

THAT'S WHY THEY CALL IT THE BREXIT BLUES

Musicians were promised it wouldn't affect them, but travel and visa rules introduced when Britain left the EU are making it too expensive to tour Europe. Now Elton John is leading the fightback for our £6 billion music industry

JOHN ARLIDGE



After his biggest gig in Britain and the biggest yet at Glastonbury, Elton John is packing up his gold lamé suit and heading off for his final *Farewell Yellow Brick Road* tour dates in Zurich and Copenhagen before ending in Stockholm. He has a small army of highly paid lawyers, accountants and administrators "to keep the show on the road" come what may.

If only Colin Schaverien had it so easy. He manages less well-known rock and pop acts such as Two Door Cinema Club and Courting. Going on tour is the best way for young bands to make a name for themselves and it used to be easy. "You rented a van, put in your kit, added some T-shirts to sell, and headed off to France, Germany, Spain," he says. Today it has never been so hard. The reason? Brexit.

Before he can take a band on tour, Schaverien has to apply for and pay for customs passes, or "carnets", to account for every item of the band's equipment, down to the last cymbal. The serial number on each item must be listed. The carnet costs £1,500 for each van or lorry. Even with the carnet, bands face hold-ups at borders as EU officials grapple with post-Brexit customs regulations.

In some countries Schaverien has to apply for employment passes for band members. He also has to make sure none of the musicians, technical crew or drivers has spent more than 90 days in the EU in the past 180 days, the new post-Brexit time limit for Brits.

Choosing a lorry to transport the band and its equipment is tricky. EU regulations mean that a band that takes its own vehicle from a "third country"

— as Britain now is — can make only three stops in EU countries before having to return to Britain. The only way round the restriction is to hire an EU vehicle, but that is more expensive.

Taking tour "merch" makes little sense any more because import duties have to be paid to take it into the EU and more when any leftovers are brought back into Britain. T-shirts can be made in Europe to avoid EU import duties, but duty still has to be paid on clothing brought back into Britain. "Both the time it takes to arrange a tour and the costs have soared," Schaverien says.

It is for these reasons — plus the impact of inflation — that Courting are playing more UK gigs than European dates this summer. Two Door Cinema Club will only play at single foreign festivals, then come home, much to the frustration of the band's bass player, Kevin Baird. "We used to do three or four weeks on tour across Europe every year — 20 to 30 dates hitting multiple cities and festivals. It's now unaffordable unless you are Beyoncé."

Overall the number of UK bands touring the EU this summer — the first since all Covid restrictions were lifted — is down by 32 per cent, compared with 2017-19, figures from the Best for Britain campaign group show. Senior government figures acknowledge that there's

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Annabella Coldrick, head of the Music Managers Forum



a problem. Lord Frost, who had insisted artists wouldn't be adversely affected by the Brexit deal he negotiated in 2019, conceded last year that Brexit "is making life difficult [for] movement of specialists like musicians and artists. We should take another look."

The problems cut both ways. Bands from EU countries are also finding it hard to tour Britain. In April Trigger Cut, a punk three-piece from Germany, were refused entry to the UK for a seven-night tour. They had planned to enter under the "permitted paid engagement" exemption, which allows musicians to spend up to one month touring the UK if they are invited and paid by a UK-based client. But a Border Force officer asked them for a certificate of sponsorship from each venue they were due to play, which can now be required for foreign bands. They did not have the certificates, so were turned back.

What does it matter if a few British musos and German punks cannot tour as they did before we left the EU? It matters a lot to the artists. They rely on live performances for, on average, 80 per cent of their income, since revenue from streaming services such as Spotify is low compared with the cash they used to generate from CD sales.

Touring also fosters creativity, Baird says. "Musicians don't want to play in a UK-only echo chamber. We want to see how audiences all over the world respond to our work."

Elton John, who champions young artists and duetted with Rina Sawayama and Stephen Sanchez at Glastonbury, agrees. To become a future Ed Sheeran "you've got to take your music on the road. You learn so much," he told Culture. "You see the way an audi-

Cancelled

Smaller bands like Two Door Cinema Club are most hurt by the rules

ence in Italy responds to your songs, the way an audience in France responds. It informs your performance and writing. You also ingratiate yourself. Once you go to a country, they really take you to their heart."

