NEA ARTS

NUMBER 3 2009

NEA and the Folk Arts

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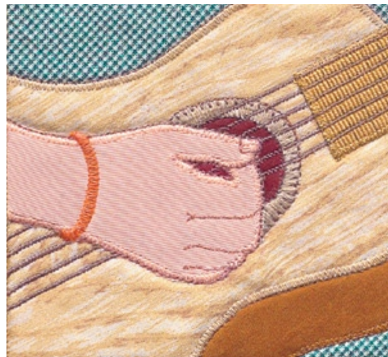
ABOUT THE ISSUE

How do you tell a story? Oral storytelling has been practiced for generations around campfires and dinner tables, in barrooms and barbershops. But there are also other ways to tell a story: there is music, there is dance, there is basket weaving and pottery. These too tell the stories of our culture, both individual and shared. The folk and traditional arts, passed down hand-to-hand, from elder to apprentice, bear our nation's history—our story of a multitude of cultures uniquely stitched together—in songs, in dances, in crafts.

ABOUT THE COVER

Stitched artwork by Margaret Cusack, photographed by Gamma One Conversions. Margaret Cusack is an illustrator, graphic designer, and textile artist—all in one. By applying graphic design techniques to her fabric collages, she has created unique stitched artworks that have appeared on magazine covers worldwide, as well as billboards, posters, and postage stamps.



Bluegrass band Sierra Hull & Highway 111 from Byrdstown, Tennessee, performing at the 71st National Folk Festival in Butte, Montana, July 10–12, 2009.

PHOTO BY WALTER HINICK, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE TRADITIONAL ARTS

The Business *of* Culture

Community-building through the National Folk Festival

BY LIZ STARK

A slide show of highlights from the current National Folk Festival and its off-shoots is found on the NEA website at www.arts.gov/nea-arts/folk-festival.html.

EACH YEAR, in cities from Butte, Montana, to Richmond, Virginia, hundreds of thousands of people converge, not to see the latest rock band or the hottest movie star but to experience art that reveals and celebrates our nation's diverse culture—the folk and traditional arts. The oldest multicultural celebration of traditional arts in the nation, the free, three-day National Folk Festival presents a range of performing arts, as well as ethnic food and craft and folklife demonstrations, that showcase the host region's own folk traditions in addition to the full range of folk arts.

The first landmark celebration, originally produced by Sarah Gertrude Knott in St. Louis in 1934, forever changed the idea of a folk festival, expanding the concept from a single-focus event to a multicultural festival. Today the festival includes indigenous and immigrant traditions as diverse as Native-American basketry, Puerto Rican *cuatro*-making, and Cambodian classical dance. The National Council for the Traditional Arts (NCTA)—founded by Knott as the

PHOTO BY KEVIN BENNETT

A dancer with Nadia Dieudonne & Feet of Rhythm performs at the American Folk Festival in Bangor, Maine.

National Folk Festival Association—continues to work with local partners to produce the annual festival that is today attracting the largest audiences in its long history.

In the mid-1980s, NCTA made the strategic decision to move the festival from the Washington, DC area, where it had been held the previous 11 years, to travel to communities across the nation, where the festival remains for a three-year tenure. To date, 26 communities have acted as festival host. At the end of each residency, the national event moves on, having laid the groundwork for the community to create its own folk festival. NCTA, however, often continues to play a key role, providing the communities with invaluable programming and production support for partner festivals. With NCTA's support, six sites have successfully established their own annual folk festivals after the national residency, three of which are entirely locally produced. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has also played a crucial role, providing funding for both the National Folk Festival and its off-shoots.

The National Folk Festival brings many benefits to its host communities: featured artists receive more exposure, and subsequently more bookings; the community gains a sense of accomplishment and ownership; and, ultimately, the festival has an incredible economic impact on the local area. NCTA Executive Director Julia Olin acknowledged that, with an operating budget of just $2 million a year, NCTA is able to generate an annual economic impact of $36 million in the four current and former host communities where the NCTA is engaged today.

When choosing host cities, NCTA considers both practical (parking, fundraising potential) and intangible factors. According to Olin, "In the communities that we go to we see a commonality—there's this critical mass of energy, a shared vision, and goals that the community wants very much to achieve. And the festival becomes a vehicle for that change."

Lowell, Massachusetts, home to one of the longest-running spin-offs of the National Folk Festival, was the first city to benefit from the three-year festival residency. The revivifying effects of the National Folk Festival became apparent as Lowell transformed from a depressed former mill town into a vibrant community.

More than 23 years later, the Lowell Folk Festival still draws crowds exceeding 150,000 each year and is a prime example of the importance of the cultural economy. With local restaurants overflowing, the Lowell festival is the highest grossing weekend of the year for many local businesses. "The degree of success was really a surprise to everyone," says Olin. "Suddenly, although I'm not sure it was recognized right at that moment, the NCTA found itself not only in the business of culture but in the business of urban and revitalization efforts."

When Bangor, Maine, first hosted the National Folk Festival in 2002, it had already begun efforts to revitalize its community with two new downtown museums and a library expansion, but wanted to do more. John Rohman, a community leader involved in the festival from its beginning, explained, "We wanted to raise the bar, raise the awareness in our community for events that could happen in our downtown and on our waterfront."

