Report on 2006 Appalachian Music Fellowship: Race and Gender in Berea College’s annual Celebration of Traditional Music
Deborah J. Thompson, July 13, 2006

Personal Context
I am a musician with a background in Appalachian Studies, a singer who also plays banjo, guitar, and dulcimer, with most of my repertoire and interests in Appalachian traditional music. I am currently a Ph.D. candidate in Geography at the University of Kentucky, conducting research for a dissertation tentatively titled, “The Place of Music in Appalachian Communities and Localities.”

My research in the geography of music explores the importance of place to notions of authenticity and tradition, and the centrality of social relations to the creation and maintenance of these musical places and spaces. The dissertation research methodology mainly consists of interviews of old time musicians and mapping of musician networks. Central to my analysis will be an understanding of what makes music “traditional” or Appalachian. The presentation and representation of music from Appalachia in festivals such as the Celebration of Traditional Music is important in exploring my understanding of these terms.

Following this study of the Celebration’s archival material, I was employed by Berea College to coordinate the CTM for fall 2006. The knowledge I gained from this study has very practical implications, informing the choices I make in presenting traditional Appalachian music in the upcoming festival.

The Celebration of Traditional Music: Its Beginning and Purpose

The Celebration of Traditional Music (CTM) was first held in the fall of 1974 and has continued every fall since then, except for two years (1999 and 2000), when a May weekend was tried out to see if that would increase the audience. The Celebration is part of the Appalachian Center’s overall mission of encouraging and coordinating many of the Berea College’s special Appalachian programs, involving students and faculty, serving the region, and documenting the region’s culture.

A Traditional Music Committee was organized in 1972 “to advise on music collections, records, video tapes and sound tapes for the library and musical instruments and other materials for the museum” (Appalachian Center Newsletter, Vol. 1, No. 1). The first committee’s members were Jean Ritchie, John Lair, Bradley Kincaid, Asa Martin, Buell Kazee, Dean William Jones, Ethel Capps, Raymond McLain, Dr. Rolf Hovey, and Loyal Jones. An early report by Loyal Jones for the period 8/70-9/71, talks about “developing a series of concerts that will give us an opportunity to make videotapes of traditional singers for our collections.”

The festival is an outgrowth of that effort, for in 1974, the committee’s duties were expanded to include advising Loyal Jones and the Appalachian Center on policies and performers for the Celebration. Later committee members included Betty Smith, Jim Gage, John Rice Irwin, Gerald Roberts, Bobby Fulcher, Rich Kirby, John Harrod, Gerald Milnes, Bob Gates, Atossa Kramer, Al White, Gordon McKinney, Harry Rice, and Susan Spalding.

According to the Appalachian Center’s Newsletter (Vol. 3 No. 3, p. 1),
The purpose of the festival, which will be both a recreational and a scholarly occasion, is to encourage the music and instrumental musicianship traditional to Appalachian people. This is actually not a new aim at Berea, since a spring dance festival and the Christmas Country Dance School have been fixtures in the calendar for many years and the college has a long-time interest in the collection and preservation of songs and ballads...

It was put on “under the direction of the Appalachian Center, with the assistance of the music department and the Berea Country Dancers” (Vol. 3 No. 3, p. 1). “The celebration is being held both for the sheer fun of it and for the advancement of music scholarship” (Newsletter 3:4: p.1). The combination of education and entertainment has continued into the present, including interpretation and context for the music by the hosts in their introductions.

The musicians have always been encouraged to provide their own contexts and communicate that to the audience as well. The festival always includes a symposium on Saturday afternoon, in which some aspect of traditional music is explored by an authority in the field. Subjects for the symposium have ranged from music of the Civil War, to shape note music, Kentucky fiddlers, women banjo players, and biographical presentations on influential musicians.

**The CTM in Special Collections**

Archival materials on the festival are located in several places within the Berea College Archives in Hutchins Library. One of the most valuable things about the Celebration is the fact that it was carefully and consistently recorded on audio tape over the years. These have been indexed according to artist and name of song performed, along with a “container” list that also documents the order in which the music was performed. Besides this extensive collection of sound recordings, there are some videotapes from various years.

The first year, especially, was documented by Kentucky Educational Television, and is a nearly complete record of the festival. The public relations office took photographs of many of the performers over the years, and good quality black and white photos exist, as well as some color photographs and negatives of some of the later years. The Appalachian Center has digital images of some of the most recent festivals. Tapes of several organizational meetings of the Traditional Music Committee were available (1974-1976, 1978, 1979, and 1983), and these provided fascinating insight into the context of the formation of the festival idea, as well as reasons behind some of the decisions made concerning the festival.

