Creative Change Project

How Community Music Creates Greater Social Equity in Remote Outback Towns by Promoting Stronger Connections to People, Community, Place, and Stories

Insights From the Creative Change Project's Case Study of Community Music-Making and Queensland Music Festival's Outback Trails in Charleville and Cunnamulla, Queensland, Australia

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We acknowledge the Yugarabul, Yuggera, Jagera, and Turrbal peoples, who are the traditional custodians of the lands on which we have housed this project at Griffith University. We pay respect to the Elders, past and present, and extend that respect to traditional custodians of the lands where we have worked across the country, including the Bidjara, Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Gunaikurnai, Kunja, Ngarluma, Wadawurrung, Wurundjeri, and Yindjibarndi Peoples. We also pay our respects to our First Nations team members, Advisory Group members, Elders and Cultural Advisors, partners, and project participants.

CULTURAL CARE WARNING: First Nations readers are advised that this report may contain images of people who have passed away.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the ARC nor the project's partners.

Front cover image

Light It Up as part of Queensland Music Trails' Outback Trail in Cunnamulla, 2023. Image by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet

For additional information on the Creative Change Project

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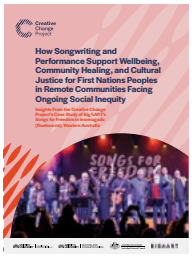
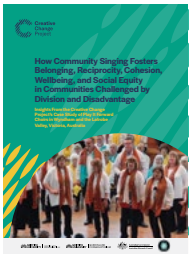
About this report

This report has been prepared for a general readership of musicians, community members, sector leaders, government departments, funders, and colleagues from diverse industries and disciplines, along with those with a general interest in harnessing the power of music to support social change in their communities.

The Creative Change Project has a wider suite of resources and outputs, all publicly available, including peer-reviewed academic articles, book chapters, conference presentations, videos, creative outputs, and the doctoral thesis accompanying this summary report. These can be found on the Creative Change Project's resources page:

Other case study reports from the Creative Change Project





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Executive Summary

Community music can play a crucial role in creating a greater sense of belonging, social connection, and social equity in Outback Queensland. Insights featured in this report come from an in-depth community music study in the remote towns of Charleville and Cunnamulla, Queensland, as one of the Creative Change Project's four major case studies. Together, these case studies provide a comprehensive investigation into the role that community music plays in creating greater social equity in Australian communities, particularly in contexts of entrenched disadvantage.

Charleville and Cunnamulla were chosen as distinct yet interconnected outback communities with histories of thriving community arts scenes and creative and entrepreneurial initiatives, alongside commonplace challenges associated with remote living, including limited access to essential services, employment opportunities, and education, which can manifest in social isolation, economic hardship, and disparities in health equity. Both towns have also been key locations on Queensland Music Festival's (QMF) Outback Trail, a cross-sectoral cultural tourism initiative that features a trail of events that seek to generate cultural, social, and economic benefits for regional Queensland communities.

This case study used an arts-based ethnographic approach and was conducted in close collaboration with QMF, local governments, and community stakeholders in both towns. Data were generated through engagement with 170 community members, musicians, and tourists via formal and informal interviews, focus groups, informal conversations, and participant observation.

Key insights from this case study centre on the state of the community music ecosystem in Charleville and Cunnamulla; the ways in which community music fosters connections to people, community, place, and stories; and how this contributes to creating social equity in these communities.

1. Outback community music ecosystems

There is a rich and interconnected ecosystem of community music in Charleville and Cunnamulla, with local musicians and audiences activating a range of sites and venues with music-making, and past activities shaping and influencing current and future activities. Visiting musicians and tourists also play an important role in this ecosystem as both peers and collaborator to local musicians and as audiences for music events.

2. Connections to people

Community music provides opportunities for community members to experience positive interpersonal interactions with people both within and beyond the community and wider region, contributing to connections and individual and collective wellbeing.

3. Connections to community

Community music acts as a social magnet, a social lubricant, and social glue, creating opportunities for gathering with community, experiencing social cohesion, and fostering relationships that strengthen the social fabric of communities.

4. Connections to place

Community music creates opportunities to experience and express connections to place in embodied and collective ways. For community members, participating in community music fosters a sense of belonging, while for visitors, it is a valued opportunity to gain a deeper appreciation for the places they visit.

5. Connections to stories

Community music provides opportunities for locals and visitors to share and encounter diverse stories and perspectives. It can offer an embodied and aesthetically pleasurable way to understand stories other than our own and collectively explore new and emerging narratives as a community.

6. Creating social equity

Strong community music ecosystems help build social equity by creating spaces in which participants can reimagine and develop more equitable relationships. Embedding community music in cultural tourism initiatives can support greater and more equitably distributed economic outcomes in regional and remote communities.

Implications

Participation in community music supports individuals and communities in connecting with each other, their local areas, and shared stories, strengthening a sense of belonging.

Additionally, linking community music to cultural tourism can create deeper, more meaningful visitor experiences while delivering cultural, social, and economic benefits to local communities. In remote towns like Charleville and Cunnamulla, where populations are expected to decline and diversify, these insights offer creative ways to build resilience, enhance community sustainability, and promote social equity.

Visualising Our Creative Change Insights: Our Imagining Instrument

The Creative Change Project has sought to describe the relationship between music and social equity in ways that reflect music's creative, generative, adaptive, and iterative nature. We have created an 'imagining instrument' to help us show the dynamic and relational way music simultaneously works at individual and collective levels to create greater social equity. In each of our case studies, the surfaces of this 'imagining instrument' feature slightly different concepts, reflecting what emerged as significant in these place-based contexts and what was considered salient by our team members and their community collaborators. In all cases, the *relational* nature of this shape echoes the interconnected way that community music operates, whereby individual processes and outcomes are always connected to the collective and vice versa. The *continuous* nature of this shape reflects the temporal way music functions—blurring boundaries between past, present, and future. When making music, we are attuned to the present experience, but we also keep the sonic memories of the past in the loop and can imagine future potentialities at the same time. This shape also reminds us of the knock-on effect when internal or external disruptions have an adverse effect on the community music experience. Moreover, we find this shape evokes a certain wonder and curiosity that embodies the creative spirit of community music and speaks to its potential to advance social equity efforts in highly distinct ways.

As you read the insights of our suite of research reports, we encourage you to keep this 'imagining instrument' in mind and consider how the reported outcomes interact with one another in dynamic ways such that they are not isolated outcomes on a linear trajectory but rather reflective of a dynamic and relational process that is constantly unfolding.

Community music in the outback can provide important opportunities for community members to connect to other people, their local community, local places, and stories. These creative connections can enhance people's sense of belonging and, in the act of collectively making music together, provide opportunities to model more equitable relations between all involved. The insights also show how cultural tourism initiatives can hook into these community music experiences in ways that allow visitors to more meaningfully connect with outback people, stories, and places. Importantly, the insights show how these initiatives provide value-add opportunities for the communities themselves to connect with one another and amplify the cultural, social, and economic benefits that can be generated in their towns by engaging in these tourism offerings. This highlights the related ways in which community music can create spaces and occasions for building interpersonal and collective connections in ways that can create greater social equity in remote communities, where intergenerational socio-economic disadvantage has customarily been experienced.

Figure 1: Insights from this case study

Introduction

Creative Change Project

The Creative Change Project is an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship that has explored the role of community music in addressing social inequity across the country (www.creativechange.org.au). Based at the Creative Arts Research Institute and Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, the Creative Change Project has aimed to build on the mounting international evidence base that documents the social, emotional, physiological, cognitive, cultural, and economic benefits that can come from participating in music and how this might be harnessed to support real impact in contexts of entrenched social inequity (Bartleet & Heard, 2024; Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Heard et al., 2023).

Community music can be broadly defined as participatory music-making by, for, and/or with a community. At its heart, community music involves the creation of inclusive, locally embedded, and community-led opportunities for engagement in music. Rather than being characterised by a particular style, genre, medium, or aesthetic, community music is distinctively reflective of its cultural context and shaped by its participants and local setting. Given its focus on community agency, musical practices within this field customarily work to uphold values of inclusion, access, equity, justice, and self-determination (Bartleet, 2023).

For the Creative Change Project, social equity is about ensuring every person has the opportunities and resources to reach their fullest potential and live a fulfilled life. Inequity can be understood as differences in the resources, opportunities, rewards, and rights a person has based on their position within society, which lead to disparities in health and wellbeing that are unjust and avoidable. Structural systems of power (i.e. the way our society is organised and operates) cause certain groups to thrive at the expense of others. Social inequity has multiple and intersecting causes and symptoms such that to achieve equity, we must work across individual, community, and systemic levels.

