

## The Trash Trout Motion Picture Show

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*The Trash Trout Motion Picture Show is a collaborative creative placemaking project that employs the power of the arts to help protect freshwater ecosystems in the Appalachian Mountains. Filmmaker Tom Hansell, musician Trevor McKenzie, and musician/dancer Julie Shepherd-Powell share a multimedia performance they developed in collaboration with local civic organizations.*

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### 1. Overview

The Trash Trout Motion Picture Show is an expanded cinema event that combines experimental film, live music, and a dance performance.

The process used to create this project is just as important as the finished performance that we shared at the Appalachian Carpathians International Mountains Conference. We hope that some of the ideas behind this project (including the participatory community-based process) can be applied in other mountain regions, furthering this exchange of global mountain cultures.

To provide a geographic context, it helps to remember that water flows downhill. This may seem obvious, but it is easy to forget that mountain regions like the Appalachian Mountains and the Carpathian Mountains are the headwaters of major river systems that supply fresh water to large urban populations downstream. Projects like the Trash Trout Motion Picture Show can reveal connections between the health of mountain headwaters ecosystems and the clean water required to support life downstream.

The Trash Trout Motion Picture Show focused on the headwaters of the New River, which flow from the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina through

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mountains of Virginia and West Virginia before feeding the Ohio, and the Mississippi rivers and eventually entering the Gulf of Mexico. The water that flows from our mountain communities literally touches millions of people. Likewise, the water flowing from these mountains near Brasov flows into the Danube and eventually into the Black Sea.

This project uses the power of culture (in this case music, dance, and film) to reveal human connections to fresh water. Our goal is to use art to illuminate the many ways fresh water sustains us, while collaborating with organizations working to protect freshwater resources in mountain communities. I hope this project may help spark new ideas in other global mountain regions.

## **2. Musical statement by Trevor McKenzie**

The music which accompanies the Trash Trout Motion Picture Show is drawn from the repertoires of historic musicians who lived and worked in communities along the New River and its tributaries. The live soundtrack traces the River's course northward through western North Carolina, southwestern Virginia, and on to West Virginia, where the New becomes the Kanawha and empties into the Ohio River. Along this route are mountains, mill towns, and farming communities that have been the inspiration for the traditional music which is still a vibrant part of the region's soundscape.

The New rises in western North Carolina near the home of Watauga County fiddler, Gaither Carlton (1901-1972). Carlton's rendering of the Primitive Baptist hymn "I'm Sorry for You," performed as part of the show's soundtrack, is sourced from a recording in the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection at Appalachian State University. It is a mournful piece which is cued by the initial entrance of flecks of trash into the film's frame, gradually building as they begin to cover the snaking blue lines which represent the New. Although the words are not sung in this performance, each stanza is a lament for a lost loved one who the singer hopes to see again, "Mother adieu, I am sorry for you, my heart is filled with trouble, now what shall I do?"

The river's jump over the North Carolina line into Virginia is followed by the route of several different rail lines which lay claim to the title of the "New River Train." This tune has been associated with several spurs of the Norfolk and Western Railway, including the Virginia Creeper Line which partially follows the river through Ashe County, North Carolina. The version played in the soundtrack is inspired by the banjo picking of Wade Ward (1892-1971) who grew up alongside the New near Independence, Virginia. Ward's version features a bluesy and playful

melody which parallels some of the bubble-like shapes that dart over the screen towards the latter third of the show. This version is preceded by a free-style jig in a water-filled washtub by Julie Shepherd-Powell, which adds contrast to the moodier tunes that accompany much of the film.

Flowing east from Independence, the New passes through the furniture mill town of Galax, Virginia, known as "The World Capitol of Mountain Music" and home to the Annual Galax Fiddlers Convention. The driving, modal tune "Chilly Winds" is a staple in the old-time string band contests held in the town's park each August. It provides a suitably dissonant upbeat, yet troubled sounding melody to accompany the speed with which the trash scrolls through the projector at the film's midpoint. A more vibrant fiddle piece, "Waterbound," also known as "Stay All Night" or "Way Down in North Carolina," accompanies Shepherd-Powell's flatfooting, keeping time with the rapid racing lines representing the New at the film's beginning. This version is drawn from the playing of the Galax area band anchored by the Ward Family, The Ballard's Branch Bogtrotters. The song includes lines which likely reference the New: "River's up and I can't get across...waterbound and I can't get home, way down in North Carolina."

The river leaves southwestern Virginia to enter West Virginia near the home of the Reed family of Giles County, Virginia. The fiddle tune "East River Mountain Blues" comes from the playing of Henry Reed (1884-1968) and takes its name from East River Mountain, a portion of which sits just above the New at Narrows, Virginia. A perfect breakdown for flatfooting, the tune accompanies the final stretch of the film which begins to incorporate more natural elements from along the new, including redbud leaves attached to film leader soaked in river water.

