Note from the Field

by Jon Lohman

In the surreal and liminal reality of the early months of the 2020 global pandemic, I had just moved on from my 19-year tenure as the Virginia State Folklorist to start my own cultural nonprofit, the Center for Cultural Vibrancy. While I felt blessed and enjoyed my time as the Director of the Virginia Folklife Program, breaking off to "start my own thing" was a lifelong dream, and when opportunity knocked, I had to answer. Yet I soon found to my unwelcome surprise that the bliss I was expecting to experience with my newfound freedom was overshadowed by a pervasive sense of anxiety, second guessing, and a full-blown identity crisis.

I always told people (after the often arduous need to explain what a State Folklorist is and does) that being the State Folklorist felt like always working and never working, as I never felt much need to separate my "work self" and "personal self." Being the Virginia State Folklorist had truly become the very core of my identity. Thus, leaving my position to start my own organization had me feeling a bit like the dog that caught the car. My afternoons were often spent walking the streets and trails of Charlottesville, keeping at least six feet from anyone passing by, wondering just what this new endeavor was and how to get started.

About the cover photo: Samuel Rose from Caymanian group Swanky Kitchen Band in a virtual residency.

It was then that my longtime friend and collaborator Josh Kohn called to discuss a unique conundrum in which he found himself. At the time, Josh was the Program Director of the Creative Alliance, a fantastic venue in the Patterson Park neighborhood of Baltimore. Under Josh's creative and passionate leadership, the Creative Alliance became a vibrant community arts center, gallery, and performance venue. During his time there, Josh forged deep connections with the Baltimore community, including a longstanding partnership with the Baltimore County Public Schools to bring artists scheduled to perform at Creative Alliance into classrooms across the district to meet with and perform for the students. Of course, when Covid-19 hit in the spring of 2020, the Creative Alliance had to live up to its name and come up with innovative ways to host performances outdoors; artist visits to the schools were no longer possible as they had to shut their doors to embark on the fraught adventure of virtual learning.

Rather than cancel the Creative Alliance contract, the county decided to keep it in place and move the artist visits to the students' new "classroom" of their home computers. Josh reached out to see if I was interested in helping out. This seemed like an exciting challenge, and it fit soundly within my longstanding interest and experiences in bringing tradition bearers into the classroom. My first experience dated back to my stint as a public elementary school teacher in New Orleans when I was fresh out of college in the early 1990s, long before I ever knew something called "folk arts in education" existed.

Inspired by the legendary New Orleans funk bassist George Porter, Jr.'s visit to my 5th- grade class, I became one of the first grant recipients from the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation to create Orleans Arts Outreach, a program that brought local musicians and culture bearers to schools across Orleans Parish, including folks like Tuba Fats, Kermit Ruffins, and many more. I found these visits to be nothing short of transformative as a teacher, and my dedication to bringing traditional artists to schools remained a core aspect of my years later at the Virginia Folklife Program. In my final months there, I started working with traditional artists to develop their ability to teach online after the pandemic shutdown had all but decimated their livelihoods. While still

Guinean balafon player Balla Kouyate with moderator Brooks Long meeting with students in Salisbury, MD.

serving as Virginia State Folklorist, I worked feverishly to create an online directory of teaching artists I called TRAIN (Teachers of Remote Arts Instruction Network).

While my adventures with TRAIN were less than five years ago, it is surreal to look back at just how unfamiliar most of us were in those digital waters in which we now swim. Feeling that I was always rushing against the clock of impending financial disaster for our artists, I found myself in the unique position of introducing them to entire worlds that were largely a mystery to myself as well, such as moving lessons to videoconference platforms like Skype and Zoom, or setting up lesson payments using banking apps like Paypal or Venmo. I spent hours with artists online to assist them with figuring out suitable sound and lighting, sometimes mailing them external mics, lights, and cameras when necessary. Together we did our best to figure out the most effective methods to teach traditions that seemed to rely so heavily on the intimacy and closeness of face-to-face contact with someone on a glowing screen, if it was even possible at all.

Having stuck out the academic field of Folklore all the way through a PhD, it had always been clear to me that our field has never managed to come to a consensus on a common definition of folklore itself, although it's safe to say that the vast majority of them include some reference to in-person, face-to-face interaction, communication, and cultural transmission. Entering the field of public folklore after my graduate studies, I discovered that there was perhaps an even broader set of theoretical underpinnings and programmatic possibilities in the ways public folklorists approach our work.

Linda Lay plays autoharp for a class.

I spent much of my time at the University of Pennsylvania floating about the theoretical stratosphere with the likes of such mischief makers as Roger Abrahams, who approached nearly anything and anyone as fair game for folkloristics. Once in my position as Director of the Virginia Folklife Program, I tended to join most of my colleagues across the country in focusing my attention and work toward those who learned and mastered their crafts through close familial, communal, informal, and "traditional" settings of everyday life. Over the years, I chose to devote whatever resources we had to offer—be they apprenticeships, participation in festivals and public programs, or other opportunities—to those who learned their craft not through a training manual, YouTube, or some kind of online course, but ideally by what we sometimes like to call "at grandma or grandpa's knee." Thus, the idea of attempting to bring this kind of traditional learning and aesthetic communication to a flashing screen

remained completely out of my comfort zone, and neither Josh nor I were particularly optimistic about its chances of success.

