



POST-BREXIT CLUBLAND



It's been unavoidable in the news over the past couple of years, and we still don't really know what's going to happen, but this month the UK is scheduled to leave the European Union. DJ Mag attempts to evaluate the effects Brexit might have on DJ and dance music culture...

Words: HAROLD HEATH

At the time of writing, the UK is set to leave the European Union (EU) on 29th March 2019, although quite what form this exit will take is still unclear. The result of the EU referendum raised a number of serious questions for DJs, musicians and performers, and indeed the whole of the UK's music business. It may not feel as though DJing and club culture are part of the greater music industry, as we often think of ourselves as underground and somehow separate from the world of executives in suits doing slick deals in large offices. But no matter how subterranean we think we are, DJs, producers, singers, rappers, musicians, promoters, designers, photographers, journalists, managers and the huge network of people who run festivals, nightclubs and record labels are all as much a part of the music business as Warner Group, Spotify or Cardi B.

CHECKS & BALANCES

While it's important that we attempt to present a balanced view of what is an extremely complex subject, it's also vital that equal space isn't given to opposing views simply to supply balance, in a way that disproportionately represents their validity. The problem with presenting 'both sides' uncritically is that it can grant legitimacy to distortions or untruths, such as with the climate change debate. If, as is the case here, every music business body has substantial concerns about the potential ill-effects of Brexit on the industry, and has little to no positive opinion on the subject, it would not be balanced to then attempt to find an equal number of opposing industry voices.

The government-funded Arts Council's 2017 'Impact of Brexit on the arts and culture sector' report surveyed a sample of the UK's creative industries and illustrated this point, with most responders having "...a negative perception of Brexit, with many expressing the view that it would have adverse effects on the arts and culture sector. When asked about potential advantages, a majority stated that they were not able to give any arising for their organisation as a result of Brexit".

It's also worth noting that despite input from MPs, the Musicians Union, the Incorporated Society Of Musicians, Immigration Advice Service, record labels, DJs, promoters and reference to European Commission and UK Government documents, the hard truth is that it is impossible to predict how Brexit is going to unfold. This article is merely a 'best guess', based on the research and opinion of industry experts.

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

Most pertinent for club culture is the loss of freedom of movement, which DJ Mag covered comprehensively in a previous feature last October. This is likely to increase the administration required to travel outside of the UK for DJs. Visas, border checks, work permits and dual taxation forms are likely to make gigging in Europe for UK citizens far more difficult and costly, which will likely hit smaller, less well-known DJs and agencies the hardest. The UK government's 'mobility framework' to counter these ill-effects has yet to be finalised or agreed with the EU.

The other main areas of concern for DJs and club culture

are the possible impact on EU artists coming to work and perform in the UK, the practical effects that Brexit is going to have on UK independent record labels, and more broadly, our international reputation within the music industry. On the plus side, post-Brexit there may be VAT advantages, and some have suggested that a weak pound means better wages for UK citizens working in Europe, something we'll return to below.

COMING TO THE UK

In summer 2018, it was widely reported that many performers attempting to get to the internationally renowned WOMAD (World Of Music Arts & Dance) festival in the UK had found the process "so difficult and humiliating" that they had given up. The UK government's 'hostile environment' policy has made the process of getting a visa more difficult, resulting in some artists abandoning their applications, or having to miss other gigs because of delays. The Arts Council survey's conclusions make grim reading for those involved in booking acts to bring to the UK too.

"A large number of respondents were concerned that barriers to bringing artists to the UK could have an impact on artistic quality," the report said. "They thought this would lead to less sharing of skills, ideas and practice, and a less convivial environment for artistic risk. Many connect these concerns with threats to future artist mobility, cross-border artistic collaborations and touring."

Damon Culbert, from leading experts in immigration law the Immigration Advice Service, confirms this trend: "... the evidence shows that extending our current immigration system to Europeans after Brexit will no doubt discourage artists from visiting, and make it much more difficult for overseas DJs and recording artists to work in the UK".

