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The impact of COVID-19 on music venues in regional South Australia: A case study

Abstract

As spaces of social, cultural, and economic production, small regional music venues are an under-explored research area that can offer insights into changing music and performance practices, place-making, and the connections between urban and regional communities. Within the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the state of precarity in which such venues operate is emphasized and exacerbated. This paper will present preliminary findings from our case study of a small, regional music venue in the mid-north of South Australia that has been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated government restrictions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the way that live music is both performed and experienced, and a case study such as this offers an opportunity to discuss its impact on niche cultural and community spaces that are geographically and socially removed from the urban milieu and its policy settings. Preliminary findings suggest COVID-19 brought about both challenges (capacity restrictions and disruption of interstate travel for audiences and artists) as well as opportunities (strengthening the presence of rural voices in policy settings). The case study also highlights the need for further research on strategies for developing and sustaining regional touring pathways throughout South Australia.

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Keywords: live music; regional; venues; COVID-19; South Australia

Introduction

This paper draws on data from a case study of The Barn at Wombat Flat, an independent small live music venue located 120km north-east of Adelaide, as an entry point to exploring the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on regional Australian music venues. The Barn is situated on Ngadjuri land in the Mid-North region of South Australia, an hour-and-a-half's drive from South Australia's capital city of Adelaide and 40kms outside the regional tourist hub of the Barossa Valley. The Barn's relative remoteness typifies it as being somewhat 'out-of-the-way', making it a destination venue that requires a commitment to travel from its audience. This 'destination' aspect is heightened by the fact that performances are limited to once-a-month. In 2020, eight of The Barn's eleven scheduled shows were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions affecting interstate artists. Under current COVID-19 conditions the venue relies on sell out shows in order to break even, and this period of disruption has thrown the future of the venue into doubt.[1]

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Context

The study of live music in regional Australia has increased over the last two decades. Much of this work has explored this issue through the lens of cultural geography (Gibson 2008, 2002), focussing on the impact of festival cultures (Brennan-Horley, Connell and Gibson 2007; Gibson, Waitt, Walmsley and Connell 2010; Gibson and Connell 2011). However, remote venues that are removed from regional centres or not otherwise associated with established touring networks,

[1] "Like I don't know whether I will get through next year or not … because right now we are working to break even. We work really hard to sell out because otherwise we lose money" (venue owner, i/v with the author, 9 October 2020).

festivals, or pre-existing live music ecologies, remain under-researched. While the researchers are aware of other remote venues that operate in contexts isolated from established regional tourist destinations, there has been no Australian research that maps the extent of such venues and the unique challenges they face – though a recent report from the Regional Accelerator Music Program (RAMP) undertaken by the South Australian Music Development Office (MDO) highlights that further research is needed regarding the development of regional touring networks in South Australia[2]. As a point of comparison, many regional venues in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland are part of established touring networks whereas such routes in South Australia are either non-existent or fragmented due to the vastness of the state, the lack of large regional centres, and the relative distance between existing centres – making regional SA venues a category of their own. This distinctiveness has been further compounded by the impact of COVID-19.

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Since the beginning of the pandemic, a wealth of literature has emerged examining its effects on the cultural and creative sector (Comunian and England 2020; Meyrick and Barnett 2020; Pacella, Luckman and O'Connor 2020). However, the pandemic's impact on regional creative industries is only just beginning to be understood (Flew and Kirkwood 2020). This paper provides an opportunity to explore the pandemic's effect on a venue somewhat removed from the issues and policy landscapes that usually dominate discussions of live music spaces, yet is indicative of the pandemic's effect on the arts and creative industries in regional Australia. Its findings are informed by ethnographic research consisting primarily of face-to-face interviews with the venue owner, venue staff, local government, audiences, and

[2] This pilot project is building to a larger mapping project with industry stakeholders, which would provide evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on urban and regional music venues across South Australia and the extent of venues operating under similarly remote conditions to the Barn.

artists as well as regular site visits. Interviews offer significant insight into management of The Barn, its unique position as a 'destination' venue that offers curated events, the obstacles posed by COVID-19 and the manner in which The Barn has addressed these, as well as ongoing issues of policy and funding restraints.

