



Survey of First Nations Music Artists Results

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Cover Photo:

Stiff Gins at Sydney Opera House, performing live online for the 2020 First Nations Arts Awards.
Credit: Flavia Rossler.

Introduction

First Nations music plays a critical role in Australia's music identity.

The future growth of the First Nations music sector requires it to be at the centre of dialogue and decision-making.

Empowering First Nations musicians to drive the creative vision and step into their role as custodians of the oldest musical practice in the world ensures that the next generation can benefit through creativity and participate in a cultural future.

It is time to hear the voices of First Nations musicians.

The Australia Council recognises the need to invest in and develop this sector to ensure opportunities for First Nations music artists continue to grow. Investment will provide crucial development opportunities for First Nations contemporary musicians, supporting their sustainability and continued success at a critical time.

**How do First Nations musicians feel about the music industry?
What is working? What could be improved on in the music business
in relation to their cultural practice and community responsibilities?**

In February 2020, a cohort of leading First Nations musicians from across Australia gathered at the Australia Council in Sydney for a roundtable led by First Nations musicians. The goal was to share insights and experiences on how to increase opportunity, create market awareness and address barriers.

A key outcome was the need to continue to hear the voices of First Nations musicians from across the country. A survey was developed to identify the sector's strengths, challenges and needs.

In April and May 2020, the online survey was distributed to the First Nations music roundtable attendees and through the APRA AMCOS First Nations Music Office. A total of 87 responses were received.

The survey results can provide insights to inform the music industry as it recovers, rebuilds and looks to the future – a future in which First Nations talent and artistry is nurtured, celebrated and central in the music industry and Australia's culture.

Key findings

The survey of First Nations music artists provides an insight into the strengths, challenges and needs of the sector. Respondents were asked to focus on their pre-COVID-19 activities and attitudes.

The survey results found that:

- The main **strengths** of being a First Nations musician are *inspiring other First Nations artists, opportunities to educate, challenge and build understanding with non-First Nations people and creating pathways for the next generations of First Nations musicians.*
- Many **challenges** were identified by respondents including *lack of financial return from creative practice, lack of time to do creative work due to other pressures and responsibilities, and access to funding or financial support.*
- The greatest **needs** were *financial assistance, recognition by the wider music industry and more networking opportunities.*

Who responded to the survey?

- Of the survey respondents, 56% were men, 39% women and 2% gender diverse. 2% of respondents preferred not to answer.
- 86% of respondents chose to identify themselves by either their name, their band or both.
- The most common age of respondents was between 25 and 44 years (44%).
- Respondents were split evenly between usually residing in a capital city (44%) or regional town (45%). 9% usually resided in remote Australia.
- 56% of respondents shared that they have not had to leave Country to pursue their music career, while 36% had left Country.
- All states and territories were represented in the survey, with half of respondents living in New South Wales or Queensland:

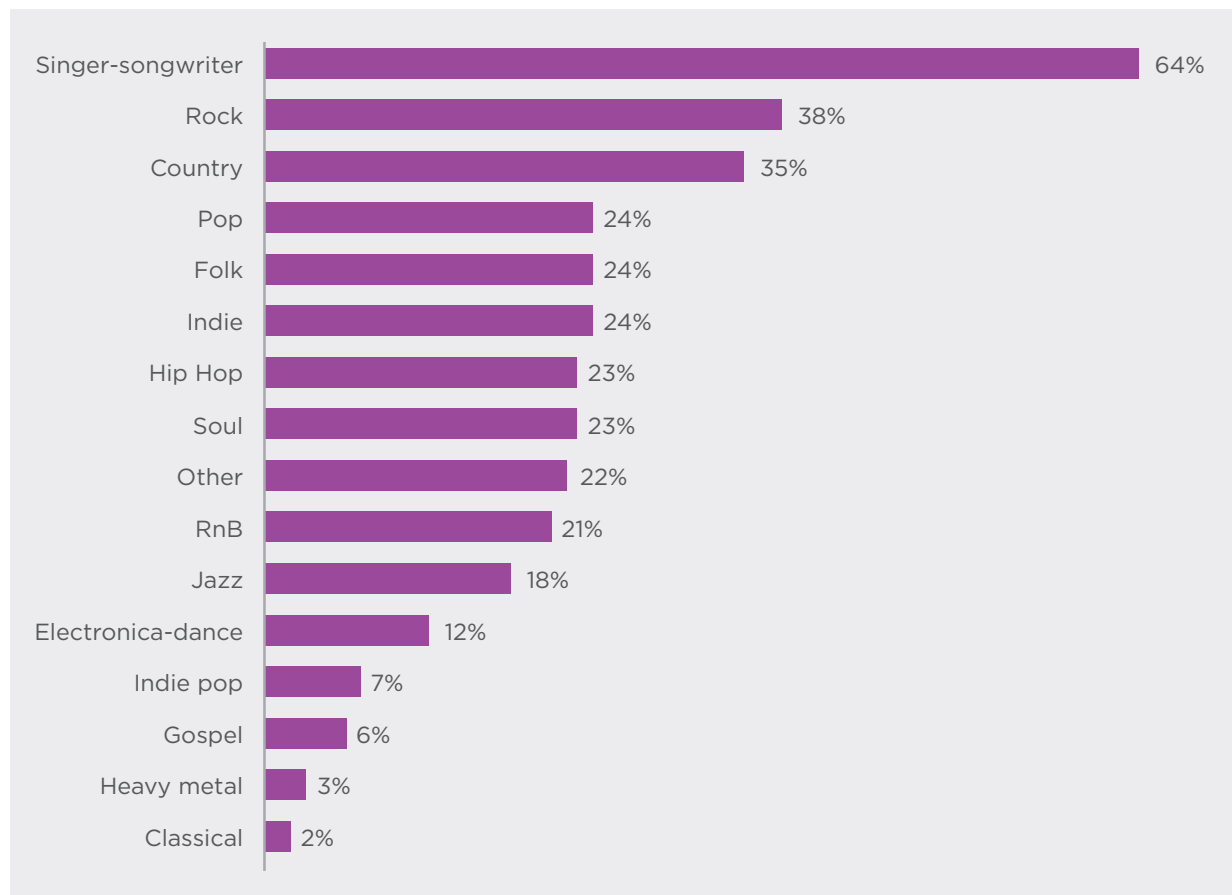
Queensland (26%), New South Wales (25%), Victoria (16%), Western Australia (12%), South Australia (10%), Northern Territory (5%), Tasmania (1%) and ACT (3%).

What languages do survey respondents speak?

English was the most common first language as indicated by survey respondents.

- 66 respondents indicated that English was, or was one of their first languages.
- 2 respondents specified a language other than English *and* English as their first languages.
- 5 respondents specified a language other than English as their first language.

Type of musician



What type of music do respondents create?

The music styles of respondents were mostly singer-songwriter (64%), followed by rock (38%), country (35%), pop, folk and indie (24% each). Respondents were able to select more than one option, therefore percentages may not add to 100%.

Respondents selected an average of 3.6 music styles each, suggesting that musicians have a broad range and more than one style.

The most common style that was not already specified in the list was Reggae.

Strengths of being a First Nations musician

What do respondents believe is the main strength of being a First Nations musician?

All strengths were rated highly, however respondents selected the following as the main strengths of being a First Nations musician:

- *Inspiring other First Nations artists* (79%)
- *Opportunities to educate, challenge and/or build understanding with non-First Nations people* (72%)
- *Creating pathways for the next generations of First Nations musicians* (69%)
- *Sharing culture and languages* (60%)

While *Inspiring other First Nations artists* was the most-selected strength for most groups, some groups differed:

- The most-selected strength for respondents from **Queensland**, and **those from capital cities** was *Opportunities to educate, challenge and/or build understanding with non-First Nations people*.
- Respondents from **remote Australia** identified *Sharing culture and languages* and *Opportunities to educate, challenge and/or build understanding with non-First Nations people* as equal greatest strengths.

For respondents who had **stayed on Country**, *Creating pathways for the next generations of First Nations musicians* was also rated highly as a strength.

Other strengths identified by respondents included:

*“Inspiring women to **believe in themselves** and be confident.”*

- Survey respondent

*“Giving **a voice to the voiceless**, and telling stories that must be told to the world.”*

- Survey respondent

*“Contemporary Cultural Practice and **reinvigorating our knowledge.**”*

- Survey respondent

For those who had **left Country**, *Opportunities to educate, challenge and/or build understanding with non-First Nations people* and *Opportunities to educate, challenge and/or build understanding with non-First Nations people* were stronger.

