

FESTIVAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLIFE



“Folk” is as much a process as it is a body of material—musical, verbal, or three dimensional. What distinguishes folk from other cultural forms are style and the method by which traditions are passed from person to person. Leontyne Price and Aretha Franklin may sing the same spiritual, but one sings in bel canto style learned from vocal coaches while the other belts out the piece as she learned it from her father, a singing preacher. The difference in style is immediately apparent. Both are rooted in time-honored traditions, but one depends on the printed page and the other, on oral transmission alone.

The “folk process” preserves the negative as well as the positive. The same system that has been responsible for the retention of vernacular architectural traditions, epic ballads, and complex craft technologies has also carefully protected racist biases, deadly medicinal formulae, and wild superstitions and legends. All that is folk cannot and should not be presented at festivals, though it may be well worth studying and understanding in the context of the culture that nurtures it.

The Festival of American Folklife, since its initiation in 1967, has sought to present varied folk traditions representing a broad spectrum of our nation’s cultural groups. It is our hope and belief that the festival will deepen and advance public appreciation of the richness and viability of American grass-roots creativity. Our first effort in 1967 was an overview of crafts, dance, and musical traditions. Since then, the event has grown considerably in size and in scope, with new and different cultural traditions presented each year.

This year, the festival features the state of Ohio, Pacific Northwest Coast Indians and Alaskan Eskimos, and the American working man as a part of organized labor.

We were fortunate to have the state of Ohio fund more extensive fieldwork than we have been able to undertake in the past. The rich bounty from which we drew the state presentation supports our belief that all areas of the nation, no matter how urbanized or industrialized, contain a wealth of folk culture.

Indian presentations, under the direction of Clydia Nahwooksy, center on the lumber and fishing cultures of Pacific Northwest tribes and on Eskimos from Alaska.

Through a joint presentation with the AFL-CIO, we are able to focus on working America. Five participating unions—Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, the American Federation of Musicians, Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union of America, Glass Bottle Blowers Association of the United States and Canada, and the International Association of Bridge, Structural, and Ornamental Iron Workers—will depict their trades and display their skills in concerts and at daily demonstrations.

We welcome you to the festival and invite your comments and suggestions on this year’s celebration.

Ralph Rinzler
Festival Director