

# The Festival of American Folklife: Doing More with Less

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*Diana Parker*

This year's Festival of American Folklife is the 27th since the Smithsonian's annual living cultural exhibition began in 1967. We have learned much in these years about how to present traditional cultures respectfully and understandably to a broad audience. We have learned about the products besides the Festival that can come from the research done to produce the event. And we have learned about the ways the labor and the money the event requires can be used to maximum effect.

Walking through the Festival, you see the culmination of more than a year of hard work. Before a Festival can happen, themes and curators must be selected, research plans formulated and researchers identified, funds raised, field research documentation reviewed, participants selected and invited, visas, transportation, housing, and meals procured, sites and programs designed and produced, signs and program book articles written, supplies located, and more. Upwards of 100 people have worked closely together to create the program on the Mall, and over 100 volunteers a day will add their labor during the Festival's span.

The annual Festival requires a tremendous concentration and commitment of intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical energy. It also takes a lot of money. Considering salaries, fees, transportation, and everything it takes to produce the event, Festivals typically cost between one and two million dollars, depending on the size, length, and complexity of the program.

In the recent past, the Festival, like the rest of the Smithsonian, has had to learn to make do with less. Traditionally, about 25% of the cost of the Festival has come from Federal funds, 25%

from Smithsonian trust funds, 20% from corporate and foundation sources, and 30% from other governments. The sale of traditional crafts, foods, publications, and beverages at the Festival, which do much to bring the intimate aesthetics and taste of folk culture to a broad audience, also help in a limited way to offset the cost of production. But the current economic climate has limited the availability of Federal and Smithsonian funds, and also made it more difficult to raise funds from the outside.

More than 1.2 million people visited the 1992 Festival. That makes the cost of the Festival about \$1.50 per visitor — less than the cost of a concert or a movie ticket and much less than the cost of maintaining an artifact-based museum. But the economy of the Festival is even greater when you consider the ways it reaches beyond the Mall.

Perhaps the most direct way that the Festival stretches beyond its temporal and physical boundaries is through the media. It is estimated that some 40 million people learn about the event and the people and themes it presents from sources as varied as "The Today Show," feature stories in national and local newspapers, and "National Public Radio" interviews with Festival participants. Public television has produced several documentaries about our programs and Festival participants, and aired others made by independent producers. Perhaps the best known is *The Stone Carvers*, produced by Marjorie Hunt and Paul Wagner which won the 1985 Academy Award for best documentary.

Remounting sections of the Festival of American Folklife "back home" has proved an effective way of multiplying the value of the money spent for research and planning by sharing the resources of the Smithsonian with non-Washington audiences. The Festival's second life reuses its research, design, and its museum-quality signs, banners, and publications; it trains people

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in various parts of the country in the art of presenting traditional culture to a broad public audience; and it increases the much deserved honor tradition bearers receive in their own home regions.

Recent Festival of American Folklife programs remounted back home include Michigan (1987), Massachusetts (1988), Hawai'i (1989), and the U.S. Virgin Islands (1990). Although there was no state or territory program at the 1991 Festival, a portion of the Family Farm program of that year was remounted in the Festival of Michigan Folklife in the fall of 1991. The legislature of the state of New Mexico has recently appropriated funds to remount the successful 1992 program back home in Las Cruces. Some of these Festival restagings, as in Michigan, have provided the impetus for year-round cultural research, educational, and public programs. Other restagings, like the one in the U.S. Virgin Islands, have led to legislation and the establishment of local cultural institutions. Generally, the Smithsonian provides in-kind staff support to these efforts, which are funded largely by states and private sources.

States and territories participating in the Festival receive complete archival copies of the research done in preparation for the Festival. The Festival has generated significant documentary collections, which are now housed in many state archives and universities. This cultural information provides material for books, policy studies, and public programs.

Festival research materials have also been used to prepare educational packets for use in public schools. Smithsonian and U.S. Virgin Islands scholars compiled audio, video, and written materials from the 1990 Festival to create teachers' kits. The kits were used to teach traditional culture in Senegal and the U.S. Virgin Islands — comparing and contrasting storytelling, foodways, music, and other expressive forms, and introducing students to the skills required to research folk culture in their own families and communities.

Other ways have been found to share the research done for the Festival with people outside the Washington area. Numerous Smithsonian/Folkways recordings accompanied by extensive documentary notes have been produced from every Festival since 1988, beginning with

the critically acclaimed *Musics of the Soviet Union*. These recordings have proved valuable tools in the classroom for teaching about traditional culture. Their quality is reflected in a Grammy Award and several nominations. The most recent Festival recording, *Roots of Rhythm and Blues: A Tribute to the Robert Johnson Era*, was nominated for a Grammy in the category of best traditional blues.

Every year the Festival generates ancillary projects that capitalize on the energy and funds put into it. For instance, the 1984 Black Urban Expressive Culture from Philadelphia program led to a traveling exhibit, an exhibit catalog, a *National Geographic* article, and a training program for young African American documentary photographers. A 1992 program on White House Workers is being developed into a film and a traveling exhibit for the presidential libraries; another 1992 program on Native American music is being transformed into an exhibit for the National Museum of the American Indian; and yet another, on Maroon cultural history, will tour the nation as a future exhibit in the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service.

Numerous interns, undergraduate, and post-doctoral fellows have used the Festival and its archives for research and publication. Additionally, the Center originated a Folklore Summer Institute which brings together selected lay scholars from communities around the country for training in research, documentation, and presentation of traditional culture, as well as proposal and grant writing. Coinciding with the Festival, the Institute allows students to use the event as a laboratory and an opportunity to meet other tradition bearers and professionals in the field of traditional culture. The National Park Service has held its training program for Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians in Washington during the Festival for the last two years for the same reason.

Proud as we are of the Festival on the Mall created by the tradition bearers it honors, we think of the event as just the tip of an iceberg. The effect of the Federal funds expended on it is amplified many times over by private, state, and income-generated funds that support Festival-inspired cultural education projects around the country and even around the world.