

Learning From Experience and Striving for Sustainability in a Combined Music Therapy/Community Music Songwriting Program for Young People Facing Adversity.

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Introduction

As signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is the position of the Australian government that all Australian young people have a right to “participate freely in cultural life and the arts” (UN assembly 1989, article 31). Many diverse music opportunities are available to young people in Australia through schools, community programs, choirs and orchestras (Tonges 2010), as well as receptive opportunities via the radio, television and the Internet. However, not all young people have equal access to music opportunities. Those experiencing adversity due to chronic illnesses, mental health challenges, or other social or emotional barriers can have difficulty accessing mainstream music programs. This may be because they are unable to be sufficiently supported in these programs, lack the financial resources to participate, or require flexible and tailored modes of participation.

Many arts programs in Australia make great efforts towards inclusion (Austin & Brophy 2015), however it can be difficult to effectively support adolescents with complex needs in large mainstream music programs. The Aardvark Songwriting Program is a youth music program that specifically addresses this challenge of access to music participation for marginalised young people in Melbourne, Australia. The Aardvark program prioritises pathways of access to a supported music program for young people who have difficulty engaging in group music experiences. The program combines the skills and expertise of professional performing musicians and music therapists, who co-facilitate the sessions to offer a dual focus on music skills and personal development and support.

The young people involved in the program, who identify as Aardvarkians, are aged between 14 and 24. They all share an enthusiasm and a passion for music and often bring formidable talent to the group. The Aardvarkians are also all young people who are experiencing adversity due to chronic illness, mental ill-health, unstable homes lives or acute personal crisis or challenge. The group is heterogeneous and music is the central focus around which the young people come together and connect. The program takes a resource-oriented approach (Stige & Aarø 2012) and does not focus explicitly on individual challenges, although young people are welcome to share their experiences. Music therapy facilitators provide tailored support in these instances and more generally to ensure that challenges do not become barriers to music participation.

Music is a powerful and engaging potential resource to promote wellbeing and social connection for young people. During adolescence, young people describe having a particularly strong relationship with music, both in their private and their public lives (McFerran 2010). Musical engagement offers young people opportunities to explore and enact their identities, and research suggests that this is not a passive process. Recent studies have identified that engagement with music can promote feelings of wellbeing for young people (Faulkner 2011; McFerran, Garrido & O’Grady 2010; McFerran, Roberts &

O'Grady 2010). Some studies also recognise that this outcome is not inevitable, and that some young people also use music to ruminate on negative experiences or emotions (Garrido & Schubert 2013; Garrido, Eerola & McFerran 2017). Authors note that this can be an adaptive processing strategy if it is transitory, however, for some young people this can become unhelpful and deepen or prolong negative mood states (McFerran et al. 2012; Garrido, Eerola & McFerran 2017). Saarikallio, Gold and McFerran (2015) consider "the behavioural patterns of music engagement that reflect vulnerability of depression in youth" (p211), suggesting that vulnerable young people may be supported in learning how to intentionally use their music effectively to support their health and wellbeing, and identify when this is not working for them.

This literature suggests that young people's relationships with music in adolescence are complex and contextual. For some young people experiencing medical or personal adversity, specialised support may be useful for them to maximise the potential benefits of music participation. Unfortunately, it is these young people who often experience the greatest barriers of access to music programs. The Aardvark program is an example of a unique program that has been successfully supporting such young people over the past 10 years. The remainder of this article outlines an overview of the history of the program, some distinctive features of this particular model, and considerations for the program in the changing non-profit sector in Australia.

A Brief History of Aardvark

Aardvark was conceptualised in 2006 when a Starlight Captain¹ working at a children's hospital in Melbourne noticed that young people with a chronic illness would often come back to meet at the hospital even when not admitted, to play music together, learn and be inspired by the musicians who happened to work there. From these small beginnings, an initial set of music sessions was piloted with six participants at a recording studio in Melbourne. The focus was on a collaborative method between the musicians and young people with a chronic illness to write original music, record and perform as a group. From the success of these small beginnings, Aardvark was founded as a Not-for-Profit Incorporated Organisation in 2007. A board of directors was established in 2008 and the organisation has continued to grow through fluctuations and changes in directorship since then.

