also gravely concerned that all of our political representatives are not doing the same. This is a public health crisis, not a partisan issue.

Every adult in my family got fully vaccinated as soon as we could back in March and April, everyone I play music with did the same. Get vaxxed for all the kids under 12, for all the immune compromised folks, for all the folks who don't have access to the vaccine, for the millions of people we've lost to this virus. Please. Do it for @john\_prime or your neighbour's baby who is battling cancer.

Do it for all the #frontlineworkers who are beyond exhausted and for the hospitals once again bulging at the seams and having to turn patients away.

Do it for the "economy" if that concerns you most... another full shutdown would be incredibly devastating in every way.

This is my daughter Ida, aged 7 and a half, very excited to start 2nd grade in person (masked) — soon, we hope. Less than 40% of the population in TN is fully vaccinated...

The #deltavariant is surging here as it is everywhere. "The level of hospitalization is almost the same as February, when the state experienced a COVID-19 surge." - @tennesseanews

Kids are not immune.  
We have to do better by our children.  
We have to do better by each other.  
We have to do better by our selves.

#GETVACCINATED ( and of course #maskup in close public quarters)

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There is some positive news about the future of live music. Two weeks after Lollapalooza, the event was determined to not be a super-spreader, with only 127 diagnosed cases traced back to the Chicago music festival. And many smaller venues are pivoting to require proof of vaccination or a negative Covid test, and mask wearing for entry. However, larger events like New Orleans Jazz Fest and acts like Fall Out Boy and Stevie Nicks have erred on the side of caution and canceled dates. And while Newport Folk might have been conducted safely, the Netherlands' Verknijpt Festival was linked to more than 1,000 cases — pointing to the fact that, at least for now, there's still an element of risk to any gathering.

But, as with any life choice, it's important to take your personal comfort level and mitigating factors into consideration. As Baker, Moose, and Sweet all point out, the best way to serve the music community — or any community for that matter — is by getting vaccinated. But when you're ready for it, the emotional rewards of going to see your favorite band can be huge. It's an idea that's kept Baker going.

"A friend of mine books shows at a local venue," she says. "And did this very undersold, like, socially distant show a couple weeks ago, and I thought I was gonna cry! I was just like, watching music! I've missed the luxury of going to see bands and like zoning out and having something be the focus of my attention where I don't have to be fully present. It's been a very solitary experience for me, listening to music in my bedroom. And so, I forgot how much I craved the proximity to other people while I watch and have a shared experience."