

MUSIC MAKERS

Disability in the Music Industry

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Arts Access Victoria
2021



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“I would like people to know that the challenges are real. And the more we all speak up about it and make change, the better it’s going to be for everybody.”

Music Maker Mentee, 2021

Research: Disability in the Music Industry

Introduction

“Find other people who share your struggles. There is strength in numbers, and together we can change the industry.”

– anonymous, Music Makers Survey, 2021

As the home state of one of the top music cities in the world, with Melbourne hosting more music venues per capita than any other city (Creative Victoria, 2018), Victoria has an opportunity to ensure that its music industry is also one of the most accessible. Approximately 1 in 5 Australians identify as disabled (Vic Health, 2009). A 2019 Australia Council for the Arts’ survey (NAPS) showed that positive attitudes towards the arts, as well as rates of creative participation in music, are higher in people with disabilities (PWD) as compared to the non-disabled population. At the same time, a lower percentage of PWD reported attending arts events and festivals, as compared to those not identifying as disabled (NAPS, 2019). These statistics are indicative of a substantial group that is still encountering barriers to participation in the music industry. As a result, this research project focused on identifying the barriers that exist within the environment of the Victorian music industry in terms of participation and creative output for people who identify as d/Deaf and/or disabled, and ways in which the industry can respond to create a more inclusive environment for all. It also aimed to learn more about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected music industry engagement within this population, and examined the online accessibility of a selection of music venues within Victoria.

Disability and Deafness

According to the last Census, 17.7% of Australians identify as living with a disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Disability encompasses a wide spectrum of unique ways of experiencing and interacting with the world, and cannot be defined in any one homogenous way. The term “disability” can refer to those visible, invisible, sensory, physical, neurodiverse, cognitive, intellectual/developmental, mental health or illness, or chronic illness (Arts Access Victoria, 2021). People may identify with lived experience in one or many categories. The term “d/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, which the authors of this report embrace, understands that “disability is the result of the interaction between people with impairments and an environment filled with physical, attitudinal, communication, and social barriers. The social model has the implication that the physical, attitudinal, communication, and social environment must change to enable people living with impairments to participate in society on an equal basis for others.” (People with Disability Australia, 2019, p.5).

Barriers

The barriers to accessibility for d/Deaf and/or disabled musicians, industry workers, and attendees have been well-documented in Victoria, Australia, and across the world (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020; Collett, 2018; Youth Music, 2020; Attitude is Everything, 2019). The concept of “accessibility” goes beyond ensuring that a location is wheelchair-friendly, and includes a wide range of considerations, such as catering to people with sensory issues, chronic pain, and mental illnesses, as well as physical disabilities. Within Australia, PWD experience most of the challenges with attending events at higher rates than the non-disabled population. NAPS (2019) identified that PWD encountered barriers such as included prohibitive costs, health concerns, transport difficulties, venue accessibility, safety concerns, lack of social support, and inaccessible language at higher rates than people without disabilities. Challenges such as lack of awareness regarding events, lack of personal interest, and difficulty finding time were experienced at higher levels in people without disabilities (NAPS, 2019), further exemplifying PWD know about, are interested in, and have the time to attend events, if more substantial challenges do not get in their way.

Participation challenges specifically facing people with disabilities fall into several categories, as outlined below.

- 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) has made it against the law for public places such as pubs, theatres, and places of entertainment to be inaccessible. It states that “every area and facility open to the public should be open and available to people with a disability. They should expect to enter and make use of places used by the public if people without a disability can do so.” (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021). The only exception to this law is if provision of access will cause

“unjustifiable hardship” of such as major difficulties or high costs that the person or organisation cannot meet. To address the financial hardship that may be experienced when improving accessibility, venues have been encouraged to apply for government grants (Australian Government, 2021).

Many solutions and changes that would result in increased music industry accessibility have been provided in such comprehensive reports such as:

- Music Victoria’s “Best Practice Guidelines for Live Music Venues” (Music Victoria, 2020)
- Morwenna Collett’s Churchill Fellowship Report (Collett, 2018)
- DIY Access Guide (Attitude is Everything, 2017)
- Access Guide: Online Music Events (Attitude is Everything, 2020)
- Reshape Music – A Report Exploring the Lived Experience of Disabled Musicians in Education and Beyond (Youth Music, 2020).

Further accommodations that the music industry can make to increase inclusion and access, as suggested by both survey participants and interviews by Arts Access Victoria as part of the Music Makers program (2021), are listed as Appendix A of this report.

COVID-19 and Music Industry Accessibility

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused abrupt and catastrophic changes to the Victorian music industry. Due to the cancellation of nearly every live music event for the majority of the year, workers from every subsection of the industry, as well as live music attendees, were limited by what they could accomplish through use of the internet and associated technologies. As a result, 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 connection and engagement with the outside world, and being home-bound.

To counter these limitations, the industry responded with a surge of livestreaming music events, ranging in scale from artists playing a single set, to large, multi-day festivals such as Isol-Aid: An Instagram Live Music Festival (Newstead, 2020). Based on the success of the original Isol-Aid event in March 2020, it quickly blossomed into an almost-weekly opportunity to experience live music, with over 880 artists performing as of March 2021 (Cunningham, 2021). Other sectors within the industry also responded to the travel-ban and social distancing rules by adapting their large-scale events, such as BIGSOUND 2020, to a free conference, delivered online (BIGSOUND, 2020). These changes resulted in an industry that became far more accessible for those people who were limited by disability or other reasons.

