

**A Future for Folklife Festivals in North Carolina and Beyond:  
A Critical Inquiry into Some 21<sup>st</sup> Century Strategies to Sustain a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Concept**

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**I. Context, Introduction, and Methodology**

*A folklife festival... is a complex, dynamic, and highly problematic undertaking, in which a number of factors (themselves highly subject to revision in the course of the festival) intersect: personal agendas for participating, hierarchies of relating among disparate categories of individuals, and the need to draw upon, to adapt, and to reframe customary activities so as to make of them a representation intelligible to the festival audience and acceptable to folklorists and to the participants themselves. (Bauman 1992: 58).*

In March 2013, Joy Salyers of the North Carolina Folklife Institute (NCFI) and the North Carolina Folklore Society (NCFS) approached me to discuss the intention of the NCFS to mount a statewide folklife festival to take place in September 2013 in downtown Carrboro, NC. She asked if I would consider conducting some research and dedicating some time to wrestling with the thorny issues that complicate and populate any such presentation of folk culture, and particularly one framed to represent North Carolinian expressive vernacular culture.

I was aware of the NCFS festival effort in broad terms, but unfamiliar with its contours or scope. So I was, and remain, eager to help with such a noble pursuit, but deeply wary of committing any categorical explication or arbitrary fiat related to the future of folklife festivals here in this state or elsewhere. My expertise as a folklorist lies in the arenas of modern and contemporary American vernacular visual art and music, and the curation and marketing thereof in gallery and record label contexts. However, many of the same dynamics (negotiating artifice, narrative, and stereotype, and rendering complex traditions, identities, and practices legible to general audiences) apply to those contexts as well as to festival planning and implementation. A festival may entail a larger scale, many more participants, and a greater degree of temporal dilation and spatial diffusion, so its challenges are unique, but it poses many similar problems.

Much has been written about the history, theory, and experience of folklife festivals—particularly the Smithsonian Folklife Festival—but less research and literature, it seems to me, is dedicated to determining how to translate those critiques and observations into pragmatic steps for actually conceptualizing or planning a festival. And much work on festivals, however excellent, is outdated when it comes to contemporary demographics, technologies, and audiences. The concept of the “folk” and festivals to represent vernacular artistry and the realm of community traditions can be traced back to 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic and nationalist notions. While the field and festivals alike have obviously evolved enormously since then, the basic premise and paradigm of the folklife festival itself has arguably not undergone the same strenuously involuted

shifts towards self-reflexivity that folklorists have diligently applied to other practices and methods of the discipline (documentary film, for instance.) Now may be the time to make that rather overdue and arduous move.

This report is certainly not sufficient in length or scope to discuss adequately the myriad conceptual issues of festivals and folklife representation, and it makes no claim to do so—on that subject I defer to experts in the field like Robert Cantwell, Dan Sheehy, and David Whisnant, all of whom I was honored to consult. Any assertions herein regarding the nature of festivals broadly speaking are necessarily tentative, partial, and contingent on my own perspective and experience as well as those of my consultants. I have attempted to use selected theoretical underpinnings to foreground some central questions and issues that can inform pragmatic curatorial strategies, programming, and logistics for folklife festivals in general. My consultants and I venture recommendations based on the North Carolina context in particular, which I hope are particularly useful for their specificity. But in no way does this report comprise a conclusive statement on a vast subject for numerous books; rather I hope it can be used to stimulate discourse among festival planners and participants. There are no definitive answers, though there are plenty of valid questions.

This paper begins with the assumption that a folklife festival in 2013 is necessarily a vexed undertaking. The cultural and demographic landscape of North Carolina has so radically transformed over the last two decades that the entire notion of presenting a festival requires a fundamental rethinking of how to define folklife for the state today and how to communicate that definition coherently and legibly to diverse audiences with increased access to mediated culture and new expectations for engagement, participation, and crowd curation. North Carolina is not the same place it was when Bascom Lamar Lunsford organized the first Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville in 1928; nor is it the same place that hosted the North Carolina Bicentennial Folklife Festival in 1976 or subsequent Eno River festivals.

The state is currently blessed with a number of excellent music festivals and gatherings that are both worthy and successful—from Mt. Airy to Happy Valley to Union Grove to the Durham Blues and Bull City Metal Festivals to Shakori Hills to the Black Banjo Gathering to BoCO to Hopscotch to Phuzz Fest and more—most of which involve some folk or vernacular music in their often impressive programming. Regional festivals and events that use the label “folk” already abound across the state: at the State Fair in Raleigh, the International Folk Festival in Fayetteville, Folkmoot USA, the Franklin Folk Festival, the NC Folk Arts Festival in St. Paul, etc. And there are likely dozens more folklife-informed festivals and programs currently active in North Carolina. How will the NCFS festival distinguish and define itself in this field? A state folklife festival is by definition more challenging and daunting because of the broad range of expressive culture and diverse community traditions it claims to encompass and represent by its very name. But it is critical to establish content, parameters, and themes that are manageably limited in scope, intelligible to audiences and participants, and somehow reflective of North Carolina at large—not an easy task.

Thankfully, there is a wealth of local expertise thanks to the brilliant folklorists at UNC, the NC Arts Council, the NCFI, NCFS, and elsewhere across the state, people from whom I’ve learned much. Joy Salyers has consulted some of these great minds in her preliminary discussions about the festival, and her notes on those discussions inform this report. So for the most part, I chose to reach out to others who haven’t been consulted. Among those Joy and her colleagues consulted are:

- Cece Conway, Professor of Appalachian and Southern Folklore, Appalachian State University
- Bernie Herman, Professor of American Studies and Folklore, UNC-Chapel Hill
- Glenn Hinson, Professor of Anthropology and Folklore, UNC-Chapel Hill
- George Holt, Director of Performing Arts and Film Programs, NC Museum of Art (formerly Director of Folklife Program, NC Arts Council)
- Art Menius, Director, Carrboro Arts Center (formerly with Merlefest and Appalshop)
- Sally Peterson, Folklife Specialist, NC Arts Council
- Kathy Roberts, Professor of American Studies and Folklore, UNC-Chapel Hill
- Patricia Sawin, Professor of Anthropology and Folklore, UNC-Chapel Hill

I spoke at length with the following; detailed notes on my discussions with them appear in Section IV, which contains a wealth of primary-voiced ideas and suggestions that I encourage readers to study.

- Bob Cantwell, retired Professor of American Studies and Folklore, UNC-Chapel Hill
- Benjamin Filene, Director of Public History, UNC-Greensboro
- Justin Robinson, Grammy-winning musician (solo artist and previous member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops)
- Dan Sheehy, Director of Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage
- David Whisnant, retired Professor of English and Folklore, UNC-Chapel Hill

In addition to the above experts consulted via personal meetings and phone calls, we also distributed a survey on the Publore email listerv via SurveyMonkey; respondents included Betty Belanus, Education Specialist and Curator at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, among others. The results of the survey responses are included in full herein in Section V. Section VI contains a selected bibliography of references and suggested readings influential to my ideas and those of my consultants. I have intentionally omitted a section for conclusions, since the aim of this project is to open up questions for dialogues, not to peremptorily offer conclusions that can only be reached through continued discourse and planning among festival organizers and participants.

## **II. Some Central Issues and Questions to Consider**

In preparing questions for consultants and the Publore survey, the goal was to synthesize critical topics to consider in planning and implementation of the festival. I distributed the following comments and questions to the individuals I approached for discussion; the same questions appeared in the survey.

*The North Carolina Folklore Society is planning a folklife festival for Fall 2013, and we're currently engaged in some research regarding new models for festivals. We would appreciate any suggestions, ideas, or examples, concrete or theoretical, for how you are considering the future of folklife festivals and how your organizations have tackled festival planning and implementation.*

*What lessons have you learned? As the landscape of vernacular culture continues to evolve, and media, technology, and funding models rapidly mutate, what is the emergent 21<sup>st</sup> century paradigm for folklife festivals? What elements do we want to retain, change, and introduce?*

*Following are a few of the many questions we would like to address. Obviously, there are no simple answers, but please feel free to offer a response to any or all. Thank you very much for your time!*

- 1.) How can we strike a balance between curatorial coherence and more participatory festival structures? In other words, if, on one end of the spectrum, the festival exhibits and performances are closely curated or juried, who should be making such decisions, and what should the entry criteria be? If the festival is crowd-sourced or open to all interested parties (contingent on space), how do we avoid diffusing its “folklife” identity to the point of incoherence, wherein it just becomes another generic street festival? To what extent is gatekeeping useful or problematic?
- 2.) On a similar note, how can we negotiate the balance between bigger-name, recognized performers with an established audience draw and participatory performances and representations of community traditions that don’t feature any famous names?
- 3.) How can we address concerns about a festival’s tendency to flatten the multidimensional nature of community representation and context? How can we avoid such reductive and essentialist representations? For example, how might we incorporate “embedded” performances wherein the boundaries between audience and performer are more porous and less defined?
- 4.) Do you have any suggestions for how effectively to engage and integrate newer traditions and communities, or those not traditionally invited to folklife festivals? (For example, we’ve had suggestions for inviting low-rider clubs, cosplayers, tattoo artists, and curators, collectors, and disseminators of online and social media culture.)
- 5.) How do you suggest effectively marketing and publicizing a 21<sup>st</sup> century folklife festival? What has and has not worked for your organizations?
- 6.) As arts and humanities grants dry up, how do you feel about the thorny potential of corporate and private sector partnerships and sponsorships? How can we pursue such relationships conscientiously, ethically, and responsibly, establishing firewalls to avoid undue influence on the festival’s content?

