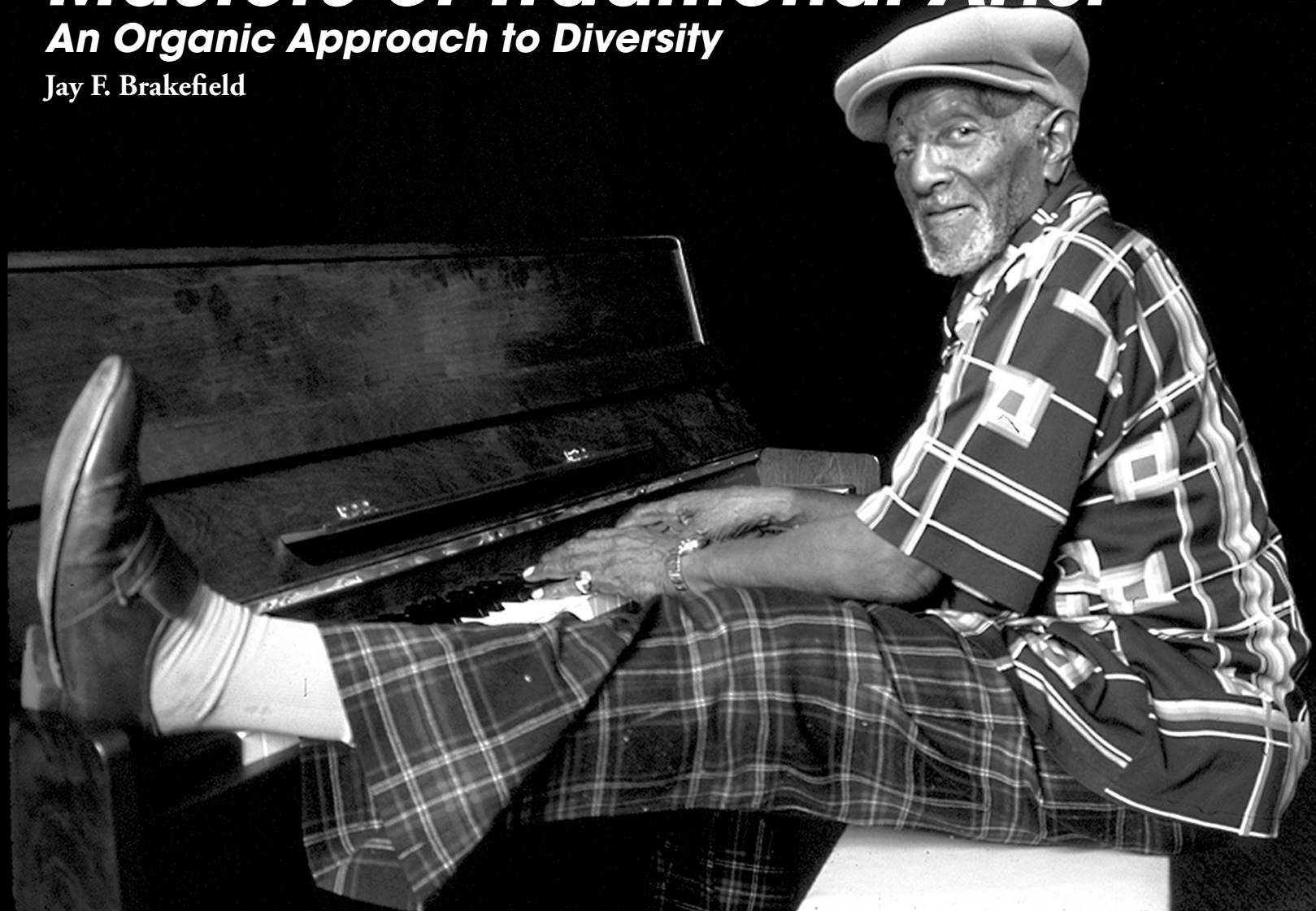


Masters of Traditional Arts:

An Organic Approach to Diversity

Jay F. Brakefield



Alexander H. Moore, Sr., African-American Blues Pianist, Dallas, Texas, Photograph by Alan Govenar, Courtesy Documentary Arts

"Diversity" has become a popular word across the nation, as Americans continue to grapple with race and other potentially divisive social issues. Yet often as we pay lip service to inclusiveness, we enforce a numbing conformity reminiscent of the 1950s. As Diane Ravitch says in her book, *The Language Police*, in the name of sensitivity, we are sanitizing the language and producing textbooks and standardized tests so bland and inaccurate that they serve only to avoid controversy.¹ The theory behind this is that, by changing language we can shape thought; if children don't hear demeaning language they're less likely to use it. Experts disagree on the validity of this idea, but, as Ravitch points out, such an approach is doomed to failure when many, if not most, young people are also exposed to movies and song lyrics that are as explicit as the school materials are circumspect. One yearns at times for a middle ground between political correctness and gangsta rap.



Joseph Cormier, Cape Breton Fiddler, Waltham, Massachusetts, Photograph by Alan Govenar, Courtesy Documentary Arts

Texas's population is a microcosm, and its music is both an expression of that diversity and a force for cohesiveness. One indication of the importance that music plays in the state's history is that 13 of the 14 Texans selected for the prestigious National Heritage Fellowship have been musicians. The fellowships are awarded each September by the National Endowment for the Arts.

The National Heritage Fellowship program embodies the true meaning of diversity and the values we wish to impart, not only to our children, but also to our neighbors and fellow citizens. This year's awards bring to almost 300 the number of fellowships presented since the NEA created the program in 1982. The recipients come from virtually every racial and ethnic group and every region

A Program with Deep Roots

The seed of the National Heritage Fellowships was sown in 1977 when Bess Lomax Hawes, daughter of the groundbreaking Texas folklorist John A. Lomax, became director of the Folk and Traditional Arts Program at the NEA. She and Nancy Hanks, then chairman of the agency, began to explore ways to honor artists in the United States. Their model was Japan's Living National Treasures program, which singles out individual artists who are perceived as unique. Obviously, the answer was not to copy the Japanese program but to adapt it, and, for several years, members of consulting panels conducted a vigorous debate on how best to do that.

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of the country. All recipients practice art forms deeply rooted in their cultures, from music to boatbuilding and egg painting to rug weaving. A few have managed to make a living from their art; many others have worked at other jobs and pursued their passions on their own time, often at great sacrifice.

The program has grown even as the NEA has endured controversy and budget cuts in recent years. This year, the stipend for each recipient has doubled to \$20,000. Yet despite this growth and the program's virtues, it receives scant coverage in the news media. Many Americans are unaware of its existence, and it is only now making its appearance in the classroom. That will change, however, if Alan Govenar, a Dallas folklorist, writer, and filmmaker has his way.

Ultimately, it was decided to honor as many artists as possible annually. Each would receive a certificate and a check for \$5,000, "a sum that was agreed to as being simultaneously impressive but not so great as to encourage any recipient to change a lifetime's living pattern." Because government agencies are legally prohibited from giving honorary awards, the NEA decided on the word "fellowships," so that the honors would not appear to be achievement awards but "simple contributions toward the artistic future of the particular recipient." Twelve fellowships were awarded the first year. The number has remained roughly constant; this year, 10 fellowships are being awarded, as well as the Bess Lomax Hawes Award 2000 to recognize service to the folk and traditional arts field as a whole.²





Inez Catalon and her daughter, Mary, African-American Creole Singer, Kaplan, Louisiana, Photograph by Alan Govenar, Courtesy Documentary Arts

