

SURVIVING ON THE LONESOME PRAIRIE

By Tom Irwin

If success in the music business world is measured on the basis of peer recognition, good bookings, and creative output, singer/songwriter/player Chris Vallillo deserves a gold star for achievement. The multitasking multiinstrumentalist from west-central Illinois began more than 25 years ago as a songwriting guitar picker looking for steady work. Today Vallillo is recognized as one of the Midwest's premier artistic voices in traditional and contemporary roots music. Since his 1985 finalist placement at the prestigious Kerrville Folk Festival songwriting contest, he has forged a career that includes several respected releases of his own work, plus numerous outstanding special projects.

From 1990 to 1997 Vallillo hosted and co-produced Rural Route 3, an award-winning public-radio music program. He developed education-oriented historical programs based on original and traditional folk music, including a successful show on Springfield's most famous citizen, called Abraham Lincoln in Song. His days and nights are filled with folk-festival showings, county- and state-fair bookings, kids' shows, a monthly hosting slot for an acoustic-music concert, and the occasional gig on the Twilight, a steamboat that cruises the Mississippi up Iowa way. "I always say there aren't really any bad shows," Vallillo says, "though some are definitely better than other ones." During 2006, Vallillo broadened his range from the familiar vistas of west-central Illinois by co-hosting Arts Across Illinois on Chicago public television, a live program later broadcast statewide. In September he appeared at Millennium Park in Chicago for the newly instituted Great Performers of Illinois festival. Recently he was chosen state scholar for *New Harmonies*, a traveling roots-music exhibit created by the Smithsonian Institution that's

scheduled for six museum stops in Illinois. "It's part of a program called Museums on Main Street that brings an exhibit about the national history of roots music to smaller towns," Vallillo says. "Each region adds its own local history to the show."

Vallillo has always been known for his strong, melodic voice and exemplary finger-picking. Lately, though, he's acquired a different technique.

"I find playing bottleneck slide an interesting art form and a very expressive medium," he says. "It incorporates well into the songs I do, from Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family to Civil War songs, a John Gorka tune or an original. It translates an emotive sound."

How does Vallillo explain his ability to maintain a successful career? "I want to play music, so I do it more as a survival technique than anything else," he says with a laugh. Chris Vallillo performs at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 13, at the Hoogland Center for the Arts, sponsored by the Prairie Grapevine Folklore Society.

