

The uncommon arts of the common man

By Nancy Maes

For eight weeks last summer, folklorist Paul Tyler was a one-man audience.

In living rooms, kitchens and churches throughout Waukegan and Zion, he listened to folk musicians perform. He heard a Slovenian play songs from the old country on a button-box accordion, an Armenian play a lutelike instrument called an oud, an old-timer repeat all the square-dance calls he knew, and many more.

Tyler was seeking traditional and ethnic folk musicians and artists so they might perform for a larger audience at the David Adler Cultural Center in Libertyville. Since 1975, as part of the center's School of Folk and Old Time Music, such people have performed for the public.

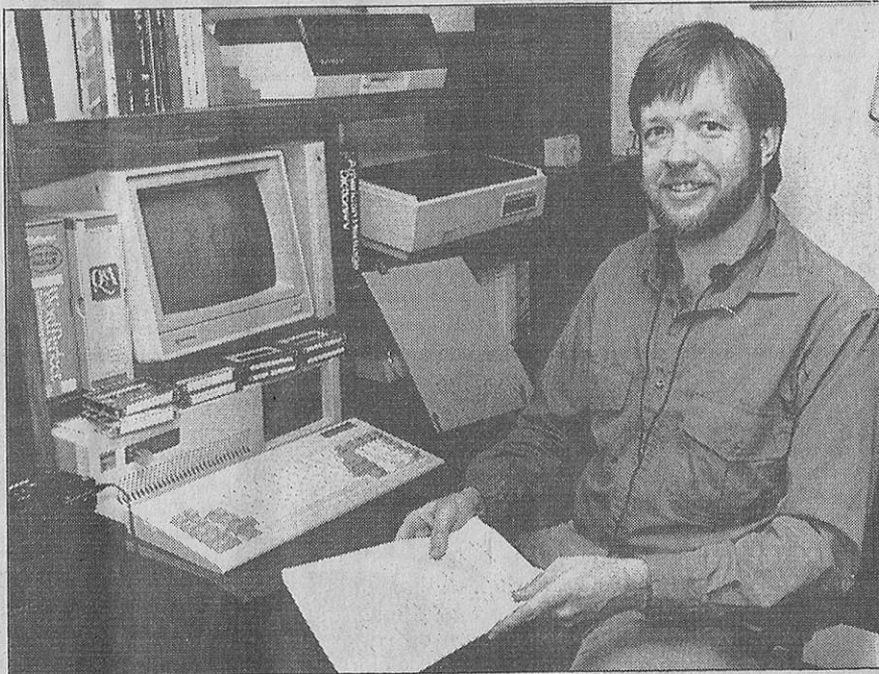
"What makes us unique is that for years we have sought to present not only touring professional folk musicians but to seek out in the community the old-timers—some who just play at home or in small community settings—who are keeping the traditions alive, because we feel it presents a more accurate picture of the full scope of folk music," said Douglas Miller, senior vice president and music program director of the center.

In 1987 the center received a \$5,000 grant from the Illinois Arts Council to make a survey of folk musicians, dancers and artists who create quilts, carvings and other works. The center hired Tyler, a doctoral candidate in the folklore department at Indiana University, Bloomington, to do the survey.

Tyler, 37, grew up in a small German community near Ft. Wayne, Ind., where as a boy he was intrigued by square dances. He has made that folk tradition the subject of his dissertation. (He has a bachelor's degree in theology from Valparaiso University in Indiana and a master's degree in folklore from Indiana University.)

Tyler, who moved to Chicago about a year ago, armed himself with a tape recorder, a camera and the Ethnic Performing Artists Directory for Illinois, published by the Illinois Arts Council, and headed for Waukegan.

"Waukegan is an old city and by and large a working-class town," he



Tribune photo by Guy Bona

Paul Tyler used a computer to do his 1987 survey of folk musicians, dancers and crafts people from many ethnic backgrounds.

Arts at large

said. "Because of that there is a lot of ethnic diversity you don't find in other northern suburbs, and ethnic diversity is a folklorist's dream."

In Waukegan, Tyler tracked down Raymond Podboy, whose parents had left the Republic of Slovenia in Yugoslavia and settled in Waukegan. Podboy started to play the button-box accordion when he was 10 and now leads the Chicago Slovene Button Box Club.

Button box accordions have two or three rows of buttons; Podboy's has three. "The buttons give you different notes depending on whether you're pushing or pulling the accordion," Tyler said. "And Podboy gets a lot of wonderful sounds out of his, playing waltzes that are sentimental, heart-wrenching love songs and lively polkas.

"The music itself is interesting, but what's most interesting is the people who play it and what it means in their life," said Tyler, who plays guitar. "The real moving thing about the

music for Podboy is not something he could put into words, but over and over again he told me about things that bring tears to your eyes.

"For him the music is the deepest form of expression that ties in with his family, his past and the Slovenian people that he identifies with greatly."

Tyler recorded the music Podboy played for him and the songs of many other musicians he heard: a Mexican band playing for a wedding, a Jamaican steel band and a Croatian band whose members play the tambura, a family of stringed instruments popular among southern Slavs. He gathered information on about 30 individuals and groups, including Serbian dancers, Swedish glee club singers, quilters and a carver of duck decoys.

Copies of the material he compiled will eventually be on file in the Library of Congress and perhaps at the Cook Memorial Library in Libertyville. Miller said he and members of other groups who have sponsored folklore research in Illinois would like to set up a central archive for all such research.

But Tyler believes that folk art should be allowed to flourish and not merely be preserved on tapes and

paper. "There's no way to preserve something that's always changing without doing what you do to a butterfly when you catch it and pin it to an exhibit," he said. "You don't want to fossilize it."

An example of the folklore changing nature came in the 25 or so square dance calls recited by Don Adams, who lives in Wadsworth, the way he used to call them in the '30s and '40s.

"He had one or two that I've run into elsewhere, but his way of doing them was a little different," Tyler said. "That's the earmark of traditional music and folk art—there's no standard, written-down version. There's a great amount of flexibility within a piece so every performer can make it his own, and each person's version expresses who he is and his connections with the past and his own... feelings and meanings."

Miller said he hopes audiences at the Adler Center will soon be able to witness the work of the artists Tyler has uncovered. The center, 1700 N. Milwaukee Ave., offers programs in all the arts in what was once a five-room farmhouse dating to the Civil War.

Architect David Adler bought it in 1917, enlarged it to 23 rooms and made it his home. After Adler's death the house was donated to the Village of Libertyville in 1949.

"The whole house is multifunctional," Miller said. "During one day a room could have oil-painting classes in the morning, Irish step dancing in the afternoon, watercolors in the evening, and two days later there could be a concert."

Tyler thinks folklore is an uncelebrated culture that deserves to be better known. "The common people who make up this country are indeed gifted artistically," he said. "They're not just statistics that can be dealt with in polls. These people have not buckled under to the material world they're bombarded with. There's a lot of dignity and beauty and creativity out there."

Opening tonight

THEATER: "Memoir," two-person show on the final summer of Sarah Bernhardt's life, presented by the Next Theatre Company; Noyes Cultural Center, 927 Noyes St., Evanston; 7 p.m. Wednesday; 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday; 6, 9 p.m. Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday. \$12-\$16. Through Feb. 7. 475-1875.