

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.

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*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