

Book Review: Music Festivals and Regional Development in Australia

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*Throughout the world, the number of festivals has grown exponentially in the last two decades as people celebrate local and regional cultures, but perhaps more importantly as local councils and other groups seek to use festivals to promote tourism and to stimulate rural development. This book discusses broad issues affecting music festivals globally, especially in the context of rural revitalisation, drawing on research which traces the overall growth of festivals of various kinds. **Paul Benneworth** commends the authors for making their landmark contribution in an open, accessible, and ultimately intellectually satisfying way.*



Music Festivals and Regional Development in Australia. Chris Gibson & John Connell. Ashgate. April 2012.

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There is an increasing interest in urban and regional studies in the socio-economic impacts of events. Since the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 showed how short-lived celebrations can drive long term urban regeneration, festivals have become an essential part of the contemporary urban planner's toolkit and attracted wider academic attention. But much of this concentrates on Mega-events, such as World Cups, the Tour de France, and Capitals of Culture, whose effect partly comes from the mega-scale of the efforts involved in their creation. These events are often important to national decision-makers who invest heavily in ensuring these events succeed. But much less is known about festivals more generally. Intuitively, they should also have these regional development effects, bringing outsiders into a place, creating new forms of cultural production and consumption, and creating new relationships between places and development opportunities. But the vast majority of festivals are unimpressive: small, short-lived, and without any massive infrastructural legacy: they seem too 'ordinary' to make a difference



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Bringing a unique set of insights into this challenging conundrum, Chris Gibson and John Connell use *Music Festival and Regional Development in Australia* provide a landmark contribution into our understanding of festivals by studying the impact of music festivals upon the ultimate 'ordinary' place: remote rural Australia. Their starting point is what they see as the dual hybridity of festivals that gives even small scale events in ordinary places the potential to create a lasting legacy. Their first hybridity is how they bring the 'outside' into local places, creating extended networks of interest in the event: visitors, musicians, music publishers, governments and the media. The interest of these stakeholders makes these places and their events more important, strengthening their political economic situation. Gibson and Connell show compellingly how Tamworth made itself the 'place to be' for country music in Australia, and how Parkes has 'put itself on the map' for Elvis Presley fans, both through rather ersatz and unlikely annual music events.



Parkes Elvis Festival 2009. Photo: [ye we nyi](#)

Their second hybridity is the relationship between economic and cultural impacts. Events may often be measured in simple economic terms such as visitor numbers and spending power, but at the same time the economic power of festivals from people collectively creating culture in particular places. Gibson and Connell document at length the informal, reciprocal voluntaristic and even altruistic relationships that build up around these festivals' commercial attractive. Their economic value depends on this local cultural community dimension, and by creating new local social capital, valued and consumed by outsiders, festivals help to strengthen and reinforce the liveability of communities that continually face a struggle for survival in contemporary Australia.

The book uses a two-part structure to make its argument. The first half is more abstract. There is a theoretical overview of the authors' perspective on festivals, driving regional development by creating local social capital which attracts wider stakeholders thereby changing wider political economies. They provide a taxonomy of what regional music festivals actually are, and in particular the different kinds of audience they attract. They highlight the tensions festivals can create, between generations, urban and rural residents, locals and outsiders, the economic winners and losers, and perhaps most interestingly, the tensions festivals bring for Australia's aboriginal and Torres Strait island communities.

The book then turns to present four thoroughly documented case studies, including the Tamworth Country festival, Parkes' Elvis festival, two classical music festivals and a number of alternative gatherings at Byron Bay. These are rich in breadth and depth, and convey very effectively how festivals 'make a difference' to these places. The reader is confronted with a well-structured mass of information that both stimulates and intrigues, and invites reflection on the development processes underway. Gibson and Connell should be praised for avoiding to merely celebrate these festivals, as they convey both the precariousness and tensions festivals can bring for host communities. The book draws more anecdotally on a database covering around forty other events in rural Australia, interwoven throughout the book to build a sense that the case studies are representative of wider trends. Tables, maps and charts are used highly effectively to give a more objective picture of these festivals, as well of photography and posters that conveys some flavour of the events.

There are a few minor niggles. There is occasional use of unexplained Australian idiom, such as ‘snags’, ‘eskies’, Akubras and the peculiar Australian connotation of the word ‘regional’. Inconsistency in referring to festivals – by their names and locations – can make it sometimes hard to work out which festival takes place where. It is sometimes hard to know in the empirical section, when the authors cite historical sources related to phenomena such as ethnic segmentation around festivals, whether those sources deal specifically with the case studies, or have merely documented the phenomenon in other contexts, which undermines slightly their plausibility. But that should not detract from their overall achievement, to successfully change the way that one should think about rural music festivals.

But what really allows this volume to make a useful landmark contribution to the field is the clarity of thinking and the depth of evidence presented. This allows the book to make a wider contribution to the field far beyond the specialist field of small events in ordinary places. The book covers many of the wicked issues facing contemporary regional studies, conceptualising the effects of temporary events and coalitions, of the impacts of culture and social relationships on economic development, and of the place of ordinary towns in the knowledge economy. The choice of music festivals in rural Australia provides a perfect laboratory, stripping away layers of complexity and noise and allowing crystal clarity in studying the interplay of people and places through events. This volume is an exemplar of what a research monograph should be, an academic masterpiece providing a turning point in an intellectual current that speaks far beyond its immediate audience. The authors should be commended for making their landmark contribution in an open, accessible, and ultimately intellectually satisfying way.

Paul Benneworth is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the [University of Twente](#), Enschede, the Netherlands. Paul’s research concerns the relationships between higher education, research and society, and he is currently Project Leader for the HERAVALUE research consortium (Understanding the Value of Arts & Humanities Research), part of the ERANET funded programme “Humanities in the European Research Area”. Paul is a Fellow of the Regional Studies Association. [Read more reviews by Paul.](#)