Southern Arts Federation

Introduction: Robert Baird, Baird Artists Management
Keynote Address: Bill Bragin

ROBERT: Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to take another moment of your time to introduce today's speaker. Thank you so much for your attention. Bill Bragin is director of public programming in Lincoln Center and our keynote speaker for today's luncheon. He oversees the summer outdoor festivals Midsummer Night Swing and Lincoln Center Out of Doors, and these keep him extremely busy. Previously, Bill was director of Joe's Pub at The Public Theater from 2001 to 2007 where he presented over 3,000 concerts. Bill has served as the music advisor to the TED conferences, of which I have been a member since 2006. In 1999, he founded Acidophilus: Live & Active Cultures, a music and performing arts consulting service devoted to exposing and developing outlets for cutting edge global culture. Bill also DJ's internationally, spinning world electronic music under the moniker Acidophilus and I think we're going to find that Live & Active Cultures are the theme of his talk today. So, Bill, welcome to PAE luncheon and thank you very much.

BILL: Thank you, Robert, and I want to thank everybody at the Performing Arts Exchange—Gerri Combs, Lisa Mount, and Sage Crump — for inviting me to be here. I am also glad that they gave me a transparent podium so that you can see my knees knocking together when doing this. As I started preparing this talk, I was reading a recent biography of Pete Seeger entitled *The Protest Singer*. One discovery from reading the book was how many of Pete's idea are about the importance of the socio-political function of music. The importance of participation and of active collective music-making, actually came from his father, the pioneer and musicologist, Charles Seeger. In the book, the appendix includes a powerful ten-point manifesto by Charles Seeger entitled "The Purposes of Music." Seeger makes a number of interesting points but there were a few that

struck me as particularly relevant here. Music, like any art, is not an end unto itself but rather, a means for achieving larger ends. The main question then should not be "Is it good music?" but "What is music good for?" He goes on to speak about how we ensuring art's opportunity to serve a well-rounded function in the community. Those ideas really resonated with me as I thought about what bound together so much of my own work, and that is what I want to talk about here today.

In *Passing Strange*, the Tony Award-Winning Broadway show by Stew, there was a point in the play when the narrator has a revelation. He says, "It is funny when you wake up one morning and realize that your entire life was based on the decision of a teenager, a stoned teenager". A number of years ago, my mom was selling her house. While cleaning up for the move, I came across a college admissions essay that I had written about how much I liked to proselytize my friends. I was always the guy that forced his friends to listen to one record then another and then another after that. And as I was reading this message from my 17-year-old self, I realized that basically I had been able to turn that inclination into my life's work. In one way or another, I have found ways to continue this pattern of proselytizing, albeit on larger platforms. I've done this both through my work as an arts presenter and as DJ Acidophilus. Or as my Twitter bio says: "imposing my artistic taste on friends and strangers since 1980."

In my freshman year at Haverford College, a small liberal arts Quaker School outside of Philadelphia, I joined the campus radio station and worked on the concert series, which is where I gained my real vocational training. Eventually, I ran the alternative concert series, where I presented everything from free jazz to electronica, indie rock to reggae and African music. All these concerts were free of charge to the students, and when I graduated, I knew that I wanted to be in the

music business. Just out of school, I went to work for George Wynn's festival productions. I worked on a number of corporate-sponsored jazz festivals, which I loved but also found somewhat limiting in terms of the scope. I spent a lot of my free time midsummer at Central Park SummerStage. I was blown away by the diversity of this free festival, the creative juxtaposition of artists from different cultures and different disciplines that was created as people from diverse backgrounds— ethnically, socioeconomically, generationally—all came together for a shared artistic experience. So, when the job opportunity there came up, I jumped at it.

