
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.