

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Review

From The BUG – Brisbane Unplugged Gigs (Brisbane, Queensland)

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Introduction

The BUG – Brisbane Unplugged Gigs is a volunteer-run grassroots live music organisation based in Brisbane, Queensland. For more than 22 years, The BUG has presented regular live acoustic and folk music concerts, creating an important cultural platform for emerging, mid-career and established musicians.

Operating primarily from the New Farm Bowls Club, The BUG presents approximately 50 concerts each year, typically featuring two feature artists per week, alongside additional community participation opportunities such as blackboard/open-stage performances. Across its history, The BUG has presented well over 2,200 feature artist performances, in addition to thousands of community and guest appearances by acoustic, folk, roots and multicultural artists from Australia and overseas.

It has a volunteer working committee of 18 persons – booking artists, arranging promotion, MCs for the concerts and door control.

In recent years, despite operating entirely through volunteer resources, The BUG has expanded its activities through several new initiatives. These include BUGFest, a one-day grassroots music festival showcasing a diverse range of acoustic and folk artists; The BUGette, created to provide performance opportunities and audience development pathways for emerging and upcoming artists; and The BUG BAZAAR, a monthly event designed to present broader multicultural and world music influences to audiences through intimate performances, community participation and dance-oriented live music experiences.

These initiatives reflect The BUG's ongoing commitment to accessible, community-driven cultural activity centred around participation, connection, live performance and cultural exchange.

The BUG exists because small-scale grassroots cultural activity matters. It creates pathways for artists, strengthens local communities, supports mental wellbeing, develops audiences, and provides affordable access to live culture. However, organisations like ours operate almost entirely through volunteer labour and face increasing financial and structural pressures.

This submission outlines key challenges and opportunities facing the grassroots live music and community cultural sector, and proposes areas where the National Cultural Policy can provide meaningful support.

1. First Nations First

The BUG strongly supports the principle that First Nations arts and culture must be First Nations led and centred within Australia's cultural identity.

The BUG has presented a number of First Nations artists over its history, many of whom have generously supported grassroots community music initiatives despite the modest artist fees that small volunteer-run organisations are able to offer. More recently, these artists have included Sue Ray, Shellie Morris, Jesse Lloyd and Joe Geia.

We recommend increased funding support for grassroots organisations to engage First Nations artists and cultural practitioners, development of mentoring partnerships between community venues and First Nations-led organisations, and stronger touring support for culturally safe presentation opportunities in smaller venues and regional communities.

2. A Place for Every Story

The BUg regularly programs artists from culturally diverse backgrounds, intergenerational traditions and emerging creative communities. Folk and acoustic music scenes are uniquely placed to support cultural storytelling because they prioritise participation, oral traditions, language preservation and community connection.

Our programming includes Australian folk traditions alongside Italian, Celtic, Scandinavian, Balkan and contemporary multicultural influences. We believe the National Cultural Policy should recognise grassroots music venues and volunteer-run presenters as essential cultural infrastructure and increase support for community-based artistic activity outside major institutions.

3. Centrality of the Artist

Artists are central to Australia's cultural life, yet many grassroots musicians and presenters operate in financially precarious conditions.

The BUg attempts to pay artists wherever possible, despite limited ticket income and rising production costs. Many musicians balance creative work with multiple jobs and unpaid labour, while volunteer organisers experience burnout from sustaining community cultural activity without structural support.

We recommend micro-grant programs for grassroots presenters, increased touring support for regional and community-based artists, and funding models that support recurring small-scale activity rather than only major festivals or institutions.

4. Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Grassroots venues and volunteer-run music organisations are an important but often overlooked part of Australia's cultural infrastructure.

The BUg operates from community-based venues such as bowling clubs and independent arts spaces that provide affordable, accessible places for cultural participation and community gathering.

We recommend recognition of grassroots venues as critical cultural infrastructure, support for venue accessibility and equipment upgrades, simplified grant processes for volunteer-run organisations, and investment in suburban and regional cultural activity.

5. Engaging the Audience

Audience engagement begins at the grassroots level.

The BUg demonstrates that audiences remain deeply interested in live, authentic and community-centred cultural experiences. Community music events create opportunities for social connection, intergenerational exchange, cultural participation and audience development.

We recommend audience development funding for grassroots organisations, support for affordable ticket pricing, and national campaigns promoting participation in local live music and community arts.

Additional Priorities

Volunteer labour is one of the hidden foundations of Australia's cultural sector. Festivals, concerts, folk clubs and community arts organisations across the country rely heavily on unpaid community contribution.

The National Cultural Policy should acknowledge volunteerism as a significant cultural asset and support volunteer-led organisations through training, insurance assistance, governance support and simplified compliance systems.

Community music organisations also provide informal arts education and mentoring opportunities outside formal institutions. Stronger links between schools, youth programs and grassroots cultural activity would help nurture the next generation of artists and audiences.

Grassroots music scenes also preserve important forms of cultural memory and community heritage. Support for archiving, oral histories and documentation of local cultural activity would strengthen Australia's cultural memory for future generations.

Conclusion

The BUg – Brisbane Unplugged Gigs believes that a healthy cultural sector must include strong grassroots foundations.

Volunteer-run organisations, small venues and community music presenters are essential parts of Australia's cultural ecosystem. They create opportunities for artists, nurture audiences, preserve cultural traditions and foster social connection.

The future of Australian culture depends not only on major institutions and large-scale productions, but also on small rooms filled with people sharing songs, stories and community.

We encourage the National Cultural Policy to recognise, support and invest in grassroots cultural activity as a vital part of Australia's creative future.