



WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

BOWLING GREEN, KENTUCKY 42101

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Folklore, Folklife, and  
Oral History Archives

June 29, 1983

Ron Short, Tom Bledsoe, and  
Angie DeBord  
Roadside Theater  
Appalshop  
Whitesburg, Kentucky

Dear Ron, Tom, and Angie,

I really enjoyed your presentation at the Appalachian Celebration in Morehead--and was very sorry I didn't have the chance to stay and see "South of the Mountain." I also enjoyed visiting with you all. Tom and Ron, your music was terrific--even at 4 in the morning!

Attached is a copy of my site report for the N.E.A. Folk Arts Panel.

Thanks! I hope we connect again soon. Greetings to Debby!

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Jan Anderson".

Jan Anderson  
Folklore Archivist

Attachment.

(P.S.--I'll also throw in a few items from our Archives you might enjoy.  
If you ever think we might have something you can use, just holler.)



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and Oral History Archives

June 29, 1983

Pat Sanders  
Folk Arts Panel  
National Endowment for the Arts  
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20506

Dear Pat,

Last week I attended some of the many Appalachian Celebration activities held in Morehead, Kentucky. Among the events I participated in was a production by the Roadside Theater company from Whitesburg, Kentucky. The show was titled "Mountain Tales and Music" and included an assortment of stories and songs drawn from the performers' own Appalachian region.

The evening before the show I talked with two members of the Roadside Theater company, Ron Short and Tom Bledsoe. (O.K., I confess: it was after a jam session which lasted til four a.m. and during which I got an impressive sample of Ron and Tom's considerable musical talent.) We discussed the next day's show and the fieldwork which is being done with Folk Arts Panel funding. Ron indicated that the fieldwork funded by N.E.A. is continuing even now and that one story collected as part of that project--and collected just the week before--would be included in the performance I was to see.

The "Mountain Tales and Music" production draws on a pool of folk stories and songs. The performers vary their choices of materials to suit specific audiences. The third member of the group, Angie DeBord, explained they have approximately thirty different tales to draw on. Some of these thirty are the products of the fieldwork the Folk Arts Panel funded.

Saturday morning I saw Angie, Ron, and Tom present "Mountain Tales and Music," a production including two songs and three stories. I have had some storytelling experience myself, and I didn't envy them the conditions they confronted. Their presentation was scheduled in a room many times larger than they needed for a cozy story-sharing atmosphere, and the space was filled with perhaps six hundred chairs! The show had been advertised as an event for children--without informing the performers. The audience was diverse, composed of families and singles from infants to

retirees. And one of their own trio was considerably pregnant--that would be Angie.

All of these drawbacks were handled without visible concern. Tom and Ron drew the audience together in the center sections of the seats provided, and the children were invited to come to the front and sit on the floor. From their pool of material the performers drew out an assortment of stories and songs suitable for the young age of the audience but with added asides and touches thrown in for the enjoyment of the adults. (As the Fat Man from under the bridge looked for a little girl in the audience to "eat," one shy young viewer first edged and then ran as far away as possible. The Fat Man pointed at her and said, "I eat you in abstentia!") As for Angie's pregnancy, she provided gentler, less active characters than her usual--roles like the narrator.

The audience was immediately drawn in when Tom and Ron began with "EVERYBODY'S favorite song--Sheebe." (YOU know Sheebe! You DON'T? Well, we'll sing it, and maybe you'll be able to join in--"Sheebe comin' round the mountain when she comes!...") The audience participation, the humor, the talking to the audience (and even touching people in the audience!) all captivated the watchers. The children enjoyed the singing and the tales, and the adults enjoyed the children enjoying the singing and the tales. The performers' skill at holding the attention of a wide range of ages was impressive.

The Roadsiders chose two songs requiring audience participation with actions and choruses. Two of the stories they told were narrated by individuals, and the third was told and acted out by all three of them together.

An audience of about 135 people enjoyed the "Mountain Tales and Music," and after the performance, many stayed to talk. All three "stars" made themselves available to both children and adults who wanted to say hello and visit.

I spoke with the three performers after the show. Angie has been with the Roadside Theater since its founding ten years ago. She told me all members of the company are from the region surrounding Whitesburg. Among the company members, only the original founder had a background of theater training, and in their smaller group of three, both musicians are self-taught.

