



CULTURE

What Goes Into Executing the Perfect Music Festival

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Earlier this year, as I strolled into the Broccoli City Festival at RFK Stadium in Washington, DC, it wasn't just Don Toliver's *Flocky Flocky* blaring through the venue's sound system as he rocked the stage in front of 30,000 hip-hop heads that caught my attention. The giant ferris wheel and the sprawling layout of concessions, games, activations, and highly-Instagrammable photo booths energized me even more to get the weekend's festivities started.

The festival was filled with great performances from the likes of Jeezy, 21 Savage, Summer Walker, and Ari Lennox, among others, and even better vibes from the other attendees. At the end of it all, not only was I satisfied with my experience, but I began wondering what goes into executing the perfect festival or large-scale concert.

Bryan Duquette, co-founder and producer of Outside Lands — a music festival held in the San Francisco Bay Area — and vice president of concerts at Another Planet Entertainment, said if he had to sum it up, there are three key factors to producing the perfect event.

First: "Location, location, location! I think having a unique, special location is one of the most important things for any festival," Duquette told Cheddar News. "You look at Golden Gate Park with Outside Lands, you've nailed one of the best urban parks in the world and the setting is just unbelievable. You feel like you're in the middle of a forest out there, but you're only a few blocks from civilization."



Atmosphere as Parcels perform during the 2022 Outside Lands Music and Arts Festival at Golden Gate Park on August 06, 2022 in San Francisco, California. (Photo by Tim Mosenfelder/Getty Images)

Outside Lands festival has more than doubled its audience size since the first run in 2008, when nearly 80,000 people attended, to more than 225,000 festival-goers this year, said Duquette. With the cost of admission on the low end of the scale around \$175, the festival raked in at least \$35 million in ticket sales alone.

Like Outside Lands, some of the country's most successful festivals are anchored by where they are held, like Coachella at the Empire Polo Club in Indio, California, Bonnaroo at Great Stage Park in Tennessee, and Lollapalooza at Chicago's Grant Park.

Second: Duquette noted the importance of the festival matching up with the audience expectations.

"Having an identity with what you're booking, whether that be a specific genre, or if it's a specific era, or you're trying to be a multi-genre/contemporary music [festival], I think it's important to find your niche, programming-wise, on top of having a great location," he said.

The third and final key: To execute the perfect festival is having something for attendees to interact with aside from standing in front of a stage.

"Having other facets of the experience at the festival site other than music [is essential]. Whether that's having big art installations, or having carnival games, or having a ferris wheel, or having a silent disco party," Duquette added. "You can't just throw music on a stage and think you have a festival. It has to have some other sauce or spice to it other than music."



A general view of the atmosphere during the 2022 Outside Lands Music and Arts Festival at Golden Gate Park on August 05, 2022 in San Francisco, California. (Photo by Tim Mosenfelder/Getty Images)

