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Music industry increasingly in tune with environmental revolution

by Preston Jones

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The music industry is turning green.

No, it has nothing to do with slumping retail sales, endless label mergers or leaked albums being downloaded online. Instead, the intense focus on "greening" everything from tour buses to CD cases stems from what "Pollstar" Editor-in-Chief Gary Bongiovanni calls "part of the shifting consciousness of the American public."

"I think the music business might've been a little ahead of the curve on that," Bongiovanni says. "The Dave Matthews Band, in particular, comes to mind as being someone who advocated green touring ... (but) it's certainly more in people's minds."

More than ever, artists of all stripes—from the arena-packing Fall Out Boy to the indie-rocking Andrew Bird—are employing various methods to reduce the environmental impact of touring, recording and releasing albums.

"What's nice is that (going green) has obviously caught on," says Adam Gardner, guitarist/vocalist for rock band Guster and co-founder of eco-minded nonprofit organization Reverb. "It's gone from 'What's biodiesel?' to—I call it the post-"Inconvenient Truth" era. There's a lot more awareness now. Everyone now is interested and wants to take action."

That heightened interest doesn't surprise Neal Turley, co-founder of Austin-based Sustainable Waves, which provides Earth-friendly equipment such as solar-powered stages.

"What's cool is that musicians seem to take causes on," Turley says. "I think that one of the natural elements of music is a reaction to society and to not be content with things. ... It makes sense that you have artists that are (environmental) role models or show leadership in some way, because they have that voice."

The most visible area of the music industry being affected by environmental awareness is touring. Numerous nonprofit organizations (such as NativeEnergy, Global Cool and Reverb) work with artists as diverse as the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Norah Jones to draw up plans that, among other things, help reduce waste, offset carbon dioxide emissions, promote eco-friendly merchandise and encourage recycling.

Gardner, who co-founded Reverb with his wife, environmentalist Lauren Sullivan, stresses that bands don't have to start from scratch to go green. For some musicians, thinking more globally can be as simple as powering armies of trucks and buses with biodiesel, a clean-burning alternative fuel typically produced from such renewable resources as vegetable oil.

"It's not all or nothing," Gardner says. "We're not this group that's pushing bands into this—we're just there to help bands that want to do it anyway."

Of course, individual artists and bands aren't the only ones thinking

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greener—most major music festivals, from Austin City Limits (helping the city maintain the grass at Zilker Park, where the festival is staged) to South by Southwest (offsetting energy used at venues during the festival), are working to limit or undo potentially harmful environmental effects. Many tours and festivals take the seemingly small step of reducing waste or purchasing carbon credits to offset CO2 emissions, but in Turley's mind, these actions represent a giant leap forward.

"(Greening) has definitely accelerated," Turley says. "It's really amazing in the last three years where this has come. When we were trying to make this happen 10 years ago, it was a pretty tough sell. Five years ago, it was starting to turn the corner, and now it's just amazing."

Gardner sees a similar spike in interest, citing Reverb's involvement with more than 500 tours since its creation in 2004 and the more than 15 projects Reverb has undertaken thus far in 2007.

"At this point, we have so much coming in from bands and management, bands solicit us, (but) it didn't start that way—it started with me calling my friends (in) touring bands," Gardner says.

But Reverb's not the only greening game around. An increasing number of artists, such as Perry Farrell and G. Love, are turning to Sustainable Waves, which recently paired with Austin-based Green Mountain Energy to create Eco-Tunes, billed as "the first comprehensive program for carbon neutral music tours and events," providing such Earth-friendly amenities as solar-powered stages and sound systems.

"I'm beyond the concept of selling eco-guilt," says Sustainable Waves' Turley. "Our stages . . . are using a thin-film solar integrated roofing material and you can't see it; there's no demonstration of it at all. One of the things we want to evolve into is a production company known for being creative and artistic; the sustainability element is just a variable."

While environmentally friendly initiatives are taking hold more firmly in the world of indie record labels—Sub Pop Records, based in Seattle, was the country's first "green-e" certified (which entails purchasing renewable energy credits) record label in the country—the major record labels, such as Warner Music Group, aren't sitting idly by.