Also, DJs complaining about airports is about to get worse. Robin Ball organises the Memory Box parties in London and Brighton, featuring DJs from the US, Europe and the UK such as Juan Atkins, Derrick Carter and Heidi. He paints a bleak picture of what he believes lies ahead in terms of getting European DJs into the UK post-Brexit.

"Over the last few years, transatlantic flights have become more expensive," Ball says. "One of the reasons for this is a rise in airport and security taxes, and it's likely Brexit will do the same for flights within the EU. If we leave the EU, we will need to make new air service agreements, which gives another opportunity for flight companies to raise fares. American DJs need a Certificate of Sponsorship to work in the UK. This has a financial cost, and adds red tape, and it's possible we will start needing something similar for European DJs to work for us."

Not to mention the extra time spent waiting while DJs get through customs. These are the kinds of costs which a larger club or festival could perhaps absorb by passing it on to their customer base or simply taking the financial hit, in a way that just isn't viable for a smaller operator.

BUT ON THE PLUS SIDE...

Counter to this, however, it has been argued that while Brexit may well discourage or even prevent UK promoters from booking European DJs and performers, this might be good for UK DJ culture by allowing British talent to come through instead. This argument might seem appealingly logical, but it also sounds alarmingly close to a simple re-hash of the old "coming over here, taking our jobs" trope. A convenient analysis, but one which assumes that everything in clubland will be identical to how it is now, except that there will be less European DJs being booked, so we'll simply replace them with UK DJs. It doesn't take into account the likely negative effect of Brexit on the economy in general, and the knock-on effect this will have on the night-time economy. Neither does it take into account the damage that is likely to be done to many UK dance music small

businesses, including agents and promoters. It also ignores just how much club and festival line-ups are led by consumer demand. And finally, and perhaps most tragically, this idea completely ignores the enrichment, inspiration and positive influence brought to UK club culture by overseas influence.

There are many uncertainties surrounding Brexit. Luke Mac, member of UK dance outfit Disciples, regularly tours around Europe and the rest of the world, and like many performers, is facing a very uncertain year.

"Along with most other touring DJs, we already have shows booked across the EU in 2019," Mac says, "and still have no idea how easy it's going to be to enter and work in these places. Leaving the EU certainly isn't going to make our lives as touring DJs any easier in the long term. The only positive we can think of is that the pound is going to be so weak once we leave, getting paid in Euros when playing in Europe is going to be worth a bit more than usual, once we convert it back into pounds."

