

# A Special Series of Music Concerts and Dances devoted to **MASTERS OF REGIONAL & ETHNIC TRADITIONS**

**SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 9**

Concert and Dance

Conjunto Music of Texas and Mexico

**ECOS DEL NORTE**

American Legion Hall

**FRIDAY, MARCH 1**

Concert

Chinese Erhu and Missouri Fiddle Music

**JI QIU MIN**

**VESTA JOHNSON**

Studio Theatre

**SATURDAY, MARCH 16**

Concert and Dance

Music from the Tatra Mountains of Poland

**POLISH HIGHLANDERS**

American Legion Hall

**FRIDAY, APRIL 5**

Concert

Country and Urban Blues

**YANK RACHELL**

**JOHN CAMPBELL**

Studio Theatre

**SATURDAY, APRIL 20**

Concert and Dance

German-American Music

**KARL AND THE COUNTRY**

**DUTCHMEN**

American Legion Hall



**FRIDAY, MAY 3**

Concert

Music from Puerto Rico and Ireland

**ANDANDO SOLO**

**JIMMY KEANE**

Studio Theatre

Concert-only programs will be held at the Libertyville High School Studio Theatre, 708 W. Park (Route 176), Libertyville, IL.

Concert/Dances will be held at the American Legion Hall, 715 N. Milwaukee (Route 21) in Libertyville. Concert/Dance programs will feature a concert followed by a participatory dance with demonstrations and basic instruction. All events will begin at 8:00 p.m.

For tickets or other information call:

**(708) 367-0707.**

This series is supported in part by grants from Baxter Healthcare Corporation, the National Endowment for the Arts and by the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

  
**DAVID N. ADLER**  
**CULTURAL CENTER**  
GATEWAY TO THE ARTS



## YANK RACHELL AND JOHN CAMPBELL

### TWO BLUES LIVES

James "Yank" Rachell was born on a farm near Brownsville in Western Tennessee in 1908. While two relatives played the guitar, Yank's musical start came when he traded a pig -- which his mother had given him to raise -- to a neighbor in exchange for a mandolin: "Mother didn't miss the pig for awhile but when she found the old mandolin she put two and two together." When Yank began to bring home eight or nine dollars from playing the country dances -- for both whites and blacks -- her opinion changed concerning the relative value of Yank's mandolin.

In the 1920s, Yank's reputation as a musician grew as he played regularly for house parties and fish fries around Brownsville. He first left the farm for a job on the L & N railroad, but quit after five years to team up with longtime friend, guitarist Sleepy John Estes. Together, these two young bluesmen traveled the Memphis-Paducah circuit until a fellow musician got them an audition with Ralph Peer of Victor Records. Those early recordings of Estes and Rachell, with harmonica blower Hammie Nixon and pianist Jab Jones, are classics of early ensemble blues. Yank continued to record through the thirties, both as a solo guitarist and as a back-up mandolinist for such singers as Memphis Minnie and Walter Davis. In the late thirties he began a long association with the original Sonny Boy Williamson, whose style influenced him greatly.

In 1955, Yank moved from Brownsville to Indianapolis and essentially retired from music in order to raise a family. But like so many other early country blues recording artists, he was "rediscovered" by the folk revival and soon found himself active in music again. He has appeared at numerous folk festivals and clubs in the U.S. and Canada, has made a tour of Europe, and has recorded at least three albums, one each for Delmark, Blue Goose, and Blind Pig. In addition, he was the subject of a 1989 PBS documentary, *Yank Rachell: Tennessee Tornado*.

Through his long career, Yank has continued to expand his musical horizons. In spite of the machinations of several record producers who have tried to fit his playing into their own narrow definitions of "country bluesman," Yank prefers to electrify his mandolin and to play with a larger, modern ensemble. Today, he is often accompanied by his granddaughter Shiela Rachell on electric bass and Peter Roller on electric guitar. Yank's style has been described as "wonderfully idiosyncratic." He himself likes to tell audiences, "I am the blues mandolin man."

