

# Getting & spending:

South African jazz musicians'  
earnings and expenditure  
pre- and post-Covid

2020-2023



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**Front Cover: Lesedi Ntsane** (Photograph: Siphwi Mhlambi)

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**prchelvetia**

 **IKS**  
CULTURAL CONSULTING

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**An overview of key findings from the research report prepared for the Johannesburg office of Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council, by IKS Cultural Consulting, investigating the context and impact of a short-term basic income relief grant for professional jazz musicians in South Africa**

**May 2024**

*Read the full report at:*

<https://iksafrika.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/GETTING-SPENDING-SOUTH-AFRICAN-JAZZ-MUSICIANS.pdf>

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**Shane Cooper** (Photograph: Siphwe Mhlambi)

# FOREWORD

The management of the Jazz Income Relief Fund for musicians in South Africa was an unusual project for our office, undertaken during the most unusual of times. While we are committed through our work to making a thoughtful contribution to a more resilient cultural field in the region covered by our office (now extending across Southern, Central East and West Africa), given our mandate, this contribution is mostly and necessarily quite oblique. The partnership underpinning the relief fund provided an exceptional circumstance in which we were able to make a very direct contribution, during a period in which a normal sense of agency was taken away not just from us, but from everyone.

This report unpacks not just the immediate impact of Covid on the lives of musicians, but also the impact of larger changes in the cultural economy for which Covid was in certain respects more an amplifier than a driver. The report also gives voice to the ways in which the fund was (and was not) able to mitigate these impacts, both during and beyond the defining period of the pandemic.

It also implicitly draws attention to the need for funding and support for the arts and culture field to be appropriately located within broader frameworks of support for the sustaining of human life in general at some essential level, and indeed all the forms of life within which our humanity is located. Without this wider framing, support for the arts and artists can come to seem questionable, carrying the implication that some lives are more deserving of sustaining than others.

We would like to extend particular thanks to Kaz-Leigh Straightfill, who provided the administrative backbone to the Fund, and the adjudicators of the fund, all of whom made themselves available at short notice to undertake emotionally demanding work during a period of great uncertainty and flux. The care and consideration accorded to each submission and human being is carried through to the present report, for which we are grateful to Gwen and Andre and the IKS team. We would also want to acknowledge the quiet role of Veit Artl in weaving together the jazz worlds of South Africa and Switzerland in ways that have both given rise to work of remarkable beauty and human bonds of exceptional strength, over many years.

We hope this report will provide ongoing nourishment for policymakers, arts organizations, and other stakeholders in shaping future initiatives to support a rapidly morphing field of practice, both in South Africa and beyond.

**Joseph Gaylard**

Head: Pro Helvetia Johannesburg

**Germaine Gamiet**

Programme Manager

# RESEARCHERS' INTRODUCTION

It is with great pleasure that we present the findings of this long-term research project into the earnings and expenditure of South African jazz musicians, and the impact of and learnings from the disbursement of the Swiss Jazz Income Relief Fund, administered by Pro Helvetia Johannesburg, the regional office of the Swiss Arts Council.

This research presents novel findings about how musicians make their livings, the working costs they carry and the support they need. As such, it exemplifies the values of both IKS and our partners in this project, Pro Helvetia Johannesburg. We both seek, in different ways, to build knowledge, network and provide support that reflects the current realities of our creative ecosystem.

By presenting a musician-centered picture of how South African jazz players earn their income and spend it in support of their careers, and quantifying the impact of the Covid pandemic restrictions on live performance, this work offers rich insights into how musicians have been surviving, during Covid and since.

Using the lens of musicians' experience of a relief fund, we illuminate the interactions between role-players: mutual interdependencies, punishing trade-offs, and roads to survival and growth. The voices of musicians themselves affirm how these specific grants certainly extended careers and family survival while supporting artists' mental health and lives. Said one: "The Relief Fund pulled me through on all levels."

Although our respondents came from one specific genre cohort (jazz) and skewed older and more experienced, our data has wider applicability than this group. Most of our respondents – like their counterparts worldwide – work across multiple genres even when jazz is their declared first love. We do not suggest that the absolute monetary circumstances of jazz players are precisely the same as those of all other musicians. But in relative, circumstantial terms they share the same needs, priorities and pressures. For all musicians, as the findings track, the ability to cover the financial and opportunity costs of a music career (travel, rehearsal and practice, instrument and equipment retention, instrument upkeep and upgrade, and more) is vital in developing – or stalling – a music career. Looking at research from elsewhere, we see that South African jazz musicians' experiences are not so different from those of their international peers in and outside jazz, including in the persistent and concerning underrepresentation of women.



We believe this research represents a significant and fresh contribution to a growing but under-documented research conversation around musician incomes and expenditure. The focus of research has too often been predominantly on yers, or on other disruptive global trends. We heard from musicians themselves, in testimonies that were often moving and sometimes distressing. From these voices and the data, we have drawn proposals for future policy and research directions that can enhance the impact of grant-making and improve artists' livelihoods, resilience and survival.

We hope you learn as much from reading this research as we did while conducting it.

**Andre le Roux**  
IKS Cultural Consulting

**Gwen Ansell**  
Research team lead

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## RESEARCH PARTNERS

### IKS CULTURAL CONSULTING

IKS stands for Indigenous Knowledge Systems. In collaboration with national, international, state, and non-governmental bodies, we research, organise and advocate for cultural development that speaks to the grassroots needs of Africa and the Global South.

<https://iksafrica.com/>

### PRO HELVETIA JOHANNESBURG

Established in 1998, the Johannesburg liaison office of Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council, facilitates exchange and collaboration in the arts between Switzerland and Southern, East, Central and West Africa. We do so through support for residencies, collaborations and research trips between the region and Switzerland, and the presence of artists and projects from Switzerland on platforms and festivals across the region.

