

# SongFarmers



**SongFarmer:** Any artist, poet, painter or musician that uses their art to make their homes, lives, and communities better.

# SongFarmer.

It's a great word.

Much better than "folksinger" or songwriter or performer. It is a poetic way to describe someone who uses their music to plant artistic seeds in their communities, families and their careers.

Here's a fact: the music business has really changed the past few years. Actually it's been turned upside down and artists have been rocked to the core. They need help and encouragement. They need a new direction because the old way of doing things no longer works.

They need honesty. I noticed a couple years ago that Folk Alliance, IBMA and the Americana Association all had one thing in common: they were well intentioned albeit expensive-to-attend trade organizations in a music world of collapsing trade. They are music business trade groups that try to help musicians, record labels and agents connect to enhance the artist's careers ... but mostly ineffective, I found, when it came to actually helping artists.

Why? Because reality often supercedes good intentions. Music stores are gone, cars are being made with no CD players, booking agents aren't signing because venues are shutting down, record labels aren't signing because nobody is buying CDs anymore. Meanwhile, these trade groups collect membership fees from artists to attend conventions based on business models that no longer exist. It is almost funny if it wasn't so sad ... their conventions are filled with artists who wrangle to get a showcase just to end up performing in front of other frustrated artists who wished they had your time slot. A futile, expensive endeavor that accomplishes little, if anything.

In my travels around the country, and I'm sure you see the same, the community of artists are adrift with no direction as the norms of our "market place" evaporate and collapse around us. These trade groups are run by very sincere people but are beholden to obsolete, outdated business models that are no longer valid or useful. Frankly, BMI and ASCAP have the same issues.

What is left, what is real, what is truthful are the tens of thousands of front porch minded musicians who love music, who love to play, who love to sing, who love to write ... but who will never make a living at it. They are worthy of validation without being lured to become members of an expensive trade group.

*"We need something new, something more better-er,"* says I.

## Creating the WFPA

To help artists deal with the changes in the music world, I wanted to organize a grand international association of front-porch minded musicians.

*"How hard can it be?"* I wondered.

Pretty ding-dang hard.

With the help of some talented, caring, and experienced friends of mine we organized the *WoodSongs Front Porch Association (WFPA)* ... an alternative to other great efforts like the Folk Alliance, the IBMA or the Americana Music Association. The WFPA doesn't compete in any way with those very fine folks.

The truth is there is no music "business" anymore. Not for the tens of thousands of artists playing at farmers markets, retirement homes, small noisy clubs, schools and front porches across the land.

I am describing the world of artists who are gathering on front porches and living rooms, turning the TV off and inviting friends over to sing and play in exchange for a pot luck meal and some homemade cookies. These are the true *Troubadours of America*, those who will sing in a local school to show kids what a banjo is, who play in a burn ward at a children's hospital or who comfort the retired with a few songs at an old folks home.

They play for the pure love of music and willingly sing where "lack of money" stop others from going.

These are the untrained and inexperienced, planting seeds with their music and nourishing a global garden with their songs. They are the tired and the exhausted from years of trying. The passionate and hungry who want to make a difference. The brilliant but unknown. The rejected and declined.

*They are the front porch community of musicians and artists  
the marketplace crushed with non-response.*

These talented, sincere songwriters, performers, dreamers and artists are being asked to pay for association fees, conference fees, travel, hotels and meals ... often totalling \$1000 or more. Instead of being helped to understand what to do with a garage full of unsold CDs in a world with no more record stores, you might be treated to a two hour speech that has nothing to do with music or the issues at hand.

Surely we can do more better-er.

## **We call the members of the WFPA “SongFarmers”**

Enter the *WoodSongs Front Porch Association*

We call our members *SongFarmers*.

A SongFarmer is any artist, songwriter, musician, poet and dreamer who uses their art and music to make their lives, homes and communities better.

To a SongFarmer, the front porch is as important a stage as a concert hall. Their banjo is a community plow, their songs are like seeds, their guitar is a hammer and saw. Music is an issue of the heart, not their wallet. They don't make fans, they make friends.

My argument for the SongFarmer movement is that it is time to create a community based on honesty. The fact is most of these wonderful songwriters and artists will never be able to make a living playing music. There is no shame in that. The crime comes when they are charged more to attend a conference supporting a non-existent market than most of them will earn in a year.

So the question is, if we create a community of like minded artists, what do we do with all of that energy?

