

A Mighty Event: Eight Lessons Learned by Bringing People Together Through Music to Support Our Mission

Caroline J. White, Outreach Archivist & Public Services Coordinator
and
Kim D. Fill, Events, Exhibits, & Outreach Coordinator
University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

On the evening of November 7, 2025, the University Libraries at the University of Massachusetts Amherst held its annual Fall Reception, attended by an audience of 300. “An Evening with Folk New England: A Tribute to Eric von Schmidt” was a return to the longstanding tradition of an event held to showcase the Libraries, while also thanking our donors for all they make possible. The Fall Reception is not a fundraiser per se—attendance is free—and it has taken many forms over the years, offering readings, talks, or panel discussions, along with refreshments. Putting on a concert or musical performance was unusual.

The event celebrated the partnership of the Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center (SCUA), known for its collecting around social change, and Folk New England (<https://folknewengland.org>), the Cambridge, Mass., organization dedicated to the preservation of folk and traditional music from the region.

“An Evening with Folk New England” was an exceptionally successful and memorable event that may inspire other libraries thinking about new types of events and trying to reach different audiences. It was planned largely by the authors of this article: Kim Fill, Events, Exhibits, & Outreach Coordinator, and Caroline White, Outreach Archivist & Public Services Coordinator.

Here are eight takeaways from our experience.

Think carefully about what the event is and where it should take place

Especially if the event is of a type you do not usually do (in our case, a concert), start by booking the appropriate venue that meets the event's specific needs. If possible, have an alternate venue reserved in case it is needed. UMass Amherst's iconic Old Chapel, now chiefly an event venue with beautiful and flexible spaces, was the first choice. The Libraries have held many successful events there, including an earlier folk concert, and our Folk New England planning partners were keen to return there. With the Great Hall set up auditorium-style, it accommodates an audience of 168—on the larger end of Fall Reception attendees. We were quite sure we would have plenty of space. We began promoting the event in early September, and by September 9, we had filled 125 seats. We immediately put a hold on 25 seats to ensure we could accommodate special guests or administrators who might register late. It was exciting to see so much interest in our event!

We had been keeping track not only of the numbers of registered guests but also of names—and names we were not yet seeing. The Libraries have donors who come to practically every open event they can, and Folk New England has core donors and board members. We wanted to ensure they all had the opportunity to register. The waitlist grew, but still we kept seats on reserve. As we heard about people we needed to accommodate, we started releasing them.

At first, it seemed like one of those good problems to have. Our event was really popular! Alas, the reality was that many of the people on the waitlist would be turned away, and that would not reflect well on the Libraries, particularly for an event that welcomed our friends and donors. Communicating our concerns to our dean, we provided details of the registration, noting we did not know whether a change of venue was desirable or even feasible.

With six weeks to go until the event, there was no guarantee we could find another, larger, suitable space. But we did! The Student Union Ballroom, a large, flexible space in the recently renovated Student Union, had become available due to a cancellation, and we grabbed it. It meant we could double our capacity. It also needed the approval of Folk New England, the performers, and the dean. But when we visited the site with the event in mind, we were sure it would work. By the time registration closed on October 27, we informed UMass Catering to expect 300 attendees.

Moving the event to a new, larger space had implications both expected (more food and drink, higher costs) and not (revisiting the sound design and equipment needs, new stage lighting needs and associated costs, a more complicated load-in of equipment and artwork). If we were to do it over again, we would consider booking one of the formal performance spaces on campus, already equipped for our needs, along with a larger space in case we needed to accommodate a larger audience.

Communicate clearly and know who is doing what

Assembling the planning team is more than assigning roles and tasks. Planners' responsibilities should align with their roles in the organization and their capabilities and experience. The bulk of the work should be handled by just a couple of people who can stay on top of the details, evolving issues, and needs.

We had support from the communications department and met periodically with the Libraries' finance director and development director. Our dean was kept in the loop, made decisions when needed, and spoke at the event. Although he was not part of the on-the-ground work to execute the event, his interest in it—and in its success—was crucial. The other key members of the planning team were with Folk New England, whom we relied on to communicate with the musicians and who had their own network of supporters.

