The new geographies of popular music (in a pandemic): Guilty geographies and compressed intimacies

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyse developments in the relationship between popular musicians and their audiences that have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–21. The first, *guilty geographies*, concerns musicians and music venues becoming increasingly reliant on charitable audience support, appealing to fans' ethical consciences through the crowdfunding (or fan-funding) model. The second, *compressed intimacies*, relates to the conditions of musical production and reception, and the new geographies of musical listening, that emerge from this guilt-based relationship. Focusing on examples from Sweden, I argue that while some artists and venues have engaged creatively with guilty geographies and compressed intimacies, these trends should be resisted.

Keywords

Popular music; guilty geographies; fan-funding; intimacy; sonic compression; streaming platforms; Mona Masrour; Alice Boman; Jens Lekman; Sweden.

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–21 has emphasised and intensified certain pre-existing trends in the relationship between pop musicians, pop audiences and the spaces of popular music. Drawing on examples from Sweden – including different kinds of Swedish streaming platforms, concert venues, a digital festival, and indie and R&B artists – I highlight two interrelated developments: *guilty geographies* and *compressed intimacies*. I argue that while live music has become extra risky in the last year, and the spaces of live music have become guilty spaces, there has long been an increasing reliance on guilt in the music industry, with important implications for how pop music works.

Drawing on research by Lauren Berlant, Malcolm James, Emil Kraugerud and others, I also suggest that these guilty geographies are driving changes in the relationship between music fans and music producers, producing new spaces and practices of intimacy, both in online platforms and in traditional music performance spaces, and that these increasingly compressed intimacies are inaugurating a new musical aesthetic. I argue ultimately that, while they have inspired some creative ways of producing, performing and experiencing music, these trends in the geographies of popular music should be resisted.

Guilty geographies

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the decision of Sweden's Public Health Agency to forgo a nationwide lockdown attracted global attention. Another Swedish institution to receive international media coverage was the Malmö music venue Plan B, which at the height of the first wave of infection in April 2020 was controversially hosting "the only show[s] in Europe" (*NME* 2020). While other live music venues closed, Plan B continued to put on concerts for smaller, socially distanced audiences. People attended in part "to support the band and the venue" (*ibid*.) and to ensure the survival of the city's live music culture more generally. (That music fans should be motivated to attend a concert out of a sense that the future of live music relies on it may seem strange or extreme, but, as I explain below, this motivation is not new, and has in fact been increasingly and actively encouraged in recent years.) And when Plan B won a Swedish music magazine's Live Music award, the owner declared it "a victory for all who have helped live music to survive" (Plan B 2021). It is revealing, however, that some of these loyal concertgoers who "helped live music to survive" did not want to be quoted in an *NME* article, "fearing that international friends and colleagues will judge their actions" (*NME* 2020). This was a twin-pronged guilt, as the fear of not supporting a vital part of Malmö's music culture combined with an awareness that attending a gig in a pandemic entailed considerable risks.

The potential risks of live music events, over and above the risks of other kinds of social gatherings, were being discussed from the pandemic's outbreak. A *Washington Post* columnist speculated on Twitter that "noise" – and more

