

Musicians drop SXSW to protest Gaza genocide and in support of Palestine

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Austin, March 7 (RHC)-- Multiple artists have pulled out of their official showcases at this year's South by Southwest festival (SXSW) in support of Palestine, citing the Austin, Texas, event's ties to the defense contractor RTX Corporation, formerly known as Raytheon, and its sponsorship by the U.S. Army.

The boycott was led by Chicago-based songwriter Ella Williams, AKA Squirrel Flower, who published a statement on her Instagram on 4 March announcing her withdrawal from the official showcase she was set to play at the festival, which begins this weekend. “I am pulling out specifically because of the fact that SXSW is platforming defense contractors including [RTX] as well as the U.S. Army, a main sponsor of the festival,” she wrote.

Shortly after Williams released her statement, other showcasing artists, including the Brooklyn-based emo band Proper, Los Angeles-based indie band Mamalarky and North Carolinian singer-songwriter Eliza McLamb, withdrew from their official showcases citing similar reasons.

“These defense contractors make the weapons that the IDF uses to bomb Gaza. The IDF has now killed at least one in every 75 inhabitants of Gaza, [and] I refuse to be complicit in that,” Williams said. “I don’t believe that a music festival should include profiteers of war – I believe that art is a tool to create a better world and has no place alongside warmongers.”

Williams first became aware of SXSW’s defense connections after seeing a post by Austin for Palestine Coalition, which is pressuring the festival to cut ties with the Department of Defense and private defense contractors. The US army is listed as a “super sponsor” of this year’s festival, and is presenting more than nine events, while Collins Aerospace, a subsidiary of RTX, is sponsoring two events at SXSW Pitch, the festival’s tech showcase.

RTX is known to supply weapons to the Israeli government; on an earnings call in late October last year, RTX’s chairman and executive director, Greg Hayes, was quoted as saying shareholders would “see a benefit” from increased demand for weapons during the war in Gaza. The defense contractor L3Harris, which is also presenting an event at SXSW, has also come under fire for supplying weapons components to the Israeli army.

Mamalarky’s Noor Khan says it was a “really easy decision” to pull out of the festival, because “playing these two official shows could never bring us anything that matters more than the lives that are being lost in Palestine today”.

Her bandmate Livvy Bennett says that playing official showcases would constitute “promoting this festival for over a week, and we do not want to do that”. Ultimately Bennett, who has been attending SXSW since she was 12 and describes it as her “favorite” festival, hopes the boycott results in SXSW and other music festivals divesting from the military and defense industries.

Israel’s offensive has killed more than 30,000 people since October, displaced 85% of the 2.3 million population from their homes, and left more than half of the Gaza Strip’s infrastructure in ruins, according to data from Gaza’s health ministry and the UN.

In addition to live music, SXSW also covers film, TV and the tech industry. The festival is a boon for Austin, contributing over \$380m in spending to the city’s economy over the course of the 2023 event.

A spot in an official SXSW showcase is an opportunity to be exposed to agents, festival bookers, managers, labels and journalists – a potentially life-changing occurrence for some musicians. The Brooklyn-based singer-songwriter Shalom Obisie-Orlu, who records under her first name, says showcasing at SXSW has been “a longstanding dream” of hers, but she decided to pull out of the festival after seeing Williams’ post. “The opportunity is massive, but I am South African – I come from the place where apartheid was invented,” she says. “I will never in my life put myself in a position where I [would] look back at my actions and be like, ‘You danced for the war machine.’”

SXSW has faced increased criticism in recent years over its alleged poor treatment of artists. In 2022, the indie rock band Wednesday published a viral X thread breaking down the cost of performing at the festival, prompting many other indie artists to discuss the unviable economics of playing at the event. At

that time, SXSW offered domestic artists either a small cash payment (\$250 for bands or \$100 for solo acts) or a festival wristband, while international artists were only offered a wristband.

Last year, more than 2,500 musicians signed an open letter from the Union of Musicians and Allied Workers (UMAW) which asked the festival to increase performance fees to \$750 and provide a wristband to all artists. Later that year, the Austin Parks and Recreation Board recommended that Austin city council reconsider its relationships with SXSW until the festival increased pay rates. Fees for SXSW 2024 were raised to \$350 for bands and \$150 for solo artists, while international artists are still only offered a wristband. An SXSW 2024 music pass costs \$995.

Williams had initially chosen to accept a wristband in lieu of payment, “so my bottom line is not affected at all – which is the irony of the situation.” “I personally feel like withdrawing my art from this festival is an act of saying I will not be involved in any way,” she says. “Withholding art and labor is a very powerful tool – it’s a tool for spreading information, and, in this case, for showing SXSW that artists will not stand for this.”

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