Various Appalachian Center files contain some documentary material, including the quarterly newsletters. There were three issues that had several photographs on the festival along with a short article. Volume 6, Number 1 (1977) took care to explain the diversity of performers – “all ages” (from a young boy to an old lady) and “all styles, from Sparky Rucker to Betty Smith.” Volume 6, Number 4 (1977) included photographs of two women and two men. Volume 7, Number 4 (1978) identified only men in the photographs, though there was one of many different participants in the Sunday morning hymn sing.

Overall, the newsletter’s coverage of the Celebration for 1977 and 1978 reveals thirteen women as compared with ten men represented and named in the photographs, although nine of the thirteen women photographed are in one group, the Mountain
Women’s Cooperative String Band. All performers in the photographs are white, except for African American singer and guitarist Sparky Rucker. From the captions and the majority of the coverage, I would say there was an attempt to show performers of both sexes, though the racial balance is not as successfully demonstrated in the photographic coverage.

Context of the Festival:

The beginning of the Celebration took place at a significant time in American folk music, when the folk revival was well under way, but still emerging. Festivals like the Newport Folk Festival had become a well-established phenomenon, though they had yet to be as prevalent as they are today. Such festivals included both musicians who grew up with traditional music and revivalists, the main audience for these festivals, who were usually urban young people who learned about folk music through recordings, festivals, songbooks, and pilgrimages to places like Appalachia and the Deep South to study with traditional musicians. Most of these revivalists were middle or upper middle class, well-educated white people of both sexes.

Continuing themes and issues:

Three inter-related issues continue to be relevant to the CTM: questions of what counts as “traditional” music; the definition of the region whose traditions the festival is representing; and how to adequately represent the diversity of traditions found in the region. Race issues are addressed in these questions, but gender in the CTM is one that gets little overt attention.

Throughout the Celebration’s history, the tension between presenting traditional musicians that are not well known and having headliners that will attract a wide audience has not been resolved. The committee was not always in agreement as to what constituted the traditions or who represented the traditions. The committee clearly wanted to represent mountain traditions in their diversity, but did not want to include much Bluegrass or recent, composed music, so the notion of how much change could be tolerated remained contested.

While it often remained unstated, it was the traditions of the Appalachian region that were typically represented. The organizers, however, often stretched their ideas of the region’s boundaries to make sure a good variety was presented, particularly to include African American musicians that represent the musical culture traditional to the Appalachian region. For this, then, they often included artists from Atlanta or Washington, D.C. if their music was traditionally linked to the region.

Race in the CTM:

Although traditional music in Appalachia has been long accepted as deriving from a combination of European American and African American influences (Malone and Stricklin 2003), traditional African American music in Appalachia has long been invisible and black musicians are rarely included in general references about traditional Appalachian music. Early commercial recordings of white “hillbilly” music in the 1920s and ’30s were contrasted to the “race” recordings of African Americans, strengthening the idea that the two categories were mutually exclusive, and early radio broadcasts continued the exclusion of blacks from Appalachian markets. African American musicians in Appalachia tend to be connected more to general African American traditions rather than Appalachian traditions, implying that race trumps regionality. (See (Thompson forthcoming) for a deeper discussion of these issues and (Hay 2003) for a special issue on African American music in Appalachia.)
Folk festivals are an important arena for the display of traditions and can often contribute to the cementing of ideas about authenticity and tradition influenced by who is invited and how they are presented. As an extreme example, David Whisnant’s study of the White Top Folk Festival in Virginia reveals the racist underpinnings of the organizer’s encouragement of Anglo-Saxon culture and exclusion of any element or person that might “contaminate” the “cultural stream” (Whisnant 1983). John Powell, originator and organizer of the Festival, was also instrumental in proposing, promoting, and gaining passage of Virginia’s Racial Integrity Law of 1924 which made the color line “absolute,” asserting that “one drop of Negro blood makes the Negro” (Whisnant 1983).

