

Bonnaroo University: A Blueprint for Teaching Music Festival Culture

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXRXPdOKU5s>

Abstract

The Bonnaroo Music & Arts Festival is one of the top music festivals in the world. The festival, created in 2002, takes place each June over a four-day period in Manchester, Tennessee. In 2019, Bonnaroo attracted approximately 80,000 attendees, and featured over 150 artists on a dozen plus stages. Belmont University, based in Nashville, Tennessee, ranks in the top five nationally for participation in short-term Study Abroad programs. Belmont at Bonnaroo (i.e., Bonnaroo University, aka Bonnaroo U) is one of the innovative programs offered during the summer months. Twenty students take two three-credit courses, “Sociology of Music” and “Research Methods and Festival Culture” concurrently in June as part of Bonnaroo University. The goal of the two classes, each taught by different professors, focuses upon sociology, consumer research, and the business of music festivals.

There are three distinct sections of the program. The first week takes place on campus prior to Bonnaroo. The students are grouped into four groups of five students, and steeped in Production of Culture theory. Research questions associated with this theory, developed in tandem with the festival organizers, are assigned to each group. The groups design interview questions they explore during the festival as part of the research methods course.

In the second phrase, the professors and students travel on two tour buses to Manchester, which are stationed backstage on the festival grounds. In 2018, year one of the program, students conducted 73 interviews centered around topics of branding, community, design, and fandom. In 2019, questions focused on the “Bonnaroo vibe” around themes including both production and consumption of culture, symbolic identity and authenticity. The rigor of the study increased, with 380 individual interviews taking place during the festival.

Upon return to Nashville following the festival, students analyze the interviews using content analysis methodology. Each group prepares a final summary paper, followed by a formal presentation of the research. The main results thus far highlight that Bonnaroo is known for community and positivity. Music is indeed important, but not the main focus of festival attendance. In addition to conducting research, the students also meet with top music industry professionals as well as enjoy the festival’s music offerings. This program has received widespread press attention including recognition by the trade industry publication *Billboard*. The pedagogical approach of Bonnaroo University can be used as a blueprint for other universities seeking to set up similar real-world learning opportunities for students.

Keywords: Bonnaroo, Belmont University, Bonnaroo University, production of culture theory, sociology of music

Ken Spring is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Belmont University. He has been an active member of the Belmont community since 2002. He holds an M.A. in Sociology with a focus on community development from the University of Toledo and a Ph.D. in Sociology with a focus in social and cultural theory from Vanderbilt University. He teaches classes on Social Theory, Cultural Theory, Sociology of Music, Politics of Knowledge, Urban Community, and Research Methods. Dr. Spring was the recipient of the Harold Love Community Service award from the Tennessee Governor’s office and Tennessee Department of Higher Education for his role in creating the YMCA Literacy Program in Middle Tennessee. In addi-



tion to his community service and research, Dr. Spring has been interviewed by more than twenty local and national news publications and has appeared in several documentaries discussing various aspects of culture which have aired internationally on Bravo!, Current TV, and nationally on PBS.

Sarita M. Stewart is an Associate Professor of Creative & Entertainment Industries in the Mike Curb College of Entertainment & Music Business at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. Stewart's teaching expertise is in the area of public relations, music marketing, and consumer research.



Her main research focus is on the topic of music consumption, with accompanying interests in the areas of fandom, mood management, and music festivals.

Dr. Stewart's publications include an essay on LeAnn Rimes' album *Blue* in *Please Allow Me To Introduce Myself: Essays on Debut Albums* (Ashgate), and book chapter, "TV, Radio, and Music Research," in *Research Methods in Communication (Third Edition)* (Vision Press). Stewart, along with her co-authors Maria Ivey of IVPR and Dorren Robinson (Belmont University) are finalizing a textbook: *Music Publicity: A Practical Approach*, scheduled for publication by Kendall Hunt in Fall 2020. Additionally, Stewart serves as a book editor of the Springer International Music Business Research Series. Currently, she is Vice President of the International Music Business Research Association, an organization based in Vienna, Austria. Stewart has also participated as a panelist at numerous academic and industry conferences.

Stewart's entertainment industry experience includes a thirteen-year stint at Curb Records where she served as Director of Marketing, and AKG Acoustics, as U.S. Marketing Manager. Stewart holds a B.S. in Business Administration from Oregon State University, Masters in Business Administration from the Drucker School of Management at Claremont Graduate University, and a Ph.D. from The University of Alabama. She is a 2017 graduate of Leadership Music.



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