

Petrice Jones (00:04):

What's up and welcome to another episode of 52 Hertz, The Lonely Whale podcast. I'm your host Petrice Jones. Today on our show, we will be talking to Adam Gardner and Tanner Watts from Reverb. Adam is both cofounder of Reverb and a guitarist for the band Guster. Tanner is director of partnerships at Reverb. Reverb is a nonprofit disrupting typical practices in the music industry by collaborating with musicians, venues, and festivals, to create green concert events and shift attitudes towards waste.

Adam Gardner (00:29):

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Petrice Jones (00:38):

I'll be talking to Adam and Tanner about the power music has to bring people together and the challenges they've faced.

Adam Gardner (00:43):

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Petrice Jones (00:49):

As always. I am your host, Petrice Jones, and welcome to another episode of Lonely Whale's 52 Hertz. But first some good news from around the reef. Scientists have discovered that underwater speakers can give dying coral reefs a second chance at life. So if you didn't know that healthy coral reef is noisy, the first time you hear one could be pretty shocking. It's like walking downtown at rush hour. Just trade out car horns and angry cab drivers for the whoosh of the ocean current and the crackles and pops of the coral reefs being cleaned by shrimp and eaten by parrotfish. Turns out the sound of a healthy reef also attracts fish to corals in need of a little TLC. Playing the audio of a thriving reef near a struggling coral doubled the number of fish in the area. You can call it coralchella. It's got the same color scheme and probably a little bit less slime. While the return of fish to dying coral reefs doesn't guarantee the regrowth of the reef on its own, combining this discovery with other conservation efforts like this feels like a promising step forward. And that's some good news. So guys, welcome to the show.

Tanner Watts (01:55):

Thank you so much for having us.

Petrice Jones (01:57):

I would love for you guys to just tell me a little bit about yourselves. Adam, let's start with you, a little bit about you and what Reverb really is.

Adam Gardner (02:03):

Yeah. Reverb's an environmental nonprofit organization that I founded with my wife Lauren Sullivan in 2004. And it kind of happened organically between our two worlds. She's always been an environmentalist and I've been touring in a band for almost 30 years now. We met when we were teens. I was 19 and she was 18. I'm 47 now. I think it just came about from living with her as an environmentalist and kind of becoming an environmentalist through osmosis. And I was falling in love with her, falling in love with everything that she was doing, and of course, then going out on the road and that just flew in the face of everything that was happening at home when we were living together. All the waste on tour, with all the plastic on the ground and how everything is disposable, the tour buses rolling around with diesel engines and it was just so clearly an issue. And then, of course, also seeing the huge opportunity with musicians and the cultural power of music to really influence millions of music fans to take everyday actions that can add up to real change.

Adam Gardner (03:02):

My motivation was I want Guster's tour to be greener, but we don't know how to do it and we don't have the resources. Everyone has a job out on the road and nobody has time on their plate. Their plates are full. And then of course Lauren's motivation was these musicians that have huge platforms and have a unique relationship to their fans where they can not only make suggestions and be quote, unquote influencers, but have their tours be walking, talking examples of what everyone can be doing on the road. So for example, Lonely Whale is a big ocean advocate. Plastic waste is such a big problem on tours. Just saying, "Hey, our band isn't using any single use plastic water bottles on this tour and we're using these reusable bottles and we're going to make them available to you at the shows and we're going to have free water available to you." Just having real easy ways for people to participate, but also bringing in local campaigns and national organizations to really just amplify the environmental movement while getting people taking measurable action at the concerts and beyond.

Petrice Jones (04:05):

Great. Thank you. And Tanner, I'd love to just hear a little bit about how you fit into that very big wheel of change.

Tanner Watts (04:12):

Absolutely. I'm so excited to be leading the efforts in partnership and developing programs and exciting ways to engage fans, engage brands, and also engage other nonprofit organizations and really bring it all together. In my time with Reverb, I've really been excited to see just that the power of music, all these young people, old people, people of all ages that are at a live event, so excited to be close to an artist they care about, and then to give them the opportunity to learn about and connect with these causes that are important to the artists. It's something that makes these fans feel closer to their

favorite artists and helps create relationships between music fans, musicians, and local, national and global nonprofit efforts.

