

Report on Anecdotal Data and Demographics Gathered for the Blue Ridge Music Trails Economic Impact Study

Steve Kruger for the North Carolina Folklife Institute

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Overview

From April to November of 2011, I collected surveys at 26 events throughout Western North Carolina for the Blue Ridge Music Trail Economic Impact Study. The purposes in conducting this study were two-fold. It sought to assess the regional economic impact of music events, based on the spending habits of the attendees. It also sought to understand that audience, thus finding ways the Arts Council can serve both the communities of that region, and the visitors who help to sustain it. This report takes anecdotal information gathered during the survey collection project, and seeks to contextualize it, providing a qualitative analysis of the make-up of audiences at Blue Ridge Music Trail events and venues, and their motivations for attending.

Introduction

Sitting at my folding table at fiddlers' conventions, in dance halls and auditoriums, I would often strike up conversations with the people kind enough to take the time to fill out our survey forms. Usually I would ask them what they liked or disliked about that particular event, or why they had come. Often, they wanted to talk about question 11 on the survey form, which asked what influence North Carolina's music traditions had had on their interest in music. People can listen to music at home. There are bluegrass and old-time events all around the country, even around the world (though perhaps nowhere as plentiful as in the southern mountains). People come to the Blue Ridge region to hear music because there are many long-standing, high quality events and venues there. But they also make the journey because it is perceived as the place where the music came from. People are willing to go there to hear music because it is important to them, and because it is part of a larger Appalachian experience that includes the land itself, and other cultural and natural attractions. Understanding why people make these decisions can help us understand the audience. That audience is formed of a variety of sub-groups, each with its own motivations, ideas about the music, demographics and spending patterns. Each sub-group represents a proportion of the whole audience, with that proportion differing at each venue.

The results of the quantitative analysis of the survey forms will demonstrate an overwhelming majority of the attendees were European-Americans. I also suspect that a high percentage of attendees were older (more than 55 years old) for reasons we will discuss later. While there is a lack of ethnic diversity at bluegrass and old-time events, it would be an oversimplification to refer to these audiences as homogenous. I encountered a range of income levels and educational background, as well as point of origin. Some were elderly couples traveling the country in an RV. Some were groups of young adults learning to play old-time and bluegrass. Some were local; some were from the other side of the country.

People also had different reasons for being in the mountains, and for being at a music venue. They had walked down different paths leading them to an appreciation of Appalachian music. Some grew up with it. Some sought it out. Some happened on an interesting sign by the road and decided to walk through the door.

For local residents and for people who have left the mountains or are descended from mountain people, hearing or playing mountain music can be an affirmation of their own heritage

and identity. For visitors to the region, the music and the experience of going to hear it is an encounter with something exotic, something that is seen as having a unique authenticity, something you could encounter nowhere else. For some it is ironically edgy and hip; for others, romantic, wholesome, anachronistic or unchanging. For some it is simply good music, or music, period.

I also heard comments that placed the music in a diverse array of political contexts. At Mount Airy I spoke to a banjo player with a tattoo of Vladimir Lenin on his arm, moments before chatting with a man whose banjo case was covered in Republican bumper stickers. It was common to hear people talk about the inherent social values present in old-time music, which range across the political spectrum from conservative values such as independence and self-sufficiency, to the music as springing from the working class and requiring cooperation and community. (Additional investigation into the values perceived at music events may be a useful line of future inquiry.)

In other words, to understand the results of the Economic Impact Study, it is helpful to have a contextual basis for the subtle cultural diversity of those present. For these reasons it is helpful to consider people as members of groups. Like all generalizations, these are flawed. People often fall into more than one category, or none at all. However, in the business of trying to understand the economic effects of traditional music events, it is helpful to understand that these actions vary between these groups, and the presence of these groups at different events has an effect on the data collected, one that might not be immediately apparent by looking at a purely statistical analysis. To that end I have divided the audience into several groups, providing some information and some anecdotal statements that help express their role in the larger audience at Blue Ridge Music Trail events. They are as follows:

1. Locals
2. Retirees and Seasonal Residents
3. Musicians and Dancers
4. Regional Tourists
5. Out of State and International Tourists
6. Members of the Arts Community
7. Regional Students and Alumni
8. Craft Buyers
9. Bikers and Recreational Drivers

In a separate section (II) I provide some contextual information for a few questions on the form, as well as some comments that subjects that came up across the boundaries of the groups identified above. They are as follows:

