The Festival: A View from the Castle

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For the past three decades, I've been outdoors on the National Mall, looking up at the Smithsonian Castle, while we prepare for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. This year, due to transitions in the Smithsonian's leadership, I've watched the preparations through a window in the Castle. What do I make of the Festival from that perspective? How do I understand this annual gathering of people who come from across the country and the planet to share their traditions with other human beings?

When you work in a building funded by a nineteenth-century Englishman's bequest, a building that stores his bones and one that saw the development of the first weather map, the card catalog system, and Civil War–era visits by Abraham Lincoln, you immediately think of history and look for antecedents. James Smithson, a chemist and mineralogist, left his fortune to the United States in order to establish in Washington an institution dedicated to "the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." He became interested in sharing cultural knowledge after visiting a display of ancient and modern Mexican traditions in London. Joseph Henry, the first secretary of the Smithsonian, made the documentation and understanding of American Indian origins and life ways a central part of the Institution's research mission. Henry's assistant, Spencer Baird, who became the second secretary and really started the Smithsonian down the path toward becoming the nation's museum, wanted to bring American Indians to the Mall in the 1870s to demonstrate their cultures—a proposal rejected by Congress.

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival started in 1967, with support from Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, who famously declared, "take the instruments out of their cases and let them sing." For Ripley and Festival founder Jim Morris, the Festival was a way of livening up the museum. For the Festival's first director, Ralph Rinzler, it was a way of showing the value of diverse cultural traditions and literally giving them standing in the nation's most important space—the National Mall. The Festival was the cultural equivalent of the political March on Washington, led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a way of allowing the voices of the people to be heard in the heart of the country's democracy.

The Festival was a feature of the U.S. Bicentennial in 1976 and has since emerged as a major vehicle for the representation of grassroots cultures. Enormously popular have been programs on the folkways of states (Hawaii, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, and New York), nations and regions of the world (Haiti, India, Mali, Mexico, Northern Ireland, Scotland, the Silk Road, South Africa, and Tibet with the Dalai Lama), and occupations (masters of the building arts, trial lawyers, and even Smithsonian workers). They have produced positive effects "back home," such as new publications, films, Web sites, and recordings that have won Academy, Emmy, GRAMMY, and Webby awards. The Festival has generated huge archives of research and documentation for scholars and educators. As a model of cultural practice, it greatly influenced UNESCO's 2003 International Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which has now been ratified by ninety-four countries.

Many books and articles have been written about the Festival, including a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* this year. In its pages, former fellows and colleagues examine the Festival and particular programs and practices in laudatory and critical ways. At a time when many academic treatments in the social sciences and humanities seem intent on emphasizing the dystopian aspects of institutions, the utopian visions of the Smithsonian and the Festival shine through. The Festival embodies the Smithsonian ideal that knowledge can be a force for individual and social betterment. It stubbornly, against all bureaucratic odds, pursues the idea that sharing cultural knowledge, wisdom, skill, and artistry can contribute to understanding, tolerance, and a greater appreciation of human diversity. That's a big purpose worthy of a great institution, and while we at the Festival and the Smithsonian might not get it right all the time, imperfection should not keep us from pursuing its realization. Our efforts are evident every day in our museums and every moment of the Festival.