

Creativity As a Cultural Value: An Interview with Bill Ivey, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts

*Interviewed by Matt Bradley and Stephen Gencarella Olbrys
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MB: In some of the recent speeches you've given you've talked about the notion of "national creativity." What is "national creativity"? Could you expand on that idea a little bit? How do you conceptualize it, and how do you work with that conceptualization in your job and with the NEA?

BI: To me, one of the overarching challenges for the arts in America, and for anyone who chairs the Arts Endowment, is the notion of establishing value. My sense is that as dynamic as America's cultural life is, our sense of artistic endeavor is not very well developed. And a big part of my job as Chairman of NEA is establishing value, and so I've tried to elevate two concepts that I think help to establish value: one is living cultural heritage and the other is creativity. My hope is that we can, over time, intensify the sense that creativity and cultural heritage are important to everyday life. And I see creativity as a cultural value, as something that is partly a polar opposite to the technological, scientific method that came to permeate our notion of what constituted cultural value in the post-Sputnik years. And so, to me, creativity is the ability to make connections between disparate ideas and concepts so that we can make linkages that create a sum that's greater than the parts. Creativity is the ability to make intuitive leaps that don't necessarily play out in a scientific methodology, but ultimately lead you to a better result than you might obtain if you move through a series of steps.

What I'm trying to find is a sense of value that works for community artists and people who care about the arts and society at large. Or said another way: I am looking for practices or ways of thinking or ways of being that can be nurtured in the populace that

would create a social benefit. So, when I think of creativity, I think of something that probably can be taught through the application of certain principles or through practice, and also something that's different than great artistry, which I think is a different sort of notion possessing a different set of underlying principles. When I talk about creativity, I often [ask]: why is our economy strong today when it was considered on the ropes a decade ago? Is it only because we've made certain kinds of investments, or that there's a certain kind of technological base? Or is it more about what we're able to do as a people? Is there something about our environment—given the multi-cultural dimension of this society over hundreds of years—that tends to make us creative people? And if creativity is one of our cultural values, our national values, is it worthwhile to find ways to nurture it? That would probably be the entire argument that I rarely get to make when I talk about creativity as something that's good.

My ultimate goal for this agency is to try to integrate it more completely with the society it serves. To me, there's an irony in having a National Endowment for the Arts that's funded at [only] a hundred-million dollar level in a society that, in many ways, is defined by its creativity, and that can see in art-making one of the strongest, most powerful metaphors for the way democracy really should be working. That one investment is so small, and our connection is so poor between how we actually live our lives, how we think we should be spending our taxpayer dollars [is ironic]. So I think that an investment in creativity and in understanding the centrality of creativity to some of the best things about our society takes us toward a deeper investment. And I also think that the notion of living cultural heritage—that is, the way in which the past lives in the present, often through creative acts but also through things that are simply remembered and brought forward—those two things together give us at least some bases on which to argue for, first, the validity of a federal investment in the arts, and then ultimately for a greatly increased investment. [This vision is] something that I believe arises out of my folklore training. Whether it really stands up to hard academic scrutiny, I don't know, [laughter] but I feel that it works. It works for me. It gives me a way of looking at reality, of looking at policy and trying to position this agency and its work.

SO: You bring up an interesting point: creativity as a democratic value that's mediated through art. I'd like to hear more about that. As you

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say, there's an academic argument that we could work out, but on the "real" ground here—where it really matters—how do you visualize this link between the making of art and looking at creativity as a kind of democratic value, widening the discourse for democracy in so many ways?

BI: I'll back up one step and talk a little bit about folklore. To me one of the great benefits of folklore study to the kind of work that I'm doing now is that folklore looks hard at what I would call the intersection between society and personality as it comes out in expressive acts of one kind or another. To me that accomplishes two things. First, for me it establishes the centrality of art to society, [and] to human behavior, and establishes art as one of the great windows—maybe *the* great window through which to look at behavior in society. And then, second, it also provides that sense that there is kind of a creative tension between what the individual is doing and what the society is carrying forward as tradition—as what's acceptable and what's not—and out of that process, out of that interaction, come these wonderful things we can use to interpret the way people behave and the way society thinks. So, to me, there's a kind of folkloric underpinning to my view, and to take it to a much more practical level, I think it's very important that the work of a federal cultural agency look like the society that it serves. We have a very complex society that says, philosophically, "We honor multiple cultural traditions equally." Our society doesn't implement that democratic vision very well all that often, but at least we hold that [position] as a value, and if you look at the sometimes collision, sometimes collaboration between cultural traditions... the collaboration and collisions between the visions of individual artists and the society and the cultures that they're a part of, you'd see, I think, a very powerful metaphor for the way democracy should be working.

