

# a man, a guitar and **A BICYCLE**

Interview by Katie Eggers



Photographs: Paul Doffing

*Last summer, Minneapolis musician Paul Doffing quit his job to go on a music tour across the country. Just when he was starting to prepare for the trip, he saw a documentary on tar sands in Canada that would change everything. Determined to send a message about the importance of individual action, he abandoned his plans to use his car, and embarked on a journey of a lifetime with nothing but his bike and his guitar. Little did he know that while he was determined to raise awareness about saving the planet, Mother Nature had her own way of giving back. After 1,200 miles and one third of his trip behind him, he met Jen, who was on the last leg of her own coast-to-coast bicycle adventure. When they arrived in Portland, Jen never got on the plane that would take her home to a new job. Instead, she became Paul's companion, biking with him to San Francisco and riding the train to Washington D.C. From there, they rode to New York City and all the way back to Minneapolis, where they both started a new life together.*



ONE OF THE MOST challenging questions that I have received is: “What is this about? Is this about climate change, and about environmental conscience, or is this about your music?” I think that living sustainably, and being conscious of your environment, is important, regardless of your profession. I would have done this tour by car if I hadn’t had a change of heart. I was reading Gandhi’s biography, and I read this article on tar sands in Canada that someone posted on Facebook. They are cutting down the boreal forest—which is the biggest carbon dioxide sink in our hemisphere—to do the most greenhouse gas-rich process known to man. It’s a really bad error of judgment—there couldn’t be anything more destructive, and it’s all because of worldwide demand for oil. People choosing to harvest these resources are driven by a particular kind of blind greed. They are not held in check by the

respect of the earth or by concern for their fellow man. People have interests, and governments have interests, and the U.S. government is making a lot of money off of oil. Their legislation to slow down consumption is always going to be one step forward, two steps back, because the taxation money from oil is one of the biggest sources of revenue for the government. We can’t really rely on governments to solve this—they don’t have the same interest that we do. The government isn’t thinking about grandchildren, but I hope that we are. I know I do. The night I first became aware of the tar sands tragedy was the night I decided to tour the United States on a bicycle. I wanted to show that there are viable alternatives to fossil fuels, and that even the most travel-intensive business, where not one consecutive day’s work happens in the same city, could be undertaken via bicycle.

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OVERALL, I RODE 4,500 MILES. It would have been five thousand miles, but we had some pretty serious leg issues on the way back. The Appalachians are really tough. The Rockies are much longer, but they climb and drop for long ways and are much easier on your body.

THERE WAS A LOT OF PHYSICAL DRAMA to the tour. At the end of our stay in Milwaukee, I got sick. I got that violent flu that everyone had at that time, except I was run down and worn out after crossing the country by bike. In Hustisford, WI, we camped in a city park. The temperature was around thirty degrees, and it was the coldest weather we had camped in. Everything we owned was on top of us, and we still were not warm enough. The following night, I got violent chills, and when I woke up, I literally wanted to die. I rested for a couple of days, but when it was time to move on, that day of cycling was murder. I couldn’t really breathe, and I was trying to pull 120 pounds over river bluffs all the way into Minnesota. At the end, we were in Red Wing, only sixty miles from Minneapolis, and because I didn’t want to bring my flu into our host’s house, we had nowhere to stay. I couldn’t spend another night outside in the cold, so I made a call to be picked up by someone from Minneapolis. On the way back, I completely broke down. I had been driving myself all the way from New York, trying everything to get back to Minneapolis, with a painful leg and while having the flu. But it just didn’t work out.



IT’S REALLY FUN TO GO BIKING WITH PEOPLE, even around Minneapolis. First of all, it’s a lot of exercise, and secondly, you’re really talking to someone, because you’re stuck with them for an hour and a half. No matter what, you’re going to learn about each other’s opinions. In cars, everyone funnels onto a freeway. It just becomes this giant mass of cars. But where are they all going? I fixed my dad’s bike and we went on a ride together. We were just a few blocks off his house. He’s lived there for years, and within a mile, we were seeing things that he didn’t know about. Within five blocks there was a park that we didn’t know was there. And then there was this marsh and a little nature preserve. In America, our reality is the walls of our home, the place where we work, and the road between. It’s hard to derive much sustenance from that. It’s really hard just to see life—just existing in the moment, observing what’s around. There is not much happening in a workplace, in your office. It’s pretty much all about what you’re doing—it’s very self-centered. It doesn’t do a lot to strip away on our self-importance. But I think it’s important to not worry so much about yourself. You know, chaos got you here—besides supplying for yourself, you have to trust serendipity.



