

## SEVENTH ANNUAL RALPH RINZLER MEMORIAL CONCERT

# RALPH RINZLER and the

by Bernice Johnson Reagon

**I**t was probably 1966, and Ralph Rinzler was setting up his tape recorder in my apartment to play me some of the Cajun music he had recorded on his recent field trip to southwest Louisiana. I had heard a Cajun group at the last Newport Festival I had attended. I remembered the group of White men singing songs in French at what was to my ears an unusually high pitch, accompanied by accordion and fiddle. However, when I heard the music coming from Ralph's recorder, I got really confused and worried. It sounded nothing like the Cajun group I had heard at Newport. It actually sounded Black. Finally, I couldn't stand it any more, and I said, "Ralph, this sounds Black!" "Oh, it is Black Cajun music," he declared, and went on to tell me about his meeting with Bois Sec Ardoin and Canray Fontenot from southwest Louisiana and a rich Black French community-based working-class culture that included wonderful dance music and a tradition where dance did not stop with age, where everyone danced, from the young children to the elders of the community. I spent that evening listening to music from a tradition I had never heard of before, and it was indicative of the relationship I would form with Ralph over the next three decades, always being invited to learn more even as I worked to share African American culture with a larger public.

Ralph Rinzler (1934–94), founding director of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, worked over the years with many gifted colleagues. This concert series honors their work together in conserving and extending the audience for traditional expressive culture.

This year's concert,  
"The Bernice Johnson Reagon  
Song Family: Continuum of  
Songs, Singing, and Struggle,"  
on Saturday, June 30, is curated  
by Bernice Johnson Reagon and  
features the SNCC Freedom  
Singers, Sweet Honey In  
The Rock, and Toshi Reagon  
and Big Lovely.





# SMITHSONIAN FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL

Sweet Honey In The Rock at the "African Diaspora Program" of the 1975 Folklife Festival. From left to right: Evelyn M. Harris, Patricia Johnson, Carol Lynn Maillard, Louise Robinson, and Bernice Johnson Reagon. Looking on: Toshi Reagon (far left), James Early, and Miriam Early. Photo © Smithsonian Institution





During the mid-'60s Ralph Rinzler was a part of what became known as the folk revival. Young musicians performing music from older cultures and songwriters creating topical songs about a society challenging itself about race and war dominated the popular music industry and were a vital part of mainstream youth culture. I entered that world as an activist and singer with the Freedom Singers of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The Movement sound of unaccompanied Black congregational singing and powerful oral testimonies, speech-making, and preaching made its way into American homes not via commercial recordings and Top 40 radio as much as the television and radio news stories about Southern-based organizing efforts.

Ralph, working then on the staff of the Newport Folk Festival, was one of the leaders who worked tirelessly with others like Guy Carawan to be sure that the newer

generation of musicians operated in an environment where we shared with each other at festivals, conferences, and community sings called hootenannies. Crucial to this work was expanding what we knew about the music we were singing, and in most of these gatherings we had the rare opportunity to meet and listen to older musicians who were still around doing wonderful music. The Moving Star Hall Singers, Georgia Sea Island Singers, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Bukka White, Skip James, the Balfa Brothers, Son House, Almeda Riddle, Dock Reed were people I heard for the first time while performing as a member of the Freedom Singers or as a soloist, at Newport, Philadelphia, and other folk festivals that began during that time. I also met the topical songwriters Len Chandler, Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, as well as Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Richie Havens, Hedy West, Jackie Washington, Sparky Rucker, the New Lost City Ramblers,



Dave Van Ronk, and Taj Mahal.

In 1968, in the aftermath of the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph had moved to Washington to develop a new national festival. And with James Morris, director of the Smithsonian's new Division of Performing Arts, he invited me along with Julius Lester to come to the Smithsonian for a meeting to discuss ways in which their work could reach out to the local community, which was largely African American. The Smithsonian was at the time opening a neighborhood museum in Southeast D.C., but they were concerned about the absence of Black people among the Mall museums' visitors. We talked about the need to have Black people represented on all levels of the work, and that especially meant the staff level. Lester talked about the environment of D.C. after the assassination of Dr. King and the upheavals that followed. He said it was important that the Mall feel open and not guarded the way marches and rallies were. "There cannot be any police! You cannot be

provide a symbolic cultural context to the presentation that captured some visual energy of the community that created and nurtured the traditions. So that year I heard the music and saw the dances, I learned about the role of corn as food and as elemental to the culture, and I saw Native Americans build a tepee.

