Review: The Berkeley Folk Music Festival

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Project
The Berkeley Folk Music Festival & the Folk Revival on the US West Coast — An Introduction

Project Director
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A full list of credits is available on the project website.

Project URLs
Exhibit: https://sites.northwestern.edu/bfmf/
Project: http://bfmf.net

Project Reviewer
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Project Overview
Michael Kramer

The Berkeley Folk Music Festival took place on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley between 1958 and 1970. My project, The Berkeley Folk Music Festival & the Folk Revival on the US West Coast—An Introduction, is a digital public history exhibit that introduces the story of the festival, its archive of roughly 33,500 artifacts (now fully digitized), and its significance.

Northwestern University Libraries purchased the festival's archive from director Barry Olivier in 1973. It consists of photographs, posters, correspondence, business records, audio, film footage, and more. Through funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the materials are now fully digitized and available online through the NUL's digital repository.

Drawing on these materials, the exhibit itself is a custom-Divi builder WordPress website that features photographs and multimedia as well as a narrative of the festival’s history. The exhibit includes sections about director Barry Olivier, the festival’s early years in the 1950s and early 1960s, its little-studied but important role during the height of the folk revival, its transition years in the mid-1960s, and how the festival changed during the counterculture years of the late 1960s. The exhibition also examines the repository’s rich holdings concerning other festivals and the West Coast music scene more broadly.

The narrative within the exhibit explores the festival's significance both to the history of the folk revival and to postwar U.S. culture more broadly by illuminating the understudied folk revival history on the West Coast. There, the folk movement at once connected to the better-known story back East (Greenwich Village, Dylan
goes electric at Newport) and diverged from it (more fluid relationships between “stars” and participants, a more seamless transition into the countercultural milieu of the late 1960s, deeper connections to the Free Speech Movement and other social movements gathering energy).

In addition to the main narrative, the exhibit features a digital timeline, audio playlists, and readings and citations for further research. The exhibit is meant to be accessible to aficionados and newcomers alike. Users can casually browse through the website as they might walk through rooms in a gallery exhibition or can read the narrative text for more detail, contextualization, and interpretation. If users click on images, they will open up for closer inspection, and users can zoom in on documents from the repository. Audio recordings and television footage are embedded in the exhibition as well. Readers can find out more about future directions of the Berkeley Folk Music Festival Project or click to the full digital repository, maintained by Northwestern University Libraries, to conduct their own research and exploration.

**Project Review**

Allan Jepson

The Berkeley Folk Music Festival is a digital exhibit of festival artifacts created by Michael Kramer. The exhibit is fascinating and provides readers with a detailed overview of the festival, which took place on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, in unique venues such as the Hearst Greek Amphitheater. This important exhibit documents the stewardship of the festival through the inclusive vision of its director, Barry Oliver, along with an interactive timeline demonstrating the early promotion of folk music in California, then a later weekend of folk music from June 27-30, 1958, to the 15th and final annual Berkeley Folk Music Festival from October 8-11, 1970.

The digital archive that serves as the basis for the exhibit is vast and contains approximately 33,500 artifacts, including music festival posters, line-ups, programs, audio interviews and clippings from live performances at the festival, and some audition clips. The main festival audio footage is taken from the 11th Berkeley Folk Music festival in 1968 and the 1958 “Cisco Houston – Concert at Cal.” Both the 1958 and 1968 recordings are of good quality. The 1968 audio file was recorded from live radio broadcasts on KPFA-FM. The collection is an excellent representation of the festival’s evolution from 1958 to its final year of production in 1970. Navigating the repository is straightforward and a “how to” guide is provided. The search options, however, are quite basic. Being able to cross-reference artists with a year or particular performances would be a welcome addition.

Kramer’s exhibit provides important points of entry into the contents of the repository that enhances the navigability of material within the collection. Its chronological organization offers visitors a firm grounding in the history of the festival and the broader context of folk revival on the West Coast of the U.S. The content within each chronological section offers a strong balance of accessible information for those new to the topic.
and insights that will appeal to more specialized audiences. The timeline in the exhibit encapsulates key dates in the history of the festival, accompanied by arresting visual images. The playlist section curates audio content from the archive and also offers access to Spotify playlists that complement visitors’ experience of the exhibit.

One disadvantage for visitors is that exhibit content does not include metadata for materials in the repository. As a result, those wishing to find those materials need to execute a separate search in the repository. In addition to the exciting future directions indicated in the exhibit itself, Kramer might consider how to facilitate transitions from exhibit content to searches within the repository. One suggestion might be to include links to repository items along with the image and audio content for visitors whose research would benefit from ease of movement between exhibit and repository.

The Beverley Folk Music Festival exhibit and archive will be of use to scholars around the world, particularly historians, cultural sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists. The festival is significant as it tracks not only folk music evolution and history on the West Coast of the U.S. but also demonstrates the peaceful evolution of inclusive society represented through a festival. The festival was intergenerational and inclusive with respect to music — championing both traditional and electrified folk music — and appealed to folk fans of all persuasions. Kramer’s exhibit has similar diverse appeal beyond academia as well.