

Music Festivals Closing

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So many iconic Music Festivals have cancelled or have closed down. This includes my favourite the Byron Bluesfest which announced that the 2025 Festival will be the 35th and last. Peter Noble last year had a press conference which I didn't attend, but Jim Booth has a press pass, so he did. Apparently, Noble said the festival is struggling and needed financial support from the Government to survive. Looking at the number of attendees at the festival I totally understand this as even Good Friday it was easy to get around.

If you look at the 2019 Festival which my mate Pit says was "the last great Bluesfest" it was packed and had great acts. One to remember! With acts like Samantha Fish (Our new discovery then and I have every album!), Iggy Pop (Incredible!), Imelda May (Incredible again!), Flogging Molly (Only the second time I've seen them, both at a Bluesfest, but amazing.), The Raconteurs (I'm a Jack White fan so this was super special), Backsliders, Vintage Trouble and I could go on and on and on there were so many great acts. As well, you could meet these acts, they weren't some amorphous entities high on some stage. Next to the CD tent was a signing tent. Over the years I've gotten to meet some of my favourite acts, ask them questions and get them to sign the CDs, or t-shirts if you prefer.



I know the trendies will say "No-one uses CDs anymore!" as they all want punters to follow them like blind sheep. However, if you have a proper Hi Fi system (Harman/Kardon amp and B&W speakers with gold linked connectors – it sounds bloody good!) those mp3's sound like crap. Try playing a band like The Angels through mp3's and they sound like crap. Put them through a proper Hi Fi and it sounds like you are at a concert! I know as I've been close to the front a number of times to hear The Angels, the best one being when they played at the Narara Festival back in 1983.

I just recently brought the box set of Deep Purple CD albums from 1970-1976 as I was big Deep Purple fan when I was a teenager. So, I know the albums well but was amazed when listening to "Made In Japan" that I could hear the pick clicks against the strings. It was always there when using vinyl, or cassettes, but CDs made it so much clearer. I know there has been an upsurge in vinyl sales of late due to the fact the sound is "warmer" and people want to hear whole albums again. However, I went through vinyl, and all its inherent problems, last time. So, I prefer CDs, and all these people are giving them away or selling them cheap much to my happiness. Word on the street is that CDs are now making a comeback for the reasons I just explained.



However, a lot of people at the Bluesfest brought the CDs to be signed, not to play them, as a memento of the Bluesfest acts. My Samantha Fish signed "Belle Of The West" is still one of my most treasured Bluesfest memories as is my signed Vintage Trouble one.



Byron Music was always a Mecca for the musicians attending the festival. You never know who may be playing there! I even was privileged to jam with the manager in 2019 who was a drummer trying out a guitar I wish I'd brought – Yamaha Revstar. I've brought a few things from the store over the years. I still go to the actual store in Byron, but it's about half the size it used to be.

The regular food stalls like Rio's Corn, who knew us by name as it was our first pit stop for buttered garlic corn and pepper every day of each Bluesfest. We'd chat about what acts were good and get some insider tips. That store is gone like the waffle place, Govinda's (Ed: Govinda's was back for the 2025 festival!), etc. This year there were obvious gaps in between vendors, even the little shops that sold various trinkets were reduced in number.

So, what has happened to the Bluesfest since 2019, as an example of what is happening to all the festivals. The obvious fly in the ointment is of course CoVid-19. When that hit in 2020 there was plenty of warning that the Bluesfest wasn't going ahead, so I'm not so sure if that situation was impactful, or not. However, 2021 seemed to be the killer stroke with the advent of nurse CoVid Katie who came straight from a CoVid ward and infected Byron cancelling the festival at the last minute. I'm sure that's what killed off many regular vendors like Rios as they would have had tons of corn which they couldn't get rid of as they were never seen again.



Still, the 2022 Bluesfest seemed like a good one with many Australian bands taking the stage. However, CoVid lurked in the crowd. Out of the 16 of us that attended 14 came down with a bad case of CoVid. I think this may have scared off many people from being in crowds as the 2023 Festival was much smaller in number of punters and things on offer.



