In its eighty-three-year history, the American Folklife Center and its predecessor, the Archive of American Folk Song, have hosted many visitors from around the world. These guests range from solitary scholars to official governmental delegations, but their common aim has been to glean information from the largest and most representative archive of traditional culture in the United States, and to learn about one of the country’s most active research and outreach centers for the study of folklife.

Because the Library of Congress is the national library of the United States and the largest library in the world, it has always attracted international visitors; and it can be assumed that some of them have come to the Archive of American Folk Song since its inception. This short survey, however, will concentrate on guests hosted by the Center in the last ten years.

Visitors come to the Center for a variety of reasons: to learn about archival practices, arrange for the donation of collections, plan joint projects, or discover the ways that Americans conceive of folklore and folklife. In many cases, our guests are sponsored by either a U.S. government agency, or an institution from their home country. The United States Department of State, for example, offers a number of programs to international scholars and professionals that include a tour of the Center’s facilities. The State Department’s International Visitor Leadership Program has been most active in this regard, creating programs such as Contemporary Approaches to Museum Management and Collection Care in the United States, which brought five museologists from the Republic of Georgia to the Center, and A Project for Brazil, which brought five government cultural workers from the Serviço Social do Comércio of Brazil to the Center. This same program has brought large, multi-country delegations to the Center. On one occasion we hosted cultural workers from Angola, Bhutan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Ethiopia, Iceland, India, Israel, Italy, Kenya, Lithuania, Mexico, Moldova, Netherlands, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Slovak Republic, and South Africa who were traveling as one delegation.

For most international visitors, Center staff members prepare an orientation lecture and tour of the facilities. The lecture includes a definition of folklore and folklife from an American perspective, since these terms are applied quite differently in other countries and cultures. The talk also outlines the history of the American Folklife Center from its beginnings as an archive in the Music Division of the Library of Congress in 1928, to its establishment as a separate Center by an act of the United States Congress in 1976, to its present programs and challenges. The visitors, depending upon their backgrounds and interests, ask questions related to all aspects of the Center’s work, from preservation problems (e.g., “How do you digitize old sound recordings?”) to collection policies (e.g., “Do you take collections only from the United States, or from around the world?”) to outreach programs (e.g., “What educational programs do you run for schoolchildren?”) to legal issues (e.g., “What intellectual property rights are involved in archiving traditional culture?”).

In almost every case, our international guests want to know if the American Folklife Center holds any material from their country, and the staff always search the archive in preparation for this question. For example, the Center hosted a delegation from Bhutan: the director of the National Library, the principal of the Royal Academy of Performing Arts, and a member of the Division for Conservation and Architectural Heritage. In preparation for their visit, Center staff found recordings from the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia, December 1949, which included Bhutanese folksongs sung by tradition-bearers who accompanied themselves on the sgra-snyan (wooden long-necked lute). While Center staff had virtually no information on these songs, the visitors from Bhutan...
were delighted to hear them, and could identify the songs and the areas of Bhutan where the songs originated. In this way, our work has often been advanced by dialog with the international scholars who come to our facility.

Among the delegations that have visited the Center are a number that included high governmental officials, especially at the ministerial level. Among these have been the ministers or deputy ministers of culture from Albania, Kirghizstan, and Montenegro. On these occasions, the Center presents archival materials that are in the American Folklife Center Archive, and that originate in the minister’s nation or culture. Thus, for the Norwegian minister of culture, the Center produced a sample CD of Norwegian-American folksong field recordings, and for the minister for culture, arts and leisure in Northern Ireland (UK), the Center showed archival film footage of Northern Irish musicians and played audio recordings of Ulster Scots immigrants to the United States—all from the Center’s archive.

In some cases, ministerial delegations have come to the Center to gain specific information or to take advantage of the expertise of Center staff. Thus, Center staff met with members of the National Institute of Korean History of the South Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development to discuss the American Folklife Center initiative to construct the Ethnographic Thesaurus. Since the ministry was constructing their own thesaurus of Korean history, they were eager to share information on the theories and practicalities of thesaurus construction, including issues such as the gathering of terms and the creation of structures, as well as funding and staffing for the project.

