

By Jessie Johnson

A summer's evening, people gathered in a city park as the sun sets, listening to the melodic strains of rustic, folksy instruments... a hand brushes away a droning mosquito, and the breeze picks up as twilight descends on the man, singing songs of bygone times in an impassioned tenor... if this seems like a throwback to the entertainment of simpler times, to a lifestyle not ruled by video on demand, movies delivered straight to your PC, and Tivo, that's exactly the way it's supposed to seem.

A concert in Veterans Park on July 28, given by Illinois artist Chris Vallillo, was another of this summer's concert series that will lead up to a Smithsonian traveling exhibit on American roots music, coming to Mendota in November. Vallillo's set definitely brought to mind a different time in the entertainment culture of America, where gathering as a community to hear music was a regular occurrence.

But plumbing the past for modern-day connections is nothing new for the Macomb area artist. Vallillo's former incarnation, prior to becoming a folk musician, was as an archaeologist. In the conversational style in which he speaks to the audience leading into his songs, he wryly shared that he quickly learned that an archaeology degree in central Illinois presented certain professional limitations. He took this inquiring spirit and respect for the past into his career as a musician, however, and his background definitely is visible in his position as a state scholar for the roots music exhibit.

Vallillo spent a portion of the 1980s doing exactly what it is that folk music is built around, that is, collecting the music "of the people," and the stories and anecdotes behind it. He traveled the countryside, getting to know senior citizens who were, at the time, the last vestiges of a population that could recall a time before entertainment meant radio and television. Discovering the story behind the music that has been passed down through generations, Vallillo carries on the folk tradition of passing the music, and its stories, along to his audiences.

He opened his set by explaining, fittingly, in a railroad town, how he learned a circa-1890s song that replicates the imagery of a steam locomotive. As he strummed his dobro, he explained how "Life is Like a Mountain Railway" is an instance of music being reflective of the time in which it was created, in this case, using the imagery of the powerful train as a simile for power and strength in life.

As much an educator as a performer, Vallillo gave miniature history lessons on the different types of instruments he picked up for each piece. He also talked about the origins of different sounds and styles of music. In explaining the roots of his distinctive "bottleneck slide" sound, he explained that it was invented in the Mississippi Delta, and steamboat deckhands and roustabouts who made their way north brought their playing style with them. "People liked the sound," he said, and the shimmering sound evolved eventually into then 1930s trend of Hawaiian-sounding music on guitar, the steel guitar sound recognizable in honky-tonk country, and others. In his travels, Vallillo also learned how to play bluegrass, one of many branches of roots music, which draws from various other types of music, itself. He explained how bluegrass arrived in our area, when settlers from Appalachian Mountains brought their Celtic-tinged old-time southern music with them through the Cumberland Gap. Listening to Vallillo strum and sing the toe-tapping sound of "Shady Grove," the cadences of Irish-inflected mountain music are easy to hear.



Vallillo shared that the people he met while researching roots music were often so interesting, they wound up in his own compositions. He told the tale of his own song, "The Walnut Fiddle," which was written about a fiddle-playing blacksmith he met along U.S. Highway 24. The old man, who died a mere 10 days later, had pulled a handmade black walnut instrument down from the rafters and played for Vallillo. The song is an imagining of the story of the tree from which the rustic fiddle was hewn, and its smooth, gentle strains note, "One hundred years of winter snow and rain ring from its grain."

Different instruments took center stage, from a simple jaw harp, which Vallillo used on a song called "Burglar Man," to a comparatively more complicated hammer dulcimer. Vallillo explained a bit about his hammer dulcimer, an instrument that he said has a surprisingly great popularity in Illinois. He struck the strings of his dulcimer with mallets, explaining how he found the body of it left in a barn for 20 years, and refurbished and restrung it, before starting on the popular dulcimer tune, "Golden Slippers."

"This is so much like the way folks shared music in the old days," Vallillo noted from his stage in the park gazebo. He led the audience, whether in call-response gospel style songs, or in songs that required clapping and motion and audience participation.

Vallillo closed with a song that he'd learned from another of his interviews with older generations. Upon the discovery of the remains of the Titanic, he spoke with a gentleman who could remember the Titanic disaster... a time when the big news of the day was memorialized in word of mouth, and song. Songs of shipwrecks and other disasters were commonplace, and helped to illustrate the current events of the day.

This varied introduction to the timelessness of roots music is something that local residents will look back on when the Smithsonian exhibit is on display this winter at the Mendota Museum and Historical Society. Vallillo will again be on hand to kick off the program as a featured performer at the Nov. 16 kickoff concert at Mendota High School.