

William Henry Meung & Sam Longmore

SL:

I am particularly interested to hear about how things are in Ōtepoti, and about your perspective on how things are going...

So, what have you been up to these last few weeks?

WHM:

Well, before things kicked I was sick with a flu for three weeks so was already isolating for two weeks. Before that, I was talking to a doctor socially and he was pretty doomy about the whole thing and was recommending stocking up on supplies. I hadn't thought about it before then, so I got on this before the panic buying started.

I didn't leave the property for three weeks, I got scared I would end up dragging a tin can on the end of a piece of string for a while.

Now I am feeling good again and I have taken the opportunity to take some guitar lessons from my flatmate. I was starting to suffer from stress and exhaustion from following the media, so I have taken a break and focused on trying to write a song with my new skills [LINK]. While I worry for the future, I am still hopeful for positive change. I miss people but it is good time for online collaborations and things are kicking off around that, so that's a cool thing.

SL:

I'm pleased to hear you're feeling better!

It is kinda amazing that the whole of society is all of a sudden in the slow-lane for the foreseeable future, huh... Having some extra space for working and learning new skills is such a silver lining I reckon!

The other day we spoke on the phone, and we talked a little about how work is comforting and human, and how it has been in a way co-opted by capitalism and now connotes labour for profit...

I did a survey for the Imperial Collage London [LINK] about how the isolation situation is affecting those in the arts, and there were all these questions about connection and disconnection. And it made me reflect, and realise that at the moment I am actually feeling more connected with society in general. More so than normally, where I tend to feel like some of my personal values are perhaps a slightly counter to those held by the majority...but now we have this situation where almost everyone is experiencing this similar moment – the way we are living our lives is more standardised... or something... At the same time I am also aware of and very grateful for the privilege I have with secure income (touch-wood), and a warm home, full cupboard, etc.

https://imperial.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0xPyLTxTOS0Svo9

WHM:

I have no idea really what to expect of the future. I am pretty privileged in that I miss going out for coffee. For a while I was a little bit in shock. I would fantasise about this kind of thing when I was a kid, but now that I am older it's not such an exciting prospect.

The last few days, I have allowed myself to forget about it all, but then every now and again I will get pulled back to reality. What that reality is I'm not sure though...

SL:

What is it like in Dunedin? Do you have much of a sense of how others in the city are dealing with the situation?

WHM:

Well, I have only just started leaving the house again, and yeah, it's end of the world-ish out there – a ghost town. It sure is a thing to see.

I keep in touch with people online and there are some who are definitely struggling. I didn't realise how much my daily mission out of the office to get a coffee and a food and talk to someone in the real world meant to me. I guess everyone is going to have these moments, though one of things I noticed getting to people is the lack of structure and the struggle to find meaning without the dictates of a day-job. This is something any self-directed worker or someone on a benefit has to face, the discipline to manage time in a healthy way under one's own terms.

What is free time when it seems endless?

And, what is it in the face of a looming crisis?

I think people who have experienced struggling with significant mental health issues are probably quite familiar with the sense of lockdown and isolation, but in that instance you're doing it on your own.

It's interesting seeing how society deals with the experience, albeit it in a far more connected way.

SL:

It's pretty crazy here in Auckland. The absence of traffic is very noticeable, but then there are seemingly heaps more joggers!

WHM:

Yeah, things seem to have chilled out. People are walking around. But then I tend to walk in the evenings when less people are about, and I am in the central city. I hear the suburbs are busy with walkers etc.

In the early few days, I was hearing five or six rage incidents per day at the intersection near my home.

SL:

I agree that it is pretty full on, but have you started following the news again since your period of exhaustion?

Comparing how different states have approached the issue has been interesting and frustrating – sad seeing how most Western nations would sooner misinform their people about the efficacy (and even the purpose) of wearing face masks than follow the lead of East Asian states... I understand that in part downplaying of the role of mass masking was to pre-empt a rush on a commodity essential for healthcare workers that was in short supply – a shame it allowed for racially charged skepticism to persist!

I feel extremely lucky (and privileged) that the time in insolation has been pleasant for me. That there have been road rage incidents I suppose is a result of the stress and fear the situation represents for many others, huh...?

WHM:

If you read about what happened to society in Europe during the Little Ice Age, it's kind of similar. You can see the frustration building, and people looking for scapegoats to blame for the virus, the mobs calling for disproportionate punishments for minor transgressions, but maybe we will avoid a headlong drive into conservatism?

Who knows, we might see a kind of left socialist system come in. I like the idea of there being a Universal Basic Income. Also, seeing that homeless people are being set up with shelter on a national scale is hopeful – maybe these people will continue to receive support after the crisis.

SL:

That would be one outcome. I am not sure how I feel, whether I'm optimistic or pessimistic about

how things will play out... at this stage it just feels like global limbo.

What was the deal with the Little Ice Age? When and where and for how long was it?

Lol, and on a tangent: what does toilet paper hoarding say about the collecting psychology of Western societies?! It seems to me to be a strange commodity to run for, ya know...?

WHM:

The Little Ice Age was a period of cooling that occurred after the Medieval Period. From around 1300 to about 1850. The global the climate cooled and weather was bad, it rained in Europe for the best part of two years, crops died, cities starved, chaos reigned. A cluster fuck of environmental chaos, social breakdown, famine and pandemics.

