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# Mapping the Australian music industry through careers research

Michael Francis Hannan  
*Southern Cross University*

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## Mapping the Australian Music Industry Through Careers Research

By Michael Hannan

When I was asked by Dick Letts if I would consider researching and writing a guide to music careers for the Music Council of Australia, I jumped at the opportunity even though I knew what a huge task it would be. I was interested primarily because of my background in training musicians for the music industry. In 1986 I was appointed to the Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education (now Southern Cross University) to develop a degree program in contemporary music (meaning rock and pop music). This was certainly a pioneering venture in Australia and perhaps even globally, and one that required a complete rethink of what professional training in music should entail. One of the obvious approaches undertaken was researching the skills and knowledge needed for a career in contemporary music. The degree course we subsequently developed provided students with the chance to follow their own creative or performance direction while giving them a grounding in the skills of performance (in various contemporary music genres), songwriting, arranging and programming, audio production and music business (including contracts, management and marketing).

By contrast, my own formal musical education was not concerned with preparing me for a music career and the curriculum did not engage with the realities of music industry survival. While I was studying at the University of Sydney there was no mention of the business side of being a musician, and no study of the dominant genre of the time, rock music. Ironically while I was doing the research for my PhD in musicology, I was forced for financial reasons to look for freelance work in the music industry and related industries, thus beginning an intensive period of enforced on-the-job training. With a friend, Wayne Findlay, I started an advertising jingle business. We had no capital apart from our raw musical talents and we got started by asking friends and students to play on our 4-track demo reel. The teenage owner of the 4-track reel-to-reel recorder was Kim Ryrie (later to become one of the inventors of the revolutionary Fairlight Computer Musical Instrument) and two of the young musicians we recruited from the Conservatorium High School for their first (unpaid) recording session were Geoffrey Collins and Cameron Allen, both of whom have had brilliant careers in music. The highlight of my one-year involvement with advertising music was being flown to Melbourne to record a *Switched-on Bach* styled jingle on the Mark 3 Moog synthesizer at Bruce Clarke's studio. Wayne Findlay, however, made a lifetime career of it. Soon after I started working for the publisher J. Albert and Sons as a transcriber of lead sheets. This was at the end of the era when songs were required to be in a notated form before they could be copyrighted. It was a shock to me that my aural training at university did not prepare me well for this job. The syncopated rhythms and the power chords of AD/DC and Rose Tattoo were unlike anything I had encountered before. As I was being paid by the tune and not the hour, however, I got very efficient at transcribing after a while, and

over the next few years completed about 400 transcriptions for Alberts. In the process I learned a lot about songwriting craft, especially from working on the classic pop songs that Vanda and Young had written for artists like John Paul Young. The advertising work as well as being around Albert's studios a lot, also led me into doing some sessions as a keyboard player for a variety of projects. In addition I got some work in music theatre as a rehearsal and audition pianist for Harry M. Miller's rock-based productions like *Jesus Christ Superstar* and the *Rocky Horror Show*. This was very challenging work, and increased my interest in playing music live. I played in a few rock bands, theatre productions and worked as a piano bar musician playing and singing the hits of the past and present. I also did copying, arranging and transcribing of popular music for concerts and recordings.

While I had been an undergraduate student I had been employed by Peter Sculthorpe as a composition assistant. I continued working for Peter Sculthorpe on and off, eventually editing some of his music for score publication, co-writing a few film scores with him and an English composer, David Matthews (including the television feature film, *Essington*, from which the score of *Port Essington* was later derived) and playing piano in the Australian Opera's production of his *Rites of Passage* at the Sydney Opera House and Adelaide's Festival Theatre.

As I was also interested in writing words about music I looked for work as a freelance journalist. I wrote articles and concert reviews of contemporary classical and contemporary popular music for a trade newspaper called *Showbusiness*, and classical music record reviews for *Australian Playboy* (My friends said they bought it just to read my reviews). The ABC and EMI contracted me to write cover notes for their contemporary classical LP releases. In addition, one of my former fellow students, Sue Butler (who had majored in music and linguistics), recruited me to edit the music terms of the first edition of the *Macquarie Dictionary*.