Petrice Jones (04:57):

Why do you think music's such a powerful tool for addressing social and environmental issues? What is it about music that brings everybody together?

Tanner Watts (05:05):

I think music's always been a catalyst for change. There's something about music and that it takes people to a special place. It opens your mind, so to speak, to whatever that message is. And addressing important issues in a positive and hopeful way makes those engagements much more exciting and that much more meaningful to the fans. Hopefully it creates a longterm relationship with that cause.

Petrice Jones (05:32):

That's great. Would you guys consider yourselves in some capacities activists?

Adam Gardner (05:38):

Absolutely. I think a lot of musicians are activists in their hearts. What's an interesting thing with our approach is a lot of musicians ... and I think this is changing actually as things are getting more intense and urgent in this country, especially. But a lot of musicians, especially when we were starting, were hesitant to kind of put themselves out there as activists. I think even Jack Johnson, when we first started working with him, he just wanted to quietly do what was right for himself in his tour. He was afraid of shouting it from the mountaintops.

Adam Gardner (06:16):

With Reverb, he understood our approach to it where it wasn't at all holier than now and it wasn't about shame. It was about positivity and positive solutions and excitement in being an enthusiast and not an expert. That allowed a lot of the musicians that we work with to feel comfortable getting behind causes, especially when it's positive and it's community based and actually a really positive side effect that we hadn't thought of when we originally started Reverb, is that there's a tightness, a closeness that actually bonds the fan to the musician even more by doing this work together and having a cause in common.

Petrice Jones (06:54):

Do you feel as though that, in the example of Jack Johnson, just trying to keep it to himself and just do right that you guys are making it easier for artists to follow in those footsteps?

Adam Gardner (07:05):

What we do is we fold our staff onto the artist tour and they become

folded into their crew, just like a guitar tech or sound engineer. And their job is to handle everything logistically on the ground. We have a back office that handles all the logistics as well. But the execution on the ground happens by our on the road staffer, handling everything backstage, as well as setting up front house Eco-village where fans can take action and just really making sure that all the systems are in place to have the tour be sustainable, making it easy for artists and crew to plug into it. And also for fans to plug in and take action and incentivize them. They can win a signed guitar, they can win side stage seating. We make it fun and interesting and exciting for fans to participate.

Petrice Jones (07:54):

That's great. How big of a problem is the music industry's waste problem?

Adam Gardner (07:59):

It's very obvious. Anyone who's been to a concert, at the end of the night all they have to do is look down at their feet and see all the plastic on the ground that they're having to wade through to get out the exits. I will say, compared to other industries, I think the ratio of positive impact through the influence of asking fans to take action and be a part of the solutions is wildly positive compared to the actual negative impact of the concerts. There's so many related industries as well from trucking and busing to hotels, food and venues, and not just the industry, but even adjacent industries that music ties into.

Petrice Jones (08:41):

How much waste do you think can be produced by a single tour? Is there any kind of information around how much is really being produced?

Adam Gardner (08:49):

The tour's impacts vary pretty wildly, which is why you're not seeing a lot of data on like, "The average tour does this." It's like, well, there's no such thing really. I mean, I guess you could take an average, but there's such a huge difference between, say, my band's tour, which is a ballroom theater size venue tour compared to a U2 tour. But you know, some of the things that we have looked at that is incredibly encouraging is we mentioned the plastic waste and a program that we have with our partners Nalgene that Tanner actually set up called RockNRefill, where we offer filter water for free to fans at the shows, and then they can make a donation for a Nalgene bottle. And those donations can go towards any number of environmental causes that the band Reverb determine together. We've eliminated over 3 million single use water bottles at concerts alone since we started that program. Was it five years ago, Tanner?

Tanner Watts (09:44):

Seven now. The partnership with Nalgene has been amazing. I mean,

Nalgene has donated over a quarter million custom Nalgene bottles to this program. And it is, like Adam said, one of the things that we can quantify through flow counters on the water station. And then also the potential of planting a seed with these fans is where I think an even bigger, positive impact comes from all of it. Our idea and the feeling is hopefully when a fan sees Tame Impala up there drinking from his RockNRefill reusable bottle, they will start to associate this positive action and really start to adopt that in their own life. And there's definitely impact that can be reduced at live music events on the ground and we do everything we can for that. But the real potential is winning hearts and minds in that positive approach, but then giving these fans hope and showing them easy and accessible ways to participate in being a piece of the solution. I really think that that's where the artists are doing more than their part. It's one thing to do your part to try and take your own impact and do your pieces backstage, but to really endorse this different way of thinking and this different way of acting to your fans, that's where the real power is.