So, is this the same with other festivals? The Big Day Out was marred by 16-year-old Jessica Michalik being crushed to death, a breakup of the original partnership, multinational involvement (C3 Presents) and eventually falling ticket sales. Those who used to revel in the music now had started to have families and had moved on. So, it had an indefinite hiatus which has lasted 10 years now. These same circumstances seem to be the root cause behind a lot of the festivals being cancelled.

There's an article in The Conversation (<https://theconversation.com/why-are-so-many-australian-music-festivals-being-cancelled>) that was published in February and it suggests four reasons the authors think that so many festivals are biting the dust.

1. High Overheads: Expensive public liability insurance for both venues and festivals. Not just the cancellations due to the effects of CoVid, but also extreme weather events. Remember Splendour in the Grass 2022 was canned after extreme wild weather. The second Narara 1984 was a wash out without even the Monday of the Festival going ahead. The Government declared it a disaster area as it was mudsville and that effectively killed any more Narara Festivals. The Bluesfest organisers have worked against that as there can be extreme downpours. They now have a surface that's virtually mud free after the Belongil Fields Mudathon of 2009 affected crowds. Still, the insurance for the Bluesfest after the 2020 and 2021 cancellations must have created high premiums.

2. Slower sales: This has been exacerbated by the effects of CoVid, but the article suggests that this was happening before CoVid hit. Remember The Big Day Out bit the dust due to low tickets sales in 2014. The Conversation article seems to hint at two aspects that could be impacting. The first is that people are waiting longer to buy their tickets. In the old days with the Bluesfest if you got the early bird specials you got a great discount. However, Peter Noble shot himself in the foot with that one as he started having better sales later in the year on Black Fridays etc. So, punters were waiting for the artist announcements and then laying their money down afterwards. As the article says: "This change can be understood as a response to the rolling cancellations of the pandemic, in combination with rising ticket prices, domestic financial pressures and busy schedules. It is increasingly normal to look for second-hand tickets at reduced prices as an event approaches." The second is that maybe there is an "oversaturated market" with so many festivals that punters are waiting to see which one they'll go to. I must admit this year I was also holding back as last year's Bluesfest was a bit lacklustre but quickly brought one when it was announced it was the last one. As the article says: "Industry observers are concerned about a drop in youth attendance. Young people who came of age during COVID missed their key festival-going years and may now have moved on to other cultural experiences – followed by younger siblings. This emphasises the long cultural tail of an event like the pandemic."

3. Youth avoidance: Even at the recent Bluesfest there have been fewer younger attendees. At the 2019 Bluesfest there was an even spread across the ages. Now the youngest attendees are bringing prams with babies in them. One of the factors that might also be impacting on this is the current economic climate. The other day I went grocery shopping in Randwick, and I noticed that seven more stores have closed down. The most recent being George's Chickens in the Royal Arcade, the best chicken shop in the Eastern Suburbs. Even at the nearby The Spot there are many closed restaurants and shops. Don't mention the "R" word, but money is starting to get very tight. Doris, who used to run the One Stop Cake Shop in Ashfield closed at the end of August. She used to make those great guitar cookies which Jocelin gave out on my birthday. We popped in to say goodbye and thank you. We found out that the absentee landlords, in Malaysia, have doubled the rent so it's impossible for her to continue. This atmosphere of job uncertainty has definitely been part of the fuel behind slow festival ticket sales in the young.

4. The consolidation of taste: The Conversation article says: "While 'variety' festivals such as Groovin' the Moo and Falls Festival – which feature diverse, multi-genre lineups – are struggling, genre-specific festivals and major artist tours continue to perform well," "The media industry and the music industry specifically are experiencing the effects of an increasing siloing and consolidation of taste within specific niches, exacerbated by the digitisation of media via highly curated streaming platforms." It seems that in these uncertain economic times in which festival organisers "must 'forecast' what will draw a crowd, booking performers up to a year in advance," is quite a challenge. "Uncertainty poses a profound threat to live music in particular, which depends on advance planning and investment, with its returns and benefits hinging on the controlled realisation of future events." "Too much uncertainty also stifles innovation and diversity, as the large multinationals that dominate the music industry are better able to withstand its effects." So, the multinationals are better able to withstand economic uncertainty, but they are also the first to pull the plug as they have little local input, nor the drive of a small group of organisers – they won't take a punt for the punters!