specifically increases in "droplet transmission" when people raise their voices – might increase infection rates (see Figure 1). A *Guardian* article asked: "Did singing together spread coronavirus to four choirs?" (*The Guardian* 2020). This logic was mocked but some scientific studies seemed to support the claim. Researchers from the Institute of Fluid Mechanics and Aerodynamics at Bundeswehr University Munich turned their attention to music and singing and presented their findings in a widely-shared YouTube video (see Figure 2). Focusing on choirs and wind instruments, the researchers used Particle Image Velocimetry to assess whether singing and performing music was safe, or how it could be made so, in the COVID context. They found that "air movement" produced through music-making was generally minimal, although some problematic woodwind instruments should essentially be masked (with "a very thin and tightly woven cloth" or popscreen over their openings). They also emphasised that music should only be performed in large, well-ventilated rooms to avoid aerosol accumulation. Also, "If the music is primarily intended to create a pleasant atmosphere, then it should not be too loud. Otherwise people who want to talk will approach and speak loudly. Both increases the probability of infection and musicians should not put people in this situation" (all quoted from "Making music during the SARS CoV 2 pandemic" on YouTube). And in August 2020, a *British Medical Journal* article reached similar conclusions, using colourful visualisations to highlight the heightened risks involved in "shouting [and] singing" together for prolonged periods (Jones et. al 2020; see Figure 3).
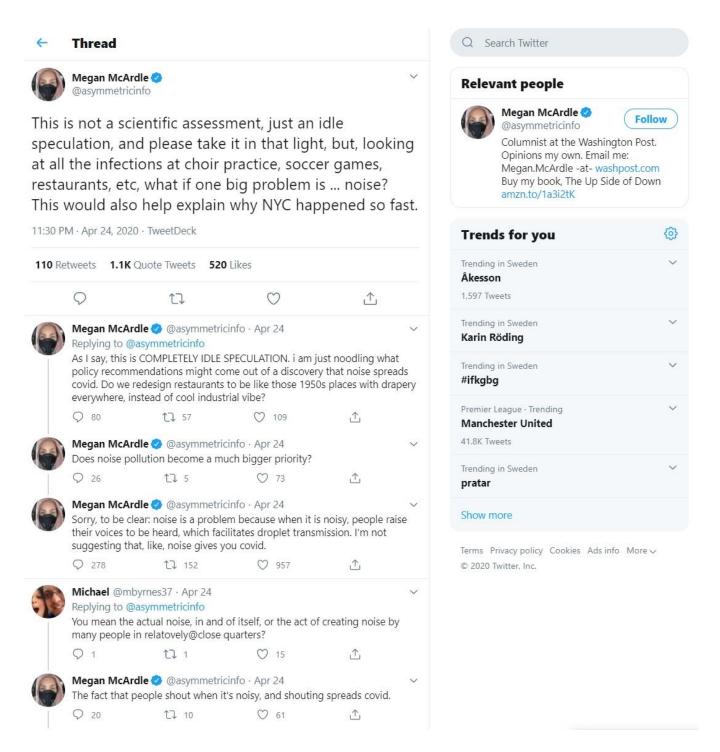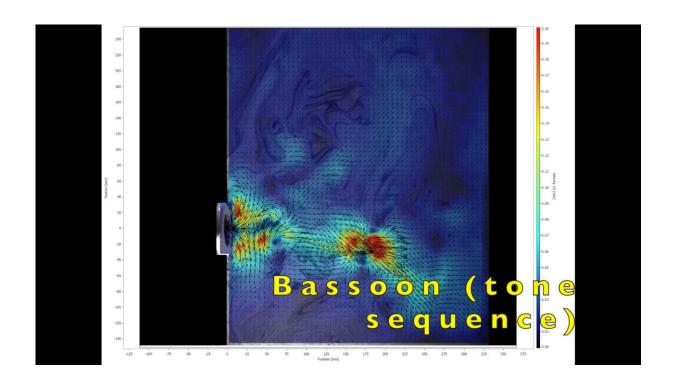
Figure 1. Tweets from Megan McArdle (@asymmetricinfo) on 24 April 2020.

Figure 2. Stills from the "Making music during the SARS CoV 2 pandemic" YouTube video, posted 17 May 2020.

Type and level of group activity	Low occupancy			High occupancy		
	Outdoors and well ventilated	Indoors and well ventilated	Poorly ventilated	Outdoors and well ventilated	Indoors and well ventilated	Poorly ventilated
Wearing face coverings, contact for short time						
Silent	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Medium
Speaking	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Medium
Shouting, singing	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low	High
Wearing face coverings, contact for prolonged time						
Silent	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	High
Speaking	Low	Low *	Medium	Low *	Medium	High
Shouting, singing	Low	Medium	High	Medium	High	High
No face coverings, contact for short time						
Silent	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	High	High
Speaking	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	High
Shouting, singing	Medium	Medium	High	High	High	High
No face coverings, contact for prolonged time						
Silent	Low	Medium	High	Medium	High	High
Speaking	Medium	Medium	High	High	High	High
Shouting, singing	Medium	High	High	High	High	High