It will be one strange thing then another but the logical progression of it is alarming. The displays of blatant selfishness in general have been a disturbing, but actually we might have to expect worse if people don't calm the fuck down.

SL:

What are you thoughts about the future?

WHM:

Well, the general state of environmental collapse in my life time has been alarming, what is more alarming than the banal way we as a species have been driving the whole biosphere to extinction which is upsetting enough is the self harming, violent and paranoid psychosis that society tends to slip into collectively in the face of the collapsing world.

I don't worry so much for life as a phenomenon – evolution does its thing when no mind is keeping track of time. What I worry about is becoming disenfranchised from the biosphere, which I thought might peak with plastics and other toxins permeating the food chains. The sea would be full of fish but none that we could eat, plants would be growing, but none that we can eat... Now it kind of looks like it could be viruses rapidly evolving in the chaos of a disrupted and damaged natural world that will alienate us. Like the world rejecting an organ. That all makes me feel a bit sad for the world and for people.

SL:

I try to avoid thinking too deeply about these sorts of things, which I appreciate reflects a degree of privilege. I go through phases of paying attention, but it is so difficult to get past the theatre of infotainment, and once one does, it feels like there is only depression and disappointment waiting.

WHM:

I'm worried about what people will do to each other individually and collectively under the stress of the crisis. Who knows how long things will take to unfold? The economic climate looks like it is going to be pretty bad, geo-political instability worries me a lot.

I also try not to let my self go down too deep a rabbit hole worrying about the future, because I am weary of latching on to doomy conspiracy theories, coming to misguided conclusions. I just try and keep track of how things are playing out.

What do you think about the future do you worry about geo political stuff, big picture stuff?

SL:

I feel a pretty limited sense of agency when it comes to the larger machinations of the world, and prefer to put energy into the levels I live at – friendships, family, community – and I find I have more energy for those things if I'm not wrecked or petrified about those in power positions driving

us all in the wrong direction at increasing speed...

As it relates to COVID-19, I suppose that we will see changes in both directions – good and bad. It is an amazing opportunity to pause and reflect on what of the world is important and working well and what isn't. An opportunity we may see squandered...who knows.

Hopefully we will move forward with some imagination and optimism. I don't entirely share your pessimism, but suspect you're right to some degree (and also that you pay closer attention to the world at a geopolitical level than I do),

WHM:

I like to think of myself as a hopeful person.

SL:

I also try to be hopeful, but then I am fairly suspicious of the intentions of some in powerful positions...

WHM:

I do hope it will be a chance for positive change, if we don't make efforts, terrible things could happen.

SL:

What about at the local level – do you have any thoughts about how things will look in the medium term, for example when it comes to live performances in Dunedin?

WHM:

Jeez, I really don't know what to think...

Hopefully some months from now we will be getting back to having some performance and art shows etc., and all this now will seem like a strange dream. But I don't know. People seem to have only just stopped talking about 9/11, and security surveillance and paranoia ramped up after that and we never returned to "normal".

SL:

I have no concerns about the creativity, or Art... I just wonder about what sort of interesting ways we will see it presented.

WHM:

I have hope in the human creative spirit, though. Whatever happens, we have to adapt, keep being human and creative.

Before the lockdown there was some pretty cool street art happening around here – unsanctioned work, artists leaving small works around the place glued on to the city walls. I wonder if more of this could happen when people are able to get out a little more. I talked to an artist recently whose practice relies upon found and recycled urban trash, they were finding it hard to get out and fossick for essential bits and bobs to carry on.

I have heard of some people making sounds out on to the streets at night for people out walking. I thought that was cool.

I have wondered about sitting down in the city some where while out only my essential exercise routine, and recording some acoustic guitar while the city is so quiet outside – it is kind of a rare opportunity.

SL:

Yeah – it is a very odd and rare situation we're experiencing right now, huh. Hard to imagine that almost everything would ever could ever just stop like it has.

WHM:

Sometimes it is a little overwhelming. Is this what it looks like when capitalism starts to collapse? It is important not to get hysterical, though.

SL:

I think this is more like capitalism on pause. I am not of the crowd that thinks this is the end of capitalism as we know it...

WHM:

I'm not sure why I am so paranoid. I don't like to think of myself as a pessimistic person, but I do think we live in something of a lucky bubble, and I worry about losing what good things we have now. Like, I perceive that there are leviathan forces in the world and we are a bit powerless to do much more than just get by.

Ultimately I'm thinking that, on a personal level, not much changes as I have worked largely in isolation and I am used to collaborating through online file trades. I would miss the ritual of going to or playing at a show.

And in that sense, personally nothing much changes in the making for me, but I wonder what it means to artists who have managed to gain a footing in arts spaces etc., and I wonder how artists remain connected to audiences in the face of, say, no longer having performance spaces, or what art looks like when the practice is dependent on social media networks which are corporately controlled.

Artists will keep making art and people will find ways to share and celebrate it. Something will happen, whether or not art spaces as we have known them exist. Where there is the will to do so people will imagine a way forward .

It's the rest of life, our emotions, the natural world, all the other things that matter, that we must attend to or we could see a break in the chain of the creative flow.

And more importantly than that one has to try and stay well.