

# THE TYRANNY OF DISTANCE VIABILITY AND RELEVANCE IN REGIONAL LIVE MUSIC PERFORMANCE

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## ABSTRACT

*Before the development of audio recording technologies, music was performed 'live' to an audience. As the most primal way to experience music, live music performances remain a popular social activity, and yet in many respects live music is under threat. This paper draws together two recent research projects on live music and regulation in Western Australia. The findings suggest that high costs, limited returns and current funding strategies inhibit the ability of regional areas to create live music opportunities and, in turn, the ability of musicians to develop regional audiences and work with communities. Implications include: the need to review funding strategies so that intra-state touring and community engagement are considered alongside the usual inter-state and international activities; formalised touring circuits and networks of stakeholders are established; and musicians are encouraged to engage with communities beyond performance, creating additional activities during an otherwise reduced working week.*

## BACKGROUND

Live music performance is crucial to the development of sustainable careers in music. This is because performing live provides direct links between musicians, their audiences and networks of venues (Ballico 2009, p.8). Small venues and regional tour circuits enable musicians to make early connections with audiences and venues while contributing to the communities in which the venues are located, although direct contributions are most often limited to performance-based activities. Nonetheless, these connections are an important marketing opportunity for bands to 'sell' their live act and to market recordings and merchandise direct to audiences. Considered an 'incubator' for future success, 'musicians, managers and recording companies share a belief in the value of the... live [tour] circuit in preparing artists for regional/ global success' (Johnson & Homan 2003, p.3).

The importance of live performances has led to several recent studies into the state of live music around Australia, yet surprisingly little has focused on Western Australia (WA). Previous studies focussing elsewhere in Australia have explored the benefits of live performance (for musicians, venues and the wider community) while also identifying barriers and threats to the industry's long-term viability such as complex legislation, changes in pub culture as well as threats and opportunities resulting from emerging technologies (Homan 2003, 2008). For example, Johnson and Homan's 2003 study of live popular music opportunities in New South Wales included a state wide survey of live music venues to 'stimulate critical debate concerning the continued viability of the state's live music environments' (2003, p.1). The study explored the extent to which venues hosted live music and identified regulatory barriers that impeded their ability to host live music. Regulatory and legislative issues were also the basis of Wardle's (2008) research, which highlighted the disparate nature of existing Australian state and territory legislation. Similarly, research undertaken by the Music Council of Australia and the Australian Performing Rights Association (2008) explored the extent to which venues hosted live music, the difficulties of doing so, and the benefits of live music to the music industry in general (Jacobs 2008).

Whilst WA contemporary music faces many of the same challenges, it is also known for its uniqueness. Diverse in sound and known for celebrating its isolation (Stratton 2003) the WA live music scene produces acts with a 'world class live presence' (DCA 2006, p.6). In recent years, prominent Perth acts including Eskimo Joe, John Butler, Little Birdy, The Panda Band and Gyroscope have toured nationally and internationally and have further lifted the profile of the local industry. As Gyroscope drummer Rob Nassif explained in the Perth music documentary *Something in the Water* (2009, WBMC), performing live is crucial:

*If the first A & R [Artist and Repertoire] person [the record label employee in charge of signing new acts] that ever saw us was at that EMI showcase, which I think it was, that was March 2002 and the band started in March '97. So that's five years of playing hundreds of shows around Perth, rehearsing twice a week, writing hundreds of songs before we'd even been in front of an A and R person.*

Performing live is not only vital to the creative development and performance skills of emerging musicians, but also throughout a musician's career. As Perth musician 'Jimi', cited in Ballico (2009, p.37) explains:

*I am a much better singer now because I have done so many shows; I've had time to learn the technique. ... Interacting with people also gives me an awareness of the fact that I have an audience, which is really good for my confidence when I'm creating new material.*

The importance of live performance means that 'suitable venues dedicated to supporting live, local, original music' are integral to the development of the music industry (DCA 2006, p.7). In the case of emerging artists, small and medium sized venues (those with a capacity of 200 people and 300 – 600 people respectively) are the preferred option. As Bennett (forthcoming) states, these venues 'play a crucial role in the growth and development of artists and provide opportunities for new acts to be "noticed". They often represent the preferred or only option for smaller tours and emerging local acts'. Despite celebrating its isolation, one of the greatest difficulties in developing a sustainable live touring circuit in WA is the tyranny of distance. Covering 2.4 million square kilometres, 20% of the state's 2.2 million people live outside the metropolitan area (ABC 2009). With relatively small population centres and large distances between Perth and many major regional centres, the ability for live music to develop outside of the metropolitan area is impeded by high costs and limited returns.

