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## **Community Music: Australia's 'Unsung Hero'**

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Community music is a vibrant and widespread phenomenon in Australia, enriching the lives of millions of people across the country. It is flourishing in every imaginable location from bustling urban centres to remote outback towns, and people are participating in vast numbers. Notwithstanding this vibrancy, much of this activity remains hidden from the outside world. This invisibility seems to stem from community music's greatest strength: strong local engagement and support, often leading to relative independence from external drivers and forces.

To learn more about this 'unsung' but significant aspect of Australia's musical life, Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre launched *Sound Links*, a two-year research project, in collaboration with partner organisations Music Council of Australia, Australian Music Association, and the Australian Society for Music Education, funded by the Australian Research Council. The *Sound Links* research team came to the project with long-standing backgrounds in community music and music education, and consisted of Professor Huib Schippers (Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre Griffith University), Associate Professor Peter Dunbar-Hall (Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney), Dr Richard Letts (Music Council of Australia), and Research Fellow Dr Brydie-Leigh Bartleet (Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre Griffith University).

*Sound Links* sought to uncover the dynamics of community music in Australia and the models it represents for music learning and teaching in formal and informal settings. The research team focused on a careful selection of six vibrant musical communities, ranging from multicultural suburbs to largely monocultural country towns, from rural networks to remote Indigenous communities, and interviewed and observed over 400 participants in these settings. A further 200 participants also contributed towards a nation-wide survey on the topic. The resulting report was launched as a book on the 10 May 2009 at a Community Music Symposium co-hosted by Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre and Music. Play for Life.

The 250-page *Sound Links* report paints a vivid picture of musical activity in Australia, and makes a number of targeted recommendations for creating a sustainable environment for community music in this country. From an international perspective, it also constitutes the first study that considers six widely different practices with a consistent approach, creating the opportunity to draw conclusions about site and project specific characteristics, as well as more general features of community music activities. This article briefly touches on some of the most significant findings from the report.

### **The *Sound Links* case studies**

At the start of the process, the scope for case studies in community music was vast: across Australia, there is a bewildering array of activities, ranging from almost invisible small-scale initiatives to fairly major organisations. From this wealth of possible examples, with input from Music. Play for Life, the partner organisations and their vast networks, six were selected from a list of over 20. These

communities included a middle class suburban location (Dandenong Ranges, Victoria), a large established regional city (Albany, Western Australia), a small rural town (McLaren Vale, South Australia), a culturally diverse urban city (Fairfield City, New South Wales), a remote Indigenous setting (Borrooloola, Northern Territory), and an urban Indigenous setting (Inala, Queensland). Each case study revealed a number of insights into the dynamics of community music across a range of settings, locations, approaches and outcomes.

The Dandenong Ranges Music Council (DRMC) case study provided a vibrant model for creative and innovative community partnerships, both through their ongoing activities and through their flagship projects such as the Fire Cycle Project, Composers Connecting Community, and the Water Cycle Project, amongst others. This commitment to partnership building also extends to education, where the DRMC has a proven track record with successful school-community collaborations, which occur on an everyday day level and a flagship level. At the heart of many of these collaborations is a strong commitment towards supporting activities and events that centre on local issues, which have been developed through considered consultation processes with the broader community. The programs offered by the DRMC show a commitment to social inclusion, and provide equal opportunities for participation regardless of age or abilities. As Bev McAlister (DRMC Executive Officer) describes: "The DRMC's philosophy is about creating the opportunity for people of all ages and abilities to make music, and for music to be performed and integrated into the lifestyle of the community" (personal interview, 14 September 2007). Overall, the creative and inspiring leadership given by Bev McAlister and the DRMC team is a striking factor in its success; in particular, how they nurture sustainability and independence amongst the organisation's various units.

