

1996: A Year of Celebration

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The Festival is a good place to celebrate. Twenty years ago, in 1976, the Festival of American Folklife was a centerpiece in the nation's Bicentennial. It was three months long, with programs from thirty-five nations, every region of the United States, and scores of occupational, ethnic, and American Indian groups on the Mall, as well as touring programs in some 100 cities and towns. That Festival provided a dramatic illustration of unity on our 200th birthday, demonstrating that Americans are a diverse yet tolerant people, interested in knowing their neighbors and in joining together with them in acts of civic participation.

In 1996, questions of national unity and purpose remain with us — yet there is much to celebrate, and good cause to do so. On the state level, this year marks the 150th anniversary of Iowa statehood; on the international level, we mark the 100th anniversary of the modern Olympics; and for the nation and the world, we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Smithsonian. Each of these anniversaries reminds us of what we value and helps set our course for the future.

Iowa is an icon of American heartland values. We imagine its main-street towns and farmlands in a peaceful vision of America, where the drama of deep personal relationships quietly unfolds — from the *Field of*

Dreams to *The Bridges of Madison County*. But Iowa is also home to agribusiness, high-tech and high-skill industries that manufacture computerized combines and fiber optics, and to high-quality service industries from education to insurance. Not without dynamic tensions and social, demographic, and occupational changes, Iowa in its sesquicentennial year does indeed foster and nurture a quiet but steadfast civic pride that turns out whole towns for girls' basketball games, propels youth into 4-H clubs, adults into volunteer fire companies and social clubs, and joins residents around a morning coffee table, on a Saturday night dance floor, or in a Sunday school. Anyone who witnessed the great floods of 1993, who saw exhausted neighbor helping neighbor, cannot be unmoved by the prevailing sense of community held by the people of Iowa.

This sense of community is celebrated by the Festival program here on the Mall in the Nation's Capital. It will also be evident back in Iowa for the first Festival of Iowa Folklife on the grounds of the State Capitol Building in Des Moines in August, and in a Smithsonian Folkways recording, Iowa Public Television documentary, and educational materials growing from the Festival and distributed to Iowans in the months to come.

The Olympic Games join athletes from across the globe in the highest levels of competition and excellence. The games have included, since their inception, a cultural component, but never before as extensively as this year in Atlanta. The Centennial Olympic

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1996 Festival of American Folklife

Games bring together excellent musical and dramatic performances, exhibitions, and artists from around the world. But most importantly, the Olympic Arts Festival highlights the American South. Southern culture was born from the interactions over the past centuries of Native Americans, European settlers, and peoples from Africa. In the South, various forms of expression have arisen and transcended boundaries of race, gender, religion, and geography. So powerful have these expressions been — jazz, blues, gospel, rock 'n' roll, civil rights songs, Southern oratory, and food — that they have come to stand for unique American contributions to world culture. At the Festival here on the Mall, we celebrate these forms of expressive culture. Later this summer in Atlanta during the Olympic Games, this program will be the core of *Southern Crossroads*, a festival of Southern culture to be mounted in the new Centennial Olympic Park — the gathering spot for some 250,000–400,000 visitors a day and literally billions more through television coverage. An Enhanced-CD Smithsonian Folkways recording with Internet connections and other educational material derived from this Festival program will reach millions more after the Olympic Games.

The Smithsonian is a cherished symbol of knowledge, a repository for treasures and national memories, a shrine of human accomplishment and natural wonders. The Smithsonian celebrates its 150th year with *America's Smithsonian* — a major exhibition traveling to twelve cities across the nation — and with television specials and minutes, a birthday celebration on the Mall in August, and a host of other exhibits, World Wide Web programs, and scholarly conferences. The Smithsonian was founded for the “increase and diffusion of knowledge” and took root in an American, democratic society as an organization dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge in the public eye, and for the public good. At the Festival, we demonstrate just how we do this, by turning the Institution “inside out,” as scientists, curators, conservators, exhibit makers, security officers, accountants, and administrators show the public how the Smithsonian works. Their work also testifies to the importance of knowledge as a basis for understanding the world, the significance of an educated citizenry, and the civic value of long-lived, high-quality public institutions.

The Festival is a wonderful way to help celebrate the anniversaries of these institutions, for like them, the Festival stands as a tribute to our own ability to speak with each other, to share our cultures and traditions, and to do so in a civil, tolerant, respectful, and enlightening way. The Festival itself is an enduring institution, and this year it marks its own thirtieth anniversary in typical fashion — by working hard to amplify the voices of others.