

A Special Series of Music Concerts devoted to **THE MASTERS OF HEARTLAND TRADITIONS**

Friday, February 3

Missouri Fiddle Champion

TAYLOR McBAINE

with **Cathy Barton & Dave Para**

Friday, March 3

Slovenian and Armenian Music

CHICAGO SLOVENE BUTTON BOX CLUB

TAKSIM WEST

Saturday, March 18

Irish Music Masters

JOE SHANNON & JOHNNY McGREEVY

KEVIN CARROLL & LIZ CARROLL

Friday, April 7

Illinois & Indiana Ballads & Fiddle Tunes

LOTUS DICKEY

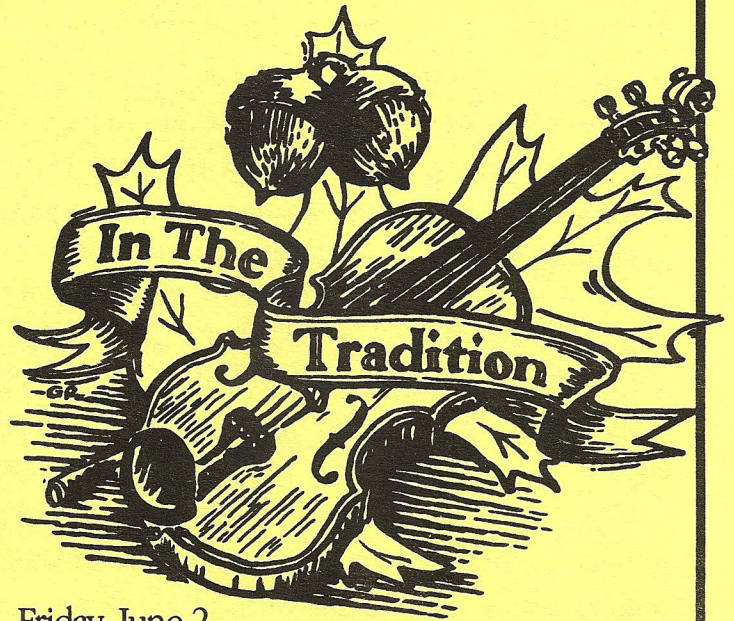
REVEREND JIM HOWIE

Friday, May 5

Scandinavian American Music

K. WENDELL WHITFORD

with **Bob & Becky Wernerehl**



Friday, June 2

Country & Urban Blues Masters

DAVID "Honeyboy" EDWARDS

ALBERT LUANDREW aka. "Sunnyland Slim"

All concerts will take place at 8:00 P.M. at the Libertyville High School Studio Theatre, 708 W. Park (Route 176), Libertyville, IL. For tickets or other information call: The David Adler Cultural Center at 367-0707.

This series is sponsored in part by funds from the Libertyville Rotary Club, The National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

**DAVID ADLER
CULTURAL CENTER**

1700 N. Milwaukee Ave. • Libertyville, IL 60048

THE CHICAGO SLOVENE BUTTON BOX CLUB AND TAKSIM WEST
ETHNIC MUSIC IN THE FIRST GENERATION

Paul Tyler: Where did you learn most of these songs?

Ray Podboy: The older ones are just melodies that are with us, you know, since infancy. We heard them-- folks singing them, the old-timers playing them-- when we were kids.

The musicians featured tonight come from quite different cultures, but their experiences as first-generation American-born are remarkably similar. For Ray Podboy, director of the Chicago Slovene Button Box Club, as well as for Sark Antaramian and Jerry Emerzian, members of the Armenian ensemble, Taksim West, growing up in an immigrant community meant growing up with an ancient musical tradition radically different from the American mainstream. Each had several years of standard musical instruction that emphasized music theory, proper techniques, and note-reading. But when it came to learning ethnic songs and melodies, each relied on himself to produce the sounds he had heard while observing up close the old-timers who played for community events.

Raymond Podboy grew up in the Slovenian section on Waukegan's south side. He claims that the word "babysitter" was unknown when he was young; when his folks went somewhere, he went along. At anniversary parties and wedding receptions at the Slovenian Hall, or at house parties "I usually parked myself right next to the musician... when the music started, I was right there. This fascinated me even as far back as I can remember." He received a button box accordion when he was about six years old, and by fooling around was able to squeeze out some of the melodies he had been hearing. But by the time he was ten the piano accordion became the thing to play. He followed fashion and took up the piano accordion and played it for the next thirty or forty years.

After years of playing in a polka band-- where he teamed his piano accordion with a chromatic accordion-- Ray began to get the urge to return to the melodies of his youth and to play the diatonic accordion once more. Interest in the button box was rekindled among Slovenians in the Chicago area in the early 1970's. In 1973, Joe Umeck arrived from Ohio to promote the organization of a club to foster traditional Slovenian music and the diatonic accordion. Ray Podboy began to teach others to play, and eventually became the director of the Chicago Slovene Button Box Club: "We were continuing a tradition and upholding our heritage and preserving it... also bringing others into the fold that otherwise would never know what their true heritage and culture was."

