

# The National Heritage Fellowships: Frames, Fames & Aims



by Dan Sheehy

The Folk and Traditional Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is pleased to join with the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies in this year's special focus on "Masters of Traditional Arts." This program of the Festival of American Folklife offers an opportunity for *retrospection* – a look at many of the artists and traditions recognized over the years through the National Heritage Fellowships, a grant program of the National Endowment for the Arts. At the same time, it is an occasion for *introspection* – a close-up, reflexive view of the National Heritage Fellowships, re-examining their purpose, listening to the insights of the Fellows themselves, and talking with those who conceive and plan such awards.

This is not the first collaboration between the NEA Folk and Traditional Arts Program and the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies. In 1982, the year the National Endowment for the Arts launched its Heritage awards, the Fellows were presented to the public on a special stage at the Festival of American Folklife.

*Dr. Robert Garfias, a member of the National Council on the Arts, presents award certificates to Hawaiian hula masters Nalani and Pualani Kanaka'ole at the 1993 National Heritage Fellowship ceremony on Capitol Hill. Photo by William K. Geiger*

But the connections run even deeper. The person whose vision and determination brought the Heritage awards into being, Bess Lomax Hawes, was formerly a senior collaborator with the Festival of American Folklife's creator, Ralph Rinzler, in organizing the mammoth and magnificent Bicentennial Festivals of 1975 and 1976. Bess's experiences with the Festival honed much of the thought that gave rise to the Heritage Fellowships. And, from the point of view of many of the artists themselves, the NEA Folk and Traditional Arts Program and the Smithsonian folklife program have long been closely allied. Through the Smithsonian's Festival and the Endowment's funding activities, the programs have worked in tandem to provide opportunities for broad public recognition of our nation's accomplished traditional artists. Many of the Fellows' histories show that they had appeared at the Festival of American Folklife before receiving a Heritage award.





*Nicholas Charles, a Yup'ik Eskimo from Bethel, Alaska, crafts a traditional mask. Photo by Suzi Jones*

## THE NATIONAL HERITAGE FELLOWSHIPS

The annual events surrounding the National Heritage Fellowships for the past 13 years have provided an occasion for both celebration and “cerebration.” Each year a small number of artists – a dozen or so – are selected by the National Endowment for the Arts to receive a \$10,000 fellowship in recognition of their artistic excellence and their contributions to our nation’s cultural life. These awards are announced each spring through a national press release that is disseminated widely, with particular attention given to the artists’ home communities and cultural networks. This initial announcement has never failed to elicit comment about how revealing the awards are of the strength, vitality, and diversity of the many artistic threads in our national cultural fabric. In the fall, Fellows come to Washington for several days of celebratory and honoring events. They receive award certificates in a lively, congressionally-sponsored presentation on Capitol Hill. They perform at a free concert/gala organized by the National Council for the Traditional Arts and hosted by a national celebrity known for the breadth of his or her work with American cultures. In the past hosts have included Charles Kuralt, Ruby Dee, Studs Terkel, and Pete Seeger.

Joy and excitement run high during this time, but in more private and informal moments, these gath-

ered, grand representatives of our nation’s diverse cultural heritage inevitably turn their thoughts toward more serious matters. This is an all-too-rare occasion for the culturally and geographically distant tradition bearers to exchange views and encourage one another. Their eloquent, insightful, personal statements transcend cultural boundaries and map common cultural concerns. Some are striking tributes to the courage and individual determination it often takes to continue local traditions in a world increasingly driven by consumerism and pop culture. Others are testimonies to the vital role of traditional arts in cultural survival and self-determination. Together the National Heritage Fellows reveal the special beauty and deep meaning that the traditional arts hold for those who understand them, as well as the importance of multiculturalism to the nation.

While the words “folk” and “tradition” place great importance on the relationships that link the members of a group, within most cultures it is often the extraordinary talents and contributions of individuals that perpetuate and shape artistic expression. The National Heritage Fellowships try to strike a balance between recognizing outstanding individuals and ensembles and celebrating the collective achievements of their traditions and cultural groups.

A review panel of experts and peers convened by the National Endowment for the Arts judges Heritage award nominations by three criteria: artistic excellence, authenticity, and significance within tradition. The criterion of excellence measures the nominee’s qualities as a practitioner, interpreter, and creator within the art form. Authenticity gauges the artist’s qualities as a representative of the deepest tenets and the cultural authority of an artistic tradition and the sociocultural group of which it is a part. The criterion of significance within tradition judges the variety of ways an individual has enhanced the tradition as a whole – through being an important role model, through teaching, through significant innovation, and so forth.





### FRAMES, FAMES & AIMS

To be sure, the National Heritage Fellowships are a tangible reward to “many of our most significant and influential folk and traditional artists [who] go unrecognized by the larger community and unre-  
 paid for their contributions to the nation and to the arts,” as stated in the Folk and Traditional Arts Program guidelines. But to those of us who worked to create and refine the awards over the past 13 years, they are also vehicles for cultural development. Three key concepts that have guided our policy might be termed “frames,” “fames,” and “aims.”

