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Live Music Intelligence

SPECIAL ISSUE



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Robbie Williams' *Britpop Tour*
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FESTIVALS & POLITICS COLLIDE

The humanitarian disaster in Gaza has continued to dominate the European festival season discourse, with the majority of promoters coming down on the side of artistic freedom versus censorship.

Organisers of Spain's Bilbao BBK described their booking of controversial Irish rap trio Kneecap as "an act of cultural resistance and a celebration of freedom of expression," and say their performance was "one of the most powerful moments of the weekend."

"At Bilbao BBK Live, we believe that music is not just entertainment, it's also a platform for identity, dialogue, and social reflection," Itxaso Hernández, head of communications for promoter Last Tour, tells *IQ*. "Our policy has always been to support artistic freedom, provided it's expressed with respect and aligns with the inclusive and plural values we promote.

"Kneecap's set was provocative, energetic, and deeply rooted in their cultural and linguistic identity, and it connected with many in the audience on a level beyond just performance. We're proud to be a space where artists can speak their truth."

Festival Republic MD Melvin Benn, meanwhile, impressed how important it was for Ireland's Electric Picnic to add the Belfast group to its lineup.

"It was a really important statement, and musically, [they are] fantastic," said Benn. "In terms of what's going on in the world, it's really important that they are here, adding their voice.

"They're great lads, they've got really important songs, they're brilliant live, but they've also got really important messages."

Earlier in the summer, the Hungarian government took the "unprecedented" step of banning Kneecap from the country, citing alleged "anti-semitism and glorifying terror."

The hip-hop act was booked to perform at Budapest's Sziget on 11 August. However, more than 150 Hungarian artists signed an open letter protesting the band's inclusion, claiming their "values run counter to the festival's decades-long tradition."

Sziget described the decision as "an unprecedented move, which we believe is both unnecessary and regrettable."

"Sziget Festival's values mean we condemn hate speech, while guaranteeing the fundamental right to artistic freedom of expression for every performer," read a statement from the festival. "Cancel culture and cultural boycotts are not the solution."

Elsewhere, the team behind Denmark's Syd For Solen festival discussed the "privilege" of giving artists a platform to discuss humanitarian issues. The smash!bang!pow!-backed festival welcomed 50,000 fans to the Danish capital's Valbyparken. Headliner Sam Fender made international headlines after bringing out activists, including Greta Thunberg and UNICEF ambassador Selma de Montgomery, to lead pro-Palestine chants at the end of his set, while displaying the Palestinian flag on the main stage screen.

Festival CEO Nikolaj Thorenfeldt tells *IQ* the festival welcomes artists who want to make a stand. "Artists have always portrayed what was going on in the world, good or bad, love or crisis – this is the core of what artists do," he says. "We think that it's a privilege that they want to use our platform to discuss these sorts of topics, because that dialogue is so important. Everything happened in a peaceful manner, and that's what's important.

"There are so many examples of these things happening where art drives us forward, and art should be allowed to do so."

Programmer Xenia Grigat adds: "[Festivals are] a platform for artists. In this case, we supported the artists and just added the framework for them."

Elsewhere, several artists, including The Last Dinner Party, boycotted the UK's Victorious Festival after The Mary Wallopers' set was halted after they unfurled a Palestinian flag on stage and said, "Free Palestine and fuck Israel."

The Irish folk group's 22 August performance at the festival in Portsmouth ended halfway through their first song. Organisers initially claimed they pulled the plug because the band had used "a chant [that] is widely understood to have a discriminatory context," which was later contradicted by video footage shared by the band.

The Superstruct Entertainment-backed festival then apologised, conceding it "didn't handle the explanation of our policies sensitively or far enough in advance to allow a sensible conclusion to be reached.

"This put the band and our own team in a difficult situation, which never should have arisen. We absolutely support the right of artists to freely express their views from the stage, within the law and the inclusive nature of the event. Our policy of not allowing flags of any kind, which has been in place for many years for wider event management and safety reasons, is not meant to compromise that right."

Separately, the boss of Oslo-based Superstruct stablemate Øyafestivalen has spoken out against the boycott campaign over the festival's ownership. A number of Superstruct events were hit by artist withdrawals due to their parent company's ties to KKR. The US-based global investment firm acquired Superstruct last year but has been fiercely criticised for its investment in Israeli tech and data companies, as well as reported connections to weapons manufacturers and defence contractors.

Øyafestivalen CEO Tonje Kaada tells *IQ*. "We have been clear on our stance on Gaza. We understand where the engagement comes from, and we stand for the same things [as the boycotters], which is an end to the ongoing genocide, and for solidarity with Palestine. But I believe it should be acceptable to have faith in different approaches t achieve the same goal. There are more effe ways of helping the people of Gaza than h ing festivals.

"We've always seen Øya as an speech, and we encourage artists to express criticism and dep wish to do so. I believe a impact onstage, and I t be the loudspeaker f vals, the space fo

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"In this new era, the success of an event is no longer measured solely in tickets sold – but in cultural impact, loyalty, and the ability to create meaning"

MATHIEU JATON | MONTREUX JAZZ FESTIVAL

As the Montreux Jazz Festival approaches its 60th anniversary, it's time to take a look in the rear-view mirror. We all know the industry has changed profoundly. What was once a symbolic cultural space has become a structured economy with its own commercial logic, opportunities, and pitfalls. Organising a festival today has little in common with what it was even ten years ago. And yet, the fundamentals haven't disappeared – they've simply taken on a new form.



Positioning has become a central issue. For a long time, it was thought that a good lineup was enough. That is no longer the case. Audiences don't just come for a programme – they come for an experience, a narrative, a spirit they identify with.

Today, two trends are making artistic programming particularly complex. Firstly, many emerging artists rise to prominence at lightning speed – their fame explodes over a single season, only to fade just as quickly. This volatility makes it difficult to plan ahead. Secondly, some major headliners have become almost unaffordable: their fees have reached such heights that booking just one name can unbalance an entire festival's budget and compromise its artistic coherence. Between these two extremes, it has become essential to build a strong, sustainable format – anchored in a clear vision of what we want to offer the public.

In an increasingly competitive landscape, what sets a festival apart is its ability to assert a clear identity. That's why positioning is so crucial. Our independence is a key part of that identity: it allows us to remain true to our values without having to bend to external commercial pressures.

This reality is what led Montreux to make very clear choices. We've rejected the race for scale. We've chosen to remain on a human-scale, to cultivate the exceptional, and to build strong storytelling around our spaces. The Lake House, the Belvédère, the Spotlight Stage – each space responds to specific expectations, audiences, and ways of experiencing the festival. Each enables very different audiences to feel fully included in the Montreux experience. This strategy also allows us to attract a younger audience – often less inclined to attend festivals – who are curious about free, high-quality, immersive experiences.

