

Sounds of success

Although some other rural events are closing or in decline, a 2200km musical romp through outback Queensland is bringing increased tourism to the bush.

STORY MANDY McKEESICK



COURTESY QMF



MANDY McKEESICK

*William Barton performs at Culinary Constellations at The Lake, Quilpie.
OPPOSITE: A big crowd gathers in Charleville for the major event of the QMF Outback Music Trail.*

Under a brilliant autumn evening sky, with the sunken sun still tinting the horizon, at The Lake east of Quilpie, Qld, a sensory smorgasbord is being served. A warm zephyr kisses skin and eucalyptus scents the air. Across the palette run hints of pepperberry, lemon myrtle and native rosella – dishes crafted for a 5-course degustation by celebrity chef Mark Olive. Candles flicker and cast animated shadows across 100 guests who dine on long tables. At the centre of the ethereal evening is renowned composer and vocalist William Barton, his digeridoo and guitar weaving magic over country and people.

This night, named Culinary Constellations, is the top-tier event on Queensland Music Festival's (QMF) Queensland Music Trails – The Outback, a 2,200km self-drive romp through western Queensland following 7 diverse musical events over 9 days. While Culinary Constellations comes with a hefty price tag, other events are free and low cost, and range from storytelling and full-day concerts to bush dances and chill sessions in beer gardens.

QMF was established in 1999 to connect music and regional communities and, in doing so, to promote artists, local businesses and First Nations people. It is funded by Arts Queensland and in recent years the Queensland Department of Tourism and Sport has come on board to support events such as The Outback Trail, which debuted in 2021 during the COVID pandemic.

The 2024 Outback Trail kicks off with a free welcome event in Goondiwindi, where trail goers meet and mingle

over picnics and music by Split Image and Chloe Styler, igniting friendships that will transcend these 9 days. The next event is scheduled for Nindigully, but rain is falling and the Moonie River at the Gully is on the rise. Roads from Gundy are cut but, undeterred, trail goers find backroads. They reconvene at the pub for a relaxed Sunday arvo on the lawn, where Chloe is joined by Beth Lucas and Travis Collins.

Some concert goers have come only for the day, while others, such as South African emigrants Anna and Andre Nel, have committed to the entire trail. "We loved Travis and his storytelling," Anna says. "This is what we imagined Aussie music would be like."

Rolling out of the Gully, trail goers descend on outback towns. At St George, they breakfast in local cafes, stock up on groceries and grog, collect scripts at the pharmacy and get mechanical attention before heading further west. At Bollon, The Outback Trail ambassador and former professional rugby league player Sam Thaiday meets with Uncle Bill Speedy (issue 153, p98) and attracts a tribe of Bronco-loving school kids.

Also at Bollon, trail goers – including Anna and Andre on their first Australian outback adventure – camp on the Balonne River. "We love music so we thought it would be better to travel with people so we would get to know about the country and about travelling," Andre says. "We're making many friends on the trail."

At Charlotte Plains station, 50km east of Cunnamulla, 400 trail goers gather to soak in artesian waters and

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listen to storytelling. The night is headlined by Troy Cassar-Daley and when a storm interrupts his set, he invites the audience to gather closer and talk as he signs memorabilia and poses for selfies. When he recommences singing, he says, “We are family now,” and his fans are treated to an intimate engagement.

“We had fantastic feedback about the event, and it definitely produced a spike in our April visitor numbers, which is usually our shoulder period,” says Rob Russell, part-owner of Charlotte Plains. “It was also good to support locals and have them attend the event, and to recommend local vendors [such as St George Bakery and Cunnamulla’s Outback Grazing] who QMF then contracted. We ran the bar and the merchandise shed and QMF took care of everything else. We look forward to building and bettering this event.”

From Charlotte Plains, some attendees spend a day sightseeing in Charleville. Others choose backroads and explore the tiny towns of Eulo, Yowah and Toompine. “We are doing all the trail except for the dinner at Quilpie, but that means we will spend another night at Tambo and do the chicken races,” says caravanner Jackie Wall from Hervey Bay. “We have come to follow the music and support local towns, and we are enjoying the flexibility of the trail travel.”

At the Tambo Town Hall, a party with the Smashing Bumpkins is an old-fashioned, kick-up-your heels bush dance. “Tambo was really fun,” Anna says. “No talking [presentations], just music and everyone let their hair down and danced.”

The biggest event of The Outback Trail, attracting 1000 people, is a whole-day family-friendly music festival at Charleville, led by Ball Park Music, Paul Dempsey and

the Pierce Brothers. For QMF CEO Daryl Raven, this event epitomises the ethos of the music trails. “It brought 600 out-of-region visitors to Charleville, and we want this to become something quite large, iconic and meaningful on their annual calendar,” he says. “What makes it really exciting and validating for us is the broad impact on the communities, businesses and all of our partners.”

Across its 9 days, The Outback Trail brought over 3,300 visitor nights to outback Queensland, contributing over \$750,000 to regional economies, including \$220,000 worth of contracts to local suppliers who supported the music events.

“Thanks to the ongoing support from the Queensland Government, we’re able to create moments that resonate deeply with both visitors and locals alike,” Daryl says. “Queensland Music Trails – The Outback is a unique opportunity for people to connect with the outback’s culture, its people and communities, as well as the music and stories that define this special region.”

The final event on the 2024 Outback Trail is held at Roma at the Western Queensland Spirit distillery, where home-grown talent Maddy Thomas is joined by blues/folk musician Mitch King.

The trail goers are exhausted and looking forward to home, but plans are already in motion for next year. With their new-found confidence in regional travel the 2025 Outback Trail is firmly on their radar. It will be held across April and May and will feature artists such as Troy Cassar-Daley, James Johnston and Wade Forster, but for Daryl the importance of the trail goes beyond outback sounds. “It’s not just a music event, people are going for the experience,” he says. “It’s often about more than what is on stage.”

PHOTOS: MANDY MCKEESICK



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Chloe Styler performs for the afternoon crowd at Nindigully; Queensland Music Festival CEO Daryl Raven, enjoying the music by the bore head on Charlotte Plains station are the Walkers, Michael Snr, Djalai, Michael III and Michael Jnr; Troy Cassar-Daley performs at Ballads and Bush Yarns at Charlotte Plains station. OPPOSITE: Caravans and campers flock to Charlotte Plains station.

