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Access, Place and Australian Live Music Samuel Whiting, David Carter

#### Abstract

### Introduction

The role of place in cultivating artistic practice, communities and audiences is well established and the economic, social and cultural benefits that flow from this are becoming better understood. By contrast, the factors impacting and influencing access to these places is poorly theorised. This paper identifies and examines these factors as they apply to live music in Australia, through a qualitative survey of live music patrons and venues. We compare the themes identified from our data with existing theories of access in the arts, with a particular focus on the ways in which place-based music scenes may encourage or exclude participation. We address the question of how access affects participation within these scenes, as well as how access might be improved.

### **Defining Access**

Access is an ongoing concern of much research and cultural policy relating to the visual and performing arts, yet it is poorly defined as a concept within this literature. Access is often framed in terms of social and cultural factors, with an emphasis on the impact of education and social status on arts attendance and participation, which are deemed to be the key determinants of arts engagement when all other factors are held constant (Belfiore; Bunting et al, From Indifference; Bunting et al, Informing Change; Kawashima; Keaney). Access is also used to refer to more tangible barriers to arts and music participation, such as disposable income and government regulation (European Union). In Australia, access tends to be equated with policies and initiatives enabling performers and audiences with a disability to participate in the arts and music sectors (Austin and Brophy; Bennison; Reimann).

Underpinning much of this discourse is the assumption that participation or attendance in the arts is a public good; that there is some implicit value or benefit that is denied to anyone without access (Kawashima 61). Much post-war cultural policy has been founded on this assumption, which demonstrates an instrumentalist approach to the arts. Within this understanding the arts are utilized as an "instrument" through which economic, social and employment benefits can be achieved (Belfiore 92; Hesmondhalgh et al 71). By extension non-participation in the arts is identified as a problem, which can be redressed through programs that increase access for groups or individuals who are in some way excluded or disenfranchised (Stevenson 81). For example, the European Union's Work Plan for Culture 2011-2014 suggests that:

The concept of 'access' focuses on enabling new audiences to use the available culture on offer, by 'opening doors' to non-traditional audiences so that they may enjoy an offer or heritage that has previously been difficult to access because of a set of barriers. (European Union 7)

As a result, a great deal of the literature on arts access focuses on those cultural activities that are subsidized by the state (Austin and Brophy; Bennison; Bunting et al, *Informing Change*; Keaney; Hesmondhalgh et al). Access is, therefore, often conceived in terms of a rather neoliberal definition of equality, which frequently corresponds with opportunity for consumption (Kantola and Squires 97).

## **Access and Live Music**

The factors that commonly guide cultural policy regarding access do not align well with the function of place-based live music scenes, despite live music providing a clear public good. In Australia, live music delivers a 3:1 benefit to cost ratio and reportedly increases audience perceptions of social connectedness and health and wellbeing (Live Music Office). Live music scenes need to be accessible in order to thrive but are by their nature exclusionary. They are tied to distinct geographical areas, social groups and cultural movements, and are defined in terms of collective participation and an ongoing group dynamic and identity (Straw, Scenes 250). Although they are often porous (Behr, Brennan and Cloonan 3), live music scenes are defined by their boundaries and are more easily accessed by those that engage with their inherent culture of participation (Shank; Straw, Scenes; Straw, Systems).

Live music scenes can be understood as those distinct socio-musical practices that occur between practitioners and participants within a defined space (Shank) that may be local, translocal or virtual (Peterson and Bennett). This space is primarily either a site of musical performance, a specific live music venue or a series of venues within a geographical area. Place-based live music scenes are constructed as forms of collective activity that foster strong feelings of membership and belonging amongst those that participate within them (Straw, Systems).

Such participation primarily takes a physical form, as participants frequent specific venues or performances by certain bands. Performance sites make up the places in which socio-musical practices are enacted, and these spaces are influential in the establishment of live music scenes. However, these spaces are not readily accessed by just anybody, and the culture of participation that surrounds live music scenes is not accessible to all, nor can it be. Due to the nature of place and cultural participation, place-based live music scenes feature socio-musical practices that are inherently defined by processes of gate-keeping and subcultural safeguarding (Gallan; Gallan and Gibson; Peterson and Bennett). Those who participate, those who don't and the differences in their cultural interests are what distinguish one scene from another.

Live music venues are particularly visible within this process of distinction, and play a significant role in situating live music scenes within urban space (cf. Behr, Brennan and Cloonan; Lobato; Shaw; Whiting). In Melbourne, Australia, for example, local music scenes articulate around a constellation of geographically convenient venues, such as those of the inner-northern suburbs of Fitzroy and Collingwood. Venues such as The Tote (in Collingwood) and the Old Bar (in Fitzroy) (Whiting 123). Live music scenes can also form around performing artists or genres of music. These scenes, described as translocal and virtual, invoke similar codified socio-musical practices, gatekeeping and subcultural safeguarding across geographical and / or socio-cultural barriers. Bennett and Peterson cite several examples of translocal music scenes, such as Deadheads, goths and Riot Grrls, fostered through sharing of "recordings, bands, fans and fanzines" (p. 9). Similarly, Baym describes the way that virtual music scenes surrounding Swedish indie music function across multiple online platforms.