The NAPS (2019) survey showed that 71% of PWD engage with digital media to connect with and learn about the arts and artists, as opposed to 62% of people without disabilities. This indicates that PWD have the experience and ability to use technology to access the music industry, and emphasises the importance of continuing to offer digital ways of participating in music that have been developed in response to lockdowns. A recent survey examining the experiences of Victorian musicians during COVID-19 (Strong, 2020) found that many participants have expressed that they would like to see increased access for marginalised groups as the music industry reopens. With this in mind, the current research also examined the impact of COVID-19 on the Victorian music industry involvement of PWD, and the online accessibility of Melbourne music venues.

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“The changes and the accommodations made for me benefit everyone else. It makes it more accessible for everyone not just to someone with a disability.”

Music Makers Mentee, 2021

Research: Study 1

A survey examining barriers to Deaf and Disabled persons' participation in the Victorian music industry

The following refers to an online survey distributed by Arts Access Victoria in April/May 2021.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included 41 anonymous survey respondents (19 Women, 13 Men, 7 Non-Binary, 2 Prefer not to say). Information regarding the age of all participants was not collected. All participants were recruited through the Arts Access Victoria e-newsletter, the 2021 Music Makers mentorship program, social media posts, and word of mouth. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives to complete the survey or the interview were offered.

Materials

In order to evaluate the current experience of people identifying as d/Deaf or disabled within the music industry, Arts Access Victoria (2021) created an online SurveyMonkey questionnaire comprised of 14 questions of both quantitative and qualitative nature. The survey was anonymous, and participants could elect to skip any questions they were not comfortable answering. Assistance with filling out the survey was offered by Arts Access Victoria. The data collected included questions about the participants' self-identification as d/Deaf and/or disabled, what disabilities and/or impairments they experienced, their gender identity, their role/s within the music industry, barriers they had faced to participation in the music industry both in person and online, and their experience with maintaining industry involvement during COVID-19. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix B.

Procedure

Survey links were distributed via the Arts Access Victoria e-newsletter, social media posts, and word of mouth. Participants filled out the survey at a time that suited them. Data was cleaned by removing participants who didn't match the selection criteria. Thematic coding was used to establish overarching topics that were raised in response to the open-ended survey questions. This coding was then independently verified by another researcher. These topics were then used to inform categories on a spreadsheet that tracked if each participant mentioned the topic.

Results

The inclusion criteria for this study required that participants self-identify as d/Deaf or disabled, and actively participate in the music industry. Interestingly, four individuals who did not identify as d/Deaf or disabled, and reported no ongoing experience of any type of illness or neurodiversity, (1 Woman, 1 Man, 2 Prefer not to say) responded to the study. These participants were segregated from the main cohort. One individual (identifying as a man) who did not participate in the music industry also completed the survey and was excluded from analysis.

Demographics, Deafness & Disability

After removing respondents who were not music industry participants, did not identify as Deaf or Disabled, and reported no ongoing experience of any type of illness or neurodiversity, 36 participants remained (18 Women, 11 Men, 7 Non-binary). The majority of respondents (78%) reported more than one type of disability (e.g. "Chronic Illness and Mental Illness"). Mental Health/Illness was the most commonly reported type of disability (64%), followed by Chronic Illness (50%), Neurodiverse/Neurodivergent (33%), Physical (31%), Intellectual or Developmental (17%), Sensory (17%), Cognitive (8%) and Unsure (3%).

Music Industry Identities

Participants performed varying roles in the music industry, with approximately 83% identifying as Musicians, and 61% holding more than one role within the industry (e.g. "Musician and Tour Manager"). Other identities and their frequency include Composer (31%), Producer (17%), Artist Manager (14%), Publicist (14%), Photographer (14%), Sound Engineer (11%), Arranger (8%), Tour Manager (6%), Booking Agent (3%), and Other (28%).

Barriers – General and Online

Results from the survey show that of 36 people who identify as Deaf or Disabled, 35 (97%) have reported experiencing barriers to participation in the music industry. Self-Confidence was the most commonly reported barrier (67%), followed by financial barriers (64%), and Attitude/Inexperience of others (56%). Transport, Social, Programming, and Self-Management barriers were all experienced at the same rate (42%). Technical Skills (36%) and Physical (31%) barriers were the least frequently encountered.

A figure for total barriers encountered was calculated by gender group, with women reported experiencing the highest number of barriers (51%), followed by non-binary people (49%), and men (25%). The only barrier that men reported experiencing at higher rates than the other groups was Social (Men – 45%, Women – 44%, Non-binary 29%). Non-binary people reported the highest rates of experiencing Physical (57%), Communication (29%), Education (57%), and Programming (71%) barriers. Women reported the highest rates of encountering barriers related to Transport (56%), Technical (50%), Financial (72%), Self-Confidence (78%), Self-Management (50%), and Attitude/Inexperience of Others (72%).

When examining experiences specific to online music making and industry engagement, 70% of participants reported encountering barriers. Social barriers were the most commonly reported (44%), followed by Self-Confidence (33%), Financial (33%), Technical Skills (31%), and Inaccessible Content (14%). Thirty-one percent of participants reported that they did not experience any barriers related to online engagement with the music industry.

