



After Immunity: Understanding the Post-COVID-19 World¹

Episode Three: Manitoba's Music Scene After Immunity (Part One)

Interview with Sean McManus

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Ian T. D. Thomson [IT]: The question we are exploring today is: How will Manitoba's music scene transform in the post-COVID-19 world? To help us unpack this question is Sean McManus. Sean is the Executive Director of Manitoba Music, a member-based non-for-profit industry association in the province, representing members in varying roles across the music industry. Sean, thanks so much for joining us.

Sean McManus [SM]: Yeah, my pleasure. Thanks for asking.

IT: So I guess a really helpful place to kick us off is just, can you explain to the listeners what the objective of your organization is? What supports does it provide in the arts community in Manitoba?

¹ After Immunity is a UMF 101.5 limited series broadcasted out of the University of Manitoba. For more info on the series visit: <https://umfm.com/series/after-immunity>
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SM: Sure. We're a membership organization for the music sector, so we serve our members. Our mission is to develop the music sector; that includes artists, but it also includes music companies, independent entrepreneurs, small music companies, presenters, festivals, venues, and recording studios. And really the health and well-being of the sector is our main goal. We work with classical artists and jazz artists as well. A little bit less with, sort of like, the not for profit symphony orchestra kind of side of the scene. So we're really focused a little bit more on the singer-songwriters, recording artists, touring artists. And we do focus quite a bit on the sort of business and entrepreneurial side of the sector, so we sort of treat every artist like a business and most of them see themselves that way to some degree as well. As a creative entity and also as a business. And we really work to help folks think strategically about how they invest in their creative work and how they market it and get it out and connect with audiences and all the kind of partners and pieces that they need along the way to make that happen.

IT: So the artists themselves, I feel like they're more focused on that creative element, whereas you're there to help them with the other infrastructure elements. Would that be a fair way to characterize it?

SM: Yeah, I think quite often that's the case. Folks often come into this work through the creative side of the business more than anything. And actually lots of folks working in companies came in that way too, playing music and getting involved. And so you do have folks that come into the music sector with an MBA or a law degree or some kind of really professional training. But often it's on the creative side. And so, as you say, kind of filling in that sort of entrepreneurial business side is something that we do. We don't have in Manitoba, a music business college program, like a lot of provinces do, like would be

offered through Grant MacEwen College or something like that. So we have folks that will come through university or college, often in maybe a communications side, or writing, or maybe music, but there's not a lot of music business to all of that. So there's a fairly big role for us to play in that regard in Manitoba,

IT: You're touching a little bit on the goal of this episode, which is to really look at Manitoba exclusively and its local arts. I'd really be curious, in your view as someone who works in the space, what makes Manitoba music and its local arts scene unique?

SM: Yeah, I mean, it's hard to put a finger on. I think folks that are involved in the music scene here know that it's something really special. I think a lot of folks from outside Manitoba know that it's something really special. I mean, I talk to people... part of my job is talking to music people from all across the country and around the world, and people know that Manitoba is a music place, that Winnipeg is a music place. Why that is, is tricky to figure out. Some people joke about the cold winters and the amount of creative time spent indoors but I think there's a lot of things. I think the size of the community means that different scenes interact with one another, which I think is pretty cool. You know, maybe compared to a bigger place where you can spend a lot of time around people that are doing things very similar to you. And I think in Winnipeg that happens less often, I think it causes musicians to stretch out a little bit and probably connect with other disciplines as well and I think that's part of the unique character of the music that happens here. And I think the fact that you sort of have to work hard to reach an audience. Like, Winnipeg is a small market, and so if you want to reach an audience beyond Winnipeg it takes a little bit more initiative than maybe if you were in a bigger place. So I think that factors in as well. And honestly, I do think about Winnipeg, and Manitoba, as kind of a home of historic work around community development and social justice. And I think that plays into it, into the

character of the [music] scene as well. And so, yeah, I think all those things contribute. Strong audiences, good support for local music and the audiences here. And obviously there's something a little bit secret sauce about it.

