

# RED ANTS PANTS MUSIC FESTIVAL

Cultural Programming Synthetic Essay #1

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April 30, 2015

The broadest sunset you have ever seen expands across the Big Sky country, and American music fills the hot mountain air as friends, neighbors and strangers collect together, sharing local craft brews, laughs and stories. It may sound idealized, but this setting finds its reality each summer in White Sulfur Springs, Montana, a place where differences are left behind in the dirt and dust. Founded in 2011 by Red Ants Pants owner, Sarah Calhoun, the festival will be in its fifth year this coming summer (Hagan, 2014). It has become a testament to the identity of Montana, the place, its people and their way of life, influenced by the harsh and rugged land on which they live.

The festival grew out of Calhoun's interest in starting a work wear company for women. She was inspired, or rather frustrated, by the lack of heavy work pants for women with curves. The business itself started with a real need, much like the festival programming which in just a few years helped to revitalize an entire county. Meagher County went from being listed as the lowest income county in the nation to one which hosts a robust cultural event and over 11,000 visitors in just a weekend of each summer (Calhoun, 2014). While the need for the business started with work pants, the need for the festival ran much deeper in the community and in the place. The new business found its unlikely home in an old saddle shop in White Sulfur Springs, a rural town of 900 residents, mostly farmers and ranchers. Calhoun takes deserved pride in the fact that the business, its associated foundation and the festival are all organized and ran locally or as she stated, "100% home grown" (Hagan, 2014). The idea of the ant colony makes sense. This brand reflects the strong rural communities in Montana, the networks of friends, families and neighbors eager to lend a hand, a hard working mentality, and the fact that in ant colonies, female ants do all of the work, a testament to the support for female leadership that the Red Ants Pants foundation extends through its mission.

As Calhoun's business enterprise grew, so did the ambitions of its founder, who wanted to bring people together on a larger scale and essentially throw a big party to celebrate hard work and the Montana life. In July 2011, 6,000 fans made their way to a cow pasture outside of the sleepy town for the first Red Ants Pants Music Festival, which tripled the county's population for four days that summer (Calhoun, 2014). With little to no budget available, Calhoun hoped to sell enough tickets to at least pay for the talent. The community rallied behind the festival, seizing it as an opportunity to enliven White Sulfur, celebrate Montana heritage, and strengthen rural community. In her TEDx talk, Calhoun (2014) spoke about how it took the entire town to pull it off. "Ranchers lent their hands, mowers, augers, helicopters, school groups earned money by picking rocks and filling gopher holes, the football team collected trash, county crews watered dirt roads, there were fire crews and EMTs, and hundreds of volunteers." This statement truly supports the fact that this kind of programming can create closeness and kindness amongst people not only attending the festival, but who may be a part of it in any way. The entire event is a community affair, and it benefits the White Sulfur Springs community in which it is situated in numerous ways. Today, the festival employs 75 staff members and over 250 volunteers, bringing together a wide array of friends, family and community members to organize the unique event (Red Ants Pants Music Festival, 2015).

The festival has provided varying types of music: classic country, bluegrass, blues and rock and has booked artists such as Merle Haggard, Emmylou Harris, Taj Mahal, Lyle Lovett, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Brandi Carlile, Corb Lund, Charlie Pride and Josh Ritter (Red Ants Pants Music Festival, 2015). It grows each year, and one has to wonder how it will change as more and more people flock to the cow pastures of White Sulphur Springs for music and Montana tradition, all underneath what is known as the biggest sky in the country.

## Goals

The business, foundation and festival are grounded in strong goals that run between all three entities. The goals and ambitions which first bore Red Ants Pants, now provide the guiding light for the growth of the organization, even expanding to its philanthropy. Through the success of the festival, Calhoun was able to establish the Red Ants Pants Foundation, the nonprofit arm of the company, which expands on the ideas of supporting female leadership, family farming and ranching and rural communities. It also promotes self-reliance and strength, especially among women and in rural, agricultural communities. Its values include cultivating a strong work ethic, encouraging self-reliance, maintaining traditional work skills, and providing opportunities for people with different perspectives to connect, build bridges and discover common ground.

Similar to the goals, the values of the foundation acts as guiding principles for the festival. These goals manifest themselves at the festival in a way that distinguishes the event from many others of its kind. The Red Ants Pants Festival demonstration area features agricultural and traditional Montana work skills including sheep dog trials, ranch horsemanship, cross cut saw competitions and even a meat cutting demo. The foundation also offers timber skills workshops regularly outside of the festival (Red Ants Pants Music Festival, 2015). The workshops allow women to learn skills that otherwise are not easily accessible, especially when needing a comfortable space to learn these intimidating tools. This focus on working-class traditions runs throughout the mission of Red Ants Pants in every way, and makes the festival a true celebration of Montana culture.