These basic categories and questions guided my discussion, research, and consideration, though the conversations I had with experts often ranged well beyond this matrix. Following are some elaborations on the above issues, and some ideas for how to address these problematics, based on my discussions and research.

### III. Recommendations for the NCFS

#### Curatorial Strategies

*Stereotype has no more potent antidote than stereotype, and thus the Festival adopts the psychodynamics of stereotype to mount its presentations, preempting its recognitions with categories of its own and, in a necessarily limiting way that admits of much semiotic leakage or spillage, controlling the signifiers through which the visitor identifies or fails to identify with the participant. The folklife presentation, like its structural twin, the stereotype, is a social figuration, an invention of thought, and like any figure requires a ductile language with which to work itself out—in this case, the Festival’s technical capacity to reconfigure social reality in a way that brings people otherwise estranged into a close but controlled proximity. (Cantwell 1993: 258)*

The conundrum of curatorial coherence is at the heart of the festival undertaking. Although Joy Salyers’ initial conversations yielded a spectrum of opinions on how best to pursue the curation and selection process—ranging from controlled curation by a small team of folklorists on one hand, to a completely open, crowd-sourced process on the other—the clearly preferred recommendation among most consultants was to locate curatorial control with a small team of experts receptive to input from and collaboration with others. Folklorists with experience in public folklore work are an obvious choice for curatorial positions given their training and presumed familiarity with various traditions, communities, and individual artists. But to temper any academic or disciplinary shortsightedness or lack of cultural diversity among folklorists—whether actual or perceived—the curatorial team should also include guest curators. Such individuals might be recruited from other relevant disciplines within or beyond academia and the spheres of folklore, cultural institutions, government agencies, and non-profit cultural organizations. For example, community scholars or experts from within traditions or groups represented in the festival could offer an emic expertise, and an alliance with fellow tradition bearers and community members, that would prove valuable. Moving beyond the traditional realm of non-profit cultural organizations and institutions and expert amateurs into the realms of private sector guest curators could likewise prove fruitful.

One of the primary achievements of the NCFS has been the organization’s recognition of influential folklorists and accomplished practitioners and tradition bearers with the Brown-Hudson Awards. Festival organizers intend to choose curators and festival participants from the ranks of past award winners, which is a logical pool from which to choose a first round of interested parties. However, limiting curators and participants strictly to Brown-Hudson Award winners risks a lack of cultural diversity among both groups. Furthermore, using the Brown-Hudson Awards as a sole curatorial rubric or theme risks illegibility to audience members, the vast majority of whom will not be familiar with the awards or what they mean.

One of the central challenges for the festival is to communicate a working contemporary definition of folklife in as condensed, articulate, and accessible a fashion as possible, while both adhering to and expanding the audience’s preconceptions about folklife. Bob Cantwell’s reflections in *Ethnomimesis* on stereotype as implemented in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival are apt: festivals must deploy stereotype in order to combat stereotype. During our conversation, Bob explained:

*One of the central tenets of my book was that successful festivals use stereotypes to battle stereotypes. You can't entirely dismantle audience preconceptions and render the experience illegible. It must be legible, which requires the appropriation of preconceptions and stereotypes about folk culture.*

The proliferation of stereotypes is inevitable in the festival context, but they can be successfully manipulated and subverted. Curatorially, the festival program can appeal to visitors' preconceptions while simultaneously challenging and expanding them. As Justin Robinson explains,

*I think it's an exciting opportunity to show what North Carolina has become in recent years. The more you can showcase that diversity, the better. It's not just mountain music and beach music and bluegrass, but it's all happening on the same timeline. Give people a real perspective on what's actually going on and who's doing it. I'd encourage the bookers to look at the festival in the broadest way possible. The idea that geographical communities define art forms has changed—often it's just common interests or intellectual or online communities. Looking at those other places and spaces is interesting. Oftentimes singular things come out of communities, but sometimes they come out of singular people.*

For instance, a programmatic theme investigating Appalachia can refer to, but move beyond the well-traveled realms of mountain music and Scotch-Irish settlement to explore the impact of tourism or African American culture. A program on immigration to our state over the past decade might explore not only the occupational folklife of Latino migrant workers, but likewise vibrant traditions of material culture like low-rider clubs in the Triad area. Similarly, immigration programming and exhibits may embrace local groups like Karen (Burmese) refugees or the in-migration impact of more powerful, hegemonic communities like wealthy, white retirees and golf enthusiasts relocating from Florida and elsewhere to Western North Carolina. Thematic coverage of American Indian communities in North Carolina might highlight the traditions, artistry, and political identities of less widely known and celebrated groups like the Lumbees, especially given the local availability of Lumbee historian Malinda Maynor Lowery and Lumbee folklorist Jefferson Currie. As David Whisnant stressed in our discussion:

*You need to shake the paradigm, disturb public misunderstanding of the "folk" domain, process, and knowledge. That is the most achievable, urgent cause for another festival. The festival must be thematically focused, demographically selective and representative, politically focused, and conceptually defensible.*

Arguably the most crucial curatorial imperative is to represent the contemporary demography of North Carolina by selecting what Cantwell calls "an analytic schema," at most a few distinct, well-defined themes to explore in depth, and from which to extrapolate, a folklife identity for the state. Trying in vain to represent everything and everything superficially, which is simply unrealistic and untenable, can only result in reductive and essentialist representations. All of the consultants to whom I spoke emphasize the importance of setting limitations and boundaries. Dan Sheehy put it this way: "A theme is the vehicle to populate a festival. Without a theme, you're in trouble—there are just too many artists, traditions, and communities." Using a

theme “to harness a purpose,” as Sheehy puts it, has the added benefit of making it easier to communicate participant selection criteria transparently to a public who may have an archaic or unsustainable notion of what folklife comprises. Appropriate thematic schema or curatorial rubrics for the NCFS festival might draw from one under-recognized tradition or community from each of the state’s three regions—the Western mountains, the Central Piedmont, and the Eastern coastal plain and Outer Banks—as well as showcasing one tradition or community of more immediately local significance (Carrboro/Chapel Hill or the Triangle.) Offering more than a single performer or group of participants from any selected tradition or community—for instance, not just one tattoo artist or tattoo shop, but two or three—will help avoid essentialism, providing a more multidimensional perspective. To do so requires a reduction of overall scale and scope.

A single overarching theme, even a broad one, can provide focus to an otherwise discouragingly multifarious and seemingly infinite set of options. To venture a few basic examples of potential themes, the NCFS might consider North Carolina’s folklife as examined through the lens of immigration, changing environments/landscapes, new technologies, recycling/reuse practices, or even tradition and transformation (that old folkloristic standby). Artful juxtaposition between regional articulations of that theme, and different generations of practitioners—attracting youthful audiences and participants alike is critical for the vitality, contemporary relevance, and future of the festival—will help challenge popular misconceptions that a folklife festival must be only about banjos, fiddles, potters, and elderly bearers of fading traditions. Juxtaposition likewise stimulates interaction between festival participants, further catalyzing the folk process. Making some initial selections of curators and participants from past Brown-Hudson Award winners is a good way to limit the field of possibilities in a rough way, but festival organizers will need to push quickly and forcefully beyond those individuals and organizational and disciplinary comfort zones in order to attract a sufficiently diverse and vibrant group, in terms of race, ethnicity, and age.

