

MORE THAN NUMBERS: TRENDSPOTTING CULTURAL CHANGES WITH DATA.

*Topher Lawton
Information Visualization*



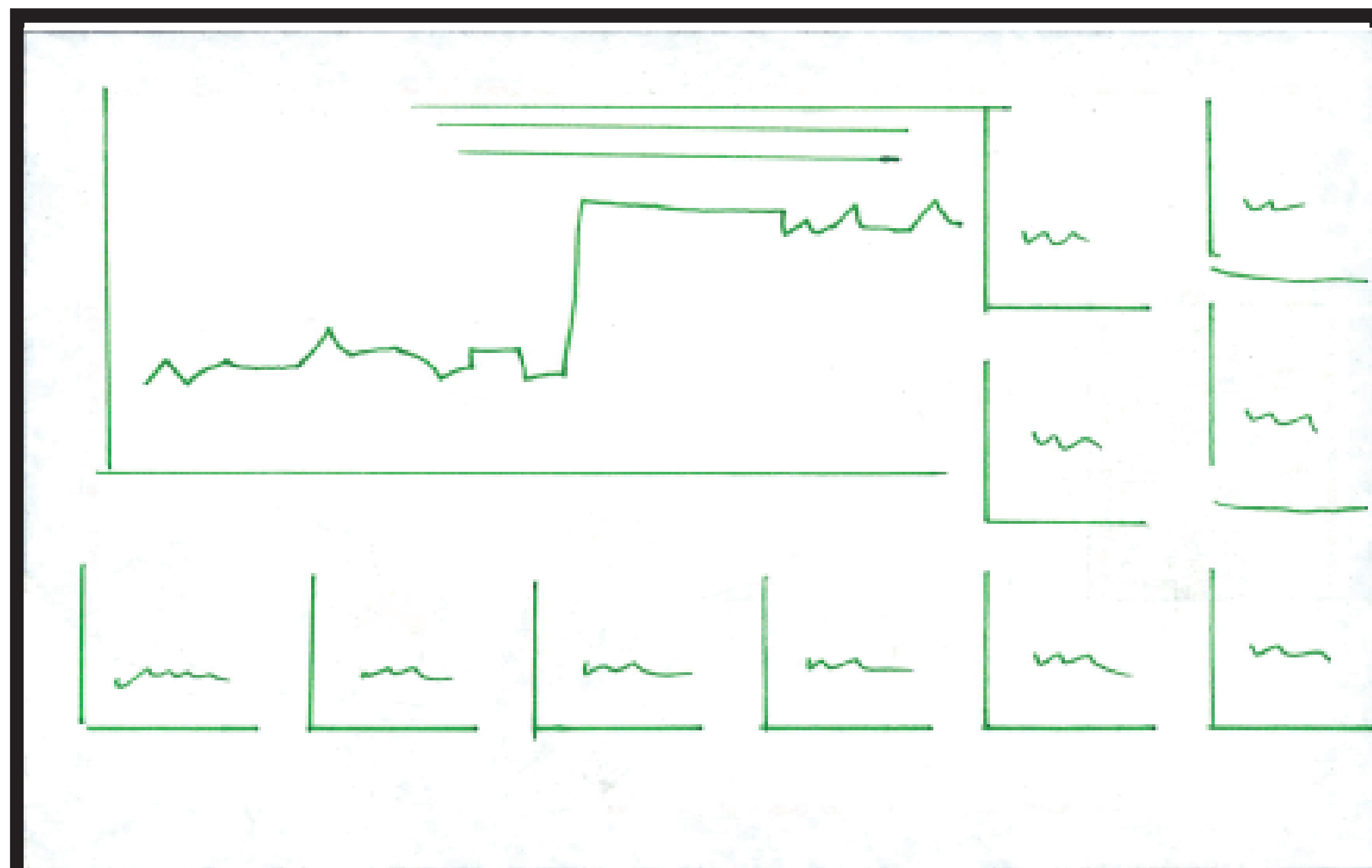
Uniquely American, the Sacred Harp music tradition has been enjoying something of a renaissance for the last thirty years. As the revival proliferates from the deep south throughout the country (and even starts to gain a foothold in the rest of the world), the data available paints the picture of a strong, living tradition of music. Having sung Sacred Harp music for over a decade, I was interested in exploring the data to see what could be learned, and when I found the connection between the film *Cold Mountain* and the popularity of the two Sacred Harp songs on the soundtrack, I knew it was the story I wanted to tell. Perhaps more importantly, I believe that this is one example of a greater trend; that popular culture can cast light on old traditions, revitalizing them for a new audience. As some traditions are threatened with extinction, simply knowing that the lens of popular culture can help bring new practitioners to the field is encouraging, especially in light of new technology making it ever easier to share stories with the world.