With the news that it had been picked to host the 64th–66th National Folk Festivals, Bangor's determination to show off the city in a positive light became evident. Community leaders donated their time to be a part of the festival committee, and members of the public participated in local beautification projects. Rohman said, "There is absolutely no question that this event single-handedly allowed the city to open up its vision to what could be done."

With audiences that peak near 200,000 by the national event's third year in residence, host communities have a solid audience base on which to establish their own folk festival (as Bangor did with their American Folk Festival, which began in 2005). The major challenge is fundraising the approximately $1 million budget. The partner festivals are also free of charge, so organizers can't defer costs through ticket sales. Communities receive support from national funders, such as the NEA, but many also depend on community fundraising. Heather McCarthy, executive director of Bangor's festival, said, "We are making requests of absolutely everybody we can think of, from the largest employers in the state, right down to the Mom-and-Pop stores downtown, and individuals, foundations, and municipalities." Communities also depend on in-kind contributions. For instance, in Bangor, the local newspaper donates ad space and local public relations firms donate marketing expertise.

Communities quickly learn, however, that the economic benefit of these folk festivals is worth the effort. In 2008, the American Folk Festival in Bangor worked with the University of Maine's Center for Tourism Research and Outreach to conduct an in-depth analysis of its audience and their visiting and spending habits. The study revealed that the festival created a $9.8 million impact on the local community each year.

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PHOTO BY JIM HIGGINS, COURTESY OF LOWELL FOLK FESTIVAL

Martha Spencer of Whitetop Mountain Band performing at the Lowell Folk Festival in Massachusetts.

A Worldly Education

Folk Arts in the Classroom in Philadelphia

BY PAULETTE BEETE

JUST OUTSIDE THE LUNCH ROOM of a Philadelphia public school you might find former Tibetan Buddhist monk Losang Samten—a 2002 NEA National Heritage Fellow—practicing the ancient art of making sand mandalas. Or you might notice that Fatu Gayflor, a Liberian singer, has commandeered the seventh-grade music class to teach traditional West African music and dance. All of this is business as usual at Philadelphia's Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS), a unique public school in the city's Chinatown neighborhood where the folk and traditional arts are at the center of the curriculum.

PHOTO BY JAMES WASSERMAN

Liberian musician Fatu Gayflor teaching students at the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School.

When FACTS opened its doors in 2005, it was the culmination of a project ten years in the making, according to Principal Deborah Wei. Wei explained that the school's founding organizations—Asian Americans United and the Philadelphia Folklore Project—were long-time advocates for improving educational access for the city's immigrant communities. "We started thinking about it at the beginning when [the city] first announced charter schools, but we had such a commitment to the public schools [we worried] it would take away from our advocacy for overall education reform." Ultimately, it became clear that a charter school would have an ongoing, lasting impact on the community. As Wei added, "We came to the realization that we were losing generations of kids. We needed to put our money where our mouth is."

Debora Kodish, Philadelphia Folklore Project's executive director, agreed. "We wanted to build a school that sees culture and community as an asset not liability. [Folk arts are] a great way to help kids think critically about where information comes from because you won't often find information about these disciplines in textbooks." While the school body is largely made up of various Asian nationalities—including Chinese, Vietnamese, and Indonesian—there is also a strong diversity of African Americans, Latinos, and whites as well. All of their various cultures are studied at the school.

In communities of new immigrants, there is often a disconnect between what young people experience in school and what they experience at home. FACTS is a place where this gap is bridged, and family traditions do not have to be left outside school walls. As Wei noted, traditional art disciplines are often "othered," such as presentations at festivals without demonstrating the place of these arts within their communities.

Sonia Arora, a West Philadelphia parent of Indian descent, has sent her seven-year-old son to FACTS since kindergarten because of its multicultural, hands-on focus. "In the society we live in, there is such pressure to conform to a certain way of being or looking. The folk and traditional arts emphasize different kinds of learning and using multiple intelligences. It also says to the kids, 'We respect where you come from—the way your family prays, cooks, the way you come together and define community. We honor these traditions that have sustained your family for hundreds of years.'"

Wei and Kodish agree that a curriculum that includes the folk and traditional arts helps a wider range of kids to succeed academically. Kodish explained, "Kids have so many different gifts and skills. [Folk and traditional arts] studies give them so many more avenues in which to grow. Because of the range of arts

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WHAT IT'S ABOUT

25th Anniversary of the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering

BY PEPPER SMITH

PHOTOS BY JESSICA BRANDI LIFLAND

PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERN FOLKLIFE CENTER

Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor was the keynote speaker for the 25th-anniversary National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. Performances included bands such as Sons of the San Joaquin.

THE MYTH AND LEGEND of the cowboy is ingrained in American thought, from the Argentinean *gauchos* and Mexican *vaqueros* to the hands that handled cattle in the Canadian and United States' West. Rugged, stoic men, saddled to a horse for days at a time, sitting by the campfire with a good mug of hot coffee. What's usually not included in that picture of the cowboy is poetry, but cowboy poetry has been with us since the 19th century, and is still a strong force today.