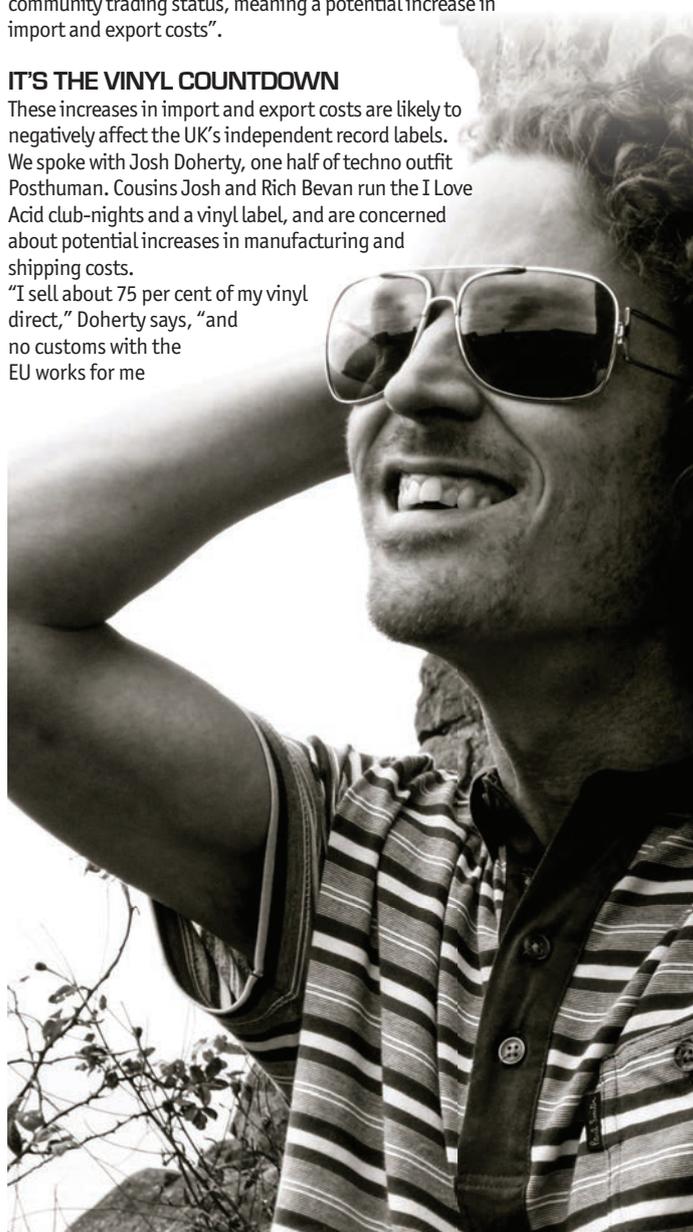
The weak pound as a result of Brexit has often been mentioned as a Brexit advantage and certainly, if you sell goods and services in Europe, then your profits will be worth more in sterling terms. However, there are other consequences of a weak pound on the UK economy that tend to counter this benefit, not least the increased price of imported goods and services. The other dance music industry-related advantage of leaving the EU could be that the UK will no longer be constrained by EU VAT rules. But again, the Arts Council says that this has to be tempered by the fact that, "Conversely, the process for trading in goods across the EU is likely to change due to the loss of intra-community trading status, meaning a potential increase in import and export costs".

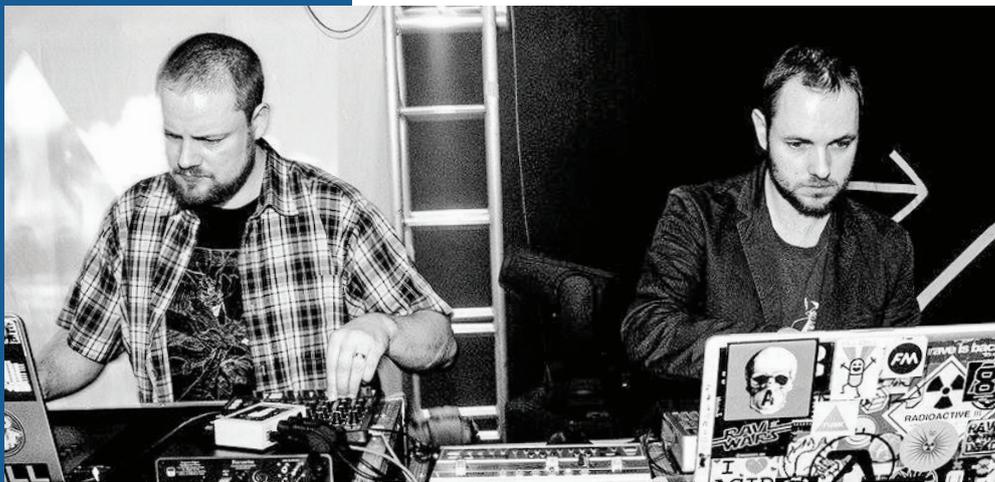
IT'S THE VINYL COUNTDOWN

These increases in import and export costs are likely to negatively affect the UK's independent record labels. We spoke with Josh Doherty, one half of techno outfit Posthuman. Cousins Josh and Rich Bevan run the I Love Acid club-nights and a vinyl label, and are concerned about potential increases in manufacturing and shipping costs.

"I sell about 75 per cent of my vinyl direct," Doherty says, "and no customs with the EU works for me

Robin Ball





Posthuman

on two fronts — manufacturing vinyl in the EU (or countries that the EU has tariff-free trade with), and then shipping to customers.”

