

Rock och Samhälle, Hultfred, 2007

From Beyond Hope to The Next Great Hope:

How a small town in Canada is using music to cross an economic divide.

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Merritt, British Columbia, Canada is a small city of 7000 located some 270 kilometers to the north and east of Vancouver. Its economy has always been dependent on natural resources. As recent as 1986 over 40% of its labour force, and thus the clear majority of its male population, was directly employed in extractive or processing jobs in the forest, mining, and agriculture industries. However, the proportion has been declining due to structural shifts in western economies and is expected drop dramatically in years to come if new music oriented initiatives come to full fruition. Since its modest beginnings in the early 1990s, the Merritt Mountain Music Festival has grown into one of the largest events of its kind in North America. In some years up to 180,000 people have taken in the 4 day event, pumping perhaps as much as \$30 million CDN (\$200m SEK) into the city's economy. This success, and rapidly evolving plans for a mega-resort development on the festival grounds, has many local residents and deep-pocketed investors convinced that flat-picking and two-stepping can transform Merritt into Branson North.

The Merritt Mountain Music Festival is not a local initiative. Active Mountain, the company that stages the event—Active Mountain Entertainment Corporation—is based in a suburb of Vancouver. Prior to setting up shop in Merritt in 1993, Active Mountain staged a music festival (the Hedley Blast) in a small community in the Similkameen valley. In search of a larger venue, the company purchased a 500-acre parcel along the Coldwater River. Proximity to major markets, efficient highway connections, and the region's cowboy identity made the location a

logical one. The site's situation with respect to Merritt also offers strategic benefits. The festival grounds are within five kilometres of Merritt's downtown, and but just outside the city's jurisdiction. Active Mountain provides bus connections between the site and downtown and has complied with municipal requests to fund additional police services.

The festival site has been likened to a natural amphitheatre. Steep hills and silt cliffs demarcate the Coldwater River's narrow flood plain on the north and south, while Middlesboro Hill delineates the site's northern edge and acts as a visual and acoustic buffer between the festival and nearby industrial and residential area. The floodplain, which lies within the agricultural land reserve and consequently functions as a cow pasture for most of the year, is transformed into several large campgrounds during the festival. The main concert venue, food vendors, a beer garden, and small amusement area are also allocated space.

The site's physical geography helps control access to the site (there are only two ways in) and symbolically isolates the grounds from the outside world. In line with assessments of theme parks and fair grounds, one is tempted to argue more strongly that the site's geography contributes to a sensation of other worldliness. Mountainfest is more than a music event, it is a kind of liminal sphere, a place where normal behavioural expectations and obligations are temporarily suspended. It provides a place and a time, in other words, for pilgrims, especially young adults, to seek gratification within a communal setting: to go western; to drink, dance, and party around the clock; to see musical heroes in the flesh; and to act out fantasies. In its initial years, older crowds (35 to 65 years of age) predominated. However, as the event grew and as it developed a reputation as a good party, the proportion of young, single adults increased. For many young adults, Mountainfest is a first and foremost a social gathering: "sex, beer, and music, in that order," are the key attractions. Or, as one young visitor reflected on his observations, "I don't

think any other place in the world can compare with the debauchery up there.” Active Mountain has not shied away from this imagery. The event’s web site features pictures of scantily clad cowboy wannabes.

Staging the event in a cow pasture with minimal infrastructure only heightens the symbolic significance of the festival and its regional context. Mountainfest sells itself on the notion Hopkins (1998) refers to as “urban rural alterity”—the idea that the rural is a different place, and perhaps a different time. The festival—through country music, Merritt’s rural setting, and altered norms—allows visitors to consume an imagined lifestyle. In this way, Merritt has much in common with Branson, Missouri (Bascom 2001) and Tamworth, Australia (Gibson and Davidson 2004), communities that have also taken advantage of the place marketing synergies found in rurality and country music. Dave Chutter, the region’s provincial representative, recently told his colleagues that,

Merritt has always been a place that has prided itself on country living and hometown values. It is one of those places where real cowboys walk the streets, and on a dry summer day tumbleweed rolls through the surrounding grasslands ... the Merritt Mountain Music Festival has put this small western town on the national map.¹

But it could be argued more broadly that Merritt has joined a long list of communities that sell their uniqueness as a commodity to visitors in search of difference. Fittingly, Merritt branded itself the “Country Music Capital of Canada.”