Asked to explain his genre, cowboy poet Wally McRae replied, "When people think of poetry they usually think of academic poetry, which is very intellectual and pretty obscure. If you hear an academic poem, you get to the end and you say, 'What's it about?' The poet will say, 'It's whatever you want it to be about.'

"Well, when a cowboy poet recites his poem, you know what it's about," says McRae, a 1990 NEA National Heritage Fellow.

Known for its traditional meter, use of rhyme, and realistic themes, cowboy poetry springs from the poetic and ballad traditions of the British Isles. In 19th-century United States, poets like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were bestsellers, newspapers regularly printed poems, and it was not unusual to have workers such as miners, railroaders, loggers, and fishermen write poems about the realities of their occupations. Cowboys were no exception, with this poetry of the

The Western Folklife Center in Elko, Nevada, was host to the 25th anniversary of the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERN FOLKLIFE CENTER

American West finding its voice during the great cattle drives of the 1870s and 1880s.

Folklorist David Stanley explained, "What makes cowboy poetry distinct . . . is not as much its style as its subject matter. It's full of the settings, the vocabulary, the details—things like saddle rigging and cattle behavior—of cowboy life. And believe me, cowboys can tell what is authentic and what is not."

This past January marked the 25th anniversary of the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, a weeklong celebration of cowboy culture. About 7,000 people attended the event, including retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who, having grown up on a ranch, served as keynote speaker. The calendar of events included musical performances and jams, a visual arts exhibit, a diverse array of workshops on everything from dancing the lindy hop to playing the mandolin to breadmaking, and, of course, poetry readings. To mark the Gathering's first quarter century, a special reunion stage featured "poets and musicians who [had] performed at the Gathering during any of the last 25 years."

The anniversary was particularly significant as, by the latter half of the 20th century, cowboy poetry had all but disappeared from popular consciousness thanks to changing mores in American poetry. In the early 1980s, however, Hal Cannon, a young folklorist hoping to revive cowboy poetry, approached major sponsors of rodeos and cowboy events, companies like Wrangler Jeans and Stetson, and asked them to sponsor a cowboy poetry event, all to no avail. "We had a heck of a time finding any funding," Cannon recalled, "I mean at that point it wasn't part of the cowboy stereotype that a cowboy could be a poet. 'Cowboy poetry,' I was told, 'is an oxymoron.'"

Lucky for Cannon, the NEA said yes to his proposal to host a conference on the genre. The Arts Endowment supported the project with a $50,000 grant that Cannon and a small group of folklorists used to research and contact cowboy poets. Supported by the NEA grant, Cannon was able to take a year's leave of absence from his job as Utah folk arts coordinator to work on what in 1985 would become the first Gathering.

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Pandit Chitresh Das and Jason Samuels Smith perform *India Jazz Suites*.

PHOTO BY MARTY SOHL

LIVING IN THE Past, Present, & Future

A Conversation with Pandit Chitresh Das and Sophiline Cheam Shapiro

AS CHOREOGRAPHERS/DANCERS in the traditional arts, Pandit Chitresh Das and Sophiline Cheam Shapiro have feet in the past as well as the future. Both lead dance companies in their respective cultures, and both work in their native countries as well as in the U.S., where they are now based. Shapiro revives the 1,000-year-old tradition that was nearly destroyed when the despotic Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia in the 1970s, yet adapts Cambodian dance to Shakespeare's *Othello* and Mozart's *The Magic Flute.* Das performs the *Kathak* dance that originated in northern India and achieved its greatest heights in the 15th-16th centuries, but also has collaborated and toured with Jason Samuels Smith, an African-American tap dancer. In 2002, Shapiro co-founded (with her husband John Shapiro) the Khmer Arts Academy in Long Beach, California,

which fosters the vitality of Cambodian arts and culture, and works in Cambodia to reestablish classical dance to its once exalted place in the country. In 1980, Das founded his own dance company and school in San Francisco, California, dedicated to the preservation and education of Kathak dance and Indian culture. In addition, Das regularly returns to Kolkata (Calcutta) to teach dance in the red-light and lower income districts.

In July 2009, Folk and Traditional Arts Director **Barry Bergey** and Audio Producer **Josephine Reed** interviewed Shapiro and Das—both 2009 NEA National Heritage Fellows—while they were performing and teaching in their respective homelands of Cambodia and India. An excerpt of the nearly two-hour discussion is below.

NEA: *I'd like both of you, if you don't mind, to talk about bringing very specific and very traditional dance culture to the larger United States.*

Sophiline Cheam Shapiro in performance.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BURR

Read additional interviews with Das and Shapiro on the NEA website at www.arts.gov/nea-arts/heritage-interviews.html.

SOPHILINE SHAPIRO: There's two types of work that I present. At the earlier end of my teaching career, when I got to the U.S., a lot of the works . . . were traditional pieces, and so I performed as part of festivals in Los Angeles or in other places. I saw my role as a cultural bridge at that time, between Cambodian culture and non-Cambodian culture.

