

NEWS

Homegrown Concerts Bring Unique Cultures to Library

By Zein Al Maha Oweis

Traditional music and dance help bring other cultures to life.

Earlier this month in the Coolidge Auditorium, Ledward Kaapana entertained a lively audience with performances on the ukulele and slack-key guitar – performances that brought a bit of traditional Hawaiian culture to the Library of Congress.

Kaapana is just one of over 100 performers who have appeared at the Library as part of Homegrown, a concert series staged by the American Folklife Center (AFC) since 2002 to showcase traditional music and dance from folk cultures around the United States.

“We named it ‘Homegrown’ because we wanted to emphasize the idea that anyone who puts down roots in this country is considered homegrown,” AFC public-events coordinator Theadocia Austen said.

Performers who take part in the program share their music from different cultures around the United States. Some of these traditions were brought here from other parts of the world – Hindustani music from Virginia, Puerto Rican folk music from New Jersey, traditional Guzheng music from China, Irish step dance, Basque song from California. Others are native to the U.S.: Native American hoop dancing, acoustic blues and dance music from Maryland, African-American gospel. Homegrown artists often perform in colorful traditional costumes on traditional instruments.

“The idea is that we want to share the best in traditional arts,” Austen said.

The series began in April 2002 as a continuation of the Neptune Plaza concert series, an outdoor series started in 1977 as a way of upholding the AFC’s mission.

“The bill that created us mandated that we preserve and present traditional culture,” Austen said. “Presenting is 50 percent of our congressional mandate, and the concert series is a big part of that.”

The American Folklife Center was



Scenes from Homegrown: Esmá Redzepova and Folk Masters (clockwise from top left); Soumya Chakraverty; Jayme Stone, Moira Smiley, Sumaia Jackson and Joe Phillips perform folk; and the Cambodian-American Heritage Dancers.

Shawn Miller

given its name – “folklife,” not folklore – because its permanent collections hold documentation of more different kinds of cultural expression than song texts, stories or proverbs, Austen said. The AFC is known for its diverse collections that share fascinating cultures of other peoples – for instance, the traditional way they build their houses, the way they prepare traditional dishes, their traditional modes of healing.

Music and dance are a big part of that.

The performers who participate in Homegrown are shared among the AFC and its partners in the program, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Kennedy Center’s Millennium Stage and the Smithsonian.

“We try very much to work with sister organizations in D.C. with programming the concert series,” Austen said. “We worked with the NEA on this year’s Smithsonian Folklife Festival.”

Through this, all three organizations can showcase such talent to many audiences for free and webcast them to audiences to relive the music.

The AFC typically stages from nine to 13 Homegrown concerts a year.

“We do smaller concerts in Whittall Pavilion and we do a little larger concerts in Coolidge, and we make sure the performers represent diverse cultures and regions,” Austen said. “We cast a broad net and bring lots of talented people from a lot of different cultures to Washington to share their immense talents.”

As the concert series continues, the AFC hopes to bring new, innovative talent, even if they are not, in a sense, traditional. Homegrown concerts begin at noon, usually in the Coolidge or the Whittall, and are free. More information is available at www.loc.gov/concerts/folklife.

“We hope to continue to bring the best in traditional music and dance,” she said. ♦

Sushi Station Closure

The sushi and noodle station in the Madison sixth-floor café will be closed from July 31 to Aug. 4. Café management apologizes for any inconvenience.