

Why Scott Morrison's white, male music playlists matter

Written by Catherine Strong, Senior Lecturer, Music Industry, RMIT University

On Monday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, in his latest attempt to brand himself a “man of the people”, released [a Spotify playlist](#) of his favourite songs. His fair dinkum credentials, however, quickly took a blow as the lack of Australian artists in the list was pointed out. Only one of the 146 songs was by an Australian band. (This was, randomly enough, Stimulation by Wa Wa Nee.)

In response to this criticism, Morrison drew attention to [another of his playlists](#), an Australian one (with a smattering of overseas artists). But, like the Liberal Party more generally, it featured a lot of white males, mostly a bit past their use-by date.

Indeed this second “Oz” playlist from the PM has exactly one woman in it, Martha from Martha and the Muffins (a Canadian band). It draws heavily on what might be called “classic pub rock” from the 1970s and ’80s, with bands like INXS, AC/DC and – bizarrely, given their politics – Midnight Oil dominating. The few songs from the 1990s by the Cruel Sea and You Am I are in the same vein musically. There is nothing on the list more recent than this.

These lists are significant as they give us some insight into what our prime minister sees as valuable in popular culture.

Firstly, he doesn’t even think of Australian content. Then, when pushed, he includes a very narrow selection of a specific type of music that represents only a small proportion of the population, or of the nation’s creative output. Women – not to mention First Nations artists, and young people – don’t get listened to (at least musically) by the PM.

This list – and the previous one, which is also man-heavy, with just 15 of its 92 acts featuring one or more woman in the line-up – is a very telling reminder of what it is that women are up against in the music industry. We know that currently Australian women represent only around [one-fifth](#) of those making money from music.

A lot of attention has been placed on this enormous imbalance over the last few years. Activists and forward-thinking industry players have been trying to find ways to turn this lack of

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representation around, from holding to account festival promoters who book mainly men, to running [workshops](#) and [mentorship programs](#) for women, to implementing [new policies](#) to try to get more women into decision-making positions in the industry.

This type of action has helped bring to light the incredible music being made in Australia today. From [Mojo Juju's](#) work grappling with what it means to be Australian, to [Camp Cope's](#) campaigning to make the places where live music happens safer for everyone, to electronic artists like [Alice Ivy](#), we are witnessing a new wave of powerful, innovative creators claiming space.

However, such waves have come before, and ongoing work is needed to prevent the music industry from getting bored with the "women issue" and reverting to its masculine status quo.

One of the things that has made it hard for women in the past is the male-dominated rock canon that tells us that all the "great" works of popular music are by men (while conveniently writing many pioneering women out of history).

Lists by powerful men, whether cultural critics or prime ministers, that only call out to other men reinforce this canon, and the idea more broadly that women don't make art of worth. The fact that Morrison didn't include acts such as The Divinyls or Renee Geyer – artists from the 1970s and '80s who fit well within the pub rock genre he is focusing on – speaks to this erasure.

Furthermore, in his desire to mythologise a very specific version of Australian culture, where beers and blokes reign supreme, Morrison is closing his ears to so much that is new, exciting and points to a different future than the past he is holding on to.

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