

CREATING, CHANGING, RENEWING

“WITHOUT TRADITION,
THERE IS NO CREATION.
WITHOUT CREATION,
YOU CANNOT MAINTAIN
A TRADITION.”¹

Carlos Fuentes, novelist

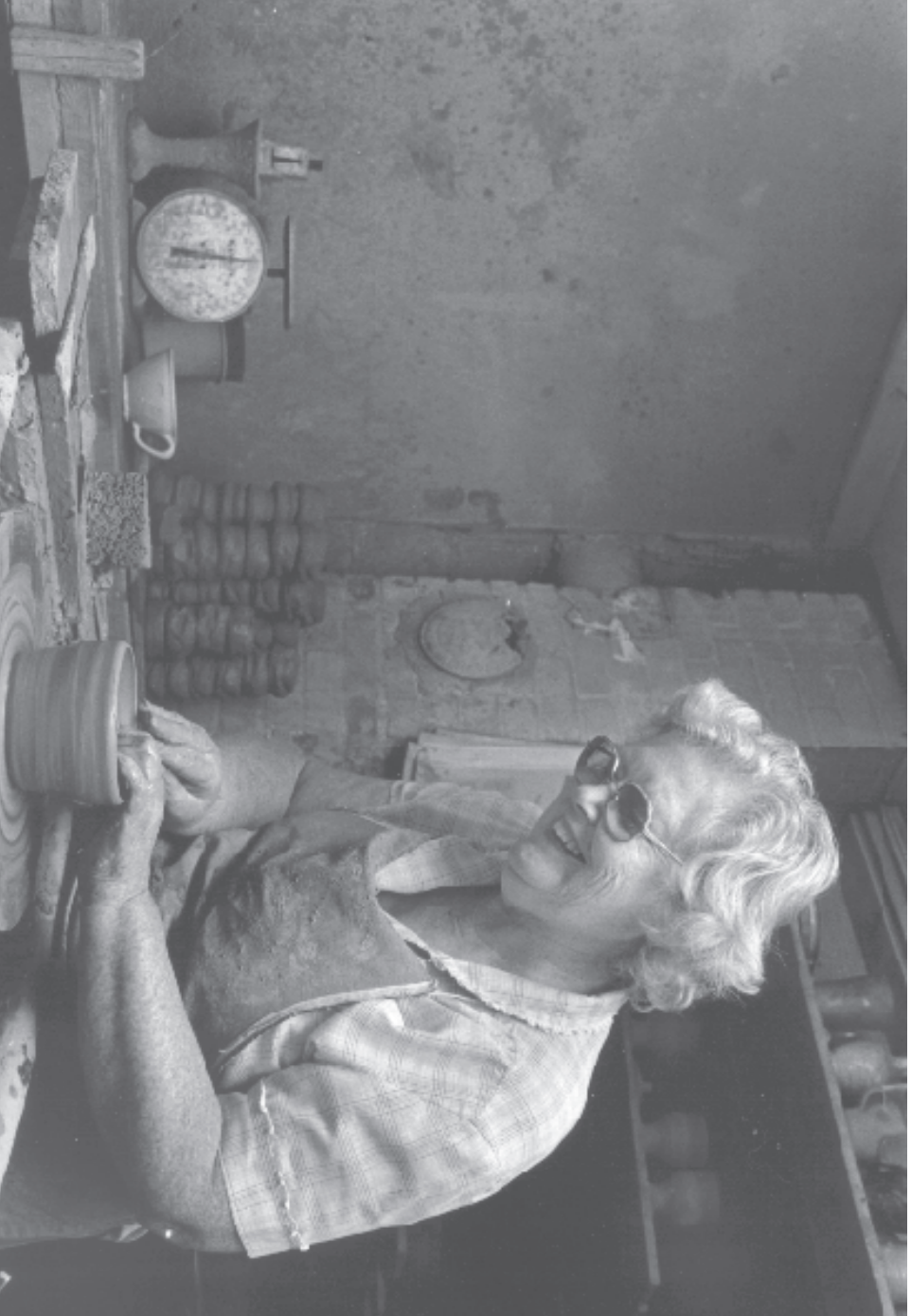
Folk arts are often depicted as the static, quaint, nostalgic skills and yearnings of earlier times; folk artists as anonymous, faceless individuals blindly carrying on the traditions of their culture. Words like creativity, charisma and cultural activism are rarely associated with traditional art or artists. The following two profiles by David Roche and Buck Ramsey; however, contradict these cliched notions and examine very specifically the impact of particular individuals in relation to cultural traditions, events and historical circumstance. In each one, creativity, change and renewal occur on many levels. Not only do artistic traditions change in terms of form, but so also do their functions, meaning, and audiences.

In David Roche’s article, the efforts of two extraordinary artists involved in cultural revitalization movements within their communities are described. For Filipino kulintang master Danongan Kalanduyan, revitalization has primarily involved teaching and increasing the level of practice of a tradition and Kalanduyan has helped to foster more kulintang ensembles in the U.S. than perhaps any other individual. For Sam-Ang Sam, revitalization has meant identifying the most strategic partnerships and opportunities at the local and national level to recover traditions nearly obliterated by war. In different ways, however, both are confronting the adaptation and innovation which necessarily occurs when “old world” traditions enter “new world” con-

texts and both are attempting to strike a delicate balance between maintaining fidelity to tradition and making it meaningful in a new context.

