

Presentation to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs Regarding the Culture and Heritage Sector

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To be presented by Raja Khanna on June 25, 2020

Good morning. I am a Toronto-based entrepreneur, born and raised in Mississauga.

I have been lucky enough to create, build and grow several enterprises in the creative, technology and cultural industries in Ontario.

As the founding CEO of Television and Digital at Blue Ant Media I helped build a content-focused company, from a startup, to a leading global producer, distributor and broadcaster, creating hundreds of jobs and attracting significant foreign capital to Ontario. QuickPlay Media, a content and technology company I co-founded prior to Blue Ant Media, similarly grew to over 300 employees before being sold to AT&T.

Today I am involved primarily in local music, culture, location-based-entertainment and arts-related businesses.

Most recently, I co-founded Dark Slope Studios, a virtual reality content company investing in original content and innovative technologies for location based entertainment venues. I co-own a music venue and a high-end rehearsal studio in Toronto. Finally, I am the co-founder of Mondo Forma, an immersive art collective that employed 100 local visual, technical, lighting and sculpture artists to build the innovative “funhouse” project on Queen west in Toronto last year. That immersive art experience attracted more than 20,000 visitors during its run last summer.

The common theme is that each business is related to some form of original content, created domestically for consumption locally, nationally and globally.

Today my music venue is shut, unlikely to ever open its doors. My rehearsal space sits empty and unused. Mondo Forma's plans to open its next interactive art experience are on indefinite hold. The location-based entertainment business for my VR company has all but ceased.

In each case we have had to lay off highly skilled labour and reassess the viability of our core businesses. My experience is not unique.

We know COVID-19 has stripped away access to so much local content - live theatre, live music, art installations, local cinema and more. The absence of these things have shone a light on the stark reality that so much of the content we consume online is curated by non-local, non-Canadian entities, or by algorithms that favour the lowest common denominator. This puts the unique fabric of our cultural identity at risk.

It is not just jobs at stake, but our connection with our home that has been reinforced and forged through the stories we tell to each other, Through the local art we consume, , through the creators that ignite a part of us. That is more important to our well being than we always realize. It's most evident when it's gone.

Seeing the devastation caused by COVID-19 in our community of musicians, my music studio co-founders and I created Music Together, an initiative supported by Ontario's music community,

and the Ministry's Ontario Live initiative. We established Music Together to get critical funds into the hands of working musicians in Ontario. I am pleased to share that in the past 3 months we have provided more than \$300,000 in cash to more than 300 musicians in need all across Ontario. I am grateful to the Minister and the Ontario government for their matching funds at Music Together. But it's not enough.

The hard task of restarting our cultural engine is just beginning. We need to do so much more to support the people, artists and companies that animate our world in so many ways.

It is important to note that **there is no free market solution for our cultural identity and cultural industries. There never has been.** We have always needed to deploy a "toolkit" to maintain the creation and consumption of arts and music in Ontario and indeed in Canada. Our toolkit finds itself suddenly insufficient to sustain our cultural industries. I would like to make recommendations in three categories: supporting our local music culture, our local artists and our local creative companies.

First, our local music culture

We know that the night time economies make our communities livable, make them vibrant, help local businesses grow, attract tourists, investors, and new residents. We need a refreshed toolkit to ensure we don't lose this vital part of what makes Ontario thrive. Ontario needs to act now to ensure the long term viability of live music in small venues in Ontario. As a musician, this is close to my heart. Ontario needs an aggressive and long term plan to **support local live music venues and events.** . I suggest adding new funds to the OMIF specifically directed toward smaller Ontario-owned live music venues, and the related local independent booking

agents and promoters. These supports will in turn directly benefit local musicians and the night time economy as a whole.

Secondly, our local visual artists

To help preserve our province's vibrant cultural identity we need to keep local artists employed.

I recommend a new program focused on **funding the creation of new, large-scale public art projects across Ontario**. Projects that will, directly or indirectly, have a material and lasting impact on our public spaces. Projects that will, together, employ thousands of local artists over a period of 12-24 months. Let's take this crisis as an opportunity to build our province in ways that will be remembered and admired for generations, by Ontarians, and by those coming to spend their money here and those looking to move here. This program would support projects of a scale in excess of \$100,000 each and employ multiple artists, ranging from interactive sculptures to art parks to water features to digital projections.

Finally, our creative industry companies

Ontario Creates provides vital support to Ontario-based creative companies. I recommend **renewed investment into Ontario Creates' programs** to better support our companies during and after COVID-19. Focus should be on programs that carry a lighter administrative load for both the agency and the applicants (accessing support should be easy and predictable, on both sides). My recommendation is to focus on programs that support digital media and technological innovation. Investments in these areas help sustain our creative companies, while also working to build a longer term sustainable cluster of locally controlled intellectual property and leading-edge jobs in our province. Ontario Creates is a critical agency to the cultural economy in Ontario, it is needed now more than ever.

These initiatives are a small part of what needs to be done and a small step down the challenging road ahead. I believe implementing these measures will help crucial parts of Ontario's cultural economy survive this crisis, and indeed thrive as we move forward with the work of reimagining Ontario.