Montreux Jazz Festival, given its format and positioning, can no longer rely solely on its annual event. That's why Montreux has become an active brand year-round. Our content creation strategy through Montreux Media Ventures plays a key role: it extends the festival experience, generates engagement, and enhances our international visibility. We produce content, launch educational projects, support young artists, develop franchise festivals around the world, and collaborate with partners on these initiatives.

This long-term approach underpins the strength of our model. The Montreux brand has become more powerful than the 16-day event in July.

This evolution is both a challenge and an opportunity. It forces us to think differently and ask: "Who are we speaking to? What story are we telling? What value are we bringing?" In an ecosystem where massive international tours coexist with locally rooted, independent festivals, each player must find their own path.

Some events focus on continuity and local anchoring – optimising their sites, maintaining stable capacities, and appealing to a loyal audience. Others explore diversification, innovation, or cultural experiences. There's no one-size-fits-all model. But there is one necessity: to be coherent, distinctive, and genuine.

At Montreux, we've chosen to embrace our legacy while rethinking our formats. We're not trying to replicate what worked in the past but to bring our values to life in the present. That means making clear editorial choices, reimagining hospitality, and consistently focusing on the artist and audience. We believe in the power of stories built over time – stories that create a bond and make a concert unforgettable – not just because of the artist but because the setting and the moment are just as special.

The temptation to go big is everywhere. But the answer isn't necessarily to follow that path. It can be to lay the foundation for a strong identity, a sustainable model, and a trusting relationship with your audience. That's what we strive to do, day after day.

In this new era, the success of an event is no longer measured solely in tickets sold – but in cultural impact, audience loyalty, and the ability to create meaning. It's a paradigm shift. And perh that's where the future of festivals will be played o

Mathieu Jaton is CEO of the Montreux Jazz Festival

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EUROPE'S FESTIVAL SUMMER 2025

For the third year, IQ has teamed up with music business directory and data platform ROSTR to analyse the lineups of ~50 top European festivals. Read on to find out about the trends in gender balance, genre splits, top agencies in terms of bookings, and the acts that benefitted the most...

ROSTR X IQ

It's been a seismic year for our surveyed festivals. The data from those events suggests that festivals are starting to feel smaller, not just in size but in scope.

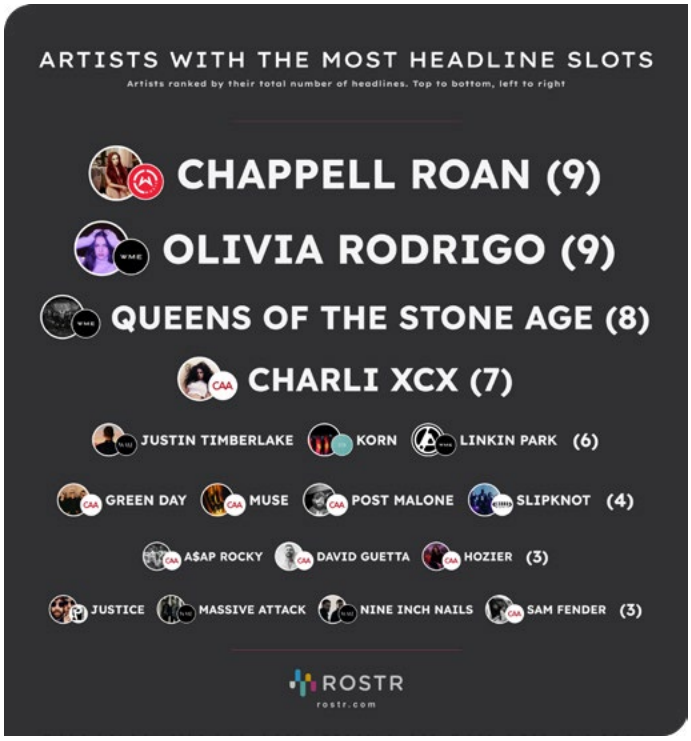
The sheer variety of artists being booked is thinning out, and that narrowing is felt most at the top of the bill. The space between superstar headliners and the next generation coming up behind them is being squeezed, forcing promoters to either lean on legacy names that have been around forever or gamble on fresh arrivals.

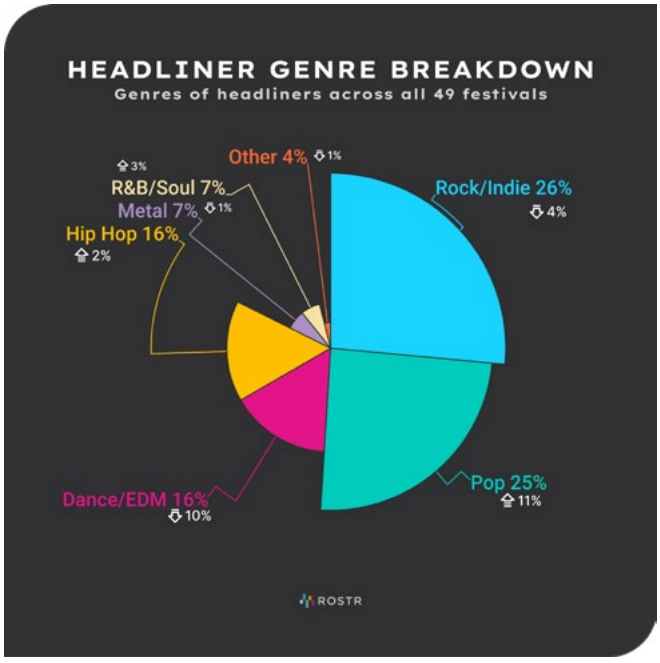
Meanwhile, the economics around festivals are shifting. With costs rising across the board, many promoters appear to be betting that fans will still shell out for tickets and food and beverages, even if the lineups are slimmer. That means fewer artists overall and more pressure on the top of the bill to deliver the draw. It's less about how many names you can cram onto a poster and more about how much value each name can generate, ROSTR observes.