While Kalanduyan and Sam are involved in managing or influencing cultural changes somewhat beyond their control, the Cowboy Poetry Gathering has been an active agent for cultural change and revitalization. Its success is more than a “right time, right place” kind of story. Viewed as a singular event or a particular moment in time, the Gathering has played a catalytic role in the development of an artistic tradition. It has introduced cowboy poetry to new and broad audiences and it has influenced numerous individual artists. Most importantly, it has provided a forum for people in the ranching community to tell their stories in their own voices. As Buck Ramsey’s piece demonstrates, the Cowboy Poetry Gathering did not create an audience—it gave voice and opportunity to an already existing sensibility and community; Ramsey’s piece speaks to the depth and power of that sentiment and its impact.

In terms of impact, the Cowboy Poetry Gathering is one of the more improbable success stories of the National Endowment for the Arts. Since the first Gathering in 1985, there are now 150-200 cowboy poetry gatherings small and large throughout the West. Much like the Gathering itself, NEA funding played a catalytic role in the initial development of the event.



EIGHTH-GENERATION POTTER DOROTHY COLE AUMAN (1925-1991) WORKING ON A POT AT SEAGROVE POTTERY, SEAGROVE, NORTH CAROLINA. SHE AND HER HUSBAND WALTER AUMAN WERE 1989 RECIPIENTS OF THE NORTH CAROLINA FOLK HERITAGE AWARD. (PHOTO BY ROB AMBERG © 1996)

A final and important observation about the two articles. Both focus on the creative roles of individuals in cultural change and renewal but both articles also allude to the critical interplay of influence and change which occurs from within and outside of a community. And this interplay can be positive and negative. For Dewey Balfa, a last-minute invitation to the Newport Folk Festival helped spark a pride and desire to advocate for the value of his cultural heritage at home and elsewhere. As an event initiated by an “outside” organization, the Western Folklife Center’s Cowboy Poetry Gathering is now an accepted part of the ranching community’s festive calendar and it’s documentation efforts are preserving ranching cultural heritage for generations to come. The partnerships that Sam-Ang Sam and other Cambodian artists are establishing with federal agencies, arts organizations like Jacob’s Pillow and private and public funders are critical steps in the revitalization of their cultural heritage.

BRAVE NEW WORLDS: MINDANAODAN KULINTANG MUSIC AND CAMBODIAN CLASSICAL DANCE IN AMERICA

BY DAVID ROCHE

“PEOPLE DO NOT CLING
TO THEIR CULTURES
SIMPLY TO USE THEM AS
INTER-ETHNIC STRATEGIES.
THEY DO SO BECAUSE
IT IS THROUGH THEM
THAT THEY MAKE SENSE
OF THE WORLD AND HAVE
A SENSE OF THEMSELVES.
THE ATTACHMENT OF
PEOPLE TO THEIR CULTURE
CORRESPONDS, THEN,
TO A FUNDAMENTAL
HUMAN NEED.”²

David Maybury-Lewis
Anthropologist/ Founder, Cultural Survival

From Cambodia’s Royal Palace in Phnom Penh and the villages and sultanates of Mindanao in the Philippines to the small towns and urban streets of America, Cambodian classical dance and Filipino kulintang music have undergone a surprising odyssey over the past two decades. Each tradition has its own story to tell, but both chronicle cultural survival at the margins of the American mainstream and tell us about the collision of old ways and new worlds. This dynamic of survival also suggests how people find ways to invest new meaning in cultural heritage and how heritage, however manifested, remains an important and necessary component of self and community identity. Most of all, Cambodian classical dance and Filipino kulintang music remind us that cultural survival and renewal are nurtured both through individual desire and creativity as well as by collective action over time.

Two individuals centrally involved in the cultural survival of Cambodian and Mindanaoan performing arts now reside in the United States. Sam-Ang Sam, Executive Director of the Cambodian Network Council, based in Washington, D.C., has been the main link between traditional classically-trained performance artists in Cambodia and artists in the Cambodian American community and is himself a highly-regarded musician and ethnomusicologist.³ Danongan

Kalanduyan, Director of the Palabunuyan Kulintang Ensemble, based in San Francisco, not only trains Filipino Americans in the art of kulintang music, but performs internationally and, like Sam, is an ethnomusicologist by training.⁴ Sam and Kalanduyan are both exemplars of enlightened cultural leadership. Both have grappled with issues of cultural appropriation, debates over multiculturalism, inherited social hierarchies of class and gender and the distance between old and new world realities. Both have managed to not only survive, but succeed without compromising the essence of their respective traditional arts.

Cambodian Classical Dance

The history of Khmer classical dance tradition dates back more than one thousand years (*see page 37*). In traditional Khmer historical chronicles, the god-king reigned as the chief patron of the dance, immersing himself in the rarefied atmosphere of prophetic ritual while constantly surrounded by his corps de ballet, the *apsara* (angelic) dancers. Vestiges of belief in the spiritual power of dance as national polity continued until the time of Prince Sihanouk’s fall in 1970. As late as 1967, royal Khmer classical dancers performed at the Prince’s behest to influence the rains during a devastating drought.

The shattering experience of April, 1975, when the capitool of Cambodia—Phnom Penh—was overtaken by troops



CAMBODIAN DANCE MASTER CHEA SANVY (STANDING) POSITIONING STUDENTS DURING A RESIDENCY AT JACOB'S PILLOW DANCE FESTIVAL, 1993. (PHOTO BY CECILY COOK)

of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge leading to the subsequent evacuation and deaths of an estimated one million Cambodians (approximately 15% of the total population), put a very different political spin on the practice of royalist court art. But even with the changed political landscape and its populist rhetoric, the image of the classical dancer continued as a preeminent symbol of Khmer greatness. It was in Thai refugee camps like Khao I Dang, by 1980 one of the largest Cambodian cities in the world, that court arts such as Khmer dance (and accompanying *pin peat* orchestral music) were reconstructed by and for a populace whose previous exposure to such refined traditions was circumscribed by class. While approximately 80% of the faculty at the national conservatory, the University of Fine Arts, perished during the Khmer Rouge purge, it was at the camps that those few who survived began to teach again. Khmer classical dance was forever changed by the refugee experience. In the words of Sam-Ang Sam, the elite art of the court became transformed into common property that helped preserve ethnic and cultural identity. In America, wherever Cambodian refugees have settled, "Court dance and music have actually become a popular art now. Refugees in every community perform it. It has become an art of the people."² Sam-Ang Sam's mentor during the pre-Pol Pot era at the University of Fine Arts, Chheng Phon, became Minister of Information and Culture under the post-1979, Vietnamese-