One of the main objectives of the festival, from its very onset, was to bring people together from many different backgrounds. The atmosphere of the festival, or in Calhoun's words, "good beer, good music, and an incredible sunset" (Calhoun, 2014), cannot help but

connect people. It seems to almost be a thank you to the good people of that place for their integrity, community and hard work; a celebration of what it means to be a Montanan, and bringing together neighbors, families, friends and good people.

Even though it is not in the established goals of the organization to stimulate economic vitality within the community, it seems that, after achieving much success, this objective has also been adopted. Meagher County is no longer listed as the lowest income county in the nation. Not only that but as a direct result of the festival, the governor's office and department of commerce estimated that 2.8 million dollars would change hands during the weekend of the 2013 festival, within the festival grounds and throughout the community (Calhoun, 2014).

There is a considerable amount of programming activity outside of the music, which supports the organization's goals, particularly community building and togetherness, but also celebrating Montana heritage. The festival kicks off with a film screening and free street dance in downtown White Sulfur Springs, which literally brings the festival into the community. Inside the festival grounds there is a dunk tank and photo booth, hayrides, kids activities, Montana crafted food, beer, arts and crafts, traditional agricultural and work skills demonstrations. As with many other festivals, the campgrounds are just as active, with morning yoga sessions, breakfast served by the Meagher County Cattle Women, and casual musical assemblages that pop-up in the evenings across the campground (Red Ants Pants Music Festival, 2015). The festival is even home to the Montana Mustache and Beard State Finals, an event that contributes to the authentic Montana identity.

### **Responsibility**

Responsibility is most definitely a major consideration for the festival founder and staff, relating back to the goals and the commitment of the organization to the community of White

Sulphur Springs as well as all of its supporters. First and foremost, as a funding event for the Red Ants Pants foundation, the festival has a responsibility to the foundation's mission. It supports women's leadership and training through demonstrations and workshops, strongly encourages community amongst diverse people, and supports the rural families and businesses that reside in the area. One thing that is repeatedly emphasized by Calhoun is the importance of integrity in the festival and in her work. The values of integrity, small town honesty and a hard work ethic are grounded in the organization but also in the people and place. The festival seems to uphold the responsibility of presenting an event that authentically reflects Montana people and lifestyle. This aspect is what helps sell the festival and attract locals to this rural area, with some people traveling many miles. The founder sees it as their responsibility to strongly uphold these values, to ensure that all production stays on American soil and to ensure that they continue to connect with people. These things are the basis for the business, foundation and festival.

The festival has a wide range of influence, involving hundreds of workers, staff, volunteers and artists. It is responsible for the safety, contributions and experiences of all of these people, and must ensure that proper measures are taken to in case of emergencies, complications and challenges in any form. This involves planning the event with a wide array of people involved, including civic leaders and departments, farmers and ranchers, business owners, and community members. Festival leaders must take measures to train and inform volunteers, providing clear responsibilities and rewards. They must also make sure that all of the participating artists and vendors are properly supported.

Red Ants Pants and its corresponding festival have come to have a great effect over time on the surrounding community. Due to that influence, and the fact that the festival and organization have come to reflect Montana living, there is great responsibility in how the festival

presents itself and how it is situated within and connects with the community. By helping Meagher County improve its economic status, the festival now holds great influence and responsibility. The addition of the foundation ensures that it gives back to the community through granting funds, leadership and training workshops, and other community events. Along with this responsibility come expectations that the festival will continue year after year, steadily contributing to the vitality and growth of the town. In this way, it even demonstrates civic responsibility, contributing to the status of the place and making White Sulfur Springs a better community to live and work. The festival affects the community in many ways, not the least of which is the land itself. Such a large festival which brings in over ten thousand people to ranch country can have a big influence on the environment, so it is important that the festival management make sustainable practices part of their planning and implementation, keeping this place as pristine as always.

Probably one of the most important responsibilities of the festival is the experience of the audience. Leadership must ensure that the programming is valuable to the community and to its potential audience, taking the time to understand how this particular audience might be willing to spend their quality leisure time. This requires getting to know the inhabitants of White Sulfur Springs very well, forging strong relationships, which Calhoun has certainly done, and getting to know Montana, its people and its culture in general. In planning the festival, it is likely that staff considered the expectations and goals of the audience, and used this in order to help shape programming that is responsive to this audience. Red Ants Pants is also responsible for ensuring accessibility that allows people of all ages and abilities to be included. Golf carts are available to transport people to the festival grounds, and the local Sheriff's Department is on hand to assist anyone. There are also designated handicapped areas in the campground (Red Ants Pants Music

Festival, 2015). Just like any festival, there are a number of rules policed in order to ensure that everyone can enjoy the festival safely.