The 'tour circuit' is a set of interconnected performance venues. Whilst touring circuits can be informal, formalised circuits have the potential to develop strong audience and venue support through increased activity and exposure. Western Australia's largely informal regional touring circuit extends from as far north as Broome to Albany in the state's South (DCA 2008). The major regional tour circuits can be broken down into areas as follows:

#### *South West region*

Perth – Bunbury – Margaret River & Dunsborough – Perth (540km)

Perth – Bunbury – Margaret River & Dunsborough – Albany – Perth (1 120km)

#### *Mid and North West regions*

Perth – Geraldton – Perth (860km)

Perth – Geraldton – Carnarvon – Karratha – Port Hedland – Broome – Perth (5 080km)

Of these regional tour circuits, the South West is the most active because of its proximity to Perth and to larger regional centres. In contrast, the Mid and North West regions of the state are less active because of the large distances between regional centres, which result in high transport and accommodation costs alongside quite considerable commitments of travelling time. As such, it is cheaper for a WA band to travel to highly populated centres such as Melbourne and Sydney or, equally, to South East Asia, than it is to tour areas such as the far north of their own state (DCA 2008, p.13).

Whilst this paper focuses primarily on the importance of small venues and regional tour circuits to the presence of live music performance, it is important to acknowledge the crucial role of arts and culture, including music, in the vibrancy and wellbeing of regional areas. Not only does performing in these areas give musicians the opportunity to develop their audiences, it enables the local community to foster a sense of local identity. As Anwar (2005, p.15) explains: 'it emphasises the importance of expressing community values, creating a sense of place, gaining new insights, and learning new ways of doing things.' Citing Hawkes (2001), Anwar (p.15) writes: 'actively involving community in the arts is the essential starting point to the exercise of generating community-owned expressions of what matters to them'. Similarly, Jones and Tonts (1995) find that original music venues can play a role in the overall social cohesion and wellbeing of local communities, particularly in centres experiencing high youth unemployment. Indeed, 'there is an emerging consensus among researchers that community arts programmes, celebrations and/or festivals can promote community cooperation, reduce the isolation of individuals and groups within community and promote economic and social development (Kelaher et al 2007, p.1).

These three considerations: musician and career development, social and community benefits of live performance activities, and formalised touring circuits and funding, combine to raise questions about the sustainability and relevance of existing regional activities, and potential avenues for improvement.

## **APPROACH**

This paper draws on the results of two Western Australian research projects. The first was undertaken to identify existing and potential live music venues and to review and combine data on current and future live music requirements for WA. This research was underpinned by the Department of Culture and the Arts (DCA) Mission, Vision and Strategic Plan, which recognises the value of culture and the arts in WA. The inclusion of DCA guidelines was important because of the direct relationship between the DCA and much of the available contemporary music funding. In particular, the research considered Western Australia's needs as a 'dynamic, creative community in which artists play a central role' (DCA 2008, p.1).

A substantial literature review was followed by collection of field data from live music venues across the state. The venues operated mostly as pubs, nightclubs, wineries, café bars and community centres. Data collection was undertaken via a survey that collected data from 243 venues (142 from the metropolitan area and the remaining 102 from regional WA) followed by interviews with eight venue managers, booking agents and industry representatives. The survey gathered data relating to performance types and genres, overall activities and live music capacities, audience numbers and demographics, and the attitudes of venue managers towards hosting live music performances.

