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# Migration, music and social relations on the NSW Far North Coast

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This article explores urban-rural migration on the NSW Far North Coast (the 'Northern Rivers' region) and the emergence of popular music as a niche cultural industry. The various images of the NSW Far North Coast as a 'lifestyle' region, 'alternative' region and coastal retreat have attracted a diverse mix of exurban professionals, unemployed persons, youth subcultures and retirees, yet despite population growth, the region continues to suffer unemployment rates among the highest in Australia. Against this backdrop, popular music has emerged as a niche industry with linkages to cultural production in Sydney, Melbourne and overseas, and also an area of creative expression that interacts with, and mediates local social relations.

## **Keywords**

relations, nsw, north, music, migration, far, coast, social

## **Disciplines**

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**Abstract:** This article explores urban-rural migration on the NSW Far North Coast (the 'Northern Rivers' region) and the emergence of popular music as a niche cultural industry. The various images of the NSW Far North Coast as a 'lifestyle' region, 'alternative' region and coastal retreat have attracted a diverse mix of ex-urban professionals, unemployed persons, youth subcultures and retirees, yet despite population growth, the region continues to suffer unemployment rates among the highest in Australia. Against this backdrop, popular music has emerged as a niche industry with linkages to cultural production in Sydney, Melbourne and overseas, and also an area of creative expression that interacts with, and mediates local social relations.

**Key terms:** migration, popular music, far north coast NSW, cultural industries, social relations

### Introduction

This article explores one regional context (the NSW Far North Coast) where movements of people and resources between urban and rural areas have created new images of region and locality, and generated new forms of cultural production. In this case, patterns of migration and economic change over the last 20 years have transformed the NSW Far North Coast, shifting regional identities from those centred on dairying, fishing and sugar harvesting to images of a 'lifestyle' or 'alternative' region, with growth in employment in tourism, recreational services, 'gourmet' agricultural production, culinary, retail and cultural industries. It is one niche within the last of these sectors - the popular music industry - that is the focus of this paper. In this case, popular music activity is particularly useful in reflecting patterns of regional transformation. It has been closely associated with demographic change, movements of individuals and subcultures to the region; it has been suggested as a new area of employment growth (especially for young people), with links to the burgeoning tourism industry in centres such as Byron Bay and Ballina; while as text, music is both central to the re-defining of place and a means of generating (sub)cultural capital (Gibson, 2000, Connell and Gibson, 2002; Bourdieu, 1984; Thornton, 1995). Popular music is a highly concentrated cultural industry, both in corporate and geographical terms, and is not normally associated with rural areas. The emergence of popular music scenes on the New South Wales North Coast

illustrates how Australia's East Coast has been reconfigured by migration, as part of an imagined subcultural geography.

Moreover, in this paper I argue that the emergence of popular music as a niche cultural industry in coastal NSW must be understood both in terms of the links between migrants and new cultural production, and in the way in which new activities cut across and interact with local social relations (cf. Kneafsey 2001). Music is one form of cultural production and consumption that has been present in the region throughout generations, but became much more pronounced after significant counter-urban migrations to the area began in the 1970s (see Hannan in this issue). Music came with new residents to the Far North Coast, and in various instances complemented or supplanted previous forms of production and consumption. As music emerged as a unique part of the cultural mix of the region, it became much more entangled in the particular politics of that region and in the transitions and tensions that have surrounded successive waves of migration.

Elsewhere, work in popular music studies has attempted to chart the ways in which popular music 'scenes' emerge, and variously capture a dynamic mix of endemic cultural expressions and hybridisations of outside influences. Various studies have emphasised regional identities in music (McLeay 1994; Cohen 1994; Mitchell 1997), the importance of local social relations in shaping the networks and institutions within which local music production is apparent (Cohen 1991a, Finnegan 1989), syncretic appropriations of global cultural templates such as hip hop and country music (Mitchell, 1996) and the extent to which musical subcultures and productive 'scenes' replicate themselves from place to place as part of a 'matrix' of niche markets found across locations (Straw 1991). This paper shares with such research a focus on the ways in which popular music scenes establish social and cultural spaces for various styles, sounds and subcultures across geographical locations, becoming a sustained presence on the NSW Far North Coast. Straw (1991), for instance, argued that common music scenes persist in relatively stable forms, alongside others, in various places. Using examples from North American 'alternative' scenes, he found musical sites emerging for various styles and sounds that persist, not only in their 'place of origin' (as it is perceived from beyond), but also in a multitude of other settings:

The development of alternative-rock culture may be said to follow a logic in which a particular pluralism of musical languages repeats itself from one community to another. Each local space has evolved, to varying degrees, the range of musical vernaculars emergent within others, and the global culture of alternative rock music is one in which localism has been reproduced, in relatively uniform ways, on a continental and international level. (Straw, 1991: 378)

In contrast, 'scenes' become the basis for new articulations of regional identity, precisely because such localism, while reproduced in relatively uniform ways across places, still relies on particular spaces for expression that vary with histories of local modes of entrepreneurialism, physical geography and state regulation (see Connell and Gibson, 2002; Homan 1998). It is also mythologised by local populations, with uniquenesses claimed in the face of a dearth of musicological evidence for distinctive regional cultural expressions. Implicit in Straw's arguments, and in those of many studies on regional music scenes (e.g. Cohen 1994; Gill 1993) is an assumption of a relatively established local population that, while in some cases is influenced by diasporic movements of people (see for example, Gopinath 1995), generally receives and absorbs the 'musical languages' of globalised scenes through national and international 'mediascapes' (Appadurai 1990), as part of commodity flows rather

than through the mobility of subcultures and importation of musical practices with migrants. Here, I argue that a mix of demographic change (in this case urban - rural migration) and physical infrastructures for music performance, a 'cultural apparatus', as Grossberg (1984) put it, have underpinned musical activities in the NSW Far North Coast. Local 'scenes' are products of how consumers receive transgressive musical influences from afar, but also need to be situated in relation to dynamic movements of people, and the shifts in social relations such movements engender.

## **The NSW Far North Coast**

The Far North Coast (comprising the catchments of the Clarence, Richmond and Tweed Rivers, hence the region's other name: the 'Northern Rivers'), is the fastest growing and most densely populated rural region in Australia, with nearly 10 per cent of the state's total population (Hall, 1990), yet communities are still quite dispersed, from large centres such as Tweed Heads, Lismore and Ballina to a range of older and smaller rural towns (Casino, Grafton, Kyogle, Murwillumbah, Woodburn), new coastal estates (Ocean Shores, Suffolk Park, Brunswick Heads) and recently gentrified 'boutique' villages and coastal resorts (Byron Bay, Bangalow, Nimbin). The region has a somewhat distinct demographic profile for rural areas in Australia. It is a popular destination for contemporary counter-urban flows, as professionals, academics, retirees, artists and musicians gravitate towards the region's natural and cultural environment, particularly from Sydney and Melbourne (Burnley, 1988; Paris, 1994; Walmsley, *et al.*, 1995, Weinand and Lea, 1990). This has provided the region with overall population growth rates three times the national average (Lismore City Council, 1998). One catalyst for these trends was the decision by the National Union of Students (NUS) to host the Aquarius Festival, a major 'alternative lifestyles' event, at Nimbin in 1973 (see Hannan in this issue). The trend toward 'dropping out' - escaping the capital cities in order to migrate to the Far North Coast - has continued, not only within 'hippie' communities but across a much wider range of social groups, from permaculture enthusiasts to surfing subcultures, artists, musicians, large numbers of unemployed young people and 'travellers'. As a corollary to this, extensive suburban expansion has occurred along its coastal corridor from Ballina to Byron Bay (Essex and Brown, 1997), linked to movements of young couples, nuclear families, and retirees from capital cities and inland regional towns.

The expansion of the Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education (NRCAE) during the late 1980s and early 1990s, its incorporation with the University of New England (UNE) as a remote campus, and then transformation into Southern Cross University (SCU) in 1994, had significant impacts on regional demography and the strength of various aspects of the local economy, with the growth of a major campus on its new site at East Lismore, and new kind of consumers - students, technicians, academics - for the cultural commodities produced in the region. SCU brought wider changes to the town of Lismore, as cultural activities, communities of students, academics and other associated workers, and a range of people from different backgrounds, were drawn to the region through employment or study. Between 1991 and 1996, the population of the North Coast grew by 10.3 per cent (Lismore City Council, 1998:12); coastal shires, such as Ballina, Byron and Maclean witnessed growth in the ten-year period from 1988 to 1998 at around 40 percent. By contrast, older rural towns such as Kyogle and Casino remained stagnant or experienced population decline (ABS, 1993; 1999).