START TO FINISH: THE DESIGN PROCESS

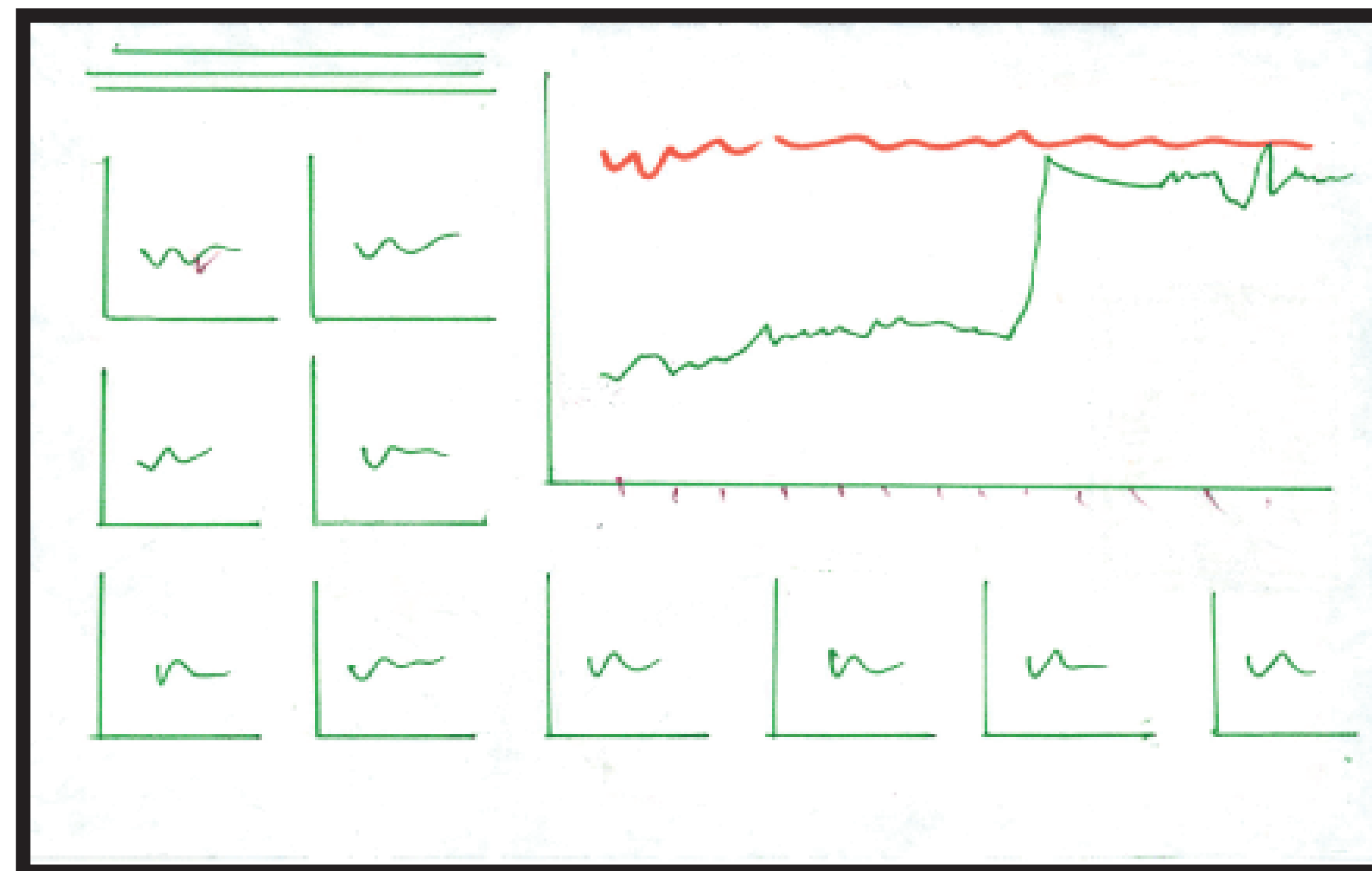
Sketch it out!

With multiple variables and ideas, I turned to pen & paper to explore ideas and design/layout options...



