

# National Heritage Fellowships Program

by Bess Lomax Hawes

*Bess Lomax Hawes is the Director of the Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. She has taught folklore at the California State University at Northridge and has been a Deputy Director of The Festival of American Folklife. Her publications include with co-author Bessie Jones, Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage.*

The North American continent has long been hospitable to immigrants – to the first Americans, to Hispanics, to French, to Russians, to English; to Africans, Irish, Jews, Scandinavians, Chinese, Germans; to the homeless, to the hungry, to the rebellious, to the adventurous of the world. The rolling North American land has been broad enough to nourish us all.

Still, none of our settlers came here empty-handed. Each people who undertook the frightening journey to this new land brought with them both mother-wit and know-how as well as their own special part of the vast, centuries-old encyclopedia of particular human solutions to the inescapable human problems. Human beings long ago learned how to take an oak tree and make out of it not only something useful but something beautiful – a carved front door, a woven basket. Human beings long ago learned how to take a melody and make of it a hymn of praise or a song of love, to take a personal experience and turn it into a classic joke or an epic ballad. The particular ways all these things are done depend upon the particular traditional stream within which the artist has developed. Our artistic trades go far back in history, each artist building on what has been learned before.

Being host to an extraordinary number of human beings from different parts of the world, we in the United States are thereby hosts to an extraordinary number of matured and developed artistic and technical traditions. What a privilege. It is this that the Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts celebrates through its National Heritage Fellowships. Each year we will greet, salute, and honor just a few examples of the dazzling array of artistic traditions we have inherited throughout our nation's fortunate history. Each year, we will happily present yet another assortment of splendid master American folk artists and artisans who represent still different artistic forms and traditions. We believe that this can continue far into the future, each year's group of artists demonstrating yet other distinctive art forms from the American experience.

For this year of 1982 we commend to your attention:

**Dewey Balfa**, a Louisiana man, an eloquent musician and spokesman for Cajun culture. His people, exiled centuries ago from French Canada, carved a new homeland in the swamps of the Mississippi Delta and over two hundred years gradually created a new music to celebrate their achievement.

**Joe Heaney**, an Irishman and a fabled *sean nos* singer of great range and depth. As Irish workmen helped push the expanding system of canals, roads, and railways across the young nation, Irish tunes became part of the country's standard repertoire. Joe Heaney is one of a long line of Irish bards whose songs speak to our deepest remembrances.

**Tommy Jarrell**, a North Carolina countryman and a mountain fiddler of storied repertoire and technique. The home-made fiddle was the most important instrument of the frontier, easy to carry along and an orchestra all by itself. In Tommy Jarrell's wise and experienced hands, it still is.

**Bessie Jones**, a Black woman from rural Georgia with a head full of the oldest and strongest songs of her people. Like Joe Heaney, Bessie Jones sings the "deep songs;" like him, she usually sings without accompaniment. But unlike him, her tradition calls for her children and neighbors to sing in harmony with her, to bear her up, and so make her joyful sound all the more joyful.

**George Lopez**, a sixth generation woodcarver from the village of Cordova in the Sangre de Cristo mountains of northern New Mexico. His *santos*, or religious figures, are simply carved; their purity of line reflects the purity of spirit that informs this ancient devotional tradition.



*St. Michael and the Devil carved by George Lopez of Cordova, New Mexico.*



**Brownie McGhee's** singing lays bare the wit and ironic detachment that characterize the blues of the upland south. His brilliant guitar work is almost casually tossed off; his musicianship is impeccable. Together with his long-term partner, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee has influenced many generations of bluesmen and musicians.

**Hugh McGraw** has labored tirelessly on behalf of his beloved Sacred Harp music, an American choral religious tradition that dates back at least two centuries. A song leader and singing school organizer beyond compare, Hugh McGraw's dedication, knowledge, and musical skills have inspired Sacred Harp singing conventions across the entire south.

**Lydia Mendoza** began singing in her family *conjunto* (musical group) as they entertained in small towns along the lower Rio Grande Valley a generation ago. She was only six when she began, but her vibrant personality, strong singing voice, and vigorous twelve-string guitar work brought her into early prominence, and many songs now considered standard in the Mexican-American repertoire were first recorded by Lydia Mendoza.

**Bill Monroe**, song-maker, mandolinist, and father of bluegrass. Once described as "folk music in overdrive," this brilliant musical style takes the familiar American country string ensemble of fiddle, banjo, guitar, and mandolin into a new dimension. Bill Monroe is one of the few living American musicians who can justly claim to have created an entire new musical style.

**Elijah Pierce** began to carve with a pocket knife at the age of nine. Beginning with traditional forms, such as walking sticks, Pierce later came to carve free-standing figures and then large elaborate bas-reliefs of Biblical scenes and personal experiences. His "sermons in wood" reflect the importance of traditional religion in much Afro-American folk expression.

**Adam Popovich**, senior musician and a principal shaper of the American *tamburitza*, the most important form of traditional music in older Serbian and Croatian-American communities. Like bluegrass, *tamburitza* music is played by small ensembles of stringed instruments improvising endlessly and brilliantly around traditional melodies. Unlike bluegrass, *tamburitza* singing is fullthroated, liquid and choral. Adam Popovich is master of both voice and instrument.

**Georgeann Robinson** is a member of the Deer Clan of the Osage Tribe and one of the most skilled practitioners of the Osage art of ribbonwork, a needlework tradition that features striking geometric designs executed in brilliant bands of contrastive color. Mrs. Robinson works from designs she has learned from old Osage women and researched through family and museum collections, becoming both scholar and artist of this almost lost tradition.

