CHAPTER 4
Why We Do the Festival

Gladys Widdiss, a Wampanoag Indian from Gay Head on Martha’s Vineyard, sat in a rocking chair under a tent on the National Mall. She picked up the microphone to speak to some of the more than one million people who would visit the Festival in 1988. Gladys spoke of her pottery made from the clay of the Gay Head cliffs and of her efforts to teach young people about the traditional Wampanoag respect for the natural environment. She spoke of her own life, and, with her voice cracking from the emotion of the moment, Gladys said:

I’m a Wampanoag Indian grandmother. And that’s what I want to be.
I don’t ever want to feel ashamed of what I know and who I am. And I want to tell my grandchildren that.

Years ago, my daughter Danielle made a calendar for her preschool art project. For each month she drew an accompanying illustration: Valentine hearts for February, turkeys for November. For July, she drew a picture illustrating fireworks for the Fourth of July, along with three, large, human-like statues in flames. Danielle couldn’t explain that her picture evoked the 1985 Festival, when as part of the India program we burned 40-foot-high paper and bamboo statues of the evil king Ravana and his cohorts on the Mall. Instead she recalls that “the fireworks scare away bad things.”

In 1987, Alexandre Nikolai Demchenko, deputy director of cultural education at the then USSR Ministry of Culture, was negotiating the terms under which Soviet folk artists and musicians would come to the Festival. “So,” he said, “you do not want our best dance academy students to come to your Festival to perform peasant dances. You want the peasants themselves, the real people who do these dances.”
I'm a Wampanoag Indian grandmother. And that's what I want to be. I don't ever want to feel ashamed of what I know and who I am. And I want to tell my grandchildren that.

— Gladys Widdiss, Potter, Gay Head, Massachusetts, 1988
In 1976 for the Bicentennial Festival, Ethel Mohamed from Belzoni, Mississippi, worked with Festival designer Janet Stratton to make a tapestry illustrating the diversity of American and world cultures based upon the previous years’ Festivals. The colorful, memory-style tapestry illustrates folk dancing, cooking demonstrations, musical performances, and children’s games on the Mall. According to Ethel, the tapestry is like the Festival — a celebration of all of us joined together.

Gladys, Danielle, Demchenko, and Ethel are each right. We do the Festival to encourage grandmothers to teach their granddaughters, to scare away possible public evil to give voice to living traditions, and to celebrate our common, though multicultural, humanity.

While the Festival seems to us both logical and valuable, it is viewed by some as an innocuous diversion and possibly even deceitful. Consider Allan Bloom’s views in *The Closing of the American Mind*:

The “ethnic” differences we see in the United States are but decaying reminiscences of old differences that caused our ancestors to kill one another. The animating principle, their soul, has disappeared from them. The ethnic festivals are just superficial displays of clothes, dances and food from the old country. One has to be quite ignorant of the splendid “cultural” past to be impressed or charmed by these insipid folkloric manifestations. . . . And the blessing given the whole notion of cultural diversity in the United States by the culture movement has contributed to the intensification and legitimization of group politics, along with a corresponding decay of belief that the individual rights enunciated in the Declaration of Independence are anything more than dated rhetoric.

Accordingly, if this view is correct, it would make little sense to do the Festival: folk life should be relegated to a museum of dead cultures, and the Smithsonian should reject representations of cultural diversity. Why then do we do the Festival? Are our reasons well founded?

**For the People to Be Heard**

We do the Festival so that people can be heard. The Festival gives voice to people and...
The closer you look at us, the more you will see. At this Festival, we can see ourselves, not as others see us, or think they see us, but as we really are.  
— Robert Ray, Chair, Iowa Sesquicentennial Commission, 1996

Bahamians came to fully appreciate that we do in fact have a rich cultural tradition of which we can be justifiably proud. On behalf of the government and people of The Bahamas, I want to thank you.  
— Hubert Ingraham, Prime Minister, The Bahamas, 1995

cultures not otherwise likely to be heard in a national setting. The Festival emphasizes folk, tribal, ethnic, occupational, and regional traditional culture, generally non-elite and noncommercial forms created in communities throughout the United States and abroad. It is the culture of people trained by word of mouth and practice, doing what they do largely for members of their own family, town, city, social group, or religious community. The Festival has been instrumental in representing the cultures of particular groups who often do not appear in the nation’s cultural consciousness. The Festival has been a leader in illustrating the occupational cultures of working people — taxicab drivers, waiters, firefighters, railway workers — and the cultures of deaf people, of children, and of new immigrant groups.

