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**Inquiry into the challenges and opportunities within the Australian live music industry:  
Submission from the Yuin Folk Club Inc, Cobargo, NSW**

This submission is prepared by the Yuin Folk Club Inc. (YFC), a not-for-profit, community-led organisation based in Cobargo, a rural village in the Bega Valley, NSW. The YFC's primary objective is to foster a thriving, independent, folk and roots music community in our region.

The YFC produces the Cobargo Folk Festival, an award-winning, medium sized, community-run folk and roots music festival now in its 28th year. The festival is a regional creative hub, supporting the live music sector across our region and beyond. The YFC uses funds raised through the festival to provide support for independent musicians at all stages of development, to host live music concerts in venues across the Cobargo district, and to invest in local infrastructure that benefits the festival and nurtures the growth of a vibrant regional cultural sector.

Our region was severely affected by the Black Summer Bushfires, and our music, arts and cultural sector was further damaged by the Covid pandemic.

Our submission offers a community viewpoint on the importance of implementing a live music policy that emphasizes fostering a vibrant regional cultural sector and supports non-commercial folk and roots music festivals. It calls on the government to offer increased and structured assistance to the organisations that produce independent community-led folk and roots festivals, acknowledging their crucial role in sustaining a dynamic, regional live music sector.

Our submission has been prepared specifically for the purposes of this inquiry but also draws elements from our 2022 submission for the National Cultural Policy review and our 2023 submission for the NSW Government's Arts, Culture, and Creative Industries Policy - Creative Communities. We advocate for inclusive and respectful national and state cultural policies, which provide meaningful support for regional cultural endeavour and regional community festivals. This network of interlinked activity will underpin support for the reinvigoration of the live music sector in regional Australia. These policies would champion regional Australia as a rich source of cultural activity and achievement, enhancing our national cultural story.

**Community-run folk festivals and their role in a vibrant music culture**

Grassroots community festivals such as the Cobargo Folk Festival and other folk festivals throughout Australia play a vital role in developing and sustaining the live music sector. They provide work for performers, foster artistic innovation, encourage cross-cultural partnerships, promote community music-making, stimulate economic development, and enhance community bonds. The Yuin Folk Club uses festival surpluses to support live music performance throughout the year through a series of curated concerts featuring local, regional and interstate performers and international acts.

Our festival supports artists at every stage of their careers, assisting professional musicians on the challenging journey towards establishing sustainable long-term careers; providing opportunities for amateur musicians and hobbyists to participate at a high level; and encouraging everyone to engage in music-making.

Regional festivals offer paid opportunities for local and regional artists to showcase their talent in venues with professional production values. These events act as a stepping stone for emerging artists, allowing them to perform at larger festivals like Woodford Folk Festival and the National Folk Festival.

Well-organized festivals provide a guaranteed performance fee, and provide marketing, PR, and publicity for festival acts. They establish connections with artists and promoters from around the world, fostering artistic exchanges and creating new work opportunities. Folk festivals are enduring fixtures in the national events calendar, adding to touring opportunities and simplifying tour scheduling.

The Cobargo Folk Festival supports the live music sector in the following ways:

- Providing paid performance opportunities for musicians at all stages of their musical journey;
- Funding projects to help musicians, especially young talents, to enhance their musical and performance abilities, to promote themselves and their work to a diverse audience, to improve marketability, communication, and business skills;
- Investing in creative projects by musicians in regional NSW;
- Assisting artists from regional NSW in embarking on national and international tours;
- Offering direct support for music development for individual artists and acts from regional NSW, including through grants for professional growth;
- Hosting an annual festival that showcases Australian talent to national festival organizers and international promoters attending the event.

### **Support what we have and what endures**

In the post-Covid era, a significant amount of funding for music-related activities has been allocated to large-scale commercial concerts and tours in regional areas.

While we appreciate the new initiatives, we urge the government to safeguard long-standing rural and regional music festivals with proven track records of success. Government funding for these activities would build on existing strengths and support what we already have.

Instead of providing substantial subsidies to commercial, profit-driven festivals, redirecting taxpayers' money to support the growth of community-led, not-for-profit initiatives would be more beneficial for Australia's cultural enrichment. These festivals provide greater value in terms of direct support for artists, local economic returns, in social capital benefits derived from extensive local community participation and goodwill, and have greater cultural significance to the surrounding communities that endorse and participate in these events.

Volunteer-run festivals and events are often seen as a higher financial risk in contrast to commercially operated events with paid employees. However, this perception is inaccurate. While numerous commercial festivals have ceased operations in the past 24 months, community-led folk festivals are proving their resilience and longevity.

However, regional festivals are not immune to the economic risks that have shut down so many of the bigger events this year.