### **Audience**

The audience of the Red Ants Pants Festival has very much to do with the place where the event is located, both White Sulfur Springs and the state. Montana is a place with grit, a strong agricultural backbone and many farmers and ranchers. White Sulfur is a hard place with hard winters yet it is situated in the Smith River Valley, a dreamy, beautiful place in the summer. The people here have to live with many challenges not limited to the cold, harsh winters, dry summers, high altitude, and tough climate. According to Calhoun (2014), Montana is marked by romanticism but it is just as rough and tough as it is majestic, and the people are uniquely rugged and independent, descendants of settlers who had to scratch away a living in this wild country. Therefore, the festival is targeted to a unique audience, yet the key to success is simply spending the time to get to know them. Marketers are charged with reaching out to an audience spread far across Montana and its neighboring states, asking them to travel many miles, to listen to music together in a cow pasture, 100 miles from anything resembling a city. While the constituencies are not diverse in ethnicity they are colorfully varied in experience and background.

Building the trust of this audience, the festival supporters and participants has been key to the success of the event. Calhoun built her reputation in White Sulfur by being involved, getting to know people, and offering to help out in the community. Much like the Renfro Valley Barn Dance of John Lair and Sarah Gertrude Knott's National Folk Festival, the Red Ants Pants Festival absorbed the personality and values of its creator as demonstrated by its emphasis on community, integrity, work ethic, and providing a helping hand.



As mentioned in the introduction, the festival employs a broad range of programming in order to include a wide variety of audience leisure preferences and modes of participation. Almost all attendees will take part in ambient participation by experiencing the music present, especially on the main stage, but they might also experience observational participation by choosing amongst all of the other activities, local side-stage performances, demonstrations and competitions. While the festival does not really allow for curatorial or inventive participation, interpretive participation is available through workshops and art activities, and the general atmosphere of the campground which encourages anyone to bring their own instruments and play by the campfire, resulting in a myriad of informal music performances under the stars. Through all of these activities and opportunities for participation, the festival becomes an umbrella for people to come together in their own temporary community or colony. While 21<sup>st</sup> century media begins to blur the boundaries of “passive consumption and active participation” (Goldbard, 2006), such influential participatory programming becomes even more valuable, especially in such rural areas where cultural activity is so much less prominent.

### **Functions of Cultural Programming**

Cultural programming can take on an endless variety of functions, with similar types of programming serving radically different functions depending on context. The Red Ants Pants Festival was founded out of a simple ambition to throw a party for the hard working rural people, to bring together friends and neighbors across the “country” of the northern plains and Rocky Mountains in celebration of good music, Montana heritage and community. The festival is a sort of demonstration of the human experience in the rural west. It began as a way of bringing people together but it is increasingly has become a marker of the local way of living. It is this connectivity through celebration of heritage that manifests across all three of the themes

discussed: goals, responsibility and audience. Borrup states that “bringing together diverse people and efforts in creative new ways” can “reinvigorate places that have gone stale or are facing complex new challenges” (Borrup, 2011). Something as seemingly simple as bringing people together for a celebration of culture can transform not only the participants, but potentially the place itself, as demonstrated by the dramatic change in White Sulfur Springs.

Creating that sense of community is a key element in the ambitions of the festival and foundation. The Red Ants Pants business itself relies on this community in the end for support and sustainability. Not only does the programming provide an occasion for communal gathering and fun, but it helps cultivate a wider audience for the support of Calhoun’s business and the foundation, which in turn give back to the local communities. Therefore, community connectivity is not only a goal of the programming but a responsibility as well, and the audience, volunteers, artists and participants are the essential element for its creation. It is the uniqueness of the audience, and the place in which they reside, that makes this community equally as unique and the connectivity so genuine.

While community connectivity remains a central goal of the festival programming, there are many other functions that can be discerned once we look closely, and many of these functions are commonly found in arts and culture programming. Nurturing local or regional cultural heritage, providing education and training in traditional work skills, supporting the affiliated foundation and business, improving the economic health of Meagher County, providing access to unique cultural activities and entertainment, creating opportunities for local artists, nurturing community vitality, and creating a unique experience all result from the Red Ants Pants Festival.

The festival also provides interesting use of space, transforming a common cow pasture into a public cultural space. The transformation of the rural open space is echoed in the transformations which happen in the town and the people during this one week of every summer, in the end becoming a wholly transformative experience. This transformation is an essential element of cultural programming and the role of the artist. According to Goldbard, “Without exception, they [artists] recognize to deploy their gifts in service of larger social aims as well a individual awareness and transformation” (Goldbard, 2006). The artists and the visionary behind-the-stage personalities are at the helm of this transformative experience.

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