TRANSCRIPT
Sound As Ever (Australian Music Vault Podcast) Episode 4
Healing and the Community (Mental Health in the Music Industry)

Music: Paul Kelly – Before Too Long

Welcome to Sound as Ever, an Australian Music Vault podcast produced by young content producers and radio makers interested in exploring stories and issues in the Australian Music scene. This episode hears from artists, industry workers and entertainment-specific support organisations in conversation about our industry people's mental health. This episode was produced by Erin Dick and Paul Waxman.

Narration: This podcast contains discussions of mental health problems, mental illness, depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicide. Listeners discretion is advised.

Music: Frida – I Want It All

Elspeth Scrine: We're pretty good at singing about our emotions but when it comes to really taking responsibility for them, it just doesn't seem to happen. I'm sure that there are many bands and spaces in the industry that it's not at all normal at all for someone to be sitting in the tour van or about to get on stage and say 'I feel so alone.' Or to express these really raw, vulnerable statements. Or to say I'm so jealous of this other band, I'm so jealous that it's killing me. These are not comfortable things to say.

Eilish Gilligan: Even looking through those questions when you sent me them, and one of them was "what's your personal experience with mental health?" I was like, "That's so personal, I can't talk about that." But it's just like well, I mean, "hang on, why can't I?"

Narration: Eilish and Elspeth are not alone in this. As performers, they are not immune to life's ups and downs, no one is. In this episode of Sound as Ever, we'll discuss the reality of how we talk about mental health in the Australian music industry. Music has greater reach than ever and is a great form of self-expression and advocacy. Yet, there are some human experiences that continue to be ignored. The conversation around mental health goes far beyond lyrics on a page, and the performances we see on stage. Sometimes, we forget to listen to the people behind the music. Or, we fail to consider those who work tirelessly behind the scenes, away from the spotlight, to keep our industry alive and well. We wanted to understand where we are as an industry, in expressing, empathising and supporting the mental wellbeing of our people. So, before we uncover what goes into helping musicians and industry workers, we first must understand who these people really are.

Music: The Feeling - Eilish Gilligan

Eilish: My name is Eilish Gilligan and I'm a musician and music publicist from Melbourne. I love music so much, it's like one of those dramatic relationships you see in movies, I love it so, so much that sometimes it causes my life to take funny turns or planets to align in some ways and then throw me completely off balance in others. I wouldn't change it for anything, I love who I am and I love my job and most things about my life, but it's not an easy career path, that's for sure.

Elspeth: My name is Elly Scrine or Elspeth Scrine, and I am a musician, an artist in a band called Huntly, and I work as a music therapist and I'm currently doing research into music therapy and young people. The reason why I studied music therapy was because I guess I wanted to explore what was happening, like why did I feel so good when I wrote a song, why did I feel so connected to other people when I made music with them, why did it give me such a rush to see my favourite band live and sing along? So yeah, my career has basically just been dedicated to figuring that out and figuring out how to use that in ways that make the kind of change that I'm really passionate about making in the world.

Narration: Music is so powerful in communicating to one another. We wondered whether artists, and those surrounded by music in their everyday lives, believed that there was value in the relationship between music and their mental wellbeing, and whether either side of those things had been adversely affected by the other.

Eilish: Like a lot of creative people I have had some mental health issues in the past, that have never been life threatening, but have been kind of prominent over the years. I mean, I can always track major events in my life through the songs that I've written, because that's just the way that I write as an artist, I usually write from personal experience.

Elspeth: Mental health is something that I guess has always been I guess a very present part of my life, from a very early age when I didn't use those words to define it, but I was, you know, found my emotions so difficult to control sometimes and then as a teenager just really getting into the depths of some incredible angst. And then, as I grew up kind of realising, it wasn't just teenage angst and depression was a very real part of my life. I've lost multiple people to suicide and I've done it all, I've been in hospital with friends, I've been people's contact person. Music has been a big part of it in that it can be an incredible expression. And as a music therapist I've learnt about the theory and what's actually happening when I write a song, and I will process an experience and what it is to externalise an experience. It's a very core part of everybody's daily functioning and I guess for me it's a very active and present part of how I exist and how I see myself and move through the world.