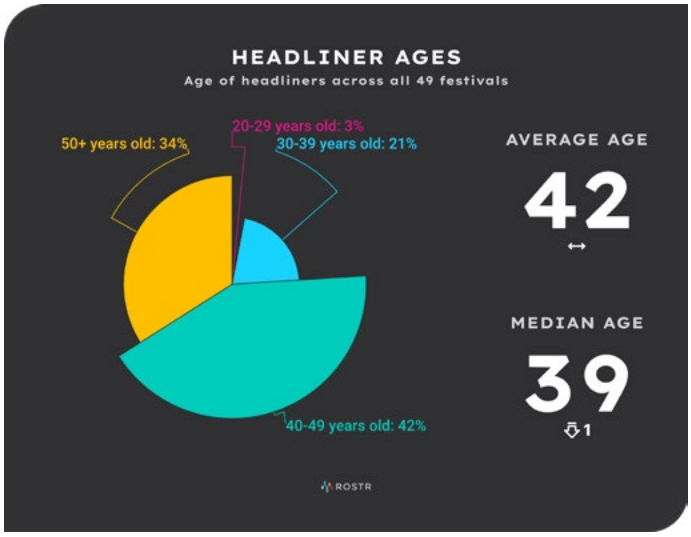
Agencies are both shaping and reflecting this change. The biggest players – the true super-agencies – are entrenched, controlling the vast majority of the headline slots. Below them, though, there's a chaotic churn: hundreds of smaller agencies fighting for scraps, most placing just one act all year across the festivals we honed in on. The landscape has a long tail, but the real power sits firmly with a handful of players who can, perhaps, dictate who gets to headline Europe's biggest stages.

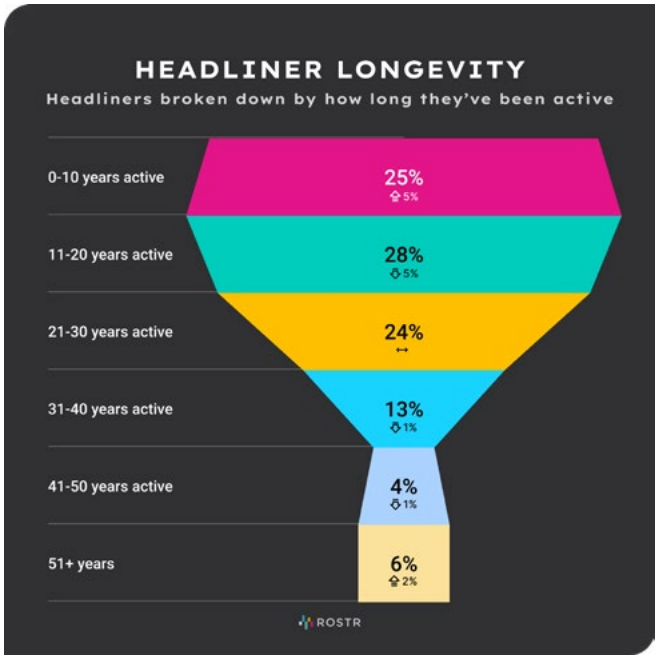
Altogether, the 2025 data paints a picture of a festival circuit under pressure: cautious in its bookings, risk-averse in its lineups, and increasingly shaped by the gravitational pull of a few global gatekeepers.











Headliners

Since *IQ* and ROSTR first began gathering the data of the 50 named festivals (now 49 after the cancellation of Balaton Sound), the number of unique artists that are headlining at least one festival has been dropping. In 2023, there were 147, which dropped to 132 in 2024, while this year was just 95, meaning the number of unique acts headlining festivals has fallen by over a third in just three years.

Looking deeper into the data, festival bookers stepped up their activity with pop artists this year – increasing the ratio of headline acts by 11% from last year, representing a quarter of all headline bookings. This led ROSTR to question whether this is due to the universal attraction pop acts bring to festivals trying to stay in business, or if the phenomenon is a downstream impact of labels prioritising the pop genre?

For the third year in a row, 90%+ of all humans on stage during a headlin set at our festivals were men. However, showing marginal improveme there were 7% more solo women acts headlining this year, but just thre top ten artists by total # of headline bookings in 2025 were non-m

The overall split between "newer" and "older" headliners YoY, but the composition inside those groups changed. On th biggest gains came at the start of careers: acts in the fi career jumped +5%, while the 11–20 tier lost ground smallest bucket – 51+ years active – grew by 2%, w tiers (31–50 years) slipped slightly.

The inference is that festivals are leani legacy names to anchor bills.

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ABSOLUTELY FAB-ULOUS



© Alastair Brookes

As one of the most likeable professionals in the production business, Jess Shields has spent the last ten years building her company, Far and Beyond, into an industry powerhouse. On the back of FAB's biggest year to date, **Gordon Masson** learns about the operation's story so far and the exciting times that lie ahead, with plans for further international expansion...

Growing up on the grounds of Download Festival all but sealed Jess Shields' destiny to work in live music, but had it not been for her dogged perseverance, her career may have involved studying human history, rather than creating it in fields and venues around the planet.

"My parents own a hotel and some land attached to Donington Park, so I grew up with Download Festival literally on my doorstep," says Shields. "So I absolutely fell in love with live music when I was a teenager. I'd spend all my time going to gigs, and I realised that I wanted to work in music in some capacity. As a result, I kept writing to Live Nation to apply for work – any work – at Download. But I was always too young."

Emerging from university with a degree in archaeology, Shields took a last punt at Download. "I just basically begged John Probyn for a job, and he kind of said, 'Okay, we'll give you some summer work.' I was beyond happy."

Probyn remembers it slightly differently.

"He didn't *ask* me; her father, John, *told* me I was going to give his daughter some work experience," he laughs. "I actually remember going back to the office and telling the team, 'We've got somebody coming in to do work experience. She's probably gonna be a pretentious brat, but it's John's daughter, so let's stick her in accreditation where she can't do any harm.' Then Jess turned up...

"Every now and again in this industry, you meet somebody who just gets it – they understand this world and how it works: they're not afraid to work hard; they're not worried about what jobs they need to do; and they're not bothered about the long hours or working in a muddy field with no Internet connection. What made Jess stand out was that she also did everything with this massive smile on her face.

"At the end of her placement... she actually tells this story where I was driving around the site and pulled up next to her and asked, 'What are you doing when you leave Download?' She said, 'Nothing.' And, apparently, I said, 'Right, you've got a full-time job, then,' and then I just drove off."

Shields takes up the story. "After Download, I went to Hyde Park and did Hard Rock Calling, Wireless, and spent the summer with Live Nation. And they kept me on, so that summer turned into a year, where I was kind of being a festival assistant. Then, when festival season ended, we did the Madonna tour, which was a few weeks at Wembley, then Cardiff... and the rest is history.

"I spent the next eight years at Live Nation, where I worked my way up to festival manager until I left in 2015, when I switched to Festival Republic for a year. I was the event manager for Download, Creamfields, and Electric Daisy Carnival.

"But after a year, it felt like the right time to move on, and that coincided with Hannah Farnham, my boss at Live Nation, also leaving."

Becoming FAB

Word quickly spread about Farnham and Shields' newfound freelance status, meaning they were not idle for long.

