



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Ralph Rinzler Oral History Interview, 1993

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title:	Ralph Rinzler Oral History Interview
Identifier:	Record Unit 9569
Date:	1993
Extent:	2 videotapes (Reference copies).
Creator::	Rinzler, Ralph, interviewee
Language:	English

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9569, Ralph Rinzler Oral History Interview

Historical Note

Ralph Carter Rinzler (1934-1994) was born in Passaic, New Jersey, and was interested in music at an early age. He was given a collection of ethnographic recordings from the Archive of Folk Song of the Library of Congress by his uncle, Harvard University ballad scholar George Lyman Kittredge, and they soon became his favorites. He became actively involved in folk music while attending Swarthmore College, organizing an annual folk festival on campus. He received his B.A. in 1956, and did graduate work at Middlebury College and the Sorbonne in French literature and language. Upon his return to the United States, he played mandolin for four years with the Greenbriar Boys, touring with singer Joan Baez. During the 1960s, he also studied and worked with performers of traditional music, such as Doc Watson and Bill Monroe, both of whom gained international recognition, in part through his efforts. In 1964, Rinzler accepted the position of Director of Field Programs at the Newport Folk Foundation. Rinzler came to the Smithsonian in 1967 as the founding Director of what is now the Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies, then in the Division of Performing Arts, to establish a center for research, publication, and presentation of programs in American subcultures. As Director, he also developed the annual Festival of American Folklife. After the summer-long festival of 1976, he initiated Smithsonian Folklife Studies, a publication series, and did research for the Celebration exhibit, which opened at the Renwick Gallery in 1982. Rinzler was appointed Assistant Secretary for Public Service in 1983 and Assistant Secretary Emeritus in 1990.

Introduction

The Smithsonian Institution Archives began its Oral History Program in 1973. The purpose of the program is to supplement the written documentation of the Archives' record and manuscript collections with an Oral History Collection, focusing on the history of the Institution, research by its scholars, and contributions of

its staff. Program staff conduct interviews with current and retired Smithsonian staff and others who have made significant contributions to the Institution. There are also interviews conducted by researchers or students on topics related to the history of the Smithsonian or the holdings of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Rinzler was interviewed for the Oral History Collection because of his distinguished career as the founder of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, as well as a Smithsonian administrator. Additional information about Rinzler can be found in the the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections in the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

Descriptive Entry

The interview of Rinzler, with friend and colleague Roger D. Abrahams, by Marc Pachter, Acting Assistant Secretary for External Affairs, covers his early life and interest in music; involvement in the folk music scene at Swarthmore and organization of the festival there; time spent in London after graduate courses; life on the road with Joan Baez; work with Doc Watson, Bill Monroe, and others; field work for the Newport Foundation; beginnings of the Folklife Festival at the Smithsonian and his subsequent career at the Institution. It also includes reminiscences of many individuals at the Smithsonian and in the larger folklife community, including S. Dillon Ripley, Frank A. Taylor, Charles Blitzer, David Challinor, Robert McC. Adams, Michael Seeger, Peggy Seeger, and Alan Lomax; and discusses the rise of the folklife movement including the political and ethnological forces behind the movement. The interview consist of 2.5 hours of videotape and 94 pages of transcript.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Art
- Folk music
- Folklife studies
- Interviews
- Mandolin
- Museum exhibits
- Music
- Oral history
- Performing arts

Types of Materials:

- Audiotapes
- Transcripts
- Videotapes

Names:

- Abrahams, Roger D., interviewer
- Adams, Robert McC. (Robert McCormick), 1926-2018
- Archive of American Folk Song
- Baez, Joan
- Blitzer, Charles

Celebration: A World of Art and Ritual (Exhibition) (1982-1983: Washington, D.C.)
Challinor, David
Festival of American Folklife
Greenbriar Boys
Joseph, Samuel
Kittredge, George Lyman, 1860-1941
Lomax, Alan, 1915-2002
Middlebury College
Monroe, Bill, 1911-1996
Newport Folk Foundation
Pachter, Marc, interviewer
Renwick Gallery
Rinzler, Ralph
Ripley, S. Dillon (Sidney Dillon), 1913-2001
Seeger, Mike, 1933-2009
Seeger, Peggy, 1935-
Smithsonian Institution. Assistant Secretary for Public Service
Smithsonian Institution. Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies
Smithsonian Institution. Division of Performing Arts
Swarthmore College
Taylor, Frank A. (Frank Augustus), 1903-2007
Watson, Doc

Preferred Titles:

Smithsonian Folklife Studies (Serial)

Container Listing

Interviews

Interviews

Interview 1: July 9, 1993

Interviews

Covers his early life, education, life-long work in folklore, career at the Smithsonian, and the development of the Festival of American Folklife, c. 1934-1993, including: Early life and schooling at Swarthmore College; introduction to folk music, including contact with Charles Seeger, Pete Seeger, Mike Seeger, and Peggy Seeger; graduate work at Middlebury College, including study in Paris and London and contact with Ewan MacColl, Joan Littlewood, and Margaret Barry; first experiences with international folk musicians; music experience with the Greenbriar Boys and touring with Joan Baez; introduction to American folk art/craft while touring with Baez; role as an impresario with Clarence Ashley, Doc Watson, and Bill Monroe; employment at the Newport Folk Festival, including work with Dewey Balfa, involvement in the development of Cajun folk music, and a new focus on crafts; creation of Country Roads in Harvard Square; first meeting with Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley and discussion and planning of the first Festival of American Folklife in 1967; reminiscences about working with a variety of Smithsonian Institution staff, including Frank A. Taylor, Charles Blitzler, and David Challinor; perceptions of how the Festival of American Folklife fit, museologically in the Smithsonian Institution; Congressional attempts to create a Folklife Institute; Bicentennial of the American Revolution celebration and the twelve week-long Folklife Festival; the creation of a separate Office of Folklife Programs and the permanent establishment of the Festival of American Folklife at the Smithsonian; discussion of Victor Turner and the exhibit *Celebration: A World of Art and Ritual*; the development of the Festival of American Folklife to include staff from diverse backgrounds and in the creation of the Festival with participants from diverse backgrounds; the acquisition of Folkways Records from Moses Asch; reminiscences on working with Secretary S. Dillon Ripley; employment as Assistant Secretary for Public Service; reminiscences on working with Secretary Robert McCormick Adams; discussion of the exhibit *Aditi: A Celebration of Life*; and the spirit of the Festival of American Folklife, including the Heritage Awards and the future of the Festival.

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 1-94, of videotape recording, 2.5 hours.

Interviews

Video Recordings of Interview: Total Recording Time: 2.5 hours

Note:

- Original Masters: 5 Betacam videotapes
- Copy Masters: 2 3/4" U-Matic videotapes
- Reference Copies: 2 VHS videocassettes