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How Green Is the Music?

Festivals, bands, and musicians seek environmental harmony

BY DANIEL MOTTOLA

Last October, Thom Yorke, frontman for the British band Radiohead, told the UK's *Guardian* newspaper he would "consider refusing to tour on environmental grounds, if nothing started happening to change the way the touring operates." He explained, "Some of our best ever shows have been in the U.S., but there's 80,000 people there and they've all been sitting in traffic jams for five or six hours with their engines running to get there, which is bollocks." Yorke, who has become an impassioned and articulate advocate for greenhouse-gas limits in the United Kingdom, acknowledged that playing live is a "necessary part of what I do," but he's also well aware of the "ridiculous consumption of energy" required to tour.



Guster at Stubb's: (l-r) Brian Rosenworcel, Ryan Miller, Adam Gardner, and Joe Pisapia
Photo By Mary Sledd

Yorke is in harmony with an emerging movement among musicians, as they plug into a new era of consciousness about energy and its geopolitical and ecological ramifications. While music is a key medium to engage people emotionally about environmental issues, the way people have come to experience music – in clubs, at festivals, and by purchasing CDs and reams of related swag – is itself environmentally taxing. As Yorke notes, it takes huge amounts of energy to power bands' constant circulation around the country, as well as fans' movement to and from shows. In the venues, glass and plastic refreshment containers often remain usable for mere minutes before becoming trash. Mountains of concert flyers are printed, T-shirts are sold, and CDs – most shrouded in toxic plastic – continue to be a common way to distribute albums, even in the digital age. So, the music industry is indeed a fertile ground for greening.

Just what is the eco-inspired rock community doing? Here are a few big-name examples:

- The Vans Warped Tour employs a solar-powered stage engineered by Austin's Sustainable Waves, is saving 81,000 disposable plates by using washable dishware and utensils for bands and crew, and avoids 50,000 pounds of carbon-dioxide emissions by using varying blends of biodiesel in the tour's nine big-rigs and 17 buses.
- Dave Matthews Band buys renewable-energy credits to offset energy use from amps

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onstage, as well as trucking, travel, and hotel stays for current megatours – as well as retroactively over the last 15 years.

- Sub Pop Records recently committed to buying enough renewable-energy credits to offset 100% of the company's energy use.

- Pearl Jam is now using 100% biodiesel in all tour production trucks and is donating \$100,000 to nine organizations doing climate-change-reform activities, while shooting for net-zero emissions from tours and business.

- Willie Nelson, Bonnie Raitt, Neil Young, Indigo Girls are all prominent biodiesel burners.

- Andrew Bird: The whistling troubadour, who packed Stubb's during South by Southwest, offsets the energy used at his shows with renewable-energy credits from NativeEnergy, uses B20 (20% biodiesel blended with 80% diesel) in his bus, requests organic foods and biodegradable cups backstage, and offers fans organic merchandise as well as ways to neutralize emissions from their drives to the show.

Here in Austin, the ever-expanding South by Southwest Music Festival, which wrangles more than 1,500 bands and overruns Downtown each spring break, made environmental strides in 2007. Festival planners enacted a host of eco-reforms, including offsetting all of the energy used in its offices throughout the year as well as at all of its concert venues around town by buying the equivalent amount of renewable-energy credits (RECs: created when green power from wind, solar, or biomass sources is sold onto the electricity grid). Una Johnston, SXSW's European manager, led the Festival's greening efforts – which included providing more transit options for participants to minimize individual car trips and powering some outdoor generators with biodiesel. Some of SXSW's offsetting was done through the donation of \$5,000 to the city of Austin to fund local tree-planting – part of the city's larger climate-protection initiative. Johnston said her motivation was in part to "show leadership" in preparing for an energy-constrained future. So, when the music biz came to town, SXSW had already set the stage for what might have been the nation's most dynamic meeting of music's green pioneers.

Changing the Culture

Johnston took part in an internationally representative dais for the key panel discussion Greening the Music Industry. She was joined by moderator Neal Turley, an Austin local who improves the environmental profile of musical events with his company, Sustainable Waves, and operates three all-solar-powered stages that he helped design; Perry Farrell of Jane's Addiction and Porno for Pyros and the founder of the legendary Lollapalooza; Frank Mauceri, president of Chicago's Smog Veil Records, which is soon to be completely powered by on-site wind, solar, and geothermal energy; Rick Farman of Superfly Productions, which organizes the massive, jam-band-laden Bonnaroo Music & Arts Festival in rural Tennessee; Arnt Olaf Andersen, head of marketing for Oslo, Norway's biodiesel-powered, heavy-recycling Øya Festival; and Paul Diaz, owner of Atlanta's Tree Sound Studio, which has gone carbon-neutral in addition to helping bands produce albums in recycled and recyclable packaging.