Petrice Jones (11:05):

I feel as though Generation Z has pushed a lot of these things forward. Have you felt that it's easier to get people to uptake these ideas?

Adam Gardner (11:13):

Absolutely. When we first started this green was just a color in 2004. There was no environmental association with that word. Carbon footprint or environmental footprint, those were foreign concepts. Just the level of conversation that we're having with these fans face to face in our Eco-village and of course online through social media, the level of discourse is in a whole new world. There's almost an expectation at certain points that artists are doing something good with their tours and with their status. We are seeing increased interest from the artists themselves. We've been able to work with Billie Eilish and Harry Styles and Sean Mendes who have that generation of fan that you're talking about where they're excited and they're ready to plug in.

Tanner Watts (12:02):

I think that we're also seeing a younger generation of artists being inspired from some of the previous generation of artists. We connected with Sean Mendes through Jack Johnson's tour. Sean came out to our tour and was really interested in what Jack was doing both backstage and front of house with fan engagement. That really inspired him to start doing some of those things on his own tour. And that's an exciting thing to see this younger generation of musician looking at the musicians that they grew up with, taking that positive influence and expressing it to their fans.

Petrice Jones (12:36):

It's great that the artists were on board, but it almost begs the question of how much support are they getting?

Adam Gardner (12:42):

Our approach has always been with the artists first because music industry wouldn't be an industry without the music. Obviously it hasn't moved as quickly as we'd all like it to, but you are starting to see real efforts being made. And again, it's the influence of the artists. They're putting this in their writers, "Hey, if we're going to play at your venue, we want to have XYZ happen." We've been on over 250 tours since we started in 2004. And when COVID hit, we were in the middle of six tours. We were out with Billie Eilish, Tame Impala, the 1975, Sturgill Simpson, Guster. And who am I forgetting?

Tanner Watts (13:17):

The Lumineers?

Adam Gardner (13:18):

Yeah, can't forget The Lumineers. So to have all these artists going out at the same time asking the venues the same things, it also is a positive peer pressure sort of, "Hey, we are your top grossing bands and this is what we'd like to see happen."

Tanner Watts (13:32):

How's that been impacted by COVID-19? How has sustainable events been sort of damaged by it, if at all?

Adam Gardner (13:38):

Venues and promoters are reassessing, renegotiating everything. And while they're trying to figure out what normal looks like on the other side of this, we don't want them to forget about sustainability. We don't want to slide backwards on the progress that's been made, and there's actually an opportunity to leapfrog forward as everything is being renegotiated. For example, if concessionaire contracts are being renegotiated, let's look at what waste is being created through those concessions and how to get rid of that contractually.

Petrice Jones (14:08):

Do you meet a lot of resistance or is this something that's been relatively smooth?

Tanner Watts (14:12):

Things like eliminating single use straws, that was a super easy thing to get accomplished because vendors and concessionaires realized, "Oh, this is something that I don't have to purchase anymore." It wasn't about something with a more expensive alternative. So those sorts of things are easy, but they're also few and far between. Most of the solutions are either going to be, at best, the same cost and in some cases, a little more expensive. But as with anything, to do something right, and to do something with people and the planet in mind, it

usually isn't going to be a discount, right? So I think that's a piece of it, but I do think that others are figuring out ways to turn some of these ideas into new revenue streams that can make up for those additional costs and sometimes come out on a plus positive.

Tanner Watts (15:05):

But these programs where venues are switching to an infrastructure of reusable cups with a deposit system or reusable water bottles and refill stations, those are sorts of things where venues can actually sell reusable pint cups. They're finding ways that, "Hey, this is another revenue source that can help us cover the cost of the change of infrastructure, the education and the price differences all around." So I do really think that in the long run, it's a bonus for everyone, but there are hurdles and money is one of the biggest hurdles to get over when you're dealing with large contracts or small.

Petrice Jones (15:37):

The amount of dollar is often the thing that stands in the way of the progress, unfortunately, but can also be the solution.

