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## **Smithsonian Exhibition Explores America's Musical Roots --Exhibition Part of Three-Year Tour of Rural American Communities**

What do blues, country, gospel, rhythm & blues, folk and rock 'n' roll have in common? All are musical styles that emerged from America's rich immigrant cultural traditions. "New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music," an exciting exhibition from Museum on Main Street, takes a look back at this music and how it served as the foundation for many musical genres appreciated worldwide today. Museum on Main Street is a partnership of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) and the Federation of State Humanities Councils. In March and April 2009, five copies of the exhibition will begin tours of rural museums in Missouri, Nebraska, Alabama, Alaska and West Virginia.

"For the past 14 years the MoMS program has brought Smithsonian exhibitions to nearly 800 communities nationwide," said Anna Cohn, director of SITES. "We are excited to continue this important program with 'New Harmonies' and to tell a new American story: the story of American music."

When the earliest immigrants arrived in North America from Europe and Africa, they brought with them the musical traditions of their homelands: percussive beats from west Africa; protestant hymns from Great Britain; and folk music from Old World Europe, among others. In time, the music of their past evolved into expressions of their new journeys and triumphs, creating new sounds and harmonies. From the sacred songs of Native Americans and enslaved Africans emerged gospel. From the folk music and guitar strums of Europe emerged country and bluegrass. As each new musical form took shape, even newer ones emerged, resulting in a musical heritage that is as unique and defined as the nation's history.

"New Harmonies," the sixth MoMS exhibition, tells the American musical story through photographs, instruments, lyrics and artist profiles. Although "roots music" is a relatively new term that generally applies to forms of folk music, its influences run deep throughout American culture and can be heard in today's commercial country, gospel, pop and hip-hop genres. The exhibition explores

the work of well-known folk, gospel, country and blues artists who have inspired generations of musicians, like Ma Rainey, B.B. King, Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, Mahalia Jackson, Woody Guthrie and Joan Baez, and captures the spirit of musical styles that are at the heart of local heritage in the United States—Tejano, zydeco, polka, Cajun, conjunto and klezmer. “New Harmonies” focuses on how roots music gives Americans a soundtrack and a voice for their stories.

The MoMS program was created to serve museums, libraries and historical societies in rural areas, where one-fifth of all Americans live. The SITES-Federation of State Humanities Councils partnership, which began in 1994, was formed as a creative response to the challenge faced by these rural museums to enhance their own cultural legacies. Venues are encouraged to supplement the exhibitions with objects, stories and programs that celebrate local heritage and inspire community pride. Major funding for Museum on Main Street has been provided by the United States Congress.

State humanities councils located in each state and U.S. territory support community-based humanities programs that highlight such topics as local history, literature and cultural traditions.

SITES has been sharing the wealth of Smithsonian collections and research programs with millions of people outside Washington, D.C., for more than 50 years. SITES connects Americans to their shared cultural heritage through a wide range of exhibitions about art, science and history, which are shown wherever people live, work and play. For exhibition description and tour schedules, visit [www.sites.si.edu](http://www.sites.si.edu).

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