

INTRODUCTION

“THE FIELD OF FOLK
ARTS IS NURTURED IN
AMERICA’S COMMUNITIES,
PROVIDING FOR THE
REINVIGORATION AND
SUSTENANCE OF
COMMUNITY STRENGTH
AROUND THE CONCERNS
THAT ALL AMERICANS
SHARE.”

Peter Pennekamp
Humboldt Area Foundation

The “field” is the folk and traditional arts. These “accessible arts,” to paraphrase one folklorist, are practiced among families, friends and neighbors throughout the United States in familiar settings of everyday life and, increasingly, on concert stages and in museums. Most folk arts activity occurs outside institutional settings and, while some of it intersects with commerce and popular culture, other portions find nurturance from public and private funding. Folk arts are seemingly everywhere and nowhere at the same time. This study sketches the breadth and depth of folk and traditional arts activity in the United States.

Our goal is to begin to provide some quantitative and evaluative data about this area of cultural activity which remains remarkably unexamined. There is no national service organization to track information about folk and traditional arts. Systematic research has rarely been conducted to assess the growth of folk arts organizations, the nature and extent of artistic activity, audience participation or constituents served. Most documentation efforts remain scattered, anecdotal and simplistic in their conceptions. Studies of other areas of the arts provide little help, compounding this lack of information since traditional artists, cultural practitioners and community-based organizations are rarely counted in studies which rely on self-identification. But how does one go about identifying the unidentified? How do you count or account for all the basketmakers,

tamburiza groups, volunteer-run ethnic organizations, bluegrass societies, gospel quartets, crafts fairs, family-based rituals and traditions, the church suppers or Buddhist temples? In fact, you don’t. Instead, this study examines how artists, communities and organizations marshal the desire and resources to make folk arts activities happen and continue. Within a larger context of social scientific research, planning and evaluation, folk arts and other community-based arts require a re-consideration of conventional approaches to measurement, assessment and evaluation. A different kind of inquiry combining field-based or case study methodologies with quantitative research is essential to fully understanding the diverse cultural situations and non-institutional base of most folk or traditional arts. This study is a first exploration towards that goal and an invitation to others to amplify its findings.

With the assistance of Endowment staff and a national advisory committee, a small number of organizations, individuals and activities were selected as case studies to provide in-depth examination of common issues, obstacles and useful strategies for action. While they do not constitute a representative sampling of the field, they suggest a broad spectrum of folk arts activities. Profiles were developed by writers with expertise in the field—artists and specialists alike. They conducted interviews and analyzed materials provided by the organizations or individuals in the study.



SPECTATORS AT FRYEBURG FAIR, MAINE. (PHOTO BY CRAIG BLOUIN/COURTESY OF MAINE ARTS COMMISSION)

“THIS REPORT IS NOT ABOUT WHAT THE RICH AND POWERFUL HAVE DONE TO MAKE A SPLASH IN THE ARTS WORLD. THIS IS NOT A REPORT TO JUSTIFY ANY POLITICAL PURPOSE. THIS IS A REPORT ABOUT HOW ORDINARY PEOPLE ARE COPING WITH CHANGE AND HOW THEIR CULTURAL TRADITIONS ARE FARING.”

Hal Cannon
Founding Director
Western Folklife Center

“THE NEXT TEN TO FIFTEEN YEARS CONSTITUTE A VERY CRITICAL PERIOD FOR THE CONTINUITY AND DEVELOPMENT OF NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES. MANY TRADITIONS ARE NOW AT RISK OF BEING LOST, SINCE ONLY A FEW ELDERS IN COMMUNITIES REMEMBER THEM. IT IS AN IMPORTANT TIME FOR DOCUMENTATION, INSPIRING SUCH COMMUNITIES, AND TEACHING THESE TRADITIONS.”

