

The Theory and Practice of a Folklore Activist: From Fieldwork to Programming and Beyond

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This piece focuses on the relationship between the theory and practice of folklore, between what folklorists think and how they convey the results of that thought to a range of audiences, from other colleagues to the general public. The practice of folklore generally starts with fieldwork, the process of gathering information from cultural sources. This fieldwork can lead directly or indirectly to a variety of possible expressions, from a paper or an article to a book to a documentary film to a festival presentation to a museum exhibition, among others. Or it can lead to nothing more than a better understanding of an issue by the fieldworker. The fieldwork itself can produce a variety of documentary trappings, including field notes, audio- or videotape recordings, drawings, photographs, and maps. This documentary evidence can remain in the possession of the fieldworker or it become part of a collection of similar materials, usually called an archive.

Sometimes in addition to, sometimes instead of documenting and analyzing past performances within the scholarly community, folklorists strive to program and present one of the next performances in a setting that will communicate it to wider audience, not only on the page, but also on a stage. This practice brings challenges and opportunities of its own. For example, the most sensitively programmed cultural presentation at a folk festival is not the same as the natural performance in its own time and place. But some of these concerns can be resolved with the same sort of careful and serious study of performance and context at that produced in the academic setting.

Programming issues were directly related to the activist fieldwork and archival philosophies at the heart of the University of Louisiana's Center for Acadian and Creole Folklore. The theoretical issues underpinning the fieldwork that initially led to the production of the first Cajun Music Festival in 1974, as well as the issues that emerged and evolved as the festival became an annual event, were directly related to the establishment of the Center's archives. The programming of the festival was based on a marriage or an integration of ideas that grew out of two distinct camps: on the one hand, activist folklife-based considerations as influenced by the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife, and on the other, linguistic-based considerations that grew out of CODOFIL's language and cultural preservation initiatives. Fieldwork and programming practices evolved based on a desire to discover and present excellent folk performers from real-life (authentic) contexts, avoiding the more self-conscious, public purveyors of folkloric (authentic-like) culture. The fieldwork practices that grew out of the festival experience also contributed to the fieldwork practices that addressed the collection and analysis of other traditional genres in French Louisiana, including oral tradition and material culture. Selecting the collection of performers who would essentially define the moment in Cajun music and zydeco each year posed interesting problems and opportunities for festival producers, including the incorporation of young performers and the new, emerging styles that are necessarily part of a living tradition. Cajun musician Dewey Balfa put it best, insisting on the importance of treating tradition

as a process, not a product. “I’m interested in the very life of this culture and how it continues to evolve in its own terms. I don’t want to freeze-dry it or pin it to a wall like a dead butterfly.” Dewey was not only a musician, but what folklorists have come to call a community scholar, that is, a member of a folk community who has learned to address the issues that are at the heart of the study and practice of folklore, such as cultural equity, as described by Alan Lomax (1972) and the relationship between preservation and innovation within the traditional context.

I first met Dewey Balfa in 1973, upon my return from an academic year in France where I learned about him from Roger Mason, an American folk musician who had encountered Cajun music through Dewey Balfa on the folk festival circuit, and who was now performing it on the Maisons de la Culture circuit in France. Homesick after nearly a year away from my native South Louisiana, I was drawn to the announcement of this performance of “la musique cadienne de la Louisiane.” After the concert, I met with Mason to tell him how much I had appreciated hearing the music that I had always associated with my father’s generation. Growing up in the late 1950s and ‘60s, I listened to rock and roll like the rest of my generation, but we heard Cajun music on the radio, on television and when it was Daddy’s turn to choose the records. Mason said, “If you’re from Louisiana, you must know the people that I learned from, Dewey Balfa, Nathan Abshire...” I had to admit that I didn’t know them. While I had studied French for four years in high school and three years at the university to that point, we had not been afforded many opportunities to learn about our own French culture, language and history. Mason suggested that if I were interested in learning more, I should look up Dewey Balfa. Soon after my return to Louisiana, I went to Dewey’s house just south of Basile and introduced myself, telling him about the experience I had had in France, and insisting that I needed to know him more than Roger Mason. He laughed and invited me in. We started a conversation that was to last nearly two decades. I learned at least as much from Dewey as from any professor I ever had in a formal university setting. One of the first projects that came up on the screen was the first Cajun music festival on March 26, 1974. Inspired by Dewey and enriched by his connections to the Smithsonian’s Folklife Program staff, including especially Ralph Rinzler, we prepared the first Tribute to Cajun Music which turned out to be the first large popular rally of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana’s renaissance movement.

The fieldwork we did for the festival was a natural extension of the fieldwork that had begun with John and Alan Lomax who began collecting folksongs for the Library of Congress in the 1930s. The Lomaxes had a New Deal-style activist agenda, intending for their collection to serve as the basis for cultural recycling projects in regions throughout the country. Based on their experience in French Louisiana in 1934 and 1937, Alan had used his position on the Newport Folk Festival board to send Ralph Rinzler and Mike Seeger to Louisiana early in 1964 to identify musicians who would be invited to perform at Newport later that year. Following leads from Harry Oster who had collected in the area a few years before, they found Gladdy Thibodeaux, Louis “Vinesse” Lejeune and Dewey Balfa (who served as a last-minute replacement on guitar). The trio received standing ovations for their performance of old-time traditional Cajun music at Newport. Dewey Balfa was overwhelmed by this reception for what was often dismissed as “nothing but chanky-chank” back home. He came back home determined to spread the good news that Cajun music was appreciated outside of the area. He maintained close

contact with Rinzler who became in 1967 Director of Folklife Programs at the Smithsonian Institution. There Rinzler continued to produce folk festivals celebrating America's rich cultural diversity; these festivals often featured the Cajun and Creole music he had encountered during his early fieldwork. Through his steady contact with Rinzler and other public folklorists, Balfa learned to articulate such issues as cultural conservation and the process of tradition.

