

**Phillip Johnston: Response to the
"Supporting Australian Stories on Our Screens" Options Paper**

I am a working Australian Screen Composer and am deeply concerned about the marked decline in the volume of Australian productions and the rising uptake of Streaming Services that currently do not have any obligation to contribute to Australian film making.

I am a dual citizen of the US & Australia. My early career involved scoring both Hollywood and Independent features & documentaries. Some of my feature credits include *Noise* (dir. Henry Bean, 2008), *Faithful* (dir. Paul Mazursky, 1996) and *The Music of Chance* (dir. Philip Haas, 1993); feature documentary credits include *Umbrellas* (Henry Corra, 1994), *Money Man* (Hass, 1992); Australian credits include *Mr Sin: The Abe Saffron Story* (dir. Hugh Piper, ABC, 2010), *Shock Room* (Kathryn Millard, 2015 – winner of best Australian Documentary, 2015 Antenna Documentary Film Festival) and *Stolen Life* (dir. Rasmussen/Turnure. 2007, winner, best original music, 2006 Machinima Film Festival).

I don't work much in the commercial film industry anymore; instead I teach film music at Sydney University (Conservatorium) and the Australian Institute of Music, and I compose scores for silent films and other multimedia projects, such as *Wordless* (2013) with Art Spiegelman. My current project involves historical Australian silent films, for which I was awarded the 2018 Johnny Dennis for Film Music Composition.

I support the changes advocated by AFTRS/AGSC (Model 3 – Significant), and I will very briefly explain why.

Every year in my teaching, I meet brilliant young (and some not so young) Australian music composition students, who work very hard at university and conservatory to develop their composing and technical craft in music for the moving image. These students are working on music for film, television, the internet and games, among other projects, and are poised to make a significant contribution in creativity and technical skill. However, at the moment, the professional opportunities for these students are so limited and they are moving in the direction of being more so. As a teacher of film music history, I am aware that losing their most exceptional and motivated creatives has been a consistent problem in Australia for the last few decades. In acting, music, directing and many other disciplines, young creatives leave Australia and move overseas, in search of opportunities, because here there is just so little, much of it rooted in economic policy. They feel they are not valued by their own culture and they are right: they are not.

As an immigrant from the dominant film culture, the USA, it is very clear to me: if Australia, where I now live, wishes to have a culture of their own, they need to support and invest in it by creating opportunities for both young and established creatives. If we want to have an Australian film culture, rather than just consuming Hollywood superhero and action pictures, we need to support it. Billions are invested in 'development' for every industry from coal to sport, yet when creative artists, like filmmakers and film composers, look for support against the hegemony of Hollywood corporate product, they are viewed as looking for a handout. Yet, this industry brings in millions/billions to Australia, and could do so much more. Australians are huge consumers of film and television, yet so much of it comes from overseas. When I moved here (2005), my friends said, 'oh, that's great, because they have such a great film industry. I said, Oh?' And they said, sure, 'Picnic At Hanging Rock', 'The Last Wave', 'Mad Max', movies which were made decades ago. Sure, great films still manage to be made and occasionally make an impact internationally, but Jenifer Kent spent 10 years trying to get 'Babadook' made: it went on to win awards internationally. It's really hard to get an Australian film made in Australia.

It is imperative that the government makes the necessary changes in legislation to make the screen industry not only sustainable but flourish in Australia. There must be a priority to support new Australian scripted content – drama, documentary and children's content.

I wish to make the following recommendation in response to the Options Paper "Supporting Australian Stories":

Adoption of **Model 3 - Significant**: this allows for a more even playing field amongst the Free to Air Networks and Streaming Services. This model supports regulation that would make subscription services pay a percentage of their income to make locally produced content, or, pooled into as *Australian Production Fund (APF)* that will be distributed to make local productions of drama in feature film and TV, children's television and documentary

The modelling should support decision-making ensuring a level that *moves past the status quo and allow for substantial growth* in the amount of Australian content available to audiences. New modelling must not result in a drop in production.

Further Recommendations:

1. **Streaming Services Contribution to Local Content**
Streaming Service providers should contribute 10% of their subscription services revenue derived in Australia to make, promote and broadcast Australian made content.
2. **Big Tech contribution to the Australian Production Fund (APF)**
Giant technology companies such as Google/YouTube and Facebook should contribute 1% of their advertising revenue generated in Australia (estimated at \$6billion p.a.) to be pooled into the same *Australian Production Fund*

(APF). This system could be based on the mandated code of conduct that the ACCC is preparing in order to compensate media companies for news services.

3. **Reinstatement of Quotas for Free-to-Air TV with regulation and allocated funding for National Broadcasters**

Until such time that new regulations are implemented, I call for the immediate revocation of any current suspension on quota obligations for Free-to-Air broadcasters. It is imperative that broadcasters continue to be required to produce and show Australian drama, documentary, childrens' programs and First Nations screen content.

4. **Harmonisation of Production and Post-Production Offsets**

The Producer, Post, Digital and Visual Effects (PDV) and Location Offsets should be harmonised to 30% with a "cultural uplift" incentive of an additional 10% applied if key Australian crew, including composers, are being utilised. This would bring Australia into line with territories such as New Zealand that has a 40% offset for both film and TV and incentivise productions to use Australian screen personnel, on local and international productions that are made in Australia, both large and small.

5. **The Post Production Spend Threshold**

The Post Production Offset (PDV) threshold (that is currently \$500,000) be reduced or removed. This would allow overseas productions to more readily employ Australian composers and post production services without only being applicable to large budget films.

Furthermore, the Post Production Offset (PDV) should have a weighted or points based system to further define post into the categories of visual effects, editing, sound and music. This would attract international as well as local productions to use Australian based talent across the Post Production sector rather than simply utilizing large Digital and Visual Post Production Houses.

6. **Reinvestment Deals**

Reduce or abolish the current trend towards unsustainable reinvestment practices, where composers are being asked to reinvest up to 70% of their fee back into the film, with little to no likelihood of seeing a return on their investment. This practice has enabled production companies to attract a government rebate, whilst predominantly resulting in composers not receiving their full fee but being taxed on the full amount up front.

7. **Incentives for Film Distributors**

Film exhibitors and cinemas be allocated a form of rebate or offset to screen Australian made films in order to help attract Australian audiences to the box office.