The second research project explored the impact of government regulation on the creative free flow of talent (Breen 1993) experienced by original contemporary musicians when performing live. The study explored noise regulations, copyright revenue under the Australian Performing Rights Association (APRA) Live Music Returns, and the Contemporary Music Program (CMP) grants administered by the DCA. Specifically, the study gathered data on the impact of these regulations on musicians' opportunities to perform live. The focus in this case was exclusively musicians' experiences of venues holding 'indefinite' liquor licenses. For this project, field data were gathered via an online survey (which elicited twelve responses) and with four in-depth interviews. The study sought information on whether musicians feel that live performance aids in the creative development of their songs and performance skills; whether musicians consider the volume of their music when performing live and have had their performances interrupted due to noise complaints; whether musicians claim for copyright revenue payments from performing live; and whether they have received CMP funding for Perth performances. For the purposes of this paper we focus on findings related to the importance of live performance, noise regulations, and CMP funding.

Researchers involved in the two projects consisted of two musician academics (one of whom works in original live music), one early career (Honours level) researcher with a background in music journalism and a fourth researcher with a background in music management in WA. Findings common to both projects, particularly the impact of the CMP funding and the importance of performing live to the development of musicians careers, were combined and further analysed to draw general conclusions relating to live music, regional communities and legislation.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results discussed here are presented first in relation to strengths and weaknesses and then in relation to opportunities. Finally, we present potential strategies for alleviating some of the difficulties identified from the research.

### STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES:

The research found that the WA live music scene is diverse in nature, providing a wide cross-section of genres as shown in Figure 1. Whilst many venues provide an eclectic mix of entertainment for their patrons, however, the picture is somewhat misleading; many smaller communities have particular musical tastes, and extending these tastes with unfamiliar acts presents a financial risk for the limited number of venues: 'In a small town we really have to choose bands that would suit our patrons. Cover bands are good for giving the crowd what they want to hear' (r8).

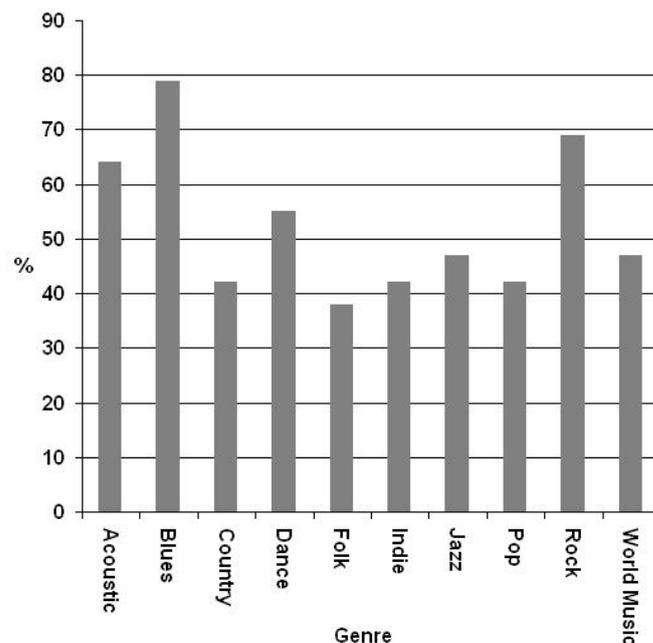


Figure 1: Ten most common live music genres at participating venues (% occurrence)

From the venue perspective, audience preference for cover bands is directly linked to bar takings: venues 'need to sell drinks to make money' (r18). Half of the participating venues hosted less than 25% original music and the other half hosted over 50% (one quarter of which exceeded 75% original music). As discussed, regularly exposing audiences to original live music is important in broadening audience tastes. Doing so also encourages cover bands to include more original songs in their performance sets. Of the cover bands surveyed, 75% performed at least one original song in each performance. As one respondent explained, 'the same crowds will enjoy listening to original songs as long as they can still dance to it' (r8).