1. Outdoor Recreation
2. Local Food
3. Educational/Historical Activities
4. Exposure to the Blue Ridge Music Trails Project
5. Listeners
6. A Final Note: The Importance of Affordability and “Family-Friendly” Events

A Short Disclaimer:

My comments are influenced by my own experiences as a former resident of the region, and as a semi-professional Appalachian musician. Full disclosure: I love this music, and the mountain region. I moved to Watauga County at 17. My official stated purpose was to attend Appalachian State University. In reality I wanted to spend time in the mountains themselves, and to better learn to play the banjo and fiddle, something I picked up as an adolescent in the Washington, D.C. suburbs. Traditional music is now one of the most important parts of my life, and I owe much of it to the places I revisited during 2011. Like some of the respondents, I learned to play, and formed many friendships and good memories at jam sessions at places like the Mount Airy Fiddlers' Convention. I learned to get over stage fright playing at small dance halls like the Alleghany Jubilee and local festivals like MusicFest 'N Sugar Grove. I want to thank the Arts Council and the North Carolina Folklife Institute for the chance to relive some of those memories, and to forge new ones.

Steve Kruger

I. Audience Demographics

1. Locals

In this section I distinguish between residents (anyone living in the mountain region) and locals in the sense the term is used in the area, meaning people who grew up there and often have deep roots in the community going back for several generations. While there is friendship and interaction between residents from different backgrounds at music events, there is a difference between the lifestyle and culture of people born and raised in the mountains and people who were not. A socio-economic class difference often exists between recent newcomers (often retirees and second-home owners) and longtime residents, who tend to be from more blue-collar backgrounds.

I cannot stress enough that all venues were open to all. Some actually did serve as a place for locals and more recent residents to socialize together. This was especially true at the Orchard at Altapass, and the coffee shop at Zuma, which are both run by more recently arrived residents, but reach out to the local community. I heard this comment at the latter, which also refers to positive economic development in the community:

Joel (Zuma Proprietor) has really turned this place around. 10 years ago there was nothing happening on this street. Things are starting to pick up, and I think it's because Joel started this business here, reached out to the locals and the newcomers. This is a place where everybody (the locals, second homers, tourists etc) can mingle together and have a good time.

But some venues, especially the older, smaller sites such as the Alleghany Jubilee, form valuable and increasingly rare social spaces for the local community. One respondent told me:

This is where I see all of my old friends. Coming here on Saturday night is like coming home to a high school reunion or something like that.

In communities where music within the community was once ubiquitous, these events take on greater importance for those who had music as a part of their own lives. I heard the following comment at the MusicFest 'N Sugar Grove.

I grew up around here and my whole family was musicians. My uncles helped build this school. My grandfather used to have the whole community over to his house and have music and dancing all night long. This kind of reminds me of those nights.

The role of music in the act of remembering is especially important to people who have returned to the region after a period of absence. I heard the first comment that follows from a middle-aged man at Shindig on the Green and the second from a recently-returned alumnus of the school that now houses the Stecoah Valley Arts Center:

This is a community thing for me. I've known the Glenn (Glenn Bannerman, the emcee) since I was a kid. He used to call dances in Montreat when I was growing up. I had some

musicians in my family and when I moved away, I really missed all of this. I try to come out to Shindig whenever I'm home visiting, and I hope one day I can find a job that allows me to stay here.

I left the mountains to find work, but I came back because I wanted my children to experience it. My kids went to school here until it closed down. This school was the center of the community. There's not a whole lot else around here, so it's good to have something like this going on, and to keep the history of this place alive.

Cultural Identity

Apart from being a social space for local residents, these traditions themselves are seen as being an important part of the community's cultural identity. This is summed up by a local attendee at the Merry Go Round at the Earle Theater in Mount Airy:

I'll tell you my favorite thing. You see there? (Points through glass door at child watching the jam session) They're learning where they come from. That's really important. You can't do anything if you don't know where you come from. This is our heritage and part of who we are. So when you see that happening, it makes you feel good.

This was sometimes referred to in an oppositional way, where music events served as a constant in a region that is rapidly changing, especially in places like Asheville. I recorded this statement at Shindig on the Green:

I understand what you're (referring to the survey work) doing, but this shouldn't be about money. This is part of our heritage. My family has been in this area and played music for generations. That's what is really important. This town is changing a lot and we're losing something, our character and our culture in the process. People talk a lot about Asheville changing, and that is just the way it is. No one can stop it. At least they're still doing things like this. It shows the city values the traditional culture here.

