Presenting Mississippi's Traditional Artists: A Handbook for Local Arts Agencies

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Table of Contents

Purpose

In 1991, the Mississippi Arts Commission, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts, began a series of training and planning sessions to develop and strengthen the state's thirty-five local arts agencies. While evaluating, planning, and setting goals, these agencies expressed a desire to develop arts programming based on the unique characteristics of their own communities rather than presenting standard touring programs with no direct relation to their cultural heritage.

In a workshop on the Fundamentals of Local Arts Agency Management held in September of 1992, representatives of local arts agencies were asked what types of assistance they needed from the Commission. They indicated that they wanted training in locating and presenting their own artists and in developing a deeper knowledge of Mississippi art forms.

In response, the Mississippi Arts Commission developed a three-part program called *Artists Build Communities.* The first part consisted of a daylong workshop held on December 2, 1993, during the Commission's *Art WORKS* Conference. It included an overview of Mississippi traditions followed by sessions for local arts agencies on studying a community's traditional culture and presenting its tradition bearers. Concurrent sessions for artists focused on marketing and working with presenters. Workshop participants also experienced presentations of Delta blues, old-time and bluegrass music, and African-American gospel music.

The second part of *Artists Build Communities* encourages local arts agencies to apply for grants to fund a six-month planning period in which a broad-based community group will work with a scholar or folklorist to develop plans for an extensive community artist residency. The agencies receiving the grants and completing their plans will then apply for up to $20,000 for a residency in which a Mississippi artist will conduct artistic programs that significantly relate to that particular community's heritage and its diverse populations. These residencies promise to be as varied and creative as the artistic traditions that inspire them. While not everyone will choose to explore folk arts, some local arts agencies will plan residencies that explore the richness of the traditional arts in their communities. The participation of folk artists is essential to the success of these projects.

This handbook is meant to assist local arts agencies in doing research during the planning phase as well as provide information they will need as they identify and work with folk artists. It includes suggestions, ideas, definitions, admonitions, and human and bibliographical resources presented at the December workshop, as well as information drawn from the writings of folklorists involved with the National Folk Festival, the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife, various state folk arts programs, and the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress.

Though published in conjunction with *Artists Build Communities*, this handbook is designed to be useful beyond the time-frame of one specific program. We hope that it

will help all who are interested in researching and presenting elements of their community's folk culture at festivals, craft shows, school programs, and other events.

Recognizing
What is Traditional in Mississippi Culture

Three Layers of Culture

Before embarking on a project involving Mississippi's traditional arts, the planner must be able to differentiate between the traditional and non-traditional aspects of a community's culture. Scholars often divide the elements that shape our culture into three levels, visualizing them as a layer cake. Joe Wilson and Lee Udall in *Folk Festivals: A Handbook for Organization and Management*, however, present the image of an ice cream sandwich, with the middle layer larger than the top or bottom layers. They explain that the top layer is *academic culture.* Schoolteachers, professors, music instructors, governmental officials, and conference panelists contribute to academic culture. Symphonies, novels, poetry, plays, lectures, essays and instructional guides are its tools and products.

The middle layer is *popular culture.* Some of the forces that drive popular culture are advertising, magazines and newspapers, movies and videos, fashion designers, television and radio programming, the recording industry, and so forth. Popular culture is "Achy Breaky Heart," Disneyworld, *Jurassic Park,* Reeboks, and McDonald's.

The bottom layer is *folk or traditional culture.* Folk music, crafts, practices, and beliefs are transmitted orally in face-to-face situations in small groups or communities over a period of time. Each of us belongs to several communities or *folk cultures*—our family, neighborhood, ethnic group, church congregation, school, social club, labor union, etc.—in which we informally learn stories, behaviors, and skills. For instance, a daughter learns to make biscuits by watching and helping her mother prepare breakfast every morning; a blues musician learns by sitting in on jam sessions with relatives and neighbors, learning words, chords, and stylings with no formal instruction. A Sacred Harp singer, though he or she holds a book produced by academic culture, learns the style in which the hymns are sung by hearing them at church and home.

A member of folk culture learns orally, through the *folk process*, and seldom consults written lyrics, musical notation, or instructional books in pursuit of his or her art. Thus folk songs, crafts, recipes and stories are never fixed; they are always changing, producing what the folklorist calls variants. Individuals allow their own tastes, abilities, memories, and understanding to produce such variants. Still, there is also a basic consistency to the products of the folk process, because they must remain acceptable to the tastes and uses of the community in which they were originally learned. For instance, a dancer taking part in an old-style square dance may add his own stylistic innovations to the figure "Cage the Bird." If his innovations confuse or discomfort the other dancers he meets, he will either stop doing them or start having trouble getting partners. But if his modifications are pleasing, others may adopt them and gradually change the way that community "cages the bird."

Of course, the three levels of culture melt into each other continuously. Literature and symphonies often deal with folk themes; McDonald's adds grits to their menu in the South; and many old fiddlers' repertoires include "Lara's Theme" from the movie *Dr. Zhivago.* Most folk artists make concessions to popular taste in order to sell their products or please their audiences and themselves. The presenter of traditional Mississippi culture will seek out those who have not allowed popular culture to change their basic methods, repertoires, and values.

