

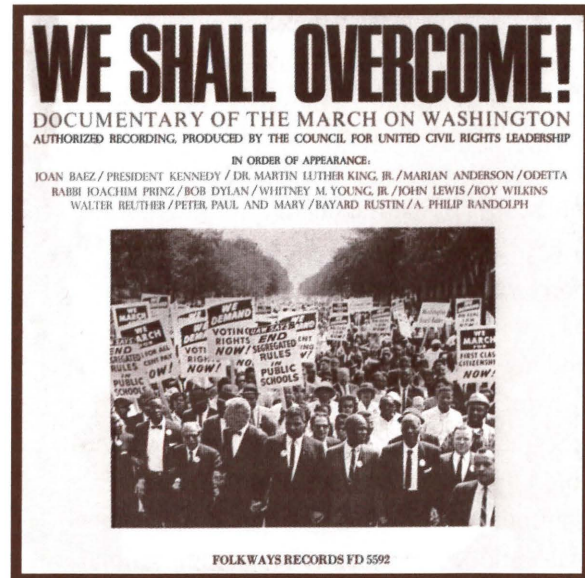
Pursuing Cultural Democracy

by Richard Kurin

For some, the Festival is an entertaining show on the National Mall, a pleasant summertime diversion with song, dance, and food. For others, it is a museum exhibition, albeit with living people, but nonetheless a display of traditions rooted in a historical past. While these are indeed possible ways to see the Festival, they might not be the best. More appropriate, in my opinion, is to see the Festival as the exercise and pursuit of cultural democracy — a view closer to the intentions of Festival producers, collaborators, and most participants.

The founding director of the Festival, Ralph Rinzler, developed an idea of cultural democracy from such teachers as Woody Guthrie, Charles Seeger, and Alan Lomax and through the folk music revival and the Civil Rights Movement. Guthrie expressed American populist democracy in song. His “This Land Is Your Land” presents the idea that everyone has an equal place as an American in this country and that no one owns the nation more than anyone else. Charles Seeger, the founder of ethnomusicology and a public documentarian, found in America’s communities a diversity of cultural treasures embodying wisdom, artistry, history, and knowledge. Alan Lomax clearly saw the growing problem of “cultural gray-out” — the worldwide spread of a homogenized, commercial, mass culture at the expense of most local and regional cultures. In the 1960s Rinzler drew these strands together and created a plan.

Rinzler saw the problem of cultural disenfranchisement, as people lost touch with and power and control over their own cultural products. He saw that in rural Appalachia and in Cajun



The March on Washington marked the modern beginning of the use of the Mall for public gatherings to assert participation in the institutions of democracy. The documentary album of the march, including Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech, was published by Folkways Records.

Louisiana and in Texas, the spirited performances by old-timers of superb musical skill were underappreciated by their descendents, but had achieved popularity among city youth in the Northeast. He saw the strength of cultural enfranchisement in the powerful role music played in the Civil Rights Movement, where it mobilized people in community churches, on picket lines, and in the streets for a great moral battle. For Rinzler, the grassroots creation and continuity of culture in contemporary society was a building block of democracy. The democratic force of culture was raised to a new level on the National Mall with the March on Washington in 1963 and

the Poor People's March in 1968.

Rinzler came to the Smithsonian Institution, hired by Jim Morris, to design the content for a folklife festival, as a popular attraction on the National Mall. Rinzler envisioned a project of cultural conservation and recovery, in which, with the efforts of people like action-anthropologist Sol Tax and the leadership of then-Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, endangered cultures and traditions could be revitalized for the life and livelihood of grassroots culture-bearers and for the educational benefit of the larger society. Displays like the Folklife Festival on the Mall, concerts such as at the Newport Folk Festival and in Carnegie Hall, recordings on labels such as Folkways Records, documentary films, and other programs could honor musicians and their cultural communities, enhance their cultural identity, standing, and practice, and convey knowledge to others. Rinzler, with artisan and activist Nancy Sweezy and economist John Kenneth Galbraith, also helped revive crafts operations and Southern family potteries to aid cultural and economic development in the region. Museum shops, by selling these crafts, generated income and regenerated these American cultural traditions.

By the time of the American Bicentennial celebration in 1976, Rinzler was ready to orchestrate a redefinition of America's cultural heritage in the face of European nationalist and American elitist models. American culture has its multiple levels and interpenetrating sectors — national, regional, local, ethnic, religious, occupational, folk, popular, elite, community based, commercial, institutional, and official. Most importantly for Rinzler, American culture is diverse, vital, and continually creative. It is situated in a larger economy, a larger society, indeed a larger world of technological and social transformations. In this world lie opportunities and challenges. Rinzler did not want to recreate an older world of utilitarian crafts or purge music of electronic media, or reconstitute the nation or world into villages. Rather, his vision was to move the contemporary world

towards more culturally democratic institutions. This vision grew and took shape thanks to the efforts of a broadly inclusive and diverse group of scholars and cultural workers in the Festival project — folklorists Roger Abrahams and Henry Glassie, Gerald Davis, Bernice Johnson Reagon and the African Diaspora Group, Clydia Nahwooksy, Lucille Dawson, and other Native Americans, Archie Green and those involved in occupational culture, and many concerned with the broad range of U.S. immigrant groups, new and old. Scholars and researchers working on the Festival recognized that older aesthetic traditions, forms and systems of knowledge, values, and social relationships would not just inevitably and uniformly fade away, but rather could be used by people to design and build their own futures. The village might get bigger, the forms of communication more wide ranging, the systems of exchange more complex, but skill, knowledge, and artistry based in human communities could still remain and prosper. If voices that could contribute to cultural democracy became silent, everyone would lose.

