

Folk Tales Podcast

Episode 6: Streetwise

Audio Transcript

[00:00] **Intro (spoken by several consecutive voices over upbeat music):** Every summer, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival brings voices together, honoring the traditions we carry forward. This podcast is the un-hosted open mic for the Festival's tradition bearers, creatives, and storytellers. Culture isn't preserved in glass cases—it's lived, breathed, and passed forward. Here's the story.

[00:30] **Antonio Eagle Bear:** Expressing certain stuff through a piece—that's just a way to put yourself out there in the world.

[00:35] **Wyatt Showen:** It's being able to teach them, like, this is what we do, this is who we are, and this really matters.

[00:40] **Alasdair Delgado:** Random kids from all the different areas can show up, and they can see how much of a community skateboarding can be, 'cause especially for me, the skateboarding community has done wonders.

[00:48] **DJ Znorthy:** Graffiti is art. Skateboarding is art. Raves are art.

[00:52] **Andrea Mayorga:** I just didn't realize how much was gonna go into this program and how beautiful it was going to be and ended up being.

My name is Andrea Mayorga, and I am a curatorial assistant for the Folklife Festival.

The *Streetwise* tent was this massive tent on the National Mall that included the lowrider section and skateboarding, DJs, muralists, graffiti artists, and sidewalk astronomy. Streetwise really was the brainchild of Michelle Banks and Sojin Kim in partnership with the National Museum of American History.

[01:34] **Michelle Banks:** I'm Michelle Banks, and I'm the lead curator for the 2025 Smithsonian Folklife Festival program, *Youth and the Future of Culture*.

One of our meetings, we are like, "Okay, but what do we call lowrider cars and bikes and graffiti and all these other pieces?" And it was Arlene Reiniger who said, "What about 'Streetwise?'" And we said, "Yes, that's it!"

[01:53] **Mayorga:** With street culture, I feel like, for the most part, it usually grows out of some kind of, like, marginalized community. The youth, today especially, they recognize that, and they also recognize the importance of intergenerational knowledge exchange and what it means to pass down the culture.

[02:11] **(Rap song in Spanish by Andes MC)**

[02:18] **Mayorga:** People, when they think of lowriders, there's this image that's painted in their head of a specific group of people in a specific way, and it tends to not be the most positive light that lowriders are painted in. I think what we did at the Festival shined a light on what lowriding is really about in the sense that it's not just about cars. It's really about family. It's about coming together. It's about having each other's back.

[02:45] **Ash Dalal:** What I thought was just, "Hey, it's like a car show on the ground that drives," I'd come to realize that it's a labor of love. Every aspect of lowriding is far more than I expected.

My first name really is Ashish, Ash for short.

Lowriding to me is completely new, but I was given this opportunity to work with the lowrider community through the school. SAVA is a technical education school. They want to provide the best skills for their students and for them to accelerate into their career and to basically get a job and get money. So, when I was giving them these attributes of this industry, of the things you need and the ways to do it, the one thing that I appreciated most was there was never a no. They are very proactive in knowing and understanding the industry to say "How do we take this now and give these opportunities to kids?"

[03:34] **Showen:** My name is Wyatt Showen. My family's from San Jose, California, which has another huge car community, especially in lowriding.

All lowriders are uniquely different for multiple different reasons. They tell a story about a family, about a memorial, about an upbringing, or about something that someone really deeply believes in and they wanna send a message. So, they do it in the form of a tapestry or something, whatever. And with this, I feel like we're doing the same exact thing but with our own little flare.

SAVA, they understand people have hardships in life. We're a very "build on top of another person" community. We love to improvise, adapt, and overcome.

[04:12] **Dalal:** We are at a point in time now where the education system doesn't realize that some students don't learn the traditional way. SAVA luckily has tailored their entire school to focus on technical education, technical in the sense that I'm giving you the necessary physical skills to move on with your career and interest, whether it's construction, whether it's art, whatever it is that you want.

A traditional school—here's a hammer, here's a nail, go. What SAVA does is "Here's a hammer; here's a nail; let's build a house so you can build a house together." They take that final step to help exercise the tools and knowledge that's already in place to give them something so they can carry home and say, "I have pride in what I did."