Earlier this year, the Warner Music Group announced a slate of initiatives aimed at cutting CO2 emissions, using more post-consumer recycled content in all standard releases and hosting carbon-neutral events. It's a vivid example of the "trickle-up" theory, as many artists, rather than the companies supporting them, have galvanized their employers to re-think their impact on the Earth.

"(Our initiatives were) a culmination of the leadership of the company and artists talking about the topic at the same time," says Mike Jbara, WEA Corp. executive vice president and chief operating officer. "They were both led by . . . a strong desire to make the company's environmental profile represent its values."

Andrew Sullivan, head of multimedia marketing for Sub Pop, says that while the label didn't set out to flaunt its environmental achievements, it has served as a role model of sorts for the industry.

Aside from packaging changes and revamped distribution models, publicists for a variety of labels, including Beggars Banquet, Atlantic and Universal, are getting into the act by offering advanced streams of music, rather than the common practice of mailing out watermarked CDs.

But for all of this forward momentum, it will be years, if not decades, before any quantifiable change is seen.

"I would say that in all my experience of doing this, it's not a sprint, it's a marathon," Turley says.

Gardner sums up the movement even more succinctly, reaching far beyond amphitheaters, equipment trucks and tour riders.

"The word just spreads, certainly within the industry. I think everybody, especially in this country, has finally woken up."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Support labels and artists that forgo plastic CD jewel cases for recycled packaging. Better yet, download songs online and skip packaging altogether.
- Car pool to concerts or take mass transportation.
- Instead of tossing that dead iPod in the trash, take it to an Apple store near you; the company began offering free iPod recycling programs in 2005. You even get a discount on a new iPod. For info, go to www.apple.com/environment/recycling/.
- Volunteer with eco-minded organizations that set up booths at concerts; Reverb, for example, is soliciting volunteers through its Web site to pitch in at Dave Matthews Band concerts around the country this summer.

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- Take advantage of recycling bins at concert venues.

HOW GREEN IS THEIR TOUR?

Beastie Boys

Aside from adding a dollar to ticket prices that will go to an EcoFund with the nonprofit organization Artists Resources in Action, the Boys are offsetting CO2 emissions, organizing cellphone recycling collection programs at their shows and relying on biodiesel for touring vehicles.

Brandi Carlile

Rising singer/songwriter star Carlile, who will perform at Dallas' House of Blues on Sept. 20, is donating 50 cents from every ticket sold on her fall tour to Reverb, which will help her plan an environmentally sustainable tour.

Dave Matthews Band

The jam-band rockers were one of the early adopters of "greening" techniques, offsetting CO2 emissions as far back as 2002. Currently, the Dave Matthews Band is working with Reverb. According to Reverb's Adam Gardner, the group continues to offset its carbon emissions as well as use biodiesel fuel for its buses and trucks.

The Fray

Denver-based pop-rockers the Fray have an ambitious slate of environmental initiatives they're implementing on their current summer tour, including offering organic cotton merchandise to fans, offsetting CO2 emissions and using sustainable supplies such as biodegradable or reusable catering products along with local organic foods.

John Mayer

Mayer's Continuum summer tour, which stopped in the Metroplex in June, boasts two traveling Reverb staffers, who help coordinate the biodiesel fueling of tour buses and trucks. In addition, Mayer encourages recycling plastic waste and hosting "eco-villages" outside the stage area that educate visitors about environmental concerns.

Norah Jones

On her recent tour, which stopped at Nokia Theatre at Grand Prairie in June, the University of North Texas alum relied on biodiesel to fuel her buses and trucks.

Red Hot Chili Peppers

According to the Warner Music Group, the Peppers are one of the corporation's first recording artists to push for more environmentally conscious packaging and touring methods. On the road, the funk-rockers use biodiesel fuels to power their trucks and buses.

Sheryl Crow

Crow, a veteran environmentalist, has been especially vocal about the "greening" of not just the music industry, but the world. Along with activist Laurie David, the singer/songwriter stopped at Dallas' Southern Methodist University this year as part of the "Stop Global Warming" tour. The vehicles used during the college tour were powered by biodiesel fuel.

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