

"So Long, It's Been Good to Know You"

A Remembrance of Festival Director Ralph Rinzler

RICHARD KURIN

Our friend Ralph did not feel above anyone. He helped people to learn to enjoy their differences. . . . "Be aware of your time and your place," he said to every one of us. "Learn to love the beauty that is closest to you." So I thank the Lord for sending us a friend who could teach us to appreciate the skills of basket weavers, potters, and bricklayers — of hod carriers and the mud mixers. I am deeply indebted to Ralph Rinzler. He did not leave me where he found me.

— Arthel "Doc" Watson

Lay down, Ralph Rinzler, lay down and take your rest.

So sang a Bahamian chorus on the National Mall at a wake held for Ralph a day after his passing on the second day of the 1994 Festival. It seems so incongruous to those who knew Ralph Rinzler to imagine him lying down and resting. If there are festivals in heaven, one can only imagine that Ralph is organizing them.

Ralph Rinzler's career at the Festival, the Smithsonian, and beyond was marked by his attention to traditional music and crafts, his development of institutions that support people's culture, his social activism, and his use of electronic media in support of the traditional. He was caring, gentle, and courteous, frustratingly creative, brilliant of wide scope, someone who brought out the best in people. Freewheeling and of boundless energy, he was also charming and a man of incredibly good taste. Self-effacing and quite modest for someone so accomplished, Ralph left thousands of friends on the Mall and around the world.

Ralph came to the Smithsonian Institution in 1967 to develop with James Morris the Festival of American Folklife. The Festival

quickly became a symbol of the Smithsonian under Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, energizing the Mall. It showed that the folks from back home had something to say in the center of the nation's capital. The Festival challenged America's national cultural insecurity. Neither European high art nor commercial pop entertainment represented the essence of American culture. Through the Festival, the Smithsonian gave recognition and respect to the traditions, wisdom, songs, and arts of the American people themselves. The mammoth 1976 Festival became the centerpiece of the American Bicentennial and a living reminder of the strength and energy of a truly wondrous and diverse cultural heritage — a legacy not to be ignored or squandered.

The Festival of American Folklife will remain Rinzler's major contribution, one that has had tremendous influence both in this country and the world. It represents a place where the whole country could be itself and be appreciated.

— Alan Lomax

The Festival for Ralph required sound research and understanding. He also felt that the value of the Festival lay in its impact back home on the lives and hearts of people. "Presenting these people with pride on the Mall," he said, "makes them feel they have something of value, and it encourages them to keep doing it." The Festival also stimulated institutional activities locally and nationally, at home and abroad.

Ralph was a beautiful example of a basically scholarly person doing an extraordinary show-business job, bringing hundreds of thousands of people to music, food, and crafts they'd never

heard before. His miracle was how to get the authenticity in a larger space and still keep it authentic.

— Pete Seeger

Ralph's mission was personal and professional. He was active in the folk song movement in the 1950s at Swarthmore College and on the festival circuit with fellow student, folklorist, and lifelong colleague Roger Abrahams. Ralph's early interests spanned fine arts and mythology, but then Library of Congress field recordings of traditional music captured his attention. He was an excellent musician and learned to play banjo and mandolin. He taught others, and became part of a bluegrass group, the Greenbriar Boys. Ralph learned some tunes from Woody Guthrie in Washington Square Park, organized performances with Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Mary Travers, and Bernice Reagon, and worked with Moses Asch and Mike Seeger in producing Folkways records.

Ralph Rinzler had an adamant and acute critical sense. Early on he knew what he liked and why.

— Jonathan Shahn

Ralph Rinzler selflessly sacrificed a professional career as a musician to make sure that the music of others could be heard. But it is as a personal friend and mentor that I knew and loved Ralph.... Ralph was my musical guru.

— David Grisman

Meeting Appalachian musicians Clarence Ashley and Doc Watson in their homes gave Ralph a new perspective. Said Ralph, "I knew the style of the music but had never really connected with the people who played. I knew it as a sound, not as an expression of the thinking, functioning person sitting in front of me. I had no idea what kind of people played this music. I just had the sound ringing in my ears of this beautiful, pentatonic, archaic-sounding music sung in a vocal style that left Frank Sinatra far behind....What astonished me was that the people who are great musi-



Photo by Bob Yellin

cians in traditional music are as profound as artists in any kind of art."

Ralph was a giver of opportunities.

— Robert Yellin

Ralph managed Watson's early career and revived the career of Bill Monroe. Ralph worked for the Newport Folk Festival, traversing the nation researching and documenting American folkways, learning his theory and method en route from Alan Lomax, Charles Seeger, A.L. Lloyd, and others. Through the seminal Newport Festival, Ralph brought Dewey Balfa and a host of people to broader public attention.

