

THURSDAY, JULY 1, 2010

## Another Kind of Freedom

We'll celebrate our national day of independence this Sunday, which made me hope I could write a little bit about some of the freedoms we all share as citizens of this country. But as often happens, the day-to-day events surrounding me have driven my mind down an alternate highway, with some thoughts on a different, but equally compelling kind of personal freedom on my mind.

I spent an enjoyable day serving as emcee for the annual Bishop Hill Midsommar Music Festival last Saturday. It's always a fun one for me, with the chance to meet and greet old musician friends, and get to know some new ones, as well.

This year's lineup began with Galesburg singer/guitarist John Heasley, with his traditional folk group, Morningstar. I got a large charge out of the Templeton Family, a bluegrass/Gospel band that includes mom and dad on bass and fiddle, along with eight talented kids. Three of the boys, aged 15, 13 and 10, share frontman duties and play banjo, mandolin and guitar with a skill that makes this old guitarist wish he had practiced harder when he was their age. Musician/historian Chris Vallillo displayed the talent and knowledge that has made him the Smithsonian Institute's Illinois Scholar on the subject of "roots music" this year, and the Blackhawk pipes and drums gave the sleepy Swedish village a powerful taste of the Scotch highlands.

But the performer I connected with most was a fellow named Mark Dvorak, a Chicago native who spends all his time sharing his love and knowledge of traditional folk music with anyone who's willing to sit down and listen.

"What's your day job?" I asked him after he played, knowing full well that many musicians find it hard to live on music alone and are forced to find additional employment to make ends meet..

"This is," he said, gesturing to the gazebo/stage where he had just performed to an appreciative crowd.

“You can make a living at this,” he continued. “You just can’t make a killing.”

But I don’t think he cares.

And that was the start of this story.

It’s not just because he’s talented, though he is, with a fine, clear voice, some excellent picking on both guitar and banjo, and a repertoire that covers just about everything important in his folky genre.

It is, in fact, his whole happy approach to what he’s done with his life that caught my attention. Most of us make “life’s work” decisions based on a combination of passion and ambition, with the latter often overwhelming the former when it all comes down to it, because it’s so very easy to confuse monetary success with happiness.

We all do it.

Mark Dvorak doesn’t.

Instead, for over three decades, he has pursued his passion and his very heart’s desire as a modern-day troubadour who is happy--overjoyed, in fact--to travel the United States and different parts of the world with nothing more than his voice, a guitar and banjo, and an undying love for traditional American music and the people he shares it with.

He’s played the big cities and concert halls.

He’s played small towns and out-of-the way venues.

But it doesn’t seem to matter where, as long as he he’s playing his music and singing his songs.

When he’s not on the road, he shares his love for his craft and its roots and traditions as a teacher at the world-renowned Chicago Old Town School of Folk Music.

“I look at this music as a great gift. Not everybody can do it,” he said. “It lets me connect with all kinds of people. And the people I meet are nice people.”  
Seeing him perform, it’s clear that he loves what he’s doing.

You can see it in his face. You can hear it in his voice.

The result, for me, at least, was a sense of awe, admiration and flat-out, right-back-at-you joy at the sight of a man who seems to be doing just what he was meant to do and is kind of overwhelmed at the chance to do it.

That’s a special kind of freedom.

“It’s not like working just for money,” he said.

“No, indeed,” I thought.

And that’s why it made my day.

