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Bluegrass to Greengrass: Hosting Ecologically Friendly Events

by Jennie Lee Frank

Nowadays, just about everywhere you go, one can't help but hear or see a certain color in the air. Green! Green your grocery bags, green your energy, green your life! It seems the environmental changes around us have called the entire world to a new perspective of living.

Green attitudes are creeping up everywhere, including in the music industry as a whole. For the duration of the globally-recognized outdoor summer music festival, Bonnaroo, held last month in Manchester, Tenn., artists from all participating genres shouted to fans from the stage, ?Go green!? This wide-spreading panic (pun intended) is exploding into every aspect of the industry, from the way companies plan their conferences and meetings, to the education of the masses regarding ?sustainable green living.? Several of the bluegrass industry?s most passionate artists, labels and event producers are leading the way on this exciting ride.

Planet Bluegrass' marketing and communications director, Brian Eyster, is an enthusiastic proponent of the ?greengrass? lifestyle and business model. "To me, being ?actively green? means thinking about the impact of each of our actions as artists, labels and festival/concert promoters,? Eyster says. ?Rather than simply accepting that things are done a certain way, being actively green means taking a minute to think about whether we can accomplish the same goal (CD packaging, press kits, festival waste, etc) in a more sustainable manner. It's about thinking about the details of your music career and it's about being creative with those details."

Planet Bluegrass is working hard on the ?bluegreengrass? concept, and through their efforts they?re slowly beginning to educate and inspire artists and fans who come to RockyGrass and the Telluride Bluegrass Festival. In 2007, Planet Bluegrass worked with a sustainable touring organization called Reverb, offering information to their performers about the simple things they can do to green up their touring careers. Eyster went on to explain that by offsetting the travel emissions of all their festival performers for the past few years, Planet Bluegrass has thus had the opportunity to have a dialogue with every artist about the impacts of touring and how those can be minimized. (For info on how to measure and decrease your individual or band?s total amount of carbon emissions during travel, go to http://www.independenttraveler.com/resources/article.cfm?AID=736&category=13 [1])

The Telluride Bluegrass Festival has been 100% wind-powered since 2003. Carbon dioxide emissions (their ?carbon footprint?) inside the festival grounds amount to a very small percentage of fuel used for every aspect of the event, Eyster points out. ?Close to 95% of the emissions are created by travel to and from Telluride?by our crews, by our artists, and by festivarians (attendees). We are tackling this problem two ways: by reducing emissions as

much as possible through carpooling, biking or walking to the festival; then purchasing carbon offsets to neutralize the remaining travel emissions that we can?t reduce?say for instance, that flight from Ireland. Thanks to assistance from our partners?including New Belgium Brewing?s Team Wonderbike, Renewable Choice Energy and Clif Bar, we are committed to making the 35th Telluride Bluegrass the world?s second 100% carbon-neutral festival?behind last year?s Telluride Bluegrass, which was the first.?

Camping at a festival creates a very light footprint on the planet, with no use of air conditioning or electricity. In addition to composting leftover food, Eyester says some of their more creative campers have done everything from using solar panels to power blenders, to employing a small hydro-turbine to power a rotating disco ball. (Telluride isn?t your traditional bluegrass festival?.)

This year Telluride Bluegrass hosted the 1st Annual How Green is Your Grass Campsite Challenge. Festival attendees nominated campsites which were honored each day of the event, leading up to the selection of a grand prize-winning campsite which received Town Park camping passes for the 2009 festival.

Along with a close look at energy and composting (recycling and compost bins are manned by volunteers at Planet Bluegrass events, so attendees know where to toss what), the festival this year aggressively pursued banning plastic water bottles. Artists were given reusable water bottles to use onstage. Sources of the public water supply were researched and the information was publicized. Plenty of free water was available to everyone, filtered onsite to remove any taste of chlorine. Vendors were allowed to sell water in 2008, but in nothing smaller than one liter containers.

According to Planet Bluegrass? Steve Szymanski, there has been some resistance from vendors on the issue of bottled water sales, which is understandable. After all, due to an increased nation-wide focus on health and wellness the past few years, bottled water went from a $150 million a year industry in 1990 to a $11.5 billion a year industry in 2007. Changes like the switch away from plastic to 100% compostable plates and cups and the move from bottled to free water have been phased in over a two year period at Planet Bluegrass events to help ?ease the pain,? but vendors who can?t cope will not be invited back.

Plastic bags at souvenirs stands have been eliminated. Festivarians either purchase reusable bags or bring their own from home. Attendees are also encouraged to bring their own reusable silverware, napkins, plates, vintage beer cups, water bottles and more.

With the help of partners Red Bird and Organic Valley, Telluride Bluegrass boasts that 75% of their backstage food came from locally-grown, organic farms.

On a more individual level, band leader Adrienne Young is a good example of an artist who has focused on being environmentally conscious in all aspects of her career. Young, who believes the freedom to follow the "greener" route is very closely linked to maintaining the quality of life most people are privy to, feels things must come full circle. She firmly recognizes that bluegrass music?s roots are from a time when most folks were living off the land. Thus, she feels personally responsible?onstage and off?to live and work in a way that protects and preserves the earth.

Currently, Adrienne lives and breathes in the country, "grouping" to town, filling her diesel

engines with recycled waste-vegetable oil, and composting and recycling just about everything. "Decisions made on a moment-to-moment basis, to perhaps spend a little more time to buy local, to take time to recycle those bottles, to make that trip to the store one less time per week, to communicate with our political leaders that we really do care enough as a society to fund the walk we tout, ensuring our children have time outside each day and understand the full breadth of why all of these little things add up, are each and every one of them, bricks in the road,? she emphasizes.

The green road is becoming more well-traveled. Adrienne sums up her philosophy like this: ?Music is a universal language, as is love, and both are vibrations felt with the mind, body and spirit. Audiences surrender quite naturally to the greater voice, and in that surrender lies an inherent willingness to listen and honor the artists creating those lovely sounds, as well as their personal ideas. This points quite obviously to a pre-existing and vastly creative medium through which to offer perspectives about our world. If you can say it, you can sing it."

To learn more about how to implement more green in your music event or business, visit www.sustainablefestivation.com [2] , www.communitygarden.org [3]and www.foodroutes.org [4].

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