There were no respondents who selected *none of these* as strengths.

How many strengths on average did respondents select?

Each respondent who chose to answer this question selected an average of 5.4 strengths out of a possible 11.

On average, **women** chose slightly fewer strengths than **men** (5.1 compared to 5.7). Looking at age, **the 65 or older** age group* selected the highest number of strengths on average (6.5), followed by those aged **25-34** years (6.1).

- Respondents from the **ACT*** and **Western Australia** selected the greatest number of strengths (10 and 6.6 strengths per respondent respectively).

Average number of strengths selected by state or territory:

- **ACT:** 10*
- **New South Wales:** 4.3
- **Northern Territory:** 5.5*
- **Queensland:** 5.3
- **South Australia:** 5.6
- **Tasmania:** 6*
- **Victoria:** 5.6
- **Western Australia:** 6.6
- Respondents living in both **capital city** and **regional towns** selected 5.3 strengths each on average, while those living in **remote areas** selected a higher number (6.4).
- Those who had **left Country** to pursue their music careers chose more strengths on average than those who **stayed on Country** (6.0 vs 5.0).

Challenges experienced by First Nations musicians

What do respondents believe is the main challenge of being a First Nations musician?

Survey respondents also indicated a number of challenges experienced by First Nations musicians. The challenges most-selected by respondents were:

- Lack of financial return from creative practice (73%)
- Lack of time to do creative work due to other pressures and responsibilities (56%)
- Difficulty with grant applications (55%), this was rated slightly higher than Lack of access to funding or other financial support (52%).
- Lack of work opportunities (53%)
- Lack of First Nations people in decision-making roles (53%)

Other challenges identified by respondents included:

*“Music production directed to be commercial rather than cultural. **Losing the genuine Indigenous sounds** to folkish music from other cultures.”*

- Survey respondent

*“Living in **low socio-economic situation** in crowded houses means it is difficult to plan and build our own workspaces. Also, we are the first women to play music as it is not a tradition in our community and this creates **pressure** for us”*

- Survey respondent

*“General anxiety and **change of world.**”*

- Survey respondent

Lack of financial return from creative practice was the most strongly rated challenge across most groups of respondents, except for those from remote Australia and those from the Northern Territory:

- The biggest challenge for those respondents living in **remote Australia** was *Lack of First Nations people in decision-making roles*.
- Respondents in the **Northern Territory*** indicated that several challenges were significant for them including *Lack of access to funding or other financial support, Difficulty with grant applications, Lack of time to do creative work due to other pressures and responsibilities, Geographic location or isolation, Living and/or touring away from Family* and *Lack of First Nations people in decision-making roles*.

Lack of access to funding and or other financial support was also rated strongly by those from **South Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory**.

South Australian respondents also indicated that *Lack of work opportunities, Lack of time to do creative work due to other pressures and responsibilities* and *Lack of First Nations people in decision-making roles* were significant challenges.

While those aged **18-24** and **35-44** were also experiencing *Lack of time to do creative work due to other pressures and responsibilities* to the same degree as *Lack of financial return*.

The most strongly rated challenges for those from **remote Australia** differed to the total sample. These were: *Lack of First Nations people in decision-making roles, Lack of access to funding and or other financial support* and *Geographic location/isolation*.

Only one respondent did not identify any of the answer options as challenges.

Discrimination

Discrimination was selected as a challenge by 27% of respondents who chose to answer. Where additional details about discrimination were described, responses included:

"I'd prefer not to make specific comments other than to say it is a major issue particularly in parts of the country music industry. I've had to work harder and for less than many non-First Nations people I've grown in the industry with. It becomes disheartening to the point that I've had to give up multiple times and return to the scene because of the deep hurt that you feel without an outlet to be able to let it out, with fear of the repercussions. Especially because you don't want to be seen as one who would use a race card."

- Survey respondent

"I'm fair skinned, and I am certain I am not 'black enough' for certain opportunities, both gig wise and funding wise."

- Survey respondent

"Quite often on music festivals or radio programming there is a box ticking mentality which leads to less opportunities for other Indigenous artists/performers."

- Survey respondent

How many challenges on average did respondents select?

Each respondent who chose to answer this question selected an average of 5.6 challenges out of a possible 15.

On average, the number of challenges selected was similar for **men** and **women** (5.7 and 5.4 challenges respectively). First Nations musicians aged **25-34** years faced the greatest number of challenges (6.4).