"People heard about us through the grapevine, and we were asked to run some pretty big projects, but we hadn't set anything up formally, so because we had work in the pipeline, we quickly created a company together, came up with the name Far and Beyond, and based ourselves in a spare barn at my parents' hotel."

As the business took off, Far and Beyond took on another former Live Nation staffer, Chris Hannon, as its first employee.

"The three of us just used to sit in this little makeshift office barn, and those first few years were really, really hard graft with not much return," recalls Shields. "There were definitely moments of sitting there, thinking, 'Is this actually worth it?' And I was headhunted a few times by some really big companies offering me head of events roles. One or two were very tempting because, for the first three years, Hannah and I made no money. We made enough to pay Chris but that was about it."

However, their patience was rewarded. "We'd run a couple of small festivals, and then, as we started to get our name out there, we picked up a festival for MTV in Gibraltar. Then, in 2018, we were contacted by James Craven, president of Live Nation Middle East, who said John Probyn had recommended us. There had been a cultural shift in Saudi Arabia where suddenly they wanted to start producing Western concerts around sporting events. So, for us, it was Formula E that introduced us to Saudi, and we ended up sending a team out there to produce shows on Live Nation's behalf. They were the first gender-mixed concerts – men and women had always been segregated in the audience before – so it was a ground-breaking moment. And for us, it was incredible, because we built this relationship with Live Nation Middle East, who brought more and more concerts, and we ended up becoming their official event delivery partner, which still stands to this day."

By 2019, the Saudi contract became a three-month project that included shows every week for Formula E, which rolled into Diriyah season, and then Riyadh season, providing Far and Beyond with about 90% of its turnover, at that time.

"I'd just had a baby, so when she was eight months old, I was commuting between the UK and Saudi: I'd do five days a week in Saudi, then two days in the UK, every week for three months – it was intense."

Establishing Far and Beyond as the go-to specialists in the Middle East was a turning point for the company. But then, everything came to a shuddering halt.

Less FAB

The pandemic saw Shields remaining office-bound and tendering for business every single day without success. And just when restrictions finally began to lift, there was a seismic change for Far and Beyond.

"Hannah left," says Shields. "She'd spent all of those months at home with her family, and I think the thought of going back into work and that sort of stressful graft environment just wasn't for her. So, I ended up buying her out to become the sole shareholder, which was quite scary at the time because there was absolutely no work coming in."

FAB head of commercial, Amy Choudhry remembers those days all too well.

"Although I'd known and worked with Jess for a few years pre FAB, it was just as Covid hit that I officially joined the company," reveals Choudhry. "[It was] alightly strange timing, but none of us had any idea what Covid would turn into. Thinking it might only last a few months, she offered me the chance to ride the wave with her. Fast forward to some very late nights and endless hours on Zoom, writing pitches for wildly ambitious projects in the Middle East. Back then we were a tin team of four, but we made it through."

However, as the world rushed back to liv tainment, Far and Beyond bounced b vengeance. "We went back out to S added shows in the UAE and Qata we also produce in Egypt. So in 2022, our focus really w

Employee number that Middle East off years, he tells I speaks to Jess

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LOVE MY LIVE

ROBBIE WILLIAMS TOUR REPORT

Designed to cement his status as the self-styled king of entertainment, Robbie Williams' *Britpop* tour is also a spectacle that's as much about showmanship as sound – the very embodiment of "let me entertain you!" So how did Robbie and his team put all this together? **Derek Robertson** spoke to those who brought the tour to life and made it one of 2025's most successful, compelling, and enjoyable nights out.





Photo © Simon Niblett

"Welcome to the Robnaissance!" blared headlines earlier this summer. Except, can you call it a comeback if Robbie Williams has never really been away? Sure, this might be his first stadium tour in seven years, but he had a run of major arena shows in 2023 and sold out a BTS Hyde Park show last year. Then there's *Better Man*, the biographical musical film based on his life that spawned new music and endless rounds of cosy chat show appearances. So, it's no surprise that Robbie has shifted over 1.3m tickets thus far for *Britpop*, a 39-date, 23-country celebration of pure entertainment and a 25-year solo career.

Yet, far from a being a standard nostalgia trip or a greatest-hits-type jaunt, this tour is a strategic masterplan, neatly dovetailing with the forthcoming release of his 13th studio album (also called *Britpop*, and a raw, guitar-driven homage to the 1990s era he helped define) and building on a newfound admiration from Gen Z and Millennials to tap the commercial power of a legacy artist in mid-career rejuvenation.

The first thing to understand about Robbie Williams is that there's never no demand – only two years ago, he was selling out iconic arenas like The O2, Amsterdam's Ziggo Dome, and Barcelona's Palau Sant Jordi. The second thing is, he doesn't even need production. "He can do an amazing show with one mic, one spotlight, some monitors, and a PA – he *is* the production!" says John Lafferty, *Britpop*'s production manager. "He doesn't need anything else to blow your socks off."

So why now? "Following the release of *Better Man* and the advanced sell-out of his 2024 Hyde Park show, this year felt right for a return to stadiums," says Ian Huffam of X-ray Touring, Robbie's agent. And these 39 Europe-only dates are just the beginning; with *Britpop* the album due for release in October – and the tour's success thus far – "other major markets are currently being planned, with announcements to follow in due course."

Being such a well-established star, Huffam says it wasn't particularly difficult working out priorities in terms of which territories and which cities within those territories to play. With that being said, initial sales were so strong that additional dates were added in several lesser-known markets – Bulgaria, Greece, and his first-ever show in Türkiye – pushing a "summer" tour into October, which is a first according to Huffam.

There was also the issue of routing the tour around venue availability, which has given it a somewhat haphazard, zigzag look on paper: for example, his seven shows in Germany are interspersed with trips to Belgium, France, Spain, Austria, Italy, Sweden, Lithuania, and Latvia; the Scandinavian shows (Copenhagen, Oslo, Helsinki, and Stockholm), are spread out across three months; and sandwiched between Austria and Finland is a visit to the island of Malta. It all adds up to an extremely long tour – 31 May to 7 October – and special consideration required for organisation and logistics.

The road to Kazakhstan

Given Robbie's enduring appeal, *Britpop*'s tour route is understandably extensive, but even among some of the far-flung host cities, one destination stands out – Kazakhstan (he's headlining Park Live Almaty festival on 3 September). Indeed, so keen was the festival to have Robbie grace their stage that they even added an extra day to the event to accommodate him. "By the time we learned about Robbie's plans to visit the Middle East, the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday slots of our festival were already filled," says Maria Axenova, Park Live's promoter. "The only option was to offer him a Thursday headline, and we gladly did, even though it meant expanding Park Live into a four-day celebration."