Representing the African American experience in Appalachian traditional music has been important from the beginning of the Celebration, though including black musicians and interpreting African American traditional music was at times controversial. Besides Berea’s interracial tradition, the Appalachian Center’s first director, Loyal Jones, was adamant that African American traditions be included, evidenced by the available recordings of the Traditional Music Committee and the limited discussions that ensued over the subject. Not too much was said on the subject, but race did seem to impact some of the committee members’ ideas of what could be considered to be traditionally Appalachian music. To be more specific, at least one member felt that true traditional music in Appalachia was from a European heritage. Complicating this discussion is that African American musicians at the CTM, more than the white musicians, appear to have been recruited from the margins of Appalachia or even from far outside the region, if they represented styles also found in the region.

African American musicians have been represented at the festival most years: 1974-1978, 1980-1984, 1986-1991, and 1994-2004 (all years except 1979, 1985, 1992, 1993, and 2005). The styles of music played by these performers include guitar and harmonica (and vocal) blues; old time string band music; country blues; gospel; and balladry.

In some cases, there has been an attempt to link black and white music from the region together. For example, Joan Salmon-Campbell, a minister from Washington, DC who was invited to perform in the 1977 CTM while she was on campus for another event, introduced her rendition of “Black is the Color” in this way:

I’ve done lots of festivals, but this is the first time I’ve done an Appalachian festival, and I’m delighted to participate, because you made me do some homework. I am delighted to find out that a lot of the traditional music of my people really come out of and feed a lot of the music we’ve been singing tonight, especially the music that this gentleman just finished playing.

Ed Cabbell, a scholar, singer, and founder of the John Henry Memorial Festival in West Virginia, was on the CTM schedule in 2000 and 2001. In 1978, he introduced “Uncle” Homer Walker, a fine “pre-blues” banjo player who sang and played some songs from slavery times and was one of the musicians that worked very actively with the John Henry Festival:

...one of the things we try to do here, seeing he’s sitting here, now with Uncle Homer playing the banjo, is to make an awareness of blacks in the mountains and the kind of music that we have done along with everybody else in the mountains since we’ve been over in here. Since, according to my research, about 1716 in what is now called West Virginia, so our heritage goes back about as long as anyone else’s in the
mountains. And Uncle Homer is going to do a few standard tunes here on the banjo.

Ed Cabbell takes pains to normalize “Uncle” Homer’s performance and his repertoire by placing him “along with everybody else in the mountains” and characterizing his banjo tunes as “standard,” even though Mr. Walker’s style is somewhat more free-flowing than many white banjo players and he performs songs learned from slave traditions.

Several other performers might be considered to be “cross-over” performers, with repertoire and styles that are shared by many white musicians. Bill Livers was a fiddler and singer from Monterey, Kentucky that benefited from the folk revival — he was “discovered” by young, white, urban “back-to-the-landers” in the 1970s and enjoyed a burst of musical activity late in his life. While he was technically from outside Appalachia, he was a Kentucky native and played many tunes also common in white repertoires.

Sparky Rucker, a singer, banjoist, and guitarist from Knoxville, Tennessee, was a frequent performer at the CTM (1975, 1976, 1981, 1986, 1994, and 2002) and presented the 1994 Symposium on “Civil War Music.” His music includes a mixture of blues and gospel styles, as well as old time and country. Earl White, fiddler and founding member of the Green Grass Cloggers, performed in 2004 and spent several days on campus speaking with students about his experiences. Part of his presentations included discussions of being African American in a musical scene and type of music (old time string band music) most often connected with white musicians.

There have been many blues guitarists in the CTM line-up, the majority of whom are African American. The Foddrell Brothers performed in 1978, 1982, and 1983, one of whom is the proud parent of three Berea College alumni. Nat Reese, from Princeton, WV, plays “a mixture of country blues and Delta blues” and performed several times — in 1980, 1990, 1991, 1998 — and will return in 2006.

Some of the performers were from admittedly marginal areas of the region, but represent the black tradition of the region: Etta Baker, only one of two African American women to perform at the festival, is from the Piedmont of North Carolina (Morganton) and performed in 1983; Buddy Moss, from Atlanta, GA and Washington, DC (1978); Robert “Bud” Garrett (1984); Drink Small from Columbia, SC (1980); Moses Rascoe in 1989 (York, PA). Eddie Pennington from Princeton, WV and western Kentucky (1999) and Cliff Carlisle (formerly of the Carlisle Brothers with his brother Bill from Lexington, KY) are white guitarists who also play blues guitar.

Black gospel groups have been represented at the festival by Berea College’s Black Music Ensemble (1974 and 1995), Northern Kentucky Brotherhood from Covington, KY (1995), Sons of Glory from Wilmore, KY (1996), Mighty Gospel Harmonizers from Lexington, KY (1997), and Tri-City Messengers (2002). In 1999, symposium speaker, Carl Smith from Kentucky State College spoke on “African-American Lined Hymns.”