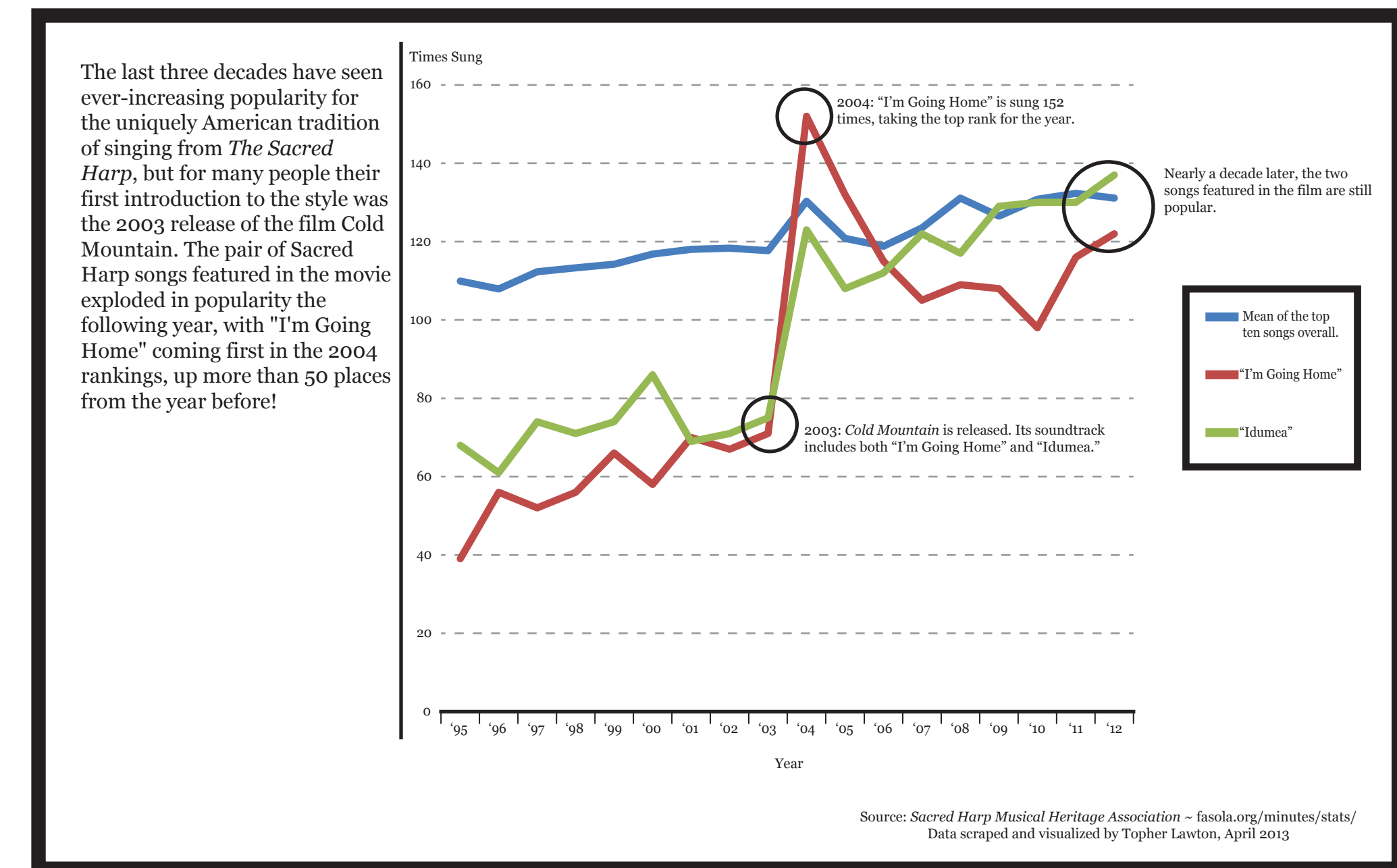
Refine, Refine

I hit an idea I liked, but I wasn't certain, so I showed it to a few people. One suggested adding the "mean" line to make the comparison easier.



