

For using music and grassroots organizing to mobilize people to save the Earth

INDIGO GIRLS & WINONA LADUKE

PICTURE A MOBILE CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING machine that rocks for justice. Imagine a band of organizers and musicians who travel to sites where nuclear waste is abandoned and companies dump dioxin—on lands inhabited by Native Americans, mostly—and work with the grassroots activists who live there to raise public awareness. Visualize a marriage of minds between Amy Ray and Emily Saliers (a.k.a. the folk/rock duo Indigo Girls) and indigenous rights activist Winona LaDuke. Welcome to Honor the Earth, where music is a means to political change.

Ray and Saliers have been working on environmental issues since the early 1980s—well before their first major-label release established them as part of the pop firmament. LaDuke, who

grew up on the White Earth reservation in Minnesota, is program officer of the Seventh Generation Fund, which supports Native American environmental and social justice groups. In 1991, the three met at a benefit concert in New York City to ban the James Bay Hydro-Quebec project, and they decided to combine forces. The Indigo Girls would headline a tour to get the word out on crimes against the ecosystem and to raise money for indigenous groups. LaDuke would organize with the Indian communities.

Their 1993 and 1995 tours together raised over \$300,000 for dozens of groups. The latest, which toured the United States in 1997, netted another \$200,000, and also spread the bad news about the proposed federal Nuclear Waste Policy Act, which seeks to ship the nation's radioactive refuse cross-country and dump it on sacred Western Shoshone territory

By Jennifer Baumgardner



Emily Saliers, Winona LaDuke, and Amy Ray

in Nevada. The tour generated more than 15,000 action cards urging President Clinton to follow through on his promised veto of the bill. At each stop from New York to Montana, the seven Honor the Earth crew members, musicians, and organizers met with community activists and, using the Indigo Girls as bait, pressed for coverage of local environmental issues. They played free concerts at sacred sites and benefit gigs in big stadiums.

I met up with the Honor the Earth family in Missoula, Montana, on its twenty-first and final stop. "Tour" doesn't quite capture what I witnessed—it was more like a tour de force. Within 45 minutes of my arrival, I was in a van on the way to an editorial board meeting of the *Missoulian* with Winona, Amy, Emily, and the Lakota Sioux activist Rosalie Little Thunder, among other local organizers. Winona briefed the Girls on the issue around which Little Thunder and her colleagues are mobilizing: the senseless slaughter by federal and state officials

of a third of the United States' last free-range buffalo herd.

"We consider ourselves activists first and pop stars second," says Amy to a table of dubious-looking editors. One man questions whether Little Thunder and gang really need celebrities to support their cause. They do. In fact, the tour was filled with stories of Amy and Emily's presence being the key to getting a long-time activist heard. Witness, for example, the experience of Katsi Cook, a Mohawk midwife in Akwesasne, New York. In the aftermath of General Motors' dumping of PCBs into the St. Lawrence River in the 1960s and 1970s, her community has been dealing with the transmission of PCB-contaminated breast milk to infants, and an array of other health problems. For years, Cook has tried to get the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, Carol Browner, to demand that GM clean up the site, but the activist never even got a "sorry, no" to her pleas for a hearing. This year, traveling with the Indigo Girls, Cook got a

45-minute meeting with Browner. Cook's message was reiterated by 3,500 cards collected at concerts and sent to Browner.

"It's a sad fact that our culture does pay attention to celebrities," Emily says to the editor.

"And it's not like Indians are silent on these issues," says Winona. "Common people simply aren't heard in Washington—so we have to get some musicians to help us get heard."

After the *Missoulian* meeting, we head to the University of Missoula. Amy and Emily do a press conference with community activists, go through their sound check, give five or six interviews with local media, record some public service announcements, and eat dinner. Then Winona and the Girls tell me about their month on the road.

Emily says: "The [Indian] community visits were amazing. At each stop we had dinners with the communities and me and Amy and the band, all our crew. We did drum circles, traditional dancing, prayed together, and we also visited the sites that were poisoned."