Non-binary people reported the highest rates of online-specific barriers in every category (Inaccessible Content – 29%, Social – 57%, Self-Confidence – 57%, Financial – 43%, and Technical Skills – 43%).

As a follow up to the questions about barriers (both online and general), participants were asked an open-ended question about what the Victorian music industry could do to become more inclusive of their particular needs. The three most commonly cited themes were changes to event venues, dismantling stigma around disability, and making adjustments to event programming. A comprehensive list of feedback for the industry is available in Appendix A.

COVID-19

A majority of survey participants (83%) reported that COVID-19 had impacted their ability to participate in the music industry. Over half (53%) said they had fewer opportunities and gigs, about a third (31%) experienced financial difficulties, and 19% reported increased social isolation as a result of the pandemic. Almost half (42%) of participants noted that their prior experiences with Deafness or disability had helped them navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, with 17% citing this was due to experience with prior isolation, and having pre-existing mental health or medical supports in place. Experience working from home (11%) was another helpful skill when navigating the pandemic. Four participants (11%) also reported experiencing benefits from the slower pace of life and the improved access that was a result of physical lockdowns.

Interpretation of Findings

The present research shone a light on the experiences of people identifying as Deaf and/or Disabled, and the barriers they have encountered whilst operating within the Victorian music industry, both pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. It also sought to provide a platform for participants' suggestions and requests related to improving the current state of accessibility. With all but one participant reporting that they have experienced barriers to access, the results of this survey support previous findings that many impediments still affect access to the music industry for people who are Deaf and/or Disabled (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020; Collett, 2018; Attitude is Everything, 2019).

The vast majority of our sample identified more than one type of disability, with "Mental Health/Illness being the most prevalent disability mentioned, followed by Chronic Illness and Neurodiverse/Neurodivergent issues. This

supports the view that disability, while often invisible, can be both complex and intersectional in nature, affecting people in myriad ways and requiring differing accommodations on a case-by-case basis (Attitude is Everything, 2019). The Victorian music industry must consider accessibility through this lens, rather than make sweeping and broad generalisations over what constitutes “access” for any particular individual.

While “Musician” was the most commonly held role within the study’s participants, over half of the sample performed more than one job in the music industry (e.g., “Musician and Publicist”). It can be inferred that with the addition of each role comes a new set of challenges and potential difficulties in achieving equitable access, e.g., a musician would face a different set of working conditions to a Music Photographer or Artist Manager. Due to the high level of overlapping roles in such a small sample, further research is recommended to identify if particular barriers are occurring at higher rates in specific subsections of the industry. A better understanding of the prevalence of these issues will allow a more tailored allocation of resources and targeted education for others working in the same field.

The most common accessibility barrier experienced across the sample was Self Confidence, indicating that a large number of people identifying as Deaf or Disabled do not feel equipped within themselves to participate in the industry, and/or to ask for what they require. There are many possible reasons for this, including the experience of other barriers, such as the Attitude/Inexperience of others, which was the third most frequently cited challenge. Several participants mentioned encountering stigma related to disability, as well as a feeling that disability and accommodations that can increase access are generally not well understood or practiced by people without disabilities.

In this study, gender differences in the experience of barriers to industry participation were prevalent, with participants identifying as women and non-binary experiencing barriers at a rate of approximately twice that of men. Out of twelve barriers, men experienced only one category – Social – at a marginally higher rate than the other groups, and with such a small and unmatched sample group, it could be argued that the one percent difference was not significantly different enough to interpret. Non-binary people were most significantly affected by barriers to online participation, with the highest rates of impact across every category. As gender inequality within the music industry is well-established (Triple J Hack, 2020), it must be considered as an intersectional force at play affecting accessibility for non-males identifying as Deaf and Disabled.

In line with recent research (Strong, 2020) that has shown a reduction in music-related income of people who identify as “functionally impaired” during COVID-19, a high number of participants in the current study reported that the pandemic impacted their music industry participation. In particular, participants experienced reduced opportunities, gigs, and financial difficulties due to the repeated lockdowns of 2020 in Melbourne and Regional Victoria. Out of the categories relating to the effects of COVID-19, “Social Isolation” was one of the less frequently cited. This may tie in with the prior experiences and skillsets of people who have experienced isolation due to disability-related reasons (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020), and have taken steps to overcome these issues.

Some respondents reported feeling that they were particularly well-equipped to navigate the changes that COVID-19 brought to the world, as a result of pre-existing mental health supports, being used to working from home, having “social isolation” be a regular part of their lives pre-COVID, and already having established networks and social connections online. The reported experience of having a high level of established networks and connections online is supported by the findings of higher online engagement by NAPS (2019). Several survey respondents also reported that due to the slower pace of life that came with lockdown, they were better able to manage their disabilities, chronic illnesses and pain.

The findings of this research provided a jumping off point for a more in-depth examination of what is preventing the high level of accessibility and inclusion that the Victorian music industry and its participants deserve. It is important to ask not only how the music industry can assist Deaf and Disabled people, but acknowledge that many members of the community have a level of resilience and skills that would be beneficial for the rest of the industry to learn from. This study was a starting point in providing a voice and platform for Deaf and Disabled people who are experiencing inequitable conditions, and helped to provide context for the more in-depth interviews that comprise Study 2.

