

Who Am I Without My Ensemble?

Dear Angela: My group hasn't played together since March and I'm left with an ensemble-shaped hole in my life. It's not just that I miss working with my colleagues, it's that I so identify with the group that without them, I've lost a big part of my identity. How can I keep moving forward?

BY Angela Myles Beeching



You are not alone. As musicians, most of us grew up with our identities inextricably tied to music-making. For many of us, there's no separation between our selves, our souls, and our music.

So whether or not we've lost loved ones to Covid, we're all grieving multiple losses:

There's the loss of the energy and excitement that comes through rehearsals and performance, the loss of our familiar schedules (including travel and down time), and, of course, the loss of income and financial stability. There's also the loss of a shared sense of belonging that we experience with colleagues and audiences.

Losing all that can bring up a range of emotions: sadness, anger, hurt, guilt, shame, and fear.

There's no "right" way to experience grief. But isolation, denial, or attempting to "power through" only exacerbates the symptoms. Considering all that we've lost, it's not surprising you're asking yourself that scary question, "Who am I?"

To help answer this, it's good to journal your responses on these follow-up questions:

"Why do I make music?"

"Who am I making it for?"

And "What's it for?" or "What's the change I seek to make in the world through my music?"

By writing your answers down—just for yourself—you can clarify and reconnect to the path you're on as a musician.

Here are three more recommendations:

1. Adopt a journaling habit.

Even 10 minutes a day is enough time to

get your thoughts and emotions on paper, to avoid suppressing them and letting them fester. Be specific about what you're feeling and thinking.

And make sure you also write what you're grateful for. The small and simple pleasures remind us of the beauty of life.

Although journaling is for you alone, you may find it helpful to share with friends what you discover in the process.

2. Get inspired.

Protect your time and sanity: limit your news and social media intake. Turn to recordings that expand your imagination. Study scores and read works that feed your artistry. Use that positive energy to fuel your practice: keep a regular schedule and focus on repertoire and small goals that build your curiosity and challenge you creatively.

3. Focus on the future.

Connect with your ensemble colleagues in phone or video calls—check in with each other. Besides catching up, you may also want to use the time you have now with each other to plan your next projects. Why not overhaul your group's written promo materials, articulate your mission, and create interactive community engagement materials?

By reminding yourself of your "WHY," you can connect with a power much greater than your circumstances. Your colleagues, fans, and community need your inspiration and example.

Be the light: we're all in this together—even when we're apart.

Angela Myles Beeching is a career consultant and the author of Beyond Talent: Creating a Successful Career in Music. Angela works with individuals, ensembles, and organizations to facilitate positive change.