

The Midway on the Mall: Twenty Years of the Festival of American Folklife by Robert Cantwell

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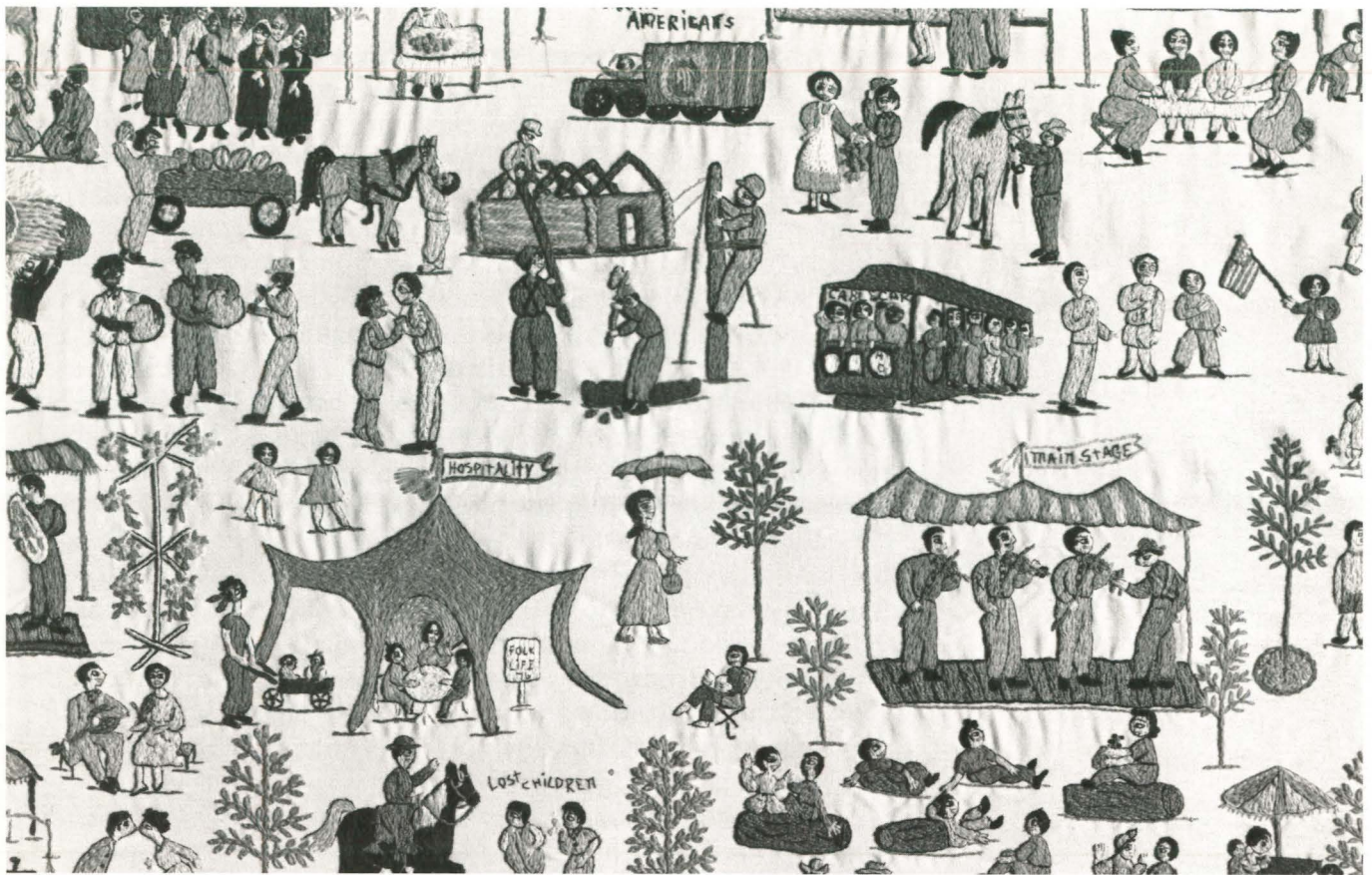
By 1967, the year of the Smithsonian's first Festival of American Folklife, the folk revival of that decade had dissolved into a youth movement deeply alienated from its national culture. It had created a culture of its own, with its own music and literature, its own pantheon of heroes, its own way of life — all swiftly appropriated with characteristic voraciousness, by the nation as a whole. It seemed impossible, in 1967, still more so in 1968, to think or to do anything that was not somehow a declaration of allegiance to one side or the other, in the bitter and unseemly struggle which disrupted the delicate equilibrium of social forces by which our democracy had conducted its business. The issues, of course, were fundamental: racism and war. Still more fundamental was the sinister polarization along racial and economic lines which ultimately eroded the heady idealism that had given the epoch its grandeur and glory. But to have been alive in those times, still more to have been young, could be exhilarating, when good and evil seemed so easily distinguishable, when it seemed that hatred, intolerance, and stupidity could be swept away with an establishment that had become the sole owner and proprietor of them.

