

ALL TOGETHER NOW

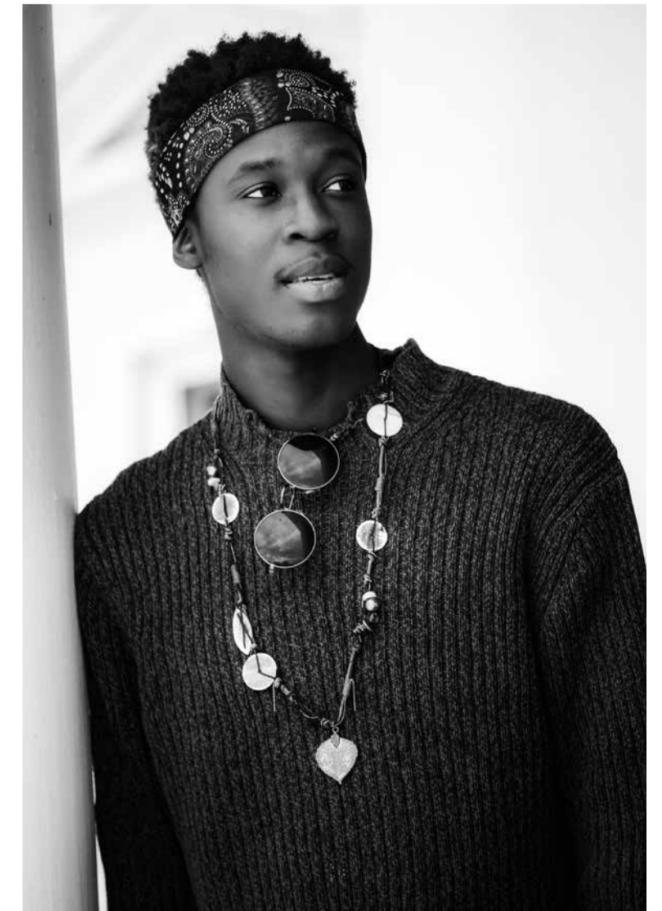
The music and nightlife scene is the beating heart of a community and represents a microcosm of larger social, civil and developmental issues. After a rough couple of years in the live entertainment world, five longtime and newly local musicians discuss how to move into the next chapter in the region they call home.

Interview by JANET MERCEL

JM: There's such an enduring legacy upstate of the familiar bluesy, folksy, singer-songwriter. What are people expecting from live music now? When you're booked at a venue, are you comfortable just being yourselves, or do people come for that recognizable sound? **RIVER:** We're musical chameleons, which helps. Joelle's great at reading the audience, even if it's a beer garden setting and people are there to chill. We always play some of our original music, hip hop, Caribbean, Latin, rock. Otherwise, what's the point? **JOELLE:** It's nerve-wracking, but after a whole set of music they've never heard before, people will come up and say, thank you for being you. Authentic. **LEE:** It's all about the band, their audience, and following. Booking The Falcon, some bands will blow your mind, and two people show up, and bands that play covers all night, you can't get a reservation weeks out. **MO:** Acts used to pack out old BSP (now Wall Street Music Hall) with people coming from three states away. Fans will follow their band; it's always a draw. There's an old, rich history of music here. If we keep that going, people will come out. **KORTNEE:** The hardest beast for me by far is the local one. It's very hard to get support locally from other people of color who don't understand that you're trying to maintain a grasp on who you are, while still trying to get booked in the Hudson Valley. When the organizers are primarily white, there's a secondary check level in my mind — play the "comfortable" version of my set. When it comes to Black musicians, if you don't craft the message right, you're not getting called again. But here, it's an eclectic, melting pot of people! You run across white people that know more about soul music than Black people; it's not uncommon. I will always listen to my audience. You don't have to call me back as a venue, but this crowd is only going to get this one time to see this experience.

JM: I know there's some discord between bands and venues, like radius clauses that prohibit the frequency and region in which acts can play, or new development coming in and the local community not benefiting. What are some of the current tensions? **LEE:** There are discussions that need to be had amongst venues and with local governments. There are issues with noise ordinances; a lot of venues are dealing with fine threats. There's not much conversation or support from the town or county. Radius clauses make it very difficult for local acts who draw well. If one venue books you, it's contracted you can't play within ninety miles for the next three months, even if you draw three hundred people. You can't get more than a few gigs the whole summer. I see both sides because if you're paying a band to play, you want the ticket guarantee. But with the amount of venues we have, it is theoretically possible for an artist to make a career regionally [if those contracts ease up]. **MO:** I hope the venues find a little love in their hearts because we're doing it for love. These towns are all so different. You should be able to play a club and then play another one a thirty-minute drive away. It's also a drag for the fans. Everyone has busy schedules and might not be able to catch you on Thursday, but they'll go Sunday afternoon. **KORTNEE:** Everyone has an interest to protect, but the conversation around artist value is starting. I play local music by local artists on the radio, and people are hearing something they've never heard. Hopefully, we can take it to real life, take the majority of the power out of only venue owners' hands. We need a place to play, and they need artists. We all need each other. We can't live without the other. **JM:** I feel like there's been a slow down or a diminishment of the music scene upstate in the last several years, prior to the pandemic. Am I romanticizing a past era?

KORTNEE: I one hundred percent agree that the star has dimmed. Crowd-wise, of course, that's recently the pandemic, but musician-wise, those myriad issues are going way beyond the pandemic. **MO:** There's definitely an ebb and flow, but I see a resurgence. I want to shout out DIY Kingston, this IG account putting up a lot of basement and backyard shows. I don't know who's behind it, maybe a little younger, but it's nice to see that kind of thing creating a scene. **LEE:** Like River and Joelle, many creative people have moved to the area, a lot of artists, bringing their energy and money. That will only make the music scene better. For the most part, it's beneficial if done the right way. **JM:** The region has always been an escape for creatives, a place to recharge. Legendary music has come out of that. How do you see that legacy moving into the future and giving back to the community? Is that history still valued by outsiders and the next generation? **LEE:** There are many more big-name acts that get involved with the community than not. Big names always turn up for charity shows; Bob Dylan, Kate Pierson [of The B-52's]. Amazingly, they all donate their time, and a major reason why people are still drawn here. **RIVER:** We're modern hippies. I feel like we get that legacy. It lives in us. I can tell you that all I have to do is play a couple of Jimi [Hendrix] covers, and everyone goes nuts. **MO:** I love to hear you guys getting love for the originality, too. Around here, it always pays to be unique. When I hear someone playing a new song, and it starts to blow me away, I'm so much more into it. **JOELLE:** Most of the compliments we get are that they feel like they're home. Maybe they don't use that word, but it's the feeling. **MO:** I have a question. What would you name this band right now? (gesturing to the Roundtable) **LEE** (shouting): Make The Hudson Valley Music Scene Great Again! *Groans. Laughter. End.*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOELLE AND RIVER ROUEN, married, multi-instrumentalists from Harlem and New Orleans, together lead their duo, Aziza and The Cure; LEE FALCO, an engineer, touring drummer for Donald Fagen (Steely Dan) and The Lemonheads, grew up in the family business of The Falcon music venue in Marlboro; KORTNEE SIMMONS, born in Poughkeepsie and based in Troy. Recording artist, actor, and host of Rhythm and Blues on Radio Kingston; MO KELLY, Hudson Valley born and raised, and a local player for nearly two decades, immersed in the regional music scene since his teenage years helping out at Levon Helm's Midnight Ramble. Photography clockwise from top left: Catie Colvin Sampson; Ayla Rector; Lark Agency/Esther Joy; Boneshaker