Aside from a massive roots music education program that goes free to teachers and home school families ([SongFarmers.org/classroom](http://SongFarmers.org/classroom)) we engaged the home communities by starting SongFarmers Chapters, now in scores of cities including the latest as I write this in the Virgin Islands. We expect to have well over 200 involved in the next two years, and we need one in *Your Hometown*, too. Our members gather their friends and neighbors to sing, share pot luck and create friendships in music. The SongFarmers Chapter in little Tellico Plains TN averages 50-60 attending each event. They visit retirement homes, schools, hometown gazebos and downtown parades.



They sing, they write, they play, they stay busy. This is much better, and healthier, than sitting home counting rejection letters from record labels about to go out of business.

And, lo and behold, our SongFarmers create an audience that didn't exist before. They work for Free. They work for Love. They work for the audience ... and the audience does what the audience always does: buy their stuff.

The WoodSongs broadcast helped pioneer that business model and was created in the belief that love is the greatest transaction of the arts. It is the only transaction that matters. It causes hearts, minds and wallets to open. The music business is failing because they focused on money and not what causes the money: Love.

Here's an example I use often: no one in the history of music ever bought an album because it said "RCA Records." They bought it because they *loved* Elvis. End of story. They could care less about the record company. They would have bought his albums if he was selling them out of his 1953 Buick station wagon.

Love sells everything in the arts. WoodSongs has created a weekly audience of well over 2 million people on 514 radio stations plus American Forces Radio in 173 nations and 96M USA TV homes on PBS because of the love transaction.

Love creates incredible, powerful things and its greatest accomplishment is that it can create a massive audience. On WoodSongs yours truly works for free, the engineers and TV directors work for free, the 36 member crew are all volunteers, the theatre is donated, local hotels put the artists up for free, local restaurants feed them and the crew for free. The show goes free to public radio, free to the American Forces Radio Network, free to public television. Even the artists who come on the show are volunteers and don't even get a travel stipend.

And now you know why folk rhymes with broke.  
Just kidding ... sorta :)

Yet Judy Collins has been on WoodSongs six times, Tommy Emmanuel nine times, Bela Fleck five times. Why? Because "free" built a massive audience and the audience does what the audience ALWAYS does ... buy the artist's stuff. And artists sell stuff when they come on WoodSongs, so the fact they do it for free becomes irrelevant.

## **The FREE business model**

Free is the new business model of the Arts.  
Before you gag, let me explain.

"Free" has always been a viable business model. For decades record companies send the album to radio for free, the station plays it for free, the audience listens on their favorite station for free. And if they end up *LOVING* the artist, they run to a record store and buy the album, and concert ticket, and t-shirt ... Free is the fastest way to generate an *audience*, who are in fact the greatest benefactors of the arts.

Don't believe me?

Facebook created a multi-billion dollar empire by letting users have the platform FREE. Google, iTunes, YouTube ... all free and they are all worth billions. Why? Because FREE generates an audience, and once anything has an audience, wallets will open. FREE as a business model is viable. What the music business and most artists forgot was the LOVE part. I know it sounds very kumbaya and all, but it's true.

So my point is this:

Free works. Just don't be afraid to use it.

The more good work an artist does for the love of it, even if free, the bigger their audience will get. The bigger the audience, the better odds of them making a living. So, in a very real sense, focusing on money instead of the audience, focusing on trade instead of the heart, FA and IBMA are actually interfering with artist's ability to make a living.

I believe any financial transaction that prevents an artist from reaching their audience is a bad deal, which is why BMI and ASCAP need to change their business model. They have to get the heck out of the way of artists reaching the audience and stop making it cumbersome for venues to present live music. It's a dinosaur of a system and it has got to be upgraded. I expound on this later.

## **Which brings me back to the world of SongFarmers.**

The community of front-porch minded musicians make up the actual audience of roots music. That audience is special, it's talented and worthy of cultivation. Ever notice where the best music gets played at a folk or bluegrass festival? It's not on the main stage ... it's in the parking lots and campgrounds. Folk music, for all it's genres, is best played by members of its own audience. Usually for free.

The WFPA and our SongFarmer members are simply organizing that audience and giving them a positive direction for their talents, heart and music. We do this honestly. Let's stop pretending a market exists for them where there is none.

This community of "musical deplorables" has tremendous power and potential, and by tapping into it you can accomplish great, wonderful, unheard of things. And accomplishing good things, in the end, is the best PR campaign for any artist.

I'll use Pete Seeger as an example. Yes, again. Sure he was a good songwriter and fine banjo picker and he had his fan base, albeit damaged by the communist hunt. But his greatest, global PR campaign was something he did for free: *The Clearwater*. It gained him genuine, complete respect, it made him an inspiration to tens of thousands of musicians and millions of people.

