

Working to beat the sound of silence

Covid-19 has been catastrophic for live music, theatre and the arts in general. Gigs and performances cancelled since March, thousands of jobs gone, companies lost and artists struggling.

Strangely, the arts were an afterthought when the government announced its aid package and yet the industry brings in billions of pounds every year.

Can we get music back on the stage? Sammy Jones spoke with the Milton Keynes man heading up the search for a solution.

Back in the 1980s and 1990s Chris Kemp enriched the memory banks of many a local music fan; as promoter at Milton Keynes venue The Pitz, he was responsible for bringing artists including Iron Maiden, PJ Harvey and Blur to town.

After delivering more than 3000 bands to the stage, he retired himself as a promoter, and became a professor and Pro vice Chancellor at a university.

And then he set about another challenge – creating a company that would be completely unique to anything else, and Mind Over Matter (MoM) Consultancy was born.

They are experts in the fields of crowd and event safety, risk management, leadership, crowd science and counter terrorism.

Chris has worked at festivals and events all over the world, and has provided consultancy for some of the biggest global music and events companies.

When it appeared almost out of nowhere, Covid-19 hit hard.

“On the first day of lockdown, my business was all but wiped out,” Chris admitted, “Without my major clients producing, without venues working, both my consultancy and courses had no work.”

Chris’ company kept busy providing free support to clients who were struggling in the eye of the pandemic. It was an opportunity to give something back in a time of need.

Nine months on, and with venues around the world still silenced, MoM is utilising the expertise of its 21 world class consultants by trying to find a way forward for venues during their darkest hour.

“The pandemic hitting the country has made it even more important for us to be at the heart of the changing event space,” Chris acknowledges.

Initial work was spent focusing on providing



Teamwork - Chris pictured (centre)
Credit: Mark Bennett Photography

special tablespots for Premier Clubs so they could test new ways of working against the debilitating backdrop of Covid, with the ultimate goal of learning how the developments would work in a real environment.

Chris said: “Further work was with dance; with schools and the International Dance Teachers Association, to get dance back into people’s psyche in a safe way. We are focused on large

scale events as well trying to bring this back into circulation as quickly and as safely as possible.”

Much of his time is currently being spent at London venue The Roundhouse, a much loved 5000-capacity concert and performing arts venue in Camden Town.

“It is one of a series of key London venues working to get shows back on their stages,” Chris told me.



Live music at The Roundhouse

safely it can be carried out.

“You have to look at how people will feel and their journey from sofa to sofa. How they will experience the event and how safe they will feel? We always have to remember that everyone has a different risk appetite; some are large, some small, so we have to make sure that we are catering for all and making sure that everyone returning feels safe.”

Chris continued: “Communication is vitally important. With every change we make and every element we discuss, the way it is communicated pre, during and after the event has to be taken into consideration.”

And it really is a complex business. If you think a one-way system and table service in a pub is difficult to adjust to, just imagine the scenario in a venue as significant as The Roundhouse.

“When focusing on just the entry into the venue so many permutations are available, starting with safe and socially distanced queuing.

“Taking it to another level, discussions may be had as to whether temperature testing should take place inside or outside the venue, and what the protocols are if the venue produces a three strikes policy.

“This also encapsulates the way in which tickets and cloakrooms are used and whether the venue has to go totally online and everything is downloadable onto the phone to create a clearer delivery.”

It is a complex business, Chris says, and that much is clear. The pandemic has devastated the industry that he works in, and the only certain thing right now is uncertainty.

For Chris, music is his job and his passion, so having the pandemic trash his work and leisure time in one fell swoop has been a hard blow.

From the moment he saw Uriah Heap in 1974, rock music had him in its grip.

“That was the catalyst for much of my formal work in the leisure and music industry. Music is our beating heart as well as our friend,” he says, “The role of music and events is staggering - before Covid it was worth in excess of £3 billion annually to the economy; it employs millions of people both directly and indirectly in the UK and provides people with the most brilliant experiences.

“Covid has thrown the music economy into freefall making us less effective in the way we perform as a nation.

“Sadly, hundreds of thousands of individuals who support the industry have either gone bust or been laid off. Where were the Government when they really needed help?”

Business is thankfully showing signs of improvement for Chris. But let’s be clear, there is still a long way to go.

“It’s nowhere near back to any form of normality,” he admits, “Only time will tell whether we can ride the storm, but there are signs of a slight recovery.

“My biggest fear is that people forget just how deadly this virus can be and go back to normal too soon. But on the other hand, if we don’t return to some kind of normality, there will be a further downturn; we are faced with profit versus safety and that’s a tough call for some.”

Mind you, even in this decidedly dour time for our music industry, Chris can still find reasons to be cheerful: “Working with companies during Covid has been fun; things like attending meetings where everyone wears a mask, and no one can hear what people are saying!

“The camaraderie and friendship brings out the best in people. I just hope that that won’t be forgotten too quickly...”