Fewer tours by British artists risks damaging one of Britain's most successful creative industries. Official figures show that the music and broader touring industries are worth about £6 billion a year, much of which is generated abroad. The sector supports up to 200,000 jobs. "Music is a huge British export industry. We punch way above our weight," says Annabella Coldrick, the head of the Music Managers Forum, which represents 5,000 leading musicians.

It's not just musicians and fans who are losing out. Acts are supported by a



small army of truckers and roadies. Thanks to the strength of the British music scene, coupled with US artists' desire to use English-speaking crews, UK firms used to dominate the European music haulage business. "Britain had about 85 per cent of the market," says Stuart McPherson, who runs KB Event Ltd, which operates a fleet of lorries worth £20 million. His business was hit hard when the post-Brexit EU rules came into force.

To carry on operating he has set up a subsidiary in the Republic of Ireland and reregistered most of his 130 lorries there. "It cost me £750,000, coming off the back of the pandemic when we had

had no work for almost 12 months," he says.

The operating costs of the new arrangements are growing. The drivers of the now EU-registered lorries need to pass the EU's Certificate of Professional Competence test because Brussels no longer recognises the UK's driver qualifications. The EU tests take five days and have to be done in Ireland. To get all of his 200 UK drivers qualified costs more than £200,000. "It's new costs, upon new costs, upon new costs."

“The serial number of every last cymbal must be recorded



Craig Stanley, a leading producer, promoter and agent for prominent international artists, warns that UK-based sound engineers and lighting crews, who also dominate EU touring, are also likely to decamp to EU countries.

Orchestras are suffering too. They face two problems unique to their scale and operation. With up to 120 players in a symphony orchestra, wrangling work permits "can be a nightmare", says Hanna Madalska-Gayer, the head of policy and communications at the Association of British Orchestras. "Orchestras are having to hire up to two extra staff to navigate all the new rules and bureaucracy, which now is the equivalent of organising a tour to Asia — all for a place on our doorstep."

What's more, unlike amplifiers and electric guitars, classical instruments, which can be worth up to £10 million per orchestra, have to be transported in air-conditioned, humidity-controlled lorries with a unique packing case for each instrument. British orchestras use British trucks, often bought with taxpayers' money at up to £250,000 each, but can no longer use them for EU tours due to the post-Brexit three-stops-and-you're-out rules. Renting similar lorries in the EU is hard because the UK provides most of them. It's also expensive, "adding around £30,000 to the cost of a tour, which makes the difference between it being profitable or loss-making", Madalska-Gayer says.

Who is to blame for the mess? Baird does not want to relitigate the 2016 referendum. "I don't have an issue with anyone for voting the way they voted." But he does say: "Nationalism and pop music don't really go hand in hand."

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Elton John

Campaigners claim that the Brexit deal was rushed through and ministers failed to heed the warnings that it would make touring difficult for all but the stars with the deepest pockets. "It has been an absolute mess. Ministers have consistently failed us," says Gill Morris of Carry on Touring, which campaigns to help artists to work in the EU.

Pressure from industry groups is helping to ease the problems. Each EU country controls its own work permit regulations and Spain, France, Germany and Sweden recently introduced exemptions for UK musicians. But lorry regulations and the 90-in-180-days limit on Britons visiting the EU can only be changed at an EU-wide level. The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement is due to be reassessed in 2025. Campaigners are already pushing for renegotiation of these restrictions.

In a statement the Department for Culture, Media and Sport said it was "supporting the UK's brilliant musicians to adapt to the new arrangements and make touring easier. We have made the case to every EU member state about the importance of touring."

One person who will carry on banging the drum for reform is John. When his *Farewell Yellow Brick Road* tour ends this month, he and David Furnish, his husband and manager, "will be banging on the door of the government harder than ever to get change", he says. "Music is the best soft diplomacy Britain has. It's the best ticket our country could ever ask for. We can't lose it." 🇬🇧