

# COLLABORATIONS

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## An Interview with Joe Wilson

*Interviewed by Betty Belanus*

People don't necessarily like to have you rub their nose in learning. The less you jawbone them and the more that you let them figure it out for themselves, the better the lesson.... Putting people together around their music and their dance and their foodways, particularly the common ordinary working folks, has a way of lessening prejudice and promotes things that need very much to be promoted.... I think that it's an exciting time to be a folklorist. Some of the old illusions are dying.... To wish to control the future is the ultimate conceit.

*—Joe Wilson*

I interviewed Joe Wilson, the Director of the National Council for the Traditional Arts (NCTA) on August 18, 1999 at the NCTA offices in Silver Spring, Maryland. Joe is known in public sector folklore circles for his wisdom, eloquence and political savvy. Although he was not formally trained as a folklorist, Joe has been a central figure in the world of public folklore since the mid-1970s, and grew up in a region and a family rich in traditions. Among other topics, we discussed Joe's personal history and how it led him to folklore, the history and current work of the NCTA, and the future of public sector folklore. As we began the interview on tape, Joe and I were discussing jobs in the public sector versus jobs in academia, and, really, the nature of both branches of the discipline.

**JW:** I just don't see the jobs being created, the teaching jobs. These programs seemed to assume that there would be an unending supply of jobs but they always knew that many of their students went somewhere else. They ignored the fact that many of them did very well in other places. Like Nick Spitzer. Spitzer's played in a big field, he's done well. A top graduate down at Texas. Do they think people like Nick have wasted their lives?

**BB:** Well you could argue that working at the university is an application—to teach young minds.

**JW:** For what purpose? You track through this life, you can have an effect and you can be beneficial in lots of ways. To say that this body of

learning is good only for teaching at universities is rather silly. It draws the circle so tight and so small. It can't endure that way, and we've proven that. This is a great body of knowledge to launch people into all kinds of fields. I wish that it would be seen that way.

**BB:** I think it's beginning to be, don't you think? There are people pushing the envelope or widening the circle. Using what they learned as a folklorist in other fields. What's your own background? How did you get into all of this?

**JW:** I come at this from the fringes. I grew up in northeastern Tennessee on the western slope of the Blue Ridge. One high school in the county. I come from one of the little houses up on the side of the hill. I went to a two-teacher school. When I was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade my teacher let me keep the library, which was a bookcase, and the book-mobile stopped every six weeks. I got to pick the books and check them in and out, so I thought that I should read them all. I did that from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade until the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and it made all the difference. When I got to high school they didn't know what to do with someone who liked books as much as I did. There were no SAT tests.

At age seventeen I took to the road with my dog and my dad's last \$20 in my pocket and my right thumb in the air. I hung dry wall. I went to school at night. I saved enough money to go to Lees McRae College in North Carolina for two years. I ran out of money again, was briefly at the University of Tennessee in Nashville. I went to Alabama, worked on Civil Rights things down there. I took classes at night at the University of Alabama, Birmingham Center, and ended up at New York enrolled in General Studies at Columbia. I had an ungodly number of credit hours in all kinds of things and no degrees in anything.

After a while it didn't seem important to me because at that time I was working on Madison Avenue at a good job and I realized that I had entered into a part of life where you were measured by what you could do.

**BB:** What were you doing on Madison Avenue?

**JW:** I was working for a conglomerate that had a fund raising arm, a bond sales arm, an export-import company. I was a vice-president. Took a heck of a pay cut to come here. But that was twenty-three years ago and I've never had a moment of regret. I've loved all of this and feel I'm the luckiest guy in the world.

**BB:** Did you always have an interest in traditional music? Was that in your family?

**JW:** My uncle played the fiddle and when I was a little guy he and Uncle Willet—who was a neighbor, not a relative, and who lived up the road, played the banjo. They would play and I would sit under the table and I thought that was glorious. I had a great aunt, whose name was Sally, who played an old fretless wood banjo, the kind that Frank Proffitt made. Hers came from the same community that Frank came from, but was made in the 1880s—I have it. This photograph over here is my Uncle Charlie, who was another great uncle from the other side of the family with the same kind of banjo. There are lots of those around where I'm from.

