

COVID-19: Laughing off the pandemic with The Covid Arms

The date was 28th March 2020, and the papers tested positive for across-the-board Coronavirus headlines. Boris Johnson was confirmed as having COVID-19. Experts were cited on the front page of the Guardian as saying that the PM ‘failed to heed his own advice on social distancing.’

So, where was uprightness when we needed it? Well, reader, I can tell you where it was-ish. Of course, I’m talking about online hot-spot, or remote comedy dive, [The Covid Arms](#).

This is, virtually (in both senses of the word) the pub of dreams: no queuing necessary; smoke indoors if you like; no last orders; and a perennial lock-in with some of your favourite comedy stars. Equally, why not drink in your underwear?

Jake Lea-Wilson, a documentary producer by trade, set up the initiative missing the conviviality of the local pub during lockdown and, without work on, with time to spare.

‘Like the rest of the country we started hosting pub quizzes and film watchalongs. We wanted to do a night of stand up comedy and my sister is good friends with Kiri Pritchard-McLean so we asked her to do a bit.’

Jake, his sister, Jess, and Kiri then roped in their network 'and suddenly we had a night of amazing comedians.'

If this didn't already seem kudos-earning enough, the team decided to charge for tickets in order to raise money for The Trussell Trust, who support a network of food banks here in the UK, as well as to pay the comedians whose incomes were under threat with the country-wide venue closures.

That first ticketed night, 3,000 socially-distanced, *positively exemplary* rule-followers watched Rachel Fairburn, Rosie Jones, Stephen Bailey and Nate Williams host the charity pub comedy show, with Kiri as compere.

'We quickly built up a loyal fanbase and it started to be a really fun thing to organise. The three of us have maintained a pretty tight working unit throughout the whole experience.'

With a day job that sees Jake work on *Inside the World's Toughest Prisons* for Netflix – so not a stranger to lockdown (ho-ho) – and Reggie Yates' shows for the BBC, he's used to high profile productions, but didn't expect the success of his elected lockdown time-filler.

'So far we've raised over £95,000 for charity' (I, for one, have baked four loaves of sourdough) 'and have managed to pay quite a few comedians who are struggling for money because they've had all their gigs cancelled.'

The team managed to secure sponsorship from Beavertown Brewery, too, who supply on-the-spot prizes to viewers – say, when comedians task viewers to compete, or for the best response to their call out for the weirdest purchases during lockdown – and who designed the coat of arms for the pub. The beer company has also pledged £5,000 to the Trussell Trust.

To top it all off, t'Covid were approached by Crowdfunder, to join forces and organise a huge, world record-breaking pub quiz of 6,000 people, which in turn raised an additional £34K for the National Emergencies Trust in a week.

This is the holy triumvirate for doing good: not only has the team behind it put a lockdown's worth of hours into the project, but they've enlisted the likes of Nish Kumar, Aisling Bea, Tim Key, Frankie Boyle and Rosie Jones, to name but a few. The third good? The thousands of viewers-come-donors that have turned up and ordered the usual at The Covid: laughter in the name of food bank funding.

According to Jake, though, most gratification has come from the sense of a community banded together.

‘It gives people a chance to dress up, socialise (remotely) and have some fun during a pretty dark and challenging time. We finish each show with a singalong where we try and include as many members of the audience as possible. It’s a joyous experience to see 100 people on screen at once dancing to ‘Always Look on the Bright Side of Life’ by Monty Python. Something you wouldn’t get at a live music venue or on TV.’

‘In normal times this project wouldn’t have come about but the goodwill during this crisis shouldn’t be underestimated... If you have an opportunity to use your skills, your time or your money in a way that’s creative and able to do some good then you should jump at the chance.’

From conception to launch, The Covid Arms has been backed by cunning plans. By making the tickets only £2 the show is accessible to anyone with an internet connection; the acts involved bring their own set of fans, which helps with promotion; and – its real catalyst – ‘we’ve got a captive audience. The whole country has been at home and desperate to socialise and have some fun.’

Well done, you lot. Boris has now said we can leave the house to spit into each other’s mouths again, thank god. So this pub’s shutting down as others are nigh on reopening?

‘There’s no doubt that this project is a response to a national situation but it’s thrown up all kinds of interesting questions. We’ve had wonderful messages from people who can’t watch live comedy in normal times because they are restricted geographically or for health reasons. It’s made us think that this kind of thing could work well in the future. The Covid Arms has also developed a real fan base of thousands and thousands of people so it will definitely continue in some form whether that’s an actual live night, monthly livestreams or just the occasional party.’

Like ten million of us have been finding here in the UK, doing good isn’t as distasteful as early chapters Scrooge would have us believe. For the team at The Covid Arms, it seems that the sky’s the limit in terms of what they could put their minds to in the interests of helping those in need. ‘I think I will always look at funding models differently after this; adding a charitable element to a company or project is so wonderfully satisfying.’

I, for one, will be a proud regular of the taps at The Covid Arms, as they pour me a pint of their finest hilarity, and not only because I’ve enjoyed mixing metaphors in this article.

To keep up-to-date with the events at The Covid Arms, sign up to their newsletter comedyatthecovid.co.uk.

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Article by ELLA BOWMAN