The first Cajun music festival was an overwhelming success, surprising even the most enthusiastic of its organizers. Musicians were selected according to the notions of cultural authenticity established by Rinzler and Balfa. "No crooners," Rinzler cautioned, for example. His preference for the clear, high-pitched vocals and unadorned instrumental styles of earlier Cajun music dominated the evening. The concert was structured to feature the historical development of Cajun and Creole music, ballad singers Inez Catalon and Marcus Landry, twin fiddlers Dennis McGee and Sady Courville, early stylists Marc Savoy, Lionel Leleux and Varise Connor, Nathan Abshire, the Balfa Brothers, and the Ardoin Family, as well as the more modern sounds of Clifton Chenier and Blackie Forrestier and the Cajun Aces. Cajun country star Jimmy C. Newman, whose hit "Lache pas la patate" was in full swing, was used to anchor the concert, despite his silky smooth instrumentals and rich vocals. Even Rinzler saw the wisdom of Dewey's brilliant plan to use Newman's popularity to attract a crowd that would then be there to hear the rest of the evening's line up. And it worked; many in attendance commented then and later that they had come to hear Newman and were in some cases reminded of and in others surprised by the power of the more traditional performers. The festival was an undeniable success, packing Lafayette's Blackham Coliseum despite lightning, thunder and driving rain. It turned out to be the largest mass rally of what was coming to be called the Louisiana French renaissance movement.

Organizers also saw the opportunity to use the energy produced by this initial concert to fuel a long-term project. In the momentum of the moment, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (then the University of Southwestern Louisiana) created the Center for Acadian and Creole Folklore to integrate this new field of study into the academic community. Balfa, who had seen the benefit of the archives at the Library of Congress and at the Smithsonian Institution, insisted that we needed a similar bank of information on ourselves here in Louisiana. When I pointed out that I did not have the financial resources to produce an archive, Balfa pointedly asked, "Do you have enough money to buy one tape?" I answered yes. He continued, "Then buy one and go out and record an interview, and put that tape on a shelf. Then record another one when you can afford it. And when you put that second tape next to the first one on the shelf, you have the beginnings of an archive." He was right, as usual; the beginnings of the archive were just that homemade and it worked. About the same time, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana bought dozens of tapes and funded early recording efforts, using the fieldwork tapes in French radio programming. Soon enough, we also received critical support from the Rockefeller Foundation that paid for hundreds of tapes, which were recorded and gathered on the shelves to extend the archive. We also contacted folklorists who had worked in Louisiana in the past, such as Lomax, Oster and Rinzler, to obtain copies of their fieldwork materials. Other collections from the past, such as those of Elizabeth Brandon, William Owen and Corinne Saucier, were also obtained. Now, gathered in one place for the first time, the Center's archives provided a

sense of the evolution and development of Cajun and Creole music from unaccompanied ballad tradition to contemporary dance band styles. Fieldwork on oral tradition and material culture was added as well. The field recordings of students and colleagues continue to enrich our understanding of who we are and how we had come to be that way. But the collection is not an end in itself. Instead, it is intended to serve as a resource for cultural recycling. For example, when the Center acquired copies of the 1934 field recordings made by John and Alan Lomax, it was not only to repatriate this important research for archival purposes. Copies were provided to the families of the original performers, and contemporary musicians were encouraged to use the collection as a source for “new” material.

In this spirit of cultural recycling, the Center for Acadian and Creole Folklore also organizes festivals and special performances, television and radio programs, and offers classes and workshops through the university’s French and Francophone Studies program. The Center produces books and articles that communicate new discoveries and interpretations to community members as well as scholars. There were precious few books and articles available on Cajun and Creole culture, and most of the few that there were had been done by outsiders who often misunderstood the culture because they did not have a deep understanding of it. I became interested in writing books and articles so that there would be some. But books and articles do not reach the large audiences especially of Cajuns and Creoles who needed to have access to information about themselves. So the Center has explored other ways to disseminate its findings. We joined forces with record producers to release special recordings based on the fieldwork we were collecting. We joined forces with radio producers and filmmakers to produce special programs and documentaries based on the fieldwork we were collecting. We joined forces with educational institutions to have singers and storytellers perform in classes and special lecture series. Student and faculty researchers have focused on a wide range of subjects, including the traditional Mardi Gras, *traiteurs*, folk religion, folk justice, traditional humor, social institutions, foodways, dances, and material culture. This research typically focuses on contemporary as well as historical aspects of the issues, reflecting Dewey Balfa’s concerns, considering folklore as a vital ongoing process rather than as a stagnant product. The roots and development of Cajun and Creole folklore are actively explored, taking researchers back to the regions of France (especially Poitou, Vendée and Bretagne) that provided most of the French settlement of Louisiana, as well as the other major sources of influence, including Spain, Germany, England, Ireland, Québec and the Acadian Maritimes, the West Indies and Africa. Of particular interest is the process of creolization, the unique blending of cultures that occurred in Louisiana to produce the folk architecture, music, oral tradition, and cuisine of the region. Through this range of activities, we try to integrate both sides of folkloristics, the scholarly and the public, without getting caught in the perceived trap between the two.