Granting national recognition to a community artist and traditional art form puts a metaphoric “frame” around that person and practice and invites others to see it in a new light as something worthy of special attention. This cultural strategy has long been fundamental to the practice of conferring the Heritage awards, and it generally works as intended. But we never in a million grant cycles could have imagined how it would actually play out in the real world. When Okinawan-American musician Harry Nakasone received his award, his friends in Honolulu organized a golf tournament in his honor. Apache violin maker Chesley Wilson was hired by Wrangler to appear in advertisements for blue jeans. Woodcarver Emilio Rosado, maskmaker Juan Alindato, and *bomba* musician Rafael Cepeda –

Mexican-American mariachi musician Natividad Cano (center right) of Monterey Park, California, is the leader of the group *Los Camperos*. Photo by Lalo Garcia

all from Puerto Rico – became the subjects in a series of Budweiser advertisements in *Hispanic* magazine that spoke of cultural pride. Black Sacred Harp singer Dewey Williams was invited to address the Alabama state legislature. Musician / dancer Kevin Locke and porcupine quillworker Alice New Holy Blue Legs, both Lakota Sioux from South Dakota, received special awards from the governor of that state. The governor of North Dakota dropped by Sister Rosalia Haberl’s convent to view the German-style lace for which she was honored (though her fellow nuns delight in telling how she hid in a closet at first because she didn’t know what to say to him).

The Fellowships have brought thoughtful attention from the mass media. Many of the Fellows were featured in an article in *National Geographic* (co-authored by the co-curator of this Festival program, Marjorie Hunt), which reached 20 million readers. The *New Yorker* published a profile on the awards and a feature article on North Carolina storyteller Ray Hicks. An award-winning radio series presented a 52-part retrospective on that number of past Fellows. WNET public television in New York





*Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass music, received a National Heritage Fellowship in 1982. Photo by Dane Penland, courtesy Smithsonian Institution*

produced six vignettes entitled “The Songs of Six Families,” which was a 90-minute segment of the “Great Performances” series and featured Cajun fiddler Dewey Balfa, Inupiaq musician Paul Tiulana, Irish musician Jack Coen, mariachi leader Natividad Cano, Mardi Gras Indian costume maker Tootie Montana, and B.B. King. The Museum of International Folk Arts in New Mexico mounted the major touring exhibit “America’s Living Folk Traditions,” which gave special attention to the first 10 years of Heritage-award-winning craftworkers. And so on.

One of the major effects of this new “frame” was to intensify the Fellow’s particular “fame” within a community; that is, it enhanced his or her role in nurturing the tradition. In Steve Siporin’s attractive retrospective on the first 10 years of Heritage Fellows entitled *American Folk Masters* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), he grouped these roles into three categories – Inheritors, Innovators, and Conservers. Inheritors, as the name implies, are venerable elders, carriers of potent cultural meaning, “living libraries” of cultural and artistic wisdom. Inheritors typically have a long-time devotion to a culturally important art form or occupy an esteemed place within their cultural group. Doug Wallin is the latest in a long line of Anglo ballad singers in and around Sodom Laurel, North Carolina. Yup’ik Eskimo craftworkers, dancer / musi-



*Janie Hunter is an African-American singer and storyteller from Johns Island, South Carolina. Photo by Wade Spees*

cians, and storytellers Nick and Elena Charles provide younger Yup’ik a vital lifeline to their cultural past and a key element in their cultural future.

Innovators use their deep understanding of traditional aesthetics to explore new artistic directions, finding harmonies in sociocultural change, enlivening it, and creating new artistic possibilities for their cultural

groups. Bill Monroe, Ralph Stanley, and Earl Scruggs created “bluegrass” music with their talent and knowledge of an Anglo-Appalachian string band heritage, and established a new and popular regional musical style.

Conservers are at the same time artists, advocates, and teachers. The Kanaka’ole sisters Pualani and Nalani are exquisite dancers and key voices in the Native Hawaiian sovereignty movement. The elderly Cambodian dance teacher Peou Khatna brought the refined skills of a geographically and psychically distant past into the lives of members of her refugee community in the United States.

For some a Heritage award is an added credential to be used in pursuing desired goals. For other Fellows, an award confirms and multiplies their determination to play a positive, active role in their local cultural milieu. On many occasions bluesman



John Cephas is a master Piedmont blues musician and a dedicated teacher of the tradition.

Photo by Lisa Falk

John Cephas has spoken of how this honor brings a responsibility of caring for his tradition and helping others to carry it on. With his award Slovenian-American accordionist Louis Bashell created a mini-endowment that generates small grants to support Slovenian music in his hometown of Greenfield, Wisconsin. Mariachi musician Nati Cano said of the award, "I know what this means. I have to make mariachi music the best it can possibly be."

The National Heritage Fellowships are conceived within and dedicated to the notion that our democracy is constantly in a state of *becoming*. We are constantly searching for ways to enhance our freedom to be ourselves, both as individuals and as groups of people bonded together by shared ways of communicating, working, celebrating, and worshiping. And at the same time we seek the mutual understanding necessary to live together harmoniously in a shared political, social, and cultural framework. The National Heritage Fellowships continue to demonstrate that *e pluribus unum* is still an experiment in how the *pluribus* can be more vivid and lively and the *unum* more informed and stronger. During the Festival of American Folklife's Bicentennial years, Ralph Rinzler declared the Festival to be a "Declaration of Cultural Independence," an assertion of our basic right to practice our own cultures freely. Exercised with consideration, it is a right that brings us

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together, not tears us apart, as Americans. The National Heritage Fellowships share this conviction with the Festival, making it appropriate to find these two ongoing experiments in cultural democracy once again united on our National Mall.

### SUGGESTED READINGS

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