

Festival of American Folklife: Not Just a Festival

Richard Kurin

The video begins with elderly and lanky farmers from the U.S. Midwest, plucking their stringed instruments in a way suggesting the strangeness of their music. Next on the screen women from Iowa puff on brass trumpets; the camera angle and sound mix again suggests the exotic quality of their performance. Next come images of monumental Washington seen not so much as landmarks, but as evidence of the presence of visitors from Chiapas, Mexico — the subjects of the video. Deliberately, a story of the 1991 Festival of American Folklife unfolds through the eyes of a video crew that accompanied a delegation of native Mayan and Lacandon people from the southern Mexican province of Chiapas and documented their participation in the Festival.

I was sitting in an auditorium in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of Chiapas. The auditorium was overflowing with hundreds of people — the ten Chiapanecos who had participated in the Festival, their relatives, government officials, scholars and local citizens. It was December, six months after the Festival on the Mall in Washington had featured, among other programs, “Land in Native American Cultures,” which included people from Chiapas. Other staff and I had written our reports and reviewed the press coverage and our own video documentation, and now I was seeing how others had seen the Festival, how members of the participants’ communities had construed and represented their participation to folks back home.

Also exhibited in that auditorium was a journal written by a Mayan storyteller, Xun Gallo, in

his native Tzotzil, published with Spanish translation and illustrations. The journal, entitled *Mis ojos vieron, mi corazon lo sabe* (My eyes saw, my heart knows) was a wonderful, serious, poetic and humorous account of his visit to Washington and participation in the Festival. He had discussed his work with the audience, academic scholars and Smithsonian program curator Olivia Cadaval before the video began. He and others spoke of the importance of the Festival in reaffirming cultural identity and raising consciousness about cultural issues that cross ethnic, national and international boundaries.

This theme was echoed in the video documentary that proceeds from the exoticized family farmers to the Chiapas group, and from them to widening circles of inclusiveness. First the other Indian groups at the 1991 Festival, from Mexico, Peru and Bolivia are included in the Chiapaneco Indian world. Then Alaskan groups, the Hopi and Ecuadorian Shuar are included. The video treatment then embraces the Indonesians — Javanese, Dayak from Kalimantan and people from Sulawesi, also at the Festival last year — and finds they too are Indian of a sort. Then the bluesmen. Yes, they too are Indian. Finally, by video’s end, the formerly strange family farmers reappear and are included — they too are Indian; they too are humans with culture and value.

A few days later, Smithsonian Assistant Secretary James Early, Dr. Cadaval and I were in a small Chiapan pueblo visiting a family. One of the daughters, an excellent weaver, had been inspired by other weavers at the Festival, especially by the economically successful and well-organized Peruvian weavers. She was determined to start a weaving cooperative with other village women.

This experience in Chiapas is a reminder that the Festival does not end on the Mall in Washington when visitors go home and the staff

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MIS OJOS VIERON...



XUN GALLO

MI CORAZÓN LO SABE

packs up the tents. The Festival has always been designed to have an impact beyond its public education function with visitors. The Festival frequently plays a catalytic role for tradition bearers, scholars, officials and others to think about the practice, continuity, viability and creativity of grassroots culture. It extends "back home," certainly in the minds of participants, but often also in the institutions and policies of communities whose members have come to see and be seen. And the Festival, though ephemeral, leaves documentary trails, images, ideas and experiences, which live beyond the ten days or so on the Mall.

The dissemination of the Festival through time and space is broad, and often outstrips the ability of our staff to keep fully engaged with its numerous developments. Nonetheless, we feel a commitment to those who have worked with us to create the Festival, and in many cases, we continue our cooperative efforts.

This year, results of such collaborations were seen in the U.S. Virgin Islands, whose folklife tra-

ditions were featured at the 1990 Festival. As a direct result of that successful research, organizational and presentational effort, the U.S.V.I. undertook several initiatives to examine the present state and possibilities of local cultural resources. Joining with the newly formed and locally based Friends of Virgin Islands Culture, the Festival was remounted on the island of St. Croix in October, 1991. This first Virgin Islands Folklife Festival reassured residents and especially young people of the power of locally produced cultural representations. Half the population of the territory attended. The Festival became an arena and an idiom for discussing issues of local culture. Also participating in the Festival were Senegalese artists and the Freedom Singers, who had been featured along with the U.S.V.I. on the Mall at the Smithsonian's 1990 Festival. They offered local audiences an important comparative perspective on their own culture. The poignancy of the historical passage from West Africa to the Caribbean to the U.S. mainland was apparent to many, and was underscored when Senegalese sto-

ryteller Bigue N'Doye, joyful in her reunion with Virgin Islanders, spoke as if among family, "I am happy to be here. I walk without my shoes, so I can feel the land upon which my [captured] grandfathers walked."