WE GOT IN A CAR IN SAN FRANCISCO. It was the first time that I got in a car after two-and-a-half months. I couldn’t handle it, and I almost jumped out of the car. It was way too fast. It felt like it shouldn’t be so easy, and it also felt wild and stupid to go that fast. It was strange—I had never felt that way before. The train felt like cheating, really. We were going sixty miles an hour while we slept. It was unbelievable.

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HERE WE ROLLED INTO an all-you-can-eat spaghetti dinner, where we ate so much pasta that they refused to give us any more sauce. The owner didn't understand where we put it all and thought we were packing it away in Tupperware boxes.



WHEN I REACHED MY KICKSTARTER GOAL on the very last day—on the morning of which I was still a couple a thousand dollars short—it was one of the best feelings I have ever had. It was incredible. I was really worried that I wasn't going to get the money, because I was still going to go on the tour. But the Kickstarter money was money for food, and I was so grateful for it. That's all I really needed. You need fuel—and reaching the Kickstarter goal also meant I could get another person to accompany me. There are some stretches in Montana where there are no houses or services for a hundred miles. That takes a while on bike. You need four to five thousand calories a day—that's a lot of food. You need money to be able to afford that. Even if you just eat rice, it's hard to eat as much rice as you need to reach four thousand calories. Being able to pay for the food for my friend Greg to come along was a really big deal. It would have been much more challenging to go all that distance alone.

AT FIRST, I INITIATED CONVERSATIONS about climate change pretty much at every concert, and I realized that I would lose people if I started off with the topic. People huffed and puffed a little bit, especially in Billings. So I changed my strategy to just let the example of my tour speak for itself. I really didn't need to say much for people to realize that this

is something that I took seriously. As a result, I had more in-depth conversations with individual people after the show. It really depends on how genuine you are—if you seem like some crazy, radical person, or like someone who wants to sell them something, people won't really believe you. But if you're sincere, then they'll see reasons to be concerned.



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WHAT I WANT TO PROMOTE is a sense of selflessness—the realization that we are part of a reality where we are all interconnected. What we do has an effect on the whole. A lot of people are looking for a fight—but there really isn't one. There is only one reality. One of the things that got me thinking about this was hearing the Dalai Lama's perspective on climate change. Basically, he said that it's fairly obvious that there is no easy way for us to get off this planet. Even if there was no way to prove that we are destroying it, we'd still need to do everything to protect it. It's not like we can just hop into a spaceship and leave. If we're conscious of that on an individual level and change as individuals, then we can actually make a difference. There are a lot of ways, like fear-mongering, that make people defensive and dismissive. And if you feel that your viewpoint is one that is very threatened, then there is a temptation to over-compensate. I want to be as non-confrontational as possible.

WE WERE ROLLING into Big Timber, Montana, where we were going to stop at a gas station. And right as we did, these people pulled out. They were the first bike tourers that we had seen in three or four weeks, since leaving the Twin Cities. They were biking away. So we caught up to them. We thought, no, these people are not getting away from us. We were ready for some company, and so were they. They had been biking since Virginia. All of us had some of the most difficult days of the tour behind us. They call Eastern

Montana the “high desert”—it was very dry, very barren and extremely hot. We met them, and I figured they were dating, or maybe even married. But they weren’t. I never expected Shaughn and Jen to take me up on my offer to crash with us at our host’s home in Livingston, but they did and they were full of stories about their two-month-long trek across the United States. I wouldn’t have believed that Jen would bike from Portland all the way back to Minneapolis with me. The universe must have been on my side.

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WHAT DID I LEARN after three months on the road? I learned to smile at the challenges, to accept and accomplish the tasks I faced, and to feel safe without a plan. I felt connection and not separation. I began to see myself in the eyes of the strangers that filled my days, and helped when I was in need. I also learned to have trust in the goodness of my fellow men, and that

the great majority have good and compassionate hearts—they are ready and willing to open their doors to someone in need. I was seeing a United States that I did not expect. The fact that we don’t have a more peaceful and more cognizant society that makes better choices is sad. I think most people agree with each other, they just don’t realize it.