For my own part, I became involved in fieldwork quite simply because I realized that it was the only way to reach the information that was missing from the record. The most important untapped source for information on the Cajuns and Creoles was the Cajuns and Creoles themselves. The fieldwork-based approach of folkloristics provided a method to reach that source. The naturally interdisciplinary nature of folkloristics, necessarily integrating considerations of history and art, text and context, provided the wide range of approaches needed to understand the complexities of culture and tradition,

including oral tradition, traditional music, vernacular architecture, folk art, and seasonal rituals, among other cultural expressions. Folkloristics also led to considerations of important cultural and social issues such as conservation, transmission, and innovation within the context of tradition. And folkloristics and linguistics made perfect partners in the effort to understand the context of French Louisiana.

People are most aware of my work in Cajun and Creole music, perhaps because of the high visibility of the Cajun Music Festival and the Liberty Theater radio show, but what first drew me to the study of Cajun and Creole folk cultures was oral tradition. My first book project, *The Makers of Cajun Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984; rpt as *Cajun and Creole Music Makers* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999]) grew out of my work with musicians, but it was based more on them than their music. Elemore Morgan, Jr., and I got the idea to visit the musicians involved in the first festival where they lived, worked and played, to interview them about their lives and experiences and to photograph them in their own worlds. What we were doing was indeed fieldwork, but it felt more like visiting. It was our intention to see and hear in their own terms these “barbers and bus drivers, farmers and firefighters, mechanics and masons” who “sell discount furniture, discount gas, insurance and insulation,” who “work nine-to-five and seven-and-seven, onshore and offshore,” because “they make art out of everyday life,” and because they were also becoming important figures in this cultural self-preservation experiment (1984:11). Elemore and I worked for ten years on the project, collecting oral histories and taking photographs of these remarkable performers in various contexts, from their kitchens and front porches to festival stages and concert halls in Louisiana and beyond.

Around the same time, I became interested in Louisiana French fictional tales. French-speaking Cajuns and Creoles have virtually no literary tradition, since most did not have the opportunity to learn to read or write French. Yet they do have a tradition of oral poetry (in songs) and oral stories (in tales). And just because the storytellers and singers could not themselves write their own stories and songs down, this did not mean that the stories and songs could not be written down by someone who had learned to write the language of their expression. In an attempt to place these traditions on the record, I began recording folktales and folksongs and transcribing them. Lacking any formal training at the time, I improvised my own first fieldwork forays based on instinct and good intentions. I found that identifying potential singers was fairly easy; friends and family members were generally aware of those in their midst who can sing. Identifying storytellers proved to be more of a problem, at least initially. This is ironic, since everyone tells stories of one sort or another at one time or another. But in the early going, I was approaching the issue from the same direction as my predecessors, including Alcée Fortier, Calvin Claudel, Corinne Saucier and Elizabeth Brandon. We had all looked for the animal tales and magic tales that clearly illustrated the connection between French Louisiana and its historical and cultural roots in France and Africa. Basically, we found what we were looking for, but there was not much of it. We knocked on the doors of potential informants and asked, “Do you know any animal tales or folktales?” If they said, “No.” we thanked them and went on to the next lead. We often found out what they did not know, but not what they did know. Sometime later, when I read Corinne Saucier’s assertion in her introduction to *Folk Tales from French Louisiana* that her collection of 33 tales was small but “representative... of our Southern Louisiana form of oral tradition

known as folklore, a heritage that is disappearing in our mechanized age” (Saucier 1972), it occurred to me that something must be wrong. First, my activist position made me unwilling to admit that the tradition was dying. And second, I knew that there were more stories than that in French Louisiana oral tradition because I had spent nearly every afternoon after school in my father’s barbershop where I had heard thousands of stories over the years. So I rethought my fieldwork strategy. I realized that it is much easier to find out about storytellers in a bar or a barbershop or a garage than in the parish rectory. An essential aspect of my change in methodology involved seeking out *storytelling* rather than *storytellers*, events rather than people. I found that the first method had exposed the tradition of memory, the stories that a few people remembered from long ago, but no longer really told actively, while the second exposed the active tradition, the stories that people were telling each other on their own, unprompted by a folklorist’s questions.

My fieldwork interests have also been driven by my interest in and commitment to preserving the French language in Louisiana. The stories presented in my collection, *Cajun and Creole Folktales*, represent the continuity of the core of Cajun folklife in the midst of what has been a sometimes brutal Americanization process. At the turn of this century, several successive generations of young Cajun and Creole children found themselves in classrooms for the first time. They also found themselves forbidden to speak their native French language in those classrooms. This occurred not only in South Louisiana, but in communities across the country where languages other than English were spoken. Among the results of this language repression was a rip in the social fabric. Parents who had learned to be ashamed of their language and culture, of their parents and of themselves, avoided inflicting what they considered a social liability on their own children. A major current in the natural flow of cultural transmission was of course severely disrupted. The language barely survived, despite remarkably well organized efforts to eradicate it. Efforts to revive it have come mostly through official channels, especially in the schools. Tales are, of course, told in a certain language and in South Louisiana that language has been on the verge of completely disappearing for several decades. Given this situation, that storytelling in French would persist in the South Louisiana context to this day might reasonably be considered nothing short of a miracle. Yet I have been able to record thousands of stories in French since 1974. This is not because I am a miracle worker (though it is only with a fresh infusion of modesty and great reluctance that I relinquish that notion). It is instead because what is often described as a fragile tradition seems instead to be remarkably resilient because of the nature of its transmission, not only from one generation to the next, but also across the generations. And even in seemingly innocuous jokes, one can sometimes find impressive historical pedigrees. “Tu pourrais mentir” was told to me by Martin Latiolais, from Catahoula, attributed to one of his neighbors:

Un nommé Willie Johnson. Et il est mort. Sa fille reste droit là. Ma première voisine-là, c’est sa fille. Il est mort, il y a plusieurs années, mais lui, il avait une mémoire, Jack! Tu parles un vieux bougre qu’avait une mémoire! Il pouvait te raconter des contes qui duraient des heures de temps long. Puis ça rimait, tu connais? O, lui, il aurait été bon pour ça-là, ouais! Et puis s’asseoir toute la journée, et puis te conter jamais le même.