Despite the importance of place in fostering live music scenes, live music is rarely mentioned by research and cultural policy relating to access. Where live music is discussed in this literature it is typically considered a commercial activity wherein attendance and participation is the result of market forces (Garnham 28). This is problematic for a number of reasons, not least that popular music performers' careers are highly unstable (Hracs & Leslie) and few receive a living wage from their activities (Throsby and Zednik).

Access to live music is peripherally addressed in literature relating to the nighttime economy, regarding issues of regulation and enforcement surrounding pubs, clubs and venues (Flew; Lobato). Live music venues typically fall, indiscriminately, under regulation designed to address high-risk drinking behavior such as violent assaults (Homan), and in Australia this has resulted in some cities limiting access to live music venues via so-called lockout laws. Access to live music venues has been similarly impacted by residential developments and the gentrification of inner-city suburbs, resulting in increased commercial rent and compliance costs resulting from noise complaints (Shaw; Holt; Lobato).

These issues highlight the contradictions inherent in reconciling goals of inclusive public space, higher density urban populations and increased patronage with attendant low-tolerance for public drunkenness and anti-social behavior (Roberts). They also speak to the need to better understand how access to live music functions; is negotiated; and might be impacted outside of the market economy.

## Access to Live Music

For the purposes of this paper we define access in terms of the ease with which potential audiences can experience the arts in general and (popular) live music in particular. As discussed above, access has traditionally been conceived in terms of barriers to new or non-traditional audiences who might consume publicly funded culture, often underpinned by a desire for universal participation. This is problematic in relation to popular live music, which is generally considered a commercial activity and ignored in public policy and academic discourse on access. Furthermore the nature of place-based music scenes suggests universal access may never be practical or desirable.

Access to live music needs to be understood both as the physical ability to access a space or activity and how receptive such a space, event or culture is to potential

participants. Understood in this way, access is affected by enabling and impeding factors that have to do with place; individuals perceived agency; and perceptions of social and cultural norms, including behaviour and appearance (Bunting et al, *From Indifference*; Bunting et al, *Informing Change*; Keaney). In order to better understand access to live music we need to identify these factors as well as the ways this access might be contested.

To identify enabling and inhibiting factors affecting live music access we have used data collected as part of a report on the economic and cultural value of live music in Australia prepared by the authors (National Live Music Office). Data collection for this study comprised anonymous face-to-face interviews with thirty-eight live music venue owner / operators in five Australian capital cities and an online survey of approximately fifteen hundred audience members. A convenience sample was used for face-to-face interviews and the online survey was promoted nationally via the Australian Music Industry Network, APRA and media interviews on youth broadcaster Triple J. The interview and online survey tools included open-ended questions about what the respondents believed enabled or encouraged audiences to attend live music and barriers to their attendance. Qualitative content analysis of producer and consumer responses identified several factors that respondents believed impacted access to popular music performance – and by extension, place-based music scenes.

The online survey relied on self-selecting participants, many of whom identified as professionally engaged in the Australian music industry. This is typical of creative industry workers for whom the informal nature of work and blurring of the "business-social divide" (Watson 18) generates a strong affective community keenly interested in justifying its significance (Pratt). This introduces a potential bias in terms of the weight of responses. However, the distinction between industry professionals and audience members is largely irrelevant to this research as we are principally concerned with identifying the ways these overlapping groups think about and experience access to live music.

From this data we have identified interest, cost, public transport, regulation and enforcement, social connectedness, and stage of life as enabling or inhibiting access to live music

#### Interest

Interest as an enabler or inhibitor of live music attendance seems obvious, but is rarely discussed in cultural policy or academic discourse around access. This is interesting, given the tendency in this literature to aspire towards universal access for arts and cultural activities (Kawashima 65). Whether potential audiences are enthusiastic, indifferent or actively disinterested appears to be an overlooked aspect of access, especially as interest may be, and often is, influenced by producers and promoters.

#### Cost

Cost, and by extension a lack of disposable income, was cited by audiences and producers as an inhibitor to live music access. This was expected, given disposable income is cited as a barrier to arts access in some literature (European Union). As live music is a commercial activity we would expect that cost would be seen as an important market signal. However in existing literature the influence of socio-economic status, a stand-in for disposable income, is seen as negligible when measured against other factors such as education and social status (Keaney 110). The degree to which price signals affect access to live music appears under-examined.