The festival is not without its critics. The environmental impact of thousands of campers on the Coldwater River is a major concern, as is a dependable supply of potable drinking water.

¹ BC, *Hansard*, May 7, 2003, 15(5): 6554.

Locals are also concerned about traffic congestion, crime, and the disruption of normal business patterns. The community's economic development officers have tried, nevertheless, to use the festival as a opportunity to showcase the community to potential investors. CFDC, the local economic development office, hosts an Ambassador Investor Symposium that allows potential investors to come for the music and check out the city at the same time. CFDC arranges tours of Merritt, meetings with owners of existing businesses (28 companies are involved this year), and social events. Sixty-five out-of-town companies have signed up for the 2005 symposium.

Active Mountain hopes to expand its operations through the development of a 5-star, "world class", year-round resort. The resort will be built at the north end of the festival site and will feature 150 upscale lodge suites, townhouses, and houses built in tandem with an 18-hole golf course. The resort is being promoted as a managed real estate investment opportunity. Also in the works are a driver-training and motor sport facility that features a 4.2 km track. The course will be located up the hill and to the west of the main music site. The developers suggest that regular race and music events will generate a longer rental season (9 months) than is typically associated with ski resorts. A water park, 25,000 seat outdoor entertainment complex, 300 seat indoor theatre, spa and fitness centre, hiking trails, 2 man-made lakes, shops, Tuscan styled winery, casino (?) and tramway link (?) to Merritt are also proposed. The total investment is forecast to exceed \$80 million. The race track and resort complex are currently under construction.

Several community groups, the downtown business association, and the city have individually and collectively proposed responses to this challenge. One obvious opportunity several groups have championed is the country music festival. During the festival, the main blocks of Quilchena Avenue are given over to street vendors (many from out-of-town) and pedestrians.

Groups have tried to extend the geographic and temporal reach of street event through a Walk of Stars initiative. Since 1993, the hand prints and signatures of more than 100 musicians have been captured in concrete stars. In 2003, bronzed replicas were mounted to granite displays and strategically placed to entice visitors to move through the shopping district. A related festival spin-off is a mural project. At present, a half dozen murals present larger than life caricatures of Mountainfest performers. However, recent proposals call for 60 outdoor murals to adorn the sides and backs of commercial structures throughout the downtown core. The revitalization or construction of heritage / country façades in the downtown is a third initiative in this theme. Black's Pharmacy, Panago Pizza, and the new regional library building are notable examples. The Walk of Stars society has also constructed a false front. The fake building serves as a promotional display for the society and its sponsors, and beautifies an otherwise empty lot on the commercial strip. These alterations supplement an earlier beautification strategy (brick sidewalks, ornamental street signs, traffic control barriers, trees, and street furniture) in the 1980s.

Despite this momentum, the direction of future changes in Merritt's downtown is not clear at this time. Several organizations have encouraged the city to take the next logical step and adopt a theming strategy. In response, city administrators and politicians have travelled to Leavenworth and Winthrop in Washington state. Bavarian Leavenworth is one of the oldest and most successful examples of a themed community in North America, while Winthrop, host of an annual Rhythm and Blues festival, promotes itself as a frontier town (Frenkel et al. 2000). Other groups, in contrast, have questioned the wisdom of theming the downtown. They argue that the goal of a bright, interesting, and ultimately healthy retail core does not depend on the adoption of a single theme pace Leavenworth. Given the region's diverse economic base and ethnic

community, and the community's decision to make "quality of life" a cornerstone of its planning agenda, a more varied approach may be in order.

To solve this dilemma, the City of Merritt has purchased the services of Urban Systems, a consulting firm with expertise in streetscaping. Urban Systems has tried to build a collaborative vision among local groups, one that promotes Merritt's city centre as the "Star of the Nicola Valley", as a place to "Experience the Stars." The proposed strategy has obvious ties to the Merritt Mountain Music Festival while celebrating the city's broader character at the same time. In particular, the plan envisions Merritt's city centre as a "place combining the built environment, facilities and experiences in a package reflecting authentic character and image and multiple opportunities of enjoyment." Concrete changes under consideration include widening the sidewalks and improving traffic flow on Quilchena Avenue; adding more shade trees, ornamental streetlights, and banners; and supporting ongoing façade enhancement.