In 1967, the idea that a folk festival, with all of its associated bohemianism, could be attached to the federal government, was, like many good ideas in a difficult period, a controversial one. S. Dillon Ripley, the civilized and imaginative ornithologist who became Secretary of the Smithsonian in 1964, was sensitive to the optimism of the period and its festive mood, which he brought to the Mall in the form of evening concerts and play performances, extended museum hours, and, most conspicuously, the carousel which with cool irony he placed squarely in front of the romanesque Smithsonian castle. There it filled the atmosphere with the gilded strains of "After the Ball" and "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze" — to the horror, of course, of a few members of Congress, who feared that Ripley planned to "make a midway of the Mall." But Ripley was more thoroughly cosmopolitan; he understood the Parisian character of Washington, where the spectacle of people at play, he thought, could plausibly become a national example — a suggestion that a culture which had learned to appreciate itself might be able to live at peace with itself again.



Jesse Fuller, a one-man band from San Francisco, performs at a workshop at the 1969 Festival of American Folklife.

That was the climate, then, in which the Festival of American Folklife took root. But times change, and youth is fleeting; the Festival of American Folklife has survived because, from the very beginning, it sought to transcend the moment and to attach itself to the history of the Smithsonian. Ripley had charged James Morris, soon to become Director of the Institution's Division of Performing Arts, to consider the feasibility of some sort of summer celebration of America's cultural diversity. Morris consulted folklorist and musician Ralph Rinzler, who as a fieldworker for the Newport Folk Foundation and friend of the North Carolina guitar picker Doc Watson had become a central figure in the folk revival. Rinzler had an instinct for authenticity, and a willingness to enlist in the project a community of men and women already distinguished as folklorists, ethnographers, and activists: Alan Lomax, the famous collector whose work with the world's folksong heritage had suggested the close connection between songstyle and social structure; Roger Abrahams, the folklorist who helped Rinzler to translate social scientific theory into practice; Henry Glassie, the young field researcher who returned folk crafts to the complex social, technological and aesthetic process which had produced them; Archie Green, San Francisco's shipwright-scholar who saw the traditional element in the lore of working men and women; Bernice Johnson Reagon, the lucid and outspoken Black activist who put Afro-American culture in the anthropological setting that revealed its unity and continuity; Ethel Raim and Martin Koenig, who saw that one of the richest veins of American folklore lay in the country's urban ethnic groups; and Clydia Nahwooksy, a Native American advocate from Oklahoma who taught that her



A portion of a tapestry of the 1976 Festival of American Folklife embroidered by Ethel Mohamed, a traditional needleworker from Belzoni, Mississippi.

ancient traditions were forces that informed the most immediate contemporary concerns of Indian life — these among many others.

Even the word “folklife,” adopted from European usage through the Pennsylvania folklorist Don Yoder, was a departure — it embraced both material and spiritual culture, that is, both the imaginative and the working life of a community — calling attention to what revivalists had sensed but could not embody, the wholeness and integrity of folk culture. The Festival of American Folklife was not, finally, a folk festival at all — not in the way that Newport or Philadelphia or Monterey, the great watering spots of the folk revival, had been folk festivals; rather it was an effort to extend into a new dimension — the dimension of living traditions — James Smithson’s original charge, “the increase and diffusion of knowledge” — or, as Ripley memorably expressed it, to “bring the instruments out of their cases and make them sing.”

Washington “had a ball,” to cite one newspaper account, at the first Festival of American Folklife. Its sheer variety and color, concentrated in the heart of a city which, more than any other in America, has the abstractness and impersonality of philosophy, seemed to bring the palpable national life, in microcosm, literally into the view of the body that presides over it — as if the whole of vernacular culture, regional, ethnic, occupational and familial, had undertaken a political demonstration on its own behalf. Not surprisingly, then, the Festival had an almost immediate influence upon government — which is, after all, the province of real people, people who happen to live where the Mall in addition to being a national shrine is also a public park.

