

# Mark Dvorak

by Larry Penn

Mark Dvorak never did claim to be from the same blood line as the great Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904). When I asked him if he thought he was, he replied that, the name was common in Czechoslovakia. Still, I can't help but believe that the Czech genius' gene pool resides in Mark somehow. The DNA evidence is definitely there in Mark's music.

Over one hundred years ago, Antonin mined the Slavic folk traditions to create his compositions and cantatas. Today, Mark finds himself immersed in the American folk tradition. So in some mystic way Mark is bringing the circle around, to repay Antonin's debt to the music of the people. Besides, Mark's great-grandfather was born in Prague.

My friendship with Mark Dvorak has developed over the span of nearly twenty years. His web site claims that he started touring in 1981. It had to be sometime after that I first became aware of him, but my memory is like an accordion these days; and my mind tends to recall all things in the tones of right now. That first awareness of him though, came about with a letter he wrote, requesting license to record my parody of "On the Banks of the Ohio." The song had appeared in the pages of Sing Out! Magazine, now transformed to a paean on the demise of the American steel industry. My version of the murder ballad was included on Mark's cassette, "No Lonesome Tune," released in 1988. The cassette is now out of print, but the ego rush from it still thunders. How can I not proclaim Mark to be one of the more intelligent and artful musicians on the folk scene today?

You can find Mark's web site <[www.markdvorak.com](http://www.markdvorak.com)> or surf the net to find the various promotional descriptions of him. It would be an easy thing just to parrot the blather, but rather than be redundant, I'd prefer to talk about the stuff the net don't talk about.

I wondered about Mark's formative years, and the role of music at home. He is the third son of four, two others of which were involved with music; mostly in the form of Rock and Roll. One brother, did in fact become an excellent luthier. There was the usual record collection and some singing around at family events when the mood was on, but his was certainly not the classic house full of music image, like one would imagine to be found in the Carter family.

Sometimes when I listen to Mark tell stories about his youth I get the feeling his Dad would have rather seen the boys played more baseball, and a lot less Rock and Roll. Of course, that is typical Dad stuff, but did you even know that Mark played baseball? He was good at that too. Like, just out of high school when he tried out for a scouting division of the St. Louis Cardinals, but that hint of the Czech composer's genes were tugging even then. Mark was out there in center field noodling on a blues harp between fly balls at practice.

In 1978, Mark took a day job in the shipping department of a xylophone factory (believe it or not) where he earned enough

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money to buy his first guitar, and take a motorcycle trip around the country. He learned his first rudimentary chops in those long, hot summer days, on a Harmony guitar with a biker friend, and anyone else who was willing to sit around and jam. After a trek of fourteen thousand miles, he went to work for Jewel Foods. By now, hopelessly hooked on guitar, he found himself signed up for a spate of lessons at Chicago's famous Old Town School of Folk Music. His musical tastes were turning to Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Big Bill Broonzy, the blues, and contemporary folk artists like Pete Seeger, Peter, Paul and Mary and the everlasting Bob Dylan. If the advent of recorded music has given us the accidental blessing of extending the legitimate form of the oral tradition, then without a doubt, Mark has studied at the feet of the masters.

One has to only watch Mark perform these days to realize how good he has become at his craft. The degree of commitment and time it took to arrive at his current level is sometimes lost on the layman, but Mark jumped into the folk music milieu with all his might and mane, to read, to study, to listen and to practice, and to practice, and to practice.

Ever the true disciple, Mark has his list of pilgrimages. Mark plays it down of course, but to me it reads like a "litany of Saints." He visited Lead Belly's grave near Mooringsport, LA, and made a rubbing of the original gravestone. When a new headstone was added, Tiny Robinson (Lead Belly's niece) and her husband Jim invited him to the ceremony.

Long before the Okemah, Oklahoma Chamber of Commerce discovered the value of a Woody Guthrie festival, Mark went and listened to Woody Guthrie stories as told by the Okemah Historical Society's Roy Overhall. Many of these classic Woody tales, you might even coax Mark to share over a glass or two. He has been to Chicago's Maxwell Street to listen to blues and get a pork chop sandwich. You can hear some of that influence on Mark's CD, "The Streets of Old Chicago," and read in the liner notes his tribute to Frank Hamilton, whom he met and interviewed and befriended. Hamilton is cofounder of the Old Town School of Folk Music, and learned about teaching folk music at the side of Bess Lomax Hawes (yes, that Lomax!). How traditional is that?