Those from the **Northern Territory**, * **South Australia** and **Tasmania*** reported the highest number of challenges.

Average number of challenges selected by state or territory:

- **ACT:** 4.5*
- **New South Wales:** 4.7
- **Northern Territory:** 6.8*
- **Queensland:** 5.3
- **South Australia:** 8.1
- **Tasmania:** 9*
- **Victoria:** 5.5
- **Western Australia:** 5.9

Respondents from both **capital cities** and **regional towns** selected a similar number of challenges on average per person (5.5 and 5.4 respectively), while those from **remote Australia** selected 7.1 each.

Those respondents who **left Country** to pursue their music career selected substantially more challenges (6.7) than those who **did not leave Country** (5.2).



Needs

What are First Nations musicians' greatest needs?

All needs were rated highly. First Nations musicians selected their greatest needs as:

- *Financial assistance* (66%)
- *Recognition by the wider music industry* (63%)
- *More networking opportunities* (60%)
- *Support and encouragement from a professional body* (53%)
- *Support and encouragement from a philanthropist, corporation, foundation or other funding body* (53%)
- *Help with grant applications* (53%)

Greatest strengths and challenges were consistent across most groups, however greatest needs varied substantially.

While *Financial assistance* was the greatest need across the total sample, a closer look identifies differing needs across different groups:

- **Women** selected *More networking opportunities* and *Support and encouragement from a professional body* as their greatest needs ahead of *Financial assistance*.
- **Men** required *Financial assistance* as their greatest need, closely followed by *Recognition by the wider music industry*.
- The greatest need for those who had **left Country** was *Financial assistance*, and for those who **stayed on Country** it was *Recognition by the wider music industry*.

Greatest needs by age group:

- For those aged **18-24**: *Rehearsal or administrative space* and *Recognition by the wider music industry*.
- For those aged **25-34**: *Professional development, education and training opportunities* was rated as highly as *Financial assistance*.
- For those aged **35-44**: *More networking opportunities*.
- For those aged **45-54**: *Financial assistance*.
- For those aged **55-64**: *Support and encouragement from a philanthropist, corporation, foundation or other funding body*.
- And for those **aged 65 and above***: *Recognition by the wider music industry*.

Greatest needs by respondents' state or territory¹:

1. Only one respondent resided in Tasmania, therefore greatest need is unavailable.

- **ACT:** Financial assistance, Recognition by the wider music industry and More networking opportunities.
- **New South Wales:** Recognition by the wider music industry.
- **Northern Territory:** Financial assistance, Support and encouragement from a professional body, Support and encouragement from a philanthropist, corporation, foundation or other funding body and Professional development, education and training opportunities.
- **Queensland:** Financial assistance.
- **South Australia:** Recognition by the wider music industry.
- **Victoria:** Financial assistance.
- **Western Australia:** More networking opportunities.

Greatest needs by metropolitan, regional or remote location:

- For those in **capital cities:** Financial assistance and Recognition by the wider music industry.
- For those in **regional towns:** More networking opportunities
- For those in **remote Australia:** Financial assistance and Support and encouragement from a philanthropist, corporation, foundation or other funding body.

Three respondents selected *none of these* as needs.

Other needs identified by respondents included:

*“The problem with mentoring opportunities available is many of them already have mentors engaged, whereas I have had very high profile artists offer to mentor me but **the money and opportunities to make it happen seem not to exist** unless we go through a grant writing process, which would probably have to be done with no support by the organisations set up to support musicians.”*

- Survey respondent

*“I’m a seniors entertainer most of the time and aged care don’t have lots of funding, and **trying to get backing from grants and philanthropists** as a solo entertainer (you have to be a registered charity is all I get) so cannot help anyone outside the scope of highly restricted funding the aged care facilities, disability and Indigenous schemes are getting.”*

- Survey respondent



How many needs on average did respondents select?

Each respondent who chose to answer this question selected an average of 6.1 needs out of a possible 13. Average number of needs did not differ by gender (6.1 needs for both men and women).

Younger musicians selected more needs than older age groups: the average needs were greatest for those aged **25-34** years (7.8), followed by **18-24**-year olds (6.2) and **35-44**-year olds (6.2).