Splendour in the Grass also cancelled earlier this year after a few weeks of slow ticket sales. They had acts like Kylie Minogue, Arcade Fire and G-Flip booked, but still cancelled. Splendour had been going since 2001, so it was a massive shock to the fans. Co-chief executives of the festival, Jessica Ducrou & Paul Piticco form the company, Secret Sounds. "Secret Sounds has staged the annual three-day festival under the umbrella of the US multinational entertainment company Live Nation since the latter bought a majority share of the Australian entity in 2016."

"Splendour is the second major music festival run by Live Nation to hit the wall in the past few months. On New Year's Eve, the long-running Falls festival in Byron Bay did not go ahead, with Secret Sounds saying the event would take a year off to 'recalibrate'" (Both these quotes are from an article in the Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/mar/27/splendour-in-the-grass-2024-music-festival-cancelled-ticket-sales>). Who are Live Nation? A multinational entertainment company!

That then draws me into the article in The Guardian about the "'Amazonification' of Australian live music industry hurting artists and crew." (<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/article/2024/jul/26/australia-live-music-industry-inquiry-amazonification-anti-competitive-behaviour-allegations-live-nation-teg>). Kelly Burke's article says: "US-based multinational Live Nation became the focus of a parliamentary inquiry into the struggling live music sector on Friday, after previous public hearings identified sluggish recovery from CoVid-19, rising insurance costs and changing audience habits as the causes behind the cancellation of dozens of music festivals over the past two years. The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance told the inquiry on Friday the Australian live music industry had fallen victim to 'Amazonification' by Live Nation and its main competitor TEG, through vertical integration business models that allow large corporations to control venues, ticket sales, merchandise and the artists themselves."

The Guardian article went on further to say: "This industry has always been about control and in particular control of artists and access and distribution," the president of MEAA Musicians, Kimberley Wheeler, said. "But the difference in the past was that those controlling interests were at least based here and had some sort of connection to our society and our social fabric. It wasn't



necessarily great for artists then, but when you introduce the sort of faceless international corporations that are now taking hold, it's amplified the financial pressures."

The article also noted: "'It's not an accident that musicians are struggling to make a living in Australia and one of the key reasons that's driving that is that over the past few decades, a group of just three major companies has come to control an estimated 85% of the Australian live music market," the MEAA researcher Lilia Anderson told the inquiry. "And it's largely done that through a kind of Amazonification of live music ... Live Nation not only controls ticketing, but **festivals**, music agencies and, increasingly, music venues. What that does is give them unprecedented power over musicians and their audiences."

Did you know that the Government sponsored Live Nation to the tune of 22 million! Why aren't they supporting our local artists and festivals? It seems Peter Noble is in the right ballpark when he says the Government should be sponsoring or helping the Bluesfest stay alive.

So, why are the music festivals closing down? High overheads, slowing ticket sales, youth avoidance, consolidation of taste and the influence of multinational companies seem to have been the main factors. As The Conversation article said: "The struggles of festivals historically backed by Triple J (such as Groovin' the Moo and Falls) may reveal the national youth broadcaster's loosening grip on relevance and its inability to appeal to a broad audience in an increasingly hyper-curated media environment." So, maybe it's the fact that people are so attune to Spotify etc that live music has less relevant.

Ed: Since this article the 2025 Bluesfest has come and gone. It was meant to be the last one but Noble tried for another one in 2026 but it was cancelled three weeks before hand and punters aren't getting their money back. I knew that this would happen as no one in any bus line we were in was going to come back as they felt Noble had lied to them.