And then, later on, since 1999, that was when I started to choreograph and *Othello* was my first major adaptation [*Samritechak*], a full-length dance drama dealing with issues of leadership and women, and then *Seasons of Migration,* an attempt to deal with the issue of culture shock—which, you know, immigrants or anybody who travels from place to place experiences. And there are four types of culture shock: euphoria, rejection, adjustment, and equilibrium. And so I created four dances, each of them about ten minutes long, to address different stages of culture shock.

Another production, which was commissioned by Peter Sellars, was *Pamina Devi,* an adaptation of *The Magic Flute,* Mozart's opera. What drew me the most [to the adaptation] was the conflict between Sarastro and the Queen of the Night. It was a conflict of ideology, it was gender conflict, and they took it to an extreme approach. And these extreme approaches were something to remind me or help me understand what happened during the Khmer Rouge. They had these ideas of making Cambodia into a prosperous country; they didn't really step up and say, "Oh, we did something wrong so maybe we should change our course." They didn't. So that was a reminder that I find relevant in the conflict between Sarastro and the Queen of the Night. They couldn't see anything positive. And that's not productive to our society.

CHITRESH DAS: I was brought to the United States by the University of Maryland dance department. In September 1970, I came to California. Now, I was surrounded by almost all the greatest Indian classical musicians [at the Ali Akbar College of Music]. So we were living

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PICTURE PERFECT

PORTRAITS OF NEA NATIONAL HERITAGE FELLOWS

BY TOM PICH

For nearly 20 years, Tom Pich has crisscrossed the U.S. photographing NEA National Heritage Fellows in their homes, in their studios, in sites sacred to their communities and to their crafts. As Pich tells it, "In 1991 I was reading a story about the National Heritage Fellows in the January issue of *National Geographic*. It was at that moment that I knew what I wanted to do with my photography career." Gazing at one of Pich's portraits, you might be tempted to believe the old superstition that cameras steal a person's soul. Whether set against the backdrop of a field or a family room, tools in hand or handwork hung on the wall, in traditional regalia or "at-home clothes," these portraits quietly but powerfully reveal the artists' mastery of and reverence for their art. Here are just a few of the more than 125 portraits Pich has taken over the years, with his commentary.

1989

Vanessa Paukeigope Jennings

KIOWA REGALIA MAKER

"I photographed this portrait of Vanessa in an earthen lodge located steps away from her home out on the prairies of Oklahoma. To celebrate her heritage, Vanessa and her husband Carl Jennings selected historic feather war bonnets and lances [for the background]. The fan Vanessa is holding belonged to her grandmother, and the blanket she is wearing is a wool broadcloth decorated with Osage ribbon work."

A slideshow of all of Pich's portraits can be found on the NEA website at www.arts.gov/nea-arts/heritage-portraits.html.

1990

Wally McRae

COWBOY POET AND RANCHER

"Wearing his signature red cowboy boots, pant legs always tucked in. During one of Wally's poetry readings [that I attended] he paused, told the audience that he was up all night with a toothache. He then proceeded to end the ordeal by pulling out the tooth. He placed it into the cellophane of his cigarette pack and, without missing a word, proceeded to finish his poem."

1999

Jimmy "Slyde" Godbolt

TAP DANCER

"During the photo session, Jimmy's protégé, Rocky Mendez, was dancing in the background. Jimmy instinctively would yell out corrections to Rocky without ever turning his head away from the camera. His ears never missed a step."

2007

Julia Parker

KASHIA POMO BASKETMAKER

"I took this photo in a wind-driven, rain-soaked, golden meadow, located in the valley of Yosemite National Park. Earlier in the day, Julia said an important part of her heritage is that Native-American people are intertwined with the earth and sky, the mountains and trees, and the animals that roam their land. Under a heavy sky, in this quiet meadow where only the sound of the rain could be heard, as if on cue, as I started photographing Julia, five deer rose from the meadow, stood tall, and remained in frame as if to complete Julia's world."

2009

Dudley Laufman

DANCE CALLER AND MUSICIAN

"In the spring of 1948, a man in his early twenties, Bob McQuillen (2002 NEA National Heritage Fellow), was playing accordion with the festival orchestra at the New England Folk Festival. During the event, Bob noticed a young man in his mid-teens wearing a grayish sweater who would watch the group intently when he wasn't joining in on the dancing. That young man was Dudley Laufman. Dudley recalled being so awestruck by McQuillen's playing that, after the show, he and his father, mother, brothers, and sister followed Bob like a pied piper down the stairs, out the door, and down the street."

The Business *of* Culture

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But the National Folk Festival is not only about building the community economically, but also highlighting what is important about its culture. To make the festival even more connected to the community hosting it, NCTA draws on the knowledge of local folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and other cultural specialists to make sure that each iteration of the national festival reflects the local site. Olin said, "In our programming, we not only bring new and exciting artists and traditions to a community that perhaps have never, or very infrequently, been presented there, but also showcase the heritage and culture of the host community and region." For example, at the 2009 National Folk Festival in Butte, Montana, NCTA organized programming around the horse culture of Montana and the West, including horsehair hitching, saddle making, and "cutting" horse demonstrations and family activities such as yodeling lessons and a pony petting zoo.