Throughout the organisation's evolution, the model for the Aardvark songwriting program, established in 2007, has remained consistent. A performing musician who is also a professional songwriter and a music therapist work collaboratively as co-facilitators to support the young people through a weekly, semi-structured group process of song writing, recording and performing. In general, the performing musician supports the overarching musical trajectory of the program while the music therapist takes responsibility for the psychosocial and interpersonal aspects of the group process. This model has proven itself to be robust and essential to the program's success as the

¹ Employed by the Starlight Foundation at children's hospitals around Australia, a Starlight Captain is a person who's aim is to make hospital patients have fun for a little while using imaginative play and distraction techniques. Starlight Captains are often performing artists and/or musicians by trade.

organisation has grown and widened its referral criteria beyond targeting youth with a chronic medical illness to providing access to music opportunities to a broader spectrum of young people facing medical or personal adversity.

The aim of Aardvark is to reduce barriers while increasing access to music opportunities, and to provide pathways for leadership, work experience and eventually employment. Particular focus is placed on increased skills development, increased peer support networks, collaboration with and exposure to professional songwriters, and an increased sense of belonging and community.

At its core Aardvark is guided by the mission – ‘creating music, community and opportunities’ – with principles including youth participation and collaboration between all stakeholders. While the Aardvark participants are at the center of the community, stakeholders of Aardvark include the music therapist, the resident songwriter, visiting artists, volunteers, the Board and organisational partners. An important element of Aardvark is the ongoing engagement with Aardvarkians after graduating from the Aardvark Sessions.

The Aardvark Process

Below is a diagram to show the pathway a young person travels through in the Aardvark Program.

Referrals



Aardvark accepts referrals for young people experiencing adversity, such as:

- A chronic medical condition
- Mental health issues
- Unstable home life
- Significant/acute life challenges

To be eligible to take part in the Aardvark Sessions young people must also:

- Be aged between 14 and 24
- Be linked in with a health or community support person or organisation
- Be passionate about music
- Want to connect with other young people with similar experiences
- Want to play music and write songs

The Aardvark Sessions

The Aardvark Sessions are held weekly for three hours over 14 weeks and run twice a year. Up to 15 young people can be included in each round of Aardvark Sessions and sessions are facilitated by the music therapist, resident songwriter and two to three youth music mentors. The Sessions are held at a central location in the city to maximise the accessibility of young people from around Melbourne. Towards the end of the 14 weeks the participants enter a professional recording

studio for an intensive weekend of recording. Each program culminates in a performance and a large-scale CD Launch at the end of each year.

The Aardvark Alumni

Once participants graduate from the Aardvark Sessions they can choose to remain connected in the program and participate in ongoing monthly sessions and further performance opportunities. If young participants show the interest and ability to be leaders, they can choose to move to the Pathways Program where they can access extended opportunities for leadership and work experience. In the Pathways Program, young participants can volunteer to be youth mentors in the Aardvark Sessions and participate in youth leader meetings that inform the development of the program as a whole. Progressing from these volunteer roles, youth mentors can then choose to be trained to co-facilitate song writing workshops with Aardvark staff for corporate, community and council organisations. This co-facilitation role is a paid position for the young people. The Pathways Program has been developed to offer leadership and work experience and casual paid employment to young people who often miss out on these experiences due to their complex lives.

Distinctive Features of the Aardvark Model

Over 10 years of development, some distinct features have grown to characterise the Aardvark Songwriting Program. This combination of features offers particular skills and structures through which facilitators can engage and support a heterogeneous group of young people with very diverse needs and barriers to music participation. In particular, the three features articulated below contribute to this unique program culture.

