

## Good Vibes Friday: Reflections on Livestreaming During the COVID-19 Lockdown

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This is a tale of seven DJs' rapid adaptation to a new way of performing, accompanied by reflections from the dance music scene on the future of the virtual club. A few weeks into the COVID-19 "lockdown", on Good Friday 2020, we decided to convert my planned "In the Key of She" networking party at Brighton Music Conference to a live-streamed event: "Good Vibes Friday".



Figure 1. Good Vibes Friday Flyer. Photo credit: Samantha Warren (2020).

[In the Key of She](#) is the title of my Leverhulme Trust Fellowship, exploring career experiences of female, female-identifying and gender minority electronic music (self) producers to shed light on the persistent male dominance of digital-creative cultural production. The music industry recognises its gender balance problem with various initiatives to balance festival and gig line-ups, such as the [Keychange](#) initiative. When we consider the more technical roles in the industry, things get even more unbalanced. For example, according to the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, only around 2% of music producers are women (Smith et al. 2019). With electronic music production increasingly being seen as a source of reputational capital for contemporary DJs, if women are not producing and/or releasing their own tracks, they will struggle to compete with their male peers (Reitsamer 2011).

### Getting Started: Pre-Show Nerves

We'd agreed to run the event several weeks in advance of the planned date, and I got stuck in to producing flyers and artwork for it (Figure 1), but we all put off doing anything about the technical arrangements until just over a week beforehand. With the exception of me, we were a bunch of experienced, accomplished performers, well used to setting up technical equipment and with considerable audio know-how. Yet we were still suffering from that destructive kind of paralysis that comes from being anxious of the unknown, and especially the technological unknown. These streaming technologies are rooted in the gaming world, and thus firmly coded as masculine, so it can feel extra daunting for women to learn to use them. After some deliberation we decided to use the free broadcast software OBS, and stream via Twitch. I think we were all in denial about learning how to livestream an event to some degree. At the start of this project most of us didn't know each other very well, but we all

agreed that one of the nicest parts of the experience was pulling together to help each other out—there was definitely a camaraderie in trying to get everything to work, and none of us wanted to quit. I'm pleased to say that all but one of us managed to get the set-up to work in the end.

When you're a DJ who is also female, you're used to having to make everything just that little bit better than when the men do it. We feel we are under pressure to be perfect *every* time as any mistakes we do make are less likely to be attributed to an off day, or regular slip-up on the part of the DJ, than they are to the fact we are women. In turn, our clattered mix, or poorly adjusted sound level is then extended to *all* female DJs, in ways that just don't happen for men. It can be hard to mix with the weight of the sisterhood resting on your shoulders. We also knew that women are likely to be subject to online trolling (Suhasini 2020), with misogynist posts and sexualised remarks about their appearance, dress, hair, etc. Track selection, set progression and especially technical skill are also often called into question (Renshaw 2016).

Despite being confident live performers in the physical world, it was not surprising that most of us were nervous about putting ourselves out there to a public we couldn't see, through a medium we weren't familiar with.

### **To Charge or Not to Charge?**

I initially intended to link the livestream to a PayPal pool so I could pay the 6 other DJs who were sharing their music and time. For at least 2 of the DJs, gigging is a large part of their income, and another relies entirely on her musical career to make a living. The COVID-19 lockdown has completely wiped out most full time DJs' main revenue streams. At the time of writing, there is still no live sector, and with no clubs open, there are no gigs, which means no income. In addition, many freelance DJs fell between the cracks of the UK government's support for the self-employed. I hoped that our audience would want to support these artists who had seen their livelihoods disappear overnight.

