

Hey Drums: Documenting Australian Drummers

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*Hey Drums*¹ (2016-present) is a blog documenting the work and experiences of Australian female and non binary drummers. The site also features percussionists but is largely focused on promoting a diverse intersection of players of an instrument widely and predominantly accepted as the territory of cis gendered men²: the drum kit. At the time of writing, interviews with more than 125 drummers from across the continent have been published on the site and promoted on *Hey Drums* social media platforms and a dedicated Spotify playlist featuring bands with female and gender non conforming (gnc) drummers. The project has grown into an online and real life community of drummers, regular articles in a nationwide drumming magazine, as well as live performance events and academic outcomes. This chapter will document the genesis, goals and evolution of *Hey Drums* and affiliated events, highlighting some of the individual artists and the broad range of areas they are working in.

*A woman's work is never done. Or it's erased from history books*³

I wanted to do something to counter the incessant feedback I had received throughout my teens and twenties that 'girls don't play drums,' with some kind of project listing and profiling all the non male drummers I could find. I began the *Hey Drums* blog as an acknowledgement of the people I already knew, and to learn about others. It started with some personal emails and a public call out on Facebook, which resulted in more than twenty candidates within an hour. There has been a steady stream of willing and eager interviewees ever since, demonstrating the great need and enthusiasm for this project. I find them by word of mouth. Some are self nominated. Some are suggested or nominated by bandmates or friends. Some are found at gigs and on social media. The need for the project is affirmed almost every time I contact a new drummer and explain what the project is (often now they have heard of it and are already fans), and receive many replies along the lines of:

*It's so great to see a space dedicated to female/non binary drummers. It's such a male dominated area*⁴

A chance discovery of the female focused drumming magazine Tom Toms⁵ in a music store in New Orleans in 2015 had me reflecting on Australia's own drumming magazine, *Drumscene*⁶ and its lack of representation of female and gender diverse drummers.

The birth of the blog and beginning to pen feature articles for the magazine happened almost simultaneously in mid 2016. I was starting to collect all this information and saw that something more than simply presenting it on the *Hey Drums* blog could be done. It was evident that a wider audience could be reached, at the same time as challenging the typical male drummer stereotype very much reinforced by previous issues of *Drumscene*.

A few email exchanges later with editor and founder of the quarterly magazine, Frank Corniola, and I was to become a regular writer for DrumsScene, contributing articles about all aspects of life as a drummer that just happened to feature non male artists. Frank was aware of the lack of representation in the magazine, and open to doing something about it together.

The articles don't mention gender unless it's something that the interviewees specifically bring up. They instead focus (just as in all the other articles in the magazine) on different elements of drumming and drumming related experiences. I have been careful to avoid sensationalising the people in the articles.

You can't be what you can't see

The desired outcome of this work is the normalisation of seeing and hearing women and gender diverse folks behind the drum kit: to simultaneously increase representation and raise awareness that these drummers exist. It is just as important for these drummers to see themselves represented as it is for younger aspiring drummers to see themselves represented in print.

Since 2016 I have penned more than 15 articles for DrumsScene, including profiles of dozens of Australian drummers both here and overseas, articles on touring, session playing, yoga for drummers, inclusive music education programs for young people, practice hacks, promoting yourself as a drummer on social media, and interviews with international superstars Terri Lyne Carrington, Cindy Blackman Santana, and Vera Figueiredo.

Each artist featured on the *Hey Drums* blog answers the same set of questions:

Name

Where are you based?

How long have you been playing drums? And what initially drew you to the instrument?

Do you play any other instruments?

What bands/projects/collaborations are you involved in right now?

What else have you previously been involved in (bands/shows/projects etc)?

Do you write music or develop your own shows? What are they about/how have they come about?

What are your thoughts on collaboration in music and in the projects you're involved in or the projects you run?

Who are you listening to/whose music are you enjoying right now?

Do you have any favourite drummers? Or other musicians who inspire you? why?

How would you describe the kind of music or projects you're mostly involved in? And what kind of unique perspective/sound do you bring to these gigs?

Do you have a particular warm up or practice routine? Or favourite exercises?

Does social media play a big part in how you promote yourself as an artist and your various projects? Do you promote your work in other ways?

Do you make a living from music? What different types of work does this comprise?

Where's the coolest place that music has taken you?

If you could give your younger drumming self some advice what would it be?

