



THE
**NATIONAL
FOLK** 2023-
2025
FESTIVAL





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THE NATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL

First presented in 1934, the National Folk Festival is the oldest multicultural traditional arts celebration in the nation. Now entering its 80th year, this traveling festival has been held in 28 communities around the country.

Musicians and craftspeople from every state in the Union and most U.S. territories have participated in this “moveable feast of deeply traditional folk arts,” which is now attracting the largest audiences in its history.

The National Council for the Traditional Arts (NCTA), the nation's premier folk and traditional arts presenting organization, is accepting applications from cities and community partners to co-sponsor the National Folk Festival for the three-year period 2023-2025.



Aunt Samantha Bumgarner of Buncomb County, North Carolina, sang, fiddled and played her banjo at the second National in Chattanooga. Aunt Samantha was one of the first Appalachian women to record commercially, making her first 78-rpm discs in 1924.



Eleanor Roosevelt and Agnes Meyer at a National held in Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. Mrs. Meyer was Chair of the festival and Mrs. Roosevelt was Honorary Chair.

photo by Harry Goodwin of the Washington Post.



W. C. Handy was billed as “Father of the Blues” when he appeared at the fifth National, held in Washington, D.C. in 1938. He was also at the Cleveland festival in 1946.

courtesy of the W.C. Handy Museum, Florence, Alabama.

The National Folk Festival, first held in St. Louis in 1934, is the longest-running, most diverse festival of traditional arts in the country and the event that defined this form of presentation. Its most radical and enduring innovation was that of putting the arts of many nations, races and languages into the same event on equal footing.

Eleanor Roosevelt was involved in the National’s move to Washington, D.C. in 1938, and served as the festival’s Honorary Chair. In 1976 festival founder Sarah Gertrude Knott recalled: “...we were associated with the New Deal, an interest of the First Lady, one of many causes she supported. The times were difficult, but exciting. We knew this new work was changing the way the nation saw itself, that some of the smaller pieces of the national puzzle were being viewed with appreciation for the first time...”

Some of the artists presented at the first festival are now legendary and the recordings and other documentation made possible by the National are precious. W.C. Handy’s first performance on a desegregated stage was at the 1938 National. It was the first event of national stature to present the blues, Cajun music, a polka band, a Tex-Mex conjunto, a Sacred Harp ensemble, Peking opera—the list goes on and on.

Leota Ware was a child when she came to the 1936 National in Dallas with the Kiowa Indian Dancers. “All these people of different colors and different talk were sitting in the dining hall having supper when we got there,” she recalled. “Texas and Oklahoma were segregated then and I’d not seen black people and white people and Indians eating together. It made a big impression on me and I talked about it

when I got home. I told my grandmother and she said, ‘Heaven will be like that.’”

Creating new festivals

Showcasing the nation’s finest traditional musicians, dancers and craftspeople, the National Folk Festival is now a traveling festival, presented in a selected community for three years. It is held in the hearts of cities and urban ethnic neighborhoods. Mounted by a coalition of local organizations and the NCTA, the National’s tenure is intended to lay the groundwork for the continuation of a locally produced, high-quality traditional arts festival after the National moves on to another city.

The National’s many successes have resulted from partnerships with mayors, city managers, park superintendents, police chiefs, public works department heads, presidents of chambers of commerce, heads of local non-profits and media publishers. These festivals have been held downtown, on turf owned by many, and subject to the public will.

This cooperative approach has worked for the National and its partners in astounding ways.

A moveable feast

A large-scale outdoor event presented free to the public, the National Folk Festival celebrates the richness and variety of American culture. It features a broad array of music and dance performances, workshops, storytelling, parades, dances, crafts exhibitions and foodways.

National Folk Festivals present authentic ethnic and folk artists. Programming embraces the heritage and traditions of all Americans—from

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TRIPP &
DRAGSTEDT
APARTMENTS



Welcome to the
National Folk Festival





National Folk Festivals embrace and celebrate the heritage and traditions of all Americans—from those whose families have been here for centuries or millennia to those of the most recent immigrants.