The Cambodian Artists Project

Rebuilding a nation and a cultural heritage takes time and perseverance. One remarkable example of this is the Cambodian Artists Project, a coalition of Cambodian American artists and scholars (including Sam-Ang Sam) dedicated to the conservation and perpetuation of Cambodian performing arts through teaching, research, video, recording, cultural exchange and public programs. This project was initiated in 1990 by the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival with seed funding from the Ford Foundation, NEA Folk Arts, and the New England Foundation for the Arts and has grown to include a loose-knit network of organizations and supporters committed to this ideal, including the Cambodian Network Council, Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, the Ministry of Culture in Cambodia, Cornell University, the Rockefeller Foundation, Asian Cultural Council, United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, Albert Kunstadter Family Foundation and a generous grant from the National Initiative to Preserve American Dance. Such long-range vision and multi-year funding has made possible repeated artistic exchange opportunities between the U.S. and Cambodia, extended artist residencies with Cambodian master artists in multiple U.S. sites, video documentation of dance repertoire and extended interviews with surviving master artists, and opportunities for dancers, teachers and university administrators to assess preservation methods and dance facilities in the U.S. Future efforts will involve distribution of archival materials, and establishing an archive and training archivists in Cambodia. For more information, contact the Cambodian Network Council, 713 D St., S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003.



SAM-ANG SAM PLAYING THE SRALLAI (OBOE). (PHOTO BY EVAN SHEPPARD)

The Difference between Khmer and Cambodian

Like any modern nation-state, Cambodia is a country composed of different ethnic and linguistic groups. “Cambodian,” as used here, refers to any citizen of Cambodia regardless of ethnic or cultural heritage. “Khmer” refers to the historically-dominant ethnic group of Cambodia, its customs and practices, artistic traditions and language. Khmer classical dance refers to the court dance tradition. Until 1970, court dance (*robam kbach buran*) was performed by a single troupe resident in the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh and from 1970 to 1975 at the University of Fine Arts.

backed Cambodian regime. He was the principal cultural architect who eventually brought together a dance faculty and reopened the University of Fine Arts in 1981 to a new generation of dance students. Chheng Phon defended his efforts to rebuild the classical dance tradition by appealing to a sense of pride in a Cambodian “national aesthetic.” “The aesthetic is the people’s,” Chheng remarked. “Artists created the classical dance. The king didn’t create it. We must preserve the national aesthetic. We must respect the creations of the artists of the past.”

This articulation of a national artistic direction inspired Sam-Ang Sam and other former students. In America, where Sam-Ang Sam, with his wife, the dancer Chan Moly Sam, had immigrated in 1977, he set sail on his life’s work, the re-establishment of Khmer performing arts as the soul of Cambodian and Cambodian American cultures. With a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University in hand, Sam-Ang has been the chief spokesperson for Khmer classical performing arts in the United States. In 1994, a MacArthur Fellowship was awarded to him in recognition of his importance in this reconstructive effort.

Since the late 1970s, Cambodian refugees have arrived in great numbers in places like Lowell, Massachusetts; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Greensboro, North Carolina; and Stockton and Long Beach, California. In these and other Cambodian American communities across the country,

Khmer classical dance continues to represent a central cultural activity for teenage girls, while other uniquely Cambodian arts are intertwined with wedding, funeral and Buddhist temple activities. For Sam-Ang Sam and many other Cambodian American artists, concern for the survival of Khmer classical dance now focuses on strategies of innovation. Dilution in the quality and staging of classically choreographed repertoire poses a real threat. There is concern that the dance will be reduced to a rite-of-passage for middle-class teenage girls, a chance to wear expensive jewelry and dance costumes, rather than flourish as an expression of spiritual significance. Yet, Khmer classical dance has its roots, however tenuously, still planted in Cambodia. With continued exchanges between the old world and the new, a contemporary global aesthetic for Cambodian dance is in the process of being created.

Kulintang Culture

The passage of Public Law 89-236 in 1965, eliminating a highly restrictive immigration quota system, set the stage for a massive Filipino immigrant influx in the decades which followed. While most immigrants of the 1920s and 30s found jobs as laborers, cutting cane and pineapples on Hawai’i and harvesting grapes and asparagus in California, Filipino immigrants today are generally well-educated men and women working in professional and service occupa-

Cambodian Settlement in the U.S.

45% of all Southeast Asian Americans in the United States now reside in California. While the official 1990 Census counted 68,000 Cambodians in California, the state with the largest concentration, unofficial figures run much higher. Long Beach, the largest Cambodian enclave in the Western Hemisphere, is estimated to have a Cambodian American population in excess of 40,000. According to the Cambodian Network Council, an estimated 30,000 are in Lowell, Massachusetts, the second largest Cambodian settlement in the U.S.

tions. Like their predecessors, they remain predominantly Christian by religious heritage and ethnically Ilokanos, Cebuano and Tagalog-speaking. This pattern of Filipino immigration to the U.S suggests that traditions from the lowlands of the northerly Christianized Philippine Islands would be more culturally significant for contemporary Filipino Americans. But Muslim Filipino Americans from the southern islands of the Philippines, an overwhelming minority in the immigrant population, have somehow become central to the creation of cultural identity here for a growing number of young Filipino Americans, the self-proclaimed “most invisible Asian American minority.” How did this come about?