This report features insights from one of four Creative Change Project case studies. This case study partnered with Queensland Music Festival (QMF) and worked with the communities in and around the towns of Charleville and Cunnamulla in South West Queensland. This case study was chosen because Charleville and Cunnamulla represent unique outback towns with well-known histories of healthy community arts ecologies, along with current creative and entrepreneurial initiatives that are unique to their geographical contexts. The towns are only 200 km apart, but they have distinct socio-economic challenges associated with the remoteness of their locations, including limitations in infrastructure, essential services, employment opportunities, and education pathways, which can result in social, economic, and health equity disparities. Both towns were also chosen as they have been prominent locations on QMF's Outback Trail, a cross-sectoral cultural tourism initiative designed to celebrate the cultural identity of the region with a trail of events that bring cultural, social, and economic benefits to remote and regional Queensland communities. Given the changes in the agricultural industry, tourism is recognised in both towns as a growing industry that is important for sustaining their economies.

Charleville and Cunnamulla: A Brief Introduction

Charleville[1] and Cunnamulla[2] are both remote towns located on the banks of the Warrego River in South West Queensland, roughly 750 km west of Meanjin (Brisbane). The region is characterised by mulga scrubland and floodplains and is susceptible to both drought and flooding.

The First Nations Peoples of the region were displaced by colonial settlers in the mid-1800s through the appropriation of land for pastoralism. This took place within the broader context of the British colonisation of Australia, regarded by many as an invasion because of the 'use of force, lack of negotiation with Aboriginal peoples, and the resistance that was mounted by Aboriginal peoples' (Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland, 2017, p. 5). The towns of Charleville and Cunnamulla were established as a result of settlements that formed at the intersections of major stock routes in the region. During this time, many local First Nations People relocated to 'station camps', often working for station owners and playing a vital role in the region's agricultural growth. The introduction of the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 by Queensland authorities resulted in further displacement of First Nations People, with many forcefully 'removed' to mission stations and reserves in other parts of the state (Frankland, 1994, pp. 3–5). First Nations *yumbas*, or 'fringe camps', were developed on the outskirts of many towns in the region and remain important cultural sites for community (McKellar, 1984).

1 The Creative Change Project makes every effort to recognise First Nations place names in their resources. There does not appear to be a widely recognised First Nations name for the town of Charleville itself, as the Bidjara language region also encompasses Charleville and the surrounding areas.
2 The word *Cunnamulla* means 'long stretch of water' or 'big waterhole' in the language of the Kunja People.

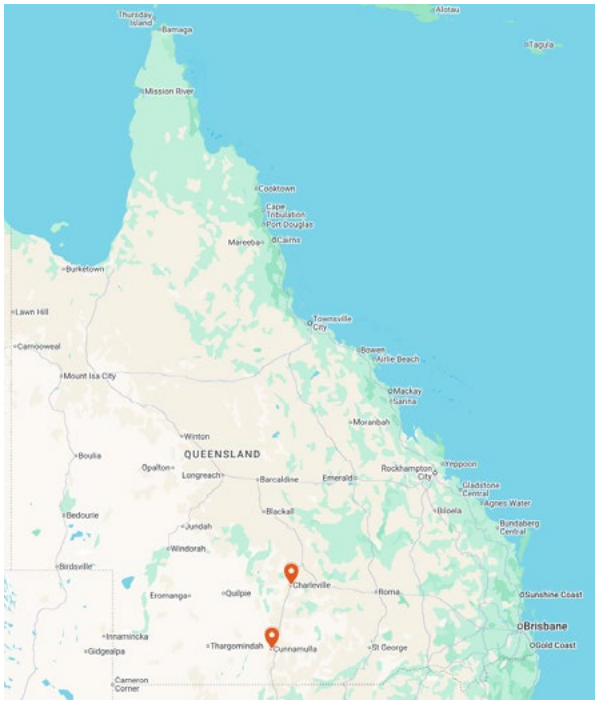

Figure 2: Map of Queensland showing Charleville and Cunnamulla. Sourced from Google Maps

Towns across Western Queensland flourished as the wool industry boomed, with the region's population peaking in the 1950s and 1960s. However, drought and changing economic conditions have since contributed to a gradual decline in the population. Agriculture continues to be a major industry of the region, with public service, health, and education also key employers. Tourism development is a key priority for the region at both local and state levels of government.

Both towns continue to function as community and service hubs for the broader population in the region. Each town has a public hospital that delivers hospital, community, and allied health services and home and community care support to the local community, supported by a local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and a number of other health service providers. The Royal Flying Doctor Service provides vital access to emergency healthcare through its aeromedical retrieval service.

Charleville, located on the land of the Bidjara People, is the largest town in Murweh Shire, which also includes the smaller towns of Augathella, Morven, and Cooladdi. It has

Figure 3: Wills Street, Charleville. Image by Flora Wong

a population of 2,992 people, 13.7% of whom identify as First Nations (ABS, 2021a). The town is serviced by four schools: a state primary school, a Catholic primary school, a state secondary school, and a state school of distance education. The health services delivered through the Charleville Hospital are supported by several targeted health service providers, including Charleville and Western Areas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health[3] and BlueCare Charleville.

Local tourist attractions that highlight the local natural environment include the Cosmos Centre and Observatory, the Bilby Experience, and the Charleville Botanic Reserve. Those that share local culture and history include the Mulga Lands Art Gallery, Charleville Historic House and Museum, and the World War II Secret Base. The Murweh Shire Council's tourism development strategy has more recently led to the commissioning and opening of the Charleville Airfield Museum at Charleville Airport, with the delivery of the Charleville Outback Museum of Australia delayed because of increased building costs.

Cunnamulla, located on Kunja/Kunya Country, is the largest town in Paroo Shire, which also includes the smaller towns of Eulo, Wyandra, and Yowah. It has a population of 1,233 people, 44.4% of whom identify as First Nations (ABS, 2021b). The town includes a state school that encompasses primary and secondary schooling and a Catholic primary school. Health services are delivered through the Cunnamulla Primary Health Care Centre and the Cunnamulla Aboriginal Corporation for Health Clinic.

3 An Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation.

Figure 4: Vanessa Tomlinson, Flora Wong, and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet (left to right) with the Cunnamulla Fella, Cunnamulla. Image by Flora Wong

A bronze statue of the Cunnamulla Fella was erected in front of the town hall in 2005 as a tribute to both Slim Dusty and Stan Coster's song of the same name and ringers (expert sheep shearers). The Cunnamulla Fella Roundup, which features rodeo and music events, is a major event in the community's calendar, along with Music in the Mulga, an annual country music festival held at a working goat and cattle property in nearby Eulo. Paroo Shire Council's tourism campaign highlights the toughness, resilience, and creativity of the people of Cunnamulla. The local visitor information centre includes a museum, a gallery, and a gift shop with locally made arts and crafts. An artesian hot spring facility and river walk was opened in January 2024 as part of the local government's tourism strategy for the shire.

The local First Nations community includes the Kunja Traditional Owners, along with people from the neighbouring Kooma, Kullili, Budjiti (Budjari), and Mardigan (Mardgany) tribes (McKellar, 1984). Broader Australian perceptions of the inequities faced by Aboriginal People in this region have largely been shaped by national media attention sparked by Dennis O'Rourke's 2000 documentary 'Cunnamulla' and the Four Corners episode 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind—1969' (Reid, 2011). However, in contrast, the accounts of First Nations community members who grew up in the Cunnamulla *yumba*, or 'fringe camps', such as Herb Wharton and Lawrence 'Cheesy' Anderson, tell of the sense of belonging, community, and connection fostered there. The Kunja people attained Native Title over 20,000 ha of land and water centred around Cunnamulla in 2022.

Case Study Aims

This case study aimed to investigate the role that community music can play in creating greater social equity in remote outback communities with legacies of creative and cultural strengths alongside histories of socio-economic disadvantage. Moreover, given the towns' ongoing interests in outback tourism, this case study also aimed to investigate how cultural tourism initiatives can plug into local music ecologies to add value to their efforts for community members and provide a more locally engaged experience for visitors. By mapping the music-making activities that exist in the community and drawing on the perceptions and experiences of local residents and visitors, this case study shows how community music-making can strengthen connections between people, communities, places, and stories in ways that foster a sense of belonging and support the development of more equitable relationships.