Finding ourselves merely days away from our first school "visit," we had little time for doubts or hesitation. We decided that our best chance for success was to go with the incredibly gifted and engaging young Delta blues artist Jontavious Willis. While I suppose you can never fully know who might be influenced by any given program, or what potential spark might have been lit or seed planted, it is safe to say that this first program was pretty disastrous, although in our defense the cards were stacked against us. For starters, unbeknownst to us, the Director of Social Studies invited *every* student, from Pre-K to 12th grade, across the *entire* Baltimore County School District to join in from their home computers for the evening program.

Once we went live, the session quickly began to feel less like a school assembly and more akin to a New York City subway platform at rush hour, with students constantly shuffling in and out of the Zoom, with their cameras and mute buttons intermittently flickering on and off. The students' Wi-Fi connections were erratic and unreliable at best, although no worse than Jontavious' own dial-up connection from his home in tiny rural Greenville, Georgia, which resulted in his image freezing up at many inopportune moments, particularly when playing his guitar. When Josh and I weren't frantically texting each other desperate suggestions or angst-ridden emojis, we did our best to moderate the conversation, field questions on the group chat, and do whatever we could to keep the entire evening from going off the rails.

Jontavious Willis on guitar.

Despite the many problems and challenges, we were surprised and delighted to witness quite a few moments of genuine connection. Jontavious, a young yet seasoned performer who has won over tougher rooms in his day, employed his commanding stage presence and infectiously joyful positivity to find ways to capture the students' attention, going so far as to pull off co-writing a blues song with the students, aged 5 through 18, on the spot. We knew then that while we had a long way to go, we might be on to something.

After the Jontavious program, Josh and I held the first of what would become many postmortem conversations, analyzing what went right and, in those early days, more of what didn't, to improve on the next one. We quickly realized that the best practices for virtual classroom artist visits are no different from those for in-person cultural and educational experiences. Class size matters. The best teaching artists can relate to the students' grade level and meet them where they are. The artists are best received when teachers and their students are interested, engaged, and well-prepared.

To this last point, we developed what we came to refer to as "T.A.P. Guides," which stood for Tradition, Artist, and Place for teachers to share with students in advance of their artist's visit. These short guides are designed to prepare both the teachers and students to get the most out of their time with the artist, gaining advanced knowledge about their lives and the larger cultural and historical contexts of their tradition. With these guides, the students get to learn a little about where the artist is from and how that place and cultural community informed and impacted their craft. These guides comprised the beginnings of the larger curricula materials we would later develop for each participating artist.

Although we were making great strides with our program model, technical issues persisted, particularly musicians freezing up mid-frame. We concluded that no matter what kind of equipment we provided our artists or how many hours we spent with them working through kinks ahead of time, the Zoom of 2020 was unable to keep up with the speed of music, a problem that largely persists today. After trying numerous approaches, including hiring tech support to help run the sessions, we decided that our best option was to work with the artists directly to produce videos that students and teachers could watch in advance of the visit, allowing them to capture a well-recorded, uninterrupted performance.

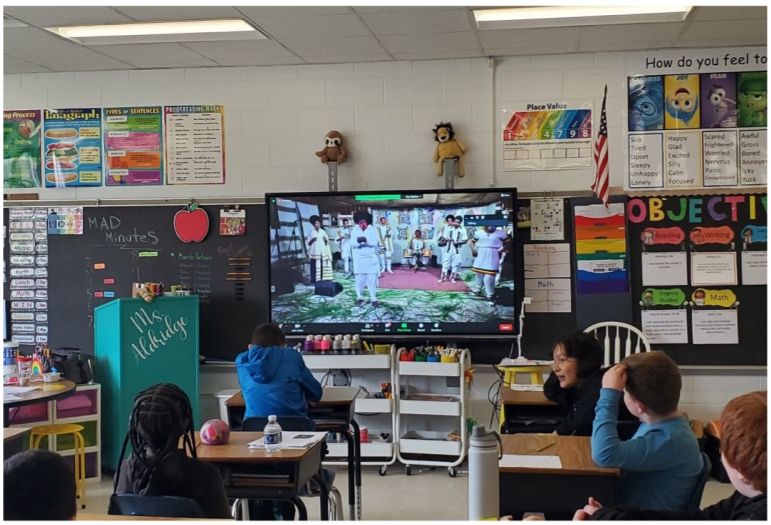
Looking back, those early video collaborations with our artists really opened our minds to the true potential of this program. Up until this point we had always compared the virtual visit to "*the real thing*"—as in having living, breathing artists together with students in their classroom. After all, these "virtual visits" first emerged out of necessity, thus we were hardwired to judge our virtual programs against in-person ones, leaving us invariably dissatisfied. But as the videos started coming in, we were inspired to take a break from focusing on the obvious comparative deficits of the virtual visit to pause and consider some new questions. What, actually, *is* cool about this? What can this virtual space offer that the in-person visit might not?
Our first answer was that this new technology allows students to interact with *anyone in the world.* While perhaps common sense now, at the time we found this concept mind-blowing. The previous possibilities of when and which artists could visit the students in Baltimore County were limited to whom the Creative Alliance had booked for performances, and it wouldn't even be possible without a visionary, hard-working, community-minded program director at the helm. And the Baltimore situation is by no means unique. Despite the work of organizations such as Local Learning, independent folklorists, dedicated schoolteachers and administrators, and local and state folklife programs, vast rural and urban regions and schools throughout the country have little to no access to arts and cultural educational programming. Yet, in the aftermath of the pandemic, the majority of classrooms in the country are now equipped with the internet and the ability for the teachers to use it, allowing for these kinds of virtual cultural experiences to help fill the void.