In many cases, the events were a place to communicate a positive cultural identity to people from outside the region. I heard this remark at Sims Barbecue. They also proudly display newspaper articles relating to same practice:

When I was in high school we would bring foreign exchange students here to give them a taste of local color. It doesn't get much more local than this. They had a great time.

Others at Bluegrass at the Old Rock School, and Old Fort Mountain Music (to name just a few) would bring relatives and visiting friends to the events, to give them a sense of place. For them, these places represented the best of their community, and their culture. I collected the following anecdote at Old Fort Mountain Music.

I have friends visiting me from New York and I wanted to take them out to experience some local culture. Things like this, real local gatherings are not easy to find, if I didn't live here I would have no idea things like this existed.

2. Retirees and Seasonal Residents

One of the largest groups represented in this study are retirees and people who live seasonally in the mountains in a second home. Often, second-homers and retirees did not grow up with an appreciation for Appalachian music. Many live part of the year near the beach, often in Florida, and grew up in the mid-Atlantic or Northeastern region. Still, they turn up in large numbers at traditional music venues, especially at festivals. And I met many who are now aficionados or who have taken up the music themselves.

Retirees and second-homers are attracted to similar amenities, leading to communities that encompass both groups – often clustered around areas with access to quality health care, close to a university or an urban area, such as Asheville or Boone. Both demographics also cite the ability to attend cultural events as a deciding factor in their housing locations, even leading to more remote areas, such as Stecoah, in Graham County:

This is a big reason we decided to move here (to Stecoah). If there wasn't a regular meeting place like this, with such great entertainment we may have gone somewhere else. We have another home in Florida, but we hope to end up spending most of our time in this area.

The notion that the presence of cultural events like these was a factor in deciding where to move came up at other venues too. Second-home owners—people who often spend winters further south or off the mountain, and their summers in the High Country—often make it a point to visit and to welcome visitors during annual events such as the MusicFest 'N Sugar Grove:

We have a home here and one in Florida. We make it a point to be here and to have family visiting this weekend so that we can all make it out to the festival. It's a great chance to hear some good music and experience some local culture.

I spoke with several retirees who had spent time in the region when they were younger and returned. For some, the music was again a motivating factor. I recorded the following at the Music in the Mountains Festival in Burnsville:

I remember visiting family in North Carolina when I was 8. I thought it was so beautiful and I wanted to move back ever since. When I was 65 I finally got my chance. Part of that coming back and remembering that older time was the music, and it has been one of my favorite things about living here. There really are more traditional musicians here than anywhere else in the country.

I heard a similar story from a couple attending the WPAQ Merry Go Round in Mount Airy:

We saw this thing on the Internet and we thought we would come and check it out. We're both retired, but when we were young we taught in Watauga County for a while and got hooked on the music. He plays the banjo and I play the dulcimer. We moved to Bethel (community in western Watauga) last year. The best thing about it is that there's something like this going on every weekend, and it's all high quality. You don't realize how special it is until you leave, but that was a big reason why we came back

There is another retiree demographic present at festivals during the summer, one with significantly different spending patterns. These are traveling retirees, folks living out of an RV. I spoke with several who plan their routes based on music events, with the scenic beauty of the region being a second factor. One couple was reliving their days as wandering musicians:

We just retired. It's been a long time since we've come to any festivals but the kids have moved out and we wanted to do some traveling. We both play and we have lots of old friends that come out to these things. We're trying to hit as many as we can for the rest of the summer.

Another was just discovering her musical talents, and was looking for backup musicians at Sugar Grove:

I am traveling across country in an RV. I'm retired and at some point I just started writing country songs. I don't know why, I'm more of an opera person, but I'm coming to these kinds of things now to get inspired.

3. Musicians and Dancers

Musicians

A high percentage of attendees at all of these events are themselves musicians. Bluegrass and old-time music tend to be participatory. The chance to jam and or perform onstage during a competition is a major draw for some events, especially fiddler's conventions, as one attendee at the Happy Valley Fiddlers Convention put it:

I like how this isn't a performance-oriented festival. It's mostly all competition and the real good music is out in the jam circles. It just goes to show you that you can't draw a line between "professional" musicians and the rest of us.