<https://prohelvetia.ch/en/>  
<http://prohelvetia.ch/johannesburg>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**This publication has three sections.**

**Part One** maps the impact of the Pro-Helvetia Jazz Income Relief Fund on the lives and livelihoods of those South African musicians who applied for and received it during the Covid years. It finds that:

The Fund had a lasting, positive impact on those who received its grants.

It made innovative career growth, household survival and hope possible.

An accessible process and consistent payments over time supported resilience.

The respect and trust that applicants experienced was highly valued.

**Part Two** analyses the data from this instance of effective Covid relief funding; a follow-up survey helps us to understand what and how musicians really earn in South Africa, the circumstances they operate in and the expenses they carry in establishing and growing a music career:

In terms of relative (not absolute) earnings and expenditure pressures, our sample of South African jazz musicians had much in common with other cohorts of musicians inside and outside jazz studied here and across the world.

On average, the musicians we studied were neither as highly paid nor as impoverished as stereotypes suggest – but averages hide variation. Our survey revealed real desperation and destitution for many individuals.

A mature musician at the peak of their career has average earnings equivalent to a formally-employed mid-level technician – but with none of the benefits or allowances that formal employment packages include.

Women earn less than men; gender inequality was visible throughout the research.

Musicians constantly have to make trade-offs between household survival and professional development that can hold back their careers.

Musicians carry all their own costs of working (with transport costs particularly burdensome) plus substantial opportunity costs in the unpaid time essential for practice and rehearsal.

The industry has not returned to “normal” for performers. Covid damage is still being repaired; costs related to being a musician have risen; performance fees have mostly stayed static or fallen.

**Part Three** brings these two aspects of understanding together, so we can begin to consider what lessons they offer to grant-makers, policy makers and other concerned role-players on the South African music landscape. Steps are needed to:

Understand and accommodate how music work really functions, in policy and through more accessible grant-making processes.

Acknowledge and support cost-of-working elements (particularly artist mobility) through targeted enabling instruments.

Consider gender impacts: projects should offer gender-diverse opportunities, mentorship in non-stereotypical roles and equitable remuneration.

Bridge the digital divide; digital costs are now seen as part of music costs.

Reform the tax regimes around musicians' tools of trade.

De-silo planning around transport, gender and other aspects.

Support musicians' psychological wellbeing.



**Tutu Puoane and Ewout Pierreux** (Photograph: Siphwe Mhlambi)



**Mamba Tshabalala** (Photograph: Sipiwe Mhlambi)

# PART 1: RESEARCHING THE JAZZ INCOME RELIEF FUND AND ITS IMPACT

## 1.1 What and how did we research?

This research occupies a distinctive space in music industry research. Relatively few studies undertaken anywhere provide granular information on what and how musicians earn and, in particular, how they spend it: what the costs of a musician's working life comprise.

This research draws on data gleaned from 711 recipients of an income relief fund targeting jazz musicians based in South Africa, and implemented during the course of 2020 and 2021 in the context of the Covid pandemic. The fund ("the Jazz Income Relief Fund") was managed by the Johannesburg office of Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council, and financed by a private foundation based in Switzerland. This research report was commissioned by Pro Helvetia Johannesburg with finance from the same private foundation.

Compiling the report involved mapping the application data of 711 recipients of the Jazz Income Relief Fund, and then following up via a voluntary survey, which slightly over half of the original recipients also completed. The survey questions were informed by what we learned from the grant applications. Identifying details were removed from grant form information and survey responses before the researchers saw and processed the data. Respondents were asked to opt-in to the subsequent survey, non-disclosure agreements were in place, and great care was taken to protect identities and keep information secure. The process of mapping and surveying covered more than two years of recipients' lives and experiences in music during Covid, as well as while the pandemic was waning. Seven in-depth interviews – informed by our findings from both application data and survey responses – in late 2023, strengthened this long-term perspective with on-the-record reflections looking back on the whole experience.

The research thus had three stages: studying Jazz Income Relief Fund application data; administering a follow-up survey; and interviewing for post-Covid reflections. This approach, with each stage building on the previous one, enriched our understanding of working lives in music, during and after the pandemic

## 1.2 Whose voices did we hear from?

All nine South African provinces were represented among the 711 musicians who responded to the calls for grant applications. Applicants, however, came overwhelmingly from urban areas, with just under half based in Gauteng and a quarter in the Western Cape. The largest group of applicants were those with nine or more years' experience as performers (we labelled this group 'veterans') and the smallest cohort were new entrants with fewer than three years' experience. Less than a quarter of applicants were women, but where they lived and their levels of experience were similar to those of the whole group.

Just over half of those applicants – 374 people – opted in to the follow-up survey. These respondents had the option to answer open as well as closed question items, so they could be heard as well as counted.

Just over half of them were based in Gauteng and a fifth in the Western Cape. Whatever province they named, however, overwhelmingly they were based in urban centers: Joburg, Cape Town, Ekurhuleni, Durban, Tshwane, Nelson Mandela Bay, Buffalo City. The largest numbers of survey respondents had ages between 36 and 54. Just under a quarter were women. In terms of experience, 'veterans' dominated, at 82%.

When survey respondents were asked to name their top sources of income, instrumental playing, composing, vocal work, leading a band and music teaching and lecturing featured most prominently. A deeply gendered division of labour emerged. Women were most prominent as vocalists, they were underrepresented in instrumentalism, composing and leadership roles and invisible among sound engineers. 8% of respondents identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Almost all survey respondents (91%) reported working across multiple genres, even though their primary vocation was jazz. Music genre boundaries are elastic, and no agreed definitions have been established for research purposes, but Afro-soul and traditional music (15% each), pop, gospel, and adult contemporary, in that order, were the genres most often named.