Narration: After talking more with Elly and Eilish, we came to realise that the experiences, stresses and anxieties of musicians were more often than not, very similar. We asked Eilish and Elly to reflect on what they felt contributed to problems with mental health in their industry, from their experience.

Eilish: It's not easy to be an artist, for lots of reasons, most of them financial. I'm trying to be like, "Oh why isn't it easy to be an artist? Oh yeah, I'm poor most of the time." And it's just this expectation, especially for women because it's like, "you are allowed to be famous between the ages of 18 and 28 and that is it and then you're done. So, within those years, the expectation is that you're going to work yourself to the ground and then be happy with what you get at the end of it. It's like, everyone else is doing it so you have to keep up. And you know what, it's kind of what you sign up for.

Elspeth: I think also there are structural aspects of the music industry that make certain environments like, late nights, and not much sleep, and a kind of romanticism of drinking and taking drugs, being on tour. On one hand music is a space to release our emotions and to talk about emotionality, and yet when we're not singing about it or it's just... these discussions when they require some really raw, vulnerable honesty and responsibility taking, that's when it's really taboo. I work really hard to try and normalise that kind of vulnerability but I'm very aware that that's not the case in a lot of other environments.

Music: Antonia and the Lazy Susans – Home Here With Your Friends

Narration: So let's talk about one of these other environments, and take a look behind the curtain, the backstage of the music industry, and speak to the often unsung heroes of the music industry, our technicians.

Murray Johnstone: My name is Murray Johnstone, I'm the Manager of Technical Training and Development and I sit within the production department at Arts Centre Melbourne. I actually still play and always have played in bands myself so I've kind of got a foot on either side. I've come from a background of rock 'n' roll and most of that is a casual work pool. So, the biggest one I would say is not knowing where you're going to be working, job security... If you can't make plans you don't really have a life, and if you don't have a life your mental health suffers. History shows that working at all those concerts and events for 30 plus years, with all those people they don't really know where they're going to be in 2 weeks' time. To go with the lack of job security, you've got the repercussions of that. So, you've got no health care, no retirement plan so once you've stopped, you've stopped. It just depends again on where you work and who can provide support and if that's available.

Narration: We came across a startling statistic from the 2017 Australian Entertainment Safety Resource Guide, stating that 36% of roadies reported "suicide ideation" in their lifetime.

Murray: I don't feel very good about that, I've got to say. 'Roadies', if it was defined as people on the road, a lot of the time their issues of touring and I've done a bit of touring as well, you really are up against it. And when you come off tour and the crickets are chirping and you're looking to fill in your diary, and you've just pulled off amazing feats around the country, around

the world and it's dead silent. A lot of my friends that aren't here anymore would sort of attest to those figures as well. It's not an easy life, it's not an easy choice you make.

Narration: All of this got us thinking about what structures exist to support these conversations. Is there support out there for people in the industry? Is anybody out there really listening? The answer is yes, these are the people who are listening.

Tracy Margieson: Hi, I'm Tracy Margieson and I have the great privilege of being the project manager at the Arts Wellbeing Collective at Arts Centre Melbourne. The Arts Wellbeing Collective was initiated in February 2017, and it's a consortium of about 138 arts and cultural organisations across Victoria all with the shared vision to improve mental health in our industry. Susan from Entertainment Assist, who commissioned a fantastic research piece a couple of years ago, the working in the Australian Entertainment industry, and that was really a game changer that put numbers to what I think we all anecdotally knew to be true. It was shocking and it was startling, but when you think about it you go, "that feels about right from our experiences in the industry".

Sally Howland: Hi I'm Sally Howland, I'm currently the Chair of Support Act which is the music industry charity helping artists and music industry workers when they hit crisis. The charity is unique in Australia because it's the only charity that provides crisis relief services for artists and music industry workers. We provide financial support, counselling, advice and referrals. It's only recently that the music industry in particular has started to have a mature conversation about it. That's only happened in the last few years. It principally came about because of the survey Victoria University did with Entertainment Assist in 2015, that was across all creative industries, and that highlighted some pretty alarming figures.