IT: The secret sauce of Manitoba's local arts scene, I rather like that. So this series as a whole is focusing on kind of that post-COVID-19 world, but we can't really start there. We have to kind of start with what we're currently undergoing in the pandemic as a whole. In your view, what have been the effects of the pandemic on Manitoba's musicians and artists during this time?

SM: Yeah, well it's varied, for one. I think there's more than one effect and it's affecting different folks in different ways, but the overarching primary thing is that our business is about gathering people and it's about travel. And so those are the two hardest things to do during the COVID pandemic shutdown and whatnot. And so not being able to gather people for live events, for concerts and festivals and events, and for artists not being able to be on the road, touring in front of their fans and connecting with people, I think both of those things have been, you know, hopefully not catastrophic in the long term, but certainly have changed everything. For artists that were either in a place in their own creative cycle where they were getting ready to do some writing and maybe be in a solitary mode, or in a creative collaborative mode, that would still work over the Internet. I think it's been a pretty interesting time and there's been lots of writing going on and lots of collaboration. For artists that were [in] a place where that was done, and the record was made, and it had just come out or was about to come out, and touring was just about to start, it was pretty bad, it had a big impact. And so that has an impact, obviously, on people's business and it also has an impact on their psyche. And then we've had these different kind of waves of those effects throughout the year too, where you've had modes where people were feeling

really productive and engaged. We've certainly seen it in terms of the strategic planning on the business side. You know, we've had times where people thought 'OK, I'm going to work on my marketing plan for my record, like I'm going to dig in' and then we go through another wave where it's like 'Well, I can't even plan a tour, I've had to reschedule my dates three times, what's even the point'. And so there's a psychological aspect of this, obviously for everybody, in terms of the anxieties and the unknowns around the pandemic and I think that's been huge for artists. So I think it has been varied. I think overall for the sector, it's been very, very bad.

IT: I appreciate the different ways in which you said this is kind of explored, and you certainly touched on a number of them...I can only say, you know, the buzzword I saw the other day was "Zoom fatigue", and I can safely say that I think everyone's feeling that at this point. You know, you have that mode of productivity and then it's a question of how long does that continue on? And so it's interesting to see how that affects the artists. Now, you touched on a little bit of this aspect of the business planning, of the releasing, and how that's all been affected by the pandemic. How has the pandemic affected your ability, your organization's ability, to actually support Manitoba artists? Has it been harder to adjust and to meet these concerns that they've faced?

SM: Yeah, for sure it has. Again, our business at Manitoba Music so often is about gathering people and travelling. You know, it's about getting people together for conferences, for workshops, for training. It's about getting people together for showcases, and showcasing emerging artists. It's about working with those artists to get into new markets and showcase for folks in Toronto, or L.A., or Germany. And so all of that's been affected. Like everybody else, we've tried to move our work into a virtual setting and move it online. And in lots of ways there's always opportunities and you don't want to miss those

opportunities, and we've certainly seen that too. We've found ways that we can connect with people virtually, you know, international business delegates who we don't have to fly here and so the costs are reduced and it's easier to get. You know, you can get on someone's schedule for a few hours, you don't need to get them for a few days. And so there are some things like that that have been pretty interesting, I think, and participation from members, too. You know, not everybody has to be in the same place at the same time. So I think all of that's been interesting and there are hopefully things that we'll learn through that process that will carry on in terms of our connecting with people and creating an inclusive environment for people to participate. I think that everybody would still agree that for the most part, being able to do these things in person is just better. We communicate better as human beings when we're in the same room together, that's just biology and psychology at work. For us, as an organization I think it's meant that... we've been very lucky with our funders and most of the funding that we've had has stayed in place throughout the year and so we've still had the mandate to do the work that we do. But it's meant that everything is being done in a new way. So we don't have the old models, we can't use our old budgets and our old templates and our old structures, we can't use our old partners in lots of cases. And so everything has been almost like starting from scratch and reinventing, and that's been pretty taxing on our team, too. Again, there's been different waves that we've gone through. We came out of the gate really excited about the ways that we would try to build community and connect with people and serve our members. And then at times it's been like "why are we even doing this? I haven't been able to go to a show in six months" and it feels, you know... and just a lot of work, trying to get people engaged. And like you say, the Zoom fatigue aspect, and *a/ways* checking in with members to see what do they actually want, what are they actually up for? Like how much how much time can they actually spend engaged through a virtual portal? So it's

been a lot. We've had a lot of fun, we've run a lot of really good projects, I think, over the course of this year, but it's it's been pretty taxing.