However, when contacting a couple of PR people in my networks to ask if they would help promote the event, they were reluctant to do so if we were raising money for the artists themselves. So we decided to run the event as a fundraiser for Crisis, the UK homeless charity, for their COVID-19 appeal (and raised almost £400). The general feeling was that if we "charged" to access the livestream, there would be a social media "backlash" with fans considering a DJ playing in their own home, to audiences in *their* own homes to be money-grabbing and self-centred, plus people just wouldn't pay to watch/ listen. I had already seen this response to deep house/ techno DJ Mr. C's Facebook offer of one-to-one DJ lessons via Zoom for \$100, plus a similar reaction to another DJ's offer to provide detailed feedback on bedroom producers' tracks for £30 a time. These seemed like excellent opportunities—when else would you be able to have such direct access to big name professionals in this way? And why shouldn't these people charge for their time (Reynaldo 2020)?

The backlash demonstrates an assumption that DJs are well paid, something that is not true for the vast majority of those who work in the industry. But more significantly, it speaks very much to the "culture of free" on the Internet, that just because it's online, it should be way cheaper, ideally costing nothing. We see this in the pricing of any creative product distributed or consumed via the Internet. There is no shortage of people who will provide their content for free either, meaning that anyone who wants—or more importantly *needs*—to monetise their content will have great difficulty doing so because there is always someone to undercut them. Even the Good Vibes Friday DJs were happy not to get paid, saying that they were just looking forward to jamming with a bunch of other women, learning new livestreaming skills

and getting the chance to play "in public" which in turn would help them maintain their profile among their followers. Yet in the physical world, clubbers would have happily paid to enter a club. We were providing 8 hours of non-stop music, the DJs were still performing for the audience, still doing their job, so surely that's worth a *fiveer*?

### **Managing the Stream: Communication is Key**

Sadly, on the night there were problems with Jay Hill's stream quality. She is located on the east coast of the U.S. and although her local internet was working fine, something was going awry under the pond it seemed and her stream quality was so poor that we had to abandon her feed. She has since recreated the set and posted it on her YouTube channel (Hill 2020).

### **Jay Hill's Post-Stream Recording of Her Set for Good Vibes Friday.**

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<iframe width="600" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/2EtKDaEO_Vk"
frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-
picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>
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Poor Jay played for at least half an hour before she glanced at her phone and saw I'd been trying to message to tell her that both her video *and* audio stream were too stilted and jumpy to continue and we had to move to the next DJ who played for an extra hour. This really brought home how important keeping in real-time contact with one another was in managing the stream—coordinating set start and finish times to ensure minimal pauses between DJs, and relaying feedback on audio levels, camera positions and so on proved invaluable. We already had a shared Facebook Messenger group and it was brilliant fun sending comments and messages of support to each other as the night progressed.

However, it can be hard, and feel unprofessional, to check your phone when you are in the mix, but unless you are working with two laptops it's also the only way you can see the comments that your audience are leaving, which is a vital part of feeling connected, as I discuss further below.

A couple of us had computer crashes and last-minute tech panics, but by and large the stream went off really well. Twitch has a mode where one account can "host" another stream through it and this is the system we used. It meant that the audience only had to stay "tuned" to one Twitch account for the whole night, and only one of us (me) had to be involved in managing the change-over between DJs. At the end of one set I would simply "un-host" the current DJ, then "host" the next using a simple command in the chat box. If there was a delay I could revert to streaming my own content which displayed an "up next" placeholder. Changeovers were a little stressful, but apart from Jay's connectivity disaster they all went smoothly and the sense of achievement was palpable. I very much enjoyed being a virtual stage-manager! Yes, we *could* pull this off!

### **Performing to a Virtual Audience: Togetherness Through Comments**

One of the most interesting dimensions to the whole event was how it felt to be performing at home, to an empty room—or perhaps our partners, and pets—while simultaneously knowing you are broadcasting live to an unseen audience. DJing is a co-created performative artform as Brigitte Biehl's wonderful work on "kinaesthetic feedback loops" (2018) explains. The circuit of embodied exchange between DJ and dancers is an affective element in working the crowd and responding to their vibe in terms of mixing style, track selection, tempo, energy management and so on. In turn, they respond to you as DJ and the loop continues. Of course, all this is missing when the audience is only in your imagination! As I have mentioned already, one important way in which connection was established was via online messaging.

