



## SUMMARY

# First findings from conversations with Asian New Zealand musicians



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This is a summary of the key findings from preliminary research aimed at understanding the challenges to work and wellbeing experienced by Asian New Zealand musicians. Please contact us to request a copy of the full report. The research was commissioned by SquareSums&Co., funded by New Zealand Music Commission, and supported by the Center for Culture-Centered Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE), Massey University.



# Colophon

## DISCLAIMER

This report has been prepared in good faith and every effort has been made to ensure that the content is accurate and the participants' anonymity maintained. SquareSums&Co., New Zealand Music Commission, and CARE take no responsibility for any errors or for the correctness of the information contained herein.

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# Overview

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# Rationale

**The impetus for this study begins with the question: 'Who is not present here?'**

Anecdotal evidence suggests a lack of equitable representation of Asian New Zealand musicians in the music sector, and little formal research has been undertaken on how these musicians could best be supported. This report addresses that gap by presenting key findings from preliminary research aimed at understanding the challenges to work and wellbeing experienced by Asian New Zealand musicians.

This report is guided by the idea that Asian New Zealand musicians' lived experiences of negotiating multiple layers of precarity and marginalisation offers entry points for co-creating community-led solutions, and envisioning how disempowering infrastructures might be transformed. As such, it regards the experiences of Asian New Zealand musicians as a catalyst for change within the music sector at large. It suggests pathways forward drawing on the opportunities and potential solutions that musicians foresee amidst ongoing transformations in neoliberal economies.

This report is primarily intended to assist community and artist-led responses to the problems conceptualised by musicians. However, it is also hoped that the findings will prove useful to a wider audience including policy makers, funding agencies and industry professionals. Given the complexity of this study's aim—to develop shared understandings of precarity, marginalisation and other factors that form fundamental threats to work and wellbeing—the impacts from this study are likely to be best evidenced in the long term.

This report may be considered as part of a growing body of literature on precarious working arrangements in Aotearoa New Zealand across a number of related fields, where a skilled workforce is defined by insecurity, relative deprivation and a sense of disposability. At present, little is known about the conditions of precarity even as it is a salient feature of the work of musicians. Read in the context of wider literature on precarity, this report might help to broaden the category of the precariat or precarious worker to encompass those involved in creative work.

This preliminary research was commissioned by SquareSums&Co., a production company and talent management agency based in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. It was funded by the New Zealand Music Commission in alignment with its strategic aims to lower barriers to participation, promote diversity and inclusivity, and provide accessibility and connectivity for underserved communities. It was supported by the Center for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE), Massey University.

## Scope

This report is primarily a reflection of in-depth conversations (20 interviews) supplemented by a larger survey (55 responses). The study should not be interpreted as exhaustive, but rather as a starting point for mapping the difficulties faced by Asian New Zealand musicians. As a preliminary study, it intends to provide key perspectives from musicians who are negotiating challenges to work and wellbeing 'on the ground', and articulates pressing challenges needing to be addressed.



**20**  
Interviews



**55**  
Survey  
Responses



**NO**

This study retains the voices of musicians front and centre, and the concern for their ability to access fulfilling and sustainable music-related work. To bring the scope of this report more sharply into focus, the following points provide clarification of what the research does not intend: Firstly, this study does not intend to function as market research. It does not conceptualise music as a commodity within market systems. It does not take sector growth as an assumed positive, nor the profitability of music industry businesses as a focal point for marshalling the distribution of resources. Insofar as it takes an interest in the cumulative health of the music industry, it does so with a view to know how the infrastructures serve musicians' everyday needs for work and wellbeing. Secondly, this study does not intend to audit the music industry to evaluate the extent of representation and/or inclusion of Asian New Zealanders. Thirdly, this study is not policy analysis; it does not evaluate the impact of current legal frameworks. Finally, this research remains neutral in regard to judgements of artistic merit and aesthetic value. However, it should be noted that study participants demonstrate a broad range of expertise with 20 of 55 (36%) having worked in music for more than 10 years, and 31 of 55 (56%) having sought formal training and/or tertiary qualifications towards their music-related work.