IT: I appreciate your honesty with the challenges that you've had to face. As well I can safely say, as a live show fan myself, not being able to go see live music during this time I think has been... it sucks, to put it bluntly. So this show we're looking at the post-COVID-19 world, we've talked about the pandemic itself and what its effect has been and you've kind of hinted at some of the trends we've seen throughout this. But I'd be curious to know, how do you see Manitoba music and its local arts scene evolving in this post-COVID-19 world, given how it's played out across the pandemic?

SM: I think there's lots to wait and see, and learn on that. I do hope that there are some things that we learn and there are some ways that we evolve. I mean, it's easy to forget that if we go back 12 months or 18 months, one of the things that we were dealing with, thinking about more than anything, was how burnt out artists were for being on the road all the time. And the unhealthy nature of the fact that our business has really moved to a place where artists really have to be playing live a lot in terms of the economics of it and in terms of building global audiences in different markets. And that's what we were really thinking about. And now we've had this whole shift where nobody's on the road. Some artists have been really able to use that time to heal and repair relationships, and sort of think about their own health and well-being, which is great. And so when we talk about the idea of getting back to normal, there's lots of ways which I don't think we want to be back at normal, like what the old normal was. I think we want to be back in a healthier, more sustainable version of the industry. And so what can we learn from these virtual things that we've been doing? From taking the time to plan strategically, thinking about a tour as not just like "I've got to get back on the road", but "why am I doing this tour? Why am I touring

in that market? What's the point? What's the plan? Have I really thought it out? Is it really going to be impactful?". So I hope that some of that sticks. I hope that some of the ability to connect with people virtually sticks and makes it maybe a little easier on the artists and companies so that people aren't on the road all the time.

IT: That's really interesting, just in the sense that you had, prior to the pandemic, almost some burnout there. And it's a question of, now that we've had the pandemic, do we actually want to return back to the way things were? And it doesn't sound like we do.

SM: Yeah, and I don't know. I mean, the market is a funny thing, it's hard to control it, but I do hope that there's something that will be in the psyche of the music sector across the board, where people... like I know there's going to be a big, big desire for artists to get back in front of audiences. I know the audiences want it, I know the artists want it, I know the companies want it, like there's no question. And there's going to be huge demand for touring, I feel that too. But I also hope that we will have come through this learning something about maybe how to take care of ourselves a little bit better, and that we think about that as we start to put these tour schedules back together as well. And like I said, trying to learn from the idea that it's actually not that strange for us to do this particular meeting or this particular showcase virtually. And maybe that part of the "new normal" is something that will help us out as we go forward.

IT: So you're getting at some of my next question, which has to do with the trends that we've seen across this, and a big aspect of that is obviously online shows and online festivals. Other trends we've seen have been the growing use of streaming services to find new music, as well as the artists recording and releasing music more frequently during this time. Quite simply, what is going to stick from this? It sounds like you think that online

shows might stick a little bit if they're targeted specifically, but out of these trends what do you think will continue to last in the post-COVID-19 world?

SM: Yeah, I think the online shows thing is interesting. I think we've seen that it works pretty well for artists that already have an audience, [but it's] trickier to find an audience just because there's so much noise online and it's so crowded already. So I think we'll maybe see something there. I think we've had a lot of artists who have taken time to learn how to create content, which is something that we talk to them about all the time. For better or for worse, the social media environment that we live in, one really good way to deal with that is to create a lot of content. Some artists didn't have those chops or the gear to do it or whatever, and now a lot of them do. So that'll be interesting to see how that goes forward. I think the bottom line with a lot of the virtual stuff is that there's no economic model that makes it makes sense. It's been interesting during COVID to do it, some artists have been able to do things with tickets attached and others have been focusing on free content. But I think it's not a great... there isn't really a business model that works very well unless you're an artist of a certain stature to be able to sell tickets to an online event and have it make sense. I think audiences have been very generous during this time, I've seen audiences have been very supportive of artists wanting to buy merch, wanting to buy a ticket or a virtual show when they can. And so coming out of this, hopefully that desire of audiences to see artists, to pay for tickets, to go to shows, I'm really hoping that that is something that comes out of this as well. And it feels like it will.

