

Festival's first director, Ralph Rinzler, who served as head of research and programming at the Newport Folk Festival. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival has generally viewed the idea of cultural community as exceedingly broad, conducting research and produc-

ing public programs on a wide variety of communities whose traditions are defined in ethnic, racial, occupational, religious, familial, regional, national, associational, and topical terms. While the Folklife Festival has featured the traditions of numerous American eth-

nic groups, American Indian communities, and national and regional cultures, it has also examined the culture of occupations ranging from cowboys to trial lawyers, farmers to scientists; communities defined by institutions, like the White House and numerous unions

Creating Cultural Heritage through Recordings

Anthony Seeger



Research documentation is housed in the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections at the Smithsonian. Here, head archivist Jeff Place looks for a recording. *Photo by Kenn Shrader*

Some people think recordings are just entertainment. Other people consider them a kind of scholarly publication. Yet others imagine them to be the source of vast income. At Smithsonian Folkways Recordings we have our own ideas about the significance of the recordings we put out — entertaining though they may be, scholarly though they may seem, and unprofitable as they are.

Until little more than a hundred years ago, no one could hear exactly the same sound twice. People tried to write down sounds but could only do so approximately. A vast part of human cultural heritage was transmitted personally — visually and aurally — through demonstration and instruction. With the invention of audio recording technology, and later film and other media, more resources have become available for passing on traditions from one generation to another as well as from one place to

another. Today most people in the world listen to more recorded performances than live ones, and recordings have become one of the means through which cultural heritage is demonstrated, celebrated, and passed on.

Communities everywhere are documenting their traditions on audio and video recordings. Most media, however, have a shorter life span than a person: a person may live 80 or more years; a digital audio tape (DAT) may last fewer than ten, and in humid, tropical climates, videotape may become unplayable after only a year or two. Only if they are deposited in archives and the sound transferred from medium to medium will the documents of human cultural heritage survive far into the next century.

Publishing recordings is another way to increase the chance of their survival. When we sell 2,000 copies of the sounds of performers in western Sumatra, we

spread them to countries all over the world, where some may survive, even if the master tapes are destroyed by natural disaster or war. Even in the United States — which has suffered fewer wars than other countries, has a temperate climate, and has audio archives — master discs and tapes of recordings done in the 1920s often no longer exist, but good copies can be made of the 78 rpm discs that were produced from them.

Many of our recordings are produced through collaboration with specific communities that seek us out and want us to publish their music. They see a recording as conferring prestige on their traditions. Taking the recording back to their communities, they can both demonstrate its significance to others and preserve the sounds of some of their best practitioners. Some communities, like the Old Regular Baptists of the Indian Bottom Association, approve of our publishing their beautiful singing because the Smithsonian is a non-profit institution; for them music is not something performed for money, but for faith. They also wrote many of the notes accompanying the recording and determined its cover art. They felt very much that the recording represented their intentions, and their experience has been shared by many other individuals and communities.

In some cases, Folkways keeps in print recordings of the last known performers of a genre — like the sacred chants of the Selk'nam in Tierra del Fuego, who no longer perform them. The survival of the genre is now entirely through media, at least for now. In other cases, recordings

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and guilds; cultural communities, like those of the deaf, who have built intricate systems of communication and expression; and communities of interest, like those of the Civil Rights movement, the Farm Workers movement, ham radio operators, and the like.

Due to its very nature, the Festival recognizes the real people who practice their culture, not just the abstract forms of traditions. The Festival develops an ethical relationship with those people; to invest in them is to invest in what they do, even when what they do may extend

far beyond the bounds of traditional practice. It is impossible to find in the world the operation of singular cultural systems, untouched by others. Indeed, the social world is now characterized by the intersection and interpenetration of various cultural systems. Local musical traditions developed in a South African township may reach around the world through the electronic media. A local tale based on the historical Dracula may be radically transformed as it meets the imaginations of others. Conversely, popular traditions with broad geographic and cultural spread may take on particular form and meaning in a localized context. Yankee and French fiddling, meeting in New Hampshire, have developed their own distinctive characteristics and community practices, as have traditions of popular democracy in the state's distinctive American primary electioneering.

Scholars writing about cultural heritage tend to approach the topic as objectivists or processualists. For the former, cultural heritage is an objective set of cultural items and practices, a catalog or inventory of cultural features associated with a particular people or community. This inventory is handed down from one generation to the next, with some items dropping out from disuse and others being added. For the processualists, cultural heritage is something invented and continually reinvented, a way of defining the cultural practices and preferences of a group in the present by referencing the past. Objectivists tend to stress tradition, researching the origins of a particular custom or cultural creation, its history, social and geographical dispersion, and variations in form. Processualists, on the other hand, tend to be more concerned with traditionalization — how various cultural practices, whether old or new, are created, adapted, used, and symbolically manipulated in a community and larger social contexts.

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we make revive interest in musical forms. In Nias, an island off Sumatra, a recording in the *Music of Indonesia* series (volume 4) stimulated an enthusiastic revival. In Wisconsin, our recording of polka music as part of the 1998 Smithsonian Folklife Festival received somewhat embarrassed local newspaper reviews acknowledging that polka is part of the heritage of the state — albeit a part of the heritage that some people try hard to forget. What our recording also did, however, was bring polka into the hands of a much larger public.

We make recordings to increase and diffuse knowledge about and through music and the spoken word. In so doing we also contribute to the preservation of part of the cultural heritage of communities around the world. Moses Asch, the founder of Folkways, once said that he was the pen with which his artists created their art. To a certain extent Smithsonian Folkways Recordings is the vehicle through which individual artists and communities contribute to the celebration and preservation of their cultural heritage.

You all can participate in this celebration and preservation by buying Smithsonian Folkways recordings, asking your libraries to buy them, enjoying them, and keeping them safely. Or you can go out and learn a tradition that you can pass on yourself.

Anthony Seeger is curator and director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.