

MUSIC INQUIRY SUBMISSION

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This submission* is based on my extensive involvement with Australian folk (often referred to as 'roots') music as a researcher, writer and performer since the early 1970s.

The performance of Australian folk music, both in its traditional forms (bush ballads, work songs, dance music, etc.) has been the basis of the Australian folk revival, stemming from the 1960s when folk festivals, folk clubs, concerts and other venues for performance originated. The pioneers were mostly amateur musicians, though from quite early on, many began to make a living, or significant part of a living, from performing and recording (Gary Shearston, Marian Henderson, Phyl Lobl, Glenn Tomasetti and numerous others).

Since those early days and the subsequent 'bush dance' era of the 'Bushwackers' and many similar bands) the 'folk scene', as it is often known, has developed to the point where there are large numbers of musicians who make a living, or part-living from this form of music, which has now evolved into a distinctive voice connecting past and present. (Examples of performers include Chloe and Jason Roweth, The Fagans, Ruth Hazleton and Kate Burke, to name only a few).

In both its traditional and contemporary forms, Australian folk music is strongly associated with the history and lore of Australia and performers have often represented Australia abroad at trade fairs, festivals and the like, though this seems to have fallen off in the last decade or so and was only ever an occasional opportunity.

As well as performers of what might be broadly described as 'Anglo Celtic' folk music, we also benefit from a rich variety of 'ethnic' music from the many cultural traditions of Australia, including indigenous performers. As well as often having considerable profiles within their own communities, musicians from these traditions also operate through networks outside the mainstream music industry and need the same kinds of resourcing and profiling.

Taken together, this is a vast and under-acknowledged field of music-making within the national community that needs to be more broadly visible and audible in the Australian music scene. In most other countries, traditional music is recognized and encouraged as a vital aspect of local, regional, ethnic and national cultures, in education, history and tourism. Australia is almost unique in its neglect of its own diverse musical traditions.

However, there are very limited opportunities for folk musicians to develop their skills, record and otherwise evolve outside of the relatively insular network of 'folk' and similar

festivals. These events are important culturally and educationally, and while they do provide opportunities for performers, the larger events (National Folk Festival, Woodford, etc.) tend to feature expensive imported overseas acts, further reducing opportunities and payment for local performers. It is a good thing to have international acts come to Australia, of course, but there is little opportunity for the flow of local musicians in the other direction to the larger markets of UK, USA and Europe.

I see the problem as having two intersecting aspects, one national and one international.

Nationally, it would be beneficial if Australian performers had access to funding, skilling and resourcing for touring, recording and associated aspects such as publicity, marketing and generally increasing and extending the profile of this music and its makers. This would, as argued above, be culturally valuable but also better fit them for entering and competing in the global market for 'roots', 'world' and related forms that constitute a considerable, if largely 'indie' industry.

Internationally, assistance for performers to enter those global markets (funding, promotion, networking, etc.) is vital. The internet is useful for global profiling, but there is so much there that most things are lost in the noise. There is no substitute for travelling to other countries and performing face-to-face with audiences and taste-makers.

To solve these problems, facilities, resourcing and funding (the levels are relatively minimal) need to be made available. These could perhaps be administered through the festivals and related organisations as happened in the 1970s and 80s through the Australian Folk Trust and the Australia Council, or some variation of that arrangement.

REFERENCES:

Graeme Smith, *Singing Australian: a history of folk and country music*, Pluto Press, Melbourne, 2005.

Folklife: our living heritage: report of the Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia. Australia. Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia, Canberra, 1987.

Graham Seal and Rob Wills (eds), *Verandah Music: The Roots of Australian Tradition*, Curtin Books, 2003.

Verandah Music at verandahmusic.blogspot

* This submission does not relate to the Australian 'country' music scene. While there are overlaps between the folk and country networks, Australian country music has usually, apart from the 1960s, had a higher profile through recording, radio and high-level festivals, such as Tamworth. This is not to suggest that country music is without industry issues, but they are of a different nature than those affecting the folk field.