By enabling culture bearers to speak from the “bully pulpit” of the National Mall, the Festival disseminates alternative forms of aesthetics, history, and culture. Musical performances, crafts, foodways demonstrations, and other programmatic activities meet Smithsonian standards of authenticity, cultural significance, and excellence. Their placement in a national museum setting conveys their value to artists, to home communities, to general audiences, and to specialists.

Some worry that “lesser others” will be embarrassed in public or exploited for their “otherness” in front of Festival crowds. Sometimes there is good cause to worry. But sometimes it is the worries themselves who are most embarrassed, and who either from their own shame, romanticism, or paternalism would prefer to talk for those “others.” From my point of view, the problem is not in giving people, all sorts of people who have something cultural to say, the center stage. The issue is the quality and quantity of mediation — how to effectively provide the ways by which people can speak for themselves. We have found that people who come to the Festival are pretty skilled in self-representation, or get to be so quickly.

When we ask crucial questions to former Smithsonian Folklife Festival participants about their experience, the results are overwhelmingly positive. In surveys, 81 percent rate their Festival experience as “excellent,” 18 percent as “good”; very few rate their experience as “fair,” no one bad. When we ask participants if they’d come back again, an overwhelming 86 percent say “definitely yes”; almost all the rest respond “maybe yes.” Participants like the Festival, generally feel they are well represented and that they impart some useful information to visitors. The majority also feel the Festival has a positive effect on their life and that of their community.

So That People May Be Encouraged

We do the Festival so that practitioners may be encouraged to pass on their skills and knowledge. Much of popular mass culture suggests to traditional practitioners that they are anachronisms, practicing forms of culture and art that have lost their vitality and beauty. The Festival is a way of saying to such people, “What you do is valuable, so valuable that the Smithsonian Institution would like you to show it to the nation.” This recognition — of particular crafts, musical styles, verbal art, folk medical knowledge, occupational lore — provides encouragement to the practitioner and is sometimes a source of strength back home. Some people gain an understanding or appreciation of their own cultural contribution and may promote and transmit the tradition with greater resolve as a result of Festival participation. Over the years, the Festival has had this revitalizing effect on Cajun culture in Louisiana, among various American Indian nations, among African-American communities, among stone carvers. In other countries such as India, Festival participation contributed to the effort of street performers and itinerants to gain rights to practice their arts and gain title to their land. Similar effects are reported elsewhere. In a survey of participants, 63 percent indicated the Festival had a direct, substantial impact upon their lives. Some 56 percent reported the experience had positively affected their community.

The Smithsonian Festival has sometimes helped nations, states, and territories, work-
Being a participant in the Festival was certainly the highlight of my life.

— Lloyd Snow, Musician, Castana, Iowa, 1996

We are very much aware of the impact this Festival has had on our own states and regions. The cultural traditions brought out by the Smithsonian are worthy of respect, celebration, and scholarship on home turf.

— Mark Hatfield, Senator from Oregon, 1978

ers, and communities reconceive their identity. Letters from officials of other nations, from governors, senators, community leaders, and tribal heads, often attest to this. These kinds of helpful though intangible effects are also felt by individuals, who have sent scores and scores of unsolicited letters asserting the direct impact of the Festival experience upon their lives.

Participants’ experience in developing their own means of self-presentation and interpretation as they interact with Festival staff, experts, and the public often helps back home and in other exhibition contexts. In some cases culture bearers have sought professional training and advanced educational opportunities, partly as a result of their Festival experience. They have used this training, combined with their own knowledge, to teach about their cultures in universities and to develop and run programs and exhibits at museums, including the Smithsonian.