Dave Warren (Santa Clara Pueblo)
Member, President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities



DAVID GONZALES PERFORMING COMANCHE DANCE, TALPA, NEW MEXICO, 1996.
(PHOTO BY MIGUEL GANDERT © 1996)

Statistical information appears throughout the publication—some from original surveys developed for the study and conducted by NuStats, Inc. of Austin, Texas (*see page 10 for further discussion of methodology*) as well as available sources. The study has been structured to be as inclusive as possible. The two original surveys, for instance, track breadth and depth of organizational involvement in the folk arts. One focuses on a small sample of those organizations self-identified as folk arts or folklife organizations while the other assesses the range of organizations nationwide involved in folk arts activity and their level of participation. The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) provided further information regarding the range of activities and institutions funded through folk arts programs at state arts agencies throughout the U.S.¹ Other data point to impact, provides contextual information and breadth of activity in areas of cultural life sufficiently institutionalized and organized to track such information—particularly performing arts.

The results of this study suggest that involvement and interest in folk arts and folk culture is significant, pervasive and increasing in varying cultural worlds—from ethnic organizations, museums, libraries, schools, historical societies and local arts agencies to folk arts organizations, presenters, festivals, fraternal organizations, Saturday night dances and beyond. For instance, types of organizations

responding to the NuStats survey designed to gauge breadth of activity included several local arts agencies; performance groups; historical societies; non-art museums; festivals; schools and other instructional organizations; community service organizations; folklore or folk music societies; and a substantial number of cultural centers engaged in multi-disciplinary activity.² Three primary motivations or perspectives guide these organizations in their support of folk arts or traditional cultural activity. Discipline specific interests—weaving groups, pottery centers, folk music societies—define one important category of involvement. Arts or cultural organizations attempting to reflect or serve the needs and interests of a particular region or locale are another—that is, organizations such as local arts agencies who serve the needs of a diverse local population or organizations such as historical societies, heritage preservation groups, cultural tourism organizations or organizations who not only serve a particular locale or region but also offer programs or services *of or about* that locale. The broadest and most significant category of involvement, however, invokes programming focusing upon traditional art or culture as an expression of cultural identity.

Other data from NASAA confirm these findings as well. Information from state arts agencies for fiscal year 1994 reveals that they funded 48 types of organizations, the most common ones being primary schools, community service

Types of Activity of Organizations Involved in Folk Arts Programming
(n=102)

Public Demonstrations or Workshops	83%
Concerts, tours, performances	76%
School programs	76%
Exhibitions	65%
Festivals	61%
Other	18%

Since survey respondents were permitted more than one response, percentages do not total 100. "Other" includes a wide range of activity such as weekly dances, publications, radio programs, conferences, outreach activity and fieldwork/documentation.

Source: NuStats, Inc.

Annual Budget of Organizations Involved in Folk Arts Activity
(n=102)

Under \$50,000	33%
\$50,000-\$100,000	16%
\$100,000-\$250,000	18%
\$250,000-\$500,000	10%
\$500,000-\$1,000,000	4%
Over \$1,000,000	15%
No answer	4%

Source: NuStats, Inc.

organizations, local arts councils and agencies, school districts, performing groups and non-art museums. The Fund for Folk Culture's Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Community Folklife Program has funded organizations as varied as the Winnebago Language & Culture Preservation Committee, the Historic Chatahoochee Commission, the World Music Institute and the Ethnic Heritage Council of the Pacific Northwest. A previous NEA publication, *Cultural Centers of Color*, indicates significant involvement in folk arts programming by these centers and underscores the great importance of traditional culture in contemporary arts activity in communities of color.³ (See page 11) Such diversity of organizational involvement and type of activity is a characteristic feature of folk arts and culture.

