

Lessons Learned from Many Voices

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A recent special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, "Constructing Folklife and Negotiating the Nation(al): The Smithsonian Folklife Festival," provides an opportunity for Festival staff, participants, and visitors to view the Festival through the academic lenses of six scholars. Looking at three American and three international programs, these writers shed light on the complex process of organizing the Festival and, in several cases, also describe the responses of participants and audiences. The Festival visitor would do well to read these analyses to gain a better appreciation not only of the complexity behind Festival organization, but also of the many voices in that organization. For more information about the journal, go to www.afsnet.org/publications/jaf.cfm.

The Festival has always been particularly proud to provide a place for cultural practitioners to discuss the joys and challenges of nurturing their arts in an ever-widening world, as well as to demonstrate them to the public. However, a quick glance at the back section of this program book will show that hundreds of people have actually been involved in what may appear to be the simple task of providing a stage for the participants. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival is not only a place for Festival visitors to see, listen to, and engage traditional artists, but it also, in effect, represents a process that has involved the input of Smithsonian curators, community leaders, government officials, National Park Service regulators, university scholars, program funders, and others. The Festival you witness on the Mall is due to the efforts of myriad people, and what ties them together is a commitment to provide the most appropriate context for you, the visitor, to meet extraordinary traditional artists.

A community leader may place the health of his community before that of the individual; the government official may have the good of the whole nation rather than that of the local community in mind when agreeing to cosponsor a program; the scholar may fear that, in spite of its best intentions, the Festival depoliticizes culture or participates in wider global movements that commercialize and undermine traditional arts; corporate funders may represent products that displace traditional crafts; and the Park Service is always concerned about the aesthetics of the Mall. Each of these voices may compete for a place in the program. But in my experience, all the people I have worked with in the organization of a Festival program recognize and support the crucial role that traditional arts play in the health of a community. That's why they're involved.

Smithsonian staff members are negotiators of these voices. The program curator works closely with his or her counterparts in the cosponsoring organization. Often these counterparts take a role in participant selection and even program design. But it is the curator's job to ensure that, whenever possible, everyone is heard in the development of the program. Articles like those in the *Journal of American Folklore* provide us with the voice of academic analysts, and annual surveys give us the responses of visitors. We welcome your opinions, and hope that, together, all voices will strengthen the Festival.