

THE CREATIVE COVID PIVOT



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ARTISTS AND ARTS GROUPS REINVENT THEMSELVES AS THE WORLD SHIFTS

by ELLEN FAGG WEIST

A musician performing on your sidewalk. Artists posting new works in their yards and radio DJs recording their shows at home, bird sounds included. Audiences and artists connected via computer screens.

THIS IS THE STATE OF UTAH ARTS IN 2020.

This season, musicians, artists and nonprofit leaders embraced reinvention — the creative COVID-19 Pivot — as they faced the massive economic rupture, caused by cancellations and closures that are expected to stretch into next year.

“We had to write a new playbook using the best information we had available at the time,” says Sheryl Gillilan, executive director of the Holladay Arts Council. She was talking about restructuring a summer concert series, but she could have been talking about what it means to present art in a pandemic.

Some arts leaders say they’ve been reinspired to shift programming that better serves their nonprofit mission. Others are recharging by reaching audiences beyond their physical walls. Yet even as we take the pulse of Utah’s creative community, the stories of local artists are still being written. Says Jeff Whiteley, founder of the Excellence in the Community concert series: “This is kind of a brave new world for all of us.”



Alex Boyé. Photo by Megan Snell.

In one day in mid-March, as the economy quickly closed down, singer Alex Boyé learned just as quickly his upcoming concerts had been canceled. The cancellations added up to more than \$100,000 in income.

His first thought: How can I support my family now? His second thought: How can I help my community?

The British-American singer’s answer: performing Curbside Quarantine concerts.

Boyé, who lives in Sandy, invites nominations of individuals, families or essential workers for intimate concerts. “It’s something people don’t even realize they need until they get it,” he says. He brings a portable sound system

“YOU’VE GOT TO TAKE A LOT OF DEEP BREATHS.”

and performs a short concert 6 feet away from a small audience, singing motivational, Africanized pop songs, including his popular YouTube hit “Lemonade.”

By early September, Boyé had performed 50 quarantine concerts in nontraditional Utah and Idaho venues, including more than a dozen hospitals and nursing homes, as well as fire and police stations.

“Some of the most fulfilling musical experiences I’ve ever had in my life,” says the former European boy band singer and former featured soloist of the LDS Church’s Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square. “It’s just been amazing, the financial side has been taken care of” through donations.

The singer performed one concert on a doorstep while a man and his family listened through an open window. The man died of the coronavirus the next day. “This was the best thing you gave our family,” his loved ones told the singer.

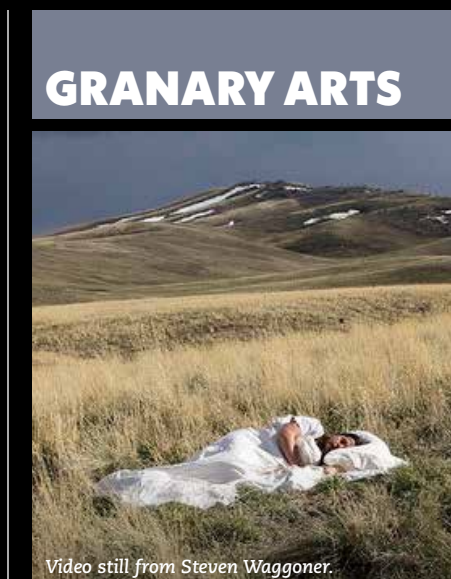
When performing a large show in a hospital parking lot, he was moved by seeing the deep red grooves in healthcare workers’ faces left behind by their masks and shields. He, too, has learned how to work in a mask. “You’ve got to take a lot of deep breaths,” Boyé says.

Quarantine concerts can be exhausting — in the best possible way, the singer says. “It feels like I’m ministering through music,” he says, using The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ term for community caretaking.

“I’m busier now than I was before COVID,” says Boyé, adding that his attitude toward music has changed. Now he thinks of performing as a service for first responders and neighbors, and that approach is boosting his own mental health.

WATCH a curbside quarantine concert: bit.ly/MUSE20AlexBoye

NOMINATE at facebook.com/alexboyereal



GRANARY ARTS

Video still from Steven Waggoner.

Using front yards as an outdoor art gallery, like a progressive dinner, was the aim of “Lawn Gnomes 2020,” a partnership between Ephraim’s Granary Arts and Salt Lake City’s Utah Museum of Contemporary Arts.