Risk of transmission
Low (green) Medium (yellow) High (red)

* Borderline case that is highly dependent on quantitative definitions of distancing, number of individuals, and time of exposure
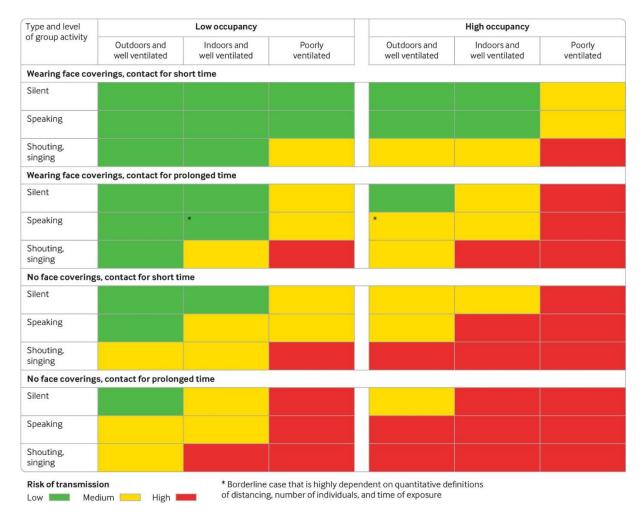
Figure 3. "Risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission from asymptomatic people in different settings and for different occupation times, venting, and crowding levels (ignoring variation in susceptibility and viral shedding rates)." Copied from Jones et al. (2020).

This attention to sites of live music marked them as risky spaces, and places where people might feel guilty to go. Certainly there were contrasting opinions in Sweden and beyond about Plan B, and media articles emphasised the controversy and stigma associated with attending concerts there (e.g. *Rolling Stone* 2020; *NME* 2020). Music venues became part of what Alberto Vanolo calls the urban "spatialities of guilt" (Vanolo 2020, 6), joining the traditional sites associated with certain kinds of illicit practices and unethical consumption. Moreover, musical practices became key mechanisms by which guilty geographies were produced, and music had a role in how places became "defined by individual or collective feelings of guilt and shame" (*ibid*., 7).

Of course the association between guilt and live music comes mostly from the extreme circumstances of a public health crisis in which live music, and the spaces in which it is performed, have become risky, but this association was already evident in the rise of crowdfunding (or fan-funding) models for artists and venues, which pre-dated the pandemic but have increased in prominence during it. Over the last year, venues have had to rely on charitable support. I donated to two Swedish venues to help them survive. But they had already embraced aspects of fan-funding, the logic of which is that fans' enthusiasm, ethics and public-spiritedness are responsible for the maintenance of musical culture. In their influential study of voluntary payment systems, Regner and Barria (2009, 404) quote one platform promising "Internet music without the guilt", adding that "Trying to appeal to the morality of customers seems plausible in the highly charged field of online music". They find that guilt may explain music fans' generosity in donating more than the suggested price for artists' albums, or indeed in choosing not to just download albums for free, suggesting that fans see such voluntary payment as "their private contributions to a public good", and perhaps also as a means of "alleviat[ing]" the "latent guilty feeling" of having previously enjoyed the artist's work for free (ibid.).

Aspects of this were present in the marketing and organisation of the "Från Malmö" festival of April 2021, which was presented as a way for music fans to support and "preserve" the city's "unique cultural meeting places and expressions" (Kulturbolaget 2021). Posters around Malmö hardly mentioned that it was a *digital* festival, with no audiences in physical venues, although they did promote its connection to the city's concert spaces (see Figure 4). We see in this a version of how materiality "bites back" in digital music consumption, as Paolo Magaudda (2011) memorably puts it. People still seek material connections – even intimacy – when they consume music digitally, even as device-based and technologically-mediated music consumption has "changed the intimate material landscape of listeners' experience" (*ibid.* 23). The high ticket prices – equivalent to a "traditional" concert – were presumably intended to support these live music venues and Malmö's music culture more generally. Music fans – especially those who did not want to risk attending physical shows at Plan B – were inclined to buy tickets less for the privilege of watching a live stream and more for this sense of supporting the city's cherished cultural sites. But elsewhere the

organisers wrote of another intention: to "develop methods to achieve financial sustainability in streamed events so that these can be used individually and as a complement to traditional live events in the future" (Svensk Live 2021). In this sense, music fans' conscientious purchases driven by a desire to preserve traditional music venues were also driving the development of new kinds of digital live musical spaces.