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Audiences are treated to blues, rockabilly, gospel, klezmer, jazz, bluegrass, breakdance, cowboy, polka, tamburitza, old-time, mariachi, western swing, beatbox, honky-tonk, rhythm and blues, and zydeco music as well as traditional music and dance from Cajun, Native American, Celtic, Middle Eastern, Caribbean, East Asian, Appalachian, Latin American, African and Pacific Island cultures. Folklife exhibits and demonstrations feature the finest craftpeople, as well as excellent practitioners of occupational, ritual and recreational traditions, and foodways. They explore subjects ranging from traditional pottery, blacksmithing, body art, quilting, instrument-making, boat-building, weaving and woodcarving, to needlework, American Indian beadwork, basketry, religious iconography and spoken word poetry. These masters often take part in discussions and workshops, creating a deeply educational experience.

Chinese dragon and lion dancers, Mardi Gras Indians, New Orleans brass bands, Puerto Rican *bomba y plena* ensembles, Italian-American religious processions and a host of other traditional street and celebratory activities are also part of the National's mix. Such elements are among the traditional forms of public celebration employed to present additional facets of vernacular culture, facets very much at the heart of communities throughout America.

The festival's artistic diversity is complemented by a delicious variety of ethnic and regional food specialties available for sale throughout the festival site.

Success stories

The National Folk Festival is currently attracting the largest audiences in its history. Changing locations on a three-year cycle, the festival has been held at 13 sites over the past 36 years: Peninsula, OH; New York, NY (for the Bicentennial); Lowell, MA; Johnstown, PA; Chattanooga, TN; Dayton, OH; East Lansing, MI; Bangor, ME; Richmond, VA; Butte, MT; Nashville, TN; Greensboro, NC and Salisbury, MD.

The city of Lowell, MA, where the National was held from 1987-89, has continued to produce a festival. After 35 years the Lowell Folk Festival, with an attendance in the 175,000 range, has become one of New England's most important cultural events. It is much respected for its devotion to deep tradition, and its showcasing of local and regional artists along with artists from elsewhere. The NCTA is still involved with programming the Lowell Folk Festival, but the other partners have essentially taken over the festival production—as planned.

Host cities both large and small have achieved notable successes. In Bangor, ME (pop. 32,000), festival attendance increased 70% between 2002-2004, from 80,000 to 145,000; the successor American Folk Festival consistently enjoyed large audiences. The 69th National Folk Festival in Richmond attracted a record 175,000 in 2007, a figure consistently surpassed by its successor, the Richmond Folk Festival, which drew 210,000+ in 2018. In Butte, MT, 165,000 attended the 72nd National Folk Festival in 2010, a number equal to 13% of the state's entire population. In 2018, the 11-year-old Montana Folk Festival attracted 175,000. In Greensboro, NC, host city for

"The festivals create a renewed sense of pride in the cities. Suddenly they are seen as showcases, places where hugely successful events have been held ... Bangor's attitude has developed from 'Can we?' to 'Sure we can!'"

Heather McCarthy,
Executive Director,
the American Folk Festival



National Folk Festivals are family affairs, with activities that appeal to all ages.



A variety of ethnic and regional food specialties are offered throughout the festival site.



Pop-up street performances engage festivalgoers in the action.



The nation's finest craftspeople demonstrate in the regional folklife area.



The National builds a sense of pride and creates new community collaborations.

2015-2017, attendance increased from 103,000 to 162,000 over the festival's three-year stay.

What the National brings to your city

Some of the potential benefits of bringing the National Folk Festival to your city are obvious: regional and national media exposure; thousands of out-of-town visitors who spend their money at local businesses during this free event; an opportunity to showcase the area's best traditional artists in a national context in the heart of the community. Less obvious, but equally important, is the role the festival can play in pulling together diverse elements of the community to work towards a common goal—the establishment of a high-quality traditional arts festival that will continue to thrive after the National Folk Festival moves on.

Building a successful partnership

Although the exact division of responsibilities between the NCTA and the local sponsors varies somewhat from site to site, there are some basic components that are essential to a successful partnership.

The local partnering organizations involved may also vary, but must include the government of the city represented by its chief administrator (mayor or city manager). This is necessary in order to have the full use of downtown or other critical sites and good cooperation from police, fire departments, public works and sanitation personnel.

A second critical local organization is a 501(c)(3) with a solid track record to ensure fundraising success (cash budgets are generally in the \$1.5 million per year range), strong

promotional capabilities, and sufficient staff to organize substantial components of the event, and to take charge when the National leaves in three years.