I've said this in jest: I think the only area of our society in which we work better in this regard is in cuisine, you know, [laughter] in the sharing and combining. I think art is a fairly neutralized, rather safe place to go for cultural exchange. I think food is probably a safer place, but I'm the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, not the National Endowment for Cuisine [laughter]. And in that context, I think that looking at that intersection where cultures come together in our democracy, and where individual creative artists connect with those cultural traditions—that's a great spot to nurture

artistic activity, because that activity is such a strong metaphor for the best of our democratic values when it's working, when artists are creating, when they're well connected with their cultural heritage. When they have access to all the traditions that surround them, and they're in an environment in which they can do their best work, I think you have democracy working at its best, even if the surrounding legal structure, the civil society that surrounds it, is not quite as evolved. I'll say this sort of parenthetically: that's one reason I've thought it would be timely today for scholars to revisit the entire Southern artistic experience with an eye less towards looking at the exclusivity of the African-American and Anglo-American traditions and what they produced out of their unique characteristics, but rather to focus on the shared experience of the South and the way in which multiple traditions combine and recombine to produce terrific forms of cultural expression. I think there exists a "phase two" to looking at the Southern experience, to see it in a more positive light, and see Southern music as *one* thing, not as many things.

- SO: I'd like to follow up. I really like this metaphoric notion of art as a process and democracy as a process. It seems to me then, to follow that comparison through, that the question is: if we're concentrating on the process, is it really a high culture/high art issue at stake or is it high art versus everyday art or something like that? When you say "art," do you mean something that is available to everyone, something that everyone can participate in?
- BI: I think that the terms that we use are inadequate in talking about the subject. I've been in so many meetings as Chairman—and this is also true of the Country Music Foundation—when you would use the terms "culture," "art," "high art," "elite art," "quality," "excellence," all of those terms, if you had a balloon above each person's head with a definition, you could have a meeting in which people were talking to one another, and each balloon would have a different definition in it. So, around art issues, you're frequently talking and not communicating. I think from the Endowment's perspective, we are concerned with nurturing the best in artistic expression. Sometimes we're involved in laying the groundwork so the best can occur. A lot of our engagement in arts education and in building community-based arts organizations would be put in that category, of putting artistic values [and] the skills in place, or

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nurturing the structures that would allow excellence to flourish. Basically, what we would do if I had the ability to just wish the Endowment to my ideal role, would be to line up all of the different culture traditions—including the great pop culture traditions in the society—and find a way for the federal arts agency to engage the best of each of them, or to help each produce the best in their work. In some cases that would involve giving money to certain kinds of activities, in other cases it might mean just bringing people together to talk about issues, or in some cases, it might mean honoring something that's the best, not with dollars, but just with recognition. But when I think of art as being broad, diverse, and deep, I think of it more in a cultural way than a sense of art being simply an everyday activity. The folk arts, in particular, are, in many ways, everyday activities, [and] in some cases, very practical activities, such as making a basket, sewing a quilt, or weaving a blanket. I think in most areas of art we find ourselves recognizing things in which the artist has made some kind of decision to define themselves artistically, to *separate* themselves somewhat from their society. And I think there is a danger that in expressing a commitment to a breadth of artistic experience in this country, my commitment would be interpreted as supporting amateur or quartet singing in church basements, or things that really are off the radar screen in terms of what the federal arts agency should be dealing with. So, because of my training in folklore I tend to look at a model that might not stand up under close scrutiny, but one in which you have, in this society, hundreds of cultural traditions standing proudly side by side, and our task as the Endowment is to engage the best of the expressive lives of each of these cultural traditions. I think that's something that we can do, and while there are certain areas that we don't connect with at all, I think with our folk arts program, we have actually tried to engage the diversity and the complexity of the society.

