

Submission to the Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts

Inquiry into the challenges and opportunities within the Australian live music industry

Submission on behalf of “a group of smaller independent musicians, DJs, promoters, agents and venues”, an informal organisation for the purposes of making a submission to this inquiry.

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Introduction

This submission outlines key issues and recommendations regarding the Australian live music industry, with an emphasis on the independent electronic scene and nightlife elements of this sector. This submission represents the experiences and views of a range of smaller independent mostly queer artists, promoters, festival directors and venues principally located in the inner-north of Melbourne.

There is a strong perception that government at all levels, while interested in live music, is less interested in the electronic, club, festival and party scene given a perceived focus on more traditional live music. A government that takes this segment of the industry seriously and views it as an economic and cultural priority would be welcomed.

This submission argues that the full potential of this industry is not being realised in part due to structural barriers, a challenging economic climate and—of specific relevance to this committee—inadequate government support/funding. It is important to note that the majority of activity in this scene has occurred without the direct or indirect support of government to date.

Part A focuses on an overview of challenges and opportunities, based on a collation of individuals' anecdotal experiences. Part B details specific policy recommendations to address the challenges in Part A that may be considered as part of the policy response to this issue.

PART A -- OVERVIEW OF CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Government Support and Investment

The live music and nightlife industry perceives that there is a lack of genuine interest and support from the government and relevant authorities. Stakeholders feel that they lack support from government, with the balance of political convenience resting in favour of residents and property developers over younger people, electronic music, nightlife and the culture and community it generates. This submission calls on the Commonwealth Government to recognize the importance of nightclubs, parties, electronic and other forms of live music and to invest in its development and sustainability. Further, it calls on government to exert its influence on the States to align consistent policy priorities across the country.

A primary recommendation of this submission is the commissioning and publication of detailed economic impact modelling, broken down by event types (including, electronic, day parties, festivals, club nights etc.), size and LGA, among others. The purpose would be to provide an academically rigorous data set for policy makers, and further to provide data based arguments in support of new events and the scaling of existing events, countering a perceived underestimation by local, state and federal government of the scale and economic benefit provided by these types of events.

It is promising to see Creative Australia put out a tender for an economic impact study of the live music industry. However, it is key that this analysis breaks down to the level of granularity proposed and includes detailed breakdowns of the impact of electronic music, day parties, festivals and club nights. It's critical this is not lumped together in a broad category of contemporary music.

Grant and Support Programs

Grant programs are perceived as inadequate both in terms of the quantum of funding offered and the number and type of grants available. High levels of competition for a small number of grants are perceived as in part eroding the collaborative nature of the live music industry, while the administrative burden associated with applying for grants acts as a significant barrier to access, discouraging many from even investigating their eligibility.

There are concerns regarding the fairness and representation of electronic music and more modern forms of live music in the grant administration and award processes. Stakeholders feel that certain aspects of electronic music and nightlife, such as running parties, are not

adequately recognised as legitimate by grant programs. This submission supports a recognition of these events as not just live music, but also as forms of participatory experimental art.

In general, grants on offer are not seen as representative of the diverse array of live music offerings taking place. There is a perceived lack of diversity on the panels that determine the allocation of grant funding and support, which may be leading to an imbalance of government investment and support.

Grant programs are often focused on licensed or established venues and events, with overly restrictive requirements on the use of funds granted. The process is perceived to favour established players and incumbents with government connections and resources to invest in bid development, rather than being a meritocracy. In addition, these grant schemes in recent times often take a short-term focus by skewing towards subsidising artists' fees. While these types of grants are important, it would be valuable to complement them with structural grants targeted toward driving long-term sustainability or sector development, such as grants aimed at improving infrastructure and developing the sector as a whole. It was often highlighted that grants aimed at improving sound proofing in venues would benefit a broad array of stakeholders, including residents and venues, while enabling venues to upgrade their sound systems to the benefit of attendees.

Finally expectations in some grant programs for co-funding or joint funding have posed a significant hurdle for small and independent artists, particularly in light of reduced levels of crowd-funding due to cost-of-living pressures.