The impact of COVID-19 on a regional venue

Challenge 1: Capacity restrictions and travel disruptions

There are a range of long-standing issues that challenge the sustainability of regional venues. Interviewees talked about the costs associated with running events and that regional audiences are often small, emphasising a reliance on tourists. Pre-existing issues such as these have only been exacerbated by COVID-19, as the cultural and creative industries have been one of the most heavily impacted sectors of the economy.[3]

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Small live music venues have a capacity of 500 patrons or less and fit two types of categorisation: licensed premises and unofficial, unlicensed venues (Bennett & Rogers 2016, p. 492; Whiting 2019, p. 41). While the Barn is located on a private residential property, the venue holds a liquor license that is renewed annually and under normal circumstances has a capacity of 140 patrons. In March 2020 the venue had to shut down due to COVID-19, during which time its owners applied for and received funding for livestream equipment and an internet upgrade. Their contingency plan was to livestream shows with no audience present. However, in

[3] Deloitte Access Economics estimates the impact of COVID-19 on arts and recreation to be AU$6 billion, second only to accommodation and food services (Richardson, 2020; Flew and Kirwood 2020). During the week of the 30th of March 2020, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found that only 47% of businesses in the arts and recreation were trading (2020).

May 2020 the venue's capacity was lifted to 36 and before they could hold a show, the government revised restrictions again, lifting their capacity to 72 and making it possible to consider a show that would cover staff wages and break even if sold out. Under these revised restrictions (currently in effect, March 2021) the venue has been operating at half capacity. The Barn was also fortunate to secure state and federal funding over the past twelve months, which has allowed the venue to keep their doors open. With this funding, their current income is comparable to what they would have made pre-Covid-19 if they sold out each event at 140 patrons.[4]

The Barn attracts both interstate travellers and a small number of international tourists, with the majority of visitors travelling from the areas surrounding Adelaide (between 1 and 3 hours away by car). Prior to the pandemic the Barn did not require any government funding to remain viable. However, as a destination venue that relies on an audience committed to travel, COVID-19 has posed significant obstacles to the financial sustainability of The Barn:

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> COVID-19 obviously has been a huge hit [to the business] where…best case scenario the Barn can break even and that's fairly unlikely in most circumstances because everyone wants a few free tickets and things like that; so it's pretty difficult. [The venue owner] is at the mercy of grants and things like that which make things more viable, but you can't subsidise wages for that. (videographer, i/v with the author, 8 October 2020)

> We have plead our case and the Live Music Australia grant we recently received recognised that and awarded artist and tech subsidies for 2021 - or we would have had to shut the door. (venue owner, i/v with the author, 9 October 2020)

Following the initial Australia-wide lockdown from March to May 2020, South Australia's relative stability and lack of infections has meant that many live music

[4] "Without the grants, if we sold 72 tickets, we would pretty much break even. It was always a risk that I was prepared to wear last year but if the grants hadn't become available, we probably would have closed for 2021." (venue owner, i/v with the author, 2 March 2021)

venues have been able to resume hosting events. Despite this, COVID-19 has severely disrupted the ability of venues to make a profit by restricting audience numbers while also disrupting the ability of interstate artists to travel to SA. Although most of The Barn's opening acts are emerging local musicians, at least half of the venue's headliners reside interstate.

> We had artists from Melbourne supposed to play here, and obviously they weren't allowed to travel. This month we are supposed to have several artists who are based in New South Wales – they cancelled the whole trip because to tour is expensive, and for them they couldn't drive through Victoria, so they would have had to fly; hire a car; accommodation etc. And with half an audience we couldn't pay artists full rates (venue owner, i/v with the author, 9 October 2020)

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Challenge 2: COVID-19 has reinforced traditional urban/rural divides, as well as highlighted the internal diversities of the 'rural'

The venue owner and staff described the double-bind that COVID-19 has brought to regional areas. Prior to COVID-19 many regional areas had been severely impacted by years of drought, with an existing need for increased regional investment:

> COVID really affected everybody out in these small places because no one was allowed to travel... I think they really need to look at maybe expanding the grant system further because it's not just COVID, it's the years of drought as well that has killed them up there… (sound engineer, i/v with the author, 23 November 2020)

Disparities between funding provided for urban versus regional creative industries[5] have been compounded by disparities in funding within the rural space itself - with the perception that certain towns/tourist centres attract investment more easily than