Aunt Sally would play the banjo on the back porch and sing old ballads. She's the only person I know of who ever played one of those things on radio. She had a fifteen minute radio program weekly on WOPI in Bristol as "Carolina Sally," singing on a Saturday afternoon jamboree. My father sang gospel in quartets, my mother knew old songs, ballads and older country things. So, yes, I grew up in that and loved it from the beginning. I learned that there was music like this in other cultures and found that I liked that. I tend to be able to tell when things are in tune.

**BB:** That's a virtue. So you kept that interest all through the other things that you were doing?

**JW:** I did. I didn't know that you could work in that field. I was always interested in those things. When I was in New York working on Madison Avenue, I had a set of portable recording equipment and some good microphones. And I was making records at that point, literally as a hobby. Some country things that I recorded are still around. When we were finding artists, Rich Nevins found Tommy Jarrell, and was raving. He'd been down looking for old records and, he said he'd found Ben Jarrell's son. Ben Jarrell recorded in the late 1920s with the Galax Area series string band. Nevins said, "He's a better fiddler than Ben was and you're not going to believe this." He was right. There was little cadre of people, the Rounders among them, three kids with a Volkswagen bus. There were these people who loved these things and who came at it maybe like I did, from a direction other than academia.

I learned folklore existed as an academic discipline at that point; in fact I had been reading things for years. I guess the first would have been Frank Dobie, but I'd been reading the books for a while and then became

more focused on folklore as an academic discipline. I met Archie Green when I was there. Archie thought I should go back to school, but I had two kids and I had a big mortgage, and I had no proper background to go to anyone's graduate school. There were all these hours stretched over five or six institutions. So, I decided not to do that.

I can't recall a folklorist that I ever disliked. I like all of the things that folklorists have turned up. I think they belong to me as much as they do to them. I don't tend to call myself a folklorist. I think it's okay to be an amateur. I think people who turn up their nose at amateurs are showing their own insecurities about what they are.

BB: I can think of a lot of people who you would put in an amateur category that do a whole lot better job than some folklorists I know. Like Bobby Fulcher, for instance.

JW: In our field and in all other kinds of fields.

BB: How did you meet Archie?

JW: When the legislation was under consideration to start the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress I was in New York and our company had an office in Atlanta and that office fell under my supervision. Somehow in Atlanta I heard of the bill and called Archie and told him I would try to help with the politicking of the thing. There had been a time back years before that when I worked for the U.S. senator for a brief period in an election of the Tennessee senator. So I kind of know the political side of things.

I became a member of Archie's little committee. I signed up some southern senators as sponsors for that legislation and talked to them. Those included Howard Baker and Herman Talmadge. I had a wonderful meeting with Talmadge. Talmadge was always very proud that he'd see anyone that walked in. He'd shake hands and spend about 30 seconds with you. So we walked in and he said, "Hello, glad to meet you." Looking sideways I saw a photograph on the wall of Eugene Talmadge, his father, up on the back of a truck making a speech with outstretched arms. He says, "That's my father," and I pointed to the guy down under him with the fiddle case under his arm and I said, "And that's Fiddlin' John Carson." He physically turned me around and said, "How do you know that?" I knew, of course, from all of the old records and a set of people who had studied these things. He became a very enthusiastic sponsor of the bill only because I knew

he'd grown up under the feet of Fiddlin' John who'd worked for his father.

BB: How did NCTA get started?

JW: NCTA started in 1933 in St. Louis. Sarah Gertrude Knott came from Kentucky and was a recreation worker there. She'd been to Black Mountain College at one point which was a forward-looking liberal arts institution in the southern mountains. She'd studied with Frederick Koch who had put together a festival of plays. She went to St. Louis in those depression years and organized activities—she got all of these show biz people that were out of work. They were entertainers, they were carnival workers, and they were pop music people.