Other thoughts/info

Website

There is no common theme amongst the answers given, except perhaps in the final question: 'what advice would you give your younger drumming self?' - there is a strong sense of solidarity amongst the interviewees and their less experienced selves; a combination of many variations on 'don't be so hard on yourself' and 'don't let annoying old man drummers try and intimidate you with useless facts about what kind of cymbals you should be using.'⁸

There are three main goals of *Hey Drums*:

1. The documentation of Australian drummers
2. The inclusion across all iterations of the project of trans and gnc people
3. The promotion of all the interviewed drummers the same way regardless of level of experience, 'fame', 'chops', or genre

Documentation

The number one goal of *Hey Drums* has always been to satisfy the need for documentation of female and non binary artists in a traditionally male dominated field: to present unequivocally the existence of and creative work being done by female and non binary drummers around Australia, despite a still common perception that these people don't belong or are a rarity behind the kit.

My experience as a young drummer in the early 2000s is not an uncommon one: being confronted, even accosted, in drum shops and at gigs, by men who felt the need to either point out or challenge the fact that I was a drummer and also not a man. Having had (only a few but very influential) incredible female mentors – very established artists in their own right 10-20 years my senior - I wondered what it must have been like for them at my age (and now). Each generation seems to be continually surprised that women and gnc people are drumming, perpetuating what feminist author Dale Spender describes as a submergence of information,⁹ the erasure of the achievements and experiences of non males at every age. As Australian author and journalist Jane Caro writes, 'the revolution that has occurred in the lives of women remains relatively unacknowledged. It's as if each step forward is regarded in isolation.'¹⁰ And

as Catherine Strong writes in her essay *Grunge, riot Grrrl and the forgetting of women in popular culture* 'women are generally written out of historical accounts of music in order to reinscribe the creative dominance of men in this field.'¹¹

Though only three years old the *Hey Drums* blog is an important historical document that will continue to be added to for years to come. By providing a snapshot of women and gender diverse people working in the music industry it serves and will continue to serve as a resource for musicians, music fans, students, and researchers alike.

The importance of inclusion: trans and gnc artists

For the first 12 months the blog was called *She Drums*. I knew this was not inclusive of trans and gnc artists but I wasn't yet sure how to make it so whilst also making it clear that I wasn't going to be interviewing or featuring male drummers. With the encouragement and advice of some patient non binary drummers who were enthusiastic but reluctant to participate in a project titled 'she' (with good reason) *Hey Drums* - a reference to the gender neutral pronoun 'they', was created in its place.

The second goal of *Hey Drums*, the importance of the inclusion of trans, non binary, and gender non conforming drummers, cannot be understated. In a time where these people are being actively excluded, bullied, and vilified in the arts, in sport, this is a movement, like any feminist movement, that must be trans and gnc inclusive.¹²

It's important to note, however, that this is not a project seeking to 'out' anyone. There are no check boxes around gender identification that accompany the drumming questionnaire. There are drummers who feature on the blog who are non binary but not public about this, or trans but not public about it. There are others who are very much out and outspoken. The blog and affiliated events are safe spaces that are inclusive but respectful of the drummers' privacy; places they need not feel like 'a specimen with all the lights bearing down'. It is important that all of these artists are seen as people, as drummers, first.¹³

Snapshot of drummers: diversity

The third important element of this project is that it does not discriminate in terms of level of experience, technical ability, or genre of music played by the drummers in question. In fact the very opposite is true: the diversity of the featured artists in terms of playing level and style is part of what makes this community and this project both interesting and unique. The range of stories and experiences is important: to hold a mirror up to as many different types of musical practices as possible; to show that there are many different ways one can be a drummer and that they are all valid. There is not one type of female or gnc drummer, just as there is no one type of male drummer.

At the time of writing more than 125 drummers and percussionists (overwhelmingly drum kit players) had been interviewed. These include some of Australia's most seasoned players like Sonja Horbelt (co-founder of the Melbourne Women's International Jazz Festival), Julia Day (Do-Re-Mi), Jen Sholakis (Jen Cloher, Laura Jean, The Orbweavers) and Clare Moore (Dave

Graney). There are interviews with well known artists such as Lozz Benson who drums for folk pop star John Butler and was awarded first prize in 'Australia's Best Female Drummer' competition in 2016, Leanne Cowie of 'The Scientists' fame and pop sensation G Flip who belts out powerful original songs from behind the kit. Alongside Lozz, Leanne and G are dozens of little known and non professional but regularly gigging drummers, all with their own experiences and all given equal weight within the project.

