

Folk Arts Peer Session Report

NASAA Assembly 2008, September 11-13

Submitted by Willie Smyth

Approximately 20 people attended the Folk Arts Peer Session activities at NASAA's Assembly 2008 conference in Chattanooga. The group first convened Wednesday evening for an informal dinner hosted by Taco Rico restaurant, which was recently documented by the Chattanooga Latino Arts Survey, and which served such Salvadoran dishes as pupusas, tamales, empanadas, and plantains. Attendees were welcomed by logistics director Roby Cogswell (TN).

The first formal session began Thursday morning at the Chattanooga Hotel. Robert Baron (NY) and Troyd Geist (ND) lead a discussion that focused on the relationship of state arts agency (SAA) folk arts programs to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), with special attention on the NEA Folk Arts Infrastructure Award grants and TAG funds. Robert started by outlining the history and function of NEA Infrastructure grants.

Troyd Geist presented information about the financial breakdown of Infrastructure funds over an eight-year period, pointing out that the percentage of NEA funds that have been going into Folk Arts Infrastructure grants has been decreasing in relation to the NEA overall budget.

Barry Bergey (NEA) explained how the Infrastructure grant process has been divided into two pools—one for SAAs and one for non-profits outside the SAA Partnership process. There was discussion of the pros and cons of changing the grants to allow for two- and possibly three-year awards.

Thursday afternoon, session participants discussed and gave specific examples of how our programs contribute to non-folk arts specific dimensions of our agencies and enhance the agencies' missions and strategic plans. These included initiatives involving underserved rural and ethnic constituencies as well as innovative arts and education, cultural tourism, visual and performing arts touring, and community development projects. One of the results of this process was heightened awareness of the diversity of projects and programs that we have created, mostly from the use of NEA Infrastructure funds.

The following evening the Folk Arts peer group took a field trip to Signal Mountain for a weekly concert at the area's oldest country music community venue. The program included a special performance by old-time singer Roy Harper, a recipient of the Tennessee Arts Commission's Tennessee Folklife Heritage Award.

The final peer session convened Saturday morning at the convention center. A workshop on cultural diversity was led by Amy Skillman (PA) from the Institute of Cultural Partnerships. Folk Arts programs were first created by an awareness of the need for recognizing cultural diversity and creating cultural equity with the NEA and SAAs. At the same time, we have the world coming to our doorsteps dressed in the hope of an immigrant, the courage of a refugee, the curiosity of a foreign student and the skills of a professional on a work visa. With this burgeoning diversity come opportunities and challenges for folklorists – especially those working in state arts agencies. Folklorists are often called upon to mediate that intersection between newcomers and the existing community. Amy began the session by having us examine our own experiences with diversity, and led us through a process of seeing how we can practically address the toughest issues facing our workplace and communities.