

Trump’s travel ban concerns Grass Valley Center for the Arts

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Calle Placer performs during the 20th annual California WorldFest at the Nevada County Fairgrounds last summer.
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Regardless of the outcome of President Donald Trump’s proposed travel ban some damage has already been done, especially in regard to cultural arts centers and the organizers that work to bring artists to the U.S. from countries on the list.


“No one’s going to book those countries now, especially this summer,” New York attorney at law Matthew Covey said. “No one can risk booking someone from Somalia. And even if you want to, you can’t afford it.”

Covey’s law firm handles 3,000-4,000 visas a year for artists traveling into the country and is also an executive director for the nonprofit, Tamizdat.org, which provides research and advocacy workforce for those traveling artists.

“Even if the ban is lifted ... there’s been a huge chilling effect on preforming arts around the country,” Covey said. “It isn’t just the five days that the ban was in effect. It’s going to be a year before these artists will want to travel here.”

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On the local stage, Grass Valley Center for the Arts’ executive director Julie Baker shares Covey’s concerns but hasn’t directly been effected by Trump’s executive order.

“We haven’t encountered anything quite yet,” Baker said. “But we’re certainly aware of that and strategizing when trying to reach certain artists.”

Baker, who is tasked with coordinating the annual California WorldFest music festival, is steeped in preparations for this year's event. Now in its third year under the tutelage of The Center for the Arts, WorldFest is set for July 13-16 at the Nevada County Fairgrounds.

The festival has brought internationally known artists from all reaches of the globe to Nevada County for 21 years. Baker recalled Iranian musician Sahba Motallebi, who played the festival here in 2016, as being someone who potentially could have been affected by the travel ban if she were to have been scheduled to perform this year. Though none of the currently scheduled artists for California WorldFest 2017 are coming from countries on Trump's travel ban list, Baker is concerned that the list might expand.

"We have artists coming from Nigeria, Austria, Tuva, Ukraine," Baker said. "All of those could potentially have interesting developments. We don't really know."

While booking artists from one of the countries listed could make things tough, Baker assured that she isn't going to keep away artists from those countries, either.

"In fact, I don't think so at all," Baker said. "We are cautiously reviewing everything. We are all aware of what's going on. It honestly makes WorldFest more important than before. We'll do what we can, but we don't want to put the festival in jeopardy too."

BOOKING AGENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Craig Hyman, a booking agent and manager of world artists who booked Motallebi last year in Grass Valley, was disappointed but not surprised to hear of the local concerns in bringing world talent to Nevada County, and stated that this summer is when the real issues regarding the travel ban will occur.

"The summer season is the biggest season for touring," Hyman said. "The summer through early October is when there are the greatest number of world music fests. This is when we will have the biggest problems. On the other end I think the artists that want to come over are going to be so fearful of touring because of the news. If you're touring and are detained one day, it could affect your whole tour."

Hyman, who operates Numinous Music out of Los Angeles and New York, works as a management presenter, curator, consultant, and point man for international embassies. He too is currently in the process of booking talent for the aforementioned North American festivals.

"The thing that's really rough ... we know that from experience, if we go through all the procedures to get the work visas to be allowed to perform legally in the U.S., which is time consuming and expensive, usually everything works out fine," Hyman said. "But with the way things are now, we can push and invest all of that into it, and at any given time, all of that can go to waste and impact so many different people's livelihoods."

"From craft, and careers, and not only the artists, the transportation of the artist, the airlines, the managers and presenters like myself, the rental gear companies, the musicians here that work with artists from other countries and work with studio musicians here, those guys lose the work here. A four-piece band from any country has anywhere from 25 to 100 people that will be affected depending on the extent of the damage. You don't see it, but that's the factor."

Hyman elaborated on the sentiment from world artists.

"They don't say it, but they're all worried," Hyman said. "It's unbelievable, however it's better to happen now than in June."

NEEDED NOW MORE THAN EVER

"I understand the concern about terrorism," Covey said. "But if you don't have access to diversity and other types of people, it's hard to really understand them. Communication is really the core of empathy, and empathy is the thing that drives civil society and the notion of people getting along together. In parts of this country where you don't really have an immigrant population, their art helps people understand that people from the middle east aren't just terrorists, they're musicians and story tellers."

Covey elaborated.

"It was always hard to get artists in, now is the time when we need these people more than ever. We need to be fighting our own xenophobia."