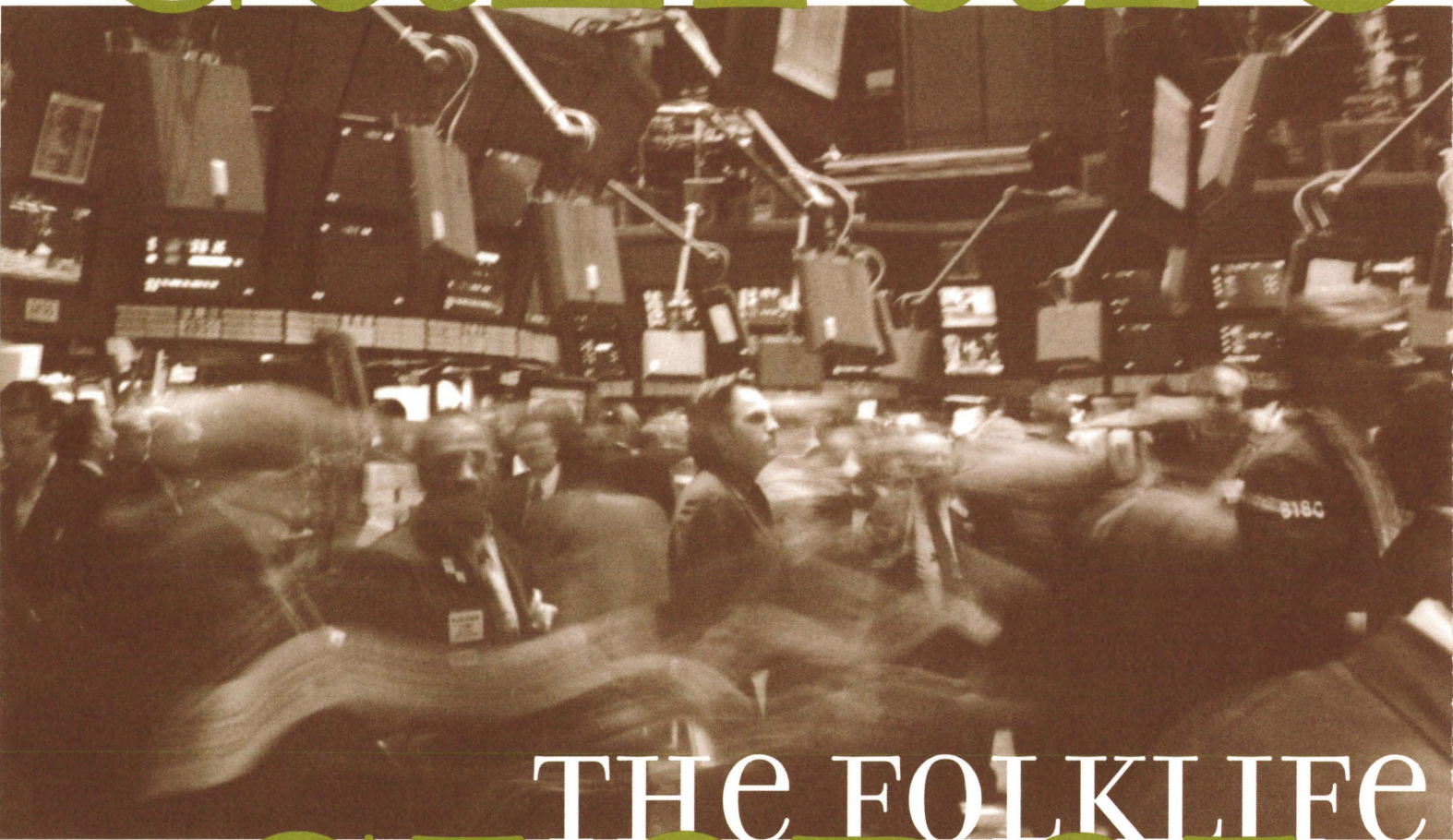


LOCAL CULTURE



THE FOLKLIFE

IN THE
GLOBAL
CITY

What makes New York City unique? Distilling the essence of New York's cultural complexity, summing up its vitality, richness, and energy is a daunting assignment — one that calls for a good deal of hubris, or, in the local parlance, chutzpah. But the New York I experience daily as a folklorist and as a New York resident, a liveable metropolis of discrete neighborhoods and overlapping communities, is rarely the one I see portrayed by the media, read about in novels, or hear spoken of by tourists.



OF NEW YORK

by Nancy Groce

The 2001 Smithsonian Folklife Festival gives me and some of my fellow New Yorkers a chance to describe how we see our city, to demonstrate its traditions and trades, and to explain how New York can be simultaneously both a global capital and a hometown. It provides a national platform to refute the tourist's refrain "I love to visit New York, but I couldn't live there." Like me, millions of New Yorkers wouldn't think of living anywhere else.

At first, it might seem like an oxymoron to talk about the “folklore” or “folklife” of one of the world’s most modern cities, but daily life in New York would be impossible without this body of shared urban traditions, of collective community knowledge, customs, historical memories, and cultural understandings. It provides the basic ground rules that shape how New Yorkers interact with their families, their colleagues, and their fellow New Yorkers. From subway etiquette to local street food to stickball games, these traditions give New York City its unique sense of place.

