

The Victorian Government's Inquiry into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism and events sectors.

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It is no secret that the Live Music Industry and community has been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The live music ecosystem has been affected in multiple ways and exists on the brink of economic collapse at this moment in time.

Small Live Music Venues.

The major problem non-seated live music venues face is that restricted audience capacities remain in place whilst being lifted for private residence, retail, public transport, and seated sporting / entertainment venues. These places can operate at 100% whilst non-seated live music venues are still unable to fill their venue spaces beyond approximately 30% of pre-COVID capacities. This is a consequence of the density quotient remaining in place.

Capacities and business revenues are directly proportional. As live music venues emerge from the end of JobKeeper, rental relief and the much-appreciated Victorian Government's Live Music grants (15 March 2020 – Jan 31 2021), they are trying to cover a cost base in excess of pre-lockdown trading with around 50% of their possible revenues. The cost base includes deferred rents and the repayment of accumulated debt from the three lockdowns. This is the precarious and serious situation live music venues are in and there is nothing that is within their powers to address this financial predicament.

The seriousness of this situation cannot be emphasised enough.

It is unclear what concerns the Victorian Department of Health aims to address. Industry representatives have only received various verbal concerns that seem to change depending on who is spoken to and what day it is, leaving the Industry guessing as to what these preconceptions and fears are that drive the reticence to consistent regulatory treatment of live music venues.

In the absence of these concerns, the following is an attempt to address the issues.

Singing.

Almost all of the bands that play in Melbourne play their own compositions and songs. Cover and tribute bands are the exception, not the rule. Consequently, the audience more often than not don't know the lyrics of performed songs.

Although singing does occur, it does not occur on the scale or gusto of team songs sung at AFL games which is now deemed acceptable by health regulators.

Stadiums are outside and seating enforces social distancing.

There is some truth in this statement but when entering major sporting stadiums, the entered spaces are internal spaces. Clustering is unavoidable at entrances, toilets, catering areas and entrances/exits, breaking down any notion of social distancing. If the time added up in these congested areas at sporting events was accounted for, it would likely be proportional to an average band set at a live music venue. Even in large standing venues audiences at 1 person per 2 sqm, the audience still cluster naturally in spaces such as in front of the stage, in the PA sweet spot, at bars and naturally in social groups.

Clustering occurs in all venues and all public spaces.

Regulation around density quotients are still in place for live music venues with standing audiences and this is inconsistent with other industries and regulations. This is patently discriminatory and unfair.

The perception that live music venues are hot and sweaty.

It is true some gigs are energetic but not all. If this is a concern of government, it can be managed by the industry. However, the industry is in the dark if this is an issue. Furthermore, dancing no longer attracts specific regulation. It's also winter and if of genuine concern, can be addressed in late autumn.

Contact tracing.

Live Music Venues maintain two separate levels of contact tracing logs which is far in excess of other industry sectors. The first is upon entry with QR codes like all hospitality venues and businesses. Separate contact logs are automatically generated as function of ticketing. All venues receive a Track and Trace Report from live music show ticketing platforms such as OzTix. This is generated from the ticket sales information.

Touring

There is almost no touring occurring in Australia at the moment. The financial risks of touring have rendered it unviable. These risks relate to snap lockdowns potentially stranding artists in interstate locations, festivals cancelling (such as The Byron Bay Bluesfest) due to

health orders), tails of other touring artist experiences and venue capacities changing due to unpredictable regulation changes affecting touring viability.

Live music venues depend on festival side shows and tours to fill dates. As such, with international borders closed, larger venues are now competing against smaller venues for the same shows, creating intense competition for bookings. The result is a distortion in the marketplace with the smallest venues on the bottom unable to compete for shows against larger venues. This is accentuated by non-seated live music venues not being able to utilise their potential historical capacities due to the current mandated density quotients whilst some larger venues are unaffected by the same restrictions.

Festivals.

The financial risks around live music festivals have been dramatically demonstrated by the cancelation, by a NSW government health order, of the Byron Bay Blues Festival, sending seismic shock waves through the music industry and community alike, one day before the festival opened. Many businesses will be affected by this single incident and it is likely to amount to tens of millions of dollars of losses businesses and artists alike.

It will be hard to see how festivals will attract finance, obtain insurance, attract advanced ticket sales, and form consortiums to put on live music festivals in the future.

As a result, this will financially impact the entire live music ecosystem: small live music venues as discussed above, production companies, agents, touring companies, artists, crew, the festival workforce, environmental operators, accommodation providers, food vendors, etc.

The economic impact on this sector and the economy that intersects it is yet to fully play out. However, it is unarguably astronomic.

However, for musicians, a substantial section of their playing opportunities evaporated in Easter 2021. It would be a double tragedy if Victoria also lost its live music venues leaving musicians with few performance opportunities and little work.

A situation that must urgently be addressed by the Victoria Government.

A cultural tragedy is unfolding.

Melbourne is acknowledged as one of the worlds great music cities of the world and has more live music venues Per Capita than other world cities. The weekly audience is greater than the AFL. Multiple studies and report published over the last 10 years attest to both the cultural and economic value of live music in Victoria.

Bar Open and The Tote are just two of the 554 live music venues in Victoria. Between these two venues, pre-pandemic, they staged 4,000 bands a year facilitating 16,000 to 20,000 opportunities for musicians playing to an estimated audience of 115,000 attesting to the

strategic importance of live music venues. Live music venues are the Suez Canal of the music industry. No artist goes from bedroom to stadium. Bands develop their stage craft and find their audience in their local live music venues.

If the live music ecosystem collapses, Melbourne will emerge from the pandemic as a shadow of itself and with significant reputational damage. Consideration needs also to be given to the impact on musicians and their music loving audience's wellbeing. For many people, cultural identity and community are defined and inter-linked by the music scene. If the live music scene collapses, then so will go the community meeting places and the social fabric that holds together this community.

Examples of strength of the community are events such as the community cup (A football game between community radio (The Megahertz) and musicians (Rock Dogs) to raise moneys for charity, the hundreds of fundraises for communities effected by bushfires. However, day in day out thousands of people go to gigs in Melbourne without fanfare and this is the backbone of the music community activity. If we lose the music scene, we will all be irrevocably diminished, many will be alienated and distressed.

Urgent Action

With no COVID-19 in the circulating in community for six weeks, quarantine holding and when an infection does escapes, contact tracing and containment strategies have proved effective. We are probably as close as we will ever get to "COVID Normal". Yet there is no Government music industry strategy policy either in development or in place to direct music industry business (like live music venues such as Bar Open and The Tote), artists and musicians to a 'Road Map' back to economic sustainability.

The sectors is a currently on a trajectory to collapse.

Urgent Government action is required.

The Victorian Government should urgently consider:

- Immediately removing Density Quotients for non-seated live music venues.
- Release an urgent second round of the Victorian Live Music Venues Program for core funding for Live Music Venues (\$15m).
- Ensuring consistent health regulations for live music venues with other industries such as sport.
- Ensure regulations affecting live music venues are announced at the same time as other industries (such as sport) and not treat the music industry as an after-thought.
- Consult with the music industry on any health concerns the Victoria Department of Health has and discuss the impact any future regulatory changes may have on live music venues and festivals.
- In conjunction with the music industry and community, the Victorian Government to facilitate an all of sector recovery plan with specific focus on live music venue's and live music festival's viability and sustainability, the reestablishment of touring and artist/musician career sustainability.
- Urgently re-establish a reconfigured Victorian Government Live Music Roundtable under the Dept of Premier and Cabinet, so the industry does not have to conduct discussions with government in the public sphere. A formal pan-government forum is required.