When Robert Garfias, then Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Washington, brought Usopay Cadar and then Danongan Sibay Kalanduyan to the university to teach kulintang music and matriculate in the Music Department, he inadvertently set in motion a social process with complex dimensions. While Cadar’s achievements as an ethnomusicologist and performer have informed a wide audience over the years, Kalanduyan’s background as a kulintang musician and revered teacher of the tradition resulted in his selection as a 1995 NEA National Heritage Award Fellow. Following his tenure in Seattle, Kalanduyan relocated to the San Francisco Bay area in 1985 and began working with

community-based Filipino American cultural groups as workshop leader and, in some instances, as artistic director. Such groups in the Bay area have included Kulintang Arts, Kalilang Kulintang Ensemble, the Filipino Kulintang Center, Filipiniana Dance Troupe, and his latest ensemble, the Palabunyan Kulintang Ensemble. He has also worked with the World Kulintang Institute in Los Angeles, Samahan Philippine Dance company in San Diego, and Amanan Filipino-American Multi-Arts Center, Siron Ganding, Inc. and Lotus Fine Arts in New York. Kalanduyan-led kulintang ensembles have performed for large audiences at the Northwest Folklite and Bumbershoot Arts Festivals, Oakland’s Festival at the Lake, the 1990 I.A. Festival, the Kennedy Center, and scores of other venues on the West Coast, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In other words, Kalanduyan has been associated with nearly every Filipino American group performing kulintang in this country, at one time or another. Still, the question of kulintang’s significance remains.

One answer comes from Daniel Giray, longtime associate and student of Kalanduyan’s, who explains the dilemma faced by many Filipino Americans. Born in Hawaii, he was brought up on the Mainland and raised to assimilate. “I would always answer that I was Filipino when asked, but what did that mean? I had no knowledge of my own history. Even my mother couldn’t answer. So I grew up connecting

Filipino Americans in California

California is home to the largest Asian American population in the United States, estimated at 3,000,000 or 10% of the state’s population in the 1990 Census. California is also home to the largest Filipino immigrant population (732,000 in the 1990 census). The Filipino American population is now the largest Asian American community in the state, barely overtaking the 1980 census leader, the Chinese American community.



1995 NATIONAL HERITAGE FELLOW DANDUNGAN KALUNDUYAN.
(PHOTO BY JOHN BISHOP-MEDIA GENERATION)

with Afro-Americans, Hispanics, other Asians looking for my own identity among the many?" Then Giray heard Kalanduyan's kulintang gong-drum ensemble and his world changed. "I had never heard nor knew that this music form existed in the Philippines. I became very inspired by the strong rhythms and beautiful tones I was hearing for the first time. It also became apparent that this music instilled a pride in me that was lacking from my Filipino identity?" For Giray and others of his generation, kulintang represents passage to deeper Malay roots. And this is where culture, ethnicity and authenticity sometimes generate friction.

Both Kalanduyan and Cadar have expressed grave concern over the politics of personal identity within Filipino American communities and among certain individuals who inappropriately claim ownership of the kulintang tradition without possessing either the cultural heritage or musical expertise. There are religious and historical factors to contend with as well, since kulintang has been nurtured among Muslim minority populations in the Philippines but among Christian majority populations in the United States. Contemporary pan-Filipinoism can cut two ways: in the case of Giray, a commitment to ongoing study and performance with Kalanduyan and Cadar as masters of the tradition; for others, appropriation of the name "kulintang" and a rush to performance for personal artistic goals. As Cadar reports,

Assessing the Needs of Traditional Artists

In 1991, the Lia Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund commissioned the Fund for Folk Culture to conduct a nationwide study to determine the needs of the field with respect to its disciplines, practitioners, organizations and resources.

The Folk Arts in America reports the study's findings. As part of the study, 170 performing and visual folk artists were sent surveys and 106 responded (an overall 62.4% response rate). * What did folk artists have to say?

■ More than 85% of folk artists surveyed teach others their art—often without compensation—and a majority consider “identifying and motivating the next generation of artists” a priority.

■ 90% of artists surveyed perform, exhibit, or sell their art in public and most would like to do more. Many feel that presentation opportunities outside of their immediate communities are necessary to the maintenance of tradition.

■ 6 out of 10 artists are in need of basic materials essential to the practice of their art: whale ivory, taqua beans, twine, eggs, swords, rehearsal space and power tools are a few of the items that indicate “the specialized nature of the field and the need for individualized attention.”

■ Many expressed a need for help with the “non-performance aspects of presentation” such as business, financial and legal matters.

*Harder + Kibbe Research and Consulting of San Francisco conducted the data research and analysis for the Fund for Folk Culture. Copies of the study are available from the Lia Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

DEWEY BALFA (1927-1992)

In a time when schools in Louisiana punished children for speaking Louisiana French, Dewey Balfa and his brothers—Will, Burkeman, Harry and Rodney—grew up in a family full of Cajun music, culture and language. They played in dance halls in the 1940s, and after World War II, Dewey and Will (and later Rodney) performed as the Balfa Brothers and were well known throughout southern Louisiana. Then in 1964, Dewey was a last minute replacement at the Newport Folk Festival where, for the first time in his life, he played his music for an audience of tens of thousands. Inspired by the experience, he returned to Louisiana to organize traditional music concerts and other events as his part of a ground swell of activity to preserve Cajun music, language, and culture. The 1974 Tribute to Cajun Music Festival he helped start became an annual event. In recognition of his artistry and tireless cultural activism, Dewey received one of the first National Heritage Fellowships in 1982. He continued to play and speak eloquently on behalf of his culture until his death in 1992. His impact on Cajun music is immeasurable and his influence on a younger generation of musicians like Michael Doucet and Steve Riley is undeniable. Dewey once said, “My culture is no better than anyone else's but it is mine. I would expect you to offer the same respect for my culture that I offer yours.”