A National Folk Festival site must be capable of accommodating five to seven performance stages, a crafts demonstration area, a festival marketplace, a family area and regional/ethnic food sales, with parking and space for 50-75,000 people per day. Along with this goes the means to secure electrical service, tents, booths, sanitary facilities, trash removal and other physical needs for a large outdoor event.

The NCTA is the organizing partner that coordinates programming and most aspects of production, but it holds programming meetings in the site city. The other organizing partners and cultural community representatives are urged to participate, to hear recordings and see videos of potential performers, and to argue for favorites. The group invariably offers excellent aesthetic guidance and valuable perspectives.

The NCTA brings to the coalition over 80 years of experience in producing successful festivals within diverse communities. Although our primary expertise is in program content, site planning and production, we work closely with the local sponsor on all aspects of the festival, including marketing and promotion, fundraising and volunteer coordination.

"What is traditional and what is not is a constantly evolving question. Culture that's safely dead and can be put in a glass case hardly ever bites back. Living culture is trickier..."

Joe Wilson (1938-2015), late Chairman, National Council for the Traditional Arts



If you are interested in partnering with the NCTA to host this “moveable feast” of America’s finest traditional artists in your community from 2023-2025, we look forward to hearing from you.

**National Council for the
Traditional Arts**

8757 Georgia Avenue, Suite 450
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910
Phone: (301) 565-0654, ext. 19 or 16
Fax: (301) 565-0472
E-mail: festivals@ncta-usa.org
Visit our website: ncta-usa.org

Photos courtesy Michael G. Stewart,
Remsberg Inc, NCTA Archives, Skip Rowland,
Tom Pich

"It's such a nice mix of people, it restores your faith in America. I know that sounds sappy and very 'American Pie,' but it's really true."

Mary Ann Arabadjis,
first-time festival attendee
The Lowell Sun

"You just see all different cultures together, and everybody's just friendly. I feel so good today to be here, I can't wait to come back."

Rita Lopes,
first-time festival attendee
The Lowell Sun

"I love to dance and I love to shake. I'm going to be here every day until they say goodbye. It's our roots music."

Carmen Banda, first-time festival
attendee, Lansing State Journal

"The first year of the National Folk Festival's three-year run in East Lansing was a huge success, musically, financially and organizationally."

Lansing State Journal

"...three solid days of music, dancing, socializing, eating, drinking and incredible good will on Dayton's center city streets... The best thing to happen to Dayton in a long, long time... everybody seemed to be saying it."

Dayton Daily News

"...the National Folk Festival offers as much a smorgasbord of edible delights as it does musical ones."

Chattanooga Free Press

"...a smashingly successful weekend. Music and dance from all over the world and from America's dazzlingly diverse ethnic heritage could not have been better displayed..."

The Boston Globe

"80,000 visitors hail Bangor debut... the once-neglected strip of riverside property exploded with a vibrancy that locals only could have dreamed of years before... a magical moment, elevating both spirits and pride as the community proved it really was capable of pulling off an event of such grand scale."

Bangor Daily News



"The National Folk Festival was, hands down, the best outdoor musical event I can remember being staged in Richmond ... A home run for Richmond... As one festival goer said, he'd 'never saw so many happy people in one place.'"

Richmond Times-Dispatch

"I am very proud to be involved with this event, because it celebrates the best of our music from across many different genres... Attendees will find themselves amazed at the variety... It's great that Nashville and the State of Tennessee were able to bring this here..."

13-time Grammy Award winner
Emmylou Harris

"A Greensboro Hit... a terrific show over the weekend, turning all of downtown into a performing arts center."

Greensboro News & Record

"Having a signature event like the festival was a way to get people back downtown... In both Dayton and East Lansing, it accomplished exactly what the cities wanted it to: drawing tens of thousands of people back into the heart of the city."

Ted Staton, City Manager,
East Lansing, MI

"The National Folk Festival's 2010 audience grew by more than 94 percent over 2008 to 165,000... causing local and statewide tourism impacts... \$12 million for the Butte community and area, and another \$20 million in direct statewide sales during four-day travel period."

Mainstreet Uptown Butte
[Montana]

"We pulled off our community's largest event in history. We shone a bright light... on our city, as we hosted the first of our National Folk Festivals... \$20M in economic impact... an unprecedented level of enthusiasm touching every corner of our community."

Jake Day, Mayor,
City of Salisbury





Bring America's
premier celebration of
traditional arts and culture
to your community!

2023-2025
NATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL
APPLICATIONS NOW BEING ACCEPTED

