

STATE FOLKLORISTS AND STATE ARTS COUNCILS:
THE MARYLAND PILOT

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Background

On 10 December 1973 I received a phone call from James Backas, Director of the Maryland Arts Council. He wished to know if I would fly to Baltimore and give him some advice about hiring a qualified person to take on the new job of Maryland State Folklorist. The arts council, Backas informed me, had recently received a \$10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to establish such a position. Two days later I was seated in his office in downtown Baltimore.

The first thing Backas showed me was the grant request which he had sent off to the Endowment. His proposal called for a folk arts program staffed with one full-time professional folklorist and one part-time secretary. He set forth essentially five goals: (1) to build a resource file of contemporary folk and ethnic art and their sources in the state, (2) to establish official state liaisons with folk and ethnic artists and groups and to determine their requirements for survival and possible amplification, (3) to begin publications of the products of these arts, folksongs, folktales, culinary specialities, etc., (4) to study the possibilities and desirability of encouraging the distribution or marketing of this art, and (5) to prepare for a possible folk arts festival in 1975.

The document intrigued me. Here was a man whose primary business was dealing with the fine arts (dance, drama, literature, music), but unlike many of his kind, he sensed that art thrived at another level, and that these folk artists merited examination and possible subsidation.

For those unfamiliar with state arts councils, they function strictly as granting agencies. Like the National Endowment for the Arts, with the exception of smaller and state-oriented ones, arts councils funnel money to such institutions as museums, symphonies, local dramatic organizations, city ballets and so forth. Budgets for these state arts agencies vary considerably from state to state. New York, for instance, has a budget of over 30 million dollars; Massachusetts, until the state went broke, had a budget of nearly two million. Maryland's budget in 1975 was close to \$800,000. Though some of this money goes towards paying the staff, by far the largest portion of it ends up in the coffers of what are known as the large "line" items. For example, in Maryland around \$200,000 is earmarked annually for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, another \$100,000 for several city art museums. Once all the "big" money is allotted, there is usually about \$250,000 left over for smaller groups throughout the state. The council, comprised of eleven men and women hand-picked by the governor, meet monthly to decide exactly where this money will go. The staff convenes with the council and together they go over the grant requests and approve, partially approve, or deny a wide variety of proposals.

Backas explained all this to me and then we talked at length about his proposal and how it might best be implemented. Though a folklorist might balk at some of the language Backas employed to explain the goals of the project, there was no doubt in my mind that the man had his heart in the right place. Our conversation further revealed his intention to learn whether indeed there was any way of filtering money down to folk artists in a way that could help them without corrupting their art. This line of thought appealed to me at once for I have always worried about the cultural rip-off that folklorists so often perform under the aegis of collecting. I began to wonder if this program might not be a possible way to "repay" the folk for their unending generosity.

The more Backas and I talked, the more excited I became about the position he described. Though there were guidelines, clearly the state folklorist was going to be his own man--able to shape the program as he saw fit, hire field-workers to work along with him, and generally promote the folk arts scene in the state in a number of ways. The total budget for the program was to be \$25,000: \$10,000 from the Endowment, and \$15,000 from the state, with additional money to be appropriated for any grants that were awarded. Backas noticed my enthusiasm. "Would you be interested in taking on the job," he asked.

I said it was worth considering. But then it turned out that the funding was so arranged that someone would have to begin the job by February 1974 or the money would be forfeited and returned to the Endowment and the state treasury. I was still contracted with the University of Massachusetts for the spring semester of 1974 and the deadline to make application for a leave without pay had passed a number of months before.

Still, my mind began to turn deviously. My spring schedule was such that all my classes met Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. That left the end of the week free. I asked Backas if he would be willing to hire me on a part-time basis. I could work half the week in Massachusetts, then fly down and work Thursday through Saturday in Baltimore. In the interim, I could apply for a leave without pay from the University for the fall of 1974. That way I would have a full year at the job and possibly establish the position firmly enough so that the council would hire a replacement and another folklore post would thereby become available.

Backas liked the idea but questioned my sanity in subjecting myself to such a rigorous work week. "And what about your family? How are they going to feel about it?" I assured him that my wife and I had both read Open Marriage, that she would probably be happy to see me out of the house for a while, and that, furthermore, I was deep into the throes of male menopause and a backbreaking schedule might help get me through the middle-age doldrums.