The blending of traditional music with the highly experimental nature of this film highlights the constant regeneration of the New and the unbreakable link between the River and the musical memory within the region it flows through. These instrumental passages, inspired by the music of artists connected to the New, display the cultural influence the River continues to have on those who live alongside it and interact with it. Curating and performing the Trash Trout Motion Picture Show soundtrack continues as a process of learning and caring about the New River, its environment, and its people.

### **3. Dance statement by Julie Shepherd Powell**

Appalachian percussive dancing, colloquially known as flatfooting, is an important part of the Appalachian music soundscape. Mountain music, such as the old-time string band music that originated with the marriage of the African banjo and Celtic

fiddle, does not traditionally include drums, but rather relies on feet to provide a strong percussive element to the music. Flatfooting encompasses an informal series of percussive steps with no strict rules or style requirements, allowing practitioners to create rhythms that match the music, often “tapping out the tune” with hard soled shoes on a wooden floor or dance board. The series of steps is not prescribed; rather, throughout the Appalachian Mountains, dancers use or create different steps, drawing on local traditions, as well as those from the historical roots of Appalachian dance, including Irish sean nós, West African, and Native American dance.

Dance is a vibrant part of the culture of mountain communities, as it is a multi-generational and welcoming practice that encourages participation from young and old, accomplished and amateur, and local and visiting dancers alike. Community dances like the weekly dance at the Alleghany Jubilee in western North Carolina, a community that the New River flows through, is a gathering place for people to come together and celebrate local culture. Anthropologist and dance scholar Cynthia Novack argues, “Culture is embodied. A primary means of understanding, knowing, making sense of the world comes through shared conceptions of our bodies and selves and through the movement experiences society offers us” (1990, 8). Using the embodied practice of local dance traditions as part of the soundscape of the film helps to provide a way for community members to understand, know, and make sense of *The Trash Trout Motion Picture Show*.

The artistic process for creating a soundscape to accompany the film was a multi-stage process that included identifying the emotional elements of the film and working to match the mood of the film with music and dance. At times during the film, the music and dance moves slowly, mournfully-- expressing both the beauty of the river and the sadness that surrounds environmental degradation of watersheds. At other times the music and dance is quick and light, showcasing the playfulness and joy that rivers provide in their communities. At one point during the film performance, bare feet splash in a washtub full of water, mimicking the sounds of children playing in creeks behind their homes. And at a few crucial moments, the dance is loud and angry as trash and writing flash across the screen, reading “WHY.” Finally, the materials of the dance—sand from the headwaters of the New River sprinkled on the wooden dance floor, and water in a washtub-- provide a grounding to the soundscape.

Appalachian dance scholar Susan Spalding writes that, “As a part of the fabric of other socially prescribed and meaningful ways of moving and embodying values, thought, and action, dance becomes a tool to navigate and negotiate social change, and perhaps to influence it” (2014, 7). Alongside music, flatfooting creates a sense of community in rural mountain communities. By using dance as part of the

soundscape for the Trash Trout Motion Picture Show, our goal is to use this embodied cultural practice as just such a tool, navigating and negotiating social change to help protect our waterways.

#### **4. Participatory filmmaking statement by Tom Hansell**

The long-term goal of this public art project is to transform sites along the New River in North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia into a place for community events that create new ways for people to understand their connections to freshwater ecosystems and to each other.

The collaboration to create the Trash Trout Motion Picture Show extends beyond the three presenters at the Appalachian Carpathian International Mountains Conference to include more than 50 volunteers throughout the New River Valley that helped make the film for The Trash Trout Motion Picture Show. Municipalities including the town of Boone, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Watauga Riverkeeper and New River Conservancy, helped coordinate the cleanup efforts and workshops that contributed to this project.

To understand the participatory process, it is important to know that the Trash Trout is more than just a cute name, it is a passive stormwater collection device that captures plastic and other debris from the headwaters of the New River near Boone. We partnered with the town of Boone, Watauga Riverkeeper and New River Conservancy to remove trash from the river, then hold a series of workshops where dozens of people taped this trash to 16mm film.

These workshops took place between March and May 2022 in three locations, including: a local brewery – the Appalachian Mountain Brewery in Boone, North Carolina; an art gallery – the Turchin Center for the Arts; and at a conference - the New River Symposium in West Virginia.

During the workshops, dozens of volunteers created about 350 linear feet (or 106 meters) of film from plastic bags and other debris we pulled from the Trash Trout. First they cut the plastic bags into pieces small enough to fit on a 16 millimeter film strip. Then, they used splicing tape to secure the plastic to the film. Some of the volunteers also drew on the film with magic markers. I spliced these film strips together, and added film leader that had degraded in the river. The result is a 10 minute experimental film that is silent. Finally, my colleagues Julie Shepherd-Powell and Trevor McKenzie created the original soundtrack that they perform live as the film is projected.



Scan the QR Code above in order to watch the performance.

### References

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