

PLAYING AROUND... ...in preparation for a music career.

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The news is good. Not so long ago, would-be musicians had only performance and teaching as career options. Now, a range of professional alternatives reflect increasingly hybrid artforms and a diversity of music industries. In addition, a comparable array of training programs are available. Still, most students would be wise to remain flexible, playing around with the options, because many will rely on diversity to sustain their careers. "Being a musician today involves having the opportunity to take on a series of roles, different from and broader than the act of performing or composing." (Rick Rogers, *Creating a Land with Music*, HEFCE, London, 2002).

The Australian Guide to Careers in Music (Michael Hannan, MCA, Sydney, 2003) lists over 150 categories of professional opportunities for musicians, describing the nature of the work, potential remuneration range and required training. Music institutions reflect this diversity: a survey of music training providers conducted by the Australian Music Centre (AMC) in April 2004, uncovered more than thirty undergraduate degrees in music, forty postgraduate degrees with music specialisations and a similar number of vocational awards. Now that Australian conservatoriums are located inside universities, it's not surprising to find combined degrees pairing music with commerce, law, psychology, science and visual arts. Musicians have the chance to play around with their emerging careers, and fewer opt for performance in its traditional guises. Even teaching now comes in a range of shades - studio, classroom, multi-instrumental and community mentoring. Some options are available online.

Music has always embraced many traditions and styles. What musicians do and how they do it parallels social, economic and technological factors as much as new forms of artistry. Current trends in collaborative practice and recording have created new careers. Some emerge from technology – multimedia, complex audio production, delivery of real time performance online, and composing direct to computer offer fresh options for performers and composers. Now very competitive, courses in music technology demand applicants of higher quality, with music ability on entry. Increasing reliance on technology is making room for more specialist librarians. In fact, behind all this technology lies an army of options in music's various associations with engineering, production, administration, management, distribution, publishing, and law.

Then there are the makeovers. Previously available only at postgraduate level at the University of Melbourne, music therapy is now also offered to undergraduates at the University of Queensland. Interest in music theatre inspired its early elevation from elective to degree at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, followed by more recent programs devoted exclusively to music/musical theatre at Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music and the Arts Academy (University of Ballarat). Screen composition, originally the postgraduate responsibility of the Australian Film Television and Radio School, now appears in varying measures elsewhere.

The pop music industry hosts numerous careers for musicians: performers, audio/video engineers, producers, entrepreneurs, agents, and distributors. Recognising this potential, some institutions have adopted pop ('contemporary') music in a serious way. Most providers within the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector focus on 'commercial contemporary' music performance, music technology and music business as complementary pathways to this industry. Box Hill Institute (Victoria) is a notable example: it is an accredited Digidesign Pro School offering certification in Pro Tools, essential to cutting edge production of live and recorded (audio/screen) formats.

Southern Cross University was the first to move away from traditional training, and has focused on contemporary music since the late 1980s. The Gold Coast Campus of Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University has since joined the pop-only club, conveniently co-located and collaborating with multimedia. Whilst other universities offer popular music as an option, only these two have devoted their resources exclusively to this field.

The jury is still out on whether institutions can keep up with the rapid pace of change in pop music, but its recognition as a formal training option can't help but strengthen interest in it as a viable professional alternative for more than just aspiring bands. Clearly, its inclusion has underlined the range of skills necessary for survival in the commercial music industry, both specific and generic. "Contemporary popular music practice typically involves instrumental performance, vocal performance, songwriting, record production and business skills in equal amounts." (Michael Hannan, "The Training of Contemporary Popular Musicians", *Music Forum*, Vol.7 No.1, Sydney, 2000)

Despite expanding professional possibilities, and a range of training to match, there is still little evidence of effective collaboration between institutions and industries. Not many universities take seriously their potential to assist graduate placement. Some provide short-term projects in their local communities or with professional organisations like festivals, orchestras and opera companies. Fewer exploit non-traditional alternatives with the commercial sector or Indigenous companies. Recognising that musicians are more likely to need a diversity of skills to sustain a career, several universities encourage activities which develop self-sufficiency. However, on the whole "no-one could accuse Australian tertiary education of being in the (music) industry's pocket." (Andy Arthurs, "Creative Industries and Music", *Sounds Australian*, No.64, 2004).

Surprisingly, the AMC survey found VET institutions less likely to interact with industry than do the universities, even though VET focuses on skills-based training. Further, the potential for the VET framework to feed into universities has yet to be realised. Only a minority of universities are dual-sector providers offering parallel VET awards, and relatively few others currently recognise VET equivalents towards degree requirements. The higher education framework contains a wealth of such possibilities, with various entry and exit points and scope for manipulation in early training and lifelong learning.

Australian institutions are not required to maintain a long-term professional profile of their graduates, and they don't. The only national indicator of graduate destinations measures successful first placement, no matter what its specific nature. However, in 2000 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) introduced a crucial and specific criterion for premium funding of specialist institutions that "more than 75% of graduates are working primarily in professional music performance, as performers of music, within five years of graduating from the institution." (*Funding of Specialist Higher Education Institutions*, HEFCE, London, 2002). This funding implication confines institutions to performance training, contrary to existing Australian trends toward more disparate outcomes. If current discussions on higher education reform in Australia eventually result in similar policies, institutions will be forced to develop more tangible professional connections.

The survey asked music institutions how they interact with graduate destinations. Responses largely centred on informal tracking of graduates via alumni associations and teacher networks, with no indication of how this might be useful. Some draw on visiting lecturers to link with professional practice. Only a few recognised the question as inviting detail of industry involvement in planning, internships or graduate placement, probably because these are less common.

Because many music graduates freelance, they don't relate to a single career destination in the traditional sense. Still, institutions could do more to forge effective links with various industries. Currently, less than 20% of institutions confirm that they apply industry advice to their courses, only 12% offer work experience or field placements, and 10% provide showcase opportunities

with industry personnel for their graduates, an activity appropriate only to specific programs. Potential students take note!

Perhaps these statistics result from attempts to provide some professional practice within the curriculum. However, beyond the lofty claim by one respondent that students “receive all the information that successful musicians need” (*Survey of Australian Music Institutions*, AMC, Sydney, 2004), the data suggest that whilst most institutions offer some training in technology, relatively few provide music industry electives, business skills, and career-oriented projects.

The reality is that building and sustaining a successful career is largely the responsibility of the graduate. With the competitive nature of the music profession, this is a positive requirement for any emerging musician, but it may create a dilemma for those who choose a program with a narrow range of available options. Most will need to apply their creative skills to developing a career path in parallel with developing their art. When Lucy Holmes of Brisbane enrolled in a Bachelor of Music Theatre at Central Queensland Conservatorium in the late 1990s, she had no thought of a career based on impersonating pop singer Kylie Minogue. Yet, as her creative response to an agent’s suggestion, Lucy’s *100% Kylie* show has since made her an international success.

The trend toward collaborative practice offers access to a wider range of opportunities, encouraging students to become responsible for their own learning – a positive quality for musicians who must build their own portfolio careers. Most institutions encourage and support collaborative work, but relatively few devote specific programs to it. Leading the field, Queensland University of Technology’s Creative Industries focus explores “forms which cannot be easily categorised”, encouraging students “to work across boundaries”, and the University of Wollongong has recently redesigned all programs into one Creative Arts degree requiring collaboration in each strand.

Despite inevitable concerns about reduced focus and lack of quality, interdisciplinary experiences soften the edges for musicians who have yet to decide where their individual boundaries lie, and how much playing around they wish to do.

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