

For the Love of Music, At the Cost of Mother Nature

On July 7, 2007, over 2 billion people tuned in to watch some of the world's biggest names in music take a stand to “combat the climate crisis”—that’s over 30% of the global population at the time. A few years before former U.S. Vice President Al Gore helped organize the infamous benefit concerts known as Live Earth, the love story between an environmentalist and a musician blossomed into the desire to empower people through music, in the name of Earth. In 2004, Adam Gardner and Lauren Sullivan brought their passions together and founded a non-profit called Reverb. The organization was established with the intention to raise climate change awareness and to make concert tours more environmentally friendly. Twenty years later, the couple’s vision has sprouted into a partnership with some of the largest tours around the globe. Reverb continues to seek ways to greenify the music industry, while embracing the awareness that Live Earth first paved in 2007.

Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour is the highest-grossing concert tour of all time. Swift has maintained a consistent presence in the media and holds an impressive following of devoted fans. While the global sensation has used her platform to speak out on social issues, the musician faces controversy on the negative impression her international tour is leaving on the health of earth.

A major environmental concern pertaining to concerts and large tours is the extremely high quantities of carbon dioxide emissions produced by the burning of diesel in vehicles. For massive headliners such as Taylor Swift, the sets are extensive and the budgets allow for more equipment to be used during the show. However, more equipment requires more transportation to ensure that necessary equipment travels from city to city. Consequently, with several vehicles en

route from tour date to tour date, more diesel continues to be burnt as the global pop star travels around the world.

While electric vehicles are one alternative to relying on diesel, many rural areas do not have public charging stations, making the practicality of electric vehicles inconvenient for people living outside of urban areas. Another promising alternative to diesel fuel is biofuel. However, biofuel is an alternative that reduces petroleum use and decreases greenhouse gas emissions in transportation (Betts para. 3). Biodiesel is a mixture of vegetable oil or animal fats with various amounts of traditional diesel fuel. The most common grade of biodiesel is B20, which is 80% petroleum and 20% crops. While another form, B100, contains no petroleum and emits inconsequential amounts of carbon dioxide when burned (Knopper para. 4).

The first major rock tour to convert to biodiesel was Greendale in 2004. Looking to the tour as a model, several artists have made steps toward converting since then. While biodiesel stations are not plentiful all across the nation, some tours pay an extra fee to have tankers truck it in (Knopper para. 6).

The blame does not fall entirely into the hands of the artists. Swifties and other music fans attending concerts often contribute to the issue of CO₂ emissions in their own travel to the events. Another way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through transportation is to carpool to concerts.

Brendan Spears attended The Eras Tour last summer. A persistent concert-goer himself, an issue Spears brings up is the lack of control that the fans hold in selecting the locations chosen as tour dates. Many tours tend to include locations that are relatively spread out, while also aiming to visit places with higher demand. Residing in southeast Indiana, Spears notes that he

often travels across state lines to see his favorite performers live. “Over half my concerts were to Chicago...so like even if I wanted to, carpool was not an option,” Spears said.

Aside from travel, concerts hold a history of plastic waste. Spears recalls his experience at the The Eras Tour last summer and cringes at the alarming amount of plastic waste produced. “They were giving plastic water bottles, but since I was on the floor we couldn’t have any bottles with us, with the risk of people throwing it at Miss Taylor herself,” Spears said. “They literally would take a bottle of water and dump it into a plastic cup to give to us and then throw away the bottle.”

In the U.S. alone, 86% of plastic water bottles used become garbage or litter and over 38 million end up in landfills a year (Cortoneo p. 2). In an effort to cut this statistic, Reverb aims to work with artists in aiming to reduce or eliminate single-use plastic water bottles across tours (Routhier para. 8). A tour that began to implement this approach was Shawn Mendes’ Wonder: The World Tour. The tour ensured that there were hydration stations available to fans to use for free.