These events form the highlights of the year for a certain sub-culture of non-professional musicians. Some of them will go to a different fiddlers' convention or festival every weekend, and their social groups mostly consist of other musicians. Some have friends that they have only ever seen at Mount Airy or Union Grove. Some met their spouses there. It is a substantial part of their life, and each event has its own traditions and its own flavor. One person said of Mount Airy:

I had a friend who got married here in the '90s. They had a bunch of people march out to the field near the tank playing Cripple Creek, one group for the bride and one for the groom and they got married out there in that big flat field. Then it basically turned into a huge party.

Events like Mount Airy, a giant three-day music party with really no onstage entertainment other than amateur competition, can serve as a sort of gateway for others to become old-time or bluegrass musicians. There tend to be more young adults at events that

feature jamming in some capacity, although older musicians move in the same circles and live the same lifestyle. It is a place where people who know a little about the music can experience the place of its origin for the first time, and interact with people who have that tradition in their own communities and families, something that is highly valued in the old-time music world:

This is the event I always drag first-timers to. Some people are nervous about the cultural experience, you know being around real country people. This festival is a good example of a place where the locals, the revivalists, and the hippies are all in one place. I bring people in here, show them the lay of the land, where the crazies on the hill are, the bluegrassers in their RVs, the hippies and rednecks in the lowlands and then I take them around. We watch the band contest and I introduce them to the Birchfields and the Bowmans (local musicians). They're usually hooked after about 5 minutes.

In a sense, these kinds of events are where the musical tradition actually resides and lives. Their existence is seen as important for the continuation of that tradition. I heard the following comment from a father at the Halloweenfest in Brevard:

My kids are in the Y.A.M. (SC version of J.A.M) program in South Carolina. It's good that they have a youth category. There aren't as many old-time musicians down there as there are here, so it also opens their eyes to what else is going on, and let's them see how good you can get.

In some cases, the moment that becomes a life as a musician is tied to a particular venue, like the Alleghany Jubilee. I heard this from a musician in his 20s:

I started playing old-time music because I used to come here and watch. I was in a rock band, but one night they called me up on stage. That's part of the atmosphere here. They are very welcoming.

(I should mention that I too was called on stage when I showed up with my surveys and a fiddle case. It was a wonderful experience.) I heard similar stories elsewhere, like this one from Shindig on the Green in Asheville:

I started playing music because of Shindig. I came with my husband and after seeing all the music I went out and bought a banjo. It's a big part of our lives now, and I owe it to Shindig.

These approachable venues can also be where one takes one's music to the next level and learns to be a professional. Shindig for instance, lets anyone who wants to, play on a stage in front of thousands of people. I heard this anecdote from proud parents at Zuma who were watching their teenage daughter:

We drive about an hour from Tennessee to be here, just about every week. That's my daughter playing fiddle and singing in there. She met Bobby and he's been sort of a

mentor for her. We have a family band, but she's the star of the show. It's pretty special to be able to play with some of these guys on a regular basis.

I found that musicians tended to spend more money on music. This is obvious at a glance, because they are paying for strings, instruments (one banjo collector claimed to have spent \$40,000 in a year trading instruments) and lessons, but they also seemed to spend more money on concert tickets and recorded music too, partially because of the notion that this is not just a hobby for many people, but a lifestyle and a culture of its own.

Dancers

Some of the events were also frequented by dancers, who also saw the venues as being necessary for the continuation of their tradition and the preservation of their community. Flat-footing and two-stepping is relatively common in the mountain region, particularly among older demographics, but it requires a space and of course, music. Many flat-footers will drive long distances more than once a week to be around good dancing music (which is not all mountain music), and in a place with hardwood floors and a community of other dancers. An elderly woman pointed out to me at the Alleghany Jubilee that it was also a way to stay healthy and active:

I am 91 years old and I try to come out whenever I can. My family were all dancers growing up, and it reminds me of my childhood. I think its also great exercise, especially for those getting up in years.

The same rules that apply to those trying to learn and pass that tradition on. I talked for a while to a mother who had brought here two daughters to the Stompin' Ground, considered by some to be the capital of clogging in the Southern Mountains.

My grandparents brought me here when I was a kid. We used to drive up from South Carolina. Dancing was important to them, and that all of us kids learn. It was a much bigger crowd back then, but I still come up and I bring my girls too

4. Regional Tourists

Tourists from off the mountain, but still from North Carolina formed a sizeable group at some of the larger venues and festivals. However, I found that it was a broad group, hard to generalize about here. The largest number fall into the musician category, people I encountered at fiddlers conventions. Of the pure spectators, I would say the largest groups tended to be families and elderly couples. Many of these medium-range visitors' trips would coincide with other mountain activities, such as hiking or traveling on the parkway.

