

Striking a chord

Music can lift our mood, get us moving and provide a backdrop to our daily lives. Almost 2.4 million Australians aged 14 years and over attend at least one concert every three months, making live music more popular than attending professional sports events.

Music is also big business in Australia, contributing between \$4 billion and \$6 billion to the nation's economy every year. But something is missing. As researchers from the University of Sydney Business School and Deakin University's Business School in Melbourne concluded in a ground-breaking 2017 report, the Australian music industry is skipping a beat when it comes to gender equality. Here's why:

- Women represent only one-fifth of songwriters and composers registered with the Australasian Performing Rights Association, despite making up 45 per cent of qualified musicians and half of those studying music.
- Women creative artists earn far less than their male counterparts.
- Women receive less airplay on Australian radio.
- Music festival line-ups are dominated (sometimes entirely) by male artists and male-lead acts.
- Women are significantly less likely to be honoured in the music industry's most prestigious awards.
- Men continue to hold the most powerful positions in Australia's music industry.
- Women are under-represented on the boards of all national music industry peak bodies.

Exact data on women working in contemporary music is hard to come by as it is one of the least researched areas of the Arts. But we do know that it's not just female artists missing out on the limelight. Women are under-represented in all other areas of the industry especially in the Board rooms of our peak music industry bodies and in sound, technical and music production.

According to Founding Executive Director of Australian Women in Music Awards (AWMA), Vicki Gordon, the Australian music industry has always struggled to recognise and address the equity problem with consistent and systematic policy change.

"Even when there is acknowledgement of the problem, too often there is a complacency that implies that the problem will eventually fix itself; that eventually women will be recognised or that talking about the issue is the same as fixing it," Ms Gordon said.

"It is so important to call out what you see as merely a change of optics. Strategies which make visible individuals are important of course, but in 2020 activists and diversity advocates are not going to be distracted by tokenism or insincere commitment to real power shifting and change."

AWMA was first held in Brisbane in 2018, attracting extensive support and praise for taking on the music industry to recognise and celebrate the talent and contributions of women. But it's not just about music and awards. AWMA is about shining a light on gender inequality and issues such as ageism, racism, sexual harassment, body image and diversity.

AWMA also spearheaded discussion and valorised truth-telling about harassment and assault in the industry and continues to advocate for collaborative commitment to put respect and safety firmly on the music industry agenda.

It's a tough road, but one that Ms Gordon remains locked on.

"Long-term activists acknowledge that change does not happen merely through consensus and agreement," she said. "Change happens when power is made to shift, marginalised people get a voice, and many people work hard to lift the profile of diversity and creativity."

In 2020, Vicki Gordon has placed AWMA in a position to continue this fight for change with joy, generosity and great music! Whatever the future of the Australian music industry, AWMA will be a foundational contributor. ■

Read more at womeninmusicawards.com.au/statistics-and-research/ or follow AWMA on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

The Australian Women in Music Awards will be held in Brisbane on 5–6 October 2021.

Words by Cheryl Gray. Group photo by Wendy McDougall.



Changing the record

Ngati Kahungunu woman and award-winning producer Vicki Gordon has always had an enduring commitment to gender and cultural equality in the Australian music industry.

She has pioneered provocation, activism and change throughout her career. In the 1990s she founded the Australian Women's Rock Institute and joined with creative, talented women who were being side-lined and stymied by systemic discrimination. She created alliances with First Nations women and established Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's contemporary music festival (With Open Eyes), first all-girl rock festival (Fast Forward) and first training program for female DJs (SCRATCH).

As Music Manager Vicki guided the careers of Indigenous singer-songwriters Emma Donovan and Ursula Yovich and was record label executive of Transistor Music when it released Vanessa Amorosi's multi-platinum album *The Power* and global hit single "Absolutely Everybody".

More recently, Vicki produced and toured internationally the *Barefoot Divas*, a cross cultural, spoken word concert, and was the commissioning co-producer for the musical *Barbara and the Camp Dogs*, taking out four Green Room Awards in 2020 including Best Production, Best Music Composition and Outstanding Performance and four Helpmann Awards in 2019 including best Musical and Best Original Score.

"It's good to see the conversation around gender and diversity no longer being side-lined in a tokenistic way," Ms Gordon said. "But the challenges and fights can still feel relentless and resistance to change endemic.

"Being a part of the wave of activists who have insisted that the industry talk about diversity and empowerment of previously marginalised musicians, practitioners and songwriters is encouraging."

As founding executive director of Australian Women in Music Awards (AWMA), held in Brisbane in 2018 and 2019, and returning in 2021, Vicki is empowered by her colleagues and collaborators, a diverse group of women and communities across all areas of the industry including First Nations and culturally diverse women, LGBTQI and others.

"AWMA's mission is to lead with generosity, to insist that our society benefits when musicians and those who work with them are empowered from a diversity of places, cultures and identities," Ms Gordon said.

Despite having to postpone AWMA 2020 due to the unpredictability of COVID-19, Ms Gordon is confident

that the return to Brisbane in 2021 will be the best year yet.

"When you initiate change on this scale, it's like turning around a huge ocean-going vessel," she said.

"Just because a new course has been set on the bridge, it still takes a big effort and time to swing the ship around, to fight the headwinds of negativity and resistance to change and actually change course, not just talk about doing it!

"AWMA, for me, represents the opportunity to realise something about the truth of our industry that is overlooked – there have always been diverse, talented women, people of colour and other marginalised voices. They just don't get enough attention, recognition and acclaim. But they're not going away and neither is AWMA!" ■

Vicki Gordon has been awarded a Human Rights commendation, was a finalist in the 2020 Telstra Business Women's Awards and was recognised as a 2019 AFR Top 100 Women of Influence for her lifetime commitment to addressing gender and cultural equity within the Australian music industry.

Photo by Peter Collie.