Ralph had felt intuitively that the melodies and harmonies of a region were directly related to the rhythmic vitality of its handcrafted objects.... Ralph brought his insistence on the contextual presentation of tradition to the Smithsonian.

— Jeffrey LaRiche

Ralph also loved regional crafts, especially pottery. He drove across the South and brought back quilts, pots, and baskets. Ralph thought that people should know about them, that the object was as significant as the performance in representing particular people.

Fieldwork took Ralph Rinzler into churches, barbershops, bars, radio stations, homes, back yards, and street corners nationwide. His documentation of American expressive forms – traditional music, crafts, and narrative – resulted in collections, Festival programs, documentary films, scholarly recordings, books, and exhibitions.



Photo by Diana Davis

Bill Monroe had a profound influence on Ralph, who learned to play mandolin bluegrass style when he joined the Greenbriar Boys trio in 1958. Ralph became Monroe's manager and introduced him to northern, urban audiences. Left to right: Bill Monroe, Alice Gerrard, Birch Monroe, Charlie Monroe, Mike Seeger, and Ralph Rinzler on a workshop stage at the Festival of American Folklife, late 1960s.

He joined with Nancy Sweezy to help financially support several craft enterprises, and with Bob Sayers coauthored two books and films on pottery.

No one in our day has more deeply and positively influenced folklore than Ralph Rinzler. The foundation of his contribution was broad vision and perfect taste.

— Henry Glassie

Ralph worked with scholars Kenny Goldstein, Bess Hawes, Archie Green, Roy Bryce-Laporte, Victor Turner, Abrahams, Glassie, and others to develop ways of understanding and communicating the significance of cultural differences. As the *Washington Post* well noted, Ralph was “a champion of cultural equity long before the winds of multiculturalism first blew.” At the Festival he hired the first Native Americans — Lucille Dawson, Clydia Nahwooksy, Barbara Strickland, Rayna Green — to work for the Institution. He worked with a dedicated group of African-American folklorists and cultural documenters — Gerry Davis, Bernice Reagon, James Early, Worth Long, Roland Freeman — in establishing the African Diaspora programs. He encouraged all sorts of people to bring their insights and perspectives to the Festival in order to better represent their communities and others to the nation.

Ralph Rinzler was the key person who opened space in the Institution for peoples who were not part of the Smithsonian agenda.

— Bernice Johnson Reagon

Ralph's work continued as the Smithsonian's Assistant Secretary for Public Service. He founded the Cultural Education Committee and the Committee for a Wider Audience to encourage the broad inclusion of the American people in collections, programs, staff, and audiences.

As the Smithsonian's Assistant Secretary Ralph blazed the Institution's trail toward digital technologies. He led the effort to acquire Folkways Records from founder Moses Asch as a collection, museum of sound, and business. Needing money for the acquisition, he produced *Folkways: A Vision Shared*, with Bruce Springsteen, U2, Little Richard, Emmylou Harris, Willie Nelson, Bob Dylan, Sweet Honey in the Rock, and others rendering contemporary interpretations of Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly songs. The album, on which Ralph accompanies Taj Mahal on the mandolin, made the money, and won a Grammy in 1988.

We continue to celebrate Ralph's success in making Folkways a part of his vision that the great diversity of American and world cultures must be integral to the mission of the Smithsonian.

— Michael Asch

Ralph continued his work on the Festival and Folkways after retiring as Assistant Secretary. He co-curated *Roots of Rhythm & Blues* at the 1991 Festival and won another Grammy nomination for the resultant recording. He produced new albums of Watson, Monroe, and Ashley, and at the time of his death was completing an expanded edition of Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Ralph produced a series of oral history/music instruction videos with Pete Seeger, Ralph Stanley, Watson, and Monroe, and encouraged video/book publications, CD-ROM, and CD-I products.



Photo by Carl Fleischhauer

Ralph received many honors, including the Smithsonian Secretary's Gold Medal in 1993 and Washingtonian of the Year in 1976. He served as vice chair of the U.S. National Commission to Unesco, and on a White House task force for music in education. He was also a fellow of the American Folklore Society.

Ralph facilitated the role of all people to come and be part of the conception and diffusion of knowledge.

— James Early

Ralph and his wife Kate were members of the board of the Highlander Center in Tennessee and strong supporters of movements for civil and human rights. Ralph was always aflame with something, often a campaign that had to be organized right then. Ralph made the struggles of traditional artists, cultural exemplars, and intellectuals his own. As Bess Hawes noted, Ralph "stroved with the artists he loved and admired; he argued with them and listened to them with all his being; he totally supported their right to dignified, democratic, conflict-laden choices even when he thought they were wrong."