For the profile interviews conducted in late 2023, Pro Helvetia contacted a number of musicians primarily identified with jazz, but with highly diverse professional profiles. The researchers saw the details of only those who agreed to go on the record with their reflections about the whole time-period and process, and thus to be identified as grant recipients. They were:

Joburg-based bassist, producer and composer Shane Cooper, who has 20 years of live music experience;

Allemandsdrift (Mpumalanga)-born vocalist, songwriter and music educator Zodwa Mabena, who also has 20 years' experience;

Free State-born and based veteran guitarist, composer and youth music mentor Menyatso Mathole, who self-describes as having been “in the music business forever”, since the days of Club Pelican (South Africa's first Black-owned jazz club), founded in 1973;

Soshanguve-born pianist, vocalist, bandleader and composer Thandi Ntuli who has been working in music for 15 years, starting her career while she was still studying at the UCT College of Music, and who argues it is incomplete to identify her only with jazz;

Cape Town-born and based pianist, bow-player, composer and visual artist Hilton Schilder, who has been working professionally in music for 45 years and grew up in the business as the child of a historic Cape Town jazz family. As for what he plays, “jazz is just one facet of it.”

East London-based trumpeter, leader, and music educator Sakhile Simani, working professionally in music for a dozen years-plus, but who began playing much younger, as a junior Salvation Army bandsman; and

Langa (Cape Town)-born bassist, composer and leader Herbie Tsoaeli, who has been working in jazz for more than 30 years – “but I can't be just a jazz musician. I'm a sound musician with generous genre genes.”

The comments drawn here from these interviews represent only a tiny sample from what, in the main report, are extended, deep reflections on lives in music.

## 1.3 What was the Pro Helvetia - administered Jazz Income Relief Fund?

On behalf of a Swiss charitable foundation concerned with supporting the development of jazz music, Pro Helvetia made two rounds of calls for applications and disbursements of income relief to South Africa-based jazz musicians between July 2020 and October 2021. This was the (anonymised) application data that formed the basis for the first stage of our research. The total amount of funds disbursed across both rounds was , ZAR 62 513 625 spread among 355 musicians in the first round, with a further 356 musicians being added in the second round. Grant amounts ranged from ZAR2 000 per month to ZAR 15 000 per month, paid for at least six consecutive months and in some cases for 12. A more detailed account of the fund can be found in the full report.

A patchwork of other relief funding, from private, national and local/provincial government sources, was created during the Covid period. Just under one in three of those who applied for the Jazz Income Relief Fund reported accessing some of that funding too, primarily receiving modest, once-off sums.

The distinctive features of the Jazz Income Relief Fund were:

- It benefited from a generous funder with both a very precise mandate and significant discretionary power, able to move swiftly.

- The agency managing the fund locally also brought significant experience of working in the jazz music field in South Africa, and could rapidly draw together appropriate internal and external expertise to adjudicate applications and administer the finance flexibly and efficiently, mindful of the exigencies facing musicians.

- Grants were specifically directed towards musicians based in South Africa whose primary identification was with jazz. But because almost all grant applicants worked across multiple genres, the gains were diffused more widely.

- Artists self-reported their financial circumstances and were trusted, without conditional demands for documentary proof of income and expenditure and the formal paperwork (for example, tax registration and clearance) that musicians often do not possess.

- The grants considered artists' pre-Covid "income streams" (aggregated work rather than a single job); multiple, diverse income sources were not a disqualification.



The grants sought to support individual household “shortfalls” rather than applying a universal benefit threshold, and no conditions were set or reports demanded on how the money was used.

Grants were paid monthly for a guaranteed number of months, offering continuity.

Grant application forms – although still in English, in a multilingual country – were edited to conform to Plain Language communication principles.

There is no doubt that many other South African grant-makers longed for the freedom from administrative and resource constraints that would have allowed them to operate in similar ways. The above is a description of this grant, not a criticism of others. But several potentially beneficial features (for example, accessible, Plain Language documents and processes, or an income streams approach) emerge that are certainly worth wider consideration for future grant-making.

## 1.4 How did musicians experience and use the fund?

**“Until [the grant] came, I was in ... a kind of manic state ... sort of frantically trying to create stuff to sell in a world that was ... in confusion ... Getting the grant enabled me to focus on actually getting back to practice. I could actually work ... I could pay my rent, put groceries on the table and then get back to work ... So many people in the music industry weren’t able to get relief, and they had to change careers...Many weren’t able to return to music ... Having the relief was for me ...having some sense of calm and certainty, knowing I could weather the storm and stay afloat ...”**

**- Shane Cooper -**

The importance of music solidarity and networks became very clear in comments on the fund. Musicians heard about it not only through the various mailing lists and information websites that posted calls for applications, but from friends and colleagues. They, in turn, passed the news on to others.

**“I applied. Then I started to share that form, that link, to musicians around the townships. The older musicians ... I started to help them fill the form ... I remember the form had something that you had to download [evidence] that you’re a jazz musician ... I had to help with that ...”**

**- Sakhile Simani -**

Those who responded to the survey were asked to rate their experience of the grant process using a five-point scale based on how adequate the support provided was; how relevant it was to their circumstances; how trustworthy, fast and easy it was; and how far they felt an attitude of trust had been shown to them.

The responses were overwhelmingly positive, with full-marks ratings (5/5) dominating all categories. Only 11 people out of 374 indicated a negative experience.

More illuminating, though, were the open comments. The Word-cloud below illustrates the terms that dominated these answers: “saved me” and “survive”.

**“[The grant] didn’t just help me survive as an individual, [but also] the people who depend on me. My daughter lost her job so I could manage to help her. And expand on my songbook...buy this laptop because my old one was done...and a new phone. So I could continue to notate my music...I managed to do a lot of things that I would’ve never done.”**

**- Menyatso Mathole -**

In more detail, people talked about four positive aspects:  
their career development and learnings;

the impact on family and household survival;

the impact on mental health; and

the impact of the implicitly open and trusting attitude of the grant-givers.