The history of the American Folklife Preservation Act (1976), a bill which has engendered both the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress and the National Endowment's program in the folk arts, began when a Texas populist named Jim Hightower, legislative aide to Senator Ralph Yarborough, visited the Festival when Texas was the featured state in 1968. Ripley himself was the first to speak for the bill to the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare in 1970, recalling the "fascinating glimmer of recognition" in the faces of festival audiences "when they hear a half-forgotten melody taught them by their parents or grandparents, or see an ancient and perhaps dimly remembered craft reappear before their eyes." By 1974, chiefly through the indefatigable lobbying of Archie Green, the bill had acquired over 200 sponsors in Congress, including half of the United States Senate, and in the second day of the Bicentennial year it was signed into law by Gerald Ford.

The Bicentennial Festival of American Folklife — 12 weeks long, with hundreds of folk communities from all over the world represented, 5,000 participants in all — was a virtual World's Fair of folklife. This event consummated the Smithsonian's folklife program and, through the immense effort of nine years required to produce it, created the dedicated community of fieldworkers, scholars, writers, photographers, filmmakers, sound technicians, artists, archivists and administrators, in Washington and in various cities and states — all of them public sector folklorists, who strive to carry out the letter and the spirit of the American Folklife Preservation Act: to "preserve, support, revitalize and disseminate" the "customs, beliefs, dances, songs, tales, sayings, art, crafts and other expressions of spirit" belonging to the American people. The leaders of this community — Bess Lomax Hawes at the National Endowment for the Arts, Alan Jabbour at the American Folklife Center, Joe Hickerson at the Archive of Folk Culture, Joe Wilson at the National Council for the Traditional Arts, Rinzler himself — had been among the pioneers of the urban folk revival; but many of the younger people, in the Endowment or at the Folklife Center, in the Smithsonian's Office of Folklife Programs, or in the various state and local agencies which with federal funding have created folklife programs of their own, found their careers as visitors, as volunteers, or as participants in the Festival of American Folklife.

In 20 years the Festival of American Folklife has at last bridged a generation, so that among our visitors and volunteers are young men and women who were here years ago, with their parents. For them the blacksmith, the woodcarver, the blues singer, the tribal dancer, the potter, basketmaker or banjo picker, the bright tents and melodious breezes are fulfillments of the impalpable wishes and vague designs that rise like a scent out of childhood memories. This should tell us, approximately, what in 20 years the Festival of American Folklife has become — not only a reservoir of culture but, because it has riven deep into the imagination, a fountainhead of it.

The work of the Smithsonian, our national museum, is to preserve the inward forms of American life — the forms whose resemblances, when we find them in our hearts, bring our experience home to us. Though rife with social and political implication, public folkore is not a social but a cultural program, one which begins and

ends with the fact that folklife and its productions, I mean the genuine folklore that is not in thrall to trade, to fashion, or to ideology, is originally and inherently beautiful, in a way that nothing else can be, at any level of culture. It is a national treasure, as much as the Gossamer Condor or the Star Spangled Banner, and warrants our attention, reflection, and care. It is a fine thing, of course, that we have a national culture and all the privileges that accrue to it, a melancholy thing, however, that access to it is not yet universal. But folk culture, the deep culture in which personality is rooted, is more domestic; it is shaped to the immediate conditions of life, to the influences of growth and nurture, work and play, people and place, privacy and society, and it is in the human scale. A culturally diverse society based upon the principle of individual rights must be a society dedicated to the conservation of cultures — for culture at every level is the imaginative medium, the body of codes and conventions, of signs and signals, dreams and fancies, in which we have our individuality. We have seen what happens to people when they are robbed of their way of life, and how utterly nugatory is the idea of individual rights when there is no culture in and through which to exercise them.

Maybe we have lost some of the passionate intensity of the 1960s, with all its righteousness and hope, when to love some people it seemed necessary to despise others — hardly a formula for domestic tranquility. Those were times for self-discovery; these are times for the discovery of others. It is a sign of our civilization that we can trust our cultural institutions to keep alive the consciousness of our folk heritage, which is as ancient as English ballads and as modern as “rap.” High and low, folk and popular, culture is really one thing, moving up and down in society, and to and fro within it, through an endless series of transformations that testify to human resiliency and genius. The Festival of American Folklife and all the work on behalf of beleaguered cultures undertaken in its name has been such a transformation; and when the folk revival comes again, as it has intermittently in various forms since the dawn of the modern era, to seal the fate of some future generation, we can hope that the Festival, with its love of human diversity and its global embrace, will have provided the pattern for it.

Suggested reading

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