In addition to a shared urban culture, most New Yorkers also have one or more reservoirs of specialized traditional knowledge, which they have acquired from their ethnic and/or religious upbringing, working in a particular occupation, or living in a specific area of the city. The innumerable, multifaceted ways in which these factors interact are what make New York and New Yorkers so fascinating. Of course, it would be impossible to cover all aspects of New York’s culture in a single event, but by approaching city culture thematically, and by carefully selecting examples that highlight different aspects of work, life, and leisure in New York, *New York City at the Smithsonian* hopes to acquaint Festival visitors with both the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of life in Gotham.

Many New York communities are not ethnically based. The city abounds with groups of people united by occupational, geographic, or intellectual interests. Depending on when you ask, the average New Yorker might identify herself by the ethnic group(s) into which she was born, the neighborhood she comes from (or lives in now), what she does for a living, or what she does in her leisure time. Thus, a Jewish Puerto Rican from the Upper West Side (who now lives in Cobble Hill), who works as a stock trader on Wall Street during the day and spends her evenings at Indian *bhangra* dances in Queens, can legitimately claim to be part of each of those separate communities. The number of choices available in New York is mind-boggling. The sheer size of New York allows residents the freedom and, if they wish, the anonymity to re-create themselves endlessly. This vast social and cultural smorgasbord contributes to the allure of, but also creates apprehension about, the city.

New York has always been different. Unlike Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and other East Coast cities, it began not as a refugee settlement for out-of-favor English religious sects, but as a Dutch trading colony. Soon after Peter Minuit obtained rights to Manhattan Island from the Canarsies in 1626, visitors from Boston and Philadelphia wrote condemning New York as a poly-

“New York gives the directest pr

THE CITY: A COMMUNITY OF COMMUNITIES

What gives New York a sense of being different is not merely the myriad ethnic and interest groups that are found in the city, but the complex ways in which they overlap and interact. The physical landscape of New York – the lack of space, the reliance on mass transit by people of vastly differing backgrounds, neighborhoods which are home to both the very rich and the extremely poor – makes it impossible for New Yorkers to ignore the influence of “others.” From kosher Chinese restaurants to Irish hip-hop groups to Mexican pizzas, cultures from all corners of the globe have influenced one another in New York, in part because of their physical proximity.

glot den of iniquity: a place where Mammon’s money and trade overshadowed the word of God, where people of all nations and colors mixed freely, and where children were allowed to play in the streets even on the Sabbath. Although New York has been the port of entry to more Americans than any other city – a recent study estimates that one in four Americans has at least one ancestor who lived in Brooklyn – few Americans think of New York as a typical American city. Why? Perhaps it can be traced back to a deep-seated distrust of urban life. From the time of Thomas Jefferson and other early framers of our Republic, through 19th-century reformers, to the rush to modern suburban housing developments, ownership of



of yet of successful Democracy.”

— Walt Whitman

land and renouncing foreign ties' to become “fully” American have always been the national ideal. Renting apartments, remaining in ethnic enclaves, and using mass transit have not. And if cities were inherently evil and filled with recently arrived “foreigners,” no American city was more evil or more foreign than New York.

Today, New York City is a metropolis of more than 8 million people. It consists of five separate boroughs — Manhattan (New York County), Brooklyn (Kings County), the Bronx (Bronx County), Queens (Queens County), and Staten Island (Richmond County), of which only the Bronx is located on the North American mainland. (See the map on p. 47.) Contemporary New York is barely a century old,

dating back only to the Consolidation of 1898 that united Manhattan with the surrounding city of Brooklyn and smaller towns and hamlets scattered throughout Staten Island, Queens, and the Bronx. (Some Brooklynites still refer to Consolidation as “The Mistake of '98.”)

New Yorkers rarely step back to think of their city as a whole; rather, they mentally compartmentalize the city into a series of more than 400 neighborhoods that function almost as adjoining villages, each with a distinctive look, history, and character of its own. To residents of New York, the cafes of Manhattan's Greenwich Village or the tree-lined streets of Brooklyn's Park Slope are light years away from the pandemonium of Times Square, the suburban calm of



DOCUMENTING NEW YORK'S CULTURE

New York is home to hundreds of cultural organizations that reflect the diversity of the city's ethnic and community life. Some are large, others tiny. It's impossible to list even a fraction of them here. But by highlighting a few, we hope to suggest the richness and variety of New York's cultural landscape.

Museum of Chinese in the Americas

70 Mulberry Street, New York, NY 10013
212.619.4785 / www.moca-nyc.org

Located in the heart of Manhattan's Chinatown neighborhood, the Museum of Chinese in the Americas (MoCA) is the nation's first professionally staffed institution dedicated to the reclamation, preservation, and presentation of the history and culture of Chinese and their descendants in the Western Hemisphere. Our goal is to document and interpret Chinese American history by involving, telling, sharing, and eliciting "stories" and memories from all our visitors. Since our opening exhibit about Chinese laundry workers in 1984, MoCA's exhibitions and public programming have encouraged visitors of all backgrounds to explore the complexity and diversity of the Chinese experience in the Americas. The museum's unparalleled collection and archives allow unique access to photographs, papers, artifacts, artwork, oral histories, and research documenting that story. MoCA's exhibits and programs are designed to promote mutual understanding by educating people about one of New York's oldest communities.

