The Australian Regional Recording Industry

Regional Music Research Group Research Papers.

March 2023 | Number 1 | Print ISSN: ISSN 2653-7737

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To cite:
Cashman, D. & Goold, L. 2023. The Australian Regional Recording Industry. *Regional Music Research Group Research Papers*. No. 1.

Abstract

Regional recording studios play a key role in a music scene acting as a site to build the creative capacity of a regional area. However, there remains significant problems for more remote actors. This industry report gathers the perspectives from four regional and remote studio operators and stakeholders on the status of the regional recording sector in Australia.

Keywords: Regional, Australia, Music industry, Recorded Music, Regional Music Scenes

Introduction

In November 2021, with the spectre of COVID still very much a part of Australian everyday life, the Regional Music Research Group held a symposium on the regional recording industry of Australia[1]. It was our intention to consider the recorded music scene in regional Australia and to see what impact COVID had had on this vital aspect of the regional music industries. To that end, we drew on the experience of four participants.

Lizzy Rutgen, from Grow the Music based in Coffs Harbour, NSW. Grow the Music is a community music hub that works with first nations and migrant musicians. Lizzy was a founder and is now the codirector.

Laurie May is the Director of Music for CAAMA. The Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association is the oldest first nations record label and was established in 1980 in Alice Springs.

Craig Honeysett from Dotted Eight Studios in Orange, NSW. Craig is a working recording engineer and music mentor.

Dr Lachlan Goold is a Regional Music Research Group member and a Lecturer in Contemporary Music at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. He is also a successful music producer known as Magoo.

What is the role of regional recording studios?

In the past, recording studios have existed in regional areas. They seemed to fall into two categories. Music Farm in Byron Bay and Bush Traks in Nimbin operated as retreats for urban bands to disconnect from the urban environments and concentrate on recording albums (Gibson 2009: 66). Other studios acted as local hubs for musical activity. A few educational institutions set up recording studios, such as Southern Cross University in Lismore (Gibson 2002), and SAE setup its international headquarters in Byron Bay in 2003 (Gibson 2009). In 1984, CAAMA established a recording studio and a record label—Imparja Recordings—to record first nations artists. This drew indigenous artists from all over the country (Batty 2003). While the former role seems to have fallen away, with musicians increasingly recording from home or in urban areas, recording studios have continued to act as a nexus in which to build a scene. They also operate as spaces for musicians to conveniently and economically record and as a supplier of industry expertise in regional and remote areas.

Studios exist all over regional Australia. In addition to our informants' practices, Claughton (2016) notes the following regional studios.

- Pearl Shell Studio in Broome that has recorded Jimmy Barnes, Midnight Oil, Alex Lloyd, Shane Howard, Paul Kelly, Missy Higgins, and John Butler.
- Heliport Studios in Buderim
- Rocking Horse studios in Byron Bay, NSW
- Heaven's Gate Studios in Boyland
- Lindsay Butler Studios in Tamworth
- Vale Sound in Moore Creek, NSW
- Foggy Mountain Studios in the Hunter Valley, NSW
- Flying Fox Studios, Wagga Wagga, NSW
- Pete Bird's Yelp Studios, Warrnambool, N
- Atlantis Studios in Port Lincoln, SA.

Studios are a nexus. Sometimes they are a nexus for a regional area. Sometimes specialist studios can become nexus for larger areas. As the process of music recording becomes increasingly digitised, the economic barriers to start a recording studio business have significantly fallen. No longer is establishing a working recording studio a multimillion dollar undertaking; rather a computer, some affordable recording software (DAW), an audio

interface and a few microphones form the basis of many recording studios. Informant Goold noted

> Now the barrier to entry has reduced significantly, which I think has allowed these regional areas to start having a recording studio, and a recording studio can often act as a bit of a Nexus, or a centre for a scene.

A regional studio tends to reach large geographical distances, yet remain integral to a community music scene. Remote musicians are prepared to travel long distances to reach a regional recording facility.

