

## COMMERCE FOR CULTURE

From the Festival and Folkways to Smithsonian Global Sound

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One of the aims of the Festival is to promote the continuity of diverse, grassroots, community-based traditions of Americans and people of other countries. To do this, the Festival relies upon several methods that demonstrate the value of such cultural traditions. First, the Smithsonian invites members of regional, ethnic, and occupational communities to illustrate their artistry, skill, and knowledge at the Festival on the National Mall. The symbolic value of the setting and the invitation by the national museum help convey the prestige accorded to the tradition and its practitioners. Second, we place Festival participants in the positions of teachers, demonstrators, and exemplars of the tradition. Providing a stage for participants to address their fellow countrymen or citizens of the world in a dignified way on the salient issues bearing on their cultural survival not only helps visitors learn directly about the culture but also engenders a profound respect for it. Additionally, the officials, crowds, and publicity attending the Festival signal that the prestige and respect are widespread and important. Finally, commerce too plays a role. If Festival visitors buy food, music, crafts, and books, it shows that they value the culture produced by participants and members of their communities. Commerce has always been part of the Festival and part of our larger strategy to encourage the continuity of diverse cultural traditions.

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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION



Craftspeople and artisans sell their goods at the Haitian Market at the 2004 Festival, bringing much-needed income back home.

## Culture and Commerce

Commerce has been intimately connected to culture for tens of thousands of years. Long before the invention of nations and money, and even before humans had settled in villages and cultivated crops, communities traded and exchanged foodstuffs, stone tools, and valuable minerals. Since then, no single people, country, or community has by itself invented anew all of its cultural products. Rather, cultures everywhere have depended upon an infusion of foods, material goods, songs and stories, inventions and ideas from others. So many of the things we associate with particular cultures—tomatoes with Italians, paper with Europeans, chilis with Indians, automobiles with Japanese, freedom and democracy with Americans—are actually results of intercultural exchange. Much of it has been of a commercial nature—whether by barter or sale, borrowing or theft, done fairly or through exploitation. Of course not all commercial exchange is for the good. Sometimes commerce has led to the commodification of things that should not be assigned monetary or exchange value, e.g., people, as has been the case with slavery and human trafficking. Other items subject to commercial exchange—arms and drugs, for example—may have terrible, deleterious effects. Still, while there may be many reasons to create and produce goods and services—utility, tradition, prestige, and pleasure among them—exchange value certainly provides an incentive to do so.

## Commerce in and at the Festival

The link between culture and commerce is amply illustrated at the Festival this year. Many Omani traditions arise from an active economy that connects the desert, oasis, and sea, and also connects Oman to eastern Africa, India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Frankincense, silver, jewelry, and the amazing boats—the dhows—that transported them, point

to the importance of commerce in cultural production. As *Food Culture USA* illustrates, the phenomenon of commercial cultural exchange is not just a thing of the past. American culinary culture has been immeasurably enriched by immigrants arriving over the last four decades. Their presence has resulted in new foods, new fusions, and new adaptations, as well as the growth of small businesses. Family-owned restaurants become centers of continuing cultural expression, extending culinary traditions while at the same time helping promulgate new “tastes” for customers and neighbors. Similarly, Latino music has found vitality in contemporary America, not only within its home community but also within a larger market. That market has ensured new audiences and a new generation of musicians gaining broad recognition and attendant economic benefits. The cultural traditions evident in and surrounding our forests are also bound up with economic relationships. Loggers, foresters, scientists, conservationists, artists, and others are engaged in efforts to both exploit the forests commercially as well as preserve them.

Commerce is not only inherent in cultural traditions featured at the Festival but also is part of its very structure. It has been so since the beginning. Ralph Rinzler, the Festival’s founding director, came to the Smithsonian from the Newport Folk Festival, where he encouraged musicians and artisans to find new audiences and sources of income for their art. Rinzler recognized that musicians had to make a living. In the 1960s he produced several albums for Folkways Records and managed traditional music icons Doc Watson and Bill Monroe. He thought that their skill and repertoire deserved attention and merited commercial reward and appreciation. The same impulse led him to team up with potter Nancy Sweezy and Scottish weaver Norman Kennedy to start Country Roads in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This enterprise sold the weavings, woodcarvings, baskets, and other





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The food concession for the *Mela* at the 1985 Festival increased the popularity of Indian cuisine in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area and led to many restaurants, among them Bombay Bistro and Indique, which are directly operated by personnel associated with the 1985 program.

crafts of traditional artisans and also aided many Southern potteries, like Jugtown, to gain renewed and expanded commercial viability. As Festival director, Rinzler would rent a truck, pick up crafts from Appalachia, sell them on the Mall, and return money and respect to regional craftspeople.

