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U.S. Visa Hike Could Be 'Deeply Damaging' for Touring Artists

Trade group U.K. Music is pushing officials to lobby against the U.S. proposal, which would more than double rates for foreign artists playing U.S. shows.

By [Richard Smirke](#), [Steve Knopper](#)



Alexis Taylor of Hot Chip performs live on stage during GPWeek Festival 2022 at Allianz Parque on Nov. 12, 2022 in Sao Paulo, Brazil.
Mauricio Santana/GI

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LONDON — A proposed hike in U.S. visa fees, which could take effect as early as this November, would have a “deeply damaging” effect on touring artists from other countries by more than doubling their costs, says a leading British music industry trade group.

The proposal from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, announced in early January, would raise the rates for O and P visas for working entertainers in the U.S., including musicians playing festivals, concerts or label events.

U.K. Music, which represents the country’s recorded and live music industries, is protesting the fee hike, including a \$600 “asylum program fee,” a new charge USCIS has proposed adding for U.S.-based employers, which the U.K. group says would raise total visa fees by more than four times their current levels. The trade group, which says the U.S. visa process is “already long, complex and prohibitively expensive” for many musicians, has asked British officials to lobby against the increases.

“The visa process for U.S. musicians entering the U.K. to work is far simpler and less costly,” the group says in a statement, “and we believe that this should be reciprocated by the U.S.”

Under USCIS’s **proposed new rates** (https://img.federalregister.gov/EP04JA23.057/EP04JA23.057_origin), a concert promoter who employs an international musician qualifying for an “O” visa to tour the U.S. would pay \$1,055, rather than the current fee of \$460, an increase of 129% — or 260% with the proposed \$600 asylum program fee. For the “P” visa classification for touring musicians, the U.S. employer’s fee

would jump from \$460 to \$1,015, or 121% — plus the \$600 fee, which would add up to a 251% spike.

A USCIS spokesperson tells *Billboard* the increases would not affect musicians themselves, but rather their U.S. employers, including promoters, club owners, labels or festival producers. International artists reps say employers are likely to pass these fee increases onto the artists — and possibly to consumers as higher-priced tickets — making it more challenging to tour crucial American concert venues.

“It leaves our artists in a state of paralysis,” says **Courtney Askew-Conti** of Verdigris Management, which represents U.K. bands **Hot Chip** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/hot-chip/>) and **Jungle** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/jungle/>), adding that the fee increase “feels like the final nail in the coffin” after Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The U.S. government is proposing the new fees to allow USCIS to “more fully recover operating costs for the first time in six years” and to “support the administration’s effort to rebuild the legal immigration system,” the agency’s director, **Ur M. Jaddou**, said in a January statement.

“For artists who are established, it’s an annoyance,” says **Michael Lambert**, whose management company A Modern Way represents Idlewild, We Were Promised Jetpacks and other Scottish bands. “There will be a lot of artists in that emerging to mid-level stage that just decide that they can’t afford to do it.”

While “some cases might be reasonable, this gigantic increase seems unreasonable,” says **Rita Sostrin**, a Los Angeles immigration lawyer who represents international artists trying to obtain O and P visas. “It’s just not the right way, to do this broad-brush increase for everyone.”

The USCIS rep stresses that the fee changes are not final, and the **comment period** (<https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/news-releases/uscis-issues-proposed-rule-to-adjust-certain-immigration-and-naturalization-fees>) is open through March 13. “If organizations have those

concerns, that's what they should be submitting," the spokesperson says. "This is just a proposed rule."

U.K. trade groups are particularly concerned about how the changes will affect artists during a period when gas prices, supply-chain issues and other lingering COVID-19 effects are making it challenging for club-and-theatre-level artists to tour international markets, including the U.S.

For U.K. artists, the U.S. is the second-largest touring market after Europe. Even before the proposed price hikes were announced, rising costs were already leading British artists to pull U.S. shows. In April, Mercury Prize-winning rapper **Little Simz** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/little-simz/>) cancelled an 11-date U.S. tour, citing the financial unviability of the undertaking as an independent artist.

A survey conducted by two other U.K. trade bodies, Music Managers Forum (MMF) and the Featured Artists Coalition (FAC), found that 70% of their members believe the increased visa charges would mean they could no longer afford to tour the U.S.



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