

Peter Mulvey:

Intertwining Passions

By Cam Terwilliger

When musicians speak of being “on the road,” most people probably think of a tour bus and roadies criss-crossing the country by highway. But for guitarist and singer-songwriter Peter Mulvey, the reality is very different. For the past three years, Mulvey has traveled to many of the 120 shows he performs each year by bicycle, bringing his distinct take on American folk music to destinations throughout his home state of Wisconsin—and beyond.

A Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) member for two years, Mulvey often uses RTC’s free trail-finder website, TrailLink.com, to plan his routes. His most recent album, “Letters From a Flying Machine,” even features a mention of Milwaukee’s Hank Aaron State Trail.

I met Mulvey while he was on tour outside Boston. Rain forced us off the Minuteman Bikeway and into Diesel Cafe, where we chatted about music, traveling by bicycle and the combination of these two passions in his life.

How did you get the idea to do a tour by bicycle?

It’s all the fault of the Glacial Drumlin State Trail [from Waukesha to Cottage

With his music and cycling, Mulvey talks about staying connected to your community and the outside world.

Grove]. My home court gig—the gig I grew up playing—is in Fort Atkinson, right off the trail. I had the thought, “If I could find a way to carry a guitar on a bike, I could bike to work.” That thought was innocent enough, but then I had the next thought: “Wait a minute. Then I’d only be 40 miles from Madison, and I could do a little tour that way.” And that was it. I was off and running with the idea.

How do you manage the logistics of bicycle touring?

The first year I did eight shows, all in Wisconsin. It was a little loop. I had a bike trailer and I took way too much stuff. Then the next year Wheel and

Sprocket, a chain of family-owned bicycle shops in Milwaukee, gave me a long wheelbase recumbent to do the tour. One of their mechanics built this aluminum rack that held the guitar behind the wheel without a trailer. It was pretty cool, though the entire rig was something like 9 feet long. It was a bit like a Cadillac.

How does TrailLink.com fit into your tours and your message?

I use it all the time. All the time. What I love about it is that it’s using the Internet to get people to not use the Internet. It doesn’t suck you in. When you go to TrailLink and do a review of the trails, it’s because you weren’t at your computer



JOHN NOLTNER

earlier. What you're hoping is that other people at their computers will read it, and then have a good reason to get off the computer and go outside.

What's the longest tour you've done by bicycle?

Last September I did one called "The Long Haul Tour." That was 10 shows, 17 days, and it went from Grand Rapids, Mich., out here to Boston, then back west to Northampton, Mass. In total it was 1,100 miles, covering trails whenever we could. The opening act, a singer named Brianna Lane, biked the whole way with me. Three friends of ours came as well, with no support vehicle to carry baggage or equipment.

It was exhausting physically, particularly going over the mountains. I'm not used to that since I'm from such flat places. But in some ways it became easier because you get to that point where you're so beyond your limits that the only time you actually feel good is when you're riding.

Any interesting things happen to you while touring on trails?

Once I fixed a flat for some women riding on a trail, and they later came to one of my shows. I was just out on the Glacial Drumlin trail again, as usual. It's a great trail.

Then, on The Long Haul Tour, we stopped at a doughnut and cider stand

in Saratoga, N.Y. When the people there saw the five of us ride up on bicycle, they asked where we were coming from. When we said Michigan, everyone was stunned. Then they saw the guitars and we told them what we were doing. Well. They bought our doughnuts that morning. You've got to love things like that. They wouldn't happen if you were in a car.

Do you see any parallels between your mode of travel and your music?

Absolutely. I don't do mainstream music or the big labels. I'm this small, organic, room-to-room musician doing it all myself. And that's similar to the difference between biking to work and driving. I would rather do things myself—music or bicycling—in a way that is communal. Also, cycling has been super positive for me as a person in terms of health and mental health, and that must find its way into my work.

What role do you think trails can play in a community?

Getting more people walking and biking instead of being encased in glass and metal bubbles is always an improvement. People should be able to walk around and meet each other on the street. The more that happens, the more we can enjoy the great aspects of a community that are right under our noses—all the things you might miss if you stayed inside.

Go look at the face of a person who's gone to work on a bicycle, and look at a person who sat in traffic. It's obvious who's happier. So that's what this tour has meant to me. I don't talk about it at shows, but I hope the action speaks for itself.

Cam Terwilliger is a freelance writer living in Boston. He loves to ride his red single-speed bike all over town.

Want to check out Mulvey's music?
Visit www.petermulvey.com.