The Albany case study provided valuable insights into how community music operates in an Australian regional city. There was a striking community-mindedness in this regional centre, which then translated into a commitment towards participating in and supporting community music-making. Due to the scale and close-knit nature of Albany, the interaction and connectivity between the community groups was very high, and this in turn fostered a creative climate and lifestyle which was highly attractive to local residents. Sheena Prince (Senior Music Teacher, Albany Senior High School) notes this shared approach to music-making: "In Albany I've been really impressed with the number of people who've wanted to get better at their craft and share it with other people" (personal interview, 15 October 2007). This creative climate was also strongly nurtured by community leaders and philanthropists, who are part of a long and significant tradition of supporting and fostering the arts in Albany. From an educational perspective, engaged teachers played a significant role in fostering a dynamic community music environment in Albany. Likewise, highly useful models of informal and non-formal music learning and teaching were found, such as the popular music program *Recipe for Jam* and the Celtic music program *Just Fiddling*.

The McLaren Vale case study provided a practical model of how a school-initiated community music program can take shape. The local Tatachilla Lutheran College is nurturing a number of vibrant school-community collaborations, which show a commitment to intergenerational learning, and in turn enhance the school's curriculum and students' learning experiences. These programs, such as the Community Carols, also provide important music educational opportunities for parents, grandparents, and the broader community. Greg John (Head of Performing Arts, Tatachilla Lutheran College) explains the importance of this inclusive approach to community music-making: "It's about community building and relationship building and the underpinning thing in all of this is the music. That's the thread that goes through all this community building around here, where you

can get people from the stiff accountant through to the hippy performing together" (personal interview, 9 December 2007). Clear structure, support, and key leaders were also identified as crucial elements in the successful running of these events. However, the vibrancy of community music in this region was not simply limited to Tatachilla Lutheran College. In fact, there were a range of other significant venues and places nurturing community music activities both in McLaren Vale and neighbouring towns, such as Willunga. Throughout the region, people attributed this vibrancy to the desirable lifestyle and location, which appears to attract creative people.

The Fairfield City case study examined how community music programs operate in a culturally diverse urban location in Australia. In this case study, there was compelling evidence to support the connectivity between community music and cultural identity, particularly in case of migrant communities. Many attributed Fairfield City's musical vibrancy to this cultural diversity, and the strong commitment musicians feel towards maintaining their cultural customs and traditions. As Tiffany Lee-Shoy (Senior Policy Advisor, Cultural Planning, Fairfield City Council) suggests: "One of the things that you'll notice is the use of traditional forms of art, particularly music and dance, to be that conduit of adjusting to life in Australia where there is a leaning on homeland culture to be that connection socially, and to be that connection toward culture as well in Australia" (personal interview, 18 February 2008). They also identified the crucial role that community music plays in connecting the generations of particular cultures, and the somewhat complicated situation that then arises when second and third generation migrants look to define themselves in relation to their parents' and grandparents' cultures. This case study has hinted at the potential role community music could play in connecting these cultural groups further, although this is still to reach its full potential. At the present time, the most visible cultural connections are being made in schools and various community music educational programs, which are having a very positive impact on the lives of young people in this area.

The Borroloola case study illuminated how community music operates in a remote Indigenous context. It showed that in such contexts, notions of culture, kinship and the land are deeply connected to Indigenous concepts of community, and by extension community music. In other words, music-making in this particular context cannot be understood independently from its relationship to people and places. Liz Mackinlay (a long-standing researcher in the community) explains the importance of these connections: "Everybody relates to each other as family, but that family relationship is inherently linked to country and where people live is about country. People are really strong about keeping these relationships to country in place, but those relationships aren't divorced from family. So I think that's partly what community is about here; country and family. Music is one of those very powerful and potent ways that those two things come together" (personal interview, 25 April 2008). In this case study, the strong connections between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' ways of making music, singing and dancing were observed through the vibrant women's culture and the recontextualisation of traditional cultural messages through popular music in the four local bands. From an educational perspective, many identified the important role that music could play in connecting young people with their culture, and the potential of school-community collaborations to facilitate this was being explored at the time of the fieldwork. It was also observed that somewhat controversial external forces, most recently a local mine's community benefits trust, have the potential to positively impact upon the provision of music and the arts in the community.

