

## A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.

### Musicians as Allies in Social Change

By Erin Potts

*Musicians are powerful allies that leverage their activities in ways that amplify the messages and strategies of social justice movements and that draw the necessary resources—creativity, targeted audiences, press, funding—to make change possible; they do this best when they have support, strategy, and tools.*

*Inspired with a desire to work on social change and to help raise money for the causes and issues they care about, musicians are contributing publicly in powerful and concrete ways: They lend their celebrity to movements and issues, their creativity inspires people to think differently about the world, and they have a level of influence and reach in society to convene and activate people. Some examples: will.i.am’s song and video “Yes We Can,” released during Barack Obama’s presidential campaign; Farm Aid’s concert-based and online advocacy efforts on behalf of family farmers; Airborne Toxic Event’s song, “Neda,” important to the democracy revolution in Iran; the education of fans about using carpool and public-transit to reduce band-tour carbon emissions footprints; and the use of mobile technologies to engage concertgoers in activism.*

*Musicians need smart partners, resources, strategy, and support to reach their full potential as artist-activist allies in social justice movements. Activism needs to be integrated into the music business, and opportunities to support musicians in the record cycle need to be pursued.*



Moby speaking at San Francisco City Hall (10/15/09).  
[www.cpedv.org/SOS%20Fund](http://www.cpedv.org/SOS%20Fund)

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Last fall, a musician named Moby was reading a *New York Times* article about the severe budget crisis in California and the state legislature's decision to cut all funding for domestic abuse services. Moby had a personal connection to the importance of these services because his mother had been a victim of domestic abuse. He also had two sold-out concerts in California coming up in a couple of weeks.

Moved by this situation, Moby decided to donate all of the profits—approximately \$90,000—to a domestic abuse organization, but didn't know which group to work with. Moby's publicist reached out to colleagues, including an artist resource organization that run called Air Traffic Control (ATC). ATC and others recommended a nonprofit advocacy group called the California Partnership To End Domestic Abuse. In working with this organization, and through the publicity generated, Moby and his social justice colleagues managed to shame California's governor and legislature into reinstating the \$16 million funding. Moby received this news halfway through his first California concert and announced it to his audience, to tremendous applause.<sup>1</sup>

This story perfectly illustrates two essential points in working with popular musicians on

*Artists are the real architects of change, and not the political legislators who implement change after the fact.*

-William S. Burroughs

social change issues. First, musicians are incredibly powerful allies that leverage their activities in ways that amplify the messages and strategies of social justice movements and that draw the necessary resources to make change possible. Second, musicians do this best when they have support, strategy, and tools.

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## MUSICIANS AS POWERFUL ALLIES

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From the civil rights movement, to debt relief, to human rights, popular musicians have been allies that lend their celebrity and spotlight to movements and issues, and their creativity and ability to convene people. President Barack Obama acknowledged this important role that musicians can play when he called the civil rights movement, "a movement sustained by music."<sup>2</sup>

We know that music inspires us to think differently about the world, to join social change movements we didn't know about before, and that music can become the energizing soundtrack for our personal activism. Interestingly, the power of music is also being documented in market and academic research:

- A study in California found that music is the most important influencer in the formation of young peoples' identities—even more than religion.<sup>3</sup>
- Biologists determined that music activates the part of the brain that governs optimism, making it a powerful antidote to the long and sometimes difficult work of change making.<sup>4</sup>
- Research found that musicians engaged in activism help their fans feel more personally connected to issues and believing that their participation can make a difference.<sup>5</sup>
- A recent study found that musicians were reaching new supporters—ones not already touched by other social justice groups.<sup>6</sup>

Musicians have astonishing scale, scope, and reach through their fan bases and through concert tours. Fan bases range from 10,000 for smaller artists to more than a million members for those more established. In other words, each band's fan base is equal to the membership size of organizations like Colorado Progressive Coalition, Sierra Club, or Rock the Vote. Musicians are simultaneously business people, campaigners, and artists. Few professions have this level of influence and reach in our society. Inspired with a desire to work on social change, musicians are contributing in powerful and concrete ways to social justice. Here are just a few of them:

### Musicians Create Music That Moves People

The musician will.i.am's song and video "Yes We Can" sampled Barack Obama's speech and occurred at the moment of the deepest doubt and despair in his presidential campaign—his devastating loss to Hillary Clinton in New Hampshire. The campaign was disheartened but will.i.am was able to capture the strength and courage of the would-be

President. It was not something that the campaign asked will.i.am to do. He did it because he was moved to. And, as millions of people watched the video that first month, it became a turning point—and a symbol of the transition from campaign to movement, as well as the cultural moment that embodied the motto of "hope."<sup>7</sup>



### Musicians Are Long-Term Advocates

When it comes to policy battles and advocacy, musicians have historically played a number of key roles, including helping to energize and sustain advocacy over time, awaking emotion in their fans, and engaging new audiences. For 25 years a group of

dedicated musicians have been doing this kind of advocacy work on behalf of family farmers through Farm Aid. Farm Aid is not just an annual benefit concert, although it has raised \$37 million. It also works with local, regional, and national organizations to promote fair farm policies and grassroots organizing campaigns designed to defend and bolster family farm-centered agriculture. Musicians and farmers have gone hand in hand to visit elected officials to demand that they promote policy that keeps family farmers on their land. Farm Aid's concert-based and online advocacy efforts have led to 13,000 petitions being delivered to the Secretary of Agriculture over the past 25 years.

Hundreds of other musicians have similarly gone to Capitol Hill to have meetings and give testimony. Damian Kulash, from OK Go, opened his testimony to Congress on net neutrality in 2008 by saying, "I'm a rock singer, so I'm used to speaking my mind in front of a mic. But to be honest, this isn't the crowd I'm used to." He then closed his time with an impromptu concert for staffers. Since then he has written two op-ed pieces—for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—advocating for net neutrality.

### **Musicians Activate Fans To Demand Change**

The core of a musician's art and business is intended to engage and activate their fans. So it is not surprising that they are exceptionally adept at doing so in the context of social justice. Musicians of all magnitudes and genres have worked to activate their fans to register to vote; to make calls to Congress about health care reform or other policy initiatives; to boycott goods, companies, or countries for human-rights abuses; to volunteer for local community organizations; and much more. The ways that bands do this vary, but some of the most intriguing ways include the band talking about these actions from the stage, using mobile technologies at concerts, and embedding calls to action in music videos.

One example of this was an effort by a band called the Airborne Toxic Event. The band wrote a song about Neda, a young Iranian woman whose gruesome death was recorded during the June 2009 democracy protests in Iran and then viewed around the world. The band felt that Neda's death was not only important to the democracy revolution in Iran, but also that "It was the first viral video to change the course of history, a symbol that the power of broadcasting is no longer simply in the hands of governments and corporations, but in the hands of people." On the one-year anniversary of her death, the band released the song "Neda," a video with embedded actions,<sup>8</sup> and an engagement campaign in partnership with Amnesty International ([www.nedaspeaks.org](http://www.nedaspeaks.org)). Despite being a relatively small band in terms of reach and audience, their video has been seen more than 150,000 times, with thousands of fans taking action through the campaign website and social-network pages.

### **Musicians Align Their Business Practices With Social Justice**

On top of being cultural influencers, musicians are the drivers of an immense industry that reaped more than \$60 billion in revenue in 2009 alone.<sup>9</sup> Musicians have the opportunity to

align their own businesses and the music industry in general with social-justice goals. One example of this potential lies in touring, a mainstay of many popular musicians' businesses (about \$4.6 billion in concert tickets sold in 2009) and a unique and vital way to promote social and environmental change.

For instance, in 2008 Radiohead calculated that fans coming to their shows contributed between 86–97 percent of the overall carbon emissions of their tours, and that by educating their fans about carpool and public transit they could easily reduce tour emissions. Specifically, the band determined that if their fans carpooled a bit more—increasing average car occupancy from 2.2 to 3—the whole tour's overall CO<sub>2</sub> output would be reduced by 22 percent. Similarly, if 10 percent of car users took a bus they would reduce carbon emissions another 7 percent.<sup>10</sup> Thom Yorke, lead singer of Radiohead said, "With Radiohead, the most shocking yet obvious thing we discovered was that the way people travel to our shows has the biggest impact. So we now play in venues that are supported by public transport."<sup>11</sup>

New ways of booking shows and new methods of fan transportation can be replicated across thousands of concerts a year. Forty million concert tickets were sold last year. A reduction of 30 percent in carbon emissions—both in terms of the miles saved by fans not driving to and from concerts and the potential of inculcating good transportation habits—is enormous and would be a long-lasting contribution toward environmental sustainability.