Among the limitations of this preliminary study was its geographic scope. Except one respondent from the small town of Ōpōtiki, all other participants were based in major cities. The major centres in the South Island were also severely underrepresented. Another significant shortcoming was that the preliminary research did not include in its scope any information on disability. It is recommended that future research aims to address these areas.

## First findings

<b>01</b>	This report recommends that campaigns for equitable representation of Asian New Zealanders be grounded in the context of Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a project of overcoming white privilege in the kāwanatanga (Crown) sphere.
<b>02</b>	Racism forms an everyday experience for many Asian New Zealanders. It also flows into the market logics of the music sector limiting musicians' work opportunities. At the same time, the perspectives of 31% of survey respondents who did not identify as part of any marginalised group offer important ways to make sense of other pressures on musicians—specifically, experiences of precarity amidst ongoing transformations in neoliberal economies.
<b>03</b>	Challenges to work and wellbeing are significantly greater for LGBTQIA+ musicians, all of whom cited precarity as the greatest challenge in pursuing a fulfilling and sustainable career in music. Financial and infrastructural support for artist-led initiatives is recommended to address a dearth of LGBTQIA+ community-run sites and safe spaces that attend to race-based asymmetries.

<b>04</b>	In the context of rapidly changing demographics among settler communities in Aotearoa New Zealand, infrastructural groundwork for supporting musicians ought to consider an Asian population that is projected to surpass 1 million in 2024–2027.
<b>05</b>	When participants were asked to narrate their identities, only 1 musician chose the descriptor 'Asian'. Despite its use in demography, Asian is an umbrella term that overwrites important differences and disparities across diverse communities. Any initiative focused on Asian New Zealanders should understand communities as heterogeneous spaces where asymmetries of power and inequalities are continually negotiated.
<b>06</b>	Even as social identity forms the backdrop of this study, cultural productions based on homogenising identitarian frameworks are unlikely to be as compelling for musicians as those centred on craft.
<b>07</b>	Participants who work in music of Asian cultural origins reported difficulties in their efforts to vernacularise their craft in Aotearoa New Zealand. Their responses also invite further research on the way governmental infrastructures support music of Asian cultural origins, including the possible reasons study participants find the site of Diwali particularly problematic.

<b>08</b>	Seeking inclusion of Asian New Zealanders in a music sector that struggles to provide a living wage for the vast majority of musicians would be a misdirected aim if it does not come combined with transformations of the sector itself. For entry points to envisioning structural changes at large, this study recommends listening to the voices of musicians who negotiate multiple layers of precarity and marginalisation in their everyday lives.
<b>09</b>	Participants described an asymmetry of power between musicians and 'management'. They identified 'artist management, booking agencies, presenters, promoters' as among 'the biggest problems and therefore the greatest potential for change that would improve the status quo of the music sector as a whole'.
<b>10</b>	While industry bodies, sector organisations, governmental initiatives, community groups and the like exist to help musicians navigate work in the sector, this study identifies failures of communication such that musicians either do not know about such networks or feel reluctant in seeking their support.
<b>11</b>	Musicians overwhelmingly emphasised peer networks as most helpful for navigating music-related work. It is critical that artist-led collectives and community-led initiatives—especially those attending to race, gender and class-based inequalities—be strengthened with funding and infrastructural support.

<b>12</b>	Participants identified a need for mentorship opportunities. It is recommended that artist-led collectives be supported with funding to develop and deliver such programmes.
<b>13</b>	Participants reported that sector infrastructure for supporting music-related work—from equipment hire to platforms for music distribution and more—is currently insufficient to meet community-level demand.
<b>14</b>	Given that many Asian New Zealand musicians said they receive greater recognition overseas, sector infrastructure should consider supporting musicians seeking international opportunities. This may also help with talent retention.
<b>15</b>	When asked to define the most important thing to achieve from music-related work, study participants overwhelmingly chose responses centred on craft, affirming a values system contradictory to expected markers of commercial success.
<b>16</b>	Many musicians articulated the need for activist resistance to neoliberal market logics and entrepreneurial imperatives, which threaten to restructure how they understand their own work.

