THE CITY: CREATIVE MIGRATION AND THE DEMISE OF LIVE MUSIC VENUES

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ABSTRACT

The centrality of the arts to liveability and community wellbeing is clear, yet opacity surrounding the practice and conditions of creative artists presents a major impediment to effective policy and planning. Drawing findings from recent research, this paper considers arts practice in relation to the migration of creative artists from smaller cities and regions. The first phase of research gathered data from Western Australian creative artists living in Europe, the US and other Australian states. As expected, the dominance of major cities as centres of economic and cultural activity emerged as an obvious migration factor. More surprising was the strong link between local opportunities and the demise of small venues, which was most apparent in relation to live music. Smaller live music venues became, thus, the focus of the second research phase. The study found that creative artists most commonly migrate because of insufficient local opportunities and a desire to make new artistic connections. The results suggest that in order to fill large venues into the future, we must recognise the unique role played by small venues in developing audiences and artists, and fostering creativity and uniqueness.

KEYWORDS: creative arts, venues, artist migration, careers

INTRODUCTION

There is an almost familiar ring to the claim that creative people, whether creative artists or those whose creativity is embedded within other areas of the economy, are the power behind the knowledge economy. From this the concept of a creative class (Florida 2002) somewhat simplistically positions creative artists as magnets for attracting and retaining more valuable creative and talented thinkers and, in turn, creating "cool city" images (Peck 2005). Despite increasing recognition of the important role played by the arts, however, there is little research that documents the practice, migration and working lives of individual creative artists. This opacity presents a major impediment to effective policy and planning.

The lack of comprehensive research into the working lives of creative artists largely relates to the variety of scale, economic activity and organisation of the creative industries, which Hartley (2005) describes as "an entirely new species of cultural and economic enterprise … whose shape and extent has yet to be properly mapped and understood, even by the people involved" (26). Commonly credited to the 1997 British 'Knowledge Economy' initiative, in fact the creative industries discourse began in Australia with Prime Minister Keating's 1994 Creative Nation policy statement (Commonwealth of Australia 1994). Keating's Third Way ideas provided the basis for UK remodelling of arts and cultural policies. Since this time, the arts have increasingly been aligned to urban and rural economic development in areas such as human capital, regeneration, community engagement and, of course, to branding and image (Markusen 2009; Pratt 2009; Vanolo 2008).

One of the causalities often cited is the impact of the arts on community wellbeing: for example arts activity enabling local communities to foster a sense of local identity by emphasising "the importance of expressing community values, creating a sense of place, gaining new insights, and learning new ways of doing things" (Anwar 2005, 15). Similarly, Jones and Tonts (1995) find that the arts play a role in the overall social cohesion and wellbeing of local communities, particularly in centres experiencing high youth unemployment and delinquency. Recognising the importance of active engagement, Hawkes (2002) advocates that: "involving community in arts practice (as against product

consumption) is the essential starting point to the exercise of generating community-owned expressions of what matters to them" (14). Contributing to a culturally enriching environment that may discourage regional youth from migrating to larger centres, communities often value the arts for their role in providing an "extension and development of local social networks, particularly amongst youth and disadvantaged sectors of the community" (Bennett, forthcoming). Indeed, "there is an emerging consensus among researchers that community arts programmes, celebrations and/or festivals can promote community cooperation, reduce the isolation of individuals and groups within community and promote economic and social development" (Kelaher et al. 2007, 1).

Despite the wealth of research on the arts in connection with planning and policy, the impact of these alignments on individual artists is much less prominent within the academic discourse. Staying with community wellbeing, for example, one impact for artists has been the increasing need to frame projects in terms of a funding strategy's non-arts objectives. Many artists do not possess the skills and political knowledge to write such proposals, notwithstanding the skills and experience required to manage a program of social change. As arts programs form part of much larger social initiatives beyond what can realistically be tackled by individual artists, more funding has been targeted towards organisations. Ironically, the difficulties of meeting non-arts objectives have also been felt institutionally: Metier (2001) found that 89 per cent of British music institutions require outside, specialist assistance to access arts funding. In short, artists need to think, and to articulate their thinking, way beyond the arts, engaging with communities in a more overt and more scrutinised way than ever before. And as rejuvenation strategies come to life, artists can be "caught up in gentrification" (Markusen 2006, 2), unable to access crucial living and work spaces.