There is also substantial attendance at all the venues, including the smaller ones, by travelers from neighboring localities. I would define these as people traveling for an hour or less. The economic and cultural landscape varies widely in short distances in western North Carolina, so despite geographical proximity, these visitors may have quite different backgrounds. Usually these travelers have negligible economic effects on the community, but at the WKBC Hometown Opry I did hear the following from one couple who had come from two counties over:

We came from Burke County. We'll come a long way to see music, even this early in the morning. We usually make a day of it, go out to breakfast and sometimes we go and see a movie.

Often regional tourists have family connections to mountains, either by relation or by decades of family trips to places like Grandfather Mountain, Mayberry, or long-running events like Coon Dog Day. One family I spoke with at that event demonstrated how the presence of a music event would influence the date of their trip:

We used to live in Saluda and we are visiting some relatives. We would come up anyway, but we planned it this time to be here for Coon Dog Day. You know it's just one of those places. The train comes through once a week, and we've got some great places to eat, nice people and stuff like this going on. What's not to like?

5. Out-of-state and International Tourists

I encountered visitors from out of state at most of the venues I attended. The majority of the people were from neighboring states, but some people came from a great distance. Again, the draw is not just the music, but also a chance to experience the music in its context, and to get the full cultural experience. All of the events, but especially the smaller, more intimate venues are attractive because they have what people called an authenticity, meaning it was a real grass-roots community space, where you could really meet the people whose family and friends had created the music. For visitors from outside the region, interacting with Appalachian culture is, in a sense, exotic. I often heard comments like “I didn’t know places like this still existed,” or “this is like taking a step backward in time.” Though comments like this are problematic, as is the concept of authenticity itself, it is a very real and positive experience for people at these events—a reason for coming. The chance to interact with local people may also lead to lasting friendships, and a deep connection to the venue, as expressed by a man at the Heritage Day at Bolick Pottery:

I met the Bolicks here in the 80s and we became friends. I come from Nashville Tennessee every year. Coming to their place is like going back in time. I actually wrote a song about the Bolicks, and they had me sing it this year before they opened the kiln.

As we have mentioned before, the gap between performer and audience at these events can be more permeable than people’s usual experience. It is common for even well-known artists to wander around a festival ground, or personally sell their merchandise. This was a draw for woman I met at the Happy Valley Fiddlers Convention:

I'm RV-ing around the country and I came to this event last year. I love being able to talk to the performers after the show. Most of my family is up in Wisconsin and they don't get to see stuff like this. I usually pick up some CDs to take up there to them.

There were also more international visitors than I had expected, especially at the larger events. Most were traveling through the region as part of a larger vacation, visiting natural

destinations and larger urban settings. But a few had picked the Blue Ridge, and their particular travel schedule, to be able to see traditional music. Some were musicians themselves, or aficionados like one I ran into at Mount Airy:

I run a record label in France, blues, and old country mostly, but some bluegrass too. I've been coming over here for 30 years. I love this country; it feels more like my home than France. This is the first time I've been here to this festival, but it is good. Afterwards I'm traveling west by motorcycle, looking for musicians and visiting friends.

Others were here for other reasons, but made it a point to experience the music and culture for which the region is famous. I heard two people talk about the shared roots between Appalachian and other traditional music from the Old World, including this comment from the Folk Music in the Mountains Festival in Burnsville:

I'm a visiting art instructor from Australia. I have loved the opportunity to go out and see traditional music while I've been visiting. It's interesting to see the similarities between this and music back home, and also the differences. It is much more alive here, and that is very special.

One couple visiting from England had happened on Old Fort Music by chance and planned their next visit accordingly.

We were traveling on holiday years ago and were passing through town on a Friday and ended up checking this out. When we planned out next trip to America we went to as many music events as we could, and we made sure to have Old Fort be a part of our trip. It is the real thing, you know?

6. Members of the Arts Community

Local arts councils and other similar organizations often help organize events, particularly small and mid-sized festivals. Many of their members, as well as artists from other genres, showed up at the venues that I visited. This demographic tends to be over 55, well-educated, and extremely enthusiastic about the importance of arts in general both to the health of communities and to maintaining their own quality of life. For some of the respondents I talked to from this demographic, old-time and bluegrass music were important more as aspects of art indigenous to the region than for any qualities intrinsic to the music itself. One attendee at the Music in the Mountains Festival in Burnsville who was active in the local arts council expressed this with a particular eloquence:

Without Art, life is a soul-less existence. Art brings out the best in people and in communities. I think we need to acknowledge that and support it in whatever way we can. With this kind of music, you're seeing what makes North Carolina unique.