Chinatown, corner of Mott and Pell Streets, ca. 1930.
Photo courtesy the Museum of Chinese in the Americas

Queens's Forest Hills, or the small-town feel of Staten Island's Tottenville. Cobble Hill in Brooklyn has very little in common with Murray Hill in Manhattan, or Cyprus Hills in Queens. Watching sailboats gently ride at anchor off City Island in the Bronx seems a world away from the bustling boardwalk at Coney Island. Every day, millions of New Yorkers leave *their* neighborhood — and most New Yorkers will tell you (confidentially) that their neighborhood is the best — and travel across dozens of other neighborhoods to reach their jobs, visit their friends, pursue their education, or just look for fun. Manhattanites journey to what they refer to as "the Outer Boroughs" where the "b & t" (bridge and tunnel) people live; residents of Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island go to "The City," which, many of them believe, is overrun with snobs and tourists. By cognitively mapping out New York in this way, as a series of intellectually manageable neighborhoods, New Yorkers make their city more comfortable, less overwhelming.

THE NEW YORKERS

So who is a New Yorker? If you were not lucky enough to be born in New York, how long must you live in the city to become a "real" New Yorker? New York has always been a city of immigrants who, for the most part, have welcomed or at least tolerated other immigrants. Nowhere else on earth do more people from more varied backgrounds live together in relative peace. Perhaps because it has been decidedly multicultural from its earliest days, both 12th-generation descendants of founding Dutch merchants and newly arrived Asian immigrants can call themselves New Yorkers with equal validity. (Personally, I think you become a New Yorker as soon as you can name the important stops on your subway line.)

New York is experiencing a wave of immigration unparalleled since the 1890s. According to the NYC Department of City Planning, 794,400 official immigrants settled in New York City between 1990 and 1996. That works out to 15 people per hour and doesn't take into account perhaps as many as 500,000 others who have settled in New York without documentation. Another recent study found that 52 percent of newborns in the city had at least one foreign-born parent. In the late 1990s, the leading homelands of New York's newest residents were, in descending order, the Dominican Republic (400,000 current residents were born there); the former



Recent immigration has transformed and reinvigorated neighborhoods throughout the city, like this one in Flushing, Queens.
Photo by Ed Grazda, courtesy the Citizens Committee for New York City

Soviet Union (240,000); China (200,000); as well as Jamaica, Mexico, Guyana, Ecuador, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago. There are enough Maltese, Estonian, and Cuban-Chinese New Yorkers to support their own social clubs and trade associations. Many of these newly arrived New Yorkers will eventually move west of the Hudson River, to the “real” America of cars, suburban malls, and individually owned washing machines — but not right away. First, their children will join one million other students attending New York’s vast public school system; and they will cross paths with thousands of other immigrants from myriad other cultures as they walk the city’s streets and ride the subway. And in each new wave of arrivals, there will be people who decide to stay in the city permanently. Today’s New York is a palimpsest of generations of New Yorkers who have gone before, leaving their cultural marks, however faintly or vividly, on the urban landscape.

In addition to immigrants from other countries, the city has always been a magnet to other Americans who

saw in New York opportunities, freedom, glamour, and excitement that were lacking in their hometowns. These “urbanites by choice” include several main groups: first among them are African Americans, mostly from the South; they were part of the “Great Migration” to New York in the early 1900s, drawn by job opportunities and hopes for greater personal freedom. (It should be noted, however, that New York has always had a prominent African-American community. As early as the 1740s, 20 percent of the city’s 11,000 residents were Black.) Another great influx of migrants was (and is) composed of the economically competitive and culturally gifted people who have come to New York from America’s hinterlands seeking an alternative to what they believed to be the limited opportunities and social conformity of mainstream American life. Some stay for a few years, others stay for a lifetime.

IMMIGRANT CULTURE IN A GLOBAL CITY

New York’s vibrant ethnic communities are what many tourists find most striking, perhaps because it’s easier to

notice the city's diversity than to appreciate it as a whole. New York has always been an immigrant city, but today, the very nature of immigration is changing. Many Americans think that, like their own ancestors, contemporary immigrants arrive carrying neatly packed cultural baggage — stories, songs, customs, foods, etc. — which remains on hand (albeit in storage) to be brought out on holidays and special occasions to enrich their lives and the lives of their children. This is still true, but only in part.

Today, in the age of cheap and easy-to-use global communications and inexpensive international travel, does it still make sense to talk about immigrant groups being removed or culturally divorced from their homelands? Throughout New York, neighborhood *bodegas* (small convenience stores) sell cheap overseas phone cards, well-stocked newsstands carry the latest international papers and magazines, and ethnic bars and restaurants feature daily cable TV broadcasts from home. Modern technology allows contemporary immigrants to maintain a sense of connectedness to their places of origin undreamed of by previous generations. Have we, as some suggest, entered a “global” or “transnational” era in which peoples and cultures flow back and forth across real and/or virtual

space in ways that make previous concepts about distance and borders meaningless? It might be too soon to tell, but speaking to a Brooklyn steel pan band that flies to the Caribbean for monthly performances, or to Bronx Irish musicians on their way to Dublin for their third recording session in a single year, raises questions about whether we can still talk about discrete local immigrant communities. In our increasingly complex, technologically sophisticated world, folklorists and other cultural observers are struggling to develop new ways of describing the experiences of 21st-century immigrants, especially in a city like New York.

When discussing the existence and transmission of traditional culture in New York, neither the time-worn metaphors of “melting pot” nor “salad bowl” really work. The city is more like a toaster oven: the central core of ethnic traditions remains relatively stable, but there is a good deal of melting and melding around the edges. New York is enriched by thousands of talented tradition-bearers who keep alive ancestral customs and ancient traditions both by practicing or performing them for their fellow immigrants, and by teaching them to American-born students. Most of these students come from the teachers' own ethnic community, but many of them do

“New York is a particle accelerator [for culture] — some things stick together, others splinter and shatter.”