She had a truck and a little pioneering sound system and she'd do shows in parks. She noticed that what people liked the best were the folk things. They liked the early blues guys, they liked the Ozark musicians. She found out that there were other people in the country, like Bascom Lunsford in Asheville who was a banjo player and organizer of a festival there. All of these pioneering folklorists, Helen Flanders, Constance Roark, she found that they were also dealing with folk things. So, she got in touch with all of them and decided she would put together a National Folk Festival. It first was held in May of 1934 at the Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis, which was then brand new. It lost money but got a lot of attention. Chattanooga wanted to do one the next year so she went to Chattanooga.

Then in 1936 she did an amazing festival, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of those festivals, held for the Texas Centennial in Dallas. And if you look at the old program book it seems wondrous, from another time. There were Comanche Indians and Texas Rangers talking about fights they had had out on the plains in the previous century. There were old slaves and old masters and there were old Yankees and old Confederates talking about a war they had had. There were the Red Headed Fiddlers, one of the great string bands, and the East Texas Serenaders. There were Sacred Harp singers, Black Sacred Harp singers, Cherokee Sacred Harp singers—shape-note singers I should say. Then there were retired sailors from Snug Harbor doing sea shanties, people who really knew sea shanties. And there were gandy dancers. It was just an amazing event.

Sarah Gertrude violated the rules. The Indians and the blacks and the whites were sitting down eating together and one woman participating said she came home and told her grandmother about that and her grandmother said, "Heaven would be like that." So it was a grand event.

There are supposed to be recordings of the festival somewhere in the Texas university system, but I have never located them. It went on for I think eight days, which was a long festival at that point.

In 1938 they came to Washington and Agnes Myers was the chairman. Mrs. Myers's family owned the *Washington Post*, she's Katherine Graham's mother, and Eleanor Roosevelt was the honorary chairman and attended all of the events and took an active part in the planning. Albert Gore, Senior, the Vice President's father, was a newly elected congressman in middle Tennessee and he played the fiddle there for a group of Tennessee square dancers. We have a recording of that.

When we did the festival in Chattanooga a few years ago, Gore came and we gave him an award for being the oldest former performer there. He came up on stage and we played his recording as he walked up. He didn't know that there was a recording of him playing the fiddle. So he came up on stage and he danced. I'd known him from years before when I was working in politics in Tennessee. Well, when they brought him home to die he asked to hear that recording again, and he'd accidentally taped over the tape I'd sent him. The Vice President's secretary was on the phone here one night at 7:00; I was the last person here. By 8:00 I had it Fed-Exed and they had it the next morning. The Vice President played it for him, and as the last thing at the funeral.

There was another thing about that 1938 festival: Zora Neale Hurston was there and helped plan it. This was before the Marian Anderson matter, where Constitution Hall refused to let Ms. Anderson sing. Major Pickering was a business manager for the festival and Miss Knott had signed this agreement that they would not put black people on stage. There's a memo from Major Pickering to Sarah drawing her attention to that part of the contract. Sarah just decided to sign it and go ahead and present Black performers anyway. It was something that the DAR had to know was happening. Mrs. Roosevelt was there. I don't know why they let Knott and Pickering get away with this. Probably they were not ready for the confrontation, because a part of the festival, of course, was white. But they could hardly have ignored the fact that black performers were there, because the program book was printed by the *Washington Post*.

Miss Knott was with the festival until about 1970. When she went away, some new people took hold of the festival. There was a new National Park Service agreement. There were some folk revival people, some people from the Park Service and this fellow from the Council of the Southern Mountains. They thought what the festival needed was someone "a little more professional" than Miss Knott. So, they hired a fellow from Columbia Artist management. The poor guy was miscast, and he was

here for, I think, four years. There was one folklorist on the board, and that was Charles Purdue. Dick Spotswood, who was also on the board, comes from a set of people who love the old recordings and is one of the great scholars of the whole business. They had met me and they called me. I had never applied for a job and didn't know one existed.

BB: You were still working in New York at that point?

JW: I was in New York. They called me on a Sunday afternoon and said, "Would you like to come down and talk to us about this job?" I was kind of amazed, but interested. So, I came and took the job and that's that.

BB: It started out as directing the festival itself, but you've really branched out into a lot more things here.