Yet, concurrently, the Far North Coast region has had the highest unemployment rate in NSW. Lismore, the region's service and industrial centre, has an unemployment rate of 17.3 per cent, at twice the national average. All the region's local council areas figure in the top 40 list of unemployment in NSW (Lismore City Council, 1998:20). According to Haberkorn et al (1999), the entire region has unemployment rates as much as 40 per cent higher than other Australian non-metropolitan regions. The relative mobility of welfare services has resulted in a 'social economy' (Amin, *et al.*, 1999), including community services and unemployment benefits, forming a major income sector in the region, as unemployed persons moved from colder climates and more expensive capital cities in search of cheaper accommodation, cultural amenities and employment opportunities in tourism and cultural industries. Youth unemployment is an issue of particular concern. Byron Bay, one tourism-retail centre well-known for backpackers and domestic 'travellers', currently has an unemployment rate of over 30 per cent among 15-24 year olds (ABS, 1996).

Despite its importance to the regional economy, unemployment has also been sharply felt in the public sector, where, in Lismore alone, over 300 federal and state employees were made redundant with the closure of eight major regional offices (Lismore City Council, 1998). Meanwhile, population growth, income and general economic disadvantage vary considerably within the region, particularly in the distinctions between major towns and coastal areas that benefit from tourism, migration and rapid urbanisation, and inland communities experiencing similar conditions to other parts of rural Australia: falling populations, rising unemployment (against the national trend towards declining jobless numbers), and high levels of socio-economic disadvantage (Haberkorn et al, 1999). Within places such as Byron Bay, which is currently experiencing rapid growth, rising real estate prices and new 'niche' industrial development, there is stark inequity. A high proportion of retail and service sector employees are paid under-award rates of pay, and a large informal sector (busking, market stalls, drug trafficking) supplements incomes for those struggling to meet rental payments at levels akin to inner-city areas of Sydney or Melbourne. As Nik Jeans, station manager for Bay-FM, Byron Bay's community radio station described, 'a lot of people have fled from the cities, there's a lot of artistic people here, there's in some places a lot of money, some disposable income, and then in other areas there just isn't - it's very split in that way' (N. Jeans, 1999, pers. comm.). These tensions are also cultural, indicating schisms between consumers of a range of diverging cultural texts and products, between a more established, rural political and cultural landscape and more recent generations of migrants. The region has, through urban-regional migration, become both more culturally diverse and economically divided.

The same revisions of regional identity that have drawn migrants to the region since the 1970s - environmental quality, 'alternative' cultural activities, 'creative' industries - have also figured in attracting increased numbers of tourists to the area, solidifying linkages with metropolitan centres and cementing its reputation as a 'lifestyle region' (Larcombe and Cole, 1998). In the year to June 1999, the Far North Coast received 1.75 million domestic visitors (7 percent of all NSW domestic tourists), with intrastate visitors the main source (23 percent from Sydney and 31 percent from regional NSW), alongside daytrippers and 'short break' tourists from Southeast Queensland (36 percent) (Tourism NSW, 2000: 1). There are also high numbers of overseas tourists compared with other rural locations: the Northern Rivers received 171 000 overseas visitors in the year 1998 - 1999, the second highest number behind Sydney, and double that of the next region (Mid-north Coast) (Tourism NSW, 1999a: 1). Many of these are backpackers from Europe, North and

South America and North Asia, who have contributed to the positioning of Byron Bay as a key node in global 'traveller' networks alongside other 'hippie trail' sites such as Goa, India, Bali, Kathmandu and Koh Samui, Thailand.

