

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NEW PUBLICATION TELLS UNKNOWN SMITHSONIAN STORY



A new memoir, *Smithsonian Impresario*, has just been published. It tells the story of the Smithsonian Institution at a critical juncture in its history. The author, James Morris was a Smithsonian official for 18. He brought the performing arts to the Smithsonian, created the Smithsonian’s annual Folklife Festival, the Discovery Theater and innovative programs in jazz, popular culture, black American culture, music and dance and musical theater. He also established touring performances that helped the Smithsonian serve a broad, national audience. Morris created the Smithsonian Collection of Recordings and produced numerous Grammy Award winning recordings.

In 1964, Dillon Ripley, newly appointed Secretary of the Smithsonian, found the national museum “staid and stogy.” He also likened the National Mall to “Forest Lawn on the Potomac,” but attempts to change the great institution were met with resistance and inertia. Ripley’s solution was to appoint Morris the Smithsonian’s first impresario, a non-museum professional with vision and organizational experience. Morris was able to speak to the experiences of common people and previously ignored minorities. He also raised a large amount of funds, increased Smithsonian audiences and attracted supporters and donors.

*Smithsonian Impresario* recalls Morris’ work bringing the national museum to life and addressing deeply embedded issues of racism, social privilege and apathy. In the process, Morris changed the Smithsonian’s image from the Nations Attic, to a vibrant, living museum. He also created a unique, profitable recording business that added considerable resources to the Smithsonian’s treasury.

*Smithsonian Impresario* is a story of opportunities and frustrations, of risks that paid off and defeats that threatened progress. It’s about obtuse adversaries and passionate allies, behind-the-scenes conflicts and successful resolutions, all played out in an international arena. Readers interested in American culture and the history of entertainment, anyone who enjoys the arts and the antics of famous people, will enjoy this book. It is available at Amazon, [www.smithsonianimpresario.com](http://www.smithsonianimpresario.com) Additional information at [www.folklife.si.edu/center/legacy/Morris.aspx](http://www.folklife.si.edu/center/legacy/Morris.aspx)

## What People Are Saying About Smithsonian Impresario

*“This splendid book is more than a chronicle of one individual’s journey through the world of performing arts. It also vigorously recalls a significant era in governments sponsorship of the arts.”*

- Dwight Blocker Bowers, Curator, Division of Cultural and the Arts, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

*“Jim was a visionary who could look at an orange and see a moonscape. (At the Smithsonian) he assembled the perfect office-diverse, knowledgeable & supportive. He was a staunch supporter of my efforts to work with the collections. Now he’s written a fascinating book, enjoyable for every reader.”*

- Jim Weaver; Founder, Smithsonian Chamber Music Society

*“I’ve known Jim for over 45 years. His brilliant singing talent helped him understand the arts. This important book tells the dramatic story of the Smithsonian’s belated recognition of neglected American cultural achievements. For anyone interested in American culture, it’s a must read.”*

- Donald Pippin; Composer, arranger and conductor; Tony Award, Emmy Award and Drama Desk Award winner, and former Musical Director of New York’s Radio City Music Hall Among his Broadway credits are La Cage aux Folles, Cabaret, Mack and Mabel, Seesaw, Applause, Mame, Oliver and A Chorus Line.

*“In his years at the Smithsonian, Jim Morris blended scholarship and showmanship to bring America’s past and present together in unprecedented ways. His breadth of vision created new insights and wowed the crowds. The story of those remarkable years has never been told – until now.”*

- J. R. Taylor; Grammy Award winning author and cultural historian.

From: Kurin, Richard [<mailto:Kurin@si.edu>]  
Sent: Saturday, November 19, 2011 12:24 PM  
To: jim morris  
Subject: RE: My Book is Out!

Dear Jim,

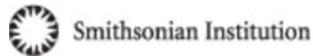
I am so glad you wrote this book. It fills in a lot of the history of the Festival and your work at the Smithsonian.

While the Institution has come a long long way from where you found it in the 60s and left it in the 80s, many of the underlying tensions and dynamics are still extant.

