

## Anything can happen at a spontaneous folk jam

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By **DAN PEARSON** Contributor

The Lake County Folk Club welcomes back national touring troubadour Mark Dvorak at 7 pm Sunday to host a Spontaneous Folk Ensemble at the El Barrio Restaurant & Lounge in Mundelein.

Dvorak, who lives in Riverside, invites all attendees to bring along their musical instruments and their voices and participate in this special fifth Sunday event which is open to all ages.

"I also call it a sing-along concert and jam session," said Dvorak who teaches classes in guitar, banjo and the blues at the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago. "When we get warmed up I start asking people who's got a good idea for a song. Most of the time, people will have one, and one leads to another."

### No two the same

Dvorak has been a member of the Lake County Folk Club since it began. He hosted this program at the Folk Club a year ago and said no two gatherings ever unfold identically.

"Last November was a great success. The main floor of the El Barrio was filled with instruments and there was a very high level of musicianship. I hope we can build from there. If I see someone noodling around on the strings, I'll call on them to take a solo."

Dvorak is currently gathering original and traditional material for his 12th CD, which will mark the recording debut of the Mark Dvorak Trio with fellow musicians Ellen Shepard of Sweet Fern and Christopher Walz, from the long-running stage show "Woody Guthrie's American Song."

Dvorak credits Frank Hamilton, one of the Old Town School of Folk Music founders, with introducing him to the spontaneous folk ensemble concept in 1997.

### Winging it

"Frank was giving a workshop for instructors. They didn't hand out anything and they didn't write anything down. For two and a half hours this group improvised under Frank's leadership. We used our own ideas. The music was simple that people in the group could handle as they would.

"I told Frank it would be nice to have a class like that offered at the Old Town School on a regular basis and he said, 'You're right, there should be a class like that and you should teach it.' I said I didn't know enough about music and he said, 'Well, what's that got to do with it? You just begin from where you are.'"

Encouraged by his students, Dvorak has been conducting improvised sessions like these for more than 10 years including a bi-monthly spontaneous folk ensemble at The Grafton Pub for the last six years.

"The Grafton invited me to perform and I suggested a better idea. I have all these students who want a place to hang out and jam. So we began meeting twice per month after class. One of

the things I learned from this process is what kinds of songs work well within a group dynamic.

"It is very exciting to see people come to life, not so much as students, but as musicians and singers, even if they have been playing a short while. I always felt my job as a teacher is not just to supply information and resources but to also help foster a meaningful experience for people."

### Simple Songs

Dvorak said the key is finding songs known to most of the group and ones that aren't complicated to play. Songs like "This Land is Your Land," "You Are My Sunshine," and call and response songs like "When the Saints Go Marching In."

Some song circles use songbooks or hand out sheets of music to guide the program.

"We thought we would try it differently," Dvorak said. "I discovered the minute we put the pieces of paper and song books away, people began watching each other and listening to one another. If I see someone struggling a little, one of us can call the chords out. That's why it's important to choose simple songs."

He acknowledged that there are some audience members that just come to listen.

### Comfort level

"Some people are comfortable staying in the background and chording along and of course, that's fine. This program is not about putting people on the spot. It's about creating a musical environment where people can participate at a level they find comfortable."

Dvorak said that somewhere in the middle of the evening he enjoys teaching a song that is new to him. A current favorite is "Woody Knows Nothin'," a traditional song suggested by the late Erik Darling of The Weavers.

"Erik said this was the first song he learned that made him want to get into performing, so I'm looking forward to sharing that story and song with the Lake County Folk Club group.

Dvorak, who co-starred in the long-running tribute show "Weavermania!" is also fond of a quote by Weavers member Pete Seeger.

"Seeger said, 'If we agree on the right songs and sing them over and over again, that is the starting point for a lot of good things.' That's my conclusion too. It's a wonderful thing when people meet to sing and play in tune together."

### Spontaneous Folk Ensemble

Hosted by Mark Dvorak at 7 pm. Nov. 29 at the El Barrio Restaurant and Lounge, 1122 Diamond Lake Road, Mundelein. \$12/\$10 members, students and seniors.



**Singer-songwriter Mark Dvorak will lead a sing-a-long and jam session in Mundelein Sunday, Nov. 29**