

Folk River: The Vital Current of Folk Music in Democracy

A Thesis Project Presented by

Rhonda J. Miller



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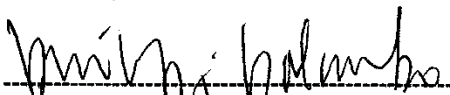
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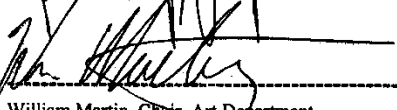
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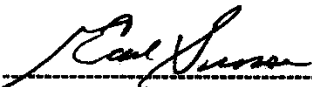
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Nancy Bockbrader, Program Director, Media Studies

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Earl Simson, Dean, Faculty of Arts and Sciences

4/30/13

Date

**FOLK RIVER: THE VITAL CURRENT
OF FOLK MUSIC IN DEMOCRACY**

BY RHONDA J. MILLER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Master of Art
Concentration in Media Studies

In

The Department of Art
Faculty of Arts and Sciences
Rhode Island College

2013

Thesis statement:

As the boundaries between journalism, social media and entertainment become increasingly blurred, folk music provides a stream of diverse voices essential for a healthy democracy.



Freedom of Information
TV
Sunshine Laws
Beat Reporting
Magazines
Radio

Folk Music
Democracy
Newspapers
News

Folk River: The Vital Current of Folk Music in Democracy

By Rhonda J. Miller

Abstract:

America's technology-infused society is cluttered with torrents of information and often scarcity of facts. Many people never bother to check where information is coming from, whether the sources have been documented and if the presentation is fair, balanced and worthy of our democratic nation. Hundreds of experienced journalists have left or been forced out of newsrooms due to financial pressures in the industry and monumental changes in technology. These experienced journalists have been dedicated to serving as the eyes and ears of citizens who do not have time to attend hours of meetings, question those in authority, analyze details from multiple sources and request documents through the freedom of information process. Journalism is the 'fourth estate,' charged with maintaining a watchdog presence over the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. As newspapers, radio and television lean toward entertainment and sports programming, a vital stream of diverse voices comes through folk music. Long a channel for commentary on war, peace, work and social issues, folk music is a valuable, and increasingly critical, element for preserving a healthy democracy.

FOLK RIVER

RHONDA J. MILLER WRITER & PRODUCER



1 2 3



LABOR OF LOVE HAS ROOTS IN NEWPORT FOLK AND JAZZ FESTIVALS

A labor of love can be sparked by a smile from a legendary blues musician. In Rhode Island, a 20-year-long community music gathering has roots in the Newport jazz and folk festivals. There's...

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CRAZY HEART AUTHOR NOT THE WEARY KIND WITH NOVEL IN SPOTLIGHT

With the movie "Crazy Heart" winning Academy Awards for best actor and best original song, Rhode Island author Thomas Cobb says the seeds of his book were planted in his own life as a...

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THE MAN WHO INTRODUCED MUSIC FESTIVALS TO THE WORLD

George Wein changed the way Americans experience their music. The pioneering jazz musician and music producer launched the first Newport Jazz Festival in 1954. It was the first big outdoor music event...

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CAJUN MUSIC HEATS UP NEW ENGLAND WINTERS

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ONE MAN DANCING CREATES CAJUN AND ZYDECO FESTIVALS

The footprints of Frankin Zavacki are on the ground in California and New England, where he started out as one man dancing, but got thousands of people to dance with him. San Francisco got...

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SCHOOL SHOOTINGS TO KAZOOS, COMMON FENCE YENUE ENCIRCLES TRAGEDY AND JOY

While America continues to grieve over the massacre of 20 children and adults at Sandy Hook Elementary, the community at Common Fence Music finds emotional support in times of tragedy, rejuvenation in times...