As it was, when I finally did confront my wife with the idea of taking the job, it was a piece of cake. I simply verbally bludgeoned her to death with the logic and wisdom of the choice. Here, I argued, was a unique position for a folklorist. Unlike the defunct Pennsylvania folklore post, this one combined both state and federal funds and besides, it had a secure financial power base which might well stimulate a variety of folklore research. Moreover, the

director stood behind the program one hundred percent. Finally, this job provided the opportunity to leave the somewhat stultifying atmosphere of the academe and see how folklore might be applied outside the classroom. My wife reluctantly agreed, and on Thursday of the first week in February I appeared for work at the arts council.

I staged this madcap commute from February until the end of May. It was better than suicide, I rationalize, but only slightly. It did, however, keep the position open until June when I took over full-time. What follows, then, is a synoptic account of my activities during a year's tenure as state folklorist.

Approach and Technique

My first endeavor was to set up a clearing house at the arts council by assembling all archival and other folklore data that related to Maryland. This I did in two ways. While at the University of Maryland between 1966 and 1971, I had compiled a small archives consisting of my own collectiana and some five hundred or more student collections dutifully gathered for class projects. Some of this material I had carted off to Massachusetts when I left; the remainder lay collecting dust in several file cabinets at College Park. I convinced the people at the university that all this material ought to be stored in one place, and the place where it would be most used and best cared for was at the arts council. I had been promised some secretarial help and harbored visions of at long last organizing all this raw data into some retrievable form.

Next I went to the Smithsonian. In 1972 they had featured Maryland in their annual extravaganza on the mall and I knew they had records of all the people they had interviewed as potential participants in the festival. Ralph Rinzler proved extremely generous. He turned over to me all sorts of field notes, informant cards, tapes, and printed matter which I in turn copied. Anyone familiar with the Smithsonian's fieldwork methods knows that they do not penetrate very deeply into a culture or community, their principal undertaking being simply to locate traditional folk craftsmen or performers for their festival. This shotgun approach turns up innumerable tradition bearers, and the Smithsonian's ability to cover a diverse area with a battery of fieldworkers provides information that it would take a single person years to amass. Thus the Smithsonian's finding lists furnished me a nucleus of known craftsmen and performers in the state.

Organization of a folk arts advisory panel of folklorists in the area was the next step. Arts councils work that way: they have advisory panels for each of the arts, dance, theatre, music, etc. These panels meet as often as the staff deems it necessary. Their job is to help set policy and advise about where monies should be channeled.

Written into the folk arts budget was a specific sum for part-time assistant fieldworkers. I hired three. Two were professional folklorists, one a young woman who knew Baltimore extremely well and had experience working with the Maryland Historical Society's oral history project. Here main sphere of con-

cern was to be the ethnic enclaves in the city. I assigned the other two fieldworkers to specific areas of research as well. One, who was herself black, went forth to uncover as many black craftsmen as possible; the other worked primarily with female crafts and their practitioners. I left the more general canvassing of the state to myself.

I remember being asked early on by one of the council how long it would take to do a general survey of folk arts in the state. "About three months," I answered naively. I now see that more realistically it would take a battalion of fieldworkers laboring full-time about five years to canvass just the city of Baltimore, and even then a lot would be bypassed.

The purpose of their fieldwork, as I explained it to these three women, was first, to seek people who might possibly participate in a folk festival were one to be staged, and second, to record and photograph worthwhile aspects of Maryland folk culture and identify potential regions, individuals or groups that might later be followed up with in-depth research.

With this underway, I began to drum up publicity. The arts council put out a press release announcing the new post and immediately we were contacted by reporters from three large city newspapers who composed feature pieces on the program. Moreover, during the summer of 1974, the editor of the magazine section of the Baltimore Sun contacted me and explained that they planned to bring out a pamphlet in the Sunday paper dealing with Maryland folklore and folklife, and would it be possible for his people to make use of the archives which he had read about. As it turned out, the editor was kind enough to let me write the introduction to this pamphlet which comprised 17 illustrated articles dealing with a wide range of Maryland folk culture. This publication, of course, brought further attention to the folk arts program.

Early in the spring of 1974 I began to contact different organizations in the state informing them about the new state position and what we were doing. I sent out form letters to all county and local historical societies suggesting that an exchange of ideas between us might prove mutually beneficial. I further indicated that I would be happy to come and talk to their group at any time.

This procedure set the general pattern of my work. In the next nine months I delivered twenty or more talks to different gatherings with, in most cases, profitable results. The procedure also set the pattern for my fieldwork. Given a request to come and speak before, say, the Harford County Historical Society, I would first do as much reading as possible about the county, then deliver a talk with slides which combined history and folklore and as much specific information about that county as possible.

