



Burrinja, the Cafe and Music – past and future

Commencing in May 2019, approximately half of Burrinja's internal spaces will undergo a much needed redesign and redevelopment. With completion scheduled for May 2020, our aim is to provide to the region purpose built studio spaces that can accommodate more than twice as many studio artists and a greatly improved gallery that can bring in works from major lending institutions as well as our local artists. The café will be opened up to the foyer as a more inviting day-time space, while upstairs we will see an improved space for music, performance and other events.

While we look forward to the improvements these changes will deliver in the cultural experience we can provide to the region and community, this does not come without short term impact across all of the Centre's activities. Although the theatre will be able to continue its operations during the development, other venues including the café, studios and galleries will be closed and significantly altered. This includes major changes to way the café has operated as a combined music and café venue for the past twenty years.

Consistent feedback from those who have operated the Cafe space during its history is that the room needs to be able to accommodate larger audience numbers for many music nights, but should be smaller and more open to the centre for day time patronage. This is not achievable in its current location or within the one 'space'. Early design drafts looking to achieve this outcome showed the impracticality of such dual purposes. The separation of those spaces into two distinct venues and uses became the only practical design and operational response.

The first floor area known as the Black Box space will become the venue where the majority of music at Burrinja will move to. As we are still in final design stages of this project, the exact outcomes for this space and the way music nights will run are still to be confirmed. Programming aside, this new venue will not recreate the same physical space that many people have enjoyed as 'Burrinja Café' in the past.

There is more information about the redevelopment and future music detailed in our online ['project page'](#) and [FAQ](#).

The redevelopment also means that the space currently operated as the Skylark Room will no longer be operational. Due to the pending redevelopment works first confirmed in late 2017, the commercial catering services contract with the business operator of the café space runs until December 31, 2018, at which time the venue has always been scheduled to close for approximately 12 months during building works.

The Board acknowledges that the recent evolution of the redevelopment plans has brought significant change during the past 6 months to what will be the future operating environment for catering services and music at Burrinja, both for the cultural centre itself and for any business looking to take on those operations. Therefore more work will be done during the first part of 2019 on the best ways to manage these spaces for the future.

During that time we will be putting out to our patrons and performers a survey and feedback process to ensure we capture what it is that people have enjoyed about music programming at Burrinja over the years; what they want more of, and perhaps less of. We know there has been such a diversity of music valued in the café – from the importance of supporting emerging musicians just starting out, to being able to enjoy high profile performers and bands. This survey process will assist us in planning a future program, either in partnership with others or directly.

So, while all of this does mean that the venue for music at Burrinja will change, it does not diminish our commitment to supporting a music program both local and from afar. There have been many chapters to this story so far, and there will be more to come. Here's a short potted history...

The genesis of the Café itself at Burrinja belongs to Neil McLeod, or 'Uncle Neil' – and indeed up until about 2004 it was called 'Uncle Neil's Place'. Neil also began the history of live music in that space with some fabulous and high profile musicians and bands making their mark on the stage, surrounded by brown ochre, a very large crocodile, and many potted palms.

When Burrinja took over running the operations of the café back in 2001, firstly as Uncle Neil's and later as Burrinja Café, we continued that music legacy in partnership with some great and committed people, most notably Bernie Lobert who booked the bands for us for many years, and the Dandenong Ranges Folk Club, including AJ and Dave McFarlane – a big thank you to them and all the Folk Club crew.

Cheryl and Alan then continued the live music tradition for many years when they took on operating the cafe, and notable local musicians like Tracey Roberts and Stax were (and still are!) very involved in that program of music. It was during this time too that the unforgettable Alex Legg set up the "Blues n' Roots" and songwriters nights, along with many other gigs here and throughout the region – and his legacy lives on today through the Alex Legg Memorial Foundation.

Move forward a few years, and the inimitable Snowy and CJ developed the vision for 'The Skylark Room' with its 'speakeasy' vibe and live music program. Aply assisted by a creative crew they rebooted the music program, with Snowy herself taking stage too in The Skylarks. Since early this year Alexandra and Danny have continued that live music story with the ongoing assistance of Ben Langdon booking some great bands.

To name any of the fabulous bands and musicians who have played in this room since 1999 would only be to leave out so many, so we won't even try! Those who have come to and enjoyed music nights here know who they are and will have their personal favourites.

So while this live music chapter comes to an end, there will be more live music to come at Burrinja in the future. Despite the short disruption, the Board fully expects that this redevelopment will ultimately enhance the overall value of Burrinja to and within our community.

Our many thanks to all of those involved in the live music program and café operations at Burrinja during the past twenty years: most importantly the countless musicians and their supporters, and to everyone who has been involved in making those nights happen.

With thanks, the Board at Burrinja