Figure 4. Promotional image for the "Från Malmö" digital music festival.

Magaudda (2021) has recently used an STS-perspective to analyse the "infrastructuring" of digital music practices, with specific references to newly dominant music technologies and streaming platforms. He argues that listening devices have increasingly become "infrastructural interfaces", contributing to "the platformization of music circulation" (*ibid*. 241; 246). It should be added that platformization creates new kinds of spaces where people *have to* go to for music, as people no longer own or even download music of their own, and as new digital platforms increasingly outperform traditional venues and distributors, at least in economic terms. New streaming platforms abound, especially in Sweden, where the latest tech start-up – Staccs – offers a subscription streaming service for live music concerts. Aiming to be "the Netflix for concerts" and with "aggressive expansion plans", Staccs has attracted significant

investment from venture capital funds (*Dagens Industri* 2021). It wants to drive the development of hybrid concerts with both digital and live audiences (ibid.), and according to its CEO's LinkedIn page, this "service built by fans - for fans" will be delivered by a "Stockholm-based and global-minded" team of "mediatech entrepreneurs and business innovators" (Anders Tullgren, LinkedIn). Of course, as Shara Rambarran points out (2021), connections between – and hybrid versions of – digital and physical in music can be creatively valuable, and are certainly nothing new, even if they have proliferated in recent years. What is new is the rise of a platform-based digital infrastructure and the associated implications for musical aesthetics, and for how music is produced and experienced. Recent research by Keith Negus and Qian Zhang (2021) has shown how digital stages, platforms and streaming services in the "experience economy" increasingly shape experiences and expectations of live music. Meanwhile, musicians on new digital music platforms are obliged to "optimize" their outputs in response to the pressure of platformization, such as by creating songs suited to Spotify's playlists (Morris 2020). These are all examples of musical "infrastructuring".

Through streaming services such as Spotify, the relationship between music and the spaces of listening enters a kind of feedback loop, whereby the power of the platform induces musicians to produce music for its place-specific playlists (e.g., "At Home" or "In the Car"), thereby reinforcing these spaces as spaces in which we should listen to (certain kinds of) music. Spotify's stated aim is "to bring music into every part of your life, wherever you are" (quoted in Eriksson and Johansson 2017, 67), and in striving for this aim it has influenced, and insinuated itself into, the spaces of listeners' lives. Moreover, as Eriksson et al. (2019, 136) have highlighted, the Spotify business model is based on producing and monetizing a "sense of intimacy" in order to gather data on what different kinds of spaces mean to their listeners:

> As users are drawn into a supposedly tailored universe that seeks to provide the right music for 'everyone' and 'every mood', they are also encouraged to enter into an affective and intimate relationship with the service… The functional and intimate framings of playlists insist that listeners share data not only about their streaming behavior but, implicitly, also about their state of mind at any given moment, which, in turn, generates revenue for the service. (*ibid.* 136–7)

Spotify has, during the pandemic, also provided a platform for a new form of fan-musician intimacy by adopting aspects of the "fan-funding" model. Its "Artist Fundraising Pick" feature – essentially a tips jar – enables fans to donate money to specific artists (or to charities chosen by those artists). An obvious alternative would be for Spotify to give these artists a larger share of its subscriptions and advertising revenue, but instead it provides a mechanism for alleviating consumer guilt (see Regner and Barria 2004). The implications of the rise of such mechanisms in terms of fan-musician relationships, and for the kind of music being produced and performed, are profound. For Suzanne Scott (2015), "fan-ancing" – with its suggestion that it involves *more* than just a financial transaction – has the potential to produce "a moral economy that requires that fans/backers be 'served' more attentively" (179). In "the new economy of fandom", music fans assume roles as "sponsors, co-creators of value, stakeholders, [or] investors" (Galuszka 2015, 26), and this can come with "fan entitlement" (Plante et al. 2017), encouraging musicians to reveal more of their personal lives or present a public persona through multiple channels and platforms. And it can lead to (expectations of) a new intimacy between fans and artists, with all the relational work that entails (Baym 2018; Hair 2021).

