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Interviewees: Katie Condon, Jordan Lane, Lhanna Writesel, Josh Hungate, Dillon Johns

Interviewer: Michael Larmann

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Interviewer's Note: This is an audio oral history with five interviewees. For the purpose of simplifying the transcription process, each interviewee was asked to state their name before they spoke.

Michael Larmann: Test, Test. Okay. This is Michael Larmann. I am interviewing the band Letter B. Today is June 19, 2020. We are in the Barbara Hollmann Community Center in the University of Montana Lewis and Clark apartments complex. It is just past 9AM. So, at this point I would like to ask all of you to go down the line to introduce yourself, introduce your name and spell your name, and tell me a little bit about yourselves.

Katie: Hey I'm Katie. That's spelled K-a-t-i-e and I'm from the band Letter B.

Josh Lane: I am Jordan Lane, J-o-r-d-a-n L-a-n-e, and I play guitar, keys, and sing in Letter B.

Lhanna Writesel: I'm Lhanna Writesel, L-h-a-n-n-a W-r-i-t-e-s-e-l, and I play saxophone in Letter B.

Josh Hungate: My name is Josh Hungate, J-o-s-h H-u-n-g-a-t-e, and I play trombone in Letter B.

Dillon Johns: My name is Dillon Johns, D-i-l-l-o-n J-o-h-n-s, and I play bass guitar in Letter B.

Michael Larmann: Awesome. Step one done. Everyone is so excited. This is wonderful. After doing some research about your band the first thing I'm curious is how this all happened? I read that this band formed in both 2013 and 2014 so for the record when this band form and how you all got involved?

Katie: Jordan has been playing music around downtown for years. He and I started Letter B in 2014 after I wrote a poem titled "Letter B" and informed him that if we ever had a band I'd call it Letter B.

Michael Larmann: Awesome. Does anyone else want to speak to that or one and done? That's okay. Okay. Great. Awesome. Okay then. I have also read that Letter B has a very unique music style. I've heard that you play everything from roots rock to pop, folk, rock, indie-hop hop. How would you describe your music style or styles?

Katie: I think you nailed it. We have a collection of six different artists with very different backgrounds and musical influences so our music is very dynamic. We like a lot of different things and I think we try and make a lot of different kinds of music.

Jordan Lane: This is Jordan. We try to just have a lot of freedom between the six of us. With the songwriting I tend to bring it to the band or Katie and I will bring it to the band and it's sort of a free-for-all. And I think those different music styles and different backgrounds shine through and that's what you get our very eclectic style from is everyone just having the freedom to do their thing.

Michael Larmann: Awesome. Okay. We are going right though these. Okay. What do you like the best about playing in Missoula or the wider western Montana region?

Josh Hungate: This is Josh. For me at least what I really enjoy about Letter B and then playing for the Pacific Northwest is the amount of different musical influences that influence the Pacific Northwest. And through Letter B's combined different musical backgrounds we kind of are able to cater to everybody in their own music sense. Like there's a little bit of Letter B for everybody I would say.

Michael Larmann: Great. Do you guys have a favorite place to perform either in Missoula or outside of Missoula? Any favorite performance memories perhaps?

Lhanna Writesel: This is Lhanna. We played a show last summer in Great Falls -

All: [laughter]

Michael Larmann: To which the band goes wild.

Lhanna Writesel: Everyone just cheered for that silently. And it was during a monsoon rainstorm and the show ended up hours behind schedule because of this rainstorm we ended up playing like a little busking set on the side of the street soaking wet with our also soaking wet instruments and still getting to play the show later and it just amped up everybody up so much and like everyone in the crowd was already excited because we did that little busking set and it's just a really cool memory for all of us I think we bring it up pretty often.

Jordan Lane: This is Jordan. We do love our hometown venues, The Top Hat and Caras Park, generally the two that we play the most, but I think I can speak for everyone when if it's an outdoor gig it's going to be just a little bit better. We like the freedom and the air and the oxygen and I mean there is nothing, you know, better than having your music just ring through as far as it can rather than be confined by walls. So, we do like outdoor gigs and that Great Falls gig was outdoors and one of the most epic situations we have ever found ourselves in and it could have been terrible, but we made the best of it and it was the best show.

Michael Larmann: That's awesome. We will definitely come back to that. Anything else on that question? Great. Okay. So now we are going to dive into the COVID-19 related questions and we can go down the line or whoever wants to speak on this one can. When was the first time that you remember hearing about COVID-19 and when was the first time you felt like it directly impacted your life or perhaps the band?

Dillon Johns: This is Dillon. So outside of Letter B I am an elementary school teacher and I heard about COVID-19 in late February, early March. I'm just kind of thinking about, you know, if this does actually end up happening in America what's going to happen to our schooling and what are we going to have to do. And I was actually one of the first people in my building to talk about it. Everyone kind of just wrote me off. Then we came back from spring break and it hits and all that jazz and that was super fun, but I'd say the first time I really started hearing about it was in that mid-March during our spring break at Missoula County.