Given that the other headliners include Marilyn Manson, Alan Walker, and Röyksopp, Robbie might not seem like an obvious addition, but the festival was convinced he'd be a huge draw. "Park Live has always been about presenting cultural icons – artists who have helped shape modern music – and Robbie fits that mission perfectly," adds Axenova. "His unmatched charisma, electrifying energy, and long list of catchy, era-defining hits make him a globally desirable performer. For Kazakhstan, this is truly a historic moment – no exaggeration."

It will, however, be different from a standard *Britpop* show; "Fortunately, nobody suggested driving to Kazakhstan!" jokes Garry Lewis of Beat the Street bussing. Instead, it's a fly-date show, with "a completely different idea and design – a very stripped-down version," says Lafferty. "We're only flying four pallets of backline and audio control, and nothing from this current production is going."

Nonetheless, fans in the region are clearly excited – while Axenova says they don't have precise data on international ticket-buyers, they've seen reports of flight shortages from certain cities around the festival dates. "That's a strong indicator of regional interest," she says.

And "strong" is an apt description for the Europe-wide demand to see Robbie strut his stuff – his debut show in Spain at the RCDE Stadium sold out, as did two nights (80,000+) at Amsterdam' Johan Cruijff ArenA, two nights at Lond Emirates Stadium, and 44,000 in Sofia, B

"German fans love him, have grow him, and they're very loyal," explai tur promoter Scumeck Sabottk during popularity in the coun sold out seven dates ther 100% what they expect robbing their purse

"With an ar nights that w

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GREEN GUARDIANS 2025

Sustainable suppliers & innovators

WELCOME TO IQ MAGAZINE'S 2025 GREEN GUARDIANS – OUR ANNUAL RECOGNITION OF THE COMPANIES, ORGANISATIONS, ECO-WARRIORS, EVENTS, AND ARTISTS WHOM OUR READERS BELIEVE ARE DRIVING THE LIVE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY'S EFFORTS TOWARD A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE. WE HOPE THE TIRELESS WORK THAT EACH OF OUR GREEN GUARDIANS IS DOING CAN INSPIRE MANY OTHERS TO FOLLOW IN THEIR (CARBON-REDUCED) FOOTSTEPS.

ASCENDANCE SUSTAINABLE EVENTS

Founded by respected event professional and sustainability leader Vivian Belzaguy Hunter, Ascendance claims to be Miami's "first sustainable event consultancy" and is transforming the way events are planned and executed by infusing purpose, accountability, and measurable impact into every stage of production.

The multidisciplinary team behind Ascendance also includes programmes and partnerships director, Milly Milton, a marine ecologist and sustainability strategist who brings scientific insight and practical expertise to their mission of transforming events into classrooms and catalysts for environmental action.

This small-but-mighty, woman-led team has demonstrated the positive impact that happens when events use their platforms to teach people how to care for the planet. One of Ascendance's most recent programmes, developed in partnership with their local government and environmental non-profit Debris Free Oceans, created free sustainability plans for some of the city's largest events and venues, including both short- and long-term strategies and third-party accountability.

With a proven history of scalable solutions, meaningful partnerships, and an unwavering commitment to helping events turn passion into action, Ascendance has delivered measurable and replicable sustainability programmes in live events, led Florida's first city-backed event sustainability initiative, and empowered both event producers and attendees to become environmental stewards.

The company's work is actively shaping the future of sustainable events in Florida and beyond through education, data, and innovation, proving that events can drive positive change, catalyse community resilience, and lead the way toward a healthier and happier planet.

BM PARK LIVE

BM Park Live operates Junction 2 and Paradise in the City festivals that take place at Boston Manor Park in West London, welcoming 60,000 people across both events. The company is implementing a NetZero by 2025 strategy to accelerate its drive toward carbon-positive events.

Recent moves include making all menus meat-free and plastic-free serveware is made from plastic-free materials, allowing it to be composted at a local facility, while other initiatives have also targeted energy and travel.

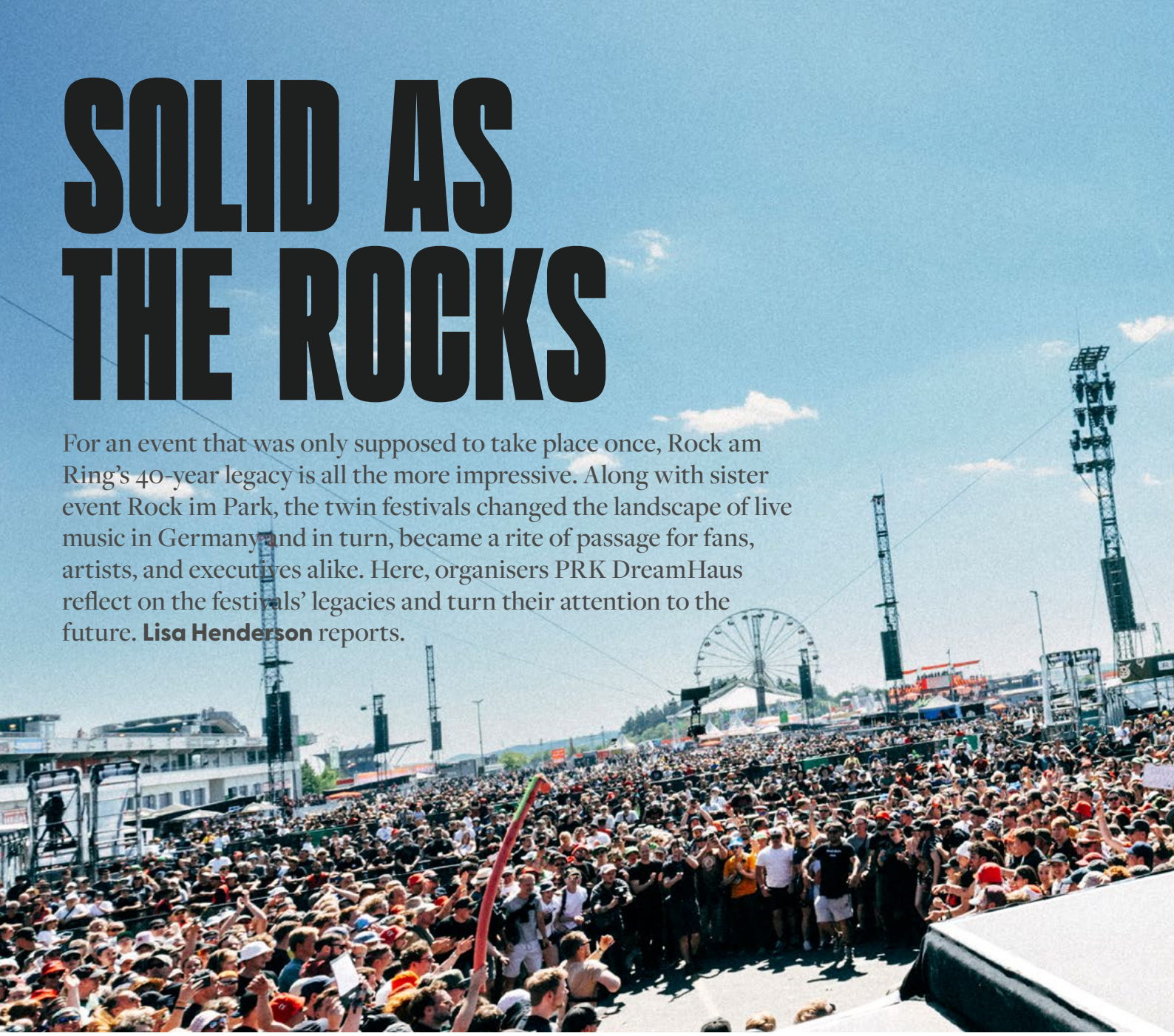
For energy the events use HVO, which has a 90% lower carbon footprint than diesel. The promoter is also working to switch out diesel generators for batteries where possible. In 2025, all of the events' energy, waste, and food emissions that cannot be reduced will be offset through a carbon-removal scheme.