The PhD candidate (Flora) leading this case study has lived in Meanjin (Brisbane) since the early 1990s, having migrated there from Hong Kong with her parents as a child. Her relationship with regional and remote Queensland grew from being a musician, performing and touring with numerous ensembles, conducting workshops for music students, and coordinating Musica Viva Australia's music education touring program in Queensland from 2014 to 2021. Her work as a performer, educator, and producer is focused on community-building and place-making, and her research centres listening and creativity as vital methods of generating and sharing knowledge. She is a qualitative social and artistic researcher with an interest in community music and how it strengthens the dynamic relationships between people and places.

The Project Leader (Brydie) accompanied Flora on field trips at the beginning and end of the case study. She has a deep history of engagement with QMF and has attended a number of the Queensland Music Trails. She has lived in regional Queensland and undertaken music and arts research in numerous regional, remote, and very remote communities across Australia. As a non-Indigenous, first-generation migrant from South Africa, she has worked hand-in-hand with First Nations collaborators in Central Australia, the Kimberley, the Pilbara, and regional Queensland for the past 15 years. This work builds on Brydie's extensive portfolio of projects exploring how communal music-making can open up pathways for greater social justice, equity, inclusion, and wellbeing, especially in communities where entrenched social disadvantage, displacement, and division exist.

Partner Organisation Profile

QMF was established by the Queensland Government in 1999 as a biennial music festival aimed at addressing geographical and social disadvantage experienced by regional Queensland communities. The initiative has evolved to encompass a broad range of music programs across metropolitan and regional Queensland that include

Figure 5: The Barleyshakes Duo performing in the courtyard of the Corones Hotel, Charleville, as part of the 2023 Outback Trail's On The Road program. Image by Flora Wong

events, tours, participatory programs, installations, and the commissioning of new Queensland works, all of which aim to celebrate the cultural identity of Queensland communities and places. Building on this place-based work in regional communities, QMF developed the Queensland Music Trails (QLD Music Trails)—a cultural tourism initiative that aims to deliver cultural, social, and economic benefits to regional Queensland communities through the development of iconic place-based cultural events as part of a 'road trip'. The QLD Music Trails leverage cross-portfolio investment from the Queensland Government as a response to the ongoing inequities faced by regional communities, as a pandemic recovery for the arts sector, and as part of a broader tourism development strategy for the state in the leadup to the 2032 Olympics in Meanjin (Brisbane). In 2023, QMF launched the inaugural QLD Music Trails program, which consisted of several Trails, each focusing on a different region of the state. One of these was the Outback Trail, which took place in April 2023 and involved music events in St George, Cunnamulla, Charleville, and Tambo in South West Queensland. Four main music events, unique to each location on the Trail, were complemented by a variety of participatory workshops for both locals and visitors and four smaller-scale events that featured travelling musicians.

Research Design

This case study used an arts-based ethnographic approach, involving iterative, participatory, and arts- and place-based fieldwork. In line with the Creative Change Project's ethos of valuing the collective creativity, expertise, wisdom, and dynamism inherent in community, this case study was developed in close collaboration with QMF, local governments, and community stakeholders. A number of methods were used, including semi-structured interviews, short informal interviews, focus groups, informal conversations, and participant observation with musicians, music teachers, event attendees, local government staff, and tourism business owners across four major trips (see Table 1). Additionally, researcher Flora undertook four-week-long residencies in Charleville and Cunnamulla, during which she maintained a public pop-up studio, engaged in local music-making activities, volunteered as a musician and educator in a variety of community settings, and observed local community music events. A total of 170 participants contributed to the data generation (see Table 2 for participant demographics). The Creative Change Project received ethical clearance through Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref No: 2020/679).

Figure 6: Flora Wong (left) and George Balsillie (right) being interviewed by radio announcer Daryl Kirkup (centre) and performing live on air for local radio station 4RRFM, Charleville. Image by Flora Wong

Figure 7: Flora Wong (left) and Luke Cuerel (right) performing alongside Kunja musician Rube Nixon (centre) at the 2023 NAIDOC Seniors Luncheon in Cunnamulla. Image by Christine Higgins

Figure 8: Flora Wong with committee members, volunteers, and guests panellists of the Charleville Performing Arts Festival. Image supplied by the Charleville Performing Arts Association

Figure 9: Flora Wong (right) performing alongside Jon Virtue (left) at the 2023 Outback River Lights Festival, Cunnamulla. Image by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet

Figure 10: Flora Wong presenting a 'Songs and Yarns' community co-analysis session with local participants at the Charleville Historic House and Museum in Charleville. Image by Shun Tak Wong

Table 1

Summary of Methods

Method	Participant Type	Aim	Number of Participants / Events
Observation and participation in cultural tourism events and community music activities	Conducted by FW	To understand QMF event experience and observe outcomes of music participation for local and visitor attendees at cultural tourism events.	13 events
Vox pop (short informal audio interviews)	2023 Outback Trail event attendees	To gather in situ reflections of local and visitor attendees on QMF event experiences and community benefits.	75
Focus group	2023 Outback Trail event attendees and participants	To understand QMF event attendee experience and community benefits from the perspective of local and visitor attendees and participants.	19
Observation and participation in music events and community music activities	Conducted by FW	To observe outcomes of music participation at music events and community music activities in Charleville and Cunnamulla.	63 events
Semi-structured interviews	Community members—Charleville and Cunnamulla	To gain contextual knowledge about Charleville and Cunnamulla, map current and past community music activities, and to gain a deeper understanding of the role music plays in people's lives and the broader community in each town.	40
Focus group	Senior community members—Charleville and Cunnamulla	To gain contextual knowledge about Charleville and Cunnamulla, map current and past community music activities, and to gain a deeper understanding of the role music plays in people's lives and the broader community in each town.	12
Significant informal conversations	Visiting musicians	To understand experiences and outcomes of music participation in Charleville and Cunnamulla from the perspective of visiting musicians.	13
Significant informal conversations	Community members—Charleville and Cunnamulla	To gain contextual knowledge about Charleville and Cunnamulla, map current and past community music activities, and to gain a deeper understanding of the role music plays in people's lives and the broader community in each town.	11
Total			**170 participants** **76 events**

Note: Three participants took part in two phases of data generation.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

N = 170

Gender	%
Woman	21.56
Man	15.57
Gender-diverse[1]	0
Not reported	62.87

Cultural Background	%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	7.19
CALD[2]	2.40
Cultural background reported[3]	16.77
Not reported	62.87

Sexuality	%
Heterosexual	17.96
Queer[4]	0.60
Not reported	81.43

Housing	%
Owner-occupier	26.95
Renting	9.58
Share-house	0.60
Not reported	62.87

Age	%
Under 18	0
19–29	2.99
30–39	4.19
40–49	3.59
50–59	8.38
60–69	11.38
70+	6.59
Not reported	83.23

Disability	%
Yes	4.79
No	31.14
Prefer not to say	0
Not reported	64.07

Employment	%
Full-time	16.77
Part-time	7.78
Casual	0.60
Self-employed	0.60
Unemployed	0.60
Volunteering	0.60
Retired	8.98
Pension	1.80
Other (self-described)	0.60
Not reported	61.67

1. We use the term 'gender-diverse' to indicate myriad genders that sit outside the heteronormative colonial gender binary, recognising that the term remains imperfect.
2. Culturally and linguistically diverse.
3. Participants were asked to identify their cultural heritage according to how they interpret this term. We do not indicate whether participants were born in Australia. Responses included English (n = 4); Australian (n = 11); Austro-Italian, German, and Welsh (n = 1); compulsive bush dweller (n = 1); Filipino (n = 1); Māori and Aboriginal (n = 1); New Zealander (n = 1); Māori (n = 1); Samoan (n = 1); Tongan (n = 1); and English and Irish (n = 1).
4. As with 'gender-diverse', we employ the word 'queer' as an umbrella term describing sexualities that range from gay to pansexual to asexual and beyond. In doing so, we do not wish to elide the important differences between the ongoing histories, experiences, and struggles of each sexuality. Nor do we mean 'queer' to be interchangeable with the more expansive LGBTQIA+ acronym. Responses included pansexual (n = 1).
5. Some participants listed multiple forms of employment in their responses. In such cases, the participant's first type of employment is included in the statistics for employment. Examples of multiple forms of employment included unemployed and volunteering (n = 1); part-time and self-employed (n = 1); full-time, volunteering and studying/training (n = 1); part-time, casual, volunteering and managing a business (n = 1).

