



# VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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## Broadcasting a Positive Image of the Mountain State

Larry Groce, Artistic Director, Co-founder and Host  
Mountain Stage

Larry Groce is the Artistic Director, Co-founder and Host of Mountain Stage, the live performance music program produced by West Virginia Public Broadcasting and distributed by National Public Radio. Recorded in front of a live audience, each two-hour episode of Mountain Stage can be heard every week on more than 240 stations across America and around the world via NPR Music and [mountainstage.org](http://mountainstage.org). Groce is also the Founding Executive Director of FestivALL, Charleston, West Virginia's 10-day celebration of the arts.

This is an article about Mountain Stage and West Virginia tourism, but please indulge me for a moment if you would. A few weeks ago, I went fishing on the New River with my friend Teddy Queen, a rafting guide who owns and runs The Swiftwater Café in Charleston, and his friend Billy Bright. We had a beautiful day on the river, even if the smallmouth weren't cooperating like we'd hoped they would. However, about 45 minutes before we pulled out, I hooked a 22-inch walleye, and that made the day even more beautiful.

Now, I'm not just telling you this so I can put a picture of me and that fish into print (well, maybe that's part of it). After we pulled out, and Teddy and Billy had gone to get the truck, I began to talk to some folks who pulled their raft out after us. They were two dads, one with a young son and the other with a daughter, who had bought the raft after taking float trips with Adventures on the Gorge. They were enjoying a day on that lovely river surrounded by the sweetest mountains in the world.

Turns out the guy I spoke with lived in the Charlotte, North Carolina area, so I welcomed him to West Virginia, and he said he loved it here and visits often. "As a matter of fact," he told me, "I'll be back next week." When I asked what was bringing him back, he said, "I'm going to Mountain Stage."

He didn't know I was host of the show, so I identified myself and told him I'd see him there. It was a fun moment for us both. He then asked about where to eat in Fayetteville and I gave him several suggestions. He seemed most interested in the ones that included local craft beers.

My point is this: folks often visit here for more than one reason. It might be for the natural beauty, a festival, outdoor recreation, food and drink or a sporting event. But it's more likely a combination of these. The more reasons to come, the more likely we'll see them. Think about why you visit a place.

These days, almost everyone can travel, not just the well-to-do. They may not stay in the same



*Larry shows the 22" walleye he caught on the New River*



*Clockwise from top left: Audience waiting to get into Mountain Stage at the Culture Center in Charleston, WV (Photo Credit: Mountain Stage); Larry Groce holding poster printed by Base Camp Printing (Photo Credit: Brian Blauser); Mountain Stage final song (Photo Credit: Josh Saul); River Whyless Band on Mountain Stage (Photo Credit: Josh Saul).*

hotels (or campgrounds) or eat at the same places, but they can all play in the same rivers and hike in the same mountains. Even the thrickest visitors will add something to our local economies, and many spend substantial amounts of money.

Because Mountain Stage is broadcast over 220+ stations and is downloaded 60,000 times per show, we reach nearly a quarter of a million listeners per week all over the world. Our largest radio audiences are Philadelphia, Boise, Boston, Birmingham and Anchorage. Attending a live Mountain Stage is often a bucket list item for longtime listeners. We've had audience members who have planned family reunions, vacations and even bachelorette parties around the live taping of Mountain Stage and we try to give them a special, personal experience when we know they're here.

In 2018, we had over 13,000 people see Mountain Stage live, and 8,000 were at our home base in Charleston. More than half of those Charleston attendees come from at least an hour outside the city. The great majority spend money here on food, gas and merchandise, along with their tickets. From near or far, tourism is tourism.

Some folks have mixed feelings about tourism because they think of certain places as their own private retreats. But if it's intelligently planned for, it won't spoil anything, and tourism dollars are undoubtedly a very important element as this state begins to diversify its economy – which it must. We should aim to attract the best kind of visitors, those who respect and value what's here naturally and culturally.

One of the most important things Mountain Stage does is help to change the image of our state among those who have a mistaken idea – or no idea at all – of who we are. Tourism also does this. Everyone who deals with visitors can tell you that it may be hard to get folks here, but once they've been here, most of them want to come back. They love the West Virginia experience, as I did when I came here 47 years ago. I loved it so much I stayed. I'm sure glad I did.

Oh, one more thing: did you check out the photo of me and the fish? ▾