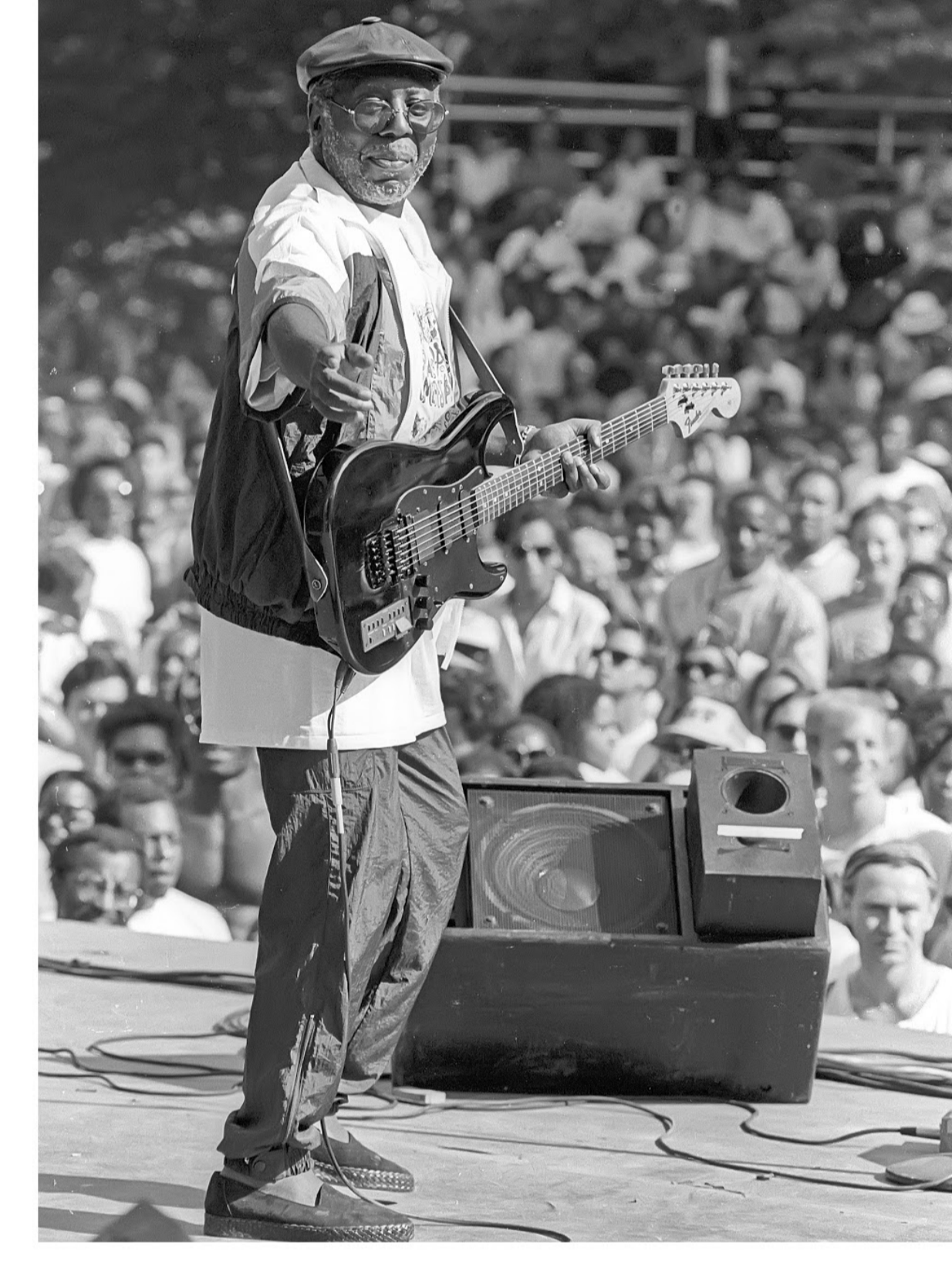
Scouting Acts

While it is important to keep interactive experiences in mind for the perfect festival and large scale music events in general, what would it be without the talent to match? Music fans wait all year for their favorite acts to announce tours or slates of shows, but those announcements are sometimes years in the making.

Heather Lubov, executive director at the City Parks Foundation in New York City, noted just how much planning goes into artist selection alone for the annual SummerStage concert series, which first began in 1986.

"We basically started [in August] to book for next summer," she told Cheddar News. "It takes a good year to do it. We have to finish by March so that we can announce the season in April and get ready for everything."

SummerStage, which is held in Central Park, looks to bring a diverse set of musical performances to its productions and in the past has hosted acts like Celia Cruz, Joni Mitchell, Curtis Mayfield, Machine Gun Kelly, and Public Enemy.



(Left) Curtis Mayfield performs at Central Park's SummerStage on July 7, 1990. (Right) Celia Cruz performs at Central Park SummerStage on June 16, 2002. (Both photos by Jack Vartogian/Getty Images)

"We have two programmers, we have an artistic director, and a programming manager, and they are really the drivers of our season. They stay on top of who's the coolest, who's the newest, who's the hottest, who's the rising star that you should want to know because they're going to be really great, and we have lots of examples of that," Lubov said.