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NEWPORT FOLK FESTIVAL STILL GOING STRONG AS A VENUE FOR DIVERSE VOICES



MISSISSIPPI STUDENT SINGS OF OIL SPILL DEVASTATION

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Spontaneous music circles are a way of life in the tiny mountain town of Floyd, Virginia.
(Photo by Rhonda J. Miller)

Folk River: The Vital Current of Folk Music in America

By Rhonda J. Miller

MA in Media Studies, Department of Art, Rhode Island College

ARTM 523 Digital Portfolio 1 - Professor Heemong Kim

Master's Degree Thesis – Preliminary Proposal

November 13, 2012



Newport Folk Festival 2010 (Photo by Rhonda J. Miller)

Purpose: To create a digital territory offering insight into the intersection of folk music, politics and culture and to give expression to a wide variety of voices amidst the decline of print journalism.

Concept and Inspiration

Journalism is in a continuous state of change resulting from the onslaught of digital media. As a journalist with extensive experience in public radio, newspapers and magazines, I am disturbed by the emphasis on speed, as well as what I consider superficial information viewed by much of the public as news, even though it lacks the oversight and perspective of experienced editors.

So dramatic are these changes, there is even a website called *Newspaper Death Watch: Chronicling the Decline of Newspapers and the Rebirth of Journalism*. The site's R.I.P. list includes metropolitan daily newspapers in Baltimore, Tucson, Cincinnati, Oakland and Honolulu. The site also has a list of dailies that have cut print editions or adopted hybrid print/online versions or online only models, including newspapers in Detroit, Seattle and New Orleans, where I believe the voices of diverse citizen groups desperately need to be heard.

The recent announcement that the 79-year-old *Newsweek* magazine will publish its last print edition in December and launch an all-digital format in 2013 is one more red flag for me. Who will take the time to submit Freedom of Information requests and monitor politicians and state and federal agencies in charge of millions of dollars in taxpayer money?

Here is where I see the value of folk music – at the intersection of politics, culture and change. Songs about war and peace, work and love are, obviously, not going to fill the gap where experienced journalists have been laid off. But my long interest in folk music and my experience creating and hosting my *Folk River* radio show on WXIN Rhode Island College Radio has deepened my faith in folk music as an often unedited, and valuable, voice of the people. A chilling example is *Strange Fruit*, the tale of the lynching of a black man in the South that forced some in America to come face-to-face with racial injustice.

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

That social awareness was sparked by Billie Holiday's haunting version of the song in 1939, touching Americans in an emotional way beyond what news reporting alone could accomplish. In my own life, songwriters of the 1960s and 1970s have had an impact on shaping my choices, sometimes in remembered snippets of songs, such as *There But for Fortune* by Phil Ochs.

*Show me the alley, show me the train
Show me the hobo, who sleeps out in the rain
And I'll show you a young man, with so many reasons why
There but for fortune, go you or I.*

Ochs described himself as a singing journalist who wrote topical songs based on stories he read in *Newsweek*. One of his best-known songs, *I Ain't Marching Anymore*, mourns the loss of life in wars of many eras.

*It's always the old to lead us to the war
It's always the young to fall
Now look at all we've won with the saber and the gun
Tell me is it worth it all.*

*For I stole California from the Mexican land
Fought in the bloody Civil War
Yes, I even killed my brothers
And so many others
But I ain't marchin' anymore.*

I was inspired to create my Folk River radio show when my teenage daughter told me she didn't know the music of Phil Ochs. "She should know this music," I thought. "It tells important stories." I got in touch with Phil Ochs' sister, Sonny Ochs, who has a folk music radio show in New York, and she gave me details for launching my show. Folk music did not come and go with the 1960s. Seasoned and young songwriters continuously contribute vital stories. While 17-year-old Aubrey Hays, a student at Gulfport High School in Mississippi, may not be considered a typical folk musician, her crying out for the pain of the sea from the 2010 BP oil spill is a moving example of the voice of the people.

