

STUDENT SHOWCASE

A Captive Audience: A Film to Express Students' Perspectives during the COVID-19 Pandemic Pivot

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Abstract

This essay introduces a film that was produced for a course project during the Spring 2020 semester. The film, entitled "Captivity," presents music students' perspectives and experiences early in the pandemic. It points to the important role that the arts play in people's lives as they navigate frightening and uncertain situations. The film can be viewed at <https://blount.as.ua.edu/captivity/>.

Keywords: COVID-19; performing arts; students

2020 began with the great hope that many, including myself, experience at the New Year: it was a time for fresh starts and brighter mindsets. This hopeful scene stood in stark contrast to the many tragic events that seemed to characterize 2020. As COVID-19 continues to change lives and shape the "new normal," the beginning of 2020 feels both like yesterday and long ago. The passage of time has felt "off" as the daily structure of our lives still has not returned to what we consider normal.

I witnessed many changes over the past year at the University of Alabama from a student's perspective. The progression of the pandemic and subsequent pivot to the "new normal" impacted campus communities across the nation. The effects of COVID-19 were disorienting for many, but especially so for young people working to develop a better understanding of the world and our place in it, an already challenging journey under normal circumstances, much less during an unprecedented global pandemic. It was in the midst of this that I created a film, entitled "Captivity," for a class project (see Copeland and Wightman 2021, this issue). The project was one way that our anthropology class pivoted from in-person to virtual learning.

While the project assignment was quite open-ended, I wanted to produce something that was personal but also larger than my experience alone. I created a video that provided a glimpse into students' perspectives as the pandemic restrictions were rapidly evolving during the spring semester of 2020. The film can be viewed online at

<https://blount.as.ua.edu/captivity/>. This project is a combination of personal vlogs during the first months of the pandemic as well as discussions of other students' experiences as we tried to find our footing in this uncertain and quite unsettling time. Those sharing their experiences in this project are both undergraduate and graduate-level music students as well as professors at the University of Alabama. Everyone faced new challenges during this time, but the experiences of music students were unique as music is based so deeply on personal connection, interaction, and collaboration. Vocal artists encountered more difficulty learning, practicing, and performing as vocal projection was discouraged as unsafe during COVID-19. A career in the arts is scary to pursue under normal circumstances, but more so during a pandemic that left many unable to do the work that they love.

The pandemic pivot posed unique challenges for budding performing artists. It was therefore important to me that this project show the multiple emotional transitions that took place in the first few months of 2020. It begins with renewed – yet short-lived – hope as tragic events began to unfold within the first week of 2020. Then, COVID-19 emerged and drastically impacted life as we knew it. While processing this change, the video also captures the hope that people hold for the future.

The University of Alabama faced many crucial decisions. For everyone's safety, after an extended Spring Break, classes were moved online. The knowledge that this decision was the safest and best practice did not make it easier. Everyone found themselves learning many new skills to navigate this new form of learning, all while trying to maintain our physical and mental well-being. In what seemed like an instant, our surroundings shifted from a campus filled with people to our homes and our computers. Our lives were filled with confusion, stress, and uncertainty as we began to fully realize the immensity of these changes. There seemed to be a collective feeling of falling behind where we were meant to be in life, missing experiences, not doing enough, not achieving enough, though in reality getting anything done in this state of global confusion was an accomplishment in and of itself.

Many music classes were not easily switched to an online format. The practical applications of our future jobs, such as performing, suddenly seemed impossible due to the new technical and psychological obstacles. Emotional and psychological strain affect performers just as much as physical strain, and 2020 packed quite a punch in that regard. Things shifted and we continued to learn as best we could while watching the world come to a halt. Centers of performing arts all over the world closed, with directors not knowing when it would be safe to reopen and wondering, as everyone was, "what now?" The only answer seemed to be to continue on and figure it out as we went. This time demonstrated the importance of art in people's lives. We watched as people expressed how art – books, movies, puzzles, painting, television, poetry, music – was the only way they maintained any normalcy. Quotes throughout my short film reflect this clearly. These were all responses

when I asked people to comment on what the arts and especially music has meant in their lives during COVID-19.

The pandemic situation has continued to change rapidly since the creation of this film, and it almost seems already outdated. Many COVID-19 precautions have shifted back and forth between strict and lenient. The problems and roadblocks that seemed so intimidating and scary have become the new norm for all students trying to learn during the pandemic. The arts community specifically has shown so much ingenuity and creativity in continuing to spread joy and creation as safely as possible under the current circumstances.

If, while spending a substantial amount of our college career in this almost constant state of change, we somehow find a way to learn, achieve, and grow as people, we will be more than ready to continue shaping the world into what we see as the brightest future. Despite being scary, difficult, and quite unnerving, this pandemic has also been a time of reflection, reevaluation, and personal growth, all things for which we previously did not allow ourselves time. I hope this project shows both the difficult situations faced during the earlier days of the pandemic and the hope that we still hold – for the arts community and for the world.

References

Copeland, Toni, and Abigail Wightman. 2021. "The Pandemic Pivot: Change and Adaptability during Quarantines, Social Distancing, and Anthropology in the Virtual Classroom." *Teaching and Learning Anthropology Journal* 4 (1).

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