### Diverse Programming, Participatory Structures, and Participant Experience

*The risk of celebrating folk culture in public was therefore that the folk, if left to themselves, might celebrate the wrong thing. (Whisnant 2008: 229)*

David Whisnant’s withering above assessment of the White Top Folk Festival in Virginia in the 1930s points to a diminished, but sadly still persistent, anxiety. How can we transcend these kinds of anxieties of authenticity and instead—via a model of collaborative ethnography—embrace the authority of knowledgeable festival participants to present their traditions and their work in the way they feel is most appropriate? One means is to enhance participants’ festival experiences and to ensure their comfort; as Justin Robinson explains, simple, often-overlooked strategies like providing quiet, private spaces for artists, consistently available food, and limiting festival contacts to one or two responsive and sensitive staff members or volunteers can go a long way. Cantwell elaborates:

*As important as the audience experience, if not more, is the experience of the participants. You need to foster and protect the relationships among the artists themselves. It’s critical to treat the artists as guests, ensuring that they are adequately attended to, well-fed, well-housed, comfortable, well-treated, not overworked. The*

*festival should incorporate some device that brings people together, some emphasis on intimate social interactions.*

On the programmatic side, Dan Sheehy advises to “collaborate with first-voiced people as much as possible” and raises the specter of Ralph Rinzler’s notion of “induced natural context.” In other words, it pays to develop programming in collaboration with selected festival participants in order to provide a suite of different contexts for presentations, performances, and exhibits that are as resonant and organic as possible, while bearing in mind, and not trying to efface, the fundamental artifice of any folklife festival context. Acknowledging self-reflexivity in festival programming seemingly demands a contrapuntal approach to diversifying presentations, appealing to preconceptions of what Justin Robinson deems the “Western ideal” of stage and audience, while elsewhere opposing or complicating those default formats. The NCFS festival might feature a counterpoint of formats: performances and presentations that are deliberately staged (a concert raised on a low stage, for example); embedded and participatory performances (like ground-level bluegrass jams in the round in which the public can participate); and performances occurring in more “natural” settings (satellite programming at other venues, such as a gospel concert at a local church.)

In order to pursue the aforementioned contrapuntal possibilities, plans must be made as soon as possible to allow for programming that extends beyond the bounds of a single venue or set of stages and tents on the festival grounds, none of which easily foster organic context on its own. Dan Sheehy and Bob Cantwell both reference *verticality*—the actual relative height of performance zones—as a mechanism for controlling degrees of integration of performances and exhibits and inspiring audience engagement. A slight rise allows for both commentary by an interpreter or presenter and continuing work or performance that can be viewed from a slight distance. However, an embedded musical or dance performance in which audience members are invited to join in is easier to catalyze at ground level. Events at satellite sites and partner venues may be more difficult to secure and orchestrate than varying festival formats on the primary festival grounds, but according to Sheehy, “building a program around an atypical venue... is a way to get at your deeper goals about people, communication, understanding, and communities.”

As Benjamin Filene suggests, allowing for performers and participants to provide their own explanatory context for their work is often effective, as is pairing participants with a curator or presenter. In either case, but particularly the latter, commentary is often best kept to a minimum, at intermittent points during the presentation, to avoid distraction from the activity at hand and a perception of excessive loquaciousness. Narrative stages, if sufficiently intimate in scale, can allow for both presentations with detailed description and occasional invitations to audience members to participate in activities. Printed signage or graphic interpretive material is critical to way-finding and basic navigation of the festival grounds. Mobile phone and tablet apps can potentially offer a richer, more interactive experiences, if time and budget for development allows. (Although as Cantwell argues, “Today face to face interactions have assumed a folkloric quality, since all other communications are so thoroughly mediated. A folklife festival in 2013 should offer a study in face to face interaction.”)

In an age when many of our technological communications are so open to feedback and comment, there is an increasing expectation among audiences, especially younger audiences, for direct engagement and dialogue, or, as Benjamin Filene describes it, “instant curation.” Participatory structures that allow for this kind of feedback or instant curation require, as Filene explains, extensive planning and resources, since that expansion of curatorial authority is

“extremely time-intensive.” Setting up a recording booth for oral histories or commentary on exhibits is a basic means of providing this kind of forum for engagement, as is the old-fashioned physical or online comment board for sharing stories and thoughts. However, Filene cautions that due to different comfort levels, not everyone will pursue the same depth of experience, which organizers must accept:

*Inevitably, not everyone will get the same experience or understand the same richness and depth and nuance. So as long as there’s no one part of it that’s truly at odds with the culture and its values, you just have to recognize that some people will only want and get the initial, surface engagement. But it’s helpful to offer options for folks to engage more deeply, even if only a minority takes you up on it.*

Dan Sheehy observes that, just as “if you train audiences for big names, they’ll expect it... If you train audiences to expect participation and something different, they will. Savvy audiences members will teach less knowing audience members.”

### Marketing, Publicity, and the Role of New Media and Technologies

*What was once a unidirectional relationship in which arts organizations broadcasted messages to audiences via websites, email, and online advertising has now evolved into a multidirectional relationship wherein arts organizations and audiences engage each other in a series of multimedia conversations. (Borwick 2012: 174)*

The marketing and publicity effort in the months prior to the festival is of paramount importance. Social media has become the default answer for questions about how to publicize events effectively these days, but that assessment is both deceptive and reductive. Social media platforms require substantial upkeep to find and craft unique content to distribute; to maintain organizational or event branding; to distribute timely messages and alerts aggressively but without oversaturation; and to cultivate viral transmissions that advertise your event subtly by artfully embedding it within singular content that users want to share with their own networks of friends and followers. Above all else, successful social media and publicity campaigns require time and a personal touch to distinguish them from yet another faceless, official press release. It is all too common to spread an online campaign too thin—it’s preferable to build a depth of content on just one platform (whether a website or a blog, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Vimeo, Vine, etc.) and attract loyal, engaged users, than to pursue superficial, easy-to-ignore campaigns on multiple platforms. Providing forums to encourage user-generated comments and content can be a successful device, but that requires policing to remove abusive or offensive material.

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival, according to Sheehy, has two staff members dedicated to fostering a robust online and social media presence, plus a videographer to create new content. The NCFs should advertise at least one position for a volunteer with PR, publicity, or online marketing experience. It’s hard to overestimate the sheer number of hours involved in a successful campaign that can be distinguished from the mass of other appeals that bombard us on a daily basis. And currently, the NCFs website appears under-designed, under-utilized, and lacking important functionality to maximize the impact of fresh and constantly updated content. Apps like the one currently under possible development by the Smithsonian Folklife Festival can

be leveraged as tools for advance publicity and previews of festival content, as well as providing ways visitors can engage more deeply during the festival with interpretive content and even purchase merchandise remotely via PayPal or credit card.

As undeniably significant as social media and online content are to attracting visitors and press attention, it is important to remember that the festival itself promotes face to face interaction and engagement, so more traditional channels for publicity should also be exploited. Beyond press releases to print media, TV, and radio outlets, fliers, and street teams for posterizing, tying festival programming to auxiliary programming around the state could yield important results in terms of both spreading the word and attracting potential participants. Consider how to move beyond the festival grounds and designated dates by organizing and sponsoring community educational programming, children's programming, and public radio, TV, and online content in the weeks and months preceding the festival. By offering off-season programming, much of which is free to the public, Durham's Full Frame Documentary Festival has had success in expanding their brand, exposing their mission to new audiences, and conducting powerful outreach in the broader community. The NCFS should strategize about how to pursue similar advance campaigns to attract new eyes and ears.

### The Specter of Sponsorship, Funding, and Support

The possibility of corporate support raises concerns about undue influence on festival content, but most parties consulted agree that it is a necessary reality in today's landscape of dwindling public resources for cultural funding. Two statements, one from the perspective of a seasoned festival curator and the other from the perspective of a experienced musician, illustrate the complexities and challenges of private sector support, while remaining hopeful that benign corporate sponsorship is a real possibility. According to Dan Sheehy:

*It's always quid pro quo in terms of corporate support. Authentic corporate philanthropy doesn't really exist any more. But at the same time, there are corporations that have ideas that aren't pernicious agendas. The challenge is to engage sponsors in discussion to: 1) find mutual agendas with resonance, and 2) find innocuous ways to have corporate funding that is little more just superficial branding.*

Justin Robinson observes:

*I think a well-run festival is a well-run festival no matter who's paying for it. Now if it was a company I had ideological disagreements with, I probably wouldn't do it. But there's no way to police that really—no company is perfect. The Chocolate Drops did turn down some things because of who was sponsoring it. It's something I think about. That's as much as I'd say about it. It wouldn't make a big difference unless there was an ideological issue. It can go either way. If you look too deeply into the books of any successful company, you'll find something you don't like. When it's supposed to be "folk," people get wary. The preservation of that homegrown idea, whatever that means today, is important.*

## V. Notes on Discussions with Expert Consultants

*N.B.: The following texts are based on my notes taken during discussions with experts in the field, but I have edited, elaborated, and paraphrased in many cases for readability and coherence. These are not interview transcriptions or direct quotations and should not be considered as such; rather they are attempted syncretic digests of wide-ranging conversations and brainstorming dialogues, drawing from my consultants' ideas and experiences as well as my own. I have rendered what strike me as significant statements in boldface.*

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### Discussion with Dan Sheehy, Director of Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

April 26, 2013 (telephone)

Curation: Mission and Theme

Is the NC Folklore Society a non-profit? If so, **begin with the organization's conceptual mission statement. Does the festival square with that?** The Smithsonian takes cues from its organizational mission: the understanding of traditional cultures, to strengthen the heritage of these cultures, etc.

