

Composer's solo becomes group trek down Mississippi

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What began as a solo kayaking tour of the Mississippi River for Eve Beglarian has morphed into an all-star excursion, complete with special guests.

Beglarian is a Grammy-nominated music composer from New York who wanted to see firsthand what secrets the mighty heartland river held.

On Aug. 1, she launched her one-woman craft from the river's source, Lake Itasca, in Minnesota. She plans on completing the trip "sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"Prior to a year ago, I really had no particular connection to or interest in the Mississippi River," Beglarian wrote in her blog while in La Crosse, Wis., on Sept. 9. "It's not like I've been fantasizing about doing this journey since childhood or anything like that. It just came over me, and now, here I am."

Traveling down the river with her red, 17-foot kayak, bicycle and Honda Accord, Beglarian arrived in the Alton area Oct. 9. Along the way, she has picked up several people who have made her voyage easier.

"When you're by yourself, it's a little complex," Beglarian told The Telegraph. "If I just had the kayak, I could stay on an island and it would be fine. It would be fine with just one vessel, but with multiple vessels, it makes it difficult."

In a cumbersome routine, when Beglarian's by herself, she docks the kayak upstream and drives about 10 miles down the river to drop off her bike. She then drives back to the kayak, leaves the car and floats downriver to where the bike is. Leaving the kayak, she bikes back to the car before heading back down to again join all three modes of transportation. A 10-mile float ends up taking all day.

Beglarian's first traveling companions were Mac Walton, a trombonist and musicologist she had met two years earlier while he was attending Williams College, and Richard Steadman-Jones, a linguist and historian at the University of Sheffield in England. Beglarian previously had worked on a project with Steadman-Jones, studying the displacement and language of the Ojibwa tribe in Minnesota.

Since then, she has been accompanied by Heather Hitchens, the executive director of the New York State Council on the Arts; Chicago poet Caroline Walker; Cori Ellison, the dramaturge for the New York City Opera; Mary Rowell, a violinist in the string quartet Ethel; and numerous other "locals" who have provided inspiration for her on the journey.

"It's a neat thing," said Beglarian, who had a five-day stretch in late September alone. "It's a sort of ever-changing group of people who I knew before, and people I've met along the way. I've had this ever-rotating crew of friends and acquaintances. It's sort of like the river itself, always changing."

One woman from Columbus, Ohio, Lori Gum, started following Beglarian's blog and wanted to be part of the trip, so she drove from Ohio to Northern Illinois just to join Beglarian for a few days.

During her solo time last month, Beglarian had a nightmarish experience when both her kayak and bike went missing near Fort Madison, Iowa.

When she got back to where she had docked her kayak, she discovered it was gone. She checked downstream. Nothing. She then drove to get her bike, only to find that it was missing, as well, along with its chain lock. She reported the missing items to the local sheriff's department and then had an uneasy, sleepless night.

But all was well the next day.

Her kayak was found snagged downriver in some trees and reeds. Her bike was thought to be stolen, but it actually had been picked up by the Lee County Conservation Office.

A Lee County officer saw the abandoned bike and figured it had been stolen and stashed there. He cut the chain and took the bike back to the office. It wasn't until the next day when they learned it belonged to Beglarian.

Beglarian set up a network of friends and family to assist her on the trip, including a cousin in Clayton, Mo. Her cousin took her to City Museum in St. Louis, which Beglarian "loved."

She also enjoyed her time around the River Bend, thanks to the hospitality of Bob and Wita Halsey. In a "wow, what a small world" sort of thing, Bob Halsey was in the same fraternity at Southern Illinois University Carbondale as the father-in-law of one of Beglarian's friends in New York.

When the Halseys learned that Beglarian was going to be floating through Alton, they offered to "put her up."

"Being Bob, he introduced us to basically everybody in Alton," said Beglarian, who was with Rowell while in Alton. "He's like the unofficial mayor, but we met the official mayor, too."

Wita took Beglarian to the First Presbyterian Church for services last Sunday, when Beglarian received a blessing for a safe journey.

"She's just a neat gal," Bob Halsey said. "She's got all sorts of interests in the river, history, religion and all sorts of things. I was surprised at how little we talked about music, which was good, because I'm lucky if I can play a kazoo."

Following church, Beglarian had brunch with Dale and Linda Chapman, the president and dean for academic affairs, respectively, of Lewis and Clark Community College in Godfrey. Beglarian commented in her blog that LCCC gives her "a whole new understanding of the phrase 'community college.'"

Beglarian met back up with Mike Clark, whom she had paddled with farther upriver, in Alton. Along with Rowell, the trio traveled downstream past the Chain of Rocks and stopped at an island for "high tea" about 4 p.m.

Later, Clark introduced Beglarian to Scott Mandrell, whom Beglarian referred to as "The Captain," and the two told her about Mandrell's Lewis and Clark Expedition re-enactment.

History was part of Beglarian's inspiration for the trek. Harkening back to the days of Works Progress Administration following the Great Depression, the 51-year-old said the modern depression sparked the idea. Photographers, writers, musicians and artists toured the Heartland as part of the WPA project. They recorded sounds, images and music of the area, and shaped the artistic future of the 20th century, Beglarian said.

She is composing music while on her journey and plans to make a reverse trip upriver next year, making stops in several towns - including Alton - to perform community-involved concerts that will focus on whichever city she's in.

She'll have a core band with her but also wants "members of the community in the band or orchestra to rehearse" with them and be part of the show.

A Davenport, Iowa, destination even may have provided the name for next year's foray.

The River Music Experience is a museum with a concert hall, cafe lounge and bandstand that has displays about different music from the bayou country to Memphis to St. Louis to Minneapolis.

"All of this is a great idea, but it sort of feels like a Web site that has been put on a bunch of different kiosks," Beglarian said about the museum.

While not impressed with the display, Beglarian said Davenport's musical archive is the perfect title for her project.

"A friend of mine commented on my blog that those three words (River Music Experience) have to be embedded in my trip, because that's exactly what I'm doing," Beglarian said.

It's uncertain when her trip back upriver would begin next year, or when she would be back in Alton. But along with McGregor, Iowa, and La Crosse, she said Alton definitely is a beautiful locale she looks forward to seeing again.

To monitor Beglarian's journey, or to leave comments, visit her blog at evbvd.com/riverblog/.

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