### Musicians Are Creative Philanthropists

Many musicians want to help raise money for the causes and issues they care about, and there are lots of creative ways to do this beyond benefit concerts. Some artists have auctioned off the opportunity for a fan to sing on stage with them. Others have asked fans to throw paper money at them while they perform a particular song; it is then gathered and donated to a charity. Others have leveraged their guest lists by requesting guests to make donations in lieu of paying the price of the ticket. And still other musicians have created albums, singles, VIP packages, t-shirts, and posters to benefit nonprofits.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most common techniques for raising funds is for a musician to add a charity "surcharge" (usually ranging from \$.25–\$2) to the sale of each ticket sold on tour. These surcharges are one of the simplest ways to raise money. My Morning Jacket, a rock band from Kentucky, has been able to raise more than \$100,000 in two month-long U.S. tours through ticket surcharges, with relatively little effort. They did not need to set up a foundation or other infrastructure to make significant contributions to social change.<sup>13</sup> The creativity and potential of musicians' philanthropic activities are immense, and the impact is immediate. As one executive director said, after hearing that a musician was giving her organization a small donation, "This donation is more energizing to our movement than much bigger donations because of who it came from!"

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## MUSICIANS AS ALLIES

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*Music is the weapon of the future.*  
-Fela Kuti

Just as it takes time and practice to become a great musician, the same is true for becoming a great artist-activist. With limited infrastructure or support for this work within their industry, musicians cannot easily reach their potential as allies in social justice. To do so they need smart partners, resources, strategy, support, and tools that they can trust and rely on. Here are some guiding principles to help create effective social-change collaborations with musicians:

**Start where artists are most comfortable.** Have a deep respect for artists and know that starting where they are comfortable means their activism will go further than if they been pushed out of their comfort zone early. Musicians who stick to an issue or a narrow set of issues that they feel most comfortable with are often more effective. They also tend to be inoculated from media backlash.

**Understand the business.** Find ways to integrate activism into the business of making music—both can be done extremely well, and activism doesn't have to get dropped when life gets busy. It can also provide opportunities for movements to earn income with musicians and add value to musicians that goes beyond "feeling good."

**Document better practices.** It is essential to refine and mature this important field of activities—to understand what works and doesn't work and to share those lessons. It is also critical that organizations not only measure the impact of their collaborations with musicians but that they communicate impact back to the artists.

**Innovate.** We continue to find new ways of doing this work. After years of studying how to better engage concertgoers, musicians began using mobile technologies to better engage their fans in both their music and activism instead of relying solely on the ineffective practice of inviting organizations to table at their shows. We should remember—what works today might not tomorrow.

Working with musicians is about changing hearts, minds, and policy simultaneously. It is inspirational, and it is as much about making the world more just today as it is about ensuring it will be so in 20 years. Ultimately, effective artist activism is not a question of *if* artists will engage: They often are already active, responding, and self-organizing. Rather, it is a question of *when* these artists *do* act, what resources will exist for them to do so in strategic ways that

amplify the messages and strategies of social-justice movements and that draw the necessary resources—creativity, targeted audiences, press, funding—that will make change possible.

*I don't expect one song to change the world. The real concrete things that get accomplished happen when people gather together and pool money and sign petitions and volunteer and organize. What music has given us is that ability to gather people together to do that.*

Amy Ray, Indigo Girls

### Opportunities to Support Musicians in the Record Cycle

Music and activism can happen most effectively when resources and trusted intermediaries exist to support artists. These trusted agents should understand the business of making music and find ways to integrate social justice activities into business. There are many opportunities throughout a typical record cycle to collaborate on social justice activities that go beyond simply doing benefit concerts. Here are some:

Core Aspects of a Record Cycle	Corresponding Social Justice Opportunities
<p><b>In the studio</b> – creating a record</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• capacity building by holding retreats and other activities for musicians and managers</li> <li>• developing a strategic plan for a musician’s activism, philanthropy, and advocacy work</li> <li>• supporting creation of music that is relevant to specific social-justice themes or issues</li> </ul>
<p><b>Pre-production and production</b> – planning tours, creating music-video, designing merchandise, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• designing cause-related campaign: call-to-action music videos, merchandise, ticket surcharges, or other charitable giving for the tour</li> <li>• planning strategic routing of the tour based on core issues and legislative timelines (Stops are coordinated with movement needs or venues are accessible by public transportation.)</li> </ul>