**Your festival should follow one or more lines of the NCFS mission statement. Think strategically; key the festival to that mission, and work collaboratively.** That doesn't mean you should crowd-source the curation, but look for specific goals to accomplish. **We look for the coincidence of our goals with partners (local community groups, government agencies, cultural ministries, various organizational entities, institutionalized or not.) See what your needs are and how agendas overlap. Use that as a basis for how to proceed. Determine how to ally with tradition bearers and communities.**

Based on that—and how to do some good in the world—follow a logical sequence of events. **You want to ensure understanding at outset by working with communities or institutions. Are they compatible, with resonance? Work with a team or committee to develop a programmatic purpose and goals and then a theme to harness a purpose.**

Colombia was one of the past year's Smithsonian Festival themes. We worked with the government of Colombia. The overall team was supported through funding to a non-profit funding institute, paired with three people from a Smithsonian team. A lot of initial meetings were necessary to determine what are the needs, what to do to make a publicly impactful festival program, and how to forward the aims of people back home in Colombia. Themes emerged of interdependence and confluence of ecosystems and regional cultures. Colombia is divided starkly by geography: mountains, coast, plains, coffee country, etc. So what is the confluence between those ecosystems and regional cultures? What impact do humans have on ecosystems and vice versa? (Cattle systems, etc.) How does geography shape the cultures that evolved there? We were looking at the culture of slavery, Afro-Colombian presence, regional cultures. Government

policies in support of natural environment and human culture can bear in a positive way. On the government level, Colombia signed the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and they were required to do a cultural inventory. On the local level, many lesser known traditions could be highlighted: flowers, fishing, basketry, etc.

**The theme is the vehicle to populate a festival. Without a theme, you're in trouble. There are just too many artists, traditions, and communities otherwise... like a museum exhibition, a festival needs a theme.**

**A festival is storytelling, by curators, partners, and participants. So it's very helpful to think of a theme, a story.**

### Partnerships and Funding Models

**It's always quid pro quo in terms of corporate support. Authentic corporate philanthropy doesn't really exist any more. But at the same time, there are corporations that have ideas that aren't pernicious agendas. The challenge is to engage sponsors in discussion to:**

- 1) find mutual agendas with resonance, and**
- 2) find innocuous ways to have corporate funding that is little more just superficial branding.**

We're talking to a sponsor that wants to buy t-shirts for volunteers, with a logo saying "X supports the 2013 festival." That helps bring some visual uniformity to a group of volunteers, and it doesn't hurt the festival's content in any way. Find other ways to attract funding that will play into the corporate agendas.

We have a special situation at the Smithsonian regarding sponsorships, more restrictive than the norm. The National Mall is controlled by the National Park Service. So there are legal restrictions on selling and branding, like no logos larger than 1/3 the size of the event name. More and more restrictions are involved, on the grass, grounds, etc. Those restrictions don't encourage a lot of corporate support stories for us.

**Currently we're in touch with an app company that would like to help create a Smithsonian Festival app, with schedules, alerts, schedule change, bios, additional content, and all kinds of info. A corporate sponsor could sponsor that app—for instance, the Verizon logo appears on your screen. The app could have a donate button, accumulate email addresses, and eventually you parlay emails into more donations. We have to look at new ways to bring in dollars to make it work.**

Some apps offer geospatial tagging. When you get close to something, that can trigger the app to pop up info on an artist or schedule at that particular stage or area. We can sell products through the app: it can say, if you like this, you might consider this CD, etc. So you can purchase merch right on your smartphone.

This will be our first year with an app; we were just approached two weeks ago about it, so we don't have a lot of time. We're right now rethinking if we have the time and human resources to make it work.

### Marketing

**For Facebook, blogs, Twitter, etc., you need people to make it happen. We have two people on the blog everyday removing bad comments, maintaining content, etc.** We're blessed with a videographer on staff who contributes short pieces. **You have to get the content out there, starting at least 2 or 3 months in advance of festival. That's a way to build momentum toward the festival, like keeping a countdown of days until the festival.**

The Smithsonian has a press office. They're good for press releases and big press items, but **with niches like Spanish language audiences, it's helpful for us to have other platforms and options.** One year we had \$20,000 to hire a PR person to reach the Latino community. **We do surveys—you need to do surveys—and noticed the Latino attendance bumped up. So we did some targeted language and cultural group marketing.**

There are many other ways other ways to engage that we don't do, but you could: ancillary events at churches, gospel concerts, etc. **Build a program around an atypical venue.** They do this in Houston with the cultural arts organization there. **It's a way to get at our deeper goals about people, communication, understanding, communities, etc. You learn a lot more using an alternative venue.**

A collaborative process can engage people. **Involve communities with thinking through what the strategic aims are of this or that group. Communicating with cultural insiders and helping them feel invested in the festival and its content and process is critical.**

### Formats of Presentation

We work with narrative stages. **With more intimate situations, you can invite people up for a hands-on experience and intimacy. It goes back to Ralph Rinzler and "induced context," a presentation that's not artificial. You need to do the legwork to make that work. Savvy audience members can teach less knowing audience members.** I've seen this with Mexican audience reactions that are sometimes more spontaneous. People get a bigger picture of the whole and the intended ambience.

Museum education type things for kids can work well. Curators can just make them up. Catchy approaches and formats that rely on individual's creativity are effective. **You can have a family area for adults and kids, featuring different kinds of engagement, based on multi-generation family groups.**

For certain kinds of festivals, **if you train audiences for big names, they'll expect it. But if you train audiences to expect participation and something different, they will.** In the Southwest, low-riders have been part of festivals for a long time. So in a sense, you're behind—**this stuff is**

**not new, so you shouldn't feel trepidation on conceptual grounds.** Roddy Moore's Blue Ridge Institute Festival in Virginia has featured both muscle cars and mules.

**It sounds like you have the opportunity to be more culturally inclusive with the NCFS Festival. Collaborate with first-voiced people as much as possible.** If 1/10 organizers is saying we should have culinary traditions, low-riders, the whole gamut, then that's enough to consider those things. You could do a whole program on bread. **Inviting metaphor is a good way to learn to appreciate diversity.**

**Look at the top-level organizational structure for the event and look for something to reflect how the area actually looks demographically. Look for cultural issues of cohesion and identity.**

North Carolina's Latino and Hispanic populations have increased enormously in recent years. You might consider contacting a Mexican music expert, my friend James Fogelquist, who played professionally and chairs two departments at App State, Foreign and English languages, I think. He doesn't advertise himself as an expert in Mexican music, but he's incredibly knowledgeable and might have some programming ideas for you.

### **Discussion with Benjamin Filene, Director of Public History, UNC-Greensboro**

**May 2, 2013 (telephone)**

#### Curatorial Concerns: Definitions and Boundaries

I'm not a folklorist by training, but happy to help. I do have a lot of curatorial and exhibition design history, and we've done a good deal of oral history work. Do you see the festival defining folk culture or expanding the boundaries? The perception issue with folklore is that there's something there, but how do you put your finger on it? And a festival is a diffuse medium; how to communicate the content and themes? Of course, the Chicago Blues Festival is also diffuse; you just have to deal with it.

**Perhaps the goal is to indirectly communicate a vision of folk culture that begins with matching preconceptions and then extends those limited notions in interesting ways. The part that appeals to me is thinking of folk culture as a process of tradition and change. I would hope that cumulatively that the effect of the festival could represent that.**

Do you ask people to reflect from the stage, or demonstrate traditions as they perform, offering commentary and interpretation? How would this look different than the Carrboro Music Festival? It's got to be different. So I can see some arguments for curating it, though I'm interested in how to engage visitor voices in the process.

#### Participatory Structures

**In my experience, visitors do not resent expert voices if they are also given room to make their own sense out of things. Giving visitors free rein doesn't work as well as giving boundaries, structures, some opinions to react to. Participatory structures must involve curatorial coherence and guidance. That often involves much more work than non-participatory structures.**

Guest books, post-its, online forums are all mechanisms of feedback. There are good low-tech solutions for representing opinions and fitting them into a context of audience opinions. One-direction input is one-way. Museums have tried to collectivize that: have everyone place their pin or ticket in a container that shows their vote on something. **Representing collective opinions or questions seems useful—for example, you could pose the question, what is folklife, anyway?**

My own work is community partnership based. People reflect on their own take and history, using voice to give a different kind of expertise than the omniscient curatorial voice. In terms of tools, that's the resonance between my work and folklorists.

You might consider a guest curator model: turn over authority to someone else outside of the NCFSS organization. **It works better when the guest curator, if they have interpretive authority, can be helped by a designer or planner for logistics.**

**Letting go of curatorial authority means different things in different situations and is not inherently better. People are increasingly interested in public self-expression and hearing from non-experts, but there are different extents to that strategy. That release of responsibility is extremely time-intensive.**

There may be room to do some simple voting, nominating, reflecting. Asking people to post opinions that you could then help open up. Just to open up that definition of folklore and folklife, open up this question that you're wrestling with, so that people know that you're self-aware with it. Engage online in advance too.