While both arts galleries were closed, curators invited local artists to plant new works in their yards, and visitors were invited to follow a map to drive by the art. Some viewers went on to make their own yard art, says Amy Jorgensen, executive director of Granary Arts. (The project was a revival of a 2011 Salt Lake City installation organized by UMOCA guest curator Micol Hebron.)

Jorgensen says the drive-yourself-by exhibit drew different viewers than those who attend shows at the contemporary art center.

“It was a timely and perfect application of how to experience art out in the world in this moment when all of us have to think about safety and health and breathing,” she says.

Granary Arts reopened in June, and as expected, walk-in traffic has been down.

“We’re finding we can still be a productive and engaging art space without having to be a physical space,” Jorgensen says. One example is the center’s recent “Incubation Period” digital exhibit created by PARC Collective, fellows of the art center. They curated a show by 40 artists from around the world, inviting artworks sparked by the idea of quarantine as a “creative incubation period.”

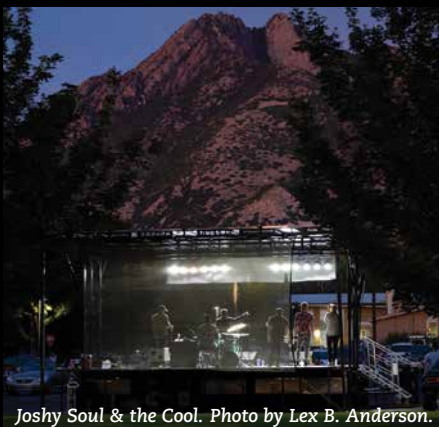
Some pieces invoked nature as a dream world, while others explored the emotional landscape of the body, amplified by the shutdown of regular work and school routines, as well as the Black Lives Matter protests across the country. “It’s fascinating how we’re all going through similar experiences,” Jorgensen says. “When else has this happened?”

VISIT “Lawn Gnomes 2020” in person and online. Artworks will remain posted in Ephraim, Spring City, Fairview and Mt. Pleasant yards as long as weather allows. granaryarts.org/umoca-lawn-gnomes-2020

GET YOUR MAP of Salt Lake City artists’ “Lawn Gnomes 2020” by emailing lawngnomes@utahmoca.org

VIEW the virtual exhibition, “Incubation Period.” granaryarts.org/incubation-period-parc-collective

HOLLADAY ARTS COUNCIL'S "UN"COMMON CONCERTS



Joshy Soul & the Cool. Photo by Lex B. Anderson.

By the third reiteration — or was it the fourth? or fifth? — of a summer concert series in the COVID-19 era, the Holladay Arts Council decided to keep plans as simple, and as safe, as possible.

The group planned four “Un”Common drive-in-style concerts. Cars served as portable social distancing bubbles, so plans didn’t have to change based on Salt Lake County’s fluctuating risk status, says Sheryl Gillilan, executive director.

Since Holladay City Hall isn’t equipped with a theater sound system, the arts council sought a suitably sized parking lot, which was harder to find than it sounded. Eventually, a local Latter-day Saint church lot was secured, where they could build a portable stage.

Concertgoers reserved staggered parking spaces online, with the crowd capped at 100. Demand was high in a season when most summer events were canceled. In addition, the concerts were live-streamed so more

people could enjoy the music in their air-conditioned living rooms.

All of the plans and the revising of plans have caused the arts council to refocus on its mission of bringing together the community through art. And like its colleagues across the state, Gillilan says the council is embracing the challenge of creative problem-solving.

CHECK OUT Holladay Arts Council’s upcoming events: holladayarts.org

KZMU



KZMU DJ Josie Kovash

When Moab’s community radio station closed its building in mid-March, the station first turned to an automated system, which it usually relies on for overnight programming.

After a week, KZMU volunteer DJs began taping their shows from home, complete with ambient sounds. Listeners heard familiar voices, and “you could hear the birds in the background, and you could hear the music, and it was a really, really awesome thing,” says Serah Mead, general manager.

“We want to make sure you’re OK. Call us up,” was the tone of the public service

announcements DJs recorded and aired, while the news director launched a list of COVID resources on the station’s website.

During the earliest days of the lockdown, online listeners doubled with every show, Mead says, which translated to an even larger physical audience. Listeners told her the station was their lifeline. “Listening to you is my connection to the outside world,” they said.

Eventually, in June as the town opened up, the station’s building also reopened. Staff members set up microphones 6 feet apart and were able to have two people in the recording booth at the same time.

