

Museum on Main Street

NEW HARMONIES: CELEBRATING AMERICAN ROOTS MUSIC Ideas for Local Exhibitions and Public Humanities Programs

No Museum on Main Street experience is complete without local exhibitions and humanities programming supplementing the themes of the exhibition and telling the local story. The following information has been assembled to assist and inspire you in developing local exhibitions and public humanities programs around the themes of the New Harmonies exhibit. If you see some ideas you like, take them and make them yours; or develop your own program and exhibition ideas. Don't forget that your state scholar is a great resource to help you develop your program ideas.

INTRODUCTORY SECTION

Local Exhibition Themes/Ideas

- Explore the genres of roots music prevalent in your community.
- Examine stories of musicians who played roots music in your local community.
- Display instruments from your collection appropriate to roots music.
- If immigrants played a significant role in your community, bring out that story and talk about the importance of music to the immigrant experience.
- Explore manufacturing of musical instruments in your community.
- Depending on your region, explore any and all groups who had a seminal influence on American Roots Music, i.e. slave/African American spirituals, Native American music and dance, immigrant instruments and sounds, etc.
- Demonstrate through sounds and objects the transfer of musical knowledge and heritage from one group to another in your community.
- Simply display sheet music, concert posters, album covers, etc. and talk about the impact of roots music of all kinds on the listener.

Program Ideas

- Musical performances are an easy and very fulfilling choice. They can be organized in myriad ways:
 - A sampling of the different genres of roots music;
 - A series that includes a weekly performance highlighting each of the genres week to week using local musicians;
 - Various performances of the same genre appropriate to the region, again using local musicians, if possible.
- Use a demonstration performance and have a dialogue with the audience about the different elements of each genre. For a youth program, play selections and make it a game to guess the particular roots music influence.
- Have a space in the exhibition where you can safely set up various roots music instruments. This may be a space that's only open and available to visitors when you have a volunteer or docent available. Give visitors the opportunity to strum a mandolin, pull a bow across a fiddle, etc. (A local music store might have some used instruments they might loan to you or perhaps donate as a sponsorship opportunity.)

- Set up a matching game – visitors match a photo of an instrument with the particular genre of music, i.e. the mandolin with country. They'll discover that some of the instruments run through all of the genres and are used to make very different sounds.
- Have demonstrations of the instruments by accomplished players stationed around the exhibition.
- Have a wall where visitors can write a thought or a memory of how this music has affected their lives, made them happy, made them sad, etc. This would make a great scrapbook.
- There are a wide range of films about roots music and musicians (see attached filmography). Work with your local video stores in displaying any titles they may have in stock (or encourage them to add to their inventory). Work with your local movie theatre to dedicate one screen, one night a week, to a film in conjunction with the exhibition.
- There is a wide range of children's books exploring American roots music (see attached bibliography). Work with your local library and/or bookstore in developing children's reading programs that relate to the themes of the exhibition:
 - Set aside a space in the exhibition area that can be a reading room for children and families;
 - Ask the local librarian to focus the story time selections to books that explore roots music;
 - Have a reading contest: children who read X number of books about roots music and musicians will receive a special reward: free music/dance lesson; discount to local music store, etc. (A good way to get sponsorship from local businesses.)
- In the same way, work with the local library and/or bookstore in developing reading programs and learning opportunities for adults (see attached bibliography):
 - Host book club meetings focusing on books about roots music and musicians;
 - Set up a roots music exploration station at the local library, displaying books on the subject and having a computer to explore roots music web sites (see attached listing).
- Local music stores and radio stations would also be good project partners: encourage music stores to set up special displays of roots music recordings (perhaps give a percentage of sales to the host museum). Local radio stations could develop a series of "Roots Music Minutes" where they play a selection and give background information about the piece and how it relates to the local community (your scholar can help you develop this list and information).

THE FIRST SOUNDS: SACRED SONGS

Local exhibition themes/ideas

- Display a collection of old hymn books, old church bulletins identifying which songs were sung when, programs from gospel shows, etc.
- Use oral histories and photos to remember local tent-gathering traditions. (Check your local or county newspaper archive.)

Programming Ideas

- Re-enact an old-time tent gathering.
- Host a "Singspiration" a sing-along of old and favorite hymns where audience members name a hymn and the audience sings along. Note, you'll need an accomplished church pianist or organist to accompany the music.