Music therapists and resident songwriter working together. Sessions are co-facilitated by a music therapist and resident songwriter, and this combination allows for a dual emphasis on musicianship and support. Both of these areas are important to the culture of the program, and steps are taken to actively foster a sense of both musical achievement and community. The experience of this co-facilitation at Aardvark is that both music therapists and resident songwriters bring skills in song writing and social engagement through music to the program. However, Aardvark co-facilitators bring different professional training and experience to the process from their respective disciplinary backgrounds. Facilitators work actively together to make these perspectives complimentary rather than conflicting, and ongoing negotiation is required.

This requires an openness to learn from one another, and more practically, requires time for group planning and debriefing. It has also been helpful to concretely discuss how leadership will be shared. At Aardvark, this has evolved so that resident songwriters take leadership of musical dimensions of the program, and music therapists take leadership of socio-emotional dimensions. In practice, these dimensions are integrated within the structure of sessions, however, sharing leadership in this concrete way ensures a balance between musical and personal/social priorities of the program. This approach is supported by the research of O'Grady and McFerran (2007), whose grounded theory analysis of interviews with music therapists and musicians identified

differences in the priorities of facilitators. While music therapists were more likely to prioritise the individual and their experience, musicians were more likely to prioritise the music process and aesthetic outcomes of the project.

Co-facilitation by music therapists and musicians is not currently the norm for community music projects in Australia. However, examples from around the world have been increasingly described in the literature. For example, in acute hospitals (Kildea 2007; Shoemark 2009), with underserved communities (Oosthuizen, Fouche and Torrence 2007) and with adults with disabilities (Gosine, Hawksley & LeMessurier Quinn 2017; Stige 2002).

Reflection on the success and longevity of the Aardvark program suggests that there is significant gain to be had from a co-facilitation approach that draws on the strengths and priorities of both music therapists and songwriters. It is also challenging at times. Inevitable paradigm clashes require negotiation and good communication, however, a commitment to this co-facilitation approach is critical as it opens up more avenues for the program to meet the varied needs of young people involved. This approach is what allows the program to support such a heterogeneous group of young people at Aardvark.

Links to the music industry. Another feature of this program that allows facilitators to support a heterogeneous and complex group of young people is the program's ongoing links to the music industry in Melbourne. Rather than an emphasis on the challenges they face, Aardvarkians are identified first and foremost as aspiring musicians. This creates an alternative focus for the program than that of pathology or needs-oriented programs for young people with additional support needs.

Facilitators are ever-mindful of the issues and challenges Aardvarkians face, and certainly some young people use the program as a space to seek support and guidance. However, the song writing process is the central focus of Aardvark's activities. Facilitators take the young people seriously as artists, and as a result, the young people take themselves seriously as well. Aardvarkians describe this focus on musical achievement and development as important to them. This is consistent with current literature about youth engagement, which indicates that so-called 'at-risk' youth benefit from involvement in "meaningful leisure" activities (Hopper & Iwasaki 2017, p20). Research also suggests that young people facing adversity can begin to define themselves by this adversity (Hense & McFerran 2017) or can be defined that way by others (te Riele 2006). This suggests that programs which support alternative identity formation may be beneficial.

Tangible links to the wider music industry provide Aardvarkians with opportunities for musical access and exposure. Professional musicians with flourishing careers in the Australian music industry volunteer their expertise in songwriting sessions, providing motivation and inspiration to participants. The Aardvarkians record their songs in a professional studio, and learn about equipment, patience and professionalism from the sound technicians they work with. And the sessions conclude with a CD launch where participants perform their original material before a live audience in an established Melbourne music venue. These links to the music industry are fundamental to the identity of the Aardvark program. Through these links, the music industry provides a backdrop for the Aardvark program that serves to locate the program as part of the music

community of Melbourne. Within this musical frame, facilitators can then provide the scaffolding needed in sessions to foster a group process based on community, support and connection.