— Jon Pareles, music critic, *New York Times*

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

515 Malcolm X Boulevard, New York, NY 10037
212.491.2200 / www.schomburgcenter.org

New Yorkers interested in any aspect of Black culture generally begin their research at the Schomburg. Part of the vast New York Public Library system, the Schomburg is one of the world's great research libraries; its holdings are devoted exclusively to documenting the history and cultural development of peoples of African descent throughout the world. From its founding in 1925 during the Harlem Renaissance, the center has

amassed a vast collection of over 5 million items, including over 3.5 million manuscripts, 170,000 books, and 750,000 photographs, as well as rich collections of recordings, sheet music, documentary films, and oral histories. A cultural center as well as a repository, the Schomburg sponsors a wide array of interpretive programs, including exhibitions, scholarly and public forums, and cultural performances.

Rajkumari Cultural Center

84-25 118th Street, Ste. 1F, Kew Gardens, NY 11415
phone/fax: 718.805.8068

Based in Richmond Hill, Queens, this community organization is dedicated to preserving, teaching, and presenting the arts and culture of Indo-Caribbeans from Guyana, Trinidad, and Surinam living in the New York metropolitan area. Supported by volunteers and private contributions, the center's work includes after-school education and performance programs in traditional arts, culture, and contemporary creativity. To accomplish our goals, Rajkumari works collaboratively throughout the year with other cultural centers, performance groups, individual teachers and artists, theaters, museums, libraries, community centers, and patrons.

Founded in 1994 by the late Kathak exponent, Sri Gora Singh, and his sister, Pritha Singh, the center has developed three full-length repertoires of Indo-Caribbean heritage arts, which are presented at an annual musical dance-drama production. We

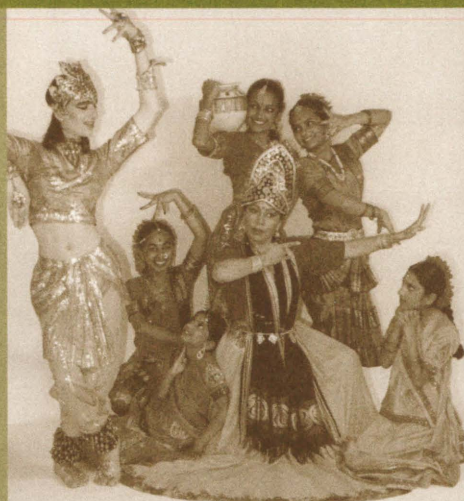


Photo by Nala Singham,
courtesy the Rajkumari Cultural Center

have brought together and presented over 30 "custodian" or master artists and created a network of major Indo-Caribbean scholars, performers, and more than 50 Indo-Caribbean community and cultural organizations in the Tri-State region. In addition, we regularly present programming at such major New York City institutions as the American Museum of Natural History, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and the Brooklyn Museum.

not — they are simply people who have come across an art form or tradition that fascinates them and are taking advantage of New York's permeable cultural boundaries to learn more about it. This used to bedevil scholars who preferred to study unalloyed cultures, traditions which were, for the most part, transmitted within a single family or ethnic group. So where do we place a prominent Irish-American fiddle player who is a French immigrant? What happens when the leader of New York's Norwegian dance community is Italian American? When an ethnic community accepts an outsider as a "master" artist and practitioner of its traditions, can we as outsiders dismiss that artist as being merely a "revivalist"? Projects like *New York City at the Smithsonian* give us a chance to reconceptualize how we define traditional culture in light of such 21st-century cultural issues as globalization, transnationalism, and urbanization.

Cross-cultural mixtures are an inherent part of the urban culture, especially in the arts. Impromptu mixing, in turn, can stimulate new styles of performance and, in some cases, lead to whole new artistic genres. For example, it was in 1940s New York dance clubs that Puerto

Rican, Cuban, and African-American musicians met and created Latin jazz, a style which later evolved into salsa. And it was at block parties and street dances in the South Bronx where, in the 1970s, practitioners of Caribbean, African-American, and Latin dance and oral poetry traditions met to spark the development of hip-hop. Irish fiddle players who came to New York at the turn of the 20th century with pronounced regional styles and repertoires had children who learned to play a pan-Irish New York style. Some of their New York Irish grandchildren now play jigs and reels accompanied by West African drummers, or interspersed with rap breaks. Where else in the world would you come across a Chinese *erhu* player busking with a Dominican accordionist on a subway platform, or hear a Senegalese-Colombian dance band? In New York, where most people live in small, thin-walled apartments surrounded by neighbors, many performances of what were traditionally community-based arts take place outside the home in public spaces where "outsiders" can hear and potentially participate. To quote a local expression, "It's always something." I would argue that this "something" is what gives New York its energy

and vitality — what makes New York, paradoxically, a cultural reservoir for both the most traditional and most innovative immigrant cultures.

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLORE OF NEW YORK

Just as amazing as the diversity of its people is the diversity of trades and professions that are practiced in New York. More than just “practiced”: New York is *the* global capital of finance, the arts, fashion, diplomacy, and media. However, none of these trades are abstract, disembodied entities that exist without New Yorkers. Nor are they huge, monolithic industries. Even in a city as large as New York, workers from each occupational community are bound together by folklore — shared customs, stories, and traditions specific to their jobs. The 35th Smithsonian Folklife Festival celebrates some of the many trades and occupations that are traditionally identified with New York City. We are honored that some of the foremost artists and practitioners from the worlds of Wall Street (finance), Seventh Avenue (fashion), and Broadway (theater) have come to Washington to explain what they do, how they learned their trades, and what it is like to be a member of their occupational community.

