



This picture shows patrons watching a band perform in a studio via a live stream, at music venue 'The Wanch' in Hong Kong. — AFP photos



In this picture a laptop and projector screen shows a live stream of a band performing in a studio for patrons at music venue 'The Wanch' in Hong Kong.

COVID curbs leave Hong Kong musicians on their 'last dollar'

A thundering thrash metal riff reverberated through a Hong Kong bar, but the music was being live-streamed from a studio across town to obey pandemic rules that have outlawed small gigs for more than 650 days. The coronavirus has battered live performances around the world, especially in the first 18 months of the pandemic, but nowhere has that hardship lasted longer than in Hong Kong. While gigs, festivals and international touring have returned with a vengeance globally, Hong Kong's musicians have had no such luck. For the vast majority of the pandemic the Chinese city has banned live performances in any place that serves food or drink.

Venues such as The Wanch, one of the city's oldest live music bars, have had to get creative. "We're just trying to do what we can to stay alive and keep the music going," John Prymmer, the bar's co-owner and a fixture of Hong Kong's live music scene, told AFP from Sunset Studios, from where the live music was being streamed. In a sound-proofed recording studio next door, local metal act Ozmium are careening through a mixture of their own tracks as well as covers of Iron Maiden and Metallica.

For now, a laptop screen perched in front of the band showing revelers inside The Wanch is the closest they can get to their fans. Frontman Ashish Jerry Justin said he had looked on with desperation as other businesses such as karaoke rooms, cinemas, banquets and hotpot restaurants have been allowed to resume. "And still in a place like a bar or a club, you cannot have live music even if there is a plexiglass separating us from the people who are watching us," he said. "I think it's highly unfair."



This picture shows band members of Occasionally Soft performing in a studio, for an audience watching a live stream at a music venue in Hong Kong.



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International isolation
Hong Kong has stuck to a version of China's zero-Covid system throughout the pandemic, which has hammered the local economy. While business hubs rivals such as Singapore, London and Tokyo have reopened, Hong Kong has kept up mandatory hotel quarantine, currently at three days. International acts including Billie Eilish, Justin Bieber, Maroon 5, Green Day and Guns N' Roses have all added Singapore to their world tours. But Hong Kong remains a touring dead zone. Live music has been classified as a high-risk activity by authorities, and banned for more than 650 of the slightly over 900 days since restrictions were first introduced in early April 2020.

Lito Castillo, head of the Hong Kong Musicians Union, estimates the job loss-

es to be "in the thousands". A professional keyboardist who is married to a singer, he says his family's income is now 30 percent of what it was before the pandemic, mainly earned from working tables in restaurants. "I'm down to my last dollar, at the moment we are just surviving, that's all," he told AFP. Others have pawned instruments and switched to the gig economy. One of the city's most talented guitarists now works for an international courier company, Castillo lamented. Many venues have closed, including Peel Fresco which shut its doors this month after 16 years. "The past three years have made it impossible to run a live music business in Hong Kong," the owners wrote on Facebook.

'Survival mode'

The mental toll has been intense. In a

recent survey, the Hong Kong Musicians Foundation found 11 percent of its members have had suicidal thoughts in the last year. Ten percent were in debt to the tune of HK\$100,000 (\$12,740) or more, and 13 percent had sold their instruments. "I think 'grim' is an understatement," said Adrian Fu, a singer-songwriter and former Cantopop recording artist who is one of the foundation's directors. Both the foundation and Castillo's union said letters and lobbying to the government had gone unnoticed.

Fu said he hoped authorities could see the importance of live performances to the economy but also Hong Kong's reputation as an international city of culture. "It is a huge, huge factor in the incubation of talent," he said of small venues and live bars. A spokesperson for city leader John Lee said the govern-

ment "understands the ardent expectations of the live music sector for relaxing social distancing measures" but gave no details on when or whether the ban would be lifted. The Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau-set up in July to promote Hong Kong as a "centre for international cultural exchange"-declined to comment. Alicia Beale, owner of live music venue The Aftermath, said she had tried to focus on the positive creativity artists had shown. Her venue has done live-streamed gigs, recorded fundraising albums and pivoted to whatever it can to draw people in, from quiz and game nights to support groups. "It's just been survival mode throughout the pandemic," she said. "I want to get to thriving mode, hopefully soon." — AFP



A King's Guard soldier walks along the lawn covered with flowers at the Windsor Castle in Windsor, England on the day of the state funeral for Queen Elizabeth II. — AFP

Flowers left for Queen Elizabeth to be composted, re-used in parks

The sea of floral tributes left in London's parks for Queen Elizabeth II will be composted and re-used on planting projects, the city's Royal Parks said Tuesday. A huge volume of flowers have been left in parks across London following the death of Britain's longest-serving monarch, who was laid to rest on Monday. Work to remove the bunches of flowers will begin next Monday, a week after the state funeral for the late sovereign, who died on September 8 aged 96 after 70 years on the throne.