Katie: I heard about it late February early march, oh this is Katie, and yeah personally it had to play a role in my workplace as well too. Make some necessary moves in order to shut things down. As a band we had ten shows booked in March alone and I don't think we played a single one of them. We did a livestream for one of our shows that was booked. Instead of going and playing at the venue we livestreamed a show from my basement. And then I believe it was the following day or maybe the day after that the shelter in place order was set and we didn't see each other again for weeks.

Jordan Lane: This is Jordan. So, you know, timeline is the same as theirs essentially. I handle all the management and the booking for Letter B and so I was in contact with all these venues, and venues and events that we were going to be playing through November really. At the beginning it was all the more recent and upcoming shows and then the emails started flooding in as COVID got worse, but the first way that I felt it impacted the band was when that first weekend was canceled because it was spring break, like Dillon said, that it really started to become a reality that things might be shutting down and that weekend of spring break was our first run of shows of the year essentially. And so, when those shows were canceled, literally, you know, hours before if not only two days before, that was when it really hit me that okay this is something and I'm very optimistic and so I thought for sure we were going to be playing those shows and then when they were canceled it was a huge reality check for sure.

Michael Larmann: Awesome. Before we keep going I think it's just important we establish, because it sounds like many of the members in this band are not fulltime musicians. You have other jobs like Dillon said. So, has this impacted life and work outside of the band as well? Can anyone speak to that?

Josh Hungate: This is Josh. I currently work on Bob Ward's Sporting Goods in town and for me when we got hit with the COVID order, nothing really changed for my job. We were considered essential by the state because we sell firearms for whatever that's worth right now. So, for me

personally I didn't see a lot of shift in my everyday nine-to-five life. I currently live at home with my mom and my grandma though so I was encouraged to be as safe as possible at work because I was coming home to a couple of older aged people and trying to make sure they stay as safe as possible. Yeah.

Lhanna Writesel: This is Lhanna. My other job is at a mental health facility and that was deemed essential for a number of reasons so I worked through the shutdown and a lot of my job is assisting our clients who have severe mental illnesses into grocery stores or medical appointments or things like that that they need assistants with like socially. So, even through the shutdown I was going into Walmart and Albertsons and wherever like two to five times a day and that was really difficult because there was a lack of understanding of why we had to be careful. And so, it was definitely something that continuing to play music would have helped like release me from a little bit, but yeah. It was a pretty big impact in both ways I guess.

Michael Larmann: Awesome. Okay. Let's see. So, was the band able to meet and practice during the pandemic or did everything kind of stop in terms of performances and meeting together?

Katie: This is Katie. We played a livestream in my basement like I said earlier sometime in mid-March. The twentieth of March or so and literally the following day or maybe a few days later there was a shelter in place order that happened and we sort of decided collectively to not meet again and to follow the orders and quarantine as much as we could even leaving gear set up in the basement. It was like this scary skeleton stage of everybody's gear that stayed there for weeks because we thought it was the best decision to not gather again until we felt safe enough to do so.

Jordan Lane: This is Jordon. And this is literally the first time that we have all been together since that livestream.

Michael Larmann: Really?

Jordan Lane: Yeah.

Michael Larmann: Well, I hope you guys feel safe with me.

All: [laughter]

Michael Larmann: Awesome. So, has it been difficult being apart for so long then? Since mid-March?

Josh Hungate: This is Josh. For me personally, I am a very extraverted person as much as I possibly can be, right now especially so for me a lot of even though it was rehearsal or we were figuring out different parts of new songs or figuring out dates and whatnot for performances and gigs, for me it was still very much a gettogether and I get to see people that I very much

care about. So, for me this has been particularly hard just not being in a band that I really love and then not seeing people that I also really love.

Michael Larmann: He said it all. Awesome. Outside of the band and perhaps outside of work, what have you all been doing with your time while in quarantine?

Dillon Johns: This is Dillon. I've put about 300 hours in Animal Crossing on the Switch.

All: [laughter]

Dillon Johns: On top of that, I've been doing a lot of practicing and I've been actually playing out with a different one of my groups for the past couple weeks or so over at **passup**, so still music. Oh, and then obviously remote learning being a teacher and having to figure out how to teach online school and stuff.

Josh Hungate: This is Josh and along with Dillon I've probably put two to three hundred hours on Animal Crossing, but Call of Duty: Modern Warfare. And then outside of that just working and then the occasional longboarding experience where I can just go outside and clear my head for a little bit.

Katie: This is Katie. I've logged probably 300 hours in my yard. I wasn't expecting to grow such an epic garden this year because I was expecting to be out of town playing gigs and instead my yard looks really beautiful and I'm growing a lot of great food.