The Tradition Bearers

Folklorists and others who research and present traditional artists have coined the term *traditional bearers* to refer to individuals who have maintained particular stories, occupational skills, crafts, rituals, beliefs, medicinal practices, and foodways that they learned orally from their family or community as part of daily life. Tradition bearers include not only fiddlers, blues musicians, gospel singers, basket makers, and potters, but cooks, coal miners, and off-shore oil workers as well. The annual Festival of American Folklife, produced by the Smithsonian Institution and held on the National Mall, has presented—alongside musicians and crafts makers—meat cutters, bakers, garment workers, carpenters and joiners, cowboys, farmers, stone masons, oil and gas workers, sheet metal workers, railroad workers, seafarers, truck and taxi drivers, bartenders, firefighters and trial lawyers. These participants demonstrate and share skills, techniques, attitudes, and lore they gain on the job and after work as members of occupational groups.

Tradition bearers also belong to groups that have newly immigrated to the United States. Among the Southeast Asians, Mexicans, and other recent immigrants who have settled in Mississippi are those who strive to preserve their cultural identities by maintaining special recipes, foods, dances, songs, clothing, and holiday traditions while otherwise adapting to American ways.

In the booklet *Folklife and Fieldwork: A Layman's Introduction to Field Techniques* (American Folklife Center) there is an extensive list of items regarding by folklorists as expressions of traditional culture, suggesting that any one of them might be the subject of a study or that a project may include several of them in combination.

In seeking a community's artistic tradition bearers, it is important to determine how each artist learned his or her skill. If the focus of a residency or other arts project is folk arts, then only artists who grew up in the traditions that they now represent should be presented as folk artists. Even though folk-style artists—ballad singers, blues musicians, storytellers, and makers of country crafts—may be highly talented and easily accessible to the local art agency, it would not be appropriate to present them as traditional artists if their repertoires and skills were not learned within their own folk communities. A weaver or an herbalist who gathered his or her knowledge from books, classes, and interviews rather than from family or community members should not be presented as a tradition bearer, though each may be the most articulate expert on that subject in the region. It would also be inappropriate to present as folk artists those who

do reenactments or museum-type demonstrations of crafts, music, and occupations that have survived only in history books. Instead, if you choose to present folk artists, select those who perform their music, craft, or occupation in a way that reflects confidence that comes from being firmly rooted in tradition.

Mississippi Traditions

Mississippi provides fertile grounds for the study of traditional culture. Diverse groups of people have put down roots in the state, their traditions shaped by ethnic background, religion, geography, and occupation. In their efforts to survive, prosper, and become mainstream Americans, these groups have given up bits and pieces of their folkways, but most have retained some traditions which they regard as symbols of their cultural identity, symbols which give their members a sense of self-confidence and strength.

In exploring Mississippi traditions, one may look at an individual tradition bearer, such as a particular quilter or blues musician. Or one may study clusters of traditions related to occupation or ethnicity. For instance, the focus may be on offshore oil workers—their stories, music, crafts, and foodways—or upon traditions retained within the Vietnamese community of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. One may also investigate how place determines customs, for instance, how the presence of good clay in Itawamba County made it a center for the production of pottery, including the stoneware tombstones found there, or how the availability of swamp cane leads the Choctaws to make a different form of basket than those who live in places where white oak is prevalent.

Looking at Mississippi culture in terms of the ethnic groups who have settled there, it is natural to start with the Choctaw Indians, concentrated in and around Neshoba County. McKee and Schlenker in *The Choctaws: Cultural Evolution of a Native American Tribe* wrote, "Not accepted by local whites and refusing to be lumped with the black community, the Mississippi Choctaws have constantly sought to assert their separate identity. Therefore, in Mississippi, native dress, language, dances, music, games, and crafts have had an important function as symbols of ethnic identity and this function has served to foster their survival." Among Mississippi Choctaw tradition bearers is Eleanor Ferris of Conehatta, who was presented at the Commission's 1993 Art WORKS Conference as a maker of traditional swamp cane baskets noted for their traditional style and outstanding craftsmanship.

Scotch-Irish and Africans both settled Mississippi in large numbers and had tremendous influence on each other's music, crafts, religion, foods, folk expressions, horticulture, and other cultural elements. Yet both retain distinctive elements of their cultures that bear presenting. Among the Scotch-Irish traditions, that could be presented, are old-time fiddling and the bluegrass music that grew out of it. Fiddler Bill Mitchell of Tupelo and bluegrass banjoist Larry Wallace of Starkville represented these traditions at the Art WORKS Conference.

Blues and gospel music are important parts of African-American culture in Mississippi, those that were represented at the Art WORKS conference included guitarist and singer

Lonnie Pitchford, guitarist Leon Pinson, and gospel pianist Alvin Shelby. Also presented at the Conference was Othar Turner's Rising Star Fife and Drum Band, one of the few groups who still play a lively form of music based on African polyrhythms and influenced by British and early American military music. Among other traditions which Mississippians of Scotch-Irish and African descent share while retaining different aesthetics are quilting, basket making, Sacred Harp singing, and southern cooking.

In *Ethnic Mississippi,* published in 1992 by the University Press of Mississippi, D.C. and Stephen Young describe many ethnic groups with a presence in Mississippi. These include a small Irish community in Bassfield, Mississippi; centered around St. Peter's Catholic Church and a "black Creole" community in Bay St. Louis made up of persons of African and French or Spanish descent, which has as its nucleus the Roman Catholic Parish of St. Rose de Lima. On the Gulf Coast are a number of "Mississippi Accedence" who have assimilated into American culture more than the French of Southwest Louisiana, yet retain Cajun foodways and holiday celebrations. Also on the Gulf Coast are Slavonians who originally settled there to work in trades associated with the seafood industry. Through the Slavic Benevolent Association, founded in 1913, they share holiday celebrations and sponsor festivals that feature Slavonian music, dance, and food.

