

## Singing for Their Supper

On their summer concert tour, the Indigo Girls raise food for shelter pets



JIM DAVIDSON/FELICKR CREATIVE COMMONS

**A**nimal welfare issues are just one of the passions of the Indigo Girls, the Grammy-winning, politically active folk-rock duo who've been making hearts and minds sing for more than 20 years. Over the years, longtime friends and band members Amy Ray and Emily Saliers have worked on causes ranging from indigenous issues to gay rights to environmental preservation.

Animals—their own and those in shelters—are never far from their hearts. In January, Ray's independent label sold a special CD to benefit The Humane Society of the United States' Pet Foreclosure Fund, which gave grants to local shelters providing assistance to people whose homes

were in foreclosure and who were in danger of losing their pets. This year, touring behind their new album *Poseidon and the Bitter Bug*, the Girls used each stop to collect food to donate to local food banks. They showed their love for animals, too: With The HSUS's help locating animal shelters along their tour route, they combined their drive to raise food for people with one to raise pet food to donate to local shelters.

In this edited interview, the Girls sat down before a concert—in which they dedicated an old favorite, "Ozilline," to "all the dogs out there"—and told magazine staff about what their animals meant to them, and how they deal with having to leave their pets behind when they're on tour.

**ASM: Can you tell us about your work raising food for people and pets?**

**Ray:** We were thinking about what we could do this year to help with the economic crisis. So ... we were brainstorming about what should we do while we were touring to kind of help people during this crisis. ... And a group called Rock for a Remedy actually got involved with us—they put musicians and communities together to achieve this kind of thing, so what we do is we go through communities and we ask the audience to bring food in, nonperishables, and we donate it to a local food bank. And then we're also working with animal welfare groups in local communities, and people bring in pet food as well.

Mixing music with something that helps community and animals, it's much better than just playing a show, you know. There's just this feeling of "We're all in this together," and the people in the shelters work hard and it's a thankless job except for the love of the animals ... they're just grateful that there are people out there who are concerned.



NEMANJA GLUMAC/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

**ASM: How'd you become aware of the connection between the foreclosure crisis and the issue of animals being given up?**

**Saliers:** Times are hard for everybody, for families, and pets are an extension of families. If they can't take care of their families, they can't take care of their pets. Times are really tough, I think harder than people even realize. I mean, you look at numbers like 35 million Americans who can't put food on their table, that's going to be 35 million Americans whose pets are in jeopardy as well.

**ASM: Is there an overarching theme to the causes you choose to get involved with?**

**Ray:** Anything we work on, whether it's queer issues or animal welfare issues or indigenous issues, we're always looking for groups that are effective within their community and are voicing problems from their community. We don't want to step in and say how to fix something in somebody else's community; we want to enable the groups that are already working within that community to do good work.

**ASM: So what are the animal issues that are closest to your heart?**

**Saliers:** The well-being of animals. Spaying and neutering programs, supporting shelters, encouraging people to adopt rather than buy breeds or from a pet store, things like that. Just general welfare concerns.

**ASM: What kind of pets do you guys have?**

**Ray:** I have five dogs and seven cats right now. They're all rescues. And I foster animals, too, when I'm home—you know, we'll have a little downtime. I have, obviously, a caretaker that helps with the pets while I'm on the road!

**ASM: Yeah, I was going to ask if they came on tour!**

**Ray:** Well, I have a partner and we have a pet sitter and we have a network of people that kind of all try to foster different animals. Spay and neuter is really, really important to me, those programs. And Emily has rescues too.

**Saliers:** Yep, lovely mutts. Two mutts. I had three cats, and they all died within two

years; it was really sad. They were all old. One boy was like 22 years old. So that was a hard loss. Now I just have the two mutts, but they bring me such joy. There's just no other dog like a rescue dog, like a mutt. They're just truly soulful creatures who are grateful for their rescue.