**“The Fund...motivated me to do more with my craft...[I thought] actually I’m sitting at home, doing nothing really, so let me pay tribute. Let me just pay homage to where I’m at: my community. So I came up with the idea of writing music for my people: ‘People of my Community’...I presented that to the Standard Bank Youth Festival...[The Fund] gave me a drive to go further, further, further and more.”**

**- Sakhile Simani -**

An impressive array of creative learnings and practical career growth moves were listed in the largest cluster of responses: purchasing studio or performance equipment to avoid dependency and recurrent hire costs; developing the skills and resources to teach music; completing qualification studies; and changing career mindsets.

**“I’m planning to go to Thaba Nchu, where I was born. I am talking to our traditional leader there to see if maybe next year we can’t bring the concept [of community music business education] home...people there just depend on gigging, which is not healthy for the minds of the young. Even us, you know, can’t just think of gigs, gigs, gigs all the time. From gigs, there’s no income. It’s just stressful.”**

**- Menyatso Mathole -**

One respondent noted learning “planning and opening myself up to other music opportunities”. There were emotional learnings too: “recovering my passion for jazz”; “Your support has taught me to be kind and supportive to other people who need help, irrespective of whether I know the person or not.”

**“I started conducting classes virtually. And doing some shows virtually. And then it propelled me to actually do some podcasts...[Now] if there are no gigs, I call the band, we do rehearsals, we record them and then put them on YouTube.”**

**- Zodwa Mabena -**

The family survival details about matters such as putting food on the table and paying bills were often deeply moving for example, enabling one participant to “feed my kids, take them to school and buy uniforms” and another to “care for my diabetic husband whom I ended up losing on Jan 1 2022...getting medication for him”.

**“[The Covid period] affected me creatively. I felt very un-nourished because I feed off travelling...meeting people. [The Fund] really helped. ..I limited it to [covering] basic expenses...food, mortgage... and it just gave me a sense of peace of mind as well...to actually be able to do the [composing] work...it’s more than the actual money, it’s the ability to just be settled in a very uncertain time...I think a lot of people would’ve quit music if [it] didn’t come though...I think I’m one of them.”**

**- Thandi Ntuli -**

An almost equal number of respondents foregrounded psychological survival – something the precarious music industry often neglects. One said: “Were it not for the [Jazz Relief Fund] I would not have made it. Now, as an older musician who has health issues and very few gigs, without another income source I literally have to live from month to month with the occasional handout. Suicide seems a very viable option.”

**“Somehow, I thought...this is not legit. How can it be so easy?... The form that we were filling in didn’t have many challenges, like all the funds we are getting ...you have to go run around, they’re looking for ... company numbers, they’re looking for things that we don’t have ... some musicians don’t even know where to start.”**

**- Zodwa Mabena -**

The second-largest cluster of responses was about the experience of the process. Some unfavorable comparisons were drawn with the “longwinded” and “red tape” processes of other grants, and the frontline Jazz Income Relief Fund administrator with whom applicants interacted most directly was thanked by name. It made an incalculable difference to many that their efforts and losses were met with trust, respect and an absence of demeaning stereotypes. One said: “We were treated like a normal working class.”



