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**NEW EXHIBITION *CLIMBING THE HOLY HILL*  
TO OPEN AT SHAKER MOUNTAIN**

*“...entering a sacred site that is continually singing...”*

PITTSFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS, August 10, 2021 – Opening September 23 at Hancock Shaker Village is the new outdoor exhibition *Climbing the Holy Hill*, which weaves together the work of artists and performers Our Native Daughters, Brad Wells, Roomful of Teeth, and Allison Smith into a radiant, immersive experience. Conceived as a celebration of the sect’s annual song-filled pilgrimages to the peak of Shaker Mountain—what they sometimes called the “Holy Hill” or “Mount Sinai”—the melody, vocals, and visual elements of this exhibition are inspired by the Shakers, the trail, and the past year of contemplation. They also evoke and transform a moderate Berkshire mountains hike back into the sacred and spiritual experience it once was, a fitting project for a living-history museum dedicated to the Hancock Shakers.

The exhibition and trail begins at the Village’s Meeting House, where visitors will find a box on a tree, with copies of a contemporary letterpress print by **Allison Smith**. The print, inspired by Shaker gift drawings, includes visual and textual transcriptions of visions and messages they received in a process of spiritual attunement during the pandemic. To Smith, a genderqueer artist from San Francisco whose work engages with historical reenactment and traditional craft cultures, the drawing is a map for a contemplative pathway and a metaphor for the pandemic as a portal and a rite of passage. A drawer in the box will include Shaker seeds. Visitors are encouraged to take a drawing and seeds to bring home or cast along the trail as intentions, wishes or spells.

Continuing along the trail, hikers tune into a 45-minute sound work through a site-specific listening app—heavenly music that can be listened to along the Shaker Trail, but nowhere else. This shape-shifting sound work weaves together singing and soundings inspired by the Shakers and the trail. The first three songs are by **Our Native Daughters**, forming an ode to Americana, anti-slavery, solidarity, and the Shakers as one ascends the two-mile trail. The work includes contemplations and *Pretty Home*, a never previously recorded song written in 1849 by a former slave turned Shaker and sung here by Allison Russell.

As climbers hike higher, they will hear through the app a new piece by **Brad Wells** called *Fountain of the Elements*, performed by **Roomful of Teeth** and the spoken voices of some local talent. The sounds of voices, both spoken and sung, are woven into the site-responsive listening experience as one ascends Shaker Mountain to the ‘Holy Hill,’ the Hancock Shakers’ temple in nature. Evoking these Shaker pilgrimages by incorporating Shaker songs from the period, Wells creates an audio experience that responds to the listener’s location. Shards of text and fragments of songs from the Shakers’ forest hikes,

woven into a rich musical path, unfold in site specific spots moment by moment. Interspersed is Roomful of Teeth singing melodies of Shaker songs or spoken phrases from Shaker manuscripts, hymns, or prayers. The feeling is that of entering a sacred site that is continually singing/sounding when tuned in.

“The Shakers were a fascinating blend of deeply spiritual commitment married to experimentation and innovation in technology and design, which makes a trail hike supported by a smartphone app an appealing way to celebrate their history and make those experiences accessible for today’s audiences,” said Jennifer Trainer Thompson, Executive Director of Hancock Shaker Village. “These artists have developed powerful but sensitive works that transform a visitor’s engagement with nature. Instead of walking alone or in a small group, the sound installations help recreate a sense of being part of the larger Shaker community that once thrived here.”

### **About the Shakers and “Holy Hill”**

To the Shakers, the summit was a site of reverence, and they hiked to Mount Sinai for the first time to worship in September 1842. More than 80 Shakers marched four abreast. Eventually all the Hancock Shakers would attend – almost 175 people in all. Meetings were held each May and September. Observers of these “mountain meetings” in the 1840s describe them as one of the most beautiful sights to behold. Songs were sung as they journeyed up the hill, and they would pause at a place called Walnut Grove and “have some singing and some communication with the spirits.” (1853). It was there the Believers picked up their angel guides to lead them up the hill.

