



Arts

Covid Visions

AMPING DOWN THE VENUES

Ness Creek Music Festival +
Regina Folk Festival

by
STEVEN ROSS SMITH



Saskatchewan
Arts Alliance

AMPING DOWN THE VENUES

by **STEVEN ROSS SMITH**

“This year was set to be our thirtieth anniversary celebration,” says Carlie Letts, Ness Creek Music Festival Manager, “so we are heartbroken to have to cancel our festival and not be immersed in the day to day planning that is common at this time of year.”

Letts echoes the experience and feelings of music festival hosts everywhere who have turned off the sound systems and cancelled stage set-ups. It’s a double whammy for Ness Creek to be deflating, metaphorically speaking, the celebratory balloons.

Cancellations of Saskatchewan music festivals include, to name a few more, those in Weyburn, Swift Current, Outlook, and Saskatoon’s Saskatchewan Jazz Festival, thereby terminating musicians’ summer touring and performing plans and incomes. At least one hundred and fifty musicians applied to SaskMusic’s Emergency Relief Fund in recent months.

It is hard to imagine a ‘silent’ summer without live music floating across the grass and through the trees, coast to coast. And some in the industry anticipate that the devastation may go well beyond this season.



Above: Ness Creek attendees enjoy the view. Below: Ness Creek announces another event cancelled. 2020.

This experience will definitely give us a new appreciation for the simplicity of hugging a friend or experiencing a moment of music or art together as a collective group.

Ness Creek, though, has rallied creatively. “We have developed an online open mic group on Facebook,” says Letts, “it’s called The Beat Goes On(Line) where members are encouraged to post a video of their open mic performance as a way to keep the Ness Creek community engaged.” Anyone can join the group and contribute or watch at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/nessopenmic/>.

Regina Folk Festival, at fifty years old, finds itself in quiet mode, and has not yet turned to music streams, while organizations and musicians across the country, even across the world, have done so. Executive Director Josh Haugerud – just appointed in April – sees two sides to streaming technology: “Music and arts are very accessible through technology, but live streams have a long way to go. Nothing comes close to seeing your favourite artists live.” And Carlie Letts notes that “a sense of community is difficult to achieve when using virtual platforms.”

Organizations are trying to plan for the future while at the same time are dealing with the present disruption. Working in the midst of uncertainty is a challenge. For

Ness Creek, reliance on cash flow has required staff contracts to be amended with hours reduced.

Letts explains. “Our ticket sales not only stopped but we suddenly needed to issue advance ticket refunds. We rely heavily on self-generated income – ticket sales, vendor fees, proceeds from beer gardens, the 50/50 raffle, all of which are no longer a reality this year.”



Regina crowd enjoy the music at the Regina Folk Festival Stage 2.

AMPING DOWN THE VENUES

Ness Creek Music Festival + Regina Folk Festival

The impact threatens the whole industry, challenging the existence of not just musicians and presenters, but of record labels, publishers, technicians, venues and more. Some companies nationwide may collapse, or will lay off most of their staff. Granting agencies will enable many to carry on.

While technological platforms are not perfect venues, musicians and fans have embraced the formats to watch and listen to music, and administrators have turned to virtual too. “Technology has allowed us to keep working, which has been a positive revelation,” says Haugerud. Such software as Zoom and FaceTime

have enabled the behind the scenes work to continue, though at-home workers may have to deal with working space constraints, with extended isolation, or with the proximity of family members which can be a bonus or a distraction. Virtual meetings at least enable contact and information exchange, so work continues. Haugerud elaborates: “There is definitely some stress around the crisis, but there is some excitement about finishing work that has been on the back burner and about future plans. I think things will have to be done in stages – smaller shows to begin with – as we go through the different phases outlined by the Saskatchewan Government.” His



Performer at Ness Creek.



Entrance to the Regina Folk Festival.

festival is optimistically planning a concert this November 14 featuring Joel Plaskett, who is currently hot with the release of an epic album package of forty-four songs. Hope and anticipation hover in the quiet air.

Carlie Letts muses: “The only thing that seems certain is that things will never be ‘normal’ again. We are also hoping that we, along with others from the festival industry in Saskatchewan, will have a seat at the table with our government, so that we can ensure a safe environment for everyone, and that is realistic and feasible for organizations such as ours to continue programming in the future.”

Haugerud is hopeful. “Our city, province and country are resilient. This experience will definitely give us a new appreciation for the simplicity of hugging a friend or experiencing a moment of music or art together as a collective group. I can’t wait to experience moments like that again.”

~



Steven Ross Smith is a poet and arts writer. He has written for literary and arts publications across the country. Over three decades, has crafted the innovative six-book poetic series *fluttersong*. He has just completed a two-year term as Banff Poet Laureate. His work appears in print, audio and video in Canada, USA, and abroad. He lives and writes in Saskatoon.