As a lover of humankind, Ralph celebrated both folk traditions and traditions of freedom. He understood the relationships between theory and practice, between freedom and culture.

— Roland Freeman

Ralph himself was the subject of an oral tradition. Renowned for his expertise, he could dissertate on innumerable subjects from the origin of the bagpipes to the potential of high-definition television. Ever thoughtful, he would whoosh into meetings and astound everyone with the sheer force of heartfelt, brilliant ideas. Ralph had ideas upon ideas, at least eight or ten an hour. A few had been thunk before, some were wacky. But one or two would be innovative, insightful, and strong. And so on any day you might be left with a dozen or so, any one of which could have occupied a lifetime — as indeed they have. It didn't stop during the day, either. Ralph loved to call well into the night, beginning conversations mid-sentence and bursting with energy. Ralph spent so much time on the phone that deaf participants at the Festival one year made up a unique sign for him — the sign for "R" with each hand positioned next to mouth and ear, as if to indicate two tele-

Alan Lomax guided Ralph's fieldwork for the Newport Folk Festival and the Festival of American Folklife. Bess Lomax Hawes worked with Ralph as Deputy Director of the Bicentennial Festival before joining the National Endowment for the Arts. Left to right: in the center, Bess Hawes, Alan Lomax, and Ralph Rinzler.

Ralph loved to vacation at Naushon Island, off of Cape Cod. He befriended all of his wife Kate's cousins, and became a figure to be reckoned with, vigorously driving horse and carriage along the miles of dirt roads. His last and favorite horse was Timmy, a retired racing trotter from New Zealand.

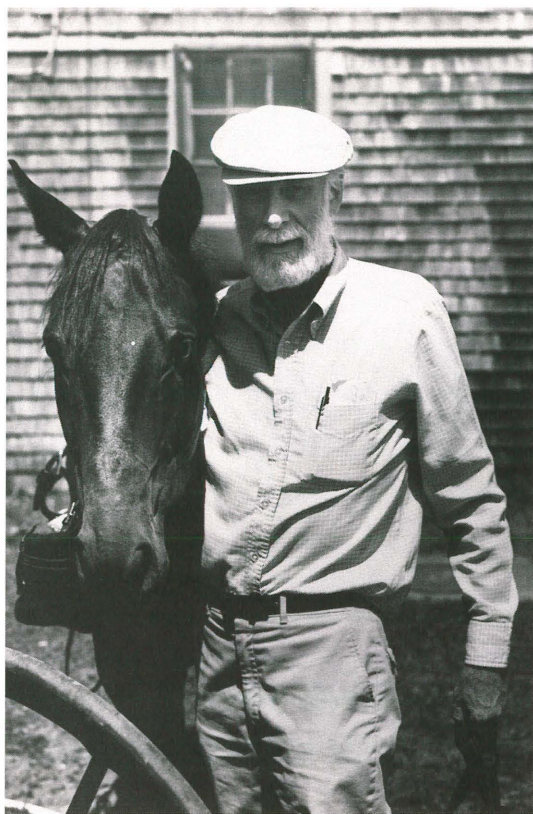


Photo by Sam Sweezy

phones and the initials "RR."

Ralph had great vision, crossing boundaries of race, class, gender, technology. He was also a bundle of opposites, caring and compassionate to people, systematic and dispassionate with institutions. He was generous. When the Smithsonian didn't support his work, Ralph, out of his own pocket, paid employees. Once I saw him write a \$10,000 check to help pay a salary. Soon after, he went out in the middle of the night before a Festival searching for donuts to bring back for those still working, and then tracked down administrator Barbara Strickland to reimburse him the \$16 and whatever cents he'd spent. Ralph donned the dress of the elite, but struggled to make conditions better for hundreds of Smithsonian working men and women who wear a uniform. He loved to drive a horse and buggy on his beloved Naushon Island in Massachusetts, and also to play with the latest digital-electronic calendars and computers.

We all have our Ralph stories. And last year, Ralph's passing at the Festival generated a few more. It was in the big music tent on the Mall that Saturday that the Bahamians were

presenting their evening programme. A great storm came up, and a thousand, maybe more, in the audience gathered into the tent. We had a respite for a few moments. Then the heavens broke loose with a sweeping deluge. It was a frightening display of thunder, lightning, and a torrential downpour of rain. Some of the folks from The Bahamas noted how it was God that was talking through the thunder and lightning and that it was not appropriate to perform until He'd finished. Kayla Edwards, the presenter and the Deputy Director of Culture for The Bahamas, explained how some people thought that such strong storms signified that a great person had died — that the storm was nature's way of making room for a new, ascending spirit. She did not know that Ralph had passed away just at that time. As the electricity went down, those in the tent sang "Amazing Grace."