“THINGS HAVE TO CHANGE,
WHEN THINGS STOP
CHANGING, THEY DIE.
CULTURE AND MUSIC HAVE
TO BREATHE AND GROW,
BUT THEY HAVE TO STAY
WITHIN CERTAIN GUIDELINES
TO BE TRUE, AND THOSE
GUIDELINES ARE PURENESS
AND SINCERITY.”

Dewey Balta, musician
National Heritage Fellow

“There is the constant dilemma that if one allows them to present the tradition in corrupted form they will perpetrate and perpetuate mistakes that will be virtually impossible to correct, but if one totally denies them any premature public presentation of the tradition, one denies the possibility of making inroads into the [Filipino American] community.”

Conclusion

For both Cambodian and Filipino American communities, innovation within the traditional arts looms as a central theme. While no one proclaims that performing traditions must remain frozen in time, it is the manner in which innovations are accomplished and the sources for the innovations that mark appropriateness. In the case of kulintang music, there is the issue of improvisation: in traditional practice, mastery of the structural and stylistic conventions of the music must precede any experimentation. For Kalanduyan, the kind of mastery necessary to improvise is a birthright: “I learned kulintang music sitting on my mother’s lap; she guided my hands. The music was all around me in the village; I didn’t need training; it came through my environment.”

Innovation in Cambodian classical dance is inevitable given the lack of well-trained classical teachers both in the United States and Cambodia and the changing social contexts. Two approaches to preserving repertoire can be

found in Sam-Ang Sam’s production of didactic video tapes of conservatory-trained dancers now residing in the United States for distribution to Cambodian American communities and through his efforts with the Cambodian Arts Project (*see page 36*). While there is no way to codify standards or certify who may teach what to whom, there remains a sense that clear artistic authority, exemplified by the artistic hierarchy of the old Palace conservatory system, remains a desirable goal. And while it is true that the cultural institutions of Phnom Penh are slowly rising from the ashes under new artistic leadership, the re-invention of Cambodian culture in America is largely in the hands of social service agencies, mutual assistance associations and motivated individuals with sporadic means of support at best. Traditional practice and innovation in both kulintang music and Cambodian classical dance in the United States will bear careful watching. That these two important art forms have survived and thrived to this point speaks to the tenacity of traditional art when it is true to social experience. With some of that experience now taking place in America, innovation can remain a meaningful process, if it is guided by knowledgeable teachers and performers recognized and respected by the community and educated in the canons of the tradition.

A REVIVAL MEETING AND ITS MISSIONARIES: THE COWBOY POETRY GATHERING

BY BUCK RAMSEY

“WE WILL SPREAD OUT
OUR BLANKETS ON THE
GREEN, GRASSY GROUND
WHERE THE CATTLE AND
HORSES ARE A’GRAZIN’
ALL AROUND....”

—“Leaving Cheyenne”

In 1985 the National Endowment for the Arts provided seed money for a group whose purpose was to tap the sources of the cowboy oral tradition and determine to what extent the tradition was still alive. The first Elko Cowboy Poetry Gathering in late January of that year turned out to be something on the order of a revival meeting; an annual event that each year inspired more and more missionaries to spread the word of the tradition’s revival and to create missions throughout the land. Few seeds have produced such progeny.

This is a brief story out of the American West illustrating how the NEA seed planted at Elko worked, how it is working. It is also a tale describing how chance encounters, all connected somehow to this yearly revival meeting, caused a cross-pollination of regional, ethnic and topical cultures that will bear fruit for generations. Multiply this story by many hundreds and you begin to get a picture of the bountiful crop of the seed. When you get an idea of the whole picture, you realize that the Elko gathering’s reputation as the premier cultural event in the American West is a modest portion of what it is all about.

In the 1940s, on one of his sweeps through the cow country West uncovering cowboy songs from the dusty pasts of old cowboys, John Lomax stopped over in Dalhart, Texas,

and recorded Jess Morris singing a rendition of “Leaving Cheyenne.” Jess accompanied himself on the fiddle tuned to a drone tuning which gave the song a most haunting quality. In the distant past Jess was a cowhand on the legendary XIT Ranch, which at one time covered a strip about forty miles wide from the top of Texas stretching down the western side of its Panhandle and South Plains border for about two hundred miles. Jess Morris told Lomax he learned the song from a black cowboy he rode with on the XIT’s.

Hal Cannon, one of the prime movers in getting the revival underway, since his college days in the early 1970s sang and played various instruments with a string band which sought out, performed and recorded traditional music of the West obscured by time. He considered an album of cowboy songs collected by John Lomax, including Jess Morris’ “Leaving Cheyenne,” to be the prime inspiration behind his wish to organize a gathering which would inspire a revival of cowboy song and poetry, a revival of American West oral traditions. Hal’s favorite song on the album was “Leaving Cheyenne.”

In 1970, Charles Gordone, a black playwright prominent in New York jazz circles and as a fixture at the famed Actor’s Studio, won the Pulitzer Prize for his play, *No Place to be somebody*. After the play’s run on Broadway and after the author’s glow of celebrity dimmed, he experienced what Tennessee Williams called “the failure of success” and lost



THE AUDIENCE ENJOY THEMSELVES AT A RECENT COWBOY POETRY GATHERING. (PHOTO BY SUE ROSOFF)

his way as a writer. He already had earned the reputation as a heavy drinker, but now he began drinking more heavily under the common delusion that alcohol might make him once again attractive to his muse. When he and Susan Kouyoumjian met in 1980 at a theater in San Francisco, he was a dried out alcoholic and a dried up writer. She asked him to join her in Berkeley, California, to direct a play she planned to produce for a “spit and paper” community theater. He stayed for two years to direct fourteen tragedies and one comedy, all by modern American playwrights.