-- Paul L. Tyler

*(John Campbell's story follows, as he told it to Paul Tyler at the Adler House on October 26, 1990.)*

JC: But getting back to when I first started. Are you interested in that?

PT: Why don't we start at the very beginning. When and where were you born?



JC: Born in Marion, Alabama. That's about 96 miles below Birmingham. And we was a very poor family. My father, he died when I was about two years old, you see. My mother, she raised me, and some uncles, big brothers. But when I was twelve years old I run away from home.

PT: What year were you born?

JC: Nineteen fifteen. And I went to Birmingham and I stayed there five years. That's where I started . . . picking up on piano, you know. I didn't have anything. I was wild. Hauling moonshine whiskey from different places for people. You would haul five gallons and make two dollars . . . while taking the chance of going to jail.

And at nights, on the weekends, they had what they called them "house parties." And I sat there and listened, and another guy named Joe Martin said, "Hey, why don't you come on in and let me teach you some." He said, "You don't need to know much." So he taught me that song *How Long* (Indianapolis blues pianist Leroy Carr's big hit --PT). And when people got drunk off of that moonshine you could play that song all night. Play that one song. Just holler every now and then you know. But I didn't do that. Well, I played and I sang. I learned some songs.

After the fifth year when I was in Birmingham, I'd been learning how to play pretty good. I could play that boogie, which you heard, and all that stuff then. I went to Cincinnati and I started playing there.

I was a drifter, now. I rode a lot of freight trains. And when I left Cincinnati I went to Bridgeport, Connecticut, and I played around there for a while. The cats never heard that kind of stuff up there. Have you ever hear Yankees talk? . . . They never heard that kind of stuff that I was singing. I made good money. Made a lot of friends. And I got on the Merchant Marine. And I worked there a year, a little over a year on the Atlantic. And I quit. Caught me another freight train. Went all the way to L.A. And I played there for a while. But I was picking up on learning all the time. See, if you go around to places, they had the kitty out there . . . The good part about me was they'd never heard stuff from Alabama all over the world, see. And each state had different types of music . . .

Come back, I played in Denver for a whole year. Five Star Club in Denver. And I left Denver and I went to Dodge City, Kansas and played . . . and it was all white guys there then. But they liked what I played. I made good money. The kitty would just be rolling with them one dollar bills and things.

But the last year I was in Denver, Satchel Paige, the pitcher -- the Kansas City Monarchs, the White Elephants, and (another Negro League team whose name he couldn't remember), they had a tournament out there, a baseball tournament -- and that boogie what I played for you, he give me five dollars every night. Satchel Paige would walk in and say "Play that." (He laughs) . . .

But it was fun in them days for me. I was learning. I met up with piano players. I met up with Count Basie once. I didn't sit in, but he let me look over his shoulder. "You can't learn nothing like this!" I didn't say nothing, (he laughs) but I listened and



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looked. I could look and then sit down and play that . . .

Then about nineteen thirty-five I went back to Birmingham, and the same year I came here. And money was good and jobs was. You go into Waukegan, and I mean it was a jumping town. And they didn't have no piano man. They had Ike Coles, but he's gone . . . King Cole, but he was in and out. And they started giving them parties for me, like the same parties they had in Alabama. And each place, one would have one Friday night and one would have one Saturday night where I could play. And I picked up a lot there. I didn't have to work. Single. I made enough money to pay room rent, eat, and keep on running around trying to learn how to play the piano.

I played it my way. But it's unorthodox. It's not like most musicians play. Then in nineteen sixty-five, that's when I quit playing . . . and I started raising a family. And there wasn't enough money in there and time was calling on you all the time, you know. You couldn't be home. So, I went and I had a friend of mine . . . he got me a job with Skokie Valley Asphalt. And that's where I worked. Then I left there and I started working for different construction companies. And that's the way I retired. I retired as a plumber.

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