

## The 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival

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WELCOME TO THIS YEAR'S FESTIVAL. Like its predecessors, this Festival has been years in the making and is typical in the way that programs were proposed. Mali was the first to express interest in 1998, when U.S. Ambassador David Rawson suggested that Mali be considered at some point in the future as a featured country. Two years later, then Minister of Tourism Zakaiyatou Halatine met with Festival staff and decided that Mali should be highlighted on the National Mall. A Mali National Commission was appointed, curators named on both sides of the ocean, and planning and fund-raising began. We were aware of the eminence of Malian musicians in the thriving world music scene, and research into the rich vein of expressive culture across the nation brought forth more extraordinary material than any ten Festivals could use: breathtaking textiles, exquisitely sculpted jewelry, architecture unsurpassed anywhere, and more.

The Appalachian program came next. It was proposed as part of a larger celebration, as is frequently the case at the Festival. A team from the Birthplace of Country Music Alliance asked if we could be part of their year-long celebration of the 75th anniversary of the historic Bristol Sessions. In August 1927, Ralph Peer, a talent scout for the Victor Talking Machine Company, went to Bristol, Tennessee, to record musicians from the region for potential use by the label. On that trip he recorded the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, and commercial country music began to thrive. From that day to this, the region has continued to produce a treasure trove of talented musicians—some famous, and some just creating beauty every day of their lives because that is what they do. The Festival has brought us in touch with a wide array of music types and talents.

Scotland is here because one of our own scholars, Dr. Nancy Groce, thought that it would make a wonderful Festival program. She convinced us, the Scottish Executive, and scores of artists, partners, and funders along the way. We knew before research began that Scotland had a lively traditional music scene and had seen an explosion of talent and confidence in Caledonian culture in recent decades. We also came to appreciate the pride of workmanship and attention to detail apparent in Fair Isles knitting and Harris Tweed weaving; in blending the perfect dram of Scotch; and the engineering genius in sculpting daunting golf courses.

On first blush it is clear the three programs share extraordinary artistic excellence. The artists at this year's Festival are quite simply among the very best we have ever presented. It turns out that there are many other parallels to explore.

All three cultures preserve their history in song. *Griots* and story-singers in Mali have safeguarded the history of the place and the genealogy of its leaders for centuries; in Scotland and Appalachia, ballads and other narrative song styles have served a similar purpose. Major issues and events still inspire artists in all three cultures today. Carl Rutherford from Warriormine, West Virginia, Dorothy Myles of Appalachia, Virginia, and Brian McNeill of Falkirk, Scotland, write songs about coal mining and its economic, social, and health impacts. In unforgettable songs Oumou Sangaré of Bamako, Mali, and Karine Polwart of Scotland draw attention to the concerns of women in contemporary life. Adam McNaughtan composes memorable songs about life in contemporary Glasgow. At the Festival you can see all of these wonderful artists perform, and you may also hear them discuss the role of song in the conscience of a people.

Appalachian flatfoot dancing, as performed brilliantly by John Dee Holeman, has been linked by scholars to both British clogging and West African dance. Cooks in Mali and Appalachia foodways demonstrations will be making stewed chicken dishes and using okra and beans. Cooks from both Scotland and Appalachia have recipes for meat pies and strawberry jams.

We could continue, but the point is clear. We in the United States trace our heritage to many sources, but none more strongly than the British Isles and West Africa. Many of the settlers who came to Appalachia were of Scottish and Scots-Irish descent, and many of the enslaved people who were captured and brought here against their will were from the area around Mali. The culture they brought with them enriches our lives in forms new and old. This Festival gives us the opportunity to recognize the artistic excellence in all three cultures, and to pay a special tribute to Mali and Scotland, to whom we owe a great debt for their contributions to the best of what we have become. □