Data analysis was iterative and involved members of the Creative Change team, QMF staff, and community members from Charleville and Cunnamulla. Researcher Flora undertook a data analysis process that combined qualitative thematic data analysis and the production of creative audio works to identify emerging themes.

Co-analysis with the Creative Change team involved the sharing and discussion of codebooks, emerging themes, and key stories and examples during fortnightly meetings and iterative full-day sessions. Co-analysis with QMF involved the sharing of emerging insights and facilitated discussion with staff members from a range of levels and departments of the organisation. Similarly, co-analysis with community members from Charleville and Cunnamulla involved a series of focus groups and public community events during which researcher Flora shared emerging insights interwoven with music and facilitated a discussion of insights and possible recommendations.

Prior to reading the Key Insights, readers are invited to listen to two sound collages—*Listening in Charleville* and *Listening in Cunnamulla*—that were created by researcher Flora as creative research outputs. They weave together excerpts from interviews with Charleville and Cunnamulla community members and field recordings that Flora recorded as part of her musician-in-residence methodology.

Key Insights

Insights from this case study reveal the wide range of community music activities currently occurring in the remote outback towns of Charleville and Cunnamulla. These insights highlight how participating in community music can provide important opportunities for community members to connect to other people, their local community, local places, and stories. These creative connections can enhance a person's sense of belonging and, in the act of collectively making music together, provide opportunities to model more equitable relations between all involved. The insights also show how cultural tourism initiatives can hook into these community music experiences in ways that allow visitors to more meaningfully connect with outback people, stories, and places. Importantly, such initiatives also provide value-add opportunities for the communities themselves to connect with one another and amplify the cultural, social, and economic benefits that can be generated in their towns by engaging in these tourism offerings. This highlights the related ways in which community music can create spaces and occasions for building interpersonal and collective connections in ways that can create greater social equity in remote communities, where intergenerational socio-economic disadvantage has customarily been experienced.

Figure 11: Members of Charleville Healthy Ageing dancing at The Big Base Party. Image supplied by QMF

> **'To me, in any community, no matter where you go, I think music is probably the nuts and bolts of it.'**
>
> **(QI019, key community informant)**

Outback Community Music Ecosystems

The people, activities, resources, and sites that contribute to community music-making in Charleville and Cunnamulla are deeply interconnected. Some are unique to each town, while others have a broader footprint that connects the local community music-making ecosystem to the wider region or across the country.

Senior community members in both towns recalled with great delight the social dances that were a major part of the community calendar: woolshed dances, dance halls, 'two bob hops', and debutante balls were important events for catching up with friends and acquaintances across the region and meeting new members of the community.

> **There were always balls and concerts in the country. The families got together, and they always had some people who played music, and most people could dance. … People who come to the area who are strangers—they'd get included in it. … All that sort of thing. That brings the community together. (QFG026, resident)**

Other Charleville and Cunnamulla residents recalled discos and live bands that performed in the local pubs, noting a decline in their frequency since the 2000s. However, live music remains an important part of key events in the community calendar that facilitate the gathering of a large proportion of the local population—the mapping of community music activities in both towns showed that music performances are integrated into agricultural shows, rodeos, campdrafts, and community market events.

Community members (both musicians and non-musicians) were quick to identify musicians in each community, suggesting that local musicians are well-known and well-connected in their local communities. This is in part due to the visibility that musicians have in these small communities; some perform regularly at community events, while others work as teachers and

Figure 12: Will Day performing at the 2023 Cunnamulla Fella Roundup. Image by Flora Wong

engage with students and families on a regular basis.[4] Only one of the community members interviewed listed a musical occupation (singer-songwriter/teacher) as their primary profession; however, 15 participants who were local residents described having an active musical practice, with 10 of these participants currently working or having worked professionally as a musician. In addition, two participants who self-identified as musicians were ex-residents who had moved away but returned on a regular basis for musical work and for visiting family and friends.

Rube Nixon, a Kunja woman in her sixties, is a musician and retired health worker who lives in Cunnamulla. Like many other musicians in the region, she sings and plays the guitar and feels a strong connection with country music. She recalled her time as a member of a local band:

> **We went all around the South West here. Played for weddings and stuff like that—21sts, anniversaries—and it opened up a whole new world for us. And that we were doing these things to make people happy… And they paid well. The money was good for a weekend's work. (QI016, local musician)**

For Rube, music is a valuable skill that enabled her and her bandmates to work and earn money while playing a role in important events for fellow community members. However, she also spoke about how music provided opportunities to better understand broader society and the world around her:

> **It made us more aware of what was going on. And we learned to play the music so we can get out to see what the other half looks like. You know, see how people are carrying on and … We did it because we had to. Get out to find out what it was all about. (QI016, local musician)**

4 As instrumental music teachers or general classroom teachers in schools, or as private music teachers.

Although there currently are no commercial music venues in either town, which might lead to the assumption that there is a lack of musical activity and resources in the community, in typical outback fashion, music-making takes place regularly in a wide variety of settings (see Table 3 for details of these music settings). In particular, some hotels and caravan parks regularly engage musicians to entertain and create a social atmosphere for their patrons. The Club Boutique Hotel in Cunnamulla has live music in its bar and restaurant occurring nearly every night during the tourist season. Its patrons often include local residents and its main clientele of tourists, creating a regular site of music-making in Cunnamulla that brings together local and visiting musicians and audiences comprising locals and visitors.

Figure 13: Local musicians Alan 'Cracker' McDonald (right), Jess Carr (centre-right), and Harry Mulhall (left) being joined by Flora Wong (centre-left) for a performance at the Evening Star Tourist Park near Charleville. Image supplied by Evening Star Tourist Park

Table 3

Community Music Sites in Charleville and Cunnamulla

Sites of Community Music	Cunnamulla	Charleville
Public spaces	Paroo Shire Hall (Main Auditorium) Paroo Shire Hall (Supper Room) Cunnamulla Library Centenary Park Bob Poncho Park	Charleville Town Hall Charleville Library Mulga Lands Art Gallery Charleville Town Hall Park (Charleville Levee Bank)
Community group- and organisation-run spaces	Cunnamulla Showgrounds	4RR FM Studios Charleville Dance House Charleville Historic House and Museum Charleville Showgrounds Charleville Racecourse Complex
Tourism and hospitality venues	Cunnamulla Fella Visitor Information Centre Club Boutique Hotel Riverside Caravan Park Charlotte Plains* (Cunnamulla Hotel) (Billabong Hotel) (Warrego Hotel)	Charleville Visitor Information Centre Charleville RSL Memorial Club Bailey Bar Caravan Park Evening Star Caravan Park* Hotel Corones World War II Secret Base (Charlotte's Nest Boutique and Coffee Shop)
Educational institutions	Cunnamulla State School Sacred Heart Primary School, Cunnamulla	Charleville State School Charleville State High School Charleville School of Distance Education St Mary's School, Charleville
Religious institutions	St Alban's Anglican Church	(All Saints' Anglican Church)
Healthcare settings	Cunnamulla Multipurpose Health Service	Charleville and District Healthy Ageing Program Waroona Multipurpose Centre (Acacia Country Practice)
Private studios/homes	Randall Osborne's home Tomas King's studio (Fishy Mitchell's studio)	Alan 'Cracker' McDonald's studio

Note: Sites marked with an asterisk (*) denote sites located outside of the township. Sites in parentheses () denote sites of community music of which the researcher was informed anecdotally but at which she was unable to conduct participant observations of community music.

