

### Martin Cloonan

Popular music matters. [\[1\]](#)

At first sight this statement might seem to be so trite and obvious that it's hardly worth making. The fact that I am making it from within the lofty portals of academe may also serve to raise hackles and confirm some people's worst suspicions in others. Such feelings may well be compounded further when it is learnt that I travelled half way round the world (with some research funding) to reach this amazing conclusion. I can easily imagine some readers thinking to themselves: "So, he thinks that popular music matters. Well, I could have told you that"

OK, but bear with me. In August and September 2006 I spent some time working at Macquarie University in the Department of Contemporary Music Studies as a Visiting Lecturer whilst on study leave from my employing institution, the University of Glasgow. While in Australia I also took the opportunity to undertake some research. Having just completed a book on popular music policy in the UK, I was keen to develop some comparative research on developments in Australia. In particular, as I have researched the impact of political devolution in Scotland on popular music policy, I was intrigued to see if any parallels could be drawn between the development of popular music policies under the new Scottish situation and the state system in Australia. I also wanted to know what, in policy terms, the big issues were in popular music in Australia and what could be learned from that.

My conclusion that popular music matters begs an obvious question – in what ways does it matter?

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e pertinently the question underlying my research was: "In what ways does popular music matter in Australia in 2006?" In order to answer this, I sought out people whose daily job assumes that popular music matters as a part of public policy. These were people were generally (but not exclusively) working in the public sector and whose job involved implementing some popular music policies, albeit sometimes as part of a bigger portfolio. So I interviewed representatives of organisations which got (or had previously got) public funding and whose activities included to a lesser or greater extent, popular music. I talked to state-based organisations in New South Wales, Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria and to a number of organisations with an Australia-wide remit. I'd like to acknowledge here the debt of gratitude that I owe to my interviews and to make clear that unless indicated otherwise the views expressed here are entirely my own.

I was fortuitous in a number of ways including the fact that my arrival in Australia overlapped

with something of a resurgence in interest in popular music policy. In part this was stimulated by the federal government decision in 1998 to dedicate \$10 million to funding popular music projects following the allowing of parallel imports of music CDs. The money was allocated via the Australia Council to a range of organisations and projects including the Music Managers' Forum (MMF) and the Australian Independent Record Labels Association (AIR).

The ending of this source of one-off funding appears to have spurred a great deal of thinking about how governmental support could and should be maintained. A key part of this process has been the series of meetings sponsored by the Australia Council which led to the production of reports such as the *Power and the Passion* (2003) by the Contemporary Music Working Group and *Let's Get This Show on the Road*, researched and written by the Allen Consulting Group (2005) for the Working Group. The Group has also been involved in discussions with the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) with a view to producing an *Industry Action Agenda* (Contemporary Music Working Group 2006). While the initial proposal was unsuccessful, at the time of my research the Group was working on a re-application with the assistance of DCITA. While this might ultimately result only in official recognition of the important of the music industries, a number of my interviewees felt that such recognition was long overdue.

My research itself consisted of face-to-face interviews with people who had responded to emails which I had sent them. The interviews were semi-structured - i.e. I asked roughly the same questions to all, but gave interviewees the space to go into depth - and myself the space to ask follow up questions - as required. In some cases I asked additional questions of organisations which had particular remits. Interviews were taped and interviewees sent a transcription for verification and further comment.

### **How popular music matters**

In effect the results of the interviews provided insights into *how* popular music matters in Australia in 2006. After analyzing the interviews thematically, it was clear to me that three key issues emerged: the importance of live music, the need to export 'product' and the development of popular music policies for youth. These should all be seen as inter-connected and as being considered in a context where popular music is both a cultural form *and* an economic product – something which has caused problems for policymakers across the globe.

With regard to live music a broader context needs to be acknowledged here. Part of this is the almost mythological status which live music performance has within the Australian music industries, which has, for example been shown by the Newcastle-based academic Shane Homan (2000). In summary, live performance has been where Australian acts have endeavoured to develop their art prior to trying to mix it with the best.

But live performance in Australia has faced at least two problems in recent years. The first of these is something of a perennial one and will be of no surprise to readers of *Music Forum*. It is the simple logistical and financial one of touring in a big country. Even touring within a state can be difficult for emerging acts. Thus many of the public funding bodies have tour support schemes. In one case cited to me this involved getting a tour support for a local band with Canadian death metal band Cannibal Corpse. As a Brit it was hard for me to imagine that public money in the UK would be used in this way – or at least not without some tabloid outrage. Meanwhile the geography of Australia combined with a seeming necessity to be able to 'cut it live' will ensure that tour support remains a key issue. The need for ongoing and systematic support was apparent.

The second, and to me much more intriguing question around live music, came with regard to the need to protect inner city venues from redevelopment and/or complaints from neighbours. What often appeared to be involved here was a creeping gentrification of inner city areas premised on redevelopment plans within which the joys of inner city cultural life was promoted. However having been lured by such cultural activities, some new residents to areas which contain live music venues appear not to appreciate the lifestyle associated with such venues. In many instances they sought to close venues which they deemed to be too noisy. Cases of this sort of problem were routinely reported to me and have received official recognition in places such as the *Valley Music Harmony Plan* in Brisbane ( [http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC\\_74](http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/BCC:BASE::pc=PC_74) ), the *Live Music Taskforce Report*: (Carbines 2003) in Melbourne and the Sound Attenuation Support Program in Western Australia ( [www.dca.wa.gov.au/sasp.asp](http://www.dca.wa.gov.au/sasp.asp) ). In addition the *Vanishing Acts* report in New South Wales (Johnson and Homan 2002) highlighted concerns about the impact of poker machines on live venues. In instances such as New South Wales and Western Australia there have been moves to deal in particular with neighbour complaints via such things as trying to enshrine mediation processes into state law and placing particular responsibilities on new tenants (commercial or private) and/or developers. In addition moves such as the development of VROOM database of live music venues ([vroom.musicnsw.com](http://vroom.musicnsw.com)) again show the importance of live popular music activities.