Charles frequently discussed with his new companion his belief that the aspirations and happiness of black Americans would remain trampled and shattered as long as they continued to be caught up in urban chaos with its utter degradation of soul and psyche, that a people could not endure as a viable American tribe if they remained packed away in city ghettos. He told a friend in the autumn of 1995, “The notion that black people are at their roots country people really raised hackles when I talked about it with my old friends in the civil rights movement. Now, as a Westerner, I believe the thwarted instinct of African Americans for a dignified involvement with nature is the biggest cause of their problems. Making them realize their heart’s true habitation is not urban is a simple idea, radical in the true sense of the word, and seminal to everything I have become as a thinker and artist in the last decade of my life.”

He and Susan moved back to Harlem where he worked on a play titled “Roan Brown and Cherry” which was set in the American West. Since his appearance on the New York theatrical scene in the early Fifties, he had been nicknamed “Tex” because of his affection of Western garb. “With his writing he was playing out a fantasy stitched together with folk memories from childhood, family tales of western experiences,” Susan said, “but he couldn’t get it to ring with authenticity. We began spending all our spare time reading and communicating to find out what the West was all about and what it could have to do with us.” Through her efforts, Charles in 1987 got a D. H. Lawrence Fellowship, and they set up residence outside of Taos, New Mexico. When the fellowship residency expired, Charles joined the faculty of Texas A&M University as professor of Theater and English. The new Texans began feeling around for an “authentic” connection with the West.

After seeing and reading media reports of the Elko gathering, the couple felt compelled to journey there in 1990. The gathering proper begins with a Thursday morning keynote address. There is, however, a “warm-up” show on Wednesday to get attendees in the spirit of the revival meeting. On that show a former cowboy, who in his youth worked on what used to be XIT Ranch country around Dalhart, recited a long poem about impressions brought to him by his years in the saddle. That was the first poem

Cowboy Poetry Gathering Fact Sheet

The Cowboy Poetry Gathering is held the last week in January every year in Elko, Nevada. The event roughly spans a week with pre-Gathering workshops and small performances earlier in the week. All day workshops and evening concerts are held at the Elko Convention Center during the Gathering and off-site readings, concerts, open-mike sessions and dances occur throughout the town. Approximately 8,000 people attend annually.

Initially, the Gathering was scheduled in January to accommodate a ranching audience (winter being the slowest work period). Ranching still constitutes the largest occupational group (28% in 1992) who attends but the Gathering has developed a broad base of support and draws from many sectors, states, and age groups.

As they say, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Since the first year of the Gathering in 1985, Cowboy Poetry Gatherings at the state and local level have established themselves throughout the West. Through 1995, annual state and local poetry gatherings were estimated at 150-200.

Seed money for the Cowboy Poetry Gathering initially came from the NEA Folk & Traditional Arts Program. In 1986, 90% of the Gathering's budget was from public sources. By 1993, public funding represented only 20% of the Gathering's budget.

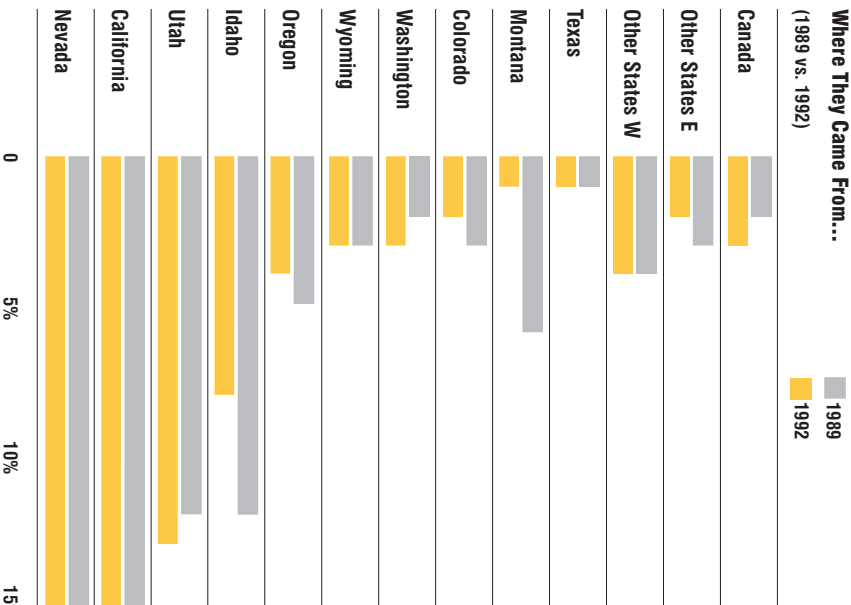
Based on the results of a 1992 survey, the Gathering's audience left in Elko \$2.9 million the town would not have otherwise had (of which \$2.5 million came from out-of-state).

Sources: 1992 Cowboy Poetry Gathering, *Audience and Business Report*, Withers and Gray Project Management and Consultancy, June 1992; Three-Year Plan, Western Folklife Center, 1994-96.