Venue Suitability and Location

There is a perceived shortage of mid-sized and larger venues with sufficient late-night licenses. This restricts the ability of smaller promoters to scale up their events, by requiring larger jumps in required attendance, which carries with it increased up-front financial risk for promoters.

While an issue for local and state government, the extension of existing licenses and granting of new licenses is seen as difficult and rare, with government at all levels perceived as prioritising the interests of residents and property developers over the cultural and economic benefits of granting these licenses.

Many venues could benefit from investments in audio-visual elements, including improved speaker systems and production, however, they are for the most part constrained by financial limitations. Many venues are in dire need of repair and upgrade, with only a scarcity of late-night venues accessible to people with disabilities.

As a result, promoters face competition to book venues, with some slots requiring bookings more than three months in advance, indicating a shortage of suitable venues. There is a need for venues with strong production and community pull to attract attendees. To remedy this, any policy response will require long-term planning around development of physical infrastructure and associated licensing, which should support rather than stifle, growth of the live music economy. Ultimately a successful response will require alignment between all levels of government on the vision and path to implementation.

Audience Development and Consumer Behaviours

The industry has observed a generational shift in expectations from nightlife post-COVID. Cost of living pressures have reduced the number of live music events attended by individuals. Audiences are perceived as preferring fewer, higher-production events, focused on international artists, day parties, and multi-day music festivals at the expense of attending smaller parties or club nights. Many have noted an evident desire for bigger and more impactful experiences.

It has also been speculated that with fewer mid-tier events, consumers are offered a choice between smaller events and larger more commercial offerings, and given that choice, are tending to choose the latter over the former. This is coupled with a rise in the number and popularity of 'bush doofs', music festivals and day parties over the past decade.

There has been a cultural shift away from alcohol consumption, with attendees spending less per head in venues on alcohol year-on-year in both real and inflation-adjusted terms. One venue noted a 50% reduction in bar spend per head for younger trending events since 2018-19.

Artist Development and Career Pathways

There is a distinct lack of spaces for up-and-coming artists to learn stage craft and build a fan base. Programming has shifted to more established local and international artists as promoters seek to de-risk events and ensure attendance, making local nights increasingly unsustainable. With many venues and promoters adopting this approach, there is a perceived race to the bottom, with venues and promoters all competing for the same tried

and tested talent for their events, limiting opportunities available for local and up and coming artists.

Venues are struggling financially and as a result are investing fewer resources in bookings and promotion. This is perceived as further reducing the number of opportunities to platform newer artists, increasingly shifting the burden of developing the artist pipeline onto promoters.

These changes may also reflect the seismic shift in consumption formats for music, with younger generations discovering artists primarily through TikTok rather than at events. It's worth noting that this provides a promising and accessible opportunity for newer artists to build a platform and audience base without needing to rely on event platforms.

Economic Benefits and Industry Sustainability

The underground and grassroots music scenes make an underappreciated contribution to music culture and economic output. Live music events operate on low profit margins, with underground music scenes often providing space for young, queer, BIPOC, and marginalized groups to find community. The need to keep events financially accessible by maintaining lower ticket prices, while ensuring staff are paid commensurately with rising inflation, has led to a precarious financial situation for promoters and venues.

Rising costs of music festivals and events, reflected in increased ticket prices, have reduced opportunities for lower-SES young people to have those experiences, with underground or fringe events often filling that gap.

Insurance for venues and events is a well-understood and acute challenge facing the live music industry and not further elaborated on here, but urgently requires intervention.

Despite the challenges, there is excitement in the industry, with the benefits of a push for increased diversity among artists and promoters flowing through to the stages of many live music events. There is an abundance of young people with musical talent and inclination to put on events, a pipeline that would benefit from being nurtured.

Social and Educational Benefit of Live Music Events

The benefits live music events provide for young people should also be acknowledged in terms of their cultural role in supporting and developing the responsible partying behaviours of young adults. Government supported programs in this area, including TAC funded breath

testing, Vanessa and many others, utilise these events to reach and educate their at-risk target audience.

Furthermore, the social and mental wellbeing benefits of providing inclusive and accessible spaces for young people to express themselves artistically and connect with community cannot be understated, particularly in light of recent lockdowns.