*Broken lives and broken bones
This broken place we once called home is drifting away.
All our lives polluted by the thing that's gold in human eyes
Whispers in the waves.*

*It's the cry of the gull
It's the voice of the whale
It's the flash of the fish
It's the dance of the dolphin
It's the prayers of the people
It's the hope for tomorrow
It's the dreams of the children
It's the song of the sea.*

One program I look to as model for my thesis project, though it is broader in musical scope, is the public radio show *American Routes*, hosted by anthropologist and folklorist Nick Spitzer, a professor at Tulane University. The songs and stories on *American Routes* describe the community origins - the "roots" - of the music, as well as the many directions - or "routes" - the music takes over time. Spitzer described on the show's website a special program called *Swingin' the Election: Music & Politics 2012*.

...American Routes checks out songs and sound bites about politics and electioneering from both sides of the aisle. Hear the late West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd on his fiddle playing as an instrument of political persuasion, and the same approach of Cajun office seeker Roland Chermie from Louisiana bayou country -- he goes door-to-door fiddling for votes.

I have experienced lively, contemporary folk music communities, such as the vibrant Cajun culture of the Louisiana bayous, the informal music circles of Appalachian communities in Southwest Virginia, and the enthusiastic folk scene in the Boston/Providence/Newport region. So I feel compelled to produce a public reminder about the importance of these voices of the "regular folks" amid the Tweets, Facebook friends, obsessive texting and the troubling decline of in-depth reporting by experienced, paid journalists.

Project Scope

My project, initially, will focus on a few streams of folk music in America, including Appalachian, Cajun, blues and political/war/labor/civil rights. These will be expanded as the website continues in permanent form.

Website

I will initiate my Folk River project with several of my own stories which have aired on public radio or been posted on Public Radio Exchange. The website is live and a work-in-progress at www.writingintosound.com, a site I originally created as an online portfolio for Digital Media Production. I intend to keep it as a permanent website and add stories I produce, as well as links to related stories, folk radio shows and folk festivals.

Installation

The installation phase of the project - Folk River Walk - will section off a corner of Bannister Gallery with 6-to-8 hanging panels, each about 3-feet-wide, of a light material to suggest nature and the slow current of a river. Along with the gallery director, media studies professors and members of the class, I am exploring the possibility of getting one or more "sound domes" to be listening stations, where radio stories of about 3-to-4 minutes will be looped. This provides uninterrupted time to listen and imagine, abilities in danger of disappearing in our overwhelmingly visual society. At the end of the Folk River Walk, the website will be projected on the wall. That will also be a listening station, with headphones or a sound dome. It is my intention and hope, that after experiencing the Folk River Walk, participants will continue to be more alert to stories and music arising from the concerns of the people, and will visit the website to enjoy, learn and comment on the rich river of folk music flowing through the U.S. and connecting to people around the world.

Bannister Gallery Installation Plan, Revised March 30, 2013

The Folk River installation focuses on listening, which is often underrated or lost in the torrent of visual input pouring onto computers, smartphones and TVs.

The main content of the Folk River installation consists of a website launched mostly with audio stories I have reported, written and produced and which have aired on public radio stations across the U.S. or been posted on Public Radio Exchange.

The stories offer interludes to contemplate culture, society, politics, the environment and the value of folk music as one element in preserving democracy. Some content from other sources and links relevant to the project are also on the website folkriver.net.

In addition to audio, the multimedia installation includes images reflecting folk music and nature, offering an opportunity for reflection. The suggestion of nature is from my interpretation of folk music as being mainly acoustic and moving directly from person-to-person in a natural path of communication. Folk music is often played on front porches, at informal community gatherings and at festivals, so it has a sense of nature, as compared to music produced in a studio for money and/or fame.

Installation Details

Entering Bannister Gallery from the front lobby of Roberts Hall, the Folk River installation begins with:

Listening Station #1 : On the left, about 7 feet into Bannister Gallery, is a 2-foot-square podium, 3-feet-high, angled about 45 degrees toward the projected images and topped with laptop #1 with headphones opened to <https://soundcloud.com/writingintosound>

Gallery visitors choose from a selection of my SoundCloud profile audio stories of approximately 4 minutes each. The stories are from the categories on folkriver.net.