Ethnic groups outside the African American and northern European American traditions have been poorly represented in the festival, but this is quite consistent with even liberal interpretations of Appalachian music. Cherokee Walker Calhoun visited twice, in 1989 and with his Raven Rock Dancers in 1990, and Paula Nelson (2002) is the only other Native American CTM performer to have appeared so far. (In 2006, we are hoping to schedule James “Bo” Taylor, a Cherokee musician and dancer.) Joseph Fulaytar is the only representative of an Eastern European heritage to have performed:
his 2002 appearance with his cymbalum (Hungarian hammered dulcimer) was an important, but unfortunately singular, representation of the large Eastern European immigrant presence in early twentieth century Appalachian coalfields. No Latino groups have yet been represented at the festival, even though their numbers are currently increasing in the region.

Much more can be done with questions of race in the CTM. My study has been very broad and descriptive – mostly just trying to determine who appeared at the festival, how it was conceived and initiated, and how these social forces worked. One thing in particular that would be most important would be to have someone with a broad knowledge of African American music and Appalachian music analyze the repertoires and playing styles of the performers in the CTM to help broaden our understanding of the diversity of African American traditional music, both in the Appalachian region and in America more generally.

A closer examination of each genre in depth would also be useful; for example, comparing the different gospel groups – with each other and with the larger tradition – to understand the variations or consistencies across the region and across the years. This could be done with the blues guitarists who have performed as well. Perhaps individuals or sub-regions that were very influential could be identified for further study.

Along with the using the CTM performances as examples of the different genres, our understandings of African American music in Appalachia can also be deepened by describing the experiences and networks of the musicians themselves. Tracing the networks of CTM musicians may lead to finding more traditionally-oriented black musicians, or contribute to further understanding of black-white interchange among musicians. Many of the musicians that have performed at the festival are still alive and could be interviewed concerning their experiences at the CTM.

Musicians have always pushed beyond their borders and refused to be bound by regional or genre definitions. Moreover, there have been many migrants from Appalachia, both black and white, that have brought their Appalachian heritage to new (often urban) music scenes and had an influence on them. A broad definition of Appalachia and its boundaries has usually helped, not hurt, the offerings in the Celebration, but it must be interpreted adequately so that the performers’ connections to the region are demonstrated.

Whatever limits there have been to representations of African American music in the CTM, this festival has been significantly more inclusive racially than many other festivals in the region, and in the local area. For example, preliminary surveys of the tapes of the Cumberland Valley Folk Festival, held in Knox County, Kentucky in 1978 and 1979, revealed no African American musicians. Further comparisons of this festival with others, such as those held at Carter Caves State Park around the same time, will no doubt verify the importance of the Celebration of Traditional Music as an ongoing venue for African American music in Appalachia, even with its limitations.

**Gender in the CTM:**

Gender is one of those social characteristics that is often taken for granted, and its influence on such cultural productions as music is often ignored, partly because it is so difficult to tease out. It is inflected by other social characteristics, such as race, age, and class, and its effects and connection to biology makes it often treated as though they were simply natural, veiling its very socially constructed origins. Its very prevalence makes the study of gender on everyday life difficult.
In order to understand the effects of gender on the CTM, the artists themselves can be examined. Is there a pattern in the instruments that are played by the different genders? For example, are female musicians more likely to be vocalists than their male counterparts? Are traditional fiddle players usually male? What roles do different genders take on in the festival atmosphere and in the music world?

Because traditional music is often passed on through families and close neighbors, family music groups are very common in the CTM. Almost any combination of related persons might be found, such as wife-husband duos (Annadeene and J.P. Fraley); parent-child duos (Lily May and Tim Pennington or Lewis and Donna Lamb); grandparent-grandchild (Addie Graham and Rich Kirby); or larger family groups (McLain Family Band or Grandpa, Ramona, and Alisa Jones).

The music itself often has gendered implications, from a tune’s name like “Soldier’s Joy,” to the point of view of the song, like “Banjo Pickin’ Girl” or “Wagoner’s Lad.” It would be interesting to investigate how musicians are influenced by gendered points of view in the songs they sing. For example, will men or women sing songs from the point of view of the opposite gender? If so, will they change the pronouns or any of the other words to conform to their own gender and gendered experience?

