

Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After: An Audio Walking Tour of Lake Merritt

Lead Artist: Scott Oliver

Summary

Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After: An Audio Walking Tour of Lake Merritt will offer an immersive audio experience to listeners—using a mixture of ambient field recordings, interviews, music and narration to weave an idiosyncratic but approachable narrative that will guide listeners through the various natural and artificial elements that surround Lake Merritt. With an emphasis on local history, cultural diversity, urban ecology, and the power of imagination, *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* will explore the invisible that surrounds the visible—the stories and forces that shape the lake and our perceptions of it. *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* will be free to the public and widely accessible to Lake Merritt visitors through both on-site and remote locations.

Goals

The ultimate goal of *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* is to raise awareness of, and deepen the commitment to preserving and enhancing, a cultural heritage that belongs to all the people of Oakland. *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* seeks to inspire curiosity in listeners, asking them to look more closely at the world around them—to see and listen with imagination and intellect, question why and how the city they inhabit came to be, and become active participants in shaping its future. With that in mind *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* will take a holistic and eclectic approach to storytelling, offering a broad history and contemporary context for the lake.

Project Narrative

Lake Merritt is often referred to as the “Jewel of Oakland.” A faceted gemstone, at once reflective and translucent, is an apt metaphor for the shimmering body of water at the heart of Oakland. But this only hints at the complex relationships that comprise one of the city’s most significant centers of public life. Centrally located and relatively uncommercialized, Lake Merritt and its accompanying parks and attractions are a democratic space within the city where the diversity of Oakland’s citizenry is both visible and dynamic. More broadly a multitude of artificial (cultural, economic, political, historical, architectural) and natural (solar, tidal, avian, botanical, meteorological) forces are at play in and around the lake at any given moment. *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* will explore how these forces converge, overlap, intermingle and coexist—an ongoing process that shapes both the lake and the lives of visitors whose paths regularly cross at its shores.

The audio tour format readily intersects with the common activity of walking around the lake, offering a novel experience to longtime visitors and newcomers alike. *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* will be a hybrid of journalism, museum tour, personal essay and radio drama modeled on tangential or associative thought—the kind of meandering thought one has while taking a walk. It will be composed of several layers of sound: a narrator, excerpts from interviews, field recordings of ambient sounds (everything from birds to traffic noise), a musical

score composed especially for the audio tour, and a soundtrack featuring original music by local artists that reflect the diverse cultural composition of Oakland (including musicians who regularly perform around the lake). Content for the audio tour will be generated through in-the-field and historical research including: personal observation, interviews with key members of organizations operating at or on behalf of Lake Merritt as well as visitors to the lake, and academic research. The Oakland History Room at the main public library, the Natural Sciences Department at the Oakland Museum, the African American Museum and Library, the Rotary Nature Center at Lake Merritt, the Nature Sound Society, local historical societies such as the Oakland Heritage Alliance, and cultural organizations such as the Oakland Asian Cultural Center, Eastside Arts Alliance, Oaklandish and Pro Arts will serve as valuable resources for the project.

The 1 ½ –2 hour audio tour will encompass the entire perimeter of the lake. It may be experienced as a big loop, beginning and ending at the same point. However, the tour will be divided into 24–30 “chapters” or audio tracks so that listeners may enter or exit the tour at any point they choose. Physical landmarks and phenomena will be used as departure points for each chapter. For example the chain link geodesic birdcage that houses the park’s sick and wounded birds; the gnarly, ancient-looking Australian Tea Trees that twist and turn at the lake’s edge; the culverts and storm drains that empty into the lake; the pergola and colonnade at the eastern end of the lake; the eclectic apartment architecture along the south side that provides picturesque views to its occupants; the dam under the 12th Street Bridge that regulates the water level; the Lake Merritt Boat House now being renovated to accommodate a restaurant; a diminutive memorial that reads “Leon Olson loved to walk here;” the sweet song of gondoliers and so on. All of these open onto rich stories that intertwine with one another and traverse subjects ranging from conservation of natural resources to real estate development, from fairytales to war protests.