Over the last three years, expenses in crucial areas such as temporary infrastructure rental, sound and lighting equipment, artist fees, insurance, cleaning, security, public health measures and volunteer management have increased by approximately 30 percent and, in some instances, even more. Some of these are cost-of-living increases, others arise from the increasing costs of compliance.

These escalating costs pose a significant risk to the sustainability of community-led festivals. Other challenges include volunteer fatigue, the rise in unpredictable, extreme weather conditions, and the need to recruit and mentor younger organizers with the time and skills to sustain these events.

And we could not deliver our festival without the enormous contribution of a dedicated team of local community volunteers, who work without pay throughout the year to organise this event. This team grows to some 350 people during festival time. This generous contribution of time and skills allows us to run a quality festival but this is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain as cost-of-living increases impact on volunteer capacity to contribute.

Concerningly, the shift in audience behavior due to Covid has led to last-minute ticket purchases, increasing the financial challenges for festivals dependent upon strong, early sales. Unfortunately, government funding initiatives have not adapted to this trend. While grant programs usually focus on backing new projects, there is a growing need for recurrent, multi-year operational support for volunteer-led arts organisations. In the current climate of uncertainty, where stability and continuity are key, the potential strain of undertaking major new projects whilst still trying to deliver the foundational event could pose a greater risk.

### **Unique voices, authentic creative experiences**

Independent musicians, especially those working in the folk and roots genres, tell the stories of our lives and contribute to our living history. The music reflects and records our experience of the times - not just remembering but also processing – learning from and moving on from events in our histories. If we leave a narrative vacuum, our own stories will be overwhelmed by external narratives, which may not reflect our own, lived experience as Australians.

We have long been the passive recipients of concerts, drama, tours and exhibitions brought into regional areas from the cities. But we have our own voices and stories and we want them to be heard. By promoting diverse regional voices and supporting locally inspired projects we contribute to a richer, more authentic portrayal of contemporary Australia that would engage national and international audiences.

Regional musicians do not have the same ready access to the music development opportunities available to city-based artists. More systematic support for regional musicians, both professional and amateur, would provide greater incentive for musicians to continue in their chosen fields despite the many challenges in pursuing a music career, especially now in these days of unlimited streaming and AI.

Government support would prioritise Australian artists and homegrown, wholly Australian-owned events when distributing grant funding. Support for artists could include direct project funding, grants, and tax incentives; education, training, and access to resources; ensuring copyright protection; increasing support for Australian cultural diplomacy programs and providing meaningful support for Australian artists to undertake national tours and develop their export-readiness to undertake international tours.

### **The socio-economic benefits to regional communities**

Investing in regional cultural activities will result in a significant return on investment. Economically, our regional festival makes a notable contribution. Destination NSW has estimated the festival's total annual contribution to our regional economy, including flow-on benefits, at more than \$2m. In 2023, we contracted more than 60 local, national and international acts. For the Bega Valley, which ranks 986 in the 2021 SEIFA Index of Disadvantage<sup>1</sup>, this is a significant amount.

Regional festivals boost the economy and create job opportunities across various sectors including trades and services, tourism and accommodation. However, the highest proportion of annual festival expenditure goes to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://profile.id.com.au/bega-valley/seifa-disadvantage>

support the regional live music sector through fees for performers and for tents, stage, sound, and lighting equipment and operators. Additionally, employment is generated for photographers, videographers, managers, booking agents, bookkeeping and other support roles.

Community festivals benefit small businesses and industries and enrich our local working communities. They attract visitors to our towns, revitalize small businesses, and offer experiential and economic advantages to the community, volunteers, staff, employees, and contractors.

Regional festivals also contribute to community resilience. Cobargo has been on a journey of recovery from the devastating bushfires that affected the eastern seaboard nearly five years ago. The active participation and financial contributions of festival performers, supporters, and volunteers in the relief, recovery, and reconstruction efforts in Cobargo and its surrounding areas has been truly transformative. It highlights how events like the Cobargo Folk Festival significantly contribute to the social capital and resilience of regional communities.

### **Government support for the regional cultural sector**

As an organization dedicated to promoting artistic and cultural engagement for all, we are advocating for increased funding and a structured governmental approach to revitalise the regional live music sector. We support the creation of a funded plan that includes clear and practical actions including:

- introduction of multi-year funding for well-established community-run folk and roots festivals, recognizing their importance in supporting regional musicians and the regional live music sector;
- more systematic support for regional musicians that assists them to establish sustainable careers in music and nurtures artistic endeavour in regional areas;
- ensuring equity by extending revitalisation and support measures to regional communities beyond urban areas.

We aim for a live music policy that acknowledges the importance of growing a supportive regional live music framework, building on proven community folk and roots festivals. Such a policy will aid the cultivation of a dynamic Australian folk and roots live music community, fostering regional creative endeavour, sustaining musicians' careers, and securing the music industry's long-term viability.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the review

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