JW: Yeah, they'd done some music programs around town before I arrived. Andy Wallace, who was working for the Park Service then and was helping in NCTA with some things, had done some things around town. We have a variety of things going on with the Park Service, and do all the time. Right now we are producing a compact disc recording for distribution by the jazz park in New Orleans. It deals with the history of jazz and the folk origins of jazz, with some of the old vintage recordings. Choosing the recordings and literally packaging and making the things that will be sold from there.

Worked last year on a new park in Nicodemus, Kansas, a little black town on the high plains of western Kansas. It was settled by freed slaves from Kentucky who rode the train as far west as they could, then walked across the prairie and started that town. First with dugouts and then sod houses and it got up to where it had eight or nine hundred people. Now it's dwindled back down to fifty-one, but there is still people who lived there that come back every year. So, they made it into a historical site and got the director to come out and help put together a program for it.

We worked some last year on Cane River, which is also a new park, south of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Cane River Creole Park is a plantation where there is a history of slavery. It's also the area where there were Creoles of color, black folk who owned slaves, some considerable numbers. The Creole aristocracy. Fascinating stories there and lots of baloney has been put into print about that. It's fascinating to me that one of the progenitors of one of the larger Creole of color families was an African woman who had a group of children by this French planter. He didn't really set them free; she bought their freedom.

She worked very hard and she and her eldest son eventually purchased the freedom of all of them, but then they went along with the capitalistic system in place there. They ended up owning lots of slaves themselves and even had some members that were part of the home guard in the Confederacy there.

We sat down and talked to John Vlach, who's on our board and who went down there with Julia Olin and me. We tried to help make a plan of how to interpret the thing. One of the things we would love to do there would be to have a reunion of the descendants of everybody who came from there. One and all would come to meet and talk and deal with that. This is not unprecedented, it's been done before, and it seems to have a healing effect. If those people can deal with the complicated reality of that time, then why can't the rest of us?

I guess this reveals me as a folk romantic. I believe that putting people together around their music and their dance and their foodways, particularly the common ordinary working folks, has a way of lessening prejudice and promotes things that need very much to be promoted. Yes, I know that is a romantic notion. But all of these other things that we have tried to do—we've not been able to shoot people into one another's arms, so maybe we should dance some.

BB: It's a nice idea and something that continues to be needed.

JW: Yes, and I like going into these big cities, into urban places. I like going into places like Lowell, the penultimate ethnic city with these ethnic populations, who came there to get an entry-level job. Who came there to get a foot on the rung of the upward mobility ladder. Some of them have done well—very very well. It's also the place where the mills closed down first and you have the first Rust Belt. It had been a town with a tough reputation, people didn't come to Lowell. But we're getting more than 100,000 people to show up in the middle of town. It astonished Lowell the first time. They were from Cambridge, they were from Portland, they were from Boston. People from Lowell didn't come the first year, they didn't come the second year either, they thought it was a fluke. But the third year they were there.

BB: The local people?

JW: Yes. Paul Tsongas walked up to me at the third festival and said, "This is a wonderful thing. What can I do for you?" I miss him, he was a great guy. And working in places like that and dealing in places like that, I think that's a part of our job. Urban renewal, urban revitalization—



renewal's a bad word. I think that we need to make allies with people who want to preserve central parts of cities. Getting people to come there once proved something in Lowell, really proved something. They've since put in a summer music series. They've built a new arena. It's suddenly a town with an entertainment thing. It's bringing lots of people in. It's got a new baseball team and a new baseball stadium downtown. I think anyone from there will tell you that the roaring success of the folk festival helped trigger that kind of thinking about the town. Made that seem less risky.

**BB:** It sounds like in the early years of the National Folk Festival it moved from city to city. Then it stayed in Washington for quite a few years. How did the idea of moving it around again come about? Was that something you wanted to do?

**JW:** Yes, and I've been supported by my board. The Smithsonian has a wonderful festival on the Mall and I just didn't see the need for more hors d'oeuvres to be laid on there. It was comfortable being at Wolf Trap Farm Park, outside of Washington, D.C. We weren't losing money or anything. It was one of those tender traps, but a trap none the less because I think the worst thing you can do with your life is to be insignificant. It seemed to me that there were other things that we ought to be doing. We had this Park Service tie, so we went out to Cuyahoga National Recreation Area near Akron. We did three festivals out there and they were successful.