**Duff Severe**, saddlemaker and rawhide worker. His work occupies a central place in contemporary Western folk art. Well-made, well-crafted saddles, reins, bits, and bridles are the occasion not only for expert craftsmanship but for the expression of an aesthetic dimension in silver inlay and engraving, in leatherwork and design, in rawhide and in horsehair. Duff Severe is legendary throughout the western states for his mastery of all these crafts.

**Philip Simmons**, a blacksmith and ornamental ironworker from South Carolina exemplifies skill, excellence and a deep knowledge of traditional design. The lacy tracery of black iron spearpoints, leaves, and scrolls decorating homes and gardens through Charleston and other fortunate southern cities are owed to the work of such skillful artisans as Philip Simmons, his many apprentices and fellow-workers.

**Sanders (Sonny) Terry**, master musician, peerlessly inventive, has developed his tiny instrument, the simple harmonica, into a mini-orchestra. When Sonny "whoops" the blues, one often does not know which voice is speaking, the instrument or the man. The balletic movements of his hands, the constant interplay between voice and instrument, the infectious beat of his music distinguishes him among all American folk musicians.

The foregoing fifteen master traditional artists have each taken their respective art form to a new height. Each one has built upon the inventions, the perfected techniques, the aesthetic experiments of countless artists in the same tradition who have gone on before – singers, musicians, artisans whose names



Western saddle made by Duff Severe of Pendleton, Oregon. Photo by Ormond Loomis



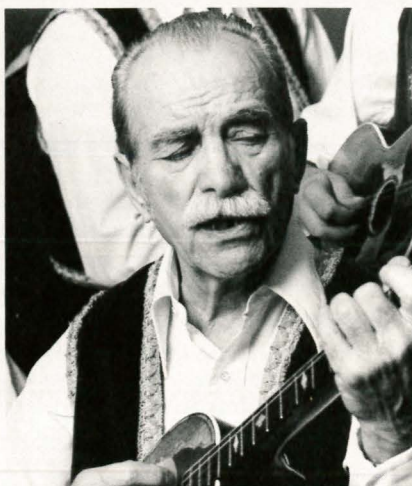
we will never know. As we honor the winners of the National Heritage Fellowships in 1982, we honor their artistic forebears as well. It is this, perhaps, that truly distinguishes these awards – that in the persons of these outstanding individuals we can honor an entire tradition and the long line of earlier artists who have helped invent the many folk art forms that grace our land and our people.

*The National Endowment for the Arts' National Heritage Fellowships will be awarded annually. The Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts welcomes nominations for the 1983 Heritage Fellowships. Please send your nomination to the following address by October 1, 1982 – Folk Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts, 2401 E Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20506.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARCHIVES OF  
THE ETHNIC FOLK ARTS CENTER



**Dewey Balfa**  
Cajun Fiddler  
Louisiana



**Adam Popovich**  
Serbian-American Instrumentalist  
Illinois

PHOTO BY DAPHNE SHUTTLEWORTH



**Georgeann Robinson**  
Osage Ribbonworker  
Oklahoma



**George Lopez**  
Hispanic Woodcarver  
New Mexico

PHOTO BY T. HARMON PARKHURST  
COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF NEW MEXICO,  
SANTA FE



**Sonny Terry**  
Blues Harmonica Player  
New York

PHOTO COURTESY OF AGENCY FOR  
THE PERFORMING ARTS



**Brownie McGhee**  
Blues Guitarist  
California

PHOTO COURTESY OF AGENCY FOR  
THE PERFORMING ARTS





**Tommy Jarrell**  
Appalachian Fiddler  
North Carolina

PHOTO BY MARK MAMALAKIS



**Joe Heaney**  
Irish Ballad Singer  
New York

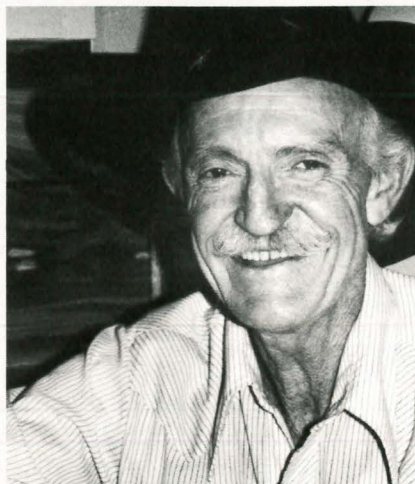
PHOTO BY JOHN VLACH



**Philip Simmons**  
Ornamental Ironworker  
South Carolina



**Hugh McGraw**  
Sacred Harp Singer  
Georgia



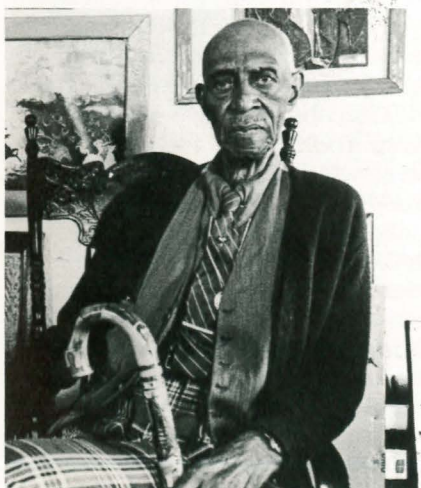
**Duff Severe**  
Western Saddlemaker and Rawhider  
Oregon



**Lydia Mendoza**  
Mexican-American Singer  
Texas

PHOTO BY CARL FLEISCHHAUER, COURTESY OF  
AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

PHOTO BY ORMOND LOOMIS



**Elijah Pierce**  
Carver-Painter  
Ohio

PHOTO BY RICK KOCKS



**Bill Monroe**  
Blue Grass Mandolinist/Singer  
Kentucky

PHOTO BY DAVID GAHR



**Bessie Jones**  
Georgia Sea Island Singer  
Georgia