Tanner Watts (15:41):

Absolutely.

Petrice Jones (15:43):

You're 16 years down the road, I think. Do you feel like you guys have accomplished what you set out to do?

Adam Gardner (15:50):

Lauren and I, when we started Reverb, said our goal was to put ourselves out of business, where we're no longer needed, where tours are all sustainable, everybody going to the shows is already doing everything they should be doing, and we live in a world where the future is bright and sustainable and we won't have to worry about it. We're not there yet. That's for sure. That being said, I remain extremely hopeful about the future. Our philosophy is that everybody can play a role in saving our asses. Because at the end of the day, that's what we were talking about. Not just humans, but all species, animal and otherwise. It's a Herculean task, but we've seen incredible strides being made and a lot of impact besides the 3 million single use plastic water bottles, fans and bands have neutralized over 120,000 tons of carbon through our various programs and supported over 50 carbon fighting projects around the world, like wind and solar, reforestation and methane capture and digestion and all sorts of stuff. So it's all feeling pretty good.

Petrice Jones (16:56):

We're fighting a good fight.

Adam Gardner (16:57):

There's much work to be done. There's no question.

Petrice Jones (16:59):

Right. Do you feel that you've exceeded your expectations of when you found this?

Adam Gardner (17:03):

You know, it's funny. I don't know if we had like these hopes and dreams. We just saw an opportunity and we thought it made sense and we just wanted to just roll up our sleeves and get to work. I think we've been surprised by the response. It started with me reaching out to the tours that we'd been touring with as Guster. So some of our early partners were Dave Matthews Band and John Mayer and Maroon 5, and those are all artists we still work with over a decade later. But what I didn't expect was the word getting out. It turns out word of mouth is powerful in the music community. And at the end of the day, it's fairly small as far as who manages who and the decision makers.

Tanner Watts (17:40):

I feel like the intensity and the immediacy of the issues has also grown, especially for the last three and a half years or so. We've made huge strides in the impact that Reverb has made, but we are also facing huge hurdles, not just with COVID, but with the current situation with the climate crisis and a government in our country that's trying to roll back every regulation and get rid of everything that is set up to protect what little protections there are for the environment.

Petrice Jones (18:08):

So essentially Trump.

Tanner Watts (18:10):

Yeah, yeah. [crosstalk 00:18:12]. I don't know that that name usually triggers four-letter [inaudible 00:18:18] for me so I'm trying to keep it clean for the podcast.

Adam Gardner (18:22):

Look, it's been an issue, no matter who's president. This isn't new, especially talking about climate change. And there's been a lot of conversation, thankfully finally, about racial injustice and systemic racism. So this idea of systemic change needing to happen absolutely for equality and to fight against racism systemically and otherwise. Absolutely, the same is true for climate change. And environmental justice and systemic racism are intrinsically linked and we're looking very hard at that. But it's interesting just seeing a recent statement from Greta Thunberg about the climate emergency and it echoes a lot of what's being said by black lives matter about this needs to systemically change. Why do we think anything's going to change without changing the root problems?

Petrice Jones (19:12):



Right. No, absolutely. And that's so interesting that you say that just in terms of how these two problems meet, because especially with regards to music, black music specifically is so often the most popular music and contributes so much to the music industry, typically in terms of sales. How do you guys approach artists?

Adam Gardner (19:34):

Some artists come to us and other times we'll approach an artist. It's something that we're trying to do more and more of is approach more ... We want a more diverse audience to talk to, and we want to have more voices and hear more feedback from everybody. So we want to figure out how to make sure that this isn't just a bunch of dudes with acoustic guitars that are doing this. A bunch of white dudes with acoustic guitars doing this. That's really important. That's female artists, that's country artists, artists of color, international artists from other countries like ... there's a lot of work to be done. We're a relatively smaller organization. We've just been able to have the fortunate partnerships with these artists that are willing to really use their power and reach to make significant impact happen.

Petrice Jones (20:29):

Right. You mentioned that you're small way, are you the only entity out there doing what you're doing in the way you're doing it?