MB: You spoke a little bit about the terms for art and the inadequacy of these terms, and then about the selection process of whom the NEA should represent and how are those decisions made. Using the term “creativity” or the notion of creativity, which every person is going to have a different idea of, how does that term get used politically? How do you and the National Endowment for the Arts try to conceptualize it?

- BI: I can speak about the way I would like to use it. I think that if we can establish a value of creativity as a societal good, this is something that will help society function effectively and help us be successful as a society. Then I think the natural next step is to find those experiences that nurture and expand creativity, and to me that involves exposing citizens, especially but not exclusively young citizens, to artistic activity that they will interpret and try to understand; engaging them in the experience of performance, drawing, painting, music and so on; engaging them in actually creating. And through that process they will become more creative people carrying that value into a wide range of activities, into the workplace, into childrearing, into community life. By creating experiences that nurture the imagination and creativity, we develop better citizens and a stronger society. And to me that's the linkage that makes a commitment to creativity ultimately a political argument. And I think, in a selfish way, it helps this agency. I think that such a commitment can make a society stronger and can move us toward first accepting and then playing to our strengths, rather than, in some ways, running against them. Our cultural diversity is probably positioned as a problem eighty percent of the time, and I think that if we start to see the way in which diversity has necessitated creativity and has itself enhanced creativity, then we can find a way to look at diversity as maybe our greatest asset as opposed to something that we always have to struggle with. Because I believe in the value of creativity it's easy for me to make the kind of reductive political arguments that actually would advance the agenda of this agency.
- SO: I want to follow up on something. When you had just become Chair, I kept an eye on the news to see how they would cover it, and one night at two or three in the morning, one of the national television stations had a piece on you. And I recall the statement that they made was something like "because he's a *folklorist* he's going to bring a whole new energy in relation to [folk art]." Again it was a high culture argument: "rather than high culture he's going to bring energy in [for the folk]." And the way that the clip framed it, it was that kind of highly romanticized notion of who the folk were. They were not all of us. There was a group of folk "out there," [and] you would be their vanguard. Then within a week's time there was a piece by George Will that came out that used the same basic

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terminology, “*because* he’s a folklorist he’s going to ruin everything...” [Ivey chimes in: “ruin everything”—laughter]

BI: I think that this is part of the debate embedded in the language problem. If you say “art,” it often means “Art” with a capital “A,” and it means the great classical traditions of Western Europe. And for many people, in a conversation about art, that’s where the conversation begins and ends. And of course for me, that isn’t what art is all about. I think one of the challenges for me—and I’m having some success with this—is to convince those who care passionately about opera and symphony orchestras and the fine art museums, that by engaging the complexity of the society more aggressively we’re ultimately going to benefit everyone. That part of the art spectrum has great value, and possesses unique characteristics that I think need to be preserved, enhanced, and carried forward. But it will benefit the most if we begin with this broad view in which all citizens can see an engagement with the work of a federal agency.

But the history of the agency has been one of an entity that grew out of a concern for the conditions surrounding the institutions of fine art, and since that time, it has been evolving—or some would say devolving—toward an agency that does look more aggressively at the full spectrum of artistic activity. There are still areas that we don’t engage. We haven’t found a way to engage the popular culture very effectively. We’ve done a good job dealing with jazz as a kind of highly-evolved, uniquely American art form that has integrated many different elements and is both folk in nature and highly sophisticated at the same time. But we haven’t been able to find equivalent niches for country music or polka bands, for example, so I think there’s a lot to be done. But I think the parties involved right now are certainly more open than they have been in the past to some kind of a new vision. So, I’ve tried to provide that vision and be aggressive about my sense of the importance of quality popular culture, the best of folk expression, and at the same time, acknowledge the importance of these great, highly evolved sophisticated artistic traditions.

SO: Let me ask you, then—since these reports made me think, “Boy, this guy just can’t get a break. He’s either romanticized or vilified”—how has the support been with the left and with the right?

BI: Well, it's an agency that serves such a wide spectrum politically that it's almost impossible to land in a place that satisfies the full spectrum. I think we have a very conservative political group that views the agency as a symbol of excess in federal engagement, and particularly anything we do in the visual arts is highly scrutinized. And from time to time, small things can become very useful for that group when they want to raise money from the most conservative parts of their constituency. So these politicians and commentators on one end, and I'll use my right hand [laughter]. And then, on the other end, we have artists and arts organizations, some of whom feel that anything other than an absolute, down the line, First Amendment definition of what artists can do in relation to what this agency should fund is an unacceptable compromise. To these observers, those compromises reveal the inadequacy and the lack of capacity in the federal engagement to really address the authentic needs of real creative artists.

