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Research: Disability in the Music Industry Abridged

This report has been compiled by the Music Makers Project Team at Arts Access Victoria. The Music Makers program including the inaugural Music Makers mentorship program and its associated showcase, Amplify, is supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria.

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[The original full report can be downloaded from our website.](https://www.artsaccess.com.au/resource/disability-in-the-music-industry-research)

 

“Find other people who share your struggles. There is strength in numbers, and together we can change the industry.” – anonymous, Music Makers Survey, 2021

One of the top music cities in the world, Melbourne is home to more music venues per capita than any other city (Creative Victoria, 2018), giving Victoria a unique opportunity to place its place as one of the most accessible music industries in the world.

A 2019 Australia Council for the Arts’ survey (NAPS) highlighted that positive attitudes and participation in music is higher for Deaf and Disabled people compared to the non-disabled population. Simultaneously, a lower percentage of Deaf and Disabled people reported comfortability in attending arts events and festivals compared to those not identifying as disabled (NAPS, 2019). This shows that accessibility barriers remain an issue and when approximately 1 in 5 Australians identify as Deaf and/or Disabled (Vic Health, 2009), this is a problem that needs addressing.

This research focused on creating a more inclusive environment to increase creative output for Deaf and Disabled people. It explored how the COVID-19 pandemic affected music industry engagement with Deaf and Disabled communities, examined the online accessibility of select music venues within Victoria, what barriers exist and how to create greater accessibility for them.

# What are the barriers and what can we do?

Accessibility means more than having a wheelchair-friendly venue. It means making a wide range of considerations, such as catering to sensory needs, chronic pain, physical disabilities, and mental health issues. Deaf and Disabled people experienced more barriers attending events than the non-disabled population including:

* Physical (e.g., lack of wheelchair access to any part of venue, finding the right instrument to play, or adapting instruments to be used by the musician)
* Communication (e.g., lack of interpreting, difficulty reaching venue staff, interpersonal communication difficulties with work or band mates)
* Transport (e.g., lack of transport to venues, difficulty transporting instruments/musical equipment)
* Social Connection (e.g., difficulty finding people to play music with, attend gigs, or network with)
* Education (e.g., music lessons are inaccessible, instructors do not understand or are unable to accommodate for students’ needs, it takes too much time to learn new skills)
* Technical Skills (e.g., not knowing how to use technology, or what technology exists)
* Programming (e.g., an event’s start time, length of event, lighting, and volume levels)
* Financial (e.g., it is too expensive to buy instruments/equipment, take lessons, purchase what is needed to be able to adapt the instrument to play)
* Self-Confidence (e.g., feeling like a person doesn’t deserve to be somewhere, not feeling comfortable to speak up themselves and/or state their needs)
* Self-Management (e.g., difficulty getting places on time, keeping motivated, staying organised)
* Attitude/Inexperience of others (e.g., stigma, stereotyping, not having needs taken seriously)

Legislation, such as The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021), have made it against the law for public places such as pubs, theatres, and places of entertainment to be inaccessible, stating:

“Every area and facility open to the public should be [accessible] to people with a disability. People with a disability should expect to enter and make use of [public] places if [non-disabled] people can do so.” (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

The only exception to this law is if providing greater accessibility will cause “unjustifiable hardship” – such as major difficulties or high costs that the person or organisation cannot meet. The government response to addressing the financial hardship of improving accessibility has been encouraging venues to apply for government grants (Australian Government, 2021).

“A recent survey of Victorian musicians during COVID-19 (Strong, 2020) found that many participants would like to see increased access for marginalised groups as the music industry reopens.“

Results of our research showed that it is clear the Victorian music industry has a long way to go to meet the standards set out in The Disability Discrimination Act (1992), or Music Victoria’s “Best Practice Guidelines for Live Music Venues – Making your venue accessible”. Some basic low-cost (or free) changes can make a big difference in accessibility, such as:

* Including access information on event advertisements using plain English,
* Sending out Access Riders to performers,
* Reserving seating near the stage,
* Setting aside a space for sensory respite,
* Training and awareness with assisting those with mental health issues,
* Providing clear contact details for access requests.

There are many free online resources (Attitude is Everything, 2017; Attitude is Everything, 2020; Collett, 2018; Music Victoria, 2020) available for industry workers to use and learn from, if they are aware of the issues and willing to work towards solving them. Further disability awareness training and public awareness campaigns could ensure bigger steps toward a more accessible industry.

“Assume that people are diverse, instead of assuming they're all capable.” – anonymous survey participant.

One of the most common pieces of feedback from participants in this research was the importance of education and understanding regarding disability in the music industry. Venues and industry workers need to be made aware of the many barriers facing people who identify as Deaf and Disabled and must take steps towards creating a more inclusive industry. Education on these barriers, as well as their solutions, will create safer spaces and encourage attendance.

Participants often mentioned physical access to venues as a barrier to participation. Problems with buildings can exacerbate symptoms of certain disabilities. Things like narrow doorways, steps, inaccessible toilets, and sensory-related issues (such as strobe lighting, lighting that is too dark, noise levels of musicians, and extreme temperatures). The late starting time of most music events make it impossible for those using public transport to attend. These late finishes can leave people feeling vulnerable, endangered, and anxious when traveling home.