That year, I also attended my first arts conference. Instead of going to a music business concept confab, as poster likes to call them, I started hearing the term "arts presenter" bandied about. I heard discussions about the values and the mission of the arts presenting community, ideas that resonated with my Quaker-influenced education. After five years of filling in music business in the occupation box on my tax return, I realized that I no longer wanted to be in the music business, that I was an arts presenter. What exactly does an arts presenter do? How is it different from being in the music or the dance or the theater business? And if we are in a mission to find fields, what exactly is that mission and who are we going to serve? Are we here to serve our institutions, the audiences, the artists, the field as a whole, the larger community?

On September 4, 2001, I started work as director of Joe's Pub, the cabaret's face of The Public Theater in New York City. One week into my new job, came the attacks of 9/11. Like so many people, I started questioning what it was I was doing with my life. In the midst of so much violence, was I wasting my time putting on shows, when there was so much need for critical service, for housing, for hunger relief, grief counseling, when you literally could smell the stench of death in the air wafting up from downtown. When drum beats of war were

starting to beat more loudly, when the collective mourning was starting to transform from patriotism into jinglelism, and when growing xenophobia and isolationism were on the rise, what was I doing booking a night club? During this period of questioning, my good friend Michael Orlo from the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, passed along a quote from Leonard Bernstein which has been part of my email signature ever since. It says “This will be our reply to violence: To make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before.”

While I agree with the heightened need to create beauty in the midst of a troubled world, I also wanted to find a way to somehow address the state of the world in a more direct way. I have been very involved in trying to increase the presence of world music since working at SummerStage, which includes co-founding World Music Presenters Network and the North American World Music Coalition. Following 9/11, and accelerating with the beginning of the US war with Iraq in March 2003, there was an increasing sense that the work many of my colleagues and I had been doing — trying to create greater international links through our presenting work — was at risk. US borders were closing, and the Visa policy’s expense was making it harder to sustain world music tours. The opinion which had been so sympathetic after the attacks was starting to turn against the US after our entry into the war. It was in this context that Isabel Soffer of World Music Institute in New York, Maure Aronson of the World Music/CRASHarts in Cambridge, Massachusetts and I decided to develop Global Fest, which debuted in January of 2004. We had a number of goals for the festival: to move world music to the center of the conversation within the presenting field and to present the broadest possible definition of world music, from traditional to contemporary manifestations as well as American regional roots music. We wanted to expand the market for world music touring in the US and help shore up often precarious tours by encouraging more tour partners in more places, from major markets to

small communities. We aimed to raise awareness of US-based world music artists to maintain a pipeline for world music, even as borders were closing and the expense in the Visa hurdles were becoming too high for many people. And lastly, we wanted to combat growing xenophobia by working to represent international perspectives during this time of conflict. Our strategy was to create the Global Fest, a showcase festival during the APAP conference which offered first-class, full production showcases. Global Fest features overlapping acts of 12 different artists on three stages for one low price. It allows people to see a large number of artists in a short period of time, and to really make their own way throughout the event. We want the event to be open to both professionals and to the general public so that presenters could experience the artist in a real world situation, helping people to move beyond their personal taste and see how diverse audiences respond. We also want to take advantage of the influx of artists that were coming in for the APAP conference and make them accessible to the New York community at large. To do all of these on a volunteer basis, none of the producers of Global Fest earn a dime from producing the event. Artists raise their own funds for travel, and all of the money that was made from the box office is reinvested in the production of the event, where we make sure that we are providing the kind of first-class production in publicity and marketing.

Now as we plan for the seventh edition, with Shanta Thake of Joe's Pub now as a partner replacing Maure Aronson, we've presented over 75 artists to nearly 7500 audience members. It has become one of the highlights of the annual world music season in New York and one of the most influential world music events in the United States. We've helped to stimulate interest in a number of artists, many of whom has gone on to touring in some of your venues, people like Marisa and Noche Flamenca. We've helped to expose lesser known artists and traditions from Iran, Hungary, Catalonia, Marse, Cambodia, and the Garifuna people of Belize. We have introduced numerous artists who have made their New York or

US debuts. We have helped unrepresented artists to gain US representation and to gain record deals. In general, we've raised the awareness for world music among mainstream media, especially helping emerging artists to develop meaningful English language press kits and, starting last year with a new partnership with WNYC and NPR, to also gain a national radio presence. We've inspired similar events, including world music showcases in the other parts of the country. I mention all of these examples by way of pointing out that one single event can serve multiple constituencies: the artists, the audiences, and the field in general.