Local authorities have capitalised on the connection between images of 'alternative' culture and tourism, targeting particular demographic groups in capital cities as part of niche marketing campaigns; thus (in marketing 'speak') centres such as Byron Bay attract the 'socially aware' (with a 'mindset associated with the highest socio-economic group ... insatiable 'information vacuum cleaners' ... addicted to finding out or trying anything that's new or different') and 'young optimists' ('mindset associated with young professionals, technocrats and students whose thoughts are focused on achieving a good career, overseas travel and generally improving their prospects in life...generally more prevalent in inner city and urban settings') (Tourism NSW, 1999b:10-11). Images of the region's world heritage listed national parks, macadamia nut farming, natural healing, farm home-stays, 'new age' lifestyles and festivals, a 'cultural cocktail of cowboys and clairvoyants, bushmen and balladeers... artists, tradesmen, traders and actors... farmers, foresters, musicians and mystics' (NOREDO, 1997:3), have figured heavily in tourist promotions, simultaneously commodifying the 'alternative' and presenting selective, iconic versions of the region. A range of complex social and geographical relations constitutes the backdrop to new forms of cultural production on the NSW Far North Coast.

### **Popular music and regional cultural transition**

As with most rural regions in Australia, the NSW Far North Coast has always had some engagement with the world of popular music, whether as consumers of products from distant hearths or as part of networks of tours by artists making a living through live performance. Country music remains the musical genre with the longest sustained presence - stretching back to touring rodeos, town 'shows' and hall performances in the 1940s and 1950s. While the region underwent the demographic and cultural transformations of the 1970s and 1980s, country music nights continued to be staged in community halls, and at pub venues such as the Ryan Hotel, Lismore and the Royal Hotel, Wardell; at rodeo balls, festivals and residencies such as the unparalleled stint of over twenty years carried out by the Country Gentlemen at Woodburn-Evans Head RSL Club. Country music became associated with a particular demographic structure during this time: more conservative, older generations of residents, often suspicious of the new 'alternative lifestylers', hippies and rock crowd. Yet, as with other rural regions of Australia (see Walker, 2000), country and western has also been popular with Aboriginal audiences in the region. Troy Cassar-Daley (from Grafton, although he now resides in Sydney) has been by far the most recognised and celebrated performer with Aboriginal heritage in the North Coast region. Cassar-Daley's popularity soared after signing with Sony Music/Columbia and recording a series of successful releases (*Beyond the Dancing*, 1995; *True Believer*, 1996, *Big River*, 1999). He has since won a series of Golden Guitars and recorded and performed in Nashville (including a showcase performance with Tommy Emmanuel, Lee Kernaghan and Gina Jeffreys).

The diverse transitional factors discussed above - of counter-cultural migration, a significant professional, ex-urban population, combined with high unemployment (particularly youth unemployment) - undoubtedly had the most significant impact on the growth of other musical scenes, particularly those such as rock, hip hop, techno and funk, that are almost always assumed to be 'urban', at least in terms of production (cf. Scott 1999). Many established figures in the region's music scenes

migrated in the 1970s as students, and consolidated their positions as musicians, recording studio managers and academics. People with 'creative' skills moved to the area for a number of reasons, including the region's climate and natural environment, cheaper housing costs (compared to the gentrified and increasingly expensive nature of 'arty' inner city suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne), lax regulation of drug cultivation, and the relative mobility of welfare payments. Community halls, the main venue spaces in the region during the first half of the 20th century (which then featured old-time sequenced dancing, country music sing-alongs, swing cabarets and Hawaiian and Polynesian nights), were revitalised by newcomers in the 1970s as rock and folk performance spaces. Few pub and club venues at that time would put on original music (particularly that associated with folk-hippie scenes who tended not to consume large amounts of alcohol), while the rural location of the halls (that were cheap to hire and a long way from complaining residents) reinforced the tropes of pastoral retreat and idyllic ruralism in much of the music played there. Popular nights included performances by regular local acts such as Fly By Night, Aleph, High Beam, Bahloo and Troppo; occasional touring international acts such as Robin Williamson, formerly of the Incredible String Band; and monthly moon dances and full moon parties. As one notable musician, Barry Ferrier, recalled:

There used to be quite a good scene in the country halls around here. That was great - independently run dances where the band would put on a dance, sell grog and food. They were pretty wild. The police wouldn't really bother you cause they were way up in the hills. It was quite a golden era of music around here in that scene (personal communication, 1999).

