

# National Heritage Fellowships Program

by Bess Lomax Hawes

*The National Heritage Fellowships Program has been made possible through the collaboration and cooperation of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Smithsonian Institution, and Continental Telecom Inc.*

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*.

Only a year ago, the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts joined with the Smithsonian Institution's Office of Folklife Programs to present fifteen outstanding American artists with the very first National Heritage Fellowships in the nation's history. These fellowships were signalled by a certificate of honor hailing each of the fifteen as "a Master Traditional Artist who has contributed to the shaping of our artistic traditions and to preserving the cultural diversity of the United States."

The event represented this nation's especial adaptation of the seminal Japanese concept of "living cultural treasures." In inaugurating such a program in the United States, some accommodation was necessary to encompass the enormous range of artistic traditions that have entered this country during two hundred years of immigration. So rather than be exclusive we determined to revel in these big numbers, to rejoice in their great variety. Writing in the summer of 1982, we said of the first year's fellowships:

Each year [forward] 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. . .

Now the first anniversary in that future has rolled around, and we can present the second year's nominations – a group of sixteen artists of equivalent excellence and perhaps even greater variety. A startling company, every one of them exhibits an authentic talent honed to brilliance by experience, passion, practice, and that exhausting relentless drive to "do it right." Each "right" way, of course, represents a distillation of a particular group of people's aesthetic choices over time, their especial picture of themselves as they most want to be seen. In presenting these sixteen superb traditional artists, then, we present the most elegant and creative aspects of sixteen segments of that part of humankind that has assembled together as citizens of the United States. It is a great joy.

For this year of 1983, we commend to your attention:

**Sister Mildred Barker**, the principal conservator of the song tradition of the Shaker Society, that tiny group whose intense concern for the aesthetic dimension has been evidenced as well through its distinctive furniture, architecture, textile design, dance and music. Sister Barker, possessed of an accurate ear and a voice of great sweetness, has devoted much of her long life to her beloved Shaker music of which she is performer, librarian, scholar and music teacher all in one.

**Rafael Cepeda** – a name synonymous with the indigenous Afro-Puerto Rican musical traditions known as *bomba* and *plena*. For over fifty years, with his wife, his three daughters, and his eight sons, Don Rafael's "Familia Cepeda" has preserved and presented the complex drumming, dance steps, vocal improvisation, and many-layered rhythmic pulses of *bomba y plena* to audiences across the island of Puerto Rico.

**Ray Hicks**, story teller – since the dawn of history a most honorable pursuit. Ray's stories, handed down through generations in his mountain family, tell about the little boy Jack, the one who killed the giant, chopped down the beanstalk, outwitted ogres, wild hogs and robbers, and served his mother and his King. Ray tells them masterfully in the Appalachian style of his forebears and in the telling brings alive the epic cycles of magic and adventure known in old Europe and around the world.



Sister Mildred Barker  
Shaker Hymn Singer  
Maine  
Photo: John V. Goff



**Stanley Hicks**, who stands with his cousin Ray as representative of the creative traditions that flourish in the close-knit families of Appalachia. He is a man that can “turn his hand to anything,” from making finely crafted dulcimers and banjos on which to pick dance tunes and sorrow songs to telling ghost stories and children’s tales. He sings the old ballads too, and when he can’t sit still any longer, he jumps up to dance the flat-footed “jumping jack” style he learned long ago. He reminds us of our grandfathers in the days when every man had to be not just a bread-winner but a teacher, philosopher, judge, and handyman, creating a whole life out of the wilderness.

**John Lee Hooker**, who, according to the critic Tony Glover is part of a “rapidly thinning group, the first line of the post war bluesmen . . . standing as a link between the field hollers of old and the smack-soul of today. As long as men like Hooker are alive, so too will be the blues that was born in Mississippi . . . It’s more than a musical style, it’s a tribute to the human spirit . . . Hooker is one of the giants.”

**Miguel Manteo**, today holding the coveted title of “Papa Manteo,” the fifth in the line. He represents five generations of Sicilian-American puppeteers and the world of characters from the courtly chivalric past they bring to life from the ancient scripts detailing the epic adventures of Charlemagne and his knights. The Manteo Sicilian Marionette Theatre is a national treasure, alive, well, and flourishing in the heart of Brooklyn; Papa Manteo is its memory, its artistic conscience, and its star.

**Narciso Martínez**, the pioneer of the button accordion, the expressive heart of the Texas-Mexican *conjunto* musical tradition. In the 19th century on small town bandstands across central and southern Texas, Czechoslovakian, Anglo, German and Mexican musicians swapped tunes, texts and musical ideas. Today the *huapangos*, *redowas*, polkas, and waltzes of “Don Chicho” Martínez bear happy witness to that fruitful period of musical interaction. They stand witness as well to the creative genius of the Texas-Mexican musicians who carved this new musical style out of the thorny southwestern landscape.

