

## All the World's a Stage

TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS CREATE NEW HEADACHES FOR FOREIGN ARTISTS, U.S. PRESENTERS, AND ORGANIZATIONS LIKE CENTER STAGE

BY ALLISON HUSSEY

**Sounds of Kolachi** PHOTO COURTESY OF CAROLINA PERFORMING ARTS

One summer evening at Motorco in 2014, what seemed like a typical midlevel rock show had actually come about through exceptional efforts. The headlining act was Poor Rich Boy, a Pakistani ensemble on its first U.S. tour. The tour was made possible by Center Stage, a program funded through the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. It helps international artists untangle the web of financial and logistical barriers they must face to tour in the States.

Center Stage is still humming along, and two Pakistani artists in its current season are scheduled to stop in Chapel Hill in the coming weeks: the folk-rock band Sounds of Kolachi, which performs at Memorial Hall this weekend, and Sanam Marvi, who arrives in mid-April.

But the national political climate has changed considerably since Center Stage artists last appeared here. The Trump administration has been aggressively attempting to block citizens of Libya, Iran, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, and Somalia from entering the U.S., and organizations like Center Stage, as well as regional arts presenters, now face thorny new challenges.

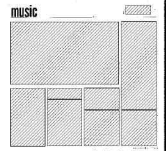
The process for an international artist to gain approval to tour the United States is just short of nightmarish. Even when they

spend weeks making sure they have their paperwork in order, it doesn't guarantee them entry.

"There's a very involved visa process for international artists coming to the U.S. that is costly, time-consuming, and, at times, capricious," says Aaron Greenwald, the director of Duke Performances, who worked with Center Stage, in its first Triangle venture, to bring Poor Rich Boy to Music in the Gardens in 2014. "It was complex enough when the former administration was in the White House, and there was not a concerted focus on visitors from majority-Muslim countries."

Center Stage minimizes those hurdles, removing paperwork roadblocks, securing visas, arranging housing and transportation, developing marketing materials, and setting up per diem funds. This year's artists hail from Algeria, Tanzania, and Pakistan. But the organization can afford to help only a handful, leaving many others on their own.

Emil Kang, director of Carolina Performing Arts, accompanied Center Stage representatives on a planning trip to Pakistan in late 2015. Center Stage was developing the programming for its current season, while Kang was assembling the CPA series Sacred/Secular: A Sufi Journey, which is ongoing. It highlights the cultural impact of Islam on Muslim-majority countries



outside of the Middle East, challenging preconceived notions about the religion—a mission that aligns with Center Stage’s push for global understanding.

“If nothing else, I’m hoping that we can support this understanding that Islam exists in many ways, primarily outside of the Arab world,” Kang says. The Muslim-majority Pakistan has been excluded from both attempted travel bans, and *Sounds of Kolachi*’s visas have already been secured, so the band is clear of any immediate border trouble. But both Kang and Greenwald are concerned about the message the bans send to all international artists, even those whose home countries are not blacklisted.

“The more that the federal government increases the degree of difficulty for organizations to present international artists, the fewer that will,” Greenwald says. Kang, meanwhile, says he’s heard from many international artists who are concerned that presenters won’t even bother trying to book them due to the difficulty of the process.

Ultimately, the potential effect of such restrictions on performing arts institutions can’t be measured in empty seats, lost ticket sales, or ruined travel plans. What’s on the line is a vibrant exchange of ideas that transcends political or military interests. It’s not just audiences’ loss. Artists denied the opportunity to tour the U.S. lose worthwhile opportunities, too, as Kang points out. When the musicians of *Sounds of Kolachi* visit UNC classes on this trip, they’re likely to discover as much about American students as the students learn about Pakistani musicians.

“Our mantra has always been, ‘We bring the world to Chapel Hill,’” Kang says of Carolina Performing Arts. “Being an institution of higher education and actually having our communities with people from other worlds hopefully breeds greater understanding and curiosity and interest in these places and environments.”

In uncertain times, Center Stage isn’t shying from efforts to further cultural diplomacy. It’s already working on booking artists from Egypt and Ukraine for its next season.

“We are not backing away from bringing artists, including artists from countries that are Muslim majority, to the U.S. In fact, we think that to combat conflict and build connections, those relationships are more important than ever,” says Cathy Edwards, director of the New England Foundation

for the Arts, which helps facilitate Center Stage’s programming.

Center Stage is currently operating in a “wait and see mode,” Edwards says. But, with no changes to its funding yet, she remains cautiously optimistic about the program’s prospects.

“Paradoxically, it’s often businesspeople and even military people who know firsthand, because of their international work, how important person-to-person connections are,” she explains. “You can’t do business or be involved in military actions unless you have real relationships with people to build on.”

*ahussey@indyweek.com*

## SOUNDS OF KOLACHI

Friday, March 31, 8 p.m., \$10-\$20  
UNC’s Memorial Hall, Chapel Hill  
[www.carolinaperformingarts.org](http://www.carolinaperformingarts.org)