Since college I've worked regularly with the black rock coalition, which is an organization that we founded to support African American artists who are working in genres and styles not easily classifiable. I kept hearing about a pop band from Los Angeles called the Negro Problem, led by a songwriter named Stew, but I just never quite connected with the music. At some point in 2002, a friend of mine sat me down and said, "I can't believe you don't know Stew, you've got to hear his music, and you're going to love him." Surely after that a number of different colleagues said to Stew, "You need to be playing in Joe's Pub in New York, that's going to be the home for you."

So, Stew sent me a couple of records. Simultaneously, he released one by The Negro Problem, which is his larger psychedelic project, and then another by his more intimate songwriter-driven project, which he just calls Stew. I remember sitting down on the subway, reading the newspaper, listening to my walkman, and being compelled to put down my newspaper to actually listen to the lyrics. With all the world music that I've listened to, I realized that most of the music that I loved the most in the world was in a language that I did not understand. So, to have somebody who, through their song writing and their storytelling, could force me to sit down and listen to the lyrics, I knew was something special. I invited him to come to Joe's Pub. His word play is incredible, he's got a sardonic sense

of humor; he tells these incredible compelling poetic narratives and has their insights of social commentary, quite like a Randy Newman or Elvis Costello.

So, we started booking him regularly, and not only was his songwriting brilliant, but so was his stage performance. He interspersed his performances with great improvisational spiels that were as much performance pieces as the songs themselves. There was a natural theatrically to what he did, and I was inspired to do more with him. We had been looking for ways to connect what happened in Joe's Pub with what happened in the rest of the public theater, with its history of presenting groundbreaking musicals from the original off Broadway production of *Hair* to *A Chorus Line* to Tony Kushner's *Caroline or Change*.

So, I recommended Stew to someone. While he might not have had a past in musical theater, (he was mostly a film guy who had seen less than a half dozen plays in his life) he could potentially have a future in theater. He was a critics' darling, and he won Entertainment Weekly's critics poll for album of the year two years in a row, but he was still essentially unknown. He was still somebody who would couch surf when he came to town on tour.

The Public Theater commissioned Stew and his collaborator, Heidi Rodewald, to begin working on a theater piece, and we connected him with Director Annie Dorison from Initial Workshop. It was a relatively small amount of money so there were no major expectations. The idea was to see what would happen if we took three smart inventive artists and put them in a room together to experiment. They created a great first draft of what we thought would be a more formalized solo rock cabaret show which was then called Stew's Travelogue of Demonically Energized Souls. It was strong enough that we decided to submit it to Sundance Institute for their theater lab. They got accepted and while at the workshop in 2004, they were given a cast to play with. So, they started to sign different parts to

various actors and when they came back from Sundance they had taken what had started as an elaborate solo show and turned it into an ensemble theater piece and a crowd pleaser at that.

After Sundance, both the public and Berkeley Rep started seeing real promise and real potential for the project, which was now dubbed *Passing Strange* and it entered a more formal development process, which included additional workshops that we often coupled with concerts in Joe's Pub, so that Stew could try out songs from the show secretly in front of an audience to get some feedback. They returned for a second year at Sundance and then did more development at Stanford University.