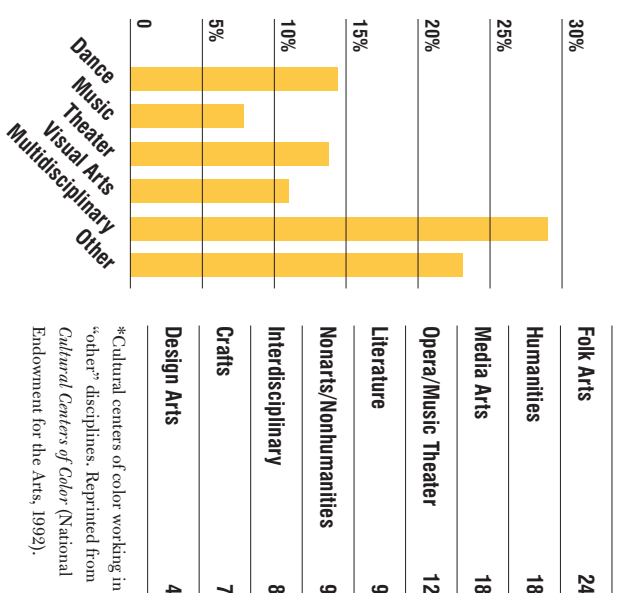
While most folk arts activity throughout the United States is carried out on a part-time basis, it is nonetheless an integral part of a daily, weekly or seasonal rhythm of community and organizational life. No amount of numbers can appropriately convey that fact. In ideal circumstances, folk arts as a living cultural heritage enable individuals and communities to shape and make sense of the world. Ultimately, this study is about the ways in which artists and communities value and share their artistic and cultural inheritances, create and change within the parameters of community tradition, connect with each other and those around them and organize for greater strength and continuity.

A Note about Methodology

For this study, two surveys were conducted by NuStats, Inc. of Austin, Texas on behalf of the National Endowment for the Arts. The first survey was designed to obtain information about the breadth and range of organizational involvement in the folk and traditional arts throughout the U.S. and its territories. Mailing lists were solicited from state and regional arts agencies, cultural agencies in the territories, and, on occasion, folk arts organizations functioning in a state-wide capacity or programs housed in other state-wide agencies. From a combined total of 1,539 addresses received from 42 states, a random sampling of approximately 500 organizations were sent surveys. Nearly 200 were returned because of incorrect addresses. Of the remaining organizations, 102 completed surveys for a response rate of 33%.

A lengthier second survey designed to attain more detail on organizational status, activities, and needs of 501(c)(3) folk arts organizations was sent to a sampling of 31 self-identified folk arts organizations to which 74% responded. The nine page survey covered topics pertaining to organizational background; facility and programming space; programming activity; audience and communities served; community relationships and organizational visibility; and financial status and needs. In addition to the original surveys, other relevant statistical data were consulted as well and are referenced throughout the study. Interviews conducted with individuals in the field helped to identify issues for the study. An advisory working group served in a consulting capacity throughout the duration of the study and assisted in shaping the focus. Eight topics representing diverse aspects and interests of the field were chosen to be profiled to provide a broad sense of issues, historical development, and range of activity. Most profiles are based largely on interviews and materials provided by organizations and individuals.

Distribution of Cultural Centers of Color by Disciplines
(n=543)



Distribution of cultural centers of color by discipline. See table for break-out of "other" category. Reprinted from *Cultural Centers of Color* (National Endowment for the Arts, 1992).

Number of Cultural Centers of Color in Other* Artistic Disciplines
(n=110)

Folk Arts	24
Humanities	18
Media Arts	18
Opera/Music Theater	12
Literature	9
Nonarts/Nonhumanities	9
Interdisciplinary	8
Crafts	7
Design Arts	4

*Cultural centers of color working in "other" disciplines. Reprinted from *Cultural Centers of Color* (National Endowment for the Arts, 1992).

Folk Arts Funding at a Glance

From 1986 through 1994, state arts agency funding for folk arts has been consistently 2 to 3% of the annual budget total. In fiscal year 1994, according to the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, states awarded over \$4,757,105 in folk arts grants out of \$219,606,353.*

State arts agency funding supported the work of 48,318 artists and an estimated 15,000,000 were reported to benefit from these grants (including audiences, instruction participants, conference attendees, broadcast listeners, etc.)

53 out of 56 state arts agencies and special jurisdictions routinely award folk arts grants. In FY 1994, 50 out of 53 reporting agencies made folk arts awards.

In addition to the \$4,757,105 in folk arts grants awarded by states in FY 1994, estimated additional funds of \$2,417,003 reached folk artists in other funding categories such as ethnic dance, ethnic music, crafts and multidisciplinary categories.