In what follows, I want to draw out the implications of how guilty geographies produce new spaces, platforms and infrastructures of musical listening by focusing on this issue of musical intimacy. As Lauren Berlant (2018, 282; 284) points out, "intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation" and acts as "a drive that creates spaces around it through practices". "These spaces are produced relationally" and may "generate an aesthetic" (*ibid*., 285). And as Nancy Baym (2018) has shown, these newly created spaces and places – these platforms and infrastructures – come with particular sonic and relational affordances, and are part of how professional musicians are incentivized to monetize their intimate relationships. It is these kinds of platform-mediated musical intimacy that I explore in greater detail below.

Compressed intimacies

Spotify, like other music reproduction devices and services through history, succeeds largely because of the technology it uses. Compression technologies have been especially important (Sterne 2012). Spotify harnesses Ogg Vorbis

software which uses a method of "irreversible compression" or, in Swedish, *destruktiv komprimering*. As opposed to lossless compression methods which involve no permanent degradation of data, *destruktiv komprimering* entails substantial data loss. It is widely used for audio streaming because of its ability to produce decent sound quality at the click of a button. Spotify's advantage, as Eriksson et al. (2019, 88) point out, is that "A streamed track is always played immediately."

But, as musicologist and philosopher Robin James acknowledged on Twitter: "the most significant sound of 2020 is Zoom compression" (@doctaj, 16 December 2020). Zoom's technology reduces echoes and makes verbal communication possible even among large groups of people, facilitating digital intimacy between pandemic-distanced families and friends. Zoom's dynamic range compression does strange things to music, though; songs played over Zoom using the standard audio settings sound thin and distant. Also, while Zoom can cope with live singers who perform at low-to-moderate volume and in a normal range, louder and higher-pitched notes tend to get filtered out. Moreover, Zoom's sound technology entirely reworks notions of shared musical performance and participation. If one participant is sounding, the others are muffled as designated listeners, encouraged to contribute only through symbolic reactions or "chat" comments. This kind of structured, taking-turns relationship clearly differs from traditional experiences of shared live music. It is interesting, then, that Swedish artists have turned to Zoom and other compression-based live-streaming platforms for live performances this year. (I explore an example below.)

To the extent that Zoom has worked for musicians and fans, it has been because of the kind of compressed intimacy it offers: connecting and bringing people "close", albeit in a specific, limited way. Berlant (1998, 281) has highlighted the connections between intimacy and compression: "To intimate", is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared." Indeed, music scholars have used Berlant's (2008) conception of "intimate publics" to explore how strangers form bonds through, for example, sharing Spotify playlists (Siles et al. 2019). In his recent book on *Sonic Intimacy*, Malcolm James (2020, 12) has used a different