It took work, effort, thought, planning and gumption far beyond sitting in his log cabin decrying his banishment from TV and loss of a record deal. He fought back by accomplishing something good ... even it was for free. And he did it as a local citizen in his local community. It was all hometown stuff.

The result was this new legion of admirers worldwide that bought his concert tickets and his albums. And he earned the very thing you notice most folk musicians don't have:

*Respect.*

Harry Chapin did the same. Benefit after benefit, helping where he could, giving of his heart, music and mind. People weren't just his fans, they were his friends. He made his hometown just as important as any national stage. He learned that from Pete Seeger. Pete and Harry humbly treated their audience as if they were "unfamous."

The byproduct of humility is often praise. It galvanized his audience, and his career was bolstered by the one thing most one-hit-wonders can only dream of:

*Respect.*

Respect is not awarded by virtue of our vocation. It is earned.

The reason, since antiquity, most musicians are not recognized as working people is because, frankly, most of them don't do or accomplish much. The cliché has become real, especially as the market collapses. If I meet another whiner sitting around their base-



**Pete planted the seeds ...  
SongFarmers cultivate  
the Garden**

ment with a small recording machine waiting to be discovered I'll scream. Get off your duff and show the world you actually want this. WORK for heaven's sake and stop complaining. The point the WFPA makes to our SongFarmers is this:

**Artists should not just think outside the box, they need to *crush the box* and build a new one.**

And the new box for musicians is local, not national. The "new box" means they probably won't make a living with their music, but it can be a powerful and effective part of their life.

Every national career is launched from our "front porch" and my goal is to make that stage important again and help pave a way for artists to be less discouraged by what is happening to this music business.

With the WFPA I wanted a new way to reach out to artists, to really explain the new music world, and really point to a brand new direction for their music and careers. I wanted this to be really, really, really cheap, just \$25 a year. And to attend our yearly conference, called *The WoodSongs Gathering*, they get to come free ... yes, as in free.

And before all you finger-waggers get started, I'm not putting down the trade groups. Heck, I'm even a member. I do, however, think they are lost in an old business model that no longer exists. The music world is upside down and inside out. Who would have guessed just five years ago that today one of the biggest retailers of CDs in America would end up being a restaurant chain? And, no, it's not Starbucks.

We all need to have a brand new outlook on music. We need to have a truthful, albeit painful look at what is really happening out there. We need a spectacular new direction for our music. And we all have to learn, as brutal as it may seem at first, how FREE works.

SongFarmers are taught the most important rule of the new music world: LOVE is the most important transaction of the arts. It isn't marketing, management, what record label you're on or who your investor is. All of that is irrelevant without LOVE. "Love" makes the world of art work.

Nashville has virtually lost it's entire music middle class because the bean counters focused on marketing and money ... not love. The only thing ... the only thing ... the audience responds to is their love for a song, love for an artist, love for an idea.



SongFarmers learn to direct that love in a way that does not focus on money. They focus instead on their families, their hometowns, their audiences and resurrect the emotional front porch in everyone who hears them.

## Where the SongFarmer name came from

This all started when I performed a concert in Winnsboro, Texas and two songwriter friends, Lynn Adler and Lindy Hearne, gave me a bumper sticker that proclaimed their pondside cabin home in Texas an "organic song farm." It sat on my desk for months and then one day, as I was organizing the *WoodSongs Front Porch Association* it occurred to me that "song farming" is exactly what we are trying to do.



Our members would be called *SongFarmers*.

I called them up and said would you mind if we stole your word? They said, go ahead, we stole it from someone else.

It was so Woody Guthrie-ish ...

**"Aw he just stole from me. But I steal from everybody.  
Why, I'm the biggest song stealer there ever was."**

*Woody Guthrie*

And that's where the SongFarmer name came from. I think Woody was a SongFarmer. So was Jean Ritchie and Pete Seeger. So is most of the music world filled with artists who love playing more than most anything else.

So join the WFPA. Become a SongFarmer. Change your thinking about the music business for the better, and be part of the amazing work our members are doing. **SongFarmers.org**



### **The WFPA mission statement:**

*To gather the global community of front porch minded musicians, bring roots music education into schools free of charge, and enhance communities by redirecting the energies of local musicians.*



I'm asked often about two things: the *medal* on my jacket and the *feather* on my guitar. Let's talk about the feather.

A few years ago a friend of mine was explaining his Native American history and how they believed dreams were like living creatures carried on the wings of eagles.

