

Feature Story on the Arts

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After two years of lockdowns and restrictions in Australia, there is finally a glimmer of hope for the performing arts industry. With live performances finally making a return to stages, we seem to have some normality back. But we still cannot look past the troubles which people working in the industry have endured.

Robert McComb, guitarist for an 80's Australian rock band called The Triffids, has felt the force of stress since the lockdowns began in March 2020. The constant cancellations of concerts during the lockdowns ruined his anticipation of reuniting with the band on tour.

"We were going to do two shows for a Triffids documentary called 'Love in Bright Landscapes' but they were both cancelled," McComb says. "We managed to get one gig in Adelaide in March 2020 and then the lockdown came, so there were two years of disappointment."

The temporary easing of restrictions between each lockdown gave McComb a false impression that he would finally be able to return to the music scene. "A window of opportunity would come up and we'd re-arrange everything and book flights but then things would change and you'd have to postpone them again, so that's why personal frustration was the hardest part of the lockdowns," he says.

Even though McComb was finally able to travel after the fourth lockdown was temporarily lifted last June, he still felt a sense of anger about the inconsistent rules around crowd sizes.

"When we were over in Perth last June, the eased restrictions meant that our show could go ahead," McComb says. "But there were some seemingly illogical situations where we were playing an outdoor show that was restricted to 400 when you could've had so many more considering that they were having 30, 000 at a football match down the road."

Boden Birkett, JPJ Audio's head system engineer, has shared McComb's frustrations. His life "basically ended" on the "fateful March night in 2020" due to the financial impacts of the lockdowns.

"I probably had 50 grand of work booked that just disappeared overnight and we were getting texts and emails for the next few days because everything just seemed to be disappearing before our own eyes," Birkett says.

Birkett ultimately lost an immense amount of money as a result of the cancellations of tours. "The cancellations probably stripped my income by about two-thirds, so it was a huge financial hit on me and everyone else," he says.

These financial tolls caused severe distress for Birkett and his colleagues. "Every time there was another lockdown there was so much devastation for my colleagues," Birkett says. "There were lots of mental illnesses rising in their heads, whether that would be from being pre-exposed or having anxiety from the loss of work or the loss of communication."

So a great deal of support and compassion was needed to ensure that everyone survived the lockdowns.

"There was a lot of counselling each other as well as dealing with the stresses and trying to reassure each other that this will only last a couple of months," according to Birkett.

These sorts of hardships have been a serious problem across the entire music industry. According to survey data published by I Lost My Gig on July 29 2021, Australia's live entertainment industry had been losing on average \$16 million in revenue each week, totalling \$64 million since the start of July. The data showed that in the year spanning from July 1, 2020, to June 30 2021, more than 82 thousand gigs were cancelled in Australia. An additional 23 thousand shows were called off between July 1 and July 29 2021.

These impacts culminated in severe mental health issues for people involved in the arts industry. In a national survey published in an Edith Cowan University report, 63 per cent of the participants reported that their mental health worsened during the lockdowns.

In their research, the university used the short form Depression Stress Scales 21, a self-reported survey which measures levels of distress. 49 per cent of the participants demonstrated moderate, severe or extremely severe levels of depression and 61 per cent showed moderate, severe or extremely severe levels of anxiety.

Even though live events have "returned consistently" since the Victorian government finally ended the fifth lockdown last October, Birkett has found that the cancellations of gigs are still not completely a thing of the past across Australia.

"We had to cancel a few shows for Perth last month because they still hadn't taken off restrictions for capacity limits, so there are still pockets of lockdown hangovers that haven't been addressed yet," according to Birkett.

The possibility of a musician testing positive to covid has been another obstacle to Birkett's ability to keep touring. "I had a tour cut short last month because the signer caught covid at a festival and that ended up knocking two weeks off the end of my tour," Birkett says.

Bek Duke, music and arts admin, has been facing similar challenges over the past few months. The cancellations of live performances are still affecting her financial situation.

"I'm working at a theatre show at the moment and a couple of cast members came down with covid, so we had to cancel a week of shows and that's a massive financial blow," Duke says.

Because covid rules such as mandatory face masks and crowd limits were not completely eased until last April, Duke has found that it has taken a while for the music industry to fully re-adjust. "It's been a strange time where even when gigs are finally able to return we still sometimes need to conduct really strictly controlled events," she says.

Duke says there have been some "hardcore protocols" since the fifth lockdown was lifted.

"When live shows returned, we had density limits on venues and instead of being a 1500 capacity venue you might only be able to operate at 500," she says. "A lot had to be seated shows, patrons had to be masked, and you couldn't go to the bar like you normally would."

Questions have been raised about what can be done to mitigate these impacts of Covid-19. The Federal Government has come under fire due to the way in which it responded to the plight of the arts industry. The arts has received far less Covid funding than other industries. Funding allocated to the construction sector was nearly 30 times more than the \$484 provided to the arts.

The \$250 Million Creative Economy Package for Arts and Entertainment Industries only exacerbated the disdain for the government. Much of this package has been targeted at businesses rather than individual arts workers. Most of the recipients have been major institutions, especially via the \$50

million Covid-19 Arts Sustainability Fund, of which more than \$40 million has been provided to 15 leading institutions.

For Duke, the way in which the government handled the shutdown of the arts industry highlighted a lack of understanding. “You’ll find that the government doesn’t have a proper arts policy, so the understanding of the arts and entertainment industry was severely lacking,” she says.

Duke found that the government failed to understand the “casualisation” of the music workforce. “For performers, music is casual and freelance by nature and these people never get paid or sick leave, so there’s absolutely no financial fallback if the work is cancelled,” according to Duke.

But there has been some support offered to the music industry. Over the course of the pandemic, a music industry charity called the Support Act has handed out more than 16, 000 Crisis Relief Grants to live performance workers, contributing to \$35 million. It has also held programs such as Mental Health First Aid and the Wellbeing Helpline.

Duke believes that the Support Act has been crucial to the survival of the performing arts sector. “Music charities like the Support Act were the sole reason people like myself and a lot of other performers and crew managed to get through the last 18 months,” she says.

At the moment, the public is mostly inclined to return to live performances. Survey data published in an Audience Outlook Monitor report last March showed that 59 per cent of respondents were prepared to attend. A further 38 per cent said they would attend when there is less risk of covid transmission, and three per cent said they would only attend when there is no risk.

Duke thinks that cautious optimism is the general sentiment. She has found that the fear of covid is still somewhat holding the arts industry back.

“When gigs and theatre shows were coming back, there was still a lot of patrons not quite ready because they were apprehensive about returning to an environment with people who may be infectious,” she says. “It was a weird feeling of going into a show where you’d sold 800 tickets and only 300 people showed up.”

But Duke is still confident that there is a “passion and hunger” from patrons to “get out there and experience live music” given that gigs are “back in full force”.

It seems that the performing arts sector has made slow progress since restrictions have eased. But we must acknowledge that it is clearly in a much better state than it was in the middle of the lockdowns. In the end, performing arts might prevail but the effects of the pandemic could take many years to fully disappear.

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