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Live music is vulnerable without government help

Australia's \$6 billion music industry is at a crucial moment and needs action from governments to protect live music venues and help to enforce better standards for musicians, says the union for Australian musicians.

In its submission to the Parliamentary inquiry into the Australian music industry, the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance is calling for government leadership through reforms of planning laws to protect live music venues, the introduction of an industry code of practice, a national school music education plan, and better funding for full-time orchestras, particularly those based outside of Sydney and Melbourne.

"Agent of change" principles should be adopted nationwide to protect live music venues in areas undergoing gentrification and governments should recognise a music industry code of practice to define a floor of conditions and expectations for working musicians.

MEAA is calling for a "recalibration" of orchestra funding so Australia's orchestras can attract and retain full-time musicians, as opposed to the increased reliance on casuals, and for funding to be adjusted annually in line with movements in the Wage Price Index.

And there needs to be greater government investment in music education to double school student participation in music activities from its current low rates in primary and secondary schools.

The director of MEAA's Musicians section, Paul Davies, said music was Australia's most popular art form, generating \$6 billion a year for the economy and supporting 65,000 jobs, including 6000 full-time musicians.

But most musicians lead precarious working lives with the decline of recorded music sales forcing them to rely increasingly on live performance as their main source of income. This precariousness has also led to growing exploitation of musicians.

"Music is our most popular and productive art form, yet most musicians are struggling to survive," he said.

"Low performance fees, unreliable contracts, undercutting of pay, and obstacles to enforcing fair and equitable treatment of musicians are signs of a poorly regulated and dysfunctional sector.

"MEAA is currently working with musicians and industry to establish a professional code of practice and basic conditions, but this needs government support."

A recent national musicians' survey by MEAA, which had 560 respondents, found that a quarter of the gigs musicians perform are unpaid, and the average hourly rate received for commercial music practice is \$7.38 – less than half the minimum wage.

Most musicians have no choice but to work other jobs, but even then, their average annual income is just \$55,000. Just 12% of their income comes from broadcasting, streaming, publishing and sales.

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A further problem is the declining number of live music venues in our cities and towns, often the result of poorly planned residential developments, the conversion of many venues into gaming venues, and other forms of regulation, such as the Sydney and Newcastle lock-out laws.

MEAA is calling for the adoption nationally of “agent of change” principles like those in Melbourne and Wollongong, which protect live music venues in areas which are being redeveloped for residential use.

“From the Easybeats to AC/DC to INXS to Courtney Barnett, the global success of Australian musicians has always sprung from our vibrant live music industry,” Mr Davies said.

“But live music has reached a crucial point where if the right decisions are not made now, it may barely exist in a few decades time.

“This Parliamentary inquiry is recognition of the issues facing the industry, and MEAA welcomes the opportunity to engage with governments to ensure we have a thriving music industry well into the future.”

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