As I moved on, I heard the Moving Star Hall Singers from Johns Island, South Carolina, performing on a Festival stage, but there was no deeper context to Black culture surrounding them. When I returned home, I began to sketch out an idea that I called "Black Music through the Languages of the New World." For English I recommended the Moving Star Hall Singers and a Pentecostal gospel group from Atlanta. For French I wanted the Black Cajun musicians Ralph had introduced me to from southwest Louisiana. Ralph suggested the Rodriguez Brothers from Cuba for Americans who were a part of an African Spanish culture. He listened to my concept and was not at all sure about the Pentecostal

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afraid to have Black people on the Mall!" We talked about programming, and being sure to do research within the region and with the local communities. Early the next year, Ralph called and asked me to create a program for the Festival. I told him I had to see it first; they brought me in during the summer, and I witnessed my first Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

The Festival was then on the upper Mall. The first thing I saw as I came near was a small field of corn and next to the field several Indian tepees. This was not like any festival I had ever witnessed. Ralph talked about the concept of a national celebration of the folk and community culture of the country. He believed that it was so important for this Festival to not only feature performances of music and dance, but also material culture, the things that people made that were signatures as sure as any song or dance. There should also be an effort to

choir; he thought they might be too powerful for the Folklife Festival. This choir *was* powerful; they sang gospel and used a Hammond organ. I told him that they were a part of urban Black community-based culture, and it was so important for them to be present. Ralph was very oriented to acoustical music and was not sure whether some of the more powerful Black urban forms fit into the balanced sound environment he envisioned for the Festival. Although not totally sure about some of my ideas, Ralph approved the concept and gave me my first experience with the Smithsonian Festival as a researcher and programmer.

One of my biggest lessons came in conversation with the Rodriguez Brothers, one of whom was Arsenio, considered the father of Afro-Cuban music. When I started to explain the program saying that they would be representing Spanish-language Black culture, I was stopped. "No!



We are from Cuba and we speak Spanish, but our songs and drumming are not Spanish! This is African! Lucumi! African!" I was delighted to be corrected, and the experience of learning live and on the ground became an integral part of my work of creating new ways to present African American culture.

Ralph was serious about opening up the Smithsonian to American cultures and audiences, but he felt it would not happen unless there were changes in the programmatic staff. When I moved to Washington to do my graduate work at Howard University, I met the late Gerald Davis, a folklorist whom Ralph had brought in as assistant director of the Festival. Davis created an advisory board of scholars in African American culture to look at the plans for the Bicentennial Festival of American Folklife. There was a concept of "Old Ways in the New World," but there was not yet a distinct program for African Americans. We gathered in a meeting: James Early, Jeff Donaldson, Daniel Ben-Amos, Pearl Williams-Jones, Halim El Dabb, A. B. Spelman, and Fela Sowande fleshed out the structure of a program we called the "African Diaspora Program."

The result was a 12-week program of African American performance and material culture presented as a part of a world family of culture based in Africa and extending to the Caribbean and Latin America to the United States. The Bicentennial Festival involved one of the largest field research projects in American local communities and their home cultures on other continents. Our program put together teams of African American and African researchers in six African countries — Senegal, Liberia, Zaire, Ghana, Cape Verde, and Nigeria; and joint teams in the Caribbean and Latin American countries of Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, Brazil, Jamaica, and Surinam. In the United States, research was conducted in Black communities in Washington, D.C., Maryland, South Carolina, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Chicago, Tennessee, Louisiana, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.

For 12 weeks on the National Mall, there was a true invitation to African Americans to come to the Smithsonian. The invitation was issued on the most complex level, in advisors, production staff, conceptualization, opportunities for African American scholars for research, and programming that many in folklore and ethnomusicology said could not be done effectively. And

they came, Americans from all over the nation and especially from the local communities. There were African Americans who came to the Mall every day for the whole course of the Festival to be with themselves in the community we created. They learned more about African America even as they made welcome those who came so far across geography and time to help form and share an international Black community on the Mall in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the nation's birth.

It was my baptism of fire, working with the support of a strong team of advisors and researchers, and as a part of the leadership team with Rosie Lee Hooks and James Early, I used everything I knew I had and discovered much more than I had ever known before. And when it was over, I knew I had just begun, I had found my work as a scholar in this world. I had found my own ground, and the place in which that had happened had been made possible in large part by the visionary work of Ralph Rinzler, the man we celebrate at this Festival with this memorial concert in his name.

When I think about the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, I feel that at its best it is a place we can come as Americans and rehearse being temporarily a part of knowing the range and complexity of this land. You walk down the Mall in wonder and think — all of this is also America? This Festival is where I began to formulate the role a museum can play within a culture. It can assist a nation to come to terms with itself. Ours is a young land, and we are still very much at the beginning of playing out a living dialogue about this country being a nation of many peoples and many cultures, and dealing with the anxiety that seems to appear at the idea of letting go of the erroneous myth of this as a White country. Ralph Rinzler worked to be sure the Smithsonian would be a part of that dialogue.

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