We continue this practice at the Festival, selling participants' crafts in our Marketplace at a very low mark-up. The idea is to encourage craftsmanship by having audiences recognize it as financially valuable. It is also why we encourage musicians to sell their recordings, cooks to sell their cookbooks, and so on. And it is why we select restaurateurs or caterers from the communities featured at the Festival to operate food concessions and serve a culturally appropriate menu. We are fostering exposure and knowledge for an important aspect of culture, and also supporting the continuity of practice for those who carry these traditions.

### Developing Commerce for Culture

The role of commerce in safeguarding diverse cultural traditions is increasingly recognized around the world, particularly given the ascent of what might be termed the "cultural economy." UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, is currently developing a new international treaty on the topic for consideration by its General Assembly in October 2005. The draft convention addresses the issue of cultural survival in the face of globalization. It recognizes the immense commercial value of cultural products of varied types—from songs to books, from fashion motifs to films. Among the many positive provisions to encourage a diversity of cultural activity, it would also allow nations to make policies to restrict the in-flow of cultural goods and services that might jeopardize their own threatened or

endangered cultural traditions. The treaty offers a means of gaining an exception from free trade policies, thus increasing the commercial benefits to homegrown cultural products while restricting cultural imports. For some, this particular provision is a legitimate way to protect the diversity of national culture from massive globalization. For others, it is a means of limiting the free flow of goods, services, and ideas through misguided protectionism.

The motivation for the draft convention is understandable, as local and regional societies find themselves overrun with products created and distributed by a global, commercially produced, mass culture to the perceived detriment of their own. To some, the multinational corporations are the bad guys whose appetite for greater market penetration must be stopped by national governments. To others, those governments are the problem, as a free market, albeit one dominated by multinational corporations, is more likely to promote freedom of choice and a better life.

Between restrictive protectionism and laissez-faire free market economics is perhaps a third way, more akin to the approach historically enacted at and through the Festival. This locates agency in people and communities who themselves have the power to act, create, produce and consume. Why not encourage local-level creativity? Why not develop local- and regional-level cultural industries around the world, in nations economically rich and poor? As a number of the fellows participating in our Rockefeller Foundation-supported humanities residency project "Theorizing Cultural Heritage" have found, varied communities the world over assert ownership or stewardship of their own traditions and are quite capable of using, exploiting, and safeguarding them for their own benefit. Rather than restrict the stimulating and useful flow

of cultural products between societies, or invest the responsibility for cultural creation in government agencies, it seems quite sensible to marshal resources, invest in local cultural capacity building, encourage the development of cultural industries, and support a more robust, diversified world cultural market. Examples of contemporary homegrown cultural industries abound. The Indian film industry, Bollywood, which at first imitated Hollywood, has developed its own styles and widespread commercial success. Worldwide, Chinese restaurants, initiated and staffed by diasporic communities, far outnumber the corporately created McDonald's.

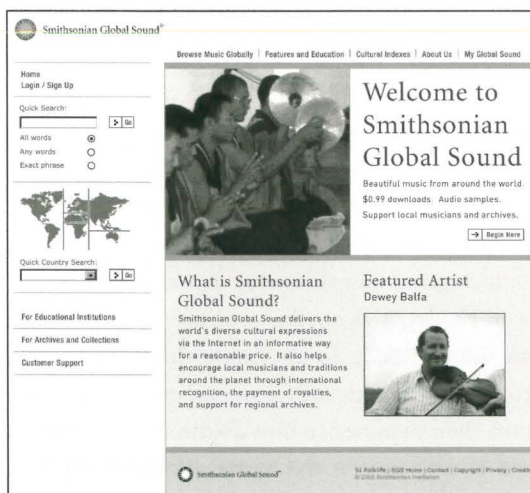
### Alternative Models: Folkways and Smithsonian Global Sound

Like the Festival, Smithsonian Folkways recordings provide a model of how local cultural traditions can be enhanced through commercial means. The Colombian *joropo* musicians appearing at last year's Festival recorded the album *Si, Soy Llanero* for Smithsonian Folkways and won a Grammy nomination as a result. This stirred folks on the Orinoco plains of Colombia and Venezuela and brought these musicians deserved recognition, respect, and income from sales.