conception of intimacy in terms of "a reciprocity so fundamental it can be *intimated* in the barest of gestures". For James, different kinds of technologies afford different kinds of intimacy and musical closeness, different sound cultures, or different collective and social experiences of sound. He looks for sonic intimacies based on *shared*-ness, as Berlant does, but with a special attention to devices and technologies like pirate radio transmitters and mobile phone screens. However, he has less to say about which musical features characterise different kinds of sonic intimacy. This musical focus is taken up more directly in Emil Kraugerud's (2021) study of *Acousmatic Intimacy*. Kraugerud acknowledges dynamic range compression as well as condenser microphones as crucial tools of intimacy production, but explores how and why compressed sounds may be experienced as intimate by listeners, and how expectations of intimacy lead to new performance styles. He explains that: "In the era of mechanical recording, singers had to sing at a certain volume for the sound to transfer to the record, but with the microphone and electrical amplification, even subtleties of a performance such as breathing and other subtle mouth sounds could be made audible" (Kraugerud 2021, 88). Or, as Susan Schmidt Horning (2013, 45) puts it: "The microphone afforded more intimacy [by] capturing more subtleties in the vocalist's performance." The microphone also enabled singers in large, collective spaces to sound to an audience as if they were singing quietly, as in intimate contexts. And recorded music is generally experienced as intimate if the listener is "able to relate its sounds to a source" (Kraugerud 2021, 86), which is why whispers, breaths and transients are heard high in the mix in "intimate" music. Kraugerud (*ibid.*, 98) also suggests that reverb can be used for intimacy when it is used "to simulate a domestic space" – although perhaps he overlooks the ways that digital and virtual spaces are increasingly experienced as intimate, as we will see. He acknowledges, crucially, that "the threshold for what is perceived as intimate with regard to recorded music is continually expanded" by developments in music technologies and the contexts in which music is experienced (*ibid.*, 4).

These conceptions of intimacy invoke some sense of closeness or connection, and Berlant (1998, 281–2) adds to this the association of personal "witnessing" genres like TV talk shows with intimacy. This implied closeness, including through microphone techniques and personal revelation, lies behind the increasing popularity and "intimate soundwork" of the podcasting medium

(Murray 2019), which is an important part of Spotify's service. These characteristics also apply to the music of the Swedish singer Mona Masrour, who won the 2021 Grammis award for Newcomer of the Year and whose "personal r'n'b" and "intimate songs create a special familiarity" (Ebba Lindqvist PR, n.d.). One review of Masrour's 2021 debut album describes her "intimate r'n'b" with "personal stories" and emphasises her soft, whispering singing style, adding that all the tracks are united by "a feeling of intimacy" (Azarmi 2021). Another review is entitled "Intimate R&B in Swedish" (Skarin 2021), while an interview feature praises her for producing "music that feels close" (Roney 2021). To some extent, it is surprising that Mansrour's music is so consistently described as intimate since her singing is generally cool, reserved, undemonstrative, without much dynamic range, and almost always digitally filtered or technologically augmented in some way. She could almost be singing through Zoom. However, listeners can hear her breathing and the delicate details of her voice, as her vocals were apparently recorded in the intimate way Kraugerud (2021) describes. Further, she reveals herself to her listeners through her lyrics' personal themes and through samples of phone conversations with her mother. The inclusion of these technologically-compressed-yet-nonetheless-intimate voices is an example of the kind of intimacy-building methods that modern musicians increasingly employ.

Other artists and songs that have succeeded during the pandemic also demonstrate elements of this kind of intimacy. The breakthrough hit of the pandemic – breaking several Spotify streaming records – was Olivia Rodrigo's "drivers license", with its breathy-voiced vocals in which the distinctive grain and plosive pops can be heard. The song's intimate soundscape begins with the car-key jingle and whispered singing of the opening seconds. The lo-fi aesthetic develops as percussion is provided by hand-claps. The lyrics tell a personal story of vulnerability after lost love, and the chorus climax drops to leave Rodrigo's quiet *a capella* singing. The song does, however, become more epic in the bridge featuring choral backing singers, with reverb and echo on the percussion implying a larger space than the (implied) car of the beginning. This section would be hard to recreate over Zoom, with its limited opportunities for participation, echo and dynamic range, but the Swedish indie artist Alice Boman makes music that is more suited to that particular form of compression. Almost all her early songs – famously recorded from her bedroom – have a distinctive

hiss that means that the listener can hear the source (i.e., the lo-fi technologies on which it was recorded). Her 2020 album "Dream On" has similar aesthetics. A reviewer praised her ability to "create immediate closeness" (Grönberg 2020). One song from this album, "Everybody Hurts", shares the lyrical premise of "drivers license": an ex-lover is with someone else now, and the singer imagines that this someone else has everything that she lacks. The production is fuzzier, more ethereal, but the intimate detail of Boman's voice comes through, always staying in that Zoom-friendly mid-range in terms of pitch and dynamics.