Jordan Lane: This is Jordan. I was feeling very creative throughout the process and I wrote a lot of music. And so, I have quite the arsenal for when we do start playing again to show these guys and it's going to be fun to reinvent these songs that I have been playing for months on my own that I will normally play for a couple of weeks and then show them and then they turn into Letter B. I'm excited for that transformation. So, yeah, I just played a lot of music and exercised as much as possible and, you know, had to stay home during the quarantine and Katie and I live together so there was a lot of time together so a lot of music.

Michael Larmann: Great. We are definitely going to come back to that.

Lhanna Writesel: This is Lhanna. I learned the guitar, which was something I've been wanting to do for a super long time. I've always been really really terrible at string instruments and I was like, there's a guitar in my room and I'm in my room indefinitely so I'm just going to play it. So, that's been really cool and also my sister Sofie lives in Billings and is also a musician, a really great singer, and a wonderful cello player and she and I have been doing like projects together where we like send recordings back and forth to each other and like taking songs in a major key and changing them to a minor key and just writing a new arrangement and that's been keeping the creative process going. Katie is shaking her head happily I think. Okay. Good. Yeah, so that's

been a really cool thing. I also did a livestream with the Letter B trio during the quarantine from outside Jordan's bedroom window. I was standing outside. He was in his bedroom and we were there just through the window so that was a gig I guess.

All: [laughter]

Michael Larmann: This is a lot of fun. This is great. Awesome. Okay. So, has the pandemic affected any of you in any ways outside of the band physically, emotionally, financially, or in any other ways that have induced stress or other worries?

Katie: This is Katie. Yes, all of the above.

Jordan Lane: This is Jordan. Yes, I was just starting two new jobs, one at the airport and one at a fitness studio and both of them were shut down. My hours were cut and so I went into quarantine and I rely a lot on the supplemental income we get from playing these shows and in fact this year was going to be the most money that we've ever made. I just kind of said screw it this year and started charging quite a bit more because I've never been very good at sensing our self-worth as a band and not really knowing how people would pay and so maybe that's why it was so easy to book shows in the past. They were like, Oh, you want that much? Okay. Great. Come on. But this year I started upping the rate and people were paying it and so I was really proud of that and also really looking forward to being able to sustain ourselves that much more. So, we took a huge financial loss this year as a band and all personally took a financial loss because we split the money. So, yeah.

Dillon Johns: This is Dillon. I would say I'm a bit luckier than the others due to my position. So, when you're teaching elementary school I'm on a contract because we are unionized so they can't really break the contract so they had to find a way to work around that. So, I didn't actually receive any pay cut whatsoever. I didn't lose any hours or anything. All I had to do was figure out how to teach online which was a challenge in itself, but I do feel that I was a lot luckier not having to worry about the financial side of the pandemic.

Michael Larmann: Great. Okay. I have to constantly be like, where were we? Yes. Have you guys been in contact with any other local bands in Missoula or western Montana? Do you know about their experiences compared with yours?

Lhanna Writesel: This is Lhanna. I am a part of a number of different groups besides Letter B. And yeah, I have been in contact with a lot of them and it's kind of the same story. You know like I play in this reggae-funk band in Whitefish and, oh so does Josh our trombone player now, and like we potentially have a show on Thursday in Kalispell and I don't know if it's happening. You know, everything is up in the air like a show gets booked and it's like a very socially distant like careful show and then two days before it'll get canceled so it's just kind of this rollercoaster of like frustration. Yea, but there are a couple groups that I'm a part of that can play safely with other people around, like busking is kind of a thing maybe. There's some options that are being

thrown around, but for the most part, it's impacted everything, like every group that I am a part of.

Katie: This is Katie. Especially in the beginning of the shutdown, I think we were all keeping track of other local bands even just on social media just to see if they were voluntarily closing or not canceling their shows to just sort of gauge what is morally correct right now if the venue isn't going to cancel our show, is it up to us to cancel at this point and I think I personally used social media. I think we all kind of did to keep any eye on other bands in town and also in the region to get some guidance I guess and to see what everybody else was doing, to help us figuring out what we were going to do.

Michael Larmann: Does Letter B, because I know Lhanna was just saying that some bands are going back to performing in weird social distancing situations, has Letter B planning to go back to live performances anytime soon?

Jordan Lane: This is Jordon. Well, we need to discuss that as a band and where we are at and that is something that is coming in the next days to weeks of just this progression. The new spike in cases doesn't have us really positively moving forward towards a show, I guess you could say. But, then again, we are just following along and trying to keep ourselves informed. And I haven't told them yet, but I did just receive an email that Great Falls wants us to come play the big show that we had booked there this year in August. And so, it's an outdoor show. It's essentially a replay of last year, but even better. So, that's one show that we have, but then again that happened with the Downtown Tonight series here. They said we're going to open up, we're going to have bands play and then a few days ago they just emailed me and said we're actually not going to have bands play. So, definitely not giving out hopes up. We are hoping to play as soon as possible, but we just want to make sure that it's right.