Passing Strange was going to be a true combination of ensemble theater piece and rock show. With the band on stage, and Stew on stage as a narrator, the logic of a rock show became equally as important as the logic of the theater piece. The show, which Stew calls *Autobiographical Fiction*, tells the story of a kid growing up on Los Angeles, feeling oppressed by the conservatism of the black middle class, who discovers rock and roll, psychedelic drugs, and foreign films, and decides that he's going to become an artist in Europe like James Walder and Josephine Baker. So he goes off to Amsterdam and later Berlin, and he discovers a freedom that he has never known through sex, through drugs, through rock and roll, thorough political action, and he explores what it means to be an artist. He discovers he has to make hard choices between his art work and between the one's he loves. He begins playing with ideas about the authenticity of race and the mutability of blackness, and all of this was told through the new form that flowed back and forth from a rock show to an ensemble theater piece and back again. It had an all-black cast who played Dutch and German characters, thus raising even more provocative questions about race and identity. The music ranged from punk rock to folk music, from gospel to German performance art to heartbreaking

ballads. The show that began as an experiment ended up being a hit both at Berkeley Rep and at The Public Theater and earned Stew comparisons to people like Stephen Sondheim and Tony Kushner. After winning numerous awards, *Passing Strange* ended up transferring to Broadway and it earned seven nominations from Tony's including winning the Best Book Tony.

Then Spike Lee, who had become a fan of the show during the Public's run, came aboard to film the stage show. Spike's film premiered at Sundance and later the Tribeca Film Festival, before opening theatrically to unanimous praise this summer in New York City. PBS also picked the film up, and will broadcast it early next year. Like the stage show, the film further blurred the boundaries and definitions of form, flipping back and forth between feeling like a concert film, a documentary, and a narrative feature.

There is a line in the show were the narrator says, "Sometimes the melody is going one way but the song has a different idea." This was certainly the case with *Passing Strange*. None of these developments could have ever been expected. It began as an experiment by a first time playwright and an underground black rocker, collaborating with an experimental director and featuring a cast of unknowns. It dealt with complex issues of race and identity, the role of an artist, a mother's love for her son, and it pushed the traditional boundaries of form and discipline. But it touched people in powerful ways, and it busted open so many different kinds of doors, both in terms of whose stories were told and the forms of telling them. It advanced the careers of both the creators and the cast to new heights. Already, we are hearing stories of *Passing Strange* being added to university course work in race studies and in theater. So, we know its impact will continue to reverberate for new generations of artists and audiences. All of this happened, I think, because the public was willing to take a chance on a great artist, and to let good art finds its own way.

One final example, in August 2005 hurricane Katrina hit and caused unspeakable damage throughout the Gulf Coast. Having spent a fair bit of time in New Orleans, working both on Jazz Fest and managing the startup of Allen Toussaint's NYNO record label in 1996, I felt a similar shock as I had in New York right after 9/11. Allen Toussaint, one of New Orleans's most important songwriters, producers, and arrangers, along with my old boss, was evacuated and they ended up in New York City. I spent a few days with them that Labor Day weekend, watching him watch his city on CNN under water. And like after 9/11 I had that recurring feeling of powerlessness, wondering what I could do in the face of this incredible tragedy.

During that time I had a conversation with Danny Milmick who I had worked with in my early days of festival productions and he said, "We put on concerts, let's put musicians to work." Allen was in town without much to do but to watch the devastation of his hometown so we invited him to perform a solo concert in Joe's Pub, which we turned into a fundraiser for the relief efforts in New Orleans. Our schedule was already full so we found a time that wasn't yet programmed, Sunday at noon, and created a New Orleans benefit brunch.

One thing to understand about Allen Toussaint, who was then in his late 60s, is that he had decided that when he was about 17 years old that he was not interested in being a touring musician. He was more comfortable working behind the scenes, producing hit records for people like Labelle and Dr. John, writing classic songs that became hits for everybody from Lee Dorsey to Glenn Campbell to the Pointer sisters to Divo. This first solo show was magical, it sold out quickly and raised a few thousand dollars for Katrina relief and it gave Allen a chance to show a musical side of himself he rarely reveals. We quickly added another benefit brunch a few weeks later, which also sold out and attracted the likes of Elvis

Costello who sat in and sang on a few songs. These two went off and then evolved into a monthly series of benefit which all sold out, attracting more press attention and more musicians in the audience.