While they listen to the stories, visitors can contemplate ambient images, some connected to the audio stories, some not from the stories, projected onto the wall across from listening stations #1 and #2. The images on the wall on right side of the entrance walkway are of venues, musicians performing and scenes of nature. The images are projected in a random fashion and may evoke intuitive, spontaneous connections to the story - or no connection at all. Most of the images were taken by me, and some taken by my daughter, Angela Rose Miller, at the 50th Newport Folk Festival in 2009 and in Berkeley, California in March 2013. Many of images have been used with the audio stories or for my website www.writingintosound.com

Just past listening station #1, toward the entrance to the studio gallery, is fabric panel #1, a 16-inch-wide by 6-foot-high hanging panel, raised 3-feet from the floor, intended to suggest the colors and textures of nature. The panel hangs on a horizontal bamboo pole suspended by fishing line.

Listening Station #2 is a mirror set-up of listening station #1, located on the other side of the entrance to the Folk River studio gallery, the podium angled about 45 degrees toward the projected images. Laptop #2 also has SoundCloud options with headphones.

Between the two listening stations is the entrance to the studio-like media room. An "enter" sign is on the wall to the right to guide visitors into the studio.

Museum text pages with information about the exhibit are posted on the wall to the right, after the entrance sign. The three pages offer: page #1- the purpose of the Folk River project with a brief description of what I consider to be folk music and its relationship to journalism; page #2- the description of the website and categories; and page #3- an invitation and instructions for viewing the website and listening to stories.

Fabric panel #2, which is 6-feet-high and 40-inches high, hangs at the back of the entranceway, over a door, facing the entrance to define the space.

Hanging mount #1 with projector #1, which projects images onto the blank wall on the right as you walk in from the lobby, hangs just over the entrance to the studio. The hanging mount is 7 feet high and 8 inches from the left wall when facing the entrance.

Laptop #3 is on a 2-foot-square and 3-foot-high podium near the entrance to the studio and is connected to projector #1 used for the looped images.

Hanging mount #2 for projector #2 is 7-feet-high and 9 inches into the entrance walkway from the floor line that marks the entrance to the studio area. Entering the studio, projector #2 is behind projector #1.

Turning toward the left and looking into the studio, the folkriver.net website is projected on the flat wall, creating a media room for viewing and listening.

Facing the projected website, on the right is a 2-foot-square and 3-foot-high podium, with laptop #4. Just to the right of the podium is a smaller 3-foot-high podium with the power speaker. Seven chairs and stools will be placed informally in the studio, offering visitors options to sit and listen or casually wander in and out.

Laptop #4 has a 3-way splitter with two headsets and the power speaker plugged in. The volume on the power speaker will not be off, but will be turned to lowest volume, which is no sound. A small sign on the speaker will let people know they can turn up the volume if they prefer to listen without headphones. This is mostly for quieter viewing times after the opening reception.

Outside the studio area, in the walking area leading to other exhibits, hanging fabric panel #3, which is 6 feet high, 21 inches wide and 3 feet off the ground, hangs on a bamboo pole suspended by fishing line. The panel hangs in front of a moveable divider. The panel defines the boundary of the Folk River exhibit.

Audio-Visual Equipment

4 Laptops with a USB mouse for each laptop

4 AC cords for the laptops

2 Epson 826W projectors

2 VGA cords at least 15 feet long to connect projector to laptops

2 AC cords for the projectors at least 25 feet long

1 Power speaker

1 Portable power connector

Available from Bannister Gallery Director James Montford

2 Hanging mounts for projectors

4 Headsets

1 Three-way splitter

Available from RIC Facilities Dept.

7 Rose-colored stack chairs to be delivered from RIC Facilities Dept. to gallery April 19.

AV and facilities equipment to be returned May 9.

Revisions to Website, Thesis Statement & Installation Plan, April 12, 2013

Website: Early into website development, I revised my previous plan to use my existing domain name www.writingintosound.com which has been used for my online portfolio. I secured the more precise domain name folkriver.net.

Thesis statement: My thesis statement evolved as I did the research and writing, clarifying the aspects of social media and entertainment as major factors in the decline of watchdog journalism. I also changed the territory of my statement from America to democracy, a broader and more precise area of concern and the reason for this project.