According to Local Arts Agency Facts, 1994, 52% of those local arts agencies who make grants fund the folk arts.**

In Round Two Funding (1994), The Fund for Folk Culture's Lia Wallace-Reader's Digest Community Folklife Program awarded \$350,740 to 36 organizations for public programs and community heritage projects.***

In past years, the National Endowment for the Arts' Folk & Traditional Arts Program routinely reviewed applications in categories including performances, festivals and tours; exhibitions; apprenticeships; media (radio, recordings, film and video); documentation; services to the field; and folk arts in education.

According to preliminary 1994 data, state arts agencies funded 26 types of folk arts activities or projects, the most common ones being apprenticeships, performances, school residencies, festivals, instruction/classes, operating support and fellowships.

In Round Two funding, The Fund for Folk Culture's Lia Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund Community Folklife Program funded projects in categories including festivals; fieldwork with public programs; exhibitions; fieldwork and research; instruction and preservation; concert series; tours; programs with multi-presentational formats; and miscellaneous (projects including technical and marketing assistance to artists, conferences, etc.).

*Source: Unless otherwise noted, figures were supplied by NASAA and are based on preliminary FY1994 data requested by the author from state arts agency final descriptive reports submitted annually to NASAA and NEA. Preliminary figures exclude amounts from Connecticut, Washington, D.C. and American Samoa.

**Source: Local Arts Agency Facts, 1994 (Washington, D.C.; National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies, 1995). Source: Randy Cohen, Director of Research and Information, MALAA.

***Source: The Fund for Folk Culture, Lia Wallace-Reader's Digest Community Folklife Program Community Heritage Projects: Public Programs, Round Two Proposals, January, 1994.

“... EVERY ARTIST
IS A LOCAL ARTIST
SOMEWHERE.
ALL BELONG TO
THE COMMUNITY
THEY CALL HOME.”⁴

from *An American Dialogue*,
a report of the National Task Force
on Presenting and Touring
the Performing Arts

All artists are local. The concept is deceptively simple but it speaks directly to one of the two guiding principles of this study. In its examination of the breadth and depth of folk and traditional arts activity in communities throughout the U.S., this study is based on a particular approach to art. It is a study that understands art and artists as an integral part of the social, cultural and economic life of a given community. It takes for granted the power of art to speak through time and across cultures and yet, it values the grounded specificity of traditional arts and artistic traditions in everyday life and further, it values the aesthetic and cultural diversity that such an approach implies. It also understands that traditional arts and artists are doubly local, that traditional arts are both rooted in time and place and expressions of the shared aesthetics, values and meanings of a cultural community. In much the same way as writer Peter Gurahnick described the “roots musicians” whom he profiled in *Lost Highway*, this study looks at traditional artists who speak from a “shared experience that links them inextricably not to the undifferentiated mass audience that television courts, but to a particular, sharply delineated group of men and women who grew up in circumstances probably very much like their own, who respond to the [art] not just as entertainment but as a vital part of their lives.”⁵

All artists are local. The statement speaks also to some of the issues involved in making generalizations about the folk

arts as well as the cultural needs and resources of diverse communities. As the profiles apply illustrate, the concerns and circumstances of particular traditions vary. Some traditions continue to thrive, the meaning and value of others have changed and shifted over time, while still others are critically endangered. Many Native American traditions, as Dave Warren’s comment makes clear, are at the brink of extinction and will possibly die with the current generation of elders. As David Roche’s article describes, Sam-Ang Sam and other Cambodian artists are involved in a literal fight for cultural reclamation. Quilts, objects of beauty once made of necessity, are now for many a pursuit of leisure. On the other hand, Louisiana Cajun music, language and culture, thought to be in imminent danger of demise thirty and forty years ago, are undergoing a revival and have been for some time. Much the same thing could be said for many Hawaiian cultural traditions.