Regional musicians travel

With specialist recording facilities, such as CAAMA, with its long history of recording first nations musicians, a hub can have a very large scope. Informant May noted

> a lot of our artists are coming in to Alice Springs as the hub. So, we're like the [metropolitan cities of] Brisbane or the or the Sydney I guess. And so, community bands want to come to Alice Springs for that opportunity; to record in a in a big studio, in a big space. So, we aren't losing community bands moving into different areas or parts of Australia to focus on their career and record music.

Having recording studios regional areas enables the production of regional music. In some areas, recording facilities are at distances, and in regional areas, some of these are big distances. However, May notes the importance of recording services in regional areas to service more remote communities.

> Bands aren't leaving their homes and their communities [on a permanent basis] and they don't want to. That's why it's really important that there is a space where you can have access to a recording facility and label services in places like Alice Springs, or in Darwin as well, so you can service the outer communities. It's really important that these spaces exist, because without it, people are going to be going moving interstate. And it just means that there just isn't anything other than, you know, some fairly average home studios in town.

Recording studios also act as an industry support network for the artists while they are away from home. Regionally-based artists want to remain based in their communities and are willing and capable of travelling vast distances to regional centres to obtain recording quality but this economically burdens the project. May adds:

> One of the main disadvantages is distance. So even if we're recording a band, the closest community is still an hour drive, on the dirt. So, for them to come into town, we have to find extra funding to have them stay in accommodation—so that they're here and they have per-diems and make sure that they can eat while they're here.

Informant Rutgen details the prohibitive costs involved for an artist that needs to travel long distances, accomodate performers, and pay for recording studio fees. She sees her role as trying to facilitate

> talented people that have nothing but disadvantage ahead of them

One solution to the travel issue would be to take the recording equipment and studio personal to the remote communities. May elaborates:

> A lot of bands that we work with would prefer to record at home in their own communities. It's definitely something that heaps of people before me have as well. It's not new—the idea of being able to travel to communities to record. The lack of facilities, spaces, and technology in communities is a barrier there. I know that Jimblah [Indigenous music producer] through Black Empire has set up a recording truck. And we've been having discussions around, how do we get out to communities and what do you want to do? And so now our next step is looking at partnering together, getting funding and going out, because it should be a priority. We have so many bands particularly in places like APY lands [an LGA for indigenous peoples] where you've just got—everywhere you go, you've got a band. Every metre you walk, there is a band member.

West Australian Music (WAM) has run a mobile recording program for regional and remote artists and aspiring sound engineers. Perth based producers informally mentor those interested in audio engineering, building the recording knowledge in those areas. WAM then assist with releasing these recordings and servicing the songs to local radio stations. They have released fifteen compilation albums since 2006. Travelling recording studios like the WAM mobile recording program would help to satisfy the needs of local communities that lack facilities, appropriate spaces and technology.

Additionally, once musicians have travelled to a regional recording studio to complete a recording, there can be additional parts required after they've returned to their communities creating logistical problems around production completion. Often, the areas where the performers are based have limited mobile phone service, and are yet to be serviced with the National Broadband Network (NBN) creating significant communication issues.

Access to Broadband Infrastructure

The Internet is a central part of the digital recording studio. Many DAW softwares require internet connectivity to function. The internet connects recording practitioners to directly to software developers to aid maintenance of the digital studio and internet-based discussion forums and instructional videos. So too, files can be shared between participants in a recording project based vast distances away, ideally suited to regional recording scenarios. Additionally, the internet enables vital communications with participants in recording projects. However, for remote areas of Australia, even mobile phone communication proves to be difficult. May explains,

> we've got a band out there [in a remote area of the Northern Territory] that I work with; they don't have the internet at all. Some of the government offices have [the internet]. So, if I need to get in touch with Jonathan Dolan, who performed recently, with Bush Bands Bash (a central Australian Indigenous festival run by MusicNT) … I have to call the [local grocery] store, and then they would have to go and find him. They would say, "no, he's at [the] council" and I would have to call the council office, and then they would go, "oh no, he's with his wife", and I have to call his wife's work, and then get her, to get him, to get me. You can't just call someone on a mobile phone. The internet's not great, anyway. You can't have a Zoom meeting with someone, you can't run source connect [remote audio recording software] and record someone in a community. It's just not possible. The NBN is nothing to us.