The series of benefits was originally created as a way to help raise needed money and to feel slightly less powerless in my role as an arts presenter, but we were beginning to see an artist who had already helped to shape American popular culture for nearly 50 years discover this whole new side of his artistry. Shortly after that, Allen and Elvis started writing together. They got signed to Verve and recorded an album *The River in Reverse*, which eloquently spoke to the impact of Katrina, eventually earning a Grammy nomination. Allen and Elvis toured internationally allowing them to keep the focus on hurricane relief even as the media began to have the inevitable disaster fatigue. Allen Toussaint, who'd made a career based on not being a touring artist, was signed to a major booking agency and at nearly 70 years old created a whole new career for himself. Most recently he released an album on Nonesuch, in which he collaborated with some of the finest names in jazz. Again, none of this was planned. It grew out of the desire to help a great artist in a time of personal need and the desire to put my role as an arts presenter to good use during the time of national crisis. As a byproduct, it not only ended up raising thousands of dollars for hurricane relief, but it also led to renaissance of one of America's true musical masters.

Recently, I saw a talk by Sir Ken Robinson who has written and spoken wildly about diverse forms of creative intelligences. In his latest book *The Elements*, he describes the point in which natural talent meets personal passion. When people arrive at the element he says they feel most themselves and most inspired and achieve at their highest levels. During these difficult recessionary times, as we all go forward in our work in the performing arts community, we all feel an increasing pressure to be careful, to be conservative and to go with the tried and true. To choose the touring revival of a Broadway hit show from 30 years ago

rather than supporting the work of an important new theatrical voice. To bring back the same jazz icon who has been featured successfully in so many previous seasons rather than nurturing the musician who may become the next icon.

To make sure we are getting butts in seats, of course it is essential that we serve our institutions, that we follow sound business practices, and that we make sure we are looking after the interests of the organization that employs us. That said, I want to encourage you all to think about the mission which lies at the center of our work, the mission that inspired me to change my tax return status from music business to arts presenter. In my experience, you can best serve your institution if you look at it as only one of several masters, while also asking other questions: How can my work serve the artists that I collaborate with? How can it serve my audiences? To enlighten, to inspire, to provoke, to entertain, to challenge, to build community? How can it serve the field as a whole? To help it grow or to aid in the evolution of the art form? How can it engage in the world around us and serve the larger social good?

As we all continue on at the Performing Arts Exchange Conference, I encourage you to think about these questions and to be bold in your thinking. In your conversations with one another, move beyond asking how we can get through the different times we are facing, and talk instead about how to be creative, to take risks, to reinvent, and to be in your element. Follow the passion and remember what called you into this field in the first place. Thank you.

ROBERT: I think now is the time where there is some time for some dialogue. So, I want to open up the floor to questions, and we’ve got a microphone over there that I think is going to move around the room. So, if anybody has a question, I guess just raise your hand or jump up and they’ll get the microphone over to you.

SPEAKER 1: Hi! Can you tell us how your work at Lincoln Center is going to continue the thread that you illuminated this afternoon?

BILL: In making the transition from a "downtown impresario" to a venerable institution like Lincoln Center, one question I had was whether or not I would be able to take the same kind of artistic risks. Would I be able to present the kind of work that I was presenting at a night club with 150 seats on this kind of scale in the midst of this kind of established institution? In the two festivals that I produced: Midsummer Night Swing, which is popularly prized festival of live music for social dancing that has also a free component, and then Lincoln Center Out of Doors, which is an entirely free to the public, I found that there was an equal hunger for risk taking. Within the institution, I found an opposition to the image of a white marbled palace of culture. Instead, there was a real hunger for diverse audiences to come to the door. I also found a real desire to create a greater sense of transparency, which has been a real theme as Lincoln Center undergoes a physical redevelopment. Some of the programs that have felt most personal and most idiosyncratic include an avant-garde marching band in collaboration with band on a can called the Asphalt Orchestra. They used the most populist form of the 12-piece parade band while playing music by Frank Zappa, Bjork, and a Swedish metal band Meshüggah. Another is the premier of a work by Rhys Chatam for 200 electric guitarists who parade around the plaza with the audience on the center. These kinds of ideas were not only embraced by the people within Lincoln Center but they actually became some of our most popular events, both with the general public and with the press.