The station’s financial support remained strong during the lockdown, but Mead is concerned about ongoing fundraising as people everywhere experience “COVID fatigue.”

“So much of the value we bring is intangible,” says Mead of the indie station that was launched in 1992. “There’s only so many times I can try to convince listeners we’re a lifeline, essentially a free subscription to ever-changing music and daily news.”

When the virus struck, Mead says she tried to drop every task that wasn’t focused on meeting the needs of listeners. “We tried to put on the best programming we could,” she says, including special dance parties and collecting and airing tips for surviving quarantine. “Some of the best radio shows I had heard all year were the shows people had recorded at home, like long-form art.”

Even better was when announcers were able to return to the console. “You could hear in their voices how happy they were,” she says. The general manager adds: “How special KZMU is in a place like this. It is a unique gem.”

LISTEN at kzmu.org/program-schedule



KZMU DJ MaryAnne Russel

ALONE TOGETHER FILM FEST



Actor Dat Nguyen with filmmaker Eduardo Ayres Soares

Film students graduating into a pandemic will face the most difficult job market in years, while many screenings of their works were canceled due to COVID-19, says Miriam Albert-Sobrino, an assistant professor in film and media arts at the University of Utah.

That’s why she and Sonia Albert-Sobrino, her filmmaking and U. teaching colleague — and twin sister — launched an online festival to showcase student work. The Albert-Sobrinos, who were raised in Spain, left careers as nurses in 2007 to earn film production degrees. They make films under their Also Sisters label.

In July, they transitioned a 4-year-old university-based festival, canceled due to the pandemic, into a digital event, Alone Together Fest. They have ambitious plans to build the site into an international platform and resource for student filmmakers.

They received 100 submissions for the first edition of Alone Together. An international panel selected 22 short films, of which more than half were directed by women. “Our goal, in many ways, is to showcase that student work is good work,” Miriam Albert-Sobrino says. Which is why they tapped filmmakers for the jury who would be committed to boosting student work.

The website attracted more than 9,000 pageviews during the festival weekend, July 1-5. Instagram posts promoting the films averaged a 38 percent engagement rate, Albert-Sobrino says.

With support from the university and the Utah Film Commission, the sisters donated their resources to build the festival’s website. It’s part of their effort to boost the reputation of the U.’s film program.

They hope the initiative will help students find their first film jobs. Rather than cash awards, Alone Together prizes were designed as a chance for student filmmakers to receive feedback and be mentored by professionals.

Next year the sisters plan to expand the online festival to include Q&As and video panels to connect filmmakers, professionals and the audience. “It was born out of the pandemic as a reaction to that, but we want it to continue for years to come,” Albert-Sobrino says.

LEARN MORE at alonetogether.site



Film still from Nathan Rice’s animated short, “Merl’s Magical Sandwiches”

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EXCELLENCE IN THE COMMUNITY



Ellen Hayashi. Photo by Lex B. Anderson.

Jeff Whiteley says he started to grieve when the Excellence in the Community concert series was forced to pause in late March — until the nonprofit's founder hit upon a new plan.

On April 16, even as Salt Lake County health restrictions tightened, the music series relaunched with weekly Wednesday and Saturday performances. The only thing missing was the in-person audience.

Instead, Utah musicians found themselves performing for huge virtual audiences, averaging 10,000 pageviews per show on the series' Facebook page. "Just what we needed," one commenter wrote. "I'm dancing in my living room."

Fundraising has been disappointing during the pandemic, but operating costs have been covered by the small nonprofit's rainy-day fund. "I work on the budgets very carefully to see how long we can keep going," Whiteley says.

In addition to Salt Lake City shows, the Excellence team has been helping other musicians and partners, such as the Holladay Arts Council, and streaming regular fundraising concerts by Utah Symphony musicians.

Last year, in the Before Times, the nonprofit raised \$600,000 and presented 128 concerts

with partners throughout the state, including 70 at its homebase at downtown Salt Lake City's Gallivan Center.

"We really believe in the healing power, the uplifting power, of high-quality music," Whiteley says. "All of us are aware of the emotional needs of the people whose lives have been interrupted. We're grateful for this chance to keep going."

STREAM concerts at excellenceconcerts.org

UTAHPRESENTS



Black Benatar by Beatrice L. Thomas

When UtahPresents shows were canceled in the spring, Executive Director Brooke Horejsi seized the opportunity. If an audience couldn't be invited to Kingsbury Hall, she asked, could the space be used to help artists create new work?