Core Aspects of a Record Cycle	Corresponding Social Justice Opportunities
<b>Publicity</b> – announcing the record	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• training music publicists to work on cause- and activist-related publicity so they can support the change-making activities around a release</li> <li>• supporting musicians on talk and radio shows to speak about record and causes (talking points, media training, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Worldwide tour</b> – performing in city after city, night after night	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• implementing sustainable touring and fan-issue engagement sequences</li> <li>• performing philanthropic activities: ticket surcharges, VIP tickets, guest-list donations, tabling, and other on-site activities</li> <li>• performing at benefit concerts or rallies</li> <li>• spending extra time in Washington, DC, or other locations to learn more or to do specific activism (i.e., visits to elected officials)</li> </ul>
<b>Off/Vacation</b> – preparing for the next cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• capacity building by holding retreats and other activities for musicians and managers</li> <li>• developing strategic plan for a musician’s activism, philanthropy, and advocacy work</li> </ul>

Erin Potts is executive director of Air Traffic Control. In her early twenties, her work to create the Tibetan Freedom Concerts with the Beastie Boys brought international awareness, mobilized hundreds of popular musicians, raised over \$5 million, and turned tens of thousands of young people into activists for Tibet. A decade later, Erin continues to work with musicians and other cultural leaders. She is an expert in cultural communications and strategies, and has a passion for engaging new audiences and innovating nonprofit activities.

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For more information, visit: [www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy](http://www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy)

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For more on Moby's work on this campaign, please watch the CNN coverage: <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/showbiz/2009/10/26/moby.gimme.shelter.cnn>
- <sup>2</sup> From "Obama: Civil rights 'a movement sustained by music'" <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/theoval/post/2010/02/obama-civil-rights-a-movement-sustained-by-music/1>
- <sup>3</sup> "California Dreamers: A public opinion portrait of the most diverse generation the nation has known," New America Media, Poll, Apr 2\_, 2007. Available online: [http://media.newamericamedia.org/images/polls/youth/ca\\_youth\\_poll\\_presentation.pdf](http://media.newamericamedia.org/images/polls/youth/ca_youth_poll_presentation.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> See also: Levitin, Daniel J., *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*. Penguin Group, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> "Celebrity Endorsements and their potential to Motivate Young Voters" *Mass Communications and Society* 11: 420–436, February 2009.
- <sup>6</sup> For more information on this, please see: <http://www.atctower.net/study-shows-concerts-an-effective-place-to-register-new-voters/>
- <sup>7</sup> Watch the video here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsV2O4fCgjk>
- <sup>8</sup> Watch the video here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXN\\_yCSbUYk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXN_yCSbUYk)
- <sup>9</sup> The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry recently issued a report valuing the worldwide music industry at \$60 billion in revenue. The report can be found at [http://www.ifpi.org/content/section\\_news/20100428.html](http://www.ifpi.org/content/section_news/20100428.html). Furthermore, *Pollstar* estimated a record \$4.6 billion in worldwide tour grosses in 2009 with a record 40.5 million tickets sold. More info available at: <http://www.pollstar.com/blogs/news/archive/2010/07/01/730088.aspx> and <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/92d98d1c-bae9-11df-9e1d-00144feab49a.html>
- <sup>10</sup> For more information on this effort, please see Radiohead's blog post that began it all: <http://www.radiohead.com/deadairspace/index.php?a=310>.
- <sup>11</sup> From "Why I'm a Climate Optimist" by Thom Yorke in the *Guardian*. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2008/mar/20/thomyorke>
- <sup>12</sup> For a more complete listing of ways that musicians creatively raise money, please download the ATC toolkit on the subject: [http://www.atctower.net/tools/raising\\_funds.pdf](http://www.atctower.net/tools/raising_funds.pdf)
- <sup>13</sup> For more on these activities, please see <http://www.atctower.net/my-morning-jacket-atc-philanthropy-our-album-new-orleans/>