

Getting back into the swing of things

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between Melbourne's live music scene and how it contributes to being an informed educator with value to bring to the classroom. Through a personal response, a snapshot of the present conditions is described and the importance of the live music experience is detailed.

Key words: music, scene, community, live music, gigs, freelance, scene, education, teaching, learning, Melbourne

I was not going to miss this one. It had been way too long. There are always many reasons for not going – inability to get off the couch, it's a school night, it's an early start the next day, I'm too tired, it's the end of term. I'm glad I did however; it was the reminder I needed. This gig had been a long time coming, after the year we've had. To be honest, it was the thing I was looking forward to most out of lockdown.

I rode off to the gig in my hi-vis, quietly hopeful that it was going to be as good as all the times I had gone to hear them before. Riding down the major retail strip I can't help but notice all the sad, empty shops with 'For Lease' signs. There was a time not so long ago that this was the beating heart of Melbourne's creative scene. We'd be out 3-4 nights a week either doing a gig, hanging out at one of the dozen live music venues within a few blocks, checking out a gallery, or eating, drinking and being alive. You'd run into people, and make new friends too. The Scene was vibrant.

In the past year I have witnessed many local, brilliant, dedicated, experienced and hard-working musicians who have seriously engaged in a very honest appraisal of their situation. Being an independent/freelance musician ('creative lifestyle') is perilous existence at the best of times: the internal dialogue of creatives is always listening, responding,

critiquing and reflecting – not necessarily in that order, not necessarily constructively nor positively. However, over the past year I have witnessed extraordinary tenacity; perseverance and persistence – bordering on stubbornness – from creatives in my circle. I have witnessed people being brilliant despite the circumstances, *in spite* of the challenges presented. I have witnessed creatives do what creatives do: invent new ways of doing things and perhaps even creating new ways of interacting and developing meaning.

I have also witnessed the opposite: people despairing in the loss of engagement in their craft; their vocation. Questioning their value/contribution/place in the world. Finding that their 'work' (yes, The Arts is work) was not just about bringing a developed skill to a particular situation – it was the social contact, camaraderie, informal psychological debrief sessions, and also an important reason to get off the couch and out of the house for many creative professionals. The grief over the loss of 'The Scene' is tangible: favourite gigs and venues where people could go to be with their tribe. The Scene is both tangible and difficult to quantify at the same time: it is a collection of venues within a manageable radius of a critical mass of people's life/work/practice/home. It is an organic place where people congregate who

share similar values and outlook – although not necessarily of the same background, generation, or socio-economic status.

The Scene takes years to develop and a fraction of a second to evaporate: it's a complicated accumulation of Goldilocks scenarios: affordable rents; favourable demographics, available disposable income, relative non-progression of gentrification, creatives with enough momentum to take a risk on a venture, wealthy benefactors/philanthropists/patrons, creative and nimble traders' associations, supportive local governments, and numerous other factors. If even one of those factors is not available, it can mean the death of The Scene in that area, as we have witnessed recently in St Kilda; where unscrupulous developers build high-rise apartment blocks with inadequate insulation and no double glazing next to long-standing music venues. And then residents complain about the noise, even though they moved there to be 'close to the action'. The Scene cannot be created artificially, despite numerous failed high-profile attempts. There is no manual for city planners to cite, prescribe or employ; there are all too few by-laws for councils to enact to protect. The Scene is organic, fragile and impermanent.

I arrive, and lock my bike out the front. Walking in, there's some familiar faces around but it does not yet have the vibe of the gigs I knew and loved, probably due to the reduced capacity requirements in force.

