

# **Response to the Draft Recommendations from the Tamworth Country Music Festival Stakeholders Group**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

First we would like to say we appreciated the opportunity of seeing and discussing the Draft with you. It helped us understand some of the things you are attempting to do and explained some matters, which we feel were not clearly defined in the document.

In summary we believe there is much to applaud in the Recommendations. However there are also a number of general and specific items and approaches with which we continue to disagree.

We hope that you will accept our comments are constructive and based on a long collective experience and expertise in starting and shaping the Festival over the past 40 years.

Once again could we say we welcome the opportunity of being involved in the formulation of the future Festival planning. Please get in touch if you would like to discuss any of these matters further.

## **GENERAL COMMENTS:**

In scanning the Recommendations, there are a number of reactions we shared.

1. That in the Management Structure section, apart from a mention of “Stakeholders communications” there does not seem to be any process suggested whereby the general community as a whole, including any group or individuals with interest in how the Festival evolves or is managed, is consulted about future Festival matters. A process is needed whereby Community groups such as service or sporting clubs, commercial interests, media and so on, who may have a vested interest in seeing this Community activity prosper, can have a say.

2. It seems to us that this document has been formulated with little consideration of the past. It is almost as if it is a blueprint for a new event instead of a new floor on a skyscraper which has been growing gradually for 40 years. Many of your recommendations to “create” applied to items which have existed for decades. Maintain, improve and encourage would have been more appropriate.

3. Reading through the document there is almost a total absence of reference to activities and issues, which relate to non-council entrepreneurs, clubs, pubs, organisations, etc. It is almost as if they don't matter in the broader scheme of things whereas it is these people and organisations who have created the Festival and who are its lifeblood.

4. Control of usage and sponsorship of Council “assets” for the sole benefit of the Council is still a huge issue. By over-riding all rights of traditional usage by community based organisations, Council is actively discouraging new entrepreneurs from entering the field by using these major venues. Who would invest when the risk of being dumped overnight from the venue hangs over them? This approach could cost Tamworth dearly in income, jobs, event expertise and publicity as existing operators pull back and long established successful events are dumped from community facilities.

Could we now address the specific issues.

## **MARKET SITUATION**

87% of visitors are over 35 years old.  
12% are between 20-34.

Surely the growth market must be in the established dominant demographic which wants to see and hear MAINSTREAM COUNTRY MUSIC.

We have a fear that by attempting to attract a few new young people, there is an enormous risk of alienating the massive committed mature audience we have catered for in the past and must continue to cater for if the Festival is to move into the future.

We believe falling attendances are mainly due to:

- Festival date uncertainty
- A greatly diminished national promotion
- Until 2010, a run of lacklustre performances by our headline event the Golden Guitar Awards.
- Dramatically rising accommodation and visitor service costs.

We don't believe it is because of a lack of appropriate Country Music entertainment though unfortunately there is a wide negative perception (the Josh Pyke Syndrome) that content is being deliberately broadened to the detriment of real Country Music.

## **DATES**

For years "the last full week in January" was sufficient. We don't believe school holidays are more important than Australia Day for visitors though it might be a factor for locals.

Our argument for traditional festival timing remains although we understand that if the Department of Education will not forgo only a few days actual school in a decade to allow a major event like the Tamworth Country Music Festival to be held on regular dates, then there's not much we can do.

That said, the adopted option of at least (a) making sure dates are known well in advance and (b) not changing previously set dates (including timing of major events), has to be acceptable.

## **HERITAGE**

Heritage is an integral part of the amalgam of elements which creates country music. Tamworth has always recognised this and has always been active in building awareness and maintaining recognition e.g. Roll of Renown, Hands of Fame, ACMF, busts, websites, concerts, etc, etc. It permeates all country music and we should do all we can to maintain this attitude. From a performance point of view there is already a Bush Ballad venue (ABBA at the Salvation Army Hall) but it would in our opinion not be an advantage to isolate the "heritage music" (whatever that may be) from the mainstream.

We believe that any assistance to the ACMF and support for the proposed Australian Country Music Hall of Fame would be fantastic!! Not just for the ACMF, but also for Tamworth as such an attraction would provide enormous year-round benefits to Tamworth.

As a Heritage resource please don't overlook the N.E. Film and Sound Archive.

We are pleased to note the general Heritage thrust.

## MUSIC & PROGRAMMING

Some of these recommendations have merit and some would appear to be unworkable or impractical, for example, the idea of centralising the planning and programming of all music and event activities in Council owned venues and having themed venues.

