June 26, 2020

To whom it may concern,

As President of the American Federation of Musicians, Local 99, I am writing on behalf of the many musicians that make Portland and Oregon their base of operations; specifically, those working in the numerous clubs and venues located in our communities.

On a day-to-day basis, we directly represent our Local 99 membership, but often, and certainly right now, we work on behalf of the entire music community, a group that has been hit especially hard by COVID-19. Musicians were among the first to be shut down and will likely be among the last to resume work and attempt to rebound from this devastating pandemic.

All facets of the live music/venue realm of the music infrastructure and economy depend on each other. Clubs depend on musicians to make their businesses attractive to the public. Musicians need venues to perform in and develop their fan/client base, and each have a wide range of support staff involved that include sound techs, stage hands, bartenders, wait staff, cooks, and others, who are integral to the function, operation, and success of these businesses.

We know that the City and State have received funds from the Federal Coronavirus Relief Fund to help provide support for the wide range of businesses affected by this pandemic and that there are working groups designed to determine how these funds are to be distributed. One of the business organizations that has been formed, representing performance venues and clubs statewide, is the Independent Venue Coalition (IVC), who has been lobbying for support for many of the venues that have been affected by the mandatory shutdown of their businesses.

As both the City and State consider their many options, including those that might be presented by the IVC, we want to weigh in with our support of their efforts. Through no fault of their own, their business ventures are being devastated by the shut down and are faced with few options for opening in a financially stable and profitable manner anytime in the near future.

That said, it is imperative that we, as representatives of the musicians in our community, be part of the conversation regarding the distribution of relief funds to the venues, and specifically, have a voice in determining the direct effect on working musicians as a result of this funding support. What will the work place will look like as venues recover from this long closure of the industry? Musicians, the key ingredient of our live music economy, have lived at the lower end of the power dynamic, and as such, are often paid poorly, or not at all, and as we rebound, this should be a time to change that dynamic.

As an example of a possible change to the “system”, several years ago we developed a campaign called Fair Trade Music PDX, specifically for all musicians working in the club scene. We considered this campaign to be a win/win for both the musicians, as it was designed to raise their pay by creating a baseline minimum wage, and for the
venues, as it included a component designed to increase attendance at their venues. Something like this campaign could serve as the basis of a plan to support both the musicians and venues when physical distancing guidelines are relaxed and we can start to return to business.

If the City and State are going to play a role in saving, supporting, and rebuilding our industry, we should all be at the table - musicians, venues and the Government - to use our experience and expertise to jointly create a plan that works on behalf of all interested parties and creates an equitable sharing of revenues provided by the Funds that are being made available, to offset both the short and long term damage taking place in our music economy.

I look forward to any questions you might have, and given the proposal we have made, wholeheartedly support financial support for the businesses represented by the Independent Venue Coalition.

Regards,

Bruce Fife
President, AFM, Local 99
bfife@afm99.org