Well-wishers will still be able to leave tributes but bunches of flowers which have already deteriorated will be taken away. The Royal Parks include well-known London green spaces such as Hyde Park, Kensington Gardens and Green Park, which is the scene of the main floral tribute site. The compost will be used on landscaping projects and shrubberies across the parks. — AFP

Theatre project aims to ease isolation of Japan's social recluses

Disillusioned by work and tired of life, Seiji Yoshida withdrew from the world for seven years, but now he's taking part in a play about the experiences of Japan's "hikikomori", or social recluses. The 42-year-old spent most of his thirties shut inside his home. "I was going through the motions of life, but lying to myself. Apart from work, I had nothing. I'd just had enough," he told AFP at a workshop for the international production. Yoshida was among more than a million Japanese aged 15 to 64 who lead highly reclusive lives, withdrawing from all social contact for at least six months, according to a 2020 government estimate.

Through an experimental theatre project, two French artists are hoping to offer

hikikomori-or "shut-ins" as they are often referred to in English-a chance to express themselves and regain self-confidence. Their play "Hiku" to be shown next year in France, Belgium and elsewhere in Europe aims to give hikikomori a platform for self-expression, while respecting their desire for isolation. It features robots controlled by participants at home in Japan and voice recordings of conversations held through bedroom doors. It also includes footage from small but noisy street demonstrations staged by hikikomori who are taking steps towards leaving their confinement-but who feel oppressed by Japan's demanding work culture. "We don't want to be forced to work! Stop oppressing us!" participants chanted at one demonstration filmed in the city of Takatsuki in western Japan. Yoshida, who took part in the protest, told AFP he was "very proud" to be part of the theatre production.

Robot 'avatars'

The producers are working in Takatsuki with a local organization, New Start Kansai, which provides support and company for hikikomori to help them gradually readjust to life in society. "It's a social prob-

lem... but society has made (hikikomori) believe that the problem comes from them," said Atsutoshi Takahashi, a mediator at the association. Nicolas Tajan, a psychoanalyst and associate professor at Kyoto University, said hikikomori often faced difficulties in childhood. In Japan, "childhood and adolescent psychological difficulties are not addressed and not treated," he told AFP. "That means in adulthood it can crystallise into a type of social withdrawal".

As adults, they face additional problems as they "are looked down on because they don't work," he added, noting that "work is really a very important part of Japanese identity." Around a dozen recovering hikikomori are taking part in the project. Some will control robots from 10,000 kilometers (6,200 miles) away during the play, painting messages on the floor and talking to spectators through microphones. The robots are "a sort of avatar" to explore "being present and absent at the same time, a recurring theme for hikikomori," said co-director Eric Minh Cuong Castaing, a visual artist and dancer. He hopes the production will help audiences reflect on their own lives, arguing that while hikiko-

mori are sometimes regarded as weak, their actions represent a kind of resistance to being "a soldier in a suit and tie".

'Prejudices'

When the French artists began researching the project in Japan, they took time to build connections with the isolated people introduced to them by New Start Kansai. "It was a big challenge for some of them to let us into their homes and speak to us," said co-director Anne-Sophie Turion, who will perform in the play as a narrator. She said being strangers from another country may have made things easier, "because the usual prejudices weren't there." "We found people who we felt closer to than we ever could have imagined."

Recovery can be difficult for hikikomori, who fear once they have withdrawn from society, they won't be allowed back in, psychoanalyst Tajan said. "This reinforces their avoidant behavior." But art can help reclusive individuals "reconnect with creativity" and envisage "another world" beyond psychiatric treatment or re-entering employment, he said. — AFP



Former "hikikomori", or shut-ins, and friends preparing banners at a park ahead of a demonstration in Takatsuki, Osaka prefecture.