<b>17</b>	With 41 of 55 (75%) of the survey respondents earning less than \$10,000 annually from music-related work, relying solely on income generated from music-related work would drive the vast majority below the 'poverty line'.
<b>18</b>	While formal training and/or tertiary qualifications towards music-related work situates musicians within supportive informal networks of practice, it remains unconvincing as a pathway progressing to financially sustainable music-related work in the long term.
<b>19</b>	Despite a pessimistic outlook on the financial sustainability of music-related work, a majority of musicians reported that they were 'likely' or 'very likely' to pursue music-related work in the long term.
<b>20</b>	Live performances offer the greatest community-building, place-making as well as income-generating opportunities for musicians.
<b>21</b>	Remuneration of musicians from streaming is poor. This report recommends bringing together a body of musicians, policy analysts, activists and others to deliberate on and campaign to fix streaming.

<b>22</b>	This report recommends bringing together a body of musicians, policy analysts, activists and others to campaign for Basic Income.
<b>23</b>	The COVID-19 relief packages provided by the government offer a way forward on a campaign for Basic Income to remedy the experiences of precarity and poverty for musicians.
<b>24</b>	The preliminary research indicates the need for the formation of community advisory groups to serve as a space for the participation of musicians at the 'margins of the margins' to develop community-led solutions to the problems conceptualised by them, engage with sector stakeholders and advocate for changes in policy to address local needs of musicians.

# Method

## Design

The guiding methodology for this preliminary research borrows from the culture-centred approach as practised by the Center for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE), Massey University. The approach employs dialogue to facilitate the participation of local communities in both the definition of problems and the determination of solutions. Drawing on observer-as-participant ethnographic approaches, the research was conducted using a mixed-method approach and a qualitative-quantitative-qualitative design. The methodology has been reviewed by research partners in Aotearoa New Zealand and abroad.

## Interviews

The first part of the research process involved in-depth interviews with participants. Snowball sampling was used in order to seek broad representation from musicians working in different genre-based communities. The researcher asked a series of questions that formed the basis for the conversation—questions about work-related issues they faced, including how they negotiated fundamental threats to their work and wellbeing under precarious conditions, and the experience of marginalisation on the basis of their ethnicity and racial identity. Questions on their experiences of work also covered areas such as COVID-19, narratives of identity and belonging, and health and wellbeing. Interviewees were further asked what solutions they foresaw in addressing ongoing challenges.

Participants spent 60–90 minutes with the researcher in the interview sessions, which were conducted digitally on Zoom. They were provided with an information sheet which detailed their participant rights. They were informed that their participation would remain anonymous, their responses would be kept confidential, that they were not obliged to answer every question, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. Participant rights also included being able to ask any questions about the study at any time during participation, being able to ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview, and being given access to a summary of the project findings when the study is concluded. Each interviewee was offered a \$40 koha for their participation.

## Survey

The second part of the research process involved the design and distribution of a survey based on the discussion points raised by interviewees. The survey was designed with the help of Umar Zakaria, a doctoral candidate in music at Victoria University of Wellington.

The primary reason for surveying musicians identifying as Asian New Zealanders was to corroborate the narratives with survey data. For example, it was important to understand the nature of marginalisation voiced by the interviewees and the extent of the struggles for remuneration. One drawback of the survey was the total number of completed responses, which numbered 55. Another was that no participant above the age of 55 completed the survey. Partial completions were not included in the study. As one comment curtly stated: 'The survey is too long.'

The survey should be considered supplementary to the narrative, as a companion to the in-depth interviews that forms the basis of this preliminary research.

## Confidentiality

The researcher named in this document was responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. In order for the study to be guided by a community of independent practitioners, the researcher maintains independence from SquareSums&Co., the New Zealand Music Commission, funders, talent agencies, and possible employers of musicians. To ensure the confidentiality of participation, identifiable information has not been stored. As such, the study cannot provide specific respondent demographic information beyond what is mentioned in this report. No names of participants will be disclosed.