Needless to say all these money-making activities consumed more time than they should have and the PhD studies were prolonged by a few years. There are, however, a number of points to the story. The first is that my musical education had only marginally prepared me to do these jobs. The undergraduate curriculum in my degree did not address practical issues of being a freelance musician or the specific skills of the jobs I ended up doing, although to be fair, it did prepare me for my subsequent career as an academic.

The second point is the realisation that unless you are very lucky to be able to concentrate on just one aspect of music (such as playing in a professional orchestra), a living in music might involve a portfolio of different but related musical endeavours. But in order to be able to take advantage of opportunities in a variety of musical spheres one needs to possess the necessary specialised skills. That means knowing what is involved in advance of the opportunity and doing something about preparing for it. That's where the *The Australian Guide to Careers in Music* (hereafter referred to as the *Guide*) will be invaluable: it details exactly what is involved in doing around 150 different jobs in music as well as the skills needed to do them well.

Some music careers don't pay enough anyway and it is necessary for financial survival to undertake a variety of related (or unrelated) jobs. A case in point is the career of contemporary classical composer. Only a handful of modern composers are able to survive doing nothing else. The best and most qualified are able to get academic jobs, but these kinds of institutional careers don't leave much time to compose these days. It is probably better to be doing some related kind of work that enhances one's compositional craft and professional versatility. My old friend David Matthews (mentioned above) has, for example, been doing lucrative orchestration work for a number of years to supplement his composing income, working principally for the screen composer, Carl Davis, and the pop legend, Paul McCartney. But this is only one example. A glance at the contents page for my chapter on composition will alert the composer to around a dozen avenues for remuneration in composition and related professional activities.

A person devoted to performing music who is not skilled enough to achieve career success as a professional performer or recording artist should be made aware that there are also many other avenues for employment in the music industry in teaching, production, administration, business and broadcasting, to name but a few. Such a person should not feel that they need look for a career in a completely different field. Thus one of the main purposes of the *Guide* is to inform people considering a career in music of the range of career possibilities. A private studio teacher I know became quite excited when I told her about the *Guide*. She thought it would be an excellent book to have in her studio for her students and their parents. She reported that so many of her young students love music but realise they will probably not be able to make it as a professional musician or singer. Having the book there might help them decide not to give up hope on a career in some aspect of music that interests them.

I plan to use the *Guide* in much the same way myself. For years I have been fielding difficult questions about career outcomes from anxious parents at the university's open days. In exasperation I have even been heard to say: "Because they're freelance activities, there are no guarantees, but if you try to stop him doing it, he'll resent you for the rest of his life." Now I will simply be able to advise them to buy the *Guide*.

## **The Research**

When I started the project Dick Letts had already devised a questionnaire and compiled a preliminary list of music job categories. A number of classical music entries (orchestral musician, classical singer, conductor and chamber musician) had been written by Rowena Cowley based on interviews with prominent musicians. My job was to flesh out the list and to continue the research and writing along the same lines as Rowena.

I quickly realised that identifying all the jobs relating to music was going to result in a map of the music industry and its operation. I was in fact charting the relationships and interactions of creative musicians, performing musicians, technicians, professional business associates of musicians (including managers, accountants, lawyers, agents, promoters, merchandisers, record companies and publishers), and people in the broadcasting and other media industries. I was documenting the music components of the

information and education industries. The research process was certainly going to connect me with areas of music that I hadn't really had any contact with (such as music instrument making and music therapy), even if I was more than vaguely familiar with these activities from reading about them. I was also going to have to develop a large network of contacts in order to collect the data I needed.