The Youngs estimate that between four and ten thousand Vietnamese have settled on the Gulf Coast since the early 1980' s, many involved in boat building and fishing. They publish a Vietnamese language newspaper, *Duyen Hai*, and have established a Buddhist temple. Other Vietnamese worship at St. Michael's Catholic Church in Biloxi.

Most towns in Mississippi have a small Jewish population, though the number of Jews in the state is diminishing. Camp Henry S. Jacobs, outside of Jackson, serves as a center for Southern Jews and houses the Museum of Southern Jewish Experience. Also, the Lebanese have had a presence in the state since 1880's when they came as peddlers and storeowners. St. George Antiochan Orthodox Church in Vicksburg serves the Lebanese community there.

In *Ethnic Mississippi,* the Youngs also note that there are several Italian Cultural Societies in the state, with a statewide association based in Jackson, as well as a number of families of German ancestry in Gluckstadt, northwest of Jackson, both groups having Roman Catholic churches at their center. The Greek population of Mississippi is large enough to maintain Greek Orthodox churches in Jackson and Biloxi.

East Indians have come to Mississippi as professionals working in hospitals and universities as well as in service industries. *Ethnic Mississippi* observes that a Hindu temple in Brandon serves as a social center where Indians can maintain religious traditions, social ties, and provide cultural education for Indian children.

The fascinating story of the Chinese in Mississippi is told in two books, *Lotus Among the Magnolia: The Mississippi Chinese* by Robert Seto Quan, and *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White,* by James W. Loewen. Brought to the Mississippi Delta

during reconstruction, the Chinese were expected to replace the freed slaves as farm workers. Instead, the Chinese became peddlers and storeowners. Unlike the Chinese of San Francisco and New York City who lived in "China Towns," Mississippi's Chinese population was scattered throughout the Delta; thus the individuals were cut off from religious, educational, and other communal institutions. As a result, writes Robert Seto Quan, their customs centered on the nuclear family and the family-centered store. However, a Chinese Baptist Church in Cleveland, Mississippi, serves as a gathering point for the Chinese community.

As D.C. and Stephen Young point out, "Ethnic communities in Mississippi do exist, and their presence in the state needs to be better understood." Arts agencies involved in projects concerning Mississippi's traditional culture may be able to contribute significantly to this understanding.

Investigating A Community's Traditional Culture Through Fieldwork

Strategies for Finding Community Tradition Bearers

When first investigating the folk traditions of one's own community, it is likely that the adage, "You can't see the forest for the trees" will apply. As Alabama folklorist Joey Brackner observed at the Art WORKS Conference, we are enveloped by the folk traditions of our people, and often do not realize that commonplace actions such as refurbishing a cemetery on "Decoration Day," or putting out gourd houses for purple martins each year, are part of our folk heritage.

The first step in developing a successful folk arts project is to identify elements of their community's traditional artistic culture and to find tradition bearers who can present them. Local arts agencies may already be aware of some traditional artists in the community. They can locate others using the following strategies:

- **Investigate local fieldwork that has already been done.** Professional, amateur, or student folklorists may have researched one or more local traditions and placed the results of their work in the local library or a state university library. Even if the collection is old, such as fieldwork done during the Depression by the Federal Writers' Project, it can give insight into the area's traditions, and it is possible that the heirs of those who were interviewed are still carrying on those traditions.

- **Read local history books.** Research can be more focused if one knows that the community was founded by a particular ethnic group or centered on a particular industry or food crop.

- **Consult local experts.** Record collectors and blues authorities may know of area musicians who should be presented. Collectors of baskets, quilts, and other crafts may identify traditional crafts makers. There may be a professor at a nearby college who has a special knowledge of traditional boat building, vernacular architecture, or labor lore. Owners of record stores, ethnic restaurants and grocery stores, and other businesses may know of folk traditions of the communities they serve. Should particular experts prove helpful, it would be wise to involve them in planning and carrying out the project.

- **Look for newspaper articles.** Local papers and large-city dailies occasionally feature area craftspersons, musicians, and good talkers with stories to tell about their occupations. Do follow-up interviews with the subjects of such articles and speak to the journalists who wrote them. They may have a special interest in folkways and be able to suggest other tradition bearers. However, journalists are not as concerned with the folk process as presenters will need to be, so don't be

surprised if interviews with the subjects of such articles reveal them to be inappropriate for presentation as traditional artists.

- **Attend local festivals, celebrations, and craft shows.** In the midst of wooden country geese, crocheted toilet paper holders, imported ethnic jewelry and clothing, and cloggers dancing to tapes of popular country and rock stars, there may be a craftsperson, storyteller, or musician whose art reflects a long family or community tradition.

- **Listen to local radio stations.** A portion of the programming may be dedicated to live performances by local gospel groups, blues musicians or polka bands. Even if the station does not have live performances, it may be possible to find out about local musicians from the hosts of the various programs or the programming director.

- **Eavesdrop or join in conversations at local gathering places** such as the benches on courthouse square, the restaurant where folks linger in conversation after breakfast, the nutrition center where senior citizens gather for lunch, the barbershop where musicians play on Saturday mornings, or the juke joint they go to on Saturday night. In such settings, one can discover natural storytellers, collect folk sayings, superstitions and occupational lore, and learn of musicians and crafts makers.

