

Presentation to the Recording Academy's Diversity & Inclusion Task Force
by Aengus Finnan, Executive Director of Folk Alliance International
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Good afternoon. My name is Aengus Finnan and I am honored to be here as the Executive Director of Folk Alliance International.

I want to thank the Recording Academy for establishing this Task Force, and I'd like to thank each of you and your colleagues for the time you are giving to this critical conversation. Thank you for convening these national listening sessions, and thank you for shining a light on these issue within our industry and communities.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the land that we are gathered on today for this meeting is within the traditional territories of the Lenape people. They sang the first songs of this area long before there was a music industry, a Folk Alliance, or a Recording Academy.

I am here today representing the Board, staff, and membership of Folk Alliance International. We are a 30-year-old charity whose mission is

to serve, strengthen, and engage the global folk music community through preservation, presentation, and promotion.

We have over 3000 members worldwide representing artists, agents, managers, labels, arts service organizations, and the festivals and venues that present folk music in its broadest traditional and contemporary definition from Appalachian to Indigenous, blues to bluegrass, global roots and Latin to and spoken word and singer-songwriters.

In addition to year-round advocacy work and support of our members and the folk genre, we produce the world's largest annual conference for the folk music industry and community, with over 2800 delegates from 35 different countries attending our 30th edition last year.

As emphatically as we welcome all people to our events and organization, we reject all forms of discrimination and harassment.

Folk Alliance, as an organization and representing a genre, has a historical relationship to a definition and community that has valued diversity, but we have not always succeeded in connecting with and including diverse communities.

Folk is often described as the voice of the people, but as a genre it has a particular historically white connotation within the music industry, when in fact folk has as many

incarnations as there are different communities of people, and those voices can't possibly be prescribed or defined by any one organization or sound; certainly not by me, or Folk Alliance International.

The voice of the people is about authenticity and expression, and each community has its own voice, and its own songs to sing.

As a white, male, English-speaking heterosexual leader of a traditional non-profit organization in a historically white industry, it is important for me to acknowledge the power and privilege inherent in my position (culturally, socially, and in this business context). It follows then, that it is my duty to also acknowledge the systemic issues of injustice, inequity, and suppression within our industry that require attention.

I am also here to voice my acknowledgment that as a white male leader and traditional organization:

- we cannot speak on behalf of others,
- we must engage in conversation when asked,
- we must get out of the way when needed
- we must make room for and welcome others
- we can create conditions to facilitate breakthroughs

As an organization we have been making efforts to acknowledge and address issues of diversity and inclusion.

We take care to ensure that diverse representation is visible in action and practice, this means constantly reviewing "who" is populating our stages, our staff, board, committees, juries, and the images we select for use in all of our content pieces and media platforms.

Intentionally and systematically allowing the principles of diversity and inclusion to inform our choices has resulted in positive outcomes and tangible results.

We have enshrined these principles in our governance and operations through the adoption of a Values Statement regarding Diversity, Inclusion, and Internationalism, complemented by a public denouncement of Harassment and Discrimination, at once indicating the norms that we expect of all our members, stakeholders, and extended community.

These statements (and the subsequent and continued Board and staff training, and public sessions at our conference) inform our daily operations, the tone and tenor of our conversations and interactions, the content and composition of our events, and indeed our long-term vision.

Efforts have been as subtle yet symbolic as no longer using the colonial “World Music” term, an industry designation that implies an “us and them”, with a *centralized norm* and a *distant other* relegated to a label. Yet, if one uses the same paradigm, to a music listener in Madagascar all regional American music would be classified “world music”.

A dedicated effort last year resulted in our meeting a gender parity goal across our 180 official showcase performances. This year we have publicly committed to extend that goal for gender parity across all showcases, panel programming, and emcee roles.

Other efforts are more long-term and have included initiating relationships and strategizing new formal partnership with multi-cultural artists and community organizations, the African-American Blues community, and the Hispanic diaspora.

An especially important effort is being made to build a meaningful bridge with the most disenfranchised community in our industry; Indigenous artists. We have approached this through Indigenous-led gatherings at our conference, Indigenous opening remarks, land recognition at all events, dedicated Indigenous artist showcases, and indigenous expert participation on panels.

This has led to our hosting of a global Indigenous Music Industry Summit this coming February, coinciding with the UN’s declaration of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

I am here today representing one of many traditional structures and systems within the music ecosystem, in which the Academy has a dominant role.

The music industry as a community is learning about itself, and our collective understanding is evolving, changing daily as more voices come from the table.

We want to be consistently progressive and want the Academy to be so also. We’re committed to change, and recognize that we are still learning as part of an active movement.

There are many questions for all of us, including how we address new understandings within community debates and conversations, with definitions that evolve overnight in the constant feedback loop and process of identifying issues, listening, learning, acting, evaluating, and starting the process again.

Traditionally organizations and companies have been thought to be exempt from these issues, that “Institutions don’t change”, and that individuals are the issue when there is a problem; however, we must acknowledge that the systems and structures of our organizations were designed by specific demographics, and consequently there are inherent gaps, obstacles, and prejudices.