**Afrika Mkhize** (Photograph: Sipiwe Mhlambi)

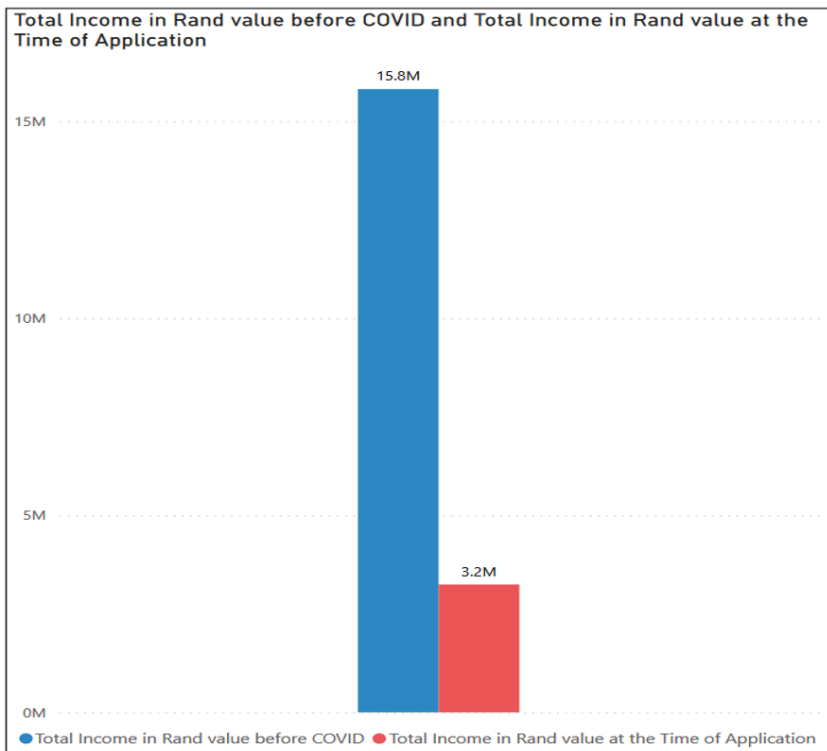


**Siya Makuzeni** (Photograph: Sipiwe Mhlambi)

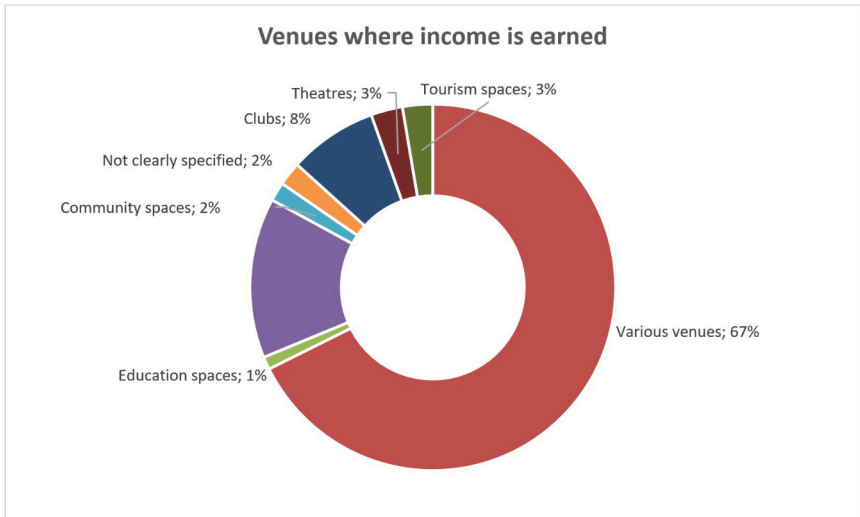
## PART 2: MUSIC LIVELIHOODS AND COSTS

### 2.1 How – and how much – do musicians earn?

“... concert fees haven’t really gone up with inflation. They’re quite radically left behind. And performing is not a very profitable activity for the average musician because you’re taking a lot of equipment there that you don’t get paid for rental for. There’s wear and tear, there’s costs to maintain... there’s lack of infrastructure for security of equipment and stuff so things often get stolen... You spend a lot on petrol, you spend a lot on rehearsals, you spend a lot on equipment, and the return isn’t great...people might see you at the venue for two hours [but] you’ve had eight hours of rehearsals leading up to that.”  
- Shane Cooper -



**Figure 1:** Total income earned by all grant applicants pre-Covid, and at the time of applying for the grant



**Figure 2:** Places where grant applicants earned their income

Those applying for the grant earned the bulk of their income from music-related activities. Their main affiliation was live jazz performance, and because they provided links to career outlines and recordings/performances, it was possible to verify this.

But – exactly like their international counterparts – almost all added a diverse range of other genres and roles in music to make up a viable income stream for professional and household survival.

Most musicians everywhere earn from “income streams”: that is, aggregated earnings from a range of diverse, short-term, often informally-agreed music projects: performance, recording, teaching and more, plus sometimes non-music work, royalty earnings and other sources.

This means that official processes designed around the notion of a single, formally-contracted “job” find it hard to accommodate music earnings. Musicians entering those processes rarely possess the required documentary proofs; each income stream profile is as unique as the artist reporting it.

Earnings of those grant applicants with substantial professional experience (we categorised them as “veterans”) were consistent with the South African Statistical Service’s average national monthly earnings of around ZAR 26,000 for full-time, formally employed people. What “average” means in real-life terms is that a cohort of genre-specialist musicians with extensive professional experience and reputation (and often academic music qualifications too) – mature, at the top of their profession

and assumed in popular imagination to be “earning like stars” – actually earn no more than a mid-level, formally-employed motor industry mechanic, payroll clerk or sales representative. By contrast, South Africa’s real top earners (those, for example, employed in the business services sector of the energy industry) take home an average R82, 400 each month, plus benefits.

Unlike a formally-employed worker, however, musicians do not enjoy any of the additional benefits or allowances (e.g. housing allowances, health and unemployment insurance) that often form part of employment packages. Nor do they have the guarantee of consistent income over time, or working hours and conditions regulated by labour laws. Musicians carry all their own costs of working, as detailed in Section 2.2 below. Their work is project-based and may be highly intermittent. And when at work, musicians put in more labour than the standard 35-40-hour working week, because (as one example) they must undertake extensive practice and rehearsal outside the hours specified for performance. Performances almost always take place during “unsocial” night-time hours.

When performance was no longer possible, musicians reported having to borrow money or sell the tools of their trade, and make disabling trade-offs between the ability to sustain and grow their careers and to keep their households fed and secure.

**“During Covid [my main source of income] stopped...I have no debt...We pay rent, we buy food...that’s just the basics...I’m getting old now; I have medical expenses...getting the funding gave me space for more art... also I started composing more things...It’s the first time in my whole music career that I’ve had that kind of opportunity – and I’ve been in music very, very long.”**

**- Hilton Schilder -**

30% of Jazz Income Relief Fund applicants reported accessing some form of South African government or private relief funding (either generic, or specific to the arts) during Covid. The amounts reported were small, once-off, and generally inadequate to compensate for the devastating loss of earnings when live performance closed down.

By contrast, Jazz Income Relief Fund grant recipients reported significant and sustained benefits from those grants. The grants enabled professional continuity, development and innovation, supported household survival, sheltered recipients against despair and further supported their psychological survival through how grant-makers treated them: with openness, respect and trust. These benefits were explicitly mentioned, both anonymously in the survey and on the record in the profile interviews.

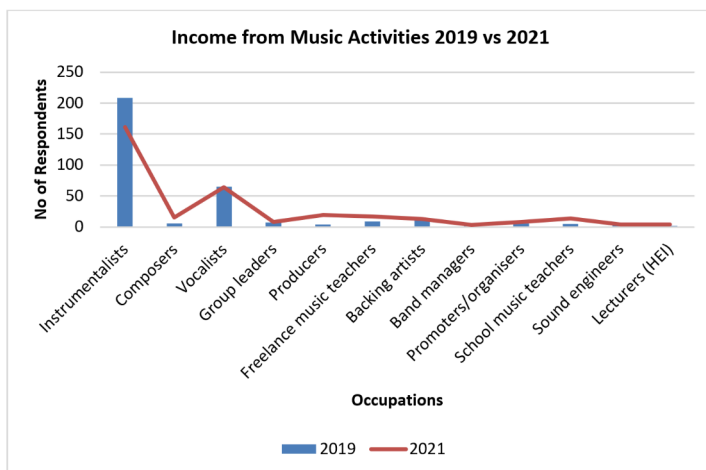
Those who responded to the survey reported a slow rate of recovery as the Covid pandemic waned in 2022.



