

Bridge Over the Visa Moat for Musicians Trying to Enter the U.S.

By **Ben Sisario**

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Of the 2,000 bands at the annual South by Southwest Music and Media Conference this week in Austin, Tex., more than 500 are from outside the United States. And to help make their way through the byzantine process of obtaining an American visa, about 200 of them have sent their paperwork, their prayers and \$600 to one tiny office on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

The office, three flights up in a tenement building with no buzzer, is the headquarters of Tamizdat, a nonprofit group with an official mission of promoting international cultural exchange, and a docket each year of hundreds of visa applications that need I's precisely dotted and T's precisely crossed. Its clients include classical, ethnic and pop musicians from around the world, but come March, the Tamizdat office is a bottleneck for bands on their way to Austin.

Matthew Covey, the executive director of Tamizdat, has heard all the horror stories about foreign bands needlessly turned away at the border by Uncle Sam, a regular occurrence as restrictions have tightened in recent years. (The British rapper Speech DeBelle, for example, missed the CMJ Music Marathon last year because her visa was denied.) And he is no apologist for the sometimes inscrutable decisions of immigration officials. But as he sees it, there are few obstacles that cannot be overcome with solid organization and some planning.

"The vast majority go through fine," Mr. Covey said in an interview at the Tamizdat office. "The vast majority of problems all could have been avoided if the artists got their act together between two and six weeks earlier."

Not all musicians are so punctual, however, and so Mr. Covey has set himself up as an all-purpose fixer for foreign bands looking to tour the United States. For a fraction of the fees charged by most immigration lawyers, Tamizdat – one of three services recommended by the South by Southwest organization – compiles and submits a full visa dossier and doggedly follows up by whatever means necessary. That can include marshaling support from government agencies and cultural organizations when a big problem turns up, like the two-day computer freeze involving the London consulate this month that sent a momentary panic through the concert industry.

“The service that Matthew and other folks provide for us is extraordinarily valuable,” said Brent Grulke, the creative director of South by Southwest, whose five-day music festival begins on Wednesday. “It inspires a degree of confidence that it will be done and done properly. Artists that endeavor to do it on their own certainly are capable of it and often do manage to do it. But the learning curve is steep.”

In person, Mr. Covey, 41, strikes a figure somewhere between aging punk rocker and detail-obsessed bureaucrat. Dressed in black jeans with long zippers up the sides, he looked as if he could be pressing play on a noisy remix track when he hit the space bar on one of the office’s gleaming iMacs. Instead, Tamizdat’s database popped up, showing dotted, color-coded checklists for dozens of artists at a time.



The Tamizdat founder Matthew Covey in his office on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where he helps musicians facing visa complications gain entry to the United States.

Chad Batka for The New York Times

“The system *kind of* works,” he said in his characteristic rapid-fire, here’s-what-you-need-to-know speech. “It’s poor; it’s badly conceived; it’s based on some decent ideas, the execution of which is needlessly Kafkaesque.”

Mr. Covey found his calling while living and playing music in Slovakia in the mid-1990s; there, and later as a Knitting Factory employee, he and his girlfriend (now wife), Heather Mount, helped promote and book tours for Eastern European bands that had few other resources. One referral led to another, and before long Tamizdat was a fully functioning visa prepper.

Its business volume is an indication of the growing international presence at South by Southwest, which in 24 years has developed from a small regional festival to a global clearinghouse of independent music; this year there are delegations from Chile, Germany, France, Britain, Brazil and other countries. But the fact that Mr. Covey’s services are so needed also points to the complications of travel to the United States.

The documentation for a performer's visa application can be extensive. Depending on the type of visa sought, an applicant may have to demonstrate evidence of "renown," in the form of press clippings and awards, which officials have wide latitude to interpret. The laws covering these visas have not changed much in decades, immigration lawyers and others say, but since 2001 enforcement has tightened in sometimes puzzling and disruptive ways.

The problems cut across all genres. Recently the Cleveland Orchestra's application for Martin Mitterutzner, an acclaimed young Austrian tenor, was denied for reasons that left the orchestra perplexed: the report from immigration officials said, among other things, that the scheduling of Mr. Mitterutzner's performances did not indicate prestige, since he was booked for matinees, not evening performances. After two denials, the orchestra retained a lawyer and got the decision reversed in the nick of time – but only after considerable expense.

"A lot of people don't imagine it could possibly be this hard," said Mr. Covey, who makes clear to clients that since he is not a lawyer, his role is strictly procedural. But despite the white knuckles that can result from the uncertainty and high stakes of the immigration system, most artists, if their applications are executed properly and with sufficient lead time, eventually do make it through. And many people in the concert industry say Mr. Covey's resourcefulness in dealing with the immigration system, and his skill in explaining it to frightened musicians and music executives, has a value all its own.

"Music people aren't always the most organized people in the world," said Bill Bragin, director of public programming at Lincoln Center. "There are lots of little steps in this process, and lots of opportunities to do it wrong or get misinformation. That's where Matthew goes into fixer mode. He keeps people on point so you can reduce that margin of error."

For the most part, Tamizdat's error rate is low. Mr. Covey boasted that of its 2,262 clients in the last five years – that's 2,262 bands, a total of almost 8,000 people – he has had only three unresolved denials.

"It's a hassle," he said, "but it's not an insurmountable hassle."

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