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The greenest band on the planet?

By **Treena Shapiro**
 Advertiser Staff Writer

Cake's lead singer and guitarist John McCrea doesn't want to come across as smug about the band's decision to use solar energy to power its Sacramento recording studio.

"We live in California where, like Hawai'i, there's a lot of sun," he said by phone in advance of this week's concerts at Pipeline Cafe. "It just seemed pragmatic to put solar panels in the roof."

Now, as the band members work on their first 100 percent solar-powered studio album, they find themselves with energy to spare and a tiny revenue stream — about \$25 a month — for the excess power purchased by the city of Sacramento.

Cake's move to solar power helped earn the 19-year-old alt-rock band, known for singles like "The Distance" and "Short Skirt, Long Jacket," a different kind of Billboard distinction — a spot among the Top 10 Greenest Bands on the Planet.

McCrea's not smug about that either, though, and is more interested in talking about why the band uses its Web site (www.cakemusic.com) to promote awareness of environmental and social issues along with its music.

"We try to mix a little bit of politics into the Web site, even though technically we're an entertainment product," McCrea said. "I don't think we're putting ourselves up as experts, but it's good to raise the issues and ask the questions."

Dealing with environmental issues is key to addressing all the other societal problems the band members are interested in, McCrea asserts.

"You can't even argue about abortion if you don't have clean air to breathe. You can't argue about Republicans versus Democrats if you don't have clean water to drink. Climate issues are just fundamental. To me it seems those need to be discussed first," he said.



Alt-rock band Cake recorded its latest album in a 100 percent solar-powered studio. John McCrea, left, is the band's frontman and lead singer. On bass is Gabe Nelson, on trumpet is Vince DiFiore and on keyboard is Xan McCurdy.

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The members of Cake tout the benefits of going green. From left: Vince DiFiore, John McCrea, Xan McCurdy, Gabe Nelson.

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The singer was prepared for talk about Hawaii's environment with a locally relevant topic, even though this is the first time his band is visiting the island: He raised the subject of false killer whales, whose population around the Islands has plummeted over the past couple of decades. McCrea recently became acquainted with Robin Baird, a researcher trying to protect the false killer whale of the Pacific.

"(Baird) has been studying these really interesting animals. They're compulsive food sharers, so they'll catch a fish and pass it around from whale to whale around the circle and no one takes a bite," McCrea related. "Then they'll take a bite, then pass it on. Sometimes they even toss their catch to fishermen."

As fascinating as the animals may be, they are experiencing population declines; in fact, they're in danger of being wiped out.

McCrea sees a similarity between the species' plight and that of the music industry, as well as the media, as more people adopt the belief that music and information should be free.

McCrea believes fans' sense of entitlement has led to a cognitive disconnect with fans who freely access music and media without thinking about where it comes from or who created it.

"I do the same thing as everyone else: go to work, work 10 hours, take an hour to eat dinner. It's a job and I'm all for music being free, but I would also like sandwiches to be free," McCrea said. "What I have a problem with is wolfing down entire albums and just consuming without any sense of where it's coming from. We're not on a major label, we're on our own label. You pretty much have to steal from us directly if you want to steal from us."

The free sharing of music devalues recorded albums to the point where they don't generate enough revenue to be much more than an advertisement for live shows, the musician said — and that endangers the practice of professional musicianship.

"There are some people who play really great music that don't want to go on tour 365 days a year," McCrea said.

He believes the disconnect between Internet users' impulses and actions is symptomatic of a larger cultural shift that creates global environmental problems.

"People want to have as little understanding of the repercussions of their actions as possible, to go on living a comfortable life. I've got that with my own life," he said.

But if people continue to distance themselves from their actions, he asks, "What does this mean for animals? For the rest of the planet?"

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LEARN MORE:

Watch a video on the rock band Cake's retrofitting of its studio with solar panels at www.cakemusic.com/solar.html. Find out more about Cake at www.cakemusic.com.