



The Festival as Community

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When the Smithsonian Folklife Program staff decided to use "community" as the theme of the 1978 presentation, they were not grafting an idea onto the Festival, but featuring an aspect of the Festival that has been present throughout its history. "Community" has been involved in the past 11 festivals in many ways.

Each participant comes from and represents a community—the community he or she lives in, or a community of people who are associated with each other because of shared traditional culture. Many Festival presentations have been community events: apple-butter making, quilting bees, or a Yemenite wedding.

Other Festival events have involved

individuals nationwide who shared related traditions but may never have met before, such as French speakers and musicians from Cajun Louisiana and French-Canadian New England.

As Olivia Cadaval, Mexican cultural liaison for the 1976 Festival, pointed out after visiting many of the Mexican participants a year later, the didactic nature of the Festival means that people hear themselves discussed through their traditions and community, and their community role is highlighted for them as well as for the audience. Some see this role affirmed; others realize it for the first time.

Their community might also be affected by the presentation of individuals and groups at the Festival. Roger Welsch, folklorist and presenter, said of his experience with German-American participants in 1975 and 1976: "In many cases, performers and craftsmen who otherwise have been ignored suddenly were

Slicing apples for an apple butter boil is a Festival event that lends itself by nature to a sense of community.

Photo by James Pickerell for the Smithsonian.

brought to the attention of their communities as artists and artisans worthy of the attention of the Smithsonian, and the question immediately arose, then why weren't they also enjoying such prominence here? It was good for both the participants and the communities."

The Festival audience also consists of community members, in the sense that all Americans share a kind of community and come from particular places and cultures. Festival-goers have often found that presentations broaden their knowledge of their own community; some learn about the rich variety of our plural culture. Others learn more about their particular community: for example, many Hungarian-Americans were surprised and pleased to learn at the 1976

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Festival that there was a viable colony of Hungarians in Louisiana.

The Festival, however, not only presents or reflects American communities; it creates a sense of community—both temporary and long-lasting—on the part of the staff, audience, and participants it brings together. Sometimes people who meet at the Festival become lifelong friends. But even when people only briefly interact, the emotional experience of sharing some aspect of culture with others often creates a warm sense of commonality between people who have danced a *kolo* together or tried in vain to make a sound come from a *shofar*. This kind of community, real though temporary, might be termed “spontaneous *communitas*” after Victor Turner’s usage.

Why is it that communities, both traditional and temporary, are tied so closely with festivals? The answer lies in the nature of festival itself. Festivals are complex events, so much so that every individual will experience them differently. The Festival juxtaposes characteristics that are opposites: the planned with the spontaneous, the serious and the playful, order and disorder. The variety of experiences possible at a festival contributes to the sense that the Festival is very different from everyday life, and that anything can happen. One may choose to stroll through as an observer, or play a *tamburitza* and go home, or one may be caught up in intense interactions with people one has never before or might not ordinarily associate with. A common comment about the Festival is that it brings together factions within and between communities. This kind of interaction is possible because the Festival is neutral territory. “Real life” is suspended and many of its boundaries may be crossed safely.

Festival is special too because it is a time set aside for celebration and for a coming together of people, whether it



A temporary but often intense sense of community is created at the Festival when participants and Festival-goers interact as this railroader and his young friends are doing, or when Festival participants from different communities get together as they are doing in this informal jam session of Virginia musicians.

Photos by James Pickerell and Richard Hofmeister for the Smithsonian.





A special kind of closeness often grows up among the various people who work on the Festival. Here a participant in the Dunham School program in 1977 gets plenty of advice from staff and other participants as he takes snapshots of his new friends during Sunday dinner at the dormitory.

Photo by Nicholas Bocher © 1978.

Boat building by a group of Native Americans at the 1976 Festival.
Photo by Paul Framer for the Smithsonian.



is an organic festival growing out of the customs and needs of a community like a parish patron saint's day, or an organized Festival such as the Smithsonian's.

Victor Turner, in his exploration of ritual, points out that two senses of community come together in ritual. One is "structure" and the other "communitas." His insights help us see that in the social ritual of festival we celebrate ourselves, the community that exists. We explore its past and the future linked to that past. But because "communitas," especially "spontaneous communitas," is possible dur-

ing a festival, we also celebrate the present, the fact and joy of our being together, and from this create a new sense of our community.

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