She Just Wanted to Play Bass. That Life Is Gone.

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Ginia Bellafante May 8, 2020

Forty-three years ago, not long after she graduated from Princeton with a degree in art history, Amy Madden turned down an acceptance to Harvard Law School, leaving her mother horrified. If you were the sort of person governed by creative longing, if you defined ambition on your own terms, there was really just one place to be in 1977. Amy Madden went directly from college to New York, moving to the Lower East Side, where she found an apartment on Avenue B for $50 a month.

Art, music, poetry — all of it compelled her. Then, in her late 20s, the man she was living with gave her a bass guitar and her passions found more clarity. A gifted musician growing up, she had turned down admission to Juilliard years earlier as a flutist. But she didn't actually like the flute; with the bass, she found an instant kinship.

"I said, You know what? I'm going to lose my life to this because I love it so much,'' she told me recently. Her art sustained her materially, if precariously, for a long time, until it didn't.

Over the next four decades, Amy Madden built a life as a working musician — through two failed marriages, through two bouts of cancer and single parenthood, the first eight years of which were spent in a studio in the East 60s.

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There were successes, meaningful, if not commercial — a well-received album, tours with bands that opened for the Rolling Stones or Mötley Crüe, appearances with blues musicians who opened for George Thorogood and Johnny Winter.

Even during the long period in which creativity was better supported, making enough money for the essential things was not easy, yet it was unclear then how much more challenging the exercise would become. This particular life was already scarred by the slow burn of the music industry's technological revolution and the brutal economic realities of New York. The pandemic rendered it to ash.

In recent years, Amy Madden had made a meager living playing in bars, most of them the dives that had defined a vanishing cultural style in the city. Now the virus had forced those bars to close. A part-time job she had at an art gallery became another casualty of the national lockdown.

Amy had made it through April with a $1,000 check sent to her by John Lee Hooker's former manager, she told me. He insisted she take it, remembering a favor she had done for him long ago, one she could hardly recall.

Playing with Hooker had been a high point in a career distinguished by the respect she had earned from acclaimed musicians. Once, early on, she picked up the phone at home and the person on the other end announced himself as David Bowie. She assumed the call was a prank; it was not. He wanted to talk to her about playing bass in his band. But she felt she wasn't ready — not good enough yet.

Amy Madden didn't really want a solo career, didn't want to be famous, didn't want to be Madonna. "I just wanted to play bass,'' she said. "I embraced the blues because people who played were so sure of who they were. They didn't want to be rich; they just wanted to play, and when you're playing, all the parts of your life fall into place; you feel like you are exactly where you are supposed to be."

Within her circle of fellow musicians, the new realities were bringing devastation. How the month of May will pan out financially, for her, was still uncertain. There was a check coming to her from MusiCares, the Recording Academy's charitable arm, but she wasn't sure when it would land. Founded in 1989 to help those in the business living on the margins, the organization opened a Covid relief fund in March, which quickly raised and ran through $14 million.

"The need is like nothing we have ever seen before," Harvey Mason Jr., chairman of the Recording Academy, told me.

After Katrina, the organization helped 3,700 people in and around New Orleans. But in just the past two months, it has processed 14,000 applications from singers, drummers, songwriters, equipment loaders, lighting riggers — people whose incomes are dependent on tours that have been canceled, on cruise ship gigs and hotel-lobby bookings that the current crisis has shuttered.

Recently MusiCares had to stop taking applications, which were coming in at the rate of 500 to 600 a day, until more money could be raised.

Beginning in the mid-2000s, the clubs that had helped characterize Downtown Manhattan as a place of anarchy and artistry were slowly lost to escalating rents. The Bottom Line closed after 30 years in 2004. CBGB, where Amy had been a regular in the '80s, closed in 2006. Kenny's Castaways followed six years later. These were the best-known of the venues to have failed. For every CBGB, there were many others that disappeared more quietly.

Dan Lynch's, an excellent blues bar on Second Avenue, had shut down even earlier. During the '90s, Amy played there often and made decent money — $200 to $300 on any given night, enough to cover a cab to her studio apartment uptown during her break at midnight, where she would scrub down to remove the stench of cigarette smoke and nurse her infant son before returning for another set. She had reconfigured a closet into a nursery; an Ecuadorean grandmother who lived in her building cared for the baby while she was gone, refusing to take more than $20 for her time.

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"Those were good days,'' Amy said. Having a child made it almost impossible for her to go on tour, so she became reliant on local bookings at a time when the scene was contracting.

Still, there were turns of good fortune. Amy was a songwriter, and proceeds from a music-publishing deal made it possible for her to buy a small two-bedroom apartment in the East 90s in 1997, near her son's school. She knew musicians who lived out their lives in tiny studios, who died alone in nursing homes. A very good guitar player she had known who called himself Joey Miserable lived in his car. She felt immense gratitude.

Three years after she moved into her new apartment, BB King's Blues Club opened in Times Square and Amy found a professional home — a regular gig on many Monday nights in the company of so many inspiring musicians. She adored the kitchen staff, who sent her home with meals for her son. She could go in anytime, even when she wasn't working, and get fed.

"BB's was unique because that community thing had disappeared in the city,'' she said.

Two years ago, the club closed when the owners could no longer afford the rent. At this point, Amy applied for food stamps, which bring her $192 a month. She doesn't have a cellphone.

In recent years, Amy had been playing in bars with Alan Merrill, the guitarist and singer who wrote the Joan Jett hit "I Love Rock 'n' Roll.'' He would pay her out of pocket — $100 or so per performance. They were old friends and very close. In mid-March they played together for the last time, in Harlem. He died of Covid two weeks later.

Amy got sick, too, but has recovered. "I have so much and such a rich life,'' she wrote me one evening, in the spirit of reflection. "There are people with nothing, on the street. Money is the handmaiden of creativity, not the God. I chose my path. I am so fortunate to be alive and have my hands and my brain. I want others to be helped and remembered."