Although more than 70 years have passed since it was created, the National Folk Festival's central mission has remained intact—to promote the best arts in a range of traditions, from those traditions which developed in this country over centuries to new immigrant arts. But with NCTA's decision to take the festival back into communities across the country, it is creating both a deep appreciation for the folk arts and using the festival to help communities reveal their full potential—both artistically and economically. As John Rohman commented about Bangor's festival, "It's part of the fabric of the community now. It's fantastic."

A Native-American horse parade opens the 71st National Folk Festival in Butte, Montana.

PHOTO BY LAURA L. LUNDQUIST, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE TRADITIONAL ARTS

WHAT IT'S ABOUT

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Cowboy poet Paul Zarzyski (left foreground) talks with Hal Cannon, founding director of the Western Folklife Center.

The founders chose the small town of Elko, Nevada, known for its ties to the Old West, precisely because it was a small town—cowboys did not want to go to a city or a resort. It didn't hurt that Elko also had plenty of cheap hotels.

Dan Sheehy, now director of Smithsonian Folkways, was with the NEA when the decision was made to fund the event. "The first Gathering was planned to be a one-time event. Initially it wasn't 'annual' anything. We had no idea what a phenomenon it would be. The press ate it up."

At that first event in 1985, Cannon had set up about 60 chairs in the Elko Convention Center just before the opening ceremony when buckaroo Waddie Mitchell leaned over and said, "Pard, let's not go overboard. We don't want to embarrass ourselves." By the end of the weekend, more than 1,500 people had come out to see what was going on.

Major media outlets such as CBS News, *New York Times,* and *People* magazine all showed up to cover the then unusual idea of "cowboy poets."

"At the time we were sort of surprised that it resonated so much with people, but I think people are very interested in going to their roots," noted Cannon, now the founding director of the Western Folklife Center also headquartered in Elko. "[The first event] came at a time when people wanted to relate to something authentic that came from the cowboy experience, rather

McRAE ON NELSON

2009 NEA National Heritage Fellow Joel Nelson reciting at the 25th-anniversary Gathering.

An active participant at the Gathering since its second year, new NEA National Heritage Fellow Joel Nelson has the distinction of having recorded the only cowboy poetry CD—*The Breaker in the Pen*—ever nominated for a Grammy Award.

Here's a reminiscence of Nelson from fellow cowboy poet—and a 1990 NEA National Heritage Fellow—Wally McRae:

"[Joel Nelson's] knowledge of different kinds of poetry has added to his ability to focus and appreciate the kind of poetry that we're writing and trying to write and some of the emotions that we're trying to get across. I can remember one time on stage in Elko in the main auditorium. Joel was in a very reflective mood and said 'I'm going to do a poem for you now that—even though you may be aware of the poem—you may not consider it to be reflective of the cowboy philosophy. . . . I think it's dead center, right on target, telling people how we feel.' And everybody kind of sat up on the edge of their seats and talked, 'What the hell is Joel talking about?' He said, 'This is a Robert Frost poem called "The Road Not Taken."' And he [read it], and when he finished, he said, 'The poet, Frost, took the road less traveled by and that has made the difference. Each of us have also come to that fork in the road, and we had, each of us, individually and collectively, taken that path less traveled by.' That's pretty insightful, you know?"

than the Hollywood makeover of what a cowboy was."

Fifteen years later, at the turn of the millennium, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution proclaiming the Gathering in Elko to be officially known as the one and only National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. Today the festival includes much more than poetry, addressing all sorts of traditional Western culture in many forms, such as crafts, music, dance, cinema, theater, and even environmental issues.

Over the years cowboy poetry has changed as well. Poets like 2009 National Heritage Fellow Joel Nelson have expanded the range of themes available to cowboy poets, including everything from war experiences to the evolution of the horse—told from a cowboy perspective, of course. Women poets such as Georgie Sicking and Gwen Peterson are prominent on the scene. Though traditional rhyme and meter are still the norm for the genre, cowboy poets today also write in free verse and experiment with every style of poetic form available. "[Cowboy poetry] is poetry, and it is just as much of an art as any other style of poetry," says former rodeo cowboy Paul Zarzyski, who studied with poet Richard Hugo at the University of Montana.

From the original Gathering in 1985, a proliferation of cowboy poetry events has sprung up throughout North America. From more established gatherings like the 21st Annual Durango Cowboy Gathering in Durango, Colorado, or the 22nd Annual Rhymers Rodeer in Minden, Nevada, to lesser known festivals such as Scofield's Cowboy Campfire at the Red Mule Ranch in Fiddletown, California, or Them Cowboys is Trailin' North in Spruce Home, Saskatchewan, more than 200 cowboy poetry events are held annually in the U.S. and Canada. To receive up-to-date info on cowboy poetry gatherings in your area, you can follow @cowboypoetry on Twitter. Once unknown to the public, now most people are familiar with the term "cowboy poetry" and have at least heard cowboy poet and veterinarian Baxter Black on NPR or have a few favorite cowboy poems of their own. This once forgotten art form is definitely back in the saddle.