*"How beautiful,"* says I. So I went and found myself an Indian dreamcatcher with a feather on it, tied it to my guitar thinking, *"Songs are like dreams, carried on the wings of voices."*

Sometime later, I was told a dreamcatcher is actually a sacred thing to many Native Americans, who are offended by having them sold as cheap trinkets in tourist shoppes.

*"What about just a feather?"* says I.  
No problem.

So I found some hawk feathers, fashioned them to hook on my tuning gears and I've been letting them hang from my guitar and banjo ever since. In my vision the feather signifies the spirit and heart of song, carried by the voices of the audience is if by an eagle, soaring high over us and beyond.

And, to me, that's what a good song should do ...

Pick it, Play it, Perform it ...

# SongFarmers BLUES



Words & Music  
©Michael Johnathon/RachelAubreyMusic/BMI  
Performed in the key of G

This is a fun song and should be played with a loose, relaxed “front porch” feel. Listen to the recording, but certainly come up with your own style. You might even add a verse, especially if you want to add a different “instrument” to the lyric mix.

## VERSE



My ba - by and me, — play-ing now - do - lin  
— and fid-dle all night long. Ha-by can I sing a - long?  
Just me and you, pick-in' Song Farm-er's Blues.

## CHORUS



We sing from the heart and play — with a cir-cle of friends.  
Tune up that old gui-tar, — play all night long.

My Baby and Me

Playin' mandolin and fiddle

All night long

Maby I can sing along

Just me and you ... pickin' SongFarmers Blues

On a Front Porch Swing

Pickin' to the rhythm

And a neighbor calls

"Maybe I can play with you"

It don't have to be new ... playin' SongFarmers Blues

We sing from the heart

And play with a circle of friends

Tune up that old guitar

and play All Night Long ...

My banjo and me

I can play any song and make it  
sound so sweet

like a 5-string symphony

but so can you ... playin' SongFarmers Blues

(inst)

We sing from the heart

And play with a circle of friends

Tune up your old guitar

and play All Night Long ...

This Martin and Me

Your mandolin and fiddle

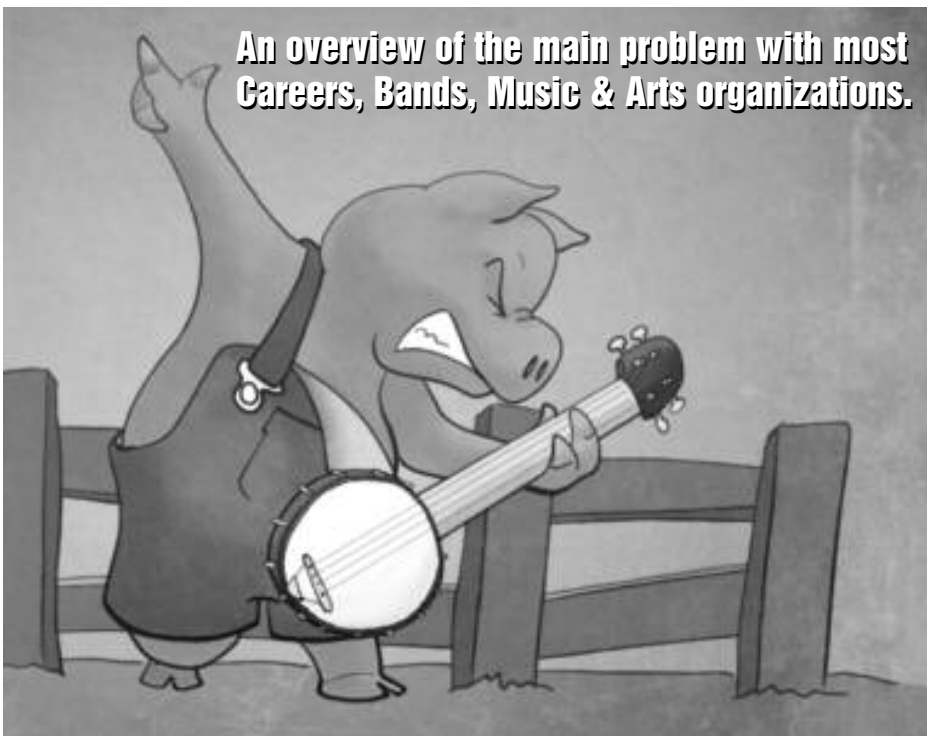
all night long

No one has to play alone

Just me and you ... playin' SongFarmers Blues

Me and you ... playin' SongFarmers Blues

Let's Discuss the  
**PIG**



Once upon a time there was a farmer ...

... and he had a wonderful, vibrant garden that fed his family, his livestock, even his neighbors. It was so healthy and food so plentiful he had enough produce for his local market. Yes, his garden even provided him with an income.

