

Musician, historian plays Labor Day in Marseilles

KATE REYNOLDS

NEWSROOM@MYWEBTIMES.COM
815-433-2000

Bucky Halker was destined for a career in music.

But his life is much more than songs. With three history



Halker

degrees, the Chicago resident is considered a prominent scholar of worker history; he's an author with articles about democracy and the American labor movement; and he's a collector/documenter of folk songs.

Halker, 54, will perform a free concert at 6 p.m. Friday at Knudson Park in Marseilles. The show will be sponsored by La Salle County Democrats and Laborers Local 393.

With nine CDs to his credit, Halker's musical style includes folk, country, Tex-Mex, bluegrass, jazz, rock and blues. He started out playing guitar.

"Girls were a big incentive. I wanted to be like Elvis or John Lennon, but I liked the way Bob Dylan smoked," he said in a Times phone interview.

At 16, Halker discovered Woody Guthrie's folk music, Lightnin' Hopkins' acoustic blues, cigarettes and black coffee.

"Along with a democratic vision, America's greatest gift to the world is the blues, jazz and rock that grew out of it," he said.

Halker has performed music history programs on Guthrie, the Great Depression and working-class protest music in the U.S., Canada and Europe. He was the first musician to join Studs Terkel, Jane Addams, Mother Jones and other labor leaders when he was inducted into the Illinois Labor History Society's Union Hall of Honor in 2009.

Q. Exactly how important was Guthrie then and how does his music relate to the working-class of today?

A. Guthrie is the model for writing engaged, politically-oriented songs. To be honest, he wasn't a huge name in his own era, except in New York City. His reputation really took off during the folk revival of the 1950s, at which point he was already suffering from Huntington's (Chorea) and spent the rest of his life in the hospital until his death in 1967.

It was really Pete Seeger and Woody's ex-wife, Marjorie Guthrie, who kept Woody's name and songs out there for the the world to know about and hear. His music still speaks to us because the issues of economic, social and racial injustice have not disappeared and continue to plague the planet. If you open up the newspaper or watch the news, the issues Woody deals with in his songs are still the issues most of the world's people have to deal with on a daily basis. Mining accidents, low wages, poor working conditions, anti-union drives, poor health care, religious intolerance, ethnic violence and related issues have not gone away, so his songs still have meaning.

Q. How long did it take you to collect the songs for your 2002 CD "Welcome To Labor Land?"

A. It took many years to collect those songs, though I was

just picking them up here and there while working on many others projects. It just happened that I finally pulled a big batch of them together and decided Illinois deserved a CD of these songs. There are literally thousands of great poems and songs written by American workers, though they have been barely studied by scholars.

Illinois produced a great number of these. Some of these are really important pieces of literature and art and my feeling is they deserve our attention as much as women's literature or African-American literature.

Q. I saw your performance of "I Ain't Got No Home" on YouTube. What's its history and how does it relate to today's working class?

A. That song was one of Woody's early attempts at political writing. He took the tune from a Carter Family song and wrote his own words, his experiences wandering around the West and Southwest during the Great Depression. He'd seen all the people who lost their homes and their farms as a result of the Dust Bowl and Depression that swept the country after 1929. This homeless army of several million people took to the road in search of something better and many ended up in California, where they thought they might find jobs. The song is about those people, the people Steinbeck treats in "The Grapes of Wrath."

Homeslessness clearly remains a problem. The loss of homes resulting from the

bank debacle under President Bush has made this song even more timely, as has the rise in unemployment that has followed. This is one of my favorite Guthrie songs, though it makes no overt political statement. He just tells it like it is and leaves you to weigh the implications.

Q. When did you first understand the importance of Labor Day? In what ways is this celebration important to you? Why should this day be so important to the younger working class of today?

A. I'm sure I didn't understand the importance of Labor Day until I was in my early 20s. Since then I have really come to appreciate its importance, particularly as a way to honor the accomplishments of our workers. Younger workers and young people in general are not very reflective, but at some point we should consider just what workers have done to make the U.S. what it is today. Most all of us came from working-class backgrounds at some point. If we remember the hard work of our grandparents and parents to get us where we are today, it's pretty simple to just remember that's the story of the country in general. Without workers not much would have been accomplished in this country. The country is built on the sacrifices of workers. It's that simple.

MORE ONLINE

- Read more questions and answers from Bucky Halker visit mywebtimes.com.