

ILLINOIS CHART TOPPERS

Burl Ives

One night in 1930 at Eastern Illinois University, legend has it that future folksinger Ives was caught taking part in an excursion to the Pemberton Hall women's dorm. School officials reportedly found him playing the piano in the lobby. Ives, born in Hunt, then hitchhiked across the country learning folk songs from cowboys, miners, and others, and in 1938 joined the legendary folk group The Weavers. In addition to such hits as *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, *Have a Holly Jolly Christmas*, and *On Top Of Old Smoky*, Ives played Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* on Broadway and narrated the TV classic *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* in 1962.

Benny Goodman

This Chicago-born jazz clarinetist and bandleader, a high school dropout raised on Maxwell Street, cut his first record in 1926, and went on to become known as the "Ambassador of Swing." Goodman made a 1962 tour of Russia for the U.S. State Department.

Lionel Hampton

One of the big band greats of the '30s, the Louisville-born vibraphone virtuoso was raised in Chicago. After being taught the snare drum by a Dominican nun at Kenosha, Wis.'s, Holy Rosary Academy, he returned to Chicago and joined the Chicago Defender Newsboys' Band, where he picked up the tympani and marimba.

Phil Everly

As the Chicago-born half of the Everly Brothers, Phillip and his sibling Don became '60s pop staples with such hits as *Wake Up Little Susie*, *All I Have to Do is Dream*, *Bye Bye Love*, and *Cathy's Clown*. Though he and his brother later parted ways, they were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986, and Phil gave his brother a pound of gold and a handmade guitar for his 50th birthday the following year.

Spanky McFarlane

McFarlane, leader of the late '60s pop group Spanky and Our Gang, was born in Peoria. From 1967 to 1969, her group had hits with *Lazy Days*, *Sunday Will Never Be the Same*, and *Like to Get to Know You*.

Gracie Slick

The Chicago-born (singer was the front woman for the '60s psychedelic rock band Jefferson Airplane (later renamed Jefferson Starship and eventually Starship). Slick wrote and sang such classics as *White Rabbit*, *Somebody to Love*, and *We Built This City*.

Chicago

The band Chicago contributed a brassy coolness to the music of the '60s and '70s. The group — renowned for such hits as *If You Leave Me Now*, *25 or 6 to 4*, and *Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?* — was called the Chicago Transit Authority until it was sued by the city agency of the same name.

REO Speedwagon

The popular rockers were named for a fire truck design developed in Champaign in the late '60s. *Keep on Loving You*, *Take It on the Run*, and *Can't Fight This Feeling* are among the band's Top 40 singles.

Head East

Formed in 1969 by a group of University of Illinois students, this rock band is known for its '70s hits *Never Been Any Reason* and *Since You've Been Gone*.

Curtis Mayfield

Mayfield wrote and produced songs for a number of Windy City performers before gaining notoriety for *Superfly* and *Freddie's Dead*, two hits from the 1972 film *Superfly*.

Smashing Pumpkins

Though this '90s alternative rock group played its last set in late 2000, it gained an unusual distinction when Chicago Mayor Richard Daley declared Dec. 2, 2000, Smashing Pumpkins Day.

Just plain folk

Illinois was a crossroads of American music, and its stories continue to inspire the people's music...

Chris Vallillo still hears the voices of the dead, raised in song and story. The Macomb folksinger treasures those voices, and helps keep their songs, their stories alive.

But Vallillo, a former anthropology major and an Illinois Humanities Council "Roads Scholar," emphasizes folk music is not only about resurrecting the words and melodies of the dead. Folk music remains about the "folk" — the people — and Vallillo continues to seek out stories about life, change, and hope in rural Illinois.

For example, when Morris-area farmer Gerold Steffes died in an August tractor accident and his neighbors rallied to help harvest his family's crops, Vallillo was drawn to the poignant story. The *Final Harvest*, on his 1995 album *Best of All Possible Worlds*, was dedicated to the community's spirit — "I thought, this has to be preserved."

Amid a world of "flash-bang production" and high-tech video, he reported the "one person-one instrument" appeal of folk music appears to be generating a new following.

"We went through the big folk scare or the folk boom in the '60s, however you want to look at it, where folk music very briefly became a popular music," said Vallillo, who recently has performed at the Illinois State Fair and on *The Twilight*, a Mississippi River riverboat.

"It now seems to be growing in a slow but healthy way — I see a lot of younger people performing, playing, even just for their own pleasure. One of the things I find so exciting about folk music is that it is music much like it was 150 years ago. One person with one instrument, can make music."

Vallillo plans soon to release a new CD mixing roughly half original and half contemporary folk songs.

