

Finding Folklife Between the Freeways: Notes from the Los Angeles Folk Arts Program

by Susan Auerbach

My first day on the job in 1985 as Los Angeles Folk Arts Coordinator, a casting director called, looking for movie extras. Did we know any Tibetan organizations in town? If not, Nepalese would do. As I flipped through an out-of-date ethnic directory, I marveled at how little was known of the local cultural landscape, eclipsed as it was by the world of the image-makers. I wondered how feasible it would be to carve a niche for traditional arts in "Tinseltown." It was fine for my colleagues elsewhere to survey a rural county, visiting basketmakers who used local grasses or old-time fiddlers who played for barn dances. But Los Angeles is a young city at the cutting edge of popular culture, with little regard for the past; a still-growing suburban sprawl of 450 square miles, without a geographical center or viable neighborhood base; a conglomeration of three million vastly dispersed, often transient people. How would we find grassroots cultures among the maze of southern California freeways? How could we lure audiences away from lavish popular entertainments or prestigious international fine arts festivals? How should we get beyond the myth of palm trees and stardom to the symbols and expressions that mattered in people's daily lives?

Los Angeles may seem an unlikely place for one of the country's forty-seven publically sponsored Folk Arts Programs. Yet it serves as a laboratory of unequalled, virtually undocumented cultural diversity and vitality, however quietly tended or lost in the hustle of urban life. Traditional artists and practitioners, companions of diversity, are undeniably out there on the side streets between the freeways – whether meticulously tooling a saddle at a Mexican artisan's workshop or offering rousing songs at a Samoan church dedication.

At the Los Angeles Folk Arts Program we have looked to the peopling of the city for our inspiration, trying to piece together a cultural map of this complex, unwieldy metropolis. Perhaps the most dramatic transformation of Los Angeles in the past two decades is a result of the phenomenal influx of immigrants and refugees from Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. The city has become a mecca, not only for would-be film stars but for displaced Iranian singers, ambitious Mexican mariachi bands and a master of masked dance, one of Korea's "Living National Treasures." In this "new Ellis Island" these artists join their countrymen in enclaves

that are often larger than any other outside their homeland. After much persistence, we found them playing marimba at a Guatemalan Maya religious fiesta; crafting lace at an Armenian social service agency; dancing the *punta* in a church parking lot at an annual holiday of the Garifuna people of Belize (a Black Carib group de-



Garifuna Settlement Day celebration in Los Angeles for Black Carib people from Belize. Photo by Susan Auerbach

scended from escaped African slaves and Arawak Indians in Central America). Our efforts to identify these people and bring them before the public culminated in the "Cityroots Festival: A Celebration of New Immigrant Traditions," attended by 20,000 at a city park last spring. "This is one of the few things that makes Los Angeles feel like one place instead of a whole lot of different places jammed together," commented one observer.

While the immigration boom is evident everywhere, other phases of the area's settlement are more obscure. Few non-Black Angelenos are aware, for instance, of the thousands of Black Louisianians who migrated west in the post-war years and today make up a closely knit sub-culture. They maintain ties to their heritage through community zydeco dances, New Orleans-style weddings,



Multicultural children's handclapping games performance at the Kidlore section of the Cityroots Festival. Photo by Lori Schindler for L.A. Folk Arts Program



"Junk Car" created by Anthony Faria, on display at the Cityroots Festival. Photo by Lori Schindler for L.A. Folk Arts Program

church activities and the sharing of *boudin* rice sausage and other regional foods – not to mention trips “back home.” Our festival, “From L.A. to L.A.: A Celebration of Black and Creole Heritage,” drew thousands of local Louisianians, generating something like the atmosphere of a family reunion. Current research in the Jewish neighborhood of Fairfax and the heavily southern European, maritime trades-dominated town of San Pedro is revealing other pockets of community tradition which challenge the city’s made-for-movies stereotype. We look

forward to expanding our cultural geography to other migrant groups, such as the city’s largely invisible American Indian population (again, the largest urban concentration in the country).

As our mapping progresses, I sometimes wonder whether we are truly documenting or wishfully creating the communities we honor. With commuter lifestyles and far-flung settlement patterns, the boundaries of community in Los Angeles are tenuous. Are we nurturing something real when we name it and showcase it in a

program, or are we promoting a nostalgic idea? Do we stereotype communities when our interviews target those most closely identified with a community, the carriers of group tradition? Or do we touch on some genuine symbolic core for all its members?

Social and cultural change make their mark on traditional life everywhere, but most radically in cities. I hope my colleagues and I can begin to look at some of the cross-fertilization that urban life fosters between traditional arts and other expressions: "revivalists" (contemporary interpreters of tradition), the avant-garde and popular culture, to name but a few. In Los Angeles, we



Homer Raymond, an eighty-year-old duck decoy carver formerly from New Orleans shown here in his home workshop in Los Angeles. Photo by Willie Middlebrook for L.A. Folk Arts Program

have explored some contemporary local lore, like children's handclapping games, personalized cars and license plates and even earthquake-coping stories. Perhaps someday we will look at the lore of make-up artists, palm tree trimmers and lifeguards, or find a way to handle the expressions spawned by the other aspects of city life, like homelessness and gangs. By then the Los Angeles Folk Arts Program will have filled in more gaps on the map, encouraging an approach to public sector folklore that is as forward-looking as the population it serves.

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