The tour was unfortunately cut short in 2022 due to the singer deciding to cancel the remainder of the tour to focus on his mental health. Nonetheless, the tour was set upon an eco-friendly foundation, with the help of Reverb. The tour’s website includes a sustainability tab, with a message from Mendes: “When we first started talking about greening the tour, I took a hard look at the many different things that make up our carbon footprint, and came face to face with a truly intimidating truth: every little thing we do matters. I was deeply upset that I, as an artist, was contributing to the climate crisis by doing one of my favorite things- touring.”

Although the Canadian pop star is only one among several headliners to partner with Reverb, the tour’s website provided data for fans to inform themselves on ways to get involved

in the climate crisis discussion along with descriptions on how Mendes and his crew will be taking precautions to step toward a greener tour. The webpage also notes that while planning the tour, measures were put into place to reduce environmental impacts and carbon emissions by 50% per show compared to Mendes' previous tour.

Another way that concert tours tend to contribute to waste is through the merch sold at the shows. Part of the method implemented on Wonder: The World Tour was to source sustainable fabrics and reducing the shipping footprint and carbon footprint produced during manufacturing. The fabrics consisted of organic cotton opposed to polyester. Implementing cotton reduces CO2 emissions by 62% and using organic cotton reduces emission by 50% compared to standard cotton (wonderthetour.com). Merch was also produced locally to reduce overall travel emissions. Mendes' tour also aimed to eliminate single-use plastic. When Spears reflected on his experience purchasing merch at concerts, he considered the plastic bags given with purchases. "I feel like they should almost not offer plastic bags...make them buy a tote bag. Truly at the end of the day, no one's going to reuse that bag," Spears said.

Concessions are another contributor of plastic waste at concerts. "I don't even know if I've ever seen like recycling only, especially near the stands...I feel like almost everything could be recycled except for the food," Spears said. Many concert-goers may describe the scene they witness as they leave the venue similarly to how a dog owner would describe what they see when they came home after their dog had gotten a hold of a bag of trash. Beer bottles linger across the venue, empty food boats sit abandoned on the cement stairs, and empty plastic cups are scattered in the parking lots. Spears reiterates that recycling has lost its emphasis in society. "I feel like it (recycling) was a very big trend like the mid 2010's and then all of a sudden, it's like not a big deal. I feel like no one talks about it," Spears said.

Along with Mendes, stars such as Billie Eilish, Harry Styles, and Fleetwood Mac have partnered with Reverb to lock arms toward raising awareness of the climate crisis. However, when the idea of greening tours and making the music industry more sustainable first began to capture the attention of concert goers, the principle sparked a lot of controversy, leaving critics asking how inspirational the artists can truly be if they aren't being proactive toward the issue.

In 2007, Live Earth introduced millions of viewers to global warming (Serpick para. 4). Along with performances by Madonna, Linkin Park, and Alicia Keys, TV audiences were surrounded by speeches, statistics, and films about ways to reduce carbon emissions. Organizers of the event strived to develop the best practices to create a greener formula for the music industry (Waddell para. 3). The team focused primarily on three main topics: energy, waste, and transport. Although Live Earth admittedly did not entirely avoid a carbon footprint, it undoubtedly shaped the focus of tours aiming toward eco-friendly options and the results of its impact are apparent today as artists such as Mendes look to those three topics when tour planning. Organizations such as Reverb still seek ways to implement these three topics into their projects and programs.

While the names on *Billboard's* Hot 100 tend to get the most backlash due to their familiarity with the general public, the music venues also play a part in eliminating waste. "There's only so much the artists and a company can do because I feel like the venue has a lot of power especially regarding waste," Spears said. Although, pointing fingers at people is not taking a step toward any solution. In fact, a glimpse into the mirror will reveal the source of the problem and the solution of the climate crisis.

In its twenty-year lifespan, Reverb has raised over \$16.7 million for environmental causes, played a part in greening over 7,300 concert events, and neutralized over 390,000 tons of

CO2 emissions. It started with a musician and an environmentalist coming together with the desire to shift the future of our planet. Music connoisseurs of all ages continue to pay hundreds of dollars to come together with other fans to see their favorite performers live, but as Spears put: “At what cost? Mother nature.”

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