



## On the Occasion of Our 40th Festival

Diana Parker, Director, Smithsonian Folklife Festival

On July 1, 1967, the Smithsonian welcomed visitors to the Festival of American Folklife. The four-day event was held on the National Mall, on the lawn between the U.S. National Museums. With performances, demonstrations, workshops and panel discussions, the Festival presented some 60 craftspeople and 20 performance groups, all free of charge, to an appreciative audience. The artists were largely from the Southeastern United States, but also included Navajo, Hopi, and Osage from the Southwest, and an Alaskan ivory carver. By the time the Festival closed on July 4, the event had attracted over 431,000 visitors, more than doubling previous peak attendance to the Smithsonian on the holiday weekend. The public wrote letters of praise to the Institution, and Members of Congress and journalists, both print and electronic, called for the Festival to become an annual event.

And so it did. For its second year the Festival added a state program (Texas) and a printed program book, similar to the catalogues produced for other Smithsonian exhibitions. In succeeding years culinary, occupational, and children's traditions were added. But it is a tribute to the wisdom of the founders of the event that as we prepare for our 40th Festival, little has changed.

We have experimented with different sites, different lengths of time, and different times of year, but we have settled back where we started—on the Mall, on the 4th of July weekend. The Festival had been presenting international programs since the early 1970s, and in 1998, we changed the name to Smithsonian Folklife Festival to reflect that global scope. Technology has given us some wonderful new tools for production, sound reproduction, and creating evocative contexts for presentations, but the basic elements of the Festival have remained. Its power still comes from personal interactions between artists and visitors, and we still spend a great deal of time exploring ways to enhance that interaction.

While each Festival has its own importance, we seem to have had a milestone each decade or so. In 1976, the Festival was chosen as the centerpiece of the U.S. Bicentennial celebration. The Festival ran for three months, and featured the cultures of every region of the United States. In addition, there were programs highlighting Native American, Working American, and Children's culture. Family Folklore collected stories from thousands of families attending the event. Old Ways in the New World brought together American artists and tradition bearers from their mother countries. The extraordinary African Diaspora program united African Americans with people sharing a common culture from Africa and the Caribbean. On any given day at the 1976 festival, there were some 600 musicians, cooks, craftspeople, ritual practitioners, workers,

Huge crowds attended the 2002 Festival, walking a simulated Silk Road along the Mall. Photo by Jeff Tinsley, Smithsonian Institution





storytellers, ballad singers, and others sharing their artistic excellence and personal histories with large and enthusiastic audiences. Most of these programs brought in new participants every two weeks, creating a gargantuan production challenge. Thousands of airline reservations, visa requests, supply needs, dietary requirements, honoraria, and more had to be processed. But in the end, what is remembered is that for one beautiful summer people met and shared their songs, food, artistry, stories, and hopes for the future.

In 1985, the Festival was part of the larger Festival of India. Our office produced the Folklife Festival, which featured Louisiana, India, and a program on strategies for cultural conservation, and co-produced Aditi: The Living Arts of India, a two-month-long living exhibition in the National Museum of Natural History. Both were huge popular successes, drawing record crowds to the Mall, and in the process, affecting the way exhibitions are envisioned.

Summer 2002 brought Silk Road: Connecting Cultures. Co-produced with Yo-Yo Ma and his wonderful Silk Road Project, the Festival brought artists from a broad swath of the earth extending from Italy to Japan, including people from Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and more. In the post-9/11 environment, it was a moment

of hope, as American visitors embraced our guests with warm enthusiasm. Attendance records were set, and the critical response was overwhelmingly positive. The event received unprecedented international press coverage.

The Festival has also become a model for large-scale content-based commemorations. Festival staff have been asked to produce the Smithsonian's own 150th "birthday" celebration in 1996, the Atlanta Olympic Arts Festival that same summer, inaugural celebrations for all but two U.S. presidents since Jimmy Carter, the grand opening of the National Museum of the American Indian in 2004, and the commemoration for the dedication of the World War II Memorial, also in 2004, among others. Each of these events has called for thoughtful programming, sophisticated technology, and careful production. But most of all, they have needed that special element that has made the Festival the unique event that it is. They have required us to present the participants in a dignified, respectful way; to create for them a stage from which they can share with the public their particular perspective on who we are at any given point in our history as a nation, and as citizens of the world.

I cannot imagine where the Festival will go in the next 40 years, but I am sure it will continue to challenge and engage us, and to remind us from time to time who we are at our best.

Tapestry by  
Mississippian  
Ethel Mohamed  
captures Festival  
activities on the Mall  
for the Bicentennial.  
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