As for more tangible impacts, Indian craftspeople gained direct income as a result of Festival participation in 1985 — so much so that a foundation, formed with the help of Jackie Kennedy Onassis and Liz Moynihan, helped channel millions of dollars in sales, and resulting financial benefit, back to India. Festival participants have received recording contracts and royalties; some have started their own businesses; others have developed strategies for their communities to gain from cultural tourism, performances, and other projects.

The Festival has also made a difference in establishing and supporting local institutions, archives, and professional positions in states — for example in Michigan, Iowa, and New Hampshire — and in other nations.

So That We Learn

The Festival provokes dialogue, not didacticism. It contributes to the broad educative function of the national museums, providing a neutral ground for approaching people different from oneself.

The Smithsonian Festival has illustrated a tremendous range of what might be considered grassroots culture. It has, by its very nature, defined as cultural forms of expression that many would overlook. It has addressed world regions and city neighborhoods, world religions and very localized ritual systems, transnational ethnic groups and complex national ones, blue- and white-collar occupations. We’ve also looked at the culture of groups like the deaf and done comparative, thematic programs, from the musics of struggle to the sounds of the sacred. And while the blues, Appalachian string music, *conjunto*, Cajun music, and Native American drumming are mainstays, over the years there have been a Quaker
Reasons Not to Do the Festival?

There have been critiques of the Festival from its inception, some serious, others spurious. In most cases, critical understanding and assessment of its purposes have contributed to making the Festival a better, more focused, cogent activity. Some people see ways of perfecting the Festival; others think it is fundamentally flawed either because its goals are wrong, or because it is not a viable way of fulfilling the purposes it sets out.

When it was first produced in 1967, some Washingtonians accused Smithsonian secretary S. Dillon Ripley of turning the Mall into "a midway." They thought the Festival was mere song and dance, diversionary entertainment that distracted from the serious nature of the Mall and its surrounding institutions. Within the Smithsonian, several curators argued that the tradition bearers on the Mall were not exemplary, true practitioners of their cultures, but rather marginal, debased survivors, who imperfectly imitated traditions which had died decades, even centuries, earlier. They saw no educational value in the performances and demonstrations — true knowledge, they asserted, resided in their own historical studies. And there was certainly no reason to encourage Festival participants to pass on their flawed artistry or skill.

In the early 1970s, various scholarly and expert observers like David Whisnant, Rayna Green, Herb Shore, Bruce Nickerson, Roy Bryce-Laporte, Peter Seitel, and others were asked to assess the Festival. While their assessments were generally positive, several recurring negatives emerged. Educational materials were not clear enough to audiences, presentations were of mixed quality, and historical background was lacking.

Several staff who worked on the Festival in the mid-1970s questioned whether the concentration on traditional folk culture had a deleterious impact on public understanding of the cultural groups at the Festival. Representation of minority culture groups by their folk traditions might leave visitors falsely thinking that these groups have no fine arts or had made no contributions to theater, literature, or popular music.

Others in the mid-1970s found that Festival logistics and arrangements for participants were not as strong as they needed to be. Arrangements put strain on them, and ran counter to the very purpose of honoring them. Richard Bauman, Inta Carpenter, and a team of graduate students from Indiana University offered similar criticism in a 1987 study, and went further to suggest that participants have their own understandings of the Festival, their own purposes for participating in it — ones not necessarily shared by the Smithsonian.

Charles Camp and Tim Lloyd, who had worked on the Festival, wrote a paper, "Six Reasons Not to Produce Folklife Festivals," published in 1982. They perceived a lack of evidence to support the thinking that folklife festivals actually help folk culture, educate and inform the public about folk culture, or serve as a public celebration of a rich and diverse cultural heritage.

In 1993 Robert Cantwell published Ethnomimesis, in part about the Festival. He claimed that people at the Festival become actors of their own ethnicity, that the Festival constructs an image of people not of their making, and then manipulates them and visitors in a magical though pleasurable rite of public theater.