Careers incorporating multiple employments and limited employment opportunities within complex markets remain significant influences among the artist population, and it is inevitable that many creative artists will travel in order to develop their careers, reach larger markets and work within established industries elsewhere in the world. Although this is largely accepted by the creative sector, the travel often becomes permanent or long-term migration and there is little research addressing the factors behind it (Houston et al, 2008). Certainly, artists' semi-autonomous migration decisions and, for that matter, their spatial distribution even within metropolitan areas, cannot be explained within theories of a creative class, which have recently attracted criticism on many fronts (Glaeser 2004; Markusen 2006; Peck 2005).

This paper takes as its focus creative artists whose practice is not embedded within other economic sectors. The first part presents findings from a study of creative artists and examines factors surrounding the demise of smaller venues, which emerged as critical to migration decisions. Next, the paper considers strategies to counter some of the issues identified. Full results from the study of artist migration from WA and the subsequent study of small to medium-sized live music venues are reported separately in Bennett (2010a, 2010b, forthcoming).

APPROACH

Arguably the largest state in the world and with one of the most isolated capital cities, the State of Western Australia (WA) covers 2.4 million square kilometres. Of its 2.19 million residents, 20% live outside of the Perth Metropolitan Region (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2009) and cultural employment is almost twice as high in Perth as it is in the remainder of the state (Gibson, Murphy and Freestone 2002); hence issues of geographic isolation and spatial distribution are particularly pertinent. This paper considers arts practice in relation to the migration of creative artists from smaller cities and regions. The first phase of the study included eight case studies of Western Australian creative artists living in Europe, the US and other Australian states. Phase one invited respondents to answer the following questions:

1. Do you still feel a connection with WA? If so, in what ways?
2. How did leaving Western Australia impact your career?
3. Are you likely to return to live or to visit in the future?
4. What could be done to support WA's creative people and cultural environment?

Participants, cited here using pseudonyms and selected at random, included jazz and classical musicians, a producer, a composer and a visual artist (five females and three males). Although this was a small sample, the depth and consistency of responses led to a wealth of information

around the themes of image, connectedness with place of origin, and creative migration. Our focus here is on creative migration.

The demise of local performance opportunities in smaller live music venues (defined as those with an average standing capacity of 400 people and seated capacity of 300) emerged as critical considerations in the migration decisions of participants working in music. As such, threats faced by these venues became the focus of the second research phase. This paper discusses the results of three phase two questions directly relating to the demise of live music venues:

1. What, if any, barriers exist for each venue in relation to the continued provision, or expansion of, performance activities?
2. What, if any, regulatory barriers are there to overcome in the support of original music performance?
3. What are the economic and/or social benefits of supporting live original music performance?

The second research phase engaged survey and interview methodologies alongside critical and discursive analysis. The study included a cross-section of booking agents, venue managers, music clubs and festival operators from a broad spectrum of venues in both regional and metropolitan WA. Secondary data included existing reports and data from government and industry, media sources, websites, and the results of related research.

Given the wide geographical area of the study, respondents were invited to complete the survey in hard copy, via email, online, or by telephone. The survey attracted 112 responses (58 online and 54 by telephone) from 239 venues, representing a response rate of 47%. Subsequent to the survey, data were gathered from a further 131 venues. Of the 243 venues included in the final dataset, 102 were regional, 111 were metropolitan and the remaining thirty were situated within the City of Perth. Approximately 75% of the venues surveyed were fully licensed and 20% used temporary or occasional liquor licenses. Almost three-quarters of the venues were available for hire.