"The other side of the tour that is equally powerful," says Winona, "is that we reach people who would probably never hear our voices but who come to an Indigo Girls show. They come up to me afterward and they say, 'I never really thought about that issue. Thank you for saying that.' And maybe you gave them the idea that they can make a difference."

WINONA LADUKE IS FIRM ABOUT KEEPING THE FOCUS ON unsung heroes. But there are reasons why much has been sung about her. As a political organizer, she is a force of nature. In addition to her work with the Seventh Generation Fund, she is spearheading the movement to recover land in Minnesota that once belonged to her tribe, the Anishinabekwe (Ojibwe). In 1996, she ran for vice president on an environmental ticket with Ralph Nader. She is also a writer (most recently of the novel *Last Standing Woman*) and the mother of two young children. Amy credits Winona with teaching Emily and her what grassroots organizing really means—"that you actually have to have the support of the community you're claiming to help"—and Emily half-jokes that she is a graduate of the Winona LaDuke mentoring program.

In the community of the music industry, the Indigo Girls are mentors themselves—even heroes, consistently producing gold and platinum records without any real support from top-40 radio and MTV. They rely, instead, on a huge community of devoted fans and an unwavering sense of ethics. One small but revealing example: they have a rider in their touring contract that demands that the venue recycles or the Indigo Girls won't play there.

As the day wears on, it becomes clear that being activists first and pop stars second brings with it a huge responsibility. The groups that Honor the Earth supports are the last line of defense against unregulated strip-mining, clear-cutting, hydrodams, and toxic waste dumping. Amy and Emily, like worried parents, are constantly trying to come up with new ways to fund the campaign. One effort was a gorgeous, inspiring ode to the Earth called *Honor*. The record, released on Amy's independent label, Daemon Records, features original songs by artists such as Bonnie Raitt, Soul Asylum, Exene Cervenka, and

Joy Harjo and Poetic Justice. And yet many "political" pop stars have been frustratingly unwilling to do events to benefit Honor the Earth.

"I don't know if the artist has a responsibility to society other than to be true to his or her art," says Emily. "But as a human being first, integral to that gift of life is a responsibility to take part in making sure that things are moving in a good, respectful direction, one that takes into account future generations. A commitment to actions that are not just based on profit."

"Right," finishes Amy. "The question I always ask is, 'What are you doing for the human community?'"

At the stadium, we greet tonight's human community—mainly college kids. Little Thunder tells them about the buffalo slaughter, as well as the plan to monitor the park services this winter and shepherd straying buffalo back to safe regions of Yellowstone. Winona jumps onstage and rouses the throngs, challenging them to feel that they have a say in what happens to the Earth and that they have a responsibility to stand up.

Then, the Indigo Girls. Emily, with the nimble, soaring soprano, writes songs that are philosophical conversations; her imagery is about finding light—as in knowledge, peace, love. Amy breaks strings from playing too hard and, in a voice as low as your dad's, sings rougher songs about battles and honor and betrayal. The audience is rapt. Song after song, the collective energy of the crowd builds so that by the time Emily sings "I'm trying to tell you something about my life"—the opening line of their first hit, "Closer to Fine"—we're all singing at the top of our lungs.

After the show, it's past midnight, and the Honor the Earth family is packing up. Amy and Emily are down on the floor taping up boxes, while Winona goes to count the thousands of signed action cards that were gathered tonight. Seeing the Indigo Girls in all of their uniquely anti-star glory, I'm reminded of something Emily said earlier in the day. A reporter had asked what they'd be doing if they weren't such crashing successes. "The same thing," Emily had replied, without batting an eye. "Only we'd have more time to do it if we weren't famous." **MS**

Jennifer Baumgardner is a former "Ms." editor. She also writes for "Jane" and "The Nation."

ACTION ALERT: Ask your senators to oppose the Nuclear Waste Policy Act. For more information, contact the Nuclear Information and Resource Service; (202) 328-0002 or www.nirs.org. To purchase the *Honor* CD, call (800) EARTH-07 or check out www.honorearth.com.

"COMMON PEOPLE SIMPLY AREN'T HEARD IN WASHINGTON. SO WE HAVE TO GET SOME MUSICIANS TO HELP US GET HEARD."