And either end of that spectrum is, when pressed, willing to see the agency go away in order to make their particular point, so I think that from time to time, each has held inordinate sway over decision making. And what I'm hoping is that we're entering a [new] era, and that I can provide a certain kind of vision internally so that those positions remain arguments that get made. [I hope] that we find a nice big middle that we can move through, where we work with most of the people most of the time and can serve a broad spectrum of artistic activity, and can also engage the arts in some very experimental and aggressive activity, but still understand that as a federal agency, we have limits. [We'll see how that goes.]

SO: Great.

BI: Thinking about cultural policy is a great starting point, and is a much under-appreciated one too. To me one of the challenges to folklore over the next decade is for the field to reassert its centrality.

SO: On a basic level is it a question of this tension of the differences between academic and public folklore? Matt, you and I were talking about this on the ride here. It seems like a mistaken dichotomy.

BI: Yes, and I think this kind of dichotomy probably is there to a certain extent in other academic disciplines, but I don't know of one besides

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folklore that is so clearly divided, because you have equal numbers of practitioners in both realms, and when they get together neither is truly marginalized. I don't know of another [discipline] in which that tension between doing and studying is so exaggerated. It was a hotter debate back in the seventies. I remember coming to a meeting here in Washington, D.C., in which the applied folklore concept was debated, and Richard Dorson was right there...

SO: Yes, we know.

MB: There are numerous accounts of that.

BI: It was really quite a deal. And since then, I think both sides have tempered the argument, but I think the tension is still there. I personally think, both from an academic perspective and from an activist perspective, that folklore should be more central to policy making than it is. I think that story of why folklore *isn't* central is a great dissertation—maybe just a book, not a dissertation: writing about how a field that in 1965 “owned” ethnicity in this country...it was the only discipline addressing it—found itself thirty years later very much on the margins of policy conversations about ethnicity and community. There's got to be a story there. And I do think that Dorson—who was a mentor of mine, who I was very, very fond of, who was truly a great man of the field, and who in many ways wanted to engage policy—he came to Washington, he lobbied to the...

SO: The NDEA [National Defense Education Act]?

BI: [Yeah, those NDEA things.] He really wanted folklore to be part of public policy, but then when it really started to happen—maybe because it happened on a community level rather than on a national policy level—it created terrific discomfort for him. And it was tied up in other debates that he had with Botkin and Lomax, but that's only a piece of the story.

But I have found, as someone that gets involved in talking about culture policy and sometimes even making it, that folklore training is just the best. Because you bring a certain vision into any room where multiple culture agendas exist that's just a very useful perspective in accommodating those agendas and understanding what the dynamics are. I don't know of another field that gets that, and I

would think there are so many fields out there that should have folklore minors, at least in order to really understand what they're doing.

But I had a very interesting and sort of dismaying experience about three years ago at a conference that was put together by the American Assembly, which is a kind of a think tank run by Columbia University. I went to a weekend-long conference called, "Art and the Public Purpose." On one panel, there was a young woman who was doing community studies in Los Angeles, and she presented what was a very well done paper, but it was a paper of discovery. In other words, she had gone into an urban center and found that there were well integrated communities based on the ethnicity, [and] the cultural traditions of these different populations in the cities, and that you could work with them [laughter]. The delightful thing was that she was reaffirming things I knew from my folklore training; the thing that was dismaying was that she wasn't a folklorist and that she didn't know about the existence of an entire discipline that had reached the same insight a century ago, and [that] has been working through a whole range of issues that arose from that basic insight. I almost said something about it during the session, but in a way there was nothing to be said, because her paper was good. It was not that she was deficient, it was just that I knew hundreds of folklorists who were way beyond her.