The lack of broadband infrastructure creates a digital divide in the regions reducing the accessibility of the digital recording studio and DIY recording practices. Goold elaborates on some research on Sunshine Coast recording studios, that appear to be flourishing:

> I know at the Sunshine Coast, just how well the studios have grown because of the access to broadband where, almost every studio that I interviewed, they were all going "I've got a country artist, I'll get a mandolin part from someone in Ireland". They'd be overdubs coming in from all around the world to these different studios. And it really builds the capacity of the studio.

Rutgen details similar international collaborations in Coffs Harbour:

> There's another another [migrant] fellow here who had recently arrived and he was a professional musician in his country. He had a pretty rough time getting his family here. And because of this place [Grow the Music hub], he got to record his vocal and send to his Tambau player in Germany, and his violinists in Turkey, and they got to release their music, because his vocal was recorded.

Participants from central NSW in this seminar also reported similar international collaborations. The Internet also builds capacity in self-educating recording practitioners via online tutorial sites and internet forums. So too, in less regional areas, such as those of Orange, Dubbo and Tenterfield, the NBN has built the capacity and knowledge for those artists looking to self-release and self-manage on an independent pathway. However, away from these regions the cost of recording increases significantly.

Education on recording and the music industry

While performers are used to travelling out of necessity, there is a desire to travel less and record in their own communities. Here we find knowledge gaps on the recording industry and the music industry in general. While many artists in urban centres move to partial or complete self-production using fairly accessible equipment, this is not the case in remote areas. Access to technology, recording equipment and education infrastructure stifles any chance of DIY styled recording sessions. The Sunshine Coast University, Southern Cross

University, and SAE's Byron Bay campus are the only regionally-based institutions with a focus on recorded music, and they are within 300km of each other.

Recording facilities support many aspects of a songs production beyond simply creating an artefact, including manufacture, distribution, release, and connection to the wider Australian music industry. Additionally, outside actors have been known to take advantage of the knowledge gaps present in regional areas. Industry stakeholders are making an effort with an APRA rep now situated in Alice Springs to address some of these issues. However, APRA has additional obstacles attributed to language barriers in indigenous communities. There is a desperate need for information and education on the music industry in regional areas. Informant May notes:

> There isn't a lot of understanding of mechanical rights, royalties, contracts, legal staff.

As a result, local musicians may turn to recording studios for their expertise. Informant Goold lectures in music and music production at USC, Honeysett has studied music at a tertiary level, and Informant Rutgen was undertaking such studies at the time of this seminar. Additionally, all have a wealth of practical experience. May noted that many such facilities act as gatekeepers as well. She asserts that the local industry in remote areas such as Alice Springs can include transient industry, crooks, or industry with limited understanding. She notes

> Part of my job is [... that] bands will call me and say, "This guy here, what do you think of this?" And then I do a lot of liaising between bands and producers who want to come here and work with artists. It's kind of a really weird space to, to be in.

Goold identifies a knowledge gap around DIY recording practice:

> I don't think the barriers to actually finding that place to record [is that great in the regional areas]. With the right education and skills of the people that are doing the recording–the sound engineers and producers–you can record anywhere. But you do need that access to all those things like power, probably just a clean space, somewhere where you're not going to annoy the neighbours, which in remote areas there's a lot of spaces to access.

Addressing these knowledge and digital infrastructure gaps would aid in building the capacity of music cultures in regional and remote areas of Australia. Beyond music, recording studios offer many other services for a regional area.

