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COLUMN | A BREAK IN THE MOSH PIT

By yomag (<http://theyomag.com/index.php/author/yomag/>) / May 12, 2020

By Jake Brandenstein

Saturday, March 14, I was helping my girlfriend move out of her college dorm in Western Pennsylvania after her college and many others ordered all on-campus students to return to their homes because of the coronavirus pandemic if they were able to do so.

It was a chaotic morning, but I had managed to pack up and fit everything in her car – absolutely everything: clothes, books, the Nintendo Switch and even her two rabbits.

Nice.

Before we left town, I pulled in to Country Fair to get some gas. Just as I was about to park my car, I got a call from my friend Nate Offerdahl, the owner of Westside Bowl, which is my favorite music venue and place to perform.

My band, We, the Creature, were supposed to perform the first of the two nights celebrating the second anniversary of Westside Bowl March 20 and 21. However, as soon as I saw that Offerdahl was calling me, I knew what it would be about. My gut feeling was unfortunately correct. The show wasn't going to happen.

"There's no way around it," Offerdahl said to me on the phone.

That was it; the show was postponed. On top of the obvious events surrounding the temporary shutdown of businesses across the country, Offerdahl told me the headlining band for that night, All Souls, backed out of the anniversary show. The group was coming all the way from Los Angeles and, understandably, this situation was not one in which the band was comfortable partaking in.

Other bands from out of the area were also scheduled to perform on this night. One of the other out-of-town bands, Lo-Pan, who is from Columbus, was also hesitant about performing since the pandemic had really started to set in.

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Although I saw it coming, I was still as disappointed to hear the news. The week had already been very chaotic, sudden and confusing. I had no reason to believe that other people were feeling any different toward this.



Frank Toncar performs in his band, Cosmic Lemons, at Westside Bowl's WestFest in March 2019. / Photo by Kamron Meyers

The fact this pandemic was serious enough to postpone one of the biggest local shows of the year was something that instilled a sense of fear in me. Overwhelming feelings of uncertainty had me pondering for much of my road trip. What was to come next? Will local venues be able to open back up after all of this?

I tried not to think too much and kept driving. The rural landscapes started to initiate an odd sense of slight comfort within. Pay attention to the road for six more hours. The rabbits munched on some hay and fell asleep.

I went on Instagram the next day and saw the post I knew was coming. Westside Bowl made a post stating that it was canceling all shows scheduled for the rest of March.

"It's hard to believe, but here we are. Like everyone else, we will be closing at 9 [p.m.]. All events for March are of course canceled. We will keep you posted in April and beyond. We have plans to do several livestream events in the coming days, so please stay tuned. We will continue to serve carry out from 4-11 [p.m.]. We love you, Youngstown. Stay safe. Stay Strong. Stay Gold. The Westside Bowl Family," the post read.



Westside Bowl has stayed open for takeout orders since these actions were taken. In fact, there has been a surge of support sweeping the place.

Hobie Butcher of Cosmic Lemons on drums. / Photo by

temporary closing of the venue, people immediately started rushing in to help by picking up the tab for hungry customers seeking pizza. On March 18 and 19, Westside Bowl's social media manager made a post on its Facebook and Instagram pages about Rebreather and DAGGRS, two local bands and friends of mine, who stepped in and paid for pizzas for numerous customers. These generous acts of the bands set a trend in the community. More people hopped on board with this idea, and it has been going quite strong since.

The current state of the world has left people in the entertainment industry particularly uncertain. No one is quite sure when things are going to settle down and venues will be able to open their doors for shows again. Fortunately, the spirit of the Youngstown music scene hasn't given up.

Barley Rantilla, frontman and guitarist of Rebreather, informed me that Rebreather is close to being done with its new album and is waiting until it's safe to plan a tour around its release. "Recording has been done. [We're] just waiting on final mixes. We haven't done anything since the quarantine," Rantilla told me through a Facebook message.

Offerdahl had also messaged me recently, saying that he still intends on having the anniversary show on a different date once the stay-at-home order is over. He is currently waiting for a confirmation with one of the touring acts. Hope perseveres.

I cannot wait to return to bellowing into a microphone in front of a crowd and strumming my bass guitar until my fingers bleed from hitting them off the strings. The unfortunate reality is that it's uncertain as to when I will be able to return to that. I miss the outside world. I miss the community of musicians who have been a second family to me. I miss the venue that has allowed people like me to go up on stage and freely express myself artistically.

Until then, I look forward to the days when everyone will look back and discuss how we all got through this—hopefully, as I stage-dive during the closing act.

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