

***National Heritage Fellowships 1982-2007.* National Endowment for the Arts. Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts Office of Communications, 2007. 78 pp.**

***National Heritage Fellowships DVD-ROM.* National Endowment for the Arts. Washington DC: National Endowment for the Arts Office of Communications, 2007.\***

Reviewed by Thomas Grant Richardson

Though the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is a U.S. public agency, funded by taxpayer money, it can sometimes feel too far removed from our daily lives and our tastes in its support of Friday night arts like symphonies, operas, and fine art galleries. This is why their new glossy publication, no thicker than a baseball game program, accompanied by a DVD-ROM celebrating 25 years of the National Heritage Fellowship feels like a gift. It is as though PBS gave us a personal copy of their premium gift without our needing to endure a seasonal fund drive.<sup>1</sup>

This book and DVD-ROM document the first 25 years of the NEA's annual National Heritage Fellowship, a prize akin to the Nobel Prize for folk and traditional arts. For these recipients, there simply is no higher recognition, and in this publication the NEA has given these tremendous artists the attention that they are due.

While the booklet lists each year's winners and highlights two recipients per year with short biographies and photos, the core of the work is found on the DVD-ROM. While the term "interactive learning experience" accurately describes the DVD, the dry, bureaucratic language hardly captures the incredible trove of images, video, and audio contained within the disc. Once loaded in your computer (Mac or PC compatible) the DVD starts a brief introduction (part flash animation tutorial and part political rhetoric) stating that the DVD represents "a journey across America through the lives and creativity of these extraordinary people," who "represent a remarkable diverse array of art forms and cultures." Luckily, that is the last of the generic grandstanding and soon enough the user is put in control of the vast amount of information at their disposal.

The format is like a cabinet of curiosities, with clear, cleverly designed buttons that allow the user to search for a particular recipient, or browse by name, year, state, tradition, or ethnicity. Within each of these are category filters. Once you select "tradition," you can further select to see only those artists in the "bluegrass" or "potter" categories.

Once you have found an artist that you would like to know more about (and there are 327 from which to choose) there is an impressive amount of documentation for each, broken into four mediums: a detailed biographical text, photographs, "voice and music," and video. Each medium allows the user to go at their own pace and offers different slices of each artist's career. These sections include interviews, commercially-released music, live concerts, thoughtful narration,

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and selections from the Heritage Awards ceremonies. Though the format is standard, the specific profile of each artist is slightly different, and while most artists have a vast amount of information and media, a few are a bit sparse. The video sections are largely segments from the awards ceremonies, and the photographs derive from a wide variety of sources.

It is the detailed biographical sketches of these often overlooked masters and the finely edited “voice and music” sections that are the most nuanced, contextual, and insightful. The audio segments are intimate portraits, often including the voices and, in many cases, the music of the honorees. The narration is smart and hospitable, allowing larger stories to be told through the lives of individual artists. The format lends itself better to musicians, but as musicians make up nearly half of all Heritage winners, it is a medium that is well used. The user longs only for a downloadable version for their car or iPod.

Given the great care and detail displayed in the curation and organization of the DVD-ROM, its oversights become both more surprising and annoying. While the filter feature is helpful in organizing artists into categories interesting to the user, it defines categories as much as it reflects them, and in some instances it excludes artists from traditions. The fiddle and mandolin player Howard Armstrong is a good example of this oversight of genre. On the DVD-ROM Armstrong is categorized as an “African American Musician; String Band,” which is a fair and understandable solution to the cross-genre music that defined much of Armstrong’s career. The problem is that “string band” is not a tradition able to be searched, whereas “bluegrass” is. Similarly, if one searches those listed under “fiddlers,” Armstrong does not appear. There is no sub-category for mandolin players since all other mandolin players, except Armstrong, are in the “bluegrass” sub-category.

While these problems of categorization and searchability are real problems, ultimately they are the problems of those users who spend a great amount of time exploring this DVD-ROM. It is a testament to its fantastic design and deep information that one can spend so much time reading, watching, and listening to hundreds of master artists, many of whom elsewhere would have little exposure on the national stage. This multimedia encyclopedia is a valuable research tool, but it is no less valuable as entertainment, and as it is available for free through the NEA’s website, it stands as a superb use of taxpayer money towards a good and noble program for culture work in the United States.

## **Note**

1. *National Heritage Fellowships 1982-2007* and the included DVD-ROM can be ordered for free or downloaded as a PDF at <http://www.nea.gov/pub/pubFolk.php>, accessed February 22, 2010.

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