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HELPING FOREIGN ARTISTS CUT THROUGH THE RED TAPE, PRO BONO

Matthew Covey's work as an immigration fixer has assumed greater urgency in the Trump era.

By Betsy Morais

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A diversity can inspire great art, but it can also be a time suck. For more than twenty years, Matthew Covey has been helping musicians and other artists deal with government paperwork. He's an immigration fixer; his firm, CoveyLaw, handles some twenty-five hundred visas every year, in affiliation with Tamizdat, a nonprofit whose mission is to promote cultural exchange. The name is a variant of "samizdat" ("self-published"), the Soviet term for clandestinely distributed dissident literature. " 'Tam' means 'over there,' " Covey explained the other day. "The stuff that's taken across the border."



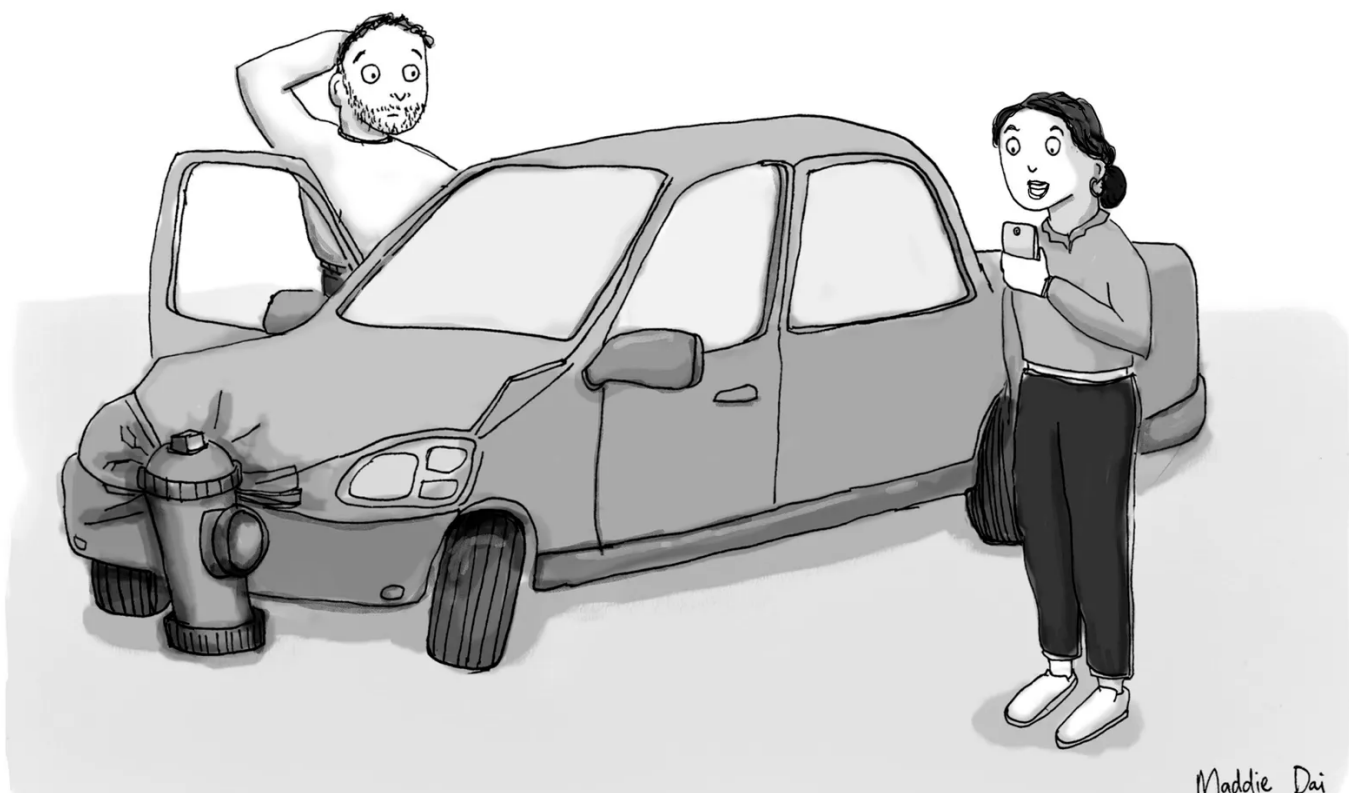
Covey, who is fifty, is a tall, cheerful Minnesotan. “I wanted to be a hermit for a really long time,” he said. “But then in grad school I studied post-colonial literary theory.” In 1992, after the Berlin Wall came down, he and a girlfriend took university gigs in Slovakia. “We found this really great indie-rock punk scene there,” he said. “I wound up starting a band, which was way more interesting than teaching. Kind of damaged-art-noise math rock.”