Then we went to Lowell and those were a roaring success. When we were ready to leave Lowell for the next city location, the Lowellians brought me up for a meeting and said, "Well, we know that you think we ought to do a regional festival here but there are about forty festivals in New England that could be called regional festivals. We don't have a festival which brings us zydeco bands and mariachis and various kinds of music from around the world and the best of regional. Yeah we'll have some regional bands too. How about you help us with these things which we need help with, which is planning that kind of festival. You can take the National Folk Festival name and buzz off with it. We'd like to increase our attendance, in fact we'd like to change the name to Lowell Folk Festival and increase the attendance next year by fifteen percent." Well, we did that and it's still percolating along.

I think that one of the suppositions that folklorists have is that there is all kinds of wonderful local culture that just local citizens don't know a thing about. Well that's usually true in part. There are always lots of local things that none of us know anything about. But that's not enough. You have to play tricks on people. In the festival we just did in East

Lansing, Michigan, people loved seeing Eilene Ivers and Natalie McMasters up there playing the fiddle. But, Les Ross comes from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and has a town hall band, a great harmonica player. They loved him too. It's always nice to know that some of the people from within the state, some of the locals, are as good as those that we bring in. People don't necessarily like to have you rub their nose in learning. The less you jawbone them and the more that you let them figure it out for themselves, the better the lesson. That kind of thinking and that kind of learning endures, and changes people, changes their thinking. So, we've tried to do that with events.

We're working on touring still. Some of our touring things have been ahead of their time. We're going to try to revive some of our touring of regional music from Mexico. There are Mexicans all over this country. Ten or fifteen years ago we were touring Raíces Musicale. We had a great marimba and a Tex Mex band and mariachi and a Vera Cruz band and some guys from northern New Mexico. And we played in lots of places, but the concept was a little early. Some of our state folk arts people, they weren't ready for that at that point. We're going to go back and try to revive it. I'm proud of what we did. We did four tours of that, from New England to the West Coast, as far south as Kentucky. It's hard to take anything into the Deep South. The South has been so close to its folklore that it has not wanted to appreciate it. I can say that, being from the region. We think that that would be a good thing to do. We have all kind of other things that we think are interesting. It's still exciting to get up in the morning and come to work.

**BB:** That's important. You've had this successful relationship with the National Park Service for a long time. Are there ways, that you see, that agencies and some of these big entities can work better together?

**JW:** Relationship with bureaucratic entities demand that you learn about the people you're dealing with, and you need to get beyond the "What can you do for my program." You really do need to understand, if you're going to work with the Park Service, what the Park Service is about. The Park Service has had a difficult time over the last quarter century. Parks have been crumbling because the Congress has put more parks on line, but it has said to the Park Service, "Operate this from the funds you have in hand." So anyone who goes to the Park Service and expects them to fund their program have come to the wrong place and they're not looking at the reality that park managers have to deal with.

Every Park has a plan that it is supposed to follow, a reason for being, and if you can deal with that and make your thing mesh with that then there are no better partners to work with than Parks. But if you look at that part of government as a possible funding agency then you're barking up the wrong tree.

I'm talking with the Park Service about managing the Blue Ridge Music Center to be built on the Blue Ridge Parkway near the North Carolina-Virginia state lines. I've worked on that for twelve years with the superintendent of that Park and with others in the Park Service. I've dealt with it from the congressional level on down. We have the money to build part of it, but there has to be some more money raised. And the Park Service, as part of the legislation, has no money to run the thing. The Congress is putting zero on that. So, whoever runs it, us or anyone else, has to go raise that money, and they have to earn whatever they can there and that is the way you work with the parks. So, bring them ideas that mesh with their ideas and you'll find great partners. Come with your hand out and they'll think you're a dork and you will be.

BB: So it sounds like what you're saying is that the key is to form partnerships and to know what part of things your different partners are good at and are looking for.

