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Composer Finds a Muse in the Mississippi

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EVE BEGLARIAN, composer, experimentalist and collaborator, has built a career translating other people's obsessions into music. "So often the collaborative projects I do are initiated by another person, and my job is to get immersed in what their obsession is — a text, an idea — and follow that through," she said. "In some ways I think of myself as a responder rather than an initiator, even though the end result might be very personal."

This time the obsession, the mighty Mississippi and its impact on American culture, is her own.

On Aug. 1 Ms. Beglarian, 51, put her bright red, 17-foot kayak into the river's headwaters and — buoyed by the example of [Works Progress Administration](#) artists who documented the state of the country during [the Great Depression](#), as well as a bit of midlife contemplation — began her passage downstream.



"I thought, 'O.K., we're in a depression again, and I need to do this,'" she said in a telephone interview from Little Falls, Minn. "Part of it was a response to the economic free fall. Part of it was when Obama got elected, I thought, 'This is my country, this really is my country, and I need to know what my country is.'"

"The river is sort of in this equilibrium between life and death all the time and is comfortable with that. And somehow it's really important for me right now to embrace that, as the condition of being alive and being conscious, and make my peace with it in some way."

For the next three months Ms. Beglarian, who has run a marathon and built a cabin in Vermont, will continue to glide the Mississippi's 2,300 or so miles, from Lake Itasca in Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. Along the way she is collecting snippets of sound, image and history from both her perch on the river and excursions into nearby towns, in wilderness and urban sprawl.

In late November, barring hurricanes and unfortunate barge encounters, she will arrive at the Mississippi's end. The next fall, after months of composing, Ms. Beglarian plans to head back upstream — by car; she's not crazy — with a small ensemble and perform new works for and with residents of the communities that inspired them.

But somewhat to her surprise, what began as a solitary sojourn has morphed into a kind of floating artists' colony and mutual collaboration society, gathering members for days or weeks at a time.

"When I decided I needed to do this, I originally was going to do this alone," Ms. Beglarian said. Soon loneliness became an overriding concern; she hadn't set out to recreate Thoreau's "Walden."

Seeking company, Ms. Beglarian sent an e-mail message to her mailing list and [Facebook](#) friends, saying: "I'm doing this. If you want to come, come."

They came. Her first traveling companions were Mac Walton, a trombonist and musicologist she had met two years earlier while he was studying at [Williams College](#), and Richard Steadman-Jones, a linguist and historian at the University of Sheffield in England with whom she has embarked on a project about displacement and language among the Ojibwa tribe in Minnesota and early European settlers.



The guest list continues to grow. Last week Heather Hitchens, the executive director of the New York State Council on the Arts, tagged along. Caroline Walker, an Illinois poet interested in the river's military history; Cori Ellison, the dramaturge of the New York City Opera; and Mary Rowell, a violinist in the string quartet Ethel, have signed on. Although each will affect Ms. Beglarian's work, and she theirs, no one is sure about the results.

Ms. Ellison, who envisions creating something of a musical dramatic nature, said: "I think Eve has begun this journey with a complete tabula rasa. She'll just use the chemical reaction of who's there."

For armchair travelers, and as another layer of her artistic endeavor, Ms. Beglarian started a blog (evbvd.com/riverblog), which she fills with photographs and writings about whatever strikes her fancy during the 20 or so miles she tallies each day. It also lists books she is reading (Michael D. McNally's "Ojibwe Singers: Hymns, Grief and a Native American Culture in Motion") and music she is listening to (Delta blues, Bob Dylan's "Mississippi" and the Talking Heads and the B. B. King-Al Green versions of "Take Me to the River"), as well as music she wrote before her trip ("The Flood," her setting of the Robert Frost poem in response to the great Mississippi flood of 1927).

Still, her soundtrack on the river is mostly silence. "When I'm kayaking, I definitely don't have my iPod on," she said. She hears mostly the rhythmic slice of oar through current, the scraping of vessel across reeds bent in submission to the water's downward flow.

Occasionally she records sounds to add to her extensive electronic database. Her current fixation is pumps, the kind found near dams and locks. On days when her traveling companions are taking their turns in the kayak, she gets into her car to scout out that night's campsite at a reasonable distance downstream and explore communities along the water's edge, with a visit to a different church each Sunday. When it's her turn to paddle, a fellow traveler climbs into the driver's seat; if she has two or more guests, someone generally boards the bicycle she has brought along and pedals to the next stop. By the time the Mississippi turns into a sort of superhighway below Cairo, Mo., with industrial vessels navigating a swift current, Ms. Beglarian said, she expects to bike more and kayak less.

On her off days and evenings she plugs in her computer and keyboard at her campsite or a public library. After a month of paddling she is finally feeling the desire to compose, though not yet with a sense of urgency.

"Probably the most significant thing here," Ms. Hitchens, the arts council executive, wrote in an e-mail message, "is the opportunity for so many people, whether it be friends like me who are throwing caution to the wind to join her for a few days or the random people she meets along the way, to be somehow involved in her creative process. This is important for her, but also for each one of us. As she has said to me a number of times, all the various people who participate will help color the experience and ultimately the work. There are not many works that get created this way, and I would venture to say that she is breaking some new ground here."

As Ms. Beglarian travels along what she called "this secret path through the country," she is content to keep an ear to the Mississippi and go with the flow.

"On this trip, it's my turn," she said. "It's clear the subject is the river. But what that means, and how it takes shape, is something that the river is going to tell me."