The Inala case study demonstrated how a community-driven program, strongly supported by a local council, can be used to engage young Indigenous people in an urban context, and allow

them to feel a sense of pride about their cultural identity. As was observed in the case of *Stylin' UP*, in order to engender this strong sense of community ownership and engagement, a rigorous community consultation process is needed. By and large, this consultation process is highly successful, but is not without its challenges in terms of intergeneration and intercultural interactions. The complex balancing act of meeting the needs of council, community and schools in the organisation of the workshops and event day was also observed. This model thus heavily relies on sensitive and high quality organisers, negotiators, and facilitators who are able to run the skills development workshops, liaise with schools and work closely with the local community to address such issues. Finally, the case study showed the importance of choosing a musical genre that engages its target group, in this case hip hop and R 'n' B. The case study also uncovered compelling evidence to show how such genres can create a sense of cultural identity, community, and empowerment amongst Indigenous youth at a local level. As Chelsea Bond (Community Crew member) says, "*Stylin' UP* is our corroboree for today and that's what I think has pulled people in over the years and attracted people to it. It has imagined us very differently to how we're frequently talked about" (personal interview, 16 June 2008).

### **The *Sound Links* survey**

The *Sound Links* nation-wide survey was designed to validate the aforementioned case study findings and benchmark them against national impressions and perceptions. The survey was developed in consultation with the partner organisations, and distributed online to a wide-range of music educators, community music facilitators and practitioners, music therapists and arts administrators, mostly through their mailing lists. Over 200 people responded, representing every state and territory.

The results revealed a number of significant trends, particularly in terms of success factors, learning and teaching models and school-community collaborations. While a wide range of practitioners working across many different styles and cultural traditions responded to the survey, school teachers made up the highest proportion of respondents (60.3%) and a large proportion of those respondents were involved in choral music (48.6%) at the time of responding.

The *Sound Links* survey identified a range of critical success factors in Australian community music, the top five being: 1) Inspiring leadership from an individual (64.7%); 2) Careful planning (62.8%); 3) Location, venue and facilities (62.2%); 4) Support from the broader community (61.5%); and 5) Choice of repertoire/style/genre (59.6%). These success factors were all highly evident in the case studies, and substantiate the importance of engaging practice and pedagogy, the provision of infrastructure and organisation, and connections to the broader community in vibrant community music-making.

In terms of learning and teaching in community settings, survey respondents noted the prevalence of one-way instructional teaching and peer or collaborative learning. Many of the responses touched on the need for the musical director/conductor to be flexible, responsive to participants' needs, and to acknowledge that skill levels differ in some cases. A focus on the process, the enjoyment of learning and the social factors of playing music together were also noted. However, the most striking response to the online survey was in relation to the connections between the schools and community music: 74.3% of respondents believe the connections are not reaching their full potential. This is significant response and illustrates the importance of not only examining this issue further, but finding positive models for how these connections can be initiated and developed more effectively.

### **Significant *Sound links* findings**

The research team was impressed with the loose but often very effective organisational structures found in the six case studies and nation-wide survey. These structures have evolved in most cases as the result of a bottom-up process, highly adaptable to change, challenges and new opportunities, and often led by a single visionary individual. Related to this is the array of approaches to learning and teaching that were encountered, ranging from what would be termed informal to highly formalised, but in most cases with considerable sensitivity to context and fitness for purpose. The case studies and the nation-wide survey indicated that the potential of music education in schools for creating synergies with this powerful and self-energising force is great and far from being fulfilled.

Given the fact that each of the six case studies was selected to represent a very different set of circumstances and environment, many of the characteristics of the community music activities observed were unique to their specific participants, facilitators, sites, contexts, aims, and infrastructure. However, there were also strongly shared underlying characteristics between the activities. These were identified under nine key domains (shown in the figure below): 1) Infrastructure; 2) Organisation; 3) Visibility and public relations; 4) Relationship to place; 5) Social engagement; 6) Support and networking; 7) Dynamic music-making; 8) Engaging pedagogy and facilitation; and 9) Links to school. The most important characteristics of almost any community music project can be described under these headings.

