

Missouri Folk Arts Program

Lisa L. Higgins
Director

Kansas City, here we come!

In 2017, the Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP) kicked off “Show Me Folk,” imagined as a multi-year initiative to identify—then to engage—new-to-us traditional artists across Missouri, region by region, by way of annual field surveys. Supported by Folk & Traditional Arts Partnership grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and matched by the Missouri Arts Council, a consulting folklorist—with staff and local partners—conducts preliminary research. The visiting folklorist then works to identify leads

to local traditions and tradition bearers, before mapping visits within the designated region.

Last year, MFAP staff focused the survey in a dozen counties between Interstate 70 and the Iowa border, with the able skills of visiting folklorist and ethnomusicologist Thomas Grant Richardson. This year, MFAP welcomes



Thomas Grant Richardson sports his Kansas City Royals baseball cap.

Richardson back to survey Jackson County, especially the neighborhoods of “Historic Northeast” Kansas City, where he intends to record a series of video portraits.

Over a year ago, folklorist Mark Livengood, now director of Mid-Century Public Library’s Story Center, invited colleagues from the Mid-America Arts Alliance, the Kansas City, Missouri Office of Culture and Creative Services, and the Kansas City Museum to meet with MFAP’s director to discuss Show Me Folk. After that meeting, MFAP narrowed the scope of its proposed 2019 metro-Kansas City field survey to Jackson County, especially to the Historic Northeast area comprised of six urban neighborhoods just northeast of downtown and south of the Missouri River. These Kansas City colleagues painted a vibrant picture of the area and a dynamic sense of place—home to some of the city’s oldest homes and many of its newest residents—one of the city’s earliest immigrant neighborhoods. We learned that nearly forty languages are spoken there and that restaurants offer a diverse mix of foodways, from pho and street tacos to barbecue and sambusa. Just recently, Consuelo Cruz of the city’s Office of Culture and Creative Services graciously shared a sweeping list of cultural

celebrations in ethnic communities in metro Kansas City, an early iteration of research for the Local Arts Index conducted by ArtsKC in partnership with Americans for the Arts. MFAP staff’s enthusiasm to continue learning about this distinctive region appears matched by our Kansas City colleagues’ enthusiasm for the potential outcomes of the field survey.

MFAP is no stranger to Kansas City, of course. In the first year of the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, Claude “Fiddler” Williams taught jazz violin to three apprentices. In the project’s thirty-four year history, especially the first decade, several jazz musicians passed on the city’s unique tradition of jazz to the next generation in vocals, and on saxophone, trumpet, piano, drums, and clarinet. Previous



The late Frank Patterson (L) teaches jazz and gospel improvisations to apprentice Keith Johnson in 1998.

MFAP director Dana Everts-Boehm highlighted older and newer Mexican traditions in the 1990s, like mariachi music and low-rider car customization (graphics, upholstery, and hydraulics). More recently, MFAP’s Folk Arts Specialist has forged relationships with southern Sudan newcomers, including dancers and musicians from the Dinka and Kuku traditions. MFAP’s director assists organizations like Folk Alliance International and the Sugar Creek Slavic Fest with their Missouri Arts Council grants, and our state arts agency funds cultural organizations in the historic northeast with festival and minority arts grants.

With the dedicated field survey in Jackson County,



The Kansas City Museum, built as a private estate in 1910.

Photos by Thomas Grant Richardson & Dana Everts-Boehm



Master mariachi trumpeter Heriberto “Beto” Lopez (L) and apprentice Antonio Sierra practice mariachi vibratos in 1993.

MFAP staff now welcomes the opportunity to explore a region that is actively in transition, vividly symbolized by restaurant menus, new storefronts, and historic preservation. For instance, under the direction of Anna Marie Tutera, the Kansas City Museum is in the midst of the first stage of a monumental restoration and renovation, due to reopen in 2020. The property has a storied past, originally built as a lumber baron’s estate in 1910, transformed with WPA labor into a history museum just before World War II, then

reinterpreted as a natural history museum through the 1980s. Via the city’s Parks and Recreation Department, Tutera, museum staff, architects, and designers recognize the property as an “anchor institution;” they have reimagined the museum’s vision through the neighborhoods’ histories and multi-layered, multi-vocal cultural heritage. “We are working toward the sharing of stories,” Tutera explains, with a design plan that “focuses on the past, present, and future of Kansas City.” After renovations, the museum will include permanent and changing exhibitions, spaces for visual and performing arts, a café and culinary programs, radio station, and recording studio to capture oral histories. MFAP staff, then, is eager to pursue partnerships with Tutera, museum staff and neighbors.

Based on previous and new relationships in Jackson County, MFAP relishes the opportunities the upcoming Show Me Folk survey offers: to uncover local traditions with the assistance of Richardson and our Kansas City liaisons and to highlight those traditions in events with local partners, like the Kansas City Museum and the Mid-Century Public Library’s Story Center. ■