Some of these sites, such as the Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center and the Music in the Mountains Festival, were regular or annual events that provided social spaces for the community

of artists and supporters of the arts to come together (as in the case of musicians and other locals).

I have season tickets, so every year I come to almost every show. It gives us something to look forward to, and a place to see all of my friends. They have really done a good job of getting this place off the ground.

7. Regional Students and Alumni

Several of the events were hosted at or sponsored by the region's universities. These events are part of the annual calendar at educational institutions. Most of the mountain schools are in small towns, and a large music festival draws everyone, whether they are normally fans of the music or not. Most universities in the mountains do have an Appalachian Heritage club, and encountering mountain music (even by chance) is part of the experience of attending a school in the region. These events are also ideal dates for alumni and the families of students to visit the school, and can become family traditions themselves, as expressed by a woman at Western Carolina University's (WCU's) Heritage Day:

I went to Western Carolina and now my daughter goes here too. We come here every year to visit here and relive our campus days.

I heard the following remark from an older couple attending the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival at Mars Hill College; it reflects the connection between the traditions of the college itself and those of the festival and the music presented there:

My grandfather drove my grandmother in an old Ford over mud roads to bring her to school years and years ago. After they got married they would come back to visit. We make the same trip a few times a year and we never miss the festival. The trip is a lot easier now though.

The MusicFest 'N Sugar Grove is a partnership between the Sustainable Development program at Appalachian State University (ASU) and the Cove Creek Preservation Society. Most of the volunteers and interns at the festival are students. The festival itself is a way of teaching students about community revitalization and community partnership. Students from ASU heavily attended that event when I was present. I also encountered several students there with their parents. One girl I spoke with was having her birthday party there, with friends, parents and grandparents from off the mountain.

8. Craft Shoppers:

The pairing of music with traditional craft and foodways is a common occurrence at traditional music festivals. The presence of crafts is a strong draw for many festivalgoers, especially at events such as John C. Campbell Folk School, Heritage Day at Bolick Pottery, and Mountain Heritage Day at WCU. People often framed their positive reactions to this facet of the festivals in ideological terms. The ability to buy crafts was not just a way to get a souvenir from the region (though this was also true), but to buy something sustainable, something locally made, or something made in the United States. The chance to be able to meet artists and give money

directly to them, therefore contributing to the local economy, was also recognized. I heard this comment at the John C. Campbell Folk Festival, but the sentiment was repeated in many other places:

You can find some very unique things and buy them right from the person who made them, so you know exactly where your money is going. That's a rare thing in this day and age.

A small group of people (in my experience, usually retirees) at these events come primarily for the crafts and not the music. Some have formed relationships with particular artists who regularly attend, and return to reconnect with them, whether or not they buy anything. Others may be particularly interested in certain types of craft—such as pottery or basketry—and know they can find quality, traditional examples at a certain venue. However, in one case, at the MusicFest 'N Sugar Grove, I heard someone make a connection between the music itself and the material nature of the crafts, applying the same concept of sustainability to both.

I try to buy local. My house is filled with North Carolina furniture and I try to eat food from North Carolina too. Music and culture to me are an extension of that.

As a side note, I was interested to hear on several occasions from people attending the events with a craft component, that they were specifically trying to do their Christmas shopping, even at the events taking place in the summer.

9. Bikers and Recreational Drivers

I encountered motorcyclists and recreational drivers at several events. While they form a small portion of the audience, I found their remarks interesting. Some of the events, such as Sims Barbecue, The Orchard at Altapass, the Happy Valley Fiddlers Convention and Sugar Grove are located in scenic rural settings far down winding two-lane roads. While this may make them less accessible to some, the location is a bonus for this demographic. One couple at the Happy Valley Fiddlers Convention had a special connection to that ride, and the festival:

We rode our bikes (motorcycles) down here for our first date last year. I think we might make this our anniversary ritual.

There are regular gatherings of bikers from outside the region who come here specifically for the scenic and technically challenging roads. Some of them also want to encounter local people and local culture, as expressed by a middle-aged couple at Sims Country Bar-B-Que:

We were riding up to a meet from South Carolina. We saw this place on PBS and we wanted to come and catch some local color. We also love the BBQ.