[04:59] **Banks:** Steve Velasquez at Museum of American History, he told us about SAVA, which is the Sacramento Academic and Vocational High School, and the work that they were doing, converting a '64 Impala to EV technology.

[05:12] **Mayorga:** In lowrider culture, like, you really don't see that kind of car ever. It's very much like you have the big engine in there. and it's just, like, your classic car, so to be able to have an electric version of a lowrider is just, like, very innovative and new and hasn't really been done before.

[05:32] **Showen:** I see us at the spearheads completely because, as my knowledge is, we are the first in the world to be doing this, and especially as high schoolers. Impalas are really known for their lowriding and their muscle car features. Back then, in the sixties and forwards, what you buy is who you were.

[05:45] **Dalal:** When folks come up to us and say, "This is sacrilege; don't do this to this car," we are simply being that bridge to show you that we're taking community, we're taking the love of the vehicle, and just taking it to the next level that we can do this. And we're not taking any of the lowriding aspect of it, that, any of the car culture away from people.

[06:04] **Showen:** We don't want to change you. We want to show you the change in what I can do and what my generation can do.

[06:14] **Mayorga:** I remember when I got like a phone call that the vehicle was arriving in its trailer, and we, like, ran down the street to flag him over and seeing them open the trailer and then have the car roll out of there after like months of seeing pictures of this car online was super exciting.

One of the most amazing comments or feedback that we've received since the end of the Festival is that people are now walking away with this newly found knowledge and respect and admiration for lowrider culture.

[06:47] **Dalal:** Wyatt and his team and his students have been angels because they're willing to learn. They're willing to put themselves, they're willing to put their best foot forward. And to me, that shows commitment. That shows that, if I'm giving you my time, you're respectful of that, and you're acknowledging that, but you're giving me the return of you learning.

[07:06] **Showen:** There's been a lot of young kids out here, and it's been a blessing to teach them and teach them what we're doing and who we are and why we're doing it.

I always thought of lowriding as just cars, but it's not. It's an art. It's a heritage. It's a story.

[07:26] **Rebecca Fenton:** There's a lot of positive self-expression that comes through in graffiti and street art.

I'm Rebecca Fenton. I'm a curator at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

We worked with RedCan Invitational Graffiti Jam, which is a product of the Cheyenne River Youth Project. It's a graffiti festival in Eagle Butte, South Dakota, on their reservation in which world-class street artists work with Lakota youth and vice versa. The Graffiti Jam is maybe the most innovative or groundbreaking program that they do.

We were just amazed by this organization, so we invited them to send us some youth artists, and we created for them a few different places to paint in the spirit of graffiti street art. Our two youth artists were Antonio and Kai'len. As we started talking about actually the Streetwise setting and the concept, like, Antonio's eyes started to get bigger.

[08:26] **Eagle Bear:** Graffiti just caught my eye because there's so much vibrant colors you could see and, like, a whole bunch of stuff and a whole bunch of different styles of it and all of this.

I've been doing graffiti since I was eight years old, and I've just been going since, layering graffiti after graffiti, piece after piece, tagging up everywhere.

[08:44] **Mayorga:** You see graffiti out at, like, on the freeways. My parents are usually like, "Oh, like, why did they do that? You know, they ruin this space with this, like, tagging." But it's not tagging. But it really is artwork. It's speaking to the experiences of the person that's creating this artwork.

[09:01] **Eagle Bear:** I'd seen this mural get done, and that's what just brought me into graffiti. It's a, it's a hand signs, and it spelt out "Lakota." I know the person who made it, but that's, that was the first RedCan mural I seen, right down the street of my house.

I like the lettering, everything, just part of all of that. It just shocked my mind when I was little, like "Holy." It just looked magical. And then that's what got me into the lettering, and I learned how to do hand signs in Lakota.

[09:29] **Fenton:** Their director, Julie Garreau, had at some point this insight that graffiti as a global art movement and culture resonates with traditional Lakota culture. And that might be surprising, I mean, where their reservation is as far from an urban area. It's in a remote and rural part of South Dakota. But she saw that the way that graffiti art is inclusive, innovative, open to lots of different expressions, and something that is generated from youth—that was the start of the global graffiti art movement.

