

Episode 99: Live Music Accessibility Specialist Pt.1 | Daniel Ashworth

Manisha Ramlu 0:00

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Manisha Ramlu 0:33

Well, welcome Dan today for our episode. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself, and then we'll hop into the questions.

Dan Ashworth 0:47

Thank you. Manisha, yeah, my name is Dan Ashworth. I'll just do a quick visual description of me. I've got blonde hair, blue eyes. I wear brown tortoiseshell glasses. I'm just wearing a black and white t shirt. I've got fair complexion and yeah. Yeah, so I am a really big fan of music. I've been involved in music pretty much my whole life. I work in kind of the accessibility side of music now, but I used to do journalism and, yeah.

Manisha Ramlu 1:43

Awesome, yeah. Well, thank you so much for sharing that. So let's start with your journey, Dan, how did your love for music and your experiences as a disabled concert-goer shape your advocacy work and eventually led to the creation of Access in Excess?

Dan Ashworth 2:01

Nice, yeah, so, like I said, I've always been a huge fan of music. I'm from the UK. I grew up with the 90s UK pop Oasis and Blur and Thrillers, and my mom and dad used to play it all the time in the car, and my British radio was on all the time at my house, so it's very like musical listening upbringing, and my dad used to play records in the living room of like all the Old English bands like The Beatles and Di-Rect also, and yeah, and we moved around quite a bit when I was a kid. So we moved to North America and it was interesting, because this is the start of, like, the G-Unit era, so you have, like, Eminem and G-Unit. So I went from this thing to, like, really, yeah, a lot of music from bands in England, and then all of a sudden I'm listening to like, yeah, "Get Rich or Die Tryin." Through my classmate introduced me to having music like systems or down, and that was really big, yeah, I

learned to point that out as like, a really big turning point in my life, because now I listen to all sorts of music, and it was, yeah, it was whatever was really popular at the time. My first few CDs I got was "Get Rich or Die Tryin," and "System of a Down," "Toxicity." And when we moved to Canada, at the beginning of high school, I started going to shows with my friends. And then I went to punk shows, a lot of punk shows, and found a really big community there. But it was interesting because while I used to go to shows, a lot of the time they were in DIY venues and they were not accessible. Sometimes, some of the venue weren't even accessible for non-disabled people. Have a DIY venue, and you'll have to, like, climb up a ladder to get to it.

Manisha Ramlu 5:25

Oh, wow.

Dan Ashworth 5:26

Okay, this is interesting, but I always had like, friends that assist me up to these places. And, yeah, it was, it was hard, but my love of the music, kind of overrode that barrier. But then eventually, as I started going to more and more shows, and it became a lot more practicing and a lot of the time I was the only person that was with a visible disability. So I started noticing that I'm like, "Well, this shouldn't be the case really." Like these places are often find viewed as welcoming and everyone's invited, especially in the punk and hardcore scene. But at the same time, there's these huge barriers in place that, like people can't access. That's kind of what led me to the realization of like, "Hey, let's try and address this and create more awareness about this." That's kind of why I created that Access In Excess.

Manisha Ramlu 7:08

Wow.

Dan Ashworth 7:09

Which I don't know really what the direction of it is just yet, but it's just raising awareness about venues and festivals about their accessibility, and trying to, yeah, trying to get the word out that this is the issue that a lot of people face, and we need to come together as a community and make these spaces more inclusive and welcoming.

Manisha Ramlu 7:49

Yeah, absolutely. Sounds like you had quite the journey, you know, coming from the UK, then going right into, you know, G-Unit music. And love that, though, that I love how you're open to all the different genres and, yeah, and like doing the work of, you know, Access in

Excess and providing that, you know, awareness for people. Like, that's huge. That's huge. And that's the first step of, you know, putting the wheels in motion, and these venues and these large organizations to actually do something about it. So that's, amazing. All right, so you've highlighted, sorry, is it "Ex Zeena" or is it "Ex Zena"?

Dan Ashworth 8:41

It's pronounced, "Zeenia." (Xenia)

Manisha Ramlu 8:43

Xenia, okay. Thank you for that. I was like, I don't know how to pronounce this. Thank you. Xenia Concerts as a model for accessibility in the arts, especially music. Can you tell us more about the work that they're doing, and why does it stand out to you?

Dan Ashworth 9:03

Yeah, so Xenia Concerts, which I'm very fortunate and appreciative to sit on the board of this organization. They create adaptive performances and concerts for neurodiverse and disability communities to come and attend, which is awesome, because they're pretty unique in Canada, they're the only organization really doing this, but like they create these concerts that are really, really accessible. They are free to attend.

Manisha Ramlu 10:00

Oh, wow.