You can hear an interview with cowboy poet Joel Nelson, 2009 NEA National Heritage Fellow, and his recitation of his poetry at the NEA website at www.arts.gov/nea-arts/joel-nelson.html.

AWAKENING

by Joel Nelson

We cannot say what drew us here,
What piper's flute, what siren's song
In younger days—another year
While sun was low and shadows long.

Her great high deserts lured us on—
We were but boys when we rode in
To live the life and chase the dawn
'Till evening sun shone down on men.

And nature was our friend and foe
She dealt us pain, she brought us bliss
Our Mother Earth we came to know
Was nurturer and nemesis.

Our cattle graze her hills and draws
Her August grain is rip'ning now.
For horseback men with horseback laws
May she be saved from park and plow.

We've seen her change since we rode in.
We've read her pages as they've turned
And worn our stirrup leathers thin.
We fear the lessons we have learned.

What hands would tear this place apart?
We are not all what we appear!
We can't afford the careless heart
That beat within the pioneer.

And red man's wisdom has been cast
Aside as savage—yet we see
The noble savage doubtless passed
Much closer to His earth than we.

Are we her stewards, foes, or friends?
And who could better serve the earth?
We throw these questions to the winds
And ride toward answers' timely birth.

—from the anthology *Between Earth and Sky: Poets of the Cowboy West* (W.W. Norton & Company)
Used by permission of the author

Losang Samten completing a sand mandala at the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School as part of his artist residency…

PHOTO BY ROKO KAWAI

A Worldly Education

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experiences FACTS can offer, we help kids have confidence in themselves."

Moreover, proponents of the curriculum maintain that the folk arts offer an alternate set of values to the ones proffered, often to the saturation point, by popular media. For example, exposing the kids to sand mandalas, which are meant to be impermanent to symbolize the transitory nature of life, teaches the students to value process as well as product. As Wei said, "It's not just the form that we want kids to learn but we want them to learn the values underneath the forms, values of respect and patience and persistence."

Through interaction with these artists, students also gain a meaningful entry point into the international conversation. Wei explained, "Fatu Gayflor is a Liberian singer and her residency's really kind of cool because our seventh graders, as part of their geography unit, study West Africa. They focus on Liberia. She comes in and talks about the civil war in Liberia, what's been going on there, what her role was in Liberia." Or take Losang Samten's residency, which allows the students to explore questions around China-Tibet relations, an extremely significant subject given the school's large Asian population and Chinatown location.

Students work not just with master artists but also with community elders. For example, FACTS has just completed a grant partnership with the South East Asian Mutual Assistance Association Coalition that combated depression in the senior citizen community by bringing the seniors into the school to work on folk arts activities with the students, including folk dancing, cooking classes, and oral history projects. Over lunch, the youngsters and seniors conversed, with language-savvy students acting as translators for their peers.

Given the educational benefits, it would seem that more schools would eagerly embrace folk arts curricula. While the unique nature of the folk and traditional arts makes them an invaluable learning tool, it also presents a challenge to integrating the discipline

The real issue is the relationship between schools and the culture of the communities they serve.

PHOTO BY ROKO KAWAI

... and working with the students to destroy the sand mandala he created, demonstrating the impermanency of material objects.

into standard school curricula. According to Dr. Sarah Cunningham, the NEA's director of Arts Education, one barrier is that "some folk arts are really hard to distill into short bursts of lessons, so it is challenging to convert them to the classroom." Another challenge is that, in many areas, the master artists in the community are simply not visible to the school.

According to Cunningham, the real issue is the relationship between schools and the culture of the communities they serve. "Are schools places where people are alienated from their culture? Or are they places where culture is celebrated? I think we have school environments where, because of performance pressures, people can't necessarily bring their own culture to school. Some schools jump right into the conversation and bring in experts. [Other] schools have a generalized global culture lesson where they do a couple of exercises saying, 'This is what culture is,' and then move on. . . . The community is always a part of the school. If there is violence in the community, then there's violence in the school. If there's poverty in the community, then there's poverty in the school. But when you start to take the positive aspects of the community and weave them into the school, it changes the spirit of what could happen."

Wei has many hopes for the FACTS school going forward. She'd like the school to be a center for traditional arts and culture in the city. She'd like to see more traditional music ensembles at the school and more FACTS students join the local Chinese opera troupe. She'd like students to think of the school as a home, returning long after they've graduated. She'd like to see all of her graduates make it into college. But most important, Wei wants FACTS to testify to the value of supporting folk and traditional arts and artists in schools and in communities. "I think certainly for the past eight years the push for standardized testing as the marker of any kind of student success has really taken a toll on the importance of arts in schools. So arts are marginalized and within arts being marginalized, folks arts are hyper-marginalized. One of my hopes is that we can show that not only are these arts important for the communities in which they sit, they're important for the education of children overall. The way these arts have traditionally been passed on, that's been broken down. I think schools can play a vital role in creating those venues and making it possible for these arts to continue. I hope that more leadership can recognize the importance of that."

