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THE ART of EVERYDAY LIFE – SINCE 1985

January 29, 2024

Dear Legislators,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in conjunction with the Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2023 Executive Budget Proposal on the topics of Economic Development and the Arts. I am writing to request robust support for the New York State Council on the Arts, and, in particular, for its mission to support the cultural heritage of New York State.

My name is Steve Zeitlin, and I am the Founding Director of the non-profit City Lore on New York's Lower East Side. Established in 1985, City Lore ([citylore.org](http://citylore.org)) is New York City's center for urban folk culture. Our mission is to foster New York City—and America's—living cultural heritage through education and public programs in service of cultural equity and social justice. City Lore encompasses a gallery space on New York's Lower East Side, performances, lectures, the People Hall of Fame Awards, a POEMobile that projects poems onto walls and buildings, and extensive education programs in all five boroughs. In 2021, we initiated the Creative Traditions Network of folk and community-based artists. We meaningfully and collaboratively document, present, and advocate for NYC's grassroots cultures to ensure their living legacy in stories and histories, places and traditions. New York City is one of the nation's richest and most diverse centers of folk culture. By embracing different aesthetics for the creation of art, we seek to democratize the arts, and foster a wider range of communities, artists, and forms of artistic expression. We are an official Smithsonian Affiliate (one of six in NYC), and a full copy of our archives is being acquired by the Library of Congress. We have an annual budget of over \$3,000,000 and bring significant federal and private dollars to New York State. Examples of our activities include:

- A rich education program that offers in-school and after-school, culturally-based residencies which reach over 10,000 public school students each year.
- Place Matters, a program whose mission is to advocate for the protection of New York City's historically and culturally significant community places.
- An exhibit curated by City Lore's Cultural Ambassador Sandra Bell, the *J'Ouvert Immersive Experience* as part of her Ambassadorship in 2023. For nearly two centuries, J'Ouvert "break of day" processions have marked the opening of Carnival in Trinidad. Held in the predawn hours of Carnival Monday, J'Ouvert evolved from 19<sup>th</sup> century Canboulay festival—the nighttime celebrations where the formerly enslaved gathered to masquerade, sing, and dance in commemoration of their emancipation — and from the 1883 Canboulay riots when revelers fought the British who sought to shut down the celebrations. The exhibition created by Sandra about the festivities is remarkable in its own right, in addition to the fact that it was hosted at Lefferts Historic House in Prospect Park, a building constructed by slaves. The venue's first exhibit after their renovation was

this City Lore-curated J'ouvert exhibition which was extended for an additional two months, and attracted over 5,000 visitors.

- An exhibit curated by Cultural Ambassador Camila Bryce LaPorte, *The Calling: The Transformative Power of African American Doll and Puppet Making* in the City Lore Gallery. The exhibit includes dolls and puppets created by a group of 26 nationally acclaimed multi-media artists from the African Diaspora, who came of age in communities in the United States during the height of the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements.
- A wide range of community-centered exhibitions and performances.

Over the 40+ years of the NYSCA Folk Arts Program, the folk arts granting program has provided important support for New York's folk arts and culture through initiatives and funding that would be difficult for folk and traditional artists to obtain through western fine arts categories for the arts. The NYSCA folk arts program serves communities of color, indigenous communities, newcomer communities, the State's increasingly diverse suburban areas and those who are located within rural upstate towns and villages. Over these years, NYSCA has created a network of folk arts centers across New York State which serve as a national model.

Over the past few years, NYSCA has shifted its guidelines to make it easier for individual artists to receive support. All of us in the folk arts field welcome this change, and the folk arts centers across the state have worked with dozens of folk, traditional, and community-based artists on successful individual artist applications. Applications generated by folk arts professionals in both Regional and County Folk Arts Programs and independent folk arts organizations dramatically increased applications to NYSCA. From 2022 to 2023 Individual Artist Grants in Folk & Traditional Arts increased from 5.5% to 9.4%. In 2023, 65% of Individual Artist Grants in Folk and Traditional Arts came from Regional and County Programs and independent folk arts organizations.

### **Maintaining NYSCA's Commitment to New York State's Cultural Heritage**

Sadly, however, NYSCA's support for the Folk Arts-based organizations, Regional and County-wide Folk Arts programs and services for artists and grass roots communities, across the state has been seriously undermined over the past few years, marking a step back from one of NYSCA's key missions, fostering the cultural heritage of New York State. The affected programs are all economic drivers statewide. The General Operating Support cap, and the limitation for each organization to submit only one proposal has had a deleterious impact on the organizational infrastructure or the folk arts field including ours. City Lore funding for organizational and support for ongoing projects is far less than half of what it received in FY 21, while NYSCA's local assistance budget has more than doubled.

The vital funding category for Regional and County Folk Arts Programs across the state has been eliminated (R&C Programs), which was supported through NYSCA partnership funding. Funding for Folk Arts applications from the Partnership Program declined from \$561,656 to \$254,000, with NYSCA denying permissions to apply for all regional folk arts programs, as well as the key statewide online portal for community-based traditional arts (NYS Living Traditions).

We believe NYSCA has been and should continue to be a model for the nation in terms of arts funding. We fully encourage the legislature to pass a robust budget for NYSCA as it works to ensure that the funds reach the state's underserved and indigenous communities and its folk and community-based artists.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steve Zeitlin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small dot at the end.

Steve Zeitlin  
Founding Director