

Redefining Live Events, One Reusable Cup at a Time

Veteran music producer and environmental solution innovator Michael Martin put his love of live concerts and the planet together. The result is r.Cup, the most disruptive — and reusable — product holding drinks at a show near you

By Robert Yehling



Michael Martin's path through business life looks more like the twists and turns of the Road to Hana — with just as much green around it. Ever since he pushed aside an early career as a Wall Street investment banker to focus on using capitalism for good, and to find ways to benefit individual and planetary health, Martin has been a crucial environmental disrupter and innovator.

It only makes sense, some 30 years after he threw off his tie, produced the massive Earth Day 1990 celebration, and became an acclaimed live event producer and expert on greening practices at venues, that Martin would create a product that married together his two great passions. With r.Cup (<http://www.rcup.com>), headquartered in Minneapolis, Martin has not only fulfilled that goal, but created a fast-growing product that is becoming a cultural hit for three generations of music and sports fans.

"We're combining culture with social change impact through our work with live music and other events. *I can't think of a better platform to launch our efforts, since this audience tends to be very receptive and action-oriented toward environmental and social issues.* Our goal is for concerts to minimize their environmental impact," Martin said. "We want to create complete awareness to stop using single-use plastics."

His approach is brilliant. Thanks to more than two dozen partnering bands — including heavyweights like The Rolling Stones, U2, Dave Matthews Band, Rod Stewart, Jack Johnson, Radiohead and Roger Waters — fans buy their drinks in r.Cups at those shows. They can then either use the cup at the show and return it, or bring it home with them as a logo-embossed collectible.

That's the delicious catch — no r.Cup is thrown away. Instead, the r.Cup team collects cups from bins set around arenas, stadiums and festival grounds, along with the turned-in cups, then washes, sterilizes and redistributes them, over and over again. The #5 virgin bioplastic used to make r.Cups, an environmentally sound product, makes that possible.

"Single use plastics — even those made of biodegradable material — is an outdated approach in need of systematic change," Martin said. "With r.Cup, we can inspire that kind of

change in a way that rewards fans while removing hundreds of tons of plastic from the waste stream."

In so doing, Martin and r.Cup are directly addressing one of the worst and most harmful pollution sources — single-use plastics. Every year, 600 billion single-use cups are used and discarded, an average of 80 cups for every man, woman and child on the planet. Of those, 4 billion come from live events. They end up in landfills, incinerators and oceanic gyres, all of which break down the cups into microplastics that end up in our food supply. When a credit card-sized portion of microplastic ends up in our diets weekly, as it now does, the environmental impact becomes a personal health concern.

In contrast, zero r.Cups are single-use. When you total up all the concerts, venues and festivals in which r.Cups are made available, the savings to the environment amount to more than 150,000 pounds of plastic trash eliminated from landfills, and more than 1 million pounds of carbon dioxide that never reaches the atmosphere. Those were r.Cup's figures for 2019. It should come as no surprise that r.Cup was named one of *Fast Company* magazine's "World's 10 Most Innovative Live Event Companies" for 2020. Another of its innovative features? Ten percent of the company is owned by non-profits working on the plastic crisis.

"The problem at concerts, is because of their nature, you can't use glass cups, and most markets require see through cups" Martin said. "It forces you to use plastic, so the best solution is to reuse the plastic."

Our vision is to become the backbone of the reuse economy. We're promoting and educating on greater awareness of reuse, along with the impact traditional single-use plastics are making on all of us — from environmental stress to plastic in the ocean to the broken-down microplastics in our food supply. We feel we've hit the combination of sustainability and efficiency."

Concert venues, promoters, band managers, producers and other decision-makers in the multi-billion live music and entertainment



world are notorious for butting heads — especially when it comes to tickets, concessions and other money-making opportunities. As a man who has produced numerous concerts and festivals, Martin knows the politics of event production well. For that reason, he came up with simple programs for r.Cups to be used in three different types of relationships: with touring bands, event venues (sports too), and festivals.

The core program is the deposit model. When someone attends a concert featuring one of r.Cup's branding partners — the Stones or U2, for example — they pay a \$3 deposit when buying a drink at the concession stand. The cup is branded with the band's logo; it's an instant collectible. Concertgoers have the option to use the cup and return it to the concessionaire or a green-shirted r.Cup official onsite for a deposit refund; put the used cup in an available bin (to have their refund donated to a local non-profit); or take it home.