All the best to you and Cynthia,

Richard

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# Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

## Mission and History

### Legacy Honorees

- Moses Asch
- Dewey Balfa
- Woodrow Wilson Guthrie
- Bess Lomax Hawes
- Ella Jenkins
- James R. Morris
- Lead Belly
- Alan Lomax
- Bernice Johnson Reagon
- S. Dillon Ripley
- Ralph Rinzler
- Pete Seeger

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## James R. Morris

Jim Morris brought the performing arts to the Smithsonian in the 1960s in an effort to liven up the Institution and address aspects of American culture generally overlooked in museums. He is the originator of the Festival of American Folklife, which became the **Smithsonian Folklife Festival**.

In 1966 Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley hired Jim as director of Museum Services and the next year appointed him director of the Smithsonian's new Division of Performing Arts. In 1964, Jim had produced an American Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina, featuring such artists as Horton Barker, Hobart Smith, Frank Proffitt, Doc Watson, Bill Monroe, and Bessie Jones and the Sea Island Singers. He proposed the idea of a folk festival on the National Mall to Ripley in January 1967, and hired Ralph Rinzler and Henry Glassie to help plan it. In May, Ripley approved \$4,900 for the event.

The first Festival of American Folklife included 84 participants—among them Jones and the Sea Islanders, bluesman John Jackson, singer and storyteller Janie Hunter, Dejan's Olympia Brass Band, cowboy singer Glenn Ohrlin, Libba Cotten, and the King Island Eskimo dancers. The four-day Festival took place over the Fourth of July weekend on the Mall and on the plaza of the Museum of History and Technology. The Festival drew 430,000 visitors, media attention, and kudos from members of Congress. A few critics questioned the



Noting that the Festival had encouraged broader participation in American cultural life, he saw the need *"to provide access to the policy-making procedures by which we will sustain a culture in which the arts can flourish."*

— James R. Morris

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seriousness of the Festival and its use of the Mall, but Jim persisted and Ripley offered his strong endorsement.

Concurrent with the first Festival, Jim organized a folklife conference including Alan Lomax, Archie Green, Moses Asch, Roger Abrahams, Don Yoder, Austin Fife, D.K. Wilgus, and Richard Dorson, among others, who proposed a comprehensive program of folklife activities at the Smithsonian and across the nation. This led to a bill, introduced by Senator Ralph Yarborough and developed by his staffer, Jim Hightower, to establish an American Folklife Institute, which later provided the basis for American Folklife Center legislation.

The increasingly successful Festival became a key component of the American Bicentennial celebration. The Festival's budget and staff grew under Jim's guidance. The Festival began a national touring program. The 1976 Festival, with a \$7 million budget, lasted twelve weeks and involved 5,000 artists from every region in the United States and from 35 other nations. Jim, along with Ralph Rinzler, was named a Washingtonian of the Year. For Jim, the Festival helped affirm the idea of a rich and vital American culture created in the daily lives of people. It was a corrective to notions of American cultural insecurity, feelings that Americans to be cultured had to imitate European art forms.

Jim's cultural program was broader than folklife and the Festival. After 1976, he and Rinzler parted ways. As the director of the Division of Performing Arts until its dissolution in 1985, Jim began the Smithsonian Collection of Recordings, the Discovery Theater for schoolchildren, and performance programs in jazz, puppetry, American dance, and musical theater—including a 900-seat nylon and steel "Theater-on-the-Mall." The Grammy-winning *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz* was produced under his leadership. The

music program in the Division of Cultural History at the National Museum of American History owes much to his work, as does the Program in Black American Culture.

Jim was himself a performing artist. He had a career as a singer and actor in Broadway and off-Broadway productions. He appeared in musical theater productions, as a featured performer on television, and on recordings. Jim created *In the Mood*, a 1940s musical revue, and in 1980, he directed and conducted the highly acclaimed operetta *Naughty Marietta*. In 1986, he was nominated for a Grammy Award for his annotation of *American Popular Song*.

Jim's ideas on cultural policy foreshadowed later Center contributions. In 1976, he saw policy enshrined in government, foundations, and educational institutions "designed to develop a greater body of consumers. These policies are determined by the few for the many, are basically patronizing in attitude, and are uncoordinated and largely unevaluated." Noting that the Festival had encouraged broader participation in American cultural life, he saw the need "to provide access to the policy-making procedures by which we will sustain a culture in which the arts can flourish."