

National Cultural Policy Submission

Wild At Heart Community Arts

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

A Place for Every Story

Wild At Heart is people who are silenced, invisible and marginalised in society.

We are people who experience social and structural disablement, discrimination and exclusion based on visible or invisible conditions, mental illness, neurodiversity, gender identity and inequity, misogyny, trauma, abuse, addiction, patriarchy and colonisation, racism, poverty and any form of economic, social or cultural discrimination. We are for people who experience loneliness, isolation, vulnerability and the low expectations of society.

In this submission we use the language “lived experience” to refer to the people whose unique human experience is described above.

Invisible. That’s how one artist felt after a recent performance at a major live music venue in Melbourne. Their performance was outstanding, but they felt they had the “disability slot” playing first to a near empty room and all the attention going to the non-disabled “headline” artists on the bill, including being paid a fraction of their fee.

“What I do as an artist is good quality. I work hard and alone. I write, record, produce, spend a lot of time and money to hone my art. This is out of necessity, not having the accessibility to achieve these things with others. I need all the things a professional artist needs, just some extra things that are about accessibility and equity.”

Their experience reflects that of many artists with lived experience.

The experience of isolation and loneliness. The absence of feeling safe and belonging without judgement, of affirmation, validation and encouragement.

Being invisible and feeling the stigma, discrimination and exclusion from society. The waste of potential contribution and the aimlessness of society’s low or no expectation. Being dependent on govt programs which frame you as “disabled” and not being able to contribute, to be paid and to pay taxes.

The experience of personal suffering and distress, continual crises, shame, life long trauma, mental health, personal health, homelessness, unemployment, conflict, violence and poverty.

The lack of accessible cultural knowledge, learning spaces and resources for artistic practice and experience, the guidance and resources to grow and develop as an artist, access networks for professional expertise, equipment, studios, and understanding how to progress in the music industry.

The systemic exclusion, abuse and disregard of political, social, economic service, welfare and religious institutions which strip value and means, inflict hurt and injury creating life long trauma and exclude people from being full citizens and equal contributors to society and culture. These are testified through multiple Royal Commissions, investigations and reviews.

What is the art, the songs and music, the poetry, the dance that comes from people who do not conform to mainstream expectations and norms?

It is art that's tempered through the experience of living on the margins, art that comes through the experience of hardship, rejection, exclusion, loneliness, not fitting in, feeling weird, not being wanted, of facing all kinds of barriers, of seeing the trappings of the mainstream, but not having access to any of those things.

It is art that is unique, stories that are inimitable and music which is essential for us to understand each other, the breadth of our human experience and how to live better together.

This art is missing. Missing from the cultural landscape, missing from stages, from studios, from radios, from playlists. Alternative voices and lives are rarely heard and when they are it is often by exception, in the "disability slot", the good news story on TV, infantilising and patronising language, the low expectation of being disability artists.

Times are changing and artists who have long been excluded are beginning to have power and access within cultural institutions and with audiences. However, we have a long way to go before it is expected and completely normal that people with lived experience can have cultural access and equity and can turn up to take their rightful place on stage.

The Centrality of the Artist

Our vision for the National Cultural Policy is for the creation of compelling, high-quality music and art by artists whose voices are rarely or never heard, nor valued, in society. Our

starting point is the unique humanity of every person and the importance for every voice to be heard in our collective cultural expression.

“It was an extraordinary night of connection, storytelling, emotion, commonality and diversity, recognising the beauty and worth in each one of us despite the differences that keep us separated as human beings”

“You could almost believe this was a regular gig. Watching artists on stage who can't even access most stages, captivating the audience from the power of their storytelling and music, the artistry of this young woman to create an ensemble to hold and convey her story. It was deeply moving and powerful.”

Wild At Heart embraces what is often hidden in society. It is rare to hear directly from people who live the experience of mental illness, disability, diversity, trauma, especially to hear their own stories told through artistic forms. Whether it's structural exclusion, fear of ableism, or of human vulnerabilities, these stories are often uninvited and neglected. Social and cultural systems and norms collude to silence, oppress and exclude artists who don't conform. Wild At Heart invites artists and audiences to engage deeply and directly with these profound human experiences.

The work artists make is beautiful, funny, gritty, challenging, powerful, clear in its depth and emotion from people whose voices aren't typically heard nor valued as artists. The music is compelling, and the stories are salient for our big social problems, like inclusion, loneliness, abuse, gender inequality and violence, diversity, social and economic participation.

Our vision is to create safe and self directed creative spaces

Rarely, if at all, do people and artists with lived experience have the opportunity to come together, recognise themselves in their peers and have a safe space in which to gather and tell stories, and create music. Not therapy or recreation, but original, self directed and controlled, authentic art and culture making.

To create the spaces for artists to meet each other, find common experience and connection, a place of welcome hospitality and belonging, a place with no judgement but learning, challenge and growth. An artistic community that cultivates, validates and reinforces each other as music creators, collaborators, performers and change makers.

A place to explore, innovate and find new forms of artistic expression that arise from their own individual and collective human experiences. A place for intimacy, friendship and trust. A place for healing and strength.

These are spaces for learning, skill development, resources and networks with music industry professionals, teachers, mentors. For gaining access to knowledge in creativity, story-telling, song and artform craft, access to industry standard spaces for recording, production, performance, promotion and pathways to further learning and careers.

Our artistic vision is to challenge the artistic and social status quo

Who challenges the purpose of art in civil society? Who challenges ableism in the music industry? Who challenges the exclusion of significant sections of our society from being creators, performers, workers, leaders and audiences? Who challenges inaccessible music industry attitudes, events, spaces, venues?

The National Cultural Policy should position lived experience led artistic practice in music, access and inclusion in the music industry and culture at the forefront.

Wild At Heart will work as activists, collaborators and partners to promote the visibility and equitable access of musicians with lived experience as creators, performers, workers and leaders so their presence is normalised within music culture, industry and broader society.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

The National Cultural Policy must acknowledge and address the past violence and injustice that colonialism perpetrated on First Nations people, the genocide and attempted cultural annihilation that is in fact the foundation of the contemporary nation called Australia.

The National Cultural Policy must also acknowledge and address the injustices, poor treatment, inequalities and exclusions within our society for people with disability and enable these to be explored, truth told and power given to those negatively impacted through their own self determined artistic voice.

The Creative Australia policy reads somewhat like a flowery whitewashing of the "why" of cultural production. The truth can be that the arts are a means for us not just to communicate the soaring delights of each other's cultures but to address wrongs, communicate injustice and seek redress and healing which our nation desperately needs.