So, she wanted to bring graffiti art to her constituents on their reservation, and so they created this festival that is not only a time for the use artists to have access to surfaces to paint on and supplies to paint with to express themselves, but they bring in guest artists, many of whom are Native and, and they also make a lot of efforts to bring those people into Lakota culture.

[10:29] **Eagle Bear:** There's just a bunch of graffiti artists that come together and just do a bunch of art murals around, and it's just a fun place to be whenever you want to go somewhere, chill out with some more graffiti artists, people just like you, artists everywhere.

Our instructor, Wakinyan, uh, Wakinyan Chief, he showed me a lot of cool things about, like, graffiti. He would show me books. He would tell me certain stuff, different techniques. He helped me through graffiti. He helped me, like, different lettering, colors that go together, how to structure your letters better, how to put colors, different pieces, characters, all of this. Yeah, he's just been helping me through it all.

[11:06] **Fenton:** Inside Streetwise, the large tent, we had a, a sea container serving as kind of a backdrop to some of the activities taking place because graffiti and street art is so, like, allied with skating and other kinds of alternative cultures and activities. We thought that it was a great.

[11:26] **Mayorga:** These are youth that are expressing themselves in an outdoor space in a way that isn't like a museum exhibit.

[11:34] **Fenton:** I hope that people saw how joyful, celebratory, and expressive and how empowering it is for these young people to pick up the cans and very directly express themselves in their identities in a public space like this.

[11:51] **Cristina Díaz-Carrera:** Skateboarding is definitely a very important community, like, for youth across many decades.

I'm Cristina Diaz-Carrera, and I'm a curator for Streetwise.

I feel really grateful to be able to work on some of the more performative aspects. That included skateboarding. It wouldn't have worked without Kat Salazar and the relationships that she had and bringing the right kind of vibe to it.

[12:21] **Kat Salazar:** My name is Kat Salazar, and I co-created the skateboarding section.

Coming into the Institution, it felt natural to be able to welcome people in an environment and make them feel like it was okay to be there. I think sometimes skateboarding can collectively work itself out to be a welcoming environment.

[12:41] **Díaz-Carrera:** It's the perfect community for folk life. The beautiful thing about skateboarding is it connects people.

Alistair Delgado, one of our young skaters who was there—such an amazing energy.

[12:53] **Delgado:** Nowadays, you can see skateboarding everywhere. Here, you've got people of all different ages and backgrounds coming together and just having a session and passing it on to the newer generation 'cause some kid who's never seen skateboarding before might come here and see somebody skate and go, "Wow, man, I wanna do that."

[13:07] **Díaz-Carrera:** This is a kid who is a photographer and is talking to different skateboarders and trying to collect historic photographs of skating. He's just so in it, and everyone just loves having that energy from the next generation.

[13:25] **Delgado:** It is a true sense of individuality but also discovering more about you and putting your twist and your touch on things. It's refreshing to look back at where you came from and know your history and, nowadays, like, that style and that era of skateboarding and, and the real, raw grittiness of it is beginning to become lost.

[13:43] **Salazar:** It can be hard for other people, especially as women and nonbinary skateboarders, uh, in this scene, to just walk up to the park with their board and start

skating. And for a lot of us, we've been in that place, so that's what makes it naturally easy for us to create such a safe space, and as much as people can create a space like that for you, it's really ultimately up to you to maintain that.

I would not be in the position that I am without my community. A lot of these skateboarding events and skateboarding community, it's not just about the actual skateboarding, it's about the people that show up, the people that contribute, the people that are artists, musicians, anything.

[14:24] **Delgado:** One of the things that I learned specifically from the old guys was that it's all about the energy that you put out onto your skateboard and you put back out into your community is the energy that you're going to give back.

[14:34] **Salazar:** I found so much joy in providing the spaces for this and allowing people that are good at it to thrive. Skateboarders will thrive everywhere. The energy and air when these spaces are created is unmatched.

[15:00] **Mayorga:** Adding the DJs into the mix really tied the whole space together. I think that was like the one missing element that kind of then created this mini community. On the National Mall, you had your skateboarders doing their tricks and doing their workshops, and you had these graffiti artists doing their artwork, but something they all happened to have in common was their love and admiration for music. So, then you have the DJs there, giving them that missing piece and pulling the space together.