The events charge a £1.75 levy for audience travel to offset travel emissions with onboard:earth. To date, BM Park Live has protected 158 acres through The Rainforest Trust's Rainforest Climate Action Fund and planted 451 trees in Nicaragua and Northern Malawi. Additionally, artists travelling to Junction 2 Festival in 2025 agreed not to use private jets.

BM Park Live's sustainability impact reports also make for some positive reading: Across the three days of Junction 2 last year, 89% of the audience travelled by public transport; the per person per day footprint was 1.23 Kg CO2e – a 14.5% reduction from 2023; waste per person was 42g/day – do from 51g in 2023; the recycling rate improved to 47% ve 38% in 2023; and the event served 2,883 vegan mea

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SOLID AS THE ROCKS



For an event that was only supposed to take place once, Rock am Ring's 40-year legacy is all the more impressive. Along with sister event Rock im Park, the twin festivals changed the landscape of live music in Germany and in turn, became a rite of passage for fans, artists, and executives alike. Here, organisers PRK DreamHaus reflect on the festivals' legacies and turn their attention to the future. **Lisa Henderson** reports.

It's 2003, and Rock am Ring's newest recruit, 22-year-old Matt Schwarz, is getting his first "character-building moment," courtesy of agent Emma Banks.

"Emma walked into our promoter's office holding a festival T-shirt and calmly asked, 'Who's responsible for merchandise?'" Schwarz remembers.

"Eager to help, I smiled and said, 'I am. What can I do for you?' Without saying a word, she pointed to Marilyn Manson's name on the shirt. Somehow, the 'I' and the 'Y' had been swapped. The entire event merch run had his name spelled 'Marylin.' I may not have had a heart attack, but I aged a few years in about ten seconds."

Fortunately, Schwarz's blunder failed to tarnish the reputation of Germany's flagship festivals, Rock am Ring and Rock im Park, which he says had already earned respect for their efficiency.

Along with heavy-hitting lineups, top-tier production, die-hard fanbases, and live global broadcasts on MTV, the rock festivals were catapulted into the global conscience in the first half of their existence.

But it was that wide-eyed 22-year-old who would go on to shepherd Rock am Ring and Rock im Park (AKA The Rocks) through the second half of their legacies, which have now spanned 40 and 30 years, respectively.

While The Rocks have involved a who's who of Germany's most-renowned executives and companies, the incumbent festival chief is Schwarz, CEO of PRK DreamHaus and eventimpresents.

"These festivals have been part of my life for more than half of it. I've grown up with them – not just professionally but personally," he tells *IQ*.

"The anniversaries were deeply emotional for me, and a chance to zoom out – to see the bigger picture and realise that these festivals have be-



Leoniden played Rock am Ring in 2024 © Jule Mehrhoff

come more than just annual events; they're living, evolving, cultural institutions, and I've had the privilege of helping steer them through some of their most transformative chapters."

One of a Kind

Considering it was intended as a one-off, Rock am Ring's 40-year legacy is all the more impressive. Held in 1985 and organised by MAMA Concerts principals Marek Lieberberg and Marcel Avram, it was billed as a celebration of the inauguration of the Nürburgring racetrack in Nürburg. Large-scale open-air festivals were few and far between in Germany, but the first managing director of the new Nürburgring, Rainer Mertel, placed his trust in the renowned promoters.

In a 2010 interview with *Rolling Stone Germany*, Lieberberg said his presiding memory of Rock am Ring 1985 was "incredible tension." He added, "We didn't know if we'd be able to pull off the premiere. How would the crowd flow? Would we be able to start on time, stick to the difficult schedule? Would the security forces be able to handle everything? Despite all the seriousness of the planning, I was aware of the dangers and imponderables."

He needn't have worried. More than 75,000 fans flocked to the inaugural 25–26 May festival, for performances from U2, Joe Cocker, Foreigner, Marius Müller-Westernhagen, Marillion, Chris de Burgh, and Rick Springfield, and a new era in Germany's live music history was ushered in.

"Rock am Ring became an instant cultural phenomenon – there was simply nothing like it," comments Schwarz. "It was bold, ambitious, and genuinely groundbreaking. Marek and Marcel didn't just launch a festival – they changed the landscape of live music in Germany and paved the way for countless others."

Naturally, Lieberberg and co revised their original plan for a one-off festival into an annual festival model, but the success of the debut edition was difficult to follow.

"It became clear that Germany still needed time to fully embrace this new festival format," Schwarz explains.

With Rock am Ring's attendance on a downward trend from 75,000 in 1985 to 30,000 in 1988, and political unrest in Germany gaining momentum, the festival's hiatus in 1989 was well timed.

In 1991, three years after the previous edition of Rock am Ring and two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Nürburg festival returned with a new lease of life.

"Rock am Ring's return in '91 marked a real turning point: from that moment on, the festival gained unstoppable momentum and has remained a cornerstone of German music culture ever since," says Schwarz. "It grew steadily throughout the '90s. By the end of the decade, it had evolved into a full-scale, three-day festival, drawing more than 85,000 fans per day."

Capitalising on the renewed interest, Lieberberg's firm, MLK, launched sister event Rock im Park two years later in Vienna. The following year, the festival relocated to Munich before landing at its current home of Zeppelinfeld, Nuremberg, in 1995.

