

## Woodstock for the 1%

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*Rock fests go the VIP route, with perks like gourmet meals and air-conditioned loos*



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In the Woodstock era, music fans came to rock festivals to see their favorite bands, partake of the libidinous scene and maybe enjoy a roll in the mud.

But at this past weekend's Governors Ball in New York, a good many attendees seemed to have a different experience in mind — one that involved chair massages, concert "concierges" and air-conditioned restrooms.

The popular three-day festival, which drew roughly 135,000 revelers for a lineup that included Outkast, The Strokes, Jack White and Vampire Weekend, has increasingly taken to emphasizing the VIP side of rock 'n' roll life. Which is to say that patrons with extra cash — a one-day VIP ticket ran \$215, or almost double the cost of a general-admission one — could buy into a more amenity-laden experience (replete with those chilly lavatories) and a guarantee of shorter waits and better sightlines.



For Jesse Overlin, a graphic designer who attended the festival with his girlfriend, the VIP price was indeed right. “I lived my rock ‘n’ roll days from 20 to 29. I’m ready to do the more relaxed thing,” said Overlin, who turned 30 in the past year.

The Governors Ball isn’t alone in promoting the idea of rocking out in style and comfort, however. If anything, it’s part of a broader trend. Festivals have grown in size and stature and become an increasingly important part of the North American concert industry, generating a record \$5.1 billion in ticket sales in 2013, and the VIP business appears to be growing in tandem with it.

At Coachella, the California festival that grossed a record-breaking \$67 million in 2013, patrons can spend as much as \$6,500 for a weekend admission package that includes a private, safari-style tent. By contrast, Lollapalooza, the Chicago festival, offers a relatively bargain-priced \$3,600 “platinum” pass — no tents are included, but pass-holders do get gourmet catered fare, plenty of premium booze, a merchandise gift bag, “mini” spa treatments (who doesn’t need a facial in the midst of rocking out?) and golf-cart transportation, among other perks.

Governors Ball, however, may have the most exclusive VIP offering. No, not that \$215 ticket, but a \$30,000 one, which includes all the standard VIP perks, plus a private cabana (good for 16 concertgoers, making the effective price \$1,875 per person). Sure enough, the festival managed to sell out all but one of the six cabana packages this year. And for the obvious reason, Governors Ball organizers say. VIP seating “adds to the experience,” said Jordan Wolowitz, one of the festival’s producers.

Of course, the real reason there’s been a boom in VIP seating, both at festivals and individual concerts, has a lot to do with the changing economics of the music business, industry experts explain. When record sales started tanking because of digitization, artists looked increasingly to touring as a way to make up the difference — and at VIP seating as a way to sweeten the pot. Essentially, the backstage meet-and-greet has become commoditized, all in the name of ensuring your favorite rocker gets to maintain his or her own VIP status, so to speak. “The last time I checked, they weren’t just handing out houses in Malibu, so that money needs to come in from somewhere,” says Bruce Duff, director of artist management at Knitting Factory Entertainment, a prominent music promotion firm.



In the case of festivals, the financial setup is a little different, but the same idea applies. The artists don't generally see a direct share of the ticket revenue. But they're asking for higher and higher fees (seven-figure sums are not unusual for the top acts) to play the most popular events. In turn, that leaves promoters looking for ways to generate more revenue. Hence, the \$30,000 cabana.

Still, for the formula to work, there have to be fans ready to fork over for those cabanas (or for just a basic VIP ticket). And industry experts say they're there in abundance because today's concertgoer — particularly today's 30-and-up concertgoer — isn't always willing to put up with the hassles and inconveniences that once defined the festival experience. "As you get older, it's harder to sit down on the lawn," says Gary Bongiovanni, editor of *Pollstar*, a music trade journal. (At Governors Ball, promoters even came up with a way to replicate lawn seating in luxurious fashion: Think reclining VIP seats covered in artificial grass.)

Not that all this VIP pampering is going over well with every fan — or every band. At Governors Ball, some concertgoers argued that sitting in a secluded VIP section goes against the let-loose, communal spirit of rock 'n' roll. "You're here to say 'hi' to random people," said Dave McDonald, 25, a festivalgoer from Cheshire, Conn.

Some artists have also balked at premium packages, refusing to allow such arrangements at their shows. And while they can't always control what happens at a festival, they can still voice their opinion. Such was the case when the band Arcade Fire played this year's Coachella festival. Lead singer Win Butler assured those in the non-VIP section they weren't missing much.

"People are dreaming to get (in VIP), but it super sucks in there, so don't worry about it," he said.