

## **Regional Music Research Group**

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### **Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts – Inquiry into the challenges and opportunities within the Australian live music industry**

Dear Committee Secretary,

The Regional Music Research Group (RMRG) is a collective of interdisciplinary researchers, educators and music practitioners formed to promote and share research about regional music industries and practices. Since 2015, the RMRG has engaged with music industry and government stakeholders, as well as regional practitioners and communities, through seminars, symposia, publications and the diverse projects of group members. Our submission concerns the particular challenges and opportunities for live music in regional Australia, spanning all elements of the terms of reference.

#### **Recognising regional perspectives**

A significant number of Australians (around 28%) live in regional and remote areas. This spans diverse statistical geographic classes outside major cities: inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote.

*Revive*, Australia's National Cultural Policy, acknowledges: 'Access to live music events is not a reality for all young people in Australia. There are fewer events in regional and outer-suburban areas'.<sup>1</sup> The 2022 National Arts Participation Survey found that Australians living in regional and remote areas are less likely to attend arts events and festivals, compared to those living in metropolitan areas (62% compared to 71%). Yet demand is strong, with almost half of those Australians living in regional areas (roughly equal to the metropolitan figure), and two-thirds of Australians living in remote locations, saying they would like to attend more cultural and artistic events.<sup>2</sup> There is a need to develop an evidence base and ongoing measures with respect to live music activity in regional Australia, including

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2023) *Revive: Australia's Cultural Policy for the Next Five Years*, p39.

<sup>2</sup> Creative Australia (2023) *Creating Value: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, pp91, 101.

infrastructure, attendance and demand, providing national data to build on the recent Victorian Live Music Census 2022 and the announcement of a NSW Live Music Census.

According to the 2015 *Making Art Work* survey, a significant minority of Australian musicians live and work in regional areas, with 18% in regional cities or towns and 8% in rural areas. Almost half (42%) of these musicians report a ‘more negative’ overall effect on their creative practice, with regional artists earning significantly less and spending more time unemployed than their urban counterparts. Regional Australia has a higher representation of female artists, artists with a disability and First Nations artists than capital cities.<sup>3</sup>

### **Regional challenges and opportunities**

The challenges and opportunities for live music in regional Australia are affected by the following factors, drawn from our research and consultations (see publication list), in addition to the issues shared with major cities:

- **Population:** The populations of regional cities and towns are subject to particular factors. Tourism destinations and routes experience seasonal visitation. Workforces are seasonal in both tourism and primary industries (agriculture, fisheries, forestry and food). Regional areas experience high workforce turnover in service industries such as health, education and government, and in fly-in-fly-out industries such as construction and mining. A long-term concern across regional Australia is youth out-migration. Each of these factors presents challenges as well as opportunities for regional live music.
- **Distance:** Despite the Contemporary Music Touring Program, metropolitan performers rarely tour to regional places.<sup>4</sup> Besides costs, a decisive factor is the lack of known contacts, suitable venues and established touring routes.<sup>5</sup> Supporting the development of regional touring networks would benefit both metropolitan and regional artists, as well as regional audiences.
- **Infrastructure:** Another reality is the lack of small-to-medium size venues in regional areas. Regional councils will often have large venues, such as the MECC in Mackay or the CPAC in Cairns. Such venues are made available to non-profits, like schools, for performances, but are priced out of the capacity of small commercial ventures. Regional performers can perform at pubs and clubs, but these are increasingly conservative given recent governmental moves to limit poker machines. This results in a focus on soloists or duos. Community halls can function as regional performance spaces, but are limited venues with limited options for liquor licensing and food preparation. Relatively few technical production providers exist in the regions, necessitating the importation of these services from urban areas. Soft infrastructure (e.g. networks, practices and knowledge) for regional live music is often marked by a vulnerable reliance on specific individuals, such as venue managers/bookers, event organisers and local government officers.

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<sup>3</sup> Throsby D and Petetskaya K (2017) *Making Art Work: An economic study of professional artists in Australia*.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers, I., & Whiting, S. (2020). “If There Isn’t Skyscrapers, Don’t Play There!” Rock Music Scenes, Regional Touring, and Music Policy in Australia. *Popular Music and Society*, 43(4), 450–460.

<sup>5</sup> Vance, L., Mulcahy, R., Goold, L., Fleischman, D., Ward, A. and Dugmore, H., 2023. Check 1, 2..... Preliminary Findings from the Building Sustainable Night-time Economies in Regional Australian Research Project.

- **Education and training:** Regional areas rarely have education facilities beyond high school, and notwithstanding the provision in most cases of specialist (creative and performing) arts teachers in secondary schools across the country, the availability of in-school and post-school music education for non-metropolitan students is far lesser than in urban communities. There are exceptions, such as the twelve Regional State Honours Ensemble Programs offered by Open Conservatorium Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University,<sup>6</sup> TAFE program in Broome (WA), the contemporary music program at Southern Cross University (QLD, NSW), the jazz program at CQUniversity (QLD), fully online Diploma and Bachelor degrees in music from the University of New England<sup>7</sup> (UNE Armidale, NSW), the Regional Conservatoriums across 17 centres in NSW, and dedicated schools-based instrumental teachers in Queensland and Victoria. Otherwise, it falls to independent regional music teachers to meet the training needs of interested students of all ages who want to prioritise music participation as an important part of their lives. The AMEB, through its classical, ‘for leisure’ and Rockschool programs, provides an examination framework for music tuition in regional areas; however, there is undeniably a pull toward cities when students in regional areas seek further music education and/or a career path in music. Our research finds that such musicians rarely return to regional areas.
- **Environmental and climate:** The natural qualities of regional places are often central to their suitability for key industries, including specialist agriculture and destination tourism, which may be related as in the case of wine regions. The wineries, breweries and restaurants of south-west Australia, for example, are known to support live music businesses and careers in the region. Regional live music events, such as festivals, are vulnerable to extreme weather disruptions, which are increasing with climate change.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, regional places look to live music events as a response to climate-related crises, such as droughts and floods, and there is an opportunity to further develop the role of live music in disaster recovery and revitalisation.
- **Governance:** There is a relative lack of policy, resources and personnel dedicated to overseeing live music in regional local governments. However, we have observed that passionate individuals in council roles, as well as local government-based initiatives like the Live Music Office ‘Live and Local’ program and Queensland’s Regional Arts Development Fund, can make significant contributions. This highlights the value of intergovernmental partnerships to support and develop regional live music.
- **Community:** The social benefits of live music are keenly felt in regional places, including benefits for job retention, well-being, placemaking and social cohesion, especially for youth, migrants and First Nations peoples. Australians living in remote Australia are much more likely to attend arts events to socialise and connect with others, and to