And in 1994, Richard and Sally Price published Maroons on the Mall, arguing that folklife festivals are so fundamentally flawed that they are discredited, immoral acts, where producers put exotic people on display, patronizingly exploiting the powerless for the entertainment of the powerful.

Responses to these criticisms have been made in scholarly journals, at professional meetings, in other published studies such as Laurie Sommers' Michigan on the Mall, and Richard Kurin's Reflections of a Culture Broker. They have also been made by Festival staff, in their practice, and by Festival participants — who, refreshingly, often take issue with what others have to say about them.
The Festival is the surest antidote for what ails America down deep. Too bad there isn’t more of it.

— William Fulbright, Senator from Arkansas, 1970

At the Folklife Festival, everyone gets to be neighbors.

— Phyllis Richman, Washington Post, 1987

This woman came up to me and said, “Can you tell me when any group will be playing ‘America the Beautiful’? I said, “Ma’am, every group here is singing that song in their own special way.”

— Mike Herter, Stage manager, 1987

The Festival is a Walt Whitman sampler of this country’s culture.

— Richard Harrington, Washington Post, 1986

Festival goers find a world in miniature on the National Mall — an international version of the county fair.

— Destinations magazine, 1993

The Smithsonian had one component of the Festival called “Old Ways in the New World.” I was hired to do the Irish-American part of it, and it was that research, going around the country for a few months, seeing what was there, that really opened all the doors to me and enabled me to find out what a wealth of Irish music there was in America. That was a pivotal event because it brought musicians from Ireland into contact with musicians from America. It was a major coming together for the scene here in America.

— Mick Maloney, Musician and folklorist, 1995

I grew up in a very Russian, very Molokan community in San Francisco. I never really thought of myself in any other way other than as a Russian Molokan. I guess we were very insular, and did not see our connections to anyone else. The Festival has now changed all this. Standing on the Mall, seeing the wealth of cultural heritage under those beautiful trees in the midst of Washington, I had the realization, and the feeling for the first time in my life that I too was an American. That I had a place here. And that my Russian, Molokan heritage made me part of America, not separate from it.

— Edward Samarín, Festival participant, 1995

tion. Some 80 percent think they learned something at the Festival; only 13 percent thought that no learning took place. Some 65 percent indicated that what they learned was interesting and enlightening.

Another study in 1997 by Krista Thompson, an Emory University-Rockefeller Humanities fellow, pointed to the centrality of the tradition bearer in conveying knowledge. Visitors ranked the quality of participant performances and demonstrations highest, followed by participant explanations of their traditions. Festival program book articles, presentations by scholars, and content signs followed in perceived importance.

The educational function of the Festival is recognized by teachers, who use its presentations in developing curriculum units and particular lesson plans. Additionally, teachers use education kits we’ve produced from Festival research and documentation.

The Festival also contributes to the development of scholarship and museology. Festival programs are based on research. This research is usually multidisciplinary, involving folklore, ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, history, cultural geography, various ethnosciences, and area and ethnic studies. In its methodology, our research veers away from the monographic, tending toward group efforts involving academic, museum, and community scholars. Descriptive and analytic efforts focused on particular traditions are balanced by synthetic attempts to understand and present larger wholes. A considerable amount of fieldwork and archival research may be accomplished in the course of Festival program development. Through the course of Festival research, linkages are established for scholars, community people, and institutions that have resulted in products beyond the Festival — books, dissertations, recordings, radio programs, and documentary films. Just as the writing of an ethnography can sharpen the understanding of a culture, so does curating a Festival program aid the process of synthesizing knowledge. Festival programs, such as
As an African American I was particularly affected when learning of the Maroons. That was never in the history books I read.  
— C. Chapelle, Friend of the Festival, 1996

Just when it seems that the nation has been McNuggeted, Roseanned, and Classic Rocked into dull sameness, the Festival comes along to prove otherwise.  
— Marsha Mercer, Richmond Times-Dispatch, 1989

To celebrate my becoming a citizen of the United States, we went to Washington, D.C. I saw a huge July 4th parade and got to visit the White House too. While both these events were fun and appropriate, nothing could compare to the thrill of attending the Festival on the Mall.  
— L. Vickers, Festival visitor, 1996

those on the African diaspora, help generate new and important scholarly understandings of cultural relationships.