For many, as in the Virgin Islands, the Festival is no mere show or passing entertainment; no mere canvas for the drawings of folklorists or cultural marketers. It was and has been a means of raising public consciousness about cultural issues and the society's future. The effort to remount the Festival on St. Croix was preceded by a cultural conference, "Go Back and Fetch It," held on St. Thomas. The conference brought together disparate groups of people and interests — government officials, scholars, community spokespeople, tradition bearers, educators, business leaders, members of the tourism industry and others. They examined strategies for conserving Virgin Islands culture and for using it to revitalize education, and promote sustainable economic development and environmental

preservation. In addition to work with the conference, the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies is collaborating with the U.S.V.I. Department of Education and the Humanities Council to develop a curriculum unit on local and comparative culture, so that students will have better access to their own traditions, their own history and the means for interpreting and representing them.

Most dramatically, the Festival program on the Mall in Washington furthered debate and discussion within the Virgin Islands about public policies relating to cultural issues. The intellectual engagement of the Smithsonian Center's staff, Festival participants and associated scholars with each other and with government officials and policy makers was a serious, sometimes contentious one — with strong debate and public commentary about how to address salient cultural issues in the Virgin Islands. In March the U.S. Virgin Islands Cultural Heritage Preservation Act was passed by the 19th Legislature and signed by Governor Alexander Farrelly. This law, a direct outgrowth of the Festival, establishes a cultural institute dedicated to the research, documentation, preservation and presentation of local cultures.

Other states and regions of the United States have remounted the Festival — Michigan, Massachusetts, Hawai'i, most recently — and have tried, sometimes quite successfully, to use the projects as catalysts for research and educational



Leona Watson (right) engages elder Miss Etta in an intense recollection of Virgin Islands community history at the Virgin Islands Festival on St. Croix.

Photo by Joan Wolbier



Ector Roebuck of St. Thomas delights local children with anansi stories at the remounting of the Virgin Islands Festival program at Estate Love on St. Croix. *Photo by Joan Wolbier*



An aerial view of 'Aina Moana Recreational Area (Magic Island), a state park jutting out into the Pacific Ocean from downtown Honolulu, shows the site of the 1990 restaging of the Festival of American Folklife Program in Hawai'i.

Photo by Carl Heffner



Christine Won teaches children Korean drumming at "Folklife Hawai'i," a restaging of the 1989 Festival of American Folklife program in Hawai'i. These children were among the 10,000 school students from Hawai'i who participated in special Festival programs organized by local teachers with the assistance of Smithsonian staff. Photo by Ray Tanaka

activities, public service and policy debate. So too have other nations, perhaps most dramatically India, used their Festival experience to mount similar presentations.

Sometimes Festival programs have built institutional relationships and encouraged governmental attention and even policy shifts, as with the former Soviet Union's Ministry of Culture, some of whose collaborative projects with us have continued after the demise of the U.S.S.R. The Soviet music program at the 1988 Festival for example, led to scholarly ties and commitments for joint research on the transformation of Russian, Old Believer, Bukharan Jewish, Ukrainian and Native traditions in the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Despite recent events, this joint research continues. Under Smithsonian auspices, Dr. Ted Levin, an ethnomusicologist from Dartmouth and Dr. Otanazar Matyakubov from Tashkent State Conservatory have been doing fieldwork among Bukharan Jews in Uzbekistan and among those who have emigrated to New York and New Jersey. They have produced scholarly articles and Smithsonian/Folkways recordings, e.g., *Shashmaqam: Music of Bukharan Jews in Brooklyn* and *Bukhara: Musical Crossroads of Asia*.



Uzbek folklorist Otanazar Matyakubov takes down a song text from Kholmurod Mirzozonov in the Valley of Yagnob, Tajikistan, June 1991 during a Smithsonian-sponsored fieldwork trip. Prof. Matyakubov subsequently did fieldwork in Uzbek communities in New York and New Jersey with American counterpart Prof. Theodore Levin of Dartmouth College. Photo by Theodore Levin

Other such teams with roots in the 1988 Festival also continue their research collaboration to understand cultural continuities and transformations among cognate peoples in the context of larger social and economic systems. We trust this research will result in a Festival program in 1994 or 1995.

Discussions also continue at the levels of communities and individuals brought together through the Festival. Peruvian and Bolivian Indian groups who met at the Smithsonian's 1991 Festival have continued to talk with each other about cultural survival and its economic strategies since returning home. Perhaps the most dramatic case of individual contact occurred after the 1986 Festival. That Festival included programs on the folklife of Japan and Tennessee. A cooper from Tennessee was intrigued by the techniques of a Japanese craftsman who makes casks for rice wine. Though they could not speak each other's language, they were able to communicate because of a mutual familiarity of the hand skills needed for their respective crafts. Taken with the desire to learn more, the Ten-

nessee cooper traveled to Japan, worked with his counterpart, and brought his new-found knowledge back home — no doubt much to the chagrin of future archaeologists who might have to puzzle over the confluence of bourbon and sake-related craft traditions.