Narration: Hearing this was concerning. What was going wrong? What had this survey from Entertainment Assist uncovered that we weren't aware of before? We decided to visit Susan Cooper, the General Manager of Entertainment Assist, at their small office in Southbank, to hear what had been right under our noses the entire time

Susan Cooper: Entertainment Assist is an organisation that advocates and raises awareness about, the mental health and wellbeing of people within the Australian entertainment industry.

Narration: We wanted to know more about "Working in the Australian Entertainment Industry", a research project by Entertainment Assist and Victoria University's College of Arts.

Susan: We had nearly 3,000 people across all sectors of the industry participate in our wellness research project which was 3 years ago. And the common denominator, regardless of whether you were wearing a tutu or a black shirt, is passion.

Narration: Susan told us that, in her findings, there is a powerful, negative culture within the entertainment industry, including toxic, bruising work environments, extreme work competition, bullying sexual assault, sexism and racism. We know that the factors that contribute to mental health problems can be diverse and dependent on the individual. We wanted to know what some of the common experiences of people in our industry face every day, that can lead to problems.

Tracy: There's so many things that play into it in our industry. So, at an individual level we have people who are creating their own work, who are working long hours, who are working strange hours, who are working when other people aren't working, who are dealing with constant rejection and change, and all these things that basically create a perfect storm for struggling with mental health problems. At an organisational level we have lots of small to medium companies who are running on the smell of an oily rag. They're trying to do too much with too little, they are producing incredible work beyond their scope. Often they don't have support from human resources or any of those traditional things you would see in a large organisation who would be responsible for employee wellbeing and programs and stuff like that. At a sector level, we're trying to unpack a framework that is generally underfunded by government that has mixed levels of respect within the community, to put it nicely, and also a huge underlying mythology around sort of the idea of the starving artist or the creative genius that almost normalises mental health problems and gives us this quite high threshold with living with mental illness before we do seek help. Because we don't necessarily have a linear career progression, you could be up and down your whole life. You could peak in your early 20's, and go really well, and hit the markets that you want to hit then sort of slow down.

Sally: But when you look at the music business, what I would call the environmental factors or the landscape of the music business, you've got some key things that create the perfect storm. So, you have irregular or low income. Most people in creative industries have no private health insurance, less than 1% of people who come to Support Act have any private health insurance, so when a crisis hits, it's pretty difficult to meet all the medical bills. There is no provision for retirement or superannuation. Less that 3% of people who come to us have any form of superannuation. So, for years in the business, musicians weren't being paid superannuation because they're contracted, and they work on a transactional basis. When you're touring, you are less inclined to do exercise, or eat well, you're away from friends and family, and there is an elevated exposure to drugs and alcohol. So, you put all of that together, and you can see the picture that it paints.

Narration: So, it's clear to us now, that it doesn't matter where we sit in the music industry. We're all in this together. We are working unpredictable hours and suffering from sleep disorders. 63% of performers, 28% of support workers and 20% of technicians and crew earn less than our National Minimum Wage. And, mental health disorders are far more common than we might think.

Susan: At the time of our research the Australian Bureau of Statistics told us that there were 42,000 people working within the entertainment industry. Research told us that were 5 of our industry brothers and sisters attempting suicide every single week, based on that 42,000 people is an extreme statistic in itself, but I believe there's way more than 42,000 people in our industry. If you look at even the APRA AMCOS membership of 90,000 people for starters, that's at least double. That becomes 10 people a week that's actually attempting suicide in our industry. It's significant stuff and we have to work to create change.

Narration: What makes discussing mental health, any different from discussing the common cold?