Pathways to and from the program. The third feature of Aardvark that has allowed the program to thrive over time is a commitment to providing pathways of growth and access to and from the program. Voluntary participant engagement is a challenge for community youth programs generally (Ho, Clarke & Doherty 2015), and this is further complicated when young people are facing medical or personal adversity (Hopper & Iwasaki 2017; Iwasaki 2016). Facilitators in the Aardvark program devote time and resources to supporting each young person to overcome their individual barriers to access. This may be practical support required to negotiate transport to sessions or personal reminders to young people of session times and events. It also may include follow-up discussions and ongoing contact and encouragement to attend for people with anxiety, low mood, or in personal crisis. Experience with Aardvark suggests that without this tailored support, young people who may most greatly benefit from the program may struggle to attend.

Within the program, young people are encouraged and supported to negotiate their own participation. Aardvark maintains an inclusive stance, and aims to cater to people with different levels of social and musical capacity. This is possible using the specialised co-facilitation model described above. Young people are also free to negotiate the level of participation they would like to have with the program, whether this be simply as a participant in sessions, a peer leader and/or as a contributor to decision-making about the program. Recent research emphasising youth participation in music programs with 'at-risk' populations has identified that it can be a challenge to engage young people in decision-making about programs they are involved with (McFerran & Hunt 2008) and emphasise that it is important for young people to 'buy in' to collaboration in order for it to afford them positive outcomes (Bolger 2015). At Aardvark, participation and collaboration opportunities are offered to young people individually in regular conversations with facilitators as they each negotiate their own engagement with the program.

Participation is transitional within the program. Initial weekly songwriting sessions are highly scaffolded and young people are expected and supported to attend regularly. Once young people transition to the monthly alumni 'Dig Days' program, regular attendance is not required. Aardvarkian alumni are invited and encouraged to attend Dig Days, but a flexible, monthly group structure is implemented in the alumni program. This requires individuals to take personal responsibility for their own involvement. Aardvarkian alumni are encouraged to explore pathways beyond Aardvark and the flexible structure of Dig Days allows young people to stay connected, but also prioritise employment or education opportunities. Interestingly, while not actively promoted, many Aardvarkians have independently pursued further study in music and adjunct professions such as sound engineering.

Aardvark also offers targeted leadership pathways to interested young people, through a youth leadership model that is embedded into the program structure – the Pathways Program introduced earlier. Approximately three Aardvarkian alumni are invited to join each round of songwriting sessions in a

volunteer capacity as peer mentors. Peer mentors work with co-facilitators to support new Aardvarkians through the songwriting process, and play a vital role in the group. Recently Aardvark has begun to deliver corporate songwriting workshops, and this has opened up another opportunity for youth leadership, this time in a paid capacity. Young people with peer mentor experience undertake leadership training from Aardvark songwriting facilitators, and join the corporate workshops as youth co-facilitators, alongside Aardvark facilitators. Early piloting of this model has demonstrated that this has not only offered invaluable leadership experience for the young people, it has greatly enhanced the workshop experience for corporate participants. This is an area that warrants further exploration and will be revisited later in this paper.

How do the Young People Describe the Program?

In alignment with Aardvark's commitment to youth participation and leadership, three vignettes below articulate the different experiences of three Aardvarkians in the program. These three young people were invited to share their stories as they were part of different song writing cohorts and appeared to facilitators to have taken quite different things from their participation in the program.

The stories were collected in the form of interviews with each young person, and the language used to describe their experiences was changed as little as possible to reflect each person's unique voice. The stories were necessarily shortened for inclusion in this paper, and the final versions were given to the three young people for approval/amendment. The young people themselves chose the names and introductions used.

Eva's story. *Eva is an 18 year old student, currently studying international studies at university. Her struggle with anorexia nervosa (and love for music) initially led her to be involved with Aardvark in 2016.*

Aardvark was a big part of my recovery process. Anorexia had taken up a significant part of my developing years. It sounds dramatic to say that I had no idea who I was, what my passions were and where I wanted to go, but looking back, that was essentially my situation.

The environment that Aardvark provided encouraged me to explore my identities, both past and current, in the context of creating music with people who understood what I was going through. Aardvark reminded me of the value of creating music. There is something about the process of writing with sound that achieves a certain level of expression words cannot. In the past I had been very critical of what I said, which had led me to be quite reserved. Not only did Aardvark encourage me to express myself, it allowed a space where judgement and self-criticism did not impede that expression.

While I was going through year 12 and the pressures and struggles (and misery) associated with it, Aardvark was there to give me something to look forward to. I could rely on the fact that, once a week, I would be granted a break from my life. This played into my recovery significantly; as previously, this break would have likely consisted of going on an 8 hour walk on no food. In many ways, Aardvark made year 12 possible for me. Every week I would go into the Aardvark sessions miserable and worn down by my life, and every single week

without fail I would emerge happy and excited about music. Aardvark made me happy when I was the most unhappy I'd ever been.

Tim's story. *Tim is a "phonometrician" and performer and was part of Aardvark in 2014.*

Before Aardvark I'd just been doing my own electronic stuff. I was quite insular at the time; I wasn't really being involved with other people musically. I think Aardvark was a good way to start doing stuff with other people again, but without any pressure. One of things that was good was that you didn't sit around and discuss your problems, you sat around and discussed music and made music. I don't think I would have liked it as much if we'd sat around and talked about why we were there. We were there and that was enough.

Things were quite low for me, and then Aardvark started, and things started going up, I think because of the Aardvark thing I'm pretty sure. Especially with the recording, it was my favourite part. I got the feeling of yes, this is right, this is what I should be doing. Which I perhaps hadn't had for a while, in general, in life. Now I'm studying music at university and doing lots of performing. Without Aardvark, I might not have had quite so much confidence to continue with music so much. I don't think I would have been quite so ok with showing it to other people.

It was useful to get, I don't know if "back on track" is the right expression, because I was already on the track. Aardvark sort of reinforced the track because if it hadn't I might have fallen off the track eventually, or maybe just gotten a little lost. Like I don't really know where I would have gone, or if I might have gone anywhere I guess.

Jordan's story. *Jordan is a 19-year-old bass player who participated in the Aardvark sessions in 2016.*

At the start of Aardvark I was very out of practice being around other people. I wasn't really confident in any aspect of who I was as a person at that point. The first couple of weeks were really scary for me. I was still in my own head thinking whether or not people actually liked me or not, because that's how I am.

Then once it got into the work side of it, the music, I was able to think less about what I was doing and if I was good enough, and I had something to focus on so I was a bit more comfortable. At that stage I was still nervous around people. It had been 6 months or so since I'd left the house really, so being around that big of a group of people was really scary for the first few weeks. I started getting to know the people I was working with, getting to know them through how they did things, the way they made music. Looking back, I didn't really feel like I knew anyone until we started playing music together.

Now, sessions are over and I have Dig Days (monthly Alumni program). I don't talk to the others every day, but if I need them, or they need me, we pick up like no time has past. It feels like a family, it really feels like a family. Aardvark gave me something I felt like I was good at, and could participate in and contribute something worthwhile. I felt like I had a bit of control, more than I did over my health, and that was something positive. Aardvark was something different to define me.

These three stories represent three different potential trajectories through the Aardvark program, as expressed by the young people and observed by Aardvark facilitators. In Eva's story, she uses her own personal development through Aardvark as a lens to describe her experiences. Tim's story reflects the process through a musical lens, reflecting the nature of his personal journey through the program. In his story, Jordan offers a social perspective, outlining the way his engagement with others and the group as a whole developed in the program. These stories represent the program's main goals of personal, musical and social development for participants, from the perspective of three Aardvarkians themselves. The stories also give voice to the way in which Aardvark's program structure can allow different young people (with diverse support needs) to have different experiences of the same program, and gain different things from their involvement.

Aardvark into the Future

Aardvark is one of many small not-for-profit organisations trying to navigate the challenges of a changing non-profit sector in Australia. It is not sufficient to simply provide high quality, needed services for users over time. In order to secure funding in a competitive climate, organisations must also demonstrate a capacity for innovation (Crutchfield & Grant 2012; GiveEasy 2017).

Social enterprise has emerged as a useful frame for approaching innovation in the non-profit sector, and the term 'social enterprise' has been interpreted in many ways. The understanding adopted in this paper is that proposed by early pioneer Andrew Mawson (2008) who defines social enterprise as "to apply business experience and business logic to social problems" (Mawson 2008, p5). Mawson (2008) sees social enterprise as a process that is experiential, emergent, long term focused, messy and multifaceted, and one that balances financial and social priorities. These are all characteristics that could similarly be used to describe the Aardvark program.

The notion of social enterprise creates some challenges for non-profits. After all, the non-profit sector exists to support activities that have important social value or function that are not served by the consumer marketplace. Many organisations address this by using a hybrid model, with a social enterprise stream to their operations that generates income in addition to core grant funding (Crutchfield & Grant 2012; Haigh et al. 2015). This is an interesting approach, but when considering this option for Aardvark, several questions arose.

- How could Aardvark incorporate "business ideas" in a way that was consistent with the values and purpose of the organisation, and did not detract from core programming?
- How could Aardvark function in this way as a service provider, not a producer of goods; and so that it could remain a free service for young people?
- Most importantly, how could it be ensured that vulnerable participants were not exploited for financial gain?

After careful consideration, an idea emerged in the form of for-profit corporate songwriting workshops. By engaging Aardvarkians in the program as co-facilitators, the program offered the potential as both a leadership pathway

for interested young people and a secondary income source for the program. Due to their complex lives, many Aardvarkians are not able to keep full time jobs, and this presented a paid work experience opportunity for their resume that could build their leadership skills and confidence. For corporate businesses, the workshops were a structured teambuilding songwriting experience, with a focus on each company's mission, and an opportunity to work alongside our inspiring and enthusiastic young Aardvarkians.

This foray into social enterprise for Aardvark is still in the piloting stage. Early program evaluation suggests that the workshops offer positive outcomes for corporate and Aardvarkian participants alike. Corporate participants have reported that the program prompted them to step outside their comfort zone and do things they did not expect. They also described getting to know their colleagues in new ways. These are important qualities of teams in the current "innovation and growth" landscape of Australian business (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017).

The inclusion of Aardvarkians as facilitators of the corporate workshops appeared to offer a unique and engaging focus for the workshops, and the young leaders involved remain enthusiastic about their role in the program. At Aardvark, youth facilitators are supported with ongoing leadership training and debriefing, and financial remuneration for their time. It is believed that this investment of time and resources has contributed to the early success of the workshops. Further targeted evaluation of the corporate songwriting workshops is needed, and they will always be an adjunct to the core business of Aardvark – the Songwriting Sessions and Dig Days. However, pilot evaluation suggests that the workshops offer a potential way for Aardvark to innovate that is aligned with the organisation's mission and values, and can be embedded into the program's existing 'youth pathways' approach.

As with all non-profit organisations, the financial future of Aardvark is ever tenuous and uncertain. Therefore, developing a sustainable revenue stream is a necessary part of Aardvark's future development. The next phase of Aardvark's development is to build on these early steps and embed a social enterprise orientation into the program. In this way, it is hoped that Aardvark can achieve both financial sustainability for the organisation, and sustainable outcomes for the young people involved. At Aardvark, music is understood as a powerful and engaging resource to promote wellbeing and social connection for young people experiencing major adversity in their life. Through growing leadership pathways such as the corporate songwriting workshops, Aardvarkians are bringing this potential for musical, personal and social growth to a wider group of Australians. And growing from participants to leaders in the process.

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