

# Joe Wilson and His Crooked Road

RALPH RINZLER MEMORIAL CONCERT

Richard Kennedy

It wasn't any surprise to me when I heard that Joe Wilson had recently been walking down a Crooked Road. As far as I could tell he had been walking on crooked roads most of his life. Glad to know they've got a name now for that path he's happily been traveling on these past 68 years.

In 1981 I applied to work for the National Council for the Traditional Arts (NCTA), and my job interview consisted primarily of helping to buy costumes for immigrant Cambodian dancers newly arrived from refugee camps in Thailand. I guess I picked the right shade of gold because the following week I started working in a cramped little office off Dupont Circle with Joe, NCTA's director and the first signpost I met on my own crooked path through American folklife. What a place to start!

I'm a fourth-generation Californian whose eyes have always looked westward to Asia, so Appalachian flat footing, Cajun boudin, and Piedmont blues were all new to me. You can't imagine a better guru of these exotic traditions from the other East. Joe is steeped in the center of it—his family was settled for many generations on the North Carolina-Tennessee border in the heart of Appalachia. But his early travels took him out of the mountains, where he followed his own crooked road, crisscrossing the paths of so many other travelers getting out and coming home throughout the 1960s and '70s.

Joe grew up around banjos and Jack tales in the mountains of eastern Tennessee. But he wanted to get out for a while, and after high school traveled north to New York and back south to Alabama where he witnessed the early stages of the civil rights movement. He sharpened his wits and his pen reporting for civil rights publications on what he saw. His knack with words landed him on Madison Avenue in public relations, and it's a skill he's carried with him wherever he goes. Maybe it was those Jack tales and those long evenings in the mountains when there was still time for stories, tall or otherwise, but Joe has put his own twist on words, and anyone who has met him will remember some pithy, almost inappropriate phrase that sums up the situation perfectly. In Joe's world people don't avoid talking about the "elephant in the room," it's always the "turd in the punchbowl." And of course he's usually right. But Madison Avenue wasn't home.

1976 was an extraordinary year for government recognition of folklife in the nation's capital. The American Folklife Center was established at the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival burst across the National Mall to celebrate the country's bicentennial over three long summer months, and Joe Wilson left New York and came to Washington to direct the National Folk Festival Association (soon to be transformed under Joe's leadership into the National Council for the Traditional Arts, NCTA). The cultural explosions of the

1960s were becoming institutionalized in the late '70s, and Joe's work, like that of Ralph Rinzler at the Smithsonian, was a part of that process.

Ralph had been playing bluegrass music in the late '50s and early '60s and went looking around the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee for some of the sources of that high and lonesome sound. He came upon Clarence "Tom" Ashley, a neighbor of Joe's, and asked him and his friend Doc Watson if they would perform in New York at the Friends of Old Time Music. Their success there led to performances at the Newport Folk Festival and eventually the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife. Through this connection Joe and Ralph talked on the phone and eventually met in New York in the early '70s. But it was only in 1976 when Joe came to revitalize the National Folk Festival that the connection deepened. When the Smithsonian, in the wake of the massive Bicentennial Festival in 1976, got a late start organizing the 1977 Folklife Festival, Ralph turned to Joe and NCTA to pull together a program on Virginia—a topic we will revisit three decades later for the 2007 Festival.

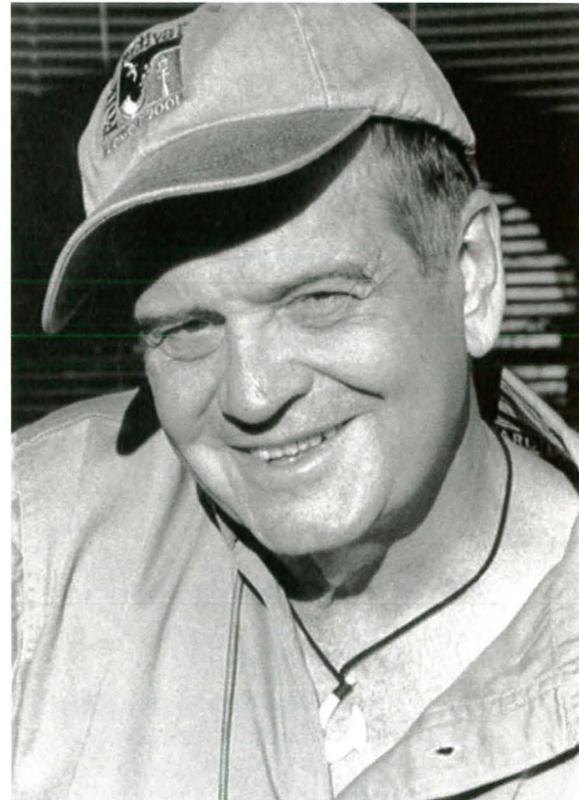
The venerable "National" had many firsts since its founding in 1933, and Joe drew on its strengths. He returned its focus to traditional performers and quality presenting. Since 1976 the NCTA has organized the National in eight cities and helped launch many local spin-off festivals. Joe and his staff have organized 25 national and seven international tours of traditional musicians. And the beat goes on, which brings us to the present bend in this crooked tale. Since retiring as executive director of the NCTA, Joe has taken on the Crooked Road project.

"The Crooked Road" is Virginia's Heritage Music Trail, officially designated by the Virginia General Assembly in 2004 to

promote 250 miles of highways and backroads that meander through Southwestern Virginia from the Piedmont Plateau to the coalfields of the Cumberland Mountains. Joe, writing in the guide to *The Crooked Road*, tells us that "Virginia is one of the places where America invented its music.... This music is the old fiddle and banjo sounds which have roots in Northern Europe, West Africa and colonial America." And, he continues, this "music from early America, treasured by musical families and small communities, is keeping to small places and instruction close to the hearth." The Crooked Road project is a careful attempt to share this regional music without destroying it. Joe and his colleagues in this effort are confident that the tradition is strong and its artists hearty.

In local parlance, "taking the crooked road" also means playing an older fiddle tune, too difficult for an ensemble to tackle because it doesn't always follow a single line and offers a few too many unexpected twists. This sums up this individualistic region, its music, and one of its sons, Joe Wilson.

*Richard Kennedy is the Deputy Director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.*



Joe Wilson, Chairman of the National Council for the Traditional Arts, produced the National Folk Festival for almost 30 years and is now a driving force behind the establishment of the Crooked Road Heritage Music Trail. Photo by Rick Massumi, courtesy National Council for the Traditional Arts