Tanner Watts (20:36):

Yeah. There's other organizations that look at the environmental and the social impact of music. Most of the other organizations doing this sort of thing are doing it from a different angle. There are a lot of great organizations that help artists determine good groups to give cause donations too. There's a lot of groups that are coming up with coalitions, which can be very powerful. But I don't know of any other organization, definitely no other nonprofit, that actually has boots on the ground and is touching the issue, developing solutions, and then executing those solutions on the road on tours and at festivals. I think Reverb really is the only one that's approaching the issue from that direction.

Petrice Jones (21:19):

Have you found that it's affected you guys' ticket price?

Adam Gardner (21:24):

Generally we don't affect the ticket price or anything like that. We can look to partnerships, sponsors, sometimes it's grants. And in many cases there's no cost at all to the artist.

Tanner Watts (21:35):

Yeah, absolutely. With partnerships, sometimes concessions gets a little frustrated with the idea that people are getting water for free.

Petrice Jones (21:44):  
I'm sure. It's the most expensive thing.

Tanner Watts (21:47):  
Exactly. Single use bottle. But we've worked with Dan Sheehan and his wife, Amy Sheehan, who run the California Foothills festival in Monterey. Reggae festival, about 12,000 people a day. And we've done a bunch of data collection around the per ticket holder spend at concessions. The first year we had free water stations. The second year, the festival decided we're going to eliminate the sale of water altogether and just provide free water stations. There's not even an option to buy a bottle of water. You can buy beer, you can buy soda, you can buy whatever, but there's no water to be sold. And even when the festival shifted in that direction, they found that the per person spend at concessions didn't go down. It remained about the same, even went up a little bit, but people just spent the money on something else.

Petrice Jones (22:35):  
On beer.

Tanner Watts (22:36):  
So when the person got their water for free, they bought another beer or they got another slice of pizza or whatever it was. So I really believe that most of that fear is just fear and not based in fact. The only thing that is real there is a single use plastic bottle of water is the item that you can mark up the highest. I mean, the units cost 15 or 20 cents a unit for a bottle of water that you then sell for \$5. So it is a big markup and that is a thing folks hate to lose. They hate to lose that income stream, but more and more fans demand it. Fans are off-put by festivals creating this waste and contributing to this global crisis. And more and more festivals are starting to recognize that and lead by positive example and therefore make their fans happier and in the long run, it works for everyone.

Petrice Jones (23:29):  
You guys seem super excited and hopeful about the future. Is there anything you guys are particularly jazzed up about?

Adam Gardner (23:35):  
We're formalizing a campaign that we're calling unCHANGEit. We're billing it as music's climate campaign. It was created out of the feeling that it's so easy as an individual to feel completely helpless and hopeless about preventing climate change or slowing climate change. How do we use the huge numbers that music reaches and show people that the only way this is going to happen is by individuals coming together and doing something about it?

Adam Gardner (24:05):  
We've already started doing this informally on Dave Matthews Band tour through the RockNRefill program. The donations from those bottles went

to building rooftop solar on low income housing in the band's hometown. What a cool thing to be able to show fans just from one summer tour, you guys were able to provide free power to low income families in your favorite band's hometown. And that's what you guys did. The fans did that. This is what we can do together. And to be able to look across 15 years of touring with Dave Matthews Band and the sheer amount of impact that the fans have contributed. Right now we're creating a massive campaign website where it offers resources and calls to actions, not just to fans and bands but to all aspects of the industry, whether that's labels, recording studios, management companies. So the idea is to pull together the industry, the community, the music makers and music lovers together, to all do something that's measurable to fight greenhouse gases and climate change.

Petrice Jones (25:11):

That is bloody incredible. Thank you so much for you guys' work. It's so impressive to see the strides that you guys have made.

Adam Gardner (25:18):

Thanks so much, Petrice. We really appreciate it. Thanks for having us.

Tanner Watts (25:22):

Thank you so much.

Petrice Jones (25:23):

Hey, listen. It's just before you go, here's a quick ocean saving tip for you from our guest.

Tanner Watts (25:29):

I would say that it's not hard. Don't be afraid to take the first step. There are a lot of impactful steps that can be taken at little or no cost. And always be aware of the example you're setting. When you set a positive example, it goes a long way. Just like it goes a long way when a negative example is set. So I think that not to be afraid to take those steps and not to be afraid to be a positive example.

Petrice Jones (25:54):

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