Average number of needs selected by state or territory:

- **ACT:** 6.3*
- **NSW:** 5.7
- **Northern Territory:** 8.5*
- **Queensland:** 6.4
- **South Australia:** 8 and greatest need: *Recognition by the wider music industry.*
- **Tasmania:** 11*
- **Victoria:** 5.1
- **Western Australia:** 4.8

Average number of needs is similar for those from **capital cities** (5.9) and **regional towns** (6.2), and higher for those from **remote Australia** (6.9).

Needs were greater for those who **had to leave Country** to pursue their career (6.7) than **those who stayed on Country** (5.8).

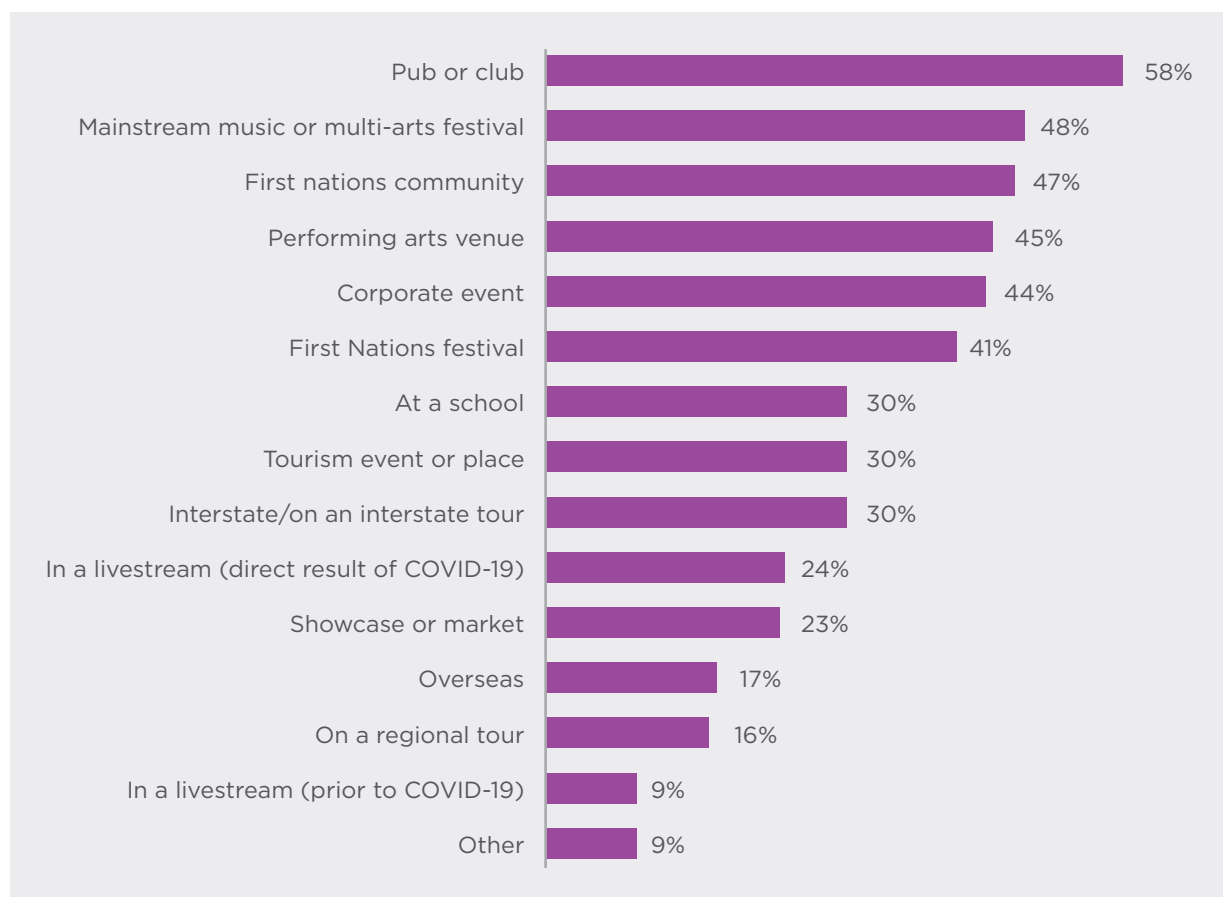
Getting music to listening audiences

Playing live (prior to COVID-19)

62% of respondents indicated that they played a gig at least once per month, with the highest proportion playing gigs two or more times per month (23%).