The catalytic role the Festival plays can be seen in the many media products — documentary films, educational videos, audio recordings, books and articles — that result from its research and documentation. The Italian-American stone carvers working at the National Cathedral participated in several Festivals. A documentary film about them by staff folklorist Marjorie Hunt and film maker Paul Wagner won Academy and Emmy Awards in 1985. We are just finishing a film to supplement a monograph on Onggi pottery, a project that grew from Festival research in 1982 for a program on Korea. And we continue to work on others — from one on Salvadorian immigrant life in D.C., growing out of the 1987 Metropolitan Washington program, to one on presentational techniques, filmed at the Festival last year. And — as in the case with the Chiapan-

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THINKING BACK A BIT

Bess Lomax Hawes

Historians will eventually look in wonder, I think, at the far reaching effects of the 1976 Festival of American Folklife. In a way, it did what all festivals do — interrupting the passing of ordinary time, providing landmarks for later recollection and brief respites from the day-to-day during which energies and ideas for the future can be sorted out. But this Festival was so big, and it involved so many people, that its sheer size affected in major ways the steady progression of work that had already been going on for decades in support of the arts and culture of all the world's people. After all, another thing festivals traditionally do is to bring people together and this one brought together for a period of serious work a serious group of people. Almost every person I know who is active today in the area of public folklore participated at least in some small fashion in the 1976 Festival.

By now, it is impossible to determine just what ideas, whose energies, which programs grew out of that extraordinary summer, but when I left in 1977 to develop the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts, I know I approached my new job with an unpurchasable wealth of experience. Fifteen years later, with a lot of bureaucratic victories behind us — the establishment of state folk cultural programs in almost every state and territory, the initiation of the National Heritage Fellowships honoring individual traditional artists, and the funding of nation-spanning folk arts tours and radio series, feature films, inner city multicultural festivals, artists conferences and hundreds of other ingenious ways to further the varied arts of the varied American people — the Folk Arts Program has an honorable history and a future of enormous potential. In its continual attempts to be consistent, clear, fair-minded, focussed and forward-moving, the Program has always depended heavily upon the experiences of the many artists in this business; and the summer of 1976 brought together an unprecedented number of artists from whom to learn.

One afternoon at the 1976 Festival I heard that a young Scots woman was going to do a ballad program on the main stage. I knew her primary Festival role was to work in the Children's Area, teaching her extensive repertoire of British traditional singing games, but I had also heard she sang a great many truly unusual British and Scottish bal-

lads. It occurred to me that the prospect of occupying the big bare main stage for an hour all by herself might be a bit daunting, so I dropped by for a chat backstage before she went on. And she said something that seemed to me to sum up one of the most unremarked but most remarkable features of that never-to-be-forgotten summer. She said to me,

You know I came here with my little pack of Scots songs on my back, and then the next day when I walked up and down the Mall listening to the glorious African drums and the gorgeous religious choruses and the incredible string bands and all the music that's here from all round the world, I thought to myself, why will anybody want to listen to the little old tunes that are all I know? And I felt really frightened, and I almost wished I hadn't come. But do you know, every time I actually sing them, I just know deep down that they really are — they really absolutely are — the prettiest of anything!

And she walked out on the huge stage all alone, and her clear voice rang out with confidence, and indeed I had to think that perhaps the very song that she was singing at that exact moment could truly be the prettiest of all.

Somehow everybody always felt that way, all summer long. Every singer, musician, storyteller, crafts worker participating in every one of the twelve weeks of that so little heralded Festival thrilled to the excitement and glory of the vast differences being displayed all around them. And everybody was also thrilled to have it quietly and unostentatiously established for themselves, for all time, deep down inside, how equally (if not indeed more equally) wonderful their own particular art was. This has since become for me a test for the success of any multicultural presentation. If everyone (privately) truly thinks that theirs was the greatest while everybody else's was perfectly wonderful too, then we shall have together made the kind of a festival — and the kind of small world too — that we all dream can one day prevail.

Earlier this year, Bess Lomax Hawes retired as Director of the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts.

film last year and documentaries made by film crews from Senegal, the Virgin Islands and Hawai'i — others from back home use the Festival as a field for their own examinations and interpretations of cultural issues.