Many humorous songs trade on the competition between men and women, especially husbands and wives. For example, “Four Nights Drunk,” a very widely sung song by both sexes, tells the story of a wife’s attempts to deceive her drunkard husband by claiming that various articles of clothing and body parts of her extramarital lover are actually things her granny gave to her.

Males and females can and do sing songs about both genders, but there does tend to be some correlation between the gender of the song’s protagonist and the musician performing it, especially in terms of songs about women’s experiences. For example, “The Housewife’s Lament” was not sung by any male performers, but it must be said that it was also not sung by the vast majority of females, either.

All artists have a gendered experience, and this is often expressed in the music they choose to sing. Janette Carter, for example, sang a song in the 1978 CTM she wrote about her experience as a mother. One of David Morris’s 1977 songs was dedicated to a man who helped him survive his experience as a Vietnam War veteran.

In investigating the influence of gender on the festival, I found, through a survey of the 1974, 1984, 1994, and 2004 programs, that the first festival had the largest representation of women proportional to the total musicians (40%), with a drastic drop in the 1980s (18%) and a gradual increase, but still low, to 25% in 2004. The percentage of women serving in a leadership position throughout the years is significantly lower than the percentage of men, with only two women, Betty Smith and Jean Ritchie, filling most of these capacities, serving as emcees, members of the Traditional Music Committee, or workshop leaders over the years. Women, again, especially these two exceptional female musicians, have dominated in leadership of the sacred music portion of the weekend on Sunday morning. This is consistent with other cultural patterns in which women are often more associated with church attendance, and female leadership is more accepted.

**Future research and use of fellowship materials**

Much more could be said with a more detailed examination of gender and race in the music of the CTM. There is so much primary material to work with here, and
many of my preliminary findings will be tested against the interviews I gather for my dissertation research. So far, the research I conducted in Berea College’s sound archive has provided data for and been central to the following presentations:

3/9/2006  “Gender and Appalachian Music,” annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Chicago, IL

3/18/2006  “Gender and Appalachian Music,” Appalachian Studies Conference, Dayton, OH


4/5/2006  “The Place of Music in the Production of Appalachia” for Exploring Kentucky’s Sense of Place conference at University of Louisville, Kentucky

4/19/2006  Presentation on Appalachian Music Fellowship with three other fellows at Hutchins Library, Berea College

This summer, I will be teaching music at the Hindman (KY) Settlement School’s Family Folk Week and teaching old time banjo at the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, West Virginia as well as participating in the Cowan Creek Mountain Music School (Kentucky). In all these venues, I will be talking with other participants and staff, and we will be sharing our knowledge of Appalachian music. The insights gained from my two months’ study of the Berea sound archives will inform my discussions there.

Besides these more immediate venues for disseminating the knowledge I gained from a two-month study of the CTM archives, this research has very concrete and practical uses in two areas. In the absence of an Appalachian Center director and associate director, I was hired by Berea College to coordinate the Celebration of Traditional Music for this fall. My intensive study and consideration of the place of race and gender in the CTM has allowed me to step into the position well versed in the origin and beginnings of the festival and its context at Berea College and the wider community.

I feel better able to make decisions concerning the festival and to try and fulfill the mandate of representing “strictly traditional music” within the guidelines set by previous organizers and to have a good idea of how I may change it according to my inclinations and the context of today. For example, I am, with the encouragement of the Traditional Music Committee, searching out a Latino band to represent the growing importance of this ethnic group on contemporary Appalachia. This includes finding cultural interpreters and brokers that can help me decide which group might most closely represent a Latino tradition. Being faced with the practicalities of organizing and putting on a festival has also placed me in a unique position to understand the challenges and realities faced by the festival’s organizers.

The second area in which my research may play an important part is my plan to apply for the National Endowment for the Humanities Chair in Appalachian Studies, a visiting teaching and research position that has come open for this coming fall. The two key components of this position both involve use of Berea College’s Special Collections and my two month fellowship in the archive should place me in a strong position in my application.

The position was established to provide greater support in two areas: faculty research on Appalachian topics in the important print and non-
print collections at the College and the integration of regional materials into the classroom. (from the announcement)

I was very honored to have the luxury of two months to spend immersed in research of an important regional festival, exploring questions important to my decades-long study of Appalachia and its music. I have been dipping into the Special Collections since I moved to Kentucky in 1991, but now that I have a good understanding of how the Collection works and got to know so many of its staff and student staff, I will be able to use it in the future even more effectively, and I have come up with even more research questions and areas of study to pursue from spending time there.

Sources Cited


