

THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

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For immediate release

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NEW JERSEY FOLK FESTIVAL CELEBRATES 35TH ANNIVERSARY

Fans of all ages can enjoy traditional folk dancing, music, storytelling, and much more at the 35th annual New Jersey Folk Festival on Saturday, April 25, 2009, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., rain or shine. Admission is free for this all-day family event held on the lawn of the Eagleton Institute, George Street and Ryders Lane, on the Douglass Campus of Rutgers, the State University, in New Brunswick.

The New Jersey Folk Festival will be celebrating its 35th Anniversary this year showcasing various heritages and traditions through an array of music, art, food, and crafts demonstrations, while also honoring “The Mother of Folk Music” Jean Ritchie with the *Lifetime Achievement Award* at the festival. Jean Ritchie’s contributions to American folk music have earned her this honor. She is a traditional musician by virtue of her life and works, but she is also a commercial performer, author, recording artist, composer, and folk music collector.

Ritchie was born in 1922 in Viper, Kentucky, into a family that considered music extremely important. Her father encouraged all his children to make music and the whole family sang and played together. In addition to singing as a means of entertainment, they had songs to accompany nearly all of their activities, from sweeping to churning to working in the fields. For the most part, these songs were learned orally and sung without accompaniment. He taught her to play the mountain (or plucked) dulcimer when she was five or six years old. One of the most interesting aspects of Ritchie’s career is her own songwriting. Central to her approach is a lesson learned early from her Uncle Jason; whose practice of altering tunes from one verse to another in a song and lyrics from one performance to the next, taught her to accept improvisation and variation as natural elements of traditional music.

Also performing is Atzilut is a ten-member high energy Middle Eastern ensemble that features Arab and Jewish musicians in concert together to make a powerful statement for peace through shared music. This project exemplifies the potential for artistic collaboration and shared creativity that emerges when musicians representing two traditions with common roots overcome conflict to celebrate hope and trust through music. The resulting musical collaboration is infectious, joyous, deep, sweet and passionate. The performance becomes an inspiring statement of triumph of shared creativity over despair.

Adding to the eclectic mix of this years festival performers is Bajaly Suso, from The Gambia, a kora

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player and singer of the Griot caste, hereditary storytellers, musicians, artists and historians of the West African Mandinka empire. He has inherited the tradition of the kora from his father, who in turn learned from his father, from the first known kora player, Moussa Suso, his ancestor. He sings ancient songs relaying the history of Mandinka West Africa as well as original songs. Both are based on traditional themes such as stories of ancient battles or historical figures, and about contemporary life, including the events of today, making every performance unique.

The Dukes of Destiny, a returning festival performer, have attracted a large following – particularly in the Philadelphia area, over the past 25 years. Combining their own variations on standard blues tunes with powerful original songs, the Dukes’ style is ever-changing. Their solid musicianship and love of the music industry inspires fans and critics alike.

Also coming to this year's festival is the Violanta Street Organ, hosted by Johanna Vanderheysen, which was originally constructed by the Limonaire Brothers in Paris, France. The organ was deconstructed and hidden in pieces from the Nazis during World War II and then reconstructed in Holland after the war ended. This intricate mechanical organ was originally designed to play in a carousel, but was then converted to a street organ. The interior is visible exposing all of the inner workings of the organ. The Violanta Street Organ plays by inserting program books into a player that directs special pipes to play at a specific time. These special pipes are constructed to assemble the sounds of flutes, drums, violins and even cymbals.

Several New Jersey Folk Festival favorites will be returning this year, including Spook Handy, About.com’s “2006 Best Folk Artist You’ve Never Heard Of”. Spook will bring along his genuine blend of personal, spiritual, and political music, showing others why folk legend and Spook Handy fan Pete Seeger says, “Spook Handy really understands how to write a good song that says something important.” Atlantic City native and Smithsonian Folkways recording artist Jim Albertson returns to the festival as an artist whose many musical talents are matched only by his captivating storytelling ability.

Organized jam sessions – in the form of bluegrass, old-timey, and traditional Irish seisuns – will be held on the festival’s Shore Stage, which will then transform into the Singer-Songwriter Showcase. There, each of the eight contest winners chosen from a pool of over 100 qualified applicants will be given a chance to perform their original songs in 20-minute sets.

In addition to the four stages of music, dance, workshops, and both American and ethnic food vendors, the festival offers a diverse craft market of approximately 75 booths, craft demonstrators and a folk marketplace where performer CDs and information on area folk organizations are available. For children, there is a designated activities area with games, a clown, and free crafts to make and take. The New Jersey Folk Festival is the oldest and largest continuously-held festival of its kind in the state. Wheelchair accessible, it offers selected programs with ASL interpretation; large-print program books and audio assists are also available.

The New Jersey Folk Festival is proud to be a key component of Rutgers Day, a day of learning, exploration, and fun at New Jersey’s State University. The Folk Festival is the main attraction of Rutgers Day on

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the Douglass Campus, but visitors are encouraged to check out the many workshops and live performances at the other Rutgers campuses throughout the day—all designed to demonstrate the impact and value of our world-class university. Admission, parking, and on-campus bus shuttles are all free. For further details, including stage schedules and directions, visit the web at <http://njfolkfest.rutgers.edu> or call the festival office at (732)-932-5775 or Rutgers Campus Info Services at (732)-445-INFO.

The 2009 New Jersey Folk Festival is presented by Rutgers University and Douglass Residential College. It is sponsored in part by the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission. Additional sponsorship is provided by The Office of the Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs of Rutgers, Picture-It Awards, Inc., the Middlesex County Improvement Authority, and the City of New Brunswick Department of Parks. The festival is produced by the Department of American Studies at Rutgers, The State University, under the technical direction of Angus K. Gillespie and Erin Clarke.