

**Submission
No 358**

**INQUIRY INTO THE MUSIC AND ARTS ECONOMY IN
NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Mr Matthew McMahon

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To whom it may concern,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this important enquiry. I am a professional pianist/composer/improviser who has performed in Australia and overseas for the last twenty five years. I have released nine albums as a leader or co-leader and perform in many other projects – appearing on over eighty albums including ARIA winners etc. I have received Australia Council Grants, A Freedman Fellowship, I was a founding member of the Jazzgroove Association from 1998 – 2014. I have sat on various other committees – NSW Jazz Co-ordination Assoc and the board of Eastside radio 89.7fm (where I have presented a 2 hr weekly jazz program for the last nineteen years).

Just this morning an electrician called to my house for a small job. I was practising the piano when he arrived and we began talking about music. He told me that when he grew up in a country town in the 1970s people who were involved in the arts were considered “poofters” and that there was hostility to the Australian Government purchase of Jackson Pollock’s “Blue Poles” and the construction of the Sydney Opera House. There was real hatred for any artistic expression at all. His experience may not be universal but there is a large segment of Australian culture which I believe retains a feeling of hostility or suspicion to artistic or cultural expression. This is a huge cultural problem which is not easily solved. But it needs to be faced.

There has been, of course, an enormous amount of important and engaging artistic work undertaken by Australian performers - and there is support, and an audience, for all of this.

Sydney has suffered from a legislative environment which has made life extremely difficult for the live music scene. Thanks to the superhuman efforts of John Wardle, and his subsequent work with the Live Music Taskforce, things are a little better in the last seven years or so. It was tragic to watch venue after venue close in the 1990s and 2000s. This drove a lot of live music underground – as though we were living in authoritarian state which prohibited music. At the same time giant beer barns, replete with poker machines and screaming sports fans were allowed to flourish. We have created a society that has more poker machines per capita than anywhere else in the world. Is this something to be proud of?

The music world has been severely impacted by declining revenue from the sale of recorded music and the loss of control of copyright more generally. The lack of mandated Australian content across various platforms has also meant a lack of support for Australian creative work.

As an emerging musician during the 1980s a huge part of my exposure to music was from the ABC – particularly ABC TV. There was Countdown of course – then Rage. But more importantly for me were programs that presented jazz and classical music. I had my first exposure to many wonderful jazz

artists – many of whom I could not see live because of my age. I got to see and hear Vince Jones, Don Burrows, Dale Barlow, Sandy Evans, James Morrison, Alan Turnbull etc. – all musicians I was fortunate to subsequently share the stage with. I was also able to watch Opera, Symphony Orchestras, documentaries, etc. It could be argued that we live in a time where content is now so available that the ABC's role has "evolved" - but I think the ABC's curatorial role is more important than ever. We have space and budget for a program discussing the latest Dr Who but no space to present a weekly band feature, or, God forbid, a jazz, classical or world music concert. The ABC has a proud history of not just presenting music and other arts but in creating the culture that supports, critiques, and values creative expression. Music is a conspicuous silence here. The ABC needs to prioritise the presentation of art and music because the commercial stations will not touch it at all.

My observations belie the fact that I am a positive person. I realised the reality of life in the arts in Australia long before I decided to pursue it as the central force in my own life. I have had a successful career. But I have seen many of my talented and committed peers give up in despair, or worse, at the struggle of trying to make a living and build a life in the arts.

Some recommendations:

1. Make music education compulsory. Foster a love of music and teach children how to play instruments in school. It will enrich their lives immeasurably as they commune with each other and the great musical minds of the past. I'm so fortunate that I was given the opportunity to play in the school brass band and have piano lessons - it has given me life-long friends (eg. My wonderful high school music teachers from thirty years ago come to my performances and we catch up when we can)
2. Mandate Australian content – we need to build a culture that supports local artists - not for their sake but for what they can contribute to the life of the country.
3. Help the legislative environment in NSW for live music to flourish. Venues are struggling.
4. Commit to a Sydney International Jazz Festival. It is embarrassing that Perth, Brisbane, Melbourne have such an event but not Australia's largest city.
5. Teach the importance and power of Indigenous music – I have been honoured to perform with indigenous musicians and to share culture and learning.