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### **Submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation**

*Summary: This submission advocates for the support for small live music venues (dedicated performance spaces with a capacity of 500 or less) on a federal level, both in terms of the availability of grants and public funding for these small businesses, and their protection in legislation. Australia's live music industry is built on small venue spaces, yet they are often overlooked in discussions of sustainability and growth. An investment in these spaces would ensure the long-term vibrancy and prosperity of Australia's music industry.*

Dear Minister Burke,

Thank you for considering this submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation.

I am a Lecturer in Creative Industries at the University of South Australia with a strong research track record on the topic of small venues and live music specifically, and the cultural and creative economy more broadly. My research has included work with the SA Music Development Office, RMIT University, the National Live Music Office, Monash University, the University of Tasmania, and the City of Melbourne.

In the ten years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic the Australian music industry experienced an unprecedented level of growth, with state governments playing a key role in its development and success, as well as export and advocacy bodies such as the Live Music Office and Sounds Australia. This support has been provided because Australian music delivers tremendous social, cultural, and economic value to the Australian public. It informs our sense of identity, offers unique forms of cultural expression, and provides culturally significant experiences shared by millions of Australians. Quality Australian music can travel the world and resonate with audiences of all ages. To create music that makes these impacts, we need a vibrant, dynamic, and sustainable live music ecosystem with the ability to support young and emerging artists, from the smallest stages to the biggest festivals.

Small live music venues<sup>1</sup> offer performance opportunities for young and emerging musicians and act as social hubs for local music scenes, supporting high quality, culturally significant and innovative Australian music by:

- **giving musicians space to perform and hone their craft in a live setting,** providing them with exposure, income, and valuable industry experience.

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<sup>1</sup>As I define them, small venues have a capacity of 500 patrons or less and fit two categorisations: licensed premises; and unofficial, unlicensed venues. Licensed venues include such spaces as local pubs, clubs, small bars, dedicated performance venues, multi-use spaces, and any venue with a capacity of 500 patrons or less that holds a valid liquor license. Unofficial, unlicensed venues are usually private or privately leased spaces that do not hold a liquor license. This type of venue might include local halls, garages, shopfronts, dwellings, galleries, warehouses, converted rehearsal spaces, or private residences etc.

- **providing audiences with accessible everyday live music experiences and the opportunity to participate in local music scenes**, further contributing to the local community.
- **acting as social hubs for music scenes**. Small live music venues play an important role in bringing new bands and artists in contact with existing audiences, as well as facilitating social interaction between music scene participants.
- **forming the grassroots of the nation's live music ecosystem**, upon which the rest of the live music sector rests.

The live music sector offers a major contribution to Australia's music industry, and small live music venues are a large part of this contribution. The economic, social, and cultural value of live music was measured in the Australian Live Music Office's report into *The Economic and Cultural Value of Live Music in Australia 2014*. As demonstrated therein, the existence of a local live music industry provides a significant economic benefit to the Australian public – in 2014 the live music sector contributed \$15.7 billion in value add to the Australian economy, along with more than 65,000 full and part-time equivalent jobs (*The Economic and Cultural Value of Live Music in Australia 2014*, pp. 2-3). Small live music venues make up a substantial part of this value and have also been identified as the most important types of venues for musicians and audiences alike (*The UK Live Music Census 2017 report*, p. 49).

And while we have seen that local and global audiences are hungrier than ever for Australian music, the live music industry faces major challenges due to continued venue closures. Many small venues operate on thin financial margins, functioning on the brink of closure despite their significant economic, social, and cultural contribution. It is difficult for these small businesses to remain afloat in the face of increasing gentrification, rising rents, continued over-development of cultural precincts, noise complaints, and the high cost of operation. All of these barriers and problems were in place prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has smashed small-to-medium venues in particular, with medium-tier venues (500-1000 capacity) unable to pivot to dining and boutique consumption activities as successfully as smaller, bespoke venues.

These challenges are significant. But the opportunity to develop new audiences brings exciting opportunities for artists. The recent boom in the recorded music industry due to the rise of digital music has bolstered the standing of Australian artists in the live arena, as live performance revenue remains their biggest and most reliable stream of income. These artists began their live careers in the small performance spaces that are the foundation of Australia's live music ecosystem, playing bigger stages to larger audiences as their careers developed. Therefore, small live music venues contribute to the live music sector on a fundamental level and should be valued accordingly.

Continued government support for and investment in the infrastructure of the live music sector is essential – it ensures that a viable and thriving music industry can continue to nurture and encourage emerging artists from their first performances to the world stage. This inquiry provides an opportunity for the government to inform itself of the critical role it plays in supporting the live music industry as it continues to develop and produce high quality Australian music, offering audiences the opportunity to engage with music on an everyday level.

### **Recommendations for action**

- **Continued funding and support for the Live Music Office.**
- **A new report into the economic, social, and cultural value of live music**, with a focus on the live music ecosystem and the contribution of the venue-based live music sector.

- **Access to public funding and grants for small live music venues**, especially those that demonstrate an economic, social, or cultural contribution to the Australian music industry.
- **Legislation to help protect existing music venues and aid the development of new venues**, particularly small-scale spaces that might otherwise struggle financially.
- **Assistance and support to help venue owners purchase the freehold to the buildings they operate in.** Venues proposed a state-backed loan scheme to allow venue owners to access additional funding beyond what commercial banks and financial institutions would be able to provide to assist them in purchasing the freehold to their venue space. Owning the freehold would take a lot of pressure and risk out of the equation for live music venues, as many venues noted that those venues that might be able to withstand the current crisis were usually those that owned their premises.

I would be delighted to provide further information in writing or in person to the Minister. To facilitate this, please contact me using the details provided. I also consent to the publication of this submission.

Yours sincerely,  
Dr Sam Whiting