Puis là, il racontait un tas des contes, il se mettait lui en dedans-là, mais il était tout le temps en bas, tu vois?

Il dit, une fois, il était au bal. Il dit il était après danser avec un belle fille. Ça fait, il dit à la fille-là, “*Boy*, t’es belle! Je te trouve belle, ouais!” il dit.

Et la fille-là dit, “Monsieur Johnson, moi, je peux pas dire autant de vous. Je vous trouve pas beau.”

“Mais,” il dit, “écoute! Tu pourrais faire comme moi-là, si tu voudrais, tu pourrais mentir!”

This same story was reported in various versions from the Italian Renaissance, including this one attributed to Piovano Arlotto in Florence:

One day I was with Father Arlotto and some other friends of his, sitting on a bench opposite the famous church of St. John the Baptist. A young woman, bolder than she was wise, passed by, and with her a respectable older woman and a maidservant. Arlotto turned towards these women and said to us: “See what a pretty girl that is.” The young woman, hearing this, thought that the priest was making fun of her, and replied loudly to Arlotto: “I can’t say the same of you.” “Sure you could,” replied Arlotto, “if you told a lie, as I did.” (Bowen 1988:24-25).

It quickly became clear to me that the stories were not ends in themselves. The storytellers themselves were the real treasures. The first time I met Mrs. Evelia Boudreaux, she told me four stories, including an animal tale and a version of *Petit Poucet*, responding to my request for such tales. By the time I visited her one year later, I had had my epiphany and opened my consideration of tales to include anything she wanted to tell. She told me seven more stories. When I returned home that night, I found a message that Mrs. Boudreaux had called insisting that she had some more stories to tell me. I said I knew this, that I had gone earlier that day to record her. “No,” my mother pointed out, “she just called to say that she wants you to go back tomorrow because she has a few more tales that she forgot to tell you today.” I returned the next day, and she told me eight more stories. Over the years, she dredged up dozens of stories from her memory to tell me, because she had learned that I found them valuable and interesting. Similarly, I first met Ben Guiné while tracking down leads on storytellers, the old way, in Parks. After several visits during which I met many interesting people, but no one to tell the kind of stories I thought I was looking for, I reached the last name on my list. Not knowing where this person lived, I asked some children playing outside for directions. The little boy who won the footrace to my truck climbed in and directed me to the house. That visit turned up dry as well, but the boy who was listening to my questions about animal tales offered that his grandfather told stories like that. He took me to his grandfather’s house where I met Ben Guiné who quite literally left a plate of steaming food on his kitchen table to come into the living room to tell his tales. Over the years, he too told me dozens of stories of all sorts. His remarkable storytelling talents and wide repertoire of stories eventually attracted considerable attention, including a filming session by Louisiana Public Broadcasting on the porch of his little house in Promised Land, across the Bayou Teche from Parks, to the astonishment and delight of his neighbors. Based on a philosophy of cultural activism, I tried to find ways to integrate them into the ongoing effort to preserve Louisiana’s French language and culture. Mrs. Boudreaux, Ben Guiné and several other storytellers appeared in storytelling events at

festivals and in schools, thrilling crowds and school children with such their impressive repertoires and masterful styles.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggested in “Mistaken Dichotomies” (*JAF* 101:140-155) that it was time for folklorists “to reassess their division of labor, to reexamine the split between the academic and applied traditions, and to close it.” Yet as Robert Baron and Nick Spitzer point out in their introduction to *Public Folklore* (1992), her article “has been criticized for using language, perspectives, and examples that reify the dichotomy Kirshenblatt-Gimblett sought to erase. The article was aimed at provoking critical discourse in the field, and her academically centered, dialectical style of writing often appears to show value in seemingly contradictory positions.” Barbara K-G was attempting to calm the waters in the field because there was by then a raging debate over the relative value of what has been called “applied folklore,” “folklore in the public sector,” and “public folklore.” Archie Green traces its origins and evolution, as well as the rift it generated, epitomized by the feud between Benjamin Botkin and Richard Dorson (Green 1992). There are possibilities for a working relationship between “pure” and “applied” folklore, focusing specifically on performance-centered folklore theory and folk arts programming in the public sector.

The performance-centered approach to folklore studies has given us some of the most theoretical sounding and looking scholarship in recent times. Though its practice has sometimes been dismissed as a jargon-filled academic exercise, the basic notion of considering the whole context of folklore performances has more to offer than obtuse, esoteric articles, especially in the area of presenting and programming folk performances in a variety of public sector settings. We set ourselves up as scholars trained to learn about people from those people. We do pretty well in many cases. Other times, we fail to apply the same theories we develop to understand cultural phenomena when we present it.

Folklorists who insisted that there is more to folklore than the texts its study generates were absolutely right. There are cultural imperatives in each natural performance of traditional culture, including setting, time, and constant negotiation between performers and audience. The consideration of these complex factors has led to elaborate and highly technical studies by those whom Richard Dorson referred to as the “young Turks,” including Abrahams, Bauman, Ben Amos, Georges and Goldstein. There have been some ambitious and excellent applications of this “holistic” approach to understanding performed folklore, including Henry Glassie’s *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* (1982) and Linda Degh’s *Folktales and Society* (1969).