Mental health issues disproportionately affected members of the music industry even before the COVID-19 pandemic created additional stressors; with depression, anxiety, sleep problems, and suicidality all experienced at higher rates in industry workers than the general population (van den Eynde, 2016). Victorian music industry members would benefit from training that views mental health issues through the lens of ongoing disability. Understanding the many forms of mental health issues, the way it impacts work and creativity and how best to accommodate it will reduce harm. By increasing sensitivity and empathy, the industry can become a more supportive, inclusive, and connected community.

Across the board, Music Maker Mentees called for the need to highlight Deaf and Disabled people in the music industry; requesting more opportunities, greater disabled representation in mainstream media, and better platforming of disabled people. It is a recommendation of this study that mentorship programs continue to be funded to build community and showcase role models for Deaf and Disabled musicians and industry members. Another meaningful way to acknowledge the existence and experience of Deaf music industry participants is to allocate funding for AUSLAN interpreting at more events.

With the results of the studies in mind, the Victorian music industry can begin to address the barriers that Deaf and Disabled people encounter with solutions informed by those people with first-hand experience. By improving awareness and education surrounding barriers related to Disability, the industry can unite to dismantle the systems that exclude a vibrant and enthusiastic group of people that have a wealth of skills, creativity, and knowledge to contribute to the music scene. Inclusion facilitates a more diverse, vibrant, and productive industry. Not only does it make Melbourne and Victoria the leading music regions in Australia, but the world.

# Participant Access Requests

“It’s important to make your needs heard so that we can all learn about each other and make the industry as pleasant as possible.” – anonymous quote, Music Makers Survey 2021

## General

* Attitudinal change/greater education for non-disabled people
* Greater understanding of invisible disabilities ("The thing I want people to understand is that, for a lot of people with other types of disabilities, they're trying very much to get other people to see and understand the person behind the disability, but I think for people with ADHD and ASD we're really trying to get people to understand the disability behind the person" – Music Makers Participant, 2021)

## Career Progression

* Better networking opportunities for people with diverse communication styles
* An online disability-friendly space for connecting with like-minded artists
* Reduced emphasis on the “work hard/play hard” mentality, adequate rest breaks whilst on tour and whilst working
* Award rates standardised for musicians
* Increased government budget for accessibility
* More grants and funding for local artists
* Extensions of deadlines for Grants for Deaf andDisabled folks
* Accessible software – subsidised or free library
* Agents and audition panellists should be required to complete diversity training
* Mentoring and opportunities for 1:1 support for learning technology
* Disabled musicians need to be seen as legitimate musicians and not just creating as a form of therapy, they should not be relegated to ‘community spaces’

## Education

* Instrumental music education needs to become more accessible to **Deaf and Disabled People** in Australia. Take example from overseas education systems
* Access to equipment – Instrument & Software Libraries
* Workshops and events should only be offered at times when PT is running
* Instructors need to be trained to identify Ableism and also to work with diverse populations
* Subsidised or free instrument lesson access

## Venues

* Earlier show times in evening, more afternoon performances
* Lower capacity gigs to help prevent overwhelm in people with sensory issues
* Outdoor gigs (COVID-safe)
* Assume people are diverse, don’t assume they are capable of everything
* Provide venue layout maps and specifics regarding stairs/ramps
* Wider range of inclusive food and drinks at gigs
* Better lit environments to facilitate communication
* Staff training on Deafness and Disabilities, Mental Health, Sensory considerations, and basic Auslan skills
* More Auslan interpreters at gigs
* Limits on db strictly adhered to, to avoid hearing damage
* Quieter house music in between bands to facilitate communication
* Warnings for strobe lighting
* Providing backline of large musical equipment on every stage (drums, large amps)
* Making accessibility riders commonplace as part of booking gigs
* Free earplugs on offer at bars
* Adequate toilet access and Gender Neutral toilets
* Accessible stages & backstage areas
* More affordable and accessible rehearsal spaces with better soundproofing
* Working Lifts where access to another level is required
* Backstage areas with doors to keep others out
* Hire diverse staff
* Having in-house audio that can link to hearing aids orcochlear implants
* Offering seating that isn’t just at the very back of venues
* Livestreaming every gig to increase accessibility to home-bound folks
* Climate controlled environments to avoid extreme heat that can trigger neurological symptoms
* Kettle ormicrowave access for heating heat packs
* Non-alcoholic rider options
* Offering companion card tickets to gigs and making the ticketing workable (not restricted to “one companion per booking”, regardless of the number of tickets being booked)
* Stating accessibility information in the events on FB or ticketing pages

# Disability and Deafness

According to the last Census, 17.7% of Australians identify as Disabled (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Disability encompasses a wide spectrum of unique ways of experiencing and interacting with the world; referring to visible, invisible, sensory, physical, neurodiverse, cognitive, intellectual, developmental, mental health issues, or chronic illness (Arts Access Victoria, 2021). Many Deaf and Disabled people identify with lived experience in multiple categories.