Susan: We have physical health, and we have mental health. We come at mental health with a perception of fear, because we don't know what it is. It is just us and being. It's part of the thing of raising awareness and understanding, in that, if we have the flu, and we're snotty and all that kind of stuff, we take a day off work. If we are stressed beyond all comprehension and not able to function, we need to take a day off work. I can't stress it strongly enough, in that, I get that getting work in this industry is tough, I get that. I get all of the challenges that go with it, but I have seen too many people take their own lives, and I have certainly been in a situation where I haven't wanted to be here. That blackness, it's a never-ending kind of thing, and so if I can help stop people getting to that point, that's what it is about.

Narration: This is urgent. So, what is stopping us from taking the next step? What are some of the big mental health or industry stigmas that prevent us from seeking help?

Tracy: I think too there's the perception, both internally and externally, that we have a very lucky life. It's very glamorous, "Oh my gosh you're a performer, your life must be perfect. How amazing, you get to do this, you're successful, you must be rich beyond belief. You must get absolutely everything you want. How many times do people say, "I wish I was creative. I wish I could sing, I wish I could dance, I wish I could act." And internally we go, "This is amazing, I'm getting to work in the industry that I love and care about, and I'm producing work that has the potential to change people's lives. There shouldn't be anything wrong with me, how dare I possibly feel sick."

Sally: And then you also have the myth and persona of musicians who live hard, die young, they live on the edge. I would like to see a cultural change where health becomes more of the status and musicians are looked up to because they're living a clean and healthy life. That's probably a long way off but that shouldn't stop us from aiming for that.

Narration: Are some of these stigmas cultural? Are they embedded in the way the music industry functions? Elly also has something to say about this.

Elspeth: I've observed the ways that all male environments can breed a really toxic culture. So, when there's two or three all male bands on tour going around the country, and playing shows, having late nights and drinking and feeding into notions of toxic masculinity and what's funny. I know guys who've just had to participate in that sort of a culture and that impacts their mental health, because they're pressured to subscribe to this notion of what's this cool guy musician. And then on the other side of it if you're not a guy, you're just observing, you're constantly a bystander to these environments. I've felt what impact that has on my sense of 'what is my place here', 'how am I important here', and then I wonder, how does that feel for other people who have far less structural privilege than I do.

Narration: From Entertainment Assist's findings, 56.1% of us feel that we either can't get help, or we can only occasionally go to our friends, families, neighbours and colleagues when we are in need. It is disheartening to think that so many of us, so often feel like we are alone.

Elspeth: It's also really interesting to notice where mental health can be used within those kinds of environments actually to excuse bad behaviour, which is something that I've noticed very recently. Particular bands who are called out for abusive behaviour or sexual abuse for racial abuse. They will excuse their behaviour through mental illness and substance abuse and intoxication. And that is something that makes me so angry, because if you have mental health issues, that is so important to address, but don't conflate them with abusive behaviour. When we feel like shit we want to escape, so we'll party super hard and just try and disassociate from ourselves because it's so painful to be ourselves sometimes. But these are all things that need to be addressed. That's something that I'm really passionate about, owning our behaviour and owning the fact that being drunk or substance affected, whatever, having poor mental health absolutely does exacerbate shitty behaviour, but you don't get to use it as an excuse.

Narration: We are all creatives, in every corner of this industry. Is it true then that creatives are naturally more vulnerable to mental health problems?

Susan: So, we have passionate, creative, sensitive people working in one of the most cut-throat industries there is. And that's a real challenge. And, regardless, like people say you got to be creative therefore you might have a propensity towards being mentally unwell, that's bunkum.

Elspeth: On one hand I think people who are highly creative can tend to have a more volatile experience of mental health, but I also think it's important to acknowledge that everyone is so creative. I don't really subscribe to a belief that some people are just brilliant and therefore they have like these really unique experiences of creativity and mental health. I think everyone is creative and I think everyone has mental health.

Music: Frida – Everything Is You

Tracy: What it comes to that does differentiate us from other industries is the amount we invest emotionally and personally and creatively in our work, and that's at all levels, everyone is so

invested. No one's here because "the money's so great and the hours are great," No way, everyone's here because we love it. But as a result, it's you. You feel like what you're putting out there is yourself. I think sometimes what happens is we can become so intrinsically linked with our artistic and creative output, that if something goes wrong with that, if we get a bad review, or our album doesn't sell… or have a bad rehearsal or a bad gig or no one buys tickets, suddenly that's us

Narration: Passion can play an enormous role in what we do. Our work is so important to us, that it often becomes our entire lives. There's a fear that we won't be understood outside of the world we exist in, as Sally explains.