97%

Of survey respondents reported encountering barriers to access in the Victorian Music Industry

83%

Reported the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their ability to participate in the music industry

Most Common Barriers Reported



67%

Self-Confidence



64%

Financial



56%

Attitudes of Others

“For a very long time, I just thought there was no way that I could be a successful singer, while also being proudly disabled and speaking out about having a disability.”

Music Maker Mentee

Research: Study 2

Disability in the Music Industry – Mentee Interviews

Part of the Music Makers research involved conducting interviews with each of the 10 mentees to gain a deeper understanding into their experiences with disability in the music industry. The primary goals of the interviews were to understand the experiences of disability within the music industry and to find ways in which the music industry could be more inclusive of their needs.

Method

Participants

Ten participants of the 2021 Arts Access Victoria “Music Makers” mentorship program were interviewed (5 Women; 5 Men). Participants in this program completed an application process to join the program, and were required to identify as d/Deaf or disabled. Information regarding the age of all participants was not collected. The Music Makers program was advertised through the Arts Access Victoria e-newsletter, social media posts, and word of mouth. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives to complete the survey or the interview were offered.

Materials

In order to evaluate the current experience of people identifying as d/Deaf or disabled within the music industry, Arts Access Victoria (2021) used a video-recorded interview conducted with each Music Makers program participant. Each interview consisted of 12 questions and ranged in length from around 20 minutes to one hour and fifteen minutes. Questions that were asked ranged from the impact their disability has on their daily lives, experiences in the music industry, access needs, and their interpretation of what disability means to them. Also included were questions about online music participation, software or programs used to remove barriers and advice for other people with disabilities. A copy of the interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

Procedure

Participants scheduled their interviews with the researcher at times that suited them, and interviews were completed in-person or online over Zoom. The audio files from the qualitative interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai, and thematic coding was used to establish overarching topics that were raised in response to the set questions. These topics were then used to inform categories on a spreadsheet that tracked if each participant spoke about the topic.

Results & Interpretations

The types of disability ranged from physical, sensory, neurological, invisible, mental illness and chronic illness. The breadth of responses was a reflection of the diversity of the experiences of the participants. While it is important to understand common themes, it is also necessary to recognise the diversity of disability, and that everyone's needs and experiences are unique. It is also worthy to note that one's disability and needs can be fluid, circumstantial, and shift on a day-to-day basis. As one participant points out:

"We all have different experiences, we all have different needs, and we have different needs on different days."

Common Themes



We Hide our Disabilities

The most common theme which emerged throughout the participants' responses, regardless of their type of disability, was the experience of hiding or masking their disability.

"I hid it in all ways that I could, made sure that if I was going on a stage that I couldn't access that the audience were not there when I got onto the stage, got band members to lift me onstage in a hidden way. if I ever met a manager or prospective manager or prospective record label, I would make sure I was sitting down."

These are seen as a coping mechanism to protect oneself from the stigma, bias and discrimination that people with disability face within our society:

"We live in a world where these conditions are not always very well understood. And definitely not always welcome in society."

And these sentiments which are experienced across the wider society are felt strongly within the music industry:

"For a very long time, I just thought that there was no way that I could be a successful singer, whilst also being proudly disabled and speaking out about having a disability."

"I think that's the struggle, the pressure to be really strong and not show your weaknesses."

We Adapt

It was interesting to note that when asked what access requirements were needed or what could be used to remove barriers, many participants responded how they have adapted to the challenges they faced, rather than what external changes would make access easier for them.

"I adapted. The challenge is not being able to play an instrument live really well, but being able to do it okay with one hand."

"You have no choice but to adapt. If you want to do something you have to adapt to however you can to fit in that situation."

Focus was often on how they manage the challenges with some even stating they were only just learning what their access requirements are:

“I’m still on this kind of magical journey at the moment of discovering what my access requirements actually are.”

While this shows the strength and resilience of individuals with disability, it also suggests that because people are not given adequate support or their needs are not met, the onus is on the individual to adapt to the barriers they face. It is important to celebrate the achievements of these individuals, but to recognise that where one has had to independently overcome challenges, it is often due to lack of support.

Understand our Challenges

When asked ‘What do you wish people understand about your experiences?’, the most common response was based around recognising and acknowledging the challenges people with disability face.

“I wish they understood how much work I have to put in.”

“It’s very difficult to explain to people just how bad the difficulties can be.”

“I appreciate who I am but my disability is a constant reminder that I don’t have the same abilities as a lot of other people.”

These responses highlight the need for representation, sharing the voices and stories of people with disability within the music industry to gain true understanding of the challenges they face. One of the participants pointed to the need for people to speak up in order to create change:

“I would just want them to know that the challenges are real. And the more we all speak up about it and make change, the better it’s going to be for everybody”.

We Want to Feel Valid

When asked about the type of challenges faced in the music industry, many participants described the psychological impact of not feeling worthy, valid and lacking confidence within the industry:

"I felt like I had to work incredibly hard to, hopefully one day feel like I had permission to just be in the room alongside my peers."

"I didn't see myself as like a real musician or like a real person who was able to do all these all these things."

One participant drew attention to the reason many people feel they are not worthy or valid of being in the industry is due to the lack of representation of people with disability:

"I held so much internal ableism because there was nothing that represented me as a musician or an artist. I was very afraid."