Music income reflection from January to June 2022	
My earnings so far are slightly better than January-June 2021	32%
My earnings so far are worse than they were in January-June 2021	24%
My earnings so far are about the same as they were in January-June 2021	22%
My earnings so far are much better than they were in January-June 2021	12%
I have earned nothing so far this year	10%

**Table 1:** Reflections on income January to June 2022

Concerningly, those reporting that performance was their main source of income had declined by almost a third – mainly among instrumentalists – between 2019 and 2021.



**Figure 3:** Income from music activities 2019 vs 2021

**“We no longer do most live performances because they’ll tell you: ‘We don’t need a large group – can you take it to a three-piece?’ when we are a five-piece. And then it compromises the sound...They’re getting used to this thing of using backing tracks, which is killing us...It is killing the spirit of the musicians we work with...”**

**- Zodwa Mabena -**

Two-thirds of survey respondents reported making career pivots to try and recover earnings: they learned new skills; began teaching; worked in new genres or with new collaborators; relocated to an area with better opportunities; and more. Selling instruments and equipment also featured – this may underlie some respondents reporting they earned nothing from music, worked less as instrumentalists, or left the industry altogether. Nearly half of respondents (45%) reported themselves as “somewhat” or “extremely” pessimistic about their future in music.

## 2.2 What does being a musician cost?

**“You’re performing with a band that you have to pay...you have to take the money to the band so they can come and help you...you do sacrifices like these. It’s only here and there that you get a commission and say: ‘Yes, I can live out of this.’ It’s a hand to mouth thing.”**

**- Zodwa Mabena -**

People who applied for the Jazz Income Relief Fund reported spending more than the national average on communication, dependents and insurance cover. They spent significantly less on retirement planning. The situations they described in the survey often reflected punishing trade-offs between personal/family-related spending and spending to maintain or grow their ability to work.

<b>CATEGORY OF EXPENSE</b>	<b>% Reporting this item (would select more than</b>
Transport & communication	30%
Paying other musicians	18%
Instrument/equipment purchase & upkeep or hire	19%
Securing rehearsal space or studio time, venue hire & technicians	20%
Music education for self-development	6%
Promotion & marketing	5%
Producing media (CD/DVD)	3%

**Table 2:** Music-related expenses reported in the survey

**"It's far from the big cities here. If you have an instrument and your frets get wounded, you need money...number one for taxi – 3 taxis from where I am – to go to Joburg. When you get to Joburg, these places are not in the city. You must get to Randburg or what-what...where they've been moved to now. So now, by the time you get to their workshop, you don't have money to fix your instrument!"**

**- Menyatso Mathole -**

The grant application data had focused mainly on family and household expenses. This survey information allowed us to see how essential spending on transport and communication are to sustaining a music career. Spending on these may be one factor eroding the amounts available for retirement and pension saving.

Most often mentioned in the survey open answer items were regular and escalating transport costs on a range of aspects of local mobility (to shows, to rehearsals and to music service providers such as studios). This weakened musicians' ability to develop their careers; people spoke of having to turn down work opportunities because the cost of transporting musicians was higher than the fee offered.

**“Currently we have a member who’s living in a different city. [We used to make it work but now] it’s just not financially viable. We don’t play. The only way we could play was if a festival booked us that has that sort of capital. But we used to be able to put on a gig at a venue: it’s just not viable anymore. So that’s really sad...”**

**- Shane Cooper -**

Rehearsal space, instrument upkeep and data and communication costs were also significant, and buying data was frequently characterised as a music-related cost – an indication of how important digital working has become for South African musicians.

There was a clear age/experience divide in spending, with younger musicians hit hardest by precisely the kinds of profile-building expenses they must make to build a career. More established artists already enjoy a higher promotional profile, and may be better able to leverage established relationships with service providers.

One regularly-recurring open comment was how crucial relationships and solidarity were to surviving, from family members helping out with the expenses to band members offering their homes as rehearsal spaces, and old friends and colleagues willing to negotiate costs.

As well, open comments acknowledged how aware respondents were that their colleagues across the industry had also lost income and incurred debt. Some noted that it was more important than ever for them to provide food for band members during the rehearsals they called. Respondents volunteered they would be willing to pay others more “to help make up” – but mostly could not afford to.

**“My main source of income stopped. Also I was ill... but along with... other musicians we managed to get some stuff together, food parcels and that, just to distribute among the ouens [guys], you know?”-**

**- Hilton Schilder -**

New entrants report spending more on	Venue hire, promotion and marketing
More experienced musicians report spending more on	Transport, technicians, CD/DVD production

**Table 3:** Categories of spending by age/experience

Equally important were the time and opportunity costs of composing, arranging, rehearsing and instrumental/vocal practice. These are vital to sustain proficiency and grow careers, but they take up substantial time when no other earning is possible, as well as carrying their own monetary costs.

Many music hubs (studios, rehearsal spaces and venues) closed under the impact of Covid; those that survived suffered financial losses. The impact of all this continued into 2023. As hubs themselves struggle to recover and repay debt, the cost of accessing them has risen, while gig fees have remained static or even fallen below pre-Covid levels. The biggest reported cost increases were in transport. The story of rising costs was consistent across all provinces, and one of the most frequently heard comments was “Everything has gone up.”

