



TOURISM CASES

September 2020

Blue Ridge Music Trails

The Blue Ridge Music Trails is a cultural initiative set in remote Western North Carolina, aimed at strengthening the musical heritage assets of the region.

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Origin: Adapted from 'Chapter 2 – Routes, Culture and Human Experience'. In: Ward-Perkins D. *et al.* *Tourism Routes and Trails: Theory and Practice*. CABI, pp. 16–30.

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Summary

The Blue Ridge Music Trails is an initiative led by the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Partnership and the North Carolina Arts Council, a division of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. It is a multi-partner initiative: stakeholders include the arts councils and tourism agencies as facilitators and the music venues, event organizers, musicians and dancers on the front lines. It aims to create a thriving environment for the rich music heritage and traditions of the region to support musicians and residents and share traditional music experiences with visitors to raise interest in the authentic music of the region. In October 2018, Jackie Ellis spoke to Angie Chandler, Executive Director of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, and Laura Boosinger, Executive Director of the Madison County Arts Council and the case recounts their insight on this initiative.

This case study reflects the contents of the interview as closely as possible, with some editing for clarity. The ‘we’ in the text therefore reproduces the words of Chandler and Boosinger, talking in the name of the project partners.

The value and interest of the case study

The Blue Ridge Music Trails show how a cultural route can help travellers get an understanding of a territory that is deeply rooted in tradition. It also shows how important it is to identify the right levers – in this case, the local music venues. By providing them with support, the musicians continue to have a place to play, thus increasing the chances of a visitor getting to hear the music and of keeping western North Carolina’s rich musical traditions alive and well.

Background

The music has historic value. We hear a lot about Nashville and country music, and New Orleans and jazz. But the roots of American music are also to be found here in western North Carolina, which sometimes gets lost. We wanted to raise the profile of this area’s historical importance for innovating different types of music, for blending African-American influences, Cherokee influences, with musicianship, singing styles and dance. It’s significant and not really found anywhere else. Five-string banjo, flat-picked guitar and piedmont blues; a lot of what American country music is based on is from here. The first folk festival in the country was held in Asheville, and some of the stars have gone out into the wider world.

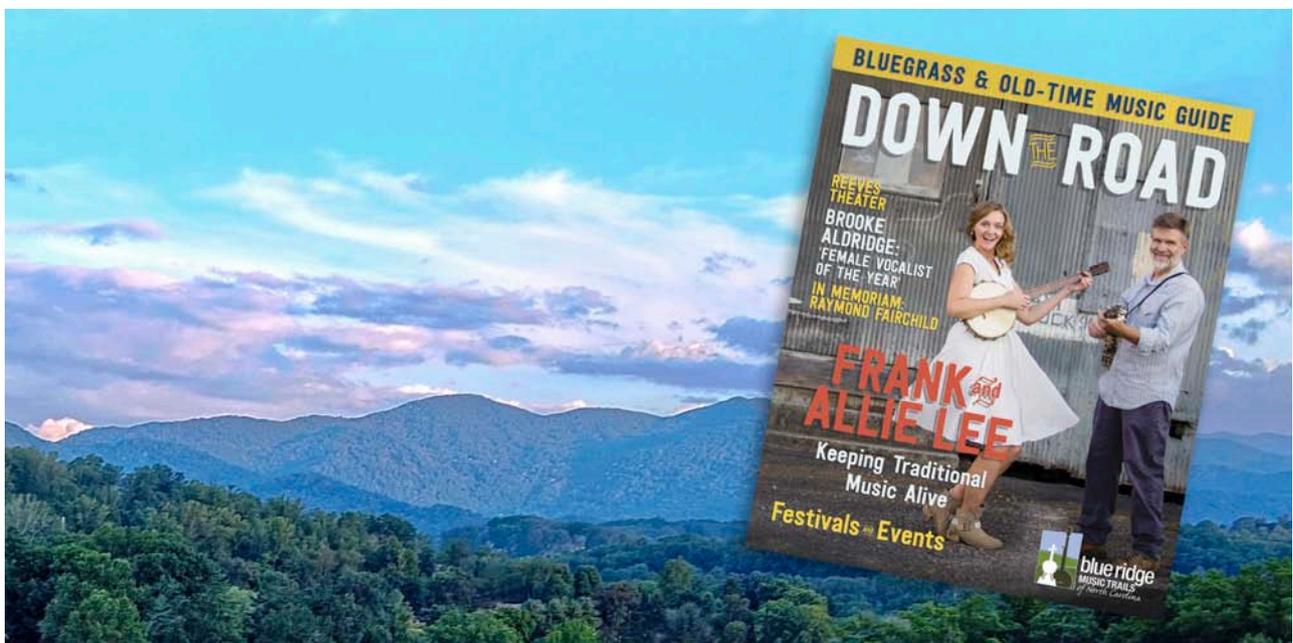
Our traditional music needed a champion. Asheville is the largest metropolitan area among mainly rural communities. It’s known as a foodie town and was at the heart of the resurgence of craft brewing in the USA.