- **Consider the churches and temples in your area as cultural centers.** Mississippi is home to many small churches that have deep roots in folk traditions. Often their ministers have felt a call to preach and answered it without seeking any sort of theological training. Because their congregations usually do not participate in national organizations which establish order of the services, require standardized hymnals, or provide printed Sunday School literature, they rely mainly on oral tradition in their service and may retain practices, such as foot washing, which are not part of more standardized denominations. Music in such congregations is often based upon the tastes and talents of church members and played upon a variety of musical instruments brought from home, rather than written choral music accompanied by piano or organ. In such churches, spirituals, shape-note hymns, Dr. Watts devotional hymns, gospel quartet music, bluegrass gospel music and other sacred folk music is often performed by talented individuals and families who have long been involved with that music.

  While the larger, more affluent congregations are not as likely to participate in folk music and rituals, it is possible that they may be serving new immigrant groups that are attempting to retain their cultural traditions. Often churches will make their facilities available to immigrant groups who wish to hold religious services in their own language with their own music. Ministers and program directors of host churches may be aware of musicians, crafts makers, and other tradition bearers among the immigrant community.

And, as we have seen, some recent immigrant groups such as the Vietnamese and East Indians have already formed their own worship centers, which also serve as cultural centers. Immigrant groups such as Mississippi's Greeks, Slavonians, and Lebanese, which have long been part of the state, are often associated with a particular church. Their congregations are likely to strengthen cultural identity by celebrating holidays with traditional foods, music, crafts, and customs. Holiday bazaars, food festivals and programs sponsored by such churches may reveal community traditions of interest.

- **Think in terms of networks.** One traditional bluesman is likely to know and have an opinion of the talents of other bluesmen in the vicinity. The same holds for fiddlers, gospel groups, potters, and basket makers. When talking with traditional artists, always ask if they can suggest others to visit.

- **Follow the signs:** Mississippi roadsides abound in hand-made signs point to Saturday night jamborees, martin gourd-house makers, fiddle worm farms, gospel singing and other aspects of traditional culture. Such signs, as well as a row of new quilts hanging on a clothes line or a roadside stand full of jams and jellies, indicate that those within welcome those who are interested in their traditions.

An Overview of the Interview

Presenting folk artists and other tradition bearers gives project planners an exciting opportunity to be involved in original research. It is unlikely that the unique details of your community's traditional arts have been documented; therefore they will have to be gathered through fieldwork. Fieldwork is the process of studying a traditional art form through interviews and observation. The reason for fieldwork is to develop an understanding of the tradition and its significance to those who carry it on. After a preliminary survey has revealed a traditional art to study and a representative of this art form to present, someone from the local arts agency will use tape recorders, still cameras, and possibly, video cameras to acquire information that will later be put to use in a number of ways, including introductions, publications, displays, and news releases about their projects.

Interviews lie at the heart of the information gathering process. The primary reason to conduct interviews is to gain a deeper understanding of the community's traditions. Oral history interviews should be done with artists selected for residencies. These interviews are broader in scope than interviews done for immediate or specific use. They document personal histories, family backgrounds, religious and social affiliations; they discuss the way the tradition bearer learned his or her art and the context in which he or she uses the art.

A number of texts listed in the bibliography provided step-by-step instruction in doing oral histories. A selected list appears in the References and Resources section of this handbook. One highly recommended text is Willa K. Baum's *Oral History for the Local*

Historical Society, which can be ordered from the American Association for State and Local History, 530 Church Street, Suite 600, Nashville, TN 37210 (615-255-2971). Elements of a successful interview are:

Consent Forms: In setting up an interview, discuss time, place, and purpose with the artist, and request permission to record the interview. After receiving oral permission to record, it is a good idea to prepare a consent form to be signed at the time of the interview. This will state that the interviewee allows his or her recorded remarks and/or image to be published for educational purposes. As part of a residency project, educational materials, programs, news articles, or other publications may be based on the fieldwork, and the consent form is essential if material from the interview is used. Local arts agencies may wish to place the results of their research at a public library, museum or university at the close of the project, another reason for consent forms.

Sample consent forms are included in *Folklife and Fieldwork: A Layman's Introduction to Field Techniques,* published by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. The contents of the booklet can be found online at the American Folklife Center's website or copies may be ordered from them (write to: American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540.

Advance Preparations: The interviewer should prepare a checklist of all the equipment and accessories which will be needed during fieldwork, such as notebooks and pencils, tape recorder, microphones and cables, cameras, tripod, extension cords, batteries, AC adapter, maps, audio and/or video tapes, film, consent forms, and so forth.

The interviewer will also need a list of questions to be asked or topics to be covered in the interview. It is a good idea, but not always possible, to prepare the questions after reviewing literature about the particular tradition. Prior research leads to more informed questions and helps the interviewer to ascertain how the local traditions compare to similar traditions elsewhere.

Interview Procedures:

- Place the microphone where both the person being interviewed and the interviewer can be clearly heard, preferably far from an air conditioner or other noisemaker that may obscure parts of the dialogue. The interviewer, if working alone, should place the recorder where he or she can easily operate it and actually see that it is running as the interview progresses.

- Begin by having the artist state his or her name, the place of the interview, and the date. The interviewer or the artist should name all others present in the room. At this point, it is wise to play the tape back to see if the sound quality is acceptable.

- After asking a question, listen to the answer. Make eye contact with the artist, show understanding and encouragement by nods and quiet affirmative statements, and allow the speaker to follow his or her train of thought to its conclusion. If questions occur, jot them down to ask them when the artist has finished speaking. Ask about the spelling of proper names, even simple ones—is it Green or Greene? Ray or Rae?

- Avoid giving opinions. If the artist asks you questions or seeks your opinions, speak briefly and refocus on him or her. Afterwards, when logging or transcribing the interview, it is disconcerting to have to write down one's own lengthy discourses.

- After finishing a tape in the interview, prepare an abbreviated label, with sequence number on it, then do a complete label later.