Also during the 1970s, local music production became influenced by the rise of distinctly Australian rock styles (or 'Oz rock'), which appealed to both local working class audiences and new tourists to the region from urban areas. Hard rock styles were first heard when urban bands such as Midnight Oil, Spy V Spy and the Radiators drew large crowds at Lismore RSL and Workers Clubs, spawning a breed of local pub rock bands, including Vacant Lot, Bourbon Street and Rockola, who performed a mix of original music and cover versions of well-known songs. During the 1980s, a range of new venues emerged for popular music in the region, in part related to the growth of the pub rock circuit throughout NSW, but also heavily influenced by new waves of migrants and tourists keen to hear live sounds from local and touring bands. Venue numbers increased significantly during the period of growth in population and tourism trade during the 1980s, laying the foundation for the growth of a niche cultural industry in the region (Gibson 2000). The opening of a major venue for touring international acts within 'alternative', 'world music'<sup>1</sup> and rock scenes (Byron Bay's Arts Factory/Piggery complex) brought credibility to the region and consolidated associations between tourism and music, with several performances and festivals held there in the key tourist periods.

### **1990s: increased musical diversification**

As migration to the Far North Coast became more pronounced in the 1990s, its music became accordingly diverse and was increasingly supported in a more formal, institutional sense. Southern Cross University developed its Program in Contemporary Music, which had a central role in providing training and infrastructure for musicians and producers in the area. SCU students went on to achieve varying levels of success in bands such as Skunkhour, the Simpletons and Grinspoon. The university also provided recording infrastructure, venues for performance, and

formed a central focal point for networking, with the social infrastructure necessary to create a sense of 'scene' (cf. Straw, 1991; Kruse, 1993). Since the development of SCU's music course and further waves of ex-urban migrants, the music output of the Far North Coast became the most diverse of any non-metropolitan Australian region. There was no unifying 'sound' to the region (cf. McLeay, 1994), although certain trends have been acknowledged in particular musical communities, for example thrash/hard rock and funk scenes in Lismore and percussion sounds at Byron Bay. A range of Lismore-based bands emerged that straddle niche markets of 'indie' rock, grunge, thrash, skate culture, punk and ska.

The growth of hard rock scenes on the Far North Coast is most obviously influenced by the international success of Grinspoon who, since the release of their 1995 debut EP through Brisbane-based independent distributor, Oracle Records, have signed to Universal Music Group and toured internationally to support major acts such as Anthrax, silverchair, Pushmonkey and Godsmack in the United States. Members of Grinspoon studied at SCU, and only formed weeks before their success in the first of national radio network Triple J's Unearthed competitions.<sup>2</sup> Grinspoon have now released major single and compilation CDs, most notably the *Guide to Better Living* compact disc (1997), which, since its Australian debut, has sold over 140,000 copies (double platinum status in Australia), and *Easy* (released November 1999, which debuted on the national album charts at number four and sold 35,000 copies in its first week of sales in Australia). Both releases have been distributed through Universal Music Group in New Zealand, Canada, UK, USA, Europe, Japan and throughout South America. Notwithstanding the band's clear talent for hard rock, their success has relied on a replication (and globalisation) of subcultural style, as Straw (1991) suggests. The band has rarely, if ever, been marketed in relation to its geographical origin, in contrast to some 'indie' groups such as REM, invariably linked to Athens, Georgia (see Jipson 1994), and somewhat different to certain styles of music such as 'world music', that always draws on constructions of local uniqueness. Other groups throughout Australia - such as Killing Heidi, who also hail from a rural background, in Victoria - have similarly banked on the replicability of niche production and consumption across urban and rural contexts.

Byron Bay has more recently been positioned as the centre of a vibrant 'roots' music scene on the Far North Coast, perceived by many as one of the major sites for blues and folk music in Australia. Each Easter, Byron Bay hosts the East Coast Blues and Roots Festival, which attracts over 50,000 attendees, major international and national acts and considerable national media attention (for example Taylor, 1999; Engleheart, 1999). Yet, more recently, few local acts have featured on the bill, due to the largely national focus of the festival and the target audience of tourists from intra- and interstate.