How do regional studios fit into the Australian music scene?

Regional studios enable music and other recording artefacts such as, podcasts and audio books to be captured that wouldn't be recorded otherwise. The difficulty in producing simple ancillary recording activities such as these are not feasible for the remote content creator without access to appropriate facilities. Historically, the difficulty in accessing a

metropolitan recording facility creates economic and geographic barriers for regional and remote artists and excludes a large proportion of minority artists from recording. Regional and remote areas have significant first nations and newly immigrated migrant populations with strong cultural connections to music. Rutgen details one of her first recording sessions:

> I remember the first three older fellows who were Aboriginal who had all recorded here with us, they ended the session literally in tears of joy. And each of them said they never thought ever that they were going to record, actually record their music. And it really took me back because I realised that we've left out a whole demographic here. They can't access it, because they can't get to Sydney, or they can't access it because they don't have the money. And I just thought there's a shame if we can get these people recorded, and it's a loss to all of us. Whether it's a storytelling or a narration for audiobook or whatever it is, because obviously it's not all just music.

These regional recording hubs have other integral functions beyond recording new music. May at CAMA explains:

> Recently, I found all these recordings from the 1980s. Obviously, we've got [them on] cassette tapes, but they were never released online [...] most of these songs from the 80s are in English, and they're all about land rights, and things that happened, like, you know, nuclear testing everything that was going on. So they were really social and socio-political albums that were made. And he [Liam, singer of Musgrave Band] said, "My dad made these albums, but they're gone. They don't exist anymore, because people don't have cassettes". And so I found that CAMAA hadn't been digitising things and putting things out online. And so you had 20 odd years of music that can no longer be heard. So I got a grant with Australia Council and I started remastering—I found the albums. I remastered them and put them back out there. And so now you can, you can hear them again. And the good thing about a record, you know, any recording, it's a snapshot, it's a moment in time.

The importance of archiving historical indigenous recordings cannot be understated. Additionally, the cultural sensitivities of such practices is important to the custodians of these artefacts further strengthening the importance of regional recording studios.

What are regional recording studios recording?

Regional studios are recording different material. Each of our informants had different target audiences. Informant Rutgen draws from a wide range of musicians and projects she runs from Grow the Music hub in Coffs Harbour:

> We've had some really amazing collaborations that we've worked with. One project that I'm working on at the moment, it's [called] "All One Under the Sun". And we've got 25 kids, very talented kids that have written a song ... There's Arabic in there; there's Campania; local Aboriginal language; there's Congolese. And it's 25 kids, from everywhere, sort of thing. And they've come together and written a song

> about racism and anti-racism. And this group is such a tight knit group of kids, and they're just making a film clip now. So that's going to be awesome. And last week, we had Bobby Singh who's a Tabla player, and Ali Hassan on Tambur and a Congolese guy singing. And quite often we have our migrant community and our First Nations community coming together and recording music [using] different instruments.

Rutgen went on to quote Bobby Singh claiming that what they recorded is representative of "new contemporary Australian music". Informant May, reports on the main styles recorded in the CAMAA studios. So, the sound from Central Australia is desert reggae. Which is an evolution and amalgamation of desert surf rock from the 80s and early 90s with Lucky Dube, South African style reggae. So that's definitely the most popular genre and those bands are huge; they can be up to 10 people and you just [tell them to] stop adding people to your band. When you're recording and a new person rocks up, "okay, we've got five guitar players, sure". Yeah, so that's definitely our main genre. But a lot of the young kids (everyone's) into hip hop. We're recording a lot of young people doing hip hop.

Honeysett reported a more contemporary sound for the area with a lot of soloists and modern country music artists.