One music professional I know regularly attended this same gig, which is held once a month in an inner-urban pub. The Monday residency has been a long one; they're coming up to their 30 year anniversary. She describes it as "going to church". Pre C-19 when I saw her at this gig, she'd be grinning from ear to ear. She made time and space for one Monday night a month to "get her fill". I run into another person, a well-known local creative who has made it overseas. He tells me this is his favourite gig of all time. He's been stuck overseas for more than two years working, but he came back as he too needs to get his fill. Reflecting on this act, I can't help but think this experience is the same for many attendees of this gig. We go to hear what is right. We

go to hear what is good. We go to hear how amazing it can be. We go to hear the experts – who have been doing it longer than anyone else around – with their decades of accumulated experience, knowledge and wisdom. This gig is a Melbourne institution. I'm not sure how much longer it can stick around, but I'll attend the gigs I can while that little island of The Scene is still intact. I will get my fill. When it's all over, I'll reminisce of the "good old days" and be nostalgic for what used to be. Hopefully The Scene will have developed something meaningful somewhere else and have the luck of all the Goldilocks elements being present and intact; and the musicians and creatives that contribute to it have the tenacity, fortitude, stubbornness and willpower to create that unique special thing that we value so much.

"Getting your fill" is important as a music educator. To be relevant in the classroom and to summon the output of energy that scenario demands, that energy source must be refilled somehow. Teachers with a "boundless supply of energy" is as much a myth as a free energy device. To be inspiring to someone, the teacher must, in turn, be inspired by someone or something.

In my own teaching experience, more and more students are presenting with significant social and emotional issues. This has made engaging with students and the act of teaching more challenging. This trend has been growing steadily year on year, but exponentially amplified by the pandemic and being locked down. More students are isolated, anxious, depressed and negative about their future. Over the past year, it has been harder to develop rapport via digital means. Engagement has been more challenging. Maybe I am old fashioned in that I prefer to develop rapport face-to-face, but maybe The Arts and engagement in creative practice requires interaction with human beings at some point to be meaningful and effective? Teaching something such as The Arts which requires so much humanity cannot be done by a machine. Human interactions are critical in the learning and teaching of music.

As educators, we have been forced to rethink

“how do we learn?” as much as “what should we learn?”. In designing appropriate, meaningful and engaging curriculum for the next generation, we all need to think about what needs to change, and work towards implementing that change fearlessly.

The band has loaded in. Now set up and ready to go. The audience who has clearly been anticipating this moment for a very long time show their appreciation. Could it be true? Actual live music? YES! I see my friend who has been eagerly awaiting this. She has “come to church” and she gives me a massive hug and is grinning from ear to ear, as am I. We don’t say anything, as we don’t need to. We know why we’ve made this pilgrimage, we’re both getting our fill. Our stores were depleted. We are ready to accept what’s on offer.

From the very first note, it’s on. The Leslie speaker fed by the Hammond B3 is spinning up, providing its unmistakable trademark Doppler effect. The drummer locks that shuffle tightly, in the unique way he does, in the way he always has. The time is unwavering, yet fluid and devoid of any kind of tension. The flow of his right arm action on the ride cymbal is where it’s at. Straight quarter notes never sounded so good. They are exactly where

they need to be, there is absolutely no other place for them. It is simultaneously pushing and pulling, leaning forwards and back, embodying tension and release. He closes his eyes and is transported to another dimension, seemingly channelling his dearly departed drumming mentors from above. The guitarist basks in the groove for a while before contributing, as he anticipates what’s coming. Intuition is at the core of the interaction. The horn player cues the head to “Vicky”, the Jimmy McGriff tune (which they often start with), and then proceeds to launch into an expertly crafted solo. He’s not happy with his reed position on the mouthpiece, but this will have to be fixed later. The moment is on, this is no rehearsal. There are no second takes, and the people have come to hear it. The opening solo contains all the textbook Soul Jazz references demonstrating the mastery of 40 plus years playing and studying the masters, and 30 years with this band alone. The solo is a lesson on how to do it for the young ‘uns – craft your solo, gradually build the intensity and density, get in the pocket, let the time breathe, don’t blow all your fast licks too early, dig in. The sound, the intensity, the groove. This is the moment, and everyone in the room gets their fill.

Dr Tim Nikolsky is a Melbourne-based musician, educator, cyclist, enthusiastic home-brewer and most of the time an all-round pretty good guy. His PhD on the development of the *Australian Jazz Real Book*, the first of its kind in Australia, has won him accolades and is widely regarded as a long overdue valuable resource. Tim has written, recorded and produced several albums, and plays in several bands around Melbourne on guitar and double bass.