There are many biker organizations and car clubs, and it is a relatively tight-knit community, one that I think is often overlooked in the region.

II FORM-RELATED INFORMATION FROM RESPONDENTS

1. Outdoor Recreation

Question 18 on the survey form asked what other recreational activities respondents engaged in while visiting the mountain region. Some respondents might have interpreted this section to mean what other recreational activities they regularly participated in, whether or not they were doing it on the same trip. This especially applies to local residents who opted to fill in the section. The most common responses I noticed and gathered anecdotal information about dealt with food (see 2 below), historical/educational activities, and outdoor recreation (An aside: though it was not an option some people also mentioned hunting, fishing and water-sports). Again, I think this reflects the perception of a strong sense of place present in Appalachian music, and its subsequent value in communication and promotion.

It is therefore no coincidence that many people who enjoy Appalachian music are also avid hikers, climbers and outdoors enthusiasts, and vice versa. At particularly scenic sites such as Happy Valley, Altapass, Heritage Day at Bolick Pottery and the John C. Campbell Folk School, I often heard comments about the beauty of the sites themselves, especially from people coming from urban areas like Charlotte and Atlanta.

The connection between the land and the music was especially apparent at Altapass, which is located on the Blue Ridge Parkway, and was originally built to preserve the land and keep it from being subdivided. I collected the following anecdotes there:

This place would have been a subdevelopment if it weren't for them (The Carsons). Now it's one of the most beautiful places on the Parkway. We really owe a lot to them for doing this.

We were just on our way hiking and happened to see this. It's pretty wild; these people know how to have a good time.

I love how you see the heritage in tandem with the land here. You have the food (the apples), the land and the music all celebrated in one place. It's very special.

Leafers, or people who come to the mountains to see the fall foliage, were present at events in the autumn. A typical comment was collected at the Halloweenfest at Brevard:

We are here to see the fall colors and we thought we would poke our heads in and hear some music. There are some great performers here, and I love the venue. It's great to see something fun happening in a courtroom for a change.

2. Local Food

Traditional foodways are often linked to local music, both being iconic expressions of mountain or southern culture. Food is a HUGE draw at these events. For some, like Sims Country Bar-B-Que, the food is on equal footing with the music. But at most small festivals, the tents and food carts run by local civic organizations, like churches, fire departments, and scout groups are seen as a strong asset, and again a chance to experience local culture, strike up a conversation with a local resident, and enjoy quality handmade food. The comments were mostly

along the line of “I come for the music, I stay for the barbecue/kettlecorn/livermush/cider, etc.” Beyond the gates and the ticket booth this is also the case, even for locals. People often go out to eat before or after an event, like the man at Shindig on the Green who said:

My wife and I come to town every week in the summer. We go out to eat, walk around town and come to this. It's a nice way to anchor a weekend out on the town.

I heard similar remarks at some of the smaller venues, such as the WKBC Hometown Opry in Wilkesboro, and at the Alleghany Jubilee.

3. Educational/Historical Activities

I would not be surprised if attendees of music trail events frequent museums and other educational activities in greater numbers than the wider public. There is a consciously historic quality to bluegrass and especially old-time music. Part of the experience of playing or listening to it is the appreciation of what came before in the musical tradition. Indeed, in old-time music, an exchange of encyclopedic knowledge of different versions of fiddle tunes, or obscure recordings from the 1920s is part of the banter before and after a tune is played in a jam session

I point this out for the readers to understand a correlation between a tendency towards historical tourism and towards heritage tourism, concepts that are conceptually and historically linked. More specifically, I encountered historic significance influencing people's decision to attend events associated with particular musicians, such as the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival, or associated with historic events, such as Laura Foster's burial in the field where the Happy Valley Fiddlers Convention takes place. In a similar way, regional music styles, such as the “Round Peak” sound present at the Mount Airy Fiddlers Convention also provide a special incentive to go. At Happy Valley I heard people talk about the significance of standing by the subject of the famous murder ballad's final resting place, and for some from outside the region, coming to the stomping grounds of Tommy Jarrell and the Camp Creek Boys borders on a religious experience. To a certain extent the same is true for Lunsford, and certainly for being able to hear the descendents of the Madison County Ballad singers. It should definitely be useful to communicate the uniqueness of a particular event to a community that appreciates its unique place within the larger Appalachian tradition.