**“Covid and loadshedding have debilitated a lot of businesses...there’s been many times when you do gigs and budgets are smaller...we’re in a recession, but things are very expensive...ticket prices have gone up...before the pandemic we didn’t see concerts with tickets for R400, which has almost become a norm now. So that will naturally reduce the [numbers of people], especially in this economy. I released an album last year but wasn’t really able to perform any of the album’s music simply because [my band] felt too big for what budgets were available...and that’s never really been how I’ve felt in the past.”**

**- Thandi Ntuli -**

**“They still want to pay the prices (if it’s not a door deal) they gave you years ago in the 2000s...And when you ask what they think you’re worth, then they say: ‘Nah, okay, we’ll get somebody else.’..But I’m presenting original music [and] I make sure the guys in my band get paid properly... Don’t let people take you for an ‘aap’ [monkey]. You’ve got to practice, get your music business together, compose...and don’t let the corporates dictate to you.”**

**- Hilton Schilder -**

In a highly interconnected industry, these changes affect everybody. It is harder for musicians to find performance venues and more expensive to secure support services, with knock-on effects rippling out to a wide range of other activities (e.g. attire - makers; drivers; equipment suppliers) and personal professional development costs. Engaging more high-profile co-players for a project, or making better quality music videos, might be required to grow a career but remain financially out of reach.

All these working costs and pressures – which parallel findings from across the world in the wake of the pandemic – were intensified by South Africa’s specific socio-economic context: extreme inequality; a significant digital divide; and almost no alternative forms of social security, particularly for those in what is the original “gig economy”.

## 2.3 Socio-economic Long Covid and the cost of working crisis

The data demonstrated a persistent socio-economic “Long Covid” for jazz musicians. Debts incurred and equipment sold to maintain a household during Covid now have to be repaid and repurchased to resume a music career. Music hubs such as studios and venues are more expensive – raising their charges or reducing the fees they pay – to compensate for up to two years of enforced inactivity.

**“In South Africa we as musicians know that performing is not sustainable ... Most of the venues have been removed from the people... closing down, right? We no longer have venues to express ourselves...to perform for the people ... Even going on tour...is expensive. Most musicians are doing tours out of their own pockets [and] when they record, they go independent ... you have to pay for everything, from musicians to studio, go and print the CDs ... the bravery of that.”**  
- Sakhile Simani -

**“There is hope. When I look at some of the young boys from these [music education] institutions ... the positiveness and the spirit ... definitely the music is in good hands ... Some of them are at my level, no doubt ... artistically, behaviors, stuff like that. It’s just the obstacles, you know?”**  
- Menyatso Mathole -

The deaths of collaborators across the music ecosystem means musicians must forge new and sometimes more costly working relationships and are less able to leverage concessions from old colleagues and partners. Skilled technicians have left the industry and the country.

Many of these problems, all detailed in very concrete terms by grant recipients, relate to the nature of music work as an activity as well as to the constraints of the Covid and immediate post-Covid periods. Music work is intermittent and project-based; reliant on face-to-face interactions; and based on income streams from multiple sources rather than one consistent employer. This is a feature, not a bug: as successive UNESCO surveys have highlighted, it is what makes creative work agile, adaptable and fertile ground for innovation. But as our research subjects told us, that does not make the problems any easier to manage.

## 2.3. A worldwide “cost of working crisis”

Desk research reinforced the sense that these are problems shared by all musicians, almost everywhere in the world. Global music workers in several surveys have reported facing what has been called the “cost of working crisis”. In this situation, the expenses incurred to perform may exceed those earned from the performance, and the additional spending required to upgrade a performer’s career may be hard or even impossible to finance. But pre-existing levels of poverty, inequality and infrastructural decay in South Africa make these situations more severe.

**“I think we will find our feet again. People are just finding their feet in many different ways. It’s not just the pandemic, it’s whatever grief people are dealing with, whatever financial shifts people have dealt with. So, it’s a lot...”**

**- Thandi Ntuli -**



**Thandi Ntuli** (Photograph: Mauti Mauakoe)

## PART 3: PERSPECTIVES ON LIVELIHOODS AND POLICY IN MUSIC

### 3.1 Why did this research matter?

The research confirms the primacy of live performance as a source of revenue. It supports the findings of earlier research, including the two Concerts SA-commissioned Digital Futures studies and a South African Cultural Observatory study on the impact of Covid on live music. All this work contributes to understanding the devastating scale of music incomes lost during Covid and how the revenue from streaming could not – and still does not – make up for those losses.

While most formal research worldwide focuses on “the industry” (that is, record labels, publishing, streaming platforms and other major businesses), this research sheds light on earnings, costs and financial dilemmas at the level of individual musicians, their colleagues in music, and their families.

Additionally, the research demonstrates what a significant impact well-designed and humanely administered relief can make. Grant recipients told us how they felt respected and uplifted by their treatment. Looking at livelihoods through the lens of the grant let us see how the interface between grant-makers and grant recipients affected both human lives and the live music ecosystem.

Further, meticulously-kept administrative data such as the grant application information showed itself to be very important, and not only for its customary use: mapping activities completed and targets met. Here, it became a source of both evidence about impact and pointers towards future policy.

### 3.2 What lessons emerge for grant-making and policy?

#### **How has the live music landscape changed during and since Covid?**

Musicians are now operating in a context of dramatically-rising working costs (particularly transport), where gigs are fewer, audiences often smaller – a major consideration for those paid from door takings – and performance fees static or reduced. Additionally, some noted longer waiting periods to be paid, and a growing tendency for booking agents to request a smaller ensemble: “duo or trio, not a full band”. Some comments suggested that music hubs such as venues and studios in more affluent areas have recovered more successfully, contributing to escalating transport costs for musicians often based in townships.

The survey did not name data costs as a category of music expense, but it was specified by many respondents. During lockdown, the pivot to digital caught up with many more musicians.

Conversations about “catching up” dominated many responses – not only as a personal need, but as an acknowledgment that others our respondents worked with also had this need. This covered repaying debts; repurchasing sold equipment, re-establishing a career profile or, tragically, reconstructing a band from whom Covid had snatched members.