Duquette and Outside Lands, meanwhile, have a similar approach when booking acts. Their focus is on diversity and big name features.

"It's really important for our festival to be in a way that represents San Francisco, that represents Outside Lands. Ultimately we try to be as diverse as possible, we try to be genreless," he said. "We always start by booking the headliners, first because those are typically the most expensive acts and also the ones that we're planning far in advance."

Vetting Performers

When it comes to insurance, it is perhaps a lesser-known fact that certain genres of music are deemed more risky than others by insurance companies.

"These types of events are underwritten specifically based on what that event is. Even the type of band that is performing will affect the rate. If this is a gospel choir that is performing, your rate is going to be less than if it is a rap concert," said Greg Esterhai, co-owner of Eventsured, an event insurance company that specializes in large-scale policy coverage.

He also said other genres, like EDM, often face more stringent guidelines for booking shows and are often hit with higher rates for a premium. Over the years EDM festivals have developed a reputation for rampant drug use and violence among festival-goers, which has led to overdoses and deaths on a number of occasions.

The Rolling Loud hip-hop festival, which first kicked off in 2015 in Miami and has since attained worldwide recognition, is no stranger to what some officials describe as "risky" performers. Ahead of this year's New York City stop, which ran for three days at Citi Field in Queens, the NYPD forced concert organizers to pull the plug on three artists — 22Gz, Sha Ek, and Ron Suno — who are linked to New York's drill scene, a subgenre of rap that has been deemed violent by some. In February, New York City Mayor Eric Adams addressed the drill music in his home borough of Brooklyn, saying "I had no idea what drill rapping was, but I called my son and he sent me some videos, and it is alarming."

In 2019, the late Pop Smoke, Sheff G, and Casanova were among artists to have their Rolling Loud sets shut down by concert organizers at the request of police.