In a similar fashion, the Center has hosted international scholars seeking assistance on their research projects. The range of such projects is considerable, including a Swedish project to compile Swedish immigrant songs; a British project on intellectual property rights related to traditional culture; a Taiwanese project to digitize ethnographic archival materials; French research on the relationship of Bob Dylan’s lyrics to African American blues; an Israeli initiative on public programming at the National Library of Israel; a Canadian study of cantometrics—the analysis of singing styles, pioneered by former head of the Archive of Folk Song, Alan Lomax; a Welsh project on parallels between the medieval Welsh bardic tradition and African American and Native American traditions; and a Korean project to collect oral histories. In each case the American Folklife Center was able to draw on archival collections, staff technical expertise and experience, Center methodologies and procedures, and other areas of knowledge to provide assistance to these international projects.

The American Folklife Center has always been a preferred destination for visiting librarians, archivists, and museologists, who often want a general tour. We have hosted professionals from the National Library and University Library of Iceland, the National Library of Colombia, the Serbian National Library, the Ethnographic Museum of Istria in Croatia, the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, the National Library of South Korea, the National Library of Wales, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Central Scientific Library of Tajikistan, the Indonesian Visual Art Archive, and the Saptak Archives of Ahmedabad in India. Other international colleagues have specific questions in mind, such as visitors from the National Library of Quebec, who were interested in discovering Franco-American materials at the Center; the National Library of Australia, wanting more information on the Ethnographic Thesaurus; and the National Archives of the Netherlands Antilles, seeking advice on adding an ethnographic component to their collecting policy.

The Center has hosted a number of delegations from North Africa and the Middle East. Professors of American studies, English, and Fine Art visited from Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia. The State Department’s program, Engaging Youth Through Music: A Regional Project for North Africa and the Near East, brought representatives from Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, and Yemen. As well, the Center has played host to many groups of educators: English teachers from Russia; educators from Thailand; and an English teacher and specialist in the Romansh language from Switzerland. One of the more unusual delegations consisted of six representatives from Brazilian Native tribes, organized by the Department of State Indigenous Leaderships Program, who were quite interested in the Center’s extensive archival holdings of Native American recordings, including a substantial collection of Brazilian materials.

While the guests described above have usually included the Center as part of a more extensive and well-planned
itinerary of visits with cultural institutions across the United States, international visitors stationed in embassies and delegations in Washington, DC, have taken advantage of their proximity to the Library of Congress to establish ongoing contacts with the American Folklife Center. Embassy staff visit, not only to learn more about the Center, but to organize joint programs. Thus, officials from the Canadian Embassy and the Washington Bureau du Québec partnered with the Center to plan a jointly sponsored symposium, *Borderlines/Borderlands: Culture and the Canada-US International Boundary*, held in 2010. A visit from the cultural counselor for the Embassy of Sweden and the director of the Culture and Cultural and Natural Heritage Directorate of the Council of Europe visited to discuss issues related the “cultural capital” concept, which highlights designated cities in Europe. These visits resulted in a 2009 American Folklife Center lecture by the Swedish counselor on Swedish vernacular architecture.

As illustrated above, the American Folklife Center has long been accustomed to hosting cultural workers, government and embassy officials, academics and librarians. In at least one instance, however, the Center was particularly delighted to receive a special guest. In the early 1940s, Arthur S. Alberts, who worked for the U.S. Office of War Information, collected folk and popular songs in several parts of West Africa. After the war, he continued collecting West African songs for the Library of Congress, and in 1949 a young woman named Eupheme Cooper from the Americo-Liberian community in Monrovia sang for Alberts. These recordings have been part of the Center’s archival holdings ever since. In 2007, Eupheme Cooper Weeks came to the Center to hear her recordings and talk about singing for Arthur Alberts. It is a rare occasion for any of the thousands of folk performers who have been recorded over the years to come to the Center, but a visit from Ms. Weeks—58 years after being recorded—is perhaps the only time that a performer from outside the United States has come for a visit.

The many international visitors to the American Folklife Center speak to this institution’s worldwide focus, and to its reputation as one of the leading centers devoted to the preservation and presentation of traditional cultural expressions. No matter where future visitors come from, the Center will be ready to answer, among many questions, “What kind of work do you do here, and do you have any materials from my country?”