Michael Larmann: Okay. By the way, I am trying to be quiet just so the recording catches everything, but I am paying attention. This is wonderful. Okay. So, that is that. We actually just spoke about this a little earlier. Back in mid-March, you guys were scheduled to play at the Union Club Bar. This was when the show was canceled due to the pandemic but you guys actually livestreamed for about an hour on Facebook to perform. So, the question is, how has technology and livestreaming made it possible for musicians such as yourselves to reach audiences during this difficult time?

Jordan Lane: It's been incredible. This is Jordan. Our first livestream was definitely an experiment. As far as the element of playing the show goes, it was fun and we had a great time. There's a couple of audio engineers in the band and so I think we made it a little more complicated than it had to be. And so, it was a good test though. We ended up not doing it again because, you know, it is such close quarters and things like that and then personally I was doing livestreams every week and I was able to figure out good audio and I had multiple people watching and actually I had opportunities come up where I played corporate happy hours for businesses, for their teams, and I would get into a little Q&A, play some music for them and

they would pay me a ridiculous amount of money to do it and it was a great way to get some not only performance time but to get some supplemental cash. And so, I did that for a few weeks, maybe like six weeks really until summer came and it was light out and I didn't want to do it anymore. And so, But the idea of the technology being where it's right now, I mean, I could go into how dangerous it is, but I think I will keep it positive. I think it was really really beneficial for musicians, not only mentally, but financially in some ways.

Katie: This is Katie. With the livestream we did in mid-March and then just then just joining I with Jordan every once and a while on his livestreams, we're really grateful for technology, but it is so wild to play a show and perform for a computer and short of try to visualize the people who might be watching through their computers. It's a completely different feeling and performance than being in person and getting to interact and see somebody's face, you know, and see their reaction to your song. So, there is that aspect of technology that sort of changed the way we performed.

Josh Hungate: This is Josh. From an educator's perspective, I know that Dillon had to adapt really on the fly on how he was going to reach all of his students in a week's time or less. For me as well, I teach a couple of students outside of everything I do and I teach them middle school trombone kids and we got a lot of different varying responses. I actually had a couple of students that adapted very well and I feel that they are actually growing more because of them being in their house and me being in my house us just talking over Skype and having trombone lessons via that. So, it's been interesting to see the different responses that we're getting, at least for me, from younger folks, how this is going to potentially further our educational studies and figure out like, Hey, how are we going to reach these kids who either A, do not have internet or B, just don't have go connections, but also kind of seeing how new kids can actually benefit from the online learning. There's some kids that just being on screen seeing and looking at a teacher talking, for them that's just a little easier of an interaction for them. So, for me technology has been very important in both aiding kids who may learn in a different style and being able to continue these studies and teaching and lessons and whatnot so we are not just spinning our wheels trying to learn nothing.

Michael Larmann: Awesome. Dillon, did you also want to speak to that since Josh mentioned you or has he said it all?

Dillon Johns: This is Dillon. Josh pretty much covered all of it. I though, branching off of what Katie said, it was definitely very different. I saw more in my educational life more than in my band life, but the actual act of performing for a webcam cause every week I'd have to make a couple of YouTube videos. I have my own little YouTube channel for my music class and I had to talk to the camera like it was a student, you know, and I mean you watch people do it on the internet all the time it's not that big of a deal, but it's really jarring to like try and actually be that person. And then, going back to what Josh said, it was really cool to see the different learning styles of some people. Some people just hated the online learning and couldn't handle

it and then I had a couple kids who never talked in my classroom, they were sending me assignments every week, you know, just super excited to be a part of it. So, I think this pandemic kind of opened us up to different types of learning, different types of people and different ways that we can explore those things without having to be strictly direct instruction one-on-one kind of a thing.

Michael Larmann: Okay. And also, just coming back to what Jordan said, cause one thing that I have noticed looking around the internet is that there is a lot of small bands and groups doing livestreams and trying to get money through Venmo. So, it's interesting playing through a webcam, playing through the internet, but also trying to make a living off of it. Do you guys have any notes on that or what you've seen with other bands trying to get something financially out of playing or livestreaming?

Jordan Lane: This is Jordan. I have mixed feelings on that. My goal with the livestreams was not to make money. In fact, I told Katie right before I got the corporate gig thing that came from one of my livestreams where they saw me playing that I didn't want it to be about that. I wanted it to be about sharing the art and sharing the music and, in fact, I was a little bothered by the amount of reaching out people were doing, If I'm going to play, I need to be paid. I think sometimes it can just be done for the art and when we are on the road, that's one thing. We need gas, we need food, we need to sleep somewhere, you know, but in the livestream sense I felt it is the easiest way to just get your music out to people for free. So, like I said, I'm a bit torn on it.

