



National Folk Festival Ltd
PO Box 179, Mitchell ACT 2911

Mr Brian Mitchell MP

Chair
Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Mitchell,

The National Folk Festival welcomes the Committee's inquiry into the challenges and opportunities in the live music industry and is pleased to provide the attached submission.

Our submission addresses the inquiry's terms of reference and provides an overview of the particular challenges facing community festivals, especially folk festivals, in the current environment.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if there is any further information or assistance we can provide the Committee.

Thank you again for the opportunity to engage with the Committee regarding this important inquiry.

Sincerely,

David Gilks
President and Board Chair
National Folk Festival Ltd

30 April 2024



Submission to the Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts: Inquiry into the challenges and opportunities within the Australian live music industry.

About the National Folk Festival

The National Folk Festival (the Festival) is one of the oldest continuous music festivals in Australia, established in 1967. The Festival has always had a strong focus on community, thriving on an incredibly loyal patron base - Australians from across the nation who return every year to celebrate and practice Australia's musical traditions and to build community through the sharing of music and stories.

Since 1993, the Festival has settled in Canberra where it established its home in the nation's capital. The Festival is produced by a dedicated not-for-profit company and attracts more than 4,000 volunteers, stallholders, instrument makers, national and international performers and community folk groups. Pre-COVID audience numbers frequently exceeded 40,000 patrons over a 5 day festival.

Introduction

Australia's cultural life relies on a strong live music industry as a base for the development of a robust Australian music scene, the development of performing artists and artistic communities, and the generation of a strong cultural economy. Australia's present economic circumstances pose significant challenges for Australia's live music industry, especially the community-run festivals at the heart of grassroots musical practice in Australia. This Inquiry is well-timed to consider the opportunities available to strengthen Australia's festivals and the infrastructure that supports artists to thrive.

When many Australians think about live music festivals, they often think of several, large, corporate festivals. These events are often owned or controlled by overseas entities focussed on delivering an entertainment product centred on established artists - "eyes on the stage" events - and with minimal opportunity to develop new artists and build community. On the other hand, events like the National Folk Festival provide platforms for emerging artists to develop and for grassroots practice of new and emerging musical traditions.

Australia should of course have a variety of music festivals, which appeal to a broad range of people and musical tastes, and government support for the live music industry should recognise this diversity of approach. The National Folk Festival Limited is a limited liability non-profit company formed for the purpose of presenting the annual National Folk Festival. We welcome this Inquiry and ask in particular that the Committee consider the important role community festivals play in boosting cultural growth, building local expertise and enhancing social cohesion.

Why community music festivals matter

Creative Australia's Soundcheck report¹ (insights into Australia's music festival sector) published in April 2024 tells us there were 535 music festivals presented across Australia in the 2022-23 financial year and that 45% of those festivals identify creating a sense of community as a key strength. The Committee would enrich its inquiry by better understanding the importance of community to festivals and why some festivals, especially folk festivals, help to build stronger communities across Australia.

There are many community music festivals across our nation. Most of these festivals are home-grown events, most of them are not for profit and they are usually reliant on volunteers to survive. For many attendees, the musical program (often featuring renowned local and international artists) is just one part of the attraction. The other major attraction is experiencing a holistic artistic program that is transformative and inclusive in nature, bringing participants into the story and helping everyone to make sense of the world we live in. The impact of these festivals on the lives of all involved is often profound.

Community festivals, with their strong focus on art and community, are able to achieve significant outcomes that enrich Australia's culture in an outsized way. In particular, community festivals:

- **Foster emerging talent:** young people wanting to learn and excel in classical music or as singers of mainstream music are able to do so through attending conservatoriums (i.e the Sydney Conservatorium of Music). For young people wanting to be a brilliant fiddle or banjo player, community music festivals provide the platform for growth and development. These events bring together Australia's brains trust of knowledge in traditional music and share it, build skills, expertise and incubate the next generation of musical talent. In addition, folk festivals have an established history of deliberately working to create performance opportunities for young musicians, through blackboard venues and deliberate programming of emerging artists to help them grow as musicians and develop their personal audiences.
- **Foster participation:** community festivals encourage attendees to participate in myriad ways - for example through joining a festival choir; joining a "session" (where anyone with an instrument can play along); learning a dance; creating art; engaging in conversation and workshops with performers; and, learning musical skills. This builds music as a part of Australian life and not just as a commodity.
- **Foster a strong volunteering sector:** volunteers are the backbone of the community - be it in aged care, at schools, at sporting events and at festivals. Community festivals give volunteers the chance to learn new skills - from set construction to being an MC; running a ticket office to providing technical support. Many volunteers at music festivals become lifelong friends and most volunteers return year after year because they simply love the experience. For some volunteers they learn skills that can be applied to other parts of their lives or provide new careers.
- **Foster a strong sense of inclusion and diversity:** community festivals are increasingly aware of the need to build diversity into their programming and to ensure their events are inclusive - so that regardless of gender, sexuality, age, cultural background, physical ability or neurodiversity there are opportunities for everyone to participate and to deepen respect for difference.

