



Artist As Leader: Eric Gilbert

In 2012 musician Eric Gilbert teamed up with three business partners to create Treefort Music Fest, a weeklong festival that placed participating artists and the community of Boise, ID firmly at its heart. Treefort quickly became one of the West's leading music festivals, beloved by musicians, audiences and Idahoans alike. The community gradually expanded the Fest's cultural offerings, and by 2019 a ticketholder could enjoy not only hearing 437 bands in 37 venues but also seeing and/or participating in nine so-called forts, such as Hackfort, Dragfort and Kidfort.

In this interview with Pier Carlo Talenti, Eric discusses how years of touring as a musician trained him to develop and curate his vision for Treefort. That time in the trenches also gave him the inner resources to be nimble and brave enough to lead and nurture artists and the community when Covid-19 forced the cancellation of the 2020 Fest just two weeks before it was set to start.

Pier Carlo Talenti: Before we start talking about your leadership journey, I wonder if you could tell us about your artistic journey. How did you become the artist you are today?

Eric Gilbert: I came into being an artist a little later in my life, in the sense that I was already in college and I was an engineering major, pretty classic freshman/sophomore in college, not really sure what I wanted to do, relatively good at school and doing school well but just seeking more purpose in my life at the time.

I started taking some poetry classes, and before long, I was an English major and diving into creative writing. And then I'd always been a fan of music. I played piano when I was a kid, but I hadn't really considered it something I was going to do more of. So I started taking a lot of music classes. I just had a revelation early in college that there was a lot of life left and I didn't need to rush where I was heading, and I made a pivot to just start pursuing what I was passionate about at the time. Before long, after a year and a half of being an engineering major and getting an internship and doing all kinds of stuff like that, about two and a half years in, I was a music-theory and music-history major, and I ended up getting a minor in creative writing.

Through that, I started playing in bands a bunch. I met my wife out in Vermont. She was a musician at the time, doing her own stuff, and we ended up toward the tail end of college starting to play together more. Then after college we formed a couple different bands, but one in particular with a good friend of ours named Cam. He's a drummer. We formed a band called Finn Riggins. All original stuff. We moved to Hailey, a small town in Idaho in the Sun Valley. We were in our late 20s at that point, just basically focusing our life completely on being artists, practicing every day, writing. Then we started touring pretty quickly after that, pretty heavily. Essentially, we lived in a van 200 plus days out of the year between 2007 and 2011.

So, yeah, I think music and art in general I've always looked at as a lifetime sport. It was really great to rekindle something I'd explored as a kid more and really make it such a huge part of my life.

Pier Carlo: And are you still playing in bands now?

Eric: I am still playing, but I haven't played on a stage in a little over a year now. My wife and I now have a daughter who's almost seven — my wife actually has an active band right now — but we play as a family with a lot of cool collaborations with the little one. And I do have a new project that I'm rehearsing with. Or at least jamming with.

I think as I made the pivot into being more of a full-time arts advocate, that started really fulfilling me in a really similar way as being an artist, so I just started putting my energy into this new path that I've been on.

Pier Carlo: It's interesting that you describe yourself as an arts advocate. I know you as the co-founder and program director of this really vibrant festival, so can you tell us about how you got into that and why you see it particularly as arts advocacy?

Eric: Even when I was in college, I was playing in bands, but I was also putting together shows and just supporting my friends that were in bands and had just a really big passion for helping make space for arts, in particular music. I got active in the student activities committee because I was frustrated with what their programming was like. I've long advocated for not just my friends but lesser-known bands and artists.

When my wife and I got married in a park in Moscow, ID, it was the morning of this community festival that we had helped start. That was in 2002.

Pier Carlo: Oh, so you had already created a festival before Treefort. That was already in your blood.

Eric: Yeah, exactly, I'd been helping set up shows, mini-festivals. We had this thing called Ranch Fest. Our drummer's family had some property with a barn. It started as a housewarming ranch party, and before long it was two days, 35 bands and invite-only.

Part of being part of the DIY music scene is you're doing a lot of the organizing. I booked our tours and helped our friends set up shows when they came through. There's a lot of the mechanics of putting

together E-events that ends up being part of being an artist in that world.

