
Q&A : Rocker Tankian spreads the word on social justice

By Cortney Harding
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NEW YORK (Billboard) - A few days before the fifth anniversary of the Iraq War, rock musician Serj Tankian is sitting in an Austin hotel room and ruminating on the costs of the endless battle. But Tankian isn't talking about dead soldiers or civilians; he's talking about the cost to the Middle East's environment, an issue that few people have raised.

"The topsoil there has been destroyed," he says, "and who knows what kind of damage all those bombs have caused to the ecosystems in the Middle East?"

Many bands these days are claiming the "green" label, but their concern often starts at the merchandise table and ends at the recycling bin. Not so for the System of a Down frontman-turned-solo artist, who sees beyond silos and realizes that issues like electoral reform, recognition of the Armenian genocide, poverty and the environment are all related.

As South by Southwest, the four-day music industry conference and party, rages below him, Tankian is serious but not humorless; clad in jeans and a T-shirt, he fiddles with his iPhone and shows off pictures of his dog before settling in to ponder weightier issues. Later that night, he brings the seething, schmoozing Stubb's crowd to a halt when he plays three haunting acoustic tracks at a show to celebrate the release of the "Body of War" documentary.

For Tankian, preaching about taking action is not enough. Rather than paying lip service to green issues, he founded a Web site, skyisover.net, to connect his fans to environmental and social justice organizations.

He also founded a nonprofit organization, Axis of Justice, with former Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello.

"The organization has grown and morphed, and we really see the environment as being tied to social justice and human rights causes," Morello says. "We both realize that while people can do things on a person-by-person basis to make the world more green, massive levers need to be thrown to cause any real change."

Tankian is spreading his green message on the road and working with environmental nonprofit Reverb to make sure that his current tour leaves as small a carbon footprint as possible. With the organization, he ensures that all the food served backstage is organic and locally grown, that recycling bins are available throughout the venues and that fans can buy energy credits to offset their travel to the show. Still, Tankian recognizes that it's not enough.

"This is all great," he says, "but it's not going to stop the destruction. Right now the Earth has a fever, and based on the accelerated rate of population growth, the way we live now is completely unsustainable."

Q: Many artists are becoming more active in promoting green issues, but you seem to be one of the few who actually go a step beyond and connect environmental issues to issues of poverty and war. How do you see the relationships between these causes?

Serj Tankian: For me, it all stems from the need to promote justice. I called my organization Axis of Justice because I didn't want to focus on only one

issue. The connections can be drawn because they are present in so many places; for instance, poor urban neighborhoods have higher asthma rates. When a city wants to build a dump or get rid of radioactive waste, they don't put it in the nice part of town. Even materials that are supposed to be environmentally friendly can be harmful to poor communities. Biodiesel, for example, uses up farmland that could otherwise be used to grow food for starving people.

Q: How did you first get involved in green issues?

Tankian: I've been a supporter of Greenpeace and the Sierra Club for years. I have a place in New Zealand, and I was really impressed with a Greenpeace action that took place down there recently. Greenpeace folks boarded a Japanese whaling ship to try to shut it down, and in the midst of the conflict, both ships ran out of fuel. When a rescue ship came, the Greenpeace people tried to disconnect the fuel lines to the whaling ship, even though it meant they'd be stuck as well. It was kind of crazy, but sometimes you have to be ballsy and put yourself out.

Q: This is all great, but I'm wondering how you justify being part of an industry that produces so much waste. You've sold more than 10 million CDs, and many of those were in plastic containers that had to be shipped to stores.

Tankian: Basically, we're all hypocrites unless we go out and live off the land. That way of living is a model for me, because I think those people are clued in about climate change and the way we're going to have to alter our lives. I spend a lot of the record talking about the end of civilization, and I don't mean an apocalypse. I think that we are going to have to come to terms with the fact that the way we live now will not exist in 50 years, period.

Q: Along those same lines, you have been touring for this record, and while you have carbon offset programs in place, you are still using a lot of resources and putting a lot of goods out there. How do you reconcile that with your belief system?

Tankian: Again, I realize I am a hypocrite by going on the road and doing this. I've had an idea for a long time, which might sound a little crazy, but I really want to look into holographic touring. I think we could reduce our need to travel if we could project ourselves into meetings and concerts. We have the technology, and we're not using it right now.

For instance, I have a studio next to my house and a live performance room in the studio. I could broadcast a show in real time and could interact with the audience as if we were in the same room. After all, it's not like the audience can touch me, anyway. (laughs) It would open up a whole new world for touring -- shows wouldn't have to be limited to bars or clubs. There would be no travel costs, so bands with very little money could play shows, and tickets would cost less.

Q: Well, even though that is still in the future, at least bands right now are starting to become more conscious. Do you worry, though, that being green might just be another trend for musicians and will be forgotten in a few years? After all, how many people do you hear still talking about Tibet?

Tankian: I'm not a big trend follower, so I don't know if this is just another blip. I think that with the ice caps melting and everything changing, bands and everyone else on the planet won't have much of a choice about becoming green. I look at a place like New Zealand, which is ecologically one of the most progressive places on Earth. People down there are unconsciously conscious -- they don't get self-congratulatory when they recycle, they just

do it as a way of life. I think we need more education to get us to that place.

Q: While bands are also becoming greener, they seem to be less interested in other issues, like electoral politics. Would you agree with that?

Tankian: I think a lot of bands are coming out for this election, many more than the previous few. Howard Dean had some good support and momentum in 2004, but it collapsed quickly. I'm an Obama fan, but I have to say I was disappointed when I found out he wanted to expand the defense budget. Still, he has done a good job getting younger people invested in the process and teaching them about the way party politics work.

Q: You've used your position as a popular musician to spread the word about a number of causes. Have you gotten any backlash or flack from your fans?

Tankian: I wrote an essay called "Understanding Oil" after 9/11 that led to me being called a traitor and stations dropping our songs. The sad thing is, now that the war has been on for five years, people are coming up to me and telling me I was right.

Q: You just performed at a concert for the antiwar movie "Body of War" and have a song on the soundtrack. What other musical plans do you have for the near future?

Tankian: I'm going to continue touring behind the new record, and I'm also working on some music for film. I might be working on a score for a theatrical production, too. My next record will be a jazz orchestral record; I want it to have a whole different vibe than the last one. I want to be able to play Carnegie Hall with the new one. I'm planning on releasing it in 2009. I never studied music; I ran a software company before I did any of this. I've been lucky that I've done so well and been able to make the music I want to make.