- Host an interfaith gospel night at a local church, inviting singers from all congregations. Have someone there to speak about the gospel tradition.

FROM THE HILLS, HOLLOWES AND PLAINS: COUNTRY MUSIC

Local Exhibition Themes/Ideas

- Have a US map noting prominent locations of Appalachian music, bluegrass, western swing, etc.
- Highlight country music venues in your community, i.e. barn dances, roadside inns, famous backyard BBQ's...could include posters, memorabilia, etc.
- Display historic photos of musicians in your community.
- Show country influences on local/regional music, i.e. Irish fiddle tunes, played in Appalachia as mountain music, and elsewhere with other different cultural twists using local collections and resources.

Programs

- Hold a Grand Ole Opry Festival:
 - Re-enact the stage show with local musicians;
 - Run some of the videos of the early opry available through Amazon.com and elsewhere;
 - Have a Minnie Pearl and/or Grandpa Jones look-a-like contest.
- Hold a mountain music contest, fiddlers, banjo, guitar, and mandolin players.
- Have local banjo/fiddle/mandolin/guitar teachers come on one day and teach visitors to play a short, easy tune.
- Hold a yodeling contest.
- Have a Texas Swing dance – in a local barn?

CAN'T BE SATISFIED: THE BLUES

Local exhibition themes/ideas

- Use MP3 listening device keyed to a Blues timeline which has been reproduced for visitors to view overlaps among key blues artists (consult <http://blues.about.com/library/bltimeline.htm> for timeline).
- Describe how early blues instruments were often imperfect or cheap musical instruments or even found objects. Display sample instruments such as: spoons, harmonica, guitar, diddley bow, electric guitar and harmonica, second-hand piano.
- Download pages from PBS' website of The Blues Roadtrip and migration map. Even without a live internet link, visitors could use a screen in the exhibition space itself to see how geography relates to the evolution of the blues, e.g. jug band blues of St. Louis vs. electric blues in Chicago. See www.pbs.org/theblues/roadtrip/mapmain.html for full details, and don't forget to scroll through artist biographies as well.
- Create a simple guess and reveal interactive using blues slang, e.g. Hootchie Coochie Man, Dust My Broom, Wang Dang Doodle, Rent Party, or Smokestack Lightening. Consult the blues glossaries such as those found at: <http://blues.about.com/cs/bluesinschools/a/blbluesgloss.htm>
- Display early collections of Blues memorabilia (records, concert posters, album covers, sheet music of recordings); organize via geography or genre

- Allow visitors chances to create their own Blues moniker, using their own place names, nicknames, and pieces from blues greats such as “lightening,” “muddy,” “b.b.,” “mississippi,” “howl’n,” “sonny,” “blind,” and “t-bone.” Display Polaroid photos of visitors with their new blues nicknames.

Programming Ideas

- Read and respond to Langston Hughes’ poem “Weary Blues” in written or artistic form, discuss.
- Discuss the joy that comes from the blues. Have scholars and performers discuss the blues’ capacity to heal and how the blues can serve as a resounding source of pleasure and enthusiasm.
- Teach the simple traditional chord structures of blues/12-bar form; demonstrate its utility and differences using different traditional and non-traditional instruments.
- For museum audiences, ask local music teachers to present blues poetry lesson plans in which visitors discover the standard blues form and complete their own basic lyric set from a set of standard beginnings, such as “ I woke up this morning . . .” (see PBS Blues link for additional activity/lesson ideas).

OTHER SOUNDS, OTHER SONGS

Local exhibition themes/ideas

- Conduct oral histories of local musicians playing accordians, klezmer, rub boards, etc. Create an exhibit using photographs of the musicians and excerpts from the oral histories.
- Display of local collections of programs, photographs or album covers of Cajun, Zydeco, Tejano and Polka music. Be sure to include explanations from the owners that provide background on the items (where they got them, their memories associated with them, etc).

Programming Ideas

- Host an Accordion Jam: invite accordion players to a local jam night. Interview them on stage about their playing experiences (who taught them, what they enjoy playing, what’s influence their music, etc.)
- Invite a local radio station to record the accordion jam session for later broadcast.
- Work with local dance instructor(s) to conduct classes on how to dance to Cajun, Zydeco, Tejano and Polka music.
- Host a community music and dance night featuring local Cajun, Zydeco, Tejano, and Polka bands.
- Hold a Rub-board building contest: who can make and play the most creative rub boards, the most authentic, who can play the best, etc.