While the 'grunge' metal scene and the East Coast Blues Festival are relatively recent developments in the region's musical language, folk music has been sustained as a stylistic marker of place since the emergence of 'alternative' lifestyles in the region in the 1970s. Blues and folk in turn have been part of a general interest in roots music in the area - a heritage of left wing politics and folk simplicity surrounding the use of acoustic instruments in public spaces (with well-known North American precedents in the music of Guthrie, Seeger and Dylan), originating at the 1973 Aquarius Festival. Folk music production in the region is generally connected to the long history of environmental activism on the Far North Coast, performed at benefit nights, at demonstrations and rallies, and available for purchase in CD format from environment shops in Lismore and Byron Bay (Parks, 1999; Hannan 2000 and this issue).

'Ambient' or 'new age' musics are also major stylistic preferences in the region that are linked to hippie traditions at Nimbin and the establishment of the Aquarius Festival, alongside the expanding 'self-awareness' and 'spiritual' industries around Byron Bay (acupuncture, aromatherapy, massage etc), but are also part of interactions between music and tourism in the region. Major performers include Dr Didge, Si, Jalalo, Coolangubra, Ganga Giri, and Tarshito. Common features of these sorts of music include connections to folk music scenes and festivals across Australia (including other locations such as Bellingen and the Blue Mountains, NSW, that have also been sites of ex-urban migration) and ideologies of environmentalism, the use of a wide variety of instrumentation, particularly percussive instruments from different national/ethnic contexts, use of synthesizers, but also at times a strong presence of acapella vocal arrangements (for example, the music of the Voices of Gaia). Recorded music of this type is generally identifiable through marketing, including the prevalence of certain representations of place: in symbols such as rainbows, dolphins, natural environments, forests, birds, butterflies and so on, yet this also replicates stylistic expressions in other locations.

At times connected to 'new age' audiences, there has been a lengthy interest in, and market for 'world' music in the North Coast region, from the performances by Indian ensemble Bauls of Bengal at the 1973 Aquarius Festival, through early tours by African rock and jazz artists, Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim) and Osibisa; frequent Polynesian nights at regional clubs, to the more recent popularity of Australian Aboriginal, Latin, African and Caribbean music. World music remains popular with tourists (particularly younger backpackers) at Byron Bay, in terms of performances, consumption of music commodities and instruments at specialist retailers, and in workshops where one can learn a range of percussion styles with local tutors (Gibson and Connell 2002).

Linked to both international backpacker tourism and the positioning of the Far North Coast as an 'alternative lifestyle' region for domestic consumers and migrants, Byron Bay has also become one of the most important sites in Australia for the production and consumption of electronic dance music, and more specifically psy-trance, drum and bass and techno sub-genres. Throughout the 1990s, a mix of legal and illegal dance parties were staged in Byron Bay and its surrounding hills by both local organisers and ex-Sydneysiders who, in response to police crackdowns on free parties in inner-city parks in 1995, moved their operations to the Far North Coast. Producers established leading independent trance labels, including Edgecore, Silicon Buddha and Digital Psionics; regular club nights began to be held in both Byron Bay and Lismore featuring local DJs, touring Sydney and Melbourne acts and international trance stars; while local radio station Bay FM started regular shows dedicated to electronic genres. Crucial to the maintenance of trance scenes on the Far North Coast has been a heightened sense of its place in a global matrix of subcultural consumption - as travellers bring back stories of local dance parties, as the subcultural press (such as the UK's *Mixmag* dance magazine) write up Byron Bay as a major world venue for raves and dance parties, and as international networks of distribution among producers and DJs include the region (Gibson 2000; Cole and Hannan 1997; Chan 1998). As a reflection of the growth in diversity of musical activities on the Far North Coast, in 1991 the inaugural North Coast Music Industry Awards were staged in Byron Bay, including regular categories such as Jazz, Rock, Country, Male and Female Vocal and Song of the Year. In future years, these awards would become known as 'the Dolphin Awards', held every November, which now feature 27 different categories, more than any awards ceremony of its type in

Australia. Despite the area's relatively small population, the annual Dolphin awards are able to support specialist categories such as 'gospel/devotional', 'youth', 'music for children', 'video production', 'ambient/new age', 'experimental/avant-garde', 'world/indigenous/reggae', 'environmental message song' and 'best promotional artwork'.