JW: If you can have in a little team of people sitting around the table—the chief electrician for the city, the chief of police, the fire chief, the Department of Sanitation, the mayor—then you've got some really strong partners. In East Lansing, Michigan, we have some glorious partners. We've got the city of East Lansing, the mayor, the city manager. We've got Kurt Dewhurst and Marsha MacDowell and Michigan State University Museum, the folklorists who work there. Gosh that's a powerful partnership.

In Lowell, it's even a little more complicated. We have a 501C3, the Lowell Festival Foundation, the Lowell National Historical Park, the City of Lowell, and us. We don't even have an agreement between us. There is no piece of paper. We started this before the Soviet Union collapsed. We did a tour of things from the Soviet Union. We had a KGB guy come along to check us out in advance. He was supposed to be a cultural guy, but he was a KGB officer. I took him up to Lowell and he looked around and he went to a meeting and after it was over with he said to me, "Who's in charge there? Was the mayor in charge?" and I said, "No." and he says, "The Park Superintendent?" "No." "You, you're in charge?" and I said, "No, no we sit around the table." He says "You sit

around this table and talk? And what do you do if someone doesn't do what they're supposed to do?" and I said, "Well, they wouldn't be able to sit at the table anymore." And he said, "Democracy [is] very complicated."

It's more than democracy, of course. In Lowell, it's trust. So, building partnerships of trust with people who have strength in areas where you need strength. There are some things you really need to learn if you are going to try to put a big crowd together. It's nice to have the television stations as a partner with you, as we did as one of our media partners in East Lansing.

**BB:** When you look at the big picture of the way that public folklore has been developing since '76, what do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the way things are going nowadays?

**JW:** I think that the strengths are that we've learned that we can go out and work in this world. We can work with city managers, we can work in places where we have not worked before and those can be very fruitful. If you are going to open a bank account with someone, you need someone who has some assets on their side of the ledger. Cities can be strong, counties can be strong. There are lots of people that would like to work with us if we can get at some of their goals. And there are goals that we share with them. It's best not to be insular about that, and realize that we do share these things with them.

There was a time when we seemed to think that it was the job of people outside of academia to replicate academia in the government bureaucracies. The way people are sometimes measured in academia is he who knows more is the strongest. There is no place on earth where that measure is applied again exactly that way. Everywhere else it is what you do with your knowledge that's critical. I think that folklorists need to be open to the needs of people around them who are dealing with the public, the population, the citizens, the proletariat.

I never had a graduate school experience, I barely had an undergraduate school experience, and so folklorists have not been my only peers. They are my peers and I love them and admire them and I've learned so much from them. But I'm also a hillbilly and some of my peers are back where I come from. Part of my loyalty is there, and it makes me look at the folk maybe a little differently.

Maybe I learned some of this from Archie. Archie has a commitment to the academy and a commitment to working folk and to occupations that I admire. He had the courage to take on things politically. I've never quit taking on things political, and never will. I

think that is commitment to the people, to have commitment, just to an academic discipline is unthinkable to me. I love folklorists as peers but I'm operating in a larger world, too.

BB: Well, it's a peculiar business that we're in, we're working with people.

JW: All of the people who've worked here before, they're my peers and always will be. But the people, the great artists, the people who come from the country church—I think that we are able to give voice to great voices in the country, voices that need to be heard, musical speech, craft and so forth. We're offered the opportunity to amplify. I think theory is a great way to understand things, it's good to have filters to look through to separate out things. We have separation media of all kinds in life so we can see how some things behave apart from the rest of life, but you always have to keep in mind that the separation itself is artificial, that we are a part of that larger cosmos.

BB: What kind of responsibility do we have back to the people and the communities that we work with? What should we be giving back to them that was meaningful to them?

JW: Everything. I've been looking at all of these piles of recordings that we've made over the years. We need to copy all of it. We need to put it in other places. There's this thought that we need to preserve all of this for scholars. What scholars? Just kids who have assignments who come there and check out a few things, and one or two people?

What we really have the ability to do now is to put lots of things online. Some kid in my little home place of Trade, Tennessee on the western slope of the Blue Ridge wants to find out about Tom Ashley or Gilliam Banmon Grayson, whose photograph is there. You know there is this great set of recordings of Tom Ashley and Doc Watson and Clint Howard and Fred Price on the Folkways. Do you know there has never been one of those sold in that County. There is no way you can buy any of those recordings in that county. There is no record store, there's no anything.