- The close of the interview may be a good time to request permission to photograph or videotape the interviewee and any objects or processes described in the interview.

The Written Report: As soon after the interview as possible, put the information into written form. You may complete a "Fieldwork Data Sheet" like that on pages 27-29 of *Folklife and Fieldwork,* or a Tape Log (pages 30-31), which lists the various topics covered, usually with a meter number indicating location on the tape, for instance:

008: Discusses how he learned to play the fiddle.
087: Describes first fiddlers' convention he won.
250: Gives examples of square dance figures done in community.

Or the report could be in the form of a word-for-word transcription. This is a time consuming, but valuable, process, because it makes the interview easily accessible to other researchers when placed in a library or archive.

Planning Programs Featuring Tradition Bearers

Community-Based Planning

It always happens: An Arts Agency prepares an exhibit of split-oak baskets made by an African-American basket maker from a poor, rural community. The people who come to admire the work, beautifully displayed at the local museum, are white city folks or suburbanites who read about the exhibit in a club newsletter or the local newspaper. The basket maker is pleased that her baskets are appreciated and purchased, but regrets that members of her own community did not attend and probably are not even aware of the honor bestowed upon her.

To avoid such occurrences and to assure that a diverse audience benefits from the presentation of traditional artists, it is important that the groups planning folk festivals, exhibits, artists in the schools programs and other such presentations be diverse. The *Artists Build Communities* program requires that its artist residencies be planned by a representative group of community citizens consisting of the artist, students, school administrators, senior citizens, people with disabilities and people of all ethnic groups in the community. The artist should have a central role in planning the residency, and various members of the planning group are expected to give input about locations, dates and hours, formats, and activities that would be well-received by the communities they represent.

Presenters of traditional arts should develop partnerships with community organizations while planning their activities. Potential partners include local Leadership Mississippi members, Cooperative Extension representatives, local and state park managers, tourism officials, Chamber of Commerce presidents, and historic preservation teams. The Mississippi Arts Commission can provide information about how to contact local representatives of these groups.

Community-Based Publicity

Reverend Leon Pinson, a master of the slide guitar, grew up in North Mississippi then lived in the Delta for over three decades, all the time playing his traditional blues-based gospel music. He played on local radio stations in the state, and in later years has traveled across the nation playing prestigious festivals such as the Chicago Blues Festival, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife. Yet, according to Worth Long, the Atlanta-based cultural scholar who presented Pinson at the Art WORKS conference, he is relatively unknown in his hometown. Long said that, "very often people we don't see as being very important are important to our traditions." Because of this lack of awareness about traditional culture, it is very important to place special emphasis on publicizing programs featuring folk artists.

It is tremendously disheartening to have a well-researched, well-presented, thoroughly entertaining, poorly attended program. Unfortunately, programs presenting traditional

artists often fall under this description. Usually the sponsors of such programs have few funds to allocate to marketing and have to depend on free public service announcements made at the convenience of local radio stations and newspapers. They are competing for print space and airtime with agents of popular culture who can afford to pay handsomely.

This is another reason why the group planning, researching and carrying out the project should represent the entire community. To make certain the event is well publicized and, it is hoped, well attended. The local arts agency should involve participants representing various traditions and cultures who will be enthusiastic about the program. Everyone involved in the project should be willing to analyze and use his or her own community's informal information networks—be they announcements from the pulpit, posters at the convenience store, notes in newsletters and bulletins of organizations they are involved in, or the endorsement of a chatty clerk at the post office. Not only should the planning group discuss which media should be used for publicity, but the various "angles" that the publicity should use. Some communities may prefer emphasis on the entertainment value of the presentation while others respond to appeals based on the educational, social, or historical nature of the event. When a diverse group of people brainstorms about ways to publicize an event that they all agree is important, the result is likely to be an effective, varied approach to publicity.

Venues For Traditional Artists

An extended residency such as that afforded by the *Artists Build Communities* program can reach a wide variety of audiences if locations and hours of presentations are carefully considered. Tradition bearers can be presented effectively in a number of formats, such as those suggested below:

School Presentations - Traditional artists can perform their music, demonstrate their craft, or tell their stories in school-wide assemblies and in classrooms. Or they may meet with small groups or individuals at workshops which allow students to be involved in the making of traditional music and crafts and explorations of other community traditions. It is ideal when an artist is able to give on-going lessons or apprenticeships to students who request them.

Community Celebrations - The organizers of harvest festivals, holiday events, county fairs, founders' days, trade days and other events that take place in your community may be happy to showcase traditional artists.

Folk Festivals - Should community fieldwork successfully locate a number of traditional crafts makers, musicians, storytellers, and persons who can talk about and demonstrate occupational skills, and folk games, an organization may want to produce its own folk or heritage festival.

Family Programs - Parents often look for interesting events to attend with their children on weekend afternoons. Consider presenting a traditional artist at a museum, library, or community center in a manner interesting to both adults and children.

Inter-generational Programs - The above program may also be presented to combined audiences of persons in retirement homes and children in pre-school or after-school care programs.

Work Place Programs - The artist may be presented during lunchtime at factories and business offices, thus reaching people who cannot or will not attend such programs otherwise.

Meetings of Organizations - Historical societies, music clubs, support groups of the local library or museum, and other organizations will provide receptive audiences for traditional artists.

Programs in Context: It may be possible to bring the audience to the traditional artist, thus presenting him or her in context—a workshop, studio, church, country-music jamboree, or blues club. Such presentations can be tremendously informative and enjoyable to audiences if they can be done without discomforting the community that is normally present at such venues.