The flipside of that is there are bands out there that their primary job. they're deemed nonessential and they can't really pick up unemployment for certain reasons or there's not this financial backing for music and bands and the individuals in them. So, people had to do what they had to do. And so, all of your shows being canceled, like I said, it was a huge blow for us and we're still kind of coming up. And so, these bands that are, you know, legitimately out there making money and that is their fulltime job, I completely understand them wanting to do that, but it's also a difficult platform in order to connect with people on a level because for instance you are playing a show and your merch table is in the back, people go by and buy your t-shirts and that's where you make a lot of your money is on your merch. So, there's not that platform and not that opportunity for bands. So yeah, I'm like 50-50 on it honestly, but I think certain bands had to do it to survive and it's their means of survival so they just did what they had to do.

Katie: This is Katie. I think that bands doing a livestream and asking for money and being paid has really highlighted the value of our artform and has just sort of brought to light how important live music is and how much people will try and figure out a way to experience live music with you and "donate" or "pay" you to share this art. So, more valuable than I realized before.

Michael Larmann: Okay. Has the pandemic possibly affected the way in which you all think about your own music? Or perhaps another question is, has it changed the music making process because I know, Jordan mentioned that earlier.

Lhanna Writesel: This is Lhanna. Yeah, it's changed it somewhat for me. I mean I've never been too much of like a songwriter, but that project I have been doing with my sister that I mentioned earlier was really like a new creative process for me that I don't think it's an avenue I would have explored if it weren't for the need to create remotely with each other. So yeah, I think it's opened up a new creative avenue for me that I really like and enjoy it turns out and that's been really cool. Yeah.

Dillon Johns: This is Dillon. [Cough]Excuse me. So, for me, my job is such a big part of my life and since I'm a music teacher all I do is play music all day so there are a lot of times when I come home from work and I'm just done. I drive home with the music off. I get home and I don't listen to any music or do anything music related for the rest of the day because I'll just burn myself out. So having this shutdown, [cough] excuse me, and having to go to remote learning has really opened up a lot of time for me and a lot of freedom and I've been finding myself watching a lot more live performances on the internet whether they're livestreams or recorded from years ago to give myself more influence, to give myself some things to practice, to actually have time to practice and I feel like that's just strengthened me as a musician and as much as I wish it could have happened in a different way, I am thankful in that avenue that it happened that way.

Michael Larmann: Great, because I've listened to a few of your recent singles, which I love by the way, and I was just very curious because the EP that you guys are working on is called *Learn to Live with It*, featuring songs such as "All I Need" and "Home" and many of these motifs are obviously important to us right now living through the pandemic and I'm just curious, has the pandemic affected the way you look at the music you've already made? Yeah. Let's just start there. Or is it completely separate?

Katie: This is Katie. The pandemic has made the music we have already made seem more valuable to me.

Josh Hungate: This is Josh. For me, I'm kind of the newbie for Letter B. I'm the most recent member, so for me kind of seeing where the band has gone with their first albums to where we are now, it's kind of cool to just see that, it feels like it's almost like a time capsule. Almost like pre-COVID-19 was this Letter B thing and some of our newer stuff and then post-COVID-19 and I think we are going to have not necessarily a different perspective, it's just going to be more informed, a little bit more depth to it. For me in particular, like when we said *Learning to Live with It* I don't think any of us were planning on COVID-19 being the it learning to live with. So, it's really eye-opening to see that, Oh, this what we are actually dealing with and this is what we're are going to live with for a little bit.

Jordan Lane: This is Jordan. One of the biggest things that I hold onto is allowing other peoples' perspectives to shine through and not really giving a lot of information on what I mean when I'm writing the lyrics, what we mean when we are writing the lyrics in order to give people the chance to make it what they want, essentially, and to take from it what they will. And so, honestly, I didn't even consider those things until you said them. So, that's beautiful. That means its working. I think *Catch Me When I Fall* was our last EP. *Learn to Live with It* is this EP. *Moving Forward* was the first album. Right, so we do have a theme in a way of growth, both as a group, as a people, as a mankind, and as individuals, and I think that's relatable no matter what and just right now I think you can make it what you want with the experiences you having during all of this. So, I think that a beautiful part of our music in general, not only the eclectic nature of the sounds, but the eclectic nature of the message.

Michael Larmann: Awesome. Do you guys think the pandemic will influence your music to any extent, whether that be through topic, or as Jordan point out, writing music throughout it?

