

The Festival As Community

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival presents community-based culture. It does this in a global capital under the aegis of a global institution. This makes the Festival an instance of “glocalization”—an activity through which contemporary local traditions and their enactors are projected onto a world stage.

The Festival tries to do this in a respectful, intimate, meaningful way.

In presenting community cultural life, the Festival engages communities. This year's Festival is a good case in point. All

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of the nearly 75 researchers who documented, analyzed, and recommended traditions and people for the Festival came from the represented communities.

Festival curators and senior staff met with researchers, shared experience from previous Festivals, challenged assumptions, listened, learned, argued, and negotiated the character of the programs. This is not an easy way to craft a cultural representation, but it allows for an honest, intellectual engagement. Mutual respect and discovery are the usual result.

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Festival for two decades or so. Al McKenney, stage manager, is back for his 25th year; Barbara Strickland, our administrative officer, is here for her 24th. We've watched each other grow

professionally and personally as a result of our Festival experience. And we've seen new genera-

tions of people joining that community, as staff, volunteers, student interns. A *Mississippi Delta* participant from last year — Gregory Dishmon, a drummer in Sweet Miss Coffy & The Mississippi Burn'in Blues Band — is returning this year as a sound engineer.

But the Festival is not just a performance, an exhibit, or a mere activity of the Smithsonian. Its effects reach well beyond its producers. For example, this May, the *Mississippi Delta* program that was produced on the National Mall as part of the Festival last year was restaged in Greenville, Mississippi. The Festival mobilized local organizations and volunteers. There were billboards on the highways saying “From the Delta to the Smithsonian and Back.” For many of those who'd been on the Mall, the Greenville festival was a reunion. On opening day, a hundred school buses pulled up to the festival site with students and teachers using the program as a vehicle for learning about local cul-

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ture, history, and traditions. Blues and rockabilly rang out across the festival grounds next to the levee of the Mississippi River. On the third day, a warm, spring Delta Sunday, Dr. Sandra Scott, a professor at Mississippi Valley State University, organized a special program. Because of her connections to religious communities in the region, she was able to entice more than 150 singers from some 20 churches to come together for a sacred sing. People, Black and White, of varied ethnicity, class, background, and religious affiliation, met each other on the stage — most for the first time. Dr. Scott moved between keyboard players, soloists, and selections of repertoire. There was no division between audience and performers. Singers began to relax, jokes were made about towns, styles, and roles. People sung and swayed together. Everyone took delight in Darice Robb's soulful rendition of the Lord's Prayer, and in the beautiful solos performed by Ike Trotter of the First Presbyterian Church of Greenville, and Chief Minor, the African-American chief of police in Greenville. The audience, composed of varied local and area residents, sat entranced, occasionally bursting into enthusiastic applause or jumping to their feet in appreciation. Through teary eyes, we all watched a magical moment. It was the Festival at its very best — community was being presented, engaged, and indeed, created.

Diana Parker has worked on the Smithsonian Folklife Festival since 1975, and has served as Festival director since 1984.