Getting Online

There were two different themes which emerged when asked the question "Does your disability impact your ability to share music online?". The first was that the majority of the participants (70%) responded "no", with some going further to claim that having sharing music online has given them greater access to a larger community and audience.

"Through COVID I've realized how we can be more accessible through the digital world. I just think that that's such a great way to reach audiences that might not be able to come to live music."

Of those that responded 'yes', one of the challenges related to challenges of sharing videos due to blindness, and the other two responses related to self-confidence and time management.

"I would spend all day working on music and then still feel like not worthy of putting anything online."

Don't Let it Stop You

When asked what advice the participants would give to other people with disability in the music industry many mentioned the encouragement of perseverance, patience, acceptance and confidence in voicing your needs.

"Don't let it stop you like, it's only a barrier and it's only an obstacle if you make it one."

"Don't give up, you know, it's all small steps. Everything takes time."

"You have incredible value, your talent is worthy of being on stage, and it's okay to state you're accessing accessibility requirements."

What Does Disability Mean to You?

When asked “What does disability mean to you?” the responses varied drastically, from those that did not identify with the word or found it offensive, to others who embraced it, seeing it as a space of pride and identity.

“I feel like I’m a person or a ‘normal person,’ that just happens to be a little d/Deaf. I don’t feel disabled.”

“It’s just the easiest way to explain to people more that I might have needed a bit of extra support or extra help. And people, they turn, they don’t, they don’t mess around when you drop the big day, you know, I mean when you drop the D word like people sit up and take notice.”

Study 2 – Recommendations

Awareness, Representation & Education

Across the board mentees called for greater representation of d/Deaf and disabled people in the music industry. In their terms, this would involve:

- More opportunities for d/Deaf and disabled music workers
- Greater disabled representation within mainstream media
- Platforming disabled people within the music industry

They also touched on the need for education within the sector to improve understanding, reduce harm and combat stigma. This included:

- Disability awareness training for music industry and venue staff
- Public awareness campaigns more broadly for patrons
- AUSLAN training within the music industry

Lastly, four key points of access were emphasised to be improved:

- Greater physical access within venues and music spaces
- Better management of noise levels in both venues and rehearsal spaces
- Funding for AUSLAN interpreting at events
- Accessibility of online platforms

“I felt like I had to work incredibly hard to, hopefully one day feel like I had permission to just be in the room alongside my peers.”

Music Maker Mentee, 2021

Research: Study 3

The Online Accessibility of Melbourne Music Venues

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption to the Victorian music industry. While many live music opportunities have been postponed, paused or ceased to exist entirely, much has shifted online. The demand for offerings such as 'live-streaming' or online interviews with artists has increased dramatically as audiences seek out socially-distanced ways of interacting with the music scene. Within this rapid shift to create and share online, many elements of accessibility were improved. These included the ready availability of online networking events, 'Zoom' options for typically in-person meetings, and the ability to watch a performance from the safety of one's home. As venues begin to re-open and host gigs for live audiences again, however, the lack of accessibility for those people still unable to attend gigs in person is returning to that which it was pre-pandemic.

To date, no studies have investigated the online accessibility of Victorian and/or Australian music venues and their associated music communities. From this, the question remains – how accessible is the live music community to an online audience? To begin exploring this question, Study 3 sought to audit the online accessibility of music venues within the City of Melbourne. A range of categories were selected to represent a variety of barriers Deaf or Disabled people may face when attempting to integrate with an increasingly digital music world.

Method

Venue Selection

A database of over 700 registered Victorian live music venues was supplied by Music Victoria. As it was not possible to assess all venues within Victoria under the funding and timing provided, a smaller, representative pool was chosen - music venues within the municipality of the City of Melbourne (City of Melbourne, 2021). Of these 111 venues, those without an online presence or who had ceased trading were removed, resulting in 107 music venues for analysis.

Procedure

Online accessibility was assessed across two areas; the venues website content and social media presence. All 107 venues had an active social media presence, either on Instagram, Facebook or both, while only 97 had active websites available for analysis.

To hone the scope of the study, key areas of accessibility were chosen. Collectively, they represent a wide range of barriers that Deaf and/or Disabled people may experience when interacting with the online music community. These categories ranged from ALT text to captioning, the definitions of which are each outlined below in full.

Where hidden from view, the accessibility of online content was analysed using specialist websites recommended by W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative. A comprehensive list of sites and tools, including those used in this study, can be found here: <https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG21/quickref/>. All other categories were assessed based on the on visibility of content (e.g. whether or not captions were visibly present on social media videos).

Results

Access Information

To allow individuals to make informed decisions about attending a venue or its events, detailed access information should be outlined for patrons to access. Without this, people may attend an event that is not accessible to them, with the potential to cause harm. Examples include a failure to notify patrons of wheelchair accessible entrances, down to event specifics such as the use of strobe lighting. To obtain a baseline, each venue's website was searched for a general section on accessibility.

Results: Of the 97 websites, 27 (27.8%) contained information on the venue's accessibility, the degree of which varied widely. Examples of brevity include:

"The club is situated in a basement and we do not have disabled access. We can assist guests down the stairs upon arrival if they wish."

However, others exceeded expectations, with one small Melbourne venue supplying a downloadable, screen-reader friendly form containing detailed access information and accompanying images to assist with venue navigation.

