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 three 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.

The Festival not only engages one or another community, but it also forms its own. Of the nearly 75 researchers who documented, analyzed, and recommended traditions and people for the Festival, 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 generations 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 Burnin' 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.

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

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