Public Presentation

Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After will be free to all. In order to facilitate maximum accessibility to the project the audio tour will be available in three forms:

1. Listening devices and printed maps will be available from 10 AM–6 PM on Saturdays and Sundays during the dates of public presentation at an on-site booth located in the Rotary Nature Center. Visitors may borrow players in exchange for a valid I.D.
2. An MP3 file of the audio tour and a PDF of the tour map will be available for download at the project web site.
3. *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* will also be available as a cell phone accessed tour by dialing a number that will appear on all promotional materials for the project.

Project Collaborators

The making of *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* will be a collaborative and cross-disciplinary process. The core group of collaborators consists of Mark Gergis (musical ethnographer/composer/musician), Maria Porges (visual artist/writer/educator), Michael Blodgett (recording engineer/musician), and myself (Scott Oliver). While none of us has produced a project identical to *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* our combined talents are well suited to the task.

As the lead artist I will be doing the research and script writing for the audio tour as well as conducting interviews and gathering field recordings. *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* brings together the interests of my visual art practice and my writing practice. I have a track record of successfully executing complex, collaborative projects within proposed budgets and timelines. I have also incorporated audio recording and production into some of my past work. Notable examples include: *An Allegory for Progress*, with collaborator Charles Beronio for the San Francisco Art Commission's View 155 (a storefront and vacant lot opposite SF City Hall); *Fog Food*, a project for the de Young Art Center in collaboration with Joseph del Pesco; *Other People's Things: Furnishing the Collective Foundation*, also with del Pesco, at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. I am also a co-founder and regular contributor to *Shotgun Review*, an online publication featuring reviews of Bay Area visual art exhibitions, and have written a number of catalog essays for local arts organizations.

Mark Gergis' experience assembling quirky world music compilations abroad and his accomplishments as a composer and musician make him an ideal collaborator for working with local musicians from diverse backgrounds, assembling the various sound elements, and creating an engaging sonic environment. A seasoned writer of scripts for museum audio tours, Maria Porges will serve as a consultant and text editor on the project, bringing her expertise in writing for the ear and diverse audiences. Michael Blodgett will contribute his talents as a recording engineer for in-studio recording sessions and mixing and mastering the final audio. He will also assist with sound editing and assembly.

Additionally, the research and development phase of the project will engage numerous community members who will have a hand in shaping the audio tour—contributing stories, music, expertise and/or insight to the project. I've already contacted individuals like Analee Allen, who organizes the city's walking tours; Richard Bailey, Executive Director of The Lake Merritt Institute; Stephanie Benavidez, Supervising Naturalist at the Rotary Nature Center; Valerie Garry, President of the Oakland Heritage Alliance; and Carson Bell, natural sounds archivist at the Oakland Museum. This will be the first level of outreach for the project, creating a broad constituency of involvement early on.

Audience and Marketing

Situated in a publicly accessible space, *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* is intended for the general public and will be suitable for all ages. There is an existing circumstantial audience in all those that regularly visit Lake Merritt, particularly those out for a leisurely stroll. However, *Once Upon A Time, Happily Ever After* is designed to have broad appeal, offering a deeper level of appreciation to longtime visitors and functioning as an introduction to Lake Merritt for newcomers. Initially the audience for the project will expand through the network of associations and relationships forged during the making of the audio tour. Additionally a concerted marketing effort will be made to generate interest throughout Oakland and Neighboring Bay Area communities. My marketing experience is limited to the promotion of my personal projects and is not extensive. I plan to work with a marketing consultant to further develop the following strategy.

- Postcards and posters announcing the project will be printed and distributed throughout the city in local businesses and community centers.
- Press kits will be sent to local media outlets including newspaper, radio and television.
- Events listings in local weeklies, online events calendars, and on public radio stations will be used to notify the public.
- Personal press contacts from previous projects will be contacted directly about the project.
- Targeted community groups such historical societies, book clubs, art associations, and nature conservancies will be contacted and sent information for their members.
- A project web site will be created to announce the project, post project updates, and eventually offer the audio tour and map as free downloads; visitors to the site will also be able to add their name to the project mailing list.
- An e-mail list will be generated and used to send electronic announcements and updates about the project.