

# Immigration lawyer and music fan champions international musicians

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The day after President Donald Trump issued an executive order banning immigration and travel from seven predominantly Muslim countries, Matthew Covey knew he had to act. The biggest question on his mind when he woke up that morning was, “What is in my capacity to do about this?”

Covey, an immigration lawyer, is director of Tamizdat, a nonprofit that assists international performing artists with U.S. visa requirements. Introducing Americans to music and culture from around the world is his passion and his life’s work, he said by phone from his office in New York City. At this moment in history, when waves of anti-Islamic rhetoric and violence are sweeping the country, he said he believes “access to people from those cultures is even more important than ever.” Through their music, their art, we are given a window into the beauty of their worlds and into our shared humanity.

On that morning in January, as he puzzled over how best to raise awareness about the broader implications of this kind of ban, his mind drifted back to South by Southwest 2002. In the waning days of the George W. Bush administration, he and Marco Werman, a journalist on the Public Radio International program “The World,” joked about programming an Axis of Evil showcase, celebrating the music of Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

Back then, hatching plots over barbecue at Stubb’s, they were mostly “being troublemakers,” but as Covey turned the memory over in his head, the seeds for the ContraBanned: #MusicUnites showcase took root. On Friday, Tamizdat — along with PRI, GlobalFest and PR firm Rock Paper Scissors — will present a bill featuring artists representing Iran, Syria, Libya and Somalia, four of the seven countries named in the original travel ban.

In the weeks since it was issued, the ban has “tossed everybody, but certainly the performing arts, into turmoil, into confusion and fear about how this is going to play,” Covey said.

“It’s made it very difficult for people in the U.S. and in the entertainment industry to think about how they would work with artists from that part of the world,” he said.

The concerns extend to artists who are expatriates — sometimes refugees who have escaped war-torn nations to start a new life in Europe or Canada — but are still traveling on passports from the banned nations.

“If you’re a record label and you want to sign an artist who’s carrying a passport from Iran or if you’re a summer music festival and you want to feature an artist from Sudan ... you are still going to think twice and three times about whether you can afford to take that risk,” he said.

Even without the travel ban, the time frame made it “effectively impossible” to get a visa for an artist living in one of the banned countries. All of the artists on the bill for the showcase were already in residence in the U.K., Canada or the U.S.

Stylistically they bring a broad range of sounds. “Some of the artists are very traditional, some are blending new styles and old styles, some artistically have nothing to do with what we would think of as being that country’s traditional music,” Covey said.

Iranian singer Mamak Khadem blends the music and poetry of Persian masters with newer sounds to create enchanting trance music that maintains a traditional feel, while Iranian composer Ash Koosha, who lives in the U.K. and is signed to the experimental label Ninja Tune, deconstructs hints of traditional melodies and smashes them into chaotic electronic soundbeds. Faarrow is an R&B/pop duo featuring sisters Iman and Siham Hashi, whose family fled the civil war in Somalia when they were young children. They occasionally mix in rhythms and melodic snippets from the old country, but their sound reflects the Western pop they listened to as Canadian teenagers.

“(Libyan artist) Khaled M coming into town, doing straight-up hip-hop. That’s very appropriate for the message he is communicating, and hip-hop is certainly an international language around the world at this point,” Covey said. “People who are going expecting to see ouds and more ouds, that’s not what you’re gonna see; there’s going to be a lot of variety.”

The diversity is by design, and the mix of Western and traditional influences reflects the way the immigrant experience impacts the sonic palate of our own culture.

Tamizdat has been presenting at SXSW for almost 20 years with a consistent mission to bring artists from overlooked parts of the world “to light of day in the U.S.” The first showcase Covey did in the late ’90s featured artists from Eastern Europe. Less than a decade after the Berlin Wall fell, they were supporting a few early independent record labels in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Years later his work is still about breaking down walls, this time providing a platform to “artists from the diasporas of the often misunderstood and misrepresented Muslim-majority countries.”

Beyond the cultural exchange, Covey sees the showcase as “a way to get a message to the entertainment industry that this is possible,” he said. “That you shouldn’t give up on artists from those countries.”