The vast range of information needed to fuel this kind of study has produced several theories concerning the documentation of performance. Many of these focus on the capturing of traditional performance for contemplation and analysis. Dennis Tedlock produced a 200+ page treatise on the importance of pause, pitch and volume in the recording and reporting of oral performance (1983). His study is intended to be a guide to the production of transcriptions “in which the reader coordinates vision with the properly-tuned reenactment of sounds.” His ultimate goal is to produce a “performable text,” a transcription with so much accurate information that a reasonably skilled reader could reproduce the performance. And since so much folklore, even in this country, is originally performed in languages other than English, Tedlock takes the process one step further to strive for the “performable translation.” He eventually goes on to analyze one

of his own performances of a translated Zuni text as a folklore performance in itself. He is either brutally honest or getting a little far afield here. [What happened to the original Zuni performance through all this processing?]

Elizabeth Fine also applied performance theory to the development of more complete transcriptions in *The Folklore Text* (1984). Her transcriptions contain lots of contextual and performance information including symbols to indicate pause, pitch and volume, as well as other non-lexical features such as gesture, position, audience reaction, etc. They consequently look like scientific notation or complex musical scores. I'm not quite sure about the purpose for such feats of transcription technology. If they lead to a better understanding of the cultural event, then they may be worth the effort. I would hope that they not become ends in themselves, an exercise in esoteric complexity. I would also hope that someone studying a cultural event later would not depend solely on the notation of another scholar, no matter how meticulous, without doing original fieldwork.

I buy, to a certain extent, the need for more detailed observation and analysis of context and performance, as championed by such American folklore luminaries as Ken Goldstein (1974). This has led to, among other things, the notion of culture as process rather than product. At the same time, I wonder why so much of this scholarship seems intent on trying to express the complexities of community and group dynamics and performance onto the printed page. Ultimately, even the most complex, elaborate performance transcription is not the folklore performance. Nor for that matter is the tape recording nor the film or videotape. Even if a storytelling event is shot in full color with four 70mm cameras simultaneously and recorded in Dolby/stereo/digital sound, the resulting documentation is not the performance. Even the performer cannot reproduce that performance. An important difference between the film and the performer, however, is that he can produce another performance the very next time he tells his stories on- or off-camera.

Sometimes in addition to, sometimes instead of documenting and analyzing past performances within the scholarly community, some folklorists strive to program and present one of those next performances in a setting that will communicate it to wider audience, not on the page but on a stage. This practice brings problems of its own. For example, the most sensitively programmed cultural presentation at a folk festival is not the same as the natural performance in its own time and place. But some of these concerns can be resolved with the same sort of careful and serious study of performance and context at that produced in the academic setting.

Academic folklorists have spent years pondering the nature and context of traditional performance, yet much of this energy has ended up only on the pages of professional journals. Meanwhile, few of the strategies and theories developed by public sector folklorists to address the specific problems of programming and presenting culture are ever applied beyond the stage in question. There is room and need for much more crossover. Joe Wilson and Lee Udall's *Folk Festival: A Handbook for Organization and Management* provides a theory of folk festival programming and presentation developed over decades of experience which then informs much of the practical information on everything from choosing performers to feeding them once they are on site. The innovative contextual programming of folklife at the Smithsonian's Festival of American

Folklife, based on some dramatic new ideas concerning the more holistic public presentation of people and their culture.

Folk festivals often tend to follow a high-energy model oriented towards large audiences developed decades ago at such events as the National Folk Festival and the Newport Folk Festival. This method of presentation has had positive effects, not the least of which has been the providing of national level validation for regional folk performers by having them perform on stages high off the ground with fancy electronic amplification before large enthusiastic audiences, often alongside nationally known performers. This method also has had certain limitations. Quieter, more intimate performance genres are difficult to program in such high-energy settings. In most cultures, ballad singing is a concert performance, that is, without dancing; it does not usually happen before thousands or even hundreds of people. In a large festival setting, both audience and performer must be prepared for this change in format. Smaller, more intimate, so-called workshops can provide a more familiar intimate setting. But even these may not be enough to set a cultural event in its best performance context. By drawing on careful observation of the rules and nature of cultural performance in its natural setting, folklorists can develop better, more sensitive, more effective and less abusive methods of presenting folklore and folklife in public settings.

The kinds of programming that folklorists produce are not the spontaneous events that occur naturally in folk communities. Folk festivals and concerts are often designed to reach an audience that could not otherwise easily experience the folk arts in question. They are thus almost invariably out of context, sometimes less so, as the case of a festival in or near its own cultural region, such as the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, other times more so as in the case of the major national festivals or a concert of folk music at Carnegie Hall. For better or worse, folklorists and festival producers often exhibit a penchant for this sort of invasion of “foreign” territory. To be successful, such public sector programming must be clever and calculating. It must inform and sensitize audiences while entertaining them. Careful preparation and presentation can usually get a crowd to understand enough to appreciate a folk performance in its own terms. Sometimes this can include simply enough ethnic and esthetic background to set up a performance. Other times, sites and audiences can be renegotiated to create a more natural environment for certain types of performance.

Storytelling, for example has been one of the most difficult cultural features to program effectively in a festival setting. Usually, storytellers are tacitly expected to perform as stand-up comics, though many do not possess the skills for entertaining the masses, nor are they necessarily interested in developing those skills. But settings can be renegotiated to work better for performer and audience as well. Storytelling is generally, by nature, an intimate performance that occurs among a small group of people who know each other and share a common language. Some storytellers can go a long way toward reaching a festival audience which may number in the hundreds, but a crowd that large will strain even the most outstanding performer. NEA National Heritage Award winner Ray Hicks told his stories well enough on stage at the 1983 Festival of American Folklife. But he seemed much more comfortable telling his stories backstage or on the grounds between performances to any crowd he was able to draw and hold on his own, which more closely resembled the dynamics of his performances back home. Festival organizers soon noticed this and encouraged Ray to tell his stories in a more spontaneous

way under the trees and without amplification (which imposed natural limitations on such important factors as the nature and size of the crowds).