IT: Yeah, and I just want to jump on what you said about the online shows. So it does sound like being able to have regular online shows, that would be more for artists that already have the established fan base versus those that, you know, they might still be like

building up their career. At that point, is it a little bit more tricky to be engaging in that digital space?

SM: I think so, that's what I've seen. Artists that are able to sell tickets almost like they're on tour, sell tickets in multiple time zones. Some of these systems are set up that way now where you can buy a ticket for 8:00 on the West Coast, or 8:00 on the East Coast, or 8:00 in Europe, or 8:00 in Australia. Those artists that have that global audience are able to sell that many tickets and also are able to, because of that, invest in a certain quality of show. I think when we came out of the gates last March and April, there was a lot of home shows, a lot of interest in just like doing something, connecting, replacing those tour dates. But, you know, when you speak about that Zoom fatigue, there's only so many hours that we can all be watching video content and we're going to make decisions and we're going to pick stuff that looks good and sounds good. And, I find myself, it's trickier, like it needs to be a pretty well produced event for me to want to watch it. And so, again, it's artists having the resources to be able to do that and if they're selling tickets to be able to make enough to offset those costs. So I don't really see that changing. I think the bar is high. I mean, there's a market for quick and dirty and fun content, too. But when it comes to concerts, I think the bar is getting higher.

IT: And I feel like you're also competing against so many artists out there internationally, across the border and everything -

SM: – well and you're competing with everything: you're competing with Bridgerton and The Queen's Gambit, you're competing with a free YouTube wormhole, you're competing with every other bit of online content that people might be spending their time with.

IT: And that YouTube wormhole is quite... you can really get suckered into that, that's for sure. So you've talked a little bit about the past model in terms of artists constantly touring. But obviously what we faced in the pandemic hasn't been ideal. As you said, people want to go see live shows, the artists want to play live shows. Obviously, that isn't one thing that hasn't been able to be recreated in this. But are there other aspects that that we haven't been able to recreate because of the pandemic that we will be returning to in the post-COVID-19 world?

SM: Well the big question is going to be around festivals and sizable audiences, and I think the timeline for that is very tricky too, that we don't know what vaccination means for large audiences. I think it's been really difficult for the festivals to get a read on that, to get public health folks to make solid predictions on that and what it might feel like. And we just don't know what the factors are around variants and we just don't know what the factors are around the immunity levels of, you know, being sort of post-vaccinated or half vaccinated or whatnot. So I think that's one of the biggest wildcards.

IT: I'd like to switch directions here and get your thoughts on the role of government and the support that it could give to the local arts during this time. What role does that government (the federal government, the provincial government) play in aiding the local arts scene in Manitoba, particularly after the pandemic is over? You've talked about the problematic models prior to the pandemic. What might be their role in fixing the model for Manitoban musicians and artists?

SM: Yeah, well, I think the role of government is huge. I think that every arts sector in every community around the world has support and a relationship with government. It's the way that we value and support the arts in the same way that we value and support