The Slovenian musical heritage preserved by the Club features polkas and waltzes that, even though they are related to Germanic dance traditions, are uniquely Slovenian in sound. The Slovenian homeland is in the northwest corner of Yugoslavia, a confederation of South Slavic peoples formed after World War I. Prior to the war, Slovenia had been part of the

Austro-Hungarian Empire, at the same time that the Croats, Serbs, and other South Slavs were ruled by the Turks. Political history here helps explain why the Slovenes adopted Germanic polkas and waltzes and the diatonic accordion while their Slavic neighbors developed traditions of tamburitza music and kolo dancing.

The polkas and waltzes played by the Chicago Slovene Button Box Club are old Slovenian folk songs, the kinds of songs their immigrant parents brought with them from the old country. In addition, Ray Podboy has expanded the group's repertory by relying on old 78 rpm recordings, handwritten music notations, and countless conversations with musicians and singers in the homeland. In his research, he seeks authentic Slovenian melodies played just the way they are played in the homeland. He studiously avoids the popular "Cleveland style" polka sound made famous by another first-generation Slovenian, Frankie Yankovic, who Americanized old world melodies, changing their titles and recasting them into more up-to-date arrangements. Ray Podboy prefers "a melody that's played the way it was intended to be played originally. Because, by the time they got it here, it's been so Americanized that you barely recognize the original Slovenian flavor."

The flavor of Slovenia offered by the Button Box Club is a unity of sound where the musicians move the bellows in visual unison and the accordion section sounds like a powerful, single instrument. When interest in the button box was at its peak, the ensemble included as many as thirty-two accordions. Today the group includes three accordionists, Raymond Podboy, Frances Adler, and Ron Latz, with rhythmic support from Frank Gradisek on banjo and guitar and Dave Pakiz (the only second-generation Slovenian in the group) on tuba. The numbers may swell again as Ray Podboy is training another generation of Slovenian button box accordionists.

Like Ray Podboy, Sark Antaramian grew up hearing the music of his people. After some lessons on the violin, Sark took up the clarinet at age sixteen. He is able to read music, and relies on written scores for American popular songs. But when it comes to Armenian music, he is purely an ear player. Through the years, Sark has acquired a substantial repertoire of folk tunes from the Anatolian plateau in the Middle East; songs that are known by Armenians, Turks, Assyrians, and Arabs alike.

Jerry Emerzian also heard many of these folks songs as he was growing up in Waukegan's small Armenian community. He describes the songs his father used to sing as "hillbilly songs," the songs that every Armenian learned as a kid. It wasn't until he was thirty-one that Jerry started playing these melodies on the oud, a Middle Eastern lute. While he was courting his wife, he met an oud player from the Armenian community in Racine, Wisconsin: "I used to go over to his house, you know, just to watch him. And I knew if I picked up an oud I could play it."

In 1971, after ten years of playing with two other bands, Jerry joined up with the Sark Antaramian Armenian Ensemble. They're frequently booked for Armenian (and other Middle

Eastern) weddings where they are asked to play "both ways;" that is, to play both traditional Armenian dance music for line dances and modern American pop music for couple dancing. The older melodies are not what a recently immigrated, modern Armenian most wants to hear. But, according to Jerry, "when you go to picnics and dances, this is what they like; a lot of [second-generation] kids get in lines and they have a lot of fun."

The older, traditional Armenian music played by Armenian-Americans like Sark and Jerry may not be the first choice of modern Armenians who like jazz and more up-to-date popular music. It is, nevertheless, a rhythmically challenging and melodically exciting musical idiom. Besides playing in 2/4 and 4/4-- meters with a regular beat-- Taksim West also plays in the irregular meters of 7/8, 9/8, and 10/8. They also play in 6/8, a meter that is characteristic of Soviet Armenia. The band includes Sark Antaramian on clarinet, Jerry Emerzian on oud, Jim Bourdisos (a Greek, the only non-Armenian in the group) on dumbek, a Middle Eastern drum, and Kai Kazarian on rhythm guitar.

Sark's clarinet playing features what Jerry describes as "runs," long stretches of soaring and wailing improvisation. Sark explains that these runs spring from a system of improvisatory modes, called taksim, which the lead player uses to signal to musicians and dancers that a shift in key or mode is about to occur. Playing a taksim is also a sign of machismo; that is, that the lead musician has the knowledge and courage to take off on a difficult improvisation that must fit within the structure of the musical tradition.

"Taksim West," the name Sark Antaramian uses for his ensemble, signifies that the band belongs in two worlds: that of ancient Armenian musical traditions as well as that of contemporary American pop culture. Besides their repertoire of Anatolian folk tunes, they can also take off on a jazz standard. Jerry leads the choir in the traditional Armenian mass at his church in Waukegan, but he also sings "wedding songs" made famous by Sinatra and Lennon and McCartney. And besides being accomplished on the oud, Jerry also performs in community musical theater (he recently played the lead in a production of Damn Yankees).

Being an ethnic-American necessitates going "both ways." For Jerry Emerzian, being Armenian means having attended Armenian school, being involved in the Armenian church, attending Armenian weddings, picnics, and dances. "Yet still," he says, "my thinking is, I'll Americanize. I'm an American. I'm an Armenian, but I'm an American... I've lived here all my life. I went to school here. You know, this is it."

--by Paul L. Tyler

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