For example, take Wall Street. Actually, as in other aspects of New York life, there is no one Wall Street; rather, Wall Street is a series of smaller, overlapping communities. Wall Street workers do share some common folklore — e.g., tales of the buttonwood tree, the wall (Wall Street was named after the wall that marked the boundary of 17th-century Dutch New Amsterdam), eccentric millionaires, and the Curb Exchange. But the tens of thousands of New Yorkers who work on “The Street” also think of themselves as members of several unique, though related, occupational communities, each with its own history, expertise, and traditions. Traders on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange (“NYSE”) have different stories and traditions from members of the New York Mercantile Exchange (“The Merc”). Members of the New York Commodities Exchange (“Coffee, Sugar, and Cocoa”) use expressions and hand signals unknown to traders across the street at the American Stock Exchange



A pigeon “mumbler” (flyer) “rolls out” his birds on a New York rooftop.
Photo © Martha Cooper

(“AmEx”). The distinctive folk traditions and histories of each of these organizations give each its own sense of identity, history, and culture. “The Street” quickly breaks down into numerous smaller communities made up of real people doing real jobs (as New Yorkers Charles Dow and Edward Jones of the Dow Jones Average were). Like other folk communities, Wall Street workers use orally transmitted stories, narratives, jokes, and generations of accumulated knowledge to do their work effectively. In an industry where custom, tradition, personal relationships, and trust are highly valued, the impersonalness of Internet trading is more than an economic threat; it is a threat to a centuries-old way of life.

The theater is another of New York’s major occupational communities being featured at the 2001 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Since the 18th century, the city has been the major hub of theatrical life in North America. The city’s theaters followed the northward expansion of Manhattan’s business district; by the turn of



the 20th century, the theater district established itself along Broadway at Times Square (42nd Street). Today, "Broadway" is synonymous with New York theater, and especially with musical theater. (Even smaller theatrical companies throughout the city acknowledge Broadway's preeminence by describing themselves as "Off-Broadway" or "Off-Off Broadway.") Behind every Broadway show and its handful of star performers is an army of other workers: chorus members, costume makers, dressers, set and prop (property) builders, stagehands, managers, wardrobe mistresses, curtain manufacturers, ushers, pit musicians, and lighting designers. In addition to a shared body of general theatrical folklore, each of these theater crafts has its own distinctive stories, skills, traditions, and customs. "It's like a small family around here," a fourth-generation New York stagehand once explained to me — as we walked through the chaos of Times Square.

Another major New York occupation featured at this year's Folklife Festival is the fashion industry, which is

City Lore: The New York Center for Urban Folk Culture

72 East First Street, New York, NY 10003
212.529.1955 / www.citylore.org

One of the co-sponsors of *New York City at the Smithsonian*, City Lore was founded in 1986 as a cultural organization dedicated to the documentation, preservation, and presentation of New York City's — and America's — living cultural heritage. We believe that our quality of life is tied to the vitality of our grassroots folk cultures, to the neighborhoods and communities in which we live out our daily lives. In an era when mass culture and commercial media increasingly press upon our lives and threaten us with sameness, traditional culture — whether our own or our neighbor's — is a resource we can turn to for renewed inspiration and a better quality of life.

City Lore's projects are dynamic and diverse, much like the city in which we live and work. Our programs include Place Matters (www.place-matters.net), a citywide initiative to document and advocate for local landmarks and cultural establishments endangered in the ebb and flow of New York's rapidly changing cultural landscape. We are currently completing a Census of Places that Matter to New Yorkers as a tool for advocacy and preservation. The biennial People's Poetry Gathering (www.peoplespoetry.org), a major cultural event co-sponsored with Poets House, highlights the city and the world's poets and poetries, focusing on the interrelationships among folk, inner-city, literary, and musical forms. The People's Hall of Fame, an annual awards ceremony, honors New Yorkers who contribute creatively to the city's folk culture. Media programs include films and exhibits on subjects such as gospel musicians and ethnic parades, stories for NPR, and sponsorship of films such as Ric Burns's PBS series *New York: A Film*. Our extensive educational programs with students and teachers include integrating folk and community arts into the classroom, operating a mail-order catalog of cultural resources (www.carts.org), and national staff development programs.

really a series of interrelated occupational communities, each specializing in a different segment of garment design, manufacturing, and marketing. It encompasses designers, fashion models, and the production of internationally celebrated runway shows; young cutting-edge clothing designers from the East Village or Brooklyn who translate the latest inner-city street styles into the next year's trendiest fashions; and ethnic tailors and seamstresses who follow centuries-old traditions to provide clothing for community rituals and celebrations. It also includes tens of thousands of New York garment workers who, like generations of New Yorkers before them, work

long hours at laborious jobs cutting, piecing, and sewing clothing for local designers. Unionization and labor laws have done away with the worst abuses of early 20th-century New York "sweatshops," but many garment workers are still recently arrived immigrants whose lack of English and technical skills limit other employment opportunities.

