

The Festival of American Folklife: Culture, Dead or Alive?

Richard Kurin

artists, performers, craftspeople, workers, cooks, storytellers, ritual specialists, and other exemplars from numerous ethnic, tribal, regional, and occupational cultures. The Festival is a research-based, curated production, drawing on the efforts of Smithsonian staff, academic and lay scholars from the featured states or regions, and plain folks who know a great deal about their community. The Festival typically includes daily and evening programs of music, song, dance, celebratory performance, craft and cooking demonstrations, storytelling, illustrations of workers' culture, and narrative sessions for discussing cultural issues.

If the Festival as a whole is like a temporary museum, each Festival program is akin to an exhibition, with its own boundaries and space (about two football fields), labels and signage. A good-sized program consists of about 100 participants and a dozen lay and academic scholars we call presenters, who provide background information, introductions, translations, and help answer visitors' questions. Programs have featured world regions, particular nations, transnational cultural groups, American states, and ethnic groups; the cultures of the elderly, the young, and the deaf; and occupational groups from

Anyone who visits Washington, D.C., around the Fourth of July can't miss the Festival of American Folklife. Held in cooperation with the National Park Service, spread out in a sea of large white tents across the National Mall, the Festival is an annual living exhibition of cultural heritage from around the United States and the world. It extends the Smithsonian outdoors but in displays very different from those of the Institution's traditional museums.

Since its inception, the Festival of American Folklife has featured more than 16,000 musicians,

cowboys to taxi drivers, meat cutters, bricklayers, Senators (as in baseball players) and senators (as in members of Congress), doctors, trial lawyers, domestic servants in the White House, and even scientists at the Smithsonian.

The Festival attempts to create a physical context for the traditions represented. In the past, the Festival has included, among other things, a race course from Kentucky, an oil rig from Oklahoma, a glacier from Alaska, a New Jersey boardwalk, a New Mexican adobe plaza, a Japanese rice paddy, a Senegalese home compound, and an Indian festival village. Animals, from cow-cutting horses to llamas, from steers to sheared sheep, have been part of Festival presentations. A buffalo calf was even born on the Mall one Festival morning, and an escaped steer was roped to the ground in the Kennedy Center parking lot after a chase down Constitution Avenue.

The Festival has had strong impacts on policies, scholarship, and folks "back home." Many U.S. states and several nations have remounted a Festival program and used it to generate laws, institutions, educational programs, documentary films, recordings, exhibitions, monographs, and cultural activities. In many cases, the Festival has energized local and regional tradition bearers and their communities and thus helped conserve and create cultural resources. Research for the Festival and documentation of its presentations have entailed complex local collaborations and training and have resulted in a documentary archival collection at the Smithsonian that is also shared with various local institutions. These resources have been used for various publications by staff scholars and fellows and for Smithsonian Folkways recordings and other educational products, which have won, among

The Festival of American Folklife & You

Diana Parker

Welcome to the 1997 Festival of American Folklife. The Festival is a Smithsonian exhibition, and in many ways it is very like what you will find inside the museums. It requires serious academic research, is guided by people who have specialized knowledge in the area being presented, and follows the same bureaucratic and programmatic regulations as all Smithsonian exhibitions. In other ways, however, it is quite different. Take one of my favorite exhibitions, the Museum of American History's *From Field to Factory*, for instance. If you had access to the museum and could go in at midnight and walk alone through the exhibition, it would still be the same exhibition. The Festival of American Folklife at midnight is just a bunch of signs and empty tents. What is missing is the heart of the Festival: the artists

who are being presented, and you.

The point of the Festival is to give you access to some of the most interesting thinkers, artists, and workers alive today. They carry with them a wealth of skill and wisdom, and, by agreeing to come to the Festival, they have agreed to share that knowledge with you. They may be doing things that are unfamiliar to you — singing a different song, wearing different clothes, cooking different foods — or they may be enacting something that you know as well as you know your own name. In either case, talk to them. Thank them for coming to the Festival. Ask about what they do. Find out more about what it means. This Festival you are attending is the ultimate interactive medium. Play it to the hilt. You may be surprised what the outcome will be.

At the 1996 Festival a visitor asked a fiddle player where she had learned a particularly lovely tune she was playing. After about five minutes of conversation they realized that they had met twenty years before on another continent. A warm friendship was renewed. At the 1986 Festival a Tennessee cooper started questioning a Japanese saki cask maker about his barrels. The Tennessean eventually applied for and received a grant to go to Japan and study the way that his skills and the Japanese traditions overlapped. Your experience may not be as dramatic as these, but I promise you it will be rewarding. Be brave. Talk to people. Make a new friend.