**Ray:** I believe in breeding work dogs and dogs that are for special [purposes], but I think you should have to have a serious license to do that. I think there should be a moratorium. I am really reactionary about it. My friends that buy breeds are all like, "Lighten up," and I'm like, there are so many dogs and cats that need homes, and there is no reason to be spending money on a big breed right now!

**ASM: Yeah, especially given how many purebreds are in shelters.**

**Ray:** I know!

**ASM: I mean, 25 percent of the animals are purebred.**

**Ray:** Yeah, you can just go to a German shepherd friends site or a beagle rescue or Chihuahua. That's a big one because a lot of people got those "Yo quiero Taco Bell" dogs. I mean, I know why people want specific things, but like you said, you can go and find a specific breed or at least a mix of that breed.

**Saliers:** And not only do you meet cool dogs, you meet cool people, too. Cool people working in animal rescue.

**ASM: Have you gotten a lot of response to the pet food drive from local animal rescues?**

**Saliers:** It's been tremendous. We've received letters from people who work with the groups and they're just like, "This has been a tremendous help." And you know, mixing music with something that helps community and animals, it's much better than just playing a show, you know, there's just this feeling of "We're all in this together," and the people in the shelters work hard and it's a thankless job except for the love of the animals ... they're just grateful that there are people out there who are concerned.

**ASM:** Yeah, it's very validating. The work you guys do is so great in that the activism elevates the music and the music elevates the activism, and they sort of feed off each other. There are a lot of artists who get involved in causes, but not all of them integrate them into their art. Was that a deliberate choice?

**Saliers:** Well, I think we were just raised to be civic-minded, and just very early in our career we realized we could organize a community benefit and bring in all our friends. 'Cause we were a bar band, and we just knew a lot of musicians, and everyone wanted to take part, and it just became a process of learning how to organize, bringing in friends to help sing, and the community comes out to help raise not only money but awareness—again, a palpable sense that we're all in something together. And it's joyous when it's music, you know? I mean, we're there for a serious purpose when we're having a benefit, but people are having a good time and their hearts are able to be lifted up in dark times, and everybody feels like we're doing something together. Music is awesome for that.

**ASM:** It seems like all the causes you get involved with are all connected to each other in that they all teach a respect for people or animals or the Earth.

**Ray:** Yeah, it's like there's a system that's for profit, and then there's a system that's for life, and we're working within the life system and trying to put that first. And in the long run, that can be good for business too—it's just that businesses don't know that, corporations don't realize that. They're all connected; people on this side are all fighting the same battle.

**ASM:** In your song, "Ozilline," you have a line that goes, "I had to put the dog down/before I hit the road/And I watched that sweet old life/Become a bag of bones." It always makes us cry. What was the story there?

**Ray:** Yeah, unfortunately, we've been traveling all our lives and so it's marked by going home and having your animal be sick and

having to do it before you leave for tour. And I mean, thank god we can do that for our animals. I wish people could do the same thing, 'cause it's merciful, even though it's hard. But yeah, every time I sing that—'cause it's an older song, and I've had to put a few dogs down since then, and it's awful. And there's always a friend I'm thinking of that just had to put their dog to sleep, or their cat.

**Saliers:** It's everybody's story.

**Ray:** But I always think it's a friend and you had a connection, and it's worth it, you know? Sometimes it doesn't feel like it is, when you lose something you love so much, you're like, "Ugh, I never want to have another pet."

**Saliers:** They don't live long enough.

**ASM:** You must miss them when you're on the road.

**Ray:** I have to compartmentalize where that's concerned, because yeah, it's brutal.

**Saliers:** I have a coffee mug, and I think you do too, that our guitar tech [made us] that's got pictures of our animals on it, so every time I turn around and take a sip of tea, there are the animals. So they're there with us.

**Ray:** But yeah, it's hard. We miss them.

**ASM:** What would you most like to see for shelter animals in this country?

**Saliers:** To be adopted into loving homes, to be fed and loved. And especially for pit bulls. They're heartbreakers. There are a lot of them out there that have had very, very tough lives out there and they can't make it and they can't socialize, and my heart goes out to them. **AS**

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