During a performance at the University of Louisiana's French House, Creole storyteller Ben Guiné renegotiated his own audience in a similar way, but with slightly different results. A crowd of some 70 people showed up to hear this extraordinary storyteller perform. He was pleased with the show of interest, but as he began, I noticed that something was off. He was telling well, but he was not taking off as I had heard him do so often while listening to his stories in his living room or on his front porch. I realized later that he was straining to engage every person in the room. He realized this before I did. I was sitting next to him and about a third of the way through his first story, he accidentally bumped my knee during one of his expansive gestures. When he noticed I was within reach, he turned his chair to face me and proceeded to tell *me* the stories. He knew from our many long sessions that I understood his Creole and his stories. Also, I was an audience that he could handle, tapping, pushing, and pinching me to make the appropriate points. He then hit full stride and the rest of the evening, the crowd watched and listened to Ben Guiné telling me stories, which was much better for everyone concerned. When I realized what happened, I began experimenting with new formats for programming storytelling based around the concept of getting storytellers to tell in a small setting and arranging a crowd around the event to witness it from outside. One of these settings involved a circular stage setting with storytellers sitting in a circle around a table or ice chest facing inward toward each other, and with the audience in a larger circle all around. The audience thus hears the storytellers tell each other tales over their shoulders.

Ironically, except for the numbers, ballad singers used to singing for listeners can sometimes enjoy a more natural context at some festivals than dance bands who are often asked to perform as a concert band with people only listening to their music. Members of these bands can experience a range of feelings from confusion to frustration and even depression because they are used to the positive feedback of dancing crowds. While it is understandably important to some programmers to have people listen to the music, some festivals have learned to program dance parties as well as concert settings to provide these bands with a more appropriate context for their performance. Audiences sometimes take matters into their own hands when festival programmers don't provide this context. By 1974, when Dewey Balfa talked the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana into sponsoring the first Tribute to Cajun Music concert, he had already come to understand enough about the dynamics of such events from his own experiences on the folk festival circuit to invert the design on purpose. He knew that a Cajun crowd would dance if it were at all possible, as they did every Saturday night in dance halls throughout South Louisiana. But the intent of this special concert was to get Cajuns to appreciate the value of their own music by getting them to listen to it. So he encouraged programmers to hold the concert in a setting where dancing would not be possible. That evening, 12,000 Cajuns wiggled in their seats in Lafayette's Blackham Coliseum and listened to sounds that they had only heard before.

Traditional ballad singers are not used to singing before huge festival crowds, and conversely, huge festival crowds are certainly not used to listening to traditional ballad singers. Sometimes, however, unexpected programming can jar an unexpected response from a crowd. Ballad singers typically sing for small groups in intimate settings. Some

have attested that they remember singing for as many as a hundred or so during wedding receptions, but the tens of thousands that show up for the Cajun Music Festival are another matter altogether. Add to the numbers, the matter of electronic amplification and the festival stage could be thought of as a place quite alien to the performance of traditional ballads, which have been described as home music. Nevertheless, convinced that the unaccompanied human voice has a power that could carry such a moment, Cajun Music Festival organizers invited Marcie Lacouture to perform a few venerable ballads during a break between two high-energy bands at the 1985 festival. The crowd was stunned by the powerful simplicity of her beautiful voice singing songs laden with the patina of history. In 1986, she appeared in a more formal way with one of her mentors, Inez Catalon, listed in the schedule between Zachary Richard's Zack Attack and the Balfa Brothers Band. The pair once again captured the moment, focusing the huge dance crowd's attention on the earliest sounds of Cajun and Creole music. Zachary Richard instinctively knew this himself, occasionally inserting an *a capella* ballad into his hard-driving performances.

Some elements of traditional life, such as material culture, occupational folklife and foodways, are not as prone to presentation as performance as music and even storytelling. Some festivals have developed ingenious ways to present these to visitors. At the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife, the National Mall has been plowed to demonstrate traditional agricultural techniques. It has been turned into a racetrack to demonstrate traditional horsemanship. Airplanes and 18-wheelers have been brought in to serve as settings for the occupational folklore of pilots and truckers. The reflecting pond has been used to launch traditional boats built on site by craftsmen.

An especially difficult aspect of folklife to program in a festival context is foodways. It is unfair to expect a traditional cook to perform à la Julia Child. Yet festivals have become increasingly adept at presenting cooking techniques with the assistance of presenters who specialize in getting people to talk about what seems second nature to them. Sometimes participants take over and provide even more than the programmers bargained for. During 1982, a Cajun housewife was invited to demonstrate Louisiana French traditional cooking at the Smithsonian FAF. Fieldworker and presenter Kathy James was able to expand the presentation to include the housewife's extended family which produced results which would not have been possible with one isolated cook. The housewife was accompanied by her husband who offered to demonstrate some of the outdoor cooking men do in that same culture. Their four children joined them as well. Two of these were married and brought along their spouses and their own children for a vacation in Washington. This ultimately turned the foodways demonstration tent and surrounding area into a holistic family folklore experience that covered much more ground than just cooking. Mom's cooking demonstrations involved the whole family with members taking on traditional roles and engaging in typical conversation around the stove and chopping block. Dad's barbecue effortlessly and unselfconsciously became a family storytelling session around the pit as it always did back home, with festival visitors listening in from across the rope. This wasn't home, but it was much closer than festival visitors usually experience because the extended family was enough to achieve a sort of cultural critical mass. This programming of a little community paralleled Redfield's theories of culture and fieldwork. Yet, as Robert Cantwell noted, such programming can sometimes be less than successful, ironically if it too successfully

recreates cultural dynamics. Potential visitors can be reluctant to wander into contextual spaces, intimidated by the apparently closed nature of the exhibition (1992).

