

A Call to Action for Cultural Equity: Voices from the Battlefield's Folk Alliance Forum

Saturday, February 21, 2009, 1:30 PM, Jackson Room
Folk Alliance International Conference, Memphis, TN



Moderator: *Art Menius*, Director, Appalshop, Inc., Whitesburg, KY (art@appalshop.org)

Panelists:

Dudley Cocke, Artistic Director, Roadside Theater, Norton, VA (roadsidetheater@verizon.net)

Gretchen Peters, Performing Artist (c/o valdenn@valdenn.com)

Jamie Haft, Imagining America, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY (jmhaft@syr.edu)

The **Voices** session at Folk Alliance will provide an introduction to cultural equity concepts followed by an open town hall meeting. We shall honor Alan Lomax' towering contributions to this field, link cultural equity to economics, and imagine the impact on the performing folk arts were cultural equity public policy.

Format

- A. 10 minutes of framing
Defining cultural equity, community cultural development, hyper-capitalism, and their intertwined relationship.
- B. 30 minutes of introductions
via brief comments by panelists and attendees about cultural equity as viewed through the lens of hyper-capitalism and the folk arts
- C. 50 minutes of a town meeting
synthesizing and building on comments with participants

Panelist Statement: *Dudley Cocke*

Two months ago marked the 60th anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 27 of the Declaration begins: **“Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”** In other words, one of our human rights is our right to culture – freely to participate in our distinct intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material traditions.

It was Alan Lomax who coined the term “cultural equity” in his 1977 *Journal of Communication* essay,

“Appeal for Cultural Equity.” In this prescient essay, Alan links cultural and biological diversity, emphasizing their symbiotic relationship as the basis for sustainability. He argues for an international cultural policy that affirms the inherent genius of every cultural community, a policy founded on the principle of cultural equity.

All of this couldn't be more relevant to us here. How can we respond to Alan's appeal? How can we collectively advocate for a national cultural policy based on the universal right to culture, a policy which has as its first purpose achieving cultural equity?



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Panelist Statement: *Jamie Haft:*

Voices from the Cultural Battlefield: Organizing for Equity has been convening international conversations about cultural diversity and cultural equity for over twenty years – practically as long as I've been alive. The conveners of **Voices** began their activist work during the civil rights and national liberation movements and subsequently founded cultural organizations that joined art to the struggle for social justice. Hundreds of activists grounded in the cultural life of their local communities and representing a variety of fields (including education, art, health, and youth services) have participated in these dialogues. The book, *Voices from the Battlefield: Achieving Cultural Equity* (Africa World Press, 1993), captures the spirit and thinking of these early international conversations.

As a young artist, I am struck by the way these veteran activists brought a consciousness of heritage and identity to their art-making and justice-seeking. They lived and breathed with their communities, allowing tradition to inspire new creativity. At arts school, I was encouraged to abandon my heritage in order to become more marketable. While this approach might help create “product,” I don't think it's a good recipe for making art, or for advancing justice. The jazz man, Clark Terry, had better advice for the young artist: first imitate, then emulate, and eventually you might innovate. And nowhere does it say Justice can't be our Muse.

“For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness” - President Barack Obama

Imagining America Artists and Scholars in Public Life

Panelist Statement: *Gretchen Peters*

[Gretchen was shocked to find Sarah Palin employing her song “Independence Day.”]

The fact that the McCain/Palin campaign was using a song about an abused woman as a rallying cry for their vice presidential candidate, a woman who would ban abortion even in cases of rape and incest, is beyond irony. They co-opted the song, completely overlooking the context and message and using it to promote a candidate who would set women's rights back decades. I decided to donate the royalties from “Independence Day” during this election cycle to Planned Parenthood, in Sarah Palin's name. I hope with the additional income provided by the McCain/Palin campaign, Planned Parenthood will be able to help many more women in need.



Internet Resources:

www.culturalbattlefront.net

www.imaginingamerica.org.

www.gretchenpeters.com

www.culturalequity.org/index.jsp

<http://culturalequity.com/>

www.communityarts.net/

www.appalshop.org

Folk Alliance: www.folk.org

Moderator's Statement *Art Menius:*

When I was Manager of the Folk Alliance, we invited Marta Moreno Vega from the Franklin H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center/African Diaspora Institute (www.cccadi.org/) to give the keynote at the 1994 Folk Alliance Conference. She spoke about cultural equity. This happened shortly after the publication of the essential tome *Voices from the Battlefield: Achieving Cultural Equity*. (Dudley, by the way, wrote one of the essays in that volume.) As a result of Marta's speech, Folk Alliance began co-convening with the Network of Cultural Centers of Color, a practice that continued for several years.

Marta's address marked a high point for a certain noble vision of what Folk Alliance could be – a truly diverse, multinational network advocating for the use of art in advancing social justice, protecting the natural environment, and building healthy communities. This was a Folk Alliance that aimed to stand on the shoulders of Lomax and Seeger. Soon, however, Folk Alliance's own financial struggles and the deleterious

effects of the culture wars, especially at the NEA, made organizational survival a higher priority.

The events of recent years have called us back to the battlefield as the effects of unchecked global capitalism have become all too apparent in New Orleans, Harriman, and countless other places. We face an informal network of shrewd cultural, political, and business organizers who have communicated a coherent world view that displaced that of the New Deal during the Republican ascendancy of the past 40 years. In my Appalachian home, this world view means the right of major corporations to use cost effective and environmentally destructive coal extraction methods is more important than the rights of the citizens to clean air and water and life without fear of sludge spills.

We, as artists and cultural organizers, must establish that something is more important than money. We offer what cannot be bought or sold – meaning and heart. When we assert that culture is more important than commerce, we are fighting back.