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.
Lessons Learned from Many Voices

Richard Kennedy, Acting Director, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

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.
Welcome to the 2008 Festival

Diana Parker, Festival Director

The Festival is always wondrous, and this year is no exception. You will meet winemakers from Texas, Bhutanese silk weavers, and robotic engineers from NASA. All are masters of their trades, who can share deep knowledge of their arts and occupational skills with you. What makes the Festival truly extraordinary, however, is that the juxtaposition of programs creates an event that is greater than the sum of its fascinating parts.

We are often asked how we put together each year’s combination of programs. The answer is we don’t. It takes several years to produce programs, and the mix of programs is based on timing rather than planning. Selecting a program for the Festival is a very democratic process. Anyone can recommend one; curators, audience members, ambassadors, state department officials, and friends have suggested recent programs. We answer four questions about an exhibit before we proceed:

- Is there an interesting story that will work as a Festival program?
- Are there specialists who can help us research and shape the story?
- Are there overriding issues that might make it impossible to produce the program?
- Are we confident that we can fund it?

When we are satisfied with the answers to these questions, we schedule a program in the next available year. As you might imagine, this process creates some surprising combinations.

As we slotted this year’s three programs into the schedule, we inspired some especially puzzled looks. But once we decided to produce the programs, the fun began. While the Bhutan, NASA, and Texas programs were conceived, documented, funded, and organized separately, their staffs still found surprising overlap.

To begin with, Texas is home to the Johnson Space Center, NASA’s center for human spaceflight activities. We learned that the campus of The University of Texas at El Paso is filled with Bhutanese-style buildings, thanks to a dean’s wife who fell in love with photographs published in *National Geographic* magazine in the early 1900s. And Bhutan, for years, has commemorated the U.S. space program with postage stamps.

At the Festival, we explore some even more interesting intersections. This year, you can hear an astrologer from Bhutan and an astronaut from NASA discuss the heavens and a Texas singer-songwriter sing “Have You Ever Seen Dallas from a DC-9 at Night?” The next day, you can ask a specialist from NASA’s food lab and a chuckwagon cook from Texas about preparing food for remote locations. And I guarantee that before the Festival is over, traditional Bhutanese will dance to time-honored Texas dance tunes, and Texas musicians will learn dances from Bhutanese.

All of us face similar situations in our lives. Nowhere but here at the Festival can you enjoy such a rich variety of interpretations of our common circumstances.