We have followed Ralph Rinzler's course for over three decades now, guided by the understanding that a living culture depends upon the self-knowledge of its practitioners and access to their own heritage. Culture depends upon liberty — the freedom to practice one's traditions, be they religious, linguistic, culinary, or musical. Democracy depends upon a community's reaping the benefits of its cultural achievements, as well as upon its continued opportunity to build on those achievements through creative change.

Cultural democracy is threatened in today's world on a variety of fronts — ecological, political, and socioeconomic. The environmental degradation of ecosystems destroys the infrastructure supporting many traditional peoples and cultures. Displacement, famine, lack of economic viability drastically change ways of life. People die, and cultures with them. In other cases, local, regional, ethnic, and other forms of culture are suppressed



Festival participation has often been used as a vehicle for expressing the joining of diverse cultural communities within a larger civic framework of dignity and respect. At the 1992 Festival, Sam Leyba painted a mural representing the various Native, Hispanic, Anglo, and African-American populations of New Mexico, who share a land and interact to create a regional culture. The mural was returned to Santa Fe, where it remains on view at the Plaza Resolana, a center for community, culture and education.

Photo above by Rick Vargas; photo at right by Richard Strauss.
Photos courtesy Smithsonian Institution



by state authorities. Despite major gains in democratic and human rights achieved in the last part of the 20th century, much of the world still lives under authoritarian and repressive national governments. Those governments often seek to limit or destroy cultural diversity within their borders. Globalization in the form of the unprecedented worldwide spread of mass commercial cultural products, forms, and sensibilities also threatens local cultures. Many see their own ways of national, regional, or local life threatened economically, socially, aesthetically, and even morally, by the availability, popularity, and packaging of global mass culture. They also witness the appropriation

of their own commodifiable traditions by outsiders without adequate compensation or benefit to the home community.

Given this situation, our job is to study, encourage, and promote cultural democracy. We seek to understand how various and diverse communities see, use, and care for the world with their cultures. We appreciate that those ways of knowing, doing, and expressing have significance, meaning, and value to real people living contemporary lives. It doesn't mean we necessarily agree with all of them or want to emulate every lifeway known to humans. But it does mean we respect the fact that varied forms of knowledge, skill, and artistry



may have something to contribute to the lives of fellow citizens of the nation and the world. We believe that as a national cultural institution we have an obligation and duty to provide a just and civil framework within which different forms of knowledge and artistry can be broadly discussed, shared, and considered, for the benefit of all. And we have learned that our mission is best achieved when we work closely and collaboratively in partnership with the people and communities we seek to represent. The Festival is one very public way of pursuing this mission.

Issues of cultural democracy are at the fore of the featured programs at this year's Smithsonian

Folklife Festival. Our program on the cultures of Washington, D.C., shows the vibrancy of local communities that live in the shadow of national institutions. *El Río* demonstrates the tenacity of regional culture at the borders, even margins, of Mexico and the United States. The program on Tibetan refugees provides a cultural in-gathering of a diaspora community that faces issues of continuity and survival. Overall, the Festival this year demonstrates that, while people may be subject to modern forms of colonization, to unequal power and economic arrangements, and to marginalization, exile, and strife in many forms, they use their cultural traditions as sources of strength, resistance, and creativity to cope with and overcome their travail. Culture, after all, is a means of human adaptation. Just because people may be economically poor or politically powerless does not necessarily mean that their cultures are brittle or bereft of value.

We pursue our mission beyond the Festival in other ways. We recently concluded our series of Smithsonian Folkways recordings on Indonesian musics, a benchmark 20-volume effort documenting that island nation's musical heritage. The project began with the development of the 1991 Festival program on Indonesia. Funded by the Ford Foundation over the last decade, dozens of Indonesian archivists, technicians, and students were trained, in an extensive collaboration with the Indonesian Musicological Society. Publication of the series — with notes in regional languages — usage in Indonesian educational institutions, and popular airplay have helped millions of Indonesians access their own traditions and build their cultural future. Half a world away from there, we are in the final stage of completing an education kit with a stellar video, *Discovering Our Delta*. This project, growing out of the 1997 Festival program on the Mississippi Delta, follows six middle and high school students as they research their community's traditions. We expect the video and the teacher and student guides to inspire a generation of students in that region to



Various nations have used the Festival to help express new ideas of cultural participation in civic life. At the 1999 Festival, a diverse group of South Africans, here with Ambassador Sisulu, gave form to the idea of a rainbow nation. Photo by Jeff Tinsley, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

learn from the people and cultural communities around them.