She invited arts companies to consider campus residencies. First up was Kinetic Light, a disability arts company "with physically fearless performers," as Horejsi describes their work. The group is creating "Barbed Wire," a dramatic piece of spectacle theater, featuring innovative rigging to fly wheelchair-based performers.

Kingsbury seemed like a safe place for the company to isolate and work together for six weeks. UtahPresents hoped to eventually present the piece virtually in order to remove the barriers for disabled arts patrons to see the work. Yet in late June, when virus cases in Salt

Lake City spiked, there weren't enough tests available locally to maintain the company's safety, so the residency was postponed.

In August, Beatrice Thomas, a Bay Area artist who performs in drag as Black Benatar, returned to Utah to develop her "funny and subversive" Black Magic Cabaret. The show is scheduled to be performed at Kingsbury next April, and it will feature local queer performers.

"We'll create a safety pod for them," is how Horejsi described the residency, adding that they would work with local artists virtually.

"The queer community has been existing in a virtual space, as their own safe space, for a long time," she says. "For [Thomas], and her queer community, the internet and virtual space was the original safe space."

Investing in new models that support artists developing work is one of the opportunities presented by this cultural pause, Horejsi says. Free virtual content might have served as an artistic balm during the early days of the pandemic, but it isn't sustainable. "The average person doesn't understand how precarious the field has always been — it's the original gig economy." Artists have been living that way for a very long time, and they are suffering dramatically."

UtahPresents changed its season announcement event, featuring the LajaMartin dance company, into a virtual fundraiser. Originally, they hoped to host 200 people in the theater, but the online event attracted almost 900 pageviews over several months, while hitting fundraising goals.

"It costs money to make work, particularly work that's worth watching," Horejsi says. "Even if audiences are watching in their PJs in the living room, we want them to have an experience that makes them feel as if it's worth their time."

VISIT utahpresents.org

DIXIE STATE UNIVERSITY'S SEARS ART MUSEUM



Photo by Kathy Cieslewicz

Most exhibitions at St. George's Sears Art Museum are months in the planning, with artworks that are meticulously hung and arranged.

But instead immediacy was the inspiration for "COVID-19 Pops-Up in Art," an exhibition in the museum's foyer, says Kathy Cieslewicz, museum curator. Anchoring the show were artist Stewart Seidman's series of eight large acrylic paintings about the death of his sister from the virus. "Very poignant," she says. "It is an immediate, first-person artist response to right now, not looking back on it."

To accompany those searing paintings, she invited local artists to create 12-by-12-inch works about the coronavirus. Artists became part of the exhibit as they were invited to come to the museum separately to hang their own work. Poems by local writers accompany the artworks. The curator also created an installation from vintage chairs arranged in taped-off squares, with signs like "Wash

your hands," and "Closed economy: We're in it together."

"I had to shift gears immediately and make all of this work really fast," Cieslewicz says.

"I wanted artists' reactions to what was going in their lives during COVID-19. That's what we got." bit.ly/MUSE20CreativePivot

VIEW searsart.com/in-the-grand-foyer

COVER PHOTOS:
Alex Boyé in concert by Rachael Gibson (@fxsrachael)

Granary Arts "Lawn Gnomes 2020" Artwork by Kamilla Earlywine

Joshy Soul & the Cool at "Un"Common Concerts by Lex B. Anderson

KZMU volunteer DJ Nancy Kurtz

Film still of Nora Lang from "Metamorphoses, Book One" by Eduardo Ayres Soares

Deann Huang by Lex B. Anderson

Black Benatar's Black Magic Cabaret show by Kyle DeVries

"Tearful Memories" by Stewart Seidman

Presenting a new blog series that tells the little known history of SLC's oldest industrial and international district.

Stories include recommended readings and some short field trips where you can step into the history of the Pioneer Park neighborhood.

Uncover forgotten stories about ancient and native inhabitants, and the Mormon, Chinese, Italian, Greek, Japanese, Latino, and who all once inhabited SLC's west side.

This geographically-based collection covers SLC's original west side that spans from West Temple Street to the I-15 corridor and from North Temple to 6th South Street.

Salt Lake West Side Stories

A History of the Pioneer Park Neighborhood

Journey through time with us at: heritageandarts.utah.gov/salt-lake-west-side-stories



> heritageandarts.utah.gov

"FOR [BEATRICE THOMAS], AND HER QUEER COMMUNITY, THE INTERNET AND VIRTUAL SPACE WAS THE ORIGINAL SAFE SPACE."