While playing my set I was receiving messages from personal friends via Whatsapp, messages from my fellow stream DJs on Messenger, and from people I didn't know via the Twitch chat box. Two of us had microphones in our set-up which made it easier to respond directly to the "crowd". Saya, one of our DJs, put this beautifully: "I felt togetherness through the comments. Instead of looking over the decks at my dancers, I was looking at my computer screen for their words".

### **The Club in the Home: Ironing Boards, Props and Camera Angles**

One of the challenges of DJing in a bar or club is that you often have no idea what the DJ booth, or set-up will be like. For women, the decks are often too high (a few of us have had to stand on boxes in the past, to be tall enough to see everything properly), the lighting can be poor, and the space cramped—all of which you have little or no control over. When you bring the club to your home, you have total control, but this brings with it a whole new set of problems. Do you have furniture that's the right height? Is what can be seen behind you appropriate? How do you stop kids and pets wandering into the scene? Are you able to shut yourself off from flatmates, pets, or family for the duration of the stream? Does any of this even matter?

For me, one of the joys of watching livestreams has been voyeuristic—to see into the artist's domestic space. The ethos of EDMC (particularly in the underground) is very much DIY, so it seems right that this extends to livestreams too. Watching Carl Cox sitting in his music room, casually flipping vinyl on and off his turntables, or Four Tet play a Boiler Room set from his house with his children's artwork on the walls also feels like a great leveller, a restoration of the human in the idol and a return to a more community feel around the music and its performance. It's also just been fun to see how my friends and DJs I admire, like [Anna Lunoe](#), have dressed their spaces with fluffy toys, disco-balls, backdrops and gone to so much trouble to recreate that club experience, all while maintaining enough light for effective video.

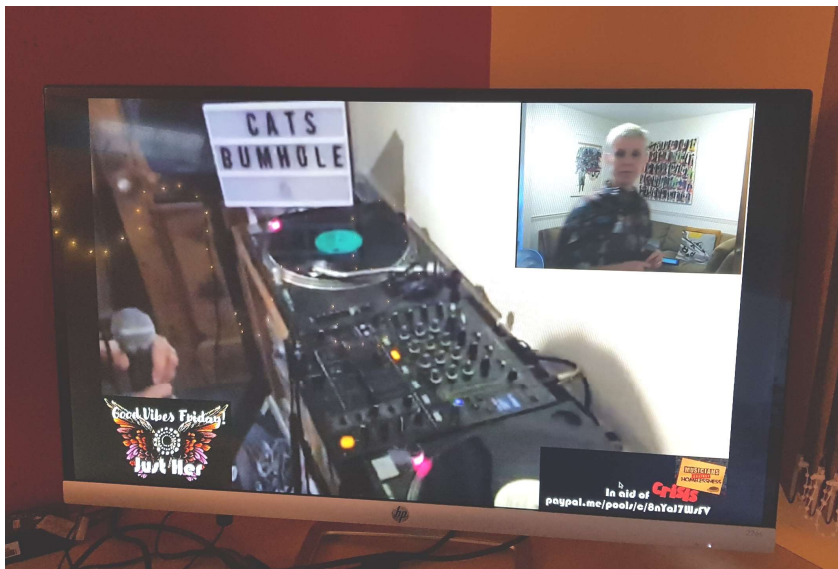


Figure 2. Just Her's Lightbox. Photo credit: Samantha Warren (2020).

Partners and family can also be much more involved than when their other half, or Mum, goes *out* to play a show. Our partners proved invaluable in helping with technical logistics and screen tests, making cameo appearances, monitoring the chat messages and even bringing

an interactive dimension to things—Just Her was taking requests for phrases to display on the lightbox that her wife then duly fulfilled no matter what was suggested (Figure 2)!