Katie: This is Katie. Yeah, I definitely think the pandemic will affect our music. First off, our saxophone player now plays the guitar so that's going to be confusing. [laughter]. And also, like Jordan was saying, you know, the words we write are open to interpretation and we've got a handful of words that are written now that, you know, will send different messages to different people. Yeah.

Lhanna Writesel: This is Lhanna. The first thing that comes to mind when you ask how it is going to change the way we write or play music is like how different it is going to feel playing together. I've been kind of like dreaming about the first show where we don't have to worry about anything after this and like who knows when that's going to be? I don't have any expectations, but it's an overwhelming thing to think about like the emotional connection that's going to be there and so much more present to all of us because we will no longer take it for granted, not that we ever really did, I don't think, but it's going to be so much more on the forefront of what we're doing and that's like something I'm really looking forward. I think it going to be very valuable, for not only for us, but for musicians everywhere. The emotional connection will be like not taken for granted anymore. Yea, like I said. Huh? It will be elevated. Yeah.

Josh Hungate: This is Josh. Kind of piggybacking on what Lhanna said, I won't be ashamed to admit there were some gigs I definitely took for granted. It's just something you do. You go and play at a little tinier bar for not as many people and you get paid not as much and I think I did kind of look at those performances immensely thinking, Eh, whatever it's just another tiny bar gig, but for me some of those gigs ended up being my most fun performances of just kind of being able to interact with each other a little more as compared to audience interaction. That's not to say that I don't want to play for tons of people. That's one of my favorite things as well. But, I think both as a performer and as audience member who goes to a lot of performances from other people I think we're all going to take collectively visual and acoustic art and just art

in general I think we are all just going to come out of this feeling so much more appreciate of all the things around us.

I do know that at least in other countries I know there's, at least from my own experiences in Germany, I mean you sometimes in certain gigs you are a government employee. I mean state taxes play for your livelihood to play music and that's not necessarily what happens in this country and I'm not saying that's terrible or great, but I'm just highlighting other countries on what they kind of do, but I think it shows an almost government-wide level appreciation for music. And I don't want to make this a political rant. That's not what we're here for right now, but I think at least it's going to give, at least for the Pacific Northwest, I think once this is all over and when we're not having to worry about social distancing and things like that, I think people are going to show up to more gigs and people are going to just appreciate live music and live art just that much more because of what we currently had to experience that lack of physical connection to music and just art in general.

Michael Larmann: Awesome. I mean, I can tell you that I've been here for not even a year yet and I'm really excited to go to some live shows so this has kind of been a bummer, but I am excited too. Okay. This is going to be a bit of a different question. Because outside of COVID, there's a lot more going on in the world right now. One particular movement is the Black Lives Matter protests that are going on throughout the country and I'm curious what your thoughts are as musicians. Do you have any perspective about what's going on in the world, responsibilities of musicians and their music to help this movement or something else?

Katie: This is Katie. I think Black Lives Matter and we believe that you can't play any of the music that we do without being influenced by black musicians and we honor that. We're all white and I think it's our responsibility to note that and recognize the cellular racism that is potentially inside of our bodies and to use our platform as musicians to highlight the fact that Black Lives Matter and in that also honor the music that came from black musicians.

Dillon Johns: This is Dillon. I think first and foremost, being a white person, my first objective is to educate myself and to try to bring to light some of the issues that have been systematically in me whether to my knowledge or not and once you start moving past that step I don't think anyone can successfully 100 percent make that step, but once you start being aware of it, I think our role and the roles of other musicians in the world, [cough] excuse me, is to educate others especially in places like Montana and other places where the population is significantly white. I think it's one of those things that a lot of people can be very racist and just have no idea that what they're saying is racist. I know I have family members who have no idea that what they're saying is wrong because that's just how they grew up, you know, and I'm not saying that's okay by any stretch of the mind, but a lot of people it's not a, oh, I might be racist kind of a thing, it's more they're born and raised to be racist and they don't really think about it. So, I think it's our job as musicians and as people who do have a spotlight on us to preach about racism and about Black Lives and try to bring more of a normalcy to the antiracism and antifascism and I think that's something that we are going to be working on as a band a lot

whether consciously or subconsciously and I think that's something a lot of other musicians are going to be focusing on both consciously and subconsciously as well.

Katie: This is Katie. I think, like Dillon was saying, we have a responsibility to keep the conversation going and we are going to do that the best we can.

Michael Larmann: Awesome. Thank you for that. I know it's a tough question, but that was excellent. Okay. Which one next? Yeah, let's do this one. Okay. So, the music promoter Logjam Presents here in Missoula has canceled, postponed and rescheduled most of its live performance shows and events all the way from March even as far as September. What did you guys think when you heard that live performance venues in Missoula were closing down?

Katie: This is Katie. I was glad because it seemed like the safest thing to do.