With our acquisition of Folkways Records in 1987, we have integrated research and production of new recordings with the Festival. The 1989 Hawai'i program at the Festival produced research and documentation that led to three Smithsonian/Folkways albums, copies of which were distributed to every school in that state so that children could learn about their cultural heritage through contemporary media. The 1990 Musics of Struggle program at the Festival resulted in a jointly-produced recording with Sony Records. Curators of the 1991 Rhythm and Blues program, Ralph Rinzler and Worth Long, are in the final stage of production for another Sony album that, with documentary notes, will provide an interpretative musical view of African-American cultural history. In developing the Indonesia program at last year's Festival, and with the collaboration of the Masyarakat Musikologi Indonesia (Indonesian Ethnomusical Society) and a grant from the Ford Foundation, we produced the first three albums of a Smithsonian/Folkways multi-volume set of Indonesian verbal arts and music. The next group of albums is due out shortly. Producing them serves as a vehicle for training Indonesian students in fieldwork, archival processes and sound engineering. The Indonesian language edition of these albums will be distributed to Indonesian schools.

Other publications engendered by the Festival are numerous. Some, like the recently released *Smithsonian Folklife Cookbook* (Kirlin and Kirlin 1991) may reach tens of thousands of people through print and inspire participation in and appreciation of regional cuisine and economics. Others, like scholarly and museological analyses of the Festival (Bauman and Sawin 1991, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991, Kurin 1991) in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Karp and Lavine 1991) and other volumes and journals (McCarl 1988, Cantwell 1991, Seitel 1991, Kurin 1992, Stanton 1992) reach specialized professional audiences and contribute to the knowledge of cultural representation.

To be sure not all the impacts of the Festival are serious, profound or even praiseworthy. But many of them are. And they are part of larger efforts of communities and their cultures to per-

severe. I just returned from India, where I was gratified to hear about the importance of participation in the 1985 Festival Mela program and the related Aditi exhibition to the artists of Shadipur, a ramshackle Delhi squatters' slum. They well remember their experience on the Mall and their stunning effect on the American public. Laws curtailing their artistic practice were changed, and they gained organizational strength and civic recognition. Yet their main goal — to gain rights to purchase land so they can develop their own community and livelihood — has not been realized, despite promises from officials and even the former Prime Minister. For them, for collaborator Rajeev Sethi and for me, that Festival project still continues.

The Festival, as a colleague of mine says, "never ends." Mined, transformed and analyzed, it continues to be a rich multi-purpose vehicle for researching, representing, expressing and making culture. And though it may be guided by Smithsonian staff and fueled by federal, trust and private dollars, there are many diverse individuals, communities, artists, scholars, officials and others who build, shape, repair and improve on it and give it a life of its own.

This is true this year as well. The White House program has helped reunite workers who share in 20th century presidential history; their experience will, after the Festival, take the form of an exhibit and video documentary to be produced in Presidential Libraries. The New Mexico program is accompanied by the first two of several Smithsonian/Folkways recordings, and discussions are underway for bringing the Festival back home. "The Changing Soundscape in Indian Country" is first to be mounted on the Mall as a Festival program, and then to be followed by the production of Smithsonian/Folkways recordings and the mounting of a 1994 exhibition and performance program at the new George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian in New York. And the Maroon program will enable leaders and people from dispersed communities, both joined and separated by 500 years of history, to meet each other for the first time and address common concerns.

The Festival generally implicates and accentuates ideas about community and personal identity, cultural values and policies held by those who participate. Participation in the Festival can be informed by the diverse concerns of tradition bearers, scholars, officials and others. The Festival may provide memorable means to worthy, even just ends; and as the following account of

an incident last year illustrates, the Festival may provide moments that unify people and ideas.

It had been a long, hot day at the Festival. The participants were back at the hotel relaxing over after-dinner conversation. An older Indonesian woman from Kalimantan (Borneo) was conversing with a man from North Dakota — a participant in the Family Farm program — with the help of a translator. The older woman was delighted to learn that the man knew about growing food, she also grew crops. An animated exchange ensued about the vagaries of weather, pesky insects, good years, bad years and other topics of universal concern to farmers.

Finally the woman shyly asked the question she had wanted to ask from the beginning. “Why are you always in that chair with wheels?”

The man spoke about the accident that had taken his legs.

Her response moved her new friend to tears. “You are so lucky,” she said. “All of us lose something of ourselves in life. I know many people who have lost pieces of their soul. You have only lost your legs.”

Citations and Further Readings

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Suggested Listening

- Levin, Ted and Otanazar Matyakubov. *Bukhara: Musical Crossroads of Asia*. Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings SF 40050.
- Levin, Ted and Otanazar Matyakubov. *Shashmaqam: Music of the Bukharan Jewish Ensemble*. Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings SF 40054.
- Yampolsky, Phillip. *Music of Indonesia Series*. Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings SF 40055, SF 40056, SF 40057.