

On Common Ground

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This past year at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, we have been crafting our strategic plan for the future, sizing up our own past, passions, strengths, and position in the world that surrounds us. We are carefully considering how we will continue to fulfill our mission—"promoting understanding and sustainability of diverse traditional cultures"—in the coming decades. And we find the brightest stars that guide us are the people with whom we have interacted over the past four decades—Festival goers and participants, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings artists and fans, researchers who use our archives, educators and learners who access our publications and teaching tools, and those involved in our cultural policy deliberations on the international stage.

As Festival visitor Larry McGehee points out, of all the Center's activities, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in particular brings "worldwide commoners" together in face-to-face contact to learn directly about one another's most cherished traditions and values. The Festival offers us the chance to sharpen our view of the diverse traditions that differentiate us, and in these, discover the mutuality of our shared impulse to create beautiful things in our everyday lives and to devise forms of cultural expression that reinforce our relationships to our communities. In a world riven by political, social, racial, economic, and religious barriers, the more common ground and aspirations that we can find, the better we can negotiate and appreciate our differences.

For over four decades, the Festival has endeavored to facilitate such processes, and in 2010, the Initiative for Global Citizen Diplomacy honored the Smithsonian Folklife Festival with one of its first Best Practice awards for International Cultural Engagement.

The 45th annual Festival continues this practice in collaboration with our longtime co-sponsor, the National Park Service, the caretaker of the National Mall. We present three "living exhibitions" of cultures from the United States and many countries around the world: *Colombia: The Nature of Culture*; *Rhythm and Blues: Tell It Like It Is*; and *The Peace Corps: Fifty Years of Promoting World Peace and Friendship*. In collaboration with Colombia's Ministry of Culture and several non-governmental organizations, a bi-national research and curatorial team explored the confluence of nature and culture in six major regional ecosystems and the three largest cities—Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín. More than one hundred participants from these regions bring this research to life. They represent the diverse faces of Colombian culture—some of which may be unfamiliar even to Colombians themselves.

For *Rhythm and Blues: Tell It Like It Is*, we join with the National Museum of African American History and Culture to recount the development of this uniquely American music. The performances and stories of veteran artists reveal how this music has been shaped by the re-ordering of race relations after World War II, the civil rights

“ [The Smithsonian Folklife Festival] is a celebration of the art of the possible. It is a convocation on a commons by worldwide commoners seeking something to hold in common and finding it in contact.”

—Larry McGehee, Chronicle-Independent, Camden, South Carolina, 1994

movement, and the interplay between the commercial industry and the artists. The participation of emerging artists demonstrates how the music continues to transform and stay vital.

The third program, *The Peace Corps: Fifty Years of Promoting World Peace and Friendship*, features returned Peace Corps volunteers and host country nationals from fifteen of the 139 countries in which the Peace Corps has served. By demonstrating the role of culture in furthering social development, the program highlights one of the Peace Corps' primary goals, “Helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.”

In the 2011 Festival, more than three hundred people who are prime bearers of their unique cultural traditions offer us abundant person-to-person opportunities to experience craftsmanship, occupational skills, musical styles, dance, and culinary traditions that we might otherwise not encounter. In learning of their accomplishments, we expand our own sense of “the art of the possible”; we learn about ourselves; and we foster an optimism based in curiosity and empathy.

In convoking this gathering on the National Mall, the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage accomplishes its mission of promoting understanding and sustainability of the world's diverse traditional cultures. Without doubt, the Folklife Festival is an exercise in idealism, but it is an idealistic vision with enormous relevance to our well being, happiness, and future. We appreciate your participation in furthering our mission. Thank you for helping us to cultivate more common ground!

I got on the bus to head over to the festival one day and this Black guy from the desert of Mali gets on. He is carrying an *ngoni* (cousin to our banjo)... I point to the hide stretched over his instrument and go, “Baaaaa.” He shakes his head and goes, “Moooo.” I strum my gourd banjo. He strums his *ngoni*. We are in perfect tune. How many years has it been since these two instruments and cultures met? Three or four hundred years? How many years of struggle and oppression? How many years have we been catching tunes from each other? And yet, here we are again...in perfect tune.

Since that day I have collected every kind of banjo I can get my hands on. Every banjo that tells the history of our journey together. The rhythm bow, the *ngoni*, the *akonting*, the minstrel banjo, a fruit-cake-can banjo. And I have been telling the story that started long, long, ago. It still lives.

Thanks, Smithsonian, for joining us together again to tell the tale that binds us together.

—Randy Wilson, 2003 Folklife Festival
Appalachia program participant