Sometimes festival organizers develop new ways of presenting culture based on their observations of performance in its own context. Sometimes participants can and do take over with their own theories about context and performance. Over the years, Dewey Balfa was visited by many folklorists and invited to many festivals. He learned from them what he needed to know to guide his own efforts to regenerate interest and respect for Cajun music in his native south Louisiana. This information also turned Balfa into quite an expert on folk festival theory sometimes to the chagrin of festival organizers who has not always thought out the issues as well as he had and certainly did not feel them as he did. An example of his insight was his constant struggle to perform with his own band rather than as a member of a Cajun All Star band. He reasoned that he should be allowed to perform in a way that was current and real, not to mention comfortable. His problem was compounded by the fact that he broke onto the folk festival circuit in the 1960s performing with the legendary Cajun accordionist Nathan Abshire. The combination of Balfa and Abshire was indeed magic and the music they made became set in the minds of audiences and festival producers alike. A number of factors including alcohol, egos and the stress of travel placed a great strain on the band and the two stopped performing together around 1970 in order to preserve their friendship. Despite their decision to avoid playing together, festival organizers continued to try to set up encounters between Balfa and Abshire. In 1976, the Balfa Brothers were invited to the Festival of American Folklife along with Nathan Abshire and his Pinegrove Boys in the hopes that the two musicians might at least be encouraged to visit each other on stage. They carefully avoided such a reunion with Dewey finally explaining that he hoped to remain friends with Nathan long after the festival ended and the crowds went home. He added that if they ever were to perform together again for a crowd, it would probably be in the Bearcat Lounge in their native Basile, or even more likely at someone's home for a friendly jam session and supper.

Two more Balfa festival stories give an excellent example of his understanding of culture as process, rather than as product. For years, he tried to convince festival organizers to allow him to come with his current band as he performed in the dancehalls every Saturday night. He eventually won a partial victory, coming with most of his dance band, but he was never allowed to bring along his steel guitar players. The argument was that the steel guitar was too modern, an inappropriate and inauthentic addition to the traditional instrumentation. Never mind the fact that Dewey Balfa, long recognized as a pillar of cultural preservation in America, chose to perform weekly with a steel guitar in his band, just as dozens of other Cajun bands did. In 1978, he finally confronted Smithsonian festival personnel on the issue, asking them, "Are you trying to present Cajun music as you wish it still were, or as it really is?" He was allowed to bring along fiddler Dick Richard who also played a few tunes on the steel guitar that year.

In 1985 Dewey delivered a brilliant extemporaneous address on the traditional process from the stage of the cultural conservation area of the Washington festival. Invited as an outstanding example of the effort to conserve America's traditional culture, he pointed out halfway through a forty-five-minute set that he had been playing some traditional songs, songs that he and his brothers had composed just before Rodney and Will died in 1978. He went to explain that he didn't have to turn around to know that he

had just made some people backstage very nervous, because he was there to represent cultural conservation. But for him cultural conservation did not mean freeze-drying culture and preserving it under glass. For him, cultural conservation meant preserving the very life of the culture. And if this was successful, then the culture was going to be alive and well and continue to grow and evolve in its own terms. And if this effort was successful in his native Louisiana, then fifty years or so from now, some young musicians were going to need some songs that were fifty or so years old to play, and so he had made some, and he was going to play them. He did, and the stage personnel as well as the audience were delighted to hear that his new songs sounded much like the old ones from his family tradition. He capped this remarkable demonstration by pointing that out and explaining that they sounded like the old stuff because they were coming from the same tradition and through the same process.

Festival organizers should never be afraid to be surprised. The people we invite to perform at festivals are sometimes uneducated, but rarely unintelligent. In a sense, Dewey's presentation was much more successful than the one that was originally intended for the cultural presentation stage that day. The audience and festival personnel alike had the opportunity to learn a fancy lesson about culture. After years of performing in such contexts, Dewey learned well how to operate the machinery. In this case, he was aiming his message in two directions at once. The immediate message was aimed at the audience, but that message and its reception was obviously meant to rebound backstage.

The Smithsonian staff has learned over the years to adapt and even yield to the natural momentum of traditional cultures. In 1985, Louisiana was featured at its annual Festival of American Folklife. Along with Cajuns and Creoles, there were folk performers and craftspersons from all over Louisiana, including Mardi Gras float builders, Mardi Gras "Indians," second-line dancers and a jazz band from New Orleans. Participants and presenters came up with the idea to have these groups parade through the site to give the crowds something of a Mardi Gras experience. Festival organizers hesitantly agreed. As the improvised parade snaked its way through the site, it became clear that something larger than was anticipated was happening on its own. The parade went outside the Louisiana area attracting crowds like a magnet. Soon there were thousands of people instinctively imitating Pork Chop and Kidney Stew as they danced and marched a second line following the floats, the jazz band and the "Indians." Eventually the procession arrived at its planned destination, the Louisiana dance party stage. The jazz band and the "Indians" gave inspired performances before yielding the stage to Filé, a traditional Cajun band scheduled to perform that evening. Filé opened its dance party concert with the traditional Cajun Mardi Gras song as several participants and Louisiana staff members appeared in traditional costume to lead the dancing. By then, the crowd was in a near frenzy. Festival director, Diana Parker came up to me and said with genuine concern in her voice, "We're very close to losing control here." She was right, but that was after all the point. I replied happily, "I know! It's great, isn't it?" To her credit, she immediately switched gears and celebrated the triumph of the moment. We had somehow conjured the spirit of Mardi Gras on a summer day in Washington, DC. In the controlled chaos of the improvised events, the crowd had gotten even closer to a true Mardi Gras experience than even the most hopeful of this affair's instigators could have imagined.