Dillon Johns: This is Dillon. Yeah. I feel exactly the same. Being in the education profession, I saw it coming. I did a lot of work on my school's – I was on a subcommittee –

[Brief interruption in the interview as a man walked into the community center and immediately left]

Dillon Johns: [laughter]

Michael Larmann: As we were [laughter].

Dillon Johns: I was on a subcommittee at my school for figuring out how were going to close down and start online learning and stuff like that and I'm actually on a subcommittee to reopen everything and I remember being one of the only people that I knew that was aware that this was going on and that was actually trying to do it. I was one of the first people I know that actually got masks and that was super worried about it. I have someone in my family with a, I guess, a compromised immune system so I tried to be on my very tippy toes for the whole thing. But when I heard that the venues were closing down it was kind of like, Oh, finally kind of a thing that I had been waiting for cause I feel like they didn't close down for quite a while at least in my brain. Yeah.

Michael Larmann: That's okay. We already talked about your planned tour a little earlier. I would like to revisit that cause in addition to performing in Missoula, Letter B is a touring band and the Learn to Live with It tour, at least part one of it, you guys were scheduled to play from March to May in Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington state. How did you react when you began to realize that the pandemic was affecting the tour?

Josh Hungate: This is Josh. Personally, never having been part of a touring band prior to Letter B, last summer was kind of my first tour part with Letter B and this year I was so excited. I was ready to hit Oregon and hit Washington and hit Idaho and just do nothing but play music and

ride in a van with some of the best people I know so I was like, Hell yeah, let's do it. And I was devastated personally. For me, this was such an exciting moment to be like, Man, I feel like part of a touring band like we're doing the thing we all want to do, and then this all happened and while I'm really glad that people are, you know, staying inside and being safe, for me personally, it was a big hit. And for me it was more of a mental thing or more of a me yelling at me in my own head thing saying, Hey, you're not, like, you're not good enough, but in a mental point I was kind of taking some of my insecurities and throwing it into why it was canceled and not just realizing that COVID was the culprit behind it. So, there was kind of a lot of anxiety that also popped up with COVID kind of canceling all of this and some stuff I've definitely been having to work through, I wasn't planning to work through in terms of my own mental facilities and whatnot.

Jordan Lane: This is Jordan. There's a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes in months and months and even the year leading up to these tours. Based on relationships we've built by going and showing up and doing a good job and continuing to be able to go back to those places and also new places and trying to always be expanding and I pride myself on getting us into new venues and into new places a little more each year cause that is the goal. We want to expand and we want to continue to be a touring band. So like Josh said, it was devastating. There's just so much that goes into it aside from just being on stage and playing and it felt like for naught, you know. It was just all done within a day essentially. So, like six months of work was just completely wiped out. So, it sucked. The more information that I have, you know, obviously now I'm glad it all happened, but at the time it was definitely hard and it was a blow and I just wanted to be out there playing because that's the fun part. All the work that goes into it, the fun part is when we get to travel and play. Yeah, that's it.

Michael Larmann: When the weather gets cold I hear that you guys usually turn away from live performances and focus more on studio work and recording. So, as the pandemic was coming in in the early spring, did that at all affect recording, EP work, album work?

Katie: This is Katie. We had all our recording done before that so I think it didn't. We had everything already recorded and we were just excited to hit the road.

Michael Larmann: Awesome. Cause also in addition to Letter B, Jordan, I heard you recently released a single, "Lost on a Hill" in April on Spotify. Was that at all problematic during the pandemic or did you get that done prior?

Jordan Lane: No, actually the pandemic really helped out a lot with my time. I've recorded my parts in my room at home and then sent it off to the label that I'm on and they sent it to a producer and then that got sent to a mixing engineer. We were all working from our own spaces. Really collaborative effort to get the two singles out that I have now. So, honestly, the creative time that I had was really beneficial to that process with the solo songs. It's a much different process with Letter B and it wouldn't have been possible to record with Letter B, but

with that particular instance and the way we're going about with my solo stuff, like I said, I had the time and I was grateful for that.

Michael Larmann: we are actually doing really well on schedule right now. We only have three questions left. Are we hanging in there? Just a quick check. Awesome. This is actually before the pandemic, but it's fascinating to me so I wanted to ask you about it because this past December and January Letter B performed at a few charity and fundraiser events. You guys performed at the Out of Office Holiday Party, which was a fundraiser for sexual assault prevention in Missoula's entertainment workforce and you guys played at the Unmasking Trafficking Masquerade Ball, which was a charity event hosted by the Lifeguard Group which tries to prevent human trafficking. So, how did this come about? How did Letter B get involved in these events and what did it mean to you guy?