Installation: Installation plans were revised as the project evolved. Sound domes as I originally conceived, igloo-like structures made of relatively lightweight material like styrofoam, could not be located, despite online research and contacts with several media producers. I went on-site to listen to small, high overhead sound domes used at the Boston Museum of Science, but they allowed sound to travel easily from one listening station to the adjoining one. The environment I am creating with Folk River is a radio studio-like experience of being immersed in sound. When the small, studio-like enclosed area in Bannister Gallery became available, I revised my floor plans to make optimal use of that space and create a more enclosed environment. Shifting to that space also allowed me to reduce the number of hanging panels needed to define the territory of Folk River. The final design uses three fabric panels to connect the elements in the space and suggest a sense of nature. The fabric design was done in collaboration with a friend, Judy Wallace, who volunteered her time and talent to create and sew the panels.

Timeline

Dec. 1-15: Proposal approval process; continue to learn WordPress for web design and upload existing stories and images to Folk River on www.writingintosound.com

Dec. 16-30: Continue to learn WordPress and upload existing stories and images; refine contents for categories/pages; explore fabrics for hanging panels; research cost and availability, or the possibility of borrowing or getting funding for sound domes.

Jan. 1-15: Report, record and produce one or two new original 3-4 minute stories for the website, likely to be on long-time folk venues, such as Common Fence Music in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, or Freight & Salvage in Berkeley, California; include segments of live performances, and interviews with organizers and musicians on the value and vitality of folk music in America.

Jan. 16-31: Continue to choose and develop content for website; choose fabric and design elements for hanging panels.

Feb. 1-15: Finalize availability of sound domes; work on hanging panels.

Feb. 16-28: Edit and upload content and images to website; finalize laptops, headsets and other technology needed for gallery installation.

March 1-15: Finish panel construction and installation planning; continue to fill out sections of content.

March 16-31: Finalize all gallery details with gallery director and adviser; edit and upload stories and images; complete all hanging panels.

April 1-15: Polish up WordPress details on website; review and edit all stories, images and links.

April 15-30: Construct installation; exhibit.

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Rhode Island College MA in Media Studies

