

Musicians withdraw from SXSW Festival over Gaza, inclusion of military and “war profiteers”

David Walsh
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Numerous musicians have decided not to perform at or support the South by Southwest (SXSW) arts festival, whose 2024 edition opened Friday, in protest against the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the festival’s connections to the American military-industrial complex.

The annual event in Austin, Texas, which includes sections on music, film and technology, draws several hundred thousand participants over the course of a little more than a week.

The last-minute protest was spearheaded by Chicago-based singer-songwriter Ella O’Connor Williams, who performs as Squirrel Flower. She published a statement explaining her position on Instagram on March 4. Her appeal led to further defections, by Brooklyn-based band Proper, Los Angeles indie band Mamalarky, North Carolinian singer-songwriter Eliza McLamb, Pittsburgh musician Merce Lemon, Brooklyn-based singer-songwriter Shalom, Chicago experimental group The Curls, Columbus, Ohio’s Villagerrr and Austin-based TC Superstar, Ibrahim “Abe” Batshon and Ama the Band.

The musicians have reacted to the strong connections between the festival and the US military and corporate arms makers. As the *Guardian* noted, in an article on the protest, 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 [the billion-dollar defense contractor, formerly known as Raytheon], is sponsoring two events at SXSW Pitch, the festival’s tech showcase.”

RTX, the piece goes on, “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.”

In a statement on its website, Collins Aerospace (which includes the former Rockwell International and United Technologies), one of the world’s largest suppliers of aerospace and defense products, with revenues of \$26 billion in 2019, explains that as “part of our presence at SXSW this year, we’re excited to launch the second year of our Powered by Collins Initiative, designed to foster technology innovation with Deep Tech small- to medium-sized enterprises.”

The multi-million dollar Penske Media Corporation (*Variety*, *Rolling Stone*, *Hollywood Reporter*, *Billboard*, *Deadline*, *ARTnews*, *Vibe*, *IndieWire*, *Artforum* and other publications) owns SXSW and has made the US military and the CIA welcome. Last year, in advance of the SXSW event, the CIA tweeted, “We’re flying south to SXSW! SXSW attendees—come see us at the Creative Industries Expo and make time to attend #CIA’s Spies Supercharged panel.” And, as *Paper* magazine noted, “it turns out it’s not their first festival.”

News station WTOP reported on the presence of the CIA at the 2022 festival. The deputy chief of the CIA’s Talent Acquisition Office told WTOP, “The SXSW Festival attracts tech-savvy, forward-leaning and diverse innovators—the exact talent we need to assess and tackle complex global challenges, and provide policymakers the answers they need to make informed policy decisions.”

In her March 4 Instagram posting, Ella Williams explained that she had decided to pull out “of my official SXSW showcases in protest of SXSW’s ties to the defense industry and in support of the Palestinian people.” She pointed specifically to the fact that “SXSW is platforming defense contractors including Raytheon

subsidiaries as well as the US Army, a main sponsor of the festival.”

The Israeli military, she noted in her principled statement, “has now killed at least 1 in every 75 inhabitants of Gaza, including 12,300 children. The International Court of Justice has ruled that this plausibly amounts to genocide. Genocide profiteers like Raytheon supply weapons to the IDF, paid for by our taxes. A music festival should not include war profiteers. I refuse to be complicit in this and withdraw my art and labor in protest.”

CultureMap Austin commented that Williams “posted a series of slides on Instagram detailing her dissent. She shared that she will still be playing unofficial shows and encouraged other artists and venues to follow her lead. At the time of this article’s writing, the post has garnered more than 8,000 likes [now more than 10,000] and a long thread of overwhelmingly—if not completely—supportive comments.”

On social media, fellow musician Eliza McLamb reported that she had withdrawn from “my official SXSW showcase after learning that the US Army is a major sponsor of the event.” She continued, “I will never put my name on or perform my labor for an event in service of the US war machine, and especially not now as they continue to fuel the ongoing violence against Palestinians. Blood money has no place in music.”

Shalom Obisie-Orlu, who performs as Shalom, also posted her views on social media:

I was born to Nigerian parents in the United States, and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa. I know too much about the effects of colonialism and apartheid to sit idly by. I have seen too much to be a bystander. I believe in the freedom of all oppressed people, everywhere. I don’t believe in the US army, and I don’t believe they belong at a music festival (or anywhere) as a super sponsor.

I am not able to go along with something I know is fundamentally wrong. I am not able to abandon my morals for the sake of exposure. I am not able to process the insurmountable grief and cruelty the Palestinian people face on a daily basis. I don’t think they are able to either. Who is engineered to bear witness to daily massacres and an apartheid state inflicted famine? Who is engineered to survive that?

Mamalarky’s Noor Khan told the *Guardian* that 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.’”

On Instagram, Austin-based band Big Bill noted that it had declined to apply to the festival this year after the latter’s “blasé reaction to artists requesting a pay increase.” The group went on, “But propping up a festival that embraces war profiteers that are actively aiding in a current genocide? That’s something we could never do.”

The *Pittsburgh City Paper* reported that for “emerging musicians, being chosen to play SXSW could mark a turning point in their careers” and that for “indie rocker Merce Lemon, who was chosen to play the 2024 SXSW Music Festival Showcasing Artists lineup, it meant sharing space with over 300 artists from around the world and gaining exposure to new audiences, possible representation, and more.”

However, on Tuesday, Lemon announced on Instagram that she had pulled out of the festival “over concerns that the festival supports defense contractors with ties to the deadly Gaza conflict. ‘I refuse to be free advertising for an event that is directly tied to the genocide of Palestinian people,’ Lemon wrote.”



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