Living in the Past, Present, & Future

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in a little India there, and we had the kind of audience who are very open to having performances. Now, you have to understand a usual concert of classical Kathak dance right now in India is the same way I dance in America: minimum two hours. No changing of costumes. You sing, you dance, you act, and now you have added Kathak yoga. So you are dancing between two to two-and-a-half hours straight, and with a very fast tabla player, and, you know, anything can go. Lots of improvisation. So then Michael Alexander, who represented AMAN dance company [AMAN Folk Ensemble], asked me to dance for AMAN. He said, "We invite you, but you have to dance 12 minutes." And I said, "What? Twelve minutes?" And that was my first understanding of how to make a three-hour dance into 12 minutes. It was one of the most challenging feats I had to go through, and also to psychologically accept, because either I had a chance to do it or not. That helped me tremendously [in] how to approach the New World.

PHOTO BY KEVIN BENNETT

2009 NEA National Heritage Fellow Pandit Chitresh Das performing at the 2008 American Folk Festival in Bangor, Maine.

NEA: *What is the difference between performing or teaching here in the United States, and then going back and performing and teaching in your respective home country?*

SHAPIRO: The similarity of teaching in Cambodia and in America is that I look at the teaching as if I was taking care of a small tree, and that the tree has to be trimmed, carefully, from the bottom to the top. And this takes a long time, and lots of patience, and persistence. So that's a core approach that I take, whether I teach in the U.S. or in Cambodia. However, the result is different. In the U.S., I find that many of my students take dance as a second priority. Their first priority going to school is to get an education, have a future. But they come to my class to take dance as an art appreciation class. And so very few dancers will stay for more than three years. In Cambodia, I'm establishing a professional dance company, so the artists that work with me are already well trained, and they get more advanced training (particularly to do the work that I choreograph, which requires a little different way of moving). So in this case, we are making art instead of seeing our class as art appreciation.

The similarity [in teaching in the U.S. and Cambodia] is that I do a lot of explanation: explaining the background of the dance, the purpose, the meaning of gestures, and all those kinds of things. I do both in the U.S. and in Cambodia. For performing, I do the same thing as well, both in the U.S. and in Cambodia. I like to do a pre-concert lecture, a performance, and then a Q&A afterward. And I find that this structure works, and it's very helpful to audiences in Cambodia, as well in the U.S.

DAS: Yes. I agree very much with Mrs. Shapiro. And the performance talk actually goes along with the word "Kathak" [which means "storytelling" in Sanskrit], because people would tell the story and then dance in India. And I think the same as it probably was in Cambodia. I don't know, but maybe.

In India when I'm dancing an episode from the

Ramayana, I will just tell them, "I am doing this episode." That's it. Whereas in America, you have to explain the whole thing. But if you tell a little story and you dance, people enjoy it much more in America.

NEA: *I wondered whether or not either of you might have a comment or question for the other. I'd love to hear you speak to one another about anything you'd like, or something that might have come up as we were talking.*

SHAPIRO: I would like to ask Pandit Das about his creative work, and what your inspiration is to create your work?

DAS: Wonderful question. I will see some athletes, tremendous in their speed, and how they take the turns on ice skating. I'm very open with that kind of a thing. The most important thing that [I ask myself is,] "What they are doing in a different style, can I do in Kathak?" Can I bring the intensity, for instance, of a soccer player, how they run, how they move. Or animals, how they move in nature. All these things help me tremendously, and I feel, "Okay, how can I do this? How can I express myself like, you know, how beautifully they are doing it?"

And always there's women's power. I have an all-female company, and there's a *Ramayana* they're going to be doing in September. For the first time, I won't be there. All the roles will be done by the women. So that also inspires me: how can women do the role of the male? It fascinates me.

NEA: *Sophiline, it was your question, but how about you and your inspiration?*

SHAPIRO: My inspiration usually derives from questions for which I have searched for answers for a long time, whether the questions relate to the past, to the Khmer Rouge, to the everyday life, or the way we behave today.

It is an honor to be born into a culture that is as old and as rich as Cambodian culture, but at the same time, it's also that women are trapped or being imprisoned by the conventional expectation of women as well. And I say this not out of criticism or out of hate, but to say this out of love, and out of trying to understand and to fill out the gap of misunderstanding of the culture itself. These are the issues that I work with. I like to think about the past, present, and the future.

This is a question I try to answer: what do Cambodian people or Cambodian Americans experience right now in terms of changing of identity and things like that? Are we really moving into the future? The Cambodian identity is composed by many things, but mainly is composed by the legacy of Angkor and the legacy of the Khmer Rouge. If the legacy of Angkor symbolizes our cultural pride, and then we reject the Khmer Rouge experience of suffering and destruction . . . we can't take one or leave another. Both have to come together, and we have to figure out how to accept the two. By creating something positive in the present that would help us to see a better future, that would be something we will leave behind as part of the history that we could be proud of.