Figure 14: 2023 Charleville Performing Arts Festival Gala Concert. Image by Flora Wong

Participants also frequently reflected on musicians and music events that had been active parts of the local music ecosystem in the past, showing that community music-making takes place over a range of timescales, with past activities continuing to inform and enrich current and future activities. In the same way that a fallen coolibah tree can continue to be a source of habitat and nutrients around local waterways, legacy community music activities in the outback play a role in shaping the current community music ecosystem. Several Charleville and Cunnamulla residents mentioned their direct or indirect involvement with the vibrant instrumental music program delivered as part of the Priority Country Area Program (PCAP)—a Commonwealth-funded education initiative that was delivered in schools across South West Queensland from the 1977 to 2011 (Arthur, 2010; Frank Rockett Consulting, 2010). For example, Stephanie Mills, a business owner in Cunnamulla, remarked,

> **Everyone had access to an instrument. And I think that was amazing. We used to go up to Offham and stay in their shearing sheds and quarters, and we did a concert at the end. But I think we could have played as a band … anywhere… It was that good. And I think that's missing now. I don't see that as much. (QI008, key community informant)**

The PCAP instrumental music program's accessibility, its inclusion of students from public and Catholic schools, the quality of the musical outcomes, and the way it valued participants' individual contributions continue to influence local perceptions of current instrumental music programs. These programs tend to be contained to individual schools and selective in nature, with limited funding to support the number of enrolments and hours allocated for an instrumental music teacher. The discontinuation of the PCAP instrumental music program seems to have had a particularly strong impact in Cunnamulla, with one local community member commenting that 'there is so much evidence to support the importance of music in education, and virtually nothing happening here. And that's—I find that frustrating' (QI007, resident).

Though PCAP has finished, its conclusion led to renewed support for the annual Charleville Performing Arts Festival. Teri Sommerfield, current president of the Charleville Performing Arts Association (CPAA), explained that the Performing Arts Festival is non-hierarchical and non-elitist and that it emphasises inclusion and participation. In 2023, the CPAA engaged 32 volunteers and fielded over 400 nominations from participants ranging from children under six to adults over 65 to deliver its five-day event (Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, 2024). As Teri says, 'For a place the size of Charleville, that's pretty huge' (QI028, key community informant).

While the small populations in remote towns can mean that there are fewer musicians who have the capacity to become community music facilitators, there is also a strong culture of creative resourcefulness and willingness to 'do the job that's needed'. Alan 'Cracker' McDonald, who sang and played the bass guitar in local Charleville band Ned and the Kellys, spoke of how he adapted after several band members moved away, developing his guitar skills so that he could play with local singer and teacher Jess Carr.

This highlights the need for responsive and adaptive modes of community musicking in towns like Cunnamulla and Charleville that experience a constant in- and out-flow of people who leave to pursue education and work opportunities, those who arrive to live and work in town for short periods ranging from a few months to a few years, and those who visit as tourists.

This vibrant outback community music ecosystem provides important opportunities for community members to connect to people, community, place, and stories. Participation in community music can activate connection across these four domains simultaneously.

Connections to People

In discussions about the benefits of community music, most people highlighted the importance of connection. For remote towns, where isolation is part of everyday reality, having opportunities to connect with fellow community members and those from within and outside the region is vitally important.

> **'People don't want to be reminded that they're isolated, they want to be reminded that they're connected. And that's what's so great about activities like [music]. It reminds them that they're connected by something other than their problems.'**
>
> **(QI028, key community informant)**

Local residents highlighted the importance of music events in bringing people together in a social environment that contributes positively to individual and collective wellbeing. Having opportunities to experience enjoyment and pleasure contributes to community members' wellbeing, as does the opportunity to form meaningful relationships with others through the shared activity of participating in music together. In particular, for people who live and work on properties outside town, larger-scale events are key catalysts for developing and maintaining new and existing relationships. Peter Crook-King explained, 'It definitely gives them an opportunity to get together, and they're going to share their problems and their successes and all that, and just... That's how you get to know different people' (QI024, resident).

Such connections are threaded throughout many local community members' stories, such as that of Randall, a Cunnamulla resident in his fifties who plays the trumpet. He regularly plays at community events in Cunnamulla, from ANZAC and Remembrance Day services to children's events at the library. As someone who developed vision impairment as a young adult and experiences severe migraines, Randall reflected on how Bob Poncho, the bandleader of the local town band at the time, was a key figure in facilitating his participation in the band despite his disability:

> **When I found out I'd lost eyesight, I just gave everything up for about five years—didn't touch the trumpet, didn't do anything. ... But after a while, my dad saw the old bandleader here for the brass band, and he had to be in his early eighties by then. And he said to my dad, 'No, come around. You don't need the eyesight to learn. As long as you can play, you'll be right.' (QI003, local musician)**

Figure 15: Cunnamulla resident and trumpet player Randall Osborne (left) with Flora Wong (right). Image by Luke Cuerel

> **'Well, it gives you a sense of identity ... a sense of belonging, connecting, being united with other people. You know, whether it's country, rock and roll, gospel, it doesn't matter. It all connects to the person.'**
>
> **(QI016, local musician)**

Randall recalled the way that Bob and his fellow bandmates would ensure that he could march and play with them through the town for parades by placing another musician in front of him who he could follow. The members of the community band valued Randall's contribution as a trumpet player and were able to work with Randall to develop a way for him to overcome the barriers that visual impairment presents for participation in a marching band performance. Randall's ongoing visibility to his fellow community members as a musician has strongly supported his quality of life and connections with others in his community.

> **It's very good living in a little town because sometimes I can't see the money. And you know the people behind the counter, and you've only got to ask them for help. And they will get the money and give me back my change. And you can... I can do that here. But you got to be careful in the city. ... Most of the time, I think it's fairly easy for [me] because most people in town know that I'm vision impaired, so they will help me. (QI003, local musician)**

Randall largely attributes his ability to hand over his wallet in the shop and trust the person behind the counter to take the payment to the differences between living in a small town and a large city. Yet he recognises that most of the residents in Cunnamulla know him and that he is vision impaired. His role as a community musician—a musician in the community who is regularly seen playing at community events—allows him to engage with his local community in a more publicly visible way than he otherwise would.

Connections to Community

Community music presents regular spaces and moments in the community calendar for locals and tourists alike to gather and connect as a broader community. The inclusive, appealing, and distinctively local nature of community music-making attracts participants and brings them together (like a social magnet), provides them with opportunities to spend time with people with whom they might not otherwise interact (like a social lubricant), and offers the chance for people to benefit from and contribute towards regular creative interactions that form strong bonds between community members (like a social glue).

Community music can help with understanding one's role in a collective and community.

Music as a Social Magnet

For many local residents and tourists, music has a universal appeal and an ability to bring people of diverse backgrounds together. Local residents and visitors alike spoke of how people 'gravitate' to music and music events in the outback. For many, music's appeal stems from its association with positive feelings like enjoyment, happiness, and 'feeling good', regardless of personal preferences for certain styles or genres.

Community music events are also magnetising in that people have a degree of agency in engaging with the music on levels that feel comfortable to them. At most of the music events researcher Flora observed in these communities, one could choose one's proximity to the musicians and the manner of their engagement (e.g. watching and listening, dancing, singing along, or socialising with others while tapping one's foot). For example, Healthy Ageing Charleville engages community musicians to perform at their location, which is a multipurpose space set up to allow for participants to engage in a wide variety of activities, such as board and card games, arts and crafts, exercise or movement classes, and morning or afternoon tea. When ex-local musician Cathy Drummond performed, some participants sat and watched, some clapped and sang along, some got up and danced, and others sat at tables further away, continuing to play card games but clearly enjoying the music.

Figure 16: Charleville ex-resident and musician Cathy Drummond performing at Healthy Ageing Charleville. Image by Flora Wong

Music as a Social Lubricant

Community music is also seen as an activity that can promote positive social interactions. Many participants shared examples from their experiences at music events of interacting with strangers or people with whom they wouldn't typically engage, with many of these interactions leading to an ongoing connection. Christine, a Cunnamulla resident in her sixties, noted the hospitable nature of social interactions between strangers that she had observed while attending live music events at the Club Boutique Hotel:

> **It doesn't matter if they turn up and they've not got anybody or they don't know anyone. They'll sit down, and music seems to bring out, 'Oh, are you right there? Would you like a drink? Or would you like something to eat? Or my name's...' You know? And that's how it happens. And I just think that music plays such a big role. (QI012, key community informant).**

Local hotelier Peieta Mills pointed out that the lubricating ability of music spaces to promote positive and productive relationships among community members of different ages, ethnicities, religions, classes, and so on is a key benefit of the active music ecosystem in Charleville and Cunnamulla:

Figure 17: Bob Lee, Flora Wong Josephine Birch, and Joanne Lee (left to right) performing together at the Club Boutique Hotel, Cunnamulla. Image by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet

I think, locally, definitely the benefit is people engaging, you know, unwinding, connecting people who are from different backgrounds and different roles in society and community, bringing them together on the same level. (QI013, key community informant)

'At the Multicultural Festival last year, we had music from seven or eight different cultural backgrounds. ... And what was really nice is that there were a lot of people near the stage, listening to each of these people, each of these groups. I think music has the ability to break through that if it's done well and not pushed down people's throats, but it's there for you to embrace. I think music's more powerful than people give it credit for.'

