

# The Festival in the Electronic Age

Richard Kurin & Diana Parker

This year, the Festival of American Folklife seems especially timely, because it is helping celebrate several major events — the Iowa Sesquicentennial, the Centennial Olympic Games held in the American South, and the 150th Anniversary of the Smithsonian Institution. Why celebrate these occasions with a festival, and with a festival that concentrates on folklife and traditional culture?

Anniversaries tend to connect the past to the present, linking a contemporary status or relationship to a historical continuity. The Festival

does *not* aim to show visitors “how it used to be.” It *does* try to show how thoroughly contemporary people use and build upon their cultural legacy to forge meaning, and often beauty, in their lives. It is not from nostalgia that we produce the Festival, but rather out of respect for and appreciation of the manifold ways people understand and express themselves. To be sure, the songs, stories, crafts, foods, dances, worklore, and other forms of grassroots cul-

ture presented at the Festival are well worth appreciating; and they have histories enmeshed in Iowan, Southern, and Smithsonian communities. But they are no mere holdovers, or receding forms of expression on the brink of inevitable destruction. Their role and social function may have changed over time, but they are vital and important to current populations. Amana crafts and Mennonite songs, sweetgrass baskets and Cajun music, Smithsonian exhibit fabrication skills and museum tales have deep roots and continue to persist in the lives of real people. They have outlived IBM computer cards, transistor radios, the Rubik’s cube, electric typewriters, the Studebaker and DeLorean, the twist, macrobiotic diets, and other popular phenomena

once heralded as so culturally significant. Culture rooted in the people, long resonant with their daily lives, has an often-understated but amazing resiliency, even in the face of what appears to be rapid and dramatic technological progress.

To be sure, technological progress has resulted in social transformations. There is a good deal of spirited debate about whether these social changes represent true progress or genuine loss. Industrial and postindustrial technologies have devalued the economic role of the household, increased familial and personal mobility, reduced the importance of geographic proximity in the production and consumption of goods and services, and globalized all sorts of relationships. Increasingly, we witness the difficulty of maintaining family life, the absence of a sense of neighborhood in cities and suburbs, and even the loss of the work place as a locus of social interaction. Many bemoan the decline of civility and the diminution of the idea of “the public,” and argue that society as a whole is less unified and more fissiparous than ever.

Modern social thought was founded upon a geological metaphor of structure and solidarity. The institutions of family, clan, tribe, neighborhood, city, state, company, association, congregation, and nation were conceived of as the bedrocks of society upon which individual lives rested. Nowadays, institutions seem less respected and less important than they once were. Instead, individual atomism, biography and career, movement and event seem to better characterize contemporary life. We “log on and off,” “surf the net,” “tune in and out.” Boundaries are more permeable, identities shifting and flexible. The appropriate metaphor to describe the ebb and flow of

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## 1996 Festival of American Folklife

ideas, movements of people, and continual change through unfolding events in contemporary social life is perhaps a hydraulic one. Fluidity, rather than stasis, is the order of the day for workers, voters, bankers, and map-makers alike.

In this world, where memory, tradition, and history are often devalued, we sorely need moments of pause, recognition, and embrace. Large-scale public events can become important symbolic occasions through which meanings are construed, negotiated, and disseminated and wherein values are asserted, re-enforced, or even discovered. The Festival serves as a totem of sorts through which ideas can be thought, understandings communicated, and feelings expressed and experienced. For the Smithsonian and its collaborators, the Festival is a wonderful moment of mass public scholarship. The Festival is a means for conceptualizing the culture of people and communities, and inspiring performers, visitors, staff, and others. It is a vehicle for bridging cultural differences for mass audiences, even for cultural healing, as Margaret Mead noted twenty years ago and as a psychiatrist and new friend recently suggested again.