"Twinning the festivals gives artists a two-date anchor in Germany – logistically streamlined and economically attractive," Schwarz explains. "For fans, it ensures regional access: whether near the Nürburgring or in southern Germany, one of the two events is within reach. While both share the same DNA, each has its own character."

> **"We were effectively building a mid-sized city from scratch – in a matter of days"**
>
> **Matt Schwarz** | PRK DreamHaus

Rock im Park's project lead, Sandra Dersch, adds: "Rock im Park is the most urban festival of its size in Germany. You can be at the gates just 15 minutes after leaving the main station or airport in Nuremberg, but the moment you're inside, it feels like a green, secluded festival bubble. Fans love the short walking distances, the well-structured layout, and the mix of city comfort and nature. It's a very relaxed but still energetic atmosphere."

Wind of Change

Armed with hard-won wisdom from bullish agents and a talent for booking, Schwarz swiftly ascended to vice president of touring and festivals for MLK.

And then, in what was one of the biggest shake-ups in Germany's live music industry, everything changed. In 2015, the newly established Live Nation GSA acquired MLK's team and contracts, including both Schwarz and Lieberberg, who became the firm's managing directors.

However, the MLK name, assets, and Rock am Ring and Rock im Park remained with CTS Eventim, which had bought a majority stake in MLK in 1999 via its Medusa Music Group subsidiary.

"At the time, there was a cooperation agreement between Live Nation and MLK, under which the Live Nation GSA team was mandated to continue producing the festivals on MLK's behalf," explains Schwarz. "While my role evolved, the festivals never really left my life – they remained a continuous thread in my professional journey and something I've always felt deeply connected to."

At the same time, Rock am Ring was going through its own transformation, with a relocation from Nürburgring to Mendig Airfield, since the operator of the racetrack reportedly terminated the contract. Schwarz remembers the move as one of the most "intense yet rewarding" experiences of his career.

"Building a new home for 90,000 people [illegible] site that had never hosted a festival befor[illegible] was an extraordinary challenge," he r[illegible] "After so many years in one place, [illegible] rhythm, a familiarity, but Mer[illegible] slate. We were effectively b[illegible] city from scratch, in a [illegible] countless nights buried [illegible] beyond just the boo[illegible]

The turn of th[illegible] for the orga[illegible]

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AIMING HIGH IN THE LOWLANDS

Costs and inflation are piling pressure on the Netherlands' live music business, with scores of festivals closing shop in recent times. However, with new events springing up and local talent gaining waves of new fans, the country's industry professionals remain upbeat. **Adam Woods** reports.



The Flaming Lips at TivoliVrendenburg
© Ben Houdijk

According to the Dutch consumer price index, goods and services in the Netherlands were 2.9% more expensive in July than they were a year earlier, with prices for rent, energy, and food and drink all rising ahead of the Eurozone average.

In an inflationary world, it's nothing disastrous, and of course, the Netherlands remains one of Europe's wealthier economies. But those in the live industry can confirm that even when things are going pretty well, rising costs can quickly take a little of the ease out of life.

Such has been the trend in the Dutch business of late, with slimmer returns on a number of fronts, even against a background of a busy, vigorous market.

In July, the Association of Dutch Pop Music Venues and Festivals (VNPF) called for increased subsidies after financial losses grew across the Netherlands' venue sector, in spite of rising attendances. The trade body's financial report showed that although 6.9m visitors attended 30,831 performances last year – an 8% upturn on 2023 – with revenues rising by 12% to €253.1m, more than half of venues still reported losses, owing to rises in programming costs (up by 17%) and wages (up 16%).

The Dutch festival scene offers a similar picture of outward abundance combined with treacherously fine margins. More than 100 events disappeared from the scene in 2024, either cancelled or discontinued, though the market also registered 46 new events, according to the Netherlands' Association of Event Makers (VVEM). So far in 2025, at least 50 more festivals have been cancelled, with most citing rising costs and ongoing inflation as the reasons.

"The figures give a mixed picture that does correspond with our ex-

> "The market has changed to such an extent that it's either the really big ones or the really clever, small, strategic ones that have the best chance"
>
> **Bas Flesseman** | Belmont Bookings

pectations," said VVEM chair Boris van der Ham of the 2024 count. "Fortunately, new titles are coming to replace festivals that are disappearing, but it is logical that the growth has stopped."

Taken as a whole, the Netherlands has the kind of problems most markets would settle for. There remain well over 1,000 festivals in the market, including such titans as Mysteryland, Amsterdam Dance Event, Lowlands, and Pinkpop. Every international tour worth the name stops somewhere in the Netherlands, and the domestic talent business is likewise at a peak.

Indoor venues – headed by AFAS Live and Ziggo Dome in Amsterdam, as well as Rotterdam Ahoy – have driven a significant increase in major concerts in the market, and a 6% increase in shows by domestic acts has brought the international-national ratio to almost 50-50 [source: VVEM].

Amsterdam is clearly the focus, with nearby Rotterdam second, but there are a number of appealing touring stops, including Utrecht, Tilburg, The Hague. Nijmegen, Eindhoven, Maastricht, and Groningen – home of industry staple Eurosonic Noorderslag.

The Dutch industry also claimed a useful victory recently, after a proposed tax hike for the cultural and creative market, initially scheduled to come into effect in 2026, was shelved. The government said the VAT increase from 9% to 21% would have generated €1.2bn for the treasury, but campaigners argued it would add more than 10% to the price of tickets and lead to a €350m annual loss in income.

But while many tickets are getting sold and demand remains strong – especially for hot tickets, even in the face of a 16% rise in concert ticket prices last year – no one is suggesting it's easy out there.

"Headline-wise, the market's very strong, especially at the top," says Age Versluis, head of touring at FKP Scorpio's Friendly Fire. "Arena shows and stadium shows are doing really well. But we do have some trouble in the starting-a-career department."

Cost-driven price rises put newer acts in a particularly tough position, says Bas Flesseman of Dutch independent promoter and international booking agency Belmont Bookings. "If the prices aren't fitting for the artists, the hurdle can be too high for audiences to take a chance and go to a show," he says. "For a couple of years after the pandemic, the sky was the limit. Everyone wanted to go out, and everyone had heaps of money to spend on shows. That's winding down now, and, especially for artists who are building a career, that has an effect."

All the same, Dutch artists regularly hit arena level on their own soil. And while the key market for Dutch-language music remains the Netherlands, there is a remarkably rich touring market for domestic talent.

"A good Dutch artist who asks a ten grand kind of fee can easily do, I don't know, 30 festivals in a year," says Versluis. "If you combine that with headline shows, there's a lot of money to be made."

