

April 30, 2020

Executive Director Sereke-Bhran
DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities
200 I St SE, Suite 1400
Washington DC 20003

CC: Kay Kendall, Stacie Lee Banks, Cora Masters Barry, Edmund C. Fleet, Quanice Floyd, Rhona Wolfe Friedman, Alma H. Gates, Miles Gray, Natalie Hopkinson, Kymber Menkiti, MaryAnn Miller, Chinedu Felix Osuchukwu, Josef Palermo, Maria Hall Rooney, Cicie Sattarnilasskorn, José Alberto Uclés, Gretchen B. Wharton, Derek Younger

Dear Executive Director Sereke-Bhran and Commissioners of the DC Commission on Arts & Humanities,

My name is Christopher Naoum I am the co-founder of Listen Local First DC (LLF). Additionally I am the co-programmer and former co-producer of the *Kingman Island Bluegrass & Folk Festival*, Co-Founder for the *Funk Parade* and the *Down in the Reeds Festival* and co-organizer of a yearly music policy conference now called *The Music Policy Forum Summit*. I am writing to you all today on behalf of the incredibly talented DC Music Community that includes thousands of individual musicians, producers, managers, venue owners, staff, sound engineers, promoters, journalists, and educators representing all wards, races, cultural backgrounds, genres, ages, and sexual orientations

Listen Local First DC and the music community at large urge the DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities (DCCAH) to 1) remit payment to all 2019 grantees who have not yet received the funds they were awarded last October 2) prioritize all new funding for individual artists and musicians 3) consider the severity of the threat facing the local music economy and reserve a percentage of the DCCAH budget exclusively for music economy support.

The Music Community Has Been Hit the Hardest by COVID and Has Nowhere to Turn for Support.

The local music community and entire local music economy infrastructure has been decimated by COVID-19. Even as the city plans to begin the process of re opening, it is clear that musicians and the music industry will suffer from extended social distancing impact well into 2021.¹

For the past seven weeks LLF and music community organizers have held bi weekly calls and illuminated the fact that almost no musicians have received a dime of financial assistance from the local government. Unemployment benefits for gig workers and creatives just opened up last

¹ <https://consequenceofsound.net/2020/04/health-expert-concerts-wont-return-fall-2021/>

week and funds won't be available for at least another three weeks. Unemployment benefits also will not cover a community with many members who work for tips, cash gig payments and either have not filed taxes in 2018 or have filed taxes that do not represent the full extent of their income. Many of these musicians including those in our older community do not have the ability to create lost income reports and have not been able to navigate the incredibly complex maze of online aid portals due to technical limitations. These scenarios are not unique to musicians, they exist across the entire arts community.

Even if an individual artist or musician successfully applies for unemployment benefits, which is likely less than they make a month from gigging, that might be the only source of income they will receive unless they were able to apply for some small lifeline grants from Musicares or local churches. It seems like individuals will not be receiving any of the DC small business grants and are most likely not eligible for SBA or other federal grants. What that means is that in a month when emergency restrictions are eased, musicians and artists across the city will be inundated with three months of back rent, utility bills, loan payments and all other bills that have accrued during this time of shut down. This debt will be insurmountable and cripple so many in the music community.

There is no doubt that this is a terrible time for everyone and no organization or local business is doing great. A majority of the support efforts and resources provided by Federal and local governments seem to be designed to support businesses and large nonprofits. Very little financial support has been directed towards individuals and especially individuals in some of our most vulnerable populations. In DC the administration is rolling out a plan to reopen the government that will provide tax breaks to larger developers, big businesses and major institutions. Meanwhile numerous studies and research show the best way to support communities in economic crises is not by propping up trickle down economic principles but by giving money directly to individuals and families.

DCCAH is in a unique position, as a newly independent agency, to be a thought leader for artists, musicians and state arts agencies across the country by rolling out a new grant cycle primarily dedicated to providing direct support to individual artists on a massive scale across the city.

If DCCAH focused all of its efforts on providing individual grants to artists and musicians that would have the greatest lasting impact on the Commission and will benefit the most number of creatives.

First off, we hope that the Commission prioritizes getting individual artists and musicians the 2020 grant dollars that they were awarded in October of 2019. We know of a handful of musicians who still have not received their fellowship grant money.

Second we understand that DCCAH provides funding to institutions, art non-profits, and individuals, but given the fact that there are federal and local resources available for institutions

and non-profits while there is a severe shortage of resources available to individual creators, we hope that the Commission will restructure grants for the remainder of the year to prioritize grants for individuals.