The garment trade is still the largest industry in New York City, and its size permits an incredible degree of specialization that can only be hinted at during the Festival. Along Seventh Avenue in Manhattan's "Garment District," small signs in second- and third-story windows



Water tower workers assemble a rooftop tank in the shadow of the Empire State Building.

Photo © Martha Cooper

advertise the presence of feather importers, button dyers, mannequin makers, trim emporiums, fur cutters, and shoulder-pad manufacturers. Many of these shops, which are open “to the trade only,” have been in the same families for three or more generations. (The longevity of many family businesses in the city often surprises non-New Yorkers.) By inviting to the Festival artists and craftspeople from various aspects of the city’s fashion industry, many of them trained in multigenerational family businesses, we hope to give visitors an insight into a few of the many traditional crafts that sustain New York as the fashion capital of the world.

Alianza Dominicana

2410 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10033
212.740.1960

Alianza Dominicana is the most diverse social service agency in Manhattan’s Washington Heights/Inwood neighborhood, as well as the largest Dominican organization in North America. Taking a holistic approach, Alianza offers various services to nurture and fortify family life. Since our founding, culture has played an important role in fulfilling our mission.

In the last 12 years, Alianza has participated in teaching and presenting Dominican culture through demonstrations, exhibitions, presentations, festivals, parades, conferences, seminars, workshops, television programs, and radio interviews — making use of all possibilities to maintain and disseminate information about our culture, establish solid contact with our roots, and strengthen our sense of identity, of who we are as Dominicans, in order to strengthen ourselves as a community.

The content and goals of our cultural programs for youth are being constantly refined both to instruct students directly and to train them so that they can teach others. Our programs include Theater, Painting and Crafts, Video, and Folklore and Popular Culture. Our work with young actors highlights two areas: theatrical presentations in schools, parks, and the streets that teach social and political relations, and the reality and consequences of HIV. We feature works by Dominican authors that reinforce our roots and identity. Our Painting and Crafts program teaches artistic technique through Dominican carnival crafts — especially the making of masks and costumes — and the origins and evolution of Carnival from the different regions of the Dominican Republic.

During the last five years, our students have been trained in the areas of Dominican folklore and popular culture through our Conjunto Folklórico group, which stresses cultural, spiritual, and material folklore to teach the students about crafts, food, vernacular architecture, language, oral traditions, music, dance, and other areas of folklore. Through these programs, the classroom becomes an interactive learning environment.



Center for Traditional Music and Dance

200 Church Street, Room 303, New York, NY 10013
212.571.1555 / www.ctmd.org

One of the co-sponsors of *New York City at the Smithsonian*, the Center for Traditional Music and Dance (CTMD) works to celebrate and strengthen the practice of traditional performing arts, affirming the value of cultural diversity as an essential component of our national identity. Since its founding in 1968, the Center has worked closely with ethnic communities throughout the NYC metropolitan region to produce over 1,000 major artistic presentations, including concerts, festivals, and national concert tours, and numerous audio and visual productions. Through our model Community Cultural Initiative project, the Center researches, documents, and presents the vibrant artistic traditions of New York's immigrant and ethnic communities, and offers technical assistance to traditional artists in newly arrived immigrant communities. Drawing on our extensive archival holdings and knowledge of New York's grassroots ethnic music, and with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Center has just produced *New York City: Global Beat of the Boroughs*, a double-CD compilation recently released by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings in conjunction with the 2001 Folklife Festival.



Above: A costume maker at Barbara Matera's shop puts final touches on a flying harness that will be worn by a dancer in *The Lion King*.

Photo by Nancy Groce, © Smithsonian Institution

Right: Traditional ethnic foods made according to traditional methods are a hallmark of life in New York. Here bagels are made at Coney Island Bialy and Bagels in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn.

Photo by Annie Hauck-Lawson, © Smithsonian Institution

WHAT KEEPS GOTHAM GOING?

Thus far, I have been focusing on New York's diversity — how different ethnic groups, occupations, neighborhoods, and activities co-exist and influence one another. Perhaps it's time to focus on the numerous traditions, customs, and celebrations that bring the residents of the city together.

Although New York prides itself on being the most modern of cities, an important key to understanding the "real" New York is to realize that, in many ways, New York is a very old-fashioned city. Twentieth-century car-based culture has had less impact on New York than anywhere else in America. True, city streets are crowded, but much of the traffic is comprised of trucks and taxis. Private car ownership is low, especially in Manhattan, where street parking is non-existent and garages and parking lots often charge more than \$300 per month. Many New Yorkers never learn how to drive.

The lack of cars combined with the city's long history of high rents for small living spaces are among the factors that fuel an active street life. New Yorkers walk, a lot.



Whether to get somewhere, run an errand, or just to find a bit of privacy away from a small shared apartment, New Yorkers spend a huge amount of time walking around their city. Furthermore, since New York is, as one local shop claims, “open 25 hours a day,” in most neighborhoods you will see people “hitting the bricks” both day and night. New Yorkers’ ability to weave their way through crowds of oncoming pedestrians, or jaywalk across a teeming avenue, is a local art form in itself.

The lack of private space encourages people to find public places to “hang out.” In fact, hanging out is something of a New York specialty. Public parks are always crowded, but over the years, New York children have developed numerous games from stickball to stoop ball that are well adapted for narrow city streets and sidewalks. Another great local sport, pigeon flying, has always been especially popular in crowded, working-class immigrant neighborhoods. Perhaps setting “flights” of pigeons free from rooftop and backyard coops allows their “mumblers” (flyers) a vicarious taste of space and

freedom they cannot find elsewhere in the congested city.