Traditional Arts in New Contexts

Blues at the library? Quilts at the chicken processing plant? Boat-building on the courthouse lawn? Bringing traditional arts to audiences' leads to unusual juxtapositions of site and subject. Having taken the tradition bearer out of his or her natural context, the presenter will have to replace physical contexts with words, explaining when, were, why, and how the traditional art form is carried out. At this point, in-depth fieldwork becomes invaluable.

For example, your arts agency decides to sponsor a performance of Sacred Harp singing, which has a long, rich history among black and white residents of north Mississippi. The concert will take place in an auditorium where the singers will be grouped on stage behind a row of microphones. The presenters will need to be aware that an uninitiated audience may perceive the tunes and harmonies as "weird" or discordant, the words as indecipherable, and some of the singers a bit "off-key." In order for listeners to appreciate the experience and have an accurate understanding of the tradition of Sacred Harp singing, the following points would need to be made:

> Sacred Harp singing takes its name from the songbook *The Sacred Harp,* first published in Philadelphia by B.F. White and E.J. King, but the actual style of singing goes back to the colonial days. The itinerant singing-school master was a common figure in colonial New England, and various masters competed in the efforts to devise an instructional system whereby congregations could be taught

to sing "by note." Most developed a method which assigned different shapes to notes of the musical scale, some employing seven shapes, others four shapes.

The Sacred Harp, published in 1844, was the most popular shape-note hymnal used in the South. It employed four shapes to correspond to the syllables, fa, sol, la, and mi.

This method was taught in annual singing schools in most small communities throughout the South. To this day, singers retain the practice of singing a hymn the first time through, saying only the names of the shaped notes before they sing the lyrics. Unlike the arrangement currently seen on stage, the participants normally arrange themselves in a square according to voice part, the basses facing the trebles and the tenors facing the altos, with the song leader in the middle of the square.

Shape-note singing is not a performance art; it is meant to be participated in by entire congregations, regardless of their vocal talents. The singing, which usually last from 9 a.m. on a Sunday morning until 3 p.m., interrupted only by "dinner on the grounds" at noon, is as much a social as a religious gathering, giving people an opportunity to see one another after some time apart. Every aspect of a singing—starting time, the order of business, the prayers, foods, and vocal stylings—is firmly bound in community tradition.

The presenter would gather this information from interviews with singers and research in such references as *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* and the *Mississippi Folklore Register* (now published as *Mississippi Folklife*), which contains in its 1991-92 issue a detailed article by Ted Olson about Sacred Harp singing in Calhoun County, Mississippi.

Aware that lengthy introductions may not have the desired effect on the audience, the presenter may have the artists themselves weave such information into their performances or demonstrations. Information which will help the audience appreciate and understand what they are witnessing may also be conveyed through program notes and newspaper articles. Wall signs or signs on easels that provide a paragraph or two of information about the art and artist may also be effective.

"Those presenting non-performance traditions, such as crafts or occupational lore, should try to render these 'non-performance' activities into performances…without interfering with their basic integrity," as the *Festival of American Folklife Festival's 1990 Presenter's Guide* points out. Presenters will need to work with crafts makers and occupational lore participants to develop interesting demonstration techniques that allow them to communicate with the audience as they work.

Working with the Tradition Bearer

Prior Understandings

For presentations to be successful, it is crucial that artists be comfortable and confident. After an organization has selected an artist for presentation, there will need to be an understanding of what the artist and organization expect of each other. If the artist is involved in planning the presentations, some questions will be quickly answered. Others may be cleared up in private discussions. Understandings should be reached on the following topics:

- **Contract items:** The organization will want to draw up a clearly written contract that specifies the number of programs, dates, times, lengths, locations, amount to be paid and schedule of payment. At the start of an extended residency, however, details about all the programs may not be finalized. If this is the case, a generalized contract showing that the artist agrees to do a certain number of performances or demonstrations of stated length during the time period of the residency should be used. With traditional artists, whose involvement in academic culture may have been slight, it is wise to discuss the contents of the contract, receiving verbal as well as written confirmation that the terms are understood and agreed upon.

- **Focus of performance or demonstration:** The artist should have a clear understanding of what type of music or craft he or she is expected to present. It sometimes happens that during a performance, a traditional musician who knows a wealth of tunes learned within the family and community suddenly launches into pop music, feeling that the audience will enjoy it more than the "old stuff." Or a pine needle basket maker who learned her craft from her mother also wishes to demonstrate craft items made from instructions offered in a recent women's magazine. Avoid such situations by explaining beforehand that the sponsors wishes to explore and present the traditional arts of Mississippi, and that songs, crafts, and stories taken from popular culture will be inappropriate, even though the artist may enjoy doing them and audiences request them. Also discuss points that the artist should remember to make during performances and demonstrations, thus alleviating the need for the presenter to make them in introductions.

- **Equipment, supplies, and types of spaces required by artist:** Musicians need sound systems for performances in large halls; buck dancers need uncarpeted floors or portable wooden dancing boards; gandy dancers need railroad tracks; wood workers need electric power for their tools; and the lack of any of these at a performance or demonstration leads to disappointing programs. Careful planning with the artist should produce a list of needs and an understanding of who will satisfy them.

- **Transportation to program sites:** It is possible that the tradition bearer your agency chooses to present may have some problem getting to performances. Old age or an unreliable automobile may prevent him or her from driving. The artist's unfamiliarity with a site and an inability to read maps may cause late arrivals or missed

performances. Anticipating such problems, working with the artist to arrange alternate transportation when necessary, and giving clear verbal directions to performance sites will increase the ease with which your program runs.

