

Folklife Festivals and Cultural Activism: Revisiting Our Legacy

Ralph Rinzler, founding director of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 1967, influenced a generation of field workers and cultural activists, including most of today's leadership and curatorial staff of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. We reprint his 1976 Bicentennial Festival program book article because, almost thirty years later, it draws attention with prescient precision to the transformative roles of festivals, tradition, culture, and community in the midst of homogenizing media trends and splintering global problems.

--James Early

A Festival to Cherish Our Differences

By Ralph Rinzler

In 20th-century America, Christmas and New Year along with a Super Bowl game, a department store promotion, and a TV run of Bogart films are all called "festival." The word is used so loosely we tend to overlook the serious regenerative function of festivals in early civilizations.

Festivals developed to strengthen people's sense of community by ritualizing common experience. The word itself comes to us from two related Latin words, *festus*, joyful, and *festum*, feast. Some contemporary festivals continue this dual tradition of joyful celebration and feast, offering many venerable traits and haps of our most ancient seasonal holidays.

The universally shared contemporary festivals, Christmas and New Year, have roots in pre-Christian Syria, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The very date, December 25th, long had been celebrated as the nativity feast of the Persian sun king, Mithra, when in 275 A.D. Roman Emperor Aurelian established it as the Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun. Originally this Roman holiday was the Saturnalia stretching from December 14th to the 27th. Then masters and slaves were granted temporary equality, gifts exchanged, possessions held, all labor except cooking and baking was suspended. Within a week followed the Kalends, or New Year Festival, sporting many of the symbolic traditions we continue to observe today: evergreens, fires and tapers, banquets and gifts. Because it fulfills basic human needs, this mid-winter festival has endured for thousands of years. In the darkest and coldest season of the year, evergreens signify the continuity of life; fires and tapers bring the reassurance of warmth and light; gifts and banquets bring people together to reaffirm their shared beliefs in the sun, but more significantly in each other--in their unity as a family or, on a larger scale, a political unit.

We may feel that the commercialization of seasonal celebrations overshadows their original purposes. But today, religious and secular festivals with songs, dances, processions, costumes and masks, and special foods and structures sustain people spiritually on every part of the globe. Internationally, Mardi Gras, like the Roman Saturnalia, levels caste and social barriers. Strangers come together in a framework which encourages sociability, stresses common heritage and interests. As one sociologist noted: "Society is able to revivify the sentiment it has of itself only by assembling."

From time immemorial, then, the world's peoples have learned the importance of setting aside work for seasonal recreations. The Folklife Festival continues this ancient tradition of festival. It is recreation in two senses of the word. First, as refreshment, it is recreation for visitors and participants who leave off regular work and join in celebration. But in the second, more interesting sense, we re-create the encouraging atmosphere of social and personal interchange. Processions, costumes, old recipes, songs, dances, and stories are re-created anew in a situation where all can join together to learn, share, and exchange.

Unique to this Festival is the work of the professional staff of folklorists. They have studied the context of many traditions on their field trips in order to re-create an environment on the National Mall which suggests the familiar surroundings of the performer's home or community. This encourages workers, storytellers, musicians, and dancers to present their most precious traditions in the relaxed manner associated with home or work sites. As visitors, you contribute to this re-creation of context, particularly if you share the cultural background of the performers. You may know the language, dialect, songs, dances, and familiar ways of relating to the performance. For example, when a Black preacher is "borne up" by a congregation in a church setting on the Mall, the hymns are sung by hundreds instead of dozens. If you know a song or dance, join in, and the barrier between audience and performer will disappear. Others who don't know, will learn and join. The artistic level of performance rises as the audience demonstrates through participation that two-way communication has been established. The event forges a community out of a passel of strangers. As a festival should, it affirms a sense of *communitas*. Formerly, this experience of sharing and participating in traditional celebrations or work practices of an in-group has been the privilege of field workers in the social sciences. The Festival, avoiding an entertainment approach to culture, seeks to serve as a window into community.

We tend to think of the Festival's effect on the public and overlook its impact on participants and their communities. The Smithsonian, as the national cultural institution, is an arbiter of taste and through the Festival acts as the cultural advocate of participants and cultures presented on the Mall. In our nation, where commercially dominated media determine the direction and accelerate the rate of culture change, this cultural activist role of the national museum is decisive.

Today, after nine years of Festivals, individuals, groups and entire areas of culture which had been unrecognized are more actively appreciated and supported by local, state, and federal grants and programs. As a consequence, the growth and development of creativity as well as scholarship are fostered. Since the inception of the Festival musicians and craftsmen presented at the Smithsonian have received national and international acclaim. Edgar Tolson's carvings were never seen outside of his native Kentucky before his 1968 appearance at the Smithsonian; he is now represented in many museums--including the Smithsonian and the Whitney. Cajun French is now being taught in Southwestern Louisiana schools, and the musicians from the area have visited Mexico, Canada, France, and major U.S. cities and university campuses. State festivals and folklore programs have been established in most of the states featured at the Festival over the years, and "Old Ways in the New World" appeared as a course offered in the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Folklore and Folklife immediately after its introduction to the Festival in 1973. The AFL-CIO Labor Studies Center is planning a pilot project in the collection of occupational folklore like that presented at the Festival, and a variation of our Family Folklore Program is being established this year at Philadelphia '76, that city's

Bicentennial Folk Festival. The National Endowment for the Arts has instituted two granting programs in folk culture and Congress, whose increasing awareness of the richness of our folk culture grew directly out of exposure to the Festival, has passed legislation establishing a National Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Through these few examples of Festival spin-off it is clear that we must first understand how our differences strengthen us. Then we can actively pursue means for benefiting from our differences rather than overlooking or eradicating them.