The term ‘Deaf’ is used to emphasise the differences in identity between those who identify with the rich cultural and linguistic features of the Deaf community, as opposed to people living with a hearing-loss-related disability.

**The Social Model of Disability understands that “Disability is the result of the interaction between [Deaf and Disabled People] and an environment filled with physical, attitudinal, communication, and social barriers. The social model [implies that] change [is needed] to enable [Deaf and Disabled People] to participate in society on an equal basis.” (People with Disability Australia, 2019, p.5).**

# COVID-19 and Music Industry Accessibility

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused abrupt changes to the Victorian music industry. The cancellation of live music events meant workers within the industry were limited to the use of the internet and associated technologies for work. Suddenly, the entire industry was faced with many of the same barriers that people with disabilities encountered pre-COVID-19. Feelings of isolation, difficulties maintaining community and networks, relying on the internet for engagement with the outside world, and being home-bound became universal experiences.

The pandemic encouraged creative problem solving within the community. Venues adapted. They offered livestreamed gigs (ranging in scale from artists playing a single set, to large, multi-day festivals such as Isol-Aid: An Instagram Live Music Festival) to break through the barriers that home-bound people had been experiencing long before the pandemic. This made live music performances accessible to everyone with an internet connection. The success of the original Isol-Aid in March 2020 even blossomed into an almost-weekly live music experience with over 880 artists performing as of March 2021 (Cunningham, 2021). Other sectors within the industry responded to the travel-ban and social distancing rules by adapting their large-scale events (such as BIGSOUND 2020 a free conference delivered online), resulting in the industry becoming more accessible.

The NAPS (2019) survey showed that 71% of **Deaf and Disabled People** engage with digital media to connect with and learn about the arts and artists compared to 62% of non-disabled people, indicating that **Deaf and Disabled People** use technology to improve access in the music industry, and emphasising the importance of continuing to offer digital ways of participation in the music industry post-COVID.

We recommend that venues and event-organisers continue to offer online access as an option to anyone who is unable to attend events or performances in person. The steps taken in response to the pandemic should not be abandoned once the music industry is operating at full capacity again.

# Directory of Victorian Disability Music Organisations

The following is a list of disability friendly music organisations and programs within Victoria.

## [Aardvark Music](https://aardvarkmusic.org/)

Aardvark Music is a Melbourne based not for profit organisation that provides song-writing and music opportunities for young people aged between 14 and 24 who have a passion or talent for music. Music therapists, musicians and youth mentors work with young people to write, record and perform original music together in groups while creating a community to stay connected to.

## [Arts Access Victoria](https://www.artsaccess.com.au/)

Established in 1974, Arts Access Victoria (AAV) is the state’s peak body for arts and disability. As a disability-led arts organisation, AAV is at the forefront of innovative disability arts practice, access and inclusion. AAV aims to achieve cultural equity for Deaf and Disabled Victorians.

## [Choose Art](http://www.ChooseArt.com.au)

An Australian Accessible Arts Directory, designed for and by people who identify as Deaf and disabled. Choose Art allows users to search for accessible arts programs, opportunities, and events in every state.

## [JOLT Arts](https://www.joltarts.org/)

JOLT Arts is an inclusive sonic arts organisation with charitable status that creates in-house new sonic works – as a production house – whilst also supporting and presenting the work of other auditory creators. JOLT Arts presents new cutting-edge work by local and international sonic artists with a focus on sound makers across a range of contexts and abilities: intellectual disabilities, youth artists, emerging artists and established artists.

## [Off The List Records](https://www.offthelist.com.au/)

Off The List Records is a disability-led independent record label, working mostly within the DIY, experimental and indie music space. Off The List Records cares about access to music and endeavours to make our shows and releases inclusive and accessible to everyone.

## [Safe in Sound](http://www.safeinsound.com.au)

Safe in Sound offers an exploratory concert series for persons living with disability and their families/supporters. They aim to engage families and carers to both supervise and take part in developing new methods of stimulation, entertainment and communication. They believe music can stimulate joy and encourage mindfulness for the listener, and contribute to a well-balanced life through engaging with art.

## [Support Act](https://supportact.org.au/)

Support Act is Australia’s only charity delivering crisis relief services to artists, crew and music workers as a result of ill health, injury, a mental health problem, or some other crisis that impacts on their ability to work in music.

## [Tibi Events & Access Consultant](http://www.tibiconsultant.com)

Tibi has been created to change the landscape of live music, events and venues. At the core of Tibi is a spirit of inclusivity and a will to open up gigs and events of all sizes to everyone. Tibi aims to improve the recognition and removal of barriers faced by Deaf and Disabled people.

## [Wild at Heart Community Arts](http://www.wildatheart.org.au)

Wild At Heart supports a vibrant community of music and arts makers who experience disability, mental illness and disadvantage. Working with mentoring and training from professional artists participants tell their stories through original music and art making, become part of a community of artists and connect with the broader society through recording, performance, online and media.