SXSW 07 Greening the Music Industry panel: (l-r) Perry Farrell, Rick Farman, Una Johnston, Neal Turley

Photo By Gary Miller

"Science and technology are in a place now for the world to go though a major overhaul. What's lacking is a change of culture," Farrell said. "What I think the music community can do more than anybody else is inform people, act as a catalyst to change the culture." He said he was "fabulous" for and says "Diaz noted that

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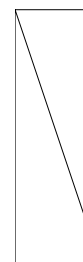
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change the culture, all while making it reasonable, fun, and sexy. Diaz noted that "music has the unique ability to transcend cultural and political boundaries." Added Turley, "If music can get kids to wear their pants around their ankles, it can get them to clean up their lifestyles." Turley and others are leading by example with their own increasingly eco-savvy events to create a new green standard in music – one they hope fans will take home from shows and replay throughout their everyday lives.

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Daniel Mottola

Turley entered the music biz by planning promotional shows for Green Mountain Energy, a company that builds wind farms and sells RECs in deregulated markets – that's where SXSW bought its carbon-offsetting credits. They're one of two renewable-energy companies working with the music business to offset related energy usage; the other is Native American-owned NativeEnergy. Both have a visible online and on-the-ground presence at music events, showcasing and supporting green-leaning artists, offsetting tour energy use, and offering education about renewable energy and interactive ways for fans to calculate and lessen energy consumption. Turley is a devout biodiesel user – despite warnings of voiding the warranties on the expensive tour vehicles he operates – and the guy behind what may be the best working examples of a 40,000-watt, off-the-grid solar stage. He's an even firmer believer in tying carbon offsets (or RECs) into the economics of music. He believes the music culture is the place to begin putting a value on a clean environment, and RECs are the best way to accrue that value.

"What's a pound of clean air worth?" Turley asked from the dais. "There's never been a value placed on natural resources. That's why it's profitable for Burger King to level a hectare of rain forest to graze cattle." Johnston added that concerning climate change, oil dependence, and pollution, "We've reached critical mass as far as awareness." Turley hopes to see that consciousness channeled into buying offsets to make events and record labels carbon-neutral, thereby supporting additional renewable energy and making music's new environmental movement economically sustainable. "This movement was stronger in 1975 and failed for a reason," Turley recalled. "If it's based on grant-writing and government subsidies, it's not a sustainable solution." Farrell added, "In '75, people were so disenfranchised and disconnected. Now, there's an upheaval of consciousness, and people are well aware of what they have to do." He declared his belief that this new green revolution will rival Beatlemania and that big bucks will sustain it.

Remaking the Package

Last month, industry Goliath Warner Music Group – with the help of the Natural Resources Defense Council and the nonprofit Reverb, which helps artists make their tours green and offers environmental outreach at events – vowed to undertake a comprehensive review of its greenhouse-gas emissions, with a goal of reducing its carbon footprint both from new album releases and employees' daily commutes, as well as stepping up office recycling and beginning to use postconsumer recycled packaging and inserts for all of its CDs. The NRDC is also working with EMI Virgin, another industry powerhouse, toward similar reforms.

Smog Veil Records President Frank Mauceri thinks his Chicago live/work headquarters – with a roof full of solar panels, two 18-foot tall windmills, and 15 geothermal wells – may be the industry's only fully renewably powered facility. He said he had to fight the city bureaucracy for permission to install his windmills and solar array. Mauceri has also battled to produce his label's music in more environmentally sound ways. As an alternative to the all-plastic traditional CD jewel case, some companies have begun using Digipaks – mostly stiff paperboard with a plastic hub or tray to hold the CD. Mauceri said that while he's experimented with using 100%-recycled paperboard in Digipaks, he's found that the trays contain as much plastic as jewel cases. When he tried encasing CDs in all-recycled paperboard, some major record stores refused to stock the packages because their top spine is a different width than the more common formats.

In any case, Mauceri said, "The digital download is the way the business is going." The popularity of MP3 devices like the iPod is clear enough, and Mauceri said the

elimination of warehousing and shipping makes digital distribution more profitable for labels like his. "Online music sellers like iTunes and eMusic pay us every month without fail," he said. "I can't say that for our hard-goods distributors."

How Green Is Your Festival?