Musicians are playing gigs at a wide variety of locations:

Gig location



Listening audiences for recorded music

First Nations musicians are getting their recorded music to listening audiences in diverse ways.

Digital platforms such as Facebook (61%), YouTube (58%) and Spotify (56%) and community radio (56%) were the most common ways for respondents to share their music with wider audiences.

Support organisations

Respondents were broadly aware of support organisations.

- 92% of respondents were members of APRA AMCOS.
 - Respondents were aware of the state and territory bodies to varying degrees, with WAM, Music NT, Music NSW, Music Victoria and Q Music the most known. A quarter of respondents (26%) had not heard of any of these organisations.
 - Respondents were more aware of funding opportunities from bodies such as The Australia Council, APRA AMCOS and Go Fund Me than they were of the state and territory bodies.
- 16% of respondents were not aware of any funding opportunities from these organisations.



Open ended questions

Moving forward as self-determined First Nations music artists

Respondents were asked, **how do you think we can move forward together as self-determined First Nations music artists for the benefit of our music communities and our cultural and business practice?**

In answering this question, First Nations musicians highlighted the need for **collaboration, sharing information** and ideas, **events and formal networks** for connection.

"More Indigenous music producers and collaborations. More music workshops. Tours to include ready to go groups. Regional Music festivals given more support."

"Support each other by providing opportunities for working collaboratively, sharing stages, cross promotional opportunities."

"...there is benefit in coming together for First Nations Festivals or events and would be great to have more networking opportunities such as a meet up before the festival or after where all artists can mingle & share tips with each other."

"Start to build together. Share information, ideas and opportunities. Give opportunities to our young ones coming up through this industry, always look out for them and teach them the ropes. Create safe spaces to have real yarns about the industry and where we fit in the big scheme of things."

More **long-term strategic planning**, more **self-determined support, presence, awareness**, opportunities and strong management were also priorities for moving forward.

"Stronger presence in the mainstream music industry."

"I think it's important for established artists to support and uplift upcoming Indigenous artists. As someone who has been performing for a long time, I find it is a competition and other more established artists won't acknowledge my work or other younger artists coming up. It's a really fickle business as it is, I think it's just important to support each other."

Some respondents indicated the need for greater understanding of the varied genres that First Nations musicians play.

"Finding the balance of not necessarily treating all First Nations performers as a single 'genre' as we have all different types of genres that we do."

Others highlighted the need for funding overhauls, support for how to apply for funding, education and professional development

"Both Financial, advice and mentoring support for Artist and producers to deliver high quality mainstream ready product and content."

The wider music industry's responsibility to the First Nations music sector and its artists

Respondents were asked, **what do you think is the wider music industry's responsibility to the First Nations music sector and its artists?**

First Nations musicians who responded to the survey believe that the wider music industry's responsibility to the First Nations music sector and its artists includes **respecting, valuing and celebrating First Nations culture.**

"Respect. The wider community should be more aware of the commitment that many, many Aboriginal musicians since the early 1900's, have made to bring culture, music, art and dance to Australia and the World."

"To provide a supportive pathway for First Nations artists to follow and grow from and to always show respect"

Many respondents believe the wider music industry has a responsibility to put **First Nations people in decision making roles**, not to make decisions about First Nations artists without their input and acknowledging the need to **make room for First Nations voices.**

"To bolster First Nations voices instead of speaking for us."

"I feel the wider industry has to give up space and give up power. It's not enough to have black stages at festivals, our artists are good enough to be on the main stage. Always include black voices in meetings, discussions etc"

Other respondents indicated that **support, knowledge sharing, encouragement and equal opportunity** was part of the wider music industry's responsibility.

"I think the wider music industry has a responsibility to support, encourage, share knowledge & work together with our First Nations music sector. As to encourage more opportunity for the future of the industry."

First Nations musicians who responded also spoke about the **need to avoid tokenism** in the wider music industry, and to ensure equality for all First Nations artists.

"See us as equals not just tokenistic..."

"Not just tick a box and actually listen and truly give every artist the time of day."

"I'm not a fan of quotas or discounts being applied to artists as it often leads to the box ticking approach but there is a genuine need for the spotlight to be put on Indigenous artists in the mainstream."

The broader arts sector's responsibility to the First Nations music sector and its artists

Respondents were asked, **what do you think is the broader arts sector's responsibility to the First Nations music sector and its artists?**

Answers regarding the broader arts industry's responsibility to the First Nations music sector were similar to the previous question. First Nations musicians who responded indicated the **need for First Nations voices**, instead of being spoken for.

