Fighting for the right to party: live music after the Paris attacks

LIVE MUSIC EXCHANGE

Adam Behr, Newcastle University

When Zoot Sims was asked what playing with Benny Goodman in 1962 Cold War Russia was like, following a tour beset with official and personal aggravations, he was typically sardonic: “Every gig with Benny is like playing in Russia.” Sims could at least afford a wry quip. The tensions of those Cold War concerts, political or otherwise, fade to nothing against the trauma that beset the recent Eagles of Death Metal gig in Paris.

That those atrocities were an assault not just on Western values, however defined, but on all civilised discourse is beyond argument. But as the fallout spreads and discussion moves to the policies and actions of nations, it’s worth dwelling briefly on an aspect of modern culture that was both at the centre of events and, understandably, swamped by their magnitude.

It’s apposite that one focus of the attacks was a rock concert. Given that rock and pop are commercialised and transnational cultural forms, we tend not to regard them as particularly fragile. But economic status aside, they are still often subject to hostility from reactionaries and fundamentalists of all stripes, particularly at grassroots. The draconian reaction to Pussy Riot’s “punk prayer” stood out and drew international attention, but punks and metalheads across Asia, the Middle East and North Africa have also been subject to repression and censorship.
The low-slung, sleazy aesthetic of the Eagles of Death Metal may have seemed a fitting avatar for the "prostitution and obscenity" of the decadent West, as IS would have it. It's also possible that the Bataclan was targeted as much for its history of Jewish ownership and past events as for that gig in particular. But popular music, rock as a case in point, has historically irritated zealots and censors across the board – from the bonfires of Beatles records following Lennon’s cocky “bigger than Jesus” remarks in 1966 to a campaign against metal in the 1980s.

Obviously censors of this ilk should not be compared to the murderers who carried out the Bataclan attacks. But there’s an irony in the fact that the consumption of hedonistic, neon sub-metal has provided a rallying point for conservatives — the censors of old — and liberals alike. It stands as an implied rebuke to the joyless, fascistic ethos of the attackers. One of popular music’s historical strengths has been a show of defiance through having a good time.

MUSIC ACROSS BORDERS

But there’s another, slightly more troubling, irony in the fact that the response to these attacks could make life more difficult for artists. If, as looks to be the pattern, border controls tighten and international movement becomes more difficult, this will put extra constraints on a form of cultural activity for which touring is crucial, and increasingly so. British musicians have had problems in the past, such as, for instance, getting visas to play the South by Southwest festival in Texas. World music expo Womex, likewise, has encountered visa issues and associated difficulties regarding the mobility of artists.

Travel has been intrinsic to the practice and consumption of popular music — all music, in fact — since at least the 19th century. From Jenny Lind's Barnum sponsored American tour to the festival circuit today, touring is how musicians build audiences and hone their skills. Audiences, too, assume that local venues will feature a stream of international performers.
An advertising board at the entrance of the Bataclan concert hall.

REUTERS/Charles Platiau

It’s also central to the modern popular music economy, especially since the massive disruptions wrought by the internet on the recording industry. Under 6% of the new artists signed to UK major labels last year managed to achieve gold album status – with only three gold-selling debut records yet this year. Of course, there’s still big money in music. Increasingly, though, it’s live revenues that count, especially for artists without a back catalogue of hits, trying to build a career.

It’s difficult to feel sorry for stars jetting between stadiums. Restrictions won’t hurt them much. But putting a show on the road with a shoestring budget, on the other hand, is hard at the best of times. Tighter borders and jumpier legislators could easily increase the touring logistics and costs for artists looking to grow internationally, still more for those from outside the West. The US has already announced stricter visa controls. The current mood in Europe is also inimical to open borders and free movement, even within the Schengen area. We can add to this the chilling effect of the knowledge that gigs – long a soft target – are now openly in the crosshairs.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Musicians remain steadfast, of course, and the language of defiance and determination certainly runs throughout rock’s core myths. The Eagles of Death Metal have already stated their intention to be the first band to play the Bataclan when it reopens. It is telling, though, if also unsurprising, that early responses were more marked by recoil. Prince, the Foo Fighters, Coldplay and a host of others cancelled or postponed European dates, partly from shock and partly a desire for a period of respectful silence. The Eagles of Death Metal were supposed to be playing Madrid and Lisbon on December 9 and 10.

Turning down the volume on any kind of an ongoing basis would be a pity. Music has a rich history of reaching across barriers – a projection of soft power long before Joseph Nye coined the term in the 1980s. Like Goodman in Russia, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie played internationally, including in the Middle East and behind the Iron Curtain. Those tours weren’t without tensions and contradictions, not least that black musicians bearing the brunt of repression at home...
were carrying the US standard abroad. There’s room for unease. Yet the capacity for popular music to bridge gaps is established and is surely preferable to cultural silos and their consequences.

And it won’t be sanitised or officially sanctioned activities that suffer in the wake of Paris but exactly the kind of good-time, internationalist, hybrid or just plain rude musics that serve as counterweights to extremism. Touring musicians are already at the sharp end of practical and ideological issues surrounding cultural exchange. Recent events look to be tightening the squeeze from both ends.

The Beastie Boys may have been joking when they sang “Fight for Your Right to Party”. Turns out, it’s not a laughing matter.

Adam Behr, Lecturer in Popular and Contemporary Music, Newcastle University

This article was originally published on The Conversation. Read the original article.