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I always thought part of being an artist is advocating for the world as you want it to be, and that goes also for supporting other artists that are around you. So in 2011 when I met the folks that ended up partnering with me and helping create the Treefort Music Fest here in Boise, I had a lot of experience playing at and organizing festivals like that, but Treefort was by far the biggest project that I'd put together. But I had already experienced a lot of the different facets: I'd set up a lot of shows; I was a sound engineer too, as it was one of the gigs I had when we weren't on the road; and I was booking our tours. I understood a lot of all the inner workings a little bit. Through all that, that's what positioned me pretty well.

Treefort was really built from this very artist-centric point of view, in large part because I was one of the ones at the center of it and was an artist and was really trying to build it as something that myself and my artist friends would be excited about. Sometimes festivals aren't exactly what we all want them to be.

Pier Carlo: How do you treat artists in a way that you yourself might not have been treated when you were touring?

Eric: It's maybe not super black-and-white around that, but I think some of the core initial principles with Treefort was inviting a lot of artists that didn't necessarily have representation yet. In a lot of the American festival circuit, actually the world festival circuit, most of the lineups are relatively the same because they're all coming from the same artist-representation pools. There's not a lot of opportunity sometimes for really DIY artists or artists that are just newer and haven't broken through on the industry side yet. So Treefort was designed to work with the industry but also make space.

One of the ways we did that was making our submissions free. A lot of festivals charge for submissions on the front-facing side unless you have representation. There are ways around that. So that was one thing. The other thing is festivals were starting to get co-opted by corporate sponsorship and such. That's part of what it takes; I get the sustainability aspects. But with Treefort we just created our own parameters for that. There's still sponsorship, but there's no banners on stages. That was something that the artists resonated with really quickly, that it finally felt like something that felt artist-centric and not like, "Oh, cool, this is Budweiser-centric, and I'm playing in front of their big sign." [He laughs.] Subtle things like that.

We always wanted to book headliners that were inspirations to the artists that were playing on the festival, not necessarily who would necessarily sell the most tickets. It was reflecting the artists' tastes themselves, like who they are inspired and excited by.

And for me too just spending a lot of time trying to be inclusive and reaching out beyond our own tastes to different pockets of the community not only here but in the music scene around the West. I'm not a big metal expert or aficionado, but actively we were trying to talk those pools of the scene and really wanted it to reflect ... Here's a good way to look at it. We always wanted to book headliners that were inspirations to the artists that were playing on the festival, not necessarily who would necessarily sell the most tickets. It was reflecting the artists' tastes themselves, like who they are inspired and excited by.

Pier Carlo: That's interesting, because it feels to me that in your mind's eye your ideal audience is the artists themselves.

Eric: Yeah, very much so. And with Treefort now there's a bunch of other forts. Not to stray too far from this, but there's a Storyfort, which is literary-focused; there's an Artfort; there's a Skatefort, Foodfort, an Alefort, a Yogafort, a Dragfort.

From a similar perspective, it wasn't like a small leadership group of us sat around and said, "All right, what are we going to do next?" It was more people from within those pockets of the community who came to us like, "Hey, we'd love to do something that represents what we're passionate about," and we essentially made space. Our kind of joke answer is, "That sounds great. Do you want to do it?" and invite them in. So once again, if someone's doing Dragfort, it's the drag community that are putting folks on stages that they're excited about and feel genuinely reflect their community. And that's very much how the music portion of it started too, as a reflection.

Pier Carlo: I'm sure it's become something very different than what you in 2012 originally imagined, since you've been letting the community have a lot of creative input. What has it been like as a co-founder to give up some control over what it's become? To what extent do you negotiate that?

Eric: One of the aspects of how we've approached Treefort feels also very much born out of the fact that it is primarily run by artists, in the sense that there's a real strong sense of collaboration. Playing in bands all of my life or a lot of my life, I guess I'm just used to letting people have their voice within the band.

To answer your question, I feel like we didn't really know where we were heading. We had a very short-term goal of like, "Hey, we want to put this on. We want to be able to better highlight our local music scene, show people that Boise can be a really good tour stop, because we want more people to stop here. We also want people to realize there's actually a really vibrant scene here. You just maybe haven't heard of it because there's no press here." We had some real basic goals, and then we knew we liked this discovery model of multistage and smaller stages, putting artists in more intimate spaces as opposed to one big field.