## **Regional cultural economy and social relations**

Music forms one of a number of 'cultural', 'creative' or 'content-providing' industries emergent in the Far North Coast. This set of economic activities has been developed on the back of an advantage in 'creative' fields linked to the waves of demographic change discussed earlier. For example, Wynn-Moylan (1991) estimated that the art industry alone had grown during the 1980s to be worth approximately \$27 million to the regional economy through goods produced, jobs created and services used; while in the 1990s the region has seen the emergence of a blooming film industry which has formed representative organisations (see Goggin in this issue) and hosted festivals and workshops. Henkel (2000) estimated that total 'creative' industries employment in the Northern Rivers region was approximately 3500, or 4.1 percent of the local workforce, with many more in related activities (such as advertising). Yet, unlike in the United Kingdom, where cultural industries planning has become a major civic focus (see Cohen, 1991b; Hudson, 1995; Brown *et al.*, 2000), such activities still tend to be ignored by regional planners and economic development boards, seen as little more than 'a possible tourist attraction' (Wynn-Moylan, 1991:1).<sup>3</sup>

Such diversity is clearly linked to migration and tourism - to the movements of people from Australian urban centres and further afield that have created and sustained particular networks of cultural flow, and constituted markets for new forms of cultural production. Yet such movements, migrations and musics interact with local social relations in complex ways. Older sorts of musical activity and production still persist in many locations, particularly in folk and country scenes; these are overlaid by particular subcultural geographies, as groups of young people stage dance parties, organise club nights around certain styles (hence emergent metal, hip hop and trance scenes) and attend festivals. Such geographies are not even, and are not always received in welcoming terms by older residents. Migrants, itinerants and those with higher skills are more likely to succeed than those with traditional rural backgrounds, while a regional split can be seen in the distribution of basic infrastructures for the industry (venues, instrument stores, record shops, retailers of recording equipment). Music industry activity is most likely to be found where urban-regional migration, tourism growth or village gentrification has been strong. Such agglomerations within the region include major centres such as Lismore, Ballina and Byron Bay alongside smaller 'boutique' villages such as Bangalow, Mullumbimby and Nimbin, while other centres such as Kyogle, Casino and Grafton (where demographic transition and tourism impacts are less strongly felt) have much less activity.

Music contributes to the accumulation of (sub)cultural capital in particular places such as Byron Bay and Nimbin (as have other aspects of creative production, particularly art, sculpture, film and increasingly, multimedia), a crucial aspect of 'lifestyle' that in turn is connected to rising demand for residential properties among new migrants, and has resulted in a 'cost squeeze' that has (somewhat ironically) driven lower income, transient and marginal people out of those centres. Meanwhile, different patterns of production and consumption have continued in other centres such as Grafton and Casino, working class rural towns where rock and country crowds still dominate, but which have suffered from shrinking live venues, smaller

youth populations, competition from cover bands, other forms of pub entertainment, and limited disposable incomes. Across these places, musical expressions themselves serve to gel particular subcultural affiliations, reflect class identities and generate public debate (particularly surrounding illegal 'doof' dance parties). 'Oz rock' remains a key music of local working class residents, in terms of radio program choice, live performances and in the production of new music; yet on a different night the same venues might be transformed and appropriated by different crowds: jazz and funk scenes populated by students and academics; folk parties drawing crowds from communes; while down the street Irish music dominates themed pubs and linedancers move to a country soundtrack.

Despite such creative expressions, there are always limited venues for musical performance, and tensions surround access to these spaces, reflecting the various factors that determine amateur participation and professional success. As I argue elsewhere (Gibson 2000), the sustained presence of musical activities on the Far North Coast has been mediated by particular sets of relations between musicians (as labour) and venue management, who invariably accept live music only if there is money to be made from door entry or alcohol sales. The sense in which local musicians compete with newcomers and transient musicians for gigs was highlighted by participants in this research. Several musicians complained of being 'squeezed out' of key venues in Byron Bay by dance music, DJs, and by touring artists, leaving only quiet spots early in the week as times to perform. It also became clear that local musicians continue to be paid much less than musicians from other areas (even if playing on a similar bill to a comparatively similar crowd) (see Table 1). Popular music has become, quite literally, a sounding board for the diversity of the region's population and a medium through which local/national/global tensions are aired.

