

Assembly 2007
Peer Session Report

Folk Arts Peer Group
Baltimore, MD
Dec. 5-9, 2007

Assembly 2007 in Baltimore provided folk arts coordinators a precious opportunity for critical reflection on the practices and possibilities of our work that will influence and inspire our work for years in a variety of ways. Our time together created new friendships and insights, the seeds of possible collaboration, and fresh perspectives that challenge and inform our work. Lively and interactive peer sessions complemented rich artistic experiences and informal conversations and gatherings in creating an event that many who participated considered one of their favorite NASAA Assembly experiences to date.

Opening Reception

Our Opening reception was held at the Sons of Italy Hall in the Little Italy neighborhood just a few blocks from the conference hotel. NASAA graciously helped us at the last minute to arrange a shuttle there, as an unexpected sleet/snow storm hit the city that night. The folks at the Little Italy Hall were incredibly hospitable and charming, and music by Tony Commodari on mandolin and the Manoldi Brothers gave us a taste of local culture. This event created the perfect opportunity for old colleagues to reconnect and new colleagues to make new friends. A round of introductions helped to put faces to names and to learn a little about what people were up to.

In our first peer session, **One Mission, A Variety of Models: Exploring Alternative State Folk Arts Programs and Their Relationships to State Arts Councils** Gwen Meister of the Nebraska Folklife Network of brought together professionals reflecting some of the incredible variety of state folk arts programs. By sharing the particularities of program structure and design, and the nature of collaboration between folk arts programs and state arts agencies, we educated each other about the innovative and diverse ways that have evolved in different states to serve a folk arts infrastructure. Issues of autonomy and flexibility on the one hand, and lack of access to decision making and resources colored these accounts. The session illuminated the elements of effective partnership that exploit the different strengths of state and non profit organizations in serving the public.

This discussion segued nicely into our next session: **What is Infrastructure?** Aably moderated by Robert Baron of the New York State Council for the Arts, the conversation deepened and broadened around the infrastructure concept. Barry Bergey of the NEA shared some of the history of the NEA in developing the concept of infrastructure for folk arts. Still relevant today, folk arts infrastructure is an approach to cultural expression that draws from fieldwork, outreach and an openness to the breadth of shared traditional expression important to communities. It requires public investment in the absence of the committed elites that capitalize the mainstream fine art genres. Bergey discussed how some changes to the state funding model have impacted funding, and got feedback on possible modifications to the infrastructure funding cycle and process. Panel members

Joey Brackner of Alabama and Bob Gates of Kentucky shared their states' impressive infrastructures, noting the importance of community scholars, partners, and participation building. Discussion raised by these presentations opened up into consideration of the nature of infrastructure partners, how artists are served by infrastructures and other matters.

That Thursday afternoon, our next session focused on both **PACT and State Programs**, and on **Local and Global issues in Traditional Arts**. Betsy Peterson of the Fund for Folk Culture shared a little background on PACT – Preserving America's Cultural Traditions – and the work of this loosely networked group of folk arts organizations, particularly on their archival collaborations. Next we turned our attention to local and global issues with invited guests Jean Pierre Dion of Quebec Government House, and James Bau Graves of the Old Town School of Folk Music (Mick Moloney, our third visitor, was unable to make it to this session due to illness, though more of him later) Again the conversation was lively and inclusive. Jean Pierre outlined possibilities for international cooperation with his Province and gave a primer on cultural funding in Quebec. Bau Graves stimulated conversation around the complexities, rewards, and pitfalls of working with immigrant groups and the importance of ethnographic inquiry in understanding the needs of such groups. More questions than answers were raised by this session, but the importance of understanding the evolving nature of traditional arts in a global context gave us all food for thought as we use the tools of program development and grant making in supporting traditional arts communities to thrive.

Friday evening the folk arts peer group activities began again with **The Green Fields of America** a concert at the Creative Alliance at the Patterson featuring Mick Moloney, the National Heritage Fellow who had recovered enough from his stomach bug to join us from New York. Mick performed superbly with fellow National Heritage awardee Donny Golden and a supporting cast including Baltimore's own Irish music legend Billy McComiskey and rising fiddle virtuoso Jim Eagan. The concert was kicked off by Cambodian master musician and Heritage Fellow Chum Ngek. The evening was of the highest artistic quality and richly informative of the Irish tradition thanks to Mick's great work introducing and contextualizing the performances.

Our final peer session **Diversity and Its Discontents**, may have been the most interesting of all. Teams from Iowa, Wyoming, and California presented on the interactions and synergistic partnerships they enjoyed linking traditional arts and diversity programs. Moderated by Andrea Graham of the South Dakota Arts Council, this session challenged us all to think deeply about the distinctive contributions of a traditional arts perspective and the wider efforts to diversify arts participation. The conversation circled back to the themes of our earlier conversation about infrastructure and global contexts, and spurred healthy reflection on the tools that we use to support and valorize art and artists. Folk arts emerged as a willing partner in diversity efforts through its dual nature both as a style of artistic production and a disciplinary perspective on culture. As the American demographic shifts and as cultural participation is more broadly understood, the efforts of diversity programs and folk arts programs at state agencies, especially when working in

tandem, can serve critical functions as public arts funding seeks to connect with more communities more deeply.

These peer sessions resonated strongly with Conference briefings, particularly Stephen Tepper's review of new forms of art making, and James Early's powerful address of diversity and culture. The conference was enriched also by the presence of a mobile exhibit on the National Heritage Awards as it celebrates its 25th anniversary at the National Endowment for the Arts.

There is really no context like the NASAA Assembly for bringing together leadership in this field and allowing a fruitful exchange of ideas. Over 40 folk arts coordinators convened and deeply helpful conversations took place throughout the meetings often in more informal settings. Our peer group is profoundly grateful for the support of the National Endowment for the Arts in making participation possible, and to NASAA for their administrative support and wisdom in making this one of the best gatherings we have enjoyed thus far. Without the help of the National Council for the Traditional Arts, the Greenfields concert would have been impossible and they, too, deserve thanks.

On behalf of the Folk Arts Peer Session Planning Committee, Elaine Eff, Maria Carmen Gambiel, Andrea Graham, and Gwen Meister, respectfully submitted,

Rory Turner