PHOTO BY JAMES WASSERMAN

2009 NEA National Heritage Fellow Sophiline Cheam Shapiro teaching dancer Pum Molyta the art of Cambodian dance.

the CORE of ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING

Bau Graves on the Importance of the Folk Arts

James "Bau" Graves wants you to understand—the folk arts matter. They matter because they reflect who we are as U.S. citizens. They matter because they sustain our heritage. They matter because they bring us together as community. And he thinks so not only because he is currently the executive director of the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago, but because he considers the folk arts vital to the country's well being. A musician himself with a master's degree in ethnomusicology from Tufts University, Graves previously has been co-founder and artistic director of the Center for Cultural Exchange in Portland, Maine, and executive director of the Jefferson House in Roanoke, Virginia. He is also the author of a book on folk arts and community entitled *Cultural Democracy: The Arts, Community, and the Public Purpose.* An excerpt from Audio Producer **Josephine Reed**'s interview with Graves in July 2009 is below.

NEA: *Can you define "folk arts" for us?*
BAU GRAVES: There's a story about the great bluesman Big Bill Broonzy who was playing a song, and somebody asked him whether that was a folk song or not, and Big Bill said, "Well, I never heard any cows singing it." And sort of extrapolating from that, pretty much anything human beings create grows out of traditional culture, one way or another.

I think that tradition is at the core of absolutely everything, including the whole classical European canon. If Mozart didn't have a bunch of folk melodies to push against, he wouldn't have done what he did. And right down to John Cage and our most extravagant experimentalists. Their experiments wouldn't hold meaning if they didn't have tradition to be pushing against. In my view, traditional heritage is sort of the foundation stone that we've got, and everything else flows out of that.

NEA: *I think of folk culture as being very grassroots.*
GRAVES: Well, that is, I think, totally accurate that traditional culture has to have some sort of a community that nurtures it and supports it, and that has a group of people that reflexively understand how the music is supposed to sound, and what the appropriate way is to appreciate it, and what the dance moves are that go along with it. All of that is part of what makes tradition happen. But traditions don't just stand still. They move, and they evolve, and they change. Most people listen to bluegrass music today, and they think this is a tradition that's got to be hundreds of years old. It just sounds like it was originally created by a couple of old guys sitting on their front porch up in some holler in North Carolina. But bluegrass has only been around since the late 1940s. It was really invented by Bill Monroe and Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and the Stanley Brothers, and a handful of other great, innovative musicians in the decade following World War II. Since then, it's become a gigantic industry, and it also has got people who've taken the music and run far further with it than Bill Monroe or Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs might've been able to imagine.

PHOTO BY KEVIN VIOL

James "Bau" Graves at the 2009 Chicago Folk & Roots Festival, presented by the Old Town School of Folk Music.

A group jam at the Old Town School of Folk Music.

PHOTO BY KEVIN VIOL

Pretty much anything human beings create grows out of traditional culture, one way or another.

Probably there's today a lot of bluegrass traditionalists who look back at the work of those founding fathers of the genre, and they disparage the work that somebody like Béla Fleck is doing, who's moved into a realm that many of them won't even consider to be bluegrass. And that's totally appropriate. It's just the way traditions grow and move and change, and I'm so thankful that there are the real traditionalists, that there are fiddlers like Don Roy in Maine, who is going to maintain that traditional French-Canadian fiddle style because he is so passionate and cares about it, and he's going to stick to that tradition, and there isn't anything that's going to budge him off of it. But I'm also grateful that we've got the Béla Flecks of the world, who are taking sort of the DNA that they inherited and are recombining it with other influences that we've all got here in the 21st century.

A lot of the interesting work that's happening these days to me is artists that are coming out of very traditional cultures and are adopting pieces of the modern age into what they do, so they're starting to use sampling and beatboxes and various forms of electronica, still playing traditional music but pushing it in directions that really sound new and fresh and exciting. I tend to kind of like that thing, although many traditionalists really bemoan it, and say, "Oh, my gosh, you know, how can you possibly play a jig and a reel with a beatbox behind it? It doesn't make any sense." But it does make sense to some of the people who are doing it, and certainly to audiences all over the world that are enjoying that kind of stuff. I find it to be sort of an interesting edge of where world culture is going.

NEA: *Why do the folk arts matter?*
GRAVES: Folk arts are such a huge part of our identity as human beings. They tell us who we are. They help shape our vision of what is right and true and correct. They are at the very basic level of notions of who we are, and that's what people are, all over the world, prepared to fight and die for. It's my community, the community that nurtured me and that made me who I am. That's what people really care about, and along with religion and land (both of which I think could be looked at as subsets of culture), culture is about the most important thing that we've got. It shapes how we interact with each other. It shapes all of the major events of our lives, from birth and puberty and marriage and childbearing and rearing to death. All of them have huge cultural components that feed into them, and the traditional arts almost always are the expressive edge of that culture that means so much to us. I don't think any of us could imagine what life would be like without it.

An extended audio version of the interview can be found on the NEA website at www.arts.gov/nea-arts/bau-graves.html.

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Photographer Tom Pich shares his favorite moments while taking portraits of NEA National Heritage Fellows on page 12 of this issue.

A slideshow of all Pich's portraits of NEA National Heritage Fellows can be found on the NEA website at www.arts.gov/nea-arts/heritage-portraits.html.

PHOTO BY TOM PICH

1986 NEA National Heritage Fellow Helen Cordero, Cochiti Pueblo potter.