

# The Festival As Model

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**E**very summer, a new museum with neither roof nor walls arises on the National Mall. Its congeries of people, performances, lectures, processions, signs, and foods offer a somewhat incongruous presence on the nation's front lawn, flanked as it is by monuments, federal buildings, and national museums. But the Festival of American Folklife, now in its 29th year, has become a mainstay of the Smithsonian, an immensely popular exhibition of American and worldwide cultural heritage. The Festival, which has been called a "living museum," "a national treasure," "a service at the Church of the Great American Idea," is an extension of the Smithsonian outdoors, with the same mission but a somewhat different approach than most museums.

The Festival's approach is to help people represent themselves, to be broadly inclusive, and to present grassroots cultural traditions in an engaging, educational way. The Festival assumes that people who create much of the art, artifacts, and technology housed in our museums are themselves national treasures. Our researchers work with represented communities to develop accurate and insightful public presentations that usually include museum-like signs, a printed program book, scholarly introductions to events, musical performances, craft and cooking demonstrations, celebratory reenactments, and narrative discussions. Overall, the tone is conversational, the spirit free, the event participatory. The list of states, nations, occupations, communities, and themes that have been represented at the Festival is encyclopedic. The Festival has illustrated the cultural richness and diversity of our nation and the world. It has also demonstrated how differences can be appreciated and serve as a source of strength and cre-

ativity. If only for a few days, the Festival provides a good example of bringing people together—no mean feat in these troubled times. Understandably, the Festival served as a centerpiece of the American Bicentennial in 1976, and more recently as a model for such large-scale public events as the Black Family Reunion, the L.A. Festival, presidential inaugural festivals, and Olympic Arts festivals.

The Festival extends beyond the Mall with the production of Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, traveling exhibitions, books, films, and educational programs. Some products have won Academy, Emmy, and Grammy awards. Michigan, Massachusetts, Hawai'i, Oklahoma, New Mexico, the Virgin Islands, and several nations have reproduced their Festival programs at home and sometimes used them to establish ongoing cultural heritage projects. *White House Workers* — a 1992 Festival program on the work lore of White House butlers, doormen, seamstresses, and others — exemplifies this Festival afterlife. The Festival program was filmed and edited into a recently aired television documentary. It was also developed into an exhibition now traveling to presidential libraries across the country. A second version of the exhibition was mounted for local schools and served as a basis for educational programs (one of them hosted by the First Lady). The exhibition will eventually rest in the new White House Visitors Center. The Festival program also stimulated a "Blacks in the White House" issue of *American Visions* magazine.

This year's Festival features American Indian women's musical traditions, the heritage of the Czech Republic and Czech Americans, music of Russian and Russian-American groups, and the cultural life of the Cape Verdean community. These programs

testify to the vitality of the human spirit, to how people, ideas, and forms of cultural expression increasingly cross boundaries of geography, politics, language, race, and gender.

*Heartbeat: The Voices of First Nations Women* presents the musical culture of American Indian women. The program examines how these women express their identity through the use of a variety of musical forms — from traditional songs of home to contemporary songs of Indian life, from the appropriation of men's music to the fusion of root music with country, folk, blues, and gospel. *The Czech Republic: Tradition and Transformation* provides a broad survey of the ways national, regional, ethnic, and local traditions have been defined in a complex state located at the crossroads of Central Europe. The "Velvet Revolution" of 1989 and the separation of the Czech and Slovak Republics in 1993 have prompted further examinations of cultural identity, the relationship between the state and popular expression, creativity and tradition. Czech Americans, too, have looked at these changes and the reestablishment of relationships to their ancestral homeland. A third program, *Russian Roots, American Branches: Music in Two Worlds*, explores the musical culture of Old Believers and Molokans, Russian religious communities created in the 17th and 18th centuries. The program unites immigrant communities long established in the United States with those from Russia, and brings together people who, separated by generations and different social environments, have nonetheless faced parallel issues with regard to cultural persistence and adaptation.

All these programs involve complex institutional arrangements, local-level research

and documentation, and strong commitment to and pride in Festival representation. *The Cape Verdean Connection* program well demonstrates these processes. Cape Verde is an independent island nation and former Portuguese colony located off the west coast of Africa. Cape Verdean Americans, now numbering about 400,000, most born and raised here, historically settled in New England during the 18th century, playing instrumental roles in the whaling and cranberry industries. Cape Verdeans have an important story to tell about their role in American life, their immigrant and continuing transnational cultural experience, their multiracial heritage, and their enduring sense of community. We have much to learn from their story. Cape Verdeans provided the impetus for the Festival program, carried out most of the research in concert with Smithsonian scholars, led the effort to raise funds from governments, foundations, corporations, and individuals through benefit dances, auctions, and other community events, and, as is fitting, joined with the Smithsonian to share their experiences with the American public.

The Festival can never offer up more than a sample of the rich and complex cultures it seeks to portray. Yet by engaging people in their presentation — the people represented as well as visitors — the Festival can enable the public's understanding of its fellow citizens and neighbors, and help communicate our legacy to future generations. As we look toward 1996, with Festival programs on the American South, on Iowa (for its 150th anniversary), and on the Smithsonian itself (for our 150th), we trust this spirit of cultural dialogue and collaboration will continue to flourish.