4. Exposure to the Blue Ridge Music Trails Project

Question number 16 on the survey form asks how the respondents heard about the event, or what media they used to inform their decision to come. My impression is that the most common answer was word of mouth, or prior experience with an event. Most of the sites in the study have been around for many years. As we have demonstrated, many people coming to the region are members of sub-cultures. For them, these events are social gatherings, so word of mouth is understandably important.

Very few people mentioned the Blue Ridge Music Trail project directly. (Some did ask if it was related to the Crooked Road, and then told us we should put up signs). There were, however, a few respondents who had encountered the guidebook. Though they may have already heard about Mount Airy or WCU's Heritage Day, they found the content of the book useful and interesting and in some cases had used the book to find smaller venues. I encountered a teacher at the Union Grove Festival who claimed she used the book as an educational aid:

We use that book in class. I teach 4th graders and every year when we do our North Carolina unit I make sure they know how important North Carolina's musical traditions are. I show them the articles on Larry Pennington and Josh Goforth (a young musician) so they know that this is something that is old, but also something that young people are doing, something that is relevant to them too.

I would also point out that many people claimed they had looked at a website to get information about a site or event. In some cases particularly with the smaller venues, the Blue Ridge Music Trails Project entry at www.blueridgemusic.org is the only substantial web presence for the venue. In other cases, in an Internet search for the venue's name, the Blue Ridge Music Trails entry for the site might be third or fourth on the list at the most. It is my own personal (though unsubstantiated) belief that more people are using the website than would be indicated in the data.

5. Listeners

Of course in all of this talk about social life and identity, it is important not to leave out the nature of the music itself. Some people from all of the demographic groups above said their primary reason for being at the venue was "to hear good music." This goes without saying, as does the reputation of the region for continuously producing great local musicians and having storied venues. However, I would qualify that by saying that the definition of what desirable music varied from event to event. Some places like the Alleghany Jubilee, the Folk Music In The Mountains Festival, and the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival valued the older, more localized traditions. Some places like the Old Rock School and Stecoah tended to offer more well-known regional acts, many of which had more a more contemporary style of traditional music. I heard both positive and negative reviews for both at each venue, but generally found the majority of the attendees knew of the venue's slant and appreciated it.

6. A Final Note: The Importance of Affordability and Family-Friendly Events

No matter where people were from and why they were there, there were two things that came up the most across the board. Eight of the events I surveyed were free and many of the other charged only a nominal admission, often less than the price of a movie or a commercial popular music concert. Time and time again, the affordability of traditional music performances was mentioned as an important factor in deciding to come. Many made the point that this was particularly welcome in a time of economic uncertainty. I found this was most important for retirees on fixed incomes, and for families.

In the case of the latter, people were often surprised at how cheap the events were as a family outing, and praised them for being so family-friendly. This was one of the most common statements ("it is great this is so family-friendly"). Specifically, youth-oriented components of events were praised. But there was also the sense that Appalachian music could be appreciated by all ages, and these events were generally perceived as being safe, wholesome environments. This is expressed well by this comment from a family at the Bolick Heritage Day:

We love the scenery and it's a great place to bring the kids and have fun as a family. I don't have to worry about them here. They're down playing in the creek catching crayfish.

These sites are also places where children can learn valuable lessons, as expressed by one father at the John C. Campbell Folk School:

It's a great place to bring the kids. It's safe, and they get to learn something. You see all these people making things, and what people had to do to survive, and you get a sense of how resourceful people have been and how resourceful they can be. It's a good thing to learn; now more than ever we need to be learning how to be self-sufficient.

III Conclusion

The sites represented by this data are diverse, ranging from intimate, local spaces to some of the largest music festivals in the country. The audience also ranges from teenagers trying to pick up the fiddle to flat-footers in their 90s; from first-time visitors to our country to people who have lived in the same community for generations. People go to hear music in the mountains to be entertained. But they are also seeking to express themselves, to create community, or to have an authentic cross-cultural experience. This music touches people, motivating them to cross great distances, even to move to the region. My conversations with respondents told me that bluegrass and old-time music communicate a sense of place, and that people want to travel to the place where the music came from. Based on my experience as a survey collector, I believe our study will show that there are material benefits to people coming to the area to hear traditional music. And time and time again, people in this study have said that the music of western North Carolina is an important part of the state's cultural and historical identity, as well as their own. I think this report demonstrates a need for support for affordable, community-based music venues in the western part of the state. I hope it can help effectively reach out to multiple demographic groups, people who may never otherwise meet except on the dance floor at the Altapass, or under the tent at Merlefest.