

Dirty Cello at the Oakland Zoo with Brock, the singing parrot



COURTESY OF DIRTY CELLO

LIFE ON THE ROAD

Performing during the pandemic has led to some wild adventures

By Rebecca Roudman

I'm the leader of the international touring band Dirty Cello, a cello-fronted blues, bluegrass, and rock band that (normally) does around 100 shows a year. We're always on the road, all over the United States and around the world. It's been a struggle to keep rocking and rolling through the pandemic, but as COVID-19 shut everything down, I made it my mission to keep playing and performing. And we found a way. We've actually managed to do a lot of performing—all with safety at the forefront of our minds.

Our first stop was the world of livestreams and all of the technology that goes along with it, and we've continued a regular schedule of virtual concerts. One of our favorite ways of doing this has been to borrow empty

theaters, crank up the stage lights, and do a rockin' show to remind people what things will be like when we're back to normal. We've also partnered with a diverse group of organizations, from the Google legal team to a slightly intoxicated yacht club. I even got to be on a Facebook commercial with actor Ken Jeong.

There were plenty of missteps and near disasters early on. As regular Zoom performers, we learned the hard way that step one is reminding the audience to mute themselves (during one memorable 45-minute show, the Zoom host kept clearing his throat and disabling our audio). Another early Zoom show found us working with an absent-minded host who forgot to be home

for the virtual concert. We therefore serenaded a grocery store from her phone while she finished her shopping.

But livestreams don't feed an artist's soul, and our first attempt to get back out in the world resulted in a crazy viral video. I had contacted the Oakland Zoo after reading an article about the animals getting bored without the regular interaction with people. A small, mobile version of the band traveled over to the zoo, and the keepers led us on a veritable safari as we attempted to entertain a diverse selection of animals throughout the zoo. Many of the animals were harsh critics—an elephant shook his head, turned his back, and walked away; a tortoise turned around and

gently lowered himself into a mud puddle; and the goats were only interested in snacks. While playing for the petting zoo, I felt a little awkward using a horsehair bow.

One of our last stops, however, brought us to a slightly molting green Amazon parrot named Brock, short for Broccoli. As we began to play, the parrot began singing an E flat. Our guitarist quickly called a blues jam in E flat, and I began trading fours with an actual parrot. Google “Dirty Cello and parrot” to see the local news coverage on this amazing new work.

As restrictions eased, I began to search out COVID-safe performance venues that were outdoors, could ensure mask wearing and social distancing, and wanted live music. This led to a whirlwind of bizarre adventures. First, the cul-de-sac concert tour. My guitarist husband and I built a large mobile stage that tows behind a truck and unfolds like a transformer to reveal lights and a sound system. We’ve dragged this creation all over the West Coast. For other gigs, we looked to ranches, farms, and other places that could do socially distant hay-bale seating. This series took us to two completely unrelated ranches that raise bison, and an apple orchard where an angry neighbor called the local sheriff over the concert. The sheriff arrived mid-set, took one look at the extensive safety procedures in place, and left us with her blessing to continue.

Our most exciting and unusual COVID-19 concert took us to another place known for sunshine, the outdoors, and lots of distance—a nudist resort. The bands’ clothes were kept firmly in place, but we played a socially distant show for a dancing, mask-wearing (and *only* mask-wearing) audience. Right before the downbeat, I reminded the band of the old adage that if you feel nervous, imagine the audience naked. In this case, not a stretch of the imagination. We also sold a surprising number of Dirty Cello T-shirts.

As things start to look a little brighter from our San Francisco-area home, with a potential end to the lockdown in sight, it’s been interesting to reflect on some of the lessons I’ve learned from this experience. Leading a cello-fronted band that plays everything but classical music has always required creative thinking, and during

this weird time, it’s been one of my guiding principles. I’m happy to say that this improvisational outlook has allowed me to keep paying my band.

I’ve also learned how deeply important live music is for many people. As our audience sizes dropped from hundreds to under 15 sometimes, there was no less value in working hard to put smiles on their faces. I was reminded that size of an audience is less important than the happiness music can bring.

No matter where this pandemic leads us as a society, I hope to keep pushing the value of live music and performing as much as I can. I’ve had very few regrets during the pandemic and made lots of great memories. Perhaps one of the only regrets from all these bizarre concerts was our *second* show at the Oakland Zoo, when NBC asked us to perform again with Brock the parrot.

On that day it was obvious that Brock had decided to pursue a solo career when he chose not to sing with my band a second time. ■

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