## Participation

A broad range of interview participants and survey respondents who identified as Asian New Zealanders and musicians—or who otherwise identified their primary work as 'artistic'—contributed to this preliminary research. Artistic work given as examples by respondents included accompanist, arranger, composer (including digital music production), conductor, critic, DJ, educator, lyricist, musician, musicologist, reviewer, and writer. On top of the artistic work, 11 of 55 survey respondents also included technical work as part of their music-related work, including music producer, audio engineer, instrument repair and restoration, lighting technician, photographer, and stagehand.

Not incorporated in the survey results were responses from industry professionals and salaried employees of music-related organisations who identified 'management' as their primary form of work, such as advertising, artist manager, tour manager, booking agent, employee at a funding agency, marketing and publicity, venue manager, shop owner, and social media manager.

Even as the division between 'artistic' and 'management' is not neat, it was maintained so that the research offers perspectives of musicians working in the gig economy or negotiating precarious working arrangements. Consider that all 5 survey respondents who identified with 'management' had annual incomes from music-related work between \$50,000–\$75,000, whereas only 3 of the total 55 of survey respondents identifying their primary work as artistic were at that same scale of income, and only 1 respondent was above the threshold of \$75,000. As such, perspectives and priorities differ between musicians and managers. Further research will be required for the perspectives of industry professionals.

While one interview participant identified themselves as 'disabled and/or differently-abled', the survey did not collect such data. This is a significant shortcoming. Further research is recommended to understand how disabilities disproportionately impact upon access to work and wellbeing in the music sector.



20

musicians who identified as Asian New Zealanders participated in in-depth interviews



55

responses to the survey from those who identified their primary work as 'artistic' provided data for this preliminary research

SURVEY SNIPPET

**A broad range of experience was reflected by survey respondents**

**36%**

20 of 55  
worked in music for more than 10 years

**40%**

22 of 55  
less than 10 years, but more than 3 years

**24%**

13 of 55  
less than 3 years

**44%**

24 of 55  
did not train formally

**56%**

31 of 55  
sought formal training and/or tertiary qualifications towards their music-related work

- 4 certificate or diploma (level 4–6)
- 15 graduate certificate, graduate diploma or bachelor's degree (level 7)
- 3 postgraduate certificate, postgraduate diploma or bachelor honours degree (level 8)
- 2 master's degree (level 9)
- 1 doctoral degree (level 10)
- 6 other

Except one respondent from the small town of Ōpōtiki, all other participants were based in major cities. The overrepresentation of Auckland (62%) is congruent with the geographic location of New Zealanders who identify as Asian as reflected by 2018 Census data where it is reported that 63% live in the Auckland region. However, the major centres in the South Island are severely underrepresented in this study:

**62%**

34 of 55  
**AUCKLAND**

**25%**

14 of 55  
**WELLINGTON**

**4%**

2 of 55  
**CHRISTCHURCH**

**4%**

2 of 55  
**HAMILTON**

**4%**

2 of 55  
**PREFER NOT TO SAY**

**2%**

1 of 55  
**ŌPŌTIKI**

This research remains neutral in regards to judgements of artistic merit and aesthetic value. However, it is worth noting that a focus on Asian New Zealand musicians need not imply a focus on music of Asian origin. This risks a reductive perspective on the multifarious practices of Asian New Zealanders. As the table below shows, interview participants and survey respondents evidenced background in a broad range of musical practices:

SURVEY SNIPPET

### What are the genres of music you work within?

- Acoustic
- Alt-pop
- Alternative
- Ambient
- Boss
- Bollywood
- Brazilian pop
- Carnatic
- Celtic
- Contemporary
- Country
- Drum and bass
- Dub
- Electronic
- Experimental
- Folk
- Funk
- Fusion
- Ghazal
- Hindustani
- Hip hop
- House
- Indian classical
- Indian regional
- Indie
- Industrial
- Japanese folk
- Japanese pop
- Jazz
- Jungle
- Metal
- Musical theatre
- Neo soul
- Noise
- Pop
- Punk
- Rap
- R&B
- Rock
- Shoegaze
- Soul
- Sound art
- Western classical
- World
- Techno
- Traditional
- Trip hop

## Acknowledgements

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