(QI027, key community informant)

In a similar vein, Kooma man and community Elder Lawrence 'Cheesy' Anderson expressed a belief in music's ability not only to bring people of different backgrounds together but also to prevent or mitigate conflict:

> **Flora: People singing together, no matter what sort of level of experience you have with singing, is always a good feeling, right? It feels good to be singing with people.**
>
> **Cheesy: Well, I look at it this way, too, Flora. While they're singing, they're not fighting. (QI019, key community informant)**

Music as a Social Glue

Participants also spoke about the way music fosters the formation and transformation of relationships that connect community members beyond the event of music-making itself. An instrumental music teacher who relocated to Charleville from the Gold Coast four years ago shared how music helped him to form community connections as a new arrival:

> **Believe it or not, a lot of the people who I've met through music have been parents [of his students], who have gone, 'Oh, I used to play,' and then 'Oh, let's play something.' And then it turns into you start playing, and then ... Someone plays drums, and it just kind of evolved from that. So yeah, it definitely makes connecting with other people who you wouldn't connect with otherwise way easier in my case. (QI036, local musician and teacher)**

Likewise, for tourists who attended the full program of Outback Trail events, participating in this series of music events fostered social connections and a sense of community. As one attendee stated,

Figure 18: Students of Charleville Dance House performing alongside Everybody Now! at the Big Base Party at the World War II Secret Base, Charleville. Image courtesy of QMF

> **We kept seeing the same people … Some of them were part of this Trail, and others weren't. And we've found you find connections with other people because you are doing something in common. You're not just sitting under a tree, having a coffee, and going your way—you've got time to talk. And so, I think in the last two weeks away, we've connected. I've personally collected and made friends with more people in two weeks than I have done for the last couple of years. And my intention is to do more things with these people, and we've exchanged details and whatever. So, that is part of the community nature that springs out of this. It's a byproduct of this sort of event. (QFG019, visiting Outback Trail attendee)**

Events such as the QLD Music Trails can facilitate gatherings made up of both tourists and a significant proportion of the local community. In particular, their engagement with both children and senior community members through community dance workshops and performances as part of the Big Base Party event in Charleville was noted by both local and visitor attendees as unique and meaningful.

> **One of the things I really liked was seeing the way the Dance House was involved. … Because there were a lot of people there. I couldn't get a seat, that's for sure. How the kids get to have that kind of experience—I think those are the things that they remember. (QI036, local musician and teacher).**

> **'There's a lot of people here that I haven't seen out in a long time, which means this must be very special for them to come out. It was good to see a lot of old faces enjoying themselves and having fun.'**
>
> **(QVP060, visiting Outback Trail attendee)**

Connections to Place

In outback communities, music is a powerful way to experience and express connection to place. In Cunnamulla and Charleville, the songs 'Cunnamulla Fella' (1965) and 'Charleville' (1993) by Australian country musician Slim Dusty are frequently acknowledged by community members as being important to the towns' cultural identities.

> **Slim Dusty, in the 50s, they worked down on a river here, on a property. … Songs make a difference. There's songs about every little town in the bush. … And when we went to Ireland … They said, 'Oh, whereabouts in Australia do you come from?'**

I said, 'Cunnamulla.' 'Oh, the song? Is that where you come from?' You know, like, in Ireland! (QI012, key community informant)

While Slim Dusty's songs were largely inspired by the people of these towns, the natural landscape also inspires music-making. As someone who moved to a property near Cunnamulla roughly 15 years ago, local singer-songwriter Josephine Birch spoke of the profound effect the landscape had on her when she arrived and how it elicited a musical response in her that resulted in her recording and releasing her debut album:

When I came out here, I think the first thing that struck me was the landscape and how just extraordinary it is, how vast, and I think some people come here into this sort of arid landscape and see nothing, but I just see life everywhere. The bird life is extraordinary, the flora is extraordinary and quite diverse in some ways, and the colour scheme really appeals to me: the endless ochre and grey-green of the mulga and gidgee trees and the massive sky and... There's something visceral for me in the way I feel in this landscape, the way the dry heat holds me. It's quite particular. ... I produced my first album of songs. ... The songs were largely written out here, and I think it was in part the landscape that allowed me to have this creative outpouring. (QI001, local musician and teacher)

Charleville resident and Gurnu Barkindji woman Karen Edwards reflected on how country music has become an important part of First Nations culture and how it provides a way to connect with place and community, despite the disruption to First Nations music practices as a result of colonisation:

I think for my mob especially, Aboriginal People, country music runs really deep. ... Songlines were always part of our culture, if you go right back, and it still continues. It's just changed. ... It was always part of ceremony. I guess it's changed now and evolved. (QI025, resident)

For owners of Charlotte Plains, a property 50 km east of Cunnamulla, music is also a way to express and celebrate connection to place. The property operates as both a working sheep station and a campground with artesian bath facilities. In 2023, they celebrated 100 years of the Nagel and Russell family's ownership of the property with Stars of Charlotte Plains, a three-day event that brought together family and friends, along with tourists. Country music featured heavily in the live music program, with performances by artists from Meanjin (Brisbane) and Tamworth (Kamilaroi Country, New South Wales), and members of the Russell family shared stories of their time on the property in between sets. Participants in such music events experience connection with place through the sensory and embodied experience of experiencing music together, regardless of whether they are performing or listening.

In *Matya-Munda: A History of the Aboriginal People of South West Queensland*, Kooma woman Hazel McKellar

Figure 19: Andrew Ryan performing at Stars of Charlotte Plains, June 2023. Image by Flora Wong

(1984) describes the dances that took place at the Cunnamulla *yumba*, particularly the care with which the space for dancing was prepared:

Dances were a very popular activity and there was a special area set aside. Before a dance, the ground was carefully prepared. First, the area was swept clean, then water was thrown on the ground. Then the area was carefully broomed, resulting in a good hard surface to dance on. The music consisted of guitar, accordion, mouth organ and gum leaf. The dances carried on till the early hours of the morning with few fights or quarrels. (p. 79)

A sense of deep connection to physical places is a crucial component of the idea of belonging; while definitions of belonging have often focused on social belonging, much literature points to the need to recognise that connections to place and culture are also essential aspects of belonging (Allen et al., 2021; hooks 2009). Community music can be particularly powerful in supporting a sense of belonging and connection to place for young people. Gurnu Barkindji woman Karen Edwards, who moved from Bourke (Ngemba/Ngiyaampa Country, New South Wales) to Charleville as a child, recalled her participation in the school band:

When I was at school... It was a big thing to be in the band. ... I twirled the sticks, the baton. So, that was a big thing because you were a leader. And it had a handful of Aboriginal kids in it. But that was the thing that gave me confidence because I started off on the tambourine and then ended up being the baton twirler. ... That's when I started to get a bit of confidence because it had to be handed down, and the girl picked me. So, that was good because I never got picked. I never got picked. But she picked me. And it just was the best thing for my wellbeing. I felt like I was connected to the school. (QI025, resident)

This school band was part of the PCAP instrumental music program, and although it was primarily an educational program, local residents in Charleville and Cunnamulla

Figure 20: Community members and travellers participating in a lantern parade as part of the Outback River Lights Festival prior to the Light It Up Outback Trail event in Cunnamulla. Image by James Adams and supplied by QMF

highlighted the way in which it involved and contributed to the broader community. Along with providing an opportunity for Karen to develop skills and self-confidence, it fostered a sense of connection to the school through contributing and belonging.

The ability for music to foster a sense of connection to place is frequently employed in tourism contexts. As an organisation based in Brisbane, QMF works with local communities to deliver QLD Music Trails events that enhance tourists' experiences of visiting a place. The artist lineup and venues for these events are carefully chosen to highlight the unique cultural and geographical features of each location. This was appreciated by visiting event attendees: 'We love travelling, and we love being outdoors. So, to experience all of those events under clear autumn skies, it's just quite amazing' (QFG014, visiting Outback Trail attendee).

