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Mohawk Hudson Folklife Festival

BY ANNE RAPPAPORT BERLINER

Summary of the 2020 Initiative

The Upstate Regional Documentation Initiative finished its sixth year in Albany and Rensselaer Counties. Unique in this phase, due to the pandemic, multiple fieldworkers were employed in their own communities, rather than one covering a region of multiple counties. Past years of this project concluded with multiple smaller presentations. So, what changed in 2021? Why did the efforts in Albany and Rensselaer result in a festival?

The region itself was a great inspiration for the event. Albany and Rensselaer Counties are home to diverse refugee and immigrant communities. It was difficult to pick just a

few artists to be involved in a smaller presentation, so why not go big? The summer and fall of 2021 was a bright spot in the seemingly never-ending COVID-19 pandemic. Outdoor events were flourishing, vaccines were abundant, and people were excited to be in the company of others for art and music. The idea that something big could be done was exciting and almost new! More practically, employing three fieldworkers—Ladan Nikravan, Edgar Betelu, and Anne Rappaport Berliner—allowed for planning duties to be divided between the three of them and with New York Folklore Executive Director Ellen McHale. New York Folklore's proximity to the

communities being documented allowed us to utilize already established connections in the immediate area, including vendors and venues. In the span of just a few hours, over 50 performers with diverse backgrounds performed, including Pakistani, Latin, Karen, Congolese, and Gospel. Artists and demonstrators were an equally diverse group: Africans, Afghans, Chinese, and Greek, among them.

Planning

With only three months to plan, the pandemic seemed to be on its way out. The considerations for an outdoor event were unique: What COVID-19 precautions were needed? If the weather turned bad, could we safely



A young woman gets henna painted on her hand by Asmah Hashimi. All photos by Anne Rappaport Berliner.



Dancers from the Karen community are led by Ehsue Klay Aung (*third from the left*).

bring the event indoors? On the other end of the spectrum, events and social gatherings were back in force: event vendors, including tents and chair rental, sound and technical services, and food trucks were difficult to confirm. Would the public choose to attend our event? Given the outdoor event, COVID-19 regulations were relatively loose. Masks, hand sanitizers, and other products would be available at the information table, but social distancing and masking were left to the individual's discretion. We debated the possibility of bringing the event indoors; however, this proved moot, as the Lakehouse was being renovated. We would rely on tents to keep our festival going if the weather turned sour (it did). Chairs and tents proved the easiest pieces to find—a combination of rented and crowd-sourced pieces from New York Folklore and our partners. Technical services and food trucks proved more difficult. On the day of the festival, we had four food vendors: Chayla's Cuchifrito, Las Capital Tacos, Halal BBQ House, and Roy's Caribbean Restaurant.

Many vendors were difficult to track down and secure. Events like ours—farmers' markets and private events were ongoing—meant food vendors were already booked. Of the utmost concern was having a halal vendor there,

as many of our demonstrators were adherent to dietary law. After a long search, one of our musicians connected us with Halal BBQ House. We collected the most meal vouchers from the BBQ House. Other vendors were



Embroidery by Afghan artist Laitifa Ali Muhammad.



Festival goers enjoying lunch.



Drummers Jordan Taylor Hill, Abdul Samassa, and Baba Buhari Naibi.

otherwise locked Lakehouse as a space to store instruments, and an electrician on site all day. This was a welcome relief, given the rainy forecast. We had a few unexpected but welcome advantages. Both *The Daily Gazette* and the *Times Union*—the Capital Region’s leading newspapers—picked up the story of our festival and shared features before the event. The West Hill Refugee Center was a seemingly unending supply of artists and demonstrators. Artists seem to come from everywhere, asking to participate in the festival. This was a marked difference in the hesitance that the fieldworkers experienced when trying to secure interviews. Perhaps, documentation projects going forward should have a concrete event to end them. However, we did have to tell some potential demonstrators we would not be able to include them—we simply ran out of time and funds for more demonstrators. Again, the Refugee Center provided funds to pay another artist and even contributed an extra pop-up tent.

A great triumph of teamwork was the stage managing of Charlotte (Charlie) Jones and audio support of Eric Ayotte, Charlie and Eric are frequent partners of New York Folklore. Some will recognize them as the leaders of New York Folklore’s recent videography and editing workshops. We originally intended to hire an audio company. Despite promises that the company would be available, they canceled only a few days before October 3. Eric Ayotte was going to attend the event and provide video documentation, which, if needed, a folklorist could provide, should Eric be needed to run audio on borrowed equipment—which he was. Charlie’s services were secured at the beginning of the planning process. Having two

concerned that attending the festival might not be worth their time monetarily. We had to creatively convince at least some of them to participate, and although a vendor or two left early due to the weather, all expressed interest in returning for the festival again.

The festival began to take shape as we cemented our venue, The Washington Park Lakehouse Amphitheatre. The park and lakehouse are well-known hosts of cultural programming in the Capital Region. Most

notably, the Park Playhouse Theater uses the space for comprehensive theatrical performances each summer. The ability to visit the Lakehouse Amphitheatre allowed us to continually visualize our event; it is a short drive from the New York Folklore office in Schenectady and was mostly public space that was always open.

An unexpected partner was the City of Albany—the owner of the space. Their unexpected co-sponsorship of the event meant we had janitorial resources, access to the



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3RD

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The Mount Olive Male Chorus performs as the festival's final musical act.

staff members who work so well together was important, given much of the day was spent avoiding the bad weather. Charlie and Edgar moved each performance up by an hour to avoid a four o'clock deadline set by the impending rain. The added hands were also useful when moving pop-up tents over the stage area, covering equipment with plastic, and getting instruments inside the lakehouse. Having a dedicated stage manager allowed the rest of the team to focus on their own responsibilities. While Edgar worked as MC, Ladan Nikravan managed the artists and demonstrator area, while Ellen and I floated, documenting and manning the information table as needed. A small, but elite team of volunteers were also integral to our success, manning video documentation of the stage, passing out information about New York Folklore, as well as doing set up and breakdown.

By the numbers:

- 300 Festival attendees
- 50 musicians performed
- 12 artist demonstrators
- 1 artist commission

Conclusions

Many activities facilitated by folklorists have changed significantly due to the pandemic. However, the festival seems to have come through the deadliest part of the pandemic relatively unscathed. The format is a model post-pandemic event. Outdoors, typically, has more than enough space to socially distance. Although having to ensure that all our artists were under a tent did restrict the ability to socially distance, but having separate pop-up tents instead of one large one, is a relatively simple solution. The community seemed to agree with the sentiment. Throughout our shortened event, we estimated around 300 people visited. The factor that kept numbers down was not COVID-19, but the rain! In the end, people did choose to attend our event—some found us as they walked in the park, but many came to the park specifically to attend the festival. One couple told us they drove from Vermont to attend!

One of the many highlights was seeing the mix of communities enjoying each other's art—we spotted a member of the Desi Music Trio enthusiastically dancing to the Wa Lika band's African beats. Children from almost every community lined up to have henna on their

hands. Only a few hours into the festival, everyone seemed to be asking, "Will the festival become an annual event?" In many ways, this is an easy answer—of course! The response to the festival both before and after was incredible. The community loved both attending and participating. However, many of the questions, which we faced in July 2021, have remained unanswered or new ones have emerged.

What COVID-19 precautions will be needed? If the weather turns bad, can we safely bring the event indoors? Event vendors are gearing up for a busy 2022, so will they be available for us? How will we secure funding to include more tradition bearers? With these questions in mind, we are moving toward a bigger and better Mohawk Hudson Folklife Festival in 2022 (see back cover for details). ▼

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