

# The 1993 Festival

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This is, in a sense, the second Festival on the Mall this year, the first having taken place some six months ago for the Presidential Inaugural. The America's Reunion on the Mall brought together performing musicians, artists, craftspeople, and cooks from all across the country in a celebration of our nation's strength in diversity. The inaugural festival was wonderfully successful. We were happy to play a role in celebrating our democracy, and all the more so because that event reinforced what the Smithsonian's Festival has been doing and saying about American culture for the past 26 years.

Through the Festival of American Folklife we have learned that to represent truly the culture of our nation, one must represent the diversity of its people, its communities, its regions, and its genres of cultural expression. We have learned that such representations — whether in the form of cultural performances, skill demonstrations, expository talks, or museum exhibits — must result from intimate collaboration with those being represented; they too have roles to play as researchers, curators, presenters, and artists. We have also learned that cultural representation is a vehicle for affirmation of self-worth, especially when it is done in a highly visible, centrally symbolic place like the National Mall. And we have learned that people — those represented at the Festival as well as visitors to it — can understand, appreciate, and learn from each other when culture is presented in an open,

respectful setting. Indeed, the Festival has proved to be a forum where the confluences and divergences of culture can be engaged in a peaceful and sometimes even enlightening way. At the Festival, the interaction of visitors, participants, and Smithsonian staff has often resulted in new cultural awareness and in syntheses of new ideas and cultural forms.

This summer, the Festival includes programs on U.S. - Mexico borderlands, American social dance, music in the Washington Metropolitan area, and urban children's culture. All point to how people creatively use the resources of community culture to shape life experiences in ways that celebrate and affirm social values.

The Festival's featured program, U.S. - Mexico Borderlands, is the latest in a series developed for the Columbus Quincentenary which has sought to expand public knowledge about the cultural history of our hemisphere and to fortify the Smithsonian's engagement of colleagues and communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. These programs, including Creolization in the Caribbean, Land and Power in Native American Cultures, New Mexico, Maroons in the Americas, and American Indian Soundscapes, have directly reached some 5 million Festival visitors. Brought to fruition with the cooperation of scores of academic, cultural, and educational institutions in 18 nations, these programs have engaged the efforts of some 250 different scholars and over 1,000 exemplary culture bearers

from across the Americas. These Festival programs have generated rich documentary archives, copies of which reside both at the Smithsonian and at collaborating institutions. Additionally, these programs have generated two documentary films, several books, and even the passage of cultural legislation.

Our consideration of cultural borderlands comes at an important time, socially and intellectually. The migrations and movements of people challenge prior notions of bounded, localized national cultures. Borderlands are generally regarded as the edges of a nation, marginal and peripheral to its cultural life. Yet what happens when the border region of two nations achieves its own sense of identity, its own idea of cultural centrality? The borderlands are characterized by cultural dynamism, liminality, and contention. And the U.S.- Mexico cultural border is quite permeable, with flows of people, goods, and ideas that extend not only geographically deep into each country, but also deep into their social lives. No doubt, in a continent whose patterns of exchange may be refashioned by the North American Free Trade Agreement or like arrangements, we will continue to witness the cultural evolution of this important region. And so too will our thinking about the relationship between culture and nation deepen. The examination of the borderlands makes it possible for us to see culture not as a static accumulation of things,

but as flows of meanings, styles, and values continually reshaped and revalidated by use.

Finding such phenomena as cultural borderlands represented at the Festival signals the fact that over the past decade, museums and their programs have increasingly become forums for addressing the cultural realities of contemporary life. These cultural realities are complex, and often intimately tied to important social and political issues. The involvement of the Smithsonian and other such institutions with issues of contemporary cultural concern is part of our public trust. We have the responsibility to contribute our knowledge and perspective to public dialogue and debate — understanding of course that our voice is only one, and not necessarily the definitive one, in that discussion.

The Festival has historically been a leader in this area. This was especially true during the past year as its staff engaged colleagues from Hebrew and Bir Zeit Universities in researching the grass-roots cultural traditions of Jerusalem. No place on earth is perhaps as culturally rich, nor as contentious, as Jerusalem. Yet working with local researchers and scholars, community artists and leaders, and members of Jerusalem's diverse communities, excellent work was accomplished. We hope that this research, the understandings and substantive practices that animate the cultural life of that great city, will emerge as a Festival program in the near future.