Stoop-sitting is another local specialty. In nice weather, New Yorkers traditionally sat on their stoops (from the Dutch word for “steps”: a steep flight of six to ten steps leading up to the front doors of many row houses and apartment buildings). Although stoop-sitting is somewhat less common today, the lyrics of Edward Harrigan’s 1878 song “Our Front Stoop” still resonate:

*You’d have to run the gauntlet if ye were
walking by, / They’d have your family history
in the twinkling of your eye, / They’d turn it
over gently while they sit there in a group, /
They’d give to you sweet ballyhoo while passing
our front stoop.*

If you’re lucky, your apartment might also have a fire escape, or even better, a “tar beach” on its roof. Some tar beaches are actually roof gardens, complete with picnic benches, flower pots, and fully grown trees; but most are just roof, barren patches of very hot asphalt to which you bring your own beach chair. The saving grace of many tar

beaches is the view: from “up on the roof,” the city’s magnificent skyline unfolds before you – a constant magical reminder of why you live in New York. Of course, it’s impossible for natives to think about the city’s skyline without thinking about water towers, tens of thousands of large, legged wooden barrels, slightly reminiscent of spaceships. Local law mandates one for every building over six stories in height, and in many ways they typify the city New Yorkers see, but tourists overlook. This is one of the reasons that the Festival has invited Andrew Rosenwach, the fourth-generation owner of New York’s largest water tank company, and his workmen to build a New York water tower in the center of the National Mall.

The lack of space also affects city merchants and restaurant owners, who pile their wares and set up their tables on public sidewalks. New York has few shopping malls and relatively few large chain stores. Department stores such as Macy’s, Lord & Taylor, and Saks Fifth



“The subway [is] like a safe looking
Through th



Avenue originated and still thrive in the city, but daily shopping, especially for food, is done very much as it would have been done in the 19th century. Most New Yorkers still go to the bakery for bread, the spice shop for spices, the corner vegetable stand for produce, and the butcher for meat. Going to a large grocery store for two weeks of groceries sounds wonderful, but how would you get eight bags of groceries home and up to your fourth-story “walk-up” apartment? Anyway, where would you store that much?

These restrictions make eating out a major local pastime. Small apartments with tiny kitchens and an endless diversity of eateries, from world-class gourmet palaces to hole-in-the-wall ethnic dives, tempt New Yorkers to eat out regularly. Over the years, some ethnic foods with strong city associations – e.g., bagels, pizza, pastrami, and seltzer – have become American mainstays. Other foods – e.g., bialys, hot pork buns, and coffee soda – have not, at least not yet. Street food is a long-standing city tradition. Today, “dirty water” hot dog and pretzel vendors have been joined by Caribbean *roti* vans, Chinese noodle pushcarts, Mexican shaved-ice hawkers, and Dominican fried-dough sellers. What people eat, when

and where they eat it, and how they prepare it are shaped by customs and traditions. But food is also an easy “way into” other cultures. Although ethnic food shops are often gathering places for ethnic New Yorkers to post notices, get advice, and meet people who speak their language, they are open to all. In addition to featuring great cooks and food historians, the 2001 Festival focuses on how two basic ingredients, flour and water, are transformed by cooks from different ethnic communities to create markedly different staples, ranging from breads to bagels, pizza to Chinese long-life noodles and Indo-Caribbean *roti*.



glass into the people, into the grittiness of New York.
 subway, people get a concentrated taste of what they think New York is like.”

—Torin Reid, MTA motorman



Mass transit ties New York’s five boroughs together. Elevated subway lines like this one in Queens sometimes give passengers a magnificent view of the urban skyline. Photo © Torin Reid

MASS TRANSIT: THE SIXTH BOROUGH

Another prominent factor that shapes and ties New York together is its mass transit system. New York boasts the world’s largest subway system with 714 miles of track along 20 separate lines, and 468 stations. The subway never closes, and it is supplemented by an extensive network of buses, ferries, and trams, which also operate 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Unlike other American cities in which members of the upper and middle classes commute in the isolation of their own cars, most New Yorkers use “the trains” at least twice a day. On an average workday, the MTA (Metropolitan Transportation Authority) serves almost 7 million riders. Mass transit is New York’s sixth borough; but like all

other aspects of city life, the subway could not operate without the skills and knowledge of thousands of transit workers. Listening to them talk about their jobs and documenting their experiences gives us a better idea of how the city itself works and flourishes.

SPEAKING NU YAWK

Language and how language is used also distinguish New York culture. There are numerous New York accents, and attentive listeners can often identify a person’s neighborhood and ethnicity by her speech. The “tough-guy” Brooklyn accent is probably the best known of city accents, although new accents are always evolving. Historically, there is a citywide tendency for New Yorkers



Fieldworker Wangsheng Li interviewed Dr. Wang Yu Cheng about Chinese herbal medicine for *New York City at the Smithsonian*.

Photo by Wangsheng Li, © Smithsonian Institution

to change “th” to “d” and do unusual things with vowels, which some scholars believe comes from early admixtures of Dutch, Irish, and Yiddish. Local pronunciations, such as “Thoity-thoid and Thoid” (that is, the intersection of 33rd Street and Third Avenue), have been parodied by generations of Hollywood scriptwriters.

