

Staying on the vanguard of folk

Vallillo, Halker team up to sing at historical site



Rick Kogan
Sidelinks

Windblown and happy-go-lucky as any two guys you're likely to meet, Chris Vallillo and Bucky Halker are folk singers.

Now, pause for a moment and consider the phrase "folk singer."

What images comes to mind? For many they'll come from boozey nights spent at the Earl of Old Town, or some lesser-known club that was thriving during the folk music boom that started here in the late 1950s and lasted into the 1980s. Maybe the young — very young — Bob Dylan comes to mind. Or Woody Guthrie? Maybe it is something of more recent vintage, a concert at the ever-vital Old Town School of Folk Music.

Halker, who lives here, is originally from Ashland, Wis., a working-class (iron ore/lumber) town on the southern shore of Lake Superior. His given name is Clark, but he was nicknamed Bucky almost immediately, after Bucky Badger, the mascot for the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Vallillo was born in Hammond and moved around a lot as a child because his father was a civil engineer. He has lived most of his years in Illinois, now calling west-central Macomb home.

Both men flirted with rock 'n' roll for a time — the best way once "to meet girls," both of the happily married men say, laughing — before devoting their energies and, indeed, their lives, to folk music, which Halker calls "the soundtrack of the meltingpot of America."

Both are also historians, because, as Vallillo says, "There is a story behind every song, stories of what the music meant to the people who created it."

This has manifested itself in many ways, notably in Vallillo's remarkable "Abraham Lincoln in Song," a 2007 album that is such a fine gathering of tunes that it was endorsed by the Lincoln Bicentennial Commission; and in Halker's participation in an ongoing series of CDs, "Folksongs of Illinois" (recently issued is No. 5, "Chicago Since 1970," which includes 18 sizzling and surprising selections).

You can, of course, explore the careers, accomplishments, music and upcoming appearances of these two men at buckyhalker.com and ginridge.com. But how



Bill Bogdan/Tribune Photo

Folk singers Chris Vallillo, left, and Bucky Halker will play a show together next month in Chicago. They will perform April 5 at the Pullman Historic Site on the Far South Side.

much more thrilling it would be for you to see the singers/historians/friends in concert together as you can do April 5 at the Pullman Historic Site, 1111 S. Forrestville Ave. on the Far South Side.

They will play and sing original material, Woody Guthrie covers and, as is Halker's wonderful wont, labor songs. Their 3 p.m. concert in an old factory space will be preceded at 1:30 p.m. by a free tour of the area led by Larry Spravak, chairman of the

Illinois Labor History Society.

"Our music is a testament to the American working class," says Halker. "This is not music born of the elite classes. It is one of the things that people really love about this country."

And this being one of the great labor towns in the world, how fitting for the concert to take place on the site of one of the union movement's most important strikes (in 1894) at a place named for

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George Pullman, one of the most virulent anti-unionists in the country's history, and where the first African-American union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was formed (1925).

Folk music has always had a home here. As the man considered the father of the local folk music scene, Win Stracke, once told a Tribune reporter: "What city offers a more congenial atmosphere? New concepts have flourished here unencumbered by conventional standards. Chicago and folk music have a lot in common. They just seem to sort of go together."

When Stracke and some pals founded the Old Town School in 1957, it was the first school in the United States devoted solely to folk music. It was treated, at least by this newspaper in a 1958 article, as some sort of curiosity. A headline from the time read, "Mountain Music Goes to Town: City Slickers Are Whoopin' and Whompin' Gee-tars Fit to Kill. Only They Call It Art."

The genre has had its ups and downs since then and currently (the film "Inside Llewyn Davis" aside) gets scant attention here unless one of its gods pays a visit, as John Prine did this month at a sold-out Symphony Center concert — or when one of its gods dies, as did Pete Seeger in late January.

But both Vallillo and Halker persuasively argue that folk music, now often placed under the larger umbrella of "roots music," is "living and breathing," as new immigrant groups continue to bring their native sounds into the larger musical landscape, realizing that this land is their land, too.

"We can't be blinded by old images of folk music," says Halker. "That can blind us to the traditions of, and continuing influence of, rural groups and ethnic communities."

"This music is universal and timeless," says Vallillo, "and of tremendous value."

Yes, Chris Vallillo and Bucky Halker are folk singers. Yes, they are historians.

But they are also missionaries, spreading the words and redefining folk music in new and vital and exciting ways.

All you have to do is listen.

"After Hours with Rick Kogan" airs 9-11 p.m. Sundays on WGN-AM 720.