The exhibition follows this trail, beginning at Hancock Shaker Village, and continuing up Pittsfield State Forest’s Shaker Trail, a hike that takes you past remains of Shaker bridges, mills, and reservoir. Until the 1960s, this Shaker ritual site had been forgotten, until a hiker came across the relics on the hilltops. Intrigued, he researched Shaker diaries and manuscripts at Williams College, Hancock Shaker Village, and the New York State Museum, and learned that the hilltop site dated to 1842, when each of the 19 Shaker villages established a place of worship on the highest mountain nearby, to be closer to God. Two local Shaker villages (Hancock, and Mount Lebanon just west on route 20) cleared summits less than two miles from each other. This led the hiker to establish a trail system from Hancock Shaker Village into the state forest. The trail is recognized as a National Historic Trail, the first in Massachusetts.

The Hancock Shakers made the pilgrimage to the summit (Mount Sinai) twice yearly, with the elderly and children brought by horses/wagons. Along the way, they’d stop at a Walnut Grove where they’d “have some singing and some communications from the spirits” (1853). As they journeyed, they would “manifest many of their eccentricities and have wonderful revelations.... march, dance, sing and play.” This was during the Shakers’ Era of Manifestations, which began in 1837, which consisted of girls and young women receiving messages from deceased members and departed spirits. The phenomenon spread and soon men and women of all ages were receiving “gifts.” It was during this period that Shaker villages set up spiritual feast grounds on nearby hills. According to journals, at a worship service Martha Van Valen (who considered herself an instrument) was given a letter instructing five brethren to go a particular location at 2 o’clock where the angel of the Lord would direct them to the Holy Hill. Accordingly, five brethren met and received staffs and, according to journals, the holy angel led them to the chosen site. Today, the summit is marked by a Boy Scout sign saying you are entering a sacred space. Indeed, it feels that way.

*The exhibition runs September 23 to December 1, and is sponsored by Mill Town, and FreshGrass, a festival of traditional and cutting-edge Roots music. The opening of the exhibition will be marked by a group hike to the summit, where there will be a brief performance, on September 23 at 4pm.*

**About the Artists:**

**Brad Wells** is the founder and co-artistic director of the Grammy Award-winning new music vocal group **Roomful of Teeth**. Wells has led the groundbreaking ensemble in premieres of works by many of today's leading composers. His own compositions and arrangements have been performed throughout the U.S. and Europe and his permanent sound installation *Silo Songs*, featuring the earliest vocal music of the Shakers, opened at Hancock Shaker Village in 2018. Since 1999 Wells has been music faculty at Williams College, where he currently teaches sound art and voice studies. Previously, he held positions at Yale University, Trinity College, University of California at Berkeley and California State University, Chico. Wells holds music degrees from Yale University, the University of Texas at Austin and Principia College.

**Our Native Daughters** is comprised of banjo players and collaborators Rhiannon Giddens, Amythyst Kiah, Leyla McCalla, and Allison Russell, who together use their music to highlight the experiences of black women in America. Assembled by Rhiannon Giddens to make an album for the Smithsonian Folkways label, *Our Native Daughters* started as a one-off collective project that turned into a real band who were featured in a Smithsonian Channel documentary "Reclaiming History: Our Native Daughters".

**Allison Smith** is a genderqueer artist whose work embraces craft culture. Creating performative sculptures, exploring history and identity through reenactment, Smith has presented their work at museums such as SFMOMA, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, P.S.1/MoMA, Palais de Tokyo, MASS MoCA, and The Tang Museum. Smith's work is held in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Saatchi Gallery London, Linda Pace Foundation, and many other collections.

**Hancock Shaker Village** is located at 1843 West Housatonic Street in Pittsfield Mass. If you would like more information about Hancock Shaker Village, please contact Carolyn McDaniel at [cmcdaniel@hancockshakervillage.org](mailto:cmcdaniel@hancockshakervillage.org) or visit [HancockShakerVillage.org](http://HancockShakerVillage.org).

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