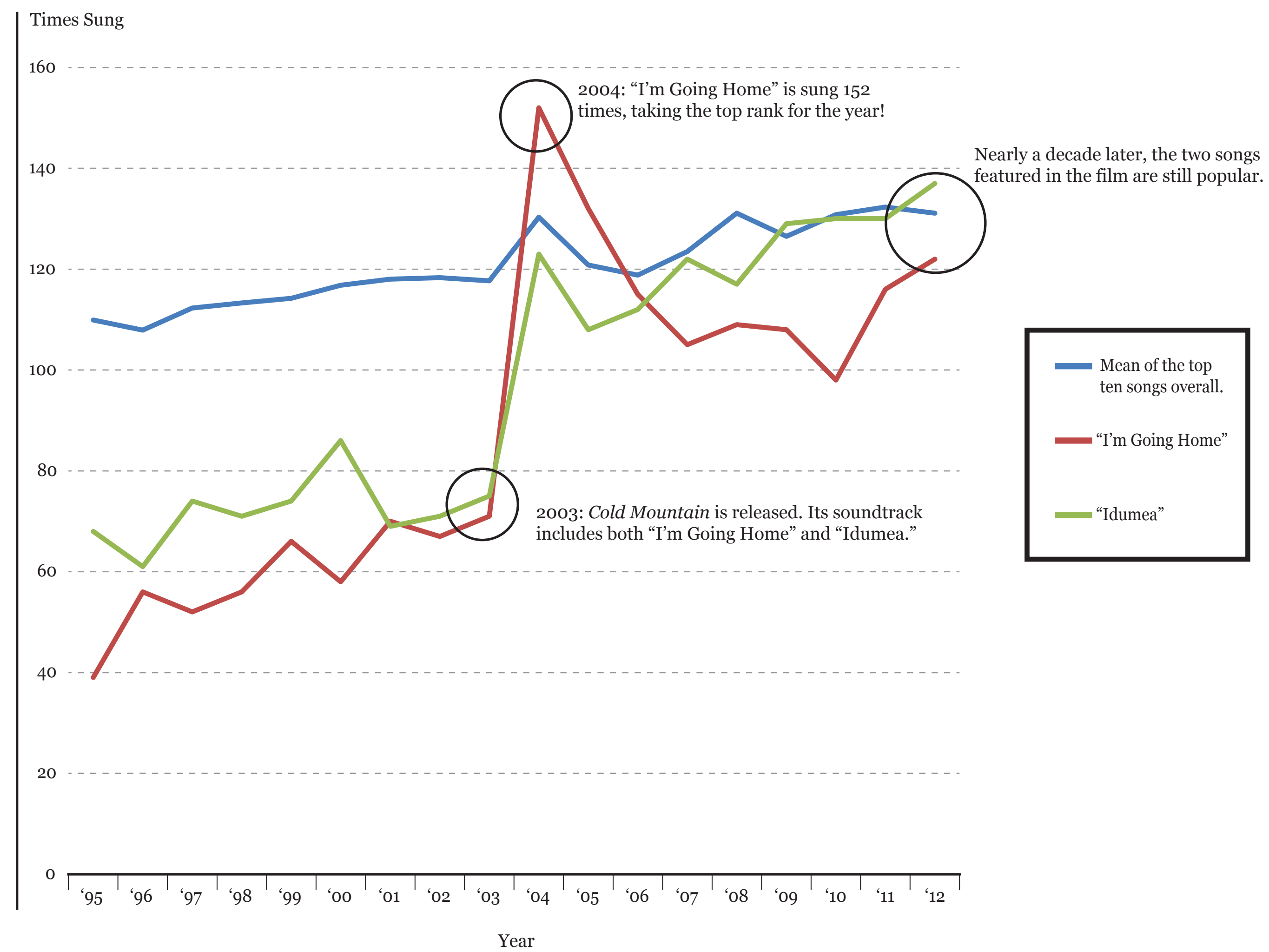
Almost There!

It was time to go to the computer. This was the first clean digital draft I created, and showed to others. Their feedback led to the final version.



THE IMPACT OF FILM ON TRADITIONAL MUSIC

The last three decades have seen ever-increasing popularity for the uniquely American tradition of singing from *The Sacred Harp* (First published in 1855). For many people, the Civil War film *Cold Mountain* (2003) was their first introduction to the 19th-century style. The pair of Sacred Harp songs featured in *Cold Mountain* exploded in popularity the following year, with "I'm Going Home" coming first in the 2004 rankings, up more than 50 places from 2003!



Source: Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association ~ fasola.org/minutes/stats/
Data scraped & visualized by Topher Lawton, April 2013

THINKING ABOUT THE AUDIENCE

The visualization is targeted toward singers of Sacred Harp music, and particularly to newcomers in the tradition. As the audience likely brings some experience with *The Sacred Harp* to the table, and certainly brings thoughts on favorite tunes, it seemed fitting to share this information about song popularity with them. Especially for new singers, who may be in the group initially exposed to Sacred Harp music by *Cold Mountain*, the film's impact on the tradition could serve as a personal connection between the singer and the data. Additionally, for groups that are generally isolated from other singers, assumptions about favorite tunes in a particular location may vary widely from the songs that are most popular in the national tradition.



THE DATASET

The Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association strives to preserve Sacred Harp music in all traditional forms, and collects annual minutes for each "singing." The collected minutes stand as a unique window into the history of singings, the popular tunes, and the rankings over time of every tune in *The Sacred Harp*