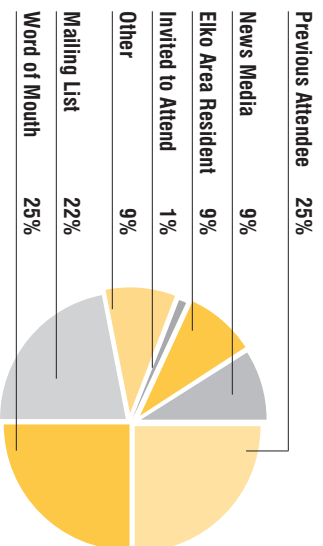


POETS GEORGIE SIKKING AND RICHARD CARLSON COMPARING NOTES AT A GATHERING.
(PHOTO BY S.R. HINRICHS)

**1992 Cowboy Poetry Gathering –
Where They Came From...**



**How They Found Out About the
1992 Cowboy Poetry Gathering
(n=571)**



Source: 1992 Cowboy Poetry Gathering *Audience and Business Report* (June 1992) p.2. Prepared by Withers and Gray Project Management and Consultancy.

Susan and Charles heard at a cowboy poetry gathering, and she would later write, “[the] recitation... restored [our] love of American literature, which had been seriously eroded by the past decade of urban living.”

Susan had convinced the A&M administration to attach her to Charles’s curriculum as a recruiter of artists-in-residence to perform for his classes and round out his lectures. From the time they attended the Elko gathering, she spent virtually her entire budget integrating into Charles’s curriculum poets and singers they met as a result of attending the gathering at Elko.

A professor who heard the Elko voices wrote: “These were native writers who had escaped the constrictions of the academies and had therefore developed an anti-establishment outlook. Their worldly experience and powerful imaginations allowed them to break out of the formalities that encased and constricted American literature. They are authentic American voices, natural storytellers who know how to fashion everyday experience into art without violating the source of their inspiration.” Elko resurrected voices that gave back to the American West the gift of its tradition, and now a university professor was amplifying the voices far outside their traditional circles to listeners amazed at what they heard and eager to spread word of the revived tradition to others.

“All his adult life Charles envisioned an American theater of diversity united by a shared myth,” Susan said. Now he talked again of a new and inclusive Theater of Americana, and he talked to Susan and his new friends as if he had discovered the “shared myth” in the rich diversity of the Elko voices. And he talked of perhaps finding a potential network of stagings for this new theater in the missionary outposts created by the Elko revival, in the hundreds of cowboy poetry gatherings growing from the scattered seed of the fruit of its tree.

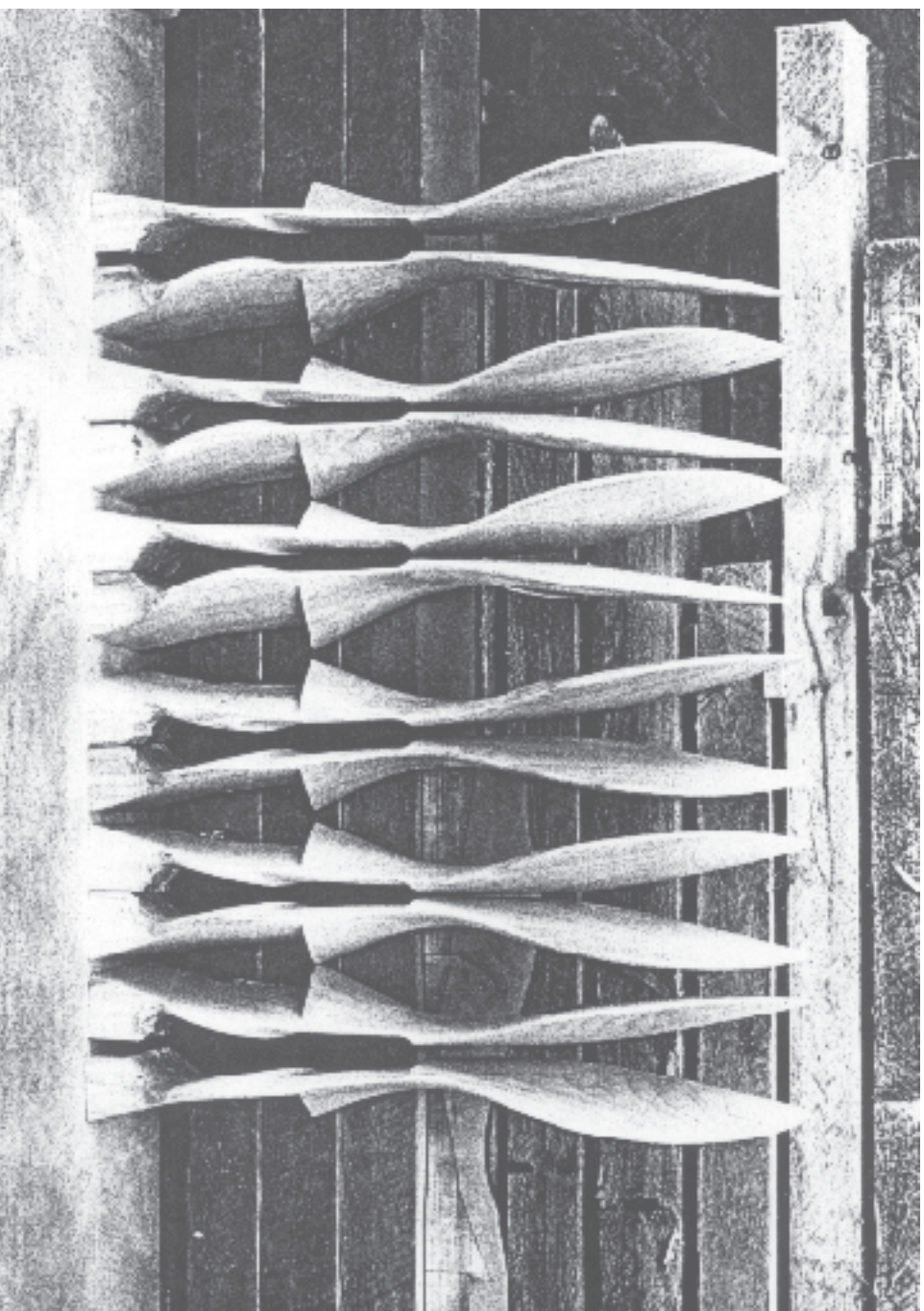
One of the newer, smaller and most isolated of the cowboy poetry gatherings was organized in the fall of 1993 at Nara Visa, New Mexico. Nara Visa is an almost deserted ranch town in the Canadian River Breaks barely west of what was once the western border of the XIT’s. It’s initial invitation to participants began: “You are invited to the Nara Visa Cowboy Poetry Gathering, but you should know if you come you might not get to perform and if you perform you might not get paid.” Sessions and shows are not organized until everyone arrives on Friday evening. Parking is in surrounding pastures. Saturday night there is an old-time cowboy dance where dancers are encouraged to waltz to waltz tunes, two-step to two-step tunes and schottische to schottische tunes. Line dancing is discouraged.