### Interviews and Oral Histories

I'm now working with scientists and educators from NSF on a project about science education in rural places in NC. Ironically, people in rural environments are losing the connection to the natural world. So we've been taking oral histories about nature. It's called Nature Chronicles.

All my exhibits have been interview-driven. Never done the video talkback version of things. So we have volunteer facilitators who we train for an hour. The main point I try to instill is that they're not the interviewer. It should be a conversation, a discussion.

It's more work to allow for people to reflect. Our ultimate products go on the web, so we need decent sound quality with a separate space with walls, sound insulation. Within sites, we need a room for interviews, oral histories. **Asking people to physically step away and go into a quiet space isn't easy.** We've had to actively hound people to sign up. Once they're there, they get really into it, and it works great. We've tried to be realistic... A recording engineer runs the

machines. People are increasingly comfortable with that. Depends on if you care about the sound quality. **You do need to tell people why you're asking them to do this, why do this kind of instant curation. More people want to watch other people than participate themselves.**

For us, the lure is a keepsake, to keep an interview with your grandmother. In galleries—I was at the Levine Museum in Charlotte—they have a self-guided video booth. It does work, but it would be difficult in a mobile environment.

### Context and Perception: How to Provide Context and Avoid Flattening Representations

How to reduce flattening of representations? **The same person can be a performer and presenter.** Have a separate tent, for a quilter for example, with a moderator who asks people questions: how did you learn this? When did you do this? Offer performers, demonstrators a chance to reflect and describe what they're doing, provide their own context. **Provide some semblance of context. Inevitably, not everyone will get the same experience or understand the same richness and depth and nuance. So as long as there's no one part of it that's truly at odds with the culture and its values, you just have to recognize that some people will only want and get the initial, surface engagement. But it's helpful to offer options for folks to engage more deeply, even if only a minority takes you up on it.**

In the gallery context, juxtaposition is good. Offer a few different perspectives out there, ask the visitor to notice differences and comment. Putting some different varieties of expression adjacent in programming invites people to complicate context, draw lines of influence. **I think we're still in the position of needing to counter the presumption that folk culture means something pure, long-ago, and unchanged.** That's what I wrote about in my book, where these notions of folk culture come from. **Start from the perspective that all these people deserve to be here, are influencing each other, the retrospective aspect. Suggests that these cultures do change.**

**But the old-timey is perception is also what gets people excited. You don't want to totally debunk that recognition of the elderly, historical, self-taught, fading traditions... That's how most people become folklorists, and it's a nice contrast to the culture we consume otherwise on a daily basis. So start there and expand and challenge.**

### Discussion with David Whisnant, retired Professor of English, UNC-Chapel Hill

#### May 3, 2013 (in-person)

Well, I'm not sure what else there is to say on the subject of curating a festival or gatekeeping. I've worked with George Holt, who is someone to consult, if the NCFS hasn't already. I've worked with the Maryland Arts Council and with Joe Wilson; I've advised the Smithsonian on their folklife program. I've been thinking about this since at least the mid-70s, and those problems persist.

You can trace the folklife festival concept at least back to Sarah Gertrude Knott and the National Folk Festival, like in my book. The National Folk Festival had devolved into a cliquish, folkish festival by the 1960's, and Joe Wilson cleaned house and transformed it into something community-based and deeply traditional—involving groups like Cajuns, various format, genres, and locations. Ralph Rinzler likewise centered the Smithsonian Festival around traditions and tradition bearers (Doc Watson, etc.)

You should consult the pamphlet on folklife festival issues that I compiled for the John Edwards Memorial Foundation seminar several years ago. The same issues are important now. Archie Green set up the conference, and we all sat around a U-shaped table for 2 days; it was taped, and the pamphlet contains transcriptions. **Folklife festivals have raised contentious issues since at least the 1890s, however grounded and politically astute and intentionally ethical the organizers may have been.** So what we say now won't be new—Bert Feintuch also covered much of this 30 years ago. All of these issues are seemingly intractable.

**The most important consideration in my mind for a folklife festival in NC today is that the demography is radically different. There have been huge demographic shifts in the last 15 years.** NC has always been demographically complex, though you wouldn't necessarily know that from attending Bascom's Mountain Dance and Folk Festivals in the 30s. **You absolutely cannot do the same old thing in the face of that new statewide demographic complexity.**

I recently spoke about this same issue with the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation. You must face the demography! Now that raises audience problems, because they want to see what they perceive as Appalachia and its old nodes of "folk" presentation: Galax, Asheville, Mount Airy, Johnston City, County Records, etc. But that doesn't speak to the complexity of that region historically and now.

So it's clear to me what you'd be trying to do with another festival, regardless of marketing strategies, mechanisms, etc. You'd have to somehow make it new. **You need to somehow limit the scale and scope of what you're attempting—you can't possibly claim to represent the entire state.**

**So instead, choose a theme—tackle the immigration debate, for example. Or choose three specific regions or communities or traditions to showcase.** You could investigate the Outer Banks, and ask Wayne Martin and Bill Finger [?] about whom to contact and all the good research that's happened down there.

**I wouldn't be interested in any fiddles or banjos whatsoever. Not that I don't love that music, but it's been done to death. What about representing fairly recent immigrant groups?** Not just the Scotch-Irish—that story has been covered, it doesn't need to be heard anymore. But newer immigrant groups, and not just in the name of fawning recognition. **That would at least give you a thematic or rubric that would reduce the scope and domain and make it more practical.**

**You could also choose one coastal group, one Piedmont group, and one mountain group. The festival curatorial work must be undergirded by experts who know the communities**

**and the issues.** [Discussion of Lumbee music, Willie Lowery, Lumbee/Plant and See, and Malinda Maynor Lowery.] For the coast, talk to David Cecelski, Bland Simpson, or Barbara Garrity-Blake, the author of *Fish House Opera*. Cece Conway and John Inscoe could be consulted about blacks in the mountains, but even that work isn't new research anymore, though it is important. The mountains used to be known as all-white, which is absurd historically. There has been a phase-related deficit about representing minority groups... even partisans of Appalachia have historically been sexist, racist, etc.

**But the example of mountain blacks, and how those communities overturn preconceptions, is a good one. Lumbees could present an analogue for the coastal and Piedmont regions, demonstrating persistence against existing stereotypes and scholarship.** And I wouldn't even dream of doing any Lumbee programming without immediately consulting Malinda Lowery! She's the expert. I like the example of Plant and See, because it challenges not only contemporary preconceptions, but also historically ones. It's easy to include Latino low-rider artists in one sense—and that would be great to see in the festival context—because audiences may think, well, that's a new thing, not an older “folk” tradition... But I'm also interested in challenging historically received preconceptions. How can you do that?

**Choosing specific regions or communities to highlight is still artificial and arbitrary, of course, but at least it begins to fall within the range of possibility.**

You could talk to Della Pollock in the Comm Studies department at UNC. She has long been working with the historically black Northside community in Chapel Hill/Carrboro. It would be worth talking to her, given the proposed location of the festival.

So maybe one coastal thing, one Piedmont thing, one mountain thing, and one local thing... Being mindful of gender, race, economic issues, etc. Then maybe you'd have some chance of making a grounded festival.

**The general public, festival-going, folk culture-vulture group (if there is such a thing) doesn't necessarily know very much that is historically sustainable. So you need to shake the paradigm, disturb public misunderstanding of the “folk” domain, process, and knowledge. That is the most achievable, urgent cause for another festival.** Otherwise there is no rationale—you need to avoid cultural fawning at all costs.

**Shake the cage! But those cages are very strong, and the momentum of those old interpretations and characterizations of culture are very strong.** But you can make some noise, do some shaking. **You can be outrageous for not a whole lot of money, which is a good thing.** That's not necessarily expensive to do. And of course, it wouldn't be outrageous at all to showcase Lumbee rap or sheet-rocking or Latino low-rider culture, but it may seem so to some people.

**The festival must be thematically focused, demographically selective and representative, politically focused, and conceptually defensible. The terms that were defensible in the festival heyday of the 1960s and 70s are no longer relevant.**

**Festivals could go through that same self-reflexivity movement as documentary films. The next folklife festivals need to develop out of huge reflexivity, or there is no point. So go back and bring the past forward to make the audience rethink the meaning of tradition. Like Plant and See. Force a rethinking and reconsideration of assumptions. That's the key. Good luck!**

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**Discussion with Bob Cantwell, retired Professor of American Studies, UNC-Chapel Hill**

**May 10, 2013 (in-person meeting)**

Curatorial Considerations and Potential Analytic Schema: Face to Face Interactivity and Materiality

**Whatever you do needs to consider and embrace Latino and Hispanic culture in the state. An analytic schema seems necessary: theme, group, or geography.** Perhaps choose 4-5 categories with a curator for each, and some of those curators and participants could be selected from the pool of Brown-Hudson Award winners, if that's important to the organizers. You can trace ties from the underrepresented to more represented groups.