The farmer loved his garden, he was proud of it, he tended it, took care of it, cultivated it, watered it and gave it all of his attention.

Then, one day, the farmer got himself a pig.

And, oh my, how impressed he was with his pig, so new and different from the garden. The farmer became so enamored with the pig that he began to give it more of his time. His pig grew and got fat and the farmer fed it more and more of the garden's produce.

Soon, most of the harvest from his garden was gathered just to feed the pig. The pig demanded so much attention the farmer had less time to tend his garden ... and so the harvest began to wither and dry up. Weeds began to take over the garden but the farmer hardly noticed because his attention was so consumed by his pig.

One day the farmer was so exhausted from caring for the pig that he asked himself, *"How did this pig get so fat, and what happened to my beautiful garden?"*

But still the pig demanded more from the garden, more time and attention from the farmer. And the farmer couldn't escape the demands of the pig. He began to lose his joy with the pig, with the garden and all the good things he once had as a loving farmer.

Until finally, one day, there was nothing left of the garden.

It was gone ... and the pig couldn't survive and the farmer had nothing for market and couldn't feed his family.

## **What is THE PIG?**

Let's use music to explain, but this is true of all artists, bands, charities and non-profits. In my universe of folk and roots music, our "garden" is the world of songs, poetry, community, instruments, the audience and all that is part of being a musician and songwriter. It is a beautiful, amazing, colorful, vibrant garden.

And there are many loving, attentive "farmers" for this world: the IBMA takes care of the bluegrass garden, the Folk Alliance cares for the folk garden, etc.

The "pig" is the corporate structure of any organization ... whether a national charity, a local community group or a garage band. It is the business entity created to oversee their operations. The "pig" is how expensive you make your existence.

## Here's what happens:

When the pig is first brought into the garden, the expenses are low and all the attention is on the music, the artists and the garden itself. The good intention is to make the garden bigger and better while feeding the pig.

Remember, the garden existed long before the pig, but once the pigs arrive they tend to take over the garden. As the pig grows the need for money takes over ... for Executive Director salaries, offices, managers, staff, marketing, vacations and benefits. Travel budgets. All of this money gets sucked out of the garden. The bigger the pig gets the more unyielding the budgets become and the more attention the farmer gives the pig instead of tending the garden.

Before you know it the garden begins to wither and dry up. The cost of being members of the organization get way too high. The cost of attending the conferences get way too high. The pig overtakes the garden to such a degree that all the beauty that was the garden begins to dry up and leave. Feeding the pig makes the cost of being in the garden too expensive for the average artist.

**It costs the average musician upwards of \$1000 to be a member of most music trade groups, pay for conference fees, travel and get hotel rooms and meals. That is more than most musicians make in a year.**

If it costs more to be part of the garden than the garden can provide, the farmer needs to make a choice:

Abandon the garden - or get rid of the pig.

My whole argument here is that the corporate structure of the arts world ... the pig ... has gotten so out of hand that it is ruining the very garden of arts we love. As the business models change and the ability of artists to make a living becomes more difficult, farmers need to reduce the size of their pigs.

That doesn't mean the people running arts organizations are "pigs." Be careful how you interpret this. Most are sincere, passionate folks that truly love the art form they are helping. It's the size of the corporate structure that becomes the pig.

Here's an example: the Clearwater organization began as a small, community driven, music loving group that protected the Hudson River. As time went on, the pig got so big and fat that most

of their attention was spent on raising money to feed the pig and NOT to protect the garden they were part of. Eventually, they cancelled the famous Clearwater Folk Festival to conserve funds to keep the pig fed. The folks at the office didn't *want* that to happen ... but it did. They've since adjusted and are back, thankfully.

By contrast, the WoodSongs broadcast is a theatre event with artists from around the world, produces 44 shows a year in front of several hundred people on a Monday night with a 30+ member crew, syndicated to 500+ radio stations plus American Forces Radio in 173 nations, a 5-camera HD-TV broadcast edited, closed captioned, satellite fed and viewable in 96M USA TV homes on public TV, live online feed plus over 800 shows archived for free on our website ... all on a weekly budget of \$629.

How is this possible, you ask? Because ... *drum roll, please ...* we have a teenie weenie pig.

My point is simple: If the pig consumes more money than the artists in the garden ... *the pig must die*. Or at least go on a diet.

All arts careers, bands and groups need to take a close look at the condition of the garden you are part of. An organization with a flourishing garden and a little pig is doing it right. If you see your garden withering, struggling ... if the artists are frustrated and the audiences dwindling ...