Structures & Practicalities	Infrastructure	Organisation	Visibility/PR
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buildings</li> <li>• Performance spaces</li> <li>• Equipment</li> <li>• Regulations (e.g. council by-laws)</li> <li>• Funding</li> <li>• Earned income</li> <li>• Legal issues (e.g. copyright, insurance, incorporation)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Method of organisation</li> <li>• Inspired leadership</li> <li>• Structures &amp; roles</li> <li>• Division &amp; delegation of tasks</li> <li>• Mentoring of new leaders</li> <li>• Membership issues</li> <li>• Forward planning</li> <li>• Links to peak &amp; related bodies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotion, audience and membership development</li> <li>• Exposure in local press/media</li> <li>• Awards/prizes/champions/prestige</li> <li>• Community centres as identifiable places</li> </ul>
People & Personnel	Relationship to place	Social engagement	Support/networking
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connections to location (e.g. urban, suburban, regional, rural &amp; remote)</li> <li>• Connection to cultural identity and cultural heritage</li> <li>• Pride of place</li> <li>• Balance between physical &amp; virtual spaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment to inclusiveness (and sensitivity to issues of exclusiveness)</li> <li>• Engaging the marginalised 'at risk' or 'lost to music'</li> <li>• Providing opportunities</li> <li>• Empowerment</li> <li>• Links to well-being</li> <li>• Relationship to audience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Links to the local community</li> <li>• Links to other community groups</li> <li>• Links to local council</li> <li>• Links to business</li> <li>• Links to local service providers (e.g. police, fire &amp; health)</li> <li>• Connections to national peak bodies</li> </ul>
Practice & Pedagogy	Dynamic music-making	Engaging pedagogy/facilitation	Links to school
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active involvement open to all</li> <li>• Responsive to ambitions &amp; potential of participants</li> <li>• Short vs. long term orientation</li> <li>• Flexible relationship audience &amp; performers</li> <li>• Balance between process &amp; product</li> <li>• Broad orientation facilitators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensitivity to differences in learning styles, abilities, age &amp; culture</li> <li>• Nurturing a sense of group/individual identity</li> <li>• Commitment to inclusive pedagogies (ranging from formal to informal)</li> <li>• Embracing multiple references to quality</li> <li>• Recognising the need to balance process &amp; product</li> <li>• Attention to 'training the trainers'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Locating activities in schools</li> <li>• Identifying mutual interests</li> <li>• Sharing of equipment &amp; facilities</li> <li>• Marrying formal &amp; informal learning</li> <li>• Exchange pedagogical approaches</li> <li>• Realising activities as part of the curriculum</li> <li>• Support &amp; commitment from school leadership</li> </ul>

The identification and exploration of these nine domains also allowed the research team to juxtapose six widely different practices through a single methodology, and may well constitute the most significant outcome of *Sound Links*. This nine domain framework has achieved this without forcing diverse practices into a single definition or by establishing value judgements, but rather by creating a practice-based, demonstrably successful instrument to describe and gauge community music activities in and between settings. This framework has also enabled a better understanding of how community music operates in a range of different contexts across Australia, and highlighted

the need to further develop the connections between such community music activities and music education in schools.

### **Recommendations**

The *Sound Links* report outlines a number of concrete recommendations based on the nine domains identified and designed to create a sustainable environment for community music to flourish in Australia now and into the future. Some of the recommendations are aimed at practitioners, others at cultural officers, policy makers, music educators or other stakeholders. Many can be used and implemented at a local level. However, the most significant recommendation on a national scale was to initiate a community music network in Australia. Wasting no time, Music.Play for Life stepped up to the challenge and acted upon this recommendation within minutes from the 10 May 2009 launch. Australia's Community Music Network is now up and running. Meanwhile, the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University is investigating how it can integrate community music training into its undergraduate and postgraduate offerings. The research team hopes that these initiatives, and the implementation of the other recommendations outlined in the report, will ensure a sustained and growing engagement with the vibrant realities of community music in Australia in the years to come.

The book 'Sound Links: Community Music in Australia' can be ordered in hard copy from the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre for \$39.95 (incl. postage). Email [qcrc@griffith.edu.au](mailto:qcrc@griffith.edu.au) to place an order. Free downloadable copies are available from the MCA and Music.Play for Life websites.