Sally: Part of the reason for musicians or arts workers not wanting to seek help is that a regular psychologist won't understand the circumstances. In fact, I heard a story where somebody had spoken to a psychologist and they went, "Well, why don't you get a day job?"

Narration: Unfortunately, there are many barriers to seeking help. We can't eliminate mental health problems, but we can definitely make things easier for those around us.

Susan: we haven't been dealing with it all that well. That's where the change can happen, in really looking at, how can we support our peers? And that's one of the really other key messages that came from our research is that despite all of these challenges. We actually want to help each other but just don't know how.

Tracy: We ran a session a couple of weeks ago and there was about 70 people in the room I think. Just at the start we were doing some of those "get to know you" questions, do you work for a small organisation or a big organisation, are you freelance or employed, blah blah blah, those sorts of things. And one of the questions was "In the last 12 months have you come close to, or have you burnt out?" And every single person put their hand up. And I had this emotional reaction to it to go, "that's not okay".

Murray: If you do actually put your hand up, and this has come from a lot of people and a lot of forums we've had lately, if you put your hand up and you are experiencing some kind of problem a lot of people feel the stigma and that will impact somehow on their prospects, and filling in that diary all the time. Again, a lot of what we've learnt from the people that all of a sudden aren't with us anymore is they didn't talk to anybody.

Narration: We are currently at a frontier for new ways of thinking, talking and acting. While there are facets of the music industry that are arguably inevitable, there are many steps we can take, big and small, that will lead to much-needed action.

Music: Tempelhof by Huntly

Susan: The thing is, that, and as hard as it is, as much as we want to make sure the gig happens, and the show must go on, all the bits that go with it, this is about saving lives. So, as an industry, we need to learn, what does anxiety look like? What does depression look like? And they manifest themselves very physically. So, we need to become aware of what are our peers doing? How are they behaving? How are they relating? And then we need to be brave enough to actually have a mental health conversation and go, "are you okay?" We actually have to have those conversations, cause unless we do, we are going to lose more people.

Eilish: You're a role model whether you asked to be a role model or not. I think it's important to enrich the community in which you create in and rely upon. Therefore, I think it's important to start those conversations and check in on your friends and colleagues. Create an environment where if you employ people in the music industry, make it so that they can have mental health days and it's not the worst thing ever. Because everyone I know in the music industry works like a dog. They work so hard, and sometimes you do need that break. And it should be available to you to take.

Murray: I have heard that term 'Starting the conversation' probably about a million times by now, but anything is good, to be talking about it, people suffering in silence, you find out they're not here anymore and that's why. And everybody does deserve a future and a great job to be sitting in and all that, but that's not necessarily the case in where we are.

Tracy: You do talk to people who have been in the industry a really long time, and what they share about when they were first starting out in the industry, even not that long ago, even 10, 20 years ago, possibly even less, even 5 years ago. The way that mental health was talked about and the perceptions of it. It feels exciting, it feels like there is this wave that's been building and it certainly feels like we're moving in the right direction.

Elspeth: I think it's also important for everyone else, for managers to be having that conversation with their artist. Labels, when they're looking at timelines for releases, why shouldn't there by a conversation around, "Okay, let's think about what kind of preventative measures we can put in place, because we know that you're prone to feeling really anxious or feeling depressed. Last time you released an album you were thinking about self harm or suicide, so let's think about what we can do to prevent that." What role can every single person play?

Susan: There is not one single person in our industry that has not lost someone, and I get goosebumps with that, every single one of us are affected, every single one of us is responsible, for change regardless of where we are in the world.