Boman suits the conditions of "intimate" live performance in the pandemic context in which she had to promote her new album. She sang stripped-down versions of her songs over a Facebook Live stream in April 2020, apparently performing from a bedroom or home studio, and responding to fans' comments in between. She also appeared on a digital music festival broadcast via Twitch from a Stockholm music studio, which was free-to-stream but had prominent Swish and PayPal donation functions. In September there was a ticketed "Virtual World Performance" through the NoonChorus platform, which is described as "a way for musicians to connect with their fans through live streaming" (NoonChorus). The service also offers "geo-targeted" options for its virtual shows whereby struggling venues earn a share of ticket sales. And mostly recently Boman broadcast a "*streamkonsert*" from a Malmö music venue as part of the aforementioned Från Malmö digital music festival. Her music's ability to make an intimate connection with fans, and to do so in support of traditional venues, has stimulated the digital platformization that will suit other music with similar qualities.

A final Swedish musical example is the Gothenburg-based indie singer-songwriter Jens Lekman, who has also adapted to the conditions of musical performance imposed by the pandemic, in part because he was already pioneering and embracing elements of "compressed intimacy" in his work. Lekman has been corresponding with his audience directly for more than 15 years, including through his blog by which fans get an insight into his creative and everyday life. He has rewarded fans' support with songs addressed directly to them (e.g., "Olivia and Maddy" from 2013.) For his 2015 "Ghostwriting" initiative, Lekman solicited fans' stories that he could turn into songs. Performing at fans' weddings has been an important income source for him, and videos of

these intimate performances are on YouTube. His ability to insert himself into – and make music appropriate for – the spaces of his fans' lives was demonstrated on his 2015 Living Room Tour, in which he performed intimate shows in fans' homes in Sweden's smaller towns. All these tendencies intensified in the pandemic, as Lekman replaced his planned tours with short "Jukebox Zoom" shows performed one-on-one to fans around the world. He used no special microphones or other recording technologies for these shows; Zoom's compression was all that mediated between him at his kitchen table and the fan listening via Zoom. This compressed intimacy reached its most intense form in the Guest Studio Session streamed from the Nordic Watercolour Museum in Västra Götaland. For this, he requested fans submit stories of their pandemic experiences, and he would choose a few to turn into songs. For the streamed live show he Zoomed these chosen fans and performed the songs, which were about their experiences, directly back to them. One viewer commented: "I didn't believe until today that online music events can feel this real and close."

Conclusion: resisting guilt and decompressing intimacy

Musicians and fans have worked creatively with the new geographies of musical listening that have been revealed starkly by the pandemic context. Music suited to these circumstances can be beautiful and engaging, as Mona Masrour has shown. When intimacy is associated with fan-artist closeness and personal experience, Zoom can suffice, as Lekman and Boman have demonstrated. Efforts to improve live music streaming services are not unwelcome, and it is to be expected that online *venues* will appear in the coming years, perhaps offering different sonic qualities based on different kinds of compression, potentially also linked to the acoustics and atmospheres of 'real' music spaces. The problem, though, is that the rise of digital live music streaming and associated platforms, including those stimulated by fans' ethical well-wishes, will in the short term lead to a compressed range of popular musical aesthetics. If a particular conception of intimacy based on the detail of the voice and personal revelation continues to dominate, then other forms of music – and the spaces in which those other forms are traditionally experienced – might be lost, along with Malcolm James's more capacious, collective, interactive conception of sonic intimacy. Of course relationships between musicians, audiences and sites of pop music performance

will always change, as will popular conceptions and expectations of intimacy, but I suggest that neither of these should be built on guilt. It is the compressed nature of the fan-artist or fan-venue relationship, in which fans are held directly responsible for the existence of musical culture and musicians are made directly responsible for fans' experiences, that affords guilt a key role in the production of pop-musical spaces. The solution, beyond the pandemic, must be to construct new geographies of musical listening, including online, offline and hybrid performance spaces, that are not dominated by guilt or by relations of obligation. Such alternative platformization can facilitate decompressed musical creativity and experience, allowing for different kinds of social and collective intimacy.

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