Diana Parker began working for the Festival of American Folklife in 1975 and has served as its director since 1984.

others, Academy, Emmy, and Grammy awards and nominations.

The Festival is free to the public and attracts about one million visitors. As the largest annual cultural event in the U.S. capital, the Festival offers insights into the way culture is presented to mass audiences and stands as an alternative type of museum display as well as of scholarly/curatorial practice.

FESTIVAL BACKGROUND

The Festival began in 1967 under Secretary S. Dillon Ripley. In the mid-sixties, Ripley surveyed a stretch of the National Mall — that vast greensward extending from the U.S. Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial. Here was the Smithsonian's front yard and, indeed, following Martin Luther King's use of the Mall for the Civil Rights march, the front yard of the nation. Yet to Ripley it looked dead — he called the Mall "Forest Lawn on the Potomac." He wanted to engage the public and signal the openness of the Smithsonian complex. He had several proposals for livening it up — a carousel, a bandstand — but he needed something big and dramatic that fit the Smithsonian's larger mission.

A proposal from James Morris, his head of Museum Services (and later Performing Arts), was to produce a folk festival. Morris was interested in American folk traditions, largely from a theatrical perspective, and had previously initiated the American Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina. This festival, which lasted only

a few years, was a staged performance — it was something written and directed. Ripley was interested in the idea, but it was to take a more ethnographic turn.

Alan Lomax, a well-known scholar, folklorist, writer, and music researcher who had been at the Library of Congress and was working with the Newport Folk Festival, suggested that the Smithsonian hire Ralph Rinzler, Newport's director of field research, to help develop the Smithsonian program. Rinzler had done documentary fieldwork in the American South and among French Americans. He had managed Bill Monroe's revived career, "discovered" Doc Watson, and introduced Dewey Balfa and Cajun music to general audiences. A college friend of folklorist Roger Abrahams, friend of Peggy Seeger, and sometime employee of Moe Asch at Folkways Records, Ralph was a child of the Folk Revival in the fifties and sixties. He learned songs in New York's Washington Square Park from Woody Guthrie, was close friends with Mary Travers (of Peter, Paul & Mary), and played with the Greenbriar Boys, an urban bluegrass group — the opening act for which was Bob Dylan. Rinzler was a musician and impresario but also had a scholarly mind and temperament and soaked in lessons from musicologist Charles Seeger, Lomax, and numerous other mentors and colleagues.

Morris, Rinzler, and others put together the first Festival in 1967 — a four-day affair overlapping the Fourth of July, with performances by Bessie Jones and the Georgia Sea Island Singers, Moving Star Hall

Singers, storyteller Janie Hunter, the Olympia Brass Band from New Orleans, Acoma potters, coil basket makers, Navajo sand painters, cowboy singer Glenn Ohrlin, Libba Cotton, bluesman John Jackson, and Eskimo, Puerto Rican, Russian, and Irish musicians and dancers.

Wrote Paul Richard of *The Washington Post* about the Festival, "The marble museums of the Smithsonian are filled with beautiful handworn things made long ago by forgotten American craftsmen. Nostalgic reminders of our folk craft heritage, the museum exhibits are discreetly displayed, precisely labeled, and dead. But the folk craft tradition has not died. Yesterday it burst into life before the astonished eyes of visitors on the Mall."

Mary McGrory echoed the sentiment and thanked Dillon Ripley, who was quoted as saying, "My thought is that we have dulcimers in cases in the museum, but how many people have actually heard one or seen one being made?"

Working with folklorist Henry Glassie, the Smithsonian organized a conference that first year to help define this new genre that abutted the museum world. The participants included anthropologists, folklorists, and musicologists: Lomax, Abrahams, Asch, Ward Goodenough, D.K. Wilgus, Don Yoder, and Archie Green; architect James Marston Fitch, geographer Fred Kniffen, and several international scholars. Others with a social activist orientation from the Civil Rights and Labor movements — Miles Horton, Bernice Reagon, Pete Seeger — also got involved. The Festival early on became a vehicle for public education and advocacy, giving recognition to the traditional wisdom, knowledge, skills, and artistry of cultural groups not well represented at the Smithsonian or in the society at large.