Rhonda J. Miller

September 20, 2012

Thesis Project

Writing Into Sound

American Folk Music as Journalism

Rhonda J. Miller Writer & Producer

Website Home Page

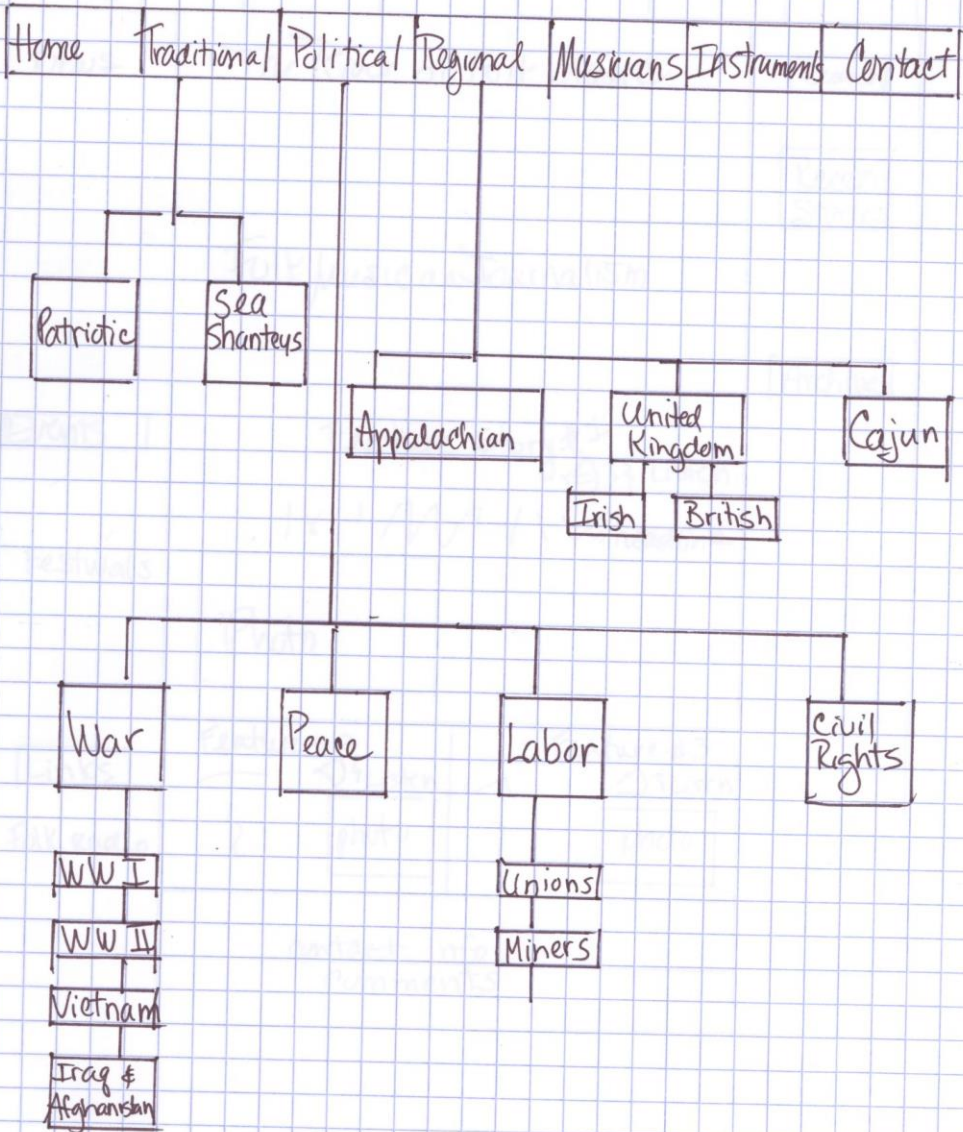
www.writingintosound.com

<h1>Writing Into Sound</h1> <p style="text-align: right;">Rhonda J. Miller Writer & Producer</p>									
Home	Tradition	Political	Regional	Instruments	Musicians	Contact			
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 5px;">News</div>	<h2 style="text-align: center;">American Folk Music as Journalism</h2> <p>What is folk music?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Traditional person → to → person Appalachians</p> <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center; border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> Example #1 </td> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center; border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> Example #2 </td> </tr> </table>					Example #1	Example #2	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 5px;">Search</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 5px;">Recent Series</div>	
Example #1	Example #2								
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 5px;">Events</div> <p>Festivals</p> <p>Concerts</p>	<h2 style="text-align: center;">Folk Music as Journalism</h2> <p>Documents the time, first draft of history</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The Impact of folk music on society</p> <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%; text-align: center; border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> labor </td> <td style="width: 33%; text-align: center; border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> War </td> <td style="width: 33%; text-align: center; border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> Peaces </td> </tr> </table>					labor	War	Peaces	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 5px;">Archives</div>
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<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 5px;">Comments</div>									