**Lanier Meaders**, Georgia potter, a second generation craftsman whose strong straightforward shapes and pied alkaline glazes represent a tradition of creativity that stretches beyond Georgia into the larger pottery complex of the eastern seacoast states. Meaders’ earth-brown, olive-green and rusty-grey stoneware pieces have a vitality that bespeaks the self-sufficient frontier spirit; his signature face jugs demonstrate the wit and sophistication common to so many country people.

**Almeda James Riddle** – the great lady of Ozark balladry. She once listed a hundred songs she could call to mind right then, and added that she could add another hundred to the list if she had the time. “Granny,” as she prefers to be called, sings in the unaccompanied way of southern ballad singers, and uses a decorated singing style of great antiquity, frilled with falsetto leaps, breaks, and vocal ornamentation. Her repertoire is extraordinary; her singing impeccable.

**Joe Shannon** who plays the *uilleann* (elbow) pipes of Ireland, one of the most technically complex musical instruments ever invented by man. A retired Chicago firefighter, Joe Shannon took up the pipes of his childhood in his later years to become the Irish American virtuoso on this extraordinary instrument. His performances are crammed with ornamentation of all kinds, each tune a stunning showpiece of epic proportions.

**Simon St. Pierre** – lumberjack, fiddler, and acknowledged master of French-Canadian dance music. His reels and two-steps are exemplary, his rare Canadian waltz melodies elegant renditions of that complex tradition. In many of his tunes he accompanies himself with foot clogging, a practice common among old-time French-Canadian fiddlers that adds verve and energy and drive and spins the dancers down the floor.

**Alex Stewart**, cooper and woodworker. He can make anything that can be made out of wood, he will tell you, and without using either glue or nails. He has made countless bowls, ladles, chairs, swings, tables, spinning wheel parts. But the strong lines of the traditional shapes of the cooper’s art – his barrels, buckets, piggins and churns, so elegantly crafted, so ingeniously joined – are the objects that remain longest in the memory and make you



Rafael Cepeda  
*Bomba and Plena*  
Musician and Dancer  
Puerto Rico  
Photo: Luis Reyes



Ray Hicks  
Appalachian Storyteller  
North Carolina  
Photo: Jack Schrader



Stanley Hicks  
Appalachian Instrument Maker,  
Musician and Storyteller  
North Carolina  
Photo: Carroll Reece Museum, Johnson City, Tennessee





John Lee Hooker  
Blues Guitarist/Singer  
Mississippi and California  
Photo: Marina Fusco



Miguel "Papa" Manteo  
Sicilian-American Puppeteer  
New York  
Photo: Martha Cooper



Narciso Martínéz  
Texas-Mexican *Conjunto* Accordionist  
Texas  
Photo: Carlos Chavez  
Chamizal National Memorial, El Paso, Texas

understand why the honest craftsmanship of Alex Stewart is honored the length and breadth of Tennessee.

**Ada Thomas**, one of the remaining masters of double-weave basketry in the Chitimacha tribe of Louisiana. Chitimacha split cane work – long recognized for its extraordinary elegance – is intricately patterned with dyed strips of red, yellow, and black in designs taken from nature – “blackbird’s eye,” “rabbit teeth” and “mouse tracks.” Museum collections are fortunate to contain one of Ada Thomas’s pieces, as she is one of the few nowadays who can handle the complex technique by which the inside and outside baskets are woven as one.

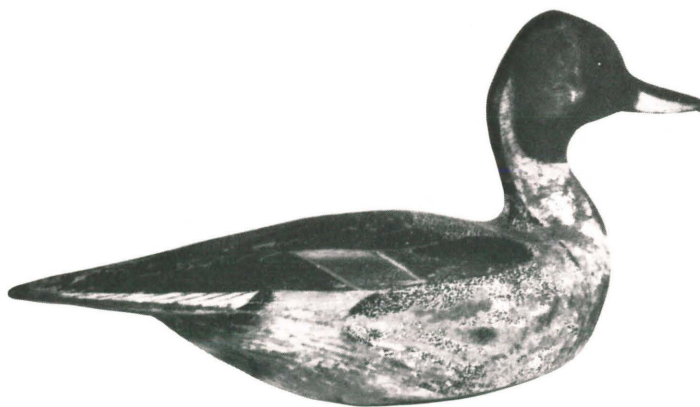
**Lucinda Toomer**, a Black quilter from southwestern Georgia. Maude Wahlman, scholar of Afro-American quilting, writes, “She will not duplicate the same pattern in successive quilt blocks but chooses to take one pattern and manipulate it in multiple ways. Her visual improvisations establish Lucinda as an artist in total control of her art form in the same way that thematic musical improvisations indicate a master jazz musician.” Her work is dazzling, a superb example of the virtuosity to be found in the traditional arts.

