

# Cultural Conversation on the Mall

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The National Mall is our country's symbolic center, where we celebrate our national civic rites — the inauguration of a president, our independence day, our bicentennial. The Mall is our national showcase where we enshrine, in our national museums, our understandings of history, culture, science, and the arts. And it is our national town square where generations of Americans have gathered to speak to each other, to represent themselves and their concerns to their fellow citizens.

Since 1967, the Festival of American Folklife has presented the grassroots culture of our nation, bringing together musicians, craftspeople, cooks, storytellers, workers, and other cultural exemplars from every region of our country. People from various states, ethnic and Native American groups, occupations, and cultures have brought their wisdom, knowledge, art, and skill to the Mall and have shared it with their fellow citizens.

For some 20 years, the Department of Interior through the National Park Service and with the cooperation of its other Bureaus, has been a proud partner in the Festival. The Smithsonian and the Park Service share a commitment to the preservation of our national heritage — cultural and natural. Over the years, the Festival's work has been guided by research done by folklorists, anthropologists, and historians from both agencies in communities across the country. The Festival has been a forum for discussions about culture conservation, environmental preservation, and local economic development. The Festival has provided a training ground for developing skills and techniques for the presentation of grassroots culture. Most of all, the Festival has functioned as a combined outdoor museum and interpretive park, where people from around the country can speak directly to their fellow citizens about their history, their culture, and their lives.

This type of cultural conversation, in which cultural traditions can be respectfully presented, discussed, and even exchanged, is vital to our continued health as a whole nation. As President Clinton has affirmed, our cultural diversity is a source of national strength. Our educational programs and public institutions need to encourage the study and broadest dissemination of knowledge about our history, and about the value and flow of ideas between people of varied backgrounds. Sometimes our cultural conversations will be celebratory, and sometimes sobering. But to appreciate their importance, one need only look around the globe to places where the cultural conversation has stopped, and where difference has led to intolerance, to the abuse of human rights, and even to endemic violence.

We continually engage the American public in every state and territory in cultural conversations. The Yaqui, represented this year at the Festival, have regularly participated in the Fiesta at Tumacácori National Monument in Arizona; musicians, craftspeople, and working cowboys like those here at the Festival from Texas have displayed their culture at Chamizal National Memorial Park in El Paso; and local Washington area musicians like those at the Festival have regularly performed in National Park venues at Glen Echo and Wolf Trap. The cultural dialogue goes on at historical sites such as America's Industrial Heritage Park in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, at interpretive exhibits in urban parks like Lowell National Historical Park, at natural sites like Hawaii's Volcanoes National Park, at cultural centers being developed in Maine and West Virginia, and in programs such as Keepers of the Treasures. Our work, and our partnerships with the Smithsonian and with many others at the national, state, and local level, help Americans understand their national heritage, and we fervently hope, each other.