

# Kids' Stuff:

## Children's Traditions of Play and Performance in Metropolitan D.C.

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*Diana Baird N'Diaye*

Nowhere is the essence of childhood revealed more authentically than in play. A vivacious and expressive play culture is still created and shared by children within the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area despite TV, Nintendo, other toys and entertainment manufactured by adults, and in the face of ever more difficult realities of growing up in the city. The 1993 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife highlights some of these traditions of children's play and performance. The Festival presents forms that invite participation by the whole group such as clapping games, ring plays, call-and-response singing, and double dutch. Also presented are genres, such as rhythmic bucket brigades, that are consciously created for an audience.

The program explores the ways children in each generation create, learn, and breathe renewed vitality into forms of play and expressive traditions and the ways they teach them to their peers and to younger friends and siblings. Children in metro D.C. accumulate extensive knowledge and master skills while engaged in creative play shaped by tradition on city streets, in suburban backyards, at recreation centers, at Saturday and Sunday schools organized by ethnic communities, and in school playgrounds.

Many people think of a tradition bearer as an elder who has accumulated knowledge and acquired expertise in a long lifetime of practice. But children's traditions are learned, performed, and passed on within a very short time span, among people who have yet to live two decades.

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So it is somewhat paradoxical that many of the clapping games and songs featured in the program hark back many centuries, and even the relatively new play traditions presented have been invented during the past few generations. Forms of play are tenaciously long-lasting as each new generation claims ownership. In a painting completed in the 16th century, Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel (the Elder) documented a great variety of children's games played in his native city of Amsterdam. It is remarkable how many of the games that he depicted can be recognized on playgrounds in and around Washington, D.C. today.

In the Washington metro area, as elsewhere, local street play traditions are taught mainly by children to other children. Some remain local and specific to the communities in which they are created and performed. Others travel by word of mouth, observation, and imitation through neighborhoods and towns, across state and national borders, and sometimes even across continents. The demographics of the metro region guarantee a large and diverse children's culture.

The cultural composition of the city is reflected in the neighborhood traditions that children bring to the Festival. Some children are African American and have parents and grandparents who are long-term residents in the metro area or have migrated from states further south. Other children and their families hail from different parts of the Spanish-speaking Americas, while more recent immigrants from countries in Africa and Asia bring games from their homelands. European traditions in music and play songs, transmitted informally and through institutionalized play in nursery schools and kindergarten classrooms, can also be found at the Festival.

Longtime residents of the metro area lament the fragility of childhood and the increasingly dangerous turn of children's games. The nightly newscasts too often remind us that for many chil-

Members of the championship fifth grade double dutch team at Seaton Elementary School in the District of Columbia show some deft moves on Easter Monday's traditional African American family event at the National Zoo.

Photo by Diana Baird N'Diaye



dren growing up in the city, gun-play and pretend games of gangster have turned all too real with deadly consequences.

Children's culture has always reflected the circumstances of its creation, and those times and places have rarely been idyllic for many children. Rhymes and games such as "Ring Around a Rosey" that seem so innocuous today represent children's experience of the epidemics of bubonic plague that ravaged Europe. The words do not seem threatening because the situation they comment on is far away. Yet there *are* modern-day examples. In the 1950s the dangers of contracting polio may have been reflected in children's use of "cooties." And some scholars have pointed to the current children's game of booger tag or booger touch as reflecting anxiety over contracting AIDS. The tales told by contemporary city children may not always be palatable to adults but they both reflect and provide a way of dealing with the situations of real life. In this play of the imagination children seek control over the conditions they meet every day. In these forms they sometimes gain the powers of eloquent expression and cultural transcendence.

Kids' Stuff encourages participation and dialogue as well as demonstration and observation. You are invited, young and old, to join in this celebration of children's play and performance.

### Further Readings

Babcock, W.H. 1888. Games of Washington Children. *American Anthropologist* Vol 1: 243-284.

Cole, Joanne. 1989. *Anna Banana: 101 Jump Rope Rhymes*. New York: Morrow Junior Books.

Schwartz, Alvin. 1989. *I Saw You in the Bathtub and Other Folk Rhymes*. New York: I Can Read Books, HarperCollins Publishers.

Walker, Barbara K. 1992. *Laughing Together: Giggles and Grins from Around the Globe*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.

Warren Mattox, Cheryl. 1989. *Shake It to the One that You Love the Best*. El Sobrante, CA: Warren Mattox Productions.

### Suggested Listening

Cabral, Len. *Nho Lobo and Other Stories*. Story Sound Productions 101.

Cabral, Len. *Anansi Stories and Others*. Story Sound Productions 102.

Harley, Bill. *Dinosaurs Never Say Please*. Round River Records 103.

Harley, Bill. *Cool in School*. Round River Records 104.

Harley, Bill. *Come On Out and Play*. Round River Records 107.

Harley, Bill. *Grownups are Strange*. Round River Records 106.

Jenkins, Ella. *Little Johnny Brown*. Smithsonian/Folkways C-SF 45026.

Paz, Suni. *Canciones para el Recreo/Children's Songs for the Playground*. Smithsonian/Folkways C-SF 45013.

Seeger, Pete. *American Game and Activity Songs for Children*. Smithsonian/Folkways C-SF 45025.