[15:27] **(High-energy drum-and-bass music playing in the Streetwise tent)**

[15:32] **Znorthy:** My name is Xavier. My DJ name is Znorthy, and I was one of the DJs.

I'm like, "Okay, like, what do I think of when I see skateboarding?" I really thought of drum and bass, drum and bass, and jungle, and so I, like, built up a little library and played it, and it was honestly so perfect.

The vibe that I really want to curate is a vibe that inspires confidence in people. I want people to really feel themselves and be moved by the music. I just really want people to feel confident and unleash parts of themselves they wouldn't usually.

[16:03] **Mayorga:** DJs play a huge part in fostering community as well. Something I've noticed since moving out here, especially with DJs and especially since the Festival, is that a lot of people do get connected and become friends through a DJ that they're a fan of. I think

probably like 90 percent of the DJs that we had at the Folklife Festival had some connection to either someone on staff or at least the people that came out and watched the set.

[16:30] **Znorthy:** I feel like the first thing that comes to mind when I tell people, they're like, "Oh, what time?" And then I'm like, "Oh, you know, 1-2 a.m.," then everybody's like, "Oh my God."

Like, but to other people, in order to find belonging, those hours are very necessary to being somewhere where you feel, yeah, like a sense of belonging that you don't feel at work, that you don't feel on the street on any given day, that you don't feel in your neighborhood, that you don't feel on the train.

Sometimes nightlife, the people that are out at those hours, are the people who are in your community, the people are not going to look at you and have to figure you out.

[17:07] **Mayorga:** I would walk over from, like, the lowrider section to where the DJ booth was, just to find, like, it completely crowded with people dancing along, and you had that all day too.

[17:18] **Znorthy:** I hope people saw this being broadcasted by this high-art institution and seeing graffiti, seeing skateboarding, and hearing music and not turning their nose up at it. Because it is legitimate.

The beauty of the Folklife Festival is that it legitimizes culture that's not the hegemonic culture. That's really the big thing that I admire. People should be able to engage in their art forms the way that they want and because it's not a symphony orchestra does not mean it's not legitimate and that people shouldn't be paid attention to.

[17:50] **Mayorga:** It's something that we maybe take for granted in a way. We hear music almost every day on our commute to work, on our way back home from work. So just to be able to see the DJs on the National Mall and spinning what they were spinning and, like, seeing all these people come together for that—I thought that was honestly beautiful.

Youth and the Future of Culture, especially today, is very important because of how much of a divisive world we're finding ourselves in. Especially with youth, I feel like sometimes they've either been told that they're not welcome in certain spaces or they find themselves in a space where they don't feel welcomed, and I think they all have very, like, different, like, creative outlets to combat that.

[18:46] **Delgado:** There's not a way to skate, and there's not a way to be a skateboarder other than really just like to be yourself and put that out there.

[18:52] **Eagle Bear:** With the spray can, it's like the best way to express yourself.

[18:56] **Mayorga:** The youth are showing us ways of just, like, going about life, and although they might be approached with some, like, skepticism at first by the older generation, I think what this Festival did is show people that they know what they're doing.

[19:11] **Showen:** We're trying to fit in but also make ourselves known. I don't want people to just come by. "Oh, that's a cool car. Oh, that's cool." No, I want them to come like "These kids are, they're doing their time, they're doing their effort. They're showing their grit and determination."

[19:26] **Mayorga:** We don't have to underestimate them. They have the tools that they need and the knowledge and the passion to keep pushing forward and make the change that we want to see in the world.

We need the youth to be continuing these cultures and these traditions and these lifestyles so that they live on. But on top of that, I think youth are really innovative, and they're looking at this world that may sometimes be working against them and thinking of ways to push through and to not just sustain themselves but to grow stronger through it.

[20:14] **Shauri Thacker:** *Folk Tales: Youth and the Future of Culture* is a production of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Sebastian Barajas produced this episode.

What we do is part of our culture, just like what we eat. Tune in next episode to learn about the Foodways stage and a few of our participants from around the Festival.