[5] "I was just reading the national creative industry grant stuff; it just started to flow out from the first round and if you read one of the reports from the Minister I think it was only 21% of the funding's gone to regional areas, the rest of its gone to major events and things like that. I mean 21% is better than 0% but it's still only a small little bit." (sound engineer, i/v with the author, 23 November 2020)

smaller towns, and that those not seen as established tourist destinations (like wine regions) become further marginalised.[6]

Interviewees also described the unique challenges presented within South Australia and highlighted the need to reframe policy that incorrectly positions the 'rural' as a 'homogenous space' - as "every region is different and has different needs and opportunities" (arts worker, i/v with the author). For example, most eastern states in Australia can more easily support regional touring with clusters of pubs and RSL's in close geographical distance and with higher population densities. South Australia does not have the same touring pathways, meaning that there can exist competition between local areas. Nodes along touring routes need to be geographically distanced to ensure that there are sufficient audiences for each show.

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Opportunities presented by COVID-19: Possibilities for innovation and amplifying rural voices

In the wake of COVID-19 and associated restrictions, our case study venue attempted to adapt by applying for grants for high quality film and sound equipment, as well as 4G connectivity, to livestream their shows. While people were invited to donate to watch the livestream through Facebook ($10), they weren't required to pay:

> When we came up with the livestream plan, it was early in COVID and there was so much opportunity for musicians to live cast and actually make money (videographer, i/v with the author, 8 October 2020)

[6] This was highlighted by an interviewee from local government who noted that council offices are usually centrally located in one of the larger towns in the region and that there is often politics around who gets more/less support, though they actively avoid promoting one town or business over another. (local council representative, i/v with the author, 30 October 2020)

However, the livestream option did not provide a significant income stream (videographer, i/v with the author, 8 October 2020). Live streaming instead played an important promotional role via social media. It was not viewed as a substitute for in-person gigs but was a useful addition that the venue may continue to engage with when in-person gigs resume at full capacity. The venue owner emphasised that livestreaming by donation is not sustainable from a financial perspective. Livestreaming can also "eat into in-person ticket sales and people are a bit sick of it now. Too much content is available for free." (venue owner, i/v with the author, 2 March 2021).

From a policy perspective, local government and arts workers also described the opportunity COVID-19 presented for a greater engagement with regional voices in creative industry planning and policy decisions. As a consequence of social distancing, communication relied heavily on virtual meetings, allowing geographically distanced people living in regional areas to contribute to conversations they had previously been excluded from:

> COVID allowed regions to be a lot more connected to things happening outside of them - training opportunities, learning, participating in broader conversations they were usually excluded from. It just allowed more of a voice from the regions (local council representative, i/v with the author, 30 October 2020)

One arts worker described how the music industry is highly networked within cities as industry stakeholders regularly meet in informal settings at gigs and at various creative industry events. However, those who are working in the regional creative industries do not have access to these kinds of serendipitous interactions and the opportunities that arise from them. As a result, there is a lack of diversity in who is driving arts/music policy. The digital connections facilitated through matters of

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necessity have somewhat ameliorated this issue in terms of connecting with the regions.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has presented a range of challenges to regional music venues, reducing audience capacities and halting the flow of tourists and interstate artists. Preliminary interviews indicate a need for regional focused arts policies that seek to develop stronger networks and relationships between regional communities and businesses and their urban counterparts and audiences. Such spatial inequalities can only be addressed by undoing the idea of the creative industries as a homogenous group, and by ensuring the meaningful inclusion of a diversity of regional voices within arts policy. There are also opportunities here to think beyond state-based policy. Touring routes provide opportunities to develop 'multi-locational milieus' (Crevoisier and Jeannerate 2009) of regional areas that seek to develop interactions across multiple geographical scales. Regional touring presents financial and cultural opportunities for artists and the communities they visit but further research is needed to understand how touring networks can be developed and sustained in ways that support the development of an 'industry' rather than one-off 'events'. This requires support that is specific to the diversity of regional contexts (e.g. with a focus on time of year and seasonality, so that region's with smaller populations aren't competing for audiences). Increasing the sustainability of venues like The Barn, and additional venues throughout regional South Australia, will make touring the state (and between the east and west coasts of Australia via SA) a more viable option for musicians.

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