The Netherlands also remains one of the foremost centres for dance music in the world, both in terms of its globally recognised large-scale events and its talent output. The export value of Dutch music grew by 11% to €220m in 2024 – a record total, with dance music accounting for 62% [source: Buma Cultuur]. Global stars such as Afrojack, Hardwell, and Martin Garrix emerged during the EDM boom in around 2012–2013 and remain live fixtures around the world.

"They really stormed all the charts at that time, and those guys are still doing great out there at all the festivals," says Karin Koopmans, dance music coordinator for Dutch Music Export.

The export body pushes hard in the electronic field and others, with creative missions to markets such as Atlanta and Seoul – the latter helpfully coinciding with Dutch producer and delegate Boaz van de Beatz's work with Diplo and Blackpink on this summer's hit *Jump*.

"When we take a producer like that to Korea, you realise this is how the Koreans see us, on an international level – as experts in beats and dance music. The Netherlands is definitely still seen as a taste-making country for electronic music," says Koopmans.

Promoters

It is no secret that Mojo Concerts, which effectively launched the Dutch business on the initiative of Berry Visser and Leon Ramakers in the late 1960s, remains by far its most powerful player – and the one around whom rivals carefully strategise their own areas of focus.

2025 is, like quite a number of years before it, the busiest year in Mojo's history, with tours including Doechii, Olivia Rodrigo, Duran Duran, Brandi Carlisle, Kendrick & SZA, Lady Gaga, and Snoop Dogg, on top of festivals such as Lowlands, North Sea Jazz, Pinkpop, and Down the Rabbit Hole.

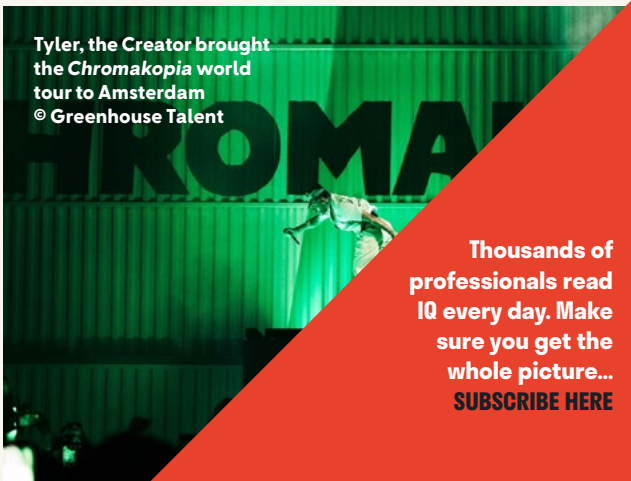
Though the gravitational field of Mojo is a strong one, there are also plenty of other players in the Netherlands, of whom the larger examples include FKP Scorpio's Friendly Fire, the independent Greenhouse Talent, and the Dutch-talent-focused Agents After All, which since 2022 has been a part of All Things Live.

Friendly Fire has strengths in international and Dutch artists and operates events such as Best Kept Secret near Eindhoven, the Live At Amsterdamse Bos concert series, and Headlines Festival at 013 Poppodium in Tilburg. Shows now on sale include Kneecap and Wolf Alice at AFAS Live, and two Ziggo Domes and a Rotterdam Ahoy for *Hans Zimmer Live*, but Versluis is also categorical about the rising tide of Dutch-speaking acts.

"I feel like, apart from the Coldplays and the Taylor Swifts, we're seeing a lot of tickets shifted by domestic artists," he says. "We have a Dutch artist called Roxy Dekker, who's doing four nights at AFAS Live out of nothing. Then there are artists like Kensington, Bente, Mula B, Meau, Danny Vera, and Krezip who are all doing very well for us. And I know Mojo are having a lot of success with New Wave, who have just sold five Ziggo Domes in a couple of days."

Friendly Fire recently formed a partnership with another busy independent, Eindhoven-based metal promoter Loud Noise, to collaborate on major rock shows.

"We were already doing shows of 5,000, 6,000 capacity, and we were looking to expand, but in order to do ▶



Tyler, the Creator brought the *Chromakopia* world tour to Amsterdam
© Greenhouse Talent

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YOUR SHOUT

What act did you discover at a festival or showcase event, and what was it that impressed you about them?


Surfing For Daisy

TOP SHOUT

I have never been more struck by an unknown live act as I was by Surfing For Daisy. This young, six-piece band, with just one year together, completely captivated the room and delivered well-written and arranged songs with the energy of well-seasoned veterans. Unsure if they could consistently deliver in larger rooms with new fans, I went to the Gramercy Theater where they opened for Cardinal Black, and they took the stage and crowd by storm.

I urge everyone to check out the self-produced and self-titled Surfing For Daisy LP – it has only reinforced my belief that you will see them on more major festival bills soon.

Sean Magovern | Production Manager – Bruce Springsteen & The E-Street Band

Lola Moxom smashed it! She got a Glastonbury Festival BBC Introducing slot, etc, after her performance at IFF last year.
Beckie Sugden | CAA

Anton [Lockwood] and the team put together a great lineup at Bearded Theory this year. Muireann Bradley is an incredible teenage country/blues singer and guitarist. Getdown Services were new to me but quickly became a favourite. Adwaith transcended any language barriers. And, if you are yet to experience Slay Duggee, seek them out.
Jon Collins | LIVE

Pretty much every time I attend a showcase or festival, I fall for an artist I knew absolutely nothing about previously. This year, top of the list is from France Music Week – the young, French, female electro-pop-rapper Miki. An electric, super-confident performer with strong tunes, brash words, and boundless attitude.
Nick Hobbs | Charmenko

This year, the act that truly stood out for me was London-based Keo, who describe their sound as "folk songs with grunge guitars." That mix creates a raw yet melodic energy that instantly pulls the audience into their world.

I had the chance to see them live for the first time at this year's Green Man Festival. Their performance confirmed my expectations: they have incredible stage energy and presence, with layered guitars, emotionally charged vocals, and a youthful urgency that feels both nostalgic and fresh.
Burak Çekiç | Blind Istanbul

I discovered Min Taka at Popronde, a showcase for upcoming talent in The Netherlands. She's talented and fun to work with. And a future popstar!
Ronald Keizer | EBB Music

I discovered Dominique at a small club in Stockholm this spring, and I was blown away by her presence, charisma, intelligent songwriting, and voice.

She has worked behind the scenes as a songwriter and producer for other artists for many years, and after receiving encouragement to do her own thing from legends like Dolly Parton, Max Martin, and the late Quincy Jones – she finally stepped out in the limelight with her debut album this year.

She sounds and looks like something out of a James Bond movie, set in a sophisticated nightclub. She deserves to be on international stages. I'm looking forward to what her next steps are – maybe the next 007 film?
Kristofer Åkesson | S

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