By providing direct funding to the individuals that have been hit the hardest by COVID-19, the Commission will allow individuals to spend the money on the exact things they need to survive this devastating period in their lives and hopefully come out on the other side with some hope and inspiration. It will also provide a unique opportunity for DCCAH to re-introduce itself to a new and much broader sector of the arts community.

LLF has served on the Music Fellowship grant panels for the past four years. Year after year we have seen the same artists apply and receive these grants. This does not mean that those applicants are not worthy of the grants but it points to a bigger issue regarding communication of opportunities. The truth is that unless an artist has applied for a DCCAH grant in the past or has signed up to receive Commission correspondence they are most likely not being notified about the grant opportunities and deadlines. Rolling out new grants for individuals at a time of real need will bring many new creatives into the fold and expand the importance and reach of the Commission throughout the music community.

Create a Brand New \$400,000 Emergency Fund for Individual Artists and set aside a Large Portion of FY21 Grants to be Redirected Towards Individuals Especially The Music Community.

We understand that the \$400,000 that the Commission will receive from the NEA through the CARES Act cannot be re-granted directly to individuals. However, we urge the Commission to reserve that funding for small nonprofits who directly hire musicians and artists. (The MusicianShip and Words Beats & Life are good examples) At the same time an equivalent \$400,000 Emergency COVID Grant should be created exclusively for individuals. Additionally we believe that a majority of the FY21 grants should be redirected to an expanded version of the Arts & Humanities Fellowship Grants with a much larger allotment set aside for music fellowship grants. Our previous testimony to the Commission explains why the Music Fellowship grants should be proportional to the actual size of the music community in relation to the arts community as a whole. ²

Not to dwell on a larger issue at this time, but the music community has been underserved and undercounted by the Commission for a long time. Unlike other arts disciplines the music community is made up of individuals, who do not have multi million dollar theatre companies, performing arts institutions and well established galleries to advocate on their behalf. There are

² Listen Local First's DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities Testimony in the February 2020 Committee on the Whole Performance Oversight Hearing, Page 2, paragraph 9, Letter dated February 27, 2020.
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/569e660569a91a75f8219bf7/t/5e7033b5a2628a4ef348a362/1584411574403/LLF+Testimony+for+DCCAH+February+2020+Oversight+Hearing.pdf>

over 5000 musicians and music industry professionals, living, regularly performing and working in the district. This community operates primarily as individual entities so the aggregated voice is rarely heard by the Commission and the Administration but that does not mean our ask for additional resources is not easily justifiable.

Thank you for your time and service,

Christopher Naoum - Co-Founder Listen Local First DC

Brent Gossett - CEO of All Inclusive Entertainment & Founder of DuPont Brass

Sandra Basanti - Pie Shop

Sara Curtin - musician

Maureen Andary - musician

Kokayi - Musician

Chris Bulbulia - Musician; Assistant GM Sticky Rice DC

Michael Ounallah - Musician/ Bandleader

Cam Poles - Manager (Black Alley Band); songwriter; musician

Jackson Sinnenberg - Listings Editor, CapitalBop

Miles Ryan - CEO, 7DrumCity

Amy K Bormet - Washington Women in Jazz/Strange Woman Records

Aerica Shimizu Banks - Head of Federal Affairs, Pinterest; singer/songwriter

Nico Hobson owner of GoGoRadio LIVE & WINDCRadio

Sterling Anderson (Steelosoul) Brass Musician

Emma Amiri-Ghaemmaghamy (Emma G) - Emma G Music LLC / singer / songwriter / managing director of Capitol Groove Collective

Aaron L. Myers, II - Chair, Board of Directors: Capitol Hill Jazz Foundation / Independent Artist

A. Elena Lacayo, Musician, Elena & Los Fulanos

Emmanuel Clarke, The Peace + Happyness Agency

Jim Thomson - Booking agent for Multiflora Productions, Bossa Bistro, Electric Cowbell Records

Will Urquhart - A/V Director, DC Music Review

Jonathan Een Newton - GM at Free Dirt Records, co-founder Hamlin Street Diner, musician

Graham Smith-White - Founder of The Infinite Goodness LLC, Musician/The Sunrise Review

Jon Weiss- Babe City Records owner and talent buyer at Union Stage, Pearl Street Warehouse, Pie Shop, Miracle Theatre, Capital Turnaround

Alex Braden - Halcyon Arts Lab Fellow, Sound Artist and Musician

Matthew Dowling - Musician, Artist Manager

Bill Spieler - DC9 Nightclub