In addition to enhancing tourist experiences, these music events can activate local sites of cultural significance and deepen local engagement with place. A local radio presenter reflected on the way the Big Base Party in Charleville activated a historical site:

> **[Holding the event at] the World War II Secret Base—that just gave it a whole new level. So, the music was terrific. The music was different. The music was something that most people could relate to. So nice to see younger people out there. The variety was great, but the location just made it that extra special. So, I really hope they jump on the back of that and use our assets we have out here in a similar sort of way because I think it was really well done. (QI027, key community informant)**

Figure 21: The Andrews Sisters tribute act the Pacific Belles performing at the 2023 Outback Trail Big Base Party at the World War II Secret Base in Charleville. Image by Flora Wong

Harry Mulhall, the music teacher, also noted that after attending the event, his partner, who is a classroom music teacher, arranged for her class to visit the World War II Secret Base as part of an excursion, highlighting the ability of such music events to bring places to the attention of local residents in different ways.

This relationship between music and place is reciprocal: music can activate spaces and help communities see and engage with them in different ways, and spaces can shape the ways in which music engagement unfolds within them. The evening before the Outback Trail's Light It Up event in Charleville, Opera Queensland presented a concert in Cunnamulla. It had been planned as a ticketed event in

the recently reopened theatre, but a fire a few days prior meant the concert had to be relocated to the lawn in front of the town hall and changed to a free event earlier in the evening around sunset. A local council employee commented on how the change in venue allowed community members who otherwise would not have attended to experience the event:

> **I think [Opera Queensland] coming out and moving on to the front lawn was a plus. It was a winner. And I saw people there: kids on push bikes coming and pulling up, some older people, some different people that I would never have expected to see sit there for that hour watching that show. But if that had've been in the hall, they wouldn't have accessed it. So, I think, yeah, how we do it, where we do it, is really important. (QI015, key community informant)**

Figure 22: The Cunnamulla Fella statue in Cunnamulla appearing to watch over event production gear during the 2023 Outback River Lights Festival. Image by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet

An Outback Trails attendee also commented on how the outdoor setting and interaction between the sounds of the musicians performing made the event more memorable: 'Having to relocate it and make it a community event out in the... out on the green, and that was a magic night. That was a magic night. The performance with the galahs [laughs] in the background' (QFG018, visiting Outback Trail attendee).

> **'I don't know if it's being on the road or just that every day is a new experience, that suddenly you feel a bit more open to the bigger world outside.'**
>
> **(QFG019, visiting Outback Trail attendee)**

Connections to Stories

Community members in both towns spoke about how participating in community music allows people to connect to stories, encountering diverse narratives that help them understand themselves and their relationship to the world. Through the shared process of making music together and listening to one another, community members are able to participate in new and developing narratives about themselves as individuals and as a collective.

> **'Music is about... It's about feeling, but it's also about telling stories and telling our stories. And the more we tell our stories, the more we embrace our stories, all of them, even the gnarly ones, the more we can accept ourselves, accept each other and move forward, I think.'**
>
> **(QI001, local musician and teacher)**

Community Members' Connections to Stories

Josephine suggests that engagement with stories is key to understanding the past and the present in order to navigate a collective future. Similarly, Tomas King, a local musician in Cunnamulla who also works as a machine operator, firefighter, and pizza truck owner, believes that it's the storytelling aspect of music that makes it so appealing and accessible to audiences:

> **We can all relate to it. It's stories at the end of the day. It's, like, from the Dreamtime right through, everyone sitting around a fire telling stories, you know, and I guess that's where it all leads. (QI005, local musician)**

Jarib, who works as the Paroo Shire Council's Youth Support Officer, similarly connects to the storytelling in music:

> **So, music to me is... it's life. I've grown up with music my whole life, whether that be traditional music, like Aboriginal music, or it be just turning on Spotify as you're in the car. So, I think music is a part of our souls. It is us. It's humans. I've always listened to music, no matter what, and podcasts, and... anything, anything to do with someone's storytelling. ... And I think that's what I love most about music—is the storytelling. ... It's the way someone portrays their emotions and the way they feel. (QI020, key community informant)**

Visitors' Connections to Stories

The way music allows large groups of people to experience storytelling collectively is one of the things that makes it so compelling as an activity for tourists. As an attendee noted, 'Every song's got a story. … They listen to a song. They hear the words. It tells them a story. And vice versa for us listening to their stories in their songs' (QFG010, visiting Outback Trail attendee).

Community music activities that involve local community members and shared local stories help tourists understand the towns they are visiting. One Trail attendee expressed her appreciation for the level of community engagement in the event in Charleville:

> **Having the kids involved, having the older people involved, being part of that—that was an absolute highlight. … I think what I've been reminded of is the resilience of individuals in communities, definitely, and how they're all unique and different, and just because you've been to one at a particular point in time, [that] doesn't mean that that's how it is and who it is. (QFG014, visiting Outback Trail attendee)**

Figure 23: Participants from Charleville Healthy Ageing rehearsing for their performance at the Big Base Party with facilitators from Everybody Now! Image by Flora Wong

In activating these connections with people, community, place, and stories simultaneously, sharing music together in place creates memorable experiences for locals visiting events in neighbouring communities.

> **A music event can really stick with you. … I'm going to talk about Charleville now. [QMF] had an open-air concert [there] a few years ago with Kate Miller-Heidke and William Barton. And it was just mind-bogglingly beautiful. Amazing. Under the outback sky. And they had a really beautiful smoking ceremony at the start, where the entire audience got up and partook. (QI001, local musician and teacher)**

Creating Social Equity

These insights highlight how participating in community music can provide important opportunities for community members and visitors to connect to other people, local communities, local places, and stories. These creative connections made through the act of making music together provide opportunities to model more equitable relations between all involved. This highlights how community music can create spaces and occasions for building interpersonal and collective connections in ways that can foster social equity in remote communities and how cultural tourism initiatives can help generate economic benefits for communities.

Reimagining More Equitable Relationships

Community music fosters 'collective listening'—a way of listening and being attentive together that is inclusive and expansive. This case study draws on and contributes to a growing body of literature about listening and how it shapes people's relationships with each other and with the world (Bodie et al., 2023; Robinson, 2020; Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., 2022; Voegelin, 2010). Through collective listening, community music can facilitate a shift in participants' perspectives from the individual—'I'm listening'—to the collective—'we're listening'.

Musical collectives can be powerful metaphors for social equity.

A musician who was born and raised in Charleville but now lives and works in Brisbane speaks about such a listening experience:

> **I mean, think of how many times you hear a song, and you go, 'Oh, wow. That speaks to me on a personal level. Like, I can really relate to that song.' And then think about… If you relate to it, how many other people just statistically have to be able to relate to it, you know? So, if we're able to share those connections, I think we would be able to possibly share a lot more time with each other and patience and just start listening to each other again. (QI021, musician)**

The act of collective listening can occur between musicians who are making music together and listening to each other in order to respond musically and between audience members who are sharing the experience of listening to a performance together.

Community music also fosters 'collective doing'—an embodied way of being together with others and working with a common purpose.

Figure 24: Signage and bunting at Light It Up in Cunnamulla. Image supplied by QMF

> **With an event like that, because the local community provide the drinks, or food, or whatever. … When people are working together, I think that helps with the social inequity because you feel like you are contributing to your community, whether that's volunteering or whatever. But when you work together and you've got a common outcome, like 'We've got to feed those people', you're there, you're working together. (QFG010, visiting Outback Trail attendee)**

Together, collective listening and collective doing allow people to reimagine relationships—with each other, with communities, with place, and with stories. This reimagining is one way in which relationships that reflect or reinforce inequities can be transformed into more equitable relations. Through collective listening and doing, community music can allow participants to explore and experience hitherto unimagined relationships that transcend the status quo.

This collective listening and doing can also provide a fertile environment for the development of community-organising and leadership skills in its participants. Community music initiatives usually require the presence of (or emerge around) individuals who are highly motivated, dedicated, and well-connected in the community. These individuals often become well-respected figures in their communities as a result of formal and informal recognition of their service to the community. For example, Charleville ex-residents Chester and Loie Wilson's contributions to the town's performing arts spanned local band Ned and the Kellys, theatre productions, the Charleville Performing Arts Festival, and informally mentoring local artists and producers, and the Cunnamulla Town Band's bandleader Bob Poncho is commemorated with a park and rotunda in the centre of town named after him. As a local business owner observed, 'People still talk about the Bob Poncho Band. Well, the Bob Poncho Band hasn't been around for decades. So… It's part of the town. It's just part of that fibre' (QI008, key community informant).

