

NY CULTURE

# At the New Museum, 'We All Have Gone a Little Bit Insane'

Musicians Play a Single Song All Day, Every Day Museum Is Open as Part of Kjartansson Exhibit

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA  
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New Museum troubadours Grady Owens, left, and Spencer Stewart take a break. *Polina Yamshchikov for The Wall Street Journal*

This summer, "marathon museum troubadour" surely ranks among the city's oddest jobs.

As part of the New Museum's solo exhibition devoted to the Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson, a group of 15 musicians have been [playing a single song](#) all day, every day the museum is open. When the gig ends along with the show at the end of the month, they estimate it will have been performed roughly 6,000 times, for 308 hours, and with the help of several dozen gallons of beer.

"I understood what I was going to be doing," said Asher Kurtz, a 22-year-old graduate of the Berklee College of Music who now lives in Bushwick, Brooklyn, "but I didn't realize what that would really mean."

Since the exhibit's May opening, 10 of the musicians have been singing and strumming acoustic guitars, any time the museum is open, with two others cycling through short breaks and a few additional performers on-call. Otherwise, the star of the show is "Take Me Here by the Dishwasher: Memorial for a Marriage," a song about three minutes long, to be played over and over. Its lyrics draw on dialogue from a scene in a 1977 Icelandic film, starring Mr. Kjartansson's parents, that is projected onto a wall in the room.

"As a musician, I've had all kinds of gigs, and this is one of the strangest things I've ever done," said Kenji Herbert, 26, from Crown Heights.

"We all have gone a little bit insane," Mr. Kurtz said.



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The troubadours answered a call put out to friends of the museum staff. It didn't take long to fill up the roster, even though the particulars of the job were unknown. Chief among them was the prospect of enduring a single song in heavy rotation Wednesdays through Sundays, when the New Museum is open seven to 10 hours a day.

"When lying down, I've started listening to white noise," said Graham Corrigan, 25, from Prospect Heights. "There's a guy who does rain sounds that I've downloaded. That's helped, but it's definitely there. It carries over."

Spencer Stewart, 23, from Bedford-Stuyvesant, agreed. "It's with me all the time," he said, "but I don't see it as a nuisance. Sometimes it just comes up from the depths of my consciousness to say hi and remind me that it's not going away."

The song, luckily, features lilting melodies and lush, pastoral chords scored by Mr. Kjartansson and his collaborator Kjartan Sveinsson, a former member of the Icelandic band Sigur Ros.



Fellow troubadour Kevin Johnston sits to perform while Mr. Owens strums and strolls. *Polina Yamshchikov for The Wall Street Journal*

"It's always in my head, and that does get tiresome," Mr. Corrigan said, "but musically I haven't really gotten sick of the song. It was designed to have all these interlocking parts, so depending on where you're standing in the room or who you're next to, it's a totally different experience."

For their daily performance, the troubadours are arranged across the fourth floor of the museum, singing and strumming on an assemblage of homey furniture (tattered mattresses, a cast-off couch, threadbare chairs) or else wandering around to stay limber. They are encouraged by Mr. Kjartansson to drink beer from bottles that accumulate during the course of the day, to achieve the ambience of guys playing guitar at home alone.

"When we met," Kevin Johnston said of Messrs. Kjartansson and Sveinsson, "they brought us all little Icelandic bottles of schnapps, and we had a morning toast. It set the whole tone of the piece."

Mr. Kurtz remembered a suggestion from Mr. Kjartansson that he has puzzled over ever since: "Ragnar said it's supposed to be mind-blowingly boring."

"It becomes theirs," said Margot Norton, the New Museum assistant curator who hired the troubadours. "It's like this living artwork that can transform as it goes along."

Museum-goer reactions have ranged from indifference to tears.

"There's been a lot of crying," Mr. Corrigan said, noting the emotional lyrics referencing

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the artist's estranged parents in their happier early years. "It takes you out of there. You can be playing this thing over and over again and lose sight of what it can do to a person."

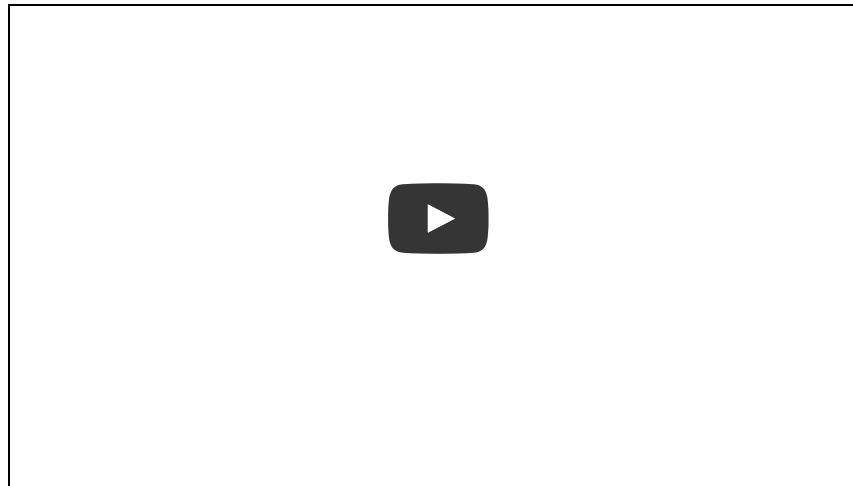
Other audience members grow interested in the musicians themselves.

"I got a girl's number," said Mr. Herbert. "She just slipped it into my boots, which were lying next to me."

Even the museum workers have been struck. "It's hard to let go when you're here every day," said Ferdinand Hoyos, a New Museum guard who visits the piece, which closes on June 29, in his regular rotation. "It's magnetic."

Mr. Stewart, who like his fellow troubadours is an aspiring musician, said he was pleased to turn down other paying jobs, such as working at a juice bar, in favor of this one. Despite the grind of the repeat performances, the museum's ambience is noticeably different from others as a result, he believes.

"At the Met or MoMA, people rush around with their phone taking pictures," he said. "Here, people sometimes lay on the floor. There have been people who have stayed for a couple hours, just looked and listened."



-- Source: New Museum

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