



# Laissez le Bon Temps Rouler\*

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Consider the Festival a good time. The senses delight in the food, music, craft and dance that come from India, Louisiana and from several other of the world's vibrant traditional cultures. But broaden the view and you can see also that the Festival is a living demonstration of how context can be so very important in understanding cultural artifacts and practices.

The Indian program at this year's Festival, for example, presents singers, acrobats, dancers and other performers in a context in which they often perform — a holiday fair, or *melā*. The economic and religious activities that encompass the performances allow us to see the artistic traditions as part of this larger institution. Each art form might stand on its own, with its distinctive aesthetic style and vocabulary of cultural meanings. But in the context of one another and of the special space created by buyers, sellers and religious devotees, the arts also make a larger statement about the complex and mutually reinforcing relationships between artistic performance, economic trade and religious belief.

Based on extensive scholarly research, anthropologists, folklorists, designers and craftspeople, both Indian and American, have re-created a *melā* and invite your participation in its flow of events. Participation makes us aware that we ourselves are part of the context of the performances and, perhaps, through our participation we may gain some idea of the role we might play as an audience, were we in India. Participation is a venerable concept in the tradition of folklore and anthropology, from Levy-Bruhl's early observation about the merging in certain symbolic systems of categories of self and other, of sacred and secular; to Malinowski's methodological insight that cultural learning comes through participating and observing; and to Redfield's understanding that acolytes in religious ritual participate in maintaining the structure of the world envisioned in their belief. All of these forms of participation are to be found at the *melā*. I urge you to entertain them and be entertained by them.

Events in the Louisiana program at the Festival speak to the context created by the unique history and geography of that part of our continent, where rich forms of creolization, or cultural mixture, have flourished. Creative blending of cultural aesthetics and repertoires has occurred in other places in our country but in few places to the acknowledged extent and with the public vitality of the traditional cultures of Louisiana. To hear the variety of musical styles, to see the varied dance and craft traditions, and to taste the renowned foods of the region should all lead one to reflect on the social and environmental conditions that brought Africans, American Indians, Anglo-Americans, French, Spanish and other groups together in ways that led to

the rich mixtures of language and culture distinctive of “The Creole State.”

Cultural Conservation — a Festival exhibition area that explores questions about maintaining the world’s cultural environment in much the same way that we have learned to think about the natural environment — shows the importance of context in yet another arena of understanding. Traditional cultures live within larger contexts of national and sometimes international political, economic and cultural institutions. Sometimes the larger institutions can assist a traditional culture to conserve and to adapt its distinctive identity, ethos and aesthetic expression on its own terms, within the context of its own experience. The Smithsonian, for example, through this Festival and other programs, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress have a continuing interest in the conservation of traditional cultures. Most often, however, the context created by larger institutions is more ambiguous and poses challenges to the continued vitality of traditional cultures. This wider context is explored in the Cultural Conservation program, and performers and craftspersons demonstrate the traditions they and others work to conserve.

But these thoughts about context and understanding are not meant to lessen your enjoyment of the Festival. Rather they are meant to offer a key to a richer experience of the performances and artifacts presented here. For it seems to me a profoundly good time when we can both see and appreciate the artistry, humanity and historical specificity of these cultural traditions in contexts which help reveal their meaning.

\*(Cajun French for “Let the Good Times Roll”)