Even so, margins for vinyl labels can be tight, and this is where Brexit could hit UK dance music hard. “I usually do advance subscriptions for I Love Acid, but I’m worried about doing that now, because if the customs change, or the currency tanks, I could be left high and dry. I already had to increase my vinyl retail costs in 2016, from £6 to £7 to compensate for the sterling crash as it hit me twice, at manufacturing level, then again at retail. If you manufacture and then sell back to the EU, every change is doubled, due to the crossing of the border/exchange of currency twice.”

Again, this could be countered by saying that UK labels should produce their vinyl in the UK, but Doherty argues, “There are of course pressing plants in the UK, but they aren’t competitive price-wise, and will also no doubt have to increase their costs [post-Brexit] as most galvanics are done outside the UK, and vinyl pellet supplies are also pretty much exclusively from abroad.”

The threat to independent record labels is a view echoed by the Beggars group, home to independents Rough Trade and XL Recordings, which has spoken out over its Brexit concerns in a recent statement, and other UK music industry bodies are lobbying the government in different ways. The Musicians Union is overwhelmingly in favour of remaining in the EU, describing the “benefits of free movement, copyright protection and joint lobbying to musicians” as “innumerable”. UK Music, the industry funded body that promotes the interests of record labels, publishers, songwriters, musicians, producers and managers has also recently written to the UK Prime Minister, regarding their serious concerns around the loss of free movement of goods and people.

NOT COMING OVER HERE ANYMORE, ACTUALLY

One more effect of Brexit to consider on our dance music community here in the UK is that the government’s new skills-based immigration system includes a minimum salary threshold of £30,000. This is a figure widely derided in the music business as unrealistic in an industry notorious for low wages, particularly in the early stages of a career. Also, EU nationals will now have to register under a new settlement scheme that will open on 30th March 2019. It’s difficult to predict just how such a hostile environment and unrealistic salary threshold will impact the make-up of the creative community here in the UK over the coming years, but it is clearly likely to discourage Europeans from working and living in the UK. And a drop in casual and low-skilled European workers coming to the UK is extremely likely too. Whether you think this is bad or good probably depends on your understanding of — and feelings about — immigration. This article isn’t discussing the pros and cons of immigration, it is trying to understand how DJing and clubland may be affected by Brexit.

However, it would be remiss to not mention the racist

component of the immigration aspect of the Brexit debate. Not all Leave supporters are racist, but the anti-immigrant strand of the Brexit debate has reignited and emboldened some highly unpleasant elements on the Right. And it’s also true that the racist overtones of much of the Vote Leave campaign narrative are impossible to square with clubland’s egalitarian, inclusive and tolerant ethos. This alone should make the dance music community concerned about Brexit and the forces behind it, regardless of whether or not we support membership of the EU.

Aside from the ‘more work for UK DJs’ argument, it’s difficult to see any real benefits

to DJ and club culture from exiting the EU in any of the current scenarios. Instead, Brexit will likely make it more difficult for independent record labels to survive in what was already a cut-throat industry, and it will clearly be more challenging for small UK promoters to compete with larger players. Gigging in Europe for UK DJs may be more costly and time-consuming, and UK DJ agents’ jobs are about to become vastly more complex too. DJ Francesca Lombardo says: “I am worried about potential visa fees coming into play more. This won’t have as much impact on the big names, it’s more going to be the newer, smaller promoters and upcoming artists that will feel the hit. I fear line-ups will become less diverse and less exciting as a result.”

The UK has an enviable international reputation as a country that can produce a couple of entirely new genres in the morning, then knock out a few amazing new artists before afternoon tea, before launching a brand new club scene after dinner. Isolating ourselves from other countries, becoming more culturally inward, and making it difficult and humiliating for other artists to come and work here is a good start if we wish to damage that reputation. The tragic truth is that it looks as though it won’t just be the reputation of the UK’s dance music scene that will be damaged by Brexit, but the actual reality of it too.

Musicians Union Brexit Campaign:
musiciansunion.org.uk/Home/Campaign/Brexit

UK Music letter to the UK Prime Minister:
ukmusic.org/policy/brexit-uk-musics-key-concerns/



Francesca Lombardo