



Throwing Digital Horns: Covid-19 and the Rise of Online Live Music Portal Shows

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Introduction

- Many musicians operate in the existing gig economy and rely on touring as a dominant source of income (Gross et al.). With this, '[t]he impact of the Coronavirus outbreak on the independent music industry has been swift and devastating' (Garland). This is also significant for small-to-mid size venues as they 'cannot do gigs under social distancing' (Dabb). Resultantly, several venues and event organisers have gone into administration (see Fig 1). However, there has been a rise in digital media live shows during the pandemic. What I term, portal shows:
- 'Portal shows are both live music events and screen media texts, where the portalisation of shows are performed live to predominantly, if not entirely, online audiences across a digital threshold. This is facilitated by online streaming technologies, curated alongside other media content (that does not necessarily have to be live music), that can be broadcast to a range of media hardware' (Rendell, 7).

Digital Technologies and Live Music



Fig 2: Code Orange's portal show via Twitch.TV

- Code Orange's album release show for *Underneath* streamed on Twitch.TV from physical venue space The Roxian, Pittsburgh (see Fig 2).
- Using a professional media crew, resulting in highly polished aesthetics. Mimics pace of face-to-face shows, yet also uses screen media devices to enhance certain elements of the gig.
- The show was free to watch and free for Code Orange to stream since Twitch.TV's income stems from advertising revenue & subscription fees.

- Beach Slang's acoustic show on Stagelt *see Fig 3).
- The visual aesthetic of the show is akin to YouTube vlogs whose authenticity is partially formed around distinctive modes of address to imagined audiences that encourages user interactivity.
- Fans could 'pay what they can' to attend (minimum cost was \$5 to reduce transaction credit card costs).
- Despite being an infinite digital space, Stagelt provides a limited number of tickets.

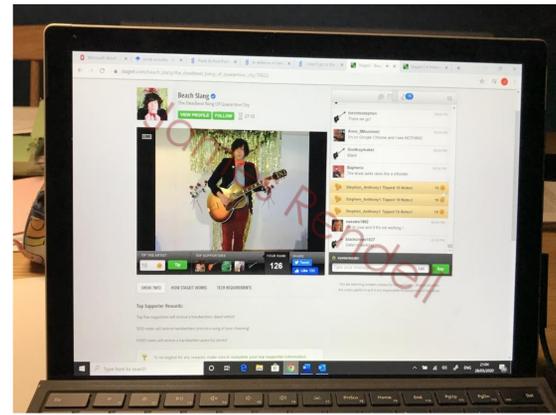


Fig 3: Beach Slang's portal show via Stagelt



Fig 4: Delta Sleep's portal show via Instagram

- Delta Sleep's Brighton in-store acoustic set streamed live on Instagram (see Fig 4).
- Event streamed live on Big Scary Monsters and Delta Sleep's Instagram profiles via the platform's live video feature
- Audiences can freely watch the gig live and re-watch the gig for free for twenty-four hours.
- The show is markedly relaxed and informal in both tone and aesthetic.
- Cameras shoot the performance to the left and right, creating diagonal positions from which the audience watches.
- Depending which profile they view, the show will position them differently much like face-to-face gigs

Findings

- Portal shows expand what is considered pandemic media that usually centres on public health awareness and (mis)information (Duncan; Pan and Meng). Provides different affective registers during times of fear, panic, and anxiety habitually buttressed by traditional pandemic media (Wahl-Jorgensen; Wheaton et al.). Listening to music, including heavy aggressive genres, can produce positive mental states for fans (Thompson et al.) (see Fig 5)
- Portal shows create spatial conflation of traditional venues (Farrow) that removes some practices, such as dancing, whilst providing audience intimacy through the close proxemics of the camera positions.
- Technological affordances, such as chat functions allow audiences to interact with one another and perform fan identity through digital lexicon, such as using emojis. Thus, there is still audience participation and interaction that adds to the experience and supports music scenes (see Fig 6)
- Since shows are streamed live and are only archived for a limited period or not at all, creates a temporally bound experience much like traditional shows, but also exclusivity that produces subcultural capital for attendees, where individuals gain 'a special kudos... from having "been there"' (Kroneburg, 3).



Fig 5: Traditional pandemic media

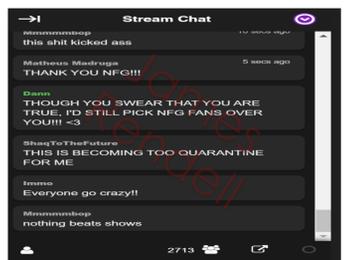


Fig 6: Online chat during show

Benefits and Limitations of Portal Shows

- + Allows for a far more transnational remit of audience attendance than traditional shows that expands through 'just-in-time' fan engagement (Hills). Thus, keeps scenes active.
- + Can be facilitated by venues or artists to fit range of budgets due to low cost of digital media, mobile technology, and Web 2.0 facilities.
- + Provides novel live experiences, leading to further commercial output (e.g. merch) (see Fig 5).
- + Can encourage audience to consume back catalogue of media.
- + Suitable for other media. For example, theatre, comedy etc.
- However, does tend to rely on existing fanbases. Can be hard for new/emerging artists
- Cannot account for the digital divide of audiences which is exacerbated by pandemic

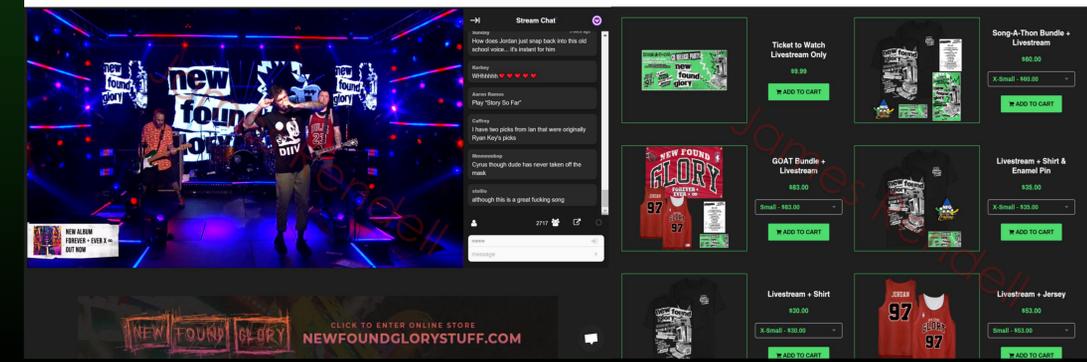


Fig 5: New Found Glory's 'Song-a-thon' portal show (left) & exclusive show merchandise (right)

References/Bio

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Dr James Rendell is an early career lecturer in creative industries at USW. His research focuses on audience engagement with screen media & digital participatory cultures. His research has been published in *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, and the *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*. He has forthcoming work in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies, The Soundtrack*, & *Global TV Horror* (University of Wales Press). His forthcoming monograph *Transmedia Terrors in Post-TV Horror: Digital Distribution, Abject Spectrums and Participatory Culture* is to be published with Amsterdam University Press.



Fig 1: Manchester's The Deaf Institute & Gorilla have shut down due to Covid-19

Methodology

- Textual analysis of music performances, artists, and audience (Wall, 187; Pipe, 113-4; Fonarow; Booth)
- Nuanced 'visual analysis, text analysis and platform analysis [of online imagery]' (Schreiber, 38)
- Economic analysis addresses the monetary strategies that stem from the online performances (Brown)