Narration: The "Working in the Australian Entertainment Industry" research project was a world first and has been an incredible catalyst for change. The work coming from groups like

Entertainment Assist, Support Act and the Arts Wellbeing Collective is clearly amazing in making our industry a safer place for its people and saving lives.

Sally: APRA and Support Act did a series of seminars around the country. At the Big Sound conference, mental health has been the subject of a series of panels. In fact, Support Act hosted a mental health summit at last year's Big Sound we pulled representatives from each of the sectors of the music industry, and out of that we are just about to launch a 24/7 counselling service, specifically for the industry.

Murray: It's great that Australian Road Crew Association, their involvement with Support Act have linked with that Association, and there's a proportion of funds that I think is just dedicated to roadies or crew.

Susan: Entertainment Assist is currently doing another body of research where we've uncovered the problem, now we want the solutions. So we're actually asking the industry "Well what are the solutions?" And then we can go to government and say "look we've got all of the industry have actually decided to work together, first time in the world. We've got some big work ahead, really big work ahead, but what's really exciting is that the industry, has embraced our researching findings. And, we can't go back now.

Narration: We recognise and know that everyone is different, and therefore, everyone copes differently with the stresses of everyday life. But when things get rough, what makes coping or looking after your mental health easier?

Susan: Through going to see a GP you get an accurate diagnosis, in relation to anxiety, depression. And I can't make it more clear these are treatable illnesses. They are not a death sentence, they are not going to be the end of the Earth, they are treatable illnesses. We must, and that's an absolute must, we must create support networks outside of this industry. Because if we're just relying on, industry mates, if you're a casual, and, or you're moving around, someone might not see you from week to week whatever it is and they're not going to know who you are. But your family know who you are or your friends, outside of the industry, know who you are. Or wherever it is that you're going regularly, know who you are.

Tracy: In terms of support, absolutely reach out. There's amazing work being done by our industry specific support agencies, but you can also benefit obviously from places like beyond blue or lifeline and R U OK? Is really helpful as well because it gives some good detail about how to have that conversation, and that's where we're going to see real change happening, is when people just ask each other and support each other and listen and reach out when they notice something and that could save a life.

Murray: A lot of the bonds we've formed over the years stand up for quite a lot... it's a big family and we tend to sort of look after each other. It's the ability to talk to each other, and that community and the spirit that hopefully it lives on.

Elspeth: Reach out to your friends, don't shame someone for taking medication, recommend people access mental health care plans, access what is available and know what's available, so that if your friend is having a hard time or your bandmate or your manager, you don't see that as a personal failure of theirs, you're there to facilitate support. Have a psychologist and don't be afraid to tell someone that you see them every week.

Eilish: Well I'm under no illusion, that everything I've ever felt ever and will ever feel ever has been felt by somebody before me about a million times and probably a million times worse as well.

Narration: On top of healthy, open communication and practical support initiatives, music itself also provides us with healing and community. Music and mental health are intertwined. We have the power to choose what makes us feel well, and for many people, that is music.

Music: Fences by Frida

Narration: With artists becoming more aware of caring for their own mental health and that of other artists and so many capable professionals in the arts health field, perhaps the industry is on it's way to becoming healthier and safer than ever.

Eilish: It's impossible for me to sum up why I think music is important. It's a part of me, and it's going to be a part of me forever and I've made my peace with that. In terms of important to the community, of course, it's important, it speaks to so many people, it saves so many people, it got me through so much of my life that I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for music, or I'd be doing something really boring. Everything good that has ever happened to me has happened, every relationship, all my friends, communication with my family, travel, money, living, career, everything, everything good that has ever happened to me has been because of music.

Tracy: Sometimes it can feel so overwhelmed when you look at statistics and you think "I just can't deal with this", or when you're looking at your friends who are just working ridiculous hours and putting their heart and soul into a work and you start getting worried about them. I suppose never underestimate the role you can play in reaching out to people and talking about mental health and just making it a part of our conversation to protect each other. I guess if we're healthy our art will be better, that's what it comes down, that's what we want, that's what we care about. So, let's just all look after each other and make amazing music and amazing art.

Music: Paul Kelly – Before Too Long

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