When the Liberty Theater's weekly live radio show was inaugurated over a decade ago, the cultural tourism benefit of having a performance that visitors could count on finding every Saturday night was an important part of the City of Eunice's strategy, but several unanticipated factors involved in the implementation of this plan strained the production team's resources. As National Folk Festival Director Joe Wilson once observed, we were "riding a bicycle while inventing it." Identifying and booking appropriate and effective cultural entertainment on a weekly basis proved to be a huge undertaking and chronically threatened to overwhelm the Liberty show's mostly volunteer staff. If the programming were to avoid depending on a limited number of known name bands from week to week, some fieldwork would be necessary. There was no provision for fieldwork built into the show's infrastructure. Consequently, programming was based essentially on the knowledge and experiences of interested and dedicated staff members. Some performers contacted the Eunice mayor's office, offering their services. Others contacted the host, the producer, the stage manager, the sound technician or a stagehand. Many furnished their own demo recordings for consideration. Nevertheless, in this seemingly haphazard way, over the years, the program succeeded in debuting such memorable performers as Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys, Richard Leboeuf and Two Step, Kenneth Thibodeaux and Cajun Dance, Balfa Toujours, McCauley, Reed and Vidrine, Charivari, Felton Lejeune and the Cajun Cowboys, Feufollet, Keith Frank, Zydeco Force, Chris Ardoin, and Geno Delafosse, among many others.

Sometimes the "fieldwork" was very close to the presentation, as in the case of Horace Trahan's debut. Helena Putnam, the stage manager, reported hearing a remarkable young accordion player and singer who was sitting in at a jam session at the Jean Lafitte Acadian Culture Center next door earlier that afternoon. During the Liberty show that night, she recognized the young man sitting in the audience and pointed him out to me. On a whim, and trusting the judgment of my colleague, based on years of shared mutual observations from our backstage perspective, I went down into the audience during a song and invited him to perform a song or two on stage that night. He accepted and performed sitting on a chair all alone in the middle of the stage during a stolen moment between scheduled performances. The crowd, we and he were all quite literally moved to tears by the experience. He eventually performed with his own full band and others many times on the same stage and many others.

Several programming issues were raised over the years, almost as much on-the-fly as the fieldwork on Horace Trahan. Based on a need and a desire to represent all of South Louisiana's musical traditions, we have programmed both Cajun music and zydeco, as well as other styles, including old-time country and bluegrass, swamp pop, gospel and blues. Some of these forays are more successful than others for a variety of reasons. Over the years, we have noticed that the crowd prefers Cajun music to zydeco, and traditional or mainstream Cajun music to more modern Cajun fusion styles. We often lose much of the audience when zydeco or Cajun rock performances have been scheduled to close the show. Some of this undoubtedly has to do with the residue of racial intolerance. Another factor has to do with the language factor; much of contemporary zydeco and Cajun rock is in English, clashing with the established French focus of the show. Still another factor is stylistic; much of contemporary zydeco has drifted far from their traditional roots, conflicting with the penchant among Liberty regulars for more traditional styles. Some

modern Cajun bands, such as Mamou, have experienced the same lack of interest among that crowd. This has meant coming up with innovative programming to insure cultural equity in programming. This can include opening with a zydeco or highly contemporary Cajun band and closing with a more mainstream Cajun band or sandwiching a highly innovative band between opening and closing performances by a Cajun band. Interestingly, the storytellers who have been featured occasionally have not been subjected to the same sort of language filter. Though some such as Ed Deshotels and Thelma Daigle told many of their stories in French, others such as Ralph Begnaud, Dave Petitjean and A.J. Smith have told theirs almost exclusively in English.

Dancing has also been a source of considerable improvisation and innovation. Many in the crowd were from another generation and may not have chosen to participate in the desegregation of a dance floor. But the Liberty, as a public institution, attracted people without regard to ethnic boundaries. Dancing naturally occurred and mixing naturally followed. After a few tense moments early on, it rather quickly became a non-issue. Additionally, traditionalists were exposed to such innovations as line dances and the newly invented complexities of fancy Cajun dancing. Despite occasional grumbling, the different elements generally tolerate each other, with more traditional two-steppers gliding around pairs engaged in the fancy passes of the so-called Cajun jig.

Because of the sometimes-imperfect nature of programming at the Liberty, ironically, it has been an excellent place to do fieldwork. Due to the demands of providing weekly performances, a wide variety of style and quality has run through that stage. The poor performances are sometimes hard for staffers to endure, but the tendency toward inclusion rather than exclusion has created a venue where just about anything is possible, including some wonderful things that might have been hard to anticipate otherwise. We have used our vantage point backstage at the Liberty in much the same way that Harry Oster and Ralph Rinzler used Fred's Lounge in the 1960s and 1970s, when a wide range of musicians regularly came out of the woods and the woodwork to perform on Revon Reed's weekly live radio show, and for the same reasons. Revon was faithfully non-judgmental, tolerating the less-talented throngs to identify the gifted few. In the end, this has proved to be an inefficient, but remarkably effective public fieldwork technique.

Folklorists espousing contextual and performance-centered approaches have insisted on the importance of studying the very life and nature of cultural performance in its most natural expression and setting. Their discoveries and subsequent theories can and do serve to adapt and improve the public presentation of the folk arts, whether within a community-based cultural presentation, in a cultural presentation destined for visitors as well as members of the community, or in a multi-cultural presentation outside of the community. Conversely, public sector folklorists can and do extract performance theory by observing how performers adapt themselves to unfamiliar setting and unfamiliar settings to themselves. These strategies can be identified to help refine future presentations and settings.

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