From there we've just been open-minded about where it headed and we listened to our community. I think for us it's more about the principle of it, and that is that it's inclusive — we have this saying that

Treefort is for everyone — and really trying to honor that and make space and just be authentic about how we do it.

Thus the way it's led and the way it's organized is there's a lot of space for people to lead their own portion of it. A lot of the team aren't professional festival organizers. They all have other jobs in the community or are artists and are active in other ways, and they pitch in where they're inspired to and are given a lot of leeway to develop portions of it.

I guess the expectation of where I was headed was, it was just a feat to get it off the ground that first year. Then after that I think we've just been amazed how much the community has supported it.

Pier Carlo: What did you learn about yourself and your leadership skills in that first year?

Eric: In the context of this conversation I'll continue to relate it back to being in a band. There's always this tug-of-war between ... it's important to step up and be bold and pull people along with you, but it's also really important to maintain the tension of people feeling like they're also invested in it and they have their own voice in it. I feel like that's still a balance we're constantly keeping.

What's crazy to me now is that first year there were about 12 of us who were the core team and everyone else was pretty much volunteers. We were all pretty much volunteers. Now when we have some team meetings leading up to the festival, there are 100 in the room and there's some people sometimes I don't even know, which is wild. It still feels very scrappy, but it's very decentralized.

... that's just something, I think, that artists in general are good at: improvising, striving for what they want out of the world but also being willing to accept the world as it is.

I think what I learned about myself as a leader and one thing I think I honed on the road was that I'm pretty good at ... I used to have this

saying when we were playing shows. It's basically, "Leave it all on the field and do everything you can to get people there, but in the end you only have so much control over the outcome." So I'm pretty good at just being able to roll with the punches. I think that's just something, I think, that artists in general are good at: improvising, striving for what they want out of the world but also being willing to accept the world as it is. So if it snows on Sunday morning, you make the most of it, Sunday morning of the festival, which has happened.

I think I'm very cool and calm and collected in the face of sometimes what would be seen as existential threats to what we're trying to do. We've had headliners cancel the day before they're supposed to show up. For me, I'm always like, "Well, cool, how are we going to make this special then?"

Pier Carlo: I'm going to guess that the pandemic has proved to be one of your greatest leadership challenges. Am I right?

Eric: Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

Pier Carlo: Could you talk about leading through that, about past, present, and future, given what's going on? The festival takes place in March, right?

Eric: March 25th this year. We ended up having to announce our postponement on March 11th.

I think one of the challenges, one of the frustrations around it was that, usually dealing with a natural disaster or a national threat like that, there's leadership above us somewhere that is handling those portions of public safety. And it was really challenging. We basically had to take a new level of leadership locally and basically get out in front of city and state and the feds at that point and postpone our festival before anyone was telling us to. But it was obvious that we needed to.

That was what was frustrating. It was like, "There's obviously something happening."

Pier Carlo: What were you hearing from the bands you'd booked?

Eric: Most of the bands we booked were holding out all hope that it was still going to happen. And most of the local businesses. That's the thing: We were actively seeking information beyond what was hitting locally yet, so I think when we postponed, everyone was like, "Oh, whoa, maybe this is more real than we thought it was." And then basically the day the festival would've happened, that's when the State of Idaho shut down.

We wanted to make sure There were a lot of cutoff dates for people's Airbnb's and hotels. We wanted bands to be able to not get too far along on things, and so we were just further ahead than, once again, leadership that was ahead of us. So that was frustrating, but I think once we got clarity, "OK, cool, no one's going to help us. No one's going to do this for us," we just grabbed the reins.

I think event organizers are pretty good at that in general.

Pier Carlo: Crisis management.

Eric: Yeah, crisis management. And then it was almost a weird joy around just problem-solving [laughing], because that's something that we love. I think that's also a trait that artists have too. We're natural problem-solvers in a lot of ways. That's how a lot of our art is created, through solving problems within the art itself or maybe sometimes within the world.

I think the biggest challenge has been we're already a pretty decentralized team and it's just been hard not connecting with the team. But we've been doing some of that. And then it's hard to plan too far in advance right now. It's really hard. The tea leaves are harder to read than in recent years, but once again I think that also plays to my strengths and our team's strengths too. We've just been confident we can figure out a way through it. We're in a pretty challenging financial position and in a lot of unknowns but I think also just grateful for the slowdown a little bit, time with our families.

