



City of South Perth hosts San Cisco gig as music lovers opt for free events amid festival decline

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Highlight: As the live music scene faces immense pressures, community and council-run gigs seem to be filling a void left by cancelled festivals.

Body

When people think about why their local council exists, it's usually to deal with the basics — empty their bins, clean the streets, and collect the rates.

But one Perth council has an unlikely new gig as a party promoter — featuring well-known WA band San Cisco — and so far it seems to be proving a huge success.

Like many industries, live music has been copping the brunt of the cost-of-living crisis, while also battling unique challenges, including competition from international acts and shifts in music consumption.

But despite these challenges, grassroots music events in WA run by local councils or community groups are thriving, growing from strength to strength.

South Perth Sounds, organised by the City of South Perth, attracted around 6,000 eager music lovers in late February.

People of all ages gathered along the Swan River foreshore, united by a love of music.

A crucial time

Headlining the event was Fremantle group San Cisco.

Scarlett Stevens, Jordi Davieson and Josh Biondillo have received national acclaim for their talents over the past 15 years.

"It's great for the community and it's free so anyone can come, which is always great," Ms Stevens said.

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"People get behind local bands and support Australian music, it's a crucial time for that."

The band said playing at low-cost or free council events, like South Perth Sounds, helps them reach new audiences.

The appetite for these localised events has been steadily growing, according to South Perth Sounds event organiser Adrian Fabiankovits.

"There's definitely been an increase over the last few years, a lot more people are coming to events than they would have been three or four years ago," Mr Fabiankovits said.

"Festival promoters have a lot more pressure on ticket sales.

"They get a lot more affected by cost-of-living pressures and disposable incomes going down.

"We're in a space where we're happy that we can run this event free. We don't have that risk."

Mr Fabiankovits hopes as interest grows, there will be a flow-on effect among suppliers and musicians, enabling councils to hold bigger events.

"This is something that we can do, to do our part, to keep supporting the music industry as well," he said.

Festivals declining

Many classic Australian music festivals have cancelled events post-COVID, citing high operating costs and low ticket sales.

Some of the most recent examples include Groovin' in the Moo and Splendour in the Grass.

San Cisco frontman Jordi Davieson said festival operators weren't immune to rising costs.

"They're not just cranking up the prices because they feel like it," he said.

"Everything across the board is costing more, so that's where it comes from."

A ticket to Laneway, a day-long music festival held in Perth mid-February, retailed around the \$200 mark.

Immense change

For up-and-coming Perth artist Finn Pearson, it can be hard watching as his dream industry struggles.

"I don't love it, put it that way. Seeing big festivals flop ... it's not good for my sense of how the industry is going," Mr Pearson said.

He's been playing live gigs since he was 16.

Nearly a decade later, he feels as though the scene has undergone immense change.

"You end up with festivals having to charge more to turn over enough of a profit to make it worthwhile. But that gets passed on to the consumer," he said.

Gigs in the backyard

WA Music CEO Owen Whittle pointed out a silver lining — rising prices mean more people look in their own backyard for Australian live music.

"\$200 to \$300 for a touring music festival is beyond many people's capacity to pay at the moment," Mr Whittle said.

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"You can head to a gig in the city or regionally on a Friday or Saturday night and for 10 or 20 bucks see a line-up of amazing bands."

Even though Mr Pearson has played at bigger events like Laneway, he often walks away from smaller gigs feeling like he's connected more with the audience.

"Genuinely, those smaller festivals have a much bigger impact in terms of growing your own fan base and building up your connection with the audience than those bigger festivals do," he said.

If re-elected, the WA Labor will invest \$2.75 million in the state's contemporary music industry.

About \$750,000 of this funding will be allocated to WA Music, to promote live music, publicise gigs and encourage audience growth.

Concertgoer Joe Ipsem said these events made council rates worth it.

"Cost-of-living, everything's going up and more expensive, also the council rates. So, it's good to know that we're getting something for our council rates," Mr Ipsem said.

Gracie Rae Winterstein said these free events felt like a privilege, as she often sacrificed non-essentials because of the cost of living.

"Live music brings people together. It's an amazing vibe, good energy. And it's always nice to be around this type of atmosphere," she said.

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