

WANTED: CULTURE--DEAD OR ALIVE? The Smithsonian's Festival on the Mall

by Richard Kurin

If you visit Washington, D.C. around July 4th, you can't miss the Festival of American Folklife. Held in cooperation with the National Park Service, spread out in a sea of large white tents across the National Mall, the Festival is an annual living exhibition of cultural heritage from around the United States and the world.

Visitors going in and out of the Smithsonian's museums can enjoy the exhibits dealing with natural history, anthropology, American history, air and space history, and art, but the festival's nearby tents offer a different kind of exhibition--craftspeople making and displaying their wares; native peoples preparing indigenous foods to buy and enjoy; and cultural specialists presenting their traditions alongside folklife specialists offering further commentary.

Each festival program is akin to a museum exhibition, with its own boundaries and space (about two football fields), labels and signs, stages and performances, and food and craft sales. A program usually consists of about 100 musicians, craftspeople, cooks, and story tellers and about 10 lay and academic presenters who provide background information, introductions, translations, and answers to visitors' questions.

In past years the Festival has featured particular nations such as India, Japan, Indonesia, Mexico; regions, such as the Caribbean or the Andes; American ethnic cultures such as Lao Americans, Russian Americans, or various American Indian tribal groups; occupational programs such as cowboys, taxi drivers, Senators (as in baseball players) and senators (as in members of congress), trial lawyers, even scientists at the Smithsonian.

If you came to the festival during the summer of 1996, you would have visited with folks from *The American South*, *Iowa*, and *The Smithsonian Institution*; if you come the summer of 1997, you will find programs on the *Mississippi Delta*, *African*

Immigrants to the U.S., and *Sacred Sounds from Around the World*.

The festival attempts to create a physical context for the traditions represented. In the past, the Festival has included, among other things, a race course from Kentucky, an oil rig from Oklahoma, a New Mexican adobe plaza, a Japanese rice paddy, a Senegalese home compound, and an Indian festival village. Animals, from working horses to llamas, from steers to sheared sheep, have been part of Festival presentations. A buffalo calf was even born on the Mall one Festival morning, and an escaped steer finally was roped to the ground in the Kennedy Center parking lot after a chase down Constitution Avenue.

Since its inception, the Festival of American Folklife has featured more than sixteen thousand musicians, artists, performers, craftspeople, workers, cooks, story tellers, ritual specialists, and other exemplars from numerous ethnic, tribal, regional, and occupational cultures. The Festival has had strong impacts on policies, scholarship and folks "back home." Many U.S. states and several nations have remounted a Festival program and used it to generate laws, institutions, educational programs,



documentary films, recordings, museum and traveling exhibits, monographs, and cultural activities. In many cases, the Festival has energized local and regional tradition bearers and their communities, and thus helped conserve and create cultural resources.

The Festival as a Museum Display

The Folklife Festival is one way in which the Smithsonian has attempted to turn museology outward, to connect with the public and its constituencies, and to include the voices of the represented. The strongest feature of the Festival is its attempt to foreground the voices of tradition bearers as they demonstrate, discuss and present their cultures. For the Smithsonian, the Festival constitutes the people's museum, wherein the celebrated national treasures are the people themselves, and their traditional wisdom, knowledge, skills, and artistry.

The Festival encourages visitors to participate--to learn to sing, dance, eat the foods and speak to the folks represented in the Festival program. The Festival, while celebrating American and worldwide diversity, encourages the bridging of differences in a larger celebration of freedom and human creativity.

Beloved by visitors and the general public, well-received by the press and politicians, heartily endorsed by tradition-bearers, the Festival of American Folklife nonetheless has its problems. In combining and crossing such categories as education and entertainment, scholarship and service, the authentic and the artificial, and celebration and examination, the festival is an unfamiliar genre and can be misconstrued.

Despite the fact that more than one thousand cultural scholars have participated in the Festival's research and presentation, a few find the Festival a throwback to the 19th century's world's fairs and other discredited forms of cultural display and voyeurism. And while the Festival receives kudos for placing ordinary people's culture on the National Mall, others have expressed resentment at the festival's placement on the Mall, its implied denigration of traditional museum functions, and its alleged effect on the natural landscape.

Living Culture on the Nation's Front Lawn

The Festival tells the story of the diverse peoples who populate the nation, but whose cultural achievements are not well represented in the Smithsonian's exhibitions or collections. As method,





the Festival pioneered the research-based use of living performances and demonstrations. This was consistent with a larger trend in the museum world at the time--the use of "living history" as a presentational or interpretive technique. Whereas living history performances were acted, the Festival emphasized authenticity--the presence and participation of the living people who were active and exemplary practitioners of the represented communities and traditions.