One time after those recordings were made I recorded Clint and Fred for Rounder and I got the newspaper there to sell their recording. Do you know they sold over 800 of them. This is in a county of ten thousand people. Almost 1 out of 10 people bought that recording. That's astounding. It's not that the market's not there, it's just that the mechanism doesn't reach there. Online, we can reach there.

Record labels are bordering on becoming obsolete. An archive that sits in pristine isolation on a campus somewhere is going to be very out of place. There is great trouble in archives now. A huge collecting craze went on, driven in part by new media to collect with—wire recorders, tape recorders—and lots of people collected, communities and all kinds of historical sites. A lot of that material is crumbling now, we need to get all of it copied.

**BB:** How do you convince the powers that be, politicians and other people with money—because this is something that takes a lot of money to do—that this is worth doing? What do you put in front of them to say this is why you should do this?

**JW:** You could tell them the truth. You tell them why this is important and why this is good and you tell them this is some of the treasure of the country. This is material that has to be dealt with, and you tell them you don't have enough money. When you have a task as big as this one, you just have to do something about that. Folklorists in general tend to be incredibly naive about how these kind of things get done. They think that you hire some lobbyist who lives on a diet of olive oil and other slippery stuff, and can just get up there and get it all done and don't realize that members of Congress like to hear from people back home.

It's not a "send in cards and letters," because the people who want to do away with all government involvement in culture tend to be cult types that can produce more letters in a day than we can produce in the rest of our time on earth. You have to sit down and talk to them, invest a little time into it. The big illusion is that it's something you do off the back of your hand. It isn't. It's something you put some time into. Folklorists tend to be passionate about what they believe in. When they invest a little time, they can get great things done. I think this is vital for us.

**BB:** Do you think there could be a more efficient way of bringing together all the people working on the state level and regional level?

**JW:** It's a problem. The one institution that we have, the American Folklore Society (AFS), has been largely a learned society. And God knows I like that, I want a learned society, no one reads the publications or goes to sessions at AFS, when I can go, with more interest than I do. I run around like a dog in heat. But we don't have an institution. A government institution could never represent us. The Folklife Center can't represent

you in front of the Congress—they're a government agency. No one else can, and the AFS has been understandably reluctant to plunge into these kinds of things. It has very slowly moved over in the direction of people who are working off campus, and we "unapplied amateurs."

We need an institution, we need a way of doing this, and maybe it can be done within AFS. There are so many smart well-organized people in our world, that you would think that it would have been done, but it hasn't been.

I've found parts of our people don't think that that's a good thing to do. Sometimes it's a form of anti-governmental bias. There are a lot of people in the country—and folklorists are not immune to it—that think all politicians are the same. That's not true, public service is a really important calling. If you fall into that kind of cynicism about government then you've done a bad thing. There are forces in the country that worry me. I worry that money and fame will become the criteria for election to public office. Which is the kind of prescription that could get our country into a bad situation. I think that there is a need to recognize that people who serve in an elected office understand almost instinctively that part of their constituency are very interested in what we do, but you have to go sit down with them and talk to them about it.

**BB:** Don't you have to produce some kind of proof evidence, don't you?

**JW:** I went to meet Rick Boucher from Southwest Virginia, years ago, about the Blue Ridge Music Center. As I started talking about it, and as we got further into it, Rick started sliding forward until he was sitting on the last inch of his chair. When we left that room he was more enthusiastic than I was. I hadn't taken him through Folklore 101 or anything else, I just told him what this was all about and he bought in. It's in his district, it's his people, and he knows his people. It's best not to be cynical about people until they give you a reason to be cynical about them. God knows there are plenty of people in Congress that I am cynical about, but they gave me a reason to feel that way.

**BB:** Is it a problem on the state level that a lot of the folklorists are working for state entities, too, and can't do their own lobbying? They must be under the same kind of restrictions that the Library of Congress would have.