Inductive coding was employed in the analysis of participant responses, which were also coded by an independent observer. Exploratory interpretations of data were determined from these two interpretations, and these informed follow-up questions in which emergent themes were explored with the participants, using individual lines of inquiry. Phase two respondents are identified by respondent (r) number.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
   LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES

In terms of migration the creative artists responded to pull factors including employment, education, experience and networks, industry size, and the perceived vibrancy of their intended location. The dominance of major cities as centres of economic and cultural activity emerged as an obvious migration factor: the low density, geographic isolation and sparse spatial distribution of arts activity in WA were compounded by its population size in comparison with the artists' chosen locations (for example, 1.5 million people in Perth, 3.5 million in Berlin, and 3.8 million in Melbourne). David, a trombonist, reflected on the isolation of Western Australia from larger centres such as Sydney and Melbourne: "By moving to Melbourne, I was exposed to a greater population of musicians, venues and audiences, therefore my performance opportunities increased. Being geographically closer to other cities also opens up more performance opportunities".

Logically the appeal of larger markets was strong, as expressed by Greta, a TV producer: "When I moved to Los Angeles I had hundreds more job options available to me". Indeed, the most vital factor in artists' decisions to migrate was a lack of local opportunities for creative practice: Gavin, a big band leader living in Norway, conceded that as much as he would like to live in WA, "there are too many limitations". The study identified a reduced working week for WA musicians, with most venues lessening risk by hosting a diverse range of music heavily weighted towards Thursday to Sunday. Opportunities for original music were further impacted by the dominance of cover bands, which for original music artists resulted in venues offering lower guarantees and lower fees: "we often prefer to hire at discounted rates" (r6).

Without self-made and ready-made opportunities, sustaining an arts career in a smaller centre is particularly challenging. Jenny, a classical pianist now based in Melbourne, observed that "the population of Perth and lack of proximity to fairly large regional towns and centres" can render full-time arts practice impossible, confining it to what Theo, a visual artist

also based in Melbourne, described as "a fringe activity". Smaller centres require an entrepreneurial approach towards the creation and self-management of performances and exhibitions: "if one wants to stage anything, it has to be individually organised, managed and put on, without support" (Jenny). Whilst this is less of a necessity in much larger centres, it is increasingly a central element of sustainable arts careers and something for which many creative artists are not prepared in the formative stages of their careers (Bennett, 2008; Fuller & Unwin, 2003). Within this context, the importance of local activities is paramount and the loss of smaller venues has an immediate impact.

VENUES
Writing from Berlin, composer and jazz singer Elise made a valid link between venues and opportunities: "I'm sure I will visit Perth again but it is difficult to live there because of its limited venues and opportunities to play live". Local opportunities across the arts appear to diminish in line with the demise of smaller venues and workspaces. With most artists working across multiple genres, sectors and in various situations (Markusen 2006) venue demise was felt across the visual and performing arts, but was most often expressed by the musicians. The study identified a number of threats facing the venues that underpin live original music, in particular the financial and labour costs of meeting infrastructure requirements, liquor licensing, insurance, security, marketing, band guarantees, and accommodation and meals. These costs need to be met with bar takings, food, and ticket sales, which means attracting large audiences and keeping them at a venue for as long as possible.

The role of small venues in the wellbeing of local communities was acknowledged by both creative artists and venue managers, who seemed all too familiar with discussing broader social objectives when 'legitimising' their arts activities. Responses to the question of social impact focused on attracting culturally diverse performers as opposed to being "an alcohol dispenser for the binge drinking cover band culture" (r12). Venue managers strongly believed that original arts activity could lead to a more community oriented atmosphere and more community recognition of the social value contributed by the venue, particularly in regional areas. This justified the economic difficulties involved for some venues. Nonetheless, this stance requires the economic means to develop a regular and profitable audience.

Venues may be the mainstay of live original music, but as Homan (2008) suggests they are "alternatively viewed as 'vibrant', exciting sites that represent a rejuvenated inner-city culture; or as sites of disruption, encouraging anti-social activity on the margins of legality (or sometimes both)" (244). Participating venue managers considered the sector to be highly over-regulated and difficult to negotiate, "sometimes bordering on the ridiculous" (r67). Overall, the difficulties of negotiating local council processes and liquor licensing regulations were found to impede the ability and willingness of venues to continue hosting live music.