Jordan Lane: We've always prided ourselves, this is Jordan, on using our platform for something bigger or better than us and so whenever possible we like to play at charity events and we like to give back via our artform. And so, these days we have a bit of a name for ourselves around here and so they actually reach out to us in hopes that more people will buy tickets and come to the shows in order to, you know, raise money for their cause. So yeah, in both of those instances we were reached out to and it was for, you know, the popularity factor of wanting people to come, not only for their event, but for us and in-turn would be giving back to them and so we are always just happy to help.

Michael Larmann: Great. Okay. Yes, okay. Do you all have any opinions on the Missoula's municipal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of closing down businesses or other regulations?

Dillon Johns: This is Dillon: I felt, honestly, I was fairly comfortable with most of the shutdown. I thought a lot of it came at a fairly okay time. The only thing that I'm personally worried about is the reopening. Based off of a lot of evidence I am ready for us to, and this is the pessimist in me speaking, but I am ready for us to be closed back down later this summer if it keeps happening the way it's happening. So, personally, and I know this is such a subjective thing, but I personally would have appreciated us staying shut down longer and that could just be because of my privilege based off of my income or anything like that, but I do feel like for the government's role in this, they could have, I guess, stepped in a little more than they did if that makes sense. Really, no one else?

All: [laughter]

Michael Larmann: Dillon said it all.

All: [laughter]

Michael Larmann: He spoke his piece. Awesome. Do you think the government, whether it be local, state, national, what have you has in any way recognized the needs of musicians such as yourselves or have you been more or less on your own?

Josh Hungate: This is Josh. I think, personally, in the United States, I think we haven't been recognized as well as we could be in our importance in keeping people a little bit more sane while they're quarantined. I've got a couple of musician friends in Germany right now who when the shutdown happened they were able to go and file for wages lost and basically list their gigs from when the shutdown happened to indefinitely and those planned gigs and say, This is what I was going to be payed for A, B, C through Z, and they were paid appropriately and they were able to therefore live and support their families still because they just have that support system already built in. I don't know, like I can't speak from experience or anything in the United States has that sort of system set up for its musicians, but I do know that a lot of freelancing artists and teachers and just people who don't necessarily have like a... what's the word I'm looking for... yeah, salary. There you go. So, if you don't have an annual salary it's basically whatever you make from kind of putting yourself out there and really just trying to hustle would be another word, do what you can and make the money that you can. I think the government here could have handled it better and in terms of musicians and just in supporting them and their families or just supporting a lot of people and their families. I'll stop talking because my train is kind of derailing.

Katie: This is Katie. I think it's obvious a lot of reform that needs to happen in the government and if highlighting the value of musicians and artists is one of them, great, but it seems so minute now that we get to experience the Black Lives Matter movement and yes, I think the government could do better in terms of recognizing the arts, but I don't even think that should be part of our conversation. I think we should make sure the government honors black lives first and foremost.

Michel Larmann: Okay, and that brings us to our final question, at least on the sheet. What kind of aid do artists and musicians need from the community to support their art and vision? Like what kind of information and resources do you need as a band during COVID-19? And that can be here in Missoula or just in a general sense. However, you feel about it.

Katie: Can you repeat the question?

Michael Larmann: Yeah, sure. How about I reword it? Let's try this. What can the community do to support artists and musicians such as yourselves either here in Missoula or just in a general sense?

Katie: This is Katie. One thing that's really helped me is hearing from folks on social media or a phone call or a text message or something hearing that they've been listening to our music. Just getting a message on even our band Instagram somebody says, Hey, I've been listening to this

song today and its really moved me or I've been really enjoying it. That is the kind of aid and support I think all artists need right now is to know that your art is out there still and people are still experiencing it.

Michael Larmann: Awesome. Well guys at this point I've run out of my questions and we've just gone a little over the hour point so this is almost perfect. Is there anything you want to talk about with your band? Something you want to share about your experiences or with Letter B over these past few months?

Dillon Johns: This is Dillon. Honestly, I'm just really excited to start playing with you guys again. I'm losing my mind. I have another group that's been playing but it hasn't been practices. We get together, we play the corporate gig, we get the money, we leave and I'm really excited to have that creative experience and a little more freedom with everything and yeah, I'm just really looking forwards to playing with you guys again.

Jordan Lane: This is Jordan. The collective step back I think is going to have the appreciation comeback with a big force both for the listeners and for the bands and like we mentioned before it can be easy to show up and play and let it be that and I think this is going to be a really long-term reminder that every gig is special and that every person out there is experiencing it in their own way and that energy exchange between you and a big crowd and you and one person is amazing and is something that I didn't realize I would miss as much as I do.

[Sneeze]

Michel Larmann: Bless you.

Jordan Lane: So, as a band I can speak for everyone that we are super excited to get back on the horse and to be playing and get back on stage. Yeah.

All: [Laughter]

Michael Larmann: It's been a very long hour.

All: [laughter]

Michael Larmann: Alright then guys. Without further ado, I guess I will end the interview.

[End of Interview]