Yeah, it's been challenging, but it's one of those things too, it's almost just keeping everyone calm. It's like, "Hey, we're going to figure this out. There's nothing to do right now, so be OK not doing anything until the storm passes." But as the storm has prolonged it does get ... it's up and down, like I think anybody's dealing with.

Pier Carlo: So now you're clearly a community leader as well as one of the leaders of Treefort. What's that like? Talk about that responsibility.

Eric: For one, Treefort, a couple years in, the city named us the Cultural Ambassador for the City of Boise, which at the time, coming out of the rock-and-roll world, I was just like, [laughing] "Hey, Mom, see? I'm doing something! See? This is cool!" It was fun to lean into that. I also just thought it was such a good look for our city. I was like, "Yeah, see? These artists can be legitimate leaders if you tap into their ingenuity and their energy and passion."

I just think artists at the table with all kinds of decision-making is very important, and the best cities or communities in general have artists at the table. They're not just pretty pictures to put on a wall.

I'm thankful to be at the table, and I try not to waste any time I get when I am at the table, and I do take the responsibility in the sense that ... There's so many artists that are playing similar roles, and that's the thing: I just think artists at the table with all kinds of decision-making is very important, and the best cities or communities in general have artists at the table. They're not just pretty pictures to put on a wall.

Pier Carlo: What do you think it would take for more artists to grab their seat at the table? You've been saying they have innate leadership, but to this day there are still, as you said, very few artists at the table. So what could change that?

Eric: I think, showing up. I think that's one thing. I think one reason why I'm at the table is, as much as when someone invites me to come be a part of a conversation ... I mean, I'd rather be playing music or going to a show or doing a lot of things; it's not really what I want to do. But I recognize the opportunity to make a difference. And so I show up. I say yes.

I could see a lot of people shirking that or just thinking ... Sometimes they're very anti-establishment within the arts community, which I think is fine, but just realize that you can make a difference if you show up. Part of that is, maybe you haven't even been invited yet. But maybe show up to community-organizing things. I think specifically, especially in a town like Boise, you can walk into City Hall. You can go to the City Council meetings. We have a very accessible government here, and I think most towns are like that.

People spend more time complaining about their local government on the internet instead of just walking in the front door and realizing that there's humans behind those doors that you could actually start a conversation with about, "You know what? We have these struggling venues in town that your noise ordinance isn't helping. Do you realize how much value we bring to the community? Can we have a conversation?"

Pier Carlo: When, if ever, will you know that it's time to hand over the reins to somebody else?

Eric: I think that's something I've been grappling with a little bit more recently, especially just realizing that I need to make sure there's people that know what I do. Even if I don't choose to hand over the reins, somebody needs to be able to take the reins if something were to happen to me.

I think that's how I've approached life in general. I feel like I'll know when it's time. I think for me it's if my passion and energy for it goes down, then it's time to make the space for somebody else. I think ever since I've jumped into the music path, I feel like I've just been pretty

responsive to my surroundings and following my muse, I guess. As long as that continues to be my muse, I think that I'll be here.



Eric Gilbert

MUSICIAN & CO-FOUNDER OF TREEFORT MUSIC FEST

Eric Gilbert is a co-founder and festival director of Treefort Music Fest in Boise, Idaho. Treefort is a multi-disciplined (aka multi-Forted), multi-day, multi-venue event that has taken over downtown Boise for five days in March since 2012. Gilbert and a couple other founders of Treefort also own Duck Club, through which they produce concerts in various venues in Boise year-round as Duck Club Presents, and maintain a boutique tour booking agency as Duck Club Touring. Built off of years of DIY touring and being active in the music community at large, Gilbert and his team hold a strong focus on community building, artist discovery and advocacy, and a passion for creating a niche within the business side of music that keeps them inspired. Maintaining a home in the cultural frontier of Idaho has proven fertile ground for their fresh and collaborative approach. Gilbert also hosts a weekly radio show called Antler Crafts on community radio station Radio Boise 89.9 FM, still occasionally plays keys and sings with his band Finn Riggins, and is a father of a crafty 7-year-old girl named Vera with his bandmate and life-partner Lisa Simpson. / Photo: Matthew Wordell