Usually I was besieged afterwards with an abundance of leads. "You ought to go and talk to so and so, he can really tell you something"; or "There's a larger rendition of the barn you showed a picture of down near our place that you ought to have a look at"; or "Miss Jones, now she had her students do a collection of ghost stories and I believe they put that together in a little book

somewhere." In several instances I discovered that the local historical society had actually begun oral history projects and the people they had interviewed were, in fact, folk practitioners. After my talk, I would generally remain in the area for a week or more, following leads and coming away with a much clearer picture of the folklife in that county.

Besides establishing contact with historical societies, I tried to set up liaisons with the academic community. The fieldworkers often spoke at local schools and I lectured at the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins. In January 1975, during the mid-winter term, I also taught a folklore course at Hopkins. I brought in genuine Maryland folk and had them perform for the class, seeing that they were paid. In January 1976 the Johns Hopkins Magazine published an issue devoted exclusively to folklore.

Grants Received and Awarded

Aside from the original \$10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Maryland Arts Council also applied to and received funds from the Endowment totaling \$55,000 for folklore related projects. Of that amount, \$20,000 was provided for the folk festival, \$25,000 for a folklife film and \$10,000 for a storytellers and craftsmen-in-the-schools project. As with most grants the Endowment awards, the recipient must furnish a dollar-for-dollar match. The first two grants are self-explanatory, but the third one deserves a further word of clarification.

The Maryland Arts Council at the present time has a program entitled, "Artist-in-the-Schools." Again through a grant from the Endowment, funds were made available to place Maryland poets into the schools on a part-time basis to teach children how to read and write poetry. Working with the woman who runs this program, I helped her devise a similar program through which local raconteurs would be paid to go into nearby schools and perform their repertoires before students. The idea was to get the kids in touch with their own culture and folk traditions. The same thing was proposed with traditional craftsmen: to find a craftsman, a retired boat builder let us say, who would be willing to meet a group of students several times a week and nurse them through the construction of a traditional boat, a skipjack or a log canoe. Both these projects, I am pleased to say, have been implemented and are underway in different parts of the state.

Getting money is one thing, giving it away quite another. My initial idealism of how grand it would be to somehow repay the folk met with harsh realities when it came to actually funding grass roots people. It became immediately obvious that I was going to have to locate grant recipients; they were not going to come to me. Unlike individual artists or writers who know how and where to find money, the folk have no idea that funding for their pursuits even exists, and until very recently, of course, it hasn't. Then too there is the compounded problem of tarnishing a relatively pure tradition by "amplifying" it for a larger audience. And some people have no desire for recognition. The little old lady on Maryland's Eastern Shore who hooks rugs for friends in her village and sells them for a meager \$6.00 apiece obviously is more committed

to her art than she is to self-aggrandizement. She wants no truck with folk festivals. She would simply prefer to be left alone.

Frequently, it is the pseudo folk, the revivalist craftsmen or the folksong interpreters who request money. And as it turned out, the two grants that we decided to award went to just such people. Seven hundred dollars was provided to stage a concert of maritime folk music aboard the Constellation which lies docked in Baltimore harbor as a floating museum. The bulk of the money went to pay the singers, Joe Hickerson, Louis Killen, Andy Wallace and others. We awarded another \$1,000 to the Piscataway Indian Project to enable young people of Indian heritage in Maryland to learn the traditional arts and crafts of their people. In both cases, though I feel the money was well invested, it was funding that fell outside of my initial idealistic concept.

I now suspect that it is perhaps too difficult to filter money out to the folk without destroying or altering for the worse what we hope to preserve. It seems to me that the most successful use of funds should stress the recording, filming, publishing and preserving of folk culture. I would, for instance, gladly approve granting money to mount a traveling arts and crafts show displaying the work of Maryland folk artists, as the Baltimore Museum of Art did this past year. (The council had already awarded the museum \$25,000 so they did not request a special dispensation for this particular show.) In this way Maryland's arts and crafts reach a wider audience without necessarily disturbing the traditional process itself.

Subsequent Developments

I left the council 20 January 1975. Though asked to remain in the position, I decided for a number of personal reasons to return to the university. At my departure no replacement had been hired, and it was decided to wait until after the folk festival in July before seriously seeking another state folklorist. It was felt that since the three fieldworkers were still on the payroll, they could handle the day-to-day business that came up, and from the beginning of March, everything would be geared to producing the folk festival.