We also have the Biltmore Estate, built by the Vanderbilt family and a huge attraction in the area. Most small towns have tourism as part of their economic development – and traditional music is as much a part of tourism as beautiful natural surroundings, small shops, craft breweries. Although this huge area covers about 28,000 km₂ and 29 counties, almost a third of the state, you are never more than a few minutes' drive from traditional music.

Origins of the Blue Ridge Music Trails

The idea took form in 2003. It was originally a two-state cultural tourism initiative between North Carolina and Virginia for the Blue Ridge Mountains, a segment of the Appalachians. State line politics eventually saw the North Carolina section take on its own identity, led by the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Partnership, a non-profit organization, and the North Carolina Arts Council. The Music Trails' many partners include tourism agencies, music venues, event organizers, musicians and dancers.

Other kinds of tourism trails are point A to point B, get in your car and drive. The music trails aren't like that. Because the region is so big, we had to categorize it into smaller footprint areas. Anyone can find venues, jam sessions, dances around the area without needing to go to all 29 counties. It's also a way for visitors to connect with real life in southern Appalachia – to live and be like a local in our community.



'Down The Road' Music Guide for the Blue Ridge Music Trails (courtesy of the Blue Ridge Music Trails).

Development of the Trails

The music trails and website raised awareness and profile of the area's traditional music.

Development of venues

We have small match-funded grants to help venues along the music trails and in small towns to upgrade their stages, lighting, seating, sound systems – often becoming a community project – and help to put new venues on the map. These include a number of old rock schools that were built in the 1930s; several auditoria or gyms have become venues able to host well-known regional and national acts, attracting new audiences from all over.

If you want visitors to come here, this is what you have to do. The work programme helped smaller communities trying to raise their tourism numbers to understand what it means for the venue to be tourist-ready – that the rest rooms are accessible, parking is available, and signage is in place. We held about 20 listening sessions with communities to hear about their needs to make this work. This helped to form a grass-roots marketing initiative.

Training staff and managers

Every staff member is touched by or has a hand in the music trails. Blue Ridge National Heritage Area has five full-time staff members and we help to manage a visitor centre in Asheville. We are stretched, but luckily, it's so rewarding and an easy product to sell. People are excited to know the product exists and when we go to events and open up the map showing the extent of the music trails footprint, it is impressive. In the early days there was an advisory group. Now we have a steering committee which meets every other week with North Carolina Arts Council staff.

We developed customer service training to prepare front-line staff and managers. These are mostly small venues, e.g. retail shops and restaurants, not major attractions with a built-in hospitality or customer service training programme. The Biltmore Estate – one of the largest attractions in North Carolina – got involved and we received grants to deliver the training. Many venues are volunteer-run without paid staff, so if you grew up in the area you may not see the value of the jam session in the barbershop because it's always been there. The worry was that if a visitor asked what's going on, front-line staff might say 'nothing'. You have to help them appreciate the value of this cultural asset, the interest of other people, and not see it as something 'Papa always did'.

Signage

We try to make the Music Trails really visible across the whole 29 counties. Signage designates the venues that are part of the music trails and each venue signs an agreement to promote the music trails. Collectively we need to make it easy for people to come here. If they've never been to western North Carolina before and are passing through the area, they can recognize the logo, know that these venues support the music trails and that the venue has been through a process to be visitor-ready. Although the visitor profile is largely domestic, we are seeing more international visitors coming thanks to the popularity of bluegrass and string band music.

