

TreeHugger Interviews Eliza Gilkyson, Folk Music's Environmental Troubadour

by Trevor Reichman on 12. 6.08



Folk Music Troubadour, [Eliza Gilkyson](#), is currently touring in support of her new release, "[Beautiful World](#)", an album which tackles environmental issues, and not timidly. Eliza Gilkyson, who has toured with folk greats such as Patty Griffin and Richard Thompson and most recently had 2 songs covered by Joan Baez, offsets all of her touring with carbon credits and also uses a [portable solar powered system](#) to power her local shows in Austin, TX. But Eliza doesn't think that is doing enough. Read further for an exclusive interview with Eliza Gilkyson and her perspective on the possibilities of green touring and a "great correction":

1)TH: At the moment, you are offsetting all of your touring with carbon credits as well as performing in your hometown using a portable solar powered system. What is the next step for you in your future of green touring ? Name one immediate, easily realized goal in your near future, and one extreme, very challenging, far-off, but attainable fantasy of yours in a further future? Don't hold back on this one. Anything goes.

Eliza: A small goal I want to reach by my next release is to use [recycled cardboard](#) for the cover. I am proud to say I was the first at the label to push for the jettisoning of plastic jewel cases. But on a larger scale, although I perform via solar when I can at home and practice restraint on the road, I worry about the trendy purchasing of carbon credits and green consumer choices as doing little more than assuaging the consciences of musicians so we can continue to live at ridiculous levels of privilege and advantage in a first world nation that feeds off the disadvantaged third world's resources, whether a group of us minimize our footprints or not. I have had to confront that in my own life just recently.

I consulted with a local solar company to take my house here in Austin off the grid entirely, and my consultant Neal Turley of [Sustainable Waves](#) had to remind me, although I could afford a system that was not on the grid, that the righteous thing to do is grid tie in a city so that you are actually giving back into the community. I was truly humbled by that remark, and have thought long and hard about how it illuminates the way I was conditioned to think in a capitalist economic system: as long as I have MY solar panels and MY storage batteries and MY ass is covered then everyone else can either sink or swim. This whole way of thinking is deeply ingrained in our culture via our infatuation with the "American Dream" fantasy, the whole "I-got-mine-now-you-go-get-yours" motivation that has bred an insane and unsustainable level of consumption, self absorption, and corruption in our country.

I see the danger of the green movement falling into another form of the same kind of self-centered thinking. You know, as long as I can use these efficient light bulbs, green products, and fill up my tourbus with biofuel I can still go out and make a ridiculous amount of guilt-free money and live in my oversized solar powered home(or homes) and drive my hybrid Lexus SUV and hey you can do that too and all's well with the world. But no, all is not well with the world. Just look at the stats around who is having a food shortage based on the biofuel demand.

I think it's important for us musicians to ponder the possibility that touring will not be an acceptable usage of any kind of fuel if the future holds the kinds of restrictions necessary for survival. Are we willing to just be the local musicians in the village without the glamorous dream of becoming the latest national whatever? These questions are confronting and possibly extreme, but they set in motion new thoughts on how communities can survive on a smaller scale. As an interesting alternative to touring, one might go have a look at [Michael Nesmith's project, Videoranch](#). But of course we will need fuel to run all those servers.

2) You seem to making real and committed efforts to incorporate earth-friendly methods into your life as a touring musician on a full time level. If there was such thing as a [LEED certification](#) for touring musicians , what would or should be the requirements?

Eliza: On the microcosm level, every musician knows full well they have to stop using the plastic water bottles on the road. If you do a tally at the end of the day you can easily have gone through an 8 pack of [water bottles](#), and backstage we open them, take a drink , set them down, forget which one is ours, open another...by the end of the night the backstage is littered with half filled bottles. So, carry a water filter for tap water, rent only a 4 cylinder automobile, don't use or take home the soap, shampoo and body lotion samples in the hotel rooms, turn off the heater/a.c.units and the lights when you leave your room....a lot of the same stuff we do at home. It is appalling how many hotels do not have recycling in the US. It's a good idea to check at the front desk because a few of them do recycle in their office. Otherwise you have to pack out your recyclables and find a center, using a lot of fuel in the search.

And, although all of us touring musicians need to commit to minimizing our daily touring footprint, I think the other questions we need to be asking ourselves are:

What are ways that I can cut back on my personal and workplace needs that will cause me to use less energy at home and on the road? How does my touring serve the greater community in a way that offsets my energy usage? What exactly is my goal as a touring musician? What am I doing as a touring musician to perpetuate the economic dysfunction and unfair distribution of wealth and resources in the USA?

I am guilty of all these sins. I have to challenge myself daily to give more and demand less and share what I have.

3)Your song "[The Great Correction](#)" is a chilling and honest depiction of our current reality...the sort of honesty that is void in politics. In what