- Does “Council owned venues” include those areas that are not owned by Council, as such, like parks which are only managed by Council on behalf of the community? Does this still mean Council is aiming to get rid of any operators in such areas who have been running successful activities for decades but whose sponsorship clashes with perceived Council interests? Not a good move, or morally acceptable.
- The concept of developing activity in the first weekend is not new. The first Rodeo was introduced by 2TM in 1982 for this reason and Star Maker was moved to the first weekend in 1985 as a crowd builder. An international artist might work but it’s a risk. Willie Nelson attracted only 1500 for his first weekend gig some years ago. Costs are astronomical and a concert of Australian Stars could have a better return in both financial and attraction terms.
- Artist accreditation and registration might be possible but benefits are doubtful. Most visitors have a fair idea of the artists they like and that’s why programs are used so much. We are worried about the idea of categorisation. Is Rod McCormack a Bluegrass musician or a superb guitarist? We have spent years bringing this broad range of music under the banner of Country and would not encourage fragmentation.
- Be VERY CAREFUL about any Artist Accreditation or Registration process as this could be construed as PERMISSION TO APPEAR... as it is at a number of other large Australian country music events.
- Rather than Council try and mentor young artists... support the College and other industry initiatives.
- We are concerned about a strategy to plan and program all music in Council venues. This means an individual would be telling everyone through Council venues what they should be presenting. What is the point of this control? Individual entrepreneurs and artists have their own preferences and requirements. It’s all about money, audiences and venues. And it’s a huge job and every time an artist gets a small audience Council will be to blame.
- Top talent in specific CBD spaces is terrific if it can be done but it is expensive and difficult to set up. Too many free shows of top artists would also undermine ticketed shows in other clubs or venues like TREC.
- Promoting the CM Capital concept year round is excellent. Creating and maintaining is hard. Remember the *Tamworth Country Music Theatre Project*, *Country Muster* and so on.
- Review of Awards. Why are the Canadian Awards being used as a model and not the more successful, prominent and professional CMA Awards in America (a much better international benchmark).

Ditto with the ARIAs. Does anyone, apart from ARIA and the organisers, actually believe these are really good? The reality is it is always going to be difficult to make an Awards television show that is successful with viewers (take the Logies and Oscars as classic examples).

Realistically, our Awards have done brilliantly over the decades with low budgets and little attention to what others have been doing. Despite this low-key approach, the Golden Guitars have built an enormous national profile and have been much more successful in comparison to the others. The real challenge is to get metro-centric television programmers to realise that things don't need to be done in the cities to be good.

In the meantime, it may be better to go back to one of the original, and successful, policies of the CMAA – to produce a stunning awards concert and presentation for the TREC audience first, and a television coverage of the event second (much more cost effective, too!).

- Curator for Council Venues only. Why not let venue users determine content. If it works it fills. If it doesn't someone else comes in. The cost and practical effectiveness of a Council Country Music Curator has not been a proven success in the past. Nothing wrong with a Council Co-ordinator in this context, assisting entrepreneurs and others possible venue users. Obviously this Curator will have no influence at all on the very significant part Festival activity, which is not run by Council.
- A mention or inference of control over third party organisers was disturbing and hopefully could not be promulgated. Entrepreneurs cannot allow their own judgement to be compromised in this way.
- In much of this part there appears to be, whether accurate or not, a policy of discouraging or certainly not encouraging, private entrepreneurs.
- Project 40 is a good idea if it is representative of all stakeholders.

## **FESTIVAL ATMOSPHERE**

- Much of this seems reasonable, especially the part about having banners and signage on major roads into Tamworth. The changed situation this year which saw no banners on Goonoo Goonoo Road like there have been in previous years created a big feeling of “what festival”?

Banners in the CBD have little or no impact in comparison.

- Not sure what “broader activities” means in the medium term recommendations. Does it mean making Bicentennial Park a carnival, for example, or a non country music promotion? Small non-core features and attractions added to the Festival over a period of time can be advantageous but we have to be careful not to expend any major money, effort or resources of any kind on non core (i.e. non country music) activities. We have more than enough diversions as it is!
- A suggestion to get the traders out of Kable Avenue and into Bicentennial Park has merit so long as the entertainment and activity in the park is properly themed.

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

- Exorbitant pricing could kill the Festival and already it is having a serious negative effect on perceptions of the Festival outside Tamworth.

The Tamworth Gold idea has merit but probably needs to be a different name. Something in line with the Country Music Capital branding would be better so it could also be used to promote local

businesses and product as has been the case for many years (e.g. Careys truck sides). This becomes the public endorsement of the Country Music Capital by business.

If it relates specifically to “honesty in pricing” etc then it probably needs to be something different and certainly needs to be a project of the Chamber. Whether it can encourage a change in commercial practice is doubtful but worth a try.

Conduct proper surveys (rather than “exit poll” or “ticket sale” type research) for better data.

The 100% motel occupancy won't be an issue if pricing is right and everything else is done well. In the end we should be concerned with overall attendance rather than just one specific commercial area.