**In Western NC, tourism could present an interesting theme.** For example, the gated communities and golf courses, the in-migration of retirees and senior citizens, the representational practices of marketing (mailer postcards and highway billboards advertising land for sale, for example.) The framing and representation of tourism, perhaps?

**In the East, Hurricane Floyd and its aftermath could offer a theme:** the ravaged landscape, the overflowing of hog ponds and resulting pollution, the destruction of housing, the racial implications.

**Charlie Thompson, an anthropologist and filmmaker at CDS, made a film about migrant Latino farm workers in NC and another about the lawsuit by black farmers. That's a possible lens for the Piedmont.**

**Today face to face interactions have assumed a folkloric quality, since all other communications are so thoroughly mediated. A folklife festival in 2013 should offer a study in face to face interaction.** You could set that against social media and mediated experience. That could present an interesting rubric, the notion of immediate social transactions based on tradition and transformation.

It is a challenge to integrate different kinds of things under different schema. You could include selected artists or traditions as part of a larger group or exhibit. **One of the central tenets of my book was that successful festivals use stereotypes to battle stereotypes. You can't entirely dismantle audience preconceptions and render the experience illegible. It must be legible, which requires the appropriation of preconceptions and stereotypes about folk culture.**

I wonder if you could involve someone like the Avett Brothers and ask them how they seem themselves as part of the tradition of mountain music? Because they certainly do view themselves that way, even if some others don't. Or pose a similar question to the Steep Canyon Rangers. What kinds of revival scenes are happening in Asheville or elsewhere in the state? [Conversation about the underground popularity of finger-style "American primitive" guitarists elaborating on the work of John Fahey, or even Jack Rose, who were in term interpreting much earlier traditions. "Folk" culture involves a cycle of influence and retrospective interpretation.]

**My own tendency would be to take a somewhat conservative curatorial approach, without being too much of a purist.** [Conversation about Jeff Currie's work about Lumbee hip-hop and sheet-rocking.] **The fact is that many traditions are old, even if invented or political. There needs to be some sense of things transmitted or moved across boundaries—that is the essence of the folk process of tradition and transformation.**

You might consider speaking with Rachel Willis at UNC. She's an economist who has studied the economy of mill towns and mill workers. **Across the state there have been attempts to recycle and repurpose mills for real estate or arts-driven economic development or 21<sup>st</sup> century economies—that could be a lens for programming or exhibits.** Hispanic migrant workers have been retrained for textile work in some places. So there has been a transformation of mill towns like Kannapolis. Now the mill town narrative has been appropriated by real estate developers.

Mega-churches are another interesting architectural and cultural phenomenon related to folklife. They structurally duplicate big-box stores. In exurbia, nothing becomes something. Contemporary evangelical movements inhabit new spaces, including TV and online spaces like YouTube.

I was thinking about Jane Addams and the Hull-House Labor Museum. Immigrants then experienced a sense of alienation, because they did not see the lines of intersection between craft traditions and industrial manufacturing. She tried to illuminate those connections. **You can bridge generations by juxtaposing online folk culture and its precedents. How to cross-harp internet innovations?** Musicians learning from YouTube, for example, instead of at the knee of elders. The link between outsider artists and bricolage and the bricolage and collections happening online and elsewhere today.

**Folklore is a leading-edge discipline about encounters between stasis and change.** That must be explicit in the programming. You can't maintain the antique folklife of the past.

George Trow wrote a book called *Within the Context of No Context* about technology and culture and history that claimed that things are meaningful only in terms of other things like themselves.

**Materiality, like face to face interaction, could inform the festival. Materiality somehow compels people to reach into ways of life and live them.** For instance, great folk revival musicians like Alice Gerrard studied not just the songs and the traditions, but likewise the physical recordings and the instruments. Today music is defined by its disconnections rather than its connections. A folklife festival in 2013 could aim to reestablish the sheer materiality and

intimacy of music as a practice. Consider the resurgence of vinyl records and record collectors as a case study. Part of the appeal of vinyl records is that they move through time and bear the marks of that movement. In the case of a digital apocalypse, can make a record player yourself, but probably not an MP3 player. They are material, fossils.

I recently read a book by an art historian that argued that the root of representation art lies in reliquaries. That reliquaries, collections and presentations of sacred objects, informed the development of religious iconography and in turn, pictorial representation and Medieval and Renaissance Art. The evolution of a palpable shrine to representation of Biblical scenes to pictorial Renaissance art... **Artists derive power from the idea of materiality. Romanticism evolved from a sense of loss and bereavement at a world vanquished by industrialism. Perhaps the same sense of loss and bereavement applies now in a world vanquished by virtuality and mediated communication.** Reclaiming that materiality and interactivity could be one major task for the future of folklife festivals.

### Participatory Structures and Audience Engagement in Programming

I covered much on this in *Ethnomimesis* as related to the Smithsonian Festival, where they do pursue means of integration and audience engagement, often successfully. **One strategy or mechanism is verticality, the height of the stage or presentation space off the ground.** That was successful for a saddle-making shop at the festival, which was set up on a small rise, allowing both conversation and continuing work. Duff Severe, the saddle-maker, had a presenter, which can be a good idea, to answer questions, intercede, and negotiate. Sometimes self-appointed presenters emerge, which can be a wonderful or detrimental phenomenon.

**Occasionally visitor engagement can yield both benefits and ethical questions.** For example, there was a cornrows exhibit in 1985, where some African American beauty shop owners set up shop on the Mall, attracting huge crowds, which was great. But festival goers actually began paying the ladies there to do their hair, which raised questions as to whether that was even allowed on the Mall. On another note, I remember a Laotian canoe-making exhibit that just did not work, because the participants just felt too out of place and self-consciously “exotic” as far as how they were presented in the festival context.

**I like the idea of an embedded improvisatory circle jam instead of just old-time or bluegrass performances.** You could give performers a chance at certain times of the day to perform on a low riser, but at other times they could lead participatory jams and answer questions.

**The Smithsonian uses sound in a sophisticated way to differentiate space.** Visitors hear amplified voices in advance, as they approach the next space, while maintaining sonic boundaries to avoid too much bleed-through. They work with audio engineers and sound designers. Entrances and egress must be open and clear; there must be evidence that you can freely walk through and into different spaces to encourage participation. That could be a major issue in downtown Carrboro.

### Respecting and Enhancing the Experience of Festival Participants

As important as the audience experience, if not more, is the experience of the participants. You need to foster and protect the relationships among the artists themselves. It's critical to treat the artists as guests, ensuring that they are adequately attended to, well-fed, well-housed, comfortable, well-treated, not overworked. The festival should incorporate some device that brings people together, some emphasis on intimate social interactions.

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### **Discussion with Justin Robinson, musician (solo artist and previous member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops)**

**May 15, 2013 (phone conversation)**

#### **Curatorial Conundrums**

**I think what's been done in the past is they get people who look like they're about to die soon.** That's oftentimes a good idea from a practical standpoint, because you need to involve certain people before they pass. So that's not the worst thing... **But something has to be contemporary too. It must be both.** Some people will want to see the older folks, some will want to be part of things that are actively happening now. The low-riding club idea sounds fascinating to me.

It is a daunting task. **The festival can't be all things to all people. I would say that you should pick a couple of things to focus on, a couple of regions or groups of people.** In a way, with the nature of the genre, you're forced to have some old people playing mountain music or bluegrass. **But juxtaposing different things can promote interaction between people. The folk process is alive and well, but it looks different than it used to, and folkies need to recognize that.** See the connectivity.

YouTube is a repository of knowledge... Technology needs to be part of things. You should promote via Facebook, Twitter, all those channels, of course. How to represent technology as part of the folk process at a festival? **Consider diagramming: find some examples of how musicians learn songs, a tree diagram.** If it were me, I'd say, well I learned this tune from watching somebody on YouTube, they learned it from a recording they heard in the 40s, that person learned it from a folk guy, and it originally comes from a minstrel tune. **Point out how technology continues to ingratiate itself in the folk process.** Learning from recording is not fundamentally different than learning from YouTube, but is fundamentally different from learning face to face. Might be a multimedia thing, with monitors set up, so you can click and make connections... Tree charts. I think those things relationships and visualizations are interesting.

It would also be interesting to see how something changes over time. **Take one song that is well known and have a sample of all the different versions...** Ever seen *The 5<sup>th</sup> Element*? The song that the blue-tentacled alien sings has been covered on YouTube at least 4 times! That thing has

been covered. If you were to take anything even a smidgen more popular than that, you'd have tons of versions to consider. That's the ultimate in the folk process. You could do that for a couple of old tunes, even newer tunes too. What has been done and redone in the period of 10 years or even 5 years? Is technology speeding up the folk process? There are probably hundreds of versions of "Sweet Home Alabama" out there, and hasn't been around nearly as long as "Stagger Lee" or "Soldier's Joy."