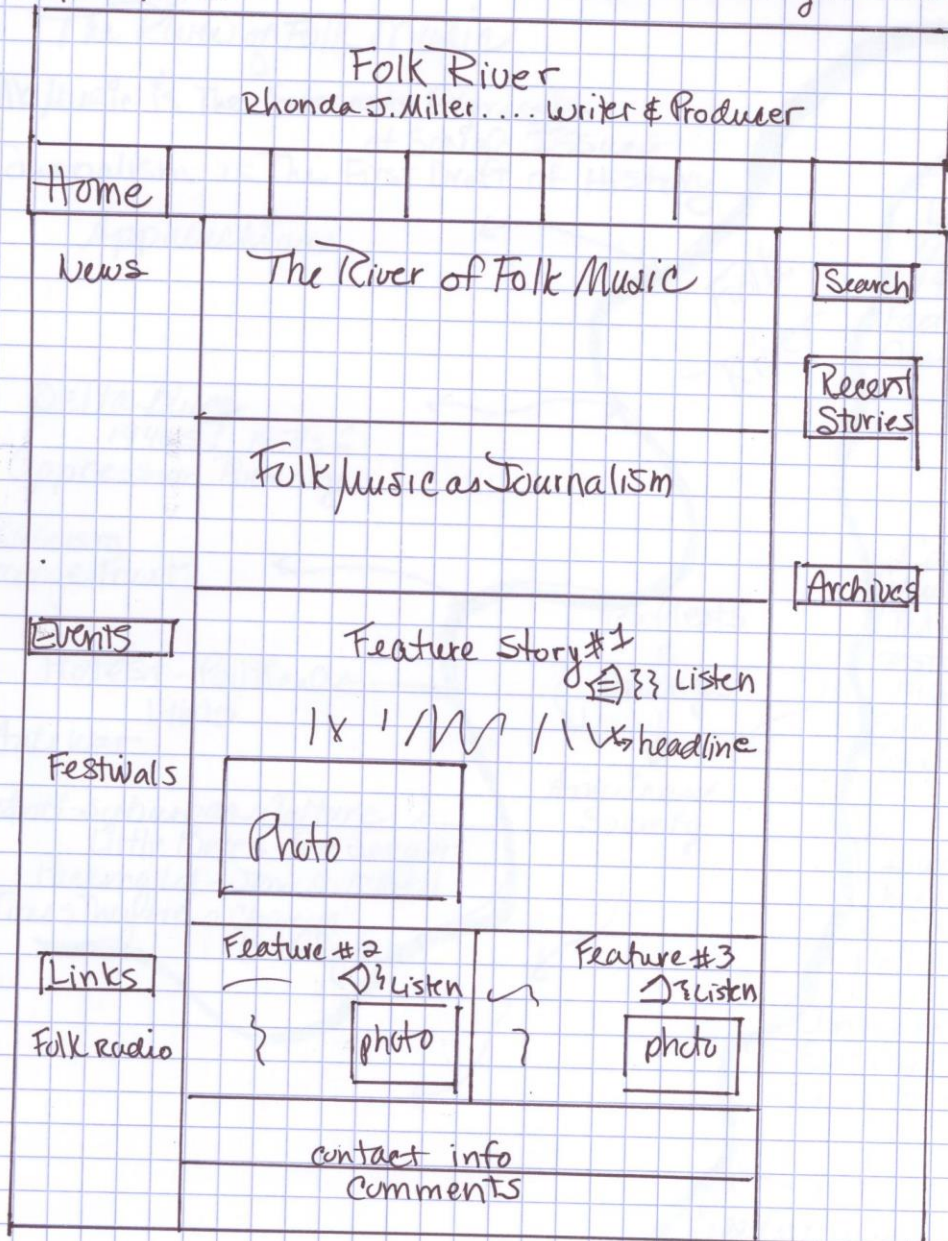
Web Architecture

September 20, 2012

Writing Into Sound	Phonda J. Miller Writer & Producer
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Sept 20, 2012
 Add impact of Digital Media on Folk Music
 Notes: Sept. 30, 2012
 online at www.writinginto sound.com



Saturday October 20, 2012
(Airplane en route to Providence)

The River of Folk Music

Folk Music is the Grassroots Expression
of Social Issues
Journalism is the First Draft of History

Appalachian

Folk
River

Labor-
Urban
1930's
Factories
Coal Mines

Delta Blues
1940's? 1950's?
Oppression Poverty

Racism
Strange Fruit

Protest - Political
1960s
Anti-war

Anti-Suburban Culture
Little Boxes - Pete Seeger
Parking Lot - Joni Mitchell
The Times They Are a Changin'
Bob Dylan

