

# — CHRIS VALLILLO — FORGOTTONIA

*“Forgottonia blends Chris's masterful musicianship with Tim's evocative photography, bringing to life the stories and memories of a place and time your audiences will want to visit. A moving and lyrical tribute to both the landscape and the people living there.”*

*Anne Lefter, Director, The Goldfarb Center for Performing Arts, Western Illinois University*

## Jay Hedblade

With a body of work spanning four decades that features a song repertoire rooted as firmly in Americana as July corn in Illinois soil, singer/songwriter Chris Vallillo intones from the heart of the Midwest in virtually everything he does. His exploration of what he calls “Unmetropolitan” America has seen him co-produce and act as performing host for public radio’s award winning *Rural Route 3* program, serve as the Illinois State Scholar for The Smithsonian Institute’s traveling roots music exhibit, and contribute to the US Library of Congress’ American Folklife Collection. His primary focus, however, has been songwriting, performing, and recording a series of albums that have garnered praise from music scholars, glowing reviews from national magazines, and occasionally landed him in the Billboard music charts.

Those albums are often graced with cover photos created by fellow McDonough County artist Tim Schroll, whose images capture visually the lazy rivers, small country diners, and humid fields that populate the lyrics of Vallillo’s songs. Given that the two men crossed paths roughly 30 years ago in Rushville, Illinois and had admired each other’s art along the way, it seemed almost fated for Vallillo to tap into Schroll’s photographic archives to augment his musical performances. And with **Forgottonia**, the show he’s launching at Western Illinois University’s Hainline Theatre on July 20th, Vallillo has done just that. **Forgottonia** promises to offer a reflective look at rural Illinois through the lens of Vallillo’s music and storytelling, while being enhanced by Schroll’s poignant photos.

“Frequently Tim was taking shots of the very things I was writing about, so I’ve always said that he does visually what I try to do musically,” Vallillo confirmed, speaking from his home in Macomb, Illinois. “I’d done several historical projects and decided I wanted to get back to doing original material,” Vallillo recalls. “That idea took shape as a retrospective of 40 years of my writing and focused on songs that reflected rural Illinois. I began to sense there was a body of work there that told a bigger story, so it seemed like a wonderful opportunity to incorporate Tim’s work into mine.”

That bigger story is of the mythical “nation” of Forgottonia, which takes its name and partial inspiration from a political stunt dreamed up in 1972 by McDonough County residents Jack Horn, John Armstrong, and Neil Gamm. As Vallillo explains, “Sixteen Illinois counties banded together to protest of the lack of infrastructure dollars coming to West Central Illinois. They created the independent nation of Forgottonia and planned to secede from the union, declare war on the United States, and then immediately surrender. The goal being that they would then apply for foreign aid. It was nothing more than political theater to highlight the lack of funding for this region of Illinois, but to everyone’s utter surprise it ultimately worked. As a result of this humorous stunt, almost a quarter of a million dollars’ worth of free PR came into the region.”

But that's simply where the story of the show **Forgottonia** begins. Vallillo took into consideration the region of Illinois that was coined Forgottonia in the 70s and used that as a jumping-off point to forge an audio-visual love letter to the area's past, present, and future. "The fact that these communities were somewhat isolated meant that they retained a great deal of an older era in their culture," he says. "I think that is a very positive thing, but over the past 40 years we've seen so much of that old way of life erode away."

You can feel what Vallillo means when you're experiencing the show. The shots of one-lane gravel roads that accompany the song "Sunday Drivin' On A Monday Afternoon" feel utterly timeless when rendered in rich black and white (Schroll abandoned color film altogether several decades ago). A few songs later during the track "Silhouette Against The Stars," however, photos of contemporary semis and silos pair with Vallillo's lyrics to put us solidly in the present day as 'the grain trucks roll by with their mounds of yellow corn piled high'. Throughout **Forgottonia**, the senses are combined like this in a tranquil meditation on past and present that unfolds so effortlessly, you'd assume the songs and images were conceived and crafted simultaneously. However, the truth of the program's gestation and birth is far more complicated.

To construct the show, Vallillo and Schroll individually culled their catalogs and began pulling pieces from across the decades that they felt epitomized the region (Vallillo's songs number in the hundreds – Schroll's photos in the thousands). Once Vallillo had winnowed his musical selections down to a dozen tracks, he and Schroll began the task of matching pictures to them. "It was a long process" offers Schroll. "We went through boxes of negatives and contact sheets, then we spent many hours going through images and songs to get just the right combination."

Vallillo was awarded an Illinois Humanities Rural Initiative Grant to mount the Forgottonia project. "Essentially I wanted to reimagine Forgottonia as I saw it through my perspective and share that with the people who live here and never really see it for what it is, simply because they're in the middle of it," said Vallillo. "He's really is the glue that brings people together, because he's authentic, he cares and he's driven," says Fairouz Abughazaleh, Director of Statewide Programs at Illinois Humanities, who has worked with Vallillo on various projects. "A lot of people have ideas, but Chris dreams them and then makes it happen! It's just been beautiful to watch."

The show premiered on July 20<sup>th</sup>, at the Hainline Theater, at Western Illinois University in Macomb, IL to a full house and received an excellent response. On stage, Vallillo was joined by two outstanding musicians, Don Steirnberg (mandolin) and Marc Edelstein (bass). This show is supported by "Visit Unforgettable Forgottonia" and a grant from Illinois Humanities.