Dan Ashworth 10:00

You could buy a ticket to them, and what you pay for the ticket, you could either donate the money or you could have a reimbursement, but it's just for people with disabilities or people who are neurodiverse for them to come enjoy music and experience music as they are. You've got no walls, no, kind of, expectation where you have to, like, act in a certain way. I love the example that they use, is when you go to, like, a orchestral concert and people are expected to sit still, be quiet and clap only when the music's over, and that is inaccessible for a lot of people. A lot of people want to enjoy the music. I find it baffling how you, if you go to a concert, you need to act a certain way. But like with music, it's like you, you feel it. You actually act how, like it's kind of, yeah, you react to music in your own way, and that's unique to you. So why do you have to have this like mask on when attending these shows, and that's what's really powerful about Xenia and what they do. And it's for everyone, so it's for, yeah, families that want to enjoy the concert. It's for, yeah, individuals that want to hear some music. And it's really great because it's interactive as well. So after

the performance is done, it's not like a long performance. It ranges from like half an hour to an hour, and after it, the audience is welcome to go and interact with the instrument.

Manisha Ramlu 12:50

Oh, cool.

Dan Ashworth 12:50

Like, play with [the instruments], touch them, to have that kind of connection further to the music that they just explained. So it's really, yeah, it's really easy, and it's really well put together. And they do artist training, so they have a webinar on how musicians or artists could get more familiar with adaptive concerts and disability justice as well, and about like ableism and how these spaces aren't necessarily, like accessible and inclusive for everyone and what they could do to out there these experiences. So it's a really great organization.

Manisha Ramlu 13:57

Yeah, it sounds amazing and very powerful. And it's so cool to see that they allow individuals to be free and how they want to express themselves, and how they want to, you know, interact with the the concert, whether it be, you know, just listening or reacting, and then they're able to actually, like, you know, play the instruments or feel them and then interact with the artists as well. So that is very, very cool. Now, I just wanted to know for our listeners, if anyone wants to attend these concerts, how do they kind of find out what's, you know, upcoming or how they buy their tickets if they want to purchase a ticket?

Dan Ashworth 14:45

Yeah, so you can visit their website. It is xeniaconcerts.com, so X-E-N-I-A and then concerts, C-O-N-C-E-R-T-S, dot com. There, on their website, you could find all sorts of information about, yeah, events that are coming up, and tickets as well. Like I said, they're free to attend, but if you want to buy a ticket and donate the money, it goes back into producing these adaptive concerts so more people can enjoy them.

Manisha Ramlu 15:37

Amazing. Yeah, thank you so much for sharing that, and we will make sure we put that in the episode description, so our listeners can also click the link if they need to. All right, so, Dan, what are some of the most common accessibility issues you've seen at the music festivals or concerts? I know you talked about a little bit about it in the last couple questions, yeah, what are some of, like, common themes you've noticed?

Dan Ashworth 16:10

So common themes that, like, one really big one is the lack of information. Just trying to search basic information, like, if the venue has stairs, or if the festival, what kind of terrain is it on? Is it on like, grass or concrete and like transit as well, like, what's the best way using public transit to get there? A lot of that information is quite easy to find and to communicate. Yeah, a lot of people, a lot of event organizers, venues don't have that. And that's the real issue, because when you go out and you have a disability, you oftentimes want to know what you're getting yourself into, and if you have that information, you could make the judgment of, oh, would I want to go to this festival? Or do I leave it out, or go to this venue? That is a huge thing, that in order to try and kind of get people out, like I've been wanting to go to, like a concert before, and I go search up the accessibility information of the venue, and there's no information available and that sways me to not go because I don't know if there's going to be three flights or the bathroom is downstairs. So that's a really big one. Transit is another big one. Oftentimes, shows go out late, and sometimes it's obviously like if you're going by yourself or with friends, or anything like that, using public transit like that late at night, sometimes the busses don't run, or it's just a little bit worrying at the times when throughout late at night, you're by yourself, or you're just with a friend, yeah, it's not. You feel quite vulnerable at times, yeah? But yeah, I've like, I've spoken to like, event organizers that are putting on like shows at a venue and ask them "Hey, like, I know this venue as like, step free access and like, an accessible bathroom available. Would you mind putting that in your event poster or your event post for social media, just so people know, 'hey, like, that's really cool that they put that there. I might want to go to that now.'" So it's really, yes, I find that's pretty important. And yeah, for me, like barriers, especially with like big music festivals, it's definitely the walking aspect and the crowd aspect. It's really hard to navigate a crowd with a disability.

Manisha Ramlu 20:33

Yeah, it's hard to navigate for a crowd even if you don't have a disability, like, I'm, like, getting squished all the time, like I'm over here. [Laughs]

Dan Ashworth 20:44

[Laughs] Yeah, so.

