

# As US takes aim at immigration, musicians feel the pinch



Kayem, who is Libyan-American, performing at the South by Southwest Music Film Interactive Festival 2017 in Austin, Texas, US, on March 18, 2017. PHOTO: REUTERS

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AUSTIN (AFP) - Before he staged a professional comeback last week, the rapper Kayem had disappeared from public life for two years.

A US citizen by birth who remembers his relatives' suffering at the hands of Moamer Kadhafi's regime in Libya, he was lying low on legal advice after the US authorities crippled his career by putting him on a no-fly list.

He blames profiling for the scrutiny he receives at airports.

"I've been on lockdown," the rapper - who used to go by Khaled M. - said at South by Southwest, the pre-eminent global media and cultural festival in Texas where he made his reappearance.

After initially planning to wait until summer, he changed his mind after President Donald Trump issued a ban on travellers from seven Muslim-majority countries in January, raising fears of future travel headaches.

Although courts subsequently suspended the ban - along with a second revised version this month - the new culture under the Trump administration is seriously complicating many travellers' lives.

At least eight foreign performers were turned away attempting to travel to the United States for South by Southwest. And among those artists who were able to play, worries are growing about how tougher immigration rules will affect their careers and the music world more broadly.

Despite the suspension of Trump's travel bans, the president has vowed to ramp up enforcement of existing rules.

"One of the major problems with the ban is that even if it's stayed, it's very difficult to consider working with artists from those countries," said Matthew Covey, an immigration lawyer who produced a South by Southwest showcase, ContraBanned, featuring musicians with ties to countries on Trump's list.

"It isolates those nations," he said. "So the question is, 'How do we counteract the narrative that we are receiving about the Muslim-majority countries?'" Covey is executive director of Tamizdat, a non-profit cultural support organisation that set up a free hotline in 2015 for artists encountering problems at the US border.

He described an especially stubborn customs officer about whom Tamizdat documented six cases: "Five-foot-six (1.7 meters), moustache, bald, didn't like DJs, didn't think they were real artists." Customs officers at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport are more friendly to foreign artists, reflecting the kind of crossing-by-crossing, officer-by-officer unpredictability foreign artists can run into at the border, Covey said.

Another group on its way to South by Southwest, the Italian post-punk band Soviet Soviet, said its three members were handcuffed and detained overnight with common criminals after being refused entry at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

It's not clear to what extent Trump has affected such decisions. The United States requires visas for performers on tour - even if they come from visa-exempt countries - but has traditionally made exceptions for appearances at showcases such as South by Southwest.

Cherine Amr, lead singer of the Egyptian-Canadian metal band Massive Scar Era, which was turned away at the border, said being denied access to US events represents a massive impediment for artists.

"Any musician here knows that in order to make it in the music business - especially for the metal scene - you have to make it in US," she wrote on Facebook.

The festival itself was not immune from criticism. South by Southwest's artist contract said festival officials would potentially work to deport those found violating visas it sponsored.

Some artists criticised the clause in an open letter for being tone-deaf to the political moment at best.

"In light of recent attacks on immigrant communities, this practice is particularly chilling," they said.

South by Southwest said it has never assisted in the deportation of any artist and would review its artist contract for 2018.

Artists say music provides emotional connections with people who might not otherwise be exposed to foreign cultures - especially under the current climate.

Dena El Saffar, who was born in the United States and explores her Iraqi heritage through music, says it provides a way to "diminish boundaries between people and cultures." For rapper Emmanuel Jal, a former child soldier from South Sudan

- which is not affected by Trump's travel ban - music helps "represent the voices of those people who are not getting heard." "My country's still at war. People are still dying, kids are in refugee camps," he said.

"If I run away from representing their voice, I run away from a responsibility."