ALT Text

ALT or 'alternative' text refers to embedded, hidden descriptions given to an image, allowing screen readers to accurately read out what the image displays. According to WCAG guidelines, descriptions should serve the "equivalent purpose" as the image, to ensure access equality (WCAG 2.0, 2016b).

Results: Of the 97 websites available, nine used ALT text on their images (9.3%), while none of the 107 used ALT text across their social media.

Captions

Captions are text descriptions displayed on videos to provide d/D/Deaf and hard-of-hearing people with vital information as to the audio content. The display is synchronised with the audio and includes both speech and non-speech information to convey the meaning (Henry, 2021; Speechpad, 2013). While captions primarily serve the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community, their use also improves access for a range of people with disabilities, from neurodivergent to cognitive.

Results: Five (4.7%) of the 107 music venues used captioning on their social media video content.

Field Labels

Form field labels are content labels coded into the backend of a website to outline the content of a website "form" or content area. For example, they may indicate that the field is a 'contact' form to be completed. These labels can be read aloud by screen-readers, to assist in page navigation (Eggert & Abou-Zahra 2019). The absence of appropriate form field labels is listed as a "10/10 violation" by WCAG checker Web Accessibility due to the difficult their absence creates for blind and low-vision users.

Results: The presence of form field labels was assessed using online software, Web Accessibility (www.webaccessibility.com). Of the 97 music venues, 58 (60%) used form field labels, however, the appropriateness of their descriptions was not assessed.

Image Descriptions

Image descriptions are a visual, text-based description that accompany visual content. They outline both the content and context of the image, which can then be read aloud by a screen-reader (American Anthropological Association, 2019). In this way, they extend access to individuals who are blind, low-vision and low-tech users, however, they also give sighted, disabled viewers additional to support in processing the content.

Results: No image descriptions were visible across any music venues website or social media content.

Text contrast

To ensure text visibility for individuals with low-vision, the contrast between text and its surrounding background must meet a certain threshold (Vision Australia). According to WCAG, the minimum accessible contrast ratio is 4.5:1, to be met on most occasions excluding a handful of exceptions (see WCAG 2.0, 2016 for full details).

To test the contrast ratio of each venue's website, online analyser "Ally" was used (<https://color.a11y.com/Contrast/>). A venues website was only deemed 'passed' if all text-to-background colour ratios met the WCAG standard. Where one or more colour pairings did not meet the criterion, a 'fail' was noted.

Results: Of the 97 music venues, 47 (48.5%) used text-to-background colour contrasts greater or equal to 4.5:1.

Web Accessibility Score

Lastly, as an indication of overall web accessibility, each venues website was passed through online checker, www.webaccessibility.com. From this, an overall score was presented, as well as the number of "access violations" (e.g., lack of form field labels) as captured by the checker.

Results: The average accessibility score of music venue websites according to "Web Accessibility" was 81.9 (min = 72, max = 92). The average amount of access violations 20.6, though they ranged from 0 to as high as 142 violations on a single website.

Summary of Findings

Considering the significant need for the music industry to exist safely online in a post-pandemic environment, steps must be taken to ensure the online space is accessible and inclusive. The results of this study indicate Melbourne music venues have a long way to go in creating inclusion online. Social media access, for example, was significantly lacking with no venues using ALT text or image descriptions that would make content available to blind and low-vision people, while only 5% using captioning on video content, excluding the Deaf community in 95% of cases. For website access, results were marginally better, with 9.7% using ALT text, but other aspects, such as appropriate colour contrast between text and background, left a lot to be answered for. This included the provision of any access information on venues' websites, with less than a third doing so, and to degrees often unusable by patrons.

While collectively these results appear despondent, they also represent a huge area for growth in the sector. To the team's awareness, the study is a first in the Victorian music industry to place a quantifiable number on online accessibility. Though caution must be taken in extrapolating the results given their metropolitan demographic and use of online, albeit WCAG-recommended platforms, they create a baseline from which targets can be set. It is the recommendation of the team that leading music organisations consider setting annual KPI's and targets for online accessibility within the music sector. In doing so, the necessary steps in venue empowerment, education and awareness can be laid out to achieve these. It would also help in reporting these figures back to the community more broadly as a show of support to d/Deaf and disabled music workers who are consistently asking for more representation, inclusion, and awareness.

Unlike physical changes in venue, the adjustments required to make our online music spaces more inclusive to Deaf and Disabled people come at minimal-to-no cost. With an industry-led, disability-informed response, it is our belief that these areas of access can be quickly adjusted, making the online Victorian music space one that is much safer, and more inviting, for all disabled music workers.

Are we accessible online?

Of the Melbourne music venues tested, none used ALT text or image descriptions on social media, and only 5% captioned their video content.

Less than half met the text contrast ratio required to make their website accessible to blind and low-vision people.

Research

Overall Summary and Conclusions

From the results of this research, it has become clear that most aspects of the Victorian music industry, including music venues, have a long way to go in terms of meeting the standards set out in The Disability Discrimination Act (1992), or following Music Victoria's "Best Practice Guidelines for Live Music Venues – Making your venue accessible". Some basic changes that are low-cost or free but can make a big difference in accessibility include providing access information on event advertisements, using Plain English on websites, on event advertisements, and at the venue, sending out Access Riders to performers, setting aside reserved seating near the stage for anyone who needs it, and providing contact details for venues where the public can reach them to discuss accessibility 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.