COME GATHER ROUND, PEOPLE: THE ROOTS REVIVAL

Local exhibition themes/ideas

- In advance, provide karaoke machine with Folk Revival standards; videotape/record the best and worst of community members' performances for use on continuous play in exhibition space.
- As with other themes, display albums, posters, recordings, concert t-shirts and memorabilia especially Peter, Paul, and Mary; Joan Baez.; Bob Dylan, SNCC Freedom Singers; the Kingston Trio; Burl Ives; Pete Seeger, etc.
- Display the common themes of roots revival music and survey parallel roots revivals around the world (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roots_revival)
- When Dylan went electric many fans and folk purists were incensed. Juxtapose one or more Dylan standards in acoustic and electric versions, early and late – have museum visitors record their own reactions, from aesthetic preferences to deeper feelings of betrayal and commercialism.
- Folk concert memories: create and photo-copy artificial tickets to fifties/sixties concerts. Have visitors record specific memories of the era on the reverse side of the tickets, then display the best on a free-speech wall for others to read.
- Revival music often incorporates politically aware lyrics, which can often be critical of a government, religion or other authority, or society in general. Juxtapose albums of artists from earlier protest periods with those of today.

Programming Ideas

- Hold an *American Idol*-style competition with contestants singing only Roots Revival music.
- Hold a community music/poetry contest asking participants to write a verse of song based on contemporary events or local controversies.
- Show and discuss *Don't Look Back*. Have scholars/discussion leaders contrast artist portraits in various forms: poetry, novel, song. Highlight the differences in how celebrities of today might react to similar stimuli.
- Host live performances of folk music from around the world, scholars can survey the differences, similarities and shared origins.
- Hold a Hootenanny, a gathering of folk musicians wherein each person gets an allotted amount of time in which to share a song or song(s) they wrote.

STAND UP AND SING OUT

Local Exhibit Themes/Ideas

- Tell the story of major political issues in the local community:
 - Labor;
 - Civil rights;
 - Women's rights;
 - War.

How do these issues tie to protest songs of national significance? Were people in the community listening to these songs? Were they writing their own songs? Was there any backlash against protest music?
- Highlight the stories of local folk/protest musicians

- Use concert posters, albums, oral histories from the local community to explore the kinds of music being listened to by different generations. Can you draw cross-generational comparisons, i.e. the grandparents listening to Woody Guthrie during the Depression, children listening to the Pete Seeger and the Weavers during Vietnam.

Programs

- Drawing on the idea of finding cross-generational comparisons, hold a roundtable talk with an audience about the elements of a protest song, then let visitors write a verse or the chorus of a song reflecting their frustration with a particular issue. This would be an excellent activity with middle and high school students, but could also be done with younger children and adults.
- For young children: create concert posters featuring their own protest group. If the organization has the resources easily available, i.e. a digital camera and printer, visitors could make a mock up of an album cover using their own image. This could be something used for just a special event, i.e. the exhibit opening or a festival.
- Have a political sing-a-long. Who doesn't know *This Land is Your Land*? This is a great opportunity to teach some of the songs and talk about the significance of the lyrics. Great for all ages.
- A quiz: how many Woody Guthrie songs do you know?
- A matching game: match the song title to the relevant political or social issue.

PRESERVING ROOTS MUSIC

Local Exhibit Themes/Ideas

- This is a great opportunity to educate your community about artifact preservation. Prepare a small display of appropriate ways to store and display musical artifacts. If you have any musical objects in your collection that show signs of deterioration, use them as teaching tools to talk about agents of deterioration.

Programs

- Collect recordings of roots music in your local community. Do you have any elderly musicians in your community who play roots music? Record their songs and play them in the local exhibition.
- Collect oral histories from these musicians. Have them talk about where the songs come from, how they create their own songs, and where and how they learned to play their instruments. Where did they get their first instrument?
- It is equally important to collect the stories of those who listen to roots music. Why did they listen to it? What exactly did they listen to? What effect did it have on them? Did they listen to it in social situations? What were their friends listening to? Their parents?