TOMMY ALLSUP, LONGTIME MEMBER OF BOB WILL'S TEXAS PLAYBOYS, PERFORMING AT THE COWBOY MUSIC GATHERING.
(PHOTO BY NATALIE BROWN)

Rooster Morris is a young cowboy who is foreman of the Spring Creek Ranch, one of the better ranches that occupy land originally under XIX fence. Great-nephew of Jess Morris, he is a player of many instruments, principally the fiddle, and is the kind of natural musician who might have been invited to attend Juillard if he had grown up in New York City. Although he lives only thirty or so miles from Nara Visa, he would not go to the first Nara Visa gathering because he thought cowboy poetry gatherings to be phony business. Besides, he said, he rarely picked up the fiddle or guitar anymore. But through the following year friends and neighbors softened him up and he drove over to the second Nara Visa gathering to join the festivities. Charles Gordone and Susan Koyonjian were at the gathering—Charles had already seen enough of the gathering with its ranchy audience and surroundings to adopt the place and the event as his poetic and musical model of cow country culture.

As people gather in at Nara Visa on Fridays, some of the participants meet in a confab to discuss whether that year's gathering should have a particular tone or theme. The visiting black playwright was particularly eloquent at the meeting. Rooster was totally silent, but he was moved by Charles' speech, his manner and look. After the confab the two came together in the school yard and began talking. It was Rooster's first handshake with a black man. From that moment it was clear to anyone who knew them that each



SADDLE TREE COMPONENTS IN DALE HARWOOD'S "TREE" SHOP, SHELLY, IDAHO. (PHOTO BY JAN BOLES)

A Word About the Western Folklife Center

Based in Elko, Nevada, the Western Folklife Center is dedicated to the preservation and presentation of the cultural traditions of the American West. Since its beginnings in 1985, the Center has been most closely identified with the Cowboy Poetry Gathering but it is gaining wider recognition for the many ways in which it seeks to honor western cultural traditions. The Center also sponsors Voices of the West, a nationally syndicated radio program featuring songs and narrative in recordings and live performance from the region. The Center is now involved in developing a summer season of activities at their facility. Staff is engaged in ongoing field research of western cultural traditions and the Center houses an impressive collection of material which has provided the basis for a range of publications, award-winning videos, recordings, and radio. Since 1993, the Western Folklife Center has been headquartered at the historic Pioneer Hotel in downtown Elko and much of the organization's focus has been on the renovation of the building with the goal of making it a cultural facility with year-round activities. Plans include development of a performance space, retail store, archives, and exhibit gallery. For more information, contact Western Folklife Center, P.O. Box 888, Elko, NV 89803, (702) 738-7508.

was as good a friend as the other ever had. Also, from that time Rooster played music every chance he got, even leaving his cattle long enough to appear as a featured performer at the 1996 Elko gathering. Some who in memory identify the gatherings by a happening or a person say the '96 gathering will be remembered as "the first gathering Rooster came to."

Early the following summer—the summer of '95—Charles was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Hoping to cheat the prognosis which offered him only a few months, Susan called their friends in the Panhandle and made arrangements to move to Amarillo where Charles might regain strength enough so that he and Susan could move to the ranch with Rooster and complete "Ghost Riders," another idea of a play that had been awaiting an authentic western attitude to carry it along. He and Susan made a few trial trips to the ranch, but it was too remote from medical facilities for Charles to spend time enough there to get any work done. And he was losing rather than gaining strength.

After a month's struggle early in the fall in the Panhandle, he returned to College Station where in November he died.

His play remained unwritten, but the human drama he caused to be played out in Amarillo and the Canadian River Breaks was surely as profound as the one he would have written, and in the long run it may touch more hearts and

minds and in its own way have a longer run. Susan carried his ashes back to the Canadian River Breaks and the Spring Creek Ranch. His cowboy friends wrapped them in a black bandanna. A slow cortege of horses and vehicles carried a couple of dozen folks to a grassy mound overlooking a rain wash that is almost a small valley. A few people spoke briefly, a few said a poem, sang a song or played a guitar or fiddle while six jolly cowboys rested horseback in a row by the bulged bandanna, fastened by a hackamore knot, resting in the grass. Rooster dismounted, cradled the bandanna in an arm, remounted and rode slowly down the grassy slope of the prairie rain wash. His horse shied and bucked for the brief moment Rooster opened the bandanna, then eased into a dignified gallop as Rooster scattered the ashes to the wind. When Rooster returned to where the people were gathered, he dismounted and played the fiddle part while the first cowboy poet Charles heard at Elko sang the version of "Leaving Cheyenne" Jess Morris had learned from a black cowboy about a hundred years earlier somewhere quite near the spot of this prairie funeral.