"Assume that people are diverse, instead of assuming they're all capable."

– anonymous survey participant.

One of the most commonly received pieces of feedback from participants involved in this research was the importance of increased education and understanding regarding disability in the music industry. Venues and other industry workers need to be made aware of the many challenges facing people who identify as d/Deaf and disabled in order to respond to them and take steps towards creating a more inclusive industry. Participants in the Music Makers program, as well as survey respondents, highlighted the importance of disability training for music industry and venue staff, public awareness campaigns more broadly for patrons, and AUSLAN training within the music industry. Greater education and understanding about the challenges, as well as their solutions, will fuel the necessary systemic change that can combat stigma and encourage participation for people from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Participants often mentioned physical access of venues as impeding their ability to partake in live music events. Problems with buildings, such as narrow doorways, steps, and inaccessible toilets were mentioned, as were sensory-related issues, such as strobe lighting, lighting that was too dark, noise levels of musicians (in rehearsal spaces and at gigs), interstitial ("house") music, and extreme temperatures, all of which can exacerbate symptoms of certain disabilities. The late starting time of most music events also makes it impossible for those using public transport to attend, and late finishes can leave people feeling vulnerable, endangered, and anxious when traveling home.

Mental Illness in particular is an issue which 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). While the importance of treatment is recognised by mental health crisis support and relief organisations such as Entertainment Assist and Support Act, it would be beneficial for general members of the Victorian music industry to undergo training which emphasises viewing mental illness through the lens of ongoing disability. Increased understanding of the varied manifestations of mental illness, the way it can impact work and creativity, and how best to accommodate people who are struggling is incredibly important to reduce harm. By increasing the sensitivity and empathy of industry workers who likely know at least one person dealing with ongoing mental health issues, the industry can become a more supportive, inclusive, and connected community.

While COVID-19 brought many challenges upon the music industry, for people living with and without disability, it also encouraged creative problem solving from the community. Venues that adapted to offer livestreamed gigs were able to break through the barriers that home-bound people had been experiencing long before the pandemic, making live music performances accessible to everyone with an internet connection. As live gigs begin again, it is important to be cognisant of increasing venue website accessibility, as noted by Study 3. It is a recommendation of this report 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, and that the steps taken forward in response to the pandemic are not abandoned once the music industry is operating at full capacity again.

“You have to see it to be it.” – unknown

The topic of representation was raised repeatedly throughout the data collection of this project. Across the board, mentees called for greater representation of d/Deaf and disabled people in the music industry. In their terms, this would involve: more opportunities for d/Deaf and disabled music workers, greater disabled representation within mainstream media, and platforming disabled people within the music industry. It is a recommendation of this study that mentorship programs continue to be funded as a highly effective way to build community and showcase role models for d/Deaf and disabled musicians and industry members. Another meaningful way to acknowledge the existence and experience of d/Deaf music industry participants is to allocate funding for AUSLAN interpreting at more events.

With the results of the aforementioned studies in mind, the Victorian music industry can begin to address the barriers to participation that d/Deaf and disabled people encounter, with solutions informed by those people with first-hand lived experience. By improving awareness and education surrounding challenges related to disability, the industry can unite to dismantle the systems that perpetuate the exclusion of a vibrant and enthusiastic group of people that have a wealth of skills, creativity, and knowledge to contribute to the music scene. The inclusion of these groups will facilitate an even more diverse, vibrant, and productive industry, cementing Melbourne and Victoria as leading music regions in not only Australia, but the world.

Limitations

All research is, by nature, a learning experience, and is limited by certain factors that can be improved upon in future endeavours.

Limitations – Study 1

Limitations of this study include a small (N = 36) sample size, unequal gender groups, and few distribution channels for recruitment. The nature of the design (electronic survey) also limited results by not requiring an answer to every question, and the inability to ask participants to elaborate or clarify answers. In addition, while a phone number was provided to contact Arts Access Victoria for alternative formats, there was no opportunity for participants to anonymously contact researchers if there were any comprehension issues related to survey questions.

Limitations – Study 2

A small sample size of ten participants limited the findings of the interviews. A follow up study including more in-person interviews would be beneficial to collect more data from a wider variety of personal experiences.

Limitations – Study 3

While the results of this study represent a start in assessing the accessibility of the online music community, there are limitations to keep in mind. Firstly, the figures are taken from central metropolitan venues, and caution should be used when applying them to a broader Victorian music community. Secondly, for results that could not be seen by eye, independent web-based software was required. As such, how these sites were analysed in depth was not available to the research team, and flaws may enter the data. However, without access to each venues website, using WCAG recommended software was the chosen work-around to obtain a baseline of results. The audit relating to online accessibility of venues was also restricted to venues located within the City of Melbourne as a result of both limited time and funding. The researchers encourage a more thorough audit in future that will include venues across Metropolitan Melbourne and Regional Victoria, and will also include in-person accessibility inventories.