All three of the tales used on Saturday showed clearly the cultural stamp of the mountain region in which they were collected. (In fact, two of the three stories were collected from Appalshop staff members who grew up in the immediate area, and the third was collected from an elderly woman nearby.) A tale involving a multi-colored fish which becomes a rainbow came from an area with a large Cherokee population. The story involving "Little People" was collected from a white woman in an area settled primarily

by Scotch-Irish. (This "Little People" tale was the one collected during the fieldwork sponsored by the N.E.A.)

All members of the Roadside Theater group are involved in fieldwork. They have developed a working release form and ask each informant to sign one. A goal is to establish an archives or library for their field recordings and make them available for scholarly and public use. (Another goal is to have the time and staff to prepare complete transcriptions of all field recordings.)

One emphasis of the group is dialect. Among group members there is a concern for preserving their own personal dialects as well as for attempting to simulate the dialects of the tales' original tellers. A variety of dialects is evident in their productions. (In addition to their own fieldwork, some group members have worked with W.P.A. transcriptions made in the 1930's which were written out phonetically to convey the dialects in which they were recorded.)

Although the Roadside Theater company is unquestionably a professional theater group, the members themselves are from the region in which they work and come out of the tradition in which they deal. It is obvious that the performers/fieldworkers consider themselves to be a part of the region's tradition and a link in the transmission of that tradition. (And the people of their own region seem to accept them as part of the tradition.)

As collectors, bearers, disseminators, and preservers of their art, the Roadside Theater members become a part of the tradition they work out of. They are contemporary but active tradition bearers in a world of television and MTV! I believe the Roadside Theater is a valuable resource worthy of the Folk Arts Panel's stamp of approval. Few who see their work would argue that they are not artists working within their own tradition.

As a part of the Appalachian Celebration activities, the Roadside Theater productions were billed as "Special Entertainments" and were open to the public free of charge. The "Mountain Tales and Music" production was the first time the Appalachian Celebration had provided an activity specially aimed at children.

I'll give you a bit of background on the Celebration itself. This is the seventh year of Appalachia-related summer activities at Morehead State University. The core of the Celebration is a week of folk arts sessions known as the Heritage Arts Workshop. Each year of the workshop's existence, more activities have clustered around it, choosing the same time and place to meet. Additional activities this year included a workshop by the Kentucky Heritage Quilt Society, an Elderhostel session, an Eastern Kentucky Economic Development Seminar, the fourth annual Conference on Appalachian Children and Families, a Watercolor Workshop, a Jesse Stuart

Symposium, and others.

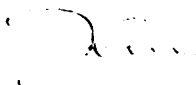
Several "Special Entertainments" were offered each day for the enjoyment of the participants in all these activities as well as for the general public. These Special Entertainments were free and included concerts, films, lectures, dances, and the Roadside Theater. (Do please see the enclosed brochures. They will tell you much more.)

During my two-day visit to this year's Appalachian Celebration, I participated in an evening dance, attended a concert by the Goins Brothers Band, and was party to a jam session which lasted until four a.m. One unusual event was a display of privately-owned Appalachian artifacts--brought out from attics and barn lofts for the occasion. (The room held artifacts from calf weaners to hammered dulcimers, and activities ranged from quilting to a free banjo lesson.) The arts and crafts sale I attended was juried to provide a select selection of wares. I also saw the Roadside Theater perform, visited with some of the Elderhostel participants, and ate homemade peach ice cream.

A whole composite of concurrent activities has developed with a strong emphasis on folk arts--art, craft, drama, dance, and music. While the total number of participants in the Heritage Arts Workshop was something less than seventy, the total number of people participating in the week's activities must have been large--800 to 1000, perhaps?? And the geographical spread of participants was great, some traveling from as far away as California to experience a week of Appalachian specialties.

Already in its seventh year, the Appalachian Celebration is obviously a viable and growing event. (I attended the entire week of the Heritage Arts Workshop six years ago, and the activities even then were well-chosen and broad in spectrum.) The Celebration has already established a wide base of events and activities related to the region's folk arts and crafts. The Folk Arts Panel might consider contacting Glenn Fulbright (of the Morehead State University Music Department and organizer of the Heritage Arts Workshop portion of the Appalachian Celebration) and encouraging an application for additional funding to help this exciting program grow.

Sincerely,

  
Jan Anderson  
Folklore Archivist

Enclosures

Fulbright's address: Glenn Fulbright  
Music Department  
Morehead State University  
Morehead, KY 40351