Supporting Economic Outcomes in Remote Communities Through Tourism

In addition to the community-related benefits outlined, embedding community music-making into regional tourism initiatives can be a way of ensuring that tourism frameworks are community-centred and create more equitable outcomes for communities, responding to calls for a 'socialising' of tourism that reorients the sector 'based on the rights and interests of local communities and local peoples' (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020, p. 620).

The Australia Council for the Arts's (2020) *Domestic Arts Tourism Report* found that arts tourists are 'high value tourists', meaning they are more likely to stay longer and

spend more when travelling, and that domestic tourists seek out arts experiences in order to understand the people, landscape, and history of the places they visit. Tourists who attend QLD Music Trails are high value not only in an economic sense but also in a social and cultural one, as one attendee suggested:

> **I think I've been a bit more conscious of that ... that it's not just focusing on what I can get out of it but trying to put back into the community a little bit more, even if it's visiting cafes and things like that. This morning, I was like, 'Right. How much cash have I got left?' Just trying to empty my pockets. ... It's just... How else can you give back? I mean, I think your presence is just as important. Talking to people and making those connections. Letting the people that you're interacting with know that you appreciate them, you see them. (QFG016, visiting Outback Trail attendee)**

Importantly, tourism in Charleville and Cunnamulla creates spaces and opportunities for community music, with tourism and hospitality venues often serving as music venues and tourists frequently attending and participating in local music events. For example, the Club Boutique Hotel in Cunnamulla features live music in its restaurant and bar throughout the tourist season, employing a mixture of local and visiting musicians. In making live music a key part of its tourism business, the hotel supports local community music by providing regular paid performance opportunities for local musicians, and opportunities for them to meet and collaborate with musicians from elsewhere.

Reflecting on the role of larger-scale music events, such as the Outback River Lights Festival, in supporting tourism in Cunnamulla, along with similar events in the region, Peieta Mills, hotelier and tour operator at the Club Boutique Hotel in Cunnamulla, said,

> **So, from a commercial point of view, events definitely drive visitation. That's proven, and it depends on the size of the event. Sometimes, it's limited. Sometimes, it's bringing back people that used to live here once, and it's a reason for them to come when something's on. Sometimes, it's people who have never been here, tourists or people following whatever it is. But yeah, it's positive. (QI013, key community informant)**

Jarib Branfield, a youth support officer at Paroo Shire Council, noted the way that tourism brings not only economic benefits but also a sense of vitality to these towns, which have experienced a significant decline in population over the last 40 years:

> **As I've gotten older, tourism has boomed in Outback Queensland, and it's really good to see because it is quite annoying trying to find a parking spot [laughs]. But no, it's really, really good for the town. Like, our local businesses, like the coffee shops, the mechanics, the tourism, everything. It just brings this town to life. And it shows you what this town used to be. As a local kid, you hear stories about what it was like back in the 60s, 70s, and 80s when everything was booming, and then you sort of think, 'Jeez, I wish it was like that now.' And you sort of get a taste of that when you do have full streets full of tourists. (QI020, key community informant)**

Figure 25: Saxophonist Josh Appleby perfoming at The Big Base Party in Charleville. Image supplied by QMF

While some participants cited the seasonality and volatility of tourism activity as challenges and limitations in terms of its benefits to these remote communities, a deeper understanding of the relationship between tourism activity and the social and cultural ecology of the local community could provide a more nuanced picture of the overall benefits. Rachael, the Community Services Team Leader at Paroo Shire Council, shared an anecdote that reflects the interwoven nature of cultural events and tourism in the region and the way in which events that promote engagement with local community members, regardless of whether they are intended for tourists, can support longer and repeat visitation, along with active promotion through personal networks:

> **[This] husband and wife had come to Cunnamulla with the intent to stay here overnight on their way through to wherever their destination was. Went over to our Visitor Information Centre: 'What's on? What can we look at?' And these guys said, 'Well, there's a free show on the night after. If you want to stay an extra night, you'll get this—it's a free show. And this is where it is.' ... I got talking to them after the show when they actually stopped and helped us pack up the tables and chairs at the hall. And they were saying that they never expected that they would find that sort of thing out here in a place like Cunnamulla. They never expected that Cunnamulla would be as interesting as what they'd found it. So, their one night turned into three nights, with a booking in 12-months' time with their neighbours, and they're to come out again and spend more time. (QI015, key community informant)**

Implications

Figure 26: Signage on a local musician's property in Charleville. Image by Flora Wong

Insights from this outback case study highlight how participating in community music can provide important opportunities for community members to connect to other people, their local community, local places, and stories. These creative connections can enhance a person's sense of belonging and, in the act of collectively making music together, provide opportunities to model more equitable relations between all involved.

The insights also show how cultural tourism initiatives can hook into these community music experiences in ways that allow visitors to more meaningfully connect with outback people, stories, and places and, importantly, how such initiatives can provide value-add opportunities for the communities themselves to connect with one another and amplify the cultural, social, and economic benefits that can be generated in their towns by engaging in these tourism offerings.

This case study highlights the related ways in which community music can create spaces and occasions for building interpersonal and collective connections in ways that can create greater social equity in remote communities, where intergenerational socio-economic disadvantage has customarily been experienced. In remote communities such as Charleville and Cunnamulla that are projected to experience both decline and increasing diversity in their populations, these insights can provide creative ways to support the resilience and sustainability of these outback communities.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Practice

1. *Strengthen connections across community music ecosystems*

- To encourage peer-to-peer skill-sharing and collaboration between musicians in the community.
- To support the viability and sustainability of music careers and community music initiatives.

2. *Strengthen cross-sectoral music engagement*

- To unlock new opportunities for music engagement for local communities.
- To provide diverse income streams for local musicians.
- To put music's ability to act as a social magnet, social lubricant, and social glue to work in a variety of community settings in a strategic manner.

3. *Identify and address barriers to access and participation in existing community music initiatives*

- To ensure all community members can access and experience the benefits of participating in community music.
- To support the sustainability and vibrancy of existing community music initiatives through broader participant and audience engagement.
- To foster social cohesion through increased intergenerational and intercultural activities.
- To explore community-led solutions to accessibility that can inform accessibility strategies and actions in other sectors.

4. *Explore opportunities for increased musical engagement with public spaces and sites of cultural importance*

- To support wider and deeper engagement with place for both residents and visitors.
- To highlight local stories and allow both residents and visitors to engage with them.
- To leverage existing cultural assets and facilitate deeper engagement with them through community music.

Recommendations for Policy

1. *Establish a local music and/or arts initiative register or network*

- To strengthen existing relationships between locally-based musicians, music educators, arts organisations and businesses, media, music venue operators, and event producers.
- To cultivate an engaged community consultation group that can provide guidance and feedback for local government and external stakeholders regarding music activities in the local community.
- To provide a channel for connecting individuals and groups in the local community music ecosystem with funding and career opportunities offered by external bodies.

2. *Adapt and develop music education programs and strategies that are responsive to community strengths and cultural contexts*

- To respond to the identified gaps in the current models of music education available to local youth.
- To promote youth engagement with education and community.
- To provide youth with the creative skills required to participate in opportunities offered by the growing tourism industry in the region.
- To improve music educator recruitment and retention.

3. *Support and incentivise music initiatives that activate existing cultural assets in the community and region*

- To increase and diversify the opportunities for music engagement for local musicians and audiences.
- To increase local and visitor engagement with existing cultural assets, such as public spaces, museums, art galleries, and event spaces.
- To increase the cultural tourism offerings in the region and attract ‘high value’ tourism.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. *Continue exploration of community music and social equity*

- To build on the solid foundation established by the Creative Change Project for exploring the role community music can play in creating greater social equity in Australian communities. Further interdisciplinary research could examine community music ecosystems in other regional and remote parts of Australia and how they interact with other determinants of social equity, such as housing, economic policy, urban planning, public health, and cultural development.

2. *Promote the combination of arts-based and residency-based methodologies*

- To recognise the benefits of employing artistic research methodologies, particularly artist-in-residence models, in social research because of their ability to foster relational, reciprocal, and responsive engagements between researchers and communities.

3. *Undertake long-term and systemic impact studies*

- To understand how community music ecosystems operate on a longer-term basis and their role in supporting social equity in communities over extended periods.
- To further investigate the longer-term relationship between community music and the sustainability of remote towns in regions that are projected to experience population decline.

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Figure 28: Bidjara woman Keelen Mailman conducts a smoking ceremony as part of the Welcome to Country at the Big Base Party. Image by James Adams and supplied by QMF