### Participatory Structures

As far as participation, I think jams typically work. At Shakori Hills, there are also places where you can jam. You need to make sure there's no sonic interference. Depending on who the performers are, you can schedule times for them to play with folks as well as onstage. **I saw a shout band in Durham years ago, mostly brass and singing, and they did a stage set. Then after that they just started playing off to the side in the audience, and this turned into a crazy dance party with sacred music. It was great and really engaging.** People's minds were blown. Removed the fourth wall, it was intimate, felt like you were having church outside. It was transformative for me. That's really a performer thing, and I've seen that before. **Coming out into the audience, destroying the Western ideal of the auditorium or stage.** You need portable non-amplified instruments to do that, of course. Oftentimes those are the more "ethnic" bands, not just regular white Americans, who are more comfortable doing that. At a festival in Canada, I saw some folks from the Basque country perform. Never seen a party like this—it was really, really engaging. They had like a hype band. Those kinds of experiences take it to a different place for the audience.

### An Artist's Perspective on Festivals

**As a performer, I like the festivals that are the most diverse in lineup. This is the one thing that Canada does better than the US....** No offense to Canadians! (They also have great healthcare.) **They do have these really expansive, "green" folk festivals, super sustainable.** Like the Calgary Folk Festival, each province has one. There aren't even cups—you have to bring your own, even the performers, and all the plates are washable. There's a heavy commitment to sustainability, and I like that. It's really diverse under the very broad umbrella of folk music. The Calgary Festival had Andrew Bird, Hawk and a Hacksaw, Wendy McNeill... You never got bored, because it was really broad. As a performer, you weren't "competing" against other people doing something very similar. Everybody was different! There was some theme of connectivity, but it was loose. It was a mish-mash, and that was personally one of my favorite festivals to play. I was as excited to see the other acts as I was to perform myself. **They brought folks from all over the world, set them up on round robins—folks who don't necessarily share common traditions—and stick them all together on a stage and say, play!** That was unnerving but great. Sometimes it was a disaster, and sometimes it was really powerful. That model worked really well, and as a result it was not a typical folk audience. More like a Coachella type thing. **There were lots of young people, half-naked, having fun—this was the place to be, unlike folk festivals here, which are not usually the same demographic.**

**The thing about festivals is that there's no private space. Having a space that's just for artists and not for volunteers, staff, etc. is really, really, really important.** Even in Canada,

they didn't have dedicated artist spaces, and there were 400 volunteers, and I didn't always feel like making small talk or eating with strangers. If you don't have a bus, there's no place for you to unwind and not be bombarded by people. That took its toll on me very quickly. You need a place for artists to escape.

**Artists also need to have a liaison dedicated to one or a few bands. It's so much easier if there's one person you can call if you need something or something's not right.** As opposed to running around and trying to find people. On the other hand, you also don't need a barrage of 80 people asking if you need something, so it's a balancing act. You want to just interact with one or two people. For artists on the road, you've already met 200 people, and adding to that with every festival is totally overwhelming.

**Having snacks and water consistently available is important. It doesn't work to have specific mealtimes. There's nothing worse than an artist who's cranky because he's hungry.** It can get hairy very quickly. I've seen some really tense moments about food. It doesn't have to be a huge spread, but just something that is available for grazing, to keep you occupied. You turn into animals otherwise!

#### An Artist's Perspective on Corporate Support

My tolerance for corporate support depends on the company. Merlefest is underwritten by Lowe's or Home Depot or something. I've heard anecdotally that the festival content changed after they had a hand in it. I think that's not necessarily negative, though many do feel that way. I don't have strong feelings about it. **I think a well-run festival is a well-run festival no matter who's paying for it. Now if it was a company I had ideological disagreements with, I probably wouldn't do it. But there's no way to police that really—no company is perfect.** The Chocolate Drops did turn down some things because of who was sponsoring it. It's something I think about. That's as much as I'd say about it. It wouldn't make a big difference unless there was an ideological issue. It can go either way. If you look too deeply into the books of any successful company, you'll find something you don't like. **When it's supposed to be "folk," people get wary. The preservation of that homegrown idea, whatever that means, is important.**

#### Final Thoughts

I'm excited about the festival. I think it's a great opportunity to show what NC has become in recent years. I think NC is a 100 times more interesting now than when I was a kid, as far as different cultures, etc. **The more you can showcase that diversity, the better. It's not just mountain music and beach music and bluegrass, but it's all happening on the same timeline. Give people a real perspective on what's actually going on and who's doing it. I'd encourage the bookers to look at the festival in the broadest way possible. The idea that geographical communities define art form has changed—often it's just common interests or intellectual or online communities. Looking at those other places and spaces is interesting. Oftentimes singular things come out of communities, but sometimes they come out of singular people.**

## VI. Results of Publore Survey

### **Survey Monkey Survey: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Folklife Festivals** **Distributed to Publore Listserv on March 27, 2013 (7 Respondents)**

*1. How can we strike a balance between curatorial coherence and more participatory festival structures? To what extent is gatekeeping useful or problematic? In other words, if the festival exhibits and performances are curated or juried, who should be making such decisions, and what should the entry criteria be? If the festival is crowd-sourced or open to all interested parties (contingent on space), how do we avoid diffusing its "folklife" identity to the point of incoherence, where it just becomes another generic street festival?*

you need to have a specialist in traditions in some kind of curatorial role - even if in partnership with community groups. Otherwise all of the candle makers and potters and artists in a "folk art style" (not disparaging their work) will show up

4/26/2013 10:50 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

Find local performers who are already "curating" or organizing events that attract a number of other established performers, thus avoiding "beginners" and guaranteeing some audience

4/23/2013 8:23 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

I believe it needs to be curated by a folklorist, if it's to be a folklife festival. In-depth field research should be conducted

4/1/2013 1:33 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

Some criteria of authenticity, in partnership with the communities involved in the event, should be set. Setting a theme might help. A Folklife Festival needs curation, if not by a folklorist, then by someone with a vision of what is special and unique about that place/region/thematic core. Recruit "community scholars" to do fieldwork and/or serve on committees. Bring together a brainstorming group from around the state, and/or take the show on the road and present draft ideas in communities and get feedback. Create "buy-in" around the state for the event.

3/28/2013 9:57 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

I'm not crazy about folk festivals that are placed in one, self-contained site. Create a more spread out festival with a lot of "breathing space" between areas. These can be set up to work on what's under the direction of the curator versus what's more participatory.

3/27/2013 4:41 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

Participation is overrated. Curatorial expertise is important. However, it makes a lot of sense to (a) gather input during the planning phase, using tools like Survey Monkey; (b) have an avenue for audience choice, such as a changing 'audience rep' seat on your planning committee, or an advisory board; and (c) being diligent about follow-up and evaluation immediately after the festival. We aren't even very good about taking advantage of these classic approaches to

understanding audience - who are we to be talking about crowd-sourcing when we can't even get a regular and appropriate evaluative structure going?

3/27/2013 2:22 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

I think the idea of "crowd-sourced" festivals to be dreadful. In my dealings, creating models that allow for community input across cultural lines is very important for by-in. At the same time, presenting high quality performances and master tradition-bearers can instill a sense of pride, ownership and engagement in a festival setting.

3/27/2013 2:03 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

*2. On a similar note, how do you negotiate the between the appeal of bigger-name, recognized performers with an established audience draw and the desire for participatory performances and representations of community traditions that don't feature any famous names?*

What you need is consistent quality and authenticity NOT big name

4/26/2013 10:50 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

Master workshops by bigger-name performers?

4/23/2013 8:23 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

Hold true to artistic excellence Master musicians, dancers, and craftspeople consistently presented, will draw audiences

4/1/2013 1:33 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

Some combination of the two is possible (or has been at our Festival) although the problem is the disparity in cost and payment. In general, crafts and occupational participants are going to be less known anyhow than musicians, but people enjoy meeting the craftspeople and seeing them work. With musicians, if you want to feature little known but excellent folk musicians, you probably need to create a publicity "buzz" around their upcoming performance. Like, you can see these famous people at many different venues - big deal! But you can ONLY see this old-time musician who actually had a huge influence on this now-big-name group HERE AND NOW! That sort of thing. I think people crave "something different" as long as it is high-quality. Famous does not always equal "better." Give the audience the sense of discovery of some new or "hidden" treasures - let them in on it. Or rediscovery of old treasures, IE a reunion of some older musicians who may appeal to the sense of nostalgia. Some of all of the above!

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Social media and tapping into various pre-existing networks helps build audiences for less well-known performers. Put the big-name acts on stage in the afternoon. Build up the reputations of the smaller acts by giving the good ones prime stage time in evening shows.

3/27/2013 4:41 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

Balance them and include both.