**“Disabled musicians
have real value.
They are incredibly
talented and have
unique perspectives
that ought to be
shared and heard.”**

Music Maker Mentee, 2021

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Appendix A

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/Disabled 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 PWD 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/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/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/bulky 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/cochlear 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/microwave access for heating heat packs
- Non-alcoholic rider options
- Offering companion card tickets to gigs and making the ticketing workable (not 1 companion per booking regardless of the number of tickets being booked)
- Stating accessibility information in the events on FB/ticketing pages

Appendix B

Online Survey: Disability in the Music Industry

Welcome!

This survey was created by Arts Access Victoria to ask Victorian music workers (e.g. sound engineer, musician) about their experience of D/Deafness and/or disability in the music industry.

We use the term 'D/Deaf and Disabled people' in line with the Social Model of Disability. We use this definition as an act of pride and solidarity.

The term 'D/Deaf and Disabled people' includes anyone with a lived experience of disability. Disability may be any of the following, and we encourage all with lived-experience to participate:

- Visible or invisible;
- Sensory or physical;
- Neurodiverse;
- Cognitive;
- Intellectual or developmental; or
- Mental health or illness

The survey does not ask for your contact information, and all responses are stored anonymously. You are welcome to skip any questions that you do not want to answer.

Fourteen questions will be asked, taking approximately 5-10 minutes of your time. If you would like support in completing it, or access to alternate formats, please contact Arts Access Victoria at Info@artsaccess.com.au or 03 9699 8299.

1. Do you identify as D/Deaf?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say
- Unsure

2. Do you identify as disabled?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say
- Unsure

3. What is your disability (select all that apply):

- None
- Sensory
- Physical
- Intellectual or developmental
- Chronic illness
- Mental health or illness
- Visible
- Cognitive
- Neurodiverse/neurodivergent
- Invisible
- Unsure
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please describe):

4. What is your role in the music industry?

- Musician
- Producer
- Sound Engineer
- Composer
- Arranger
- Artist Manager
- Tour Manager
- Booking Agent
- Publicist
- Photographer
- Other (please describe):

5. Have you experienced any of the following barriers when participating in the music industry?

- Physical (e.g. lack of wheelchair access)
- Education (e.g. educators not understanding your needs)
- Social (lack of networking opportunities)
- Programming (e.g. length of event)
- Communication (e.g. lack of interpreting)
- Technical Skills (e.g. not knowing how to use technology)
- Self-management (e.g. difficulty getting places on time)
- Attitude/inexperience of others (e.g. inappropriate questions that can make you feel uncomfortable or unsafe)
- Financial (e.g. cost of equipment being too high)
- Self-confidence (e.g. not feeling comfortable to state your needs)
- Transport (e.g. difficulty transporting instruments)
- None
- Other (please describe):

6. Have you experienced any barriers when participating in the music industry that are specific to being online?

(select all that apply)

- Financial (e.g. cost of computer or internet access being too high)
- Social (e.g. not having a person to meet, call or email to ask questions)
- Inaccessible content (e.g. lack of captioning)
- Technical skills (e.g. not knowing how to use technology)
- Self-confidence (e.g. lacking skills or confidence when using technology)
- None
- Other (please describe):

7. With the barriers you have encountered in mind, how can the music industry change to become more inclusive of your needs? (If you have not encountered barriers, please skip):

8. Are there any innovative programs, equipment or software you use to help remove barriers to online music participation (e.g. transcription or interpreting software)? Please list them below:

9. Are there any organisations or programs that you know of that help remove barriers to music participations? Please list them below:

10. Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your ability to participate in the music industry?

- No
- Unsure
- Yes (please describe the impact):

11. Have your prior experiences with D/Deafness or disability helped you navigate the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. pre-existing connection with mental health resources, being used to working from home)?

- No
- I do not identify as D/Deaf/disabled
- Yes (please describe):

12. What advice would you share with other D/Deaf or disabled music workers?

13. What is your gender?

- Woman
- Non-binary/gender diverse
- Man
- Prefer not to say
- Other, please tell us:

14. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about disability, D/Deafness, and the music industry?

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences and ideas with us!

Appendix C

Mentee Interviews: Disability in the Music Industry

Interview Questions:

1. Can you please state your name and your involvement within the music industry?
E.g. musician/composer/music photographer.
2. Can you tell me a bit about your disability and the impact it has on your day to day life?
3. How do you think your identity as a D/Deaf or Disabled artist influence your music?
4. What would you say are the biggest challenges you face within the music industry in regard to your disability?
5. What access requirements do you require to work best within the music industry?
6. What access allowance has made the most positive impact on your career in music.
7. What do wish people understood about your experience as a disabled artist?
8. What advice would you give to D/Deaf or Disabled people in the music industry?
9. How can the music industry be more inclusive of your needs?
10. Does your D/Deafness or Disability impact your ability to create or share music online?
11. Are there any innovative programs, equipment or software you use to help remove barriers to online music participation?
12. What does disability mean to you?

Appendix D

Directory of Victoria Disability Music Organisations

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

Aardvark Music

www.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

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 d/Deaf and Disabled Victorians.

Choose Art

www.ChooseArt.com.au

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

JOLT Arts

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.

Loom Arts and Management

www.loom.org.au

Loom is a not for profit that works with and for artists with disability and the broader arts industry to increase representation, access and inclusion. Loom offers agency representation, career development support and a range of consultative services.

Off The List Records

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

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

www.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

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 people with disabilities.

Wild at Heart Community Arts

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.

MUSIC MAKERS

Arts Access Victoria
2021