### **Public Transport**

For gig-goers, the availability of late-night trains, busses or taxis is a crucial element to accessing live music. Provision and availability of these services is typically outside the control of music venues or performers. This suggests a role that government planning and private companies play in enabling or inhibiting access to live music. In Australia, the City of Melbourne is currently making steps toward ameliorating such issues, running a trial of all night public transport on Friday and Saturday nights along key routes (Public Transport Victoria).

### Regulation and Enforcement

Related to this is the role government plays in regulating live music performance and enforcing restrictions on noise levels, trading hours and the provision of alcohol. The data we are drawing on for this paper was collected just as so-called 'lock-out laws' were introduced in Sydney. These laws limit hours of trade and the types of alcohol that can be served past a certain time. Unsurprisingly NSW patrons and venue operators identified and commented on these very real barriers to access. Since the implementation of these laws the Live Music Office has argued there has been a 40% drop in live performance revenue, as measured by door charge receipts, at venues within the Sydney CBD lockout area (APRA/AMCOS). Despite public protests and industry concerns, similar restrictions on trading hours are being imposed on venues in Queensland (Burke).

Several additional elements of regulation and enforcement were also identified in the data, including the handling of noise complaints, liquor-licensing conditions, trading hours, policing and the provision of public transport. From a venue perspective, access to live music is often hampered by confusion over how to navigate the various jurisdictions and government bodies responsible for policing and enforcing regulation relating to the provision of live music. As most patrons appear unaware of the overlapping jurisdictions and complicated legislative frameworks around live music, sound restrictions and the provision of alcohol in Australia, many of their responses simply identified 'the government' as responsible for a range of barriers to seeing live music.

## Social Status and Cultural Capital

As previously noted, social status and education play a significant role in determining individual's potential to engage with the arts. Social status relates to engagement with others in intimate forms of social interaction. Social status is distinct from social class in that social class is based primarily on socio-economic concerns (income, occupation, financial situation etc.).

The influence that social status has on access to live music is evident in the survey data. Many respondents suggesting live music facilitated a sense of community and that this positively impacted on their own experience of access. This aligns with existing literature inasmuch as participants are often exposed to arts events through their social networks, and participants with a network of social acquaintances participating regularly in arts events and activities are more inclined to participate themselves (Keaney; Walker and Scott-Melnyk). Place based live music scenes thrive on social and cultural capital (Thornton) and are held together by tight social networks (Gibson & Homan). However, these same factors also serve as barriers to access for those outside of the communities fostered by particular scenes and venues. Just as those of a certain social status engage more readily with arts and culture, there are many that lack such status. Within this context it has been observed that processes of gatekeeping (thus exclusion) strengthen bonds of community and belonging, contributing to the longevity of music venues and scenes (Gallan 35). As Ben Gallan and Chris Gibson state in their paper on former Wollongong venue The Oxford Tavern, regular participation within the Oxford's inherent scene came to signify "exclusivity and 'stripes earned'" (182). This extended to the physical environment of the venue, whose dingy interior and distinct atmosphere identified it as a site of 'otherness', constructed in opposition to mainstream Wollongong nightlife (188). That certain venues and events are not for 'people like me' is a commonly identified issue within discourse around arts access (Keaney 110). Among survey respondents, this phenomenon was expressed through perceptions of safety as well both positive and negative perceptions of venue environments.

Associated with this is the role that distinction, particularly aesthetic judgment, plays in identifying and excluding individuals on the basis of cultural capital. The aesthetic cultures that surround place-based live music scenes (Regev) dictate what musical practices are considered authentic. Social status plays a large role within the functioning of these aesthetic cultures, as what is understood as inauthentic within one may be deemed legitimate in another. In keeping with Bourdieu's theory of cultural consumption, effective engagement with culture is essentially the result of an acquired and trained capacity. In order to readily access certain modes of culture, one must be versed in the skills needed to decode the messages inherent within artistic products and the socio-cultural milieu that surrounds these products (Kawashima 65). In our data, respondents suggested a lack of aesthetic judgment affected attendance at live music events. 'Original' or 'independent' music was typically privileged over 'covers' bands or 'mainstream' performers, and the audiences for these were described as lacking the ability to discern 'good' from 'bad' live acts

## Lifestyle and Stage of Life

Having children or a family and the responsibilities associated with this was cited as a barrier or inhibiting factor in attending live music. Given the association between some place-based live music scenes and youth culture it's unsurprising that, as audiences age, they might perceive stage of life in this way. The nature of many live music scenes may also make them difficult places for people who don't fit the demographic or cultural norms. Potential audiences may exclude themselves rather than being actively excluded, or may face passive resistance to their engagement. This ties into the previously established notion that many potential participants perceive engagement with the arts as a risk (Bunting et al, From Indifference 8; Keaney 110). The processes of gatekeeping and air of exclusivity that define place-based live music scenes only reinforce such fears.