3/27/2013 2:22 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

In my experiences, bigger names are nice and can bring in larger audiences, however, they have the ability to throw off the balance of a program and cause those traditions that are not connected with a "big" name to be lost in the shuffle. I think it is most important to think about artistic mastery as judged by the community that the traditions emerge from. If you create an event with only the most arresting, talented artists, and then talk about/market the event in such a way, you can draw crowds despite the lack of a "name"

3/27/2013 2:03 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

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*3. How can we address concerns about a festival's tendency to flatten the multidimensional nature of community representation and context? How can we avoid reductive representations?*

try having elements presented at the festival be part of larger engagement with the traditions and their communities - i.e. what happens at the festival is tied to exhibitions, radio programs, presentations back in the community, etc.

4/26/2013 10:50 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

Asking key performers to contextualize their presentations with personal anecdotes, stories about how they acquired their skills, etc.

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We like to think that some of this information about multi-dimensionality is presented through "narrative sessions" which allow the participants to discuss other parts of their lives or other dimensions of their crafts, music, etc. But the other way we have found effective is to invite a participant to another part of the Festival. For instance, we had a top-notch musician and instrument maker and a building arts expert cooking breakfast in the foodways area. Sometimes you find a great musician among the craftspeople or food demonstrators, etc. Mix it up! Also maybe supplement with some articles on-line or in state-wide publications.

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Try to find venues that fit more comfortably with usual contexts of performance or demonstration. Rather than putting up tables under tents, see if the festival can be more situated in areas with open space in downtown neighborhoods. How about something like areas for street performers outside but inside venues set up in businesses, such as barber shops, eateries with performance space, and bars/clubs. Also, make use of pre-existing arts spots such as outdoor parks that could become stages for street theater as well as indoor venues.

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Presenting "sampler" programs with only a single representative of any particular tradition essentializes. Try to triangulate, at a minimum - 3 klezmer approaches, 3 Cajun performers, etc.

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This is always the most difficult question. I think it is impossible to not fall into this trap. A good way to help offset this is to explore the many dimensions of traditions in a multi-tiered approach to programming. Focus on one community group for example and show how the music, craft, foodways, language etc are connected. Having an academic drolling on and on at the top of a set

about a tradition is NOT how to rectify this situation. You will lose audience. Festivals are to be festive, right? That being said, concise introductions that give context and history are important. In addition, talk/demo sessions allow practitioners to share their traditions on a more intimate scale.

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*4. If folklorists study aesthetics embedded in everyday life, are there ways to incorporate "embedded" performances where the boundaries between audience and performer are more porous and less defined? What might that look like?*

community sings, community music jams, stages for street performers, traditional games tent  
4/26/2013 10:50 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

"Call and response" models

4/23/2013 8:23 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

Good question, worth exploring. An auctioneer singing chant while selling product A  
processional parade

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Invite audience members to share their experiences or try their hand at something. During the Peace Corps program, there were many former PC volunteers, PC parents and etc. in the audiences, and we tried to give them time to share their stories. Set up a place on site for people to share stories via "post-its" or on digital recorders. Invite people to upload their photos of the Festival to a shared site.

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I wonder if a flash mob approach would work? I also like walking tours -- perhaps with art stops. Or something like a culinary walking tour.

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hands on activities such as dance instruction, instrument making, playing, foodways demos are all great and I am sure have been mentioned. The fall-down is usually in site-design. If you want to blur boundaries, create environment(s) where audience and performer can easily share and communicate. This can be lower stages, putting artists in the round. You should also consider how the audience incorporates traditional culture into their everyday life and try to work that into the program. I have worked with church crown fashion shows, sessions where family recipes are gathered and a "liars contest" that allowed any audience member to come on stage and tell a tall tale/joke/story.....

3/27/2013 2:03 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

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*5. Do you have any suggestions for how effectively to engage and integrate newer traditions and communities, or those not traditionally invited to folklife festivals? (For example, we've had suggestions for inviting low-rider clubs, cosplayers, tattoo artists, and curators, collectors, and*

*disseminators of online and social media culture.)*

we've done low-riders (working with Latino communities statewide), hip hop, workers culture (including office lore with a bulletin board where audience members brought and posted their favorites), we are also moving towards a strong "green" area of the festival where the lines blur between traditional ways of recycling and new ones

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Small exhibition area with rotating, curated presentations?

4/23/2013 8:23 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

Just do it. Base your selection on field research

4/1/2013 1:33 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

We have presented low-riders and tattoo artists at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in the context of regional programs (US/Mexico border for instance). There needs to be some understanding of what a "folk group" means for the public.

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Figure out what they typically do and then let them do it. Cosplayers know how to set up their displays in conventions, for example, so set up a mini-convention space. I like the idea of festivals-within-festivals. With collectors, set up an area that literally includes cabinets of curiosities.

3/27/2013 4:41 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

1. Effective audience expansion happens by partnering with communities to activate their networks. That's no different with interest-based/demographic communities than it is cultural communities. Partner with a digitally engaged Young Entrepreneurs group to document your festival, for instance. Mainly this issue is one of willingness. I know a lot of people moaning about how our festival is not attracting young people any more - yet they don't want to change a single thing to make it more appealing to young people.

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Just invite them. I am not sure what you are asking? As soon as we started bringing traditions to our festival where the "traditional" festival goers started to complain that this wasn't "folk", I knew we were on the right track. The festival became younger, more diverse and far more exciting.

3/27/2013 2:03 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

*6. How do you suggest effectively marketing and publicizing a 21st century folklife festival? What has and has not worked for your organizations?*

social media, social media, social media ALSO, importantly, make sure that younger aged traditional artists figure into line-up. It has been very important to us in building a younger audience who can see themselves in the performers/artists presented

4/26/2013 10:50 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

NA

4/23/2013 8:23 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

Must include interactive social media

4/1/2013 1:33 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

Use any outlet available. Recruit young people to help with social media. Experiment with QR codes. Get a local "human interest" newscaster to the Festival to report out. Get a brochure in all the tourist outlets and hotels. Start a contest among school children for a Festival logo or t-shirt design.

3/28/2013 9:57 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

I've tried working with shopping malls. Not a good idea, as the venue is wrong. Malls are surprisingly noisy with awful acoustics. Social media helps, and word-of-mouth networks are good. Curiously, simply passing out posters and talking about and event really helps -- sometimes more so that just hanging a poster.

3/27/2013 4:41 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

Stop ignoring digital. Work with existing networks/communities - performance, cultural, demographic. Make and share media. Use media you make each year to promote next year's event. Make sure your media looks good, professional, appealing. Run it by your target audience before letting it out to the world.

3/27/2013 2:22 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

Social media, creating an effective "brand", carefully wording your message, creating a network that includes taste-makers within the community who can lend credence to the event

3/27/2013 2:03 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

*7. As arts and humanities grants dry up, how do you feel about the thorny potential of corporate and private sector partnerships and sponsorships? How can we pursue such relationships conscientiously, ethically, and responsibly, establishing firewalls to avoid undue influence on the festival's content?*

Los of festivals display the logo of corporate sponsors, but contractually avoid curatorial privileges on their part

4/23/2013 8:23 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

Look to models out there that have been successful, e.g., Richmond Folk Festival

4/1/2013 1:33 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

Work with legal counsel to draw up a Memorandum of Understanding that reflects your values and criteria if possible. Agree ahead of time where the lines are drawn for things like corporate logos and venue naming. Make sure potential partners understand the nature of the event, and the

difference between a folklife festival and a trade show, expo, etc.

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This is a challenge. A number of corporations aren't that interested in any real agenda -- other than displaying the logo. I think it's mostly a matter of finding sponsors who don't want to intrude on the creative control. Also, look for local organizations that will donate use of equipment and supplies, such as tents. If the connections based more on use of resources, rather than funding, then you can circumvent some of the problems.

3/27/2013 4:41 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

That stuff is drying up too. Cultivating close donor relationships with deep pocketed angels, and combining that with pass-the-hat, Kickstarter- style grassroots fundraising, are probably the more productive strategies.

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I have no issue with this at all. Most corporate sponsors do not ask or push for content and they shouldn't be offered the chance to influence content. They wouldn't make curatorial suggestions at the opera, why should they be allowed here?

3/27/2013 2:03 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

8. *Any other cautions, daydreams, suggestions, or ideas you would like to share?*

an endowment for our festival - just have had our first gift towards that. Having a clear succession strategy

4/26/2013 10:50 AM [View respondent's answers](#)

Build in time and if possible funds for good evaluation, to make sure you do not repeat things that did not work well, and to have stats for future events (demographics, numbers, yes, but also some qualitative information). Survey young people to find out what they liked/didn't like/would like to see in the future.

3/28/2013 9:57 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

It's surprising how well a pass-the-hat donation approach can work. Voluntary gifts, on-site, can fund lots of small-scale events. Sometimes it make more sense to think small. I kind of prefer an event like an afternoon and evening music festival in contrast to the multidisciplinary folklife event.

3/27/2013 4:41 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

These festivals will just die off as the audience ages out, while new kinds of festivals replace them (this is already happening) if intentional, clear, and dramatic change isn't made.

3/27/2013 2:22 PM [View respondent's answers](#)

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