

## THE LONE PRAIRIE

Various Artists

*Folksongs of Illinois, Volumes 1, 2 and 3*  
Illinois Humanities Council/University of Illinois

IT'S OBVIOUS THAT the days of the CD are numbered and that, within a few years, it will basically become extinct. The many advantages of a purely digital, online music-distribution system are clear, but when you get your hands on something as well produced as the three-CD *Folksongs of Illinois* set, you can't help but feel a bit sad knowing that wonderful sets like these will no longer be around.

Illinois has an unusually rich musical heritage, and the *Folksongs of Illinois* series, using a very elastic definition of the term "folksong," gives a healthy sampling of it. Produced by Clark "Bucky" Halker for the Illinois Humanities Council, these three CDs, which are available separately, cover an amazingly broad sonic territory. (Volume 2, which is devoted to fiddler music, was produced by Halker and Paul Tyler.) They include recordings by blues and jazz musicians; Serbian, Polish, Czech, German and Croatian groups; Irish fiddlers; gospel singers; old-time string bands; country singers; Mexican musicians and singer-songwriters.

At first it may seem odd to have "Mississippi Flood" by alt-country stalwarts Jon Langford and Kelly Hogan sharing

space with the Staple Singers' "I'm Coming Home" and the Tamburitza Orchestra Javor's "Prijedorska Carsija," but the comprehensive liner notes by Halker and Nicole Saylor do an excellent job of tracing the threads that bind all these players together. For me, the one track that encapsulates the entire Illinois musical scene, the one song that seems to include just about every influence that was in the Prairie State air, is "Dziura Polka" by the Polish Mountaineers. This song, a jazzy version of Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races" — sung in Polish — includes steel-guitar solos, polka-tinged accordion, pizzicato violins and a guy yelling "yahoo." Yahoo, indeed.

While the set offers excellent music and well-written liner notes, I was also quite taken with the cover artwork by Heather McAdams. Even though her drawings are stylized in a

"I wish I could play guitar, but basically I'm a cartoonist, artist, 16mm filmmaker, show curator and record collector," she told me. "But I have always surrounded myself with musicians and am now married to Chris Ligon, a fabulous musician and songwriter, and my brother-in-law is Scott Ligon, who is one of the best guitar players on the planet."

McAdams and Ligon, who now live in Delaware, used to run a music store called the Record Roundup in Chicago where they put on an annual music show/film festival at the local Fitzgerald's Tavern. They would have musicians play old country music and show movies of old country-music stars. One time, they were able to get Marydee Reynolds, the grandniece of Girl of the Golden West Millie Good (portrayed on the cover of Volume 1), to perform her relative's big 1930s hit "There's a Silver Moon on the Golden Gate."

"That was definitely a moving performance," McAdams recalls. "Another memorable performer was Ronnie Stoneman, who we somehow got to play the last show on the little stage at our record store in Chicago before we moved to Delaware. I remember I was just dying to ask her about Joe Maphis, who was one of my all-time favorite guitar players. Ronnie knew him personally and all, so after her unbelievable show we were still onstage, and I asked her, 'What was Joe Maphis like?' I was thinking I'm finally going to get some inside info on one of my favorites. So, she looked at me and said, real loud, 'He's dead!' Ronnie was a regular laugh riot."

In the future, most providers of online music will not likely go to the effort to create comprehensive liner notes like the ones that accompany *Folksongs of Illinois* — or to hire artists like McAdams to do the cover illustrations. While the recordings will survive as a series of 1s and 0s, the often lavish packages they used to come in will fade away. And while the brave, new world will be more efficient — and will use up fewer natural resources — I'm still going to miss well-designed, thoughtfully produced efforts like this.

— MICHAEL JOHN SIMMONS

## The Fret Files

sort of Howard Finster-ish manner, they contain enough detail for one to identify the guitar held by Dolly Good of the Girls of the Golden West as a Gibson L-Century (Volume 1) and the guitar played by Big Bill Broonzy as a Gibson Style O (Volume 3). Most artists, even those working in a more realistic style, tend to get the details wrong on instruments, so I decided to get in touch with her to see if she was a guitar geek herself.