education, in which government has a role in, and health care, which government has a role in, and infrastructure, which government has a role in. I think, from my perspective, support from the public side for the arts is just as important as it is for bridges and infrastructure. We need it in our lives. That's the way the economic model is built. There's no way for me to personally afford to build a bridge, and there's no way for me to personally afford to support a symphony orchestra. You know, the government has to be involved. So that's my fundamental belief regardless, and I think in the context of the pandemic it's even more so. And we've seen that response from the federal government. The federal government has said with regards to individuals, and businesses, and small businesses, and the arts sector, has said 'we understand that everybody's in shutdown mode for the greater public good and we're here to backstop that so that these organizations don't disappear' and that's been great. The support provincially... I think that the provinces are always going to wait to see what the federal government is doing and try to lean as much as they can on that. And that's fine, but I certainly hope that the provincial government sees that a strong arts sector in Manitoba is good for all Manitobans. And that COVID is affecting all sectors, but it is affecting the arts sector... we are among the hardest hit. We were the first to close and we're going to be the last to open. And there's so much that the arts sector can't do to operate... it's not as simplistic or easy to understand, maybe as a store is closed and therefore they can't have customers come in, but maybe they can do takeout or something. You know, on the arts side, it's a lot different. The economic models during COVID just are not anywhere near what we actually need to have a sustainable arts community, it's a patchwork of being able to maybe do some things. But I think there's a huge role for government, and I really hope that they see it. And I think your question about how do we evolve this going forward, again I hope that there is an ability to kind of learn from this and say: 'are there ways to reset the relationship as we go forward based on what we've learned? Are there ways to provide more long term sustainable

funding for the sector that's not project by project or year by year? Especially the project funding, we've really learned this year that when we rely on that and then suddenly something happens and you can't do a project, then that means what happens to all those artists, all those arts workers that are trying to sustain...? If organizations had more long term sustainable funding, then it would make those pivots and those changes much easier. Which on our side, in our organization, we had and we were lucky to do, but it hasn't been the case for all arts organizations.

IT: The series as a whole is pretty future oriented, talking about what the future might be, and I'd be remiss if we didn't talk about the rest of 2021 and what your organization has coming down the pipeline. What can people expect from Manitoba Music in the upcoming year when it comes to events, programs and the like?

SM: We've gone through pretty much a whole year now of doing virtual based programming. We've learned a lot; we've tried different things and we've learned about different ways to interact and connect with people so we're looking forward to continuing that. I mean, obviously, we're looking forward to being back in a place where we're meeting with people in person. And I think that a hybrid element of how [to] bring some of the things that we learned about the work that we do virtually into those in-person events, I think could be really interesting. How do we use that to connect with Manitobans that are not in Winnipeg, or in remote communities, and then also with the national and international folks? So that'll be the next learning curve, that kind of hybrid model. So we're looking forward to tackling that. And we're really looking forward to artists being able to get back into their cycles so that we can really see the benefits and the results of the work that has gone into the planning and whatnot. But we know that there's a lot of creative work that is going to come out this year, records that are coming out regardless of not being

able to tour or whatever, so we look forward to supporting and amplifying that activity. And also just looking inward, you know, at what we're doing, how we're working as a team and making sure that we're taking care of each other and staying healthy and staying in a position where we can properly serve our community.

IT: Awesome. Sean, I'm very grateful for your time. Do you have any final thoughts in regards to the Manitoba local arts scene and how it might evolve in that post-COVID-19 world?

SM: I guess when I think about getting to a place where we're connecting in person again, I really think about the kind of synergistic meetings that happen that I think informs so much of our creative output and creative community, and also the business output and the business side of what we do, that, I think is really missed. I think that what happens in a virtual setting is we can have a lot of purposeful connections with people that we're close to already. But those sort of happenstance, that kind of like running into people in a club and just being out, seeing shows and maybe seeing things that we that we didn't have to specifically log on to watch, you know, and being surprised by things. I'm looking forward to that being back a part of the mix. I think we may be underestimating the power of the loss of that kind of happenstance and synergy that happens from those kinds of in-person things. So I do look forward to that and I do hope, for the sake of the artists who love so much being on stage in front of an audience, that we get back to that soon.

IT: And I can safely say, as someone who would be in the crowd, I fully agree with you. Just being able to see a live show would be one of the most exciting things I'm looking forward to when we're all in that post-COVID-19 world. But Sean, thank you so much for

your time and to be willing to talk about the Manitoba local arts scene and where it might all land.

SM: Great. Well, thank you. Thanks for the very interesting conversation.