Individual leaders (especially white male leaders) must be willing to institute systems for change within traditional organizations, demonstrate that change, provide consistency, and release ownership and authorship to make room for leaders from the very communities these changes most impact.

This requires consciously leveraging power and privilege to initiate key partnerships and ensure inclusion, in order to understand and implement change that is community-informed, not just well intentioned progressive values developed at a distance.

It also requires we develop lasting relationships by establishing trust. This is achieved by demonstrating longevity of “intent-turned to action-turned to results” initiatives. It also means galvanizing community support for the core values driving these changes.

That support is hard won at times, and then we must act as intermediaries within our own demographic and community to translate and contextualize for those who don't see or hear, understand, or acknowledge the message, the need for change, and the systemic issues at play.

It also requires admitting when we are wrong, or when we do not have the answer, or know what to do.

While it is critical that we listen, it is as important that we truly digest what we hear, reflect on it, learn, and act on this new knowledge to change our personal and institutional norms.

More than anything, we must also show up, again, and again. We (white male leaders - but also our organizations) must be active, and undertake self-directed inquiry around issues, ideas, terms, and solutions that are more common conversations and realities in marginalized communities.

But we must be more than academic about it. It must include grassroots experiential learning, literally leaving the office, showing up in communities, listening, investing time to learn, and immersing ourselves in moments of discomfort and new contexts so that we are more informed, aware, and sensitive to broader conversations, realities, and needs.

And we mustn't expect marginalized communities to be responsible for coming forward, coming to us, teaching us, or initiating the changes. It is time for us to be responsible (vocally and visibly, in principle, policy, procedure, and programs), and to wield our place and whatever power or position we have to deconstruct and decolonize our own ingrained assumptions, upbringings, dominant culture isolation, and expectations.

Allyship is a complex and critical role. Ally is not a title anyone gets to bestow upon themselves or their organization. It is a relationship to be proven through developed trust and recognition of the communities we act to support. And our successes and struggles to be allies and to be effective partners in change should be examined... for their shortcomings and missteps, and also for the leadership potential to help elevate the whole community.

I have much to learn, still, but there is no end to the immediate ways we can recalibrate the way we think and act as leaders, the way we consider and understand identity, and the way we interact and engage with others.

It is paramount that colonial institutions, business methodologies, and leadership models be questioned internally, as much as externally.

That requires grace, courage, and humility; especially as we ourselves learn and openly reveal the exclusions our organizations, perspectives, and programs have systematically produced for generations, while simultaneously and positively moving forward to course correct.

To do this we have to look at the composition of our Boards, staff, membership, programs, panels, juries, and award shows, and be very conscious of who is missing, consider why, and determine how we can make changes that truly reflect, welcome, and include the diversity our of communities, nation, and world.

This is going to be messy, and beautiful - but challenging conversations, observations, and actions are our responsibility as leaders working with extended memberships, and frankly... real people with dreams, fears, and passionate voices.

We need a collective vision regarding cultural equity within the Recording Academy, and within the music industry at large.

We must call out injustice and inequalities inherent in the systems that a particular white male demographic invented and maintains, that we call the music industry.

Clearly this Task Force is a significant step in the right direction, and what is happening here today, and at the other national listening sessions you are convening, is critical.

My message from Folk Alliance International to the Recording Academy, based on our own journey, learning, and values statement, is that:

We believe that greater diversity within the music industry will allow us to collectively build a more creative and compassionate community.

Music is a core form of human expression, it is fundamentally inclusive (literally the chorus in a song is designed to be sing-able... for others to sing along in unison), and by nature music brings community together... on porches and in festival fields, in ceremony and celebration, in venues and over the airwaves... it has the power to unite and inspire, to gather and reveal.

And while these conversations today and throughout this process may be challenging and reveal gross inequities and long overdue issues to be resolved, let us remember that music and artists have always been present in movements for change, and they have amplified the key messages in anthemic ways.

We also believe that greater diversity spurs awareness of other communities, cultures, and perspectives, and we value sharing knowledge and conducting ourselves in a respectful manner.

Meaningful inclusion and engagement of a broader membership base by The Academy will introduce different traditions and perspectives to the collective, whole. Openness to varied interests and perspectives naturally leads to increased engagement.

We believe that greater diversity will provide enhanced opportunities for The Academy, its members, and the industry at large.

Especially in these divisive times, our collective knowledge is enhanced by unique and novel perspectives. A greater understanding of each other (including our differences) will allow The Academy to have a greater impact in the music community and, through the natural reach of a global audience for music, the world.

We also believe that bringing greater diversity to The Academy will challenge assumptions while revealing similarities. It will not always be easy, or obvious, or welcomed, and it will have indefinable, intangible, and unpredictable effects.

But we believe that the conversations, the costs, and the efforts to diversity and make our industry more inclusive and equitable are worthwhile, of value, and absolutely necessary.

I am here, humbly, to say that Folk Alliance International is ready to support these inquiries and initiatives, and to be in concert and partnership with The Academy to effect lasting change.

To paraphrase Dylan's 1963 classic...

"[The] old road is rapidly agin'. Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand, For the times they are a-changin'"

...again!

Thank you for your invitation to share these thoughts.