It's an interesting problem, but I think Bill Ferris and I are [in agreement]. As much as we care about our agencies, I certainly feel that part of my role is to keep folklore out there in front of everyone that deals with me [in an uncompromising fashion]. I mean, I'm not going to say I'm a folklorist/anthropologist. I'm just a folklorist. And then to the extent that Bill and I are successful, maybe we can heighten the profile of the field a little bit. I don't think we can revolutionize things, but at least [we can] get folklore in a prominent position on the table. One encounters so many situations in Washington where from a policy point of view, a folklore perspective would be very useful. I think of someone like Henry Glassie, who I think is one of the most sophisticated thinkers about culture in the world probably, that if you could drop him, or a clone, into all kinds of government meetings, you'd have much better outcome.

So, I think there's a lot of potential there, but folklorists have to do something that's very tough for them, which is to make certain compromises in relation to unstated values that they bring to their work. I've always had this feeling that folklorists are the most sophisticated observers of culture I know and the least sophisticated

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observers of the dynamics of their field and what the hidden agendas are that motivate them in many ways. I think because folklorists tend to study communities and also care passionately about the communities at the same time, it's made it tough. And I think because folklorists tend to be people, who, on a personal level, are profoundly uncomfortable with modernity, that those two notions together—extraordinary care for the communities they study and discomfort with the trappings of modernity—that in many cases have attracted folklorists to their field, make it very tough to make the compromises necessary to play with big business, big publishing, big entertainment industry, big government. Compromises with big agendas are tough, so I think there's a tendency for folklorists to maybe hold back.

But, folklore is facing some challenges, and the NEA has played a role in the current situation within the field. Since the early 1970s, the Endowment has invested more than thirty million dollars in folklore projects, and we currently fund three to four million dollars of folklore work each year. Now, eighty to ninety percent of the NEA's funds go to public programming, rather than research, so we've been a big factor in building up the public sector of folklore. In fact, it was Bess Hawes, as head of our folk arts program, who used NEA funding very strategically to create a network of state folklorists. So, the NEA must accept some responsibility for the current split in folklore between public folklorists and the academy.

But the potential for folklore to play a leadership role in cultural work, on and off campus, is very great. And public sector work will possess coherence and credibility only if the academic discipline is strong. So it seems like this might be a good time for the field to engage in some real soul searching, with an eye toward strengthening folklore in relation to other cultural disciplines. Perhaps we need to reassert the centrality of folklore work, using the kinds of arguments put forward by Dell Hymes twenty-five years ago.

MB: In your own experience, you have trained as a folklorist but you also engage in popular culture and a number of these other things that you've listed here. How have you done that?

BI: Well, it was sort of *done* to me in a sense, because I became an ABD at Indiana in the spring of 1971 and was looking for a teaching job in a year when there really weren't any. A public folklore career didn't really exist [at the time], and I heard through word of mouth about a job running a library at the Country Music Hall of Fame. I

wrote about it and was hired, and was thereby kind of pulled sideways out of the academic world into popular culture. I had to take what I had learned as a folklorist and apply it in that setting, and also learn an entirely new set of skills in terms of managing an organization, balancing budgets, and all of those things. In terms of where the Country Music Foundation should go as an organization, I think folklore provided an excellent intellectual rudder and, for me, remains the best perspective, the best way of looking at popular culture, particularly those aspects of popular culture that are grounded in traditional life. I think folklorists are very good on pop culture as well as traditional art and performance.

After I [had been] pulled sideways, Dick Dorson was very skeptical about it, as were others, but he ultimately realized it had been a good thing. But it was just a question of being pulled into an environment and trying to make the best of it and then realizing gradually that the academic training that I had received was probably more relevant than most academic training is to most people who are out running organizations. So I think there is tremendous potential for folklore as a discipline to be central to anybody who is going to do business or government in any type of culturally-charged environment. That is a pretty broad sector; that includes almost everybody. And I think the challenge for folklorists is to turn around and re-engage the kinds of structures and individuals who are seen as being hostile to those people and environments that folklorists care about. Some folklorists have engaged those structures on a personal level and done quite well—there are some interesting individual examples of that—but there can be a lot more. So it would be a very interesting process over the next decade for the Society [AFS] to take on the goal of saying, “We’re going to place folklore at the center of the spectrum as an essential humanities discipline.” Just throw that out and say, “how do we do it?” You know: What do we do? What happens at the university? What happens in the public sector? How do we engage the private sector? What do we do with government? And just see what things can be done. That process of engagement would be very interesting.

MB: A good note to end on.

SO: A great note to end on. Thank you so much. This was very generous.

BI: It was a pleasure.