Offering a variety of music can help to link a venue with new or transient community members. As one Geraldton venue manager explained, 'Geraldton is kind of an "itinerant" population; straight out of uni graduates that we want to keep in our community. Coming from various places, cities. By having live original music this helps them feel at home' (r5). Similarly, venues in tourist destinations experience seasonal fluctuations in the demand for particular types of music. The need to please both tourists and residents can be problematic, but it also presents opportunities to host more events: 'Live music attracts people. People equal money! Timing is everything. If it's tourist season then the risk of loss is small' (r39).

Several regional venue managers specifically commented on the impact of live music on community wellbeing. One respondent considered live music to foster an 'extension of social development networks, particularly amongst youth and disadvantaged sections of the community' (r48). Youth engagement also arose with respect to opportunities for young, local musicians: 'The social benefits are the fostering of the local music scene which can encourage younger musicians to partake in a constructive pastime' (r45). Described as 'cultural breeding grounds' (r43) and 'social hubs' (r42), small venues were associated with providing 'service to the community' (r48), often at the cost of increased profits. In contrast with many of the corporate-owned metropolitan venues, the role of regional venues was considered paramount both in terms of community and, often, the music sector itself: 'I think, particularly in regional areas, we have an obligation to be a vehicle for people to see quality acts when they tour the state' (r46).

Encouragingly, 60% of survey respondents expressed an interest in contemporary music beyond their venue role. As one respondent explained: 'I like to see young, upcoming, local bands succeed in the music industry and give them an opportunity to gain more experience in a live format' (r3). Whilst it could be argued that those with a personal interest in the music industry are more likely to have responded to the survey, the findings suggest strong support for networks of venues to develop sustainable touring circuits.

Despite an encouraging number of venues wanting to support live music, significant barriers were identified in relation to regional live music performance. Logically, touring activity decreases in direct correlation with increasing distance from Perth, increasing costs, and decreasing returns. Whilst bands on occasion have their accommodation and some equipment supplied by the venue, the costs of touring regionally can far exceed touring income. It goes without saying that costs, including accommodation and transport, airfares and freight, vary depending on the number of people on tour (musicians and crew) and the number and location of venues visited. These costs were felt by venue managers as well as musicians: despite being supportive of hosting live music and acknowledging the social benefits of doing so, one venue manager explained that 'performance costs associated with attracting original bands from Perth place restraints on how often we are able to host bands' (r5).

In general, only musicians with an established regional audience base embark upon regular regional tours, with the result that audience development in many regional areas is limited to radio airplay. Indeed, respondents noted that limited exposure to original music as live performance or as radio airplay on commercial stations in both the regions and metropolitan areas, contributes to the 'cover band culture' that further limits opportunities for the performance of original music. Whilst radio airplay is not the primary focus of this paper, no discussion about original music would be complete without making some reference to it. The importance of including Australian content is widely acknowledged: for example, Commercial Radio Australia (CRA 2007, p.1) stresses that 'Commercial radio airplay promotes Australian artists and their music which in turn leads to income from sales, concert performances and royalties. It also helps to stimulate the production of Australian music'. CRA is the body responsible for providing content reports to the voluntary reporting body, the Australian Music Performance

Committee (AMPCOM). According to the most recent available AMPCOM report, covering the period July 04 to June 05, the 44 commercial radio stations in WA included Australian content of between 10.6% (6IX) to 28.6% (6PR) (AMPCOM 2005). However, assessing Australian and local airplay is difficult because data are derived from only random samples of content. In addition there appear to be differences between metropolitan and regional local content. As Mason (2003) suggests, perhaps

*future discussions around the role of local content requirements should not focus on the simply on the quantity of local music broadcast, but rather seek to identify areas of local music practice that may require more support and determine how this can be meaningfully achieved through greater airplay.*

The value of these discussions would be greatly enhanced if they took into account the value of regional music activities in relation to the needs of regional communities.