Manisha Ramlu 20:47

I hope that you know us by speaking about this. You know, people are listening to this episode that, you know, word travels, and we're slowly making our way into the direction where organizations and venues start putting, like, their accessibility on their posters or the description, and actually, you know, move towards a change that accommodate for accessibility. Because, yeah, like you said, it probably does deter a lot of people attending

these events, because there's no means of of them getting there, especially with no transport, like you said, like that is, I can't even imagine, you know, having the time of your life at a concert, and then now wondering, "How am I going to get home?" You know.

Dan Ashworth 21:52

I know, like, I have been a show, and it's either stay the show until the end or leave early. Like, get home at reasonable time. But then other times I've been out, the show ends at like, one o'clock in the morning, and I've missed all transit back home, like, okay, like I'll go to a 24 hours Tim Hortons and hunker down there and camp out there.

Manisha Ramlu 22:30

Wow.

Dan Ashworth 22:34

Or, I know like, sometimes this, like, I know that I'm going to be out like, I'll maybe like, contact the friend that lives in the city and say, "Hey, I'm out late tonight, would you mind if I crash on your couch," or something like that. But yeah, not everyone obviously has that, especially because, uh, it's getting a little expensive to live in the city now.

Manisha Ramlu 23:23

No, it definitely is, yeah, like that. I can't even imagine. I'm glad you do have a friend in the city. But, like you said, like, it's not feasible for everyone, so hopefully there's like, some sort of shuttle service or something that comes about soon.

Dan Ashworth 23:39

Yeah.

Manisha Ramlu 23:42

All right. So moving on to our next question, Access in Excess such a powerful name, and you talked a little bit about how, you know, what inspired it. Can you tell me maybe what it's currently focusing on?

Dan Ashworth 24:01

Yeah. So I, have to say that the name Access in Excess came from my good friend Dillon, who's in a band called Reality Denied, and we used to live together. He won't say it, but I don't know, he just comes up with genius things, and he's one of the most wittiest people other than that. And one day he was like, "Hey, Dan, like, what do you think about Access in Excess." I'm like, "Oh, not like, it's pretty hard, could I use that?" He's like, "Of course."

And actually, I wrote a song with that title, a hardcore punk song. Ph yeah, based on the name that he gave me Access In Excess.

Manisha Ramlu 25:07

So cool.

Dan Ashworth 25:08

I wrote a song. It's not, it's not released or anything. But I was like, "Hey, let me use it for for this project, because it's the perfect kind of name for project." So, yeah, that's kind of where the name comes from.

Manisha Ramlu 25:35

Love it. Thanks for the history.

Dan Ashworth 25:37

Yeah. I have to shout out a friend.

Manisha Ramlu 25:40

Of course!

Dan Ashworth 25:43

Yeah, so this project, so I'm currently focusing on working with festivals, whether that's grassroots or more established festivals, to kind of help them start their accessibility journey and really plan out, "Okay, what do we need to do in order to get this festival more inclusive for people?" So my hopes is kind of yeah, consulting festivals, going to them and conducting audit, seeing what barriers that they have, and highlighting them with ways of just taking those barriers down and seeing what we can do in terms of like hiring practices as well for people with disabilities, like, how can we best accommodate people that work at this festival, whether they volunteer or they're a vendor or anything like that. And also musicians as well, trying to get more musicians that have disabilities to play the festivals and how we can make the experience for them accessible and really using those audits and the information and also feedback from attendees with disabilities to really map out, like an accessibility plan, basically, and see what we could do in order to, yeah, to make these more accessible for everyone. I say that like accessibility and inclusivity make everything better. It makes everything more cohesive, easier to interact with your environment for everyone.

Manisha Ramlu 28:22

Absolutely.

Dan Ashworth 28:23

And it goes beyond like people with disabilities, for people with families, for people who are older. It's for, yeah, it's for a lot of different people, and when these festivals start making really good effort, the change, then you get a higher retention rate, and people take notice and really want to come and experience the festival. And I've been at festivals before where, yeah, there's a lack of accessibility, but there's such a strong community of attendees and staff at these festivals, and they do everything in their power, in their means, to help you out. And even that is successful, like is the attitudinal barriers that also quite powerful people to come to festival and people don't see disabled people as, more or less, as people. So having those barriers. Some festivals that I've come to where people just treat you as a normal human being, with a disability and you need help, just as anyone needs help.

Manisha Ramlu 30:24

Thank you for sharing that that's amazing, and I can't wait to see where you know your project leads you to. And like you said, I think the more educated people are, the more that people actually see individuals with disabilities attend these events, I think that would, you know, shift the direction and more of an inclusive environment, and seeing you as people who want to just enjoy these festivals like anyone else, and so I'm super, super happy to hear and can't wait to see what else Access In Excess brings us. Love it.

Outro 31:10

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