Southern Hospitality

When an arts agency presents a famous classical musician, there is often a rider to the contract specifying the brand of bottled water to be supplied and the temperature that the dressing room should be. It is unlikely that the traditional artist will make any demands whatsoever. But the agency will want to insure the artist's physical comfort at each presentation by having someone on site provide information, directions, drinking water, snacks or meals at lengthy programs, and assistance in transporting the artist's equipment to the car.

Completing the Project

Evaluate the Results

At the close of a residency, festival or other large project, the sponsoring organization must carefully evaluate it. All planners and participants should gather to assess what was good and less than good in the program. It is hoped that the project will have been successful and all will want it to live on. Two things should happen here. First, the group should evaluate the project's effect and plan for the future. Should an annual residency program be developed? Do all of the collaborating organizations want to stay involved? What changes need to be made in the project's mission? Second, it is a good idea to evaluate the "nuts and bolts" of the event, to make certain that this year's difficulties are avoided next year. In examining problems, which arose in the course of the project, the emphasis should not be on assigning blame, but on seeing how they can be avoided in the future. In examining the program's successes, the evaluators may note immediate ones, such as the size of audience and its enjoyment level, the artist's feeling of satisfaction, etc., but will need to keep in mind that the results of such programs (see "Keep in Touch" below) are usually long-range, often not revealing themselves until years after the original program.

File a Final Report

At the close of a project funded by the Mississippi Arts Commission, the local organization will be required to file a report that describes the program offered, audiences reached, planning partnerships formed, and the impact of the program upon the community. This information is not permanently relegated to a file folder. The Commission uses it in a number of ways: to evaluate the effectiveness of its own programs, to report to the National Endowment for the Arts, and to celebrate and communicate the success of your project to other state and national arts organizations, the state Legislature, and others who share an interest in the vitality of community arts.

Archive the Products

In the course of working on the *Artists Build Communities* program, the local arts agency will have produced a number of taped interviews with accompanying transcripts or tape logs, as well as photographs, videotapes, newspaper articles, and printed programs. Place these in a public institution, such as a local library or museum, where they will be preserved and made available to the public for use without damage to the materials. Consent forms that clearly spell out permissible uses for these materials should accompany them.

Keep in Touch

Bess Lomax Hawes, retired director of the Folk Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts, tells in the book *Public Folklore* the story of a student who

complained that she had taught him to collect folklore, but she had not taught him how to stop collecting it. He explained that the woman who had supplied him with all the information he used in a paper on folk curing beliefs was continually calling him with yet another folk cure, even though he had long finished his project. Hawes answered that the woman apparently had believed he was interested in what she knew rather than just meeting a course requirement. Thereafter, she warned classes, "Watch out whom you collect from. When you talk with somebody about his or her folklore, you move quickly and often imperceptibly into a realm of deep intimacy, much deeper—in my experience—than you ever intended to go. And afterwards you find you haven't just collected folklore, you're very apt to have made a new friend with all the responsibilities, as well as the delights, that friendship brings." It is likely that those who work closely with a traditional artist in a residency or other program will not want to end the relationship with the filing of a final report, but will continue to be concerned with that person's personal and artistic well-being.

Assessing Long-Range Results

It's over. Fieldwork done; artist selected and presented; reports written, tapes and photos archived. The wrap-up session has adjourned and everyone has agreed on at least one thing—it surely would have been easier to hire a professional touring group with its own promotional package, transportation, and sound system! While pondering whether the presentation of a tradition bearer was worth the extra effort, consider the intangible benefits that the program may have offered both the artist and the community.

The Artist's Impact on Audiences

An organization's willingness to seek out and present tradition bearers gives audiences an opportunity to enjoy unique performances by talented individuals who might never be presented otherwise. Traditional artists, pleased to be given the chance to share their music, crafts, and stories, often form a natural rapport with the audience that elevates the performance into a special experience for those present.

Tradition bearers express and exemplify values that need to be expressed. Without preaching or lecturing, they address the topics of respect for the knowledge of elders, of making something of value from almost nothing, of filling idle hours with worthwhile pastimes, of putting down roots in the community and serving that community. When young people see persons from their community presented as tradition bearers, the effects may be far-reaching. According to the Florida Folklife Program's guide for classroom teachers, "The realization that he is an integral link in the chain of tradition may provide today's young person with the identity and purpose that his life often seems to lack. The foundation for a more meaningful future may be considerably strengthened by an appreciation of the role and importance of the cultural traditions of his people."

Presenters of traditional arts can be certain that their efforts will help Mississippians become aware and more appreciative of the talents of traditional artists within their communities, and the diversity and richness of Mississippi folk culture. This is a valuable service, for as Sarah Gertrude Knott, founder of the National Folk Festival, points out in *Public Folklore,* "no one would want to dull the richness of that pattern. The cultural outlook for the future would be bleak indeed if we overlooked the distinctive, individual cultures in a universalized, standardized, regimented culture."

The Audience's Impact on Artists

The Presenter's Guide to the 1990 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife opens with a quotation from Alan Lomax: "The Festival beats a big drum for folklore on a national level, but it is doubtful whether this is of much use to the separate traditions and to their carriers—for these traditions are local and their carriers depend upon local audiences. In my mind then, the most important thing that the Festival can do is aid and strengthen the singers." It does this by honoring them, appreciating them, and by valuing what they

do. They leave the festival with a sense that their traditions are important, even if their neighbors do not acknowledge them. Having received national recognition, it is more likely that the neighbors will see their significance.

