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Behind the music: the red tape that stops UK bands playing SXSW

It's tough getting an invitation to play the Texas festival, but visa procedures are forcing some British bands to withdraw



Red tape ... Rolo Tomassi, above, are an SXSW success story, but difficult obtaining a visa prevents many UK bands from attending. Photograph: Gus Stewart/ Redferns

This has been a good month for UK artists aiming to break the US. For the first time in 25 years, UK acts occupied all three top slots in the US album chart, with Adele grabbing the top position, Marsha Ambrosius (interestingly, this Brit is far from well-known in her native country) at number two and Mumford & Sons in third place. Meanwhile, more than 140 UK acts performed at this year's SXSW music and media conference in Austin, Texas, one of the most highly regarded events in the US music industry calendar. But some of the acts scheduled to perform at the festival were forced to withdraw due to complicated and prohibitive visa procedures. Now, a group of managers has come together to lobby officials, hoping to put pressure on the US and UK governments to make it easier for British artists to attend trade events such as SXSW.

Just getting accepted to play at SXSW is difficult, with thousands of bands applying for

the coveted gig slots. Performing for some of the most important music industry people from all over the world can lead to record deals, tours and, in the case of Sheffield's Rolo Tomassi, [getting Diplo to produce your next album](#) (the producer first came across the hardcore band at the festival in 2009).

Artist manager Peter White, of Fear and Records, says the process of getting visas to play events such as SXSW and CMJ (another major annual music trade event that [takes place in New York](#)) can be quite confusing. Simply having an invitation to play does not guarantee you a visa; you also have to prove that you're a professional band, serious about its career. According to White, there doesn't seem to be a set formula for demonstrating this. He says one UK band who have had quite considerable success were recently denied US visas after they were deemed insufficiently famous. Meanwhile, American bands playing events [such as Brighton's The Great Escape](#) have no problem getting visas, unless they have criminal convictions.

The price of obtaining visas can vary considerably depending on when you apply and how many members the band has. As some bands don't get their invitation to SXSW until a month or two before the event, they have to pay an extra fee to expedite their visa applications. Organisations such as [PRS for Music's British Music Abroad](#) and UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) have helped fund these applications, but the cost of visas can run as high as £2,500 for a band, says White.

This cost didn't put off UK act [Frankie & the Heartstrings](#), who were over the moon when they were invited to play at this year's SXSW festival. They attended the obligatory visa interviews at the US embassy, booked and paid for flights for the band members and their manager, booked hotels and were all set to go when, two days before flying out, they were told their visas wouldn't be ready in time. They were devastated.

It's understandable that applying for a temporary work permit in another country takes time and that the US authorities want to make sure applicants are not taking away work from US citizens. Record labels and managements accept that the cost of work visas is a necessary part of the budgeting when booking US tours, but the majority of bands playing at trade events such as SXSW and the annual CMJ music festival in New York don't get paid, unless you count getting a free wristband to attend the conferences attached to the festivals. As a matter of fact, they contribute to the US economy by spending thousands of dollars. According to White, a four-piece band can spend up to £10,000 on playing an event such as SXSW. (Even applying to play the festivals via Sonicbids, without any guarantee of being accepted, carries a fee.)

The managers from Fear and Records, ATC Management, Dice Management and Connected Artists are proposing that there should be an exemption from applying for work permits to enter the country for artists playing trade events, as long as they don't get paid. I'd say such an exemption would be a win-win solution for both the US and the UK.

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