Along with Frank Hamilton, Win Stracke was most responsible for the Old Town School of Folk Music coming into the world. Mark was introduced to Stracke when this visionary was already in his eighties. Still with sharp mind and great sense of humor, Stracke invited Mark to come for a visit, which led to a friendship that lasted until Stracke went to Beulah Land. Win Stracke by the way, drove Big Bill Broonzy to the hospital, when the latter was dying. Big Bill's guitar is enshrined at the Old Town School. You will also find the circle still unbroken if you listen to Mark's version of "The Glory of Love," which he garnered from the singing of the great blues legend himself. It is also featured on

“The Streets of Old Chicago.”

Mark has played a few gigs with Grammy winner Ramblin’ Jack Elliot when Jack played in Chicago in 1989, and again at the Cafe Carpe in Ft. Atkinson, Wisconsin and learned why they call him Ramblin’ Jack.

In 1994, Mark flew out to Oakland, CA and spent two memorable days with Brownie McGhee, the great blues singer and guitarist of Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry fame. Brownie is gone now too, but you can still touch the hand of the man who touched the hand of the man.

Along about 1983, the rhythm, and grace, of baseball, and the loving of the game found its way to the five-string banjo too. His tour de force, “Ruben You Can Play Your Banjo” is truly amazing. If you are fortunate enough to be in the audience when he plays it, watch the people’s mouths forming the lyrics every time the hook “all night long” comes around.

Dvorak has been a solid contender on the Chicago folk scene for a good while now, rubbing elbows, jamming and sharing the stage with a good many of Chicago’s greats. These days Mark is part of the faculty at the Old Town School of Folk Music, but he has taught at any number of venues in the Chicago area. Many of these he helped start such as the Old Quarter Coffee House in Brookfield, IL, The Acorn Coffee House in Warrenville, Good Night Irene’s in Blue Island and the Plank Road Folk Music Society. For a time, he also directed a venue at the Old Town School called “Mr. Coffeehouse.” Not too classy a name perhaps, but I remember how exciting it was to get booked there.

For all but a select few of us, the dream of making a living just playing the festivals and the club circuit is only that. A folk singer’s dues get paid by playing schools, libraries, nursing homes or other pick up work, like studio sessions, and teaching. Mark is always teaching! As he so aptly puts it, “Them’s wages.” Indeed it is more than that. The net result is a huge song bag, filled with diverse subjects, picking styles, clean arrangements, and an impeccable ear.

Any piece about Mark Dvorak would not be complete without the mention of Michael Smith (“The Dutchman” among many other songs) and Weavermania! The idea Michael and his wife Barbara Barrow for a theatrical piece based upon the music of The Weavers.

Since its beginning, the Old Town School’s group classes finish with a “Second Half” which enables the students, instructors to jam and sing together. One evening, for his part of the segment, Mark sang and gave instructions to one and all for the performance of a driving Lead Belly tune, “Bourgeois Blues.” Barbara Barrow happened to be in the audience that night and knew the performance was exactly the way Pete Seeger would have done it. When Barbara told Michael what she had heard, Michael called and the invitation was on! Since their first concert in April of 1999 in Mt. Prospect, IL, Weavermania! has traveled the country in just about every direction with Mark Dvorak holding down the Pete Seeger slot on the banjo. The original Weavers, by the way, also boasted the likes of Erik Darling and Frank Hamilton, when Pete was indisposed. For my money, no greater testimony for Mark’s

banjo prowess is needed!

If you miss Weavermania! when they are out and about, you can still get a good taste of the sound with the CD “Weavermania! LIVE.”

I suppose there can be some elements of incest found in one friend writing about another, but I would be remiss if I did not point out what a class act Mark is to perform with. We have played any number of small venues together, like house concerts and such, and last autumn we toured the great Pacific Northwest. Everybody knows I have also used him as a side man on my last four recording projects. Maybe it is the team spirit Mark acquired on the baseball diamond, and maybe because he understands how delicate my ego is. Mark can play rings around me anytime he wants to, but whenever we have worked together, he never did. “It’s about music,” he says.

Oh Mark, you can play your banjo -- “All night long!”

*Larry Penn is a songwriter and recording artist from Milwaukee, WI.*

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#### DISCOGRAPHY

On Waterbug Records

- Every Step of the Way (WGB 68), 2006.

On Old Codger Records

- Pickin’ at the Home Place, 2005.

On Depot Recordings

- Weavermania! LIVE (Depot 025), 2000.
- The Streets of Old Chicago, (Depot 021), 1998.
- Just Something My Grandma Used to Sing, (Depot 018), 1996.
- Old Songs & New People, (Depot 016), 1995.
- Use It Up, Wear It Out, (Depot 012), 1992.
- No Lonesome Tune, (Depot 008), 1988.

On Cookie Man Music

- When Steam Was Kind, (CM-91), 1992.

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