A Project that Grew

Dr. Govenar, a Massachusetts native who stayed in Texas after earning a doctorate in Arts and Humanities from UT Dallas, became involved nearly two decades ago when he began work on "Masters of Traditional Music," an award-winning 52-part radio series. For more than three years, with funding from the NEA and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Govenar traveled the country conducting interviews for the series. "All these little whirlwind trips were really very helpful," he said. "They gave me a sense of the texture of the country. The project originally had a much narrower scope. As I got more deeply into it, I saw what it could become."³

Discussions with Hawes, and her successors Dan Sheehy (now head of Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings) and Barry Bergey, led

to a plan to raise the profile of the National Fellowship Heritage program by producing a retrospective book, a new radio series and interactive media. Govenar started work on a book with Joseph Wilson, executive director of the National Council for the Traditional Arts. When Wilson had to withdraw for health reasons, Govenar moved forward and involved Documentary Arts, the nonprofit organization he founded in 1985. He contacted folklorists, writers, photographers, filmmakers, and community leaders nationwide and began the arduous task of building a database on each of the fellowship recipients. Govenar teamed up with Documentary Arts employee Andrew Dean and WGBH Radio, Boston, to produce a second 52-part radio series, "Masters of Traditional Arts," which focused not only on music, but also on artisans, dancers, and storytellers.



Over the years, Govenar interviewed about 200 of the Heritage Fellows himself and, as his work on the book and radio series moved forward, he recruited writers, editors, scholars, photographers, and filmmakers. At the same time, advancing technology expanded what could be done with the material. What originally was conceived as a CD-ROM became a DVD-ROM, a 2.67-gb disc that contains all the text in the two-volume book, more than 3,000 color and black-and-white photographs, 104 radio features, 15 hours of recorded interviews and music, and 227 edited videos. He also worked with Paddy Bowman, a curriculum specialist and director of the National Task Force on Folk Arts in Education, and Betty Carter, a nationally recognized authority on nonfiction books for young readers, to create an Education Guide that features the DVD-ROM as a learning resource.

The two-volume reference book, *Masters of Traditional Arts*, and the Education Guide with the DVD-ROM were published by ABC-CLIO in 2001 and 2002. Now, Govenar's goal is to get these materials into the schools.

"In putting together the Education Guide, I worked with a focus group of teachers and librarians, and discovered that libraries are the best way to impact the educational process. Librarians work with all students. ABC-CLIO targets school libraries nationwide. I hope that 'Masters of Traditional Arts' in all its forms—radio series, book, Education Guide and DVD-ROM—will be a catalyst for the folk and traditional forms to become a more integral part of our national dialogue.

"To further these efforts, Documentary Arts is firming up plans to donate all of its holdings on the National Heritage Fellowship program to a special collection at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. Moreover, I am committed to developing other books, which can help bring the Heritage Fellows more prominence in our national consciousness."

Last year, Govenar signed a contract with Candlewick Press to write and produce a color photographic young readers book (to be published in 2005) that he describes as "giant steps across America."

Entitled *Extraordinary Ordinary People*, the book will focus on five of the National Heritage Fellowship recipients—New York-based Chinese *wu-dan* performer Qi Shu Fang, Mardi Gras Indian Tootie Montana, Iowa weaver Dorothy Trumpold, Maine boatbuilder Ralph W. Stanley, and Texas-born *corona* maker Eva Castellanoz.

When asked "what keeps him going?," the question Govenar so often poses to the Heritage Fellows themselves, he says, "Each of these artists inspires me. Engaging in a dialogue with them helps me to better understand myself and to deepen my sense of the essential elements of the creative process. By bringing forth these experiences to the broadest possible public, I want others, of all ages, to realize that these qualities of life and work are possible. Mastery of whatever we can make is within reach." ■

For more information about Documentary Arts or any of the educational material mentioned here, please contact Alan Govenar at:

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NOTES

1. Diane Ravitch, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2003)
2. Steve Siporin, *American Folk Masters: The National Heritage Fellows*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1992), 17.
3. All quotations of Govenar are from an interview conducted by the author on July 1, 2003.