The following section considers strategies to counter some of these issues. Whilst certain factors, such as the scale of geographic isolation, are particular to Western Australia, many of the findings will have considerable relevance in other settings.

LOOKING AHEAD
For WA creative artists, who are closer to South East Asia than to Sydney and Melbourne, the difficulties of maintaining a sustainable level of income derived from creative practice is exacerbated by the wide spatial distribution of arts activity that deems intrastate, interstate and international touring prohibitively expensive. Geographic isolation was aligned with the need to be aware of opportunities as they arise, and the research suggests that there is a case for strategies to facilitate active links between WA creative artists and both local and global opportunities and networks. Typical of many Western settings, the WA creative sector is characterised by sparse, sometimes problematic communications between a multiplicity of networks such as venues and regulatory bodies, regional and metropolitan arts, and the metropolitan and geographically dispersed regions. Whilst local critical mass is not something that can be quickly developed, artists highlighted the importance of connecting with national or global industry networks, and the difficulties of doing this is from WA. Communication comes to the fore here as the factor underpinning any successful strategy for change and improvement. The findings of both research phases suggest that improved communication could overcome many hurdles.

COMMUNICATION

Several opportunities arise with respect to communication, but I will focus on three that are quite easily achievable. First, a formalised WA network of venues and communities would open up regional and metropolitan areas to new performances and exhibitions by helping artists and promoters identify opportunities along a particular touring route or within a particular space of time. Such a network would also facilitate shared expertise in relation to hosting live events, helping to alleviate some of the difficulties in negotiating legislative red tape. Over 60% of participating venues requested practical and financial help with liquor licences, security and insurance. The types of help requested suggest that individualised support would be most effective and that published materials need to be disseminated and promoted directly to stakeholders.

Communities of local musicians and people with a passion for live original music establish, support and administer music clubs, associations and festivals, book artists, and provide the audience support for venues. This support base is clearly evident from venue responses, which suggest much more than a passing interest: "I like to see young upcoming local bands succeed in the music industry and give them an opportunity to gain more experience in a live format" (r3). These music networks are the foundation of the sector and are already the driving force and, often, the expertise behind development and support initiatives. If these passions could be brought together, giving the communities ownership of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991), both online and offline elements would be self-propelling. Whilst current efforts centre on particular art forms or genres, there is a strong case for networks (and funding) that foster cross-art collaborations in line with community needs and interests and beyond political or geographical borders. In the case of WA artists this means developing funding strategies that incorporate arts activity within Asian markets rather than limiting activities to Australia.

Second, given that much arts practice requires an entrepreneurial approach to creating new opportunities, making connections with the local arts scene during training is logical not only in exposing students to local opportunities, but in forging longer-term links that may foster involvement regardless of location. TV producer Greta noted that some of the solutions to student-industry contact could be quite simple: for example, connecting students to employment opportunities through a weekly email. Similarly, pianist Jenny noted a Melbourne radio station that provides "invaluable experience" in the form of a resident artist program and weekly lunchtime concerts at which young performers and performance students perform live-to-air from the studio. Whilst curricular overcrowding has long been cited as the reason for little industry involvement, students have much to offer and to gain from involvement in the local industry as well as in networks of venues and communities (Brown 2009).

Finally, local opportunities are only part of the story when it comes to building new audiences and gaining exposure. Mia, a Melbourne-based jazz performer who had commented that organising gigs "became too difficult for effort versus return", suggested "some sort of national gig circuit". Tour circuits have been shown to increase local opportunities by developing audiences and promoting a culture of regular arts activity. Tour circuits also expose local artists to touring acts they may not otherwise see, and they provide an entry point to the industry. Building on the networks discussed earlier, they can play an important role in intra-regional and inter-regional artistic connectedness. In turn, regular audience support underpins the potential for venues to maintain a financially viable program of performances or exhibitions.

