

# Despite Sanctions and Boycotts, Some Western Musicians Return to the Stage in Russia

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Jason Derulo. [Moiyea \(CC BY-SA 4.0\)](#)

In the weeks after launching the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, President Vladimir Putin [claimed](#) that the West was trying to “cancel” Russia.

Nearly four years later, a small but growing number of Western musicians including Tyga, Gucci Mane and Jason Derulo are returning to the stage in Russia despite continued sanctions and widespread cultural boycotts.

While these acts are hardly on the A-list, their return signals that some Western artists are willing to risk backlash by entertaining fans in a country that invaded its neighbor — and that Russia has figured out a way to draw them in, analysts and music critics told The Moscow Times.

Before the pandemic and the war, it was not uncommon to see some of the biggest acts in the world performing in Russia, with artists like [Red Hot Chili Peppers](#), [Lana Del Rey](#), [System of a Down](#), [Muse](#) and [Thirty Seconds to Mars](#) playing to packed arenas across the country.

But apart from a brief [visit](#) by Kanye West, big-name Western acts were largely absent from Russia from February 2022 through the end of 2024. Audiences instead had to settle for pro-Putin actor Steven Seagal's [blues band](#) and former Deep Purple frontman Joe Lynn Turner's [solo act](#).

## **B-list acts test the waters**

That started to change in 2025.

U.S. rapper DaBaby arrived in Moscow in February 2025 for his first performance in Russia, a concert he had reportedly been [planning](#) since 2022. He was greeted at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport by a folk ensemble and presented with a custom-made balalaika.

During the show, the rapper invited a teenager on stage, who then proceeded to [vomit](#) in front of the crowd.

Rapper Tyga followed with concerts in Russia in [May](#) and [August](#). Asked after his May performance whether he feared any backlash, the rapper said: "Y'all showed me a lot of love. I appreciate it. I appreciate Russia."

Pro-Trump rapper Lil Pump also [performed](#) in Moscow in June, supported by Richie Wess and Smokerpurpp after the show's original headliner Offset pulled out due to "widespread flight cancellations." Lil Pump closed his set with "I Love It," co-written with Kanye West, and later [recorded](#) a song with Russian singer MARGO.

"Lil Pump has already been to Russia, and he really likes it here," [said](#) Anna Subcheva, CEO of Say Agency, a major Moscow-based concert promoter. "When he found out that there was an opportunity to come and perform, he was all for it."

Five-time Grammy nominee Akon [played](#) two shows in Russia over the summer — his first since 2014. Pro-Kremlin outlet Izvestia [described](#) the Senegalese-American singer dancing shirtless, crowdsurfing inside a transparent sphere and "rocking the capital's audience."

"This is really our youth," one concertgoer told Izvestia. "We love R&B, rap and hip-hop, that's why we're here. It's not about nostalgia. It's always trendy."

Rapper and "Pimp My Ride" host Xzibit played [three concerts](#) in Russia in 2025, while R&B singer Jason Derulo [performed](#) in St. Petersburg and Moscow, where he [told fans](#) he would return on his 2026 world tour.

And in December, rapper Gucci Mane reportedly [arrived](#) early in Moscow after a 19-hour journey from Atlanta via Dubai to tour the Kremlin ahead of his show.

## **Legal and logistical hurdles**

While Western artists are not banned from visiting Russia, many have avoided the country

since 2022 due to political optics, reputational concerns and the complexities of complying with sanctions.

Performing in Russia means walking a tightrope around U.S. and EU sanctions, which requires due diligence to avoid dealings with sanctioned banks or entities.

While it's not always possible to know who an artist contracts with, the exiled group Transparency International Russia told The Moscow Times that artists were likely paid not directly by Russian promoters but through their touring, booking or management companies.

Payments are often routed through intermediaries or foreign counterparties because sanctions restrict cross-border transfers, the group said.

“In other sectors we have reviewed, similar intermediaries facilitate cross-border settlement from Russia by operating across multiple jurisdictions and banking systems,” the representative said.

Transparency also noted that the Say Agency [organized](#) most concerts by foreign performers in Russia.

While the use of intermediaries is not illegal, it increases sanctions compliance risks, the group said.

## **Money talks?**

Some artists do face backlash for their performances in Russia.

“Do you really think this is the right time to visit a country whose regime is committing genocide every day?” one user commented on Jason Derulo's social media.

Music critic Artemy Troitsky told The Moscow Times that the artists coming to Russia were all “second-division acts” likely earning far more there than they would for concerts in the U.S. or Europe.

Another critic, Vladimir Zavyalov, [told](#) the news outlet Vot Tak in September that performers without socially conscious fanbases — and with less to lose reputationally — were more likely to accept Russian bookings.

He added that the war in Gaza had taken Western attention away from the Russia-Ukraine war, making it less of a PR risk for Western artists to perform in Russia.

“There are few Ukrainian flags and Ukrainian themes” at European music festivals, Zavyalov claimed. “[Instead], there is ‘Free Palestine’ — lots of Palestinian flags and anti-Israel slogans. One agenda has been replaced by another.”

## **What comes next?**

Backlash or no, “at least 20” foreign artists are slated to perform in Russia in 2026, the pro-Kremlin newspaper Izvestia [wrote](#) in September.

“Next year, we plan to hold 20–30 concerts in genres ranging from pop to rock, not forgetting our favorite rap,” Say Agency’s Subcheva told the outlet.

Igor Logachev, the director of an events agency that works with U.S. rappers, told Izvestia that foreign performers often arrive in Russia apprehensive but leave with a changed view.

“They hear one thing on television, but here it’s completely different,” he told Izvestia. “The response and love they receive from Russian fans is incomparable.”

Events agency director Logachev said that Akon is likely to visit Siberia this year, while artists like As I Lay Dying already have full Russian tours [planned](#).

Other Western artists like Hollywood Undead, T.I., Flo Rida and more are also [slated](#) to perform in Russia this year.

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