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.griffith.edu.au/arts-education-law/queensland-conservatorium/opportunities/open-conservatorium/state-honours-ensemble-program>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.une.edu.au/about-une/faculty-of-humanities-arts-social-sciences-and-education/hass/study/music-theatre/music>

<sup>8</sup> Green B & Strong C (2023) ‘What if it rains? What if there are bushfires?’: Extreme weather, climate change and music festivals in Australia. *Media International Australia*, OnlineFirst (open access), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X231184913>

improve their well-being.<sup>9</sup> Interpersonal networks and collective resourcefulness are strengths of regional music scenes, which can be supported by government investment.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the matters above, we submit the following recommendations:

1. Prioritise research into regional live music activity, challenges and opportunities. Live music censuses with specific attention to regional areas provide a necessary evidence base and ongoing evaluation.
2. Ensure that policy to support the live music sector incorporates specific attention to the challenges and opportunities for regional Australia. This should include:
  - a. maintaining and increasing support for festivals and destination events, with a focus on local leadership, participation and capacity-building;
  - b. support for regional touring, by maintaining and increasing funding to touring artists and events, as well as funding and information resources for regional venues, promoters and artists (e.g. a touring map/database);
  - c. support to develop year-round local capacities, cooperating with local communities and institutions, including funding, professional development and information resources for venues, musicians, promoters, recording studios, artist managers, and technical production providers;
  - d. funding dedicated to assisting small venues to comply with noise restrictions, accessibility and other legislative requirements;
  - e. support for regional music education initiatives such as:
    - i. in-person and virtual higher education and vocational training;
    - ii. partnerships between specialist urban institutions/providers and regionally-based music education organisations / peak bodies / associations;
    - iii. private and institutional music teachers;
    - iv. ensembles in regional areas;
    - v. examination boards in their regional engagement;
3. Incorporate live music into regional tourism initiatives. In addition to festivals, local venue-based live music should be supported and promoted as part of regional identities and experiences.

We would be glad to provide any further information to assist the inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

***Regional Music Research Group***

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<sup>9</sup> Creative Australia (2023), p95.

## RMRG publications

- A. Bennett, D. Cashman, B. Green, & N. Lewandowski (Eds.), *Popular Music Scenes: Regional and Rural Perspectives*. Springer International Publishing. Includes chapters:
- Bennett, A., Cashman, D., Green, B., & Lewandowski, N.. Fragmented, positive and negative: Live music venues in regional Queensland.
  - Blok, A. Diamonds in the Backyard: Migrant youth and hip hop in Australian regional towns.
  - Chakravarty, D. Indian electronic dance music festivals as spaces of play in regional settings: Understanding situated and digital electronic dance music performances.
  - Goold, L. The creative music networks of regional recording studios: A case study of the Sunshine Coast and Gympie.
  - Sattler, G. From the City to the Bush: An Autoethnographic Reflection on Australia's Urban and Rural Music Scenes.
- Bennett, A., Green, B., Cashman, D., & Lewandowski, N. (2020). Researching regional and rural music scenes: Toward a critical understanding of an under-theorized issue. *Popular Music and Society*, 43(4), 367-377.
- Bennett, A., Cashman, D., & Lewandowski, N. (2020). One Piece Blokes: On being a performing musician in regional Queensland. In A. Van Luyn & E. de la Fuente (Eds.), *Regional Cultures, Economies, and Creativity: Innovating through Place in Australia and Beyond*. Routledge.
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- Bennett, C. (2020). Challenges facing regional live music venues: A case study of venues in Armidale, NSW. *Popular Music*, 39(3-4), 600–618.
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- Green, B., & Bennett, A. (2019). Gateways and corridors: Cultural and spatial challenges and opportunities for live music on Australia's Gold Coast. *City, Culture and Society*, 17, 20-25.
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- Sattler, G. (2022). PUBLIC Choir: Facilitating an emergent musicking community. In J. Southcott, J., de Bruin, L. (eds.), *Musical Ecologies: Instrumental Music Ensembles Around the World* (pp. 15). Routledge.
- Sattler, G. (2013). Playing outside the generational square: The intergenerational impact of adult group music learning activities on the broader community. *International Journal of Community Music*, 6(3), 10.
- Sattler, G., & Mullen, P. (2022). An inclusion strategy approach for deepening community music engagement in non-metropolitan Australia. In J. S. Leon de Bruin (Ed.), *Musical Ecologies: Instrumental Music Ensembles Around the World* (pp. 16). Routledge.
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- Watt, P., Green, B., Baker, A., Bennett, A., & Long, P. (2023). Australia's hidden musicians: Education and training in rural and regional areas. *Music Education Research*, 1-13.