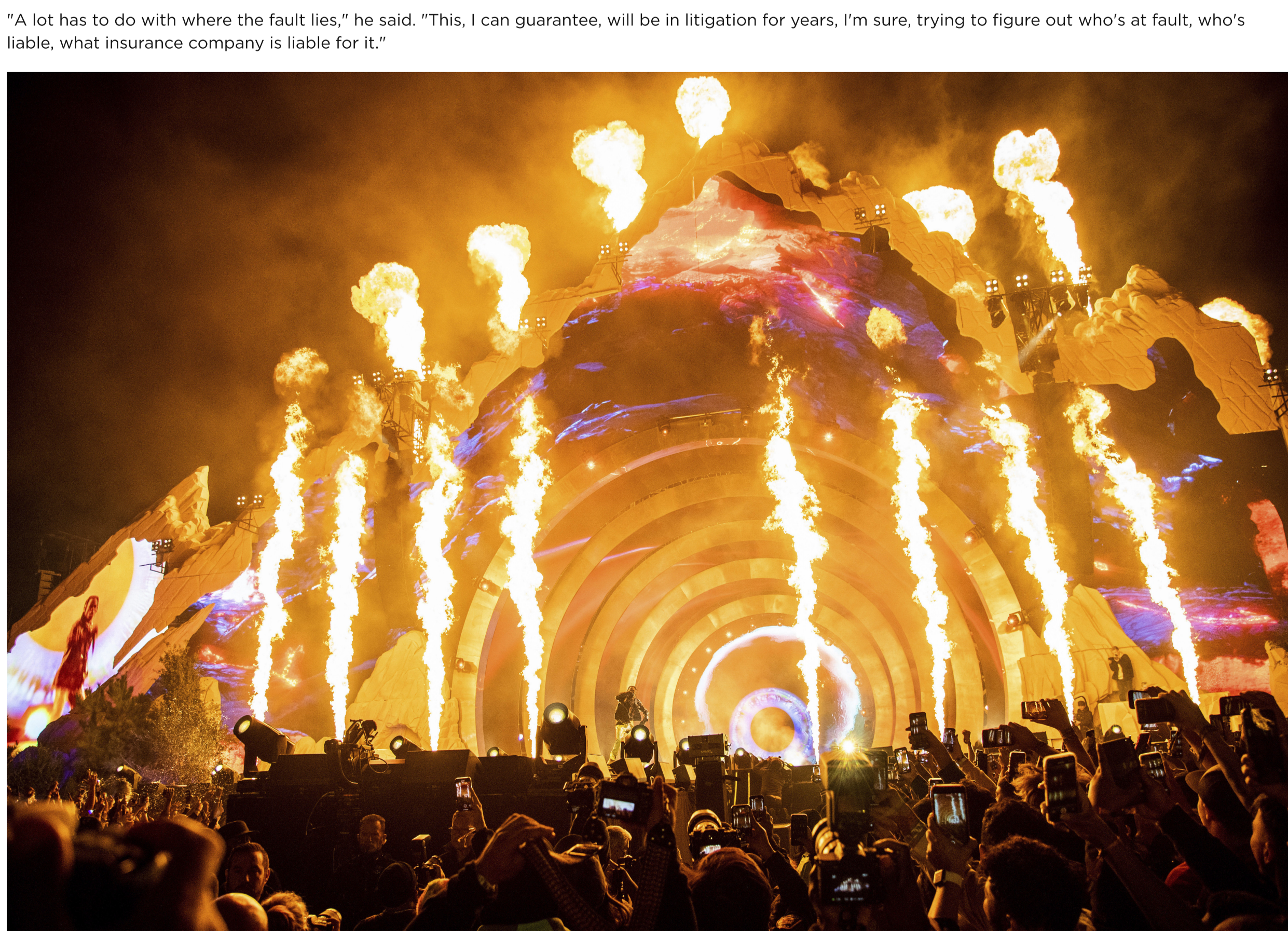
Safety & Security

Security at these events is evolving and notable changes have come after 10 lives were lost at the 2021 Astroworld Festival in Houston when a crush of tightly-packed fans rushed the stage during founder Travis Scott's set.

It hasn't yet been determined whether a larger security presence could have prevented the melee from escalating, but after the event there were reports that many of the hired security guards did not have extensive experience. Last month, Houston announced a new task force that will improve coordination between promoters and public safety agencies to make sure shows like this are carried out safely.

For Scott, it would be nine-months before he would headline another show. There were also hundreds of lawsuits to address. Esterhai said he wouldn't expect the legal battles to end anytime soon.

"A lot has to do with where the fault lies," he said. "This, I can guarantee, will be in litigation for years, I'm sure, to figure out who's at fault, who's liable, what insurance company is liable for it."



Travis Scott performs at the Astroworld Music Festival in Houston, Nov. 5, 2021. (Photo by Amy Harris/Invision/AP, File)

Hours after the crush, Scott said he hadn't understood "the severity of the situation" in the moment and would have stopped the show if he had.

Since the Astroworld tragedy, it is more common to see performers halt their shows in order to check crowd safety. It's a move that can protect concert-goers and, from a business perspective, artists, venues, and investors.

With the largest festivals drawing hundreds of thousands of attendees, there is a question about how much responsibility an artist has when it comes to crowd control.

At the Outside Lands festival there were at least 1,000 security guards in place overseeing a crowd of 75,000 attendees per day.

For Capital One City Parks Foundation SummerStage, effective security is top of mind.

"There are not that many security firms that are able to provide the level of service that we need. We've worked with all of them, as far as I know. We've identified the vendor that is right for us [and] we've worked with the same company now for at least five years. And they have a huge amount of experience working at festivals all around the city," Lubov said.

Updated December 28, 2022 to clarify Capital One City Parks Foundation SummerStage is the proper title of the concert series.

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