The council hired Tim Lloyd who had worked with the Ohio Folk Festival to direct the one in Maryland. Using the three fieldworkers already on the staff plus three others, Lloyd staged a festival which ran three days and featured more than one hundred participants from every part of the state. At least 12,000 people attended, a figure that might well have doubled had not the final day provided some of the heaviest rains of the summer. In a sense, the folk festival culminated the first year and a half of the Maryland Arts Council's folk arts program and drew favorable response from state officials in Annapolis, virtually assuring a repeat performance in 1976.

Still, for certain reasons, no folklorist was hired even though both state and Endowment money was renewed. Finally, late in the fall of 1975 the council voted unanimously to continue the folk arts program, and in December Charles Camp, a Pennsylvania graduate student, agreed to take the job.

One last piece of on-going business concerned the folklife film which was to be shot by the Maryland Center for Public Broadcasting. When we wrote the grant proposal it stated that the Maryland State Folklorist would act as advisor and interpreter for the film. Since no one replaced me right away, and since the Center wished to shoot during the summer and fall of 1975, I again agreed to commute to see this project through.

It became obvious just how useful the accomplishments of the folk arts program could be when we began to work on the film. Not only did I suggest to the film crew people what I uncovered in my fieldwork survey, but I also drew on the resources turned up for the festival. During early summer we scouted twelve different individuals and groups as possible subjects. We filmed six of them in more than 15 hours of raw footage which will be reduced to a one hour presentation.

General Assessment

From my remarks I think it is evident that I advocate applied folklore enthusiastically, and I feel a post such as the one held in Maryland allows a folklorist a forum which is missing in the confinement of the academic community. Yet I believe that state folklorist positions should not exist in a vacuum. That is, they should not simply be an isolated state post under some agency of the government. Rather, the state folklorist should work through an arts council where certain contacts and existing programs have already been established. The problem, of course, is to convince arts councils in different states that folk arts provide a province worthy of recognition; it is a fortunate turn of events when an arts council staff appreciates the folklorist's endeavors. Luckily for me, the Maryland staff turned out to be the most supportive people I have ever worked with, always anxious to draw on my knowledge and always ready to bring their expertise to my assistance.

Not all folklorists will make good state folklorists. Strictly academic types will hardly fill the bill. In my final report to the council I mentioned what attributes I thought the ideal state folklorist should possess. He/she, I said in effect, should definitely be a trained folklorist with a Ph.D. if possible. For some reason those three letters behind your name impress the people in the state house and that often allows the folklorist a bit more leverage. This ideal state folklorist must also be gregarious. He must be able to establish easy rapport with journalists, academics, politicians, county bureaucrats, the established wealth, and, naturally, the grass roots folk. He should be able to deliver talks to any of a number of groups from seventh grade children to senatorial committees. He should have carried out a lot of fieldwork, the more the better, and it would help if he knew something about how to put a folklife festival together. If he understands ledger sheets and budget paraphernalia and things like that (I did not and still do not) he will make it a lot easier on the people in the council who keep the books. And if he has Henry Kissinger's energy it will not hurt. The job is a twenty-four hour a day affair if one wants to make it such.

One last matter: administration. The state folklorist ought to have some experience in this area. At the outset there was little, if any, office work to attend to so I was able to spend a good deal of time in the field. But as the program gained momentum, as the media became interested, more and more demands were made upon me to take care of day-to-day administrative details and that meant more and more time in the office. I was astounded at the number of people who called up, just people out of the blue, saying they'd read about the program, were interested, and wanted somehow to become involved. Voluntarily, no fee necessary. All kinds too. Bored housewives, college students, unfortunates out of jobs. I was not at all prepared for this unsolicited work force that turned up and I did not really know how to deal with it. But the point is that there are a great number of people who don't really know what folklore is but find it intriguing and wish to allay their romantic yearning by becoming involved with it. And the state folklorist ought to be able to put this potential energy to work by initiating imaginative projects.

On a cold clear January morning as I drove away from the arts council heading out of Baltimore northeast along Route 40, I thought back over my year's work and suddenly an anecdote about Churchill popped into my mind which seemed to sum up my feelings pretty well. Apparently, late in life the great man was being introduced for a speech by a local politician somewhere in the midwestern part of this country. The speaker wound on with the usual eulogies regarding Churchill and finally got onto his purported love of brandy. Pointing to a specific spot half way up on the wall of the auditorium, he exclaimed: "Why, I bet if all the empty bottles of brandy that Mr. Churchill had drunk were piled up, they'd fill this auditorium right up to there." When Churchill rose to speak, his eyes were riveted to that spot on the wall, and as he reached the podium he slowly shook his head and muttered, "Ah, so much to do, so little time to do it in."