THE FESTIVAL MODEL

Though Ripley's own view of folk culture may have been somewhat nostalgic, he nonetheless saw the importance of the Festival as an alternative to traditional ethnographic museum displays. As he wrote in *The Sacred Grove*, "There is another realm in museums for anthropologists. This is in connection with folk culture or folklife." The Festival was an attempt by the Smithsonian to turn museology outward, to connect with the public, and to amplify the voices of those represented. The national treasures celebrated at the Festival are the people themselves. At the time, there was a trend in the museum world of using "living history" as a presentational or interpretive technique. Whereas living history

performances were acted, the Festival emphasized authenticity — the presence and participation of the living people who were active and exemplary practitioners of the represented communities and traditions. Whereas living history was "scripted," Festival folks were encouraged to speak for themselves, in dialogue with each other, scholars, and the visiting public. The power of the Festival was that the presentations were legitimated by the authority of the Smithsonian, occurred in proximity to the national museums, and were located in symbolically potent space, at a symbolically loaded time.

The Festival has become a model of cultural representation and brokerage that has been imitated, analyzed, lauded, and criticized. A number of books raise historical and ethical issues about the nature of the Festival. In combining and crossing such categories as education and entertainment, scholarship and service, the authentic and the artificial, celebration and examination, the Festival is a genre that can be misunderstood and misconstrued. Existing as part of the Smithsonian's museum complex, the Festival has been called "a living museum without walls" and "a living cultural exhibit." It has also been spoken of as human zoo, cultural theme park, ritual of rebellion, tool of the state, and national block party.

As for the relationship between the representation of culture at the Festival and in the museums, Dean Anderson, a former Smithsonian Under Secretary, said, "Whereas the museum is a noun, the Festival is a verb." Others moving between the Natural History Museum and the Festival have found the former staid, grown up, propertied, and static, the latter interactive, youthful, and alive. If the Festival is regarded as a youthful outpost of ethnography at the Smithsonian, it became so, not by prior design, but rather because the people organizing and developing the Festival were interested in a particular type of cultural study and presentation.

Differences in orientation between the Festival and the Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology are instructive. The Festival has always had a strong interest in representing American culture as well as that from around the world, whereas the Department of Anthropology has not dealt much with Europe and non-tribal America. The Festival is strongly attuned to how people create culture in their everyday life today; it does not have the time depth of the museum. Like Anthropology, the Festival deals with ethnic and tribal cultures, but it goes beyond those forms to occupational,



The Smithsonian's 150th anniversary "Birthday Party on the Mall" used the Festival model to show the vitality of the Institution. Museum and program pavilions featuring scientists, curators, and educators were combined with "encore" performances by people and groups who have worked closely with the Smithsonian. Here a Bahamian

Junkanoo rush-out heads down the Mall, recreating their rush two years earlier at the Festival — an event that stimulated cultural, scholarly, and educational efforts in The Bahamas.

Photo by J. Tinsley, courtesy Smithsonian Institution



Stephen Weil, senior scholar and former Deputy Director of the Hirshhorn Museum, helps present a young collector to the public at the Birthday Party on the Mall.

Photo by T. Heilemann, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

associational, and institutional cultures. The Festival is focused on expressive traditions, whereas the Department has a four-field approach (joining ethnography with physical anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics) deeply rooted in its history. The Festival is interested more in culture *performed* than culture *exhibited*; it concentrates on illustrating or demonstrating cultural processes rather than on acquiring or collecting things; and the Festival has always valued negotiated, brokered, dialogically formulated representations above more monological scholarly publications and products.

Numerous events — from the Black Family Reunion to the L.A. Festival, from the Festival of Michigan Folklife to a national festival for India, from a festival of Hawaiian culture to an indigenous culture and development festival in Ecuador, from the "America's Reunion on the Mall" festival for a presidential inaugural to "Southern Crossroads," a festival of the American South for Atlanta's Olympic Games — have drawn upon the Smithsonian's approach to show that culture is vital and alive, made and remade every day amongst people from every type of community, and aptly shared with fellow human beings. Indeed, even the venerable old Smithsonian drew upon the Festival as a model for the

production of its own 150th anniversary celebration in a mile-long Birthday Party held for some 600,000 on the National Mall August 10-11, 1996. Some of the Smithsonian ancestors might have been quite surprised, but I think ultimately heartened, to learn that the Festival genre, historically used to represent others, had become a successful means of representing ourselves.

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