Regardless of whether people eventually ditch CDs for MP3s, directly experiencing live music cannot be readily replaced, and music festivals are a one-stop shop for multiple live shows. Other major festivals have joined SXSW in eco-reforms – including the Bonnaroo Festival, held in June on a 100-acre farm in rural Tennessee. When organizer Rick Farman, in planning last year's festival, told his longtime fuel provider that he wanted to begin using biodiesel in the generators that power many of Bonnaroo's stages, Farman said the provider had no idea what biodiesel was. "We told him to get with it if he wanted to continue doing business with us, and now they retail biodiesel as part of their overall business." Last year, Bonnaroo used 25,000 gallons of biodiesel; recycled more than 250 tons of garbage; served concessions with biodegradable, renewable plates, cups, and cutlery; and offset its electricity use with Green Tags from NativeEnergy – similar to RECs but essentially put toward funding the construction of a South Dakota wind farm. Bonnaroo's main drawback is its rural location, 60 miles south of Nashville, meaning most of its thousands of attendees arrive by car.

Wren Aigaki-Lander is the enviro music program manager for MusicMatters, a Minneapolis-based marketing firm that has worked on facilitating organic T-shirts and recycled-paper flyers printed with soy ink for festivals. But, she says, the carbon footprint from people traveling to the shows far outweighs that of the bands and their performances. For this reason, she said events like Lollapalooza, within cities with lots of public transit, have an advantage. Aigaki-Lander said her group is working to create incentives for people to carpool to shows, such as offering priority parking spots. Thousands of miles away, Norway's Øya Festival is not only 100% biodiesel-powered but is located in Oslo's oldest urban park. Marketing head Arnt Olaf Andersen says guests can use the cheap rail transit and get discounted bus passes as part of their tickets and that organizers purposely don't offer individual car-parking.

While acknowledging the green strides already made, SXSW's Johnston says, "The worst thing we can do now is continue on and keep offsetting." That's because, while RECs and carbon offsets help develop the renewable-energy industry, the nonrenewable energy they're "offsetting" – be it electricity generated from fossil fuels like coal or petroleum-fueled transportation – undeniably equals pollution and climate-change exacerbation. With that in mind, Johnston says SXSW's next step is to "plan over the next three to four years to reduce our energy use and carbon emissions – which, for one, means flying less and consolidating business travel (one trans-Atlantic flight emits the estimated equivalent of a year's worth of an average car's CO₂ emissions). "We'll reduce where we can and offset where we can't," said Johnston.

Closer to the Ground

Offsets and RECs are dandy if you're a big-budgeted festival or the Rolling Stones. But what about the average touring band, green-minded up-and-comers, or one of the hundreds of SXSW artists that don't have an entourage or excess cash flows from fat record deals? One band, Portland, Ore.-based avant-garde rockers Old Time Relijun, rolled to SXSW in an early-Eighties diesel Chevy van that they fill with biodiesel whenever possible – a vehicle stand-up bass player Aaron Hartman described as the sweetest touring van ever. "Filling the tank with a renewable resource versus a nonrenewable one feels amazing," he said. While the group's lyrics – at times not in English and often featuring nonverbal throat singing – aren't environmentally oriented, Hartman says vocalist Arrington de Dioniso does give a biodiesel-related speech prior to the song "0010" – which imagines overthrowing the

biodiesel-related speech prior to the song "2012" – which imagines overthrowing the government and enlisting reptiles to turn the world's fossil fuels back into dinosaurs. De Dionysio concludes by asking the audience where one can buy biodiesel nearby. In terms of broader greening, Hartman said, "We're still an underground band; we don't have the luxury to be as conscientious as we'd probably want to be. We still do everything ourselves." This includes hand-silk-screening all their T-shirt offerings, which were stolen from an abandoned warehouse in Connecticut – kind of like recycling, Hartman said.

Cloud Cult is another example of a SXSW band doing some hardcore DIY greening. The Minneapolis sixpiece (including two artists who paint onstage during shows) donates all of its after-expense profits to environmental charity work and offsets its touring and performance-related carbon emissions with RECs purchased from NativeEnergy. It gets more innovative: Earthology, the band's own nonprofit record label, is located on a small organic farm in northern Minnesota and powered by geothermal and wind energy, and the on-site recording studio is built from recycled and salvaged materials. Boasting the industry's only environmentally and socially friendly CD-replication services, Earthology hand-cleans and reuses donated jewel cases. Instead of using bubble-wrap or Styrofoam for shipment packing, Earthology's interns collect fallen maple and oak leaves. They're also working to be the first label to use nontoxic, biodegradable, corn-based shrink-wrap for CDs. Cloud Cult founder Craig Minowa's roots in environmental activism (he holds an environmental-science degree) are evident in the pages of data (www.earthology.net) detailing the toxicity of the PVC plastic used in CD jewel cases and shrink-wrap and much other valuable info.