In 1987, Schuyler County's local arts council asked then-Rushville resident Vallillo to undertake a folk music collecting project under an Illinois Arts Councils grant. With guidance from and professional recording equipment supplied by the Library of Congress' Folk Life Center, he embarked on an expedition into the Illinois River Valley, which includes Schuyler, Fulton, Brown, and Cass counties.

Vallillo sought area residents born and raised in the pre-radio era, before recorded music. "At that point, the last of that generation was still alive," he said. "They were literally dying out, weeks after I'd see them, sometimes."

He interviewed Illinoisans about the music to which they once listened and "how they used the music." If his subjects were musicians or at least willing vocalists, he recorded "what they had retained, what they'd remembered."

Jesse Smith, 97, recalled his family singing while doing the chores ("Music was part of life — it wasn't something you turned on in the background," Vallillo noted). Homer Biedenbender, who carved his own fiddle from black walnut because "he couldn't afford to buy a store-bought fiddle," died 10 days after performing for Vallillo. Vallillo dedicated his song *Walnut Fiddle* to the musician and blacksmith.

"One of my favorites was a man named Lawrence Royer," Vallillo recalled. "Lawrence was in his 90s, and he played and built hammered dulcimers. He was a remarkable man — he knew all sorts of rural life things very few people remembered any more, and he'd done this incredible series of paintings about life in the turn of the centu-

ry specifically to preserve that information and to pass it on.

"He told me about his mother, Mary Lancaster, who had been in a singing school in the 1880s. Certain communities would gather up some extra money and hire a traveling music teacher to come in. She had written out all the songs (she'd learned) in this beautiful Spenserian script handwriting.

"Lawrence was telling me this story, and he gets up, walks out of the room, and comes back in with these pieces of paper. They were the actual sheets, written in 1884, and he starts to sing these songs to me. I about fell over. I was

able to record him singing most of the songs on those sheets, and I actually learned one of them myself (*When Katie Comes Down to The Gate*)."

The Library of Congress maintains the master tapes compiled by Vallillo during his roughly six-month project. A second set is available for public review at Western Illinois University, Macomb, and Vallillo is seeking a home for yet a third set — possibly as part of The Mississippi River Experience, a new Quad City exhibition showcasing the music of the river.

The river played a major role in shaping Illinois' musical tastes. In the 19th Century, Illinois was "a very cosmopolitan state," in large part because its extensive Mississippi-Illi-

nois river network and steamboat travel made it possible for residents of rural communities to "take a day trip" to Peoria or visit St. Louis over the weekend.

As Illinois grew, it developed more miles of rail than any other state, further improving transportation of people, ideas, and music.

"We didn't have isolated pockets of music like people in the Appalachian Mountains did — they were so isolated that their music became unique," Vallillo said. "You had a lot more blending in Illinois that you didn't see in other places."

Nineteenth Century Illinoisans enjoyed "commercial" tunes popularized on riverboats, in local opera houses, and by traveling minstrel and medicine shows. Major hits included *Red Wing* (the tale of a shy little prairie maid awaiting the return of a Native American warrior) and *Aura Lee* ("As the blackbird in the spring, 'neath the willow tree/Sat and piped, I heard him sing; sing of Aura Lee").

African-American riverboat deckhands and roustabouts imported elements such as the "almost electric" bottleneck slide guitar from the Mississippi Delta, helping spawn early country and strongly flavoring modern bluegrass music.

But while Illinois was more a folk adopter than a folk originator, Vallillo reported many of Illinois' fiddlers and hammered dulcimer players have kept more localized songs alive. The Illinois River Valley was "a real hotbed of hammered dulcimer playing." Although Vermont, Ill., builder Daniel Van Antwerp won acclaim as a creator of the relatively simple, box-shaped instrument, Vallillo noted any handy rural craftsman could easily build their own.

Vallillo is buoyed by the recent revival of interest in folk sparked by the music of the Dixie Chicks and others and films such as the folk-flavored Depression-era comedy *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). Illinoisan Allison Krauss (see page 3) was featured on the soundtrack for the George Clooney movie.

"It really connected a whole new generation with music of that style," Vallillo suggested. — Martin Ross

*The sun was up and shinin'
as I pulled back on the highway;
I slipped it into gear and headed west.
But as I topped the hill a couple miles
past that diner,
I saw a sight below me that
took away my breath.*

*Gleaming in the morning light
in rolling fields of amber,
Rumbled more than 30 combines in a row.
Crawlin' cross the cornfield
like a swarm of hungry locusts,
Blowin' silage all around like it was snow...*

The Final Harvest, Chris Vallillo



Chris Vallillo