Reflects
&
Changes

American
Society

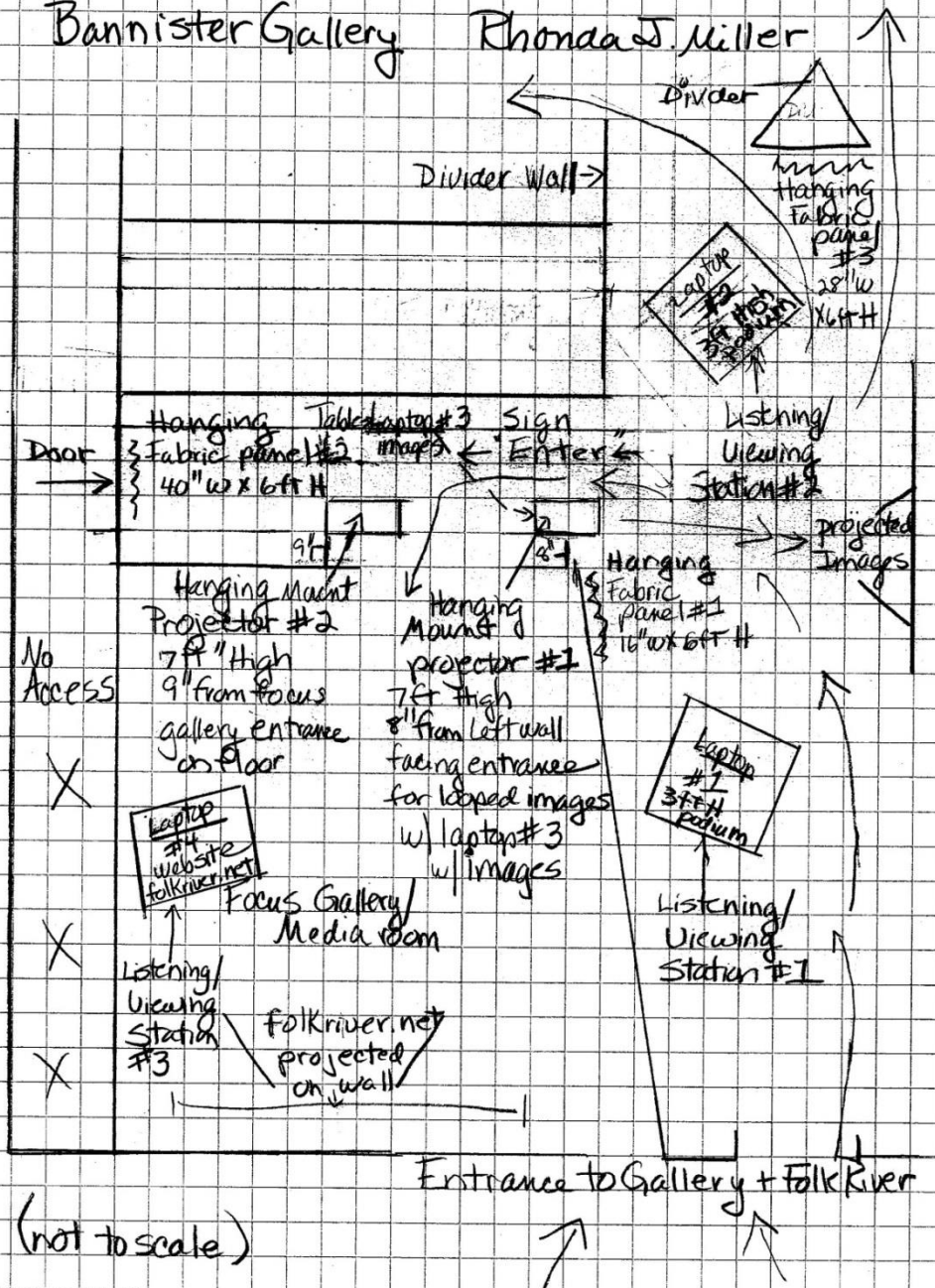
Cajun
Newport
Folk
Festival
1962?
Folk
Revival

Diversity
There But
for Fortune
Phil Ochs

Inter racial
Society's Child
Janis Ian

Freedom & Justice
If I Had A Hammer
Peter, Paul & Mary

Sunday, March 3, 2013
 Installation floorplan Folk River
 Bannister Gallery Rhonda J. Miller



(not to scale)