"Again, bolstering First Nation voices instead of speaking for us. Perhaps increased opportunities for First Nations artists to acquire new skills and equipment.

"Give up spaces. Give opportunities. Be more accessible. Be transparent. Have black voices in the space when discussing black people and black issues."

Other similar themes around **inclusion, collaboration, understanding and equal opportunity** were also mentioned.

"Inclusion. Too many times the decision to include our First Nations' musicians feels like: a last-minute thought, tokenism, a hand-out (not a hand up) and payment that often does not reflect the input. I would like to see a real first nation's organisation that does protect and promote our music without the 'bottom line' being the only reason for promoting our culture, music, dance and art."

"I think it is the broader art's sector's responsibility to practice equal opportunity."

"To involve, as much as possible, a greater collaboration between artists, venues and performance opportunities."

One respondent said they found this question more useful than the previous question.

"This is a better question. The broader arts community needs to understand that history on a timeline would see a huge long line of First Nations art, both visual and aural, and a tiny dot of European driven arts. But the national gallery, school lessons, and general importance placed on arts in our world is the reverse. Except at Reconciliation Week where schools do a week of dot painting. First Nations culture should be the starting point when writing curriculums at schools. When putting together art showcases and festivals. It needs to be an embedded normality within every part of our culture and it in turn permeates the normal ideas of who We are as a nation for the next generation."

Supporting a vibrant self-determined First Nations music sector

Respondents were asked, **how do you think the music industry and other stakeholders can partner with First Nations musicians to further develop and support a vibrant self-determined First Nations music sector?**

Respondents answered this question in varied ways. Some answers included similar themes to the earlier questions: **collaboration, inclusion, sustainability** and **communication**.

"Collaborating, write together, perform together, promote together."

"Many First Nations artists only perform at First Nation events, this is amazing, but these artists also deserve to play on mainstream events, these opportunities would grow their fan base, and opportunities for future performances, collaborations, and educating opportunities"

Some respondents answered with more specific comments around funding **and financial support**.

"Offer more financial support to create music and market music. There needs to be an actual pathway from beginning to end and a process that ensures sustainability beyond it."

"Long term projects. There are so many projects where non-local artists get paid to visit the community for a week or two, make some nice video and then leave."

Other respondents raised ideas around **governance**, including the need for a **central body for First Nations musicians**.

"Governance. There is a good First Nations music industry but badly funded and badly organised. There are many, many capable people out in communities who we continue to work with and sadly they appear to be the least funded."

"By a central advocacy agency with an accessible website"

"Look at creating one body for the First Nation artist to come under for support, guidance, networking, education. Run by First Nations people who have good experience within the current industry"

In discussing partnerships, respondents highlighted the need for **understanding** and **cultural competence** in those who partner with First Nations musicians.

"Partnerships are wonderful! However, we must lead our projects and not be dictated to! We must not be tokenism black artist for a white organisation to gain funding. We must be the leading organisation or artist when it comes to black funding and partnerships!!"

"Firstly, there needs to be an understanding and appreciation of the stories shared by First Nations musicians. Once this is established, there can be further discussions/partnerships to help create genuine interest in partnering with various industry reps and stakeholders. Our ways are all about relationships, this should not be forgotten in the work field. These important partnerships will help in growing further appreciation and acknowledgment of First Nations music sector - it would be great to see more First Nations artist on main-stream festivals and events."

"By realising for a lot of First Nations Musicians that our art is a lifestyle, part of our culture, our way of survival and a business.... Music industry and arts sector stakeholders need to realise the implications of intergenerational trauma. For me, art has always been a vessel of healing, understanding my identity as an Indigenous woman, a way to connect to my mob, a way to tell stories and a strong way of continuing to fight for the justice of my people on stolen land."

About the sample

A total of 87 responses to the survey of First Nations music artists were received. The online survey was distributed to the attendees of the First Nations music round table and through the APRA AMCOS First Nations Music Office. The survey was open from 10 April until 4 May 2020.

While the survey was in field during the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents were asked to focus on their pre-COVID-19 answers.

* indicates where a specific group has a low sample size.
These results should be used indicatively only.

Respondents had the choice to 'prefer not to answer' for all questions.

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