I think that there is a hunger, especially where ticket prizes are low or nonexistent, where you can really take chances, where you can trust that your audience is willing to invest their time if not their money. There are real opportunities to create interest in a lot of different art forms and disciplines that might not be

household names or familiar traditions, but they will speak to a public if it's presented to them.

SPEAKER 2: Thank you so much, that was a really inspiring speech. I was really pleased to hear you talk about grappling with issues of social conscience and what you're doing in the art world to join that connection between acting in a social scene and also trying to promote arts and entertainment. It is certainly something I grappled with as a musician. I'm wondering what sort of musical acts and performing organizations that you're personally excited about right now, that you see coming up perhaps from the underground?

BILL: That's such a huge question. It's a kind of question where people ask me what music I'm listing too, and it immediately leaves my mind. So, what I would say is I'm actually going to defer. When I was in Joe's Pub, I presented 500 shows a year, and over the course of six years I presented over 3,000 shows and never once felt like it was a struggle to fill those dates. There were constantly new artists who I was discovering, who were inspiring me, who became my new favorite band and then the week after that I had a new favorite band or I had a new favorite dance company. I think part of the way that I program is from a standpoint of a fan and as I discover something, it's an opportunity to share that with my audiences. The artists that I want to get behind are changing on a regular basis.

SPEAKER 3: You're in New York and New York is the center of the universe in terms of the arts. So what do you say to presenters in this room, many of whom are not in that region?

BILL I would look at festivals like the Lotus Festival in Bloomington Indiana, which is certainly not the sprawling metropolitan area that New York City is, but even with

a far less diverse community, it has become one of the most important world music festivals in the country. Through creative programming and partnering with other regional festivals like the Chicago World Music Festival, they've become a major stopping point for the same artists who are coming to New York. I think it's through that sense of collaboration that they've been able to access artists that otherwise would never come to a community like Bloomington. Through smart programming and smart work with their audiences, they've been able to cultivate a fandom for people who are not from the communities of origin for any of these artists. Again, it is putting the artist with familiar contacts. They're in night clubs where usually a rock band or a country band might be playing, and they're playing for free outdoors. I think it is important to bring the art in a context that's familiar and comfortable and to bring your audience along with you. Yes, I'm blessed to be in New York City because of the opportunity, but one of the reasons why I created things like Global Fest and why I created things like the North American World Music Presenters Group is to create more opportunities for collaboration, and I think that's the way that you can really access opportunities that you might not otherwise be able to.

ROBERT: Is there another question? Yes?

SPEAKER 4: I wanted to thank you for making the point about taking risks in this tough time and it's something that I find as an agent. It's easy to sit back and tell your up and coming artist to just hang on, it's a difficult time, and then to make your money on your more established artists but I think we have a lot more power as arts presenters and as agents and as managers than we think we do. If we start with the quality of the product, whether or not it's known, and if we create buzz properly, then we can make things happen now as much as ever. Audiences are hungry for something good. It's something that I have to fight against every day to keep pushing for the up and comers, and I just wanted to thank you for that.

BILL: Yeah, I agree. Look at people's iPods; now people are released from the tyranny of the CD and can get the individual songs that they want. People's iPods are generally far more diverse than you would give them credit for. I think people in general are open to a lot more than they are given credit for. It just needs to be presented to them, and I think as the entire structures are reforming. As the major label system is becoming less and less relevant, people are discovering music in other ways, though the internet, via Facebook or Twitter. I think there are many more opportunities to create a grassroots groundswell based on the quality of the performance and the artistry rather than on whether or not there is a larger machine behind it.

Okay, well thank you all very much for listening and I look forward to spending the rest of the week with you.

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