

Welcome to the Festival

by Diana Parker, Festival Director

Since the Festival of American Folklife first began in 1967, more than 10,000 generous people have traveled to Washington to share with us their wisdom and talent. In explaining and demonstrating their skills as singers, dancers, musicians, cooks, artisans, storytellers, and workers, they have represented legions more in their home communities. Because of the time and knowledge they have shared with us, our lives have been enriched, while our cultural understanding of the aesthetic variety in this and other nations has been broadened. Meanwhile, the Smithsonian's archive of folklife research and programming experience grows incrementally each year. There is much still to be learned, and each participant's story adds to our understanding of the mosaic of folk culture.

Often our festival participants have told us of their struggle to maintain traditions in the face of overwhelming odds. Each year brings another person to inform us, "I am the last who knows how to do this the old way." For this reason we view conservation of culture as an issue equal in urgency to the conservation of our natural resources, for the pluralism we reflect at each year's Festival would be terrible to lose.

The Smithsonian Institution is not the only organization concerned with cultural conservation. The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress has consistently contributed on a national scale to research and preservation of traditional culture. Numerous state and local programs are also hard at work in similar efforts and have made notable contributions. This year, as the National Endowment for the Arts celebrates its 20th anniversary, we are especially aware of the immense contributions of its Folk Arts Program. Grants and National Heritage Fellowships administered by the Program have provided much-needed support to community efforts in the preservation of tradition-based cultures. We congratulate our colleague, Folk Arts Program Director Bess Lomax Hawes, and her able staff on their consistently superior performance.

This year more than two hundred participants will again come to Washington in the spirit of joy and sharing in a great celebration of our cultural diversity. We urge you to take part in the events and ask questions of the participants, for they have much to teach us all.