## **BRAND & INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY**

The over-riding requirement here is for a branding which can be used by everyone. Anything less simply promotes fragmentation.

The current logo, for example, is ineffective, because from the CMAA's point of view it belittles the Golden Guitar Awards by reducing this premier event to a mere sub-heading!

It's hard to read, cannot provide proper sponsor recognition and is, quite simply, bland.

And its use has been controlled selectively by Tourism Tamworth for Council sponsorship purposes and not for the benefit of the Festival as a whole.

- We need a very good logo for universal identification, promotion and marketing which EVERYONE will support and use.

## **MARKETING & PR**

- There are a lot of good ideas in this area, but we would encourage you to consider the suggestion of a local media alliance. This could provide substantial benefits to the Festival and to the city.

Indeed, with local media's national network connections, it could contribute much to the advertising and promotional needs of the Festival without the need for any exclusive commercial or sponsorship arrangement with city based media which could cause enormous problems for committed local media from other groups

- We need to be clear on the fact that regardless of how many “guides” there are, there should only be one overall, comprehensive guide and everyone should be working to make sure that it is as inclusive as possible. Current wording in the recommendations (“creation of a centralised and conclusive guide to the event”) intimates the production of an additional guide subsidised by Council, which would be confusing for consumers and could threaten long term commercial viability of existing operators.

- The concept of marketing and PR for the festival needing to be undertaken by one body is an understandable thought but has never happened and in reality and never will. The amount of marketing and PR generated by individual entrepreneurs, organisations and individuals, is enormous and any attempt to control this would be very detrimental to the event.

The best Festival Marketing approach is a co-operative effort, with Tourism Tamworth leading the campaign but supporting and working with all other stakeholders, particularly media, to create a powerful, all encompassing “from Tamworth” theme.

It’s interesting to note that for many years prior to the partnership arrangement involving the CMAA, the Association generated more marketing and PR on a miniscule budget than anyone else, collectively or individually.

- Again, we need to be careful about the “new audience” definition. Should not be a priority as it is impractical and wasteful in this situation.
- Good marketing has always dictated “promote your strengths”.
- The idea of going out to many markets to promote is a good one. Highly cost-effective and impactful. Used to happen, and it should never have been stopped.
- What is the actual measurement of exposure from the Sydney launch. Is this as good as purported? Or could the money be better used on the more individualised and effective PR trips to cap city markets?
- Must ensure that when co-ordinating sponsorship with the marketing plan there is no deliberate locking out of any other event or activity or not crediting their sponsor even though it may conflict with Council’s sponsors. This would be very damaging for the Festival and would be a denial of what our Community funded Tourist organisation should be all about ... that is promoting all Festival activities and participants not just Councils.
- We are pleased to see the media feed is to be re-instated but would emphasise the importance of having a TV & Radio Media Crew with feeds to Sydney on a daily basis. Again this service should be open to all Festival participants not just those events supported by Council’s Sponsors.
- Geographically, we should be looking at developing the Newcastle/Hunter and South East Queensland markets specifically as they are huge and right on our doorstep!

That’s how Branson USA worked in the past, not solely because of effort or marketing, but mainly because they had major centres like Springfield (pop. 500,000), Fayetteville (pop 400,000+), Joplin (200,000) nearby.

- Similarly, New Zealand is a proven and easily accessible market, which could be re-invigorated while the potential back packer market from Europe is also huge. These are people who want to have more of a unique Australian experience (i.e. Australian country music) than a poor clone of what happens overseas.
- In the past we have found that the American tour market is restricted by their demand for first class accommodation.

## **MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE**

- Firstly any Management structure must have proper stakeholder representation or it will not work. Its structure will depend on its responsibilities.
  - a) Will it be an umbrella body, advising and recommending to all stakeholders (including Council, Tourism Tamworth etc), or

b) Will it be empowered to make executive decisions relating to public expenditure?

Either way it still needs to be endorsed and supported by Council or Tourism Tamworth.

We endorse the first approach. We believe the Festival Committee should be a community organisation which advises and co-ordinates major players both municipal and commercial, and works to create an environment which encourages maximum involvement from all present and future stakeholders. While outside bodies should be involved local interest should be predominant

- If it's going to be solely a continuation of "the partnership" – which many believe is a seriously flawed approach lacking genuine local representation – we believe it would be totally ineffectual and would not be kindly viewed or received by our community.

## **GOVERNMENT CO-ORDINATION and ENVIRONMENT**

All good but be aware that the funding and operational history of our Festival is quite different from virtually any other similar event and the fact that it has been established and developed with virtually NO government funding, apart from excellent Council infrastructure, until very recently. This means this new blueprint has to be proven to be viable.

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