Capacity Building in Event Facilitation and Promotion

Capacity and capability in the industry are often developed informally through friends and networks, with some individuals benefiting from transferable skills developed in day jobs. It was noted by all stakeholders, that the success of new promoters often hinged on their ability to build a community around an event. The development of these skills should be emphasized in any program to develop capacity and capability of those in the industry.

Those who succeed often start small and grow from there. The transition from small to mid-sized events is particularly challenging, with a lack of support available to bridge the gap between smaller events (notionally less than 200-300 persons) and larger events (notionally more than 700-800 persons). Opportunities for networking, advice, and government financial support, and support for knowledge-sharing events would be beneficial. A policy response in this area should seek to support the scaling up of smaller events, providing skills, financial support and locations for these events to grow.

Barriers to Industry Growth

Significant rises in air travel costs limit the ability to book international artists and tour overseas, something the government can support through increased airline competition by approving additional routes and increasing the number of international airlines operating in Australia, or through increased grant funding to support international export.

Artists often rely on their personal connections and networks built over time to tour, making that a difficult proposition for those starting out and those without overseas representation. Support to build relationships internationally, particularly in Asia, would be valuable.

PART B -- POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Expand and improve grants from the Office for the Arts

- Open up grants to be available to party promoters and organisers as well as venues.
- Restructure grant and support programs to be more inclusive, representative, and accessible to a wide range of live music offerings, with grant programs specifically focused on electronic and nightlife offerings.
- Diversify the panels/bodies that receive and approve applications for Commonwealth funding.
- Allocate targeted grants for venue improvements, including sound proofing, accessibility accommodations, and audio-visual production enhancements.
- Incentivise the development of mid-sized venues and support the establishment of venues that prioritise strong cultural production and community engagement.
- Introduce grants specifically designed to assist smaller independent promoters and artists in scaling up their operations.
- Invest in initiatives that nurture artist development and provide dedicated spaces for emerging artists to refine their craft and cultivate fan bases.
- Shift the focus of grant programs towards long-term ecosystem development, rather than relying on short-term, "sugar-hit" style funding, such as subsidising artist fees.
- Ensure that grants for events are accessible to promoters and artists themselves, rather than restricting access solely to licensed venues.

2. Improve Music Australia and the Office for the Arts function, by including roles representing the electronic music scene; ensuring it advocates for the industry; and improve its links to promoters and electronic music community, especially smaller to mid-sized operators.

- Establish a dedicated position within the Commonwealth Office of the Arts to facilitate knowledge sharing and upskilling within the electronic music industry.
- Serve as a trusted advisor, providing accurate information and accessible resources to industry stakeholders.
- Assist smaller events and promoters and advocate on their behalf in navigating interactions with all levels of government and facilitate their access to grant programs.

3. Strengthen export support for artists

- Leverage AusTrade offices and partner with State Government export offices to establish networks of reputable promoters and venues that up-and-coming artists can tap into to develop international touring opportunities.
- Allocate funding and resources to facilitate exchange programs between promoters and artists in Australia and their counterparts overseas.
- Leverage dialogue under the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to streamline/improve visa access for artists seeking to tour the United States.

4. Ensure the economic impact study of the live music industry currently out to tender is comprehensive, granular and covers different types of electronic music events.

- Conduct detailed economic modelling to assess the impact of live music, segmented by event type and size, capturing the specific and individual contributions of clubs, parties, raves, and festivals.
- The modelling should include and have detailed breakdowns to isolate the impact of smaller and independent events, day parties, boutique festivals, and club nights.
- Modelling should allow breakdowns at an LGA level to provide support for the growth and scaling of events from local council.
- Incorporate the following components in the economic impact assessment:
 - Revenue associated with attendees.
 - Fees, wages, and take-home pay for various occupational subtypes, including performers, event staff (hospitality, security, etc.), event production (audio engineers, lighting engineers, etc.), promoters/event organisers, and PR, advertising, and corporate administration professionals.
 - Spending associated with events, such as transportation (taxis/Uber) and food and drinks before and after the event.
 - Export value of live music.