The next day, learning of Ralph's passing, the Bahamian group did a settin' up — a wake for the benefit of Kate Rinzler, Ralph's nurse Donna Lang, and other friends. Though the Bahamians did not know Ralph, they saw the evidence of his good work in what was now their Festival, too. The folks from Thailand also saw Ralph's footprints on the Mall, and left a shrine made of candles and incense stuck on plastic cups on the desk in our office trailer to allay our grief.

A few days later in that same tent we held a memorial service. Clydia and Reeves Nahwooksy provided a Comanche Baptist invocation. Mike Seeger, Guy Carawan, and Bill Monroe played and sang. Bernice Reagon sang, as did the Bahamian ladies. Bess Hawes talked about Ralph's legacy, as did Jeffrey LaRiche and James Early; messages from Pete and Toshi Seeger, Roger Abrahams, Henry Glassie, Doc Watson, and others were read. Lucille Dawson talked about the truly profound effects the Festival's Native American programs had had on Indian education and civil rights. Mike Thomas, who helped care for Ralph during the last year, spoke for the Smithsonian custodians who always found in him a friend and supporter.

You don't get too many bow-tied

Washington officials meriting Baptist Indian prayers, Buddhist shrines, or Bahamian wakes, or having the "Bourgeois Blues" played as the recessional for their memorial service. It is indeed a tribute to Ralph's life that he was so appreciated, in so many different ways, by so many different people. And it's my guess that Ralph had a satisfied chuckle when the *New York Times* erroneously reported in its obituary that he was Black.

I think most of us will remember his ability to find the brilliance in the talents of his friends and then to search out the best ways to let the world in on this brilliance.... He was made of the best stuff.

— Roger Abrahams

Ralph Rinzler left a legacy in the people he brought into his work: an articulate Black guy with an attitude and politics from Jacksonville, an Indian farm gal from North Carolina with a knack for getting things done, a preacher's daughter from Kentucky, an Ivy Leaguer with a Peace Corps heart and connoisseur's eye, a Jewish truck driver's kid born in the south Bronx. Ralph, in every way, demonstrated that while differences among people often divided them, those same differences could be used, powerfully and creatively, to bring people together. Those following in his footsteps know the importance of this work. We see it in the faces of the people who sing and speak at the Festival to their fellow citizens and humans on this Mall, and maybe appreciate it a little more in our own hearts, because we know we've also been honored, even blessed, in helping to make it happen.

Ralph was a man of multiple talents, of immensely broad experience, and of absolutely startling energies.... I hope...many of us here will determine that we ourselves can try to help fill the terrible gap his death leaves; it will take a lot of us working all together, but we know a lot more now, from watching him, about how to do it.

— Bess Lomax Hawes

Suggested Readings

- Rinzler, Ralph, and Robert Sayers. 1987. *The Korean Onggi Potter*. Smithsonian Folklife Studies, No. 5. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- Rinzler, Ralph, and Robert Sayers. 1980. *The Meaders Family: North Georgia Potters*. Smithsonian Folklife Studies, No. 1. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- Rinzler, Ralph, and Peter Seitel. 1977. The Festival of American Folklife. *Smithsonian Magazine*.

Suggested Listening

- DeVito, Don, Joe McEwen, Harold Levanthal, and Ralph Rinzler. 1988. *Folkways: A Vision Shared, A Tribute to Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly*. Columbia Records OC 44034.
- DeVito, Don, Worth Long, Barry Lee Pearson, and Ralph Rinzler. 1992. *Roots of Rhythm and Blues: A Tribute to the Robert Johnson Era*. Columbia Records/Sony Music Entertainment and Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings CK 48584.
- Rinzler, Ralph. 1990. *The Doc Watson Family*. Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings SF 40012.
- Rinzler, Ralph. 1993. *Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys: Live Recordings 1956-1969, Volume 1*. Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings SF 40063.
- Rinzler, Ralph. 1993. *Bill Monroe and Doc Watson: Live Duet Recordings 1963-1980, Volume 2*. Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings SF 40064.
- Rinzler, Ralph. 1994. *Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley, The Original Folkways Recordings, 1960-1962*. Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings SF 40029/30.

Suggested Viewing

- Rinzler, Ralph, and Happy Traum. 1992. *Pete Seeger, Guitar Instruction*. Homespun Tapes and Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings.
- Rinzler, Ralph, and Happy Traum. 1992. *Doc Watson, Guitar Instruction*. Homespun Tapes and Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings.
- Ralph Rinzler: *A Celebration of Life*. Video of the July 7, 1994, memorial service on the National Mall at the Festival of American Folklife. Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies.

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