



HOSTING THE NATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL



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MEET THE NATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL



IMAGINE transforming your city into a vibrant celebration of music, dance, and art from across America that can bring 100,000 attendees and generate tens of millions in economic impact.

SEE your city streets flourish with an arts celebration that has been a successful catalyst for urban renewal and revitalization efforts in the communities it has touched across the country.

SHARE the richness of your local culture and expose your community to folk and traditional arts they might never have the opportunity to experience.

Become a National Folk Festival Host City!

The National Folk Festival is the oldest multicultural traditional arts celebration in the nation. Now in its 8th decade, this traveling festival has been held in nearly 30 communities around the country.

Musicians and craftspeople from every U.S. state 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.

Through its partnership with the host city, the National Folk Festival is an economic and cultural powerhouse that unites communities in renewing civic pride, strengthening community collaborations, and spurring investments in community infrastructure.

Residents, civic leaders, funders, and festival visitors alike will be enticed to explore other opportunities with the host city by this powerful, transformative, and collaborative community celebration.

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 host the National Folk Festival.

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Bring America's premier celebration of traditional arts and culture to your community!
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Eleanor Roosevelt and Agnes Meyer at a National in Washington, D.C. Mrs. Meyer was festival chair and Mrs. Roosevelt was honorary chair.



Aunt Samantha Bumgarner of North Carolina performed at the 2nd National in Chattanooga. She was one of the first Appalachian women to record commercially, in 1924.



W. C. Handy, the "Father of the Blues," performed at the National in 1938 in Washington, D.C., and at the National in Cleveland in 1946.

A brief history

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, cultures, 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.

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 a period of years. It is held in the hearts of cities, and in parks of all types. Presented 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 folk and traditional arts festival after the National moves on to another city.

The National's many successes have resulted from partnerships that may involve 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 often been held downtown, in spaces shared 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

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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.



National Folk Festivals feature the nation's finest traditional artists. Programming embraces 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. The festival presents traditional culture as the vibrant, living expressions that reflect the cultural life of communities as they change, combining tradition and innovation, from generation to generation.

Audiences are treated to blues, rockabilly, gospel, klezmer, jazz, bluegrass, breakdance, Irish, cowboy, polka, tamburitza, old-time, mariachi, Native American hoop dance, western swing, beatbox, Bharata Natyam, honky-tonk, rhythm and blues, zydeco, and much more. Folklife exhibits and demonstrations feature the finest craft demonstrators, as well as practitioners of occupational, ritual and recreational traditions, and foodways. Subjects range from traditional pottery, blacksmithing, body art, quilting, instrument-making, boat-building, weaving and woodcarving, to Native American 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, New Orleans brass bands, Puerto Rican bomba and 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 traditional forms of public celebration are 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 array of culturally diverse foods available for purchase throughout the site.

Success stories

The National Folk Festival is currently attracting the largest audiences in its history. Moving on a multiyear cycle, in the past 4 decades the festival has been held at over 10 sites with wide-ranging populations and demographics, from Montana to Maine to Tennessee, and more. Many of these cities continue to produce a local festival, building on the success of the National, often with continued NCTA involvement.

Lowell, MA, host of the National from 1987-89, has continued to produce the Lowell Folk Festival. With an average annual attendance of 175,000, it has become one of New England's most important cultural events, respected for its devotion to deep tradition and showcasing local and regional artists alongside artists from far and wide. The NCTA remains involved with programming the Lowell Folk Festival, while local partners have assumed much of the festival production—as planned.

The 69th National Folk Festival in Richmond, VA, attracted a record 175,000 in 2007, a figure consistently surpassed by its successor, the Richmond Folk Festival, which drew 230,000 in 2022. In Butte, MT (pop. 35,000), 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. During its tenure in Salisbury, MD, ending in 2022, the National drew over 400,000 people to the city's downtown, with over \$65M in long-term economic impact.

“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*



Pop-up street performances engage festivalgoers in the action.



Regional, culturally diverse foods are offered and offered throughout the festival site.



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



The National attracts large audiences to the heart of the community.



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

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 host city varies 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.

A National Folk Festival site is ideally capable of accommodating multiple performance stages, a regional folklife area, a festival marketplace, a family area, and culturally diverse food sales, with parking and space for 50-75,000 people per day. The host city also has 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 host 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 90 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 host city on all aspects of the festival, including marketing and promotion, fundraising and volunteer coordination.

"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,
American Folk Festival, Bangor, ME
NFF host city (2002-2004)

A NATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL HOST CITY CAN EXPECT:

- Tens of millions in economic impact
- Peak weekend for tourism and hospitality
- Record-breaking sales for local businesses and restaurants
- Enhanced community outreach, participation, and civic pride
- New, lasting investments in venue infrastructure and event production
- Opportunities to showcase regional cultural heritage
- Festival artists and community members collaborating across cultures

CONTACT US TODAY about hosting the National Folk Festival in your community. Email us at festivals@ncta-usa.org.

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For information about corporate sponsorship opportunities for the National Folk Festival, contact giving@ncta-usa.org.

Photos courtesy Michael G. Stewart; W.C. Handy Museum, Florence, Alabama; Harry Goodwin of the *Washington Post*; Nic Kuvshinoff; Remsburg, Inc.; NCTA Archives; Skip Rowland; Tom Pich



“Where we come from, success is taking care of family, neighbors, and the community. That’s what the National Folk Festival is doing for Salisbury, MD. Bringing all the wonderful people together.”

National Heritage Fellow
Balla Kouyaté

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

Greensboro News & Record

“... a smashing 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

“This year, the weather was perfect, the music was spectacular, [and] Salisbury doubled its festival attendance. The joint success was due, in part, to the wonderful vibe, but also to the presentation of one extremely high quality performance followed by another and another and far too many for any reasonable person to absorb in three days.”

Howard Blumenthal,
national media producer

“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

“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

“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

“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

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

Chattanooga Free Press

“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

“This festival, to me, it was everything you’d want for Greensboro—all types of music, all walks of life. For three days everybody just had a good time together.”

Chris Wilson,
Assistant City Manager,
Greensboro, NC

“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]

“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





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