

Preamble

Folk music and the folk arts (including dance, poetry and instrument making) offer a valuable contribution to Australian cultural life with artistic excellence, creative originality, a unique voice, and the telling of stories of Australia that nobody else is telling. The genre of folk also differs from other genres in that it represents a range of cohorts, from amateur to professional. The use of the term ‘amateur’ does not necessarily signal an inferior skill set; rather, the cohort who identify as traditional musicians or practitioners of the folk arts are very often highly skilled with a deep knowledge of the tradition they strive to uphold, even though they have made the choice to pursue their art as a hobby rather than as a profession. The peculiar challenge of peak folk organisations such as the Folk Federation of NSW is how to represent its practitioners wherever their position the spectrum.

At a time when community is being eroded in Australia by globalisation and commercial imperatives, folk music events differ from commercial music events in their orientation towards participation and community-building. Artists who foster community engagement in artistic practices, such as community choirs, demonstrably enrich their communities’ appreciation of cultural practices, as well as contributing to improved mental health outcomes. The many folk festivals located in small towns around the country bring huge economic and community benefits to their host towns. These events also contribute to the mental health of both urban and regional communities by creating networks, strengthening friendships and leaving a lasting legacy of music appreciation at all levels of the art form. Despite their less commercial orientation, folk festivals are still obliged to pay the same insurance costs as much larger and more commercial operations.

Governments in many countries provide support for and recognition of their national cultural heritage and arts practices. In Australia our cultural heritage was interrupted by colonisation, and in contemporary Australia must include the rich cultural heritage of our immigrant communities as well as that of our First Nations artists and the music of the 19th century working class conscripted colonisers more frequently identified with the genre. The Folk Federation of NSW fully supports the Federal Government’s articulation of support for First Nations cultural practice as the first and foremost pillar of its new arts policy.

For folk musicians who choose to make a living from their art form, many of the conditions that create stress and insecurity are the same as those for any musician in Australia. It takes a huge amount of training and practice just to get started as a musician, and the training never ends. Even when you ‘make it’, being a musician is a pressurised and financially insecure existence. Even brilliantly gifted people often face periods out of work or have to travel to find it. Accident or illness can have devastating effects on musicians and people close to them. Old age and retirement present insurmountable challenges after a lifetime of intermittent employment with vastly diminished superannuation.

Good or great music comes from having the time to practise, create, compose, work in the studio, rehearse with others – all of these are necessary activities in the life of a musician or a dancer that are generally unpaid.

We are seeing increasing interest from various countries in identifying ways to directly support artists through the highs and lows of professional working life. Both Finland and the Netherlands have long traditions of subsidising artists to support their ongoing creative output. The Irish government has recently established a trial program to support 2,000 artists with a liveable salary for 3 years. The Australian Greens took to the recent federal election a similar platform on a slightly larger scale. The Folk Federation of NSW fully supports this approach and would want to see

proportional representation of its members if such a scheme was adopted by the Federal Government.

The folk sector is well-established and a vibrant component of Australian cultural life. The Folk Federation of NSW seeks from government recognition and support that will enable practitioners of folk music and other folk arts to thrive.

Specific outcomes from the new federal Labor government

- Balance the ‘economic’ lense through which arts activities are currently assessed by government with a more holistic view of the myriad non-economic benefits provided by arts events, and by folk music events in particular.
- Acknowledge the folk and roots sector as an artistic genre that provides a unique voice in the Australian cultural landscape.
- Acknowledge and validate community music making as valuable work that engages people in making music at amateur levels.
- Offer an income subsidy for qualifying musicians, to encourage and support artistic excellence and creative endeavour. Ensure inclusion of folk musicians in above ‘qualifying musicians’ by way of a quota or other agreed formula.
- Identify obstacles that stand in the way of artists, including folk artists, receiving award wages for their work.
- Review current compliance and insurance regulations to enable folk and roots sector events to thrive after COVID-19.
- Where necessary, underwrite or assist with events insurance and growing compliance costs being imposed upon folk event organisers.
- Restore funding to the National Library, National Archives and other National institutions that exist to build a national memory and understanding of who we are and where we have come from. Enable those institutions to continue to provide fellowships that enable individuals to make full use of their resources for the purpose of a creative project.
- Enable the folk music sector to provide input to that part of school education that engages students with Australian folk music and arts, including but not limited to syllabus inclusions, teaching of folk music and folk dance, and opportunities to learn instruments associated with folk music.
- Prioritise music as a subject in primary schools. The benefits of music education on personal, social and intellectual development are legion and exceptionally well documented in academic studies. Australia is well behind many other wealthy countries in primary school music education.

In preparing this submission, we acknowledge the following submissions to *Australia’s creative and cultural industries and institutions 2020*:

- Submission #49 (Ruth Hazelton)
- Submission #98 (Pam Merrigan, President of The Folk Federation of NSW).
- Submission #167 (Yuin Folk Club and Cobargo Folk Festival)