Gomez: (l-r) Tom Gray, Ben Ottewell, Ollie Peacock, Paul Blackburn, Ian Ball
Photo By Jay Blakesberg

Not all bands have a Minowa to guide their greening and often find striking a balance between musical success and being eco-conscious difficult. "Fully greening a tour is hard to do, said Jason Colton, who manages the band Gomez. "Many bands can only make enough per night to pay their expenses and put a little money in their pockets." Colton says that Gomez partnered with Clif Bar's GreenNotes campaign, which, in return for a little branding at shows and online, subsidizes the cost of greening Gomez's tours – including filling their bus with biodiesel, subsidizing the incremental cost of offering organic T-shirts, using recycled paper and soy inks for printed materials, and offsetting tour energy use with RECs. Other GreenNotes artists include O.A.R., Martin Sexton, Hot Buttered Rum, Garrett Brennan, and Guster.

Reverb, an organization designed to support green-leaning artists while reaching out to fans at shows, was started by Lauren Sullivan and her husband, Guster lead singer/guitarist Adam Gardner. Reverb originated as part of pioneering green-rocker Bonnie Raitt's Green Highway tour, which included coordinated biodiesel fill-ups and interactive eco-villages at the concerts to engage fans on key environmental issues. Reverb has worked with larger acts, including Andrew Bird, Dave Matthews Band, String Cheese Incident, Alanis Morissette, Jack Johnson, Avril Lavigne, Barenaked Ladies, Bonnie Raitt, Red Hot Chili Peppers, O.A.R., and Ray LaMontagne. They're about to kick off a global warming awareness tour with Sheryl Crow that's eventually headed through Austin.

As more mainstream acts like Crow and events such as the Austin City Limits Music Festival embrace green values, longtime reformers applaud with cautious optimism. Speaking of greening tactics' growing popularity, Turley said, "What scares me is when the mainstream gets a hold of it: Companies with huge budgets that know nothing about the environment can take the green thing and make it lame." He referenced television's debased take on music and its feeble attempt to characterize

coolness: "People see through MTV." The fear is that in recognizing people's interest in green reforms, music-business profiteers will make their products or productions sound "green" without actually improving their impact. "It's important to be accountable and not to engage in greenwashing simply to cash in and jump on the bandwagon," Una Johnston said. "Clarity and transparency are important."

So, as Yorke and his music-biz comrades work to green the pop-music scene and the larger industry, will the public get on board? Jordan Kessler of the NRDC, who has worked with the band Green Day on joint eco-outreach endeavors, says that in many cases the NRDC now gets more feedback and direct-action participation from people introduced to the organization and its issues through Green Day than from its longtime activists. "What's beautiful is that this is going to be a revolution of the people, not just one guy," Perry Farrell optimistically declared. "Money follows culture, and the big bucks are betting on green." But even if the spacey superstar is correct, one look at the inevitably horrendous traffic jams during SXSW, late-night streets strewn with trash, and garbage Dumpsters overflowing with recyclables – all in addition to an otherwise environmentally apathetic entertainment industry and a government led by climate-change resisters and fossil-fuel fanatics – and it's apparent that eco-conscious music types and green touring bands have a long, hard road ahead of them. ■

Alternatex Solar Concerts

Austinites can witness the green music revolution firsthand in a series of upcoming 100%-solar-powered concerts around town. The Alternatex Solar Concerts Spring Series will feature national and local acts performing on a completely sun-powered stage, as well as solar-home tours, electric and biodiesel-powered vehicles, kids activities, and an info and networking area. Concerts will be held five consecutive Saturdays:

- May 19 at Opal Divine's Penn Field, 3601 S. Congress
- May 26 at Jo's Hot Coffee, 1300 S. Congress
- June 2 at Opal Divine's Freehouse, 700 W. Sixth
- June 9 at Freddie's Place, 1703 S. First
- June 16 at Opal Divine's Marina, 12709 N. MoPac

Alternatex will also host Solar Power Zappy Hours – featuring electric cars and South Austin bands on a solar stage provided by Armadillo Solar – on Fridays through June, 5-8pm, at Shock Value Electric Vehicles, 2711 S. Lamar.

For more info:

www.sustainablewaves.com

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