

National Endowment for the Arts awards one of its highest honors to Tulane folklorist Nick Spitzer

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Nick Spitzer, an anthropology professor in the Tulane School of Liberal Arts, is celebrating 25 years of producing and hosting the popular public radio show "American Routes." (Photo by Rusty Costanza)

[Nick Spitzer](#), a Tulane University professor and folklorist who has produced and hosted the popular public radio program [American Routes](#) for the last quarter-century, is being honored by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

Spitzer has been named a 2023 recipient of the [NEA's National Heritage Fellowship](#), the nation's highest award in the traditional arts. He will receive the Bess Lomax Hawes Award, named in honor of the late folk musician, folklorist and scholar who Spitzer considered a mentor. Each fellowship includes a \$25,000 award.

In making the announcement, NEA Chair Maria Rosario Jackson said Spitzer and the other eight award recipients “exemplify what it means to live an artful life. Their rich and diverse art forms connect us to the past, strengthen our communities today and give hope to future generations in ways that only the arts can.”

“Nick Spitzer’s storytelling ability is unparalleled and stems from his capacity to build authentic relationships and connections with everyone he meets,” said Brian Edwards, dean of the Tulane School of Liberal Arts. “His genuine interest in both the guests of his program and his listeners over the past 25 years has made *American Routes* what it is today.”

Spitzer, a professor of anthropology in the Tulane School of Liberal Arts, specializes in American music and the cultures of the Gulf South, creolization and public culture theory and practice. From his studio on Tulane’s uptown campus, he shares his knowledge and passion with nearly a million listeners each week on over 380 stations and via the *American Routes* website. Through stories, songs and interviews, he showcases a broad range of American music, including blues and jazz, gospel and soul, old-time country and rockabilly, Cajun and zydeco, Tejano and Latin, roots rock and pop, avant-garde and classical.

“I was taken aback and thrilled at once... stunned into silence,” Spitzer said upon learning of the honor from Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy. “We don’t do this work to get awards. Really, it’s a reward to have the freedom to do it.

“I am very proud of the audience that we've built for artists, music, cultures and the ideas that I care most about, and doing it from New Orleans and Tulane,” he said. “Meeting and conversing with so many great vernacular artists about their life histories, cultures, crafts and music has been a privilege.”

Spitzer’s guests through the years include legendary musicians Ray Charles, Chuck Berry, B.B. King, Willie Nelson, Celia Cruz, Bonnie Raitt, Tito Puente, Nina Simone and Carlos Santana, along with New Orleans music icons such as Dr. John, Fats Domino, Irma Thomas and Allen Toussaint.

Interviews with the not-so-famous have been equally important, he said. Among them are Ivy Billiot, Houma spiritualist and wood carver; Duck Holmes, a blues guitarist who runs a café in Bentonia, Mississippi; Dennis Paul Williams, a French Creole traiteur, or healer; and Belen Escobedo, a Mexican American fiddler.

“As a folklorist who’s worked in the Gulf South and elsewhere since the mid-1970s, I treasure equally, and often more, my conversations with those who are a relatively unknown,” he said. “We can learn the less known personal cultural narrative of a famous person, and universal values of humanism of those known only to their communities or families.”

Spitzer began his radio career in the 1970s, serving as program director of WXPN-FM, the college radio station at the University of Pennsylvania, where he majored in anthropology. After graduation, he worked as an afternoon drive host on the popular “underground” rock station WMMR-FM in Philadelphia. Following a move to Austin to begin doctoral studies in anthropology at the University of Texas, he began working as a deejay on the legendary progressive country station KOKE-FM.

His field studies took him to rural Afro-Creole French Louisiana, where he immersed himself in the local culture, language, traditions and music. Spitzer later launched the state’s Louisiana Folklife Program, and he helped create the Baton Rouge Blues Festival and the Folklife Pavilion at the Louisiana World Exposition.

At the Smithsonian Institution, he curated programs for the Festival of American Folklife. He was also artistic director for seven seasons of *Folk Masters* at Carnegie Hall and Wolf Trap, and the *American Roots Independence Day* concerts on the National Mall throughout the 1990s—all heard nationally on public radio.

“After *Folk Masters*, it occurred to me that I could reach even more people at less cost with an eclectic but unified weekly music mix on public radio of studio recordings and interviews with thematic ideas.”

Since beginning *American Routes* in 1998, he has produced more than 650 programs featuring more than 1,200 interviews. In addition to the NEA award, he has received a Guggenheim, an ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award, Louisiana Humanist of the Year, and Lifetime Awards from the University of Louisiana, the Louisiana Folklore Society and the American Folklore Society.

At 72, Spitzer has no plans to retire from his radio work. “In these contentious times, I’m inclined to hang on to producing and hosting *American Routes* as long as I can. I want to remind Americans what we share culturally and what distinguishes us in the best sense of diversity and inclusion.”

Spitzer will appear in conversation with Dean Edwards at the [New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane](#) from 10 to 10:45 a.m. on March 11 at the Lamar Stage at the ROTC Building on Tulane’s uptown campus.

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