Additionally, our combined experiences with in-person artist classroom visits led us to acknowledge that they too present their own host of challenges. While there were welcomed times when the school visits took place in individual classrooms or other intimate settings, more often they were presented as a largescale assembly, encompassing sizable numbers of students from a range of grade levels, in auditoriums, gymnasiums, or the ubiquitous "multi-purpose rooms" that my musician and educator friend Danny Knicely refers to as "cafetoriums." Almost invariably these spaces lack adequate sound systems, suitable lighting, and other necessary performance provisions.

In addition, these in-person school engagements often necessitated a tremendous amount of time for the artists. A typical school visit usually involves significant travel, early mornings, long waits in the school office for visitor badges, and time for both set up and breakdown. And for organizers of these visits, much if not most of limited financial resources are often swallowed up by artists' travel expenses and lodging—funds that could have gone directly to the artists. In our new program with the pre-visit videos and associated background materials, artists can visit with students with only a laptop or smartphone, from the comfort of their own homes.

Our inclusion of well-produced videos and curriculum materials in advance of the artist visit has also provided another key benefit, evoking memories of a program I produced and supported in my early years in Virginia. Sometime in the early 2000s, we had the opportunity to bring Altai Kai, an amazing ensemble of throat singers from the mountains of Central Asia to a middle school in the tiny Appalachian city of Galax, Virginia. For those unfamiliar, throat singing involves, among other unique characteristics, the baffling ability for the singer to split his or her voice into two or more different pitches simultaneously. Needless to say, the students had never encountered anything like this before, and the room erupted with shrieks of delight that nearly drowned out the singing. And while the students were treated to an unforgettable experience, it wasn't long before they were whisked away to continue their normal school day. I couldn't help but feel that while it was incredible and beneficial for the students to be exposed to this unique tradition performed by some of the genre's most celebrated artists, they were left with no real sense of the singers' daily lives or the Altai mountains, where this singing tradition originated and continues to thrive.

Among the varied and contested definitions of folk and traditional arts, I have always sided with the idea that they comprise the arts of everyday life—an expression of communal identity best understood by exploring their cultural and historical *contexts*—and how these practices operate in the practitioner's world. And while it's always powerful to have artists visit classrooms in-person, there is an undeniable power in presenting students with artists and tradition bearers in their own world. For example, in the case of Galax, the students would be able to visit with Altai Kai directly from their yurt on the other side of the globe.



It was this aspect of our virtual school-based arts program that led us to name it World Culture in Context (WCC). Since that first visit with Jontavious, WCC has expanded our roster to 16 diverse artists and counting, from across the U.S. and the world, from Korea to Pakistan, from Quebec to the Cayman Islands, showcasing genres that span Delta Blues, Klezmer, Bluegrass, Gospel, traditional puppetry, folk dance, a range of foodways, and more.

Through our program, students on Virginia's Eastern Shore have learned traditional Ethiopian dances from the master dancer Melaku Belay, and students in New York City have baked biscuits in real time with the Tennessee Bluegrass singer Linda Lay.

Our program has reached approximately 3,000 students in more than 60 schools, and we recently entered a partnership with the U.S. Department of State to offer WCC in conjunction with their CenterStage national tours. Our website now includes an interactive map for teachers and students to locate and choose artists, and each artist visit comes with pre- and post- visit student activities targeted to specific grade levels and Common Core Standards. We charge a nominal fee to schools to help offset program costs and to provide substantial compensation to the participating artists, and we can also offer the programs free or at a reduced price to ensure that schools do not face financial barriers to participation.

What began as an improvised response to a global crisis has provided influential educational experiences and presented greater possibilities than we could have imagined. World Culture in Context is no longer just a workaround for shuttered schools and travel restrictions but a powerful model that can help contribute to a more equitable, immersive, and inclusive classroom experience. It reminds us that while face-to-face interactions remain vital and irreplaceable in so many ways, technology—when used with intention, creativity, and care—can expand our reach, deepen our understanding, and connect communities that might never otherwise cross paths. As we continue to grow and refine this program, we remain guided by the same principles that have long shaped our work and the work of dedicated folklorists across the country—honoring tradition, amplifying diverse voices, and helping to ensure that cultural expression continues to thrive, whether in a classroom, in a cafetorium, or through a glowing screen.

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URLs
Center for Cultural Vibrancy https://culturalvibrancy.org
World Culture in Context https://worldcultureincontext.org