During Iowa's sesquicentennial year, the Festival helps thousands of Iowans to let their fellow citizens know who they are and what is important to them. The Festival enables a discussion of Southern culture at a time, during the Olympic Games, when the world's eyes will be on the region. And the Festival allows Smithsonian workers to demonstrate their role in an esteemed institution as that institution enters a new phase of its history.

Events like the Festival are becoming more important in the coalescence of *communitas*, or self-consciousness of community identity. Rites of festivalization are to some degree replacing institution-building, and are increasingly used to fill gaps in our social life and provide defining moments for peoples, communities, cultures, even nations. This is, as we know, a mixed blessing. We understand the limitations of the Festival. It is, as we say, a low-resolution medium, diffuse, multivocal, varied, and interactive. It cannot take the place of specific, formal, detailed adjustments of

social interests. Yet the festivalization process has worked in bringing a number of Israelis and Palestinians into dialogue over the cultural landscape of Jerusalem. The Festival recently provided a key moment in exclaiming cultural self-knowledge in The Bahamas. In Ecuador, the Festival generated a new genre of interchange and display among various sectors of the population seeking balanced economic and cultural development. Domestically, too, the Festival's consequences persist in Michigan, providing the core of a strong program in cultural research, education, and training, and in the Virgin Islands in a resuscitated effort to address issues of identity and change. Folks on the Big Island of Hawai'i recently mounted a Festival program along the lines of their unifying 1989 experience on the Mall. The Festival continues to inspire individuals, as, for example, in the artistic flowering of Louisiana's Sarah Mae Albritton — who went from Festival cooking demonstrations into the restaurant business, teaching, and now painting — to the self-discovery of Edward Samarin, who found his profoundly American identity on the Mall last year as he demonstrated his Russian, Molokan heritage. We expect the Festival will have similar effects in Iowa, where it will be remounted as the Festival of Iowa Folklife on the State



*A craftsman from the coastal region of Esmeraldas, Ecuador, explains how he uses bamboo to make musical instruments at a festival entitled the "Intercultural Encounter for the Development of a Plurinational Identity." Held in Quito in March 1996, the festival was organized by COMUNIDEC, a community research and development organization, and was sponsored by the Inter-American Foundation. Some forty-two grassroots organizations participated. Said Colombia Vivas, COMUNIDEC executive director, "It's incredible to believe that we live in one Ecuador, in one physical, geographic space, and that we don't take the time or opportunity to get to know each other. This event has allowed us to come together and recognize the richness of human and cultural resources that exists among the Indian, Black, and mestizo populations." The festival in Ecuador was directly based on and inspired by the 1994 Festival of American Folklife Culture and Development program.*

Photo by Patrick Breslin, courtesy Inter-American Foundation

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Capitol Grounds in Des Moines; in the South, when mounted as *Southern Crossroads* for the Olympic Games in Atlanta; and within the Smithsonian as well.

The Festival makes such an impact because it is, most simply, alive. Just as we have discovered with the *America’s Smithsonian* traveling exhibition, real people connect with real things. There is a power associated with viewing, touching, hearing, and being in the presence of objects of natural, historical, and artistic significance. Similarly, there is something special about interacting with real people, sharing space with them and co-participating in their lives — even if briefly. Tele-experience — whether in analog, electronic, or digital form — just does not convey the immediacy and sensory impact of such an encounter.

The Festival is actively involved and invested in electronic media, new and old, in order to advance knowledge and appreciation of diverse cultural accomplishments and creativity. Through Smithsonian Folkways recordings, video encyclopedias, CD-ROMs, a new Enhanced-CD product released for this Festival (*Crossroads, Southern Routes: Music of the American South* with Microsoft), America Online sites, a virtual festival on the Internet (<http://www.si.edu/folklife/vfest>), and other means, we extend the Festival in time and space. Yet we also find limitations in these media. It is living, thinking, sensating, emoting people who are the ultimate interactive techno-biology. The Festival is a pretty good multimedia way of expressing that humanity, and of fostering, encouraging, and punctuating its interaction in an effort to contribute to the pool of cultural creativity.

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