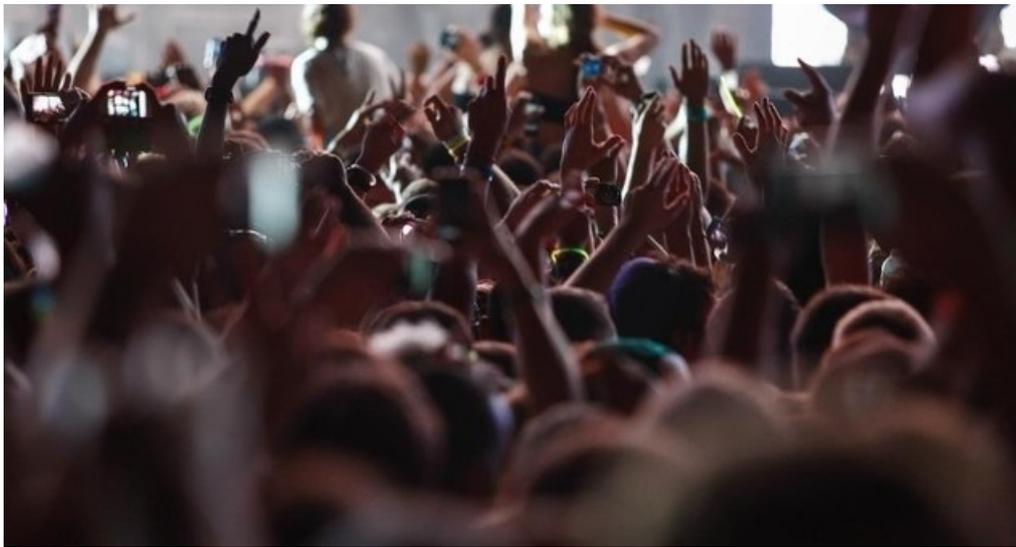


Seeing music differently

[Munisha Lall](#) discusses her unique experience of attending Reading & Leeds Festival with a visual impairment

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I'm as dedicated a music fan as the next girl; I'll happily listen to a Bombay Bicycle Club record every day of the week. What I love above all else about music though is experiencing the artists I admire perform on stage. Watching the music come alive in a reasonably sweaty room, or in a starlit field filled with a sizable number of complete strangers who share that same passion, is for me an absolute privilege. It's often said that music is one of life's greatest joys, so shouldn't it have the capacity to bring together all kinds of people?

I have Retinitis Pigmentosa, a genetic visual impairment that causes night blindness, tunnel vision and chronic short-sightedness. By day, you wouldn't even know I have RP. I've gone years without some of my friends even knowing about it. It's deceiving though, because when the lights are switched off and the sun sets below the horizon, my eyes stop functioning as they should. I'm not blind, but I probably can't see enough to walk down the street without walking into a parked car or tripping over the curb. So how does someone like me with a light affecting condition go about attending a music festival when, as soon as the daylight hours end, I see the brightly lit stage and pretty much nothing else?

It's not easy to describe what I see in poorly lit spaces; it's not blurry, nor is it pitch black darkness. What I see at night is the world so much dimmer than you probably do. I see the stage, shrouded in a bountiful array of coloured lights perfectly fine, but not the gloom that surrounds it. I see the outline of my friends' facial features beside me, and the dark shadow of peoples' heads ahead and behind me in the crowd, but the ground and the sky are an intense jet black.

My first festival experience was 12 months ago. I took a four hour coach journey down to Reading and spent five days living in a tent. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little daunted by the thought of being

packed into an 85,000 strong crowd for Arctic Monkeys or trying to get my monthly contact lenses out in the darkness. I'd never camped before and I certainly had no idea what sort of obstacles I would encounter at night. I'm a tiny thing as it is, and like most people who are 5'2" I get flung about in crowds pretty easily.



Credit: Jen O'Neill

I've faced my fair share of inconveniences and difficulty in dark gig venues and at festivals after dark. There are those that forget to tell you about the approaching stairs, and those that manage to walk you straight into a bollard or pole or, even more embarrassingly, into other people. Then there are those that forget you have a visual impairment altogether.

It's not all doom and gloom though. It's 10pm on a Sunday and I'm at Leeds Festival 2015 with my best friend in the fairly small, easily navigable Festival Republic tent. The Wombats step on stage and the mosh-pit ensues. In the sheer darkness, this could be terrifying. Instead, the experience is exhilarating. There are no stairs, no obstacles, and I feel no different to the couple hundred others packed under the canopy, and it's bliss. This kind of change in the make-up and composition of festivals - different stage sizes and atmospheres - makes the experience so much more diverse, and diversity-friendly.

And change is happening continually. Attitude Is Everything, an organisation that works with many festivals including Reading and Leeds, improves deaf and disabled people's access to live music by working in partnership with venues, audiences, artists and the music industry. The presence of such organisations, and the profile they raise, not only addresses the barriers people such as myself face in the music festival environment, but also encourages the general public to question our assumptions regarding disability. For me, that's reassuring. At Reading and Leeds, viewing platforms are available across all seven stages and signers are available for those with hearing impairments. A little understanding is going a long way.

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Yet in the UK, 16% of adults have a disability. That's 16% of the British adult population that are in some way hindered from attending gigs and festivals. But why should that be a problem? Surely there should be universal provisions in place to enable easy access for those who happen to be disabled, right? Whatever the answer, that's beside the point. The onus is on us to break down the barriers that divide the 'able-

bodied' and the 'disabled'. There is a disconcerting amount of taboo regarding disability amongst the general public, such ignorance that still continues to blow my mind and astound and shock me. Take a step back, consider how melodies are just one layer to music which is so intrinsically multi-faceted, and how lyrics can therefore be appreciated by those with hearing impairments. Consider that music is just as essential to someone in a wheelchair as it is to someone who can mosh away happily at the front of a crowd.

Presenter Jameela Jamil, founder of Why Not People, recently commented on how "Britain deals with disability by pretending it's not happening." I feel as though, unfortunately, this does reign true, but my hope is that with openness and discussion, the embarrassment and awkwardness often associated with disability will be confronted. As a side note, Jamil's campaign is doing an admirable job at addressing disability and its underlying link with music festival access, so I wholly recommend you check her work out.

Disability never defines a person's existence, and live music really is one of the greatest of joys. Remember to bare that in mind when you're at your next festival, because the person stood next to you may be experiencing the performance a little differently to you, though enjoying it just as much.



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