

Immigration Tensions Seep Into South by Southwest

By Associated Press

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The trendsetting South by Southwest music festival is all about the next big thing, but the heated politics of the moment is stealing the show.

Tensions over immigration have put a heavy air over the typically breezy weeklong music bash that begins Monday (March 13) and includes headliners The Avett Brothers,

Weezer and the Wu-Tang Clang dropping into Austin, along with roughly 2,000 other acts from around the world.

It's more than just promises of bands using SXSW as a stage for politically-charged performances in the wake of President Donald Trump's executive orders on immigration: The festival has come under fire itself for warning international artists that bad behavior could result in it making a call to U.S. immigration agents.

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Unrelated, but still stoking concerns, was the Italian band Soviet Soviet posting on Facebook on Friday that it was denied entry into the U.S. Soviet Soviet claimed U.S. customs officials in Seattle said the band members needed work visas, but the band says it didn't believe

work visas were required for a promotional and unpaid tour.

Trump's revised travel ban blocks new visas for people from six predominantly Muslim countries including Somalia, Iran, Syria, Sudan, Libya and Yemen. It also temporarily shuts down the U.S. refugee program. Unlike the original order, the new one says current visa holders won't be affected, and it removes language that would give priority to religious minorities.

Matthew Covey, a New York-based immigration attorney who helps international performers obtain visas to enter the U.S., said the travel ban has unsettled artists who are not even from the impacted countries.

"Everybody is worried now," Covey said "We're getting calls from Danish jazz musicians saying, 'Am I going to be OK?' Yeah, probably. You're a Danish jazz musician. But

everybody is on edge."

Covey is helping put on a SXSW showcase of artists exclusively from the list of banned countries in response to Trump's order, although none of the performers currently live in those nations.

SXSW organizers had quickly come out against Trump's travel ban, but later found themselves on the defensive over a contract provision warning that "SXSW will notify the appropriate U.S. immigration authorities" if a performer acts in ways that "adversely affect the viability of their official SXSW showcase."

SXSW 2017: Smaller Crowds, Fewer Brands -- Will It Actually Be Fun This Year?

The language set off a storm of criticism and at least one

performer announced plans to cancel. Organizers said the clause was a safeguard in the event of an artist doing something egregious - such as flouting rules about pyrotechnics or starting a brawl - but pledged to remove from future contracts.

Zane Lowe, who runs Apple's Beats 1 Radio and will be a keynote speaker at the festival, said he has taken more notice lately of music reflecting the times.

"I don't believe that we're in an era of a movement," Lowe said. "But I believe that we're in an era where, more than it has been in recent times, what's going on in and around the music is going to have a very direct impact on what's made."