"Everyone wins," Martin said, "because the floor is spotless, the fans get a cool keepsake, the social media is great and the venue makes some money. The venue wins because typically, 80 to 90 percent of waste from a concert goes to landfills or incinerators. None of our cups do. They're either reused or taken home."

The other model, used with r.Cup partnering venues such as the Chase Center, is the "no



deposit” program. The building embeds an added fee into drink prices, and fans receive an r.Cup of higher quality than the typical single-use plastic. They can refill, reuse, return, put the cups in the bins, or take them home.

What happens to the cups placed in bins at the venue? They are harvested, sanitized and reused, over and over. No cups remain on the floor; none go to a landfill.

Not surprisingly, artists and venues are flocking to the r.Cup caravan. They see the combination of strong environmental messaging and direct assistance to the planet with brand identification and great public relations, through the most-held product besides a mobile phone at any show — a drink cup. If the concept of sustainability could be magically bottled, these would be the ingredients. In just the past two years, r.Cup has partnered with the First Avenue venue in Minneapolis, the Hollywood Bowl, in Los Angeles, St. Augustine (FL) Amphitheatre, Warped Tour, and others. Martin has worked with Live Nation and U2 since 2009, which is why r.Cups were fixtures on U2’s eXPERIENCE + iNNOCENCE Tour.

“U2 and Live Nation continue to be leaders in showing how global tours can address

sustainability the right way,” Martin said. “r.Cup continues a tradition started on the U2 360 Tour and joins efforts like offsetting CO2 emissions, donating excess catering supplies to local food banks, working with venues to adopt paper straws and engaging directly with fans on actions they can take.”

Martin’s longstanding work on the environment has accelerated in the past twenty-five years, through his agency, Effect Partners, which created r.Cup. Their reach stretches into some of our largest manufacturing and consumer product concerns. Besides working with the world’s leading artists on greening initiatives, along with President Obama’s administration and EPA, Effect Partners has identified major sustainability issues and acted as a catalyst to develop business and culture-based solutions to tackle them. Among

the projects:

- Working with Live Nation to help develop their sustainability strategy;
- Working with Toyota to launch the Prius;
- Working with Apple Computer to take complete responsibility for their CO2 emissions;
- Working with Green Mountain Energy and Native Energy to launch green energy in the US;
- Helping make Earth Day an annual event following the huge 1990 celebration;
- Creating the nation’s first global warming campaign in 1999, the Ben & Jerry’s Dave Matthews Band One Sweet Whirled Campaign.

Martin grows even more excited when considering r.Cup’s growing foothold in the 2020s fight to mitigate climate change and further environmental damage — and the young musicians, entertainers and venues run by young entrepreneurs. For them, the environment isn’t a cause to explore optionally, like it was for many of their Baby Boomer and Gen X parents and grandparents; it’s a matter of life.

“Artists have always had a voice in identifying and speaking out on issues,” Martin said. “That’s part of our rationale for working with music and

sports industries. If I knock on a door, it might not open. If an artist knocks, people will listen. Artists are not only catalysts for change, but also spokespeople for change — whether educational programs, sampling, not using single-use, trading in. This is how society ultimately changes, how people wake up.

“There are more younger bands and artists getting involved with us. Their advantage is they’re already environmentally aware and are outspoken. They also have social media platforms that are way more powerful than what the classic artists had when they started. They can put out the message in ways that are heard.

“I love to work with emerging artists. They’re already geared to make social change and to make their tours greener. It’s really about artists influencing the world. This generation has a supercharged way of getting it out because of the power of social media,” he concluded.

This commitment to engagement, and providing a product that can make a cultural and environmental impact, fuels Martin’s mission moving forward. He sees it as a tangible way every person can reduce trash and their carbon footprint, while also benefitting from the wide platform and podium musicians, athletes and other performing artists enjoy. He also hopes it can inoculate a younger generation from the despair and hopelessness many feel as they hear the latest daunting news about the state of our planet.

“Today, there’s a huge feeling of helplessness we’re feeling, between climate change, plastics in the ocean, single-use items, not being able to make a difference,” he says. “We see the problem as being so much bigger than us, and not all governments are working to improve it. We’re all trying to think of something we can do to help.

“I see that manifested in r.Cup. Because of the message, it sends a positive signal to communities — we want the world this way. It’s disruptive. People know that what’s happening now is not right for children and future generations; our economic frontloading is destroying the planet while making a few people rich. When people see r.Cup, they message us on social media saying, ‘Why hasn’t this done before?’ It gets them to think of solutions and how they can use the cup in their community efforts.” ✂