The Festival contributes to the development of methods for the representation of culture. Folklorists, art historians, semioticians, exhibition designers, and others are continually involved in exploring the variegated means by which cultures may be represented in museum contexts. Mannequins and objects in glass cases provide one of the older means of museum exhibits, now enhanced by interactive computer terminals and screens, talking robots, and multimedia presentations. The Festival has long served as a model for museum-based living cultural exhibitions and as a laboratory for experimenting with new presentational formats and theories of presentation.

So That We Celebrate Cultural Democracy

The Smithsonian’s Festival, and I think most folklife festivals, offer a forum for the inclusion of cultural diversity within a civil society; diverse means of expression find a valuable place within a larger, global, or national whole.

This inclusive spirit prompts extraordinary sharing among participants. It happens at special moments, either on the Mall or back at the hotel out of public view. New experiences and ways of thinking arise from the juxtaposition of cultures at the Festival. For example, a saint’s day procession in 1988 was recreated on the Mall by Italian and Portuguese Americans from Massachusetts. As the procession reached the Migration to Washington, D.C. program, Salvadorans awaited with traditional sawdust drawings, which in Latin America are to be trod upon by processions. The Italian and Portuguese Americans took their cues from the Salvadorans and participated in the ritual. Similarly, Russian singers greeted the procession with songs to saints, and the people from Massachusetts hugged the singers, cry-
ing and dancing. More commonly, musical juxtapositions take place at the hotel, where musicians from India have jammed with Cajuns, Eskimos have sung with Koreans, Azerbaijanis have played with Greeks. The Festival too becomes a topic of cultural creativity. Bahamian Kayla Edwards and the Dicey Doh singers composed a Festival anthem in 1994, Zuni Roger Celfcion a flute piece in 1992, and Massachusetts craftspeople a multimedia sculpture of their common experience. While participating in the 1994 Festival, temple painter Sakaya Khuinpoltik redrew the Mall in a Thai aesthetic style. He saw the Mall as the American sanam luang, the "field of kings" in central Bangkok where major events of national scope take place. Like the Festival, these forms of expression are ephemeral, but often unpredictable, emergent, and quite creative. U. S. Virgin Islanders discovered some of their root traditions when they were co-featured at the Festival with Senegal in 1990. This led to further cultural exchange of artists in ensuing years. Sometimes the exchange has been sustained among individuals. During the 1986 Festival a Tennessee cooper observed and started sharing his knowledge with a sake cask maker from Japan. He wanted to learn more about cask making from a Japanese perspective and eventually received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to study in Japan with his fellow craftsman. The influence of Japanese techniques and aesthetics may in the future emerge back in Tennessee, and is likely to baffle future archeologists.

The Festival provides a metaphor for our own national culture. America's political and legal history establishes a context for the intensely public display of our cultural diversity and aspirations at the Festival. There are many countries of the world in which the Festival could not occur. There are also times when the Festival would be untenable, when fears of certain cultures, intolerance of minorities, the narrowing of accepted values, racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of cultural discrimination and hatred subvert the principles enunciated in our political structures and laws.

The Festival is tied to our freedom. It is both a vehicle as well as an indicator of an open national cultural conversation. The Festival makes us proud, not chauvinistically proud but, as Secretary Ripley used to say, quietly proud of who we are. And it is through that understanding and appreciation of who we are that we appreciate others. The Festival is a symbol of our ability as a nation to find strength in our diversity rather than insist on a homogeneous, singular national, or yet worse, human culture. It is no accident that the Festival is tied in time and place to a dream enunciated so clearly and powerfully by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and echoed yearly by grandmothers like Gladys Widdiss.