All artists are local. While traditional art and culture derive much of their strength and eloquence from this grounded specificity, it has also made the field vulnerable—for a simple reason. Most cultural funding programs have historically favored artists who come from “somewhere else” and have concentrated on delivering artistic resources or assets *to* communities from outside. Certainly, these approaches are not wrong or made with bad intent but their rigid application can sometimes make it easy for funders



PUERTO RICAN PLENA MUSICIANS PERFORMING IN FRONT OF A MEMORIAL WALL, NEW YORK CITY.
(PHOTO BY MARTHA COOPER © 1996)

and policy makers to be blind to the artistic traditions that are *of, by* and *for* a community and blind to the local wisdom which insists on identifying or developing the artistic traditions and cultural resources *within* and *between* communities. It is a dilemma worth considering and one to which this and other fields grounded in cultural specificity and approaches may be able to respond. At the heart of the dilemma are questions concerning the meaningful intersection of local, regional and national resources. How do we listen and respond to local wisdom? How do we identify local cultural resources? How can state, regional or national resources be brought to bear upon the needs and problems of particular cultural communities and traditions in ways that make sense? Through the profiles and other information contained in this publication, it is our intent to abstract lessons and suggest successful strategies which address some of these questions.

Just as John Dos Passos provided a newsreel of headlines in his classic U.S.A. trilogy to indicate an historically resonant context, the disparate numbers shown on the next page provide a suggestive context for this study. They are shards that refract light in several directions and they can be manipulated in many ways. They speak directly to massive social and cultural change and signify loss for some, a shuffling of boundaries for others and new beginnings for still more. Implicit in the numbers, too, are the “concerns”

Juggling Numbers: Demographic Bursts and Paradoxes⁶

- 32.8% of U.S. population growth during the 1980s was due to immigration. Nearly one out of every thirteen Americans is foreign-born.
- 75.2% of the U.S. population occupies 2.5% of the land area. Nearly one out of four people who lived on farms and ranches in 1979 were off the land ten years later.
- Only 3% of the food plants that our grandparents cultivated and ate in 1900 are still available today.⁷
- 32 million in the U.S. (13%) speak languages other than English at home.
- The top two U.S. magazines by circulation are the American Association of Retired Persons' *Bulletin* and AARP's *Modern Maturity*.
- More than 100 languages are spoken in the school systems of New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles and Fairfax County, Virginia.⁸
- The number of wage earners on farms and ranches fell 23% from 1979 to 1989. Six out of ten farmers and ranchers must seek part-time employment at least part of the time.

to which Peter Pennekamp referred in the opening quotation as well as an uncertainty about the meaning of community in an America in demographic flux. This sense of community is the second guiding principle of this study:

Community is a much banded-about term these days. We speak about “the community?” as if it were one monolithic entity. We speak about “getting community input” and “advocating for the community.” But mostly, we speak about the loss of community, a lack of connectedness, the feeling of being cut adrift in a fragmented world that moves too fast. Home is a source of comfort for some. For others, home is a place to leave, a place to mark time or a place made unrecognizable by irrevocable (and sometimes violent) change. Civil wars, global trade, ecological and technological change are rendering obsolete our notions of national borders as well as the borders defining our communities and private lives.