There is not space here to go into the results of all this here. It is suffice to say that live music shows not only that popular music matters, but that it matters in ways which might not always be apparent. For example, live music has (at least) environmental, cultural, economic, health, safety and licensing implications. Here the (local) state can regulate economic activity, but also try to act as a guarantor of the continuation of certain forms of cultural activity. If live music is to continue to thrive it may well need the sorts of support which popular music entrepreneurs have often been suspicious of.

The Australian live music scene has also been seen as the breeding ground for international success (Homan 2000). Such success obviously implies exporting the 'product' and the question of exports was frequently raised. The comparatively small size of the Australian population was generally seen as a barrier to significant commercial success. Put bluntly, only being 'Big in Oz' - let alone big within one state - was not seen as being good enough and it was routinely suggested that making it meant making it on the international stage.

Of course, the desire to make it big internationally is hardly unique to Australia. As anyone conscious of the British recording industry's obsession with its acts 'Cracking America' will be well aware. But Australia's geographic location adds a rare dimension. Being at a market *and* geographic disadvantage raises more keenly the question of what support government (at various levels) should give to export drives. As 'small fish in a big pond' as one of the chapters of

*Let's*

put it, survival in that pond was held to be an area where government could, and should, help

It would be fair to say that existing mechanisms of export support were not viewed kindly. While some funding agencies were happy that they could lend support to acts and/or companies which wanted to go to important international music conventions such as South By South West (SXSW) in Austin, Texas, and MIDEM in Cannes, there was a more general feeling that export support was inadequate. Three related complaints came to the fore here. The first was confusion between state and federal initiatives. State initiatives were seen as being too independent in the sense of not cohering with initiatives from within other states and, indeed, tending to compete with them. Secondly, with references being made to the export policies of the Australia Council, Austrade, the trades and cultural arms of various state agencies and to Austrade's overseas offices, the pattern of support picture seemed to be both complicated and uneven. The knock on effect was to produce the third complaint – that there was not a consistent Australian brand which could be promoted at trade fairs. This was held not to be the case in other countries, several of whom were cited as having better policies.

On a more positive note, and partly returning to the question of live music, I was struck by how often I was told of initiatives which involved getting young people involved in the production live music events. This was generally part of the development of a range of popular music policies orientated towards youth. The originator of involvement with live music production here appears to have been Victoria's Freeza ( [www.freeza.vic.gov.au](http://www.freeza.vic.gov.au) ) programme which involves young people promoting alcohol and drug free gigs. Similar projects include the Rammpaage project in Western Australia ( [www.rammpaage.com.au/](http://www.rammpaage.com.au/) ), the Indent project in New South Wales ( [www.indent.net.au/](http://www.indent.net.au/) ) and the A-Venue project in Queensland ( [www.qmusic.com.au/a-venue/index.cfm](http://www.qmusic.com.au/a-venue/index.cfm) ).

My impression was that there were at least three motivations for these sorts of projects. The first was the desire to develop youth policies in and of themselves.. Rightly or wrongly, popular music was seen in a number of areas as being part of youth policy and the need to respond politically to such demands was evident in conversations with a number of organisations, especially state-based ones. The second was a desire for audience development, to develop a taste for live music among young people. Respondents were aware that demand for live popular music could be somewhat fragile and saw such programmes as one way of stimulating future demand. Finally, there was a desire to develop music industries' personnel for future years. Involvement in such projects had the potential to develop promoters and other ancillary workers for the future and this was warmly welcomed.

My time in Australia did not allow me to evaluate any other these projects and I have not got access to any evaluations which have been undertaken. However, the very existence of the sorts of youth programmes which respondents identified stood in marked contrast to the situation in Scotland where such programs are generally lacking. Similarly, the desire to protect live music has yet to filter into any policy developments within Scotland of the sort noted above. Meanwhile both Australia and Scotland face continuing issues with regards to the export of popular music.

I should also note here that these three issues were by no means the only ones which emerged. Other important issues included indigenous music, the role which popular music plays in constructing Australian identity, radio quotas, copyright, inter-state and state-federal rivalry, lack of funds for arts generally and for popular music organisations in particular (one respondent talked of such projects being "funded to fail"), continuing cultural cringe, the possible need for a

representative music industry body, the need for coherent statistics on the Australian music industries, the fact that one or two activists in an area can make great impact, the need to retain talent locally and musical diversity. However the three issues alluded to above recurred throughout my research and gave me the most food for thought.

So, to return to my original point, of course, popular music matters. It matters to practitioners, fans, promoters, record companies and – to wildly varying extents – to public funding agencies. My research provided a snapshot of *some* of the ways in which it matters, of which the three issues highlighted are prime contemporary Australian examples. I can only conclude by wishing my interviewees well in their quests to ensure that Australian politicians and their public will also conclude that Popular Music matters.

## References

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[1] Note here that I use the term *popular* music, whereas the most common terminology used by my respondents was *contemporary* music – seemingly in attempt to cash in on the latter's more artistic overtones. Such terms can be debated *ad nauseum*

. Suffice to say here that by popular music I mean forms of music whose roots can broadly be traced back to mid-1950s rock and roll.