Keeping administrators and key partners informed along the way, especially with high-level developments when or if they occur, is critical; do not involve them with minutiae or any decisions that can be made by experienced event planners.

Relationships are everything

Our (Kim's and Caroline's) positive working relationship meant not only that we could each work to our own strengths but also that we could support each other when

things became stressful. This might look like an encouraging email, collaborative problem-solving, or listening with compassion.

Underlying every interaction with our Folk New England partners was our commitment to maintaining positive relationships with that organization. For an event that grew exponentially as ours did, having strong on-campus connections with the people we needed to count on positioned us for successful pivots. This included seeking out a new location and fitting it out for a concert, working closely with UMass Catering on the room setup, and communicating seemingly endless changes in guests' accommodation needs to the on-campus hotel.

Say yes and also manage demands

While planning the event, we both juggled our usual obligations and responsibilities. For example, Kim was working on 50 other events that fall, and Caroline was managing SCUA's instruction program, planning and teaching some 20 classes, doing reference, and hiring and orienting a new employee. We both had a lot to keep on top of, but we stayed organized with our own to-do lists and communicated with each other frequently. We were also in close contact with our Folk New England partners, who were equally interested in the success of the event. As our event evolved, so too did the expectations. In this case, given everything else we were juggling, we were firm when we needed to be and fluid when we could.

Find ways to include library staff/librarians and to highlight their work

Donors may appreciate hobnobbing with the library's leaders, but they can also learn from the people who do the hands-on, day-to-day work of making a library or archive run, such as arranging, describing, and digitizing collections, and then making those collections available to the public. Many library professionals genuinely enjoy talking about their work.

In our case, staff from the library, SCUA, and the communications department stationed themselves at the entrance to greet guests and check them in. They then joined the pre-concert reception to mingle and discuss their work with guests. During the event, archivists' work was highlighted by the de facto emcee from Folk New England. In this way, both the collections and the people who care for them were acknowledged.

Be flexible and be okay with glitches

Every event has hiccups during both the planning and the event itself. For us, changing the venue required communicating the new location to registrants, which we did on the event website and via email (twice), yet a few people still went to Old Chapel first—and the sign that was supposed to be on its door directing people to the Student Union had not been posted. (A library staff member dashed over to rectify the situation.)

Even with these glitches, the event was a huge success. In general, most event attendees will experience the event as you hoped and intended they would. They will forget that someone spoke for longer than planned, or that a slide show started unexpectedly early, and they won't notice when catering starts cleaning up twenty minutes too early.

Enjoy yourself

We are certain that most attendees came to hear the music of legendary performers paying tribute in song and story to their friend Eric von Schmidt (1931-2007).

The concert itself felt more like hanging out in someone's living room with several incredible musicians. It lasted for perhaps an hour. Tom Rush, Chris Smither, Geoff Muldaur, and Caitlin von Schmidt (Eric's daughter) sat onstage in chairs, guitars on knees, taking turns swapping songs and stories about Eric von Schmidt and his influence on them and on folk music. The evening culminated with the early 1900s folk song about the Galveston hurricane, "Wasn't That a Mighty Storm," which von Schmidt and Rush revived in the 1960s. The entire audience of 300 joined in on the chorus. It was a powerful moment of bringing people together.

Even if you are at an event to ensure things run smoothly, it's important take a few moments during the event to acknowledge—even just to yourself—that you put in effort and that it's paying off. And the more you can tune in to guests enjoying themselves, the better grasp you will have of what makes an event work so well.

Take the credit you deserve

Although the event was not a fundraiser, donations still poured in, totaling six figures in the months immediately following. And, we must admit, those of us who were there—whether to work or enjoy it as a guest—floated on its success for weeks after.

We were not doing the fundraising or singing onstage with guitars, but we could see clearly the impact of this event, both emotional and financial. We know our work was key. So, take that credit.

And take a breath before you start planning the next big event.