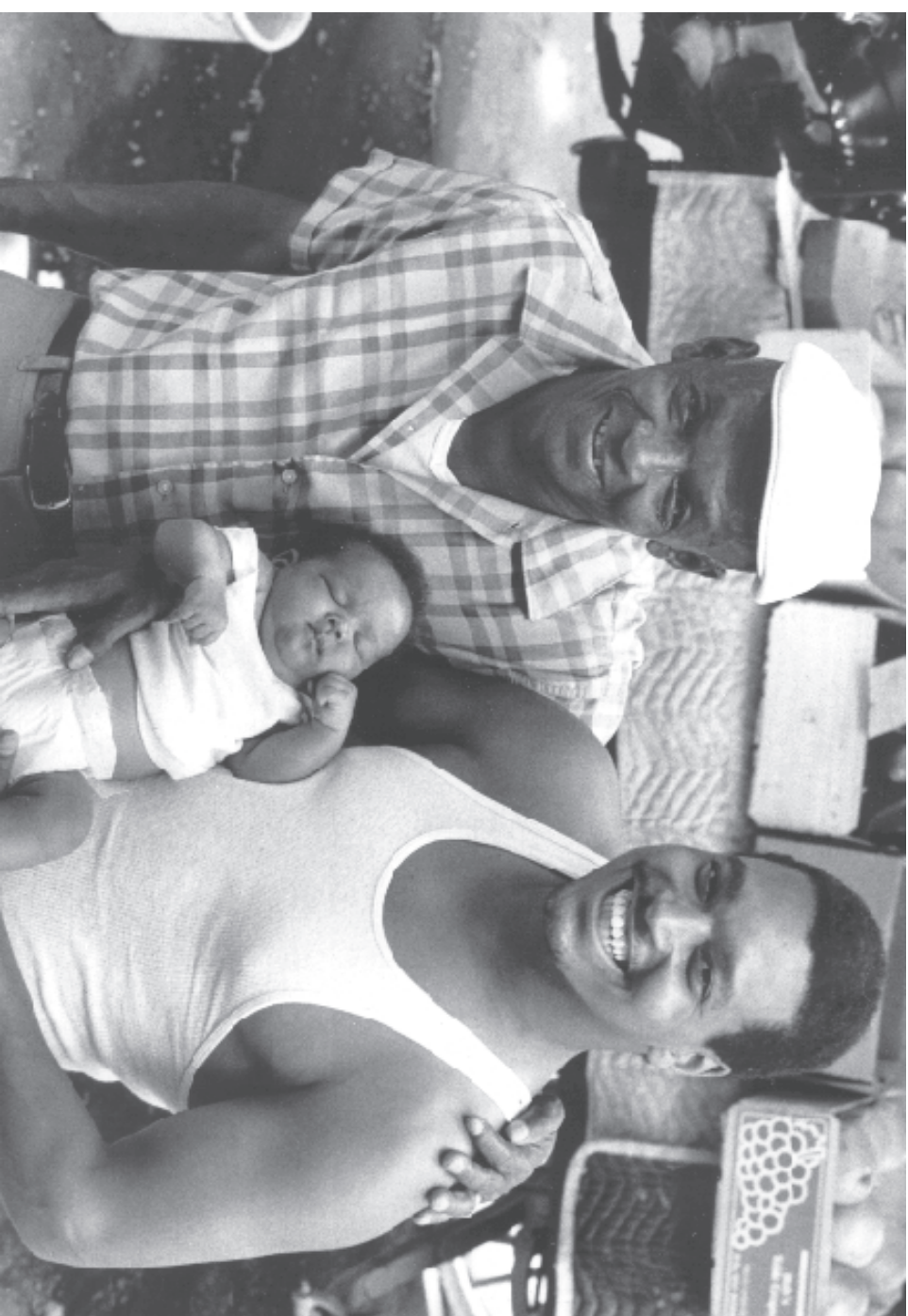
In *Habits of the Heart*, a sociological study of individualism and commitment in American life, the authors talk at great length about “communities of memory” and a shortened version of their definition is worth quoting here because it informs the sense of community that appears throughout this study and it speaks directly to the relationships of artist, artistic tradition and community which are at the core of traditional arts and culture.

“Communities, in the sense in which we are using the

term, have a history—in an important sense they are constituted by their past—and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a ‘community of memory’.... People growing up in communities of memory not only hear the stories that tell how the community came to be, what its hopes and fears are, and how its ideals are exemplified in outstanding men and women; they also participate in the practices—ritual, aesthetic, ethical—that define the community as a way of life. We call these ‘practices of commitment’ for they define the patterns of loyalty and obligation that keep the community alive. And if the language of the self-reliant individual is the first language of American moral life, the languages of tradition and commitment in communities of memory are “second languages” that most American know as well, and which they use when the language of the radically separate self does not seem adequate.”⁹

While we might quibble with the emphasis the authors give to individualism as a trait valued equally by all cultural groups in the U.S., the definition of “communities of memory” accurately describes many of the groups portrayed in these pages. They are enduring communities that share more than similar interests, consumer preferences or geographic proximity. They share values and memories and their artistic traditions, their cultural heritage are nothing if not practices of “commitment.” In his poem “The Second

Coming?” W. B. Yeats wrote, “things fall apart; the center cannot hold.” Things do fall apart—they break, they change, they die—but somehow the center does seem to hold. This study contains stories which describe what that center is and how people hold onto it—at times for dear life.



FATHER'S DAY: ARABBER GILBERT HALL, SR. WITH HIS SON GILBERT HALL, JR. AND GRANDSON GILBERT KINARD HALL III, BALTIMORE. (PHOTO BY ROLAND L. FREEMAN © 1996)