

Blues at the Festival: A Community Music with Global Impact

Worth Long and Ralph Rinzler

At the very first Smithsonian Folklife Festival back in 1967, you would have heard performers similar to the artists in this program. Grassroots singers and instrumentalists from the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands, New Orleans French Quarter, New York City, and the Mississippi Delta offered the oldest songs they knew, then described in music and words their creative innovations. They explained how their music coordinated work, praised and lifted the spirit, danced out joy or sorrow, and helped them struggle for change. In every succeeding Festival, the oldest, root traditions have been here alongside emergent forms created by artists fired and inspired by their heritage.

Museums exist to study and exhibit history, science, and art — sometimes great, oftentimes ordinary — through the perspective of time. The Smithsonian has long collected visual and plastic art treasures and artifacts of history, but prior to the 1967 Festival, it had not systematically curated and presented living forms of grassroots music and craft. Once included, living folklife traditions were acknowledged as though they had been there from the outset and should always remain.

“The Roots of Rhythm and Blues: The Robert Johnson Era” embodies a tried and true Festival approach: start with the roots and present the full flower of the traditions, old and young; highlight links in the creative chain of a people’s art. Robert Johnson was a potent and significant link

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Fiddler Mr. Kennedy and his grandchildren. Tuckers Grove, North Carolina, 1979. Photo by Roland L. Freeman, © 1991

in tradition . . . a Picasso, a Rodin of the blues. He passionately absorbed and then reformed the music of his community and era. His art decisively influenced the music of today’s world. This program is meant to explore that story of creative change and cultural continuity.

Blues historian and folklorist Worth Long has spent over 20 years doing research on Black culture in the South. He has been a Smithsonian Institution researcher specializing in blues, spiritual, and gospel music since the early 1970s. His publications include a film, made with Alan Lomax, titled “The Land Where the Blues Began.”

Ralph Rinzler was the founding Director of the Festival of American Folklife and of the Office of Folklife Programs from 1967 to 1982. He was the Assistant Secretary for Public Service from 1983 to 1990. Through his museum projects, books, articles, films and audio recordings, he has supported cultural diversity and institutional recognition of the aesthetic and ethical values expressed in folk and working class cultures.