The late Cajun fiddler, Dewey Balfa, provided a vivid example of how this process works: he and his family continued to play Cajun music long after American popular music pushed it out of most homes in southwest Louisiana. To younger members of the family, the old music was an embarrassment, and when the Balfa Brothers began going to national folk festivals, friends and family predicted they would be laughed at. However, at the 1967 Newport Folk Festival, enthusiastic audiences would not let them off of the stage. Balfa went back to Louisiana with applause echoing in his ears, determined to convince his people of the value of their own music. As a result of his efforts and the interest shown by outsiders attracted to Acadia, young Cajuns developed pride in their traditional culture, giving Cajun music, dance, language, architecture, occupations and foodways a new and, hopefully, long-lasting vitality.

Similarly, the women of Port Gibson, Mississippi, had made quilts as long as anyone could remember. Though the quilts were skillfully made and highly artistic, they were not especially valued by the community, and young people showed little interest in learning to make them. Working together, a local arts organization and the quilters changed that perception. In 1989 Hystercine Rankin, a quilter at Mississippi Cultural Crossroads, was named a "master artist" by the Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program of the Mississippi Arts Commission, and she later gained many honors for her quilting. This official recognition helped others see the beauty and importance of Mrs. Rankin's work and gave her a forum for encouraging others to take up the craft. At Art WORKS Mrs. Rankin spoke not only of the many beautiful quilts that have been made in the area by young and old, but also of the self-confidence built, the souls healed, and the idle hours filled in the process.

As Lomax wrote, "traditions are local and their carriers depend upon local audiences." Those who locate tradition bearers and call them to the attention of the local community help "strengthen the singers" and preserve that community's distinctive culture. Arts programming which does this is absolutely worthwhile. It enriches both artist and audience, reminding the community that the very characteristics which lend a community diversity also serve to unite it.

References, Resources and Acknowledgements

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American Folklore Society – The national membership organization for folklorists. Their site features information on the Society's meetings and publications, as well as employment listings and other opportunities for folklore scholars.

Oral History Association – Homepage for the national membership organization. The site includes extensive links to oral history projects and collections throughout the United States.

Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage – The organizer of the annual folklife festival held on the National Mall in Washington D. C. They also are the home for Smithsonian Folkways Records, a record company that releases recordings of traditional music.

Mississippi Culture

Center for the Study of Southern Culture – Home for the Southern Studies program at the University of Mississippi, as well as the host of numerous southern culture related events, including annual conferences devoted to William Faulkner and southern foodways.

Delta Blues Museum – The premier blues museum in Mississippi. Their site features information on current exhibits, information on local clubs and festivals, and links to other blues related sites.

Junior's Juke Joint – Follow the adventures of cultural anthropologist and Louisiana native Junior Doughty as he investigates the blues culture of Mississippi. A simple, "home made" site, but lots of first hand information about Mississippi blues sites and musicians.

Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians – The tribe's official website, which includes information on their history and culture, as well as their more recent economic activities.

Mississippi Folklife and Folk Artist Directory – Managed by the Mississippi Arts Commission, this site features information on a wide range of traditional artists currently active in the state. In addition to extensive text descriptions on each artist, the individual artist pages include photo galleries, and audio or video clips.

USM Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage – The Center is the repository for most of the recent oral history interviews done in the state. Their site also features an extensive finding aid for the Civil Rights- related oral history interviews that have been done with Mississippi residents.

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Mississippi Folklife (annually). Offers articles, photo essays and other about a wide range of aspects of traditional culture in Mississippi.

Recordings, Films, and Videos

Black Delta Religion. Video. Wide range of religious experiences filmed in variety of Mississippi Churches.

Blues Maker. Video. Fred McDowell plays, sings, and talks about the Mississippi Country blues.

Bottle Up and Go. Video. Captures the simple, deliberate lifestyle of a rural black couple in southern Mississippi.

Fannie Bell Chapman: Gospel Singer. Centers on a gospel singer, faith healer and family leader from Centreville, MS

Give My Poor Heart Ease. Video. Interviews and performances by B.B. King and James Son Thomas, Parchman Penitentiary work chants and Wade Walton's Barbershop boogie-woogie.

Gravel Springs Fife and Drum. Video. An Examination of a musical tradition whose roots extend back to West Africa and a commentary on life in rural Mississippi.

Great Big Yam Potatoes. Anglo-American Fiddle Music from Mississippi. Record album. Twelve fiddlers, 42 tunes, recorded in 1939 for the WPA and Library of Congress.

I Ain't Lying. Video. Folktales narrated by James "Son" Thomas, Shelby "Pappa Jazz" Brown, Mary Gordon, and others.

Made in Mississippi. Portraits of black folk artists and their works: James "Son" Thomas (clay sculpture), Amanda and Mary Gordon (quilts), Othar Turner (cane fifes), Luster Willis (painting and sculpted canes) and Leon Clark (white oak baskets).

Mississippi Delta Blues. Video. Rare black and white footage of live music found in juke joints, shops and at house parties.

Mississippi Folk Voices. Record album. Sacred Harp, gospel, black fife and drum work chants, blues and country music by various artists.

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Moving in the Spirit: Worship through Music in Clear Creek, Mississippi. Record album. Varied Styles of worship music plus a chanted sermon.

Traveling Through the Jungle: Negro Fife and Drum Band Music from the Deep South. Record Album. Testament Records.

Two Black Churches. Video. Services at Rose Hill Baptist Church near Vicksburg, MS, and at St. James Church in New Haven, CN.

About the Author

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About the Mississippi Arts Commission

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Contributors

Joey Brackner-Oral History bibliography

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