## What can policy-makers and grant-makers learn?

The perilous financial situation of musicians outlined in this report is often answered by proposing a “musicians’ pension scheme”, a project that has government support. However, there have been at least two previous unsuccessful attempts and there is very little current traction. Our findings suggest much more investigation is needed and more careful consideration of how government locates its support for artists and musicians within the wider framework of precarious classes of workers are more generally. Setting up a pension scheme will have limited value if musicians do not enroll or cannot contribute consistently. Spending on retirement may simply look, to many, like an unaffordable trade-off against the pressing immediate needs we uncovered. If so, some of the cost of working policy supports outlined below might have more impact in supporting retirement planning.

Our findings challenge assumptions that grants can offer only short-term mitigation. Interventions at a contextual level, better integration between funding silos – for example, between funding for inner-city development or transport projects and music projects – and shifts in funding emphasis could make an important longer-term difference. In particular:

- By **acknowledging “cost-of-working” elements** in how budget overheads for funding are defined and supported, funding could better sustain artists for future projects, avoiding a situation described by many in the survey of constantly paying debts retrospectively. This might extend, for example, to developing funding instruments for essential enabling activities such as rehearsal spaces, equipment hire and other elements.
- By **acknowledging the impact of transportation costs**, funding allocations could support both artists in developing their performance profile and music hubs in restoring the gaps in provision created by Covid closures.
- By **developing cost benchmarks for these and other working costs** (including the time and opportunity cost of rehearsal and practice) funding programmes could assist in benchmarking best practice guidelines for performance fees and project funds.
- By **developing more sustainable and targeted grant-making instruments** beyond projects that must be completed within a 12-month grant cycle, funding systems would provide levels of continuity in work comparable to those effectively utilised by Jazz Relief Fund grant recipients.



- By **developing simplified, transparent application processes in Plain Language**: minimising bureaucracy and using and trusting forms of documentation more relevant to the diverse and often informal ways business in the music industry is conducted. This could also entail training frontline grant administrators in how to engage with applicants more supportively. Future funding models could build on these features of the Jazz Relief Fund, which supported both accessing funds and using them more flexibly.

Other practical implications emerged: **bridging the digital divide** now emerges consistently as an imperative in policy studies related to South African cultural life, while **current tax and import duty regimes** on music equipment and instruments are clearly one element of rising costs. As one example, tax relief provisions for a “home studio” are far less clearcut than those for a “home office” – although for a working musician, the former may be the precise sonic equivalent of the latter.

Philosophically, our findings point towards **a rethink of those funding conditionalities for music projects that may demand a rapid transition to “business viability”**. Such conditionalities rarely reflect the nature of the activities or income flows related to a music project.

Finally, as with much recent music industry research, our findings suggested an increasingly pressing need to pay attention to two further aspects: **the gender impact of projects**; and **musicians’ need for psychological support**.

One recurring theme in our responses – and this is supported by much international research, and by the instances of self-harm and suicide reported across the local industry – was the desperation and despair created by loss of employment and by the cost of working crisis. Facilitating access to support and counselling is important to build a sustainable music industry and merits support in its own right.

Women were underrepresented as respondents. Both extant scholarship and anecdotal accounts demonstrate robustly that this is because women are underrepresented in the profession in all roles except vocalism. This is a far more complex issue than mechanically counting or changing the balance of female or LGBTQIA+ heads (which, in the case of women, often has the stereotyping impact of swelling the chorus of female vocalists). Rather, proactive efforts are required to create projects that offer more gender-diverse opportunities and mentorship in non-stereotypical roles such as composing, instrumentalism, ensemble leadership, technical stage support and more. The Southern African Music Rights Organisation has already embarked on research into specific gender aspects, and many other organisations are also working in this field. What this research underlines, is the need for de-siloing; for such projects to talk to one another and thus maximise intersectional impacts.

## WHAT DID WE READ?

Readers will find a detailed set of footnotes and references to all the South African and international research we consulted in the full Getting and Spending report, which you can access at:

<https://iksafrika.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/GETTING-SPENDING-SOUTH-AFRICAN-JAZZ-MUSICIANS.pdf>.

The following is a shorter selection of the kinds of related studies here and elsewhere:

<https://www.concertssa.co.za/digital-futures-two-taking-music-online-in-south-africa/>

<https://www.helpmusicians.org.uk/media-and-press-office/professional-musicians-facing-multiple-priorities-this-winter-with-half-believing-they-may-have-to-leave-the-industry>

<https://www.southafricanculturalobservatory.org.za/download/comments/691/10a5ab2db37feedfdeaab192ead4ac0e/Impact+Analysis+-+Live+Music+and+its+Venues+and+the+South+African+economy+during+COVID-19>

<https://www.southafricanculturalobservatory.org.za/download/comments/803/1aa48fc4880bb0c9b8a3bf979d3b917e/Measuring+the+impact+of+the+COVID-19+Crisis+on+the+Cultural+and+Creative+Industries+in+South+Africa+One+year+on>

Krueger, A.B. & Ying, Z., (2018). The Wellbeing of Musicians in the US. MIRA research report: Princeton University



## Getting & spending:

South African jazz musicians'  
earnings and expenditure  
pre- and post-Covid

2020-2023

*The Covid period* "... affected me creatively. I felt very un-nourished because I feed off traveling...meeting people. [The Fund] really helped... It's more than the actual money, it's the ability to just be settled in a very uncertain time...I think a lot of people would've quit music if [it] didn't come though...I think I'm one of them."

- Thandi Ntuli -

*The Fund* "... changed the whole me, you know, because now it was like: this is how a human being should live as an artist...We don't want too many things: we just want to live a better life, you know, that every other human being will enjoy... imagine, as a musician, you may not have a gig for three months – famous artists, young ones...old ones sometimes forgotten..."

- Herbie Tsoaeli -



swiss arts council  
**prohelvetia**

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