Advertising and PR

We're always looking for opportunities through media partners. We made about 20 videos for some of the venues with the local TV station – allowing people to see themselves at some which are really off the beaten path. Working with WNCW, a regional radio station with a very large footprint, we make 3-minute podcasts which are available on the Blue Ridge Music Trails website and for radio stations to use worldwide. By end of the year there will be 60 podcasts highlighting venues, artists and music styles and they play every week on the radio during the drivetime slot traditional music programme.

We developed a magazine called 'Down the Road Bluegrass and Old-Time Music Guide' which lists venues and where to find the music, stories about bands, historic artists and different styles of music. We initiate and launch these at our partner meetings, and partners take them to use as educational tools for staff and tourism officers in and beyond the region.

With advertising and PR we try to do a little bit of everything. The website has lots of information sections and we bought all the domain names for online use. We sponsor the TV programme 'David Holt State of Music', which is syndicated on 400 national public stations around the country. Utilizing the power of well-known performers has been a great way to get people to our website. We also have a book and maps – we use every single channel available.

Funding and Business Model

Funding comes with an expectation of goals and performance measures. We started with an economic impact survey conducted by Eastern Carolina University and the NC Arts Council to help establish a baseline. Every time we launch a new product, we carry out a partner survey. Feedback from our grantees is that audiences are increasing so alignment with the music trails means the venues see value. New venues want to be involved and we see community leaders saying how important music is to their town – to bring people in and also for quality of life for local people.

Venues don't yet pay to be involved. In the future we will look at ways to bring in more private sector support and for that we need to work on a new economic impact study. Currently, we are lucky to be primarily government-funded, but like any non-profit organization we know there's a risk we could lose it at any time. For long-term sustainability we have to look at funding from a variety of different places.

Every venue has to meet certain criteria. This ensures they are delivering what we want for the music trails and that they programme primarily traditional music, bluegrass, old-time, gospel, Cherokee, shaped-note singing or traditional dance. Venues go on our website and we try to promote their events throughout the year. A lot of product covers small venues, but we can't forget the big events which bring in 80,000 people over a weekend (over 50% from out of region).

Partners come together twice a year every year. At these events we launch new activity and product programmes and facilitate introductions and connections. The events promote sharing and networking among different organizations, which fosters a lot of cross learning. Communities go and visit other communities – across this region a lot of our tourism product is the same asset. We all have these same historic jewels and it helps to see variation in different promotions used.

There will always be funding issues, you have to prioritize. This region is not hugely urbanized and lacks corporate support. Moving forward, that's always going to be the challenge for rural areas. None of us has large marketing budgets; it's important to make sure that when venues and communities promote their own things, they also promote the trails. You have to train everyone – community and visitors – that the Blue Ridge Music Trails banner or sign shows this is a welcoming place.

Music Impact at the State Level

At the state level there is a lot of interest in the music's impact. State capital Raleigh hosts the international World of Bluegrass music festival, where 190,000 people came 2017. Outdoor street festivals attract people from all over the world. The NC Arts Council and Department of Natural and Cultural Resources takes music so seriously that 2019 is designated as the Year of Music campaign, called 'Come Hear NC'.

As a tourism differentiator, traditional music was an obvious choice. Part of the mission is to help preserve, interpret and build economy around these cultural assets and to ensure they are sustained. We partnered with the NC Arts Council in a traditional arts programme running in schools and help to supplement the Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM) programme. There are new programmes and funding for start-up after school JAM programmes, building synergy to ensure traditions stay strong. The area's online directory of traditional artists lists about 400 musicians, so anyone interested in contracting them, or craft artisans, or storytellers, can find them and know they are authentic. The online directory will add another 100 artists, mainly millennial and younger musicians, to the number of traditional musicians here.

Conclusions

Preserving and sustaining the musical heritage and generating economic benefit is a symbiotic relationship. You can't have one without the other and when we conducted a partner survey, they said the same. Authenticity and community are what makes it promotable and economically viable, and that in turn brings attention to the heritage. It brings added value by creating the next generation of tourism product as well. The important thing is to keep the connection with authenticity and not lose touch with tradition. These are living traditions so while we are here to preserve historic value, we recognize they are ever changing and evolving. This is what keeps them fresh and we help that innovation.

References

Blue Ridge National Heritage Association. Available at: <https://www.blueridgemusicnc.com/> (accessed 13 May 2019).
Interview with Angie Chandler, Executive Director of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, and Laura Boosinger, Executive Director of the Madison County Arts Council in October 2018.