In Search of a Genre

Why call this phenomenon a festival? In the Washingtonian scheme of things, the Festival of American Folklife does operate like a festival. It creates its own space on the Mall, a sometimes jarring presence in the midst of official, neat space. It creates a face-to-face community in the shadows of inanimate official buildings and the institutions of state. The Festival is messy, its boundaries of participation, time and event unclear. The Festival creates an experience and event that are intense, but short-lived, in which representations are magnified, pushed together, and then, just as quickly, dispersed. And it brings people together---tradition-bearers, the public, scholars, officials, administrators, builders, designers, volunteers, and

others who would not normally interact. As Margaret Mead once wrote, the Festival is "a people-to-people celebration in which all of us are participants---now as organizers, now as celebrators, now as audience, as hosts and as guests, as friends and neighbors or as strangers finding that we can speak the same language of mutual enjoyment" (*Redbook*, July 1975).

The Festival has always navigated between the various axes of art (as entertainment), cultural rights (as advocacy), education (as public service), and knowledge (as scholarship and experience). It has from the beginning sought to broaden knowledge, deepen appreciation, and increase support for art forms and practitioners overlooked in a society whose sense of beauty and value is generally driven by the exercise of power and the influence of the marketplace. At times during its history, and even within the same year among its programs, presentations and framing have gravitated toward one or another axis. But by and large, the Festival's form, contexts, purposes, and place have remained the same.

Cultural Representation

While the Festival, in some literal way, may recall 19th century forms of cultural exhibitionism, it has benefited from decades of cultural research and discussions about representation to evolve into something quite different. Shifts in authoritative voice, collaboration in self-representation, treatment of contemporary contexts, as well as the forms of discourse, have significantly changed, thanks in large part to the efforts of people like Ralph Rinzler, Bess Lomax Hawes, Bernice Reagon, and a generation of cultural workers who have labored at the intersection of scholarship, cultural community advocacy, and public education. Large-scale cultural displays are situated in a public world in which various parties have a stake. Politicians, advocacy groups, rebels, and scholars may use these forms to forward their own agendas, and have become very sophisticated in doing so, as readily apparent in various case studies of Festival programs.

As a representational genre, living cultural exhibitions like the Festival share features with the zoo, the local fair, a town meeting, an object-based museum exhibit, an ethnographic monograph, a talk show, and a documentary film. The Festival differs from a book, film, exhibit and concert in that it lacks linearity.

While the Festival has some highlighted special events, a daily schedule and structured forms of presentation, many events happen simultaneously. Not everyone experiences the same thing. The Festival offers the opportunity, indeed the desirability, for people---visitors, staff, participants ---to chart their own experiential routes through it. The density of the crowd, the symbolic weight of the location and the significance of the July Fourth holiday help make this experience memorable. Most distinctively, the Festival offers the immediacy and sentient presence of people possessed of knowledge, skill and wisdom, who can and do speak for themselves. At the Festival, many different people speak in a variety of voices and styles. For the most part, the authority to speak and the content of that speech is diffuse and shared among participant, scholar/curator, and visitor.

Despite the challenges to and questions about it, the Festival of American Folklife continues to represent our American and human cultural heritage, presenting it to a large audience in an educational way, connecting it to real people and communities in ways that enhance the national civic culture of our democratic society. In addition, the Festival on the Mall continues to provide a model for localities, states, and other nations to present grassroots cultural expressions to their own citizenry.

It is no surprise that many other events have drawn inspiration and lessons from the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival--from the Black Family Reunion to the L.A. Festival, from a Festival of Hawaiian Culture to an Indigenous Culture and Development Festival in Ecuador, from the America's Reunion on the Mall Festival for the Presidential Inaugural to Southern Crossroads, a Festival of the American South for Atlanta's Olympic Games. Indeed, even the venerable old Smithsonian drew upon the Festival as genre for the production of its own 150th

anniversary celebration in a mile-long Birthday Party held for some 600,000 people on the National Mall on August 10-11, 1996. Some of the Smithsonian ancestors might have been quite surprised, but I think ultimately heartened, to learn that the Festival genre, historically used to represent others, had become a successful means of representing ourselves.

For Further Reading

Kurin, Richard, *Brokering Culture*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997. (An expanded version of this article constitutes the chapter titled "The Festival on the Mall.")

Festival of American Folklife Program Book. Washington: Smithsonian Institution. Essays in the annual Program Book discuss complexities and dimensions of the Folklife Festival. See especially essays by Richard Kurin from 1990-1996.

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