Good signs for cultural democracy appear on the horizon. There is an increasing institutional consciousness that healthy ecosystems are necessary for economically viable communities. International and local policies increasingly recognize possessing culture and practicing traditions as human rights. We cooperated with UNESCO last summer to organize an international conference and prepare analyses of current international policies on folklife and intangible heritage. Our

particular contribution was to define cultural heritage in an active, dynamic sense, connect it to broader civic and economic life, and stress community self-help, participation, and enterprise as action strategies.

In the United States, many are wary of a government-based, top-down approach to “managing the culture” — a cultural policy that would impose upon the American citizenry a prescriptive cultural regime analogous to the statist and authoritarian models found in most of the world. Ministries of culture frighten Americans. They seem to be elitist rather than democratic institutions. Allowing a government power to define and decree the correct use of language, the correct appreciation of art, or the correct interpretation of history runs counter to the liberties historically enjoyed by Americans, the very liberties that have attracted so many immigrants from around the world. While national institutions provide a general sense of a broad American experience and shared laws, values, heritage, and icons, they tend to avoid overt normative prescriptions for particular cultural behavior. We avoid, with a passion, official rules for how to talk, what to wear, how to worship, what to eat, how to sing. Rather than promoting a specific, narrowly conceived cultural canon, most of our government’s very limited effort in the cultural arena goes towards recognizing and encouraging the diversity of the nation’s cultural traditions and providing the infrastructure for citizens to assemble and utilize cultural resources. Much of the cultural effort is actually handled by state and local governments, and often through the formal educational system — as a means of enculturating the population. Cultural forms and accomplishments are encouraged through curricula — the heroes and heroines studied in history, the genres of oral and written literature studied in language arts, the arts studied and emulated in music and art classes. While there is a broadly shared sense of national cultural experience, the decisions that develop it are fairly democratic, the outgrowths of public school-board hearings and local and state elections.

Increasingly, however, culture is managed not so much in the governmental sector as in the corporate sector. Cultural products — music, food, fashion, adornment, popular arts, games, and entertainments — are carefully managed by industry to produce a profit. Product development and marketing divisions generate public demand, and make the distribution and consumption of cultural products subject to the values of the marketplace. And the marketplace, even a lively one, is no guarantor of democracy. The marketplace can exclude people, ideas, and cultural products. But efforts to democratize the marketplace have resulted in the entry of cultural enterprises initiated and controlled by members of culture-producing communities. This is a good sign, as members of the cultural communities find enterprising strategies to benefit the hometown folks who sustained and shaped a tradition — music, foods, textiles — over generations.

Cultural policies are also made by various organizations of civil society. Associations, voluntary groups, foundations, unions, museums, educational institutions, clubs, and neighborhood, regional, ethnic, and other organizations regularly assess or reassess their cultural identity, values, aspirations, and forms of expression. They seek ways of realizing them within a larger social framework. This, too, embodies participatory cultural democracy at the grassroots level of American society.

We are proud to be engaged in the work of cultural democracy, in which we find many allies, friends, and collaborators. We are encouraged by the work of foundations like Rockefeller, Pew, Luce, Ford, and others who have invigorated cultural work and articulated it with attempts to increase political democratization and economic opportunity. We are encouraged by academic initiatives at Princeton University and the University of Chicago, where new programs address cultural policy issues from a research-based perspective. New non-governmental public service organizations like the Center for Arts and Culture are

bringing added vigor to ways of studying cultural communities, examining public policies, and figuring out how cultural resources may be preserved and best utilized for broad benefit.

Organizations in the culture industry and the legal profession are wrestling with questions of who owns culture and benefits from its products.

These debates over copyright and cultural ownership are a healthy development and will provide a basis for legislation in the United States and for international accords developed by UNESCO, WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization), and WTO. Economic approaches to cultural democracy also abound. Small non-profit organizations like PEOPLink, Cultural Survival, and Aid to Artisans are trying to appropriate contemporary global technologies — the World Wide Web and networks of markets and communications — for local benefit and with local involvement. Other, larger multilateral organizations like the Grameen Bank, and even the World Bank, are developing globally linked programs for utilizing local-level cultural industries to stimulate economic and political development. The desire for a diversity of flourishing local cultures exists not only at the institutional level, but also at the personal.

Individual artists, scholars, advocates, philanthropists, and others are strongly committed to the fullest range of human cultural achievement. The realization of that goal would maximize not only humanity's chances of future survival but also the quality of life we might hope to enjoy.

Richard Kurin is Director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. A cultural anthropologist who earned his Ph.D from the University of Chicago, he is the author of Reflections of a Culture Broker: A View from the Smithsonian and Smithsonian Folklife Festival: Culture Of, By, and For the People. He was awarded the Smithsonian Secretary's Gold Medal for Exceptional Service in 1996 and the Botkin Award for Lifetime Achievement in Public Folklore by the American Folklore Society in 1999.