The format for the *Guide* entries evolved into a detailed description of the job, a detailed analysis of the skills (including personal qualities) needed to do the job, an estimation of the job prospects (or business prospects in the case of freelance activities), a statement about the training (both formal and informal) required, and a comment from at least one informant which could either give some insight into the job or provide advice to people wishing to enter the field.

I realised early in the process that I would not be able to create an entry for every job in music. This hit home when I looked at the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's website and discovered there were a staggering 50 named job titles in orchestra administration. A similar situation existed with the major record companies. In order to deal with this I had to make a selection that somehow sensibly covered the whole territory. In the case of music presenting companies, for example, the key roles are CEO, artistic administration, finance, marketing, development, education, and operations. In smaller companies even these roles are sometimes collapsed into composite positions.

In the end I was asked by the publisher to reduce the manuscript by more than 10% in order to bring the book into a lower price range. This meant cutting out some of the more interesting but obscure job categories such as music popularity chart publisher and Guided Imagery in Music therapist. I was determined, however, to leave in some of the common but low profile jobs such as karaoke compere and library music composer, as I felt these jobs represented integral parts of the hidden substructure of the economy of music. In fact the karaoke compere job seems to have caught the eye of readers. It was, for example, singled out from the full range of entries by a radio interviewer. It allowed me to make my point that this job is definitely out there and that to do it competently requires specialist skills in contemporary pop singing, vocal harmony improvisation, audience motivation, crowd control and entertainment technology. Every job has its own unique set of duties and skills.

### **Issues arising**

A few significant issues emerged from the research. The first was the degree of suspicion, even hostility, from industry professionals about preparation for jobs by the acquisition of formal qualifications. This was particularly rife in the record industry where the expected career path is by getting a job in the sales area (usually the call centre) and working one's way up through the ranks over a decade or more. A few of the majors have recruitment policies that executive level staff should hold a degree, but many of the record company staff interviewed disagreed with this type of preparation. The idea of someone in A&R (Artist and Repertoire) needing a degree was considered laughable. Maybe these attitudes arise from bad experiences of graduate employees, but more likely it is because there is

no history of appropriate available training for record company personnel except in obvious areas such as finance, law and marketing.

I have encountered the same sceptical attitude in the music industry regarding the training of performing musicians. It is thought that removing musicians from the coalface of the industry will take the edge off their performance and creative energy, expose them to irrelevant musical theories and practices, weaken their resolve to succeed and delay unnecessarily their entry into the marketplace.

Such criticisms may indeed be justified and should be interpreted by music training bodies like TAFEs and the conservatoria as opportunities to improve the relevance and vitality of their offerings, preferably by consulting closely with the industries they serve or should be serving.

A second and related trend emerging from the music careers research is the importance of unpaid work experience for entry into quite a large number of industry sectors. This seems to be true of music broadcasting where applicants for jobs in commercial or public radio are expected to show evidence of time spent working in community radio. It is true also for arts administration, for independent record companies and for recording studios.

In many cases it is very competitive to get an unpaid placement so the successful person will need to be the most persistent, the most enthusiastic, and the most willing to undertake menial tasks in order to convince the employer that they are truly committed to the job. Once in the door the opportunity to move to paid work will depend on how well they apply themselves, how well they fit in, and how hard they are prepared to work.

No one really doubts the value of unpaid work experience, but it seems that a combination of professional placement with relevant formal training would be a more efficient and effective way of preparing for particular kinds of practical music and music business work. Work experience is obviously also possible with freelance professionals by observing and assisting their solitary studio or workshop routines. There was evidence in my research that this was a way forward for musical instrument makers, but it should also be possible in areas like composition, performance, music research and music journalism.

The experience of writing *The Australian Guide to Careers in Music* has been an exciting and enriching one for me. It has allowed me to develop a handle on many areas of musical endeavour that I hadn't really given much consideration to before this project. It has made me see how the myriad of industry operatives from the ballet class pianist to the computer game composer fit into the grand scheme of things, and to draw a map of how music works in industry and community.