**Lem Ward**, who with his late brother, Stephen Ward, brought the making of duck decoys, once a purely functional traditional craft, into a widely acknowledged and formalized ornamental art form. Their seminal explorations into varying poses, positions, shapes, and painting techniques increased the range of effects available to all woodcarvers, and inspired hundreds of craftsmen to develop ever more realistic and elegant bird carving.

**Dewey P. Williams**, the acknowledged master and patriarch of the Black Sacred Harp singing tradition of southeast Alabama. For forty years he has been “tuner” for his singing convention – a position reserved for the most competent singers. His vivid personality, engaging enthusiasm for his music, and compelling vocal style have helped keep an important aesthetic tradition alive. We are all in his debt.

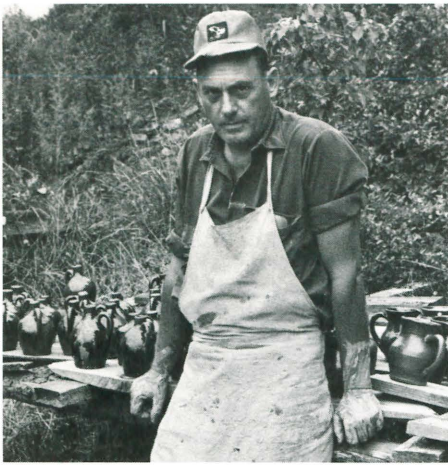
These, then, are the sixteen artists nominated in this year of 1983 – each of them exemplary, each of them representing another fragment of brilliant color in the American mosaic. And behind each stands a phalanx of other creative Americans, that reaches across neighborhoods and back through time. They are the ones from whom our honorees learned, the ones who made the mistakes, tested the limits, confirmed the aesthetic centers. In honoring our sixteen artists, we also honor their forebears, and this is, perhaps, the glory of the National Heritage Fellowships, that each one represents not a single creative genius but a linkage of people joined together to produce beauty and truth and meaning, each in their own special way.

*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 1984 Heritage Fellowships. Please send your nomination to the following address by October 31, 1983 – Folk Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts, 1100 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20506.*



Pintail decoy carved by Lem Ward of Crisfield, Md. Photo by Kenneth Basile





Lanier Meaders  
Southern Potter  
Georgia  
Photo: John Burrison



Almeda Riddle  
Ozark Ballad Singer  
Arkansas  
Photo: Smithsonian Institution



Joe Shannon  
Irish-American *Uilleann* Piper  
Illinois  
Photo: Mick Moloney



Simon St. Pierre  
French Canadian Fiddler  
Maine  
Photo: Joe Pfeffer



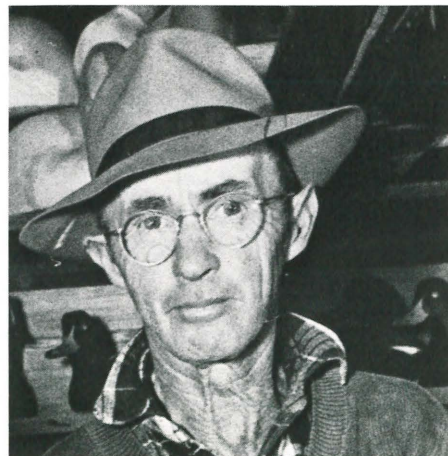
Alex Stewart  
Appalachian Cooper  
and Woodworker  
Tennessee  
Photo: Robert Kollar



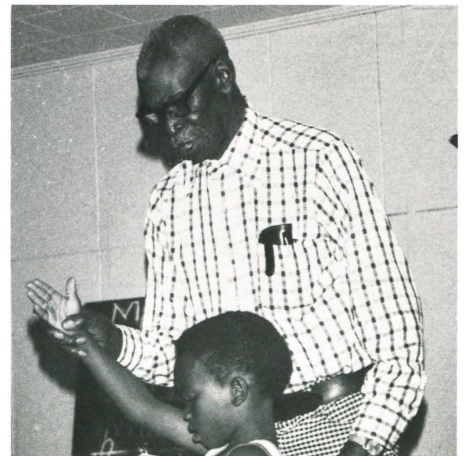
Ada Thomas  
Chitimacha Basketmaker  
Louisiana  
Photo: Indian Arts and crafts Board,  
the U.S. Dept. of the Interior



Lucinda Toomer  
Afro-American Quiltmaker  
Georgia  
Photo: Maude Wahlman



Lem Ward  
Chesapeake Bay Decoy Carver  
Maryland  
Photo: Historical Society  
of Talbot County, Md.



Dewey Williams  
Black Sacred Harp Singer  
Alabama  
Photo: Hank Willet