REGULATIONS AND FUNDING

The impact of higher costs of living and the gentrification of inner city areas, including key entertainment areas, can be seen in studies such as the Chicago Artists Survey (Chicago Artists Resource 2000), which found exhibition venues and work spaces to be the most pressing needs for artists. The value of these spaces includes the artist networks that would not otherwise exist. In an era of increasing artist independence, exposure via performance and exhibitions is increasingly important to maintaining market share through tours, festivals and marketing. Audience development is particularly important in the case of less-traditional forms of art, which by their nature are often less accessible and less passive than other genres. For musicians, live performance represents "a vital means of bringing music to audiences and unlocking sales of that music, whether in recorded form or in synchronisation with films and

commercials" (Music Publishers Association 2005, 1). Despite the importance of small venues in this regard, their number and level of activity has been diminishing for some time. Johnson and Homan (2003) identified a significant reduction in New South Wales (NSW) venues consistent with a reduction Australia-wide since the mid-1980s. Similarly, in Vancouver the demise of small venues has been described as "indifference regarding the watering holes, nightclubs and performance venues" (Chapman 2009, 6).

Homan (2003) notes that a contributing factor to the loss of venues is the demise of the city public house, which has been a mainstay of popular music performance for many years. Factors contributing to a general decline in pub attendance include the gentrification of inner-city areas: "don't disturb the condos unless you are building another condo" (Holliston, in Chapman 2009, 5), an increase in random breath testing, the introduction of anti-smoking legislation and, in some areas, a rise in the number of people from cultures where the consumption of alcohol is prohibited. Entertainment statutes such as fire, licensing and sound regulations are particularly problematic for venue owners and managers. Indeed, Johnson and Homan (2003) argue that in Australia the "cost and complexity of the processes associated with gaining public entertainment licenses are often a sufficient disincentive to the presentation of live music" (42). Drawing again on examples from Vancouver, complex legislation has been directly related to artist migration, "hinder[ing] our cultural landscape to the point where many of our most valued performer, seeing no opportunity here for advancement, are moving away to advance their careers elsewhere" (Childs 2008, 2).

Although 80% of participating venues were interested in expanding their involvement with live original music, the link between cover bands and bigger profits arose as a significant hurdle. Venues support activities that bring in the highest revenue, and the potential for touring circuits or for increased local activity is severely diminished by a perceived lack of audience support for original music. In Australia this is reinforced by the neglect of local original music content on commercial radio (Mason 2003). In addition, corporate ownership of medium-sized venues is rapidly increasing. Venue managers found it difficult to arouse the interest of corporate owners in the development of local arts activity when profits relied on bar takings or even on bulk liquor sales at adjoining liquor stores. In this climate the cover band culture has become a major threat to original music activity, and parallels can be seen across the arts. General venue support for the inclusion of original music alongside covers, "as long as they can still dance to it" (r8), was a positive finding. At this point in time, initiatives targeting the cover-original crossover emerge as an immediate strategy in the development of new audiences.

Regulatory and financial assistance could play an important role in mitigating the immediate cost of supporting original music and encouraging a longer-term approach to the development of new audiences. A positive and inexpensive initiative in this regard would be to formally recognise and reward venues hosting arts activities. Linked with streamlined regulatory processes and subsidies or rebates, this would provide venues with both social and economic incentives. In short, it would suggest that the arts are valued.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

There is potential to actively engage with and value creative migrants, and to foster their continued involvement as active agents in the cultural life and image of our cities and regions. An online approach would help connect artists and community regardless of location, and would also provide the perfect forum for creative migrants to retain some involvement with the local arts sector. The responses of the creative artists suggest that many creative migrants would welcome such involvement. The results suggest that in order to fill large venues into the future, we must recognise and consider the role of small venues in developing audiences and artists, fostering creativity and uniqueness, and giving visibility to the arts. Whilst this study provided only a snapshot of artist migration, it has revealed a need for more in-depth research into migration and the geography of talent as a feature of the working lives and career trajectories of creative artists.

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