

The Festival: For the Cultural Good of the Nation

by Lawrence M. Small, Secretary, Smithsonian Institution

The Smithsonian is an immense force for good in American society and, indeed, among people throughout the world who are touched by its programs. One way the Smithsonian achieves so much recognition and respect is by providing authentic experiences of our cultural heritage. There's authenticity in the artifacts and artworks of our museums. There's authenticity in the knowledge Smithsonian scientists, scholars, curators, and educators present in books, exhibitions, and public programs. And there's authenticity, in perhaps its most dramatic and intimate form, in the performances and activities at the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival. If you're looking for the genuine traditions of our cultural heritage, you'll find them at the Festival.

The goal of the Festival is to present diverse, community-based traditions in an understandable and respectful way. The great strength of the Festival is to connect the public, directly and compellingly, with practitioners of cultural traditions.

This year, the Festival features programs on the cultural ecology of the Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin, on Tibetan refugee culture, and on the local traditions of Washington, D.C. If you want to know how a cowboy or *vaquero* from South Texas works cattle, you can watch him do so at the Festival. If you want to know the meaning a Tibetan-American immigrant sees in her continued practice of sacred traditions, you can ask her. And if you want to imagine how an urban mural reflects life in Washington, D.C., you can let your mind's eye be guided by an experienced artist.

The Festival has an especially significant impact on those artists, musicians, cooks, and ritual specialists who participate directly in it. The attention

they receive usually fortifies their intent to pass on their traditions to children, apprentices, and students, just as it sometimes encourages cultural exemplars to extend their creativity by connecting it to broader civic and economic issues.

The Festival's rich cultural dialogue on the National Mall is particularly significant for American civic life as we enter an era in which no single racial or ethnic group will be a majority. The Festival allows a broad array of visitors to understand cultural differences in a civil, respectful, and educational way. No wonder it has become a model for public cultural presentation, adopted by organizations elsewhere in the United States and in other democratic nations.

Festival programs are often reproduced "back home" and reach directly to regions around the United States. Earlier this month, the 1999 Festival program on New Hampshire was reproduced as "Celebrate New Hampshire" at the state fair grounds. More than 14,000 students attended the program. From other recent Festival programs — on Iowa, Wisconsin, and the Mississippi Delta — there have emerged education kits for schools, Smithsonian Folkways recordings, teacher-training programs, and even traveling exhibitions and television programs.

The educational power of the Festival is felt by hundreds of thousands of people who hold a magnificent, open, public dialogue at our symbolic national center in the weeks leading up to our Independence Day — just as it's felt by countless others when the dialogue is resumed back home, in states across the nation.

We're honored and proud to offer this event to the nation.