¹ <https://creative.gov.au/advocacy-and-research/soundcheck-insights-into-australias-music-festival-sector/>

- **Foster social cohesion:** at a time when people complain that neighbours don't talk to each other anymore, and commuters on public transport engage only with their phones, community festivals offer an almost old-fashioned sense of purpose, connectedness and sometimes sheer wonder as strangers forge friendships that strengthen with each passing year. Many artists performing have a strong focus on social justice and provide meaningful content to highlight the plights of those around us.
- **Foster economic impacts:** community festivals punch above their weight and make significant contributions to local economies by paying local artists and suppliers, boosting accommodation and hospitality revenues, and encouraging visits to nearby attractions. At a time where the cost of living crisis impacts all of society, community festivals provide significant economic impacts often in regional communities. They provide paid work for local contractors and increase revenue to local supermarkets, eateries and local attractions; larger festivals also inject revenue into local economies by using local food and beverage providers. They increase tourism into areas and encourage repeat visitation. Importantly, these community festivals return their proceeds to the communities where they are based and into the artistic communities that produce them. This additive model should be encouraged and incentivised over extractive approaches that support corporate owners over communities.

The challenges

The challenges for these festivals should not be underestimated. Very few community festivals are for-profit organisations. They rely almost entirely on ticket sales and armies of volunteers to survive. Very few community festivals receive regular and/or significant funding from the Federal Government. In some cases, State, Territory and local governments are more responsive to the needs of live music festivals but this support varies significantly between events and jurisdictions.

The current economic climate places particular challenges on community festivals. Inflationary pressures continue to raise costs to produce events, and ongoing changes in audience behaviours since the COVID pandemic are squeezing revenues. It is increasingly unsustainable for festivals and events to be produced when audiences prefer to purchase tickets at the last minute and continue to be less likely to attend live music events than before the pandemic. These dynamics mean that community festivals are using their financial reserves and needing to consider their ability to continue into the future.

Previous federal programs supporting live music were largely built on the assumption that audience behaviours, and the economics of festivals, would return to pre-COVID norms. The RISE Fund was a lifeline for many events, including the National Folk Festival. Likewise, long-term arts funding has typically been devised around significant new programs rather than providing baseline support to organisations that deliver significant community benefit through the arts. These assumptions and approaches need to be reassessed.

In its submission to the National Cultural Policy Review, our friends at the Yuin Folk Club in NSW, who run the highly respected Cobargo Folk Festival, summed it up well when they wrote:

“Regrettably, the contribution of small and medium-sized festivals to the cultural sector is rarely acknowledged by arts funding bodies as culturally or artistically significant and worthy of funding support. Our events are often viewed at best as retail tourism attractors or, at worst, quaint local vanities run by well-meaning amateurs. Arts funding is hard to come by.”

This lack of funding is borne out by the above-mentioned Soundcheck Report which noted that, after rising operational costs, the second most significant barrier to running a music festival is lack of funding and grants available (39% of festivals say this has a severe or major impact on their festival).

The opportunity

This Inquiry has an opportunity to consider whether, in light of contemporary economic realities, support for live music and the arts should be reconsidered with a focus on the foundational community-building components of the industry. This support needs to be predictable and reliable to enable long-term decision making by event organisers and to provide the sustainable path forward that supports community festivals to thrive and recognises the unique impact they make to Australia's cultural life.

The National Folk Festival's submission to this inquiry is not on behalf of other folk festivals but is done as part of its leadership role as a custodian of Australian folk performance at a national level and in wanting to promote ways to address the often unrecognised importance of community music festivals.