For us, the main issues were firstly getting the right equipment—not all of us had CDJs or a controller in our homes, and even when we did, it wasn't straightforward to set up the decks where there was room to play, *and* get a decent angle for the webcam(s). Although I was fortunate to have a dedicated studio space, my DJ equipment was set up facing the wall, which required a lot of trial and error to reconfigure. It involved shifting the decks and mixer and using a tall side-table borrowed from the living room to balance the laptop on, via a pile of books.

The DJ among us with the most professional looking set up used an ironing board draped in a dark sheet! With another pinned up behind her, and disco-lights providing the perfect ambience, you never would have known she was standing in her living room. Another of us simply wasn't able to make her setup work, so we just streamed her audio with a logo placeholder for the visuals. The alternative would have been to stream footage of her chest for the entire hour which didn't seem like quality viewing! The final issue to take into account was the timing of people's slots—was the DJ able to play loud music when children, or other members of your household or neighbours were trying to sleep?



Figure 3. The Makeshift Livestream Studio. Photo credit: Samantha Warren (2020).

### **Virtually the New Normal?**

Some are suggesting that the "virtual club" may outlive the pandemic (Lhooq 2020). At least two of the Good Vibes only DJs are planning to continue online after clubs re-open—not to replace their face-to-face gigs, but for marketing, and connecting with new audiences, especially those in different countries. Since the GVO stream, Saya has been booked for an impressive number of livestreams and virtual gigs and hopes these will translate into bookings in the physical world when the time comes, and Psibindi has launched a Psysisters channel on Twitch to platform women artists and DJs. I will also continue to livestream from time to time as a result of this experience—if only to a handful of friends. I have been enjoying the "pop-up" feel of many streams—a quick message to friends, a post on social media and then "go live". Its reminiscent of the secret parties of the early rave scene.

But our experiences with Good Vibes Only show that not everyone is invited to this party. Access to DJ equipment, a space and time to perform, strong bandwidth, technical know-how and family/domestic circumstances all throw up challenges that will disproportionately affect parents (and probably that mostly means mothers), those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and people who live in areas with poor connectivity (Smith et al. 2018)—either through their rural location, or high demand on local networks. Playing music at home also requires your neighbours' patience which may not be forthcoming if you live in a tower

block, or multi-occupancy housing, which is likely to impact on BAME communities especially.

If we want to exploit the opportunities the virtual club offers *for all*, these issues are important to note. It has now become clear a return to the "old normal" is not likely for a long time and fully immersive events are now appearing. VR festivals with full and impressive line-ups such as [Lost Horizon](#) and Resident Advisor now has a [streamland](#) page where ravers can find an event to "attend" any night of the week. However, only those with the means to stream are able to take part in any digital rave revolution if it happens.

These larger, professionally organised events are also raising the profile of monetisation. Since our Good Vibes Only stream, Soundcloud have partnered with Twitch to fast-track Soundcloud Pro creators to "affiliate level" on Twitch allowing them to receive revenue from ads displayed during their stream. Facebook have a "stars" system allowing those who are enjoying livestreams and videos to send money to the artist, albeit in tiny amounts and reportedly have plans to roll-out a fuller pay-per-view system for "going live". Individual artists have been "busking" by asking for donations or asking people to buy their music on Bandcamp (especially on the first Friday of every month when Bandcamp have been waiving their fees). Mixcloud's new "live" feature allows tips (Morse 2020) and importantly has the most comprehensive partnership with licensing organizations meaning more creators get paid for their music too (Reynaldo 2020).

The virtual worlds and immersive virtual club experiences described by Llooq (2020) and Kocay (2020) certainly paint an enticing picture, and surely connect with increasing social shifts toward online connection, digital engagement and virtual experiences—whether we think this is for better or for worse. People from all over the world—DJs as holograms and crowd as avatars—can join these events in one space that simultaneously exists everywhere, yet nowhere. The ultimate in simulation, a perfect copy of something that can never exist in material form. If Baudrillard were alive today, perhaps he would just smile and say "*je te l'avais dit*", I told you so.

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## Filmography

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