

THE FESTIVAL'S BROAD REACH

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Welcome to the 2004 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, featuring programs on Haiti, Latino music, and Mid-Atlantic maritime culture. The Festival continues its long tradition of presenting the diverse cultural heritage of the people of the United States and the world to large public audiences in an educational, respectful, and profoundly democratic way.

This year, the Haitian people mark the bicentennial of their independence. In 1804, inspired by American and French ideals, Haitians fought for their own freedom, abolished slavery, and created the second independent nation in the Western Hemisphere (the United States was the first). Haitians have sought freedom and liberty ever since, and through tough times have relied on their rich culture and seemingly boundless creativity to persevere. The Festival program, in the planning for several years, comes at what is obviously an important time for Haitians and Americans—particularly Haitian Americans. It provides an excellent opportunity for Haitians to tell their own stories through their skill and artistry, and for others to learn from them.

The Latino music program helps the Smithsonian reach out to a major segment of the American population not only as audience, but also as presenters, performers, and spokespeople for their own cultural expressions. Latino music includes a wide variety of traditions now energizing social and community life in the United States. Some are centuries old and reach back to early indigenous, European, and African roots. Others have come to us more recently, with immigrants from south of our border. Sharing these traditions broadly at the Festival contributes to a valuable and needed cultural dialogue.

The Mid-Atlantic maritime program allows us to convene a public discussion of “water ways” spanning six eastern seaboard states. Many people and communities depend upon the ocean, coast, bays, and rivers for their livelihoods—whether through commercial fishing and aquaculture or recreation and tourism. Homes, jobs, and ways of life are currently facing unprecedented economic and ecological challenges. The Festival program has brought together scores of workers, professionals, and officials who use, monitor, and regulate these water ways to demonstrate their knowledge and inform visitors about the key issues they face.

The Festival has been an amazingly successful means of presenting living cultural traditions, and has provided the model for other states and nations. It has also been adapted for marking major national milestones—ranging from the cultural Olympics to presidential inaugural festivities, from the celebration of the millennium to the Smithsonian’s own 150th anniversary. This year, the Festival’s organizer, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, has been called upon to produce two other major national cultural events.

Hardly a month ago during Memorial Day week, the Center, with the American Battle Monuments Commission, produced the outstanding “Tribute to a Generation: National World War II Reunion” to mark the dedication of the new

World War II Memorial. Hundreds of thousands attended—including many veterans and members of the WWII generation and their families. They witnessed performances of WWII-era music, participated in workshops on the preservation of memorabilia, and heard the recollections and oral histories of D-Day vets and national figures, Tuskegee airmen, Rosie the Riveters, Navajo code talkers, Japanese-American internees, and many others. The Center collaborated closely with U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Stars and Stripes, the Military District of Washington, the District of Columbia's City Museum, the Veterans History Project at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, and scores of veterans' service organizations. The Smithsonian too mobilized around the Reunion, as the National Air and Space Museum and the National Museum of American History organized special programs, the Smithsonian Press published a book on the memorial, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings issued a wonderful album of WWII-era music performed by the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra, and Smithsonian Business Ventures provided crowds with mementos of their visit. Overall, the Reunion was a magnificent American occasion, a great gathering of the WWII generation to mark their service and sacrifice, and to convey their legacy to their children.

Looking ahead, the Center will produce the First Americans Festival to mark the opening of our new National Museum of the American Indian in September. This will be a massive, week-long celebration of Native American culture replete with a Native Nations Procession; performances by a full range of musicians, singers, and dancers; demonstrations by artisans; and other presentations. Participants will come from Canada, the United States, Hawai'i, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. It will be an unprecedented gathering of Native peoples and announce in the most forceful way that their cultures are not mere artifacts of the past, but part and parcel of living communities.

The Smithsonian has long pursued the research and presentation of the great range of American and world cultures. It is a tribute to the Festival and its accomplishments over the decades that in the span of a few months the Center has been entrusted by World War II veterans, Haitian artists, Latino musicians, Chesapeake Bay fishermen, and a variety of Native peoples to help them represent themselves on such significant occasions in the most important public space in the United States. I am confident we will continue to exercise that trust in the most professional, ethical, and humane way we can, humbled by the responsibility and buoyed by the opportunity to serve the greater public good.