Further influencing the trend to head to the eastern states or overseas is that tour funding such as that available through the DCA's Contemporary Music Program (CMP) does not encourage or reward regional touring, or make allowances for the difficulties and high costs associated with reaching regional areas. Analysis of CMP funding awarded for tours in the 2005-2008 period reveals that the majority of touring grants were allocated for eastern states tours (57%) and international tours (40%), with approximately 2% of tour funding going to regional tours. While the DCA provides funding for regional touring programs such as the annual WAMi regional tour (WAM 2009) and the Next Big Thing (WAM 2009), funding is poorly lacking for live music sitting outside of these programs. Perth musician 'Jimi' has received funding to tour the eastern states (Ballico 2009, p.44) and confirms how beneficial such funding can be for musicians in developing their careers:

*It has helped me to establish myself] as a touring artist to the point where I run an almost self-sufficient Australian touring operation that generates a significant percentage of my income. This would not have been possible without the initial boost the DCA funding provided.*

However, it is clear that a direct injection of funding into regional touring could greatly aid the development of regional live music. This funding would help reduce the costs for bands as well as reducing some of the financial losses the venues experience when hosting original live music.

The ability of musicians to successfully tour regional WA is further impacted by the heavy weighting of live music activity towards the weekend. This 'reduced working week' has negative consequences for musicians trying to make a living and develop their skills and audiences (Bennett, forthcoming). The wide spatial distribution of population (and, thus, activity) is a particular problem in this respect as it limits opportunities to fill in 'down time' by travelling to other, nearby, places.

These factors, combined with the exposure gained from inter-state and international appearances, strongly influence musicians to forgo regional WA in favour of larger markets.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The development of WA audiences and venue networks is vital, and this was reflected in the responses of venue managers. It was encouraging to find that venues want to host more original music. However, the economic reality is that it is hard for venues to do so. A viable and active original music industry at the grass roots community level provides the economic foundation of the contemporary music sector. Formal recognition of original music venues at the local and state government levels could perhaps leverage the social and economic benefits of music participation, assisting those venues wanting to host more live and original music and enabling communities to host more music-related activities involving local and visiting acts.

The costs of supporting original music could be lessened with regulatory changes, rebates or subsidies, as well as initiatives encouraging and supporting a longer-term approach towards audience. For example, Ballico (2009) found that the way venues enforce noise regulations on musicians can greatly impact their experience of performing. The difficulty in regulating noise is that the allowed emission levels (from a venue to a residence for example) is determined by temporal, sound type and land zoning factors, but the way in which the venues choose to enforce these regulations is at their discretion (p.29). This has been found to cause difficulties for musicians in cases where venue employees have abruptly interrupted performances, wanting musicians to reduce the volume of their performance (p.40).

Another potential intervention concerns the development of much-needed information: for example, while the state government has developed literature for venues on noise emissions and building good relationships with the local community to reduce the likelihood of noise complaints, advice on how musicians and venues can work together to reduce noise emissions has not been developed (DCA n.d). Noise issues can create great financial strain for venues, and while the state government previously provided some financial aid through the Sound Attenuation Support Program (dollar for dollar funding up to \$50,000 for sound attenuating measures), the uptake of this financial assistance program was poor (Bennett, forthcoming). Given the poor returns associated with hosting original live music it is important that costs associated with providing adequate infrastructure are subsidised, and pro-active, tailored advice given.

Opportunities exist to encourage more regional touring within existing strategies such as the CMP, with an added emphasis on regional touring and, vitally, through inter-arts and community programs. Whilst not all musicians will be interested in community engagement, others will welcome the opportunity to broaden skill sets and take on additional roles beyond performance. A network of supportive (and supported) venues would go a long way towards promoting regional touring as an economic reality and desirable activity. If this were encouraged via specific funding opportunities and leadership, it would provide musicians with more opportunities to perform and reach new audiences while allowing venues to gain community recognition, and community members opportunities to experience music as both observers and participants.

Whereas regional tour circuits help develop regional activity and, in turn, contribute to regional health and wellbeing, the activities contained within a tour need to be thought of more broadly than the giving of a music performance. The study findings strengthen the case for the development of a stakeholder group to facilitate a supportive and encouraging tour circuit incorporating inter-arts and community activities. In light of this, the results of the research have been added to the growing VROOM venues database (2009). Whilst formalised circuits are still some time away, the research team hopes that a community of practice planned for 2010 will help to facilitate this process.

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