There appears to be an interesting relationship between income, stage-of-life and live music attendance as an increase in disposable income may not mean accessing live music is made any easier. Responses suggested a gradient beginning with younger audiences with less disposable income who gradually aged out of live music attendance as they took on more family, relationship or work responsibilities. As a corollary to this, several older respondents noted they were more able and likely to

access live music as they became more established in their careers, long-term relationships ended or their children grew older and became independent. Lifestyle and stage of life may be helpful ways to think about these interrelated factors.

Given the importance of cultural capital to participation in live music scenes available time - free from other responsibilities - clearly impacts access to live music. More than simply available time outside of work or other commitments, lifestyle and stage of life also relate to peer-group norms and social expectations as well as income, education and social status. Crucially, these interrelated facets of lifestyle may not necessarily segment the audience for live music by socio-economic status or level of education. Cultural norms hold a large influence over what is seen as appropriate for those participating within the arts, and this is just as true for the practices of alternative 'indie' culture as it is for the commercial mainstream. As sites of "otherness" (Gallan & Gibson 179), place-based live music scenes are often more readily accessed by those that demonstrate such "otherness" in their everyday lives than those who do not.

#### Discussion

The commercial nature of popular music performance has often led to its exclusion from discussions of arts access. This is problematic, as few popular music practitioners benefit financially from their practice. Supply and demand clearly has some influence over access to live music, and audiences have cited interest and cost as factors affecting attendance. The role of interest, although identified within the literature surrounding arts access as influential (Buntial (Buntial

In the first instance, access to place-based live music scenes seems to be clearly impacted by the physical constraints imposed by available public transport. Audiences appear willing to travel some distance to attend live music and economic analysis of the data used for this research paper suggests live music is a source of regional competitive advantage (Live Music Office, 26). However, unlike many publicly funded arts activities, live music typically happens at night. This affects the ease, cost and availability of public transport to and from venues, which are typically located in areas that make access and parking for private vehicles unrealistic. The availability of taxis and services such as Uber offer an alternative, but may be too costly for audiences travelling into central entertainment precincts from outer suburbs. The degree to which this cost acts as a barrier clearly relates to disposable income, however in many Australian cities the significant distance between entertainment precincts and the outer suburbs also renders these options impractical. Research into the relationship between live music attendance and the provision of public transport seems an obvious and potentially beneficial area in need of deeper consideration in research and public policy.

Social status and stage of life also play an important role within public perceptions of access to live music. A link between these two factors is evident within our research, as lifestyle affects social status in so far as it delineates certain cultural norms. This is a point of departure from existing research, as although social status is often identified as an influential factor in determining arts access (Bunting et al, From Indifference; Bunting et al, Informing Change; Keaney), stage of life and lifestyle is under-represented. This may be due to the complex interrelated facets of disposable income, available time, family and relationship responsibilities, and cultural capital that may be changing as audiences age. While these aspects are discussed discretely in existing literature, the role that otherness plays in gatekeeping around live music suggests the link between these provides a valuable entry point to an emergent area of research. By extension, there may be ways to enable access to live music for audiences that may feel they have aged out of the demographic, through examining the ways that stage of life and lifestyle function as barriers to access.

Finally, government regulation and enforcement has a significant role in enabling and constraining access to live music. This ties back into a discussion of the market for live music, as government regulation is typically intended to constrain market-based activity (irrespective of whether it is intended as a public good). From an audience perspective, government regulation and enforcement seems to be viewed in monolithic terms according to our data. From a producer perspective, significant frustration was voiced about the difficulties in navigating the various levels of local, state and federal legislative bodies. Although there have been several attempts to unpack the complex problems inherent within the regulation of live music (Flew; Homan; Lobato; Shaw), it is often viewed as a singular problem by the public. Therefore there is a distinction to be made in terms of public perception of live music regulation according to the separate dilemmas inherent within the problem, such as noise complaints, licensing, trading hours and public transport. A more nuanced, detailed investigation into public perceptions of live music regulation would serve as a valuable contribution to the discussions of live music policy.

This paper has served as an initial foray into the relationship between place-based live music scenes and access. The qualitative data we have drawn on suggests that traditional conceptions of access have limited utility when applied to live (popular) music. We have identified several areas for future directions in research and public policy. Chief among these is further examining the roles that public transport, stage of life and government regulation play in enabling and constraining access to live music. Fundamental to this work is identifying an agreed upon role for live music in public policy. The goal of universal access is clearly not applicable to place-based live music scenes, however there is a case for enabling access to live music as a public good. We hope this paper will serve as an impetus for greater engagement with live music as a research and policy area, leading to sector growth and a greater understanding and fostering of place-based live music scenes.

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