**JW:** But you work with people all the time who have access to legislators. In the festival we just did in Michigan, our state senator was down at the festival opening it up. We had our Congresswoman there. They

know that these are their people. There was a person who worked for the City who knew instantly how to go and talk to those people. You have to build a private infrastructure around what we do. The idea that you can professionalize this business of working with people with dirt under their fingernails without any intermediaries is a fallacy. You need to let people organize and be the central part of that organized thing. If you don't have a group of citizens that are for this, an organized group of citizens in any state, I think you are in trouble. You do that in various ways in states, but as Tip O'Neil, Mr. Speaker, said, "All politics is local." And folklore is too. It's based on family and community and church. It's local, so these are natural affinities.

I love our opening and closing things in East Lansing. The governor wasn't there, but he invited me to come over to a meeting a few weeks ago and I went up and got to talk to him a little while about all of this. This is a Republican governor, John Engler, and he knew exactly what we were doing and he was for it. Non-partisan approaches are good. I can't say that most Republicans are for this—the truth is that in the House recently, all but five Republicans voted against an increase for the Arts Endowment. Party line vote. Having a major increase put back to the Arts Endowment, I think depends on getting a Democratic majority. I'm not sure anything short of that can do it. I think that it's an exciting time to be a folklorist. Some of the old illusions are dying.

BB: Like what?

JW: Well, I think the illusions that academic ways of operating can be replicated in state bureaucracies are dying. But that's ok, it was just an illusion.

BB: Then there are the new technological things that you've been talking about with the web and being able to really spread information.

JW: We can get to our people suddenly, we can get to them in ways that we were never able to before. Any little kid who wants to get on the box can find us now, and it demands that we be better than we were before. We're selling tickets online. We can take your credit card and it's secure. The ticket will be in the mail to you by the next morning and we'll have your money in our bank. We're still learning all of this, we have a couple of staff members who are good at this kind of thing.

BB: Well we were talking a little about training before. What kind of training do you think is going to be necessary for students other than going to folklore graduate school?



**JW:** I think going to folklore graduate school is a good and wonderful thing. I think apprenticeships are terribly important, and people figuring out if they really want to work over here with the likes of us and the sets of skills that we have that are not being taught to graduate school, which I think is all right. I want people to know how to learn, because the process we're going through is one of learning all the time. The idea that someone comes in here with a degree and that's the capstone of their learning is not the way this place works. No place has that luxury. As for what they should know; being able to write well, being able to research and think logically is terribly important. The old liberal arts education, a broad education I think is more important now than ever in these great times of specialization. I think that you have to get that mainly as an undergraduate. I think that even in graduate school, to keep more air in the program is good.

**BB:** When you dream about the future for NCTA or the field in general, what are some of the things that you think we really could accomplish, if we didn't have some of the restraints that we have now?

**JW:** I always think that the future will probably be better at planning itself than I am. The wish to control the future is the ultimate conceit. I think that it is a fascinating time to be a folklorist and to take this kind of learning and apply it in a time when there is revolutionary change going on in this society in the way information is handled and exchanged. I think there is an openness to us and what we know, if we would reach out to people who have responsibilities of dealing with the public. I think that's true of people in political office and I think it's true of people in managerial jobs. And if you can help them they will be very supportive of what you do and make very powerful allies. We need powerful allies.

I think it's good not to look for too much security. I think the search for security is one of the things that keeps people from growing and keeps them hunkered down and keeps them in jobs they should have quit. It's awfully hard to starve to death in this society. I have a little bit of an edge here—if you come from one of those two room houses everything has looked easy. But I think even if you come from a house with three bathrooms it's easy to be fearful of the future and be too conservative in your approach to life.

**BB:** A lot of folklorists of my generation are getting older and getting mortgages and taking less risks—wanting to stay put and that sort of

thing. But I'm seeing kids coming out of graduate school who are doing interesting things, so I think there is hope.

**JW:** If I've learned anything that might be of value to other folklorists, it's to make partnerships, to make common cause with people like city managers, mayors, city councilmen, legislators and other elected people who have responsibilities to the people who have the dirt under their fingernails. Don't forget that it is those people who we have the privilege and the honor of representing and working.

**BB:** I like those as final words.