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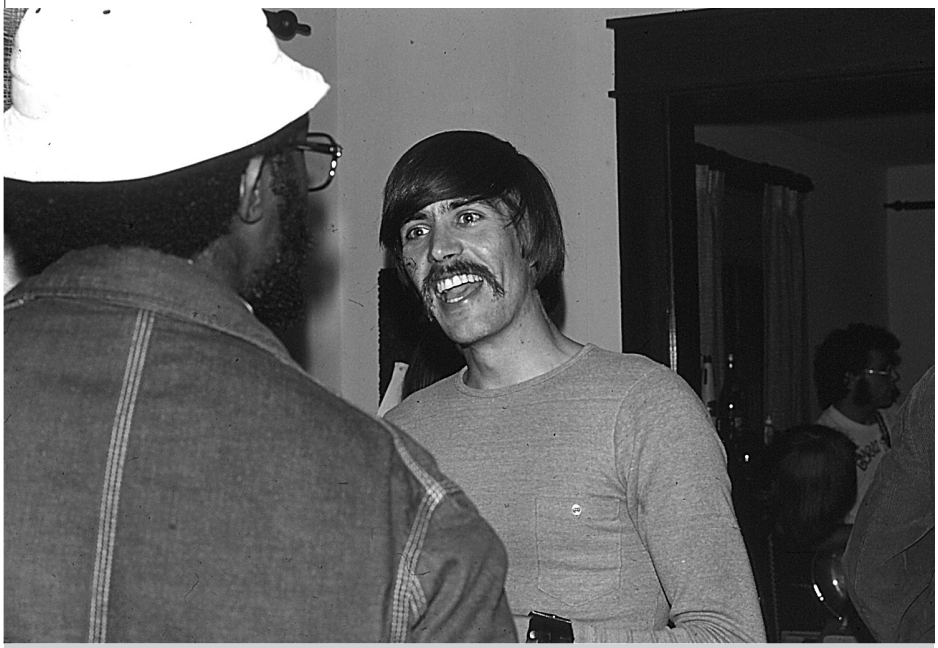
A Tribute to John Vlach

BY NANCY SOLOMON

In 1981, I began my Master's degree in Museum Studies at George Washington University (GWU). I took an introductory course in American Studies with Pete Mondale, who assigned a book that would change my life: *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* by Larry Levine. When I asked Mondale where I could read more books like this, he introduced me to John Vlach, the new folklorist that the department had just hired. John had just written *Charleston Blacksmith* about Phillip Simmons, an African American blacksmith in Charleston. I was immediately sold on this professor, since my brother was a blacksmith and I had worked at a museum on Black women's history in Washington, DC (The Bethune Museum) prior to starting my Master's degree. And, then I learned what folklorists do. Later than year, I changed my degree concentration to American Studies so that I could take some courses with him.

John taught us so many important things for folklorists, including the importance of listening deeply during interviews, so that you could develop a relationship with the person you are interviewing. He also stressed the importance of giving back, that your research was for the community, not just for your paper or project—that your work depended on gaining trust, not just by promises. And the more people working on a project, the better project it would be. One experience stands out in my memory—measuring a tobacco barn.

In my final year, while working on my thesis, John invited me to join his vernacular architecture class on a field trip to Prince George's County in Maryland, where there was a mid-19th-century tobacco barn. When we arrived, I parked on what seemed to be level ground and proceeded to join the students. John asked if I could show them how to measure the barn, so that we could produce a measured drawing later in the class. Having spent the last several months doing drawings of workers' houses in western Maryland for my thesis, I welcomed the chance to examine other vernacular architecture forms and to work with other people, too. As we finished measuring beams and braces, one task remained—determining the elevation. Back in those days, the only way to get the height was to climb up to the peak. Using the crib as a ladder, I pulled the tape measure up, when one of the cribs collapsed underneath. Fortunately, there were a lot of tobacco leaves on the barn floor, which cushioned my landing. John stood there laughing, later saying I had earned my credentials as a student of vernacular architecture.



John Vlach and Bill Wiggins at a party hosted by Vlach in Autumn, 1972, in Bloomington, Indiana. Photo courtesy of Howard "Rusty" Marshall.

John Vlach with blacksmith Phillip Simmons [*second from the right*] at the 1982 Smithsonian Festival, with Simmons' apprentices, Silas Sessions [*left*] and Ronnie Pringle [*right*]. Photo courtesy of Howard "Rusty" Marshall.

Feeling confident that I had learned something that day, I later discovered that my car was not on solid ground. John asked all of the students, especially the ones who needed rides home, to help push me out of the mud. Such acts let me know how deeply John cared for his students.

Another life-changing experience was working with Phillip Simmons, the Charleston blacksmith. The summer of 1982 was the first year for the National Heritage Fellowships awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts. Phillip Simmons was in that first group and was asked to demonstrate on the National Mall in July. John asked if I could assist him with the introductions of visitors, who also came to Washington that summer, to Phillip and his apprentices. Throughout those hot summer days, I learned how wonderful it is to form lasting relationships with the artists we work with, as I saw John attending to Phillip and his apprentices. The invitation also introduced me to the festival world, both the good parts and the bad parts.

In classes and numerous discussions in between, John always helped us explore our passions, introducing us to other folklorists and scholars, and supporting our work. Cramped in a tiny office at GWU, John always had his door open and encouraged us to work with each other. I made some very dear friends at GWU and continue to value their friendship today. That is because John nurtured us, as we supported him. When I began exploring working full-time as a folklorist, it was John who suggested I go to New York, where he said, "lots of things are happening there." From that suggestion, I have grown to love my home state and the great folklorists who work here, including my GWU classmate, Todd DeGarmo. I shall miss John dearly and will always treasure the years we had together. I send my love to Beverly and his daughters, who shared him with us unconditionally.

Nancy Solomon is executive director of Long Island Traditions, located in Port Washington, New York.

Submission Guidelines for *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*

Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore is dedicated to publishing the content of folklore in the words and images of its creators and practitioners. The journal publishes research-based articles, written in an accessible style, on topics related to traditional art and life. It also features stories, interviews, reminiscences, essays, folk poetry and music, photographs, and artwork, drawn from people in all parts of New York State. Columns on subjects such as photography, sound and video recording, legal and ethical issues, and the nature of traditional art and life appear in each issue. We encourage contributions of original articles, news items, photographs, and any other materials relating to folklore and folklife in New York State for possible inclusion in *Voices*.

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Articles published in *Voices* represent original contributions to folklore studies. Although *Voices* emphasizes the folklore of New York State, the editor welcomes articles based on the folklore of any area of the world, especially if it relates to some aspect of life in New York State. Articles on the theory, methodology, and geography of folklore are also welcome, as are purely descriptive articles on the ethnography of folklore. In addition, *Voices* provides a home for "orphan" tales, narratives, and songs, whose contributors are urged to provide contextual information.

Authors are encouraged to include short personal reminiscences, anecdotes, isolated tales, narratives, songs, and other material that relates to and enhances their main article.

Typically, feature articles range from 1,000 to 4,000 words and up to 6,000 words at the editor's discretion.

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Short but substantive reactions to or elaborations upon material appearing in *Voices* within the previous year are welcomed. The editor may invite the author of the materials being addressed to respond; both pieces may be published together. Any subject may be addressed or rebutted once by any correspondent. The principal criteria for publication are whether, in the opinion of the editor or the editorial board, the comment constitutes a substantive contribution to folklore studies, and whether it will interest our general readers. Letters should not exceed 500 words

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