

## The Festival: Doing the Public Good

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THE SMITHSONIAN HAS LONG BEEN a force for good in our society by encouraging public knowledge of our historical, scientific, and cultural heritage. Given recent world events, the role the Institution plays is even more important. We need places where people of diverse backgrounds can gather together, learn from one another, and share in inspiring educational experiences. No better place exists than the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Each year, more than one million visitors come to the National Mall to learn about the art, knowledge, skill, and wisdom of the American people and those of other nations around the world. Visitors interact directly with musicians, craftspeople, cooks, storytellers, workers, and other cultural exemplars. They leave the Festival with a better understanding and appreciation of a broad range of cultural accomplishments and the people who achieve them—today, more than ever, this is a significant benefit.

At the same time that cultural differences reinforce divisions among some nations, religions, and ethnic groups, the digital communications revolution has reduced the distances between all nations. As the interactions among culturally diverse people increase, to be productive they should be based upon fact, not fiction, reality, not myth.

In its own marvelous way, the Festival fosters respect for, and understanding of, cultural differences. This year, tradition-bearers from Mali, Scotland, and Appalachia have gathered on the Mall, in what might first appear to be a puzzling juxtaposition. But a visit to the Festival will quickly reveal all sorts of cultural connections and relationships among them. Consider “old-time” and bluegrass music from Appalachia. Although often viewed as quintessentially American, many of our American ballads came from Scotland, carried by settlers in the late 1700s. And the banjo, vital to both traditions, came from West Africa, from lands traditionally part of the Malian empire. The instrument was crafted and re-crafted by African Americans and became a central part of our musical heritage. In bluegrass bands you can hear a unique American story, the melding together of an African and European heritage.

The connections do not stop in America. Scots back home, reflecting upon their emigrant experience, invented dances and called one “America.” Malian balladeers, strumming their lutes and singing of their brethren, incorporated the enslavement experience into their repertoire of historical tales. Cultural connections go well beyond home. The bluegrass band from East Tennessee State University includes students from around the world and performs for fans in Japan. Pipe bands play Scottish music all over the world—from official functions in Bermuda to weddings in India.

Culture—creative, adaptive, enjoyable, and educational—has the power to unite disparate people the world over. The Festival, made possible by the gracious participation of our invited friends from Mali, Scotland, and Appalachia, and of visitors to the Mall, is a wonderful demonstration of this power. We at the Smithsonian are proud to take up this role and invite you to share in it. □