Getting recorded music heard

The regional artists that have access to internet infrastructure tend to self-promote their work. Honeysett elaborates on how musicians self-promote their work in regional NSW:

> I think they [the artists] do struggle to get sort of coverage in getting their recorded music out. I think a lot of the exposure that they get a probably what they're doing themselves, whether that's having a decent Instagram, or YouTube or something. There are a few radio stations here that will play it [in central NSW]. But yeah, I think it is a general struggle for most people recording music, to get it out there. So, they feel like they're investing a lot into their music. And, it is a bit of a bottleneck related to what do we do with it? Now once it's recorded and get it out?

The artists have invested a lot into the recording and presentation of their songs and feel restricted by the distribution and dissemination of their music. The recording acts as promotional material and does help pitch a performer to venues or local festivals. In this scenario, the recording is viewed as less important than a live performance and is seen as a brand building exercise. Soloists and duos do well in the central NSW area, but bands struggle to get local live gigs. While informant, Rutgen, prefers to view recording as an archival and meaning making process, more broadly these views are shared across the music industry and are not unique to the regions. Other attendees saw recording as a professional development exercise.

Considering the struggle be heard, some participants reported that the aspirations of the artists were different to those of the metropolitan centres. Trying to mould recordings for national radio play creates a pressure and an expectation from the recording. Regional

recordings tended to be free from these restrictions thereby improving the creativity in the recording studio. So too, the cultural significance of documenting the song was seen as important for the panellists.

COVID

At the time of this session, most the panelists had a mixed response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some regional areas were busy with Honeysett remarking that many musicians in Orange saw it as an opportunity.

> Artists just sitting on their hands—not being able to do gigs—came in to be recorded, or knuckle down and did songwriting. I think it was a pretty even split between musos feeling ripped off because they were affected pretty hard. And the other half just kind of went "Oh, no gigs this weekend. Awesome. Time to rest and get some music recorded". Yeah, it was good for me.

Similar attitudes were remarked from the Sunshine Coast and Coffs Harbour. However, in the more remote region of Alice Springs. it was a very different scenario. May notes that while remote artists weren't able to travel to Alice Springs, like in other areas, the CAMAA studios pivoted to holding "live in the studio sessions" to be disseminated on social media.

> [W]e've had a really different experience to the rest of Australia. And I know, most regional areas have. But we started with Alice Springs been totally locked down to remote communities. So, people were stuck in their communities; they couldn't actually come into town. So there was no way in the first eight months of last year, we could record anyone that wasn't already in town [...] So, we flipped to having live from the studio sessions, which was a lot of fun for artists, and they got to come in and have that that moment to have a recording that went out on to YouTube or on Facebook, so they could connect with their audience and connect with audiences around Australia. So it actually provided a little bit of a benefit there for bands that otherwise don't ever get that opportunity. Which was kind of cool.

Conclusions

Regional recording studios are an integral part of retaining the culture of regional music in Australia. Functioning as a multi-faceted hub of musical activity, they service a wide geographical footprint and enable remote musicians to remain in their community while building their music career. Regional studios face significant operational hurdles and the panelists in this session were very passionate about maintaining a regional facility beyond the commercial goals of running a profitable business. Musicians traveled vast distances to record as recording in remote parts of the country was not possible due poor digital and physical infrastructure. Comprehensive broadband coverage would contribute to addressing the improvement of online promotional activities, communication issues, knowledge gaps, and recording studio functionality in remote areas. Additionally, mobile recording facilities, although expensive, would work well to address some of these issues.

Regional recording studios seemed to all capture a unique sound of their region, with a wide variety of styles reported. So too, regional studios record more than music and contribute toward digital content creation, archivist activities and cross cultural connections between first nations artists, growing migrant populations and the wider community. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a mixed response from the panelists, with the regional areas reporting a growth in business, while the lockdowns in Northern Territory indigenous communities ceased all remote recording opportunities in Alice Springs.

Citations

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The **Regional Music Research Group** is a collective of academics and practitioners from universities and cultural institutions in Australia and New Zealand. We are bound by an interest in how music operates in regional areas. More information is available at http://www.regionalmusic.com.au.

1. N.B. The video of this seminar is available here ↩