[Table 1. Wage rates for live acts from different locations, Far North Coast NSW ]

## Conclusions

This article has provided an overview of Far North Coast music scenes, including the demographic factors shaping the social and economic landscapes of the region which have contributed to the flavour of musical expressions; infrastructures for music production and performance (venues, recording studios), and popular styles of music and festivals in the region. The Far North Coast features a large amount of musical activity, underpinned by the conjuncture of migration and cultural change, the establishment of important regional educational facilities and organisations, and the growth of linkages between local cultural production, urban tourists and international subcultures. Many local successes in music, some of who have gained national and international attention (Grinspoon, Diana Ah Naid, Troy Cassar-Daley, Simpletons), can be linked to the infrastructures apparent for music production, and the role of important regional associations and organisations such as Southern Cross University and Northern Rivers Performing Arts (NORPA).

As the success of Grinspoon attests, North Coast music scenes do not operate in any completely separated way from the machinations of corporate capital in the music industry. Instances of wider success are not becoming apparent in any on-going strategic sense, and the vast bulk of activity remains localised and informal. Artists able to break through to national and international markets do so due to a combination of contingent factors - initial talent, ability to travel, financial support for early national and international tours, management and promotional support, interest from major record companies - that vary from band to band, from time to time, and that can also rely on a large amount of luck in meeting the 'right' person

or being 'in the right place at the right time'. Invariably, however, the music scenes of the Far North Coast emerged from particular demographic trends, as new residents brought with them urban subcultures and sounds, and as musicians began to play to new kinds of local audiences.

The 'creative' industries are slowly beginning to be mobilised as part of a language of planning that identifies and exploits competitive advantages (as in music, film, art, crafts, multimedia and web design), but this is complicated by the nature of regional linkages and divisions, and the inheritance of particular social and geographical relations. Newer migrants from urban areas, often with IT and other skills, benefit from revisions of regional identity and culture; connections between the cultural industries and tourism have generated new niche markets in coastal resorts such as Byron Bay, yet the benefits of new cultural industry growth are certainly not enjoyed in an equitable fashion across the region. The emergence of popular music as a new form of economic activity demonstrates linkages between urban and rural areas, through movements of people, commodities and cultural influence. Yet these linkages are selective, solidifying the channels of exchange and transaction between inner-city consumers and 'trendy' destinations while by-passing other towns. Popular music reflects these processes, and resonates throughout Far North Coast NSW as part of the contours of regional demographic and economic transition.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 'World music' generally describes music distinguished from other forms of popular music due to its origins in 'non Anglo-American' contexts, and marketed through constructions of 'other', 'exotic' sounds from Africa, South America etc (see Taylor 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Triple J's Unearthed competitions showcased a different region at intermittent stages throughout the year. Winners were then provided airplay on the national youth network, and a track on Triple J compilation CDs, distributed nationally through ABC Music/EMI

<sup>3</sup> Although the need for greater promotion is beginning to be recognised, as in the Northern Rivers Regional Strategy (1998) developed by the Northern Rivers Regional Economic Development Organisation (NORED), Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils (NOROC) and The Department of Urban Affairs and Planning (DUAP) and a recent commissioned study into 'creative' industries (Henkel, 2000).

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**Table I.** Population change, North Coast region, 1988-1998 (by Local Government Area)(Source: ABS, 1993; 1999)

LGA	Population 1988	Population 1998	Percentage change
Richmond-Tweed SD			
Ballina	26,390	35,824	36
Byron	19,660	27,989	42
Casino	10,860	10,708	-1
Kyogle	9,690	9,833	1
Lismore	38,650	43,534	13
Richmond River	7,850	10,049	28
Tweed	48,620	68,816	42
Mid-North Coast SD			
Coffs Harbour	45,190	59,215	31
Copmanhurst	4,280	4,144	-3
Grafton	16,070	17,389	8
Maclean	11,840	16,285	38
Nymboida	3,410	4,547	33
Ulmarra	5,080	6,195	22

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