That pattern can be seen again and again with Smithsonian Folkways artists as our primary mission—helping the voices of diverse people to be widely heard—has been realized. Earning money has helped musicians continue to play as musicians. Royalties from recordings and music licensing, and income from ticket sales to concerts may provide income needed to maintain a tradition.

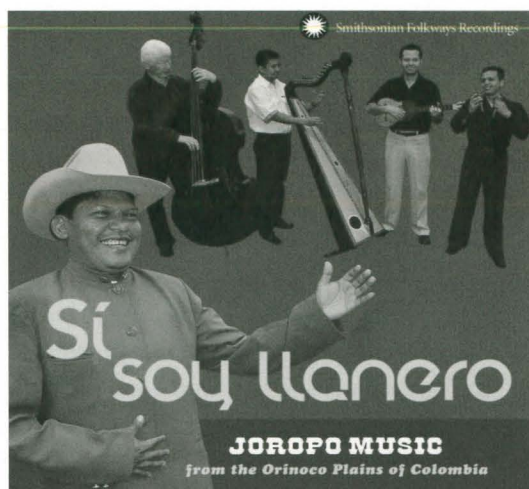
It is thus a pleasure to announce at the Festival this year our public launch of the Smithsonian Global Sound Web site at [www.smithsonianglobalsound.org](http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org). Smithsonian Global Sound is a virtual encyclo-





The Smithsonian Global Sound home page at [www.smithsonianglobalsound.org](http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org) offers a portal to a virtual encyclopedia of the world's musical traditions.

pedia of the world's musical traditions offering digital downloads, typically for 99¢ apiece, as well as subscriptions for educational institutions. As one blogger put it, "Smithsonian Global Sound is the world music equivalent of iTunes." Smithsonian Global Sound was soft-launched on February 17 in Vancouver at the meeting of the Music Library Association. Aptly, Michael Asch, an anthropologist, chair of our Folkways Advisory Board, and son of Moses Asch, founder of Folkways Records, made the announcement. Smithsonian Global Sound begins to realize in a new technology the vision of Folkways—to enable the amazing range and diversity of the planet's music and cultural expression to be heard around the world. It is only the beginning, but go to [www.smithsonianglobalsound.org](http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org) to see for yourself! You can access tens of thousands of tracks in our varied collections and those from our first partner archives—the International Library of African Music in South Africa and the Archives Research Centre in Ethnomusicology in India. You can hear streaming examples of everything. As another



The Smithsonian Folkways album *Si, Soy Llanero* by Colombian *joropo* musicians appearing at the 2004 Festival was nominated for a Grammy Award and earned the artists both recognition and royalties.

blogger put it, "You can get the notes downloaded and really learn about the music and culture." In addition to full access to liner notes and information, you can conduct sophisticated searches, play Global Sound radio, and enjoy other features such as Sychrotext—an innovative multimedia program for experiencing cultural performances from Haya epics to Shakespeare. World music celebrities and scholars will also provide guided digital tours of the collection—Mickey Hart, drummer for the Grateful Dead, music collector and producer, offers the initial percussion tour. You can also download tracks and albums easily and inexpensively, and manage your own archive—all thanks to support from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Paul Allen Foundation. Working through Alexander Street Press, we are also offering subscriptions for full streaming capability to university and research libraries in the United States and 38 other countries. Additionally, we are developing cooperative programs with the University of Alberta, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, National Geographic, and the Kennedy Center,

among others, to continue to develop the Web site's content. Shortly, other archives and institutions will be invited to participate.

Importantly, the fact that artists benefit from Smithsonian Global Sound is not lost on users. "I like the fact that artists get their due," offered one. This is an exciting moment whereby we can help artists the world over share their knowledge and artistry with others, contribute to ongoing cultural appreciation and understanding, and secure needed income.

Even though the Festival, Smithsonian Folkways, and Smithsonian Global Sound are

located in the museum world, the cultural heritage they represent is not something dead, or frozen, or stored away for the voyeuristic gaze of tourists or the idiosyncratic interest of scholars. Rather, we regard that heritage as something living, vital, and connected to the identity and spirit of contemporary peoples, all trying to make their way in a complicated world today. Making that way takes many things, including money. To the extent that we can use commerce as a means for people to continue to turn their experience into cultural expression, and benefit from it, the better off we all will be.