As distinctive as accent is the way in which New Yorkers use language. Most New Yorkers are highly skilled in the verbal arts and will readily share their opinions on almost anything, whether or not they’re asked. In addition to speaking very fast, they often express their opinions in the form of wisecracks. Using humor and sarcasm to bridge the unknown ethnic, class, language, or social divides that might exist between you and, say, your fellow subway rider allows New Yorkers to initiate social interactions without too much risk of being snubbed or getting into an argument. Thus, New Yorkers trapped on a stalled subway train are less likely to start a polite conversation about the weather than to announce — to no one in particular — “So where’s the mayor?” If no one responds,

they can always go back to reading their newspaper. But like as not, someone will have a rejoinder, and others will contribute to the verbal jousting. It’s not a coincidence that an unusually high percentage of American comedians, from the Marx Brothers on down, have been New Yorkers. Contemporary American comedy, and especially stand-up comedy, sounds so New York because it has been shaped by New York’s regional culture.

PARADING CULTURE

Finally, it should be noted that New Yorkers are great fans of public celebrations and parades. Much of the city life is street life, and every year, New York’s streets host hundreds of parades, block parties, ethnic and religious festivals, and special events. There are several parades that are unique to New York: the first is the Easter Parade — which is not really a parade at all, but rather an informal procession that starts around noon every Easter Sunday. About ten blocks of Fifth Avenue are blocked off, and thousands of New Yorkers, many of them wearing elabo-

rate homemade hats, come out to mill around and admire each other's costumes. Also unique to New York is the "ticker tape parade," a tradition that was created spontaneously by Wall Street workers in 1886 to mark the dedication of the Statue of Liberty. More recently, the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade, the Thanksgiving Day Parade, and the Coney Island Mermaid Parade have become established features of the city's calendar. Equally important is the annual Labor Day Parade, which celebrates the diversity and power of New York's craftspeople, artisans, and occupational groups.

Parades, especially ethnic parades, provide New Yorkers with more than a chance to dress up and go for a stroll with friends. Parades are a way for groups to demonstrate their power, political strength, and numbers in a very public way. From the giant St. Patrick's Day Parade and Caribbean Carnival (which draws more than a million people to the streets of Brooklyn every Labor Day) to the more modest Norwegian Independence Day Parade in Bay Ridge, the Ecuadorian Parade in Jackson Heights, or the Pakistan Day Parade on Madison Avenue, parades organized and presented by ethnic communities are an annual reminder of the size and diversity of the city's population. They also give all New Yorkers a chance to "check out" their fellow citizens, to find out more about the many cultures that have found a home in their global hometown. In a modest way, the 2001 Festival is attempting to do the same thing.

The 2001 Smithsonian Folklife Festival celebrates just a few of the innumerable manifestations of traditional culture in New York City. More importantly, fieldwork leading up to the Festival has allowed the Smithsonian, working in close collaboration with city-based cultural organizations and ethnic and occupational communities, to document daily life in New York City at the turn of the millennium. Material collected during the course of this research, as well as information recorded during and after the Festival, will significantly enrich the Smithsonian's archival holdings about New York City. A century from now, when scholars and writers want to know what it was like to live in New York in 2001, to work on Broadway, to drive a taxi, to trade stocks on Wall Street, or teach English in a school filled with recent immigrants, they can turn to the documentation collected by this project. Like us, I believe they will be amazed by this amazing city.

Suggested Reading

Over the past four centuries, a staggering amount of information has been recorded about the city of New York. Writers, scholars, reporters, artists, photojournalists, and memoirists have tried to document the city's ever-changing culture in a continuum of works that range from whimsical fiction to solid non-fiction. Perhaps because of New York's size and complexity, few commentators have attempted to address New York's traditional cultures in a single volume. In fact, the last folklorist to do so was probably Benjamin Bodkin, whose *New York City Folklore* (Random House, 1956) was really more of a compendium of historical clippings than an ethnographic survey of urban life.

If modern scholars have failed to write a single volume summing up New York's folklife, they have recently produced a flurry of excellent books and articles on various aspects of the city's culture: from Irving Lewis Allen's *The City in Slang: New York Life and Popular Speech* (Oxford University Press, 1993), to John Manbeck's *The Neighborhoods of Brooklyn* (Yale University Press, 1998), to Ray Allen and Lois Wilcken's *Island Sounds in a Global City: Caribbean Popular Music and Identity in New York* (Cornell University Press, 1998).

If you are interested in finding out more about New York's traditional cultures, the Internet is an excellent place to start. Visiting some of the Web sites listed by groups highlighted in the "Documenting the City" sidebars will provide a jumping-off point for locating the latest research on the highways and byways of city life.

Suggested Listening

In conjunction with the 2001 Folklife Festival, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has just released *New York City: Global Beat of the Boroughs*, a 2-CD sampler featuring traditional and urban-influenced music from over a dozen ethnic communities throughout New York City. The double CD is the first release of a projected 10-part *NYCD Series* highlighting many of the most prominent ethnic musicians and musical traditions thriving in contemporary New York.

Listeners interested in New York's role as a magnet for singer/songwriters might also be interested in another recent Grammy-nominated Smithsonian Folkways release: *The Best of Broadside, 1962-1988: Anthems of the American Underground from the Pages of Broadside Magazine*.

Nancy Groce, curator of New York City at the Smithsonian, is a folklorist, ethnomusicologist, and fifth-generation New Yorker. She holds a Ph.D. in American Studies and has authored numerous books and articles on the city's history and culture, most recently New York: Songs of the City (Billboard Books, 1999), an overview of New York City through 300 years of song lyrics.