The band didn’t last; neither did the relationship. Covey moved to Dublin, then to Amsterdam, where he ran the Knitting Factory’s European booking agency. He dabbled in publicity; he managed the Klezmatics. “But there wasn’t any good system for affordably getting artists into the U.S.,” he said. In 1998, he and some friends launched Tamizdat; after 9/11, visa applicants faced a much stricter level of scrutiny. “We kind of drew straws as a board, and I drew the short one,” he said. “So I wound up having to go to law school.”

With Trump’s travel ban—in each of its iterations—Covey’s mission has assumed even greater urgency. His firm takes those cases pro bono. “At the consular stage, there’s definitely some confusion coming down from the Administration about how rigid to be,” he said. Earlier this year, he tried to bring in a group of Syrian dancers. The State Department said no to a member of the troupe. “Totally a bummer,” Covey said. “I had some Scandinavian clients, and they were, like, ‘Oh no, are we not getting in?’ And I said, ‘No, you’re *Danish* jazz musicians.’ ”

Translating arcane immigration policy for aspiring rock stars and global-citizen d.j.s can be trying. On one form, applicants are asked whether they’ve ever committed genocide. “It pushes people’s patience,” Covey said.

The other night, Covey hosted a workshop called “Navigating the Labyrinth” at his office building, in Dumbo. He wore a plaid shirt, jeans, and black boots; he has glasses and a graying goatee. About fifty artists gathered in a meeting room with a small disco ball dangling from the ceiling. A golden retriever greeted them at the door. “We once had a dog act write us about getting visas,” Covey recalled. “We wrote back, ‘We assume that you’re talking about the trainer?’ ” Nope. He grinned. “Dogs don’t need visas.”



“And, just like that, Facebook is giving us ads for used cars, optometrists, and couples counselling.”

He went on, “All these laws have to do with labor policy. They’re to protect American artists from”—he leaned into a microphone—“*you guys*.” He pulled up a PowerPoint. “The Department of Homeland Security’s idea of what’s ‘culturally unique’ is, unsurprisingly, not very sophisticated. In our office, we have the Funny Costumes and Weird Instruments Rule: if you’re wearing something weird and playing an instrument that can’t be bought at Guitar Center, then you’re probably good for a P-3 visa.”

An actor asked about travel flexibility. “I think Rod Stewart has been on an O-1 visa for years,” Covey replied. “Because he doesn’t want to get a green card and he tours all the time, and he wants to spend his summers in the South of France, or whatever.”

Parham Haghighi, a pianist, has an O-1 visa, but he’s from Iran, so he can’t fly in and out as he pleases. “This is not the best place to live,” he said. “But it’s better than where I came from.”

Clicking ahead, Covey advised, “You’re going to have to get creative. And by creative I don’t mean fraudulent. You can’t do what a lot of artists do, which is make up a bunch of stuff and put it in your petition. Because what Homeland Security has started to do is *call* those venues to check.” (This elicited an ominous “Oooh.”)

In closing, Covey assured the artists that they could follow up about their particulars. His office has a hot line. He described a sample call: “ ‘The band is coming in from Toronto, and everyone but the drummer is here.’ ” The crowd murmured. “It’s always the drummer.” ♦

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Betsy Morais, who was previously on The New Yorker’s editorial staff, is the managing editor of Columbia Journalism Review.

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