The drummers I've interviewed are regulars with bands, freelance drummers, touring artists, teachers, session musicians, as well as professionals in other fields who maintain steady side careers as musicians. They are students, activists, booking agents, multi instrumentalists, electronic musicians, composers, and collaborators. Some have formal musical training. Some are self taught. Some strive to make a living from music. Some have no desire to, or even a strong urge not to combine their love of music making with the stress of trying to make a living.

There is Tanja Bahro who started playing at age 47 and now gigs regularly in Melbourne with her traditional jazz band, and 60 year old student of African drumming Anne Harkin who also began drumming in her 40s. There are a number of Australian born drummers currently living and playing overseas like latin percussionist Nasrine Rahmani (Madrid) and jazz drummer Jodie Michael (New York), and those born in other countries who now call Australia home like Bonnie Stewart (born in Ireland, now Sydney based) and drummer/composer Cissi Tsang (born in Hong Kong, now based in Perth). There are performers across rock, pop, metal, improvisation, jazz, noise, experimental music, circus and cabaret.

There is blind from birth drummer Renee Kelly, made famous through a series of short films by the Australian Broadcasting Commission focusing on disabled artists.¹⁴ There's yoga teacher and arts manager Holly Norman who has turned her focus to the mental and physical wellbeing of those working in the performing arts. There's ex Circus Oz drummer and Edinburgh Festival regular Bec Matthews, performance artist Tina Havelock Stevens who plays drums underwater and in abandoned aeroplane hangers, and electro pop percussion duo Feels who are crusaders for gender parity in their own right through their creation of WOMPP: Women of Music Production Perth,¹⁵ a community focused label and series of education groups for female and gnc music makers in Western Australia.

Approximately two thirds of the drummers interviewed for *Hey Drums* hail from Melbourne. This is inevitable as it is where I'm based but it is also the city with the highest number of music venues per capita in the world.¹⁶ Almost 10% are based in New South Wales (mostly Sydney) and there are representatives from all the other states and territories in Australia, as well as a number of Australian born drummers living, working, or studying overseas.

Outcomes

Outcomes of the *Hey Drums* project so far include the online interviews, the articles in *Drumscene* magazine, several live performance events, a conference presentation, and drum lessons that are open to the public.

There is an online community of the drummers who've been involved on Facebook; a place to ask for advice, offer support, and share opportunities. Most of the 100+ members have done an interview or a gig for *Hey Drums* at some point, and many use the private group to advertise that they are looking for work or gigs, that someone they know is after a drummer for project, to offer education opportunities for young women and gnc artists, to borrow gear when travelling, or to ask advice when buying new equipment. The larger and more diverse the community becomes the greater the opportunities for collaboration. It is a safe space, one free from comments like 'nice rack'¹⁷ when posting a picture of one's gear sitting on a shelf.

In May 2018 *Hey Drums* curated an event at the *Make It Up Club*¹⁸ which is a weekly experimental and avant-garde sound art and performance event that has been running in Melbourne for the past 22 years. Fifteen drummers set up 5 drum kits and performed three sets of completely improvised music to a full house. The reactions from performers and audience alike were electric – and the performances were incredibly diverse and engaging – with veteran noise and experimental drummers playing alongside jazz, and punk artists – all finding a way to listen and work with each other. This *Hey Drums* takeover of the *Make It Up Club* has now become an annual event.

In 2019 a summer night market in the Melbourne CBD featured a pop up speed drum lesson event, with two experienced teachers and *Hey Drums* representatives offering rolling 10 minute drum lessons to members of the public, who could then have a go at jamming along with a favourite pop tune. Preference was given to female and gnc 'students' and this event was picked up by Melbourne Music Week¹⁹ for a similar event in Bourke St Mall, in the heart of the CBD. This event provided a way to engage the public in something fun whilst also raising awareness of *Hey Drums*.

An event at the Melbourne Recital Centre, also in 2019, saw original electro pop outfit *Cool Explosions* collaborate with *Hey Drums* in an hour long concert and soundscape performance for drums, percussion, vocals, synths, and electronics.²⁰ The band specifically sought out *Hey Drums* in order to collaborate with non male drummers and percussionists.

Context

The musical landscape in Australia is changing, but representation of minority groups: people of colour, people with disabilities, LGBTI+, women and gnc artists is very much a big issue:

The 2019 fourth annual 'By the Numbers' study of the gender gap in Australian music found that "the diversity of acts represented on major Australian festival line-ups improved significantly; for the first time in the report's history, a festival analysed achieved gender parity - with 50 per cent of acts on Falls Festival's 2018/2019 line-up featuring at least one woman."²¹ 52 per cent of year 12 (final year high school) students undertaking a music subject in 2018 were female. But there is a disconnect between this and those being recognised as practising professionally. While women represent 45 percent of those with a tertiary music qualification and 50 percent of those that study music, they make up just 20 percent of those registered to receive royalties.²²

If you turned on the radio in 2018, you were more likely to hear songs performed by men than women. Only 21 per cent of the top 100 most-played tracks on Australian radio stations in 2018 were by solo female acts or all-female groups; however, 27 per cent of songs were by acts with men and women, or featuring a female vocalist.²³

On March 8 every year both national and community broadcasters turning the airwaves over to female and gender diverse presenters and recording artists for International Women's Day programming.²⁴ This sees a significant spike in representation but the above statistics show there is still much room for improvement.

Hey Drums is part of a wider series of grassroots movements in Australia: part of a broader landscape of organisations striving for greater access and inclusion:

Music Victoria is an advocacy group with a motto of 'Advocate, Support, Celebrate'. The independent body has created a variety of initiatives focusing on gender equity, safety, and inclusivity in the live music scene, amongst which is their 'Best Practice Guidelines for Live Music Venues,'²⁵ which includes a chapter for venues on how to deal with sexual harassment. Music Victoria also hosts regular panel events, training, and mentoring for female and gnc musicians and music producers.

LISTEN²⁶ (established in 2014) 'is a new music initiative focusing on fostering change, using a feminist perspective to promote the visibility and experiences of women, gender non-conforming and LGBTQIA+ people, people of colour, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disabilities and other marginalised folk in Australian music.' LISTEN began as an online community, has hosted conferences, gigs, talks and events, now incorporates a record label, and is host to the Listen Lists:²⁷ databases of female and gnc sound engineers, performing acts, session musicians, DJs, and producers (beat makers).

All in, based in Melbourne 'exists to create a more inclusive environment for musicians and audience members in the Melbourne jazz scene.' Through a variety of strategies, they are trying to address the aforementioned discrepancy between number of female music students and professionals, with activities including:

- advocating for policy change in venues and institutions,
- Listening directly to marginalised people's experiences of the scene and taking action - Share valuable knowledge, stories and perspectives
- Help to foster sustainable careers
- Boost the profiles of diverse artists
- Promote a broader range of gigs and events²⁸

Girls Rock! Australia is a national network of music camps focused on rock and pop music. Held in the school holidays, the program is 'independently run by a team of musicians and educators passionate about empowering girls, trans and gender-diverse young people through music education and mentorship,'²⁹ They have held camps and concerts in all the major Australian cities since 2016 and are aligned with the Global Girls Rock Camp Alliance.³⁰

The combined effects of all these movements, organisations, and activity is a growing pressure being put on bookers, broadcasters, and festival organisers, to be proactive in regards to gender representation. Worldwide there is also a groundswell around inclusivity of female and gender diverse instrumentalists:

Quarterly New York based publication Tom Tom Magazine was founded by drummer Mindy Abovitz in 2009 and is 'the only magazine and media company in the world dedicated to female and gnc drummers, beat makers and producers.'³¹ Like *Hey Drums* Tom Tom has expanded from the page and screen to include live performance and installation events, a drum academy, and a podcast. Also like *Hey Drums* Tom Tom recently changed their focus from 'female' drummers to be inclusive of gnc artists.

Hollywood drummer and teacher Liz Aponte offers online lessons for women and girls, to 'help female drummers who are feeling frustrated with their progress reach the next level and absolutely CRUSH it in a male dominated music world.'³² She also makes drums through her own business, The Respira Collective,³³ and makes jewelry and other accessories from broken cymbals through her company Full Circle Co.³⁴

The annual 'Hit Like a Girl' contest is an amateur contest for women and girls where female percussionists and drummers of all ages and levels are encouraged to participate. Its purpose is 'to spotlight female drummers/percussionists and encourage drumming and lifelong musicianship for girls and women, regardless of age or playing level. The event is produced by the Hit Like A Girl Contest and our activities are made possible by the generous support of artists, individuals and companies in the music and music products industries.'³⁵

The contest was conceived by a team of drum industry and media veterans (along with Tom Tom's Mindy Abovitz) as a way to promote and raise the profile of female drummers. Since 2011 it has attracted more than 5000 contestants from over 50 countries

Australia's *Drumscene* magazine ran a similar competition from 2016 - 2018. Their Best Female Drummer award was a new category created in a long standing yearly competition. The category has now been subsumed back into the existing competition.

Advocacy

Strangers contact me now – say they are looking for a drummer, percussionist, teacher – people are invested in diversity and there's a growing movement in Australia of acknowledging privilege when employing artists and looking around for who's not currently being represented. The project is being picked up - people are realising the importance and relevance of supporting, acknowledging the work being done by female and gnc people in a traditionally male dominated area.

The project offers value to the music community and music audiences in Australia via the blog, private and public social media groups and platforms. It has great value as a resource and a work of advocacy. The long term impact of this project is yet to be seen, but in a wider context,

in a world where in 2019 a women just won the Abel Prize (the 'Nobel Prize of Math'³⁶) for the very first time, this work, the recognition of these artists, and the documentation process is incredibly important.

What's unique about *Hey Drums* is that it assumes first and foremost that everyone who is interviewed, how has a lived experience of being a gigging drummer, deserves to be there.

Sensationalised articles about female drummers claim that 'girls can do it all' and that they're 'breaking the mold'. 'Marching to their own beat'. This approach can be problematic in that it presents drumming as a male experience and male skills as superior. Angela Smith's *History of Women Drummers*, though comprehensive, is guilty of coming at it from this angle. Layne Redmond's *When the drummers were women* is a better example of something that simply presents, without ... the long history of female drummers. The purpose of the creation of *Hey Drums* was not to say 'look girls can play too', but to say 'look we've been here this whole time'.

These articles claim female and gnc drummers are 'breaking the mold' but the reality is there is no mold. *Hey Drums* has always been about drumming, and about promoting and profiling all the wonderful and diverse humans in this country doing it.

1 <http://heydrums.com>

2 From hereon in when the author mentions 'men' or 'male' drummers they are referring to cis gendered men

3 Dyson, Stringer, Cloher "Falling Clouds" <https://dysonstringercloher.bandcamp.com/track/falling-clouds>

4 Correspondence between Nat Grant and a Melbourne based drummer on Instagram, 2019

5 <http://tomtommag.com>

6 <https://www.drumsceen.com.au/>

7 <https://www.childrensdefense.org/child-watch-columns/health/2015/its-hard-to-be-what-you-cant-see/>

8 <https://www.heydrums.com/home/bianca-raffin>

9 Spender D. *Women of Ideas: And What Men Have Done to Them* p15

10 Caro, J. *Accidental Feminist* p2

11 Strong, C. "Grunge, riot Grrrl and the forgetting of women in popular culture" in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 2011

12 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/19/valerie-jackson-trans-women-misogyny-feminism>

13 https://www.them.us/story/my-gender-is-mind-your-business?utm_source=nl&utm_medium=email&utm_brand=them&utm_mailing=them.+Newsletter+090119+%281%29&bxid=Mzc2NzU3ODQxODg2S0&fbclid=IwAR0YQI_dpg-LQjUxVYt_9xJ46hU8XPmXZq8EsRKNNVqILVvxUr98qQMOMkc

14 <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/seed>

15 <http://wompp.com.au>

16 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-12/melbourne-is-the-live-music-capital-of-the-world-census-shows/9643684>

17 Direct quote from another Melbourne based drumming group 2019

18 <http://baropen.com.au/make-it-up-club/>

19 <https://mmw.melbourne.vic.gov.au>

20 <https://www.melbournerecital.com.au/events/2019/arrhythmia/>

21 <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/by-the-numbers-2019-the-gender-gap-in-australian-music-revealed/10879066>

- 22 <http://artfacts.australiacouncil.gov.au/music/>
- 23 <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/by-the-numbers-2019-the-gender-gap-in-australian-music-revealed/10879066>
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- 25 <https://www.musicvictoria.